

PHIL 502
World Religions
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Seminar 1

The Academic Study of Religion

Key Questions

- What is religion?
- Why is there religion?
- How did religion develop?
- Why are people religious?

*How do we go about
answering these questions?*

Origins of “scientific” theories of religion

- Late 18th – 19th centuries – Enlightenment and explosion of science. Darwin’s *Origins of the Species* (1839)
- Desire to seek *scientific not theological* explanations
- Desire for unified theories; comprehensive and general in nature

Methods

- Scientific and analytical methods
- Comprehensive empirical observation
- Documentation

The Goal

To explain religion – all of it, in every place and time – in a single theory of religion.

- Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917)
- James Frazer (1854-1941)
- Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)

E.B. Tylor (1832-1917)

- self-educated Englishman, well-traveled
- Family were fanatical Quakers. Tylor had strong dislike for traditional Christian religion.
- Key text: *Primitive Culture* (1871)

Tylor – Key Principles

- Searched for underlying principles of culture and community
 - (1) Psychic unity of humanity
 - (2) pattern of intellectual evolution

Tylor – Psychic unity

- Psychic unity of humankind
- Things done and said at various times and places in human development resemble each other.
- Similarities are *not* coincidental but demonstrate uniformity of the human mind

Tylor – Psychic unity

The good news?

Tylor

All human beings are in essence the same, especially with regard to their reasoning or mental capabilities

Tylor – Cultural differences

Where differences do occur it is a
difference of degree,
not a difference in kind.

Higher and lower levels
of cultural evolution

Tylor

The bad news?

Tylor

- A hegemonic view of human rationality.
 - Everyone is assumed to think and reason as I would.
 - The projection of European, Victorian perspectives and habitual ways of thinking are therefore the “norm”.

Tylor – Doctrine of survivals

- customs and practices that some cultures still practice today are “leftover” from a prior era.
- Blessing someone who sneezes – why? Demon left the body at the moment you sneezed. We still say “God bless you” or “bless you” or “Gesundheit” – a wish of good health to one who sneezes.

Tylor

Origins of religion

Tylor: Origins of religion

An attempt to understand and control one's environment

Tylor: Origins of religion

- Magic
- An association of ideas – symbolic resemblance
- Myths – a logical association of ideas.
- Voodoo: acting on a piece of clothing or doll affects the person (similarity and contact)

Tylor: Origins of religion

- Noise of thunder = is like a human outburst
- rain = human sorrow and tears

Tylor: Definition of religion

- Belief in spiritual beings
- Earliest religions were animistic
- *animism* from Latin *anima* = “spirit”

Tylor: Animism

- Primitive peoples had the belief that every person was animated by a soul or spiritual principle.
- Other objects were likewise thought to be “animated”, e.g., trees, rivers, the moon, stars, etc.
- Perhaps there were even “supreme spirits”

Tylor: Animism

- Sacred objects: people were not worshipping a rock or a stick, but the spirit or anima within the object.

Tylor: Evolutionary process

Our efforts to come to terms with controlling our environment follows an evolutionary process from *animism* to *science*.