

Forms of Primitive Religion

Religion is a supernaturalism that consists of a system of belief, thought and action. It lies at the core of all primitive and civilized culture. Religion seeks to interpret and control man's relation to the forces of his physical and social environment. These forces are thought to be under the control of some supernatural power. The attempt to interpret man's relations to these forces led to several forms of religion like animism, animatism and manatism, fetishism and totemism. A brief explanation of these forms is necessary in order to clarify the concept of religion.

DEFINITION OF RELIGION:

According to the philologists Max Muller, "the root of the English word "religion", the Latin "religo", was originally used to mean only reverence for God or the Gods, carefully pondering of divine things, piety" The typical dictionary definition of religion refers to a "belief in, or the worship of , a God or Gods" or the "Service and worship of God or the supernatural."

Edward Burnett Tylor defined religion as "the belief in spiritual being".

The anthropologist Clifford Greetz defined religion as a "system of symbol which acts to establish powerful pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing, these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic".

The sociologist Emile Durkheim, in his seminal book The Elementary forms of the Religious life, defined religion as a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things"

Animism

Animism is generally the doctrine that some vital principle or some kind of soul produces the living phenomena of organized bodies and yet exists apart from those bodies. Edward Burnett Tylor in his book "Primitive Culture" (1871) defined animism as the belief in spiritual beings and the basis of all religions. In his book, he showed the evolution of religion from animism to monotheism through polytheism. Spirits are the ethereal embodiment without real flesh

and blood. Although they are non-material, they are real enough for those who believe in it. Primitives use different names to refer to these spirits – ghost, goblin, genii, trolls, fairy, witch, demon, devil, angel and even god. A spirit does not obey the laws of nature and can transcend matter, time and space. This makes the spirits wonderful and mysterious and therefore they have been regarded as supernatural.

According to Edward Burnett Tylor, all primitive people recognize some sort of subtle invisible matter inside each living body which initiates the activities of the individual. When the matter leaves the body all activities of life are stopped and the body becomes still. The unseen subtle matter is regarded as power and termed as soul (anima). As the dead people often come in the dreams with life-like appearance, souls are considered as indestructible and eternal. After leaving the body, they become spirits and begin to dwell in certain places or things and wander anywhere without any restriction by time and space. This concept of soul is the root of animism.

Edward Burnett Tylor considered the belief in spirit or invisible soul or "self" as almost an inevitable result of a universal phenomenon such as dream. Very commonly the view is held that spirit visits a man in sleep, that too when he is experiencing dreams. Tylor asserted that the primitive man could hardly explain a dream in which he had certain "actual" experiences. For example, he dreamt of a

hunting adventure which resulted in taking home the hunted animal and enjoying a fine dinner. After waking up from sleep he found in reality that he had not left his cave. The primitive man hence believed in two kinds of souls- body-soul or the fixed soul, and the free soul or the shadow. The body-soul animates the body and pervades the whole of it. The free-soul being independent of the body can come out of the body and wander in different places. When it departs the body forever, the man dies. The dead person, distant relatives, next-door neighbour, ferocious animals etc. appear in dreams and trances, because the soul interacts with them. However a man goes on sleeping until the free soul comes back to the body to make him awake. Free souls can easily be captured and injuries are created when these souls are affected.

The primitives seem to be much anxious with the ultimately departed immortal body- soul which can harm the living people. There is hardly any primitive group who does not care about this soul. But the ideas regarding the size and shape of this soul differ from region to region. Among the Lakhers of Assam, the soul resembles the original body in appearance and size. The Thadou Kukis of Manipur consider the soul as a minute replica of the individual. The idea is same to their Naga neighbour of Manipur and Naga hills. Sema Nagas view the soul as a shadow and reflection of the body. The Chenchus of Hyderabad know that the souls turn to the mortal world immediately after death. Todas of Nilgiri hills hold the opposite view. However animism has been universally accepted as the essence of primitive religion.

Animatism and Manaism

A few scholars criticized E.B. Tylor's theory of animism. According to them, the theory of animism was too critical and that did not deal with the emotional content of religion. Prof. Max Muller postulated a pre-animism stage where the spirits were

not supposed to be only those of the dead man, rather each and every object was considered to have a life and so all of them were the animate (living) objects.

In other words, animatism refers to the belief in anything or any body who is animate or endowed with "life" and that "life" is considered to have a supernatural power of force. Max Muller has shown that the earliest form of religion consisted of the worship of various objects in nature. An attitude of awe and reverence worked in the mind of the people regarding the diversified natural objects and phenomena. Being perplexed, they ascribed life to the lifeless things and corrected the unseen source of power with god. An example of animatism is found in the tribes of Bihar. They consider the bones, beads, stones and feathers to have living and magical powers. The stones are considered to be the children of mother earth and worshipped them.

More recently, Prof. R.R. Marett explained the situation with a specialized form of animatist theory called "Manaism" Mana is a Melanesian term meaning power. According to Prof. R.R. Marett, the primitive people throughout the world believe in the existence of an impersonal power, non-material supernatural power, which belongs to all objects -animate and inanimate. It resides beyond the reach of physical sense but is manifested as a physical force. All objects in nature possess it to a greater or lesser degree.

The publication, in 1891, of a work on Melanesian religion by R.H. Codrington attracted considerable scholarly attention and had important influence on subsequent interpretations of primitive religion. R.H. Codrington has pointed out that Mana is "A force altogether distinct from physical power which acts in all kinds of ways for good and evil and which is of the greatest advantage to possess or control." Ghost of the dead and spirits of many kinds had mana. Mana was highly communicable and could be drawn from and imparted to objects and man. The force of mana does not maintain conformity with the regular laws of nature or

technological knowledge and skill. It does not always work. But when it works, it shows an exceptional power to do things which are unusual. It appears all of a sudden as a supernatural attribute of persons and things. Any extra-ordinary aptitude of man can be explained in terms of mana. In Polynesia, where there were traditionally elaborate systems of rank, mana was often used as a direct measure of social position. High ranking individuals, might in fact possess so much mana that it is a prestige and mana were gained principally by personal achievement. Any success in life is considered as a blessing for mana. In Polynesia, the master craftsman is able to show his excellence because he possesses mana. The knowledge of a learned man is reflected for having mana. The weapon with which a mighty warrior wins a battle is also a favour of mana. An outstanding healer, an expert canoe-man and every successful man possess the power of mana in the background. The causes of failure are counted as a loss of mana. Any misfortune in the kingdom like outbreak of epidemic disease, famine, etc. is believed to be caused due to loss of mana on the part of the king.

M. J Herskovits compared mana with electricity. In his words “like electricity mana is impersonal and like electricity it can be channeled, direct and used to achieve a desired end by one who knows how to manipulate it”. Such a power can be diverted from an object to another, from a man or animal to another. Ideas similar to mana are found all over the world, though they are sometimes called by different names. For example the American Indians recognize a similar power known as “Orenda”, the Iroquois call it “Wakan” and the Algonquin Red Indians call it “Manitou”. Some Indian tribes, namely Santhals, Mundas and Hos designate the power as “Bonga”. This mysterious force influences not only man and other living beings, but it can also act on non-living objects like the sun, moon, mountains, rivers, rocks and seas.

Fetishism

Fetishism has been defined both as religion and as magic. In origin, it is the most primitive form of religion. It refers to an object called fetish such as a stone, shell, necklace or a piece of carved stone which is believed to have a power personal or impersonal and is capable of helping its possessor. The word fetish is derived from the Portuguese *fetico*, “something made” and was used by the early Portuguese to denote the charms and images of African people. Though the Portuguese explorers used this term to refer to the wooden images of the West African Negroes, the term is not necessarily restricted to denote artificial things. A leaf, a feather, a horn, a stone or any such thing of unusual shape is treasured and adored in exactly the same way as a carved figure. On the other hand, in the very area where the phenomena was first observed the most elaborate image is merely a work of art until a magician has “consecrated” it by thrashing a particular kind of paint into one opening or crooning a spell over it. That is to say the service of power may be impersonal, vested in an unintelligible way in paints, words or technique used.

Fetish is an object imbued with ritual potency often surrounded with taboos and conferring material benefits upon its keeper. It endows objects with supernatural or mystical powers for good or evil. The person who possesses the fetish can ward off bad luck and will have good fortunes. The fetish is, therefore adored, placated, insulted or ill-treated according to its behaviour whether it fulfills or does not fulfill its possessor’s wish. Hence, fetishism is nothing but the adoration of material things because of their mysterious power. The examples of fetishtic thinking can be seen from the widespread belief among rural people in India.

Totemism

Totemism is an extension of fetishism. A totem is a species of animal or plant; or part of an animal or plant; or a natural object or phenomenon or the symbol of any of these which signifies distinguishing features of human group, similarly represented in the same society.

In the words of James George Frazer, a totem is a class of material objects which a savage regards with superstitious respect believing that there exists between him and every member of the clan an intimate and altogether a special relation. A totem is generally an animal, rarely a plant which gives its names to clan or may be otherwise associated with it.

The concept of totemism has not been satisfactorily defined. However it could be said that according to the theory of "totemism", a tribe is supposed to be related to an object- mainly animal or plant towards which they behave in a reverent manner by adopting its name and offering sacrifices or adoring it. The totems usually belong to the animal world - real or imaginary - and a few belong to the vegetable world.

According to Emile Durkheim, all religious belief must have emanated as a sort of collective representation of the society in the form of totemic symbols. Emile Durkheim regarded the culture of Australian Aborigines as the crudest in the world. And using it as the representative of the ancient conditions of mankind, he saw in the Australian totemic ritual the earliest form of religion. He found 460 of 500 totemic names in south eastern Australia to be names for animals and plants. Only 40 were for inanimate objects such as the moon, stars, fire, smoke and water.

Members of the tribal group affiliate themselves with the totem. The totem is a collective religious object having supernatural or mysterious powers for the group. Totem is associated with tribal organization and it becomes the name of the tribe, an image of the totemic spirit and the animal or plant with which the tribe identifies.

The tribe - the spirit - and the animal - are united in a trinity which cannot be separated into parts.

Totemism appeared to be important to those societies in which it was found, by observers. It seemed to be important to be associated with the rule of exogamy between totemic groups. The relation that exists between the totem and the people is sometimes taken to be one of blood relationship. Hence the totem has to be crossed in marriage. The killing or eating the groups' totem or insulting it, or using it for some purpose other than worshipping is tabooed. The totemic emblems are evolved with religious attitude and descent is traced through the totemic line. Totem may be a wolf, bear, turtle, hawk, fox, etc. It has to be admitted that none of the traits mentioned above are invariable features of totemic societies. Though totemism is universally found it exhibits considerable variations.

NATURISM

Max Muller said that the earliest form of religion must have been the worship of objects of nature; and evidence in support of such a view has come in from archaeological excavations conducted in Egypt and elsewhere. It is maintained that an attitude of awe or love and reverence towards objects of nature is born as a result of a "diseased" mind which invests lifeless things with life and all the power that is associated with life. This error of mind is, according to this theory, born out of defective language. Such linguistic errors as the sun rises and sets, or thunder sends rain, or the tree bears flowers and fruits, give rise to belief in some power inherent in the suns, thunder, trees, etc. So far as it is maintained that objects of nature were worshipped, no difficulty arises; evidence in favour of such a practice is heavy, But any claim to such worship being the earliest form of religion, or the explanation given, is not convincing. There is no proof to show that various conceptions follow

linguistic expressions about the same. On the contrary, linguistic expressions may follow certain already existent ideas. The merit and usefulness of these various theories emerges when they are taken together, as each of them expresses some essential truth regarding primitive religion