

**An Assessment of the Early Theories of Religion by
Edward B. Tylor, James G. Frazer, Sigmund Freud
and Their Nexus with Cognitive Theorizing**

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Abstract

From the world on go, man has been asking questions on the origin and formation of religion. These questions are as a result of the quest in man to understand his object of worship, the Supreme Being or the ultimate reality. Hence it has been ascertained that man is homo-religiosus and as such is religiously incurable. It has also been established that people have faith because beliefs make sense in so far as they hold value and are comprehensible. This is also evidenced in the level and quest for people's religiosity in the present dispensation. Religion as it is practiced today developed from theories which are posited by scholars in trying to give their explanations to it. Among those scholars are Edward Burnett Tylor, James George Frazer and Sigmund Freud who made their points from both substantive theory which is focusing on the value of religion for its adherent and functional perspectives which is more interested with what religion does. Their theories were not without some influence from their intellectual backgrounds. It is germane to posit that in trying a work of this nature, the paper makes use of library and internet sources in its research. The paper therefore finds that religion is an aspect of life that is very important to human life, hence the quest for every scholar to make a contribution to it. It concludes that faith and beliefs arise from the normal function of the human mind of which the human minds acquire, generate, and transmit religious thoughts, practices, and schemas by means of ordinary cognitive capacities.

Key Words: Assessment, Theories, Religion, Edward B. Tylor, James G. Frazer, Sigmund Freud Nexus, Cognitive Theorizing

Introduction

Over the years, the concept of religion has received myriad definitions and ascriptions from different scholars and authorities. This is so because every of those scholars saw religion as having a role to play in every human being which made them to lay their voices in its definition. Man from the world go has been seen as religiously incurable and as such is homo religiousus which is not debatable with copious instances. In the words of Agbikimi (2014), the concept of religion has a wider spectrum of coverage in its meaning which is evidenced in the enormous ways of its definition. Many people recognize their own religious tradition as religion with the exclusive understanding of expression like worship and prayer as peculiar to their practice. There has been an aged long and unaddressed problem of defining religion, which is owing to various interest in its definition but in trying to carry out a work of this nature, the definition of Ejizu captivates my attention. In his definition, Ejizu (2008) opines that religion is referred to as man's experience of the holy and ultimate reality as well as the expression of the awareness in concrete life. This definition is found to be suitable in this regard because it has a coherent and understandable linkage with the assessment that this work is intended for. In view of the above noted points, this work is an attempt to study the early theories of religion by Edward Burnett Tylor, James George Frazer and Sigmund Freud with the aim of identifying and discussing their (a) evolutionary content, (b) intellectual content and (c) their nexus with cognitive theorizing. Before delving into this discussion, it will be pertinent to shade a light on the concept of theory of religion.

Understanding Theories of Religion

Theories of religion are general attempt to explain the origin and function of religion. These theories define what scholars present as universal characteristics of religious belief and practice. Theories are seen as interconnected set of ideas or statements expressed in language that frames cognitive claims about some phenomenon. Agbikimi (2014) sees theories as coherently a body of explanation, rules, ideas, principles, and techniques that are systematically arranged for comprehension. They help scholars to evaluate and unravel the underlying principles of the study, of why religion exists, how it developed, what needs religion serves among the people, especially when seen as distinct from actual practice. On the other hand, when a reference is made to “early theories of religion”, it means a period in history that depends on no modern technologies to provide comfort and efficiency in human activities. It was a time in history when the religious and philosophical development of humanity has not been organized into separate and distinct evolutionary stage by scholars. It is important to note here that, theories of religion are divided into classes; substantive theories, functional theories and Social relational theories.

Substantive or Essentialist Theories: These theories of religion according to Pals (1996) focus on the contents of religions and the meaning the contents have for people. This approach asserts that people have faith because beliefs make sense in so far as they hold value and are comprehensible. The theories by Tylor and Frazer focusing on the explanatory value of religion for its adherents, by Rudolf Otto focusing on the importance of religious experience, more specifically experiences that are both fascinating and terrifying and by Mircea Eliade focusing on the longing for

otherworldly perfection, the quest for meaning, and the search for patterns in mythology in various religions offer examples of substantive theories.

Functional Theories: These theories focus on the social or psychological functions that religion has for a group or a person. In simple terms, the functional approach sees religion as "performing certain functions for society". Theories by Karl Marx which is on the role of religion in capitalist and pre-capitalist societies, Sigmund Freud on psychological origin of religious beliefs, Émile Durkheim on social function of religions, and the theory by Stark and Bainbridge exemplify functional theories. This approach tends to be static, with the exception of Marx' theory, and unlike e.g. Weber's approach, which treats of the interaction and dynamic processes between religions and the rest of societies.

Social Relational Theories: This theory of religion focuses on the nature or social form of the beliefs and practices. Here, Charles Taylor's book on the Secular Age is exemplary, as is the work of Clifford Geertz. The approach is expressed in Paul James's argument that religion is a 'relatively bounded system of beliefs, symbols and practices that addresses the nature of existence through communion with others and Otherness, lived as both taking in and spiritually transcending socially grounded ontologies of time, space, embodiment and knowing. This avoids the dichotomy between the immanent and transcendental.

Haven laid the base of this work; it will be germane at this point to look at the evolutionary and intellectual content of each of the scholars theories.

Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917)

The anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) defined religion as belief in spiritual beings, stating that this belief originated as explanations of natural phenomena. Belief in spirits grew out of attempts to explain life and death. Primitive people used human dreams in which spirits seemed to appear as an indication that the human mind could exist independent of a body. They used this by extension to explain life and death and belief in the afterlife. He used myths and deities to explain natural phenomena originated by analogy and an extension of these explanations. His theory assumed that the psyches of all peoples of all times are more or less the same and that explanations in cultures and religions tend to grow more sophisticated via monotheist religions, such as Christianity and eventually to science. Tylor saw practices and beliefs in modern societies that were similar to those of primitive societies as survivals.

In trying to explain religion, Tylor used the concept of Animism. The term animism according to Tylor (2005) refers not to a type of religion but to a theory of religion. Asserting a minimal definition of religion as belief in spiritual beings, Tylor argued that religious belief originated in the primordial mistake of attributing life, soul, or spirit to inanimate objects. This theory of animism is derived from the primitive inability to distinguish between dreams and waking consciousness. When the “primitive” ancestors of humanity dreamed about deceased friends or relatives, they assumed that the dead were still alive in some spiritual form. Out of dreams, therefore, evolved the doctrine of souls and other spiritual beings in general, a doctrine that was rational, even if it was a childish philosophy enveloped in intense and inveterate ignorance. Animism belief in innumerable spiritual beings

concerned with human affairs and capable of helping or harming human interests.

Animistic beliefs were first competently surveyed by Sir Edward Burnett Tylor in his work *Primitive Culture* (1871), to which is owed the continued currency of the term. According to Park (2019 retrieved), the concept of animism was an answer to the question, “What is the most rudimentary form of religion which may yet bear that name?” He had learned to doubt scattered reports of people as low in culture as to have no religious conceptions whatever. He thought religion was present in all cultures, properly observed, and might turn out to be present everywhere. Far from supposing religion of some kind to be a cornerstone of all culture, however, he entertained the idea of a pre-religious stage in the evolution of cultures and believed that a tribe in that stage might be found. To proceed in a systematic study of the problem, he required a minimum definition of religion and found it in the belief in Spiritual beings. If it could be shown that no people was devoid of such minimal belief, then it would be known that all of humanity already had passed the threshold into the religious state of culture.

Tylor asserts that people everywhere would be impressed by the vividness of dream images and would reason that dreams of dead kin or of distant friends were proof of the existence of souls. The simple belief in these spiritual beings, independent of natural bodies, would, he thought, expand to include more elaborate religious doctrines, accompanied by rites designed to influence powerful spirits and so control important natural events. While Tylor offered no special theory for this expansion and so avoided most of the traps of early social evolutionism, he taught that cultures moved, though not along any single path, from simpler to more complex forms. The direction of movement was shown by

the survival of animism in muted but recognizable forms in the advanced civilization of his days. This “development theory” he championed against the so-called degradation theory, which held that the religion of remote peoples could only have spread to them from centres of high culture, such as early Egypt, becoming degraded in the process of transfer. Tylor showed that animistic beliefs exhibit great variety and often are uniquely suited to the cultures and natural settings in which they are found.

In retrospect, Park posits that Tylor seems more balanced in his judgments than later writers who constructed the problem of “minimal religion” in a narrower frame. Tylor’s greatest limitation was self-imposed, since he narrowed his attention to what may be called the cognitive aspects of animism, leaving aside the religion of vision and passion. Tylor took animism in its simplest manifestation to be a crude childlike natural philosophy that led people to a doctrine of universal vitality whereby sun and stars, trees and rivers, winds and clouds, become personal animate creatures. But his cognitive emphasis led him to understate the urgent practicality of the believer’s concern with the supernatural. It is argued from this point that Tylor’s believers are “armchair primitives”, the creatures of armchair anthropologists, not real individuals caught in the toils of discord, disease, and fear of perdition.

Importance of Animism to Religion

The term animism denotes not a single creed or doctrine but a view of the world consistent with a certain range of religious beliefs and practices, many of which may survive in more complex and hierarchical religions. Modern scholarship’s concern with animism is coeval with the problem of rational or scientific understanding of religion itself. After the age of exploration, Europe’s best

information on the newly discovered people of America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania often came from Christian missionaries. While generally unsympathetic to what was regarded as “primitive superstition,” some missionaries in the 19th century developed a scholarly interest in beliefs that seemed to represent an early type of religious creed, inferior but ancestral to their own. It is this interest that was crystallized by Tylor in *Primitive Culture*, the greater part of which is given over to the description of exotic religious behaviour. To the intellectuals of that time, profoundly affected by Charles Darwin’s new biology, animism seemed a key to the so-called primitive mind, to human intellect at the earliest knowable stage of cultural evolution. Present day thinkers consider this view to be rooted in a profoundly mistaken premise. Since at least the mid-20th century, all contemporary cultures and religions have been regarded by anthropologists as comparable in the sense of reflecting a fully evolved human intelligence capable of learning the arts of the most advanced society. The religious ideas of the “Stone Age” hunters interviewed during the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries have been far from simple.

Since the great religions of the world have all evolved in historic times, it may be assumed that animistic emphases dominated the globe in the pre-historic era. In societies lacking any doctrinal establishment, a closed system of beliefs was less likely to flourish than an open one. There is, however, no ground for supposing that polytheistic and monotheistic ideas were excluded. But what is plain today that no historically given creed has an inevitable appeal to the educated mind, had scarcely gained a place in scholarly argument more than 100 years ago.

James George Frazer (1854-1941)

James George Frazer was a Scottish social anthropologist and folklorist influential in the early stages of the modern studies of mythology and comparative religion. His most famous work, *The Golden Bough* (1890), documents and details the similarities among magical and religious beliefs around the globe. Frazer posited that human belief progressed through three stages: primitive magic, replaced by religion, in turn replaced by science.

James George Frazer follows Tylor's theories to a great extent in his book *The Golden Bough*, but he distinguished between magic and religion. Magic is used to influence the natural world in the primitive man's struggle for survival. He asserted that magic relied on an uncritical belief of primitive people in contact and imitation. For example, precipitation may be invoked by the primitive man by sprinkling water on the ground. He asserted that according to them, magic worked through laws. In contrast religion is faith that the natural world is ruled by one or more deities with personal characteristics with who can be pleaded, not by laws. The method that Tylor and Frazer used was seeking similar beliefs and practices in all societies, especially the more primitive ones, more or less regardless of time and place. They relied heavily on reports made by missionaries, discoverers, and colonial civil servants.

According to Jason (2017), among the most influential elements of the third edition of *The Golden Bough* is Frazer's theory of cultural evolution and the place Frazer assigns religion and magic in that theory. Frazer's theory of cultural evolution was not absolute and could reverse, but sought to broadly describe three spheres through which cultures were thought to pass over time. Frazer believed that, over time, culture passed through three stages, moving from magic, to religion, to science. Frazer's

classification notably diverged from earlier anthropological descriptions of cultural evolution, including that of Auguste Comte, because he claimed magic was both initially separate from religion and invariably preceded religion. He also defined magic separately from belief in the supernatural and superstition, presenting an ultimately ambivalent view of its place in culture.

Furthermore, Frazer believed that magic and science were similar because both shared an emphasis on experimentation and practicality; indeed, his emphasis on this relationship is so broad that almost any disproven scientific hypothesis technically constitutes magic under his system. In contrast to both magic and science, Frazer defined religion in terms of belief in personal, supernatural forces and attempts to appease them. As historian of religion Jason (2017) in describing Frazer's views, saw religion as "a momentary aberration in the grand trajectory of human thought." He thus ultimately proposed and attempted to further a narrative of secularization and one of the first social-scientific expressions of a disenchantment narrative. At the same time, Frazer was aware that both magic and religion could persist or return. He noted that magic sometimes returned so as to become science, such as when alchemy underwent a revival in Early Modern Europe and became chemistry. On the other hand, Frazer displayed a deep anxiety about the potential of widespread belief in magic to empower the masses, indicating fears of and biases against lower-class people in his thought.

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)

According to Cherry (2019), Sigmund Freud's views on religion are described in several of his books and essays. Freud regarded God as an illusion, based on the infantile need for a powerful father figure; religion, necessary to help us restrain violent

impulses earlier in the development of civilization, can now be set aside in favour of reason and science. He believed that religion was an expression of underlying psychological neuroses and distress. At various points in his writings, he suggested that religion was an attempt to control the Oedipal complex (as opposed to the Electra complex), a means of giving structure to social groups, wish fulfillment, an infantile delusion and an attempt to control the outside world.

Sigmund Freud saw religion as an illusion, a belief that people very much wanted to be true. Unlike Tylor and Frazer, Freud attempted to explain why religion persists in spite of the lack of evidence for its tenets. Freud asserts that religion is a largely unconscious neurotic response to repression. By repression Freud meant that civilized society demands that we not fulfill all our desires immediately, but that they have to be repressed. Rational arguments to a person holding a religious conviction will not change the neurotic response of a person. This is in contrast to Tylor and Frazer, who saw religion as a rational and conscious, though primitive and mistaken, attempt to explain the natural world.

In his opinion on Totem and Taboo published in 1913, Freud analyzes the tendency of primitive tribes to promulgate rules against incest within groups named for totem animal and objects, and to create taboos regarding actions, people and things. He notes that taboos (such as that regarding incest) still play a significant role in modern society but that totemism has long been abandoned as an actuality and replaced by newer forms. Freud believes that an original act of patricide, the killing and devouring of "the violent primal father" was remembered and re-enacted as a totem meal, mankind's earliest festival which was the beginning of so many things of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion.

Freud develops this idea further in *Moses and Monotheism*, his last book. He further goes on to attribute creation of gods to humans: thus, "...we know that, like gods, demons are only the product of the psychic powers of man; they have been created from and out of something." (Freud, 1959)

In *The Future of an Illusion* which was his second book dated 1927; Freud refers to religion as an illusion which is perhaps the most important item in the psychical inventory of a civilization. In his estimation, religion provides for defense against the crushingly superior force of nature and the urge to rectify the shortcomings of civilization which made them painfully felt. He concludes that all religious beliefs are "illusions and unsusceptible of proof." Freud then examines the issue of whether without religion; people will feel exempt from all obligations to obey the precepts of civilization. He notes that civilization has little to fear from educated people and brain-workers in whom secular motives for morality replace religious ones; but he acknowledges the existence of the great mass of the uneducated and oppressed who may commit murder if not told that God forbids it, and who must be held down most severely unless the relationship between civilization and religion undergoes a fundamental revision.

Going further, Freud asserts that dogmatic religious training contributes to a weakness of intellect by foreclosing lines of inquiry. He argues that in the long run nothing can withstand reason and experience, and the contradiction which religion offers to both is all too palpable. The book expressed Freud's hope that in the future science will go beyond religion, and reason will replace faith in God (O'Neill and Aktar, 2009). Speaking in his autobiographical study, Freud (1989) states that his essentially negative view of religion changed somewhat after *The Future of an*

Illusion; while religion's power lies on the truth which it contains, I showed that that truth was not a material but a historical truth.

Bloom (1992) sees the Future of an Illusion as one of the great failures of religious criticism. He believes that Freud underestimated religion, and that as a result his criticisms of it were no more convincing than Eliot's criticisms of psychoanalysis. Bloom goes further to suggest that psychoanalysis and Christianity are both interpretations of the world and of human nature, and that while Freud believed that religious beliefs are illusions and delusions, the same may be said of psychoanalytic theory. In his view, nothing is accomplished with regard to either Christianity or psychoanalysis by listing their illusions and delusions.

Freud's Criticism of Religion

Cherry (2019) posits that while fascinated by religion and spirituality, Freud was also at times quite critical. He critiqued religion for being unwelcoming, harsh, and unloving toward those who are not members of a specific religious group. It is seen that from the future of an Illusion (1927): the knowledge of the historical worth of certain religious doctrines increases the respect for them, but does not invalidate the proposal that they should cease to be put forward as the reasons for the precepts of civilization. On the contrary, those historical residues have helped to view religious teachings, as it were, as neurotic relics, and may now argue that the time has probably come, as it does in an analytic treatment, for replacing the effects of repression by the results of the rational operation of the intellect.

More so, some of his most critical comments can be found in his text on civilization and its discontents. The whole thing is so patently infantile, so foreign to reality, that to anyone with a

friendly attitude to humanity it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life, he suggested. It is still more humiliating to discover how a large number of people living today, who cannot but see that this religion is not tenable, nevertheless try to defend it piece by piece in a series of pitiful rearguard actions. The different religions have never overlooked the part played by the sense of guilt in civilization. What is more, they come forward with a claim to save mankind from this sense of guilt, which they call sin.

A Look at the above Theories and Their Nexus with Cognitive Theorizing

All over the world and throughout history, in cultures as diverse as ancient Mesopotamia and modern America, human beings have been compelled by belief in gods and developed complex religions around them. There have been questions of what makes belief in supernatural beings so widespread? And why are the gods of so many different people so similar in nature? Tremlin (2006) explains the origins and persistence of religious ideas by looking through the lens of science at the common structures and functions of human thought. In his introduction to the cognitive science of religion, *Minds and Gods* present the major themes, theories, and thinkers involved in this revolutionary new approach to human religiosity. Arguing that we cannot understand what we think until we first understand how we think, the book sets out to study the evolutionary forces that modelled the modern human mind and continue to shape our ideas and actions today. Tremlin details many of the adapted features of the brain illustrating their operation with examples of everyday human behaviour and shows how mental endowments inherited from our ancestral past lead many people to naturally entertain religious ideas. In short, belief

in gods and the social formation of religion have their genesis in biology, in powerful cognitive processes that all humans share.

Furthermore, in the course of illuminating the nature of religion, this book also sheds light on human nature: why we think we do the things we do and how the reasons for these things are so often hidden from view. This discussion ranges broadly across recent scientific findings in areas such as paleoanthropology, primate studies, evolutionary psychology, early brain development, and cultural transmission. While these subjects are complex, the story is told here in a conversational style that is engaging, jargon free, and accessible to all readers. With *Minds and Gods*, Tremplin offers a roadmap to a fascinating and growing field of study, one that is sure to generate interest and debate and provide readers with a better understanding of themselves and their beliefs.

Cognitive (theorizing) science of religion is the study of religious thought and behaviour from the perspective of the cognitive and evolutionary sciences. The field employs methods and theories from a very broad range of disciplines, including: cognitive psychology, evolutionary psychology, cognitive anthropology, artificial intelligence, neurotheology, developmental psychology, and archaeology. Scholars in this field seek to explain how human minds acquire, generate, and transmit religious thoughts, practices, and schemas by means of ordinary cognitive capacities. According to Barrett (2010), the view that religious beliefs and practices should be understood as nonfunctional but as produced by human cognitive mechanisms that are functional outside of the context of religion. Examples of this are the hyperactive agent detection device and the minimally counterintuitive concepts or the process of initiation explaining Buddhism and Taoism. The cognitive by-product explanation of religion is an application of the concept of spandrel (biology) and

of the concept of expatriation explored by Stephen Jay Gould among others (Boyer, 2001).

Atran & Norenzayan (2004) in their view posit that although religion has been the subject of serious scientific study since at least the late nineteenth century, the study of religion as a cognitive phenomenon is relatively recent. While it often relies upon earlier research within anthropology of religion and sociology of religion, cognitive science of religion considers the results of that work within the context of evolutionary and cognitive theories. As such, cognitive science of religion was only made possible by the cognitive revolution of the 1950s and the development, starting in the 1970s, of sociobiology and other approaches explaining human behaviour in evolutionary terms, especially evolutionary psychology.

Since 2000, cognitive science of religion has grown, similarly to other approaches that apply evolutionary thinking to sociological phenomena. Each year more researchers become involved in the field with theoretical and empirical developments proceeding at a very rapid pace. The field remains somewhat loosely defined, bringing together as it does researchers who come from a variety of different traditions. Much of the cohesion in the field comes not from shared detailed theoretical commitments but from a general willingness to view religion in cognitive and evolutionary terms as well as from the willingness to engage with the work of the others developing this field. A vital role in bringing together researchers is played by the International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion, formed in 2006.

Purportedly, Agbikimi (2014) opines that cognitive theory is a psychological theory that attempts to explain human behaviour by understanding the thought process. He maintains that the assumption is that humans are logical beings who make choices

that are most sensible to them. In his expatiation, Tremlin (2006) in his work on mind and Gods - the cognitive foundations of religion in trying to offer an answer to the question of why people believe in supernatural beings and why they also believe in particular being. To this, he maintains that the answer can be found in the manner the brain functions. It is central to what comes into the body and what goes out. It interprets and interacts with the external world and it concerns the physical system and mental conceptions of our inner world. He goes on to say that minds and Gods are connected because supernatural beings as well as the religious system which they are part of are among the plethora of mental conceptions acquired, represented and transmitted by human brain. The cognitive science of religion shows for mans understanding of human religiosity. Man can only accommodate religious ideas which his brain can understand and the religious concepts can easily become personally compelling.

Conclusion

Religion as we have it today is premised on different ideas and perceptions from different scholars which are view from psychological, sociological and anthropological stance. This work has made an attempt to look at the concept of Animism as the theory of religion as propounded by Edward Burnett Tylor. It looked at religion as moving through a process from magic to science as opined by James George Frazer and also at Totem and Taboo, and the Future of an Illusion by Sigmund Freud. The paper made an attempt to conclude by bringing those theories nexus with cognitive theorizing which holds that religious beliefs arise from the normal functioning of the human mind. And the view that religious beliefs and practices should be understood as

nonfunctional but as produced by human cognitive mechanisms that are functional outside of the context of religion.

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