

CHAPTER 2: BEGINNINGS OF THE HUMAN RELIGIOUS ADVENTURE

Chapter Overview

I. Introduction

Humans lived for hundreds of thousands and even millions of years prior to the development of the major world religions of today. Many human religions are prehistoric and hence mostly unknown, except for bits of information we can glean from archeology. Most of the religions of the past that we know about belonged to the great ancient civilizations that produced written records and texts. A common characteristic of the religions in ancient civilizations is their tribal or ethnic character; except for certain thinkers in China, India, Greece, and Rome, they generally did not see themselves as universally relevant.

II. Story of Humankind Before History

There are numerous theories to explain the origins of human religion. For example, many have sought to explain the origins as expressions of animism, magical thinking, and psychological, social, and/or anthropological factors. All such theories are nearly useless because they rely on evolutionary theories of culture and lack data. It is better to ask how long have there been humans to express themselves through religious experience. Early human species existed two to three million years ago. A million years ago *Homo erectus* emerged. Then Neanderthals emerged and lived 100,000 to 35,000 years ago. *Homo sapiens* emerged 20,000 years ago. Neanderthals and early *Homo sapiens* clearly had developed religious ideas about death and the afterlife. There seems to have also been a close religious connection between late Neanderthals / early *Homo sapiens* and animals. Female figurines found from early *Homo sapiens*' communities suggests there was some worship of goddesses or a Great Goddess. During the Neolithic period (ca. 8000-3000 B.C.E.) humans gradually ceased being hunter-gatherers and turned to agriculture and the domestication of animals. The agricultural revolution dramatically altered human life, particularly religious life. Humans became more attuned to the powers and cycles of the earth, and turned religious attention to goddesses associated with the cyclical death and rebirth of the vegetation.

III. Religions of the Great Ancient Civilizations

During the Bronze Age (ca. 3200-1200 B.C.E.) and the Iron Age (starting ca. 1200 B.C.E.) towns and cities began to develop, kingdoms evolved, and great ancient empires emerged. The invention of writing during this period gives us the first real historical records we have of human religions. We see the development of great religious systems; many of them were still tied in some way to agriculture and settled human life. The most important characteristic shared by the religions of ancient civilizations is the strong ritual component because it is through highly complex rituals that crops, society, and the cosmos are sustained.

Key Names, Concepts, and Terms

agricultural revolution	Homo erectus	Neanderthal
ancient civilizations	Homo sapiens sapiens	Neolithic
animism	Indo-European	Paleolithic
great goddesses	magic	prehistorical

Question for Class Discussion

Why were goddesses so much a part of prehistorical and ancient human religion? Why do you think so many religions, particularly in the West, no longer include goddess worship in their religious practices? What are the possible losses and gains of having feminine imagery associated with practices and doctrines of the highest religious reality?

Essay Questions

1. Discuss Edward B. Tylor's theory of animism. Then discuss James Frazer's theory of magic. What were they trying to explain with these theories?
2. Discuss Sigmund Freud and Emile Durkheim's approaches to the study of religion. What do both approaches have in common and how are they different?
3. What problems does Ludwig identify with all the modern approaches to the study of the origins of human religion?
4. Explain why archeologists believe that humans in the Upper Paleolithic Period might have worshipped goddesses or a Great Goddess. What were some of the possible reasons why humans in this period might have associated religion and feminine imagery?
5. Discuss the place of animals in the religions of prehistoric peoples and explain why scholars speculate about this.
6. Why do scholars believe that Neanderthal humans had developed religious ideas? What kind of ideas seem to be most common among them? Give examples.
7. What do scholars believe about the religious understanding of death among early Homo sapiens? Discuss how this understanding might be a development of earlier ones.
8. Discuss the role of language and art in developing the religious ideas of Upper Paleolithic people.
9. Discuss the transition from hunter-gatherer society to agricultural society (ca. 8000-3000 B.C.E.) and its impact on the development of human religion.

10. Explain why the Bronze Age and the Iron Age are so significant for the development of religion. Discuss some of the continuities and discontinuities between the religions of the ancient civilizations and the earlier phases of agricultural society.

Test Questions

Multiple choice

1. Humans lived for _____ percent of our human story in length of time prior to the development of the world religions of today.
 - A. 89.9
 - B. 95.9
 - C. 98.9
 - D. 99.9
2. A common characteristic of the religions in ancient civilizations is their
 - A. focus on the worship of a single goddess.
 - B. universal relevance.
 - C. tribal or ethnic character.
 - D. worship of the cycles and rhythms of nature.
3. The earliest form of human species was
 - A. Homo sapiens.
 - B. Neanderthal.
 - C. Paleolithic man.
 - D. Homo erectus.
4. During the _____ period human society began to undergo an agricultural revolution.
 - A. Paleolithic
 - B. Neolithic
 - C. Bronze Age
 - D. Iron Age
5. The rise of great ancient empires saw the emergence of
 - A. goddess worship.
 - B. the invention of writing.
 - C. human ideas about the afterlife.
 - D. organized religion under the leadership of priests and priestesses.
6. In the Bronze and Iron Ages highly developed civilizations emerged in
 - A. the eastern Mediterranean and southern Africa.
 - B. the western Mediterranean and north-eastern Africa.
 - C. the Indus River region and eastern China.
 - D. All of the above.

7. Many ancient peoples stemmed from _____, who migrated westward from _____.
 - A. Mongols; northern China.
 - B. Indo-Europeans; the steppes of Asia.
 - C. Persians; Persia.
 - D. Sumerians; Babylonia.

8. The religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism all have some distant roots in the religions of the _____ people who migrated to India.
 - A. Aryan
 - B. Chinese
 - C. Syro-Palestinian
 - D. northern Mediterranean

9. The religions of the ancient civilizations were all generally characterized by
 - A. belief in many gods of nature.
 - B. notions of sacred monarchy.
 - C. elaborate priesthoods.
 - D. All of the above.

10. The most characteristic feature of ancient religion is
 - A. highly codified written doctrines.
 - B. the exclusion of feminine religious imagery and goddess worship.
 - C. the strong ritual component.
 - D. the practice of animal and human sacrifice.

True/False Questions

11. The world religions of today all reached their classical form within the past four thousand years.

12. Most of the prehistoric religions of the past are unknown to us because, although they belonged to great ancient civilizations, they were extremely cultic and secretive about their doctrines and doctrines and practices; even in their own time few people knew about them.

13. Ancient peoples often did not have a word for “religion” because they had so totally integrated religious activities into their daily way of life that it was unnecessary.

14. The Neanderthal type of humans lived about 100,000 to 35,000 years ago and seemed to have had developed religious ideas associated with death and the afterlife.

15. Homo erectus from 20,000 years ago buried bodies in a fetal position, suggesting they believed in a rebirth into an afterlife.

16. Worship of life-giving goddesses may have been one of the earliest and most widespread forms of religious practice.

17. The agricultural revolution (ca. 8000-3000 B.C.E.) mostly ended the ancient practice of goddess worship and ushered in a new era of patriarchal religion.
18. Japan developed an agricultural society and an elaborate imperial state prior to the introduction of writing China.
19. The Aryans who settled India were descended from the ancient Persians.
20. While agricultural civilizations were developing in Europe, the Middle East, India, and China, the ancient peoples of the Americas (Mayas, Aztecs, Incas) were still hunter-gatherers who mostly worshipped animals.

Page References for Essay Questions

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Answer Key for Test Questions

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| 1. D | 11. F |
| 2. C | 12. F |
| 3. D | 13. T |
| 4. B | 14. T |
| 5. B | 15. F |
| 6. C | 16. T |
| 7. B | 17. F |
| 8. A | 18. T |
| 9. D | 19. T |
| 10. C | 20. F |