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Q3(c)

Critically examine different Anthropological approaches to Religion.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2016 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · Religion

5. Religion: Anthropological approaches to the study of religion (evolutionary, psychological and functional); monotheism and polytheism; sacred and profane; myths and rituals; forms of religion in tribal and peasant Societies (animism, animatism, fetishism, naturism and totemism); religion, magic and science distinguished; magico-religious functionaries (priest, shaman, medicine man, sorcerer and witch).

Core demand of the question

- Critically examine different Anthropological approaches to Religion
- Write about 200 words for 15 marks

Revision summary

Tylor and Frazer treated religion as explanation and stage.

Malinowski tied magic to practical anxiety.

Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown tied rite to the group.

Geertz and Turner stress meaning and symbol.

Asad warns that 'religion' is not a neutral universal box.

Introduction

Anthropology has treated religion as error, as social glue, as meaning, and as power. Each approach catches one face of ritual and belief.

Body

Intellectualist and evolutionary

- **Tylor's** animism and **Frazer's** magic-religion-science ladder treated belief as explanation. The limit is the armchair stage.

Emotional and psychological

- **Malinowski** tied Trobriand magic to anxiety at the reef. **Freud** read ritual as neurosis. Useful for motive; thin for public structure.

Sociological

- **Durkheim's** sacred and church, **Radcliffe-Brown's** rites of solidarity, and **Marxist** opium-and-ideology readings stress group and class.
- **Limit:** belief becomes only social cement or only veil.

Symbolic and interpretive

- **Turner's** Ndembu symbols and **Geertz's** religion as a cultural system of moods and motivations.

- **Lévi-Strauss** read myth as logic. Risk: the villager becomes a text.

Later critical

- **Asad** historicised 'religion' as a Christian-secular category. **Tambiah** and **Obeyesekere** brought practice and person back.
- Feminist and postcolonial work ask whose spirits and whose priesthood.

Flow diagram

Religion -> Tylor Frazer intellect
Religion -> Durkheim social
Religion -> Geertz Turner meaning
Religion -> Asad category critique

Conclusion

Approaches to religion run from **Tylor**'s intellectualism through **Durkheim**'s church to **Geertz**'s meaning and **Asad**'s critique of the category. Use them as a kit, not as one church of theory.

Facts & figures

Tylor

Animism as the minimum definition of religion.

Durkheim

Religion as the sacred unifying a church.

Geertz

Religion as a system of symbols establishing moods and motivations.

Asad

Genealogies of Religion: the category itself has a Western history.