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Q4(c)

Critically examine James Frazer's theory of evolutionism. Elucidate the place of religion in modernity

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · Classical evolutionism (Tylor, Morgan and Frazer)

(a) Classical evolutionism (Tylor, Morgan and Frazer)

Core demand of the question

- State Frazer's evolutionist theory of magic, religion and science
- **Examine it critically:** method, unilinear stages and intellectualism
- Elucidate the place of religion in modernity without a simple secularisation story

Revision summary

Frazer moved from magic as coercion, to religion as petition, to science as law, with **sympathetic magic** and survivals.

Critique him for armchair method, unilinear stages, intellectualism and colonial ranking. Magic, religion and science coexist.

The usable fragment is like-produces-like and contact.

- **Modernity is incomplete disenchantment:** civil religion, revival movements and political religion.

A smartphone pilgrimage is not a fossil stage.

Durkheim and **Weber** are better guides to religion as social fact and meaning.

Introduction

- **Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* offered a grand evolution of the human mind:** from magic to religion to science. It was armchair, unilinear and too clean. Later theories of religion had to step around that staircase. The second part of the question is whether religion ended when the staircase reached modernity.

Body

Frazer's evolutionism

Frazer treated **magic** as mistaken natural science. By the law of similarity, like produces like. By the law of contact, things once together remain linked. The magician tries to coerce nature. When coercion fails, humans petition personal powers. That is **religion**. When petition is found wanting, **science** explains impersonal law. Folk custom survives as a fossil of earlier stages. Comparison was global and ripped from context: a rite in Rome and a rite in a colonial ethnography became one type.

This is intellectualist evolutionism. Belief systems are ranked as proto-theories of nature, by how much they err.

Critique

- **Armchair method:** Frazer compared library notes, not living economies. **Malinowski's** Trobriand magic in fishing and gardening is practical and social. That already wounds Frazer.
- **Unilinear stages:** Magic, religion and science coexist in every living society, including laboratories with lucky charms. Stages are a Victorian ranking, not a field sequence.
- **Too cognitive:** Ritual does social work that an error-theory of belief cannot see. **Émile Durkheim's** collective effervescence and Turner's ritual process are the usual counters. **E. E. Evans-Pritchard** on Azande witchcraft also showed that "irrational" belief can be logically organised in daily life.
- **Colonial frame:** "Savages" as the childhood of Europe. Later anthropology refused that timeline.
- **What survives:** The catalogue of **sympathetic magic** still teaches. The staircase does not.

Religion in modernity

Modernity did not empty the world. **Max Weber's** disenchantment was a tendency, not a completed eviction. Secularisation in parts of Europe coexisted with public religion elsewhere, with nationalism as civil religion, with Pentecostal and other revival growth, and with science and piety in the same persons.

- **Place:** Religion remains a source of identity, ethics, protest and consolation. It also remains a field of power, including gender and majoritarianism.
- **Not survivals:** A smartphone pilgrimage, online darshan during COVID-19 lockdowns, or a televised Kumbh is not a Frazerian fossil of magic. It is a contemporary institution and a media form.
- **Indian household:** Clinical medicine and a vow at a shrine often sit in the same family. That coexistence undercuts Frazer's staircase more cleanly than a sermon about secularism.
- **Elucidation:** Modernity pluralises the religious field - privatised belief, marketised devotion, political religion - rather than replacing it with Frazer's science.
- **Durkheim and Weber help the modernity argument more than Frazer himself:** religion as social fact and as meaning under rationalisation.

Flow diagram

Frazer -> Magic
 Magic -> Religion
 Religion -> Science
 Frazer -> Critique: armchair, unilinear
 Modernity -> Religion reorganised not erased

Conclusion

Frazer gave a memorable unilinear career of the mind and a weak ethnography of ritual. Religion in modernity is not the middle step before science. It is a reorganised public and private power. **Sympathetic magic** remains his usable fragment; the staircase does not.

Facts & figures

The Golden Bough

Frazer's comparative study of myth and religion, and the classic statement of magic-religion-science evolutionism.

Sympathetic magic

Frazer's law of similarity (like produces like) and law of contact (once together, always linked).

Malinowski on magic

Trobriand magic as practical and emotional technique in fishing and gardening. A field rebuttal of armchair intellectualism.

Weberian disenchantment

A thesis that modern rationalisation thins magical explanation. Empirical religion in modernity is more stubborn and political than a completed disenchantment.

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