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Q6(c)

Discuss the concept of animism and differentiate it from naturism

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- Define animism after Tylor as belief in souls and spirits
- Define naturism after Max Muller as deification of natural forces
- Differentiate the two clearly and note later anthropological criticism of both as origin theories of religion

Revision summary

Tylor's animism is belief in spiritual beings, rooted in ideas of the soul.

Dreams, trance and death were his clues for how the soul was inferred.

Muller's naturism treats gods as personified natural forces and names.

- **The two theories differ in starting point:** inner soul versus outer nature.

Both are intellectualist origin stories from nineteenth-century evolutionism.

Later sociology of religion adds ritual, the sacred and group life.

Introduction

Nineteenth-century anthropology asked how religion began. E. B. Tylor offered animism. Max Muller offered naturism, sometimes called nature-myth theory. Both are intellectualist origin stories. They remain on the syllabus as concepts to define and to separate, even though later anthropology has criticised them as complete explanations of religion.

Body

Animism

Tylor, in *Primitive Culture*, defined religion minimally as belief in spiritual beings. Animism is the doctrine that souls and spirits inhabit humans, animals, plants and objects. He thought early humans inferred a soul from dreams, trance and death. The soul of the dead could become a ghost. Spirits could fill the world. Polytheism and later monotheism were, in his evolutionary ladder, developments from this base. Animism is therefore a theory of **souls and agencies** inside and behind things. **Durkheim** later attacked the idea that religion is only a mistaken science of spirits, and placed totemism and the sacred at the centre instead. The word animism is still used in a looser way for many indigenous cosmologies, which is not exactly Tylor's evolutionary scheme.

Naturism and the difference

Max Muller, a scholar of the Vedas, argued that religion grew from the personification of natural phenomena: sun, dawn, storm and fire. Names of powers became gods through a **disease of language**, as metaphors hardened. Naturism locates the origin in **awe before nature's forces**, not in the dream-soul. Vedic hymns to Agni and Ushas were his illustrations.

The difference is clear. Animism starts from the idea of a soul that can exist apart from the body and then populates the world with spirits. Naturism starts from natural objects and events that are named and then worshipped as deities. One is a psychology of the double, the other is a mythology of sky and storm. Both are origin theories that treat early humans as puzzled philosophers. Bronislaw Malinowski, **Durkheim** and later anthropologists argued that religion is also ritual, group solidarity and practical magic, not only a theory of souls or of weather. A good answer defines, differentiates, and then refuses to let either term exhaust the sociology of religion.

Flow diagram

Tylor -> Animism souls and spirits
Max Muller -> Naturism forces of nature
Animism souls and spirits -> Origin theories of religion
Naturism forces of nature -> Origin theories of religion
Durkheim Malinowski -> Origin theories of religion

Conclusion

Animism, for Tylor, is belief in souls and spirits inferred from dreams and death. Naturism, for Muller, is the deification of natural forces through language and myth. They differ in starting point. Neither is a complete sociology of religion, but both remain standard conceptual tools.

Facts & figures

Tylor's minimum definition

Religion as belief in spiritual beings, of which animism is the elementary form in his scheme.

Disease of language

Muller's claim that metaphorical names for natural powers hardened into the names of gods.

Durkheim's criticism

Religion is better approached through the sacred and the clan than as a primitive mistake about spirits or weather.