

Edward b tylor essay



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Edward B. Tylor A discussion of a nineteenth-century theorist in anthropology cannot be conducted without insight into the environment from which he/she came. As in any science, environment and time period is an influential part of any individual's developing theory.

To appreciate the theories of Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917), his social influences must also be considered. Tylor was an Englishman born of a Quaker family in England. Quaker belief structure is based on the idea that every individual is a vessel of God. This faith influenced Tylor's stances as a man of tolerance and his belief in his theory of psychic unity to be discussed later.

Despite his personal beliefs, one must understand he is still a product of Victorian England. This English culture held the belief that they are the superior people of the world and all others are below them. This type of group-think was bolstered by the ongoing industrial revolution of the time and the vast empire England resided over. Understanding this society reveals how liberal and progressive Tylor's thinking truly was. Tylor had many similar ideas to another theorist of his time, Henry Morgan (1818-1881).

They both rooted their theories in the idea of psychic unity. This assumes that all mankind thinks the same and has the same cognitive abilities. This meant that all societies advance through the same stages towards a more advanced society. However, Tylor focused predominantly on how people think across cultures while Morgan focused on how societies operated and what technological advancements they achieve.

In Tylor's work, *Primitive Culture* (1871) culture is described as... that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (1871: 28). This statement reflects Tylor's belief in psychic unity and theorizes that culture is derived from differing amounts of gathered information on specific topics. This thinking was concurrent with some other thinkers of the time such as Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), who like Tylor, believed in a natural progression of societies from simple to complex. This type of progression is also known as unilineal evolution. This idea is completely different than how Darwin thought.

His ideas of evolution were that organisms within a species would develop random genetic variations in different environments that allowed them to survive and reproduce thus passing on the traits. Darwin's belief in this type of evolution delineated from that of Tylor's because Darwin's theory of evolution stated that progression was a struggle with pitfalls and problems while Tylor believed in one track evolution. The theory that a society is always advancing represents Tylor's dismissal of the theory of degeneration. This was the idea that some civilizations would regress into previous states, Tylor expresses a disagreement with this in *Primitive Culture* by stating... There will come again and again into view series of facts which may be consistently arranged as having followed one another in a particular order of development, but which will hardly bear being turned round and made to follow in reversed order (1871: 37). An intriguing idea proposed by Tylor was that of 'survivals'.

These were traits found in society that were no longer of any modern day use but still occurred. One type of survival Tylor wrote extensively about was that of religion. He believed religion was survivals of how man once explained the world instead of using science. Tylor seemed to believe that as science could explain more and more that religion would follow a rational progression. An example would be a societies change from a polytheism-based religion to that of monotheism.

Perhaps Tylor's greatest strengths lie in his religious background. During a time where prejudice was an integral part of society, he focused his attention to how all humanity is one. This thinking allowed him to study people of the world with less bias than his predecessors such as Spencer. This thinking paid off for him. He wrote his first book in 1881 entitled Anthropology, which is still considered to be pertinent literature today (Minnesota State 2008). His other achievements include designing course work for a degree in anthropology at Oxford and becoming the universities head of museum (Minnesota State 2008).

He was also a major force for sparking interest in anthropology in England and had a major influence on the field as a whole. For any upcoming science it is important for there to be pioneers, and through his groundbreaking work, he laid the cornerstone for anthropology for generations. Tylor was not without weaknesses however. Along with many others at the time, Tylor used the comparative method to research other cultures. This method involved using living cultures considered primitive as a basis for the development of modern western civilizations. This method relied on the validity of psychic unity.

The weakness of the assumption of psychic unity is that cultures are shown to be different. The two biggest differences to point out that are known today are individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Societies based in two different cultural norms could not possibly have a parallel evolution. The way Tylor went about collecting, or not collecting data was also a major weakness. While he did a little field work, he relied mostly on other people's data to postulate his theories.

Using this form of research known as meta-analysis, there is a large amount of room for confounds. Improper reports, falsified information, inadequate research could all confound various amounts of data Tylor based his work on. Though Tylor did contribute many things to anthropology, his scientific methods were a bit simple and unrefined. This is true with the times, science was not as refined in the nineteenth-century as it is today.

As time goes on, society advances as does science, and with better science comes better research. This is the progression of society and science as Edward Tylor would probably agree. Bibliography Minnesota State University 2008 Edward Tylor http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/information/biography/pqrst/tylor_edward.html

Accessed 9/14/08 Tylor, Edward B. 1871 Primitive Culture. London: John Murray.