

## Religion and the Neolithic Revolution

1. As we have already seen in earlier video lectures, the origins of religion reach back into deep time.
2. We already find some ambiguous evidence of human burial among late Neanderthals in Europe.
3. But the most dramatic evidence for religiosity among *homo sapiens* was the discovery of cave paintings around the French and Spanish coasts that date back as far as 30,000 years ago.
4. These paintings comprise dramatic, stylized images of prey as well as dots, lines, rays and human hand stencils. They are usually found deep inside the caverns, difficult to access and visible only through the illumination of their fire domestication technology, burning torches.
5. The placement seems intentionally designed to enhance mimetic ritual by visually evoking states of consciousness that transcend ordinary, everyday life. In such states, participants would commune with or even feel possessed by the animals shimmering in the torch light along the cave walls.
6. Such ecstatic possession could well have been enhanced by hallucinogenic mushrooms and herbal potions. It could be undergone by tribal shamans or by hunters being initiated into adulthood or in preparation for a dangerous hunt. For what is most characteristic of reconstructions of Paleolithic religiosity is the overwhelming power of the animals to be hunted.
7. Human figures rarely appear, and when they do it is usually only as handprints marking their presence, or as in recently discovered Egyptian pictographs out in the Sahara (1) when it was still a grassland, as small stick figures in groups about far larger prey.
8. At the end of the last ice age, around 12,000 to 10,000 BCE, the behavior of the human species underwent a dramatic transformation. Small nomadic bands of hunter-gatherers living a subsistence lifestyle first started to settle down and (1) raise its own meat through herding and (2) produce its own cereal grains farming. From living off the land, like every other species, humanity began to work the land, domesticating nature for its own welfare.

9. Neolithic religion would change apace. Indeed it is coming to appear that the Neolithic revolution itself was actually instigated by religion. Late Paleolithic hunter gatherers lived a migratory, subsistence way of life, foraging in small troupes of only 8-10 individuals. These would camp sometimes in larger bands of 20-100. Finally these bands would themselves gather together periodically for seasonal festivals marking animal migrations. These largest gatherings of up to 250-500 people would be times for adolescents to seek for mates outside their own band and for trade in flint and obsidian.
10. Soon after the last Ice Age, in around 9,500 BCE, at one of these large festival sites at Gobekli Tepe at the lush and game rich northern tip of the fertile crescent in southern Anatolia, something unprecedented happened. Those gathering in the vicinity decided to build a megalithic sanctuary, the first large scale public building project in human history, erecting circles of tall T-shaped limestone pillars. There is no evidence of human habitation at the site. It sits on a promontory, visible from afar, but distant from any water source. But what there is abundant evidence for at the site, is feasting. A large quantity of animal bones, especially gazelles and wild bulls. The gazelle bones are far more numerous, but it is estimated that the bulls provided at least half of the protein at the festivals.
11. The limestone pillars are up to seven meters high and weigh several tons. They were quarried two kilometers from the site. The sculpting, hauling and raising of the megaliths would have taken the labor of virtually all hunter gatherers from a couple of hundred of miles around. They were likely rewarded for their labor by the evening feasts. These feasts would not have been one-offs, but ongoing over weeks if not months at a time. The feasts apparently not only lots of meat, but lots of beer. Huge vats have been found on the site with traces of fermented grain.
12. In fact some archeologists suspect that beer may have been the first use for wheat and barley, even before bread. Cereal grains will begin to ferment as they rot if conditions are watery. Hunter gatherers could have scooped up some fermented grains in holes in wet grassland, got a buzz and put two and two together. Then once gathering the grains for beer, some creative individual may then have played with what else they could be used for, grinding them between stones, making a paste with water and baking it.

13. Animal figures are engraved on the megaliths in a manner reminiscent of totem animals engraved on poles among other peoples elsewhere at a similar stage of transition from hunter-gatherer to settled life (eg. American Northwest, South Pacific). Some archeologists of religion have argued that the megaliths supported a roof over the shrines and served as hunting lodges for clans as in totemic hunter gatherer religion elsewhere.
14. Some of the T-shaped pillars also have anthropomorphic features, arms along the narrow sides, belts across the mid-section. It appears that these megaliths, perhaps all of them, symbolize totemic ancestors and/or divine beings. The pillars are highly stylized, likely pointing not to particular individuals but to legendary beings those about whom stories were told, and whose wisdom was handed down through the ages in aphorism, ritual and song. Some archeologists of religion have argued that a shift from the depiction of prey to that of ancestors is a step towards the personification of divinities found in later Avestan and Vedic Neolithic mythology and later classical, archaic religion.
15. Stonehenge, built 6,000 or more years later, appears at the same point of transition from hunter-gather to Neolithic herding and farming. Here traces have also been found of a second henge built of wood a thousand years after Stonehenge, two miles away with the remains of a causeway between them. It is thought that feasting may have been moved to the second site, where worshippers would celebrate life, before processing to Stonehenge at sunrise to await the summer and winter solstices in the company of the ancestral megaliths.
16. All this is speculative of course. But both sites are oriented around the equinoxes and solstices. Stonehenge has a lunar calendar of smaller bluestones as well. With the evolution from nomadic hunting and gathering to sedentary herding and farming, one would have needed to track both, to know when to sow and when to expect herds to foal in the spring and when to plan for the abundant harvest in the fall. These megalithic circles exemplify the synergy between religion and technology we shall be tracking across the ages throughout these video lectures.
17. Even the very building of these megalithic sanctuaries meet these lectures' definition of a religious ritual, binding diverse bands of nomadic hunter-gatherers together in a common purpose, transcending any one of them individually or collectively by connecting with sacred ancestors. Once built they would be sacred spaces for regular sacred rituals of

chanting, dancing or beholding the night sky. Eighteen of these circles have been discovered built on the site. It appears that they would periodically be buried and a new one perhaps in an act of religious renewal.

18. But how is it that these sanctuaries (1) catalyze the revolution (2) from a nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle to Neolithic herding and farming? (3) Well, first of all, meat spoils. And we are talking about an awful lot of grain to be gathered in the wild. (4) Providing food for feasts serving several hundred workers at a time would have forced hunter gatherers to coral living animals to be slaughtered on site and to plant and harvest rather than search out random clumps of wild wheat and barley. (5) Finally, as herding and farming began to take over hunting and gathering in Anatolia, bands adopted a sedentary lifestyle, (6) building permanent dwellings from sun dried clay brick. (7) Village life arose; the Neolithic revolution had begun.
19. A principal reason for thinking Gobekli Tepe was the original catalyst for this revolution in life style is that all of the earliest domesticated species of both animals and crops are native to the area: sheep and goats, boars and cattle,
20. as well as wheat and barley.
21. Herding and farming can sustain a much higher population than subsistence hunter-gathering. Thus as the Neolithic developed around Gobekli Tepe not only did villages multiply but excess population encouraged migration, thereby spreading the Neolithic lifestyle to other hunter gatherer bands. As you can see from this map, the Neolithic revolution probably spread from Anatolia west through Europe, as well as south along the Levant, north beyond the Caucasus into the Euroasian steppes and east through Iran and into India. Suggestively, this diffusion pattern mirrors that reconstructed by linguists for the Indo-European language family. While its birth had been dated to only the late second millennium, a new consensus is beginning to build on the work of Colin Renfrew and confirmed through new phylogenetic DNA tracking, that these first Neolithic settlers may indeed have shared a proto indo-european (PIE) culture and spoke a proto-indo-european language. (1) The domestication of the horse and the invention of the wheel by indo-europeans who had already migrated to the steppes north of the Caucasus would then have catalyzed a second mass migration into Europe in the late third, early second millennium. Horse and wheel lead to periodic mass migrations into Europe from the

Eurasian steppes most noticeably by Huns Mongols and Turks over the next couple of millennia.

22. Göbekli Tepe itself appears to have been abandoned and the last sanctuary buried sometime before 8,000 BCE. As sedentary, village life emerged and the Neolithic revolution took hold new forms of religious life centered on the home took precedence. Even among hunter-gatherers seasonal festivals would have punctuated an ongoing lifestyle recognized as having a religious character by modern archeologists. Mimetic and oral culture's alterity orientation towards all fauna, flora and even material elements in their surroundings creates a "low intensity/high frequency" religiosity complementing the high intensity/low frequency seasonal festivals. With the construction of permanent homes, clustered together into small villages, religious ritual entered into the homes as well, bonfires to be replaced by domestic hearths. In other words, its not just humans who domesticated herds and grasses, herds and grasses also domesticated hunters and foragers into herders and farmers. Religion catalyzed and reflected this domestication of *homo sapiens*.
23. An important Neolithic site for the reconstruction of the new religious life of these domesticated farmers and herders, lies a few hundred miles to the west of Göbekli Tepe in central Anatolia. Çatal Höyük, dates from 7,500 to 6,000 BCE. Here we have a large Neolithic village of 3,500 on up to 8,000 people at its peak, built of mud brick homes. Interestingly, there are no streets between homes. Homes are rather closed packed with intervening refuse areas in between. Sometimes houses would even share a wall. Access to homes was had through walking their clay roofs and descending ladders into the dwellings.
24. The religious iconography at Çatal Höyük appears to center around (1) existential realities of birth and death, group belonging and group violence-- realities that transcend our ordinary mundane routine by reconnecting us viscerally to what matters most, indeed that remind us of how our everyday lives matter at all, that yoke us to what we hold sacred. (2) Another striking characteristic of this religious iconography is that all of it is found within homes. No public sanctuaries or temples, indeed no public buildings of any kind have yet been found. (3) Thus whereas Göbekli Tepe was a collection of massive towering megalithic sanctuaries without any homes on site, (4) Çatal Höyük was a

network of homes, without any public buildings. While clearly a coordinated community, there is also little evidence of status differentiation. All homes are about the same size. Some may have been networked through the sharing of common ancestral skulls, perhaps too there may have been a council of elders which has left no archeological trace. In any case, mentioned earlier, religion here has been literally domesticated, just as had hunting, gathering and their earlier nomadic way of life.

25. One set of paintings found in many homes depict bands of diminutive stick-figure humans taunting and killing wild animals
26. particularly wild bulls of exaggerated size and presumably strength. Presumably too their death would have been followed by a communal feast, as earlier at Gobekli Tepe. Did such images themselves serve a religious purpose, binding its viewers together by reconnecting them to these communal sacred celebrations of life and death, communal belonging and group violence?
27. Many of these figures also have what looks to be leopard skins around their waist. Leopards were the keystone predators of the area at that time. Do these paintings depict humans channeling such prowess and power, identifying themselves as the new leopards of their environment?
28. Some home interiors also feature clay models of life-sized wild bull's heads, into which actual horns were inserted, immured in walls and backing benches. Did these bind and connect dwellers to the potentially lethal power of these large animals, reminding them of their own heightened experienced ritually risking their own lives in the taunting and sacrifice of these bull. Did the horns serve not merely as decoration in the home but as sacred relics making the home at the same time a sacred place?
29. Another telling feature is that elements of ordinary domestic life do not show up in the religious iconography. From animal bones, archeologists have estimated that 80% of the meat consumed at Çatal Höyük was sheep. Yet not one sheep is depicted on any of the walls in any of the homes thus far excavated. Nor has any depictions of any grains, vegetables or fruits. In short ordinary everyday life was not a theme for religious iconography. While evidence of daily, monthly and annual rituals abound around hearth and home, and these would all have occurred within an animate, ever personified religious milieu, sacred objects and images symbolized more "heroic" ancestral hunting,

depicting life lived at its most extraordinary and intense, that would evocatively draw them in, and out of themselves.

30. Birth and sex is likewise symbolized in an extraordinary frame. Clay female figurines have been found on the site. But these are extraordinary women, corpulent with pendulous breasts. I doubt they mimetically depict any actual woman in the village. They are extravagant symbols of the transcendent divine. Indeed the most striking goddess figurine sits on a throne, her arms resting on a pair of erect and alert leopards. It is also suggestive that we have yet to find any images of such goddesses, only clay figurines. Did part of their mimetic power lie in their sensuous handling?
31. Ancestors were also brought into the home. We find skeletons under the flooring. Some have speculated that corpses were left outside to be picked clean by birds, as in later Zoroastrianism, then once clean of flesh, they were buried under the floor of their offspring. Later research has thrown doubt on this, but it remains that skeletons were regularly unearthed, skulls and teeth taken and placed in positions of honor in the home as well as distributed among a network of homes. Was the point of such burial inside the home to remain bound and connected to their ancestors? Was the circulation of ancestral bones a symbolic way to bind clans together, who now live amongst a larger population of strangers? Again, all of this is very speculative. Without writing, all we have access to are material remains.
32. However, the situation is different in sub-Saharan Africa. Traditional African religion is also the product of Neolithic oral cultures, and it is still remembered, indeed still lived out in many rural areas. Even among modern urban Africans, traditional religiosity is still present and practiced whether as devotional supplements to Christianity and Islam, or as cultural retrievals of tribal roots. Now Africa encompasses hundreds of tribes, each with their own religious beliefs and practices but recent scholars have identified strong commonalities that can flesh out and supplement what can be reconstructed about Neolithic religion from archeological sites such as Çatal Höyük.
33. Shamanistic spirit possession, such as is suggested by hunter gather cave paintings and ritual dance is common in African tribal religions both in communal festivals and in domestic healing rituals. So too the Neolithic focus on fertility as embodied in goddess figures and bulls and seasonal festivals. Also confirmed is the hypothesis that the lack of

large public buildings at Çatal Höyük does not mean that communal religious rituals died out, but that they were held outdoors outside the village under the open sky.

34. What traditional African religious belief and practice adds to our understanding of Neolithic religion is their understanding of time. In *African Religions and Philosophy*, John Mbiti reconstructs a model of time that contrasts sharply with our own literate chronological approach. Unsurprisingly, as an oral culture, the traditional African understanding of time is grounded in the present moment, what Mbiti refers to as the Sasa. For these tribal peoples a moment is not an instant; it lasts as long as the event to which it corresponds. Moments can be of longer or shorter duration from a chronological point of view. And of course, without clocks, events take place according to solar and social calendars. For example, a religious ritual may take place at sunrise, or sunset. And it will not begin until everyone is present and ready to start. And the ritual will take as long as it needs to. Participants are not punctual, and events are not run on the clock.
35. Mbuti also argues that time moves from the present not so much into the future but into the past. Neolithic human activity is not an investment in the future, their meaning does not lie so much in the accomplishment of some distant future goal. Rather human activity is a retrieval and re-enactment of a traditional practice, its an investment in the personal and communal relationships embedded within it.
36. Indeed for traditional African culture, the future extends only (1) as far as needed for present planning. At most it extends (2) to the annual solar cycle of the seasons, necessary for farming. Subsequent cycles do not so much succeed one another as renew the same cycle. There is little to no need for multi-year planning. People of course are born, mature and die across many years, (3) but these life stages are also cyclical in the life of the community. Little changes from year to year, and even an individual's life will not differ substantially from that of their parents. Time does not march ahead into the future; it restores and renews the past
  - a. (4) But while the future is short, the past is long. Mbuti differentiates two stages of the past. First there is the lived past, still recalled and active in the lives of those who experienced it. When one dies one moves from the present into the living memory of relatives, friends and neighbors one leaves behind. The recent dead are still felt, talked about, and cared for in ritual. They can appear to the

living in dreams. While out of sight in waking hours, their voice can sometimes be heard from behind a tree in the forest. If the dead are not cared for, they may well come back to haunt and even punish the living. They may be dead human beings but they are still living spirits, their presence is still felt.

37. They can even be summoned by seers and mediums, who enter into shamanic trances and communicate back and forth with them. The recently dead effectively still populate the present, the Sasa. The skulls found in the homes at Çatal Höyük are likely those of such recently departed who live on in the lives of their spouses, friends and especially their offspring.
38. Events long past and the long dead, those whom no one still alive had ever lived with or even met, (1) pass into a hazier, more generic past, what Mbiti refers to as the Zamani. This is the realm of myth and legend, (2) populated by ancestral spirits who are believed to have once walked the earth, and by nature spirits and gods who were never human to begin with. They do not populate the living present of any individual now alive. They belong rather to the community, the village and the tribe, to be recalled by storytellers and summoned by shamans, seers and sorcerers.
39. Modern existentialists such as John-Paul Sartre, for whom individual freedom is sacred, claimed that “we all die alone,” that death results in our oblivion, and that it is in facing the prospect of such ultimate nothingness that we are motivated to create a meaningful life with what time we still do have. All that remains after death Sartre claims is our “being for others,” which is not us, but only what people say about us, which should mean nothing to us, for at that point we will not exist for it to matter to. However for oral Neolithic culture no one dies alone. All die surrounded by family and neighbors, accompanied by home rituals. And just as my own beloved dead live on in my life, so I know that I will live on in the lives of my own offspring and community. To face my death then is not to face oblivion but to join another part of the community, spiritual, but still members of the community, present and active in the Sasa of the village as a whole. So who is right?-- the modern, individual, private self for whom death means objective meaninglessness or the oral communal self for whom death is but another part of life, as life is another part of death in the wider ever revolving cosmic cycle of the Zamani?

Suggestions for further reading:

Bachheimer, Avi, *Gobekli Tepe: An Introduction to the World's Oldest Temple* (Birdwood, 2018)

Cauvin, Jacques

Cauvin, Jacques, *The Birth of the Gods and the Origins of Agriculture* (Cambridge, 2000)

Hodder, Ian, *The Leopard's Tale: Revealing the Mysteries of Çatal Höyük* (Thames and Hudson, 2006)

\_\_\_\_ (ed) *Religion at Work in a Neolithic Society* (Cambridge, 2014)

\_\_\_\_ (ed) *Religion, History and Place in the Origin of Settled Life* (U of Colorado Press, 2018)

Mbuti, John, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Heinemann, 1969)

A great Stonehenge website: <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/stonehenge/>