

Religion and the Neolithic Revolution

1. Welcome to this next video lecture on the co-evolution of religion and technology. Today we will look at the Neolithic Revolution from nomadic hunting and gathering to settled herding and farming, together with the subsequent shift in the sacred from wild prey to domestic fertility of flocks, fields and females.
2. Klaus Schmidt, the archeologist who discovered Göbekli Tepe in the mid-nineties, argued that by gathering together large numbers of Mesolithic hunter gatherers at a single spot for prolonged periods of time, the construction of megalithic sanctuaries may have been the immediate catalyst for the shift from nomadic hunting and gathering characteristic of our species up to that point in our history, to a sedentary village lifestyle of herding and farming defining the Neolithic.
3. Confirmation for thinking that Göbekli Tepe specifically may actually have been the original catalyst for the Neolithic revolution lies in the fact that all of the earliest domesticated species of both animals and crops are native to this particular area: sheep and goats, pigs and cattle, as well as wheat and barley. The domestication of dogs already in the paleolithic could have simply been extended to other herd animals with strong dominance hierarchies. So too, while already companions in the hunt, dogs would now assist their human masters in herding as well.
4. Now herding and farming, while calling for more sustained work, can sustain a much higher population than subsistence hunter-gathering. Thus as the Neolithic developed around Göbekli Tepe, not only did villages multiply but excess population encouraged migration, thereby spreading the Neolithic lifestyle to other hunter gatherer bands.
5. The Neolithic revolution spread from Anatolia west through Europe, as well as south along the Levant, above the Black Sea into the Euroasian steppes and east through Iran and into the Indus Valley.
6. Now there had already been some early experiments in settlements and rudimentary farming prior to Göbekli Tepe in the Natufian culture of the Lavant. However these sites were abandoned a couple of thousand years before Göbekli Tepe, when the climate cooled appreciably in the Younger Dryas (1) likely due to a large disintegrating asteroid or comet strike. With food once again scarce, humans appear to have reverted to a nomadic hunter gatherer lifestyle. This reversion further confirms the notion that human

settlement was not a forced response to scarcity but rather an opportunity enabled by abundance as argued in the previous lecture.

7. With the return of the warmer and wetter climate typical of the Mesolithic, human settlements would re-appear, this time catalyzed by the building of megalithic sanctuaries at Göbekli Tepe and, later, at other sites in southern Anatolia. Here the Neolithic would take hold for good. We shall be tracking the spread of the Neolithic and Neolithic religiosity in our next couple of lectures. An important Neolithic site for the reconstruction of the new religious lifestyle of these domesticated farmers and herders, lies just a few hundred miles to the west of Göbekli Tepe in central Anatolia. (1) Çatal Höyük, dates from 7,500 to 6,000 BCE. Here we find 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 close packed with intervening refuse areas in between. Access to homes was not at ground level but through walking the clay roofs and descending ladders into the dwellings.
8. Now homes, once built, require ongoing maintenance. At Çatal Höyük home walls were regularly replastered in a white, lime finish, refuse would be tossed out of the home into the narrow middens between them, and grain, once stored would need to be protected from rodents. We also find that as walls of homes would collapse with age, or earthquakes, new homes would be built on top of their ruins, Thus while enabling a sedentary herding and farming lifestyle, permanent homes also entangled their resident's time and energy in maintenance, repair and rebuilding as well.
9. The religious iconography at Çatal Höyük appears to center around (1) the 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, by yoking us to what we hold sacred. (2) Archeologists have not found a megalithic sanctuary or a large public temple at Çatal Höyük. Rather some of the homes, while not any larger than others, were adorned with paintings on the walls and bull's horns or full bull's heads embedded in walls and benches indicating that they may have served as family or clan centered shrines in a village of strangers. Religion at Çatal Höyük had thus also been domesticated, literally, just as had the hunting, gathering and general nomadic way of life characteristic

of *homo sapiens* for the first 100,000 years of its, or better our, existence. (3) In short, whereas Göbekli Tepe was a collection of massive towering megalithic sanctuaries without any homes on site, Çatal Höyük was a network of homes, without any large scale public sanctuaries. So too, while inevitably a coordinated community, there is also little evidence of status differentiation. As already alluded to, all homes are about the same size. There may have been a council of elders from various clans to govern life in the village, but just as we find no village scale temple, neither do we find any royal palace such as appear in later Bronze age urban centers.

10. Now the paintings on the walls of some homes, possibly clan shrines, depict bands of diminutive stick-figure humans amidst wild animals, particularly aurochs, ancient cattle of gigantic size and great strength. Presumably they were sacrificed in the open air outside the village followed by the kind of communal feast earlier seen at Göbekli Tepe. However the diminutive stick figures are depicted not so often killing their prey as chasing, even taunting them. The figures do not appear to be mimetically identifying with their prey but rather celebrating their own power over them. We will later find participants flipping over charging bulls with hands on horns for leverage in Minoan murals. Presumably the bulls would be killed and sacrificed after being exhausted by such taunting, as we still find even today in Spanish bullfighting. Female cows however would not be sacrificed, presumably as they were a provident daily source of milk, butter and cheese. And of course a herd could only calve as many offspring as it had cows, whereas a single bull could impregnate many cows. As with *homo sapiens*, the promiscuous virility of males made them both more admired, but at the same time, more expendable.
11. Suggestively, in some of these paintings the stick figures also have what looks to be leopard skins around their waists. Leopards were the top keystone predators of the area. Are humans identifying themselves as the new leopards of their environment? 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 from sheep. Yet not one sheep is depicted on any of the walls in any of the homes thus far excavated. Nor have any depictions of grains or plants, vegetables. In short ordinary, everyday life was not a theme for religious iconography.

12. Yet everyday life in the home was the *setting* for regular religious ritual. (1) Low frequency/high intensity outdoor sacrifices of aurochs were complemented (2) by high frequency/low intensity daily, monthly and annual rituals around hearth and home. Sacred symbolism, however, depicted life at its most extraordinary and intense, imagery that may have evocatively drawn residents in, and out of themselves.
13. Birth and sexuality is likewise symbolized in an extraordinary frame. Clay female figurines have been found on the site. These are extraordinary women, corpulent with pendulous breasts. I doubt they mimetically depict any actual woman in the village. They are rather extravagant symbols of the transcendent divine. (1) 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 painted images of such goddesses, only clay figurines. Did part of their mimetic power lie in their sensuous handling?
14. Now hand-sized figurines of corpulent females carved from rock and bone can already be found at earlier hunter gatherer sites. Clearly giving birth was already a potent, sacred wonder. But given their nomadic lifestyle the focus for hunter- gatherers was unlikely to have been fertility but rather safety, amulets to protect their holders during the pangs of labor and the existential dangers of childbirth. (1) As we shall see in greater detail in the next video lecture, the number of these goddess figurines explode into the thousands at later Neolithic village sites in Europe.
15. Death was 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. Some of the wall paintings in the house shrines at Çatal Höyük depict (1) vultures with huge wing spans circling and diving towards headless stick figures. Once picked clean the bones of a few of the dead were then buried under the floor of their offspring. Skeletons also seem to be 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 that where the heads of those stick figures ended up? Was the point of such burial inside the home to bind and connect home dwellers to their ancestors? Could the circulation of ancestral bones among households have been a symbolic way to bind together clans, now living amongst a larger population of strangers?

16. Like Göbekli Tepe and the even earlier proto-neolithic Natufian sites, Çatal Höyük was eventually abandoned, lost to memory and buried under millennia of accumulating dirt. What had happened? Farmers may have exhausted the soil, climate change may have weakened yields, earthquakes may have changed the course of rivers. But another likely factor was disease. Epidemics are one of the downsides of domestication. Living in close proximity with other species, grain storage and increased population density all enable bacteria and viruses to spread and even evolve to jump species. (1) Stored grain attracts rodents. (2) Many of the most common human diseases come from domestic farm animals. Since homes were replastered so regularly, those wall paintings of large vultures circling (2) and diving around diminutive headless stick figures may have been late poignant symbols of Neolithic famines and epidemics that may have led Çatal Höyük's inhabitants to scatter back into the hills. As with Göbekli Tepe, Catal Höyük was abandoned within a thousand years, also lost to history until discovered by twentieth century archeologists. But as with everything else about both sites, all of this is very speculative. Without writing, all we have are the material remains.
17. However, the situation is different in sub-Saharan Africa. Traditional African religion is also the product of Neolithic oral culture, but 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.
18. 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, virile 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.
19. 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.

20. Unsurprisingly, as an oral culture, the traditional African understanding of time is grounded in the present, what Mbiti refers to as the Sasa. (1) But in oral culture the present is not an instant; rather the present moment lasts as long as the event to which it corresponds. Now 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, noon or sunset. Nor will a social event or religious ritual begin until everyone is present and ready to start. And it will last as long as it needs to. Participants are not punctual, and events are not run on the clock. Mbuti argues that time moves from the present not so much into the future as into the past. (2) Tending herds and planting seeds, harvesting and storing grain are more future oriented than subsistence hunting and gathering, but other than homebuilding itself, such work rarely has a time horizon longer than the current seasonal cycle. Such practices, including homebuilding are not about future progress but past continuity. Work is not about building a future, but maintaining a past. Indeed for traditional African culture, the years do not so much succeed one another as (3) repeat and renew the same annual cycle of the seasons. In such a traditional society there is little to no need then for multi-year planning. People of course are born, mature and die across many years, (4) but these life stages are also cyclical in the life of the community.
 - a. (5) The present moment also draws from past wisdom and practice. Little changes in the life of the village from year to year; so too an individual's life will not differ substantially from that of their parents. (6) Crafts are done as they have always been done, from time immemorial. Time does not flow forward into the future; it restores and renews the past
21. Mbuti goes on to differentiate two stages of the past. (1) 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 the relatives, friends and neighbors one leaves behind. The recent dead are still present, talked about, attended to and cared for in regular commemorative rituals around the family hearth. The dead can re-appear to the living in dreams. While out of sight in waking hours, their voice can also sometimes be heard from

behind a tree in the forest. Indeed if the dead are not remembered and cared for, they may well come back to haunt and even punish the living. Their bodies may have decomposed but their spirit lives on. Their presence is still felt.

22. They can even be summoned by seers and mediums, who enter into shamanic trances and communicate back and forth with them.
23. Thus 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. (1) Events from the distant past however and the long dead, those whom no one still alive has ever lived with or even met, pass into a hazier, more distant, 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 now live with immortal spirits and gods who were never human to begin with. They refer less to the individual than to the community, the village and the tribe, to be recalled by a village's storytellers and summoned by shamans, seers and sorcerers.
24. Now modern literate existentialists such as John-Paul Sartre, for whom the autonomous individual is sacred, claimed that "we all die alone." Death amounts to our oblivion. It is in squarely facing the prospect of such ultimate nothingness that we are motivated to create a meaningful life with what time we 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 our reputation to matter. (1) However for oral Neolithic culture no one dies alone. All die surrounded by family and neighbors, accompanied by domestic rituals to facilitate what is effectively a transition to another world, the spirit world, rather than an annihilation. For 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 an empty void but to join another part of my community, spiritual, but still present and active in the Sasa of the village as a whole to eventually join the ancestral spirit world. So who is right?-- the modern, individual, autonomous self for whom death means objective meaninglessness or the oral communal self for whom death is but another part of life, as life itself is but another part of death in the wider ever revolving cosmic cycle of the Zamani?

25. In the next video lecture I intend to do a deeper dive into early Neolithic religion, following scholars who argue that interpretation of the archeological evidence can be assisted through speculative reconstructions drawn from the earliest sacred scriptures and ritual rubrics of humanity. Arguments over whether such an archeology of literate myth and ritual to uncover Neolithic vestiges is possible at all will begin the lecture. See you then.

Suggestions for further reading:

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)