

Religion for Hunter-Gatherers

1. Welcome to this next video lecture on the co-evolution of Religion and Technology. Today we will be exploring what Paleolithic hunter-gatherers held sacred and demonic and the religious rituals they developed to reconnect to that sacred and battle that demonic. In the second half of this lecture I shall turn to how climate change, the rise in temperature and precipitation at the end of the last Ice Age, generated an abundance of plants and game, shifting hunting and gathering from a subsistence lifestyle to a less demanding, less migratory and less precarious way of life and to the building of the first permanent structures—religious, megalithic sanctuaries that may have actually catalyzed the Neolithic transformation from the wild to the domestic.
2. As we have already seen in earlier video lectures, the origins of religion reach back into deep time. Indeed we even find some ambiguous evidence of human burial among late Neanderthals in Europe.
3. But the earliest and most dramatic evidence for religiosity among *homo sapiens* was the discovery of cave paintings in the mid-twentieth century around the French and Spanish coasts that date back as far as 30,000 years ago.
4. These paintings largely comprise dramatic, stylized images of prey. What is most characteristic of these images is the overwhelming size and power of the animals to be hunted.
5. 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 around far larger prey.
6. The setting of these paintings in dark underground caverns illuminated only by torchlight 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 wild animals shimmering in the torch light along the cave walls.
7. Such ecstatic possession could well have been enhanced by hallucinogenic mushrooms and herbs. In such ritually-induced trance states underground, a shaman might journey into the twilight world of spirits, hunters may have prepared themselves for an upcoming hunt, or young men may have been initiated into adulthood.

8. Contrasting such drug-enhanced shamanic rituals with contemporary recreational drug use demonstrates the importance of ritual and setting. Sacred ritual in sacred spaces cue participants to understand and so integrate their altered states of consciousness as “higher” or “deeper” revelations, communing with what is most sacred in ways that define and confirm one’s identity and purpose. Contemporary recreational drug use, on the other hand, is deliberately dissociated from ordinary experience as an “escape” or “release,” too often taken without regard to “set and setting” as Timothy Leary had put it. Such “trips” can be unpredictable roller coasters of sensations and emotions that can fragment as much as integrate one’s psyche and identity. Today’s drug users court the danger of a “bad trip” or of addiction to good ones.
9. The importance of set and setting can be seen in heroin use, endemic with American soldiers in Vietnam. When they returned home the vast majority were able to quit “cold turkey”. Most veterans thus were not addicted to heroin *per se*, its use was specific to the demonic setting of the battlefield from which they sought emotional escape.
10. After a half-century long futile war on drugs, the medical establishment is once again experimenting with hallucinogens but in controlled settings followed by therapeutic integration of patient’s experiences as a new treatment for mental illnesses such as severe depression, resistant to current prescription drugs. Hallucinogenic drugs are demonstrating promise as a new therapeutic resource. In any case, whether shamanic or medical, ritually controlled drug use can be a technology to reconnect participants with what they hold sacred, be it holiness or mental health or both.
11. Now early anthropologists of religion, writing during the industrial revolution, tended to interpret such paleolithic religion as “primitive” and “savage”, more demonic than sacred. Rather than mimetic evocations of awe and wonder, hunter gatherer religious ritual and imagery was described more as a mimetic contagion of terror and horror, evidence of primal and raw violence that would only gradually be sublimated by civilization, into a piety of awe and reverence, passion transformed into serene and sublime interiority.
12. However more recently these 19th and early 20th century reconstructions have been challenged. It is argued that the evidence they cite is largely reports from Christian missionaries intent on converting natives from idolatry to Christ. The violence and gore with which they depicted frenzied religious mob sacrifice and the “psychotic” shamanic

trances appear more as projections of the industrial demonic on the blank slate of the paleolithic canvas (1) Since it is literacy that ushers in civilization, literally life in the city (civitas), pre-literate oral culture is by definition uncivilized. However, once academic archeologists with no vested interest in conversion, such as (2) Claude Levi-Straus and (3) Margaret Mead entered the field, the assumption that hunter gatherer culture and their religious rituals were mimetic contagions of pent up rage and erotic frenzy has been largely debunked. While liminal intensifications of ordinary life, the paleolithic sacred functioned to nurture and sustain meaning and purpose rather than demonically undermine it in regular episodes of mob psychosis.

13. Now at the end of the last ice age, around 16,000 BCE, the behavior of the human species underwent a dramatic transformation. Small nomadic bands of hunter-gatherers living a subsistence lifestyle under harsh conditions found themselves in a new more temperate climate with lush vegetation and abundant wildlife.
14. It is said the necessity is the mother of invention. Thus, it has traditionally been thought that the shift from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic must have been caused by a need to find new ways of finding food. It was thought that homo sapiens may have become too good at hunting and gathering, thereby exhausting their ecological niche. (1) But as just noted, more recently its been recognized that the Mesolithic age that followed the last Ice Age, was characterized (2) not by wildlife hunted to the brink of extinction but by unprecedented, abundant prey; not by a land stripped bare by gatherers but by lush vegetation. In other words, the mother of Neolithic invention was not scarcity but abundance. More prey, nuts and berries meant hunter-gatherer bands no longer needed to roam as widely. And with the stakes of failure lowered, creative experimentation with a sedentary lifestyle could begin. (3) Time and effort now begins to become invested in:
 - a. (4) building more permanent structures,
 - b. (5) to create villages whose population extended beyond bands of dozens to gatherings of hundreds. Indeed, the largest Neolithic villages would number in the thousands.
 - c. (6) Time and energy was also expended in taming new prey, no longer wild animals but domestic herd animals, in part with the help of dogs, the first animal to be domesticated already in the Paleolithic as a companion animal for hunting

and guarding camps. Hunters would now become herders, dogs assisting them in tending and corral their flocks

- d. (7) Time and energy also shifted from gathering to farming. At first this may have been simply a matter of gathering grain from lush grasslands, where seeds knocked down through gathering would replenish the land turning a local grassland into a regular and reliable field for food. The transition to cereal farming was also dependent on another technological innovation: for grain is only accessible to human digestion through pulverizing it and then baking it into bread. (8) The result is an array of new tools from scythes and plows, (10) to grinding stones and mortar and pestles (11) to clay ovens for baking, (12) and pottery for cooking and storage. This new toolkit in turn is only possible now that humans had settled down. These tools could hardly be lugged around by a nomadic band of hunters and gatherers, they needed a permanent place for storage.
15. In short, from living *off* the land, like any other species, humanity began to *work the land*, domesticating both its food and its environment for its own benefit, leading to the domestication of the domesticators themselves. (1) Not yet “civilized,” humanity was no longer “wild” either. Rather *homo sapiens* became a domestic species in the most literal sense, “domestic” taken from the Latin “domus” meaning “home.” (2) The locus of the sacred would shift as well, from the wild strength and cunning of their prey to the virility and fertility of their herds, their fields, and ultimately themselves, for children too need no longer be lugged around but could be put to work at a young age to help tend herds and fields. (3) Religious ritual would likewise shift from becoming possessed by the spirit of their prey to (4) demonstrations of their mastery over them as well as (5) a turn from an emulation of the wild to ritual re-enactment of the seasons upon which fertility depends.
16. Furthermore, religion may not only have adapted to the Neolithic revolution but have helped to kick it off in the first place. As already mentioned, Paleolithic hunter gatherers lived a migratory, subsistence way of life, hunting and foraging (1) in small troupes of only 8-10 individuals. (2) These would regularly gather and camp together in larger bands of 20-100. (3) Finally, these bands would themselves gather together periodically for seasonal festivals marking animal migrations. Such large gatherings of strangers

would be times for trade in flint, obsidian, and shells, for sharing information about where hunting, fresh water and fruits could be found, and for adolescents to find mates outside their own immediate families.

17. At the end of the last Ice Age, at one of these gathering sites in the newly lush and game rich northern tip of the aptly named “fertile crescent,” (1) Gobekli Tepe, something unprecedented happened. Hunter gatherers in the vicinity who would periodically gather at Gobekli Tepe, decided to build a ring of huge t-shaped limestone pillars, as a permanent setting for their religious sacrifices and sacred feasting--a megalithic sanctuary--the first permanent building project in human history.
18. There is no evidence of human habitation at Gobekli Tepe. It is not the site of a Neolithic village. Indeed it is distant from any water source. But it is visible from afar, someplace easy to spot for migratory bands of hunter gatherers. And while archeologists have found no signs of long-term human habitation, they did find abundant evidence of human feasting--large quantities of animal bones, especially gazelles and aurochs (the wild ancestor of domesticated cattle). Gazelle bones at the site are far more numerous, but it is estimated that the far larger, and more fearsome aurochs would have provided at least half of the protein at these festivals.
19. The limestone t-shaped pillars are up to seven meters high and weigh several tons. Nor were they local. They were apparently quarried two kilometers from the site. The sculpting, hauling and raising of the megaliths would have taken the labor of virtually all hunter gatherers over a sizable region
20. What would incentivize hundreds to forgo their nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle for months at a time to sculpt, drag and position such huge stones? Clearly they would have to be fed, and so unprecedented quantities of food would need to be stored on site. So too herd animals may have been corralled to supply meat. Coercion may have played some role as well, but it would have been easy for a given band to simply walk away whenever they wanted. Consequently most would have wanted to do it. In other words, it would have had to have been meaningful labor, work through which they could bond with a wider variety of people, and work through which they could reconnect to what they held sacred.

The large festal sacrifices characteristic of hunter gather religion would thus no longer have been one-offs, but building Gobekli Tepe's sanctuaries would have years for months at a time . And the feasts apparently involved not only lots of meat, but also lots of beer, a welcome relief from a long day of quarrying and hauling, lifting and sculpting. Huge stone vats have been found on the site with traces of fermented grain still within them.

21. In fact some archeologists suspect that beer may have been the first use of wheat and barley, even before bread. For cereal grains will begin to ferment as they rot if conditions are watery. Hunter gatherers could have scooped up some fermented grains in hoof prints and divots in the wet grasslands, gotten a buzz and put two and two together. Once they began to deliberately gather grains to ferment beer, some creative individuals may have then played with what else the grain could be used for, eventually grinding them between stones, making a paste with water and baking the resultant dough. Once again invention would have been mothered not by necessity but by playing with what was already available, to see what else one could do with it.
22. Animal figures were engraved on the megaliths in a manner reminiscent of totem animals engraved on poles among other Mesolithic tribes elsewhere such as in the fishing cultures of the American Northwest and the 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. Others argue that the sanctuary was open to the starry night sky, as we find later at Stonehenge.
23. Some of the T-shaped pillars also have anthropomorphic features, arms along the narrow sides, belts across the mid-section. These megaliths, perhaps all of them, may then have symbolized spirits or totemic ancestors accessed in shamanic rituals. The pillars are highly stylized, pointing most likely not to the recently dead but to legendary beings, whose exploits and wisdom was handed down in story and aphorism, ritual and song. Some archeologists of religion have argued that a shift from the depiction of prey to that of ancestors may have been a step towards the personification of cosmic divinities to be discussed in subsequent lectures.
24. Stonehenge, built 6,000 or more years later, would appear at a roughly analogous stage of human technological evolution in Britain, erected as Neolithic herding and farming had

displaced Mesolithic hunting and gathering. Here traces have also been found of a second henge of wooden poles built 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.

25. All of 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 as well as when to harvest and when to store food to prepare for the coming winter. These megalithic circles thus exemplify the synergy between religion and technology we shall be tracking across the ages throughout these video lectures.
26. If you think about it, 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. Once built they would be sacred spaces for regular sacred rituals of chanting, dancing and beholding the night sky. Gods would be projected into patterns among the stars. Unlike Stonehenge, which has survived to this day, the remains of eighteen circles have been discovered at Gobekli Tepe. It appears that they would periodically be buried and a new one built. Such ongoing renewal suggests the sacred significance of their very construction, perhaps as important as the rituals conducted in the sanctuaries once built. For such construction would have taken many years, perhaps several generations. In such a case no one working from the beginning of construction would have been likely to ever see its conclusion. Humans were beginning to plan ahead, not just to the next hunt, or the next season, but beyond their own lifespan.
27. Gobekli Tepe appears to have been finally abandoned, the last stone circle buried and lost to human memory sometime before 8,000 BCE. Sedentary village life would lead to new forms of religious ritual. With the construction of permanent homes, clustered together into small villages, religious ritual would enter into these homes as well. In the next video we shall track the transformation from hunting and gathering to a domestic lifestyle of

herding and farming, a transformation now thought to have been catalyzed by megalithic sanctuaries of which Gobelki Tepe may have been the first.

Suggestions for further reading:

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

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

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