

Wilhelm Schmidt and the origin of religion

by Greg Hanington

When studying and comparing religions, numerous modern authors have given explanations as to how the faiths arose. Many of these scholars have been educated in universities that have accepted evolution as a scientific and historical fact. Consequently they view religious faith within an evolutionary framework. Many of them would agree with British evolutionary biologist Julian Huxley (though probably they would consider him insensitive and somewhat brusque) when he said that “Gods are peripheral phenomena produced by evolution” meaning simply that man had invented the idea of God in an ancient time when more primitive and superstitious.

Ninian Smart in *The Religious Experience of Mankind* exemplifies this view when he says, “Neither can we know how man first experienced the holy. It may have been that men, in becoming aware of themselves through the power of speech and in discovering their capacity to change the world ... also felt a sense of rapture from the natural world about them”.¹ Most modern scholars who study religions have this evolutionary bias.

Not all scholars have reached this conclusion, however. One in particular, Rev. Wilhelm Schmidt, has provided us with a valuable book entitled *The Origin and Growth of Religion*, which has as its basic thesis the concept of a monotheistic faith being the first religion practiced by men. Schmidt offers many powerful arguments showing the original belief in one God and shows the inadequacies of theories that are often evolutionary. He shows that the evolutionists often have almost no evidence for their theories, or they use only selective evidence to support their opinions. Such theories as animism, ghost-worship, totemism and magic’s being the origin of man’s belief in God are all refuted, and this is done by constantly referring to evidence found from studies of primitive peoples.

For example, when discussing the faults with the theory of magic’s being the source of religion, Schmidt says, “But the way the problem has been handled hitherto by Evolutionists quite innocent of historical research involved yet another weighty defect, which historical inquiry is able to get rid of”.²

Evolution hindered research

Commenting on one writer, Levy Bruhl, Schmidt says that due to his lack of historical research “he indulges in a wild confusion to be equaled only in the writings of the oldest Evolutionists”.³ He states that evolutionary theory has in fact hindered the research into the origin of religion. Modern creationists should become acquainted with Schmidt’s work because he offers a detailed study of the theories of religion and shows by analysis of evidence that men began believing in one God and this worship has since been corrupted.

To support this thesis of early monotheism, Schmidt looks at the ideas present in primitive cultures, such as the North American Indians, the Australian Aborigines, and many African tribes. He clearly explains his methods of historical research and gives evidence of the single Most High God’s having attributes identical to characteristics of God as described in the Bible. The Most High God is described as eternal, omniscient, compassionate, just and omnipotent. In most cultures he is the great Creator. It is worth noting that in some tribes his name is simply “eternal” which is identical to the name of

God in the Old Testament; Yahweh is derived from the Hebrew infinitive “to be”; in other words, God always “is”. This is a great similarity.

Given respect by evolution scholars

Although Schmidt’s book was published 60 years ago he is still given respect by scholars who have an evolutionary bias because of the quality of his research. These people find the evidence quite compelling, but don’t agree with Schmidt openly, because they have accepted the evolutionary history of man.

There are many interesting facts in *The Origin and Growth of Religion* apart from the main thesis. One revelation is that Herbert Spencer, who applied Darwinian theory to society and coined the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’, already had an evolutionary view of life some time before Darwin. Seven years before the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, in 1859, and the supposed scientific evidence for evolution, which is in fact only the partial truth of natural selection, Spencer was writing as an evolutionist. His work was received by those studying philosophy and by students of sociology.⁴

Another important piece of information is the lack of acceptance of Scottish historian Andrew Lang’s research into primitive monotheism.

Lang was a brilliant essayist and a gifted scholar. His research led him to reject the current ideas of the origin of religion and propose that primitive people believed in one God. This was at the turn of the century. His ideas were greeted, basically, with silence, while more speculative ideas were accepted. He wrote that, “like other martyrs of science, I must expect to be thought ... a fellow of one idea and that idea wrong. To resent this would show great want of humor, and a plentiful lack of knowledge of human nature.” This is similar to the comments made by Hoyle and Wickramasinghe, who reject Darwinian evolution in *Evolution from Space* and say that no-one has told them to stop talking nonsense but “rather that our writings have been greeted with a wall of silence”.⁵

Schmidt’s book is worthy of examination by anyone interested in the origin of religion. It was first published in 1931 and was translated from the German by H.J. Rose.

References

1. Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, Collins, Glasgow, p. 78, 1978.
2. Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion*, Cooper Square, New York, p. 158, 1971.
3. *Ibid*, p. 133.
4. *Ibid*, p. 63.
5. Fred Hoyle and Chandra Wickramasinghe, *Evolution from Space*, Paladin, London, p. 30, 1983.

For Further Study

Further exposition of this topic with extrapolation to other trends in society influenced by the ideas of cultural evolution, including liberal theology, racism, and communism, can be found in Chapter 4 of Don Richardson’s thoughtful book, *Eternity in Their Hearts*.