



Emmanuel Anati: The Origins of Religion. A Study in Conceptual Anthropology

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Patrik Lindenfors¹ 

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Emmanuel Anati, author of *The Origins of Religion*, has written an enormous number of books and pamphlets on both narrow and broad topics of great interest, not only on the origin of religion, but also on the origin of art and the origin of music. Much of this work is published by *Atelier Publications in Conceptual Anthropology*, a publisher that almost exclusively publishes Anati's own work. They also publish *Expression*, a journal of which Anati is the General Editor. These arrangements are the hallmarks of a researcher without patience for peer-review and dissenting opinions.

The topic of *The Origins of Religion* is the question of when humans first invented (or discovered) religion. To a large degree, the answer depends on what is meant by the elusive term “religion.” The choice of definition in turn determines what counts as traces of religion in the archaeological record. Consequently, much of Anati's book concerns such discussions, rather than just reporting dates of archaeological features and sites.

For those interested in the philosophical issues surrounding the emergence of religion, this book has much to offer. The author argues that religion is not limited to the type of phenomena we observe in contemporary churches, mosques, and temples. Modern mainstream religious practices are a limited snapshot of the thoughts and practices in humanity's search for meaning and spirituality. Whereas the chief contemporary monotheistic religions to a large degree focus on being *correct* — having correct beliefs, adhering to correct moralistic rules and regulations — traditional religions such as animism and shamanism steer clear of such issues almost entirely. Anati writes about present-day religions that “interreligious dialogue is mostly made

up of monologues. As it looks now, there is little chance that Christians will accept the belief in a Muslim paradise or that Muslims will accept Hindu gods, or of Buddhists will accept the dogma of the Immaculate Conception.”

Instead Anati draws on knowledge about practices of contemporary animists and shamans. He argues that such traditional religions are more focused on rituals and communicating with spirits and deceased ancestors. These supernatural entities are often appeased for health purposes (healing being a phenomenon that Anati unfortunately glances over), but also for needs such as advice, placation, and divination.

In light of the large differences between current mainstream religions and traditional religious practices, it is clear that the traces we should be looking for are archaeological materials that are more similar to finds left by contemporary practitioners of animism and shamanism. Anati reviews a number of such traces, from ‘mother goddess’ statues (of both sexes) and cave paintings to natural and artificial sanctuaries. He then bases the interpretations of these archaeological finds on comparisons with current animistic and shamanistic practices: “Figurative paintings and engravings on rock surfaces are inspired by facts, emotions, myths, beliefs and other utterances. They suggest new conceptual dimensions; along with bones and artifacts hidden in the interstices of rocks, burial grounds, shrines and sacred sites, they expose traditions and connected rituals in funeral rituals, fertility cults, initiation customs, totemic practices, rituals related to hunting, commemorative events and ceremonies to stop or cause rain, attempts to contact invisible beings, spirits, ancestors, and more. Similar practices still persist in tribal groups, the last witnesses of the hunter-gatherers” (p. 103).

Different traces emerge during different time periods. The earliest archaeological evidence of religious actions are funerary practices where objects accompanied the dead into the grave. Here, the oldest pieces of evidence are food remains next to the deceased in Mousterian burials over 100,000 years

✉ Patrik Lindenfors
patrik.lindenfors@zoologi.su.se

¹ Institute for Futures Studies, Stockholm, Sweden

ago, though some scholars argue that there is evocative evidence of funerary practices even older than that. From these beginnings, Anati infers that “the origins of religious behavior and thought appear to have been a search to understand and to avoid death, by conceiving a life after death, the survival and relocation of life energy as it leaves the body wrap” (p.179).

Anati compares statues, art, and sanctuaries that are deemed to be associated with early religious practices with much more recent phenomena. The advantage of statues, pictorial art, and sanctuaries, however, is that they can more clearly indicate religious practices as they closely resemble artefacts from contemporary shamans and animists. Paintings of human bodies with animal heads indicate the presence of shamanistic rituals as far back as 15–20,000 years.

Anati also details the first records of what are believed to be religious sanctuaries and discusses hypotheses that these arose from decoding natural forms of the landscape, providing expressive interpretations of natural formations with anthropomorphic features that evoke rather compelling images. Of one such site, at Har Karkom in Israel, Anati writes: “Seen from the Paran desert below, for a length of about 1 km the profile of the precipice appears as a pair of splayed legs joining at that valley. Looking westward, the two tops of the mountain appear like female breasts emerging skyward from the body of the mountain. The natural landscape has the appearance of an immense female body with its legs apart. A jet of water that irrigates the hills below flows at the rare times of rain, right between the legs of this natural form. We can only speculate what may have generated this landscape in the minds of the humans who erected 42 monoliths at that place, in that little valley on the brink” (p. 151). Anati argues convincingly that the age of the sanctuary at Har Karkom goes back about 40,000 years, in which case it would be the oldest on record.

From the sum of the evidence at hand, Anati argues that religion dates back at least to *Homo sapiens*, but probably is older still. Religious thought and spirituality are estimated to have been present already well back into the Paleolithic. Anati makes it abundantly clear that the claim that religious thought arose first in sedentary populations is misinformed. As with all evolutionary processes, however, the gradual change from no religion to religion by necessity passes periods where both religious thought and material evidence of religious thought are unclear and difficult to interpret.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that contemporary religions no longer focus greatly on elaborate burial practices such as providing lavish gifts for the afterlife. Given the increase in cremations, future archaeologists may perhaps invoke this decline of burials and funerary gifts as evidence for the decline of religious thought in the scientific age.

The book would have benefited from more careful review and editing. Even though the content listing promises the reader a broad, interesting, and knowledgeable overview of the subject area, the text leaves a lot to be desired. The book is something of a summary of Anati’s long career and there is no doubt that he knows his subject. However, the writing is at times discursive and off-topic. A clearer and more direct writing style, peer-review, and aid from a competent editor would probably have produced a more coherent and convincing text. However, even in its current form *The Origins of Religion* is an interesting scholarly overview of the field of the archaeology of religion and related conceptual discussions.

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