Change of Consciousness or Existence?

The Transformation of the Western Belief System

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Abstract. The evolution of the belief system was a remarkable shift in people's consciousness, however, the physical phenomena also originated from the variation of consciousness, Therefore, this paper observes the similarities they share in certain circumstances. It questions why the belief system in the West changed from a great variety of polytheism to Christianity and whether any similarities are shared within certain social events. Based on the research about the different systems of mythologies, historical events with religious relations, and crucial individuals who took part in the shift, it concludes that the change in social existence leads to the transformation of people's expectations, and they finally end up by abandoning the old gods and adopting Christianity. Furthermore, due to the active outspread of Christianity, it finally replaced other belief systems in the West and became the dominant religion, further expanding its influence in the world.

Keywords: Polytheism, Christianity, Religious Studies, Belief System.

1   Introduction

This research focuses on the evolution of belief systems in western countries and places them in specific social and historical contexts to see their relationship with social events. The main contributors to the belief revolution are also considered. Previous research on this topic was mostly based on passive factors of outmoded belief systems but the subjective factors should be included to explain the change to make a comprehensive analysis. The explanations go back to a variety of polytheism mythologies including Norse, Greek, Egyptian, and Sumerian, while the aspect of monotheism is based primarily on the *Holy Bible*. Cases of bodily changes in society are extracted from Durkheim's study of suicides [1].

The research is specifically based on Durkheim's suicide theory as a specific instance of the aspect of physical phenomenon, and on the belief aspect, it is mainly based on Norse and Greek polytheism systems. Christianity is mostly taken as a representative of the monotheism that emerged in a more civilized society. In addition, Durkheim also studied suicide in different churches of Christianity, which means choosing Christianity as a subject of comparison can conduct a higher relevance between the physical and mental aspects of people's consciousness which leads to such consequences [1].

Therefore, at the start of the research, the two major core ideas are stated, which are the rising expectations and changing environment and structure. In the rest of the paper, the reasons for the suicide phenomenon and belief system evolution are explained.

2   Durkheim's Study on Social Change

Durkheim launched a study of the rate of suicide among a certain group of people, who worked in different churches of Christianity. Durkheim's study on the difference in the suicide rates between the Catholic church and the Protestant church consequently shows that the Protestant church has a higher rate [1]. This is caused by the main ideological difference between the churches. The Catholics believe the people cannot build connections with God directly while the priests and bishops have the right to build the connection between people and God. However, in the Protestant church, one of its reforms was to change the Catholic idea into the theory that people can create connections with the almighty God directly and the clergy was not needed when people pray. Based on this logic, the higher suicide rate in the Protestant church can be attributed to the lack of cohesion and connection between people. Catholics' feelings of cohesion originated from the connection with God and the hierarchy in the church gave them a feeling of being a part of the system. From a macro perspective, this system is consistent with the social structure system theory that Catholics have the feeling of belonging to the whole religious structure, whereas the Protestants might be more likely to feel alienated from the system because there is no solid structure in the Protestant church. This could be a powerful explanation of the cause of suicidal phenomena in churches.

However, the cohesion theory might not be the only explanation for phenomenal suicide. Durkheim also mentioned suicides during unstable periods of society such as the Great Depression. The reason for suicides during this period could be briefly analyzed through the theory of cognitive dissonance [1]. This can be explained by people's consciousness which remained at the former stage of society and they could not create appropriate adaptations to fit in the new stage. The cognitive dissonance caused by the gap between expectation and reality resulted in suicide in this period.

The two aspects explained suicides in different stages, whereas the core of cognitive dissonance and alienation from the social structure were all products of the expectations of people. However, in earlier stages in the western world, such issues were not as popular as they do in the more modernized age. The essence of rising expectations is the change of social consciousness. Same as the mental aspect, the belief evolution is a piece of powerful evidence that is worth studying.

3   The Previous Belief Systems

3.1   The Natural Traces in the Polytheism Mythologies

By analyzing the mythical background of old polytheistic religious systems, it is founded that the rising expectations may be caused by the changing living styles and

increasing levels of civilization, which then led to the shift of religious systems consequently. The Norse Mythology, part of the origin of the world, narrated that the world was first split into two major parts. The northern part of the world, named Niflheim, is a cold, dark, misty world of the dead while the southern territory of the world named Muspelheim is hot and bright, guarded by Surt, the fire giant [2,3]. This creation of the world in Norse mythologies is closely related to the geography of Iceland, where the Volcanoes of Fagradalsfjall and Eyjafjallajokull are located and the weather in Iceland's winter is usually below 0 Celsius. The description in the mythology mostly matches Iceland's main geographic features, which also shows that even when the Scandinavians created a belief system out of reality but it still has a close connection with the natural environment.

More clarified observations of the relationship between the phenomenal suicides and belief evolution could be generated through Karl Marx's historical materialism. The logic of historical materialism refers to the relationship that the social existence or specifically social instability leads to the change in social consciousness which is the mindset and ideology of people [4].

The social environment was highly distinct from the period when the old polytheism was created, and due to modernization, people need a more powerful god who can provide them with mental relief. The God of Christianity is much more divine than the old polytheistic gods through the genesis theory, and according to Catholic rule, people did not get to have the chance to interact with God without anyone's support in the church. The figures whom the gods represent are closely connected with nature and play the role of supporting people to face the ecological environment. For example, Marduk in Sumerian and Babylonian mythologies represents rain; Ra in Egyptian mythologies represents the sun; Poseidon in Greek mythologies represents the sea; Ullr represents Hunting in Norse mythologies [5-8]. Even though they represent exact different figures there is still one similarity in essence that all of them aim to fulfill the expectations and demands of the worshippers. For instance, the gods of rain and sun such as Marduk and Ra represent the demands of farmers. Poseidon represents the expectations of fishermen, and Ullr represents the demands of Hunters [9,10].

3.2   Comparison with the Features of Christianity from Genesis

In Christianity, an example of Monotheism, the creation of the whole world including the sky, earth, vegetation, and all living things was completely done by God in six days, which is described in *Genesis* from the *Old Testament* of the *Holy Bible*. The content of *Genesis* shows that God is much more powerful than the ancient gods, and with higher holiness, the worshippers were not able to connect with him without clergies before the protestant reform.

Polytheism could be taken as the product of people's undermining fear of the unknown natural environment because the time that those gods were created was in the early stages of human civilization, and building the gods can be defined as an encouragement and support to explore the natural environment. However, one of the disadvantages of the ancient polytheism systems is that they merely fulfill the worshippers' demands and bring spiritual reassurance, and there are barely any signs of the gods

leading the future of people other than a few prophecies of individuals and cities. This is the key factor that the ancient polytheism systems were replaced by Christianity.

3.3   Christianity Replaced the Polytheism Beliefs by Undermining the Presence of Nature

How does Christianity successfully make people believe that God has the power to influence the future of humans? The most obvious trace is from the sixth to the ninth chapter of *Genesis*. They tell a story that human morality was corrupted and God decided to rebuild the world by creating a massive flood. God offered his most devoted believer, Noah, an opportunity to build an enormous ark for dodging this disastrous destruction. At the end of the story, Noah lived in a new world with his family. The message of the story is more significant than the content. It suggests that God had the power to destruct and rebuild the world and he would show mercy to the ones who strongly devoted their faith to him [11].

The mercy of God was mentioned in the tale of Abraham and Issac similarly. The god decided to test Abraham on the strength of his faith, so the god asked Abraham to pledge his son Issac as a tribute to sacrifice. Though Abraham had hesitated, he still intended to pledge his son to God but the Angels stopped him from doing that. God considered that the test had been beyond the limit of a mortal, whereas Abraham was named God's agent in the world. The two instances show that following God's will and keeping a strong faith in God will receive God's mercy and blessings. This theory strongly inspired people through such stories, which were different from the tales in Polytheism systems. The message that the Christian God had closer connections with people was also one of the reasons why it replaced the old polytheistic systems [12,13].

Through the representatives of those gods, the occupations in the early years of the western social system reflect a quite natural lifestyle and there were not too many systematic jobs. Even though the worshippers built temples and the authority created positions of religious officials, worshippers did not need to do sacrifices in official religious destinations. The message of old polytheism systems reflects the social structure which was not formed solidly in the society of classical periods compared to modern society. Additionally, as people's demands became complex, they needed to pledge their tributes to multiple gods, and the tributes would cost a vast amount of money. This was one of the common reasons why ordinary worshippers abandoned the ancient polytheistic gods. Therefore, the consequence of a less structural belief system being replaced by a more structuralist system was inevitable. In addition, rising expectations also took place in the evolution of belief systems. The demands were caused by the changing social environment and living conditions.

4   The Influence of Christianity on the Shift of Religious System

4.1   The Passive Spread of Christianity

Political transformation is also one of the causes of the spread of Christianity. An instance took place in the early years of Russian power. Russians replaced their ancient

Norse religion with orthodoxy. The founder of Kievan Rus, Vladimir I, Vladimir Svyatoslavi in full, used this as one of the methods to evolve his nomadic tribe from Scandinavian regions to a civilized kingdom settled in Kyiv. The event was known as the 'Baptism of Rus'. Russians marked religion as a sign of civilization because it imitated the success of orthodoxy's coalescence with one of the dominant power, the East Roman Empire, which served as the first step for the Russians to become civilized. The idea of civilizing people by taking the religion of a more powerful nation was not only agreed upon by Kievan Rus [14].

Clovis I, the Merovingian King, chose to believe in Christianity, specifically the Roman Catholic Church for a similar cause as Vladimir I did. Clovis I also demanded civilizing his Franks to consolidate and develop the power in Gaul after the Romans were driven away, instead of continuing to live as the Germanic barbarians they used to be. On the other hand, though the West Roman Empire ended at this stage, the Roman Catholic Church still held influence and they were also eager to search for a governmental power. Though the former religion of Arianism was spread among Germanic tribes and was labeled as deviant to the Roman Catholic Church, it was still based on the Christian system. Therefore, the Frankish king and the Roman Catholic Church created a corporation. Clovis used the new belief system to civilize his kingdom and strengthen his power, and the church increased its influence by receiving more believers and was supported by a strong political power [15].

4.2   The Subjective Spread of Christianity

Christianity itself has the ability to expand its scale. Events such as the crusades explain the sharp demand for expanding Christianity directly. The Western European nobles, lords, and knights believed that they should overtake Jerusalem because the city was the holy city of Christianity but it was controlled by the Muslims and Jews whom the Christians viewed as pagans. The aristocrats in Europe decided to occupy the city by force violently and the Pagans they viewed were either driven away or killed during the first crusade. Crusades had happened several times in history between the Christian forces and the ones whom they labeled as pagans. Though the violent acts were criticized heavily in the *Holy Bible*, Europeans thought that it was worth breaking the rules to occupy the city in exchange for their belief, which showed the essence of Christianity, namely expanding widely [16].

In contrast, the way that Christianity spread over was exactly from the idea of the Roman Pantheon in the later stages of polytheism systems. Roman pantheon was an architecture built by the Roman emperor Hadrian in 27 B.C., located in Rome. The pantheon mostly worshipped the gods they inherited from the Greek mythology systems. The Roman pantheon represents the allowance of newly created gods which can all be classified into this pantheon. It means the believers of other religions will not be punished as long as their gods were added to the pantheon under Roman authority. Therefore, it shows that the Romans, who were the people in the leading states in religion in that period, held a gentle attitude towards the gods outside of their traditional system. It is somehow a weakness compared to the expansion of Christianity which had

a characteristic of fanatical exclusiveness. One of the events that show the strong exclusiveness of the Christians was directly related to these religious architectures. Christians would destroy them in the name of clearing the traces of Paganism, however, the Roman pantheon fortunately survived by changing its name to "Santa Maria ad Martyres", which means it also acted as a Catholic Church [17].

5   Conclusion

In conclusion, the reasons for the shift of the religious system are complex. The evolution occurred because of the change in the social environment and ideology. The new religion Christianity empathized with people better through their tales compared with the tales from the old systems of polytheism, and the high exclusiveness of Christianity also made it the dominant religion in Europe. The change in the social environment also impacted physical phenomena in society according to Durkheim's view of suicide. Specifically, cognitive dissonance was the cause of suicides when people's mindsets could not unsuccessfully adapt to the present stage of society. To some extent, the belief evolution shared similarities with Durkheim's view of suicide. It is also a type of cognitive dissonance and a mental state shift.

However, the research was mainly focused on the information from the referring periods to make deductions. If there are more primary resources that directly evaluate the two belief systems, this research could be more comprehensive.

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