

Law of Three Stages of Evolution as conceptualized by Auguste Comte

According to Comte, each of our leading conceptions—each branch of our knowledge passes successively through different theoretical conditions:

- 1. The Theological or fictitious,**
- 2. The Metaphysical or abstract,**
- 3. The Scientific or positive.**

The Law of Three Stages

Comte considered his law of Three stages *based upon belief in social evolution to be the most important*. There has been an evolution in the human thinking, so that each succeeding stage is superior to and more evolved than the preceding stage. It can hardly be questioned that Comte's law of three stages has a strong mentalist or idealistic bias. He co-related each mental age of mankind with its characteristic accompanying social organisation and type of political dominance. This law appeared in, the year 1822 in his book Positive Philosophy.

The Law of Three Stages or Theory of Human Progress

The Theological or Fictitious stage:

The theological stage is the first and it characterised the world prior to 1300. Here all theoretical conceptions, whether general or special bear a supernatural impress. At this level of thinking there is a marked lack of logical and orderly thinking. Overall the theological thinking implies belief in super natural power.

This type of thinking is found among the primitive races. In theological stage, all natural phenomena and social events were explained in terms of super natural forces and deities, which ultimately explaining everything as the product of God's will. This stage is dominated by priests and ruled by military men.

Human mind is dominated by sentiments, feelings and emotions. Every phenomenon was believed to be the result of immediate actions of super-natural beings. Explanations take the form of myths concerning spirits and super natural beings.

Man seeks the essential nature of all beings, first and final causes, origins and purposes of all effects and the overriding belief that all things are caused by super natural beings. Theology

means discourse in religion. Religion dominates in this state of development. This state is characterised by conquest. The theological—military society was basically dying. Priests were endowed with intellectual and spiritual power, while military exercised temporal authority.

It has three sub-stages:

I. Fetishism:

'Fetish' means inanimate and 'ism' means philosophy. This is a philosophy which believes that super natural power dwells in inanimate object. Fetishism as a form of religion started which admitted of no priesthood. When everything in nature is thought to be imbued with life analogous to our own, pieces of wood, stone, skull etc. are believed to be the dwelling place of super natural powers, as these objects are believed to possess divine power. But too many fetishes created confusion for people. Hence they started believing in several gods. Thus arose polytheism.

II. Polytheism:

'Poly' means many. So the belief in many Gods is called polytheism. Human being received variety or diversity of natural phenomena. Each phenomenon was kept under the disposal of one God. One God was believed to be in charge of one particular natural phenomenon. In polytheism, there is an unrestrained imagination person the world with innumerable Gods and spirits. People created the class of priests to get the goodwill and the blessings of these gods. The presence of too many gods also created for them mental contradictions. Finally they developed the idea of one God, i.e. monotheism.

III. Monotheism:

It means belief in one single God. He is all in all. He controls everything in this world. He is the maker of human destiny. Monotheism is the climax of the theological stage of thinking. The monotheistic thinking symbolizes the victory of human intellect and reason over non-intellectual and irrational thinking. Slowly feelings and imaginations started giving place to thinking and rationality. In monotheism a simplification of many gods into one God takes place, largely in the service of awakening reason, which qualifies and exercises constraint upon the imagination.

In theological stage, soldiers, kings, priests etc. were given respect in the society. Everything was considered in terms of family welfare. Love and affection bonded the members of a family together. In this stage social organisation is predominantly of a military nature. It is the military power which provides the basis of social stability and conquest which enlarges the bounds of social life.

Basis of Social Stability and Conquest

- a) Progress is observable in all aspects of society: physical, moral, intellectual and political.
- b) The intellectual is the most important. History is dominated by the development of ideas leading to changes in other areas
- c) Auguste Comte says on the “Co-relations” between basic intellectual stages and stages of material development, types of social units, types of social order and sentiments.

Metaphysical or Abstract Stage:

The metaphysical stage started about 1300 A.D. and was short lived roughly till 1800. It forms a link and is mongrel and transitional. It is almost an extension of theological thinking. It corresponds very roughly to the middle Ages and Renaissance.

It was under the sway of churchmen and lawyers. This stage was characterised by Defence. Here mind pre-supposes abstract forces. ‘Meta’ means beyond and physical means material world. Supernatural being is replaced by supernatural force. This is in form of essences, ideas and forms. Rationalism started growing instead of imagination.

Rationalism states that God does not stand directly behind every phenomenon. Pure reasoning insists that God is an Abstract being. Under metaphysical thinking it is believed that an abstract power or force guides and determines the events in the world. Metaphysical thinking discards belief in concrete God. It is characterised by the dominance of “ratiocination.”

In metaphysical stage speculative thought is unchecked by any other principle. Human body was considered to be the spark of divinity. This kind of thinking corresponded with the legal type of society; and law, lawyers and churchmen dominated the society. Law remained under the control of the state.

The Positive or Scientific stage:

Finally in 1800 the world entered the positivistic stage. The positive stage represents the scientific way of thinking. Positive thought ushers in an industrial age. The positive or scientific knowledge is based upon facts and these facts are gathered by observation and experience. All phenomena are seen as subject to natural laws that can be investigated by observations and experimentation.

The dawn of the 19th Century marked the beginning of the positive stage in which observation predominates over imagination. All theoretical concepts have become positive. The concept of

God is totally vanished from human mind. Human mind tries to establish cause and affect relationship. Mind is actually in search of final and ultimate cause.

The scientific thinking is thoroughly rational and there is no place for any belief or superstition in it. This stage is governed by industrial administrators and scientific moral guides. At this stage of thought, men reject all supposed explanations in terms either of Gods or essences as useless.

They cease to seek 'original causes' or 'final ends'. This stage is dominated by the entrepreneurs, technologists etc. Unit of society was confined to the mankind as a whole, vision of mind was broad and there is no parochial feeling. Kindness, sympathy etc. to the cause of humanity prevailed.

This is the ultimate stage in a series of successive transformations. The new system is built upon the destruction of the old; with evolution, come progress and emancipation of human mind. Human history is the history of a single man, Comte, because the progress of the man mind gives unity to the entire history of society. For Comte, all knowledge is inescapably human knowledge; a systematic ordering of propositions concerning our human experience of the world.

Corresponding to the three stages of mental progress; Comte identified two major types of societies. The theological-military society which was dying, the scientific-industrial society which was being born during his life time. Here the main stress is on the transformation of the material resources of the earth for human benefit and the production of material inventions. In this positive or scientific stage the great thought blends itself with great power.

Criticisms:

Comte's law of three stages have been criticized by different philosophers and sociologists.

- i. According to Bogardus, Comte failed to postulate a fourth mode of thinking, i.e. socialized thinking, a system of thought which would emphasize the purpose of building the constructive, just and harmonious societies. Bogardus also says, Comte however, should be credited with opening the way for rise of socialized thinking.
- ii. According to Prof. N.S. Timasheff, Comte's law of three stages could not stand the test of facts. He opines, "Neither the later approaches (metaphysical and scientific) wholly supersedes the religious approach; rather there has been accumulation and often admixture of the three".
- iii. C.E. Vaughan has said, "But its foundation is purely negative and destructive. It is powerless to construct and when credited with the ability to do so, it brings forth nothing but anarchy and bloodshed."