



BPYG-172

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION



**SCHOOL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY AND TRANS-DISCIPLINARY STUDIES
(SOITS)**

**INDIRA GANDHI NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY
NEW DELHI**

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COURSE INTRODUCTION

One of the relevant fields of philosophy is “Philosophy of Religion.” It is the philosophical thinking *about* religion. In this sense, it differs from religious philosophy, which is the philosophical thinking that is inspired and directed by religion, such as Christian philosophy and Islamic philosophy. It’s scope is not merely limited to questions related to the existence of God, but goes beyond all this and deals even with questions like, ‘Who is the God that one believes in?’, ‘What is the God that I believe like?’, and so on. The whole thrust of this discipline is looking at religion from a philosophical point of view, going into the rationality of religion. Philosophy of religion explores some social and personal practices as well. A vast number of people are affected in some way by the phenomenon of religion. Philosophy of religion, therefore, is existentially relevant; its subject matter is not all abstract theory. It has to do with our everyday practices in which we involve ourselves.

This Course consists of three blocks further subdivided into fourteen units.

Block 1 introduces the course that we are going to pursue by looking into the nature, the problems involved in defining religion, the various theories that are proposed regarding the origin of religion, the difference among religion, theology and philosophy of religion. This block also studies the role of language in the expression of our belief or disbelief in God, concept of religious language and the concept of religious experience.

Block 2 deals with the various conceptions of God, the nature and attributes of God, various traditional arguments that affirm the existence of God, the problem of evil and finally deals with the problem of atheism and theism,

Block 3 familiarizes us with the modern trends in philosophy of religion like the religious pluralism, secularism religious fundamentalism and the inter-religious dialogue and also gives an overview of contemporary debates in the philosophy of religion.

These units will clarify the notion of religion from a philosophical or critical perspective and in a way it may allow us to give a rational explanation to one’s religious stance.



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Block 1

Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion

Block Introduction

The question of the origin of religion, perhaps, is as old as the question of the origin of human itself. The human mind by its very nature is reflective, no matter how undeveloped it might be. In the cultures of India and Greece matters of religion have been well-debated since the beginning of their history. The Upanishads and other literatures testify to this fact. Although a philosophical discussion on this notion is a later one, religion had its place in human life in its primitive and unorganized form. Etymologically, the word 'religion' is derived from the Latin root *religare* and it means 'to bind fast'. Then 'religion' has certainly a strong emphasis on community aspect. It is something that binds fast the members of religion together. But a general definition, which is accepted by all, is very difficult and involves a series of problems. Religion as a whole is looked at from various angles like: Historical, Psychological, Sociological, Ethical and Aesthetical perspectives.

This block, consisting of five units, will deliberate on the nature, the definition of religion, present a comparison among religion, philosophy of religion and theology, studies the theories that are put forward for the origin of religion, the concept and nature of religious language and religious experience.

Unit 1 studies the Meaning and Nature of Religion. The question of religion is a very complex one. Hence in this unit we will be looking at the etymological meaning and then at different meanings that are connoted by the term religion.

Unit 2 looks at some of the Theories of the Origin of Religion from the naturalistic, anthropological, psychological, social, socio-political point of views and in last this unit will present a critical exposition on these various theories related to the origin of religion.

Unit 3 deals with the elements of religion, and tries to present that Religion, Philosophy of Religion, and Theology have separate provinces. This unit also throws light on their interrelationship.

Unit 4 gives us an overall view of Religious Language. It studies the possibility of religious language as a sacred substance, the words as sacred, and the role of the speaker and the hearer, the medium and the context, the functions of the language. Beginning with the three traditional ways of approaching religious language, this unit studies some of the theological

predicates, the possibility of verifying the theological statements.

Unit 5 deals with the preliminary analysis of religious experience. Here we will study the meaning and nature of religious experience with the study of the views of two eminent thinkers William James and Rudolf Otto on Religious Experience. William James analyzed the religious experience mainly from the psychological point of view and Rudolf Otto tried to bring out the aspects of Divinity and religious experience, which according to him go beyond the rational and deductive method or enquiry.



UNIT 1 MEANING AND NATURE OF RELIGION*

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Meaning of Religion
- 1.3 Nature of Religion
- 1.4 Developmental Stages of Religion
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Key Words
- 1.7 Further Readings and References
- 1.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will try to understand

- the etymological meaning of religion,
- different meanings of religion from the background of various disciplines like phenomenology, sociology, psychology etc.,
- nature and the developing stages of religions.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

What is religion? This is a very complex question! Religion is an intrinsic part of our lived reality, but, how do we explain or define religion? There are many theories proposed regarding the origin of religion, that have emerged in part, as a result of the differences in the understanding of the development of the mind as either speculative, intellectual, or scientific. However, in spite of the differences in the understanding of this important

* Thomas Muppathinchira, Darsana Institute, Wardha.

element, it is generally accepted that religion is purely a human activity, and it has become an inevitable aspect of human life. In the West, with the dominance of the inherited tradition of the Judeo-Christian faiths, religion is largely understood theistically, while in the East, it is mostly seen as a response to the experience of the natural powers that are beyond human control, although both take into account the inner urge for an ethical, and moral reference with regards to the practice of religion.

1.2 MEANING OF RELIGION

Etymologically, the word ‘religion’ is derived from the Latin root *religare* and it means ‘to bind fast’, thus establishing that religion certainly has a strong emphasis on the community and society. It is meant to be something that binds the members of a community together.

When we start thinking seriously about religion, we naturally ponder about the definition of religion. There are numerous definitions of religion. The different points of view based on whether a sociological, psychological, political, or any combination of these, and other perspectives is being espoused, influences the meaning and understanding of religion. Some definitions are *phenomenological*, and try to expose the common elements that we see in the acknowledged world religions. For example, ‘the human recognition of a superhuman power entitled to obedience and worship’. Some others are *interpretative* definitions. Under this we may group the *psychological* definitions – the feelings, acts and experiences of the individual men, in so far as they consider themselves to stand in relation to what they may call the divine; *sociological* definitions– a set of beliefs, practices and institutions which men have evolved in various societies; *naturalistic* definitions – a body of scruples which impede the free exercise of our faculties; and *spiritual* definitions – religion is the recognition that everything in the world is the manifestation of a power that is beyond human intellect.

None of these definitions, nevertheless, are complete and exhaustive. The word religion is not an exclusive word, rather it is inclusive. It includes manifold elements and aspects of life like beliefs, feelings, experiences, values, symbols, worship, rituals, festivals, cult and cultures, myth and mythology.

Studying the primitive religion, the anthropologist Sir E.B. Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture* gives a short definition of religion where he understands religion as “the belief in spiritual beings.” There are many objections raised against such an understanding of religion on the basis of its incompleteness. The critics argue that ‘besides belief, practice also must be emphasised.

Another objection is that the faith, belief, and practices are not always towards spiritual beings, our scope of definition must be extended and widened to include even ‘nothing’. However, there are also positive sides in looking at religion from this perspective. It makes the religious attitude of the believers quite clear, and also the object to which the believers refer to. According to another anthropologist Sir J.G. Frazer, as presented in his book *the Golden Bough*, religion is a ‘propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life’. This shows that powers referred to in this context are always of superior nature (superior to man). To cope with this supra-human powers, it is argued ancient religion made use of magic, sorcery, taboos, myth and mythological stories, and so on. Philosophically, religion is seen as offering a diagnosis of the human condition in the world, and it also, offers a path towards remedying that condition.

1.3 NATURE OF RELIGION

1.3.1 The Primitive Forms of Religion

Religion is often spoken in relation to something sacred. There is no religion without having such a notion. The various aspects/ concepts used to express the general characteristics of this ‘sacred’ in terms of traditional anthropological analysis in the primitive religions were very simple. The notions like ‘unseen’, ‘unknown’, ‘infinite’ ‘immanence and transcendence’ etc. are not generally found in these faiths. Scholars trace the following general characteristics of the ‘sacred’ which may explain the nature of it in the primitive thought.

i) ***The sacred as the forbidden:*** Polynesian term ‘taboo’ in the primitive religions could be one that comes close, and conveys the sense of ‘sacred’ – *sacer* and *sanctus*. This points to the idea that something is ‘marked off’ as to be shunned, thus, an enforced sense

of mystic sanction or penalty, if avoided. Due to this aspect of sanction and punishment added, taboo comes to stand for un-cleanliness and sin on the one hand, and while it can also be interpreted as means of self-protection, against defying the norms of the sacred, on the other hand.

ii) *The sacred as the mysterious:* What was strange and new was treated in the earlier times, as sacred, having a non-normal nature. It cannot be called abnormal, rather it was non-normal nature. It was seen as mysterious, something beyond the human grasp, human understanding, and control.

iii) *The sacred as the secret:* The sacred was also understood as having a mystic and mysterious power, and therefore, it was something secret. This sense of secret was emphasized, and projected strongly through the insistence on practices of initiation, exclusion of women etc. from the religious moments of rites and rituals.

iv) *The sacred as potent:* Perhaps one of the positive and most fundamental conceptions of the sacred is that the efficacy of the sacred is identified with the magical and mystical power attributed to it. Everything is understood as having an indwelling potency, but whatever is sacred manifests this potency to an extra-ordinary degree.

v) *The sacred as the animate:* There is a lot of evidence to suggest that the primitive gods were conceived as personified, anthropomorphic characters, dwelling somewhere apart.

vi) *The sacred as ancient:* Another element found in primitive religions is the practice of ancestor worship. Ancestor worship is found even in various other religions such as the Chinese primitive religions, and aspects of Hinduism as well.

1.3.2 Higher Forms of Religion

Religion has evolved over time, and it has largely been in response to the demands of modern thought. Certain concepts, and practices have developed over time in need to satisfy the life of the modern man. Some of the motive forces that urged for a different presentation of religion could be:-

- i) The rapid progress of scientific knowledge and thought;
- ii) Changes in the social order of man;
- iii) A deeper intellectual interest in the subject; and

- iv) The modern tendencies to avoid magic and mystery, and to substitute it with more rational and scientific thought. The higher forms of religion discuss reality in terms of transcendence, oneness, supremacy and absoluteness, and also about the ethical schemes in relation to social unity and harmony, justice, human destiny, human freedom, etc.

The ethical element is of fundamental importance in determining the development of a religion. It is a powerful factor in elevating the object of worship, the religious relation, and the religious life. Another important aspect that religion is concerned with is the problem of eschatology. It is related to the ultimate destiny of man, and the world. Eschatological motives may powerfully affect the working of religion. Major world faiths such as Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Sikhism have strong eschatological articulations.

We see different approaches to God and religion; from a negative perspective, we see the trend of ***atheism***. It is the belief that there is no God of any kind. Another perspective is ***agnosticism***, which literally means ‘not-knowing’, which implies we are unable to affirm or deny the existence of God. Still another stand is ***scepticism***. This approach simply means doubting – we cannot have certainty about anything in the world, then, obviously, we cannot speak with surety about metaphysical and abstract realities. There is still another perspective of ***naturalism***. According to this theory, every aspect of human existence, and experience, including moral and religious life could be adequately explained in terms of our understanding of nature. Coming to the more affirmative approaches to God and religion, ***deism*** refers to the view according to which, this universe was created and set in motion by a God and then left alone to operate. The deists teach that natural theology is enough to explain religious matters. Finally, though perhaps not the last, a stand commonly understood is that of ***theism***. It refers to a particular doctrine concerning the nature of God and its relationship to the universe. It conceives of God as personal, and active in the governance and organization of the world and the universe.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is the meaning of religion?

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2. What are the various ways of defining religion?

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1.4 DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF RELIGION

Religion has taken various forms in its development, and it is necessary to investigate some of these forms, in order to understand religion better. These forms of religion can be enumerated as Totemism, Animism, Pantheism, Polytheism, Monotheism, and Monism.

The essential feature of **totemism** is the belief in a supernatural connection between a group of people, and objects such as certain animal species, plants, or more rarely some other thing. Usually there is a taboo on killing or eating an animal totem. **Animism** denotes the belief that everything which has life or motion also has a soul or spirit, and all natural phenomena are caused by direct personal agency.

The theistic tradition recognizes and accepts the existence of God. Theism is often understood as a synonym for monotheism, though that is not the case. Theism manifests itself in several forms. **Pantheism** is 'God-is-all-ism'. According to this view all is God and God is all. God is identical with the world and nature. In other words, God and universe are one. God is not a reality separate from the world and remote from it. The particular individual objects have no absolute existence of their own, rather they are either

the different modes of the universal substance, or parts of the divine whole. **Polytheism** is the belief in and worship of many individual Gods. Indeed, it was the result of the anthropomorphic personification of the natural powers that were believed to be beyond the control of humans. **Monotheism** is the belief in one supreme God, whereas, **Monism** is the belief in one reality, and does not necessarily involve the conception of a personal God.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

Religion being an undeniable aspect of human life, any study on human life will remain half done if it is not taken into consideration. Religion is studied from different perspectives, and it could be investigated from sociological, anthropological, phenomenological, philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic perspectives. In the contemporary scenario there is an added scope, that is, the field of comparative religion. It is an urgent need, and a demand of the present world community, to promote mutual, mature and unprejudiced understanding of others, and their religions. We are living in a world marked by globalization, that consistently brings up predicaments for peaceful co-existence. In such a scenario, it becomes imperative for us to understand and accept the plural ways of living, and religions across the world. Such forms of knowledge can mitigate prejudices, and promote an integrated way of living with other communities.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. What are the various forms of the evolution of religion?

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2. Why is the study of religion, especially the comparative study of religion relevant and urgently needed today?

1.6 KEY WORDS

Agnosticism : it means ‘not-knowing’ which implies that we are not able to affirm or deny the existence of God.

Animism : it the belief that everything which has life or motion also has a soul or spirit.

Atheism : it is the belief that there is no God of any kind.

Deism : it means this universe was created and set in motion by a God, and left alone to operate.

Monism: it is the belief in the existence of only one reality.

Monotheism : it is belief in one supreme God.

Naturalism : it means every aspect of human existence, and experience including moral and religious life could be adequately explained in terms of our understanding of nature.

Pantheism : it is ‘God-is-all-ism’, which means that all is God, and God is all, and God is not a reality separate from the world and remote from it.

Polytheism : it is the belief in and worship of many individual Gods.

Scepticism : it means doubting. That means, we cannot have certainty about anything, either of material or of spiritual things.

Totemism : it is the belief in a supernatural connection between a group of people, and objects like certain animal species, sometimes plants, or more rarely some other things.

1.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

1. The word 'religion' is derived from the Latin root *religare* and it means 'to bind fast', thus establishing that religion certainly has a strong emphasis on the community and society. It is meant to be something that binds the members of a community together.

What we call religion is very complex and inclusive. It includes manifold elements and aspects of life like beliefs, feelings, experiences, values, symbols, worship, rituals, festivals, cult and cultures, myth and mythology.

2. The different ways of defining religion are *phenomenological*, *psychological*, *sociological*, *naturalistic*, and *religious*.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

1. The various forms of the evolution of religion are - *Totemism*, *Animism*, *Pantheism*, *Polytheism*, *Monotheism*, *Monism*.
2. We are living in a world marked by globalization, that consistently brings up predicaments for peaceful co-existence. We encounter elements of social unrest and

atrocities on the basis of religion in every part of the world. It is due to the fanatic thoughts that creep into the minds of people due to sheer ignorance about the true teachings of both one's own religion, and of other religions. In such a scenario, it becomes imperative for us to understand and accept the plural ways of living, and religions across the world. Such forms of knowledge can mitigate prejudices, and promote an integrated way of living with other communities. Hence it is relevant and much needed in the modern world.



UNIT 2 THEORIES OF THE ORIGIN OF RELIGION*

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Naturalistic Origin of Religion
- 2.3 Anthropological Origin of Religion
- 2.4 Psychological Origin of Religion
- 2.5 Social Origin of Religion
- 2.6 Socio-political Origin of Religion
- 2.7 Critical Exposition
- 2.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.9 Key Words
- 2.10 Further Readings and References
- 2.11 Answers to Check Your Progress

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to present an overview of some popular vantage points from which the origin of Religion has been discussed and theorized. By the end of this Unit you should be able to become conversant with the theories concerning the,

- Naturalistic,
- Anthropological,
- Psychological,
- Social, and
- Socio-political origins of Religion.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

* Antony Kalathil, Assisi Ashram, Kottayam. (This unit is a revised version of Units 'Theories of the origin of Religion-I' and "Theories of the origin of Religion- II' of BPYE-001 compiled by Mahak Uppal, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Hindu College, University of Delhi.)

In the secular-based theories concerning its origin, religion is viewed as an empirical entity that can be traced historically and mapped geographically, such that all religions are regarded as being human creations whose history is part of the wider history of human culture. Thinkers subscribing to this view trace the development of the concept of religion by identifying it as a clear and bounded historical phenomenon. They speculate that the first religions were a response to human fear, and were established to give people a feeling of security in an insecure world, and a feeling of control over the environment where there was otherwise little or no control. Here we shall deal with naturalistic, anthropological, psychological, sociological, and sociopolitical theories of the origin of religion.

2.2 NATURALISTIC ORIGIN OF RELIGION

From Enlightenment onwards there have been several attempts at giving a naturalistic account for the genesis of religion. Why is it that people in almost all societies seem to believe in the existence of invisible supernatural beings that may influence human life for good or ill and whom it is advisable to pray to or propitiate? And why have almost all societies developed rituals, both elaborate and demanding, in connection with such beliefs? Despite much discussion, general agreement on answers to such questions has hardly emerged.

Ernst Haeckel (1834 – 1919), a scientist turned philosopher, came to be identified as one of the pioneers of the naturalistic theory of the origin of religion. He held that the discoveries of nineteenth century science present a solution to the enigmas that have perplexed mankind over the centuries. He regarded his view as “monistic” in its essence, as it stood in opposition to all “dualisms” which drew distinctions between God and nature, soul and body, spirit and matter. Haeckel believed that there is only a single substance and it manifests itself both as matter and energy or body and spirit. Every material atom has a rudimentary soul which is far below the level of consciousness. In the course of evolution, the rudimentary psychical character of substance gradually advances to consciousness which, according to him, is a purely natural phenomenon. “Monism”, in Haeckel’s understanding, therefore implied that there is no matter without spirit or energy, and no spirit without matter.

This monism is founded on the demonstrable results of science and pledges to solve the

riddles of existence. It gives negative answers to the traditional problems of God, freedom and immortality, suggesting that the very ideas of God, freedom and immortality are in fact based on a mistaken dualism. It tells us that there can be no God apart from the universe. An invisible God who thinks, speaks, and acts is considered to be an impossible conception. In the monistic deterministic cosmos, there appears to be no room for the immortality of the soul or the freedom of the will.

2.3 ANTHROPOLOGICAL ORIGIN OF RELIGION

The naturalistic interpretation of religion gained support from the developments in the discipline of anthropology as well. The ideas of Edward Burnett Tylor (1832 – 1917) inspired other thinkers like James George Frazer (1854 – 1941) and Salomon Reinach (1858 – 1932) to formulate the anthropological theory of the origin of religion.

Tylor began with two assumptions: (1) that human culture (including knowledge, arts, religion, customs, etc.) has certain laws of its own, which can be studied scientifically, such that just like in nature, in culture too we can find the uniform action of uniform causes; and (2) that the varied kinds of cultures found across the human race can be identified as stages in an ongoing process of development or evolution. Apart from these assumptions, another idea to which he drew attention was the phenomenon of ‘survival’. He believed that an idea or a custom, once it gets established, tends to persist and survive, to the extent that it may continue to penetrate into the later stages of cultural development, despite having the tendency of losing its original meaning and significance. Tylor’s main contribution came in the form of his theory of ‘animism’, i.e., the belief in spiritual beings. He explained that on being confronted with the phenomena such as death, sleep, dreams etc., the primitive man accounted for them in terms of a spirit separable from the body. These ‘Spirits’ were believed to animate almost all aspects of nature, with some of them occupying the ranks of powerful deities as well. Since these spirits were supposed to control events and to affect human lives, it was natural and expected of humans to revere and seek to propitiate them. According to Tylor this is how the very beginnings of religion might have originated, with the belief in such ‘spiritual’ and ‘animated’ beings as its minimal condition. As far as the higher, more sophisticated forms of religions was concerned, Taylor asserted that they too developed out of the matrix of primitive animism. The superiority of the higher religions specifically consisted in their moral ideas, which were almost entirely lacking in the primitive form of

religions. And it is these moral ideas, that have turned out to be the abiding fruit of animism. James George Frazer explained that we can distinguish three stages in the mental development of mankind: magic, religion and science. At the magical level humans depend on their own strength to overcome the difficulties that trouble them in their attempt to gain the ends. They believe that there exists a certain order of nature which they think they can understand and manipulate by occult means. But experience teaches them that they are mistaken and this is where they turn to religion. In religion humans no longer rely on themselves but seek the help of invisible beings. They believe that these beings possess the power to control natural events, which magic failed to accomplish. The religious attitude supposes that there is some elasticity in the course of nature, but experience again teaches humans that they are mistaken here as well. The rigid uniformity of nature is discovered, and religion, which was otherwise regarded as an explanation of nature, is displaced by the scientific temperament. In science humans revert back to self-reliance, but not through occult means (as in the stage of magic) but rather through rational methods.

Salomon Reinach was primarily an archaeologist and an anthropologist who was extremely devoted to the investigation of religion. He considered his times to be the most appropriate for the development of a science of religion. He believed that just like in all fields of knowledge, secular reason must exercise its right to investigate even the domain of religion. He wanted to present religion as a natural phenomenon, and defined it as a sum of scruples which hinder the free exercise of our faculties. Through this definition Reinach wanted to eliminate from the domain of religion the concepts of God, spiritual beings, and the infinite. These scruples, he believed, have arisen from the irrational taboos of primitive societies where they were associated with an animistic view of the world. While those scruples which have proved useful continued to persist and got transformed into rational rules of conduct, those which showed no such usefulness sank into the background. Thus, human progress, according to Reinach has taken place through the gradual secularization of those elements which were originally enveloped in the sphere of animistic beliefs. This process has not only led to the transformation of taboos into moral rules but has also led to the development of science out of magic. He visualized further progress in the direction of education and the extension of the rational outlook.

Check your progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What, according to George Frazer, are the three stages in the mental development of mankind?

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2.4 PSYCHOLOGICAL ORIGIN OF RELIGION

The naturalistic interpretation of religion received further stimulus from the development of the psychology of religion. The main proponents of this theory were Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939) James Henry Leuba (1867 – 1946).

According to Leuba the reason for the existence of religion is not the objective truth of its conceptions, but its biological value. He clarifies this idea with the example of the belief in a personal God. Earlier theologians had put forward metaphysical arguments, such as the argument from design, for the existence of such a God. The progress of the physical sciences has destroyed the strength of such arguments, leading subsequent theologians to change their arguments and appeal to inner experience instead. Here, as Leuba thinks, they have to agree with psychology, which applies the scientific method onto the innermost experiences of the individual. The inner experience, instead of establishing the existence of a personal God, shows how belief in such a God has arisen from the gratification it provides for affective and moral needs. Leuba paid special attention to mystical experiences which are considered to be the pinnacle of religious experience of God and tried to explain it in psychological and physiological terms. He compared it to the sublimation of sexual passion in the ascetical life, as well as to an altered state of consciousness induced by certain drugs. He also pointed out its affinity with such pathological conditions as hysteria and epilepsy. For the psychologist who remains within the province of science, religious mysticism is not the revelation of God

but of man himself. Human beings can no longer subscribe to a religion and its associated transcendent beliefs with intellectual honesty.

Sigmund Freud, the originator of psychoanalysis, regarded religious beliefs as illusions and fulfillments of the oldest, strongest, and most insistent wishes of mankind. He considered religion as a mental defense against some of the most threatening aspects of nature – earthquake, flood storm, disease, and the inevitableness of death. He explains that it is inn and through these forces, that nature appears to be rising up against us, with its majestic, cruel, and inexorable forcefulness. In response, human imagination transforms these forces into mysterious personal powers and the impersonal forces remain eternally remote. Now, if the natural elements are identified as having passions that rage as they do in our souls, if everywhere in nature there are beings around us of a kind that we know in our own society, then we can breathe freely, can feel at home in the uncanny and can deal by psychical means with our senseless anxiety. Though we are still defenseless, yet we are no longer helplessly paralyzed. We can at least react. We can apply the same methods against these violent supermen outside that we employ in our own society. We can try to adjure them, to appease them to bribe them, and, by so influencing them, we may rob them of part of their power.

Freud divides the mind into three provinces— Id, Ego, and Superego. “Id” is the unconscious region in which the basic instincts of our nature crowd together with no sense of order or value. “Ego” is the region in which contact with the external world is maintained, and it aims at self-preservation, selecting some of the Id’s demands for satisfaction and rejecting others, according to circumstances. “Superego” is the deposit of the parental influences of childhood, and it exercises a further control by banning those activities which are socially undesirable. We come to know about consciousness and the mind through an analysis of its disguised manifestations. It contains primal instincts or drives as well as repressed experiences. These repressed experiences still live on in the unconscious and become manifest in varied ways. These manifestations are what lead to ‘neurosis’ and Freud thinks that religion is the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity which may be left behind when humans learn to face the world relying no longer upon illusions but upon scientifically authenticated knowledge.

Freud utilizes his idea of the Oedipus complex (based on the Greek myth of a tragic hero who murdered his father and married his mother) to explicate the origin of religion. He believes that in primitive times human beings lived in small groups, each under the domination of a father who possessed all the females. The sons were driven out or killed as they induced the

father's jealousy. But they grouped together and killed the father, and partook of his flesh so as to share in his power. This was the primal crime, the parricide that has set up tensions within the human psyche out of which developed moral inhibitions, totemism, and the other phenomena of religion. Having slain their father, the brothers were struck with remorse, at least of a prudential kind. They also found that they cannot all succeed to his position and that there is therefore a continuing need for restraint. The dead father's prohibition accordingly takes on a new (moral) authority as a taboo against incest. This association of religion with the Oedipus complex, which is renewed in each individual, is held to account for the mysterious authority of God in the human mind and the powerful feeling of guilt which make men submit to such a phantasy. Religion is thus the return of the repressed. The idea of God is therefore a magnified version of the image of the human father. The transformation of the father into God takes place both in the history of the race and in the history of individuals. Individuals in adult life project upon the world the infantile memory of the father, and raise this image to the rank of a Father God. The father who gave them life, protected them, and demanded their obedience, becomes the God who is similarly the creator, preserver, and lawgiver.

What Freud wished to emphasize upon through this explanation was that a religious belief is determined by the psychological history of the person who holds it, and that such a belief is essentially infantile and neurotic. It is a projection of the nursery upon the world, and is thus a flight from reality. In the real world, which is a rigidly determined atheistic cosmos, there is no Father God who reigns over it.

2.5 SOCIAL ORIGIN OF RELIGION

In the work of Emile Durkheim (1858 – 1917) the theory of the origin of religion gets a sociological slant. His views not only imbibe a sociological theory of the origin of religion but they represent a complete philosophical perspective known as 'sociological positivism'. In Durkheim's philosophy the idea of society occupies the center position and functions as the key for understanding several other philosophical problems. According to him the idea of Truth and Falsehood are objective only in so far as they express collective and not individual thought. Even the laws of logic are taken by him to reflect the needs of civilized society. Here a Society needs to be understood not merely as the sum of the individuals included in it, but

rather it represents a peculiar kind of entity which is the source of constraints, governing the thought and behavior of its members.

In his social philosophy Durkheim devoted special attention to the subject of religion. According to him the character of primitive religion is best seen not in animism but totemism, which he considers as the more fundamental and primitive form of religion. The totem stands in a peculiar relationship to a particular social group, normally a tribe or clan. The totem is for this group the type of the sacred and the basis for the distinction of sacred and profane, and this he takes to be essence of religion.

Taking totemism as the type of religion Durkheim concludes that religion is to be understood as a social phenomenon. Religion serves the needs of the society in which it is practiced; and the object of its cult, concealed under the figures of its particular mythology, is the society itself. He points out that the earlier theories of primitive religion suffered from the defect of a one-sided concentration upon religious belief; whereas his own theory regards religion primarily from the point of view of action. So, he claims that there is something eternal in religion, for although particular beliefs become outworn, any society must from time to time reaffirm itself, and such reaffirmation is essentially religious.

Religion and society are so closely interwoven for Durkheim that religion is regarded as the matrix out of which other human activities, including science, appear to have grown. Religion is by no means discredited by the sciences, but it must always be looking for more adequate symbols in order to express its realities. In modern times, he explains, we have come to understand that the ideas of divinity and of society are foundationally the same. So, though no new religion of humanity has displaced the traditional religion, but this may happen in due course. There are no gospels which are immortal, but neither is there any reason for believing that humanity is incapable of inventing new ones.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Explain the sociological positivism of Emile Durkheim.

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2.6 SOCIO-POLITICAL ORIGIN OF RELIGION

Here we shall mainly discuss the thoughts of Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx.

“God” was Feuerbach’s first thought: the young Feuerbach was a theologian. He was studying theology to become a protestant pastor but from the standpoint of a rational religiosity. “Reason” was his second thought: for Feuerbach the theologian became a Hegelian. Oscillating between philosophy and theology and inwardly torn apart, longing for truth he came to Hegel’s lectures. After having attended Hegel’s lectures Feuerbach said “I knew what I ought to do and wanted to do: not theology but philosophy. Not to believe, but to think”. “Man” was Feuerbach’s third and last thought: for now, the Hegelian became an atheist. He wanted to follow Hegel’s path consistently to the very end. He believed that the old split between here and hereafter must be removed, not only in thought (as with Hegel) but in reality too, so that humanity can again concentrate wholeheartedly on itself, on its world and on the present time. In his “Essence of Christianity” Feuerbach enthroned materialism and dethroned God. He said that apart from nature and man nothing exists and the higher beings produced by our religious imaginations are merely the weird reflections of our own nature. He was against the idea of a personal God as well as the selfish belief in immortality.

To Feuerbach, consciousness of God was self-consciousness, and the knowledge of God was self- knowledge. Religion, was thereby the source of humanity’s earliest (though indirect) form of self-knowledge. The universal man, the community, and the unity of man with man was considered by Feuerbach as the Supreme Being and the measure of all things. The consciousness of the infinite was nothing else than the consciousness of the infinity of consciousness. In the consciousness of the infinite, the conscious subject has for his object the infinity of his own nature. Thus, the notion of God merges; man sets up his human nature out of himself; he sees it as something existing outside himself and separated from himself; and he projects it. In short, the notion of God becomes nothing but a projection of man himself. The absolute to man is his own nature. God appears as a projected, hypostatized reflection of man, behind which nothing exists in reality. The divine is the universality of the human, projected onto the hereafter. The attributes of God—love, wisdom, justice etc.— in reality are the attributes of man, i.e., of the human species.

The personal God of Christianity, believed to be independent and existing outside man, is nothing other than the specific notion of man given independent existence—the personified nature of man. Man contemplates his nature external to himself. The attributes of God are really the attributes of the objectified nature of man. It is not that God created man in his own image, but rather man created God in his own image. Man is a great projector and God is the great projection. God as intellectual being is a projection of human understanding. Here God is nothing but the objectified universal nature of human intelligence. God as the all loving Being, is also a projection of human heart. In prayer, man worships his own nature, and venerates the omnipotence of feelings. My own interest is declared as God's interest. My own will is identified as God's will. My own ultimate purpose is regarded as being God's purpose. Karl Marx maintained a negative attitude towards religion, for he found the latter to be incompatible with his theory of action, and therefore he rejected religion altogether. Marx inherited speculative atheism from Feuerbach. He was an atheist, even before he developed his theory of action.

Feuerbach's atheism was rooted in a speculative theory of man. According to him all the predicates attributed to God were purely human. It was for this reason that he said that the subject of these predicates should also be human. Thus, man simply projects his own infinite powers on to a transcendent being. God is an alienation of man. It is a self-estrangement. Feuerbach did not explain satisfactorily the origin of this alienation, though he maintained that the reason behind it was the individual's love of ease, sloth vanity and egoism. According to Marx as well man exists as an alienated being. Unlike Feuerbach, Marx pointed to the social and economic conditions of modern life as the cause of this alienation. Religion is only its expression. As a result of the division of labor, the means of production became the private property of individuals; the workers in the modern industrialized and technologized process of production have nothing but their sheer labor – merely a commodity– to offer. In the process of exchange, the product of their own labor becomes for wage earners an alienated, commodity; something separated from them. As man is frustrated in his earthly existence, he takes refuge in the phantasy world of the beyond. The culprit behind the continuance of these frustrating conditions is not religion, but the political structure which legalizes and protects the social status quo. Yet, neither the state nor religion itself reveals the roots of alienation. State and religion lie in the economic conditions of a society determined by private property. Religious alienation will get uprooted only when relations between human beings again become intelligible and reasonable as a result of new

modes of production.

Marx's former friend Bruno Bauer proposed that the emancipation of man requires a secular state which recognizes no religion. Existence of religion always indicates an incomplete emancipation. However, Marx saw that even though the American state is entirely separated from the church, still instead of being fully emancipated America continues to be a religious country par excellence. Religion is not only an expression of alienation, but also a protest against it. Religion is an inverted world consciousness; for an inverted, unjust, inhuman society produces man's religious consciousness. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed. It is the heart of the heartless people. It is the spirit of the spiritless situation. Religion is the opium of the people. Religion offers illusory happiness. For real happiness the abolition of religion is a must. Religion is a symptom of social disease.

Atheism alone is insufficient to cure the ills of the human situation. It only attempts to cure the symptoms without eradicating the disease. The disease is man's social-economic condition in a capitalist society. The social structure of private property produces the need for God, and so, it has to be eradicated. To the orthodox Marxist, atheism is very important. Atheism is the annulment of God. It is the theoretical humanism. Annulment of private property is communism. It vindicates real human life. It is practical humanism.

Atheism and communism re-establish the true relationship between man and nature. This relationship is an ever active one - a praxis. To be human is not to be something, but to do something. Work and material production constitutes man's fulfillment, not leisure. Re-establishing the true relationship between man and nature is attained through praxis. Praxis establishes a relationship between nature and consciousness - the two poles of human reality. The only true philosophy, therefore, is a theory of action. The truth of man is in what he does, not in what he knows or claims to know without his active relation to nature.

From a Marxist point of view religious belief always conflict with a truly humanistic attitude because religion always projects beyond the human. Man becomes independent only if he is his master. Man is his master when he owes his existence to himself. A man who lives by the favors of another is a dependent being. Marx's atheism is humanism, mediated through the suppression of religion, and communism is humanism mediated through the suppression of private property. Humanism does not consist of abstract postulates. It is to be realized historically in a human society whereby truly human conditions are created. There must no longer be a society where great number of human beings are degraded, despised and exploited.

Marx remained an atheist because he thought the myth of the deity was an obstacle to the rehabilitation of the poor and an impediment to complete happiness, for it stressed upon the joy of the beyond and diverted attention from the suffering here on earth. Thus, religious beliefs seem to be strikingly incompatible with the philosophy of Marx.

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. Why are the religious beliefs totally incompatible with the philosophy of Marx?

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2.7 CRITICAL EXPOSITION

The naturalists, anthropologists and psychologists whom we have considered do have something to suggest in their interpretation of religion. The strength of their argument rests on the claim that their assertions are based on verifiable facts brought to light by scientific investigation. However, a thorough examination of this claim reveals that they are noticeably unfounded. The given facts must be interpreted and that almost all the thinkers whom we have considered were scientists of one kind or another by training. In so far as they move from the findings of their particular sciences into the sphere of philosophical interpretation, they tend to bring along presuppositions, speculations and even prejudices which need to be brought out and reasonably examined.

The most obvious problem with naturalism is that it involves us in a gigantic one-sided abstraction. It takes one aspect of reality and presents it as the entire reality. Just as the naturalists isolate the cognitive aspect of our experience of the world, similarly they concentrate on the element of belief in religion. They even seem to think of religious beliefs

as offering an explanation of the world, however these beliefs can only be properly understood from within the setting of the religious life as a whole, which involves conative and affective elements as well. Some of the thinkers' idea of God illustrates their own misunderstanding of the nature of God. The abstract idea presented by the naturalists as the whole reality ignores some facts and exaggerates others, thereby merely giving a distorted picture.

What needs to be kept in mind is that the origin of a particular belief or practice does not determine the question of its validity in its present form. Any human activity goes back to humble beginnings. But this point is not remembered in the case of religion. We must judge things by what they are today, not by what they have grown out of. Something derived from a cruder origin may have acquired quite a new status and meaning.

Though psychology is indeed a valuable study, but it does not and indeed cannot be determinative for the validity of religion. We tend to believe what we want to believe. Yet the psychological criticism of belief can be carried only so far, or else it ends up in skepticism which engulfs the psychologist himself, and makes rational arguments impossible. By tracing the history of the idea of God in the projecting of the father figure, Freud discredits the very belief in God. But his theory is not applicable to religion in general, rather it only applies to those religions which recognize some kind of 'Father God'. Even if men think of God in terms of father figure, they tend to do so in the analogical language. The question of whether or not this analogue indeed presents a true representation of the reality, is one which the psychoanalysts fail answer.

Freud's ideas of religion hardly had any considerable degree of acceptance. Usually, neurosis is defined as a condition leading to difficulties in adjusting satisfactorily to one's environment, thereby leading to a noticeably negative outcome. Jung however pointed out that religion is a healthy outcome. Religious practices seem to be a desirable, justifiable, and realistic mode of activity. Freud says religion is a form of neurosis. All this suggests that there can be good neurosis and bad neurosis. The fact that religion relieves individuals from unconscious conflict, does not present a sufficient reason for labelling it as the universal obsessional neurosis of mankind. None of the thinkers discussed thus far have been able to coherently establish that in general religious believers are less able to form satisfying personal relations and are less able to get ahead in their work than non-believers.

Freud even ends up committing the fallacy of psycho-mechanistic parallelism. This is the fallacy of assuming that because two behavioral patterns are observed to exhibit that same

constituents or are reducible to the same component elements, they are to be attributed to the same psychological mechanism. Religious beliefs display some marks of infantile regression. From this one cannot conclusively derive that religion is reducible to infantile regression. Similarity is not sameness. Moreover, there is no conclusive proof for the idea of the Oedipus complex itself. The word “illusion” does not mean absence of an objective reality. Illusion is only a perceptual error. Illusion is resulted from a presence not from an absence. It cannot be taken to mean that God does not exist.

2.8 LET US SUM UP

The sociological and sociopolitical theories make it evident that religion is deeply intertwined with numerous social factors, and that no account of religion which omits the sociological aspect could be complete. But apart from this rather obvious truth, we get no clear guidance, for there are many serious conflicts among the views we have seen. We have not been given any single convincing answer to the question of what precisely is the relation of religion to the society in which it is practiced. Can religious beliefs play a major role in giving rise to an economic system? Does the economic system give rise to religion as a kind of by-product?

Durkheim recognizes religion as a social activity. In doing so he supplements a deficiency in some of the earlier anthropological accounts, which had concentrated on religious beliefs. But his general thesis relies too exclusively on identifying totemism as a type of religion. However, totemism simply fails to fulfil this role, for the following reasons: (1) totemism is not really primitive. Rather it has, as Freud recognized, a history of more primitive ideas behind it. (2) Totemism is much less universal than religion, and cannot serve as a larger category under which other types of religions get subsumed. Notably, it is precisely among some of the most backward people that totemism is absent. (3) Most researchers now recognize totemism as being primarily not a religious phenomenon but a social one. When the foundation stone of totemism is withdrawn, Durkheim’s argument for the identity between the ideas of divinity and society collapses.

Feuerbach says that religion is consciousness of the infinite, and that it is therefore nothing else than the consciousness which man has of his own limited but infinite nature. Here he implies only the orientation of human consciousness toward an infinite, but does not provide any evidence of the existence or the non-existence of an infinite reality, independent of consciousness. It may be noted that Feuerbach’s universal human being is itself a projection

as well as an abstraction, who projects something out of his existence that does not exist in reality.

Marx's praxis has primarily an economic character. For Marx, man is autonomous only in his material life process. Thus, Marx's praxis is restrictive. If religion indeed emerges out of the social conditions in which man is an enslaved being, then religion must die out automatically, when the ideal conditions are created, in which all human can be happy.

2.9 KEY WORDS

Praxis: Praxis is the process by which a theory, lesson, or skill is practiced. It is a practical knowledge applied into one's actions.

Totemism: Totemism is a religious belief that is frequently associated with shamanistic religions. The totem is usually an animal or other natural figure that spiritually represents a group of related people such as a clan.

2.10 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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2.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

1. The three stages in the mental development of mankind are magic, religion and science and each of these do not follow one another in a clear-cut succession. At the magical level man depends on his own strength to overcome the difficulties that trouble him in his attempt to gain the ends. He believes that there exists a certain order of nature which he thinks he can learn and manipulate by occult means. But experience teaches him that he is mistaken and there he turns to religion. In religion man no longer relies on himself but seeks the help of invisible beings. He believes that these beings possess that power to control natural events which magic failed to gain. The religious attitude supposes that there is some elasticity in the course of nature, but experience teaches man that man is mistaken again. The rigid uniformity of nature is discovered, and religion, regarded as an explanation of nature, is displaced by science. In science man reverts to the self-reliance but not through occult means but by through the rational methods.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

1. In Durkhiem's philosophy the idea of society occupies the center position and functions as the key for understanding philosophical problems. Truth and falsehood are regarded as being objective in so far as they express collective and not individual thought. Even the laws of logic reflect the needs of civilized society. Society is not just the sum of the individuals included in it, but a peculiar kind of entity which is the source of constraints governing the thought and behavior of its members. In his social philosophy, Durkheim devoted special attention to the subject of religion. According to him the character of primitive religion is best seen not in animism but totemism, which he considers as a more fundamental and primitive form of religion. The totem stands in a peculiar relationship to a particular social group, normally a tribe or clan. The totem is for this group the type of the sacred and the basis for the distinction of sacred and profane and this he takes to be essence of religion.

Answers to Check Your Progress III

1. For Marx religion is an inverted world consciousness. An inverted, unjust, inhuman society produces man's religious consciousness. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed. It is the heart

of the heartless people. It is the spirit of the spiritless situation. Religion is the opium of the people. Religion offers illusory happiness. For real happiness the abolition of religion is a must. Religion is a symptom of social disease. From a Marxist point of view religious belief always conflicts with a truly humanistic attitude because religion always projects beyond the human. Man becomes independent only if he is his master. Man is his master when he owes his existence to himself. A man who lives by the favor of another becomes a dependent being. Marx's atheism is humanism, mediated with itself through the suppression of religion; and communism is humanism mediated with itself through the suppression of private property. Humanism does not consist of abstract postulates. It is to be realized historically in a human society; truly human conditions are to be created. There must be no longer a society where great number of human beings are degraded, despised and exploited. Marx remained an atheist because he thought the myth of the deity was an obstacle to the rehabilitation of the poor and an impediment to complete happiness, by stressing the joy of the beyond and diverting attention from the suffering here on earth. Thus, religious beliefs are totally incompatible with the philosophy of Marx.

Unit 3 Religion, Philosophy of Religion, and Theology*

Structure

3.0 Objectives

3.1 Introduction

3.2 Religion

3.3 Philosophy of Religion

3.4 Theology

3.5 Let Us Sum Up

3.6 Keywords

3.7 Further Readings and References

3.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

3.0 OBJECTIVES

- To understand the elements of Religion
- To understand Philosophy of Religion as a subset of Philosophy
- To demarcate the separate provinces of Religion, Philosophy of Religion, and Theology and to understand their interrelationship

Note: The content in the *ponder boxes* is not part of the conventional unit, but pondering on it would enrich your understanding of the unit and would allow the assimilation of knowledge in a broader context.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

It's not uncommon to witness intersecting domains of common interest giving an impression of sameness even when they are not so, but a closer inspection quickly dissipates this misconception. Religion, philosophy of religion, and theology too are domains that intersect,

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often giving an impression of resemblance, but a closer inspection suggests otherwise, for domains might intersect, interests might align, but they do so with a different set of *aims* and *attitudes*. Thus, this unit is an attempt to closely examine this intersection and give an account of what differentiates the three.

In this effort, it seems reasonable to begin with 'religion', as apart from it being a domain in its own right, it also happens to be the subject matter for the other two. Therefore, the following is a brief account of what religion represents.

3.2 RELIGION

Although a precise number is difficult to arrive at, most of the estimations suggest that there are over 4000 religions, sects and their offshoots practised worldwide. Thus, though it is not entirely impossible, it is highly unlikely to find someone not acquainted with religion in one form or the other, yet any effort to define it in some *precise* way is likely to end up as a failure because religion represents such diverse beliefs, practices, observances and adherences that have very few parallels.

Thus, maybe a more fruitful approach to understand religion is by delineating its general or common features, and subsequently relying on such features, synthesise a broad and holistic outlook regarding what the concept of religion represents.

Religion can be identified with some core set of beliefs, associated practices and observances adhered by an individual or a group of people or a sect. Alternatively stated, religion represents a core set of beliefs that dictates the way of life of an individual or a group. In the context of the preceding statements and for the discussion to follow from here, it is significant to understand what 'beliefs' are.

Beliefs are statements, claims or propositions considered or accepted to be true by an individual or a group. For example, When someone considers the statement—'the sun rises in the east' to be true, they adopt or form an affirmative mental attitude towards this statement/proposition. This mental attitude is what we may call a belief. Belief, it needs to be underscored, is not representative of the truth or falsity of a *proposition*. Albeit, they represent the *consideration* of an individual or a group for the truth or falsity of a proposition. In view of the afore-stated notion of belief and our common experience with them, it's reasonable to state, without probably attracting any disagreement, that not all our beliefs are religious in

character, signifying that there have to be some identifiable key characteristics that separate our religious beliefs from our commonly held other beliefs. One of the promising ways, it appears, to decipher some of the essential characteristics of religious beliefs— the claims that are considered to be true within the religious domain— is by observing how the

organised religions function worldwide and arrive at some broad generalisations therefrom. The following, therefore, is an effort to bring forth some of the essential characteristics that can be solely associated with religion.

PONDER BOX-I

Beliefs play a seminal role in the decision making of individuals, thereby shaping their entire lives. The same is to be expected in the context of religious beliefs if you hold them.

List the decisions in your life that have been fully or partially influenced by religious beliefs. You may discover the extent of your life influenced or conditioned by religion.

3.2.1 Salient Features of Religion

3.2.1.1 Claims to provide answers to some of the fundamental questions

To begin with, most world religions claim to be the sole repository of the answers to some of the *fundamental* questions that concern us. Such fundamental questions, amongst others, may include ‘what the ultimate reality is’, ‘why anything exists at all’, ‘what our place in such a reality is’, ‘what our true nature is’ etc. These questions, arguably, suggest that religion claims to offer the *architecture of our reality*. Most religions, if not all, provide answers to these questions and often they project a reality that transcends our common experience but at the same time is intimately connected to our lives and wellbeing.

Some examples may prove useful in driving home the essence of what is stated above. Consider, for a moment, one of the questions mentioned above, ‘why anything exists at all’. One may find, on investigation, that many religions offer some conception of a creator or an uncaused cause as an answer to this question. Judaism, Christianity, Islam and many schools of Hinduism fall in this category, where the appeal is made to some theistic notion wherein God or gods, assume(s) the role of a creator along with many other roles. However, not all religions, it is emphasised, subscribe to such a view. For example, Jainism and Buddhism don’t offer any conception of a creator to explain the existence of this world. However, it doesn’t mean the question of *existence* is abandoned. What differs is only the *form of answers* offered.

Such answers are considered absolute truths within the fold of respective religions. Further, such claims, owing to the immutable status accorded to them, are opaque to any challenges, meaning their authority is considered *final* and their legitimacy is *unquestionable* in most religions. However, the foregoing doesn't imply that the prevalent beliefs in a religion are always accepted by all the adherents alike. Internal disagreements often occur on account of mostly varying interpretations of the same religious tenets, but the rigid character of such tenets and their different interpretations often push religion towards schism. Various subjects of all the major religions are a testimony to this propensity.

3.2.1.2 Gives a higher purpose that ought to guide our life

Another salient feature of most of the world religions is the concerted effort to address the concern of meaning of life, i.e., addressing the questions like- 'is there some inherent meaning to life' or 'is there a higher purpose that ought to guide our life'. The afore-stated concern probably stems from a foreseeable impending end to our lives, which forces upon us some psychologically unsettling questions such as, is death the final truth staring us and our loved ones, or is there some form of continuity that makes our lives more meaningful than what is apparent. Most religions attempt to satisfy this human yearning for continuity by advancing a conception of our true nature that is separate and distinct from our perishable physical body. For an instance, most religions rely on some conception of soul, self or consciousness to define our *true* nature and in effect establish a continuity and tranquillity that cannot be jeopardised by mortality, impermanence, uncertainty or death. It is in the context of this immortal true nature that most religions define or give meaning to the purpose of life. *Salvation* for Judeo-Christian and Islamic religions, *Mokṣa* for Hinduism, *Nirvāṇa* for Buddhism, *Kaivalya* for Jainism, represent such a higher purpose of life.

3.2.1.3 Offers general moral principles to guide one's actions

Most religions, it appears, assume a central role in shaping the moral compass of their followers. Alternatively stated, most religions demarcate the province of what is *right* and *wrong* or *good* and *evil*, which means, that religion offers the general principles that the adherents of a religion must follow while conducting the affairs of their life. For instance, the doctrine of 'niṣkāmakarma', one of the key teachings of Bhagavad Gita, calls for a desire-less or a self-less pursuit of an action in accordance with one's duty.

As such the principles are considered to be the commandments of divine origin, meaning, the adherents of a religion, in most such cases, are not assumed to have the autonomy to accept

or discard such principles or duties. Adherence to such principles by a follower can be seen as a function of reverence or fear or a combination of both. Reverence for such principles is understandable as they are believed to be divine commandments by a follower, whereas the fear stems from undesirable consequences and punishments that such commandments append to non-adherence.

3.2.1.4 Faith

Faith is another salient feature that is associated with religion in ways that are arguably unparalleled in other walks of life. Faith, in one sense, is subscribing to a belief or a set of beliefs without seeking justifications for having them. As mentioned earlier, belief is treating a proposition, a claim or a statement to be true. Thus, faith, in the aforesaid sense, is treating a claim/ proposition/ statement to be true *without needing any justification* to do so. The adherents of any religion, it appears, place their faith, in the aforesaid sense, in the dictates and claims of their respective religion and conduct their lives according to it.

The foregoing doesn't imply a complete absence of justification from the domain of religion. Having faith doesn't mean the adherents or practitioners completely renounce justification. Quite the opposite, justification is central to religion when it comes to the conduct of a follower or a practitioner, but such justifications always come from the tenets, claims and principles advanced by the religion. What they cannot seek, in most religions, is the justification for *these tenets, claims and principles themselves* that make up the edifice of a particular religion. In fact, questioning the core set of beliefs and their basis is often regarded as irreverence for the religion. Most religions, therefore, have instruments of deterrence to prevent such blasphemy.

3.2.1.5 Revelation as the source of ultimate knowledge

Religious beliefs often hinge on a specific source of knowledge which starkly differentiates them from most other forms of beliefs. In most religions, the source of knowledge is claimed to be some form of *divine revelation*, or some *authority*, such as *scriptures*, *prophets* or *inscriptions*, that is treated to be the repository of all knowledge, the veracity and legitimacy of which is supposedly unchallenged and unrivalled. As explained earlier, all justifications for religious practices rely on them whereas *their* justification generally lies in their claimed divinity or absolute authority.

3.2.1.6 Ritualism

Ritualism, a socio-cultural phenomenon in general, is also an integral part of most religions. *Rituals*, in this sense, constitute religion instituted specific set of practices and observances often for their supposed benefits to the practitioners. These are generally the practices seamlessly integrated with even the most secular aspects of the socio-cultural sphere of a person, dictating ‘*whats*’ and ‘*hows*’ to them. The extent of penetration of rituals often goes unnoticed, but it can be understood from merely inspecting the various stages in a religious person’s life from birth to death.

3.2.1.7 Prayer

Prayer is a phenomenon associated with most of the religions. It is conceived as a medium of communication between the divine and its subject. Prayers can be classified based on the intent of such communication. One such intent is to demonstrate adulations and reverence for the divine, and the prayer fulfilling such intent, therefore, involves elements demonstrative of worship or praise. Different from the preceding are petitionary prayers, where the intent is to see some desire getting fulfilled or to seek forgiveness for some wrong conduct or just to ensure that the blessing of the divine doesn’t abandon the petitioner. A significant facet of petitionary prayer is the conception of the divine or the God.

3.2.1.8 Spiritualism

Spiritualism, although is often identified with religion, is a secular notion. It’s a quest to understand one’s own nature or what may be called the quest for self-actualisation. In the above sense, it’s closely associated with the yearning to understand the meaning of life, but when such a meaning is sought within the confines of a religion, or when the quest to understand one’s own nature takes one to the doorsteps of religion, it becomes integrated with religion. Thus, in the above sense, spiritualism is an integral part of religion but it is not exclusive to it.

Hitherto, some of the essential features of religion have been introduced to aid the reader in identifying and segregating beliefs and practices that are representative of religion. Preceding is not an exhaustive list of features characterising religion, yet they afford enough generalisations to assist in drawing a tentative perimeter around its domain for further exploration.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with that provided at the end of the unit.

1. Delineate the general features of religion.

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3.3 PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

This section provides an exposition of what constitutes ‘philosophy of religion’, but any definitive progress in the stated direction is inconceivable without alluding to what *philosophy*, in general, represents.

Philosophy marks an *attitudinal shift* from what has been witnessed in the context of religion in the preceding section. If religion is about faith as its underpinning, philosophy adopts a posture of *scepticism** or *doubt* for any assertion. This attitude of scepticism for any apparent or obscure is at the core of philosophy. In the preceding sense, philosophy offers a prospect of *unrestrained scrutiny* into the edifice of our notions.

Consider the following questions and reflect for a moment. ‘what is reality’; ‘is there a reality beyond our sense mediated experience’; ‘why anything exists’; ‘what is our place in this world’; ‘is there any meaning to life’; ‘how do we know what we know’; ‘are we an autonomous agent with free will’; etc. In the previous section, it was told that religion claims to provide answers to these questions or at least some of these questions, but is it necessary to rely on religion or any other authority to get answers to such questions, or can one exercise the option to give into one’s sense of *wonderment* and *curiosity* and *reflect* on such issues.

When an individual exercises the latter option and reflects, it may rather quickly dawn upon that each of these questions can be responded to in more than one way. Apparently, the

* Scepticism is used in a specific sense here. It should be understood as the readiness to question any claim to truth, to seek conceptual clarity of the categories forming such propositions and to look for the logical coherency, all being done with an openness for accepting the limitation of such justifications and the assumptions involved.

existence of each of the thousands of religions and their offshoots bears testimony to the diversity and plurality in the responses to these questions, and when non-religious responses too are added to the mix, it may seem prudent to adopt a reasonable level of scepticism for any assertion made regardless of the authority it is coming from. This attitude that drives philosophy is in stark contrast to religion, which has *faith* at its root and therefore is content with embracing the words of authority.

Apparently, scepticism or doubt propels one to ask in what ways an assertion is true. This enquiry brings forth the significance ‘*justification*’ has in the context. Justification means *supporting* or *grounding* the assertion made by a declaration, which in common parlance is often called reason, but in philosophy, it has a specific meaning and structure. The structure is called an *argument*, constituting of a *conclusion*—a proposition that one intends to establish and *premise(s)*—proposition(s) that one advances to establish the conclusion. The argument is the structure philosophy relies on to justify claims.

POUNDER BOX -II

Usage of argumentation is not limited to the formal fields of enquiry. In fact, you employ them in your day to day discourses more often than you probably appreciate.

Look up the following forms of arguments:

Induction, deduction and abduction

Observe your discourses for how you and others around you employ these structures.

However, religion too, it may be argued, relies on arguments for justification. In fact, it’s a fairly common structure often employed in even regular discourses. Thus, religion definitely employs the structure of argumentation as philosophy does but doesn’t harness its potential as philosophy does. Premises and conclusions in philosophical arguments are open to challenge, and in the wake of newer information, if contradictions and inconsistencies emerge, philosophical arguments are able to make a course correction, which is entirely missing in the domain of religion. Also, in constructing arguments, philosophy attempts to keep at bay logical-fallacies* and cognitive-biases†, which, it seems, is not a particularly strong suit of religion. In the foregoing sense, Philosophy is *organic*, ever-growing, adding newer corpus

* Logical fallacies corrode the integrity of an argument. One of the ways in which they get actualised is by diluting the form or structure of the argument, i.e., by not adhering to the proper rules of inference, therefore suitably termed as formal fallacies. Informal fallacies are yet another manifestation of logical fallacies, where some devious instruments are advanced disguised as arguments

† Cognitive biases create a tunnel vision before us, hiding contradictions and inconsistencies that are often in plain sight. Cognitive biases remind us that we are not merely born in a physical world. We are also born in a socio-cultural environment, where before even getting to one’s full cognitive capacities, one is conditioned by the prevalent beliefs of one’s environment, preventing one from being considerate for the alternate views.

PONDER BOX - III

If you have been enthusiastic about the previous activities, you may have discovered arguments crucially shape your discourses, beliefs and decisions. In this sense, they shape your life, but you might not be as adept as you think you are in employing them in your life.

*Examine common **cognitive biases** and **logical fallacies** that plague your judgements.*

of knowledge. On the contrary, the claims of religious arguments, as explained in the previous section, are considered to be *absolute* truths and therefore can't be subjected to any challenge. Thus, in the event of inconsistencies or contradictions too, they remain *rigid*.

Thus, relying on the instrument of argumentation and espousing an attitude of reasonable scepticism for the apparent and the obscure in equal measures, philosophy

addresses some of the fundamental concerns. Very few concerns, if there are any, can be as fundamental as understanding the nature of reality itself. In philosophy, this domain of inquiry is labelled as metaphysics. Other fundamental concerns of philosophy are epistemology, the investigation into the nature of knowledge and its associated aspects, and value theory, which in its broadest sense is an effort to arrive at general principles that can guide evaluative judgements such as in the context of ethics, where philosophy strives to arrive at a sound basis to evaluate acts, behaviours and intents of individuals into categories of good and bad or right or wrong.

The above-stated pursuits and maybe a few others may occupy the bedrock of philosophy, but a *domain-specific confinement* of philosophy is probably ill-conceived, for philosophy embraces the mundane as it embraces the profound and the fundamental. The essence of philosophy, therefore, is probably not to be sought in the *domain* of exploration. Rather, it seems to reflect in the *act* of exploration, spurred by a penchant for scepticism and irreverence for authority, challenging the most fundamental of the assumptions and beliefs.

It is in the backdrop of the elements of philosophy revealed hitherto, the pursuit of philosophy of religion needs to be understood. The discussion thus far clearly demonstrates that the religious considerations and some of the fundamental concerns of philosophy share the same *domain*, but both approach these shared common provinces with a different set of pursuits. Where philosophy is an *enquiry* in such areas critically inspecting a wide range of possibilities, most religions *don't come across as an enquiry* into such domains. Instead, they mostly claim to be an exclusive, legitimate and unrivalled *repository* of the knowledge in such domains.

Philosophy of religion critically inspects such claims by religion, relying on a specific attitude and instrument underscored earlier. In doing so, it scrutinises religion from the point of view of identifying logical inconsistencies and incoherencies between its various concepts and claims. Also, it scrutinises the religious tenets in view of the developments and outcomes associated with general philosophical enquiry, scientific investigation and other competing, contending and even concurring positions. The rest of the section is an elucidation of how, philosophy of religion, as a second-order activity, subjects religious claims to an unrestrained scrutiny.

PONDER BOX-IV

If you are in a habit of exercising your reflective prowess, you are likely to have reflected on the meaning of life. If you have not, you can do it now.

*Critically examine your own views on the subject in the light of **existentialism, absurdism** and **Nozick's experience machine**.*

- Most religions, as stated in the previous section, claim to offer the architecture of reality, and although not always, but often in such religions, God is central to such an architecture. However, given there is pluralism in religious beliefs and other competing and contending belief systems such as atheism, agnosticism and scientific and philosophical positions, philosophy of religion scrutinises the claims and arguments offered for *the existence of God* in the light of opposing positions and available empirical evidence.
- Philosophy of religion also examines *the attributes of God* claimed by various religions and their implications. For an instance, most monotheistic religions ascribe omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, eternality and benevolence, etc. to God. In philosophy of religion, these attributes are scrutinised to demarcate their conceptual domain, to identify how different attributes relate to each other and to understand their implication in terms of consistencies and contradictions. For an instance, a philosophically challenging issue for many religions is 'the problem of evil', which brings to the fore the contradiction between two of the attributes of God, 'benevolence' and 'omnipotence'. If God is omnipotent, i.e., all-powerful, and benevolent, i.e., who is kind and desires the wellbeing of its subjects, it seems fair to assume that evils such as crimes, wars, genocide, exploitation, socio-economic crisis, pandemics and epidemics, congenital disorders, natural disasters etc. shouldn't impact the lives of innocents, infants and children, yet evil exists, meaning one of these two traits can't be ascribed to God, or else these traits have to

be understood in a different sense, something that most religions seem to have refrained from attempting.

- Many religions, as elucidated in the previous section, offer an answer to what the ‘meaning of life’ or the true purpose of life is. As stated, such answers often involve what constitutes our true nature, which, as alluded to in the previous section, happens to be ‘soul’ in many religions. Soul, it can be observed, has been conferred with a wide variety of attributes that derive their meaning from the larger context of reality professed by all such religions. Philosophy of religion scrutinises these *conceptions of soul in the context of investigating our true nature and the purpose of life*. For example, many of the attributes ascribed to soul such as vitality, consciousness, experience, rationality, emotions etc. seem to be untenable when looked at from the point of view of theory of evolution, neuroscience and molecular biology in particular. Philosophy of religion, therefore, examines the conception of soul or other contenders for our true self in light of a much broader set of arguments than what religion offers.
- Most religions claim to be the legitimate source of knowledge. Thus, philosophy of religion dons its sceptic visor to inspect such claims. In doing so, it inspects the premises advanced as a justification for a claim to be true, but, as stated in the previous section, religious claims appeal to authority for such justifications, and therefore are opaque to further investigation, but philosophical inquest is unbridled by such restrictions and consequently questions *the appeal to authority itself as a legitimate or reliable mode of justification*.

PONDER BOX-V

Although seeking and providing justification is central to philosophy, philosophy is not blind to the limitation of justification.

Can justifications be sought for every claim without slipping into an infinite regress?

If Justifications can't be sought indefinitely, does it mean that some propositions/claims have to be taken as axioms or unjustifiable foundations for the rest of the knowledge system to be built over them, or are there ways to provide justifications without presupposing foundations?

- Again, as stated in the previous section, most religions define and demarcate the province of good and bad or right and wrong and issue *commandments/ imperatives to dictate actions, behaviours and intents in accordance with such conceptions*. However, philosophy of religion scrutinises such notions and imperatives in view of the

developments and outcomes of such developments in the domain of ethics, which strives to understand the notions the terms good or evil represent, how such notions have been constructed in the society and can there be a universal basis for such categorisations as religions seem to prescribe.

The foregoing is a glimpse of what philosophy of religion strives for. It may give an

PONDER BOX-VI

Revisit the list of decisions you earlier made under the influence of religious beliefs. Given the option, would you consider any change in them in the light of what you understood of philosophy?

impression that philosophy of religion is critical of religion. Such an impression is definitely true, but it may be reminded that philosophy at its core is a critique machinery that is fuelled by scepticism for *any* given. Thus, one may find it to be true as well that philosophy is equally critical of the claims of other domains such as that of psychology, polity, law and sciences, etc. Philosophy

displays the same level of scepticism for the arguments, conceptual apparatuses, modes of justification, standards of proof and the reality constructed and advanced by any such domains. Most of all, philosophy eyes its *own* corpus of knowledge, standards of truth, modes of investigation and justification too with an equal measure of scepticism.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with that provided at the end of the unit.

1. Briefly discuss the relationship between religion and philosophy of religion?

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3.4 THEOLOGY

Theology is a systematic study of religion. The afore-stated may propel one to ask what it studies about religion that philosophy of religion doesn't. One crucial difference is that

theology, unlike philosophy of religion, is appended to specific religions, meaning most religions have their own theology, and in many cases, even the sub-sects of religions have their own theology. However, both, Philosophy of religion and theology, it may be argued, don't differ in the *content* as much as they differ in the *intent* of the study and the *attitude* with which they study religion.

Theology is the study of religion with the intent to systematize/ formalize/ organise its declarations and dictates into coherent and logically consistent doctrines. It has already been explained that the fundamental tenets of any religion are considered immutable on account of they being generally divine revelations or the words of a revered final authority and therefore act as justification for any practice, observance, ritual or belief endorsed by the follower of that religion. However, these fundamental tenets, regardless of their holiness, can appear ambiguous and incoherent and therefore are open to interpretations and often attract challenges.

Thus, to take the correct interpretation to the followers who can reliably practice, profess and preach with faith; to avoid ambiguities and vagueness; to pass the religious message to the subsequent generations and to those who are not yet in the fold of religion; and to prepare a defence against the challenges posed by philosophical scrutiny, scientific developments and other competing and contending beliefs, theology undertakes the intensive study of religion and strives to systematise and formalise it on a sound footing. The following are some of the instances where theology can be witnessed attempting the same.

3.4.1 Furnishing proofs for the existence of God

It has been expounded earlier that the conception of God is central to many religions. The collapse of this conception, therefore, may be coterminous with the collapse of such religions. Possibilities of such an occurrence for any particular religion often emerge from the challenges from other religions, philosophy and science. Consequently, one of the major tasks theologians of any particular religion have undertaken is to prove the existence of (their version of) God. To actualise the foregoing, theologians too, as philosophers do, rely on arguments, but, unlike philosophy, theology frames the argument with a foregone conclusion that God exists. Further, a refutation of challenges often requires theology to adopt argumentation as a tool for the purpose, yet, in adopting argumentation, appeal to authority is not renounced. Thus, theology, in the above-alluded sense, is stuck somewhere between the

need to *address the mounting challenges* of its time and the need to *preserve the absolute authority* of the religious tenets.

3.4.2 Interprets the notion of God and attempts to demonstrate the consistency between different attributes of God

One of the major contributions of theology in most religions is to clarify and crystallise the conception of God, which is not just consistent with the metaphysics that a particular religion advances but is also able to withstand philosophical scrutiny. Theology, in doing so, often relies on the traditional attributes of God in a particular religion such as theologies of most monotheistic religions rely on omnipotence, benevolence, omnipresence, eternity and omniscience to define God. However, some of these traits, on philosophical scrutiny, don't seem to be compatible with each other such as the ones cited in the previous section, viz., 'omnipotence' and 'benevolence' in the context of evil. Theologians, however, contest such contradictions on account of the existence of 'free-will'. Thus, non-intervention of God to prevent evil, from the vantage point of theology, doesn't pose any conflict between God's attributes. However, philosophical scrutiny still contends that such a conception of evil is very narrow as it leaves natural disasters, epidemics, diseases etc. unexplained. Be that as it may, the purpose of the aforesaid is not to demonstrate the strength or weakness of theological arguments. Albeit, it is to show how theology complements religion by attempting to bring together its various parts as a coherent whole.

3.4.3 Codification of ethical and moral precepts

Another significant task performed by theologians with implications for the organisation of society and directing the moral compass of individuals in the context of many religions has been the codification of ethical and moral principles and their interpretations. Most religions have commandments or imperatives that ought to be followed by a true follower, but mostly such principles are open to interpretations. Theology, in this backdrop, provides contextual interpretations to them and elaborates them for the reference of adherents, thereby playing a significant role in demarcating the right and wrong for a section of society. Such a role in many societies is not merely confined to the demarcations that can inform personal conscience. There are legal implications too, governed by religion instituted jurisprudence. Theology plays a crucial role in shaping and codifying its tenets. Most religions have their own schools of jurisprudence, dictating the legal dynamics of the societies where they are followed. For example, many countries of the world structure their whole legal system

around such doctrines whereas, in many others, a partial employment can be seen such as in India, where it is only confined to personal laws.

3.4.4 Clarifies the religion instituted ways to self-actualise

It has been mentioned earlier that the meaning of life or the higher purpose of life is a significant question that most religions address, but it is theology that strives to bring clarity to the attributes of true human nature that is in consonance with the true purpose of human life as religion conceives it. In doing so, it also, as in other instances, strives to address the challenges that other religions, philosophy and science mount on it. Theology also systematises the rituals and ceremonies to be performed while leading one's life according to the dictates of religion. It includes specifying the rituals to be performed, their modes of performance and when to perform them. Such systematisation often also includes prayers and modes of worship as well.

Above-mentioned are some of the instances to demonstrate how theology systematically studies religion to organise its imperatives and claims into coherent and logically consistent canons.

The preceding effort of demarcation in this unit may seem suggestive of a clear distinction between all three domains, but in practice, it has often been found that it's not as plain sailing as it seems. Various intersections between these domains do present situations where the subject content of one province can be mistaken for the other. Such errors in judgement are fairly common place. For instance, an oft-made error in judgement is to consider the arguments advanced regarding the existence and nature of God, soul, self, etc. as theological merely on the ground that the subject content involved is religious in character. However, philosophy of religion too can indulge in the same subject content, advancing the arguments with the same intent, i.e., to prove the existence of God or soul, to understand their nature; and in doing so, it is not stripped off its philosophical character in any way.

Likewise, advertently or inadvertently, theological arguments too are offered in the guise of philosophy. Argumentation is indeed central to both theology and philosophy of religion, but it is not sufficient to characterise a dialogue as philosophical. For example, if an argument is advanced to prove the existence of god, soul etc. *without abandoning the appeal to authority as the final justification*, can one call such arguments philosophical, where positions are rigid, truths are absolute, contending views are not given due considerations and the mode of justification is not questioned? On the other hand, philosophical arguments can also be made

for the existence of God and soul etc. with a critical scrutiny of one's own position and modes of judgement, an openness and due consideration for alternate and contending positions, an incessant vigilance for cognitive biases and fallacies. Philosophy is not hesitant to question the foundation of any knowledge system and if reason dictates, it is prepared to alter its position, meaning it is ever-cautious of slipping into an abyss of absoluteness.

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answer with that provided at the end of the unit.

1. In the event of already existing religious doctrines, what do you think is the role of theology?

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3.5 LET US SUM UP

As stated in the beginning, religion, philosophy of religion and theology represent an overlap of domains, which may evoke a false sense of resemblance. The effort has been made in the unit to present an uncluttered elucidation of their distinction.

Religion is a socio-cultural phenomenon represented by a set of beliefs, associated practises and observances that dictate and shape the way of life of its adherents. Its influence lies in its claim to offer answers to some of our fundamental concerns such as nature of reality and existence, our place in it, our nature and purpose in such a reality and a conception of good and evil within the contours of such a reality. In doing so, it uncompromisingly relies on the appeal to authority as a mode of justification, entailing that an adherent doesn't have any other recourse other than to rely on faith to embrace such a belief system.

Theology, on the other hand, is a religion-specific or even a sub-sect specific attempt to systematise and formalise religious tenets into a coherent organic whole. Such an endeavour is often undertaken with the intent to present an unambiguous version of religion to its

adherents to ensure their unhindered following, practices and observances, to impart religious teachings to the initiated and the uninitiated, and also to address the challenges mounting from other religions, philosophical examination and challenging scientific facts.

Philosophy of religion, however, in its scrutiny, adopts a posture of scepticism for religious tenets, and attempts to understand the soundness of religious belief systems within the larger context of theological formalism of religion, the outcomes and developments associated with general philosophical enquiries in other domains and incessant scientific developments and other opposing or concurring positions.

3.6 KEYWORDS

Philosophy of Religion: A second order activity that inspects aspects of religion(s) and the arguments advanced by their respective theologies with a critical eye.

Theology: An effort to systematise/organise/formalise religious tenets into a coherent body of beliefs for the adherents to practice, profess, preach and teach them with faith and for addressing the challenges posed by philosophical scrutiny, scientific developments of the time and other competing and contending belief systems.

3.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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3.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to Check Your Progress I

1. Religion is a core set of beliefs, associated practices and observances with crucial identifiable elements that demarcate its territory. The following are some of these elements that allow such a demarcation.

Firstly, most religions claim to provide the architecture of our reality, where our life, physical world and associated aspects are provided with a meaning often in a broader context than what is apparent. Such a context, for most religions, generally involves a detailed exposition of our true nature and a well-defined purpose of our life that is in consonance with such a nature and the rest of the reality. Secondly, the source of such knowledge, in most religions, is some religious authority, scriptures or revelations. Thus, inevitably, most religious doctrines hinge on faith and appeal to authority for justification. Thirdly, most religions demarcate the territory of good and bad, and by issuing commandments or imperatives which ought to be followed, they attempt to ensure ethical conduct that is coterminous with the religion defined purpose of life. Finally, most religions systemically institute modes of worship, rituals to be practised, prayers to be offered and ceremonies to be conducted as a meaningful part of their constructed reality.

Answer to Check Your Progress II

1. Philosophy of religion is a second-order enquiry into the beliefs, associated practices and observances that characterise religion, espousing an attitude of scepticism and relying on the tool of argumentation for justification. In carrying out its enquiry, it examines the concepts and propositions advanced by religion for logical inconsistencies and incoherence. Further, it also scrutinises the religious tenets in view of the developments and outcomes associated with general philosophical enquiry, scientific investigation and other competing, contending and even concurring positions. Religion, in the aforementioned sense, is the subject matter of philosophy of religion.

Answer to Check Your Progress III

1. Theology is the study of religion with the intent to systematize/ formalize/ organise its declarations and imperatives into doctrines. The task is undertaken to take the correct interpretation to the followers who can reliably practice, profess and preach with faith; to avoid ambiguities; and to pass the religious message to the subsequent generations and to those who are not yet in the fold of religion. Further, the emphasis of theology, in the foregoing context, is to weed out inconsistencies and establish coherency between various components of religion in a way that is also capable of addressing the challenges posed by philosophical scrutiny, scientific developments,

and other competing and contending belief systems. To give effect to its intent, theology, much like philosophy of religion, relies on the instrument of argumentation but in doing so it doesn't abandon the appeal to authority as its final means of justification.



Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Religious Language as a Sacred Substance
- 4.3 Three Traditional Ways
- 4.4 Meaning of Theological predicates
- 4.5 Non-Assertive Interpretations
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Key Words
- 4.8 Further Readings and References
- 4.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

4.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to make the learner understand the various approaches to religious languages including – its meaning, its problems and the ways in which language has been regarded as the manifestation of the sacred. In this regard the present unit will familiarize you with the following issues:

- Language as sacred substance
- the traditional understanding
- the meaning of Theological predicates
- non assertive interpretations

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Language, as a fundamental mode of human expression and communication, becomes a central element in every religious tradition. Traditional terms used to describe the forms of religious discourse include prayer, praise, petition, confession, exhortation, etc.

* Augustine Mundiath, Sawangi Meghe, Wardha. (This unit is a revised version of units 'Religious Language-I' and "Religious Language- II' of BPYE-001 compiled by Mahak Uppal, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Hindu College, University of Delhi.)

An explanation of the nature of religious language depends upon how we define religion and language. The key to the modern understanding of language is to see it as an integrated system of components that are concerned with form and purpose, as well as with meaning. Spoken languages manifest themselves as a purposeful human activity that can be analyzed in terms of its intended effect within a social context. Various attempts have been made to understand the relation between the religious and secular languages. On this view three basic approaches to the study of religious language can be outlined.

- 1 The First approach assumes that religion refers to some transcendent 'sacred' reality which concerns itself with certain all-encompassing questions such as the meaning of life and death, good and evil, and suffering.
- 2 The Second approach views religion as basically an expression of emotions.

With both of these approaches, religious language is not to be taken literally but is to be understood as being a symbolic representation of emotions that are non-cognitive. Many of the terms that are applied in religious discourse tend to be used in special ways. Most of them differ starkly from their use in ordinary contexts. There is, therefore, a long shift of meaning between the familiar use of these words and their theological employment. When we use these terms in a religious context, they all tend to adopt a peculiar meaning and outlook.

- 3 The Third approach denies that there is anything special about religious language. This approach draws upon the semantic theory of language and sides with Logical Positivism in claiming that the meaning of religious language should be explained as a part of ordinary language in which meaning is determined by the truth conditions entailed by all languages.

4.2 RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE AS A SACRED SUBSTANCE

One of the most important aspects of the modern understanding of language is the realization that meaning rests on the conventional relationship between the signified and signifier. The signifier, which usually appears in the form of a word (written or spoken), is comprised of both form and substance. Form is comprised of the phonological and grammatical rules of proper formation and Substance is its sound (in the case of a spoken word). The meaning of a word, however, is not inherent in either its form or substance.

In pre-modern attitudes toward language, such distinctions were usually not made. To regard some linguistic manifestation as sacred did not imply that it was exclusively the meaning that was taken to be holy. More often it was the exact form or even the veritable substance in which it was expressed that was felt to be the locus of the sacrality. This is seen most clearly in the reluctance or refusal to allow the translation of certain religious expressions into terms of other languages. Religious traditions have often held the position that synonymy does not preserve sacrality.

Understandably, many of the world religions developed the idea that an entire language, usually other than the vernacular, is sacred. Such languages are often reserved for liturgical or ritualistic functions. A sacred language usually begins as a vernacular through which a revelation is believed to have been received. This can lead to the belief that the language is particularly suited for revelation, and that it is superior to other languages and thereby inherently sacred.

Many traditional people, as well as high cultures, recite sacred doctrines and rituals in an archaic form of speech that may appear to be only barely comprehensible to the ordinary users of that language. In such cases the language itself is regarded as sacred, not because it is different from the vernacular, but rather because it contains the doctrines of revered figures from the past, such as gods, prophets, or ancestors. The desire to express the eternal validity of some scripture or liturgy by disallowing any change in its language has the potential for making the language itself, and the sacred meaning being conveyed thereby, largely unintelligible to those without special training.

Whenever language becomes a mere “form” to the common person, having lost the ability to convey any message beyond its symbolic representation of a particular manifestation of sacrality, it incites a reaction by those who see a need for a scripture or liturgy that can once again speak and teach. Many religious movements have begun on this very note, railing against frozen formalism, demanding and usually producing vernacular expressions of their religious feeling.

4.2.1 Set of sacred words

Not all religions, however, consider an entire language to be sacred; instead, most treat some special subset of speech as an embodiment of the sacred. In such cases it is usually held that the mere uttering or hearing of words from this special set, (which usually takes the form of a collection of sacred scriptures), will be efficacious, irrespective of whether

the meaning itself is understood. This emphasis on formulaic (as opposed to spontaneous) language brings with it an emphasis on techniques of preservation and precise recitation of the given texts, rather than on methods for inspiration and creation of new expressions.

4.2.2 The Speaker

The characteristics possessed by the speaker have often been regarded as equally significant factors contributing to, or detracting from, the sacred impact of the words uttered. The greatest impact comes when the speaker is regarded, in effect, as being a god. Very dramatic are those cases where a god is believed to talk directly and immediately through a person in the present tense as in the case of Oracles. For human persons, their status also affects the sacrality attributed to their words. Particular status may even be a necessary precondition for the use of sacred words. Priests for example, may have exclusive rights to the use of liturgical utterances.

All religions have struggled with the problem of keeping their tradition of rites and prayers from becoming an empty formalism. They insisted that a certain quality of heart or mind must accompany the recitation of the sacred formulas. This usually involves a greater attention to the meaning of the language and requires a different attitude on the part of the speaker than a focus on mere exactness in the repetition of the forms.

4.2.3 The Hearer

There is a great difference in perspective on the issue of the sacrality of language between the speaker and the hearer or audience. On many occasions, the intended hearer of the sacred discourse is a God or a Deity. However, unlike the addressee of an ordinary conversation, the addressed Gods and Deities seldom ever talk back. Many a times the discourse ends up as a monologue, or even as a ritual where there may be multiple speakers, where the participants are seldom responding to, conversing with, or addressing one another.

4.2.4 The Medium

The spoken word uses the medium of sound for its transmission. This gives it qualities that make it quite distinct from the written word, which is conveyed through the medium of print. Many cultures regard the speaking of an utterance as the manifestation of power. The

word thereby came to be viewed as an active force that is immediately and directly responsible for shaping the world itself. For instance, the texts of ancient Sumer provide the first example of the commonly found doctrine of the creative power of the divine word. The major deities of the Sumerian pantheon first plan creation by thinking, then utter the command and pronounce the name, and the object comes into being. In the first book of Bible, namely Genesis, God brings order out of chaos by simply speaking “Let there be light” and by naming “God called the light Day, and the Darkness he called Night”. Adam’s giving of names to the plants and animals in the second chapter of Genesis further embodies the idea of the manifestation of physical existence with linguistic utterance. The Vedas too contain the most developed speculations which acknowledge that speech is a basic cosmic force. One Vedic god, Prajapati (the god of creation) speaks the primal syllables ‘bhur, bhuvah, svah’ to create the earth, atmosphere, and heaven. He is said to give order to the world through name and form, which are elsewhere called his manifest aspects. These two terms ‘nama-rupa’ are key elements in much of later Hindu Philosophy, standing for the two basic dimensions of reality. The single most important term from this earliest stratum of Indian thought on language is ‘vac’ meaning speech. It has been personified as an independent deity, the goddess who is Prajapati’s wife and who is, in some places, given the role of the true active agent in creating or becoming the Universe.

4.2.5 The Context

Any Language which is regarded as sacred quite often has as its context a ritual setting. Yet, it may also find expression in settings other than the specified ritual, as in the case of spontaneous prayers or the occasional use of magic spells. The relationship between the ritual language and its context is much different from that between ordinary language and its context. Since ritual language is, for the most part, the repetition of a fixed text, it may be seen as preceding and, in effect, creating, its context rather than reflecting and representing in speech a context regarded as prior and already defined. Therefore, much ritual language tends to be directed towards defining the characteristics of the participants and the nature of the ritual situation. The rich symbolism of both the object and the action that marks off ritualistic behavior from ordinary behavior adds yet another distinctive trait to religious language. Its message is often paralleled in the symbolic systems of those other media—the visual and tactile properties of the physical objects, the kinesthetic sensibilities of gesture and movement—which then serve to reinforce, enhance, or even complete the

verbal meaning.

4.3 THREE TRADITIONAL WAYS

In the thirteenth century, St. Thomas Aquinas (1224-74) argued that religious language is analogical, that is, it conveys truth but not literal truth. In the same century, John Duns Scotus (1264-1308) contended that Thomas's view was incoherent, and according to him only two options were possible: univocal and equivocal language. For instance, the word 'bat' can mean two different things, a baseball bat or a flying mammal. If we do not know which one of these objects is being referred to, then the use is equivocal; and if we know which object is being referred then the use of that word is literal or univocal. Apart from these two uses, Duns Scotus insists, no other alternative exists. The possibility of the equivocal use of religious and scriptural language did not receive much attention, for it was assumed that since religious language does appear to be meaningful, it must be either univocal or analogical.

4.3.1 The Negative Way

The assertion that all religious language is equivocal led to the view that all words were to be denied or negated in order to understand the Ultimate Reality truly. It is for this reason that this alternative is often designated as the 'negative way' (via negativa). This view was held by German mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) and by the Jewish Philosopher, Moses Maimonides (1135-1204). This tradition sees language as valuable only in the sense of being evocative of an experience of the divine or the ultimate.

While this view may strike us as being skeptical, but interestingly, it has been defended by those who have had the emphatic vision about the reality and vividness of an experience of God. This is the view of the mystical traditions of all religions. In the West, this idea is rooted in Platonic thought which was influenced by Eastern ideas mediated by the Pythagorean School. Neo-Platonism emphasized the aspect of Plato's thought that stressed the transcendence of the One or Good and the way the One is beyond all categorical language or thought.

Plotinus (204-70) in the third century asserted that the One is beyond all knowing and saying. The One emanates into intellect and from intellect emanates soul and from soul emanates matter. The ascent to the One happens through a purification from matter to

soul and soul to intellect and from intellect to One. It is an imageless or apophatic type of meditation. One quits oneself by getting rid of the 'lowest' and moving to the 'higher'. One quits the body, followed by the images of the mind, then the words and thoughts of the mind, opening up the possibility of the unmediated encounter with the One. What is usually emphasized is that this experience is ineffable yet intensely real.

Pseudo-Dionysius or Dennis the Areopagite shows in "The Divine Names" how the names of God do not literally describe God, but that rather they point to God as the cause of all things. Treating this way of understanding God as subordinate to the negative way he argues that "the higher we ascend the more our language becomes restricted" until finally we arrive at "a complete absence of discourse and intelligibility". The way we must follow to this highest point is ultimately 'via negativa' which means that all terms must be denied of God.

Similarly, in the Indian Philosophical tradition, the concept of 'neti neti' (not this not that) reveals the indescribability of Brahman by any attributes or linguistic conceptions. The idea of Nirguna Brahman as discussed by Shankaracharya explains that we cannot describe Brahman either positively or negatively. Brahman is beyond all positive and negative qualities and attributions.

A striking illustration of this approach can be noted from the following passage of Pseudo-Dionysius' 'Mystical Theology'.

Once more, ascending yet higher we maintain that It is not soul, or mind, or endowed with the faculty of imagination, conjecture, reason, or understanding; nor is It any act of reason or understanding; nor can It be described by reason or perceived by the understanding, since It is not number, or order, or greatness, or littleness, or equality or inequality, and since It is not immovable nor in motion, or at rest, and has power, and is not power or light, and does not live and is not life; nor It is personal essence, nor eternity, or time; nor It be grasped by the understanding, since It is not knowledge or truth;...nor It is Spirit, as we understand the term, since It is not son-ship or Fatherhood;...It transcends all affirmation by being the perfect and unique Cause of all things, and transcends all negation by the pre-eminence of Its simple and absolute nature – free from every limitation and beyond them all...

This passage relies on the common method of the negative way, whereby one moves beyond words and concepts by denying them, thereby leading not to skepticism or unbelief, but precisely to the truth and the insight of actual experience that God is beyond all such words. This represents a reliance on language, but it is reliance in a functional or evocative sense only. Not only are the negative terms—evil, falsehood, unreality—denied but even the positive terms—goodness, truth, reality—also are negated. However at the very end the author alludes to an unusually straight forward assertion. When he deals with

the question of why we should approach God in this way, he relies upon a common rational explanation of God's relation to the world.

This last step in Dionysius' analysis points to a perplexing inconsistency on the part of most proponents of the equivocal way. It is very difficult to speak and write about what one has experienced, and to communicate about it, when this is what you want to disallow and deny. At the same time, this approach is a reminder, especially to the univocal way, that language is notoriously unstable when applied to God. It is a warning against the idolatry of language.

4.3.2 The Univocal way

John Duns Scotus defines univocal language as follows: "I call that a univocal concept whose unity suffices for contradiction when it is affirmed and denied of the same things. It also suffices as a syllogistic middle term". For example, in the syllogism - All humans are mortal; Socrates is human; therefore, Socrates is mortal – 'human' is used univocally as the middle term. Scotus recognized that there is much figurative language in Scripture, but the implication is that we would not know what such language meant apart from being able to translate it into literal language.

Theologian Carl Henry follows Scotus is arguing that "only univocal assertions protect us from equivocacy; only univocal knowledge is, therefore, genuine and authentic knowledge". Yet in the same breath Henry also tells us that "of course God is epistemologically transcendent; of course human beings do not have exhaustive knowledge of him". This concession appears to take back with one hand what he gave with the other. One can see in this Henry's awareness of doing justice to the transcendence of God, and that too at the risk of falling into self-contradiction, which was one of the dangers of the equivocal way. Schubert Ogden is another theologian who in his later writings firmly upheld the univocal way. He says that unless there is a univocal foundation, we cannot ascribe meaning to the use of symbolic or metaphorical language.

While it is clear that the univocal way is still alive and well, but it needs to be recognized that it has its inherent problems too. It may be that if the only choice is between equivocal or univocal language, many may choose the latter; but the cost is high. It is difficult to see

how we can move from literal language, with its context in everyday life, to the transcendence of God without sacrificing something precious to common religious sensibilities. That is why it is often that those who are most committed to spirituality opt for the equivocal way.

4.3.3 The Analogical way

Thomas Aquinas opted for the analogical way, with the aim of doing justice to the intentions of both the other ways and yet avoiding their shortcomings. His appeal to analogy became the standard model for understanding religious language. He began with the 'via negativa' and ruled out the possibility of the univocal way from the very outset. He believed that God is not a being like other beings. God cannot be 'classified' into some genus and species. Every term used of God must consequently be denied, "for what He is not is clearer to us than what He is". Aquinas agreed with Scotus that we do have cognitive revelation, i.e., we know something of God and can express this knowledge in language. As Aquinas says "If then, nothing was said of God and creatures except in a purely equivocal way, no reasoning proceeding from creatures to God could take place. But, the contrary is evident from all those who have spoken about God". How do we understand this "mean between pure equivocation and simple univocation"? Aquinas' answer is that we know and speak of God 'analogically'. We can understand this assertion in two ways: analogy of attribution or proportion and analogy of proportionality.

Analogy of attribution can be understood through an example that Aquinas uses. We attribute health to persons in a literal sense, that is persons possess health 'formally'. On the other hand, we might say of medicine that it, too, is healthy, but it certainly is not healthy in the literal sense that people are healthy. The reason seems to be that medicine causes people to be healthy; thus, it is healthy in a derivative or 'virtual' sense. When we then turn to Aquinas' famous emphasis on God as the first or uncaused cause of the world, it follows that since God is the cause of everything, the names of everything can be virtually attributed to God. God is love because God is the cause of love.

For Aquinas analogy is a much more potent category than metaphor. The second approach to analogy, that of proportionality, follows from the name itself. We may say that a cabbage has life or is alive. Probably we would consider that it has life literally in the way that any other garden plant lives. On the other hand, we may consider that there is only a proportional relationship between the life of a cabbage, and a rabbit. Life functions

differently in both cases, but it is also similar, that is, analogical. When applied to God, the proportionality is simply extended. We then would say that life is to a cabbage as life is to God. God has life or love or goodness, or power, in the way appropriate to God. The two approaches to analogy thus complement each other.

4.4 MEANING OF THEOLOGICAL PREDICATES

Most philosophers have located the difficulties of religious language in the predicates of theological statements. What, for instance, does the term ‘good’ mean in ‘God is good’? while it may seem that the starting point for understanding the meaning of such statements should be the concept of God, yet it may be argued that the only way to make clear what one means by ‘God’ is to provide an identifying description, such as ‘the creator of the universe’; and therefore to have a coherent understanding of theological statements one must understand the predicate ‘creator of the universe’ as applied to God.

4.4.1 Derivation and application

When one reflects on the use of predicates in theological statements one comes to realize two fundamental facts. 1) This use is necessarily derivative from the application of the predicates to human beings and other observable entities; and 2) The theological use of predicates is markedly different from the application of predicates to human beings.

Theological predicates are derivative primarily because it is impossible to teach theological language from scratch. How would one teach a child what it means to say “God has spoken to me” without first making sure that child knows what it is for a human being to speak to him? In order to do so one would have to have some reliable way of determining when God was speaking to him, so that when this happens one could say to him “that is what it is for God to speak to you”. And even if we admit that God does speak to people from time to time, there is no way for one person to tell when God is speaking to another person unless the other person tells him, which would require that the other person have already mastered the theological use of language. Hence there is no alternative to the usual procedure of teaching the theological use of terms by extension from their application to empirically observable objects.

As for the difference in the use of predicates as applied to God and to human beings, there are many ways of seeing that terms cannot have quite the same meaning in both cases. If, as in classical Christian theology, God is conceived of as not in time, then it is clear that God's performance of actions like speaking, making, or comforting is something radically different from the temporally sequential performance of actions by human beings. Aquinas in his famous discussion of this problem based the distinction between the application of predicates to human beings and the application of predicates to God on the principle that God is an absolute unity and that, therefore, various attributes and activities are not distinguishable in God as they are in men. But even if we allow God to be temporal and straightforwardly multifaceted, we are left with the corporeal-incorporeal difference. If God does not have a body, it is clear that speaking, making, or comforting cannot be the same thing for God as for man.

This leaves us with a serious problem. We must show how the theological use of these terms derives from their non theological use. The usual way of dealing with this problem is by cutting out the inapplicable portions of the original meaning of the terms, leaving the remainder for theology. Thus, since God is incorporeal, his speaking cannot involve producing sounds by expelling air over vocal cords. What is left is that God does something which results in the addressee having an experience of the sort he would have if some human being were speaking to him. The nature of the 'something' is deliberately left vague. Since God is a pure spirit, it will presumably be some conscious mental act; perhaps an act of will to the effect that the addressee shall have the experience of being told such and such. More generally, to attribute any interpersonal action to God is to attribute to him a purely mental act which has as its intended result a certain experience, like the one that would result from such an action on the part of the human agent.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What are the traditional approaches to religious Language?

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4.4.2 Verifiability of Theological statements

In the last few decades a great many philosophers have come to accept some form of the ‘verifiability theory of meaning’, according to which one is making a genuine factual assertion, a real claim as to the way the world is, only if it is possible to conceive of some way in which what he is saying can be shown to be true or false by empirical observation. Applying this theory to theology, it has been argued that since an empirical test is in principle impossible to carry out for statements about a supernatural incorporeal personal deity, these statements cannot be regarded as straightforward factual assertions, but must be interpreted in some other way.

4.4.2.1 Are theological statements testable?

The question of whether theological statements are subjects to empirical test is quite complicated. If we rule out mystical experience as a means of observation, then it is clear that statements about God cannot be tested directly. But science is full of hypotheses about unobservable entities –electromagnetic fields, social structures, instincts, etc.— which verificationists accept as meaningful because they can be tested indirectly. That is, from these hypotheses we can draw implications which can themselves be tested by observation. The question is whether directly testable consequences can be drawn from theological statements. We can phrase this question as follows: Would we expect any possible observations to differ according to whether there is or is not a God? It would clearly be unreasonable to require of the theologian that he specify a set of observations which would conclusively prove or disprove his assertions.

One thing that makes this problem difficult is the fact that on this point religious belief differs at different times and places. Supernatural deities have often been thought of as dealing in a fairly predictable way with contingencies in the natural world and human society. Thus, in many primitive religions it is believed that gods will bring abundant crops or victory in battle if they are approached in certain ways through prayer and ritual. Even in advanced religious traditions like the Judaeo-Christian, it is believed that God has certain fixed intentions which will result in prayers being answered and will result in the final victory of the people who believe in him.

It would seem that such expectations provide a basis for empirical test. In so far as they are fulfilled, the theology is confirmed; in so far as they are frustrated it is disproved. However, things are not that simple. Even in primitive communities such tests are rarely allowed to be decisive; the empirical implications are hedged around with a variety of escape clauses. If the ritual dances are held and still the crops fail, there are several alternatives to abandoning traditional beliefs about the gods. Perhaps there was an unnoticed slip somewhere in the ritual; perhaps devils were conducting counter rituals. More sophisticated explanations are employed in the more advanced religions. For example, God will answer prayers, but only when doing so would be for the good of the supplicant.

4.4.2.2 Are theological Statements assertions of fact?

As to whether a statement that cannot be empirically tested must not be construed as an assertion of fact, a theologian might well challenge the application of the verifiability theory to theology. If God is supernatural, we should not expect his behaviour to be governed by any laws or regulations we could hope to discover. But we could never be certain that, for example, the statement that God loves his creatures would imply that a war should have one outcome rather than another. This would mean that, according to verifiability theory, it would be impossible for us to make any statements, even false ones, about such a being. But a theory which would prevent us from recognizing the existence of a certain kind of entity, if it did exist, would be an unreasonable theory.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What are the fundamental facts concerning the use of predicates in theological statements?

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4.5 NON-ASSERTIVE INTERPRETATIONS

Thinkers like George Santayana, without holding that theological sentences are factually meaningless, were still unwilling to abandon traditional religious discourse. They feel that somehow it has a valuable function in human life, and in order to preserve it they are forced to reinterpret it so that the unwarranted factual claims are expunged.

Based on how the statements about God have been interpreted, non-assertive interpretations can be divided into four groups, i.e., as 1) expressions of feelings of various thoughts; 2) Symbolic presentations of a variety of vital aspects of experiences, from natural facts to moral ideals; 3) Integral elements in ritualistic worship; and 4) A unique kind of 'mystical 'or symbolic' expression, not reducible to any other use of language.

1. Expressions of feeling

Theological utterances have been interpreted as expressions of feelings that arise in connection with religious belief and activity. Thus we might think of "God made the heavens and the earth" as an expression of the sense of awe and mystery evoked by grandeur of nature; of "God has predestined every man to salvation or damnation" as an expression of a pervasive sense of helplessness; and of "God watches over the affairs of men" as an expression of a sense of peace, security, at-homeness in the world. This is a 'poetic' expression rather than expression by expletives. It is like expressing a sense of futility by saying "life is a walking shadow" rather than like expressing futility by saying 'Ah, me'. That is, the feeling is expressed by depicting a situation which might naturally evoke it; a sense of security, for instance, is evoked by some powerful persons looking after one.

2. Symbolic Presentations

Symbolic interpretations of religious doctrines have been common for a long time. Many of the traditional ways of speaking about God have to be taken as symbolic. God cannot literally be a shepherd or rock. The shepherd functions as a symbol of providence and rock as a symbol for God's role as a refuge and protection in time of trouble. A symbol in this sense is some concrete object, situation, or activity which can be taken to stand for the

ultimate object of discourse through some kind of association, usually on the basis of similarity. We speak symbolically when what we literally refer to is something which functions as a symbol.

It is usually only a part of the theological discourse which is taken as symbolic. For if we have to hold that the symbolic utterances are symbolizing facts about God, we will have to have some way of saying what those facts are; and we cannot make that specification in symbolic terms, on pain of infinite regress. But we are now considering views according to which all theological discourse is symbolic, which means that if we are to say what is being symbolized it will have to be something in the natural world that can be specified in non-theological terms. The most common version of such a view is that theological utterances are symbolic presentations of moral ideals, attitudes, or values. This position has been set forth most fully and persuasively by George Santayana. According to him every religious doctrine involves two components: a kernel of moral or valuational insight, and a poetic or pictorial rendering of it. Thus the doctrine that the physical universe is a creation of a supremely good personal deity is a pictorial rendering of the insight that everything in the world is potentially usable for the enrichment of the human life. It is worthwhile embodying these moral insights in theological doctrine because this vivid presentation, together with the systematic cultivation of feelings and attitudes that accompanies it, provide a more effective way of getting across the insights than would a bald statement.

3. Ritualistic interpretation

In the view under consideration, the practice of worship is the native soil from which talk about God springs. Talk about the attributes, doings, and intentions of a supernatural personal being has meaning as a part of the practice of worship and is puzzling only when it is separated from that context. If we think of an utterance like “God made the heavens and the earth” as the expression of a belief about the way things in fact originated and then wonder whether it is true or false, we will be at a loss. To understand it we have to put it back into the setting where it does its work. In that setting, these words are not being used to explain anything, but to do something quite different.

Unfortunately, proponents of this view have never been very clear about what this

‘something different’ is. The clearest suggestion they give is that the talk about God serves to provide an imaginative framework for the conduct of worship. It articulates one’s sense that something important is going on, and it keeps to indicate the appropriateness of one response rather than another. This position presupposes, contrary to the usual view, that ritual worship has an autonomous value, apart from any theological foundation. It is generally supposed that a given ritual has a point only if certain theological doctrines are objectively true. But in ritualistic interpretation, theological doctrines are not regarded as statements about which questions of truth or falsity are properly raised. Since these doctrines depend for their significance on the ritual, it is supposed that the ritual has some intrinsic value in forming and giving expression to valuable sentiments, feelings, and attitudes.

4. Myths

Ernst Cassirer has developed the notion that the basis of religious discourse lies in a unique ‘symbolic form’ which he terms ‘mythical’. He maintains that it is found in purest form in the myths of the primitive people and is based on a way of perceiving and thinking about the world which is radically different from our accustomed mode. In the ‘mystical consciousness’ there is no sharp distinction between the subjective and the objective. No clear line is drawn between symbol and object, between wish and fulfillment, between perception and fantasy.

The mythical consciousness carries its own special organizations of space and time. For example, there is no distinction made between a position and what occupies it; every spatial position is endowed with a qualitative character and exerts influence as such. Sophisticated theology represents an uneasy compromise between mythical and scientific modes of thought, and as such cannot be understood without seeing how it has developed from its origins. It is basically a mythical view of the world, given a ‘secondary elaboration’ in a vain attempt to make it acceptable to the rationalistic consciousness; judged by rationalistic standards it may not only appear groundless, but meaningless.

To the mystic the only way to communicate with God is through mystical experience, and this experience reveals God to be an ineffable unity. He can be directly intuited in mystical experience. The most we can do in language is to direct our hearers to the mode of experience which constitutes the sole means of access. Proponents of this view

sometimes speak of theological language as ‘symbolic’, but this differs from our second type of theory in that here there is no way to symbolize, and it is therefore questionable whether we should use the term ‘symbol’. A symbol is always a symbol of something. In fact, it is difficult to make clear just what, on this view, religious utterances are supposed to be doing. They are said to ‘point to’, ‘adumbrate’ or ‘indicate’ the ineffable divine reality, but all too often these expressions remain in-sufficient.

It would seem that any talk about God and the religious discourse itself is much more complex than is recognized by any of the existing theories. Theological sentences perform a great many closely interrelated linguistic functions. In saying ‘God, who created the world, watches over the affairs of men,’ the believer is committing himself to approach God in prayer and ritual in one way rather than another. And these functions are intimately dependent on each other. What is therefore needed, is a description of the relationship among these functions, one sufficiently complex to match the complexity of the subject matter

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What are the divisions of the non-assertive interpretations of Religious Language?

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4.6 LET US SUM UP

All religions have their own language to speak about the Ultimate, to express the feeling of sacred, awe and holiness. Word has a power of creation and is a sacred substance. Religious language is spoken in the atmosphere of speaker, hearer, medium and a context.

It has a power of transformation and the participants can experience it in the ritual objects and goals. Religious language is used as means of worship in invocation, praise, offering and petition.

There are traditional and non-traditional approaches to understanding the nature of religious language. All approaches have their own advantages and its own limitations. The language of religion is comprised of a set of symbols, myths, metaphors, mysticism and esoteric signs which help men of religion to share and convey their profound and ineffable emotions and experiences. The same function is performed by various rituals, practices and observances. They are all acts without ordinary meaning. They perform the function of symbols, representing realities of religion. Just as poetic expressions arouse in readers and listeners certain emotional aura felt and experienced by the poet, similarly, religious languages, or ceremonies and observances convey to others some shared experiences and certain intimations from unknown or unseen.

4.7 KEY WORDS

Analogy: Analogy is an inference or an argument from one particular to another particular, as opposed to deduction, induction and abduction.

Language: Language is a particular kind of system for encoding and decoding information.

Negative way: It is a theological theory that attempts to describe God, by negation, to speak only in terms of what may not be said about the perfect goodness that is God.

Tradition: Belief or customs taught by one generation to the next.

Univocal: A word is used univocally when it means exactly the same thing in several contexts. **Symbolic presentation:** It is the practice of representing things by means of symbols or of attributing symbolic meaning or significance to objects, events, or relationships.

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4.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

1. The traditional approaches to religious language are:
 - a) The Negative way
 - b) The Univocal way
 - c) The Analogical way

Answers to Check Your Progress II

1. There are two fundamental facts concerning the use of predicates in theological statements, 1. Empirical testability, 2. Assertion of facts.

Answer to Check Your Progress III

1. Non assertive interpretations can be divided into four groups:
 - a) Expressions of feelings of various thoughts
 - b) Symbolic presentations of a variety of vital aspects of experiences, from natural

facts to moral ideals;

- c) Integral elements in ritualistic worship
- d) A unique kind of 'mystical' or 'symbolic' expression, not reducible to any other use of language.



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Unit 5

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE*

Structure

5.0 Objectives

5.1 Introduction

5.2 William James' View on Religious Experience

5.3 Rudolf Otto's Analysis of Religious Experience

5.4 Let Us Sum Up

5.5 Key Words

5.6 Further Readings and References

5.7 Answers to Check Your Progress

5.0 OBJECTIVES

Our objective in this unit is to study closely two eminent writers who analyzed the dimensions of religious experience. At the end of this unit learner will be able to understand,

- Psychological view of William James
- Phenomenological view of Rudolf Otto

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The word "Experience" is ordinarily used to refer to an active act of consciousness. While none of the medieval theologians considered "experience" as being central to their theological works, the significance of this phenomenon began to assume a definite shape in the contemporary period with the works of William James and Rudolf Otto. While William James looked at religious experience mainly from the psychological point of view, Rudolf Otto, a well-known phenomenologist of religion, tried to bring out the aspects of Divinity and religious experience, which cannot be expressed through rational, deductive method.

William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901) and Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige* (1917) translated as *The Idea of the Holy* opened up new horizons of theorizing about

* George Antony, St. Jude Ashram, Mukhathala. (This unit is a revised version of units 'Religious Experience-I' and unit "Religious Experience- II" of BPYE-001 compiled by Mahak Uppal, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Hindu College, University of Delhi.)

religious experience.

5.2 WILLIAM JAMES ON RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, is one of the most important books dealing with the analysis of religious experience, albeit specifically from a psychological perspective. In *The Principles of Psychology* James defined experience as a 'stream of consciousness', an idea which becomes vital to his understanding of religious experience as well. Accordingly, he pointed out organic and temperamental reasons for the various religious experiences. In his book *Radical Empiricism*, he underlines the importance of experience, and clarifies the meaning of experience as something continuous, changing, and personal. According to him, experience is self-contained and self-sufficient. He held that everything real must be somewhere experiential. This principle of radical empiricism is also fundamental to James' epistemology. If there is genuine or authentic religious experience, it is based on this founding principle. He suggests a method and a theory of truth. His method proposes to interpret concepts in terms of their consequences, while as a theory of truth James considers truth as an attribute of ideas rather than of reality, which can be verified by the norm of usefulness. In other words, for James truth can be verified by experience and experience is also to be verified by experience itself.

5.2.1 Religious Experience

Religious experience, according to William James is "the consciousness which individuals have of an intercourse between themselves and higher powers with which they feel themselves to be related. This intercourse is realized at the time as being both active and mutual".

The phrase 'higher powers' is used quite broadly by James and it is meant to be inclusive of a variety of religious objects. According to him a conscious person is continuous with a 'wider self' through which experiences come. 'Wider self', for James, was not the normal 'self' of the conscious person, rather it was to be understood as having a dimension wider than the sensible world, ultimately involving the mystical and the supernatural as well. This unseen world must also be regarded as a *present reality*

because it *affects* individuals and transforms their lives. He also maintained that religious experiences have positive content because they manifest as conversations with the unseen; voices and visions; responses to prayer; changes of heart; deliverances from fear; inflowing of help; assurance of support; etc. According to James there are many forms or varieties of religious experience. The religious experience in which there could be touch of the 'unseen' is only one such form of religious experience.

James states three hypotheses which according to him are applicable to all forms of religious experience.

1. There is the touch of the 'more', which may be the 'higher spiritual agencies'.
2. The subconsciousness which is the intermediary either for divine encounter or for abnormal psychic invasion
3. The active consciousness in which the individual realizes the experience as something real.

Using these hypotheses, James tries to explain all kinds of religious experience, both healthy and unhealthy, normal and abnormal. The unhealthy or abnormal cases remain, according to him, as mere psychological phenomena. They are due to the invasions from subconscious region, which take objective appearances and suggest to the subject an external control. James speaks of the reality of genuine, healthy and normal religious experience as well. In this case there is the touch of a 'more', 'the unseen', or 'the divine'. As our primary, wide-awake, consciousness throws open our senses to the touch of the material things, so it is logically conceivable that there can also be higher spiritual agencies that can directly touch man. The possibility for such experience, James explains, might stem from our possession of a subconscious region which ends up yielding access to the spiritual beings. In short, then, genuine religious experience of the encounter of the 'more', 'the unseen', or 'the higher spiritual agencies', appear through the subconscious region of the self. In this sense, the subconscious region becomes the intermediary between the normal self and the higher spiritual agency.

5.2.2 Validity of Religious Experience

In judging the validity of religious experience, James applies his pragmatic method, and indicates three criterions to accomplish it. These include:

- (1) Immediate luminousness
- (2) philosophical reasonableness
- (3) and moral helpfulness

Immediate luminousness means direct evidence of the fact as in perception. It is the criterion of judging, based on our own immediate feeling. By *philosophical reasonableness*, he means that the fact must be consistent with logic and experimentation. It is the consistency of the alleged fact with the accepted principles, i.e., the indirect evidence of the fact. *Moral helpfulness* means the congruence of the fact with the passionate nature, especially with the resolute will. In short, the given fact should be contributing to the moral needs and to the rest of what we hold as true and good. By these criteria, therefore, James seeks the direct evidence of the fact, its consistency with the existing truths, and its moral usefulness.

If one's experience manages to withstand these three tests, then whether or not one is hysterical or nervously off, his description makes no difference. When a religious experience passes through these tests successfully, it can be considered true and valid. Consistently applying these criteria, James however finds that they are not fully verified in the case of religious experience. It is mainly because of its individual and private character. Religious experience is immediately evident and morally helpful to the person concerned. But they cannot be tested by scientific experiment, as a result of which they tend to lack scientific validity. But that does not mean that they are not valid or true at the individual level. In fact, James advocates that it is literally and objectively true and can be very well held to be so, at the individual level.

5.2.3 Mysticism: An Intense Form of Religious Experience

As we have seen, James holds religious experience to be the consciousness in which the individuals have a feeling of union with the higher powers. Mysticism may be identified as a peculiar and intense form of religious experience. Mystical intuition, according to James is to be understood as a sudden and great extension of the ordinary `field of consciousness`.

James enumerates four elements of mystical experience including: ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, and passivity. *Ineffability* implies that the experience cannot be expressed in words, for language is found to be inadequate to express its nature and significance to one who has not experienced it. *Noetic quality* of religious experience means that it is not just remarkable or pleasant but that it also contains a degree of knowledge, i.e., states of insight into depths of truth plumbed by the discursive intellect. *Transiency* means that the experience is not long lasting. Mystical instances may last half an hour or at the most an hour or two. The *passivity* highlights the fact that the experience, although often facilitated by personal concentration and discipline, involves the subject losing his or her own will. The person here is over taken by an experience that is, so to speak, forced upon him. That means this experience is not something that can be turned on and off at will.

James was concerned mainly with the cognitive aspect of mysticism and its value as a way of revelation. He omits the mention of visual and auditory hallucinations, verbal and graphic automatisms such marvels as 'levitation', and the healing of disease. Though the mystics have presented these phenomena in their witnesses, but James does not consider them as essential to mysticism itself. For him, consciousness of illumination is the essential mark of 'mystical' states. Whatever may be the mental condition of the mystics, James does not take away the value of the knowledge of consciousness which the mystical states induce.

James does not see any scientific reason, in the strict sense, to account for mysticism. He also qualifies many of the mystical cases as pathological. But he was very particular to distinguish some cases as unique. James writes "When mystical activity is at its height, we find the consciousness possessed by the sense of a being at once *excessive* and *identical* with the self: great enough to be God; interior enough to be me. The 'objectivity' of it ought in that case to be called excessivity, rather, or exceedingness." He even argues that there is no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal. The 'effect' this unseen world creates forces James to accept its existence. He emphasizes that so far as our ideal impulses originate in this region, call it mystical region or the supernatural region, we belong to it in a more intimate sense than that in which we belong to the visible world, for we belong in the most intimate sense wherever our ideals belong. Since the experience of the unseen world produces effects in this

world, the unseen region in question is not merely ideal. When we commune with it, the effect is actually imparted to our finite personality. Therefore, that which produces effects within another reality must, according to James, be termed a reality itself.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. Explain the logical conceivability of religious experience according to William James

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2. According to James what are the three criteria to judge the validity of religious experience? How does he consider the pragmatic criterion as important to prove the validity of religious experience?

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5.3 RUDOLF OTTOS'S ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Rudolf Otto, a well-known phenomenologist of religion tries to bring out the aspects of Divinity and religious experience, which cannot be expressed through rational and deductive method. *Das Heilige (The Idea of Holy)*, is the most important work of Otto wherein he describes the religious experience as the experience of the *Numinous*.

Rudolf Otto presented a phenomenological analysis of the religious consciousness. In contrast to the traditional rational method, Otto's method was descriptive and phenomenological. Phenomenology tries to investigate into what actually appears to direct intuition. Husserl the originator of Phenomenology wanted to pay attention to the phenomena of experience. It is the study of immediate, direct experience with the

intention to build an 'exact science' of description, or even a method of precise, sharable and testable description.

Phenomenology of religion is particularly concerned with examining phenomenologically the character of religious experience taking the presented aspect or moment within the stream of experience as an object of analysis and reflection. In this way Rudolf Otto tried to describe the essential character of 'the Holy' through phenomenological analysis of religious experience. In his book *The Idea of Holy*, he phenomenologically analyses and describes what he calls 'non-rational or supra-rational in our religious experience.

5.3.1 Analysis of the Non-Rational in Religious Experience

Otto analyses the fundamental religious experience and tries to understand it in its own terms, especially by elucidating the non-rational core of religion. Otto holds religion to have a non-rational core which cannot be articulated in language. He does not deny the rational side of religion. Otto's point is that if we focus only on the rational side, we miss the essential character of religious experience. To this non-rational, non-explainable element of religion he gave the name "*Numinous*". Now it may be asked that if the religious realm cannot be explained in words, how can it be known? Here Otto explains that, it can be known because everyone has an inborn sense of the *numinous*. In order to show this non-rational character of such experiences he avoids using ordinary words to describe them, preferring to use Latin words instead. *Numinous* is said to be *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. *Mysterium* denotes that which is hidden and esoteric, beyond understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar. Though what is enunciated in the word is negative, what is meant is absolutely positive. The most valuable contribution of Otto consists of his careful analysis of the feeling-states which constitute the numinous experience. There is on the one side what is called 'creature-feeling' that is the feeling of nothingness of finite being. On the other side is the feeling of the presence of an overwhelming Being, the '*Numinous Being*', which strikes one with amazement. This amazement is what is summarized by the expression "*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*".

Mysterium denotes that which is hidden and esoteric, beyond understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar. Though what is enunciated in the word is negative, what is meant is absolutely positive. It points to what is called the ‘wholly other’ character of the numinous Being, which, as supra rational, utterly transcends the grasp of conceptual thought. The word *Tremendum* comes from ‘tremor’, which means normally the familiar emotion of fear. But here the term is used analogically to denote a kind of emotional response different from mere fear. It denotes an ‘awe’ or awe-filled-ness due to *majestas*, it is a state of absolute ‘overpoweringness’ and dynamic energy of the numinous presence. The element of *Fascinans* points to the captivating attraction of the numinous Being, evoking rapture and love. *Mysterium* is expressed as *tremendum* and also as *Fascinans* or fascinating. These two qualities, the daunting and fascination are combined in a strange harmony of contrasts. The reluctant dual character of the numinous consciousness is at once the strongest and most noteworthy phenomenon in the whole history of religion. The mystery aspect is for religious man not merely something to be wondered at but something that throws him into a trance. The element of fascination is what brings out the properties of love, mercy etc. in the religious experience. For instance, what does one feel when one is in deeply felt personal prayer or when one partakes in a solemn liturgical service or when one is in an old church or temple? The appropriate expression to this feeling is *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. The feeling of it may come sweeping like a gentle breeze or tide, it may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasm and convulsions, or it may lead one to strong excitements or to ecstasy. It can also take wild and demonic forms and put one in horror status. Though it cannot be explained, but we cannot rule out the possibility to evoke it indirectly.

5.3.2 The “Wholly Other”

While “The more” is an expression used by William James to refer to the reality that cannot be identified with the natural, Otto referred to it as the “Wholly Other”, describing it as “that which is beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar...”. According to Otto even on the lowest level of religious development, the essential characteristic of religious experience is ‘stupor’ before something ‘Wholly Other’, whether such this “Other” be named as ‘Spirit’, ‘Demon’, ‘Deva’ or be left

without a name. This feeling of the 'Wholly Other' may be indirectly 'aroused' by means of objects which are already puzzling upon natural plane. "Wholly Other" as mysterious is something which is absolutely beyond our understanding. But that which merely eludes our understanding for a time is a 'problem' and not a mystery. Truly mysterious object is beyond our comprehension not only because our knowledge has certain limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently 'wholly other'.

Mysticism contrasts the numinous object, the "Wholly Other" with the objects of ordinary experience. Not satisfied with contrasting with such objects of nature, mysticism finally calls it 'that which is *nothing*'. By this 'nothing' is meant not only that of which nothing can be predicated, but that which is absolutely and intrinsically other than the opposite of everything that is and can be thought. The 'nothingness' of the Western mystics is termed as '*sunyam*' or '*sunyatha*' or 'void' and 'emptiness' by Buddhist and Hindu mystics. All these are apparently synonymous to the Numinous ideogram of the 'Wholly Other'.

5.3.3 The Epistemological Grounding of the Experience of the Holy

Otto tries to locate a transcendental basis of the experience of Numinous in the subject as Kant did in his epistemology. When the concept of the numinous and the schematizing concepts are brought together, we have the complex category of 'the Holy' itself. Otto's analysis of the structure of the religious consciousness is based on a clarification of this key-word of all religions namely 'the Holy'. 'The Holy' is identified by Otto as the 'category' by which we apprehend the transcendent both in its rational and non-rational aspects. In the case of non-rational elements of the category of the Holy we are referred back to something still deeper than pure reason, i.e., to that which the mystics call 'the ground of the soul'. The word 'holy' can have varied forms of characteristics. One of the characteristics can be that it is rational in its nature in the sense that it can be thought conceptually. Thus, for example by holiness we can mean moral goodness and it is possible to have some kind of understanding of what goodness is. But the rational characteristics do not explain completely the meaning of the word holy. For Otto the rational meaning is only derivative. In its fundamental sense the word holy stands for a non-rational character. By it we mean that it is something which cannot be thought conceptually.

From this preliminary examination we can say religion is compounded of rational and non-rational elements. We think of God in terms of goodness, personality, purpose, and so on. These ideas are applied to God analogically. They are rational characteristics in the sense that we have definite concepts of them. This rational side of religion is something that cannot be dispensed with. But sometimes it neglects the deeper non-rational core of religion. The idea of God is not exhausted via such rational attributions. He is the holy God and the adjective points to His deeper, inconceivable, super rational nature. Otto wishes to stress this non-rational side of religion, as against the traditional philosophy and theology of his times which appeared to have lost sight of these aspects, thereby giving an excessively intellectualistic interpretation.

But the problem is if the numinous core of religion is inconceivable, how can we talk about it or explain it? According to him although it is inconceivable, it is somehow within our grasp. We apprehend it in feeling, in the *sensus numinous*. This feeling is not merely an emotion but an affective state of mind which involves some kind of valuation and pre-conceptual cognition. The feeling revealed in the analysis of the numinous experience, while analogous to natural feelings, have a unique quality. The *sensus numinous* is something *sui generis*. It cannot be compounded out of merely natural feelings. It cannot even be regarded as evolved from natural feelings. For Otto it is connected with the faculty of divination which is a faculty for genuinely cognizing and recognizing the holy in its appearance.

These speculations prepare the way for Otto's assertion that 'the holy' is an a priori category. Its non-rational or numinous element is said to arise from the deepest foundation of cognitive apprehension that the soul possesses. Otto follows the Kantian model to locate religion as well as the sense of God in man. According to Kant knowledge arises from our faculty of cognition and sense impressions are occasions for such knowledge. The knowledge of the *Numinous* could be described in the same manner. It is derived from the deepest foundation of the cognitive apprehension of the soul. The experience of the *Numinous* arises by means of sense experience but not in and through sensory data. The latter provide the stimulus and the occasion for the *numinous* experience to be stirred. The experience of the *Numinous* becomes purer when the soul disengages itself from this sense experience and takes its stand in absolute contrast.

Not only the rational, but even the non-rational elements of the complex category of the Holy have *a priori* elements. The non-rational content has its own independent roots in the hidden depths of the spirit. The first stirring of demonic dread is purely *a priori* element. This could be pictured as the experience of the *Numinous* in the primitive and crude form. In the same way the developed form of the experience- *mysterium, tremendum et fascinans* is *a priori*. This non-rational element of the experience of the *Numinous* may be compared with the aesthetic judgement and the category of the beautiful. Intuitively I apprehend in the object only its sensuous qualities and its spatial form and nothing more. The meaning 'beautiful' is not given by the sensory elements. I must have an obscure conception of the 'beautiful' and in addition, a principle of assumption by which I attribute it to the object. If not the simplest experience of a beautiful thing is rendered impossible.

5.3.4 Religious Feeling and The Feeling of The Sublime

Otto tries to draw a clear distinction between numinous or religious feeling and the feeling of the sublime. Numinous feelings have two primary aspects (i) a feeling of religious dread (ii) a feeling of religious fascination. The closest analogue to religious dread or awe is the feeling of uncanniness – the feeling one has when the hair on the back of one's neck rises, the shudder or terror on hearing a ghost story, the dread of haunted places. The feeling of fascination by, attraction to, and prizing of the object which arouses the feeling in question creates both the desire to approach the object and the feeling that one possesses of value when considered in relation to the fascinating and prized object.

His attempt to conceptualize and describe the various feelings must be clearly distinguished from his theory about numinous. According to Otto numinous feelings are, first of all, unique and it cannot be analyzed as a complex of non-numinous feeling such as love, fear, horror, a feeling of sublimity, and so on. Secondly the capacity for numinous feeling is unexplainable. Although the capacity may appear in the world only when certain conditions are fulfilled, the conditions do not constitute an adequate explanation of the capacity in question. Thirdly, numinous feelings are also cognitive. The feelings are the source of the concept of the numinous – the concept of something which is both a value and an objective reality. It is cognitive in the sense that they are

like visual experiences. They have immediate and primary reference to an object outside the self, i.e., the numinous quality or object, which is an object of numinous feelings in somewhat the same way that visible objects and qualities might be said to be the object of visual experiences.

However, the relation between these two is not clear. There could be two interpretations. In the first interpretation it is claimed that numinous feelings disclose the numinous object. The encounter with the numinous object through numinous experiences gives rise to the concept of the numinous in much the same way that encounters with objects and qualities through visual experiences are thought to give rise to the concepts of those objects and qualities. The concept of the numinous is both a priori and a posteriori. It is a posteriori since it is not derived from the experience of an object or quality and it is a priori because it is not derived from any sense experience. The feeling is the source of the concept only in the sense that it discloses the object of the concept. It is the encounter with the object that produces the concept of the object.

According to the second interpretation the feeling gives rise to both the concept and the disclosure of the numinous object. However, it is not the encounter with the numinous which gives rise to the concept of the numinous rather it is feeling that furnishes the concept. The feeling which furnishes the concept also discloses the object to which the concept applies. Now the problem is how are these two functions of numinous feelings related, since neither the concept nor the object is given in isolation. The two are given together although one is not derived from the other.

In both these interpretations Otto claims that feeling puts us in contact with and discloses something outside of ourselves. Feeling becomes like visual and auditory experiences. It has an objective referent whether this is structured by an a priori concept or whether it simply gives rise to a concept. The object of numinous feeling, according to Otto, is numen. Numen is both value and object and can be only indirectly characterized. For example, the encounter with the numen evokes religious dread. This is analogous to fear. So, it may be said that it is the property of the numen which arouses religious dread. Still, we can schematize the numen by means of such rational concepts as goodness, completeness, necessity and substantiality. It means that concepts of this kind can be predicated of the numen.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. What is the difference between religious feelings and the feeling of the sublime?

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2. Explain about the category of Holy?

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5.4 LET US SUM UP

A descriptive approach to religion seems to have much to acclaim it. It plainly places before us what the basic elements in religious experience are, without distorting the picture by introducing doubtful speculations about the possible genesis or ultimate significance of such experience. One can aim at presenting the essence of the phenomenon which appears in the religious consciousness. The thinkers discussed during the course of this unit seem to have penetrated to the affective states of mind which lie at the heart of religion which are so often overlooked both in intellectualist accounts and in pragmatic accounts. The intellectualist accounts understand religion as a kind of world-view and pragmatic accounts tries to assimilate religion to morality.

An accurate description of the typical experiences of the religious person would seem to provide at least a firm starting-point for an investigation into religion. But the question is, is it enough? Do we need something more? The answer to this question depends on whether or not the religious experience can be regarded as *sui generis*, qualitatively unique and irreducible. Some thinkers take this view but Marett is more cautious. Robert Ranulph Marett (1866 – 1943), an English anthropologist aimed at translating a type of

religious experience remote from our own into such terms of our consciousness. Marett believed that the word “awe” expresses the fundamental religious feelings most accurately. For him what constitutes the core of the primitive religious consciousness is nothing other than awe. He describes awe as human being’s reaction to the hidden mysterious forces of its environment. It cannot be merely interpreted as fear of the unknown. It is much more than fear. Viewing from this point we can say that religion does not originate just in fear of the unknown. The essential constituents of awe are wonder, admiration, respect, even love.

Otto and other thinkers think that it is important to maintain the unique quality of the religious experience. But when they try to do this by talking of a faculty of divination or of the theomorphic structure in man, they seem to have left the relatively firm ground of description and receded into a more speculative realm. For example, Otto adopts Kantian terminology and speaks of the numinous as an a priori category which undergoes schematization into the idea of the holy.

However accurate the descriptions of religious experience that are offered to us may be, it seems that they cannot establish the validity of such experience. Yet on the other hand a clear description of religious experience must be the first step towards its assessment. Perhaps there is no way at all in which the validity of religious experience can be established. One can only be pointed to the kind of experience which Otto and the others describe and be left to decide about it in the light of the most honest discrimination of one’s experience that can be made.

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is the appropriate expression to the feeling of *Numinous*?

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2. How does Otto follow the Kantian model to base religion and sense of God in man?

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5.5 KEY WORDS

Phenomenology = It is a philosophical approach concentrating on the study of consciousness and the objects of direct experience. It is the description or study of appearances. This term was introduced by Lambert in 1764. It is philosophical method restricted to the careful analysis of the intellectual processes which we are introspectively aware of. Brentano, Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty are some the important philosophers who used this method in their philosophy.

Sui Generis = is a Latin expression, literally meaning of its own kind/genus or unique in its characteristics. The expression is often used in analytic philosophy to indicate an idea, an entity, or a reality which cannot be included in a wider concept.

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5.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

1. James speaks of the reality of genuine, healthy and normal religious experience where man has the touch of a 'more', the unseen or the 'divine'. As our primary wide-awake consciousness opens our senses to the touch of the material things, so it is logically conceivable that if there be higher spiritual agencies that can directly touch man. The possibility for such experience, according to him, might be our possession of a subconscious region which should yield access to the spiritual beings. In this sense subconscious region becomes the intermediary between the normal self and the higher spiritual agency.

2. The criteria to judge the validity of religious experience indicated by James are three. They are:

- a. Immediate luminousness
- b. philosophical reasonableness
- c. moral helpfulness

He gives more importance to the pragmatic criterion. Since the experience of the unseen world produces effects in this world, the 'unseen region' in question is not merely ideal. When we commune with it, the effect is actually imparted to our finite personality. Therefore that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself. Therefore James finds no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal. The 'effect' the unseen world creates makes him to articulate its existence.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

1. In his book *The Idea of Holy* Rudolf Otto tries to make a clear distinction between numinous or religious feeling and the feeling of the sublime. Numinous feelings have two primary aspects (i) a feeling of religious dread (ii) a feeling of religious fascination. The closest analogue to religious dread or awe is the feeling of uncanniness – the feeling one has when the hair on the back of one's neck rises, the shudder or terror on hearing a ghost story, the dread of haunted places. The feeling of fascination by, attraction to, and prizing of the object which arouses the feeling in question creates both the desire to approach the object and the feeling that one possesses no value when considered in relation to the fascinating and prized object.

2. When the concept of the numinous and the schematizing concepts are brought

together, we have the complex category of the holy itself. The word holy can have varied forms of characteristics. One of the characteristics can be that it is rational in its nature in the sense that it can be thought conceptually. Thus, for example by holiness we can mean moral goodness and it is possible to have some kind of understanding of what goodness is. But the rational characteristics do not explain completely the meaning of the word holy. For Otto the rational meaning is only derivative. In its fundamental sense the word holy stands for a non-rational character. By it we mean that it is something which cannot be thought conceptually.

Answers to Check Your Progress III

1. To the non-rational, non-explainable element of religion, Otto gave the name “Numinous”. The Numinous experience is expressed by him by three Latin words: *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. For instance, what does one feel when one is in deeply felt personal prayer or when one partakes in a solemn liturgical service or when one is in an old church or temple? The appropriate expression to this feeling is *mysterium, tremendum et fascinans*.

2. According to Kant the knowledge arises from our faculty of cognition. Sense impressions are occasions for such knowledge. According to Otto the knowledge of the *Numinous* could be described in the same manner. It is derived from the deepest foundation of the cognitive apprehension of the soul. The experience of the Numinous arises by means of sense experience but not in and through sensory data. They are stimulus and occasion for the *numinous* experience to be stirred. The experience of the *Numinous* becomes purer when the soul disengages itself from this sense experience and takes its stand in absolute contrast.