





RELIGION AND SOCIETY

School of Social Sciences
Indira Gandhi National Open University

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BSOE – 145 Religion and Society

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Unit 2: Elements of Religion	Prof. Subhadra Channa
Unit 3: Approaches to the Study of Religion	Adopted from ESO-15, Units 2 & 3
Unit 4: Religion and Rationalization	Prof. Subhadra Channa
Block 2: Religion in India	
Unit 5: Pluralism, Equality and Fraternity: The Constitutional Foundations	Prof. Subhadra Channa
Unit 6: Hinduism	Adopted from ESO-15, Unit 19
Unit 7: Islam	Adopted from ESO-15, Unit 22
Unit 8: Christianity	Adopted from ESO-15, Unit 21
Unit 9: Sikhism	Adopted from ESO-15, Unit 23
Unit 10: Buddhism	Adopted from ESO-15, Unit 20
Unit 11: Religion among Tribes	Prof. Subhadra Channa
Block 3: Religion, Community and State	
Unit 12: Religious Pluralism and Syncretic Traditions	Prof. Subhadra Channa
Unit 13: Secularism and Secularization	Adopted from ESO-15, Unit 16
Unit 14: Communalism and Fundamentalism	Adopted from ESO-15, Unit 15 & 32
Unit 15: Civil Religion	Adopted from ESO-15, Unit 9

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COURSE INTRODUCTION

This course acquaints students with a sociological understanding of religion. The course also examines the major forms of religion in India and its role in modern society.

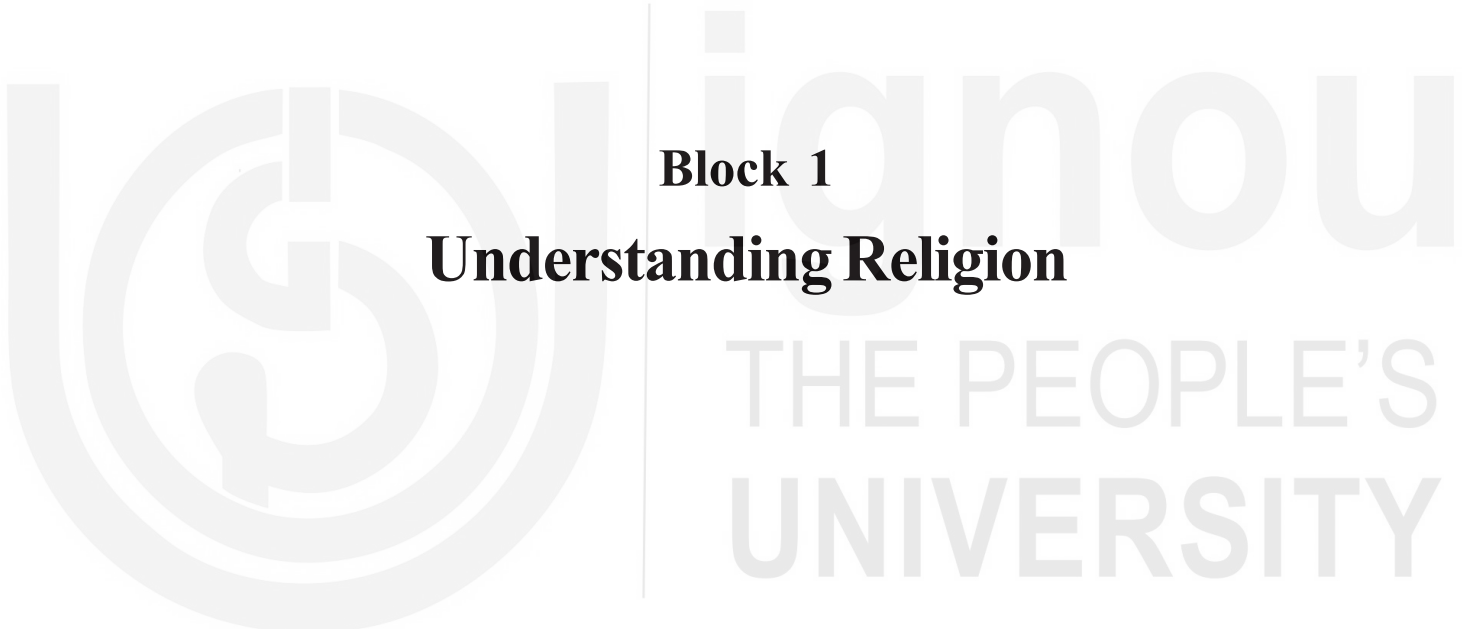
The course is organized under three broad blocks comprising fifteen Units (Chapters). The first Block which is titled “Understanding Religion” deals with the meaning and basic concepts of religion, its elements, approaches and rationale. This Block has four Units.

The second Block (Block 2) which is titled “Religion in India” discusses the concept and practice of pluralism, equality and fraternity, and the major forms of religion in India. The major religions included in the discussion are Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, and Buddhism. This block also highlights the forms of religion among tribes. The Block has seven Units.

In Block 3 (“Religion, Community and State”) some important aspects related to religion and society is discussed in four Units. They include “Religious Pluralism and Syncretic Traditions”, “Secularism and Secularization”, “Communalism and Fundamentalism”, and “Civil Religion”.

In order to help the learner to comprehend the text, the Units have been arranged thematically under successive blocks. The Units under each Block have also been structured in order to help the learner. Every Unit begins with the “Structure” of the Unit and is followed by “Objectives”, “Introduction”, main content, Summary (“Let Us Sum Up”), “References”, and “Further Reading”.

In order to make it engaging, exercises are inserted as “check your progress” wherever required. This exercise could also be useful as sample questions in examination point of view. The other important component for better comprehension of the Units is the “glossary” which are appended at the end of the course.

The background of the page features a large, light gray watermark of the Open University logo. The logo consists of a stylized 'U' and 'O' forming a circular shape, with the word 'Open' and 'University' integrated into the design. A vertical line is positioned to the right of the logo.

Block 1

Understanding Religion

THE PEOPLE'S
UNIVERSITY

UNIT 1 SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION: MEANING AND CONCEPT*

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Religion is a Field of Sociological Analysis
 - 1.2.1 Religion is a Social Phenomenon
 - 1.2.2 Sociology of Religion Differs from Philosophy of Religion and Theology
- 1.3 Sociological Definition of Religion
 - 1.3.1 Religion is a Group Phenomenon
 - 1.3.2 'Supernatural' and the 'Sacred'
 - 1.3.3 Beliefs and Practices
 - 1.3.4 Moral Prescriptions
- 1.4 Development of Sociology of Religion
 - 1.4.1 Pre-modern Societies
 - 1.4.2 Industrial Societies
 - 1.4.3 Religious Revivalism
- 1.5 Religion and Other Related Social Phenomena
 - 1.5.1 Religion and Magic
 - 1.5.2 Religion and Science
- 1.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.7 References
- 1.8 Further Reading
- 1.9 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

1.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to—

- appreciate the need to understand religion sociologically;
- differentiate between Sociology of Religion, Philosophy of Religion and Theology;
- trace the development of Sociology of Religion;
- understand the difference between magic, science and religion; and
- sociologically analyse any religion on your own.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Political parties use the appeal of religion to gain public support. Secularism debated on public platforms. In this context it is important for you to understand how religion influences social and political thinking and action today.

*This unit has been adapted from ESO-15, Block 1, Unit 1 with necessary edition.

This Unit begins with a discussion on how religion becomes a relevant field of sociological analyses. It also differentiates sociology of religion from philosophy of religion and theory. Efforts are then made to provide a sociological definition of religion by listing out and elaborating the characteristics of religion. This is followed by an outline of the development of Sociology of Religion. And before summing up, religion is differentiated from and related to magic and science.

1.2 RELIGION IS A FIELD OF SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

- How do sociologists study religion by using the scientific method?
- Is it at all possible to study religion?
- How are 'gods' and 'heaven' connected with sociology?
- When there are philosophers and theologians to study religion, why should sociologists also study religion.
- Religion is something 'sacred'. How can we take it as an object of study?
- Religion is a personal affair. Why should a sociologist intrude on an individual's privacy?

Sociologists find religion a relevant field of inquiry because religion is a social phenomenon. Moreover, a sociologist concentrates on issues and questions which are not generally considered by theologians and philosophers. The sociologist of religion focuses on the links between religion and other social phenomena such as politics, economics, science and technology. A recent book on religion by Lawson and MacCauley (1990:v) is dedicated to those who taught that "...religion need not be a force to be feared nor a dogma to be embraced, but simply a way of life". To the extent religion is a way of life, it is perfect field of sociological analysis. Now we will see what this means.

1.2.1 Religion is a Social Phenomenon

What do we mean when we say something is 'social'? It broadly refers to experience of human beings as a collectivity in all parts of the world, relationships between human beings, probably in all walks of their life, and to all facets of everyday human life; for example, education, politics, economy etc.

Every society has religious beliefs, rites and organisations. Religion very often affects our understanding of the everyday life. The way in which we relate to each other is very often influenced by our religious beliefs. Religion is also related to politics, and to economic activities like production, distribution and consumption. Religion can unite human beings together, but also sow hatred among them. Religion may produce differing impacts in different places. At one end of the globe, it serves to justify oppression and unequal distribution of resources. The same religion, you may find, serves as a reason to resist and struggle against oppression, at the other end of the globe. If religious beliefs are the same, then how do we explain why people react differently in different parts of the world? All religions teach love and universal brotherhood. Even then, why do people 'fight' amongst themselves and 'die' in the name of religion? It is precisely these sets of questions, and the like which sociologists study. In a book on *Religion*,

Society and the Individual, Yinger (1957:xi) wrote that religion is a social phenomenon, because it is “woven into the fabric of social life”.

Whether a believer or non-believer, a sociologist is supposed to observe without bias the way in which people experience religion. May be a sociologists curious to understand the different ways in which the rich the poor experience religion. Reality is not what meets our eyes alone. A sociologist most often tries to unearth the explicit, outwardly visible reality. But behind this lies the invisible trend—the increasing criminal trends of party politics. Further in times of acute crisis, there tends to emerge a strong fervor of religious revivalism. By research, a sociologist might possibly prove that the rich use religion during crises to exploit the masses, or, it may be that the masses recall and revive religion during crises, as a measure of hope.

By now, you would have understood that religion is a social phenomenon and hence it is legitimately a field of sociological study. Apart from this, sociologists also study the relationship between religion and various other social institutions like education, government and economy. They try to study the separate meaning of religion for various groups and levels in a society. This is certainly different from what is of concern to a philosopher of religion and theologians.

Let us now discuss the difference between sociology of religion, philosophy or religion and theology.

1.2.2 Sociology of Religion Differs from Philosophy of Religion and Theology

Clear-cut distinctions cannot be made between sociology of religion, philosophy of religion and theology. This is because they concentrate on the study of a singly social reality, that is religion, and no social reality can be separated like atoms. When we try to differentiate between disciplines, we do so in terms of their focus and specific issues. To be specific, though sociology of religion, philosophy of religion and theology differ in their focus and the issues of analytical interest, they have much to contribute to the development of each other. Let us see how they differ in their focus and the issues of analytical interest.

The focus of the three disciplines is broadly as follows:

- i) Sociology of religion does not ask, whether god exists. Rather, sociology of religion asks, if people believe that god exists, ‘why do they believe?’ ‘how do they come to believe?’ ‘how do they describe their god?’ and ‘is there any relationship between their description of god and their social conditions?’ Similarly, sacrificing goats or buffaloes for deities cannot be certified as right or wrong by the sociologist. To be precise, the Question of ‘what ought to be?’ does not belong to the sociology of religion. One should bear in mind that, a sociologist aims at asociological analysis or religion and not a religious analysis of society.
- ii) Philosophy of religion differs from the above. Philosophy has many specialisations like metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. Metaphysics is, broadly put, the study of the abstract. As a metaphysician, a philosopher or religion has to deduce arguments for and against the existence of god. Epistemology is a study of the ‘basis’ of knowledge. Accordingly, as an epistemologist, a philosopher of religion examines the possibility of knowing god through various means. A philosopher of religion also concentrates on the relations between religion and morals or morality.

- iii) Theology differs from both the above. Theologians are necessarily believers. They believe in the existence of god (in whatever form it may be) and try to understand the nature of divine beings by studying the faith of its believers. By analysing the people's experience of god, theologians try to understand god and god's plans. Theologians are recognised religious leaders. For example, there are Hindu theologians (Pandit, Acharya, Heads of Monasteries), Muslim theologians (Mulla theologian is interested in the comparative study of belief systems in two religions, but she or he is more close to her or his own religion than the other. Probing the soundness of beliefs of a particular religion also falls within the scope of theology. As Scharf (1970:12) would say, whereas theologian bases the analysis of religion on human experience in general, a sociologist pays attention to 'particular experiences of particular societies'. In a somewhat similar way, whereas theologians need not necessarily depend on 'society' for their explanations sociologists believe that religious beliefs and practices can be understood and explained only within their social context.

So far you have been given to understand the nature and scope of sociology of religion and how it differs from philosophy of religion and theology, in the next section sociological definition of religion is unfolded so that you understand religion as a group phenomenon.

Check Your Progress 1

Mark Yes or No against each of the following statements:

- a) A sociologist of religion need not necessarily be a believer.
Yes/No
- b) Religion is a social phenomenon because it is a system of shared beliefs and collective practices.,
Yes/No
- c) Sociology explains religious beliefs and practices, in their social context.
Yes/No
- d) Religion is the only source of moral values.
Yes/No
- e) How is religion a social phenomenon? Explain in ten lines.
- f) Mention any two differences between sociology of religion and theology. Use five lines for your answer.

1.3 SOCIOLOGICAL DEFINITION OF RELIGION

A definition helps us to identify clearly the subject of our study. The primary task of sociologists, before undertaking any research, is that they should define the object of their study. Very often definitions tend to describe the content or substance of the object of study. But adequate care must be taken so that a definition provides the essential ideas of the object of study. Broadly, the following four characteristics of religion(s) have been identified in order to construct a sociological definition.

1.3.1 Religion is a Group Phenomenon

Religion involves a group of people. Religion is a shared system of beliefs and practices. Every religion emphasises on the need for collective worship. Festivals and rituals are occasions which bring people together. M.N. Srinivas (1978:202) in his study of a Coorg village observes that the festivals of village deities include a village-dance, collective hunt and a dinner for the entire village. The collective dinner, in which the entire village participates, is called 'urome' (village-harmony). Durkheim (1912), equates god with society, so much so that, when you worship God you are worshipping your own society. According to Durkheim God is a human creation and a social creation at that. God is, in fact, born in the collective experience ("effervescence") of coming together, leading to rituals.

Some people may hold that one's religious affiliation should not be disclosed in public either through rituals or any religious marker. According to them religion belongs to the realm of the private life. Some parents are not bothered about the religious affiliation of their sons or daughters, because it is their personal affair. Some people may even declare that, 'Merahaath Jagannath' while some may say that 'my work is my religion'. Now, you might ask, whether these individual beliefs make a religion or not. The answer is that even these individual beliefs operate in the context of shared social values and norms and to that extent they can be treated like any other religion.

Many people may be critical about religion and some of us may reject it altogether. Yet the fact remains that since religion is an aspect of culture, we learn religious values, beliefs and practices as we grow up in a society.

1.3.2 The 'Supernatural' and the 'Sacred'

At the centre of almost every religion lies the idea of the supernatural. The supernatural is something beyond physical understanding. It is 'omnipotent', 'infinite', or 'extraordinary'. 'Belief in supernatural beings' was the definition for religion, offered by Tylor (1871), a famous anthropologist. Belief in the supernatural beings might also include belief in other kind of beings like magic forces, angels or souls of dead ancestors. Believers might arrange the supernatural beings in a hierarchy according to their power or they may differentiate the supernatural beings in terms of their functions. It should be interesting to note that Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, three Hindu Gods, are said to perform the functions of creation of the cosmic order, its maintenance and destruction, respectively.

Though the supernatural is all powerful, 'infinite' and 'beyond senses', some people try to personify it as a human being. This can be considered as one's attempt to comprehend the supernatural. People also believe that favours can be extracted from the supernatural forces or being by pacifying them. Certain natural misfortunes may be explained with references to the anger or outrage of the supernatural. Moreover, it is not necessary that supernatural must be personified as human beings. Supernatural beings can be natural forces as well, such as wind, fire, mountain etc.

Yet the fact remains that the notion and experience of the supernatural is present in all religions across the globe. Indeed-it is among the basic areas in which both religious specialists and laypersons happen to worship, respect, and propitiate the sacred.

Some scholars have argued that there is a definite distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane'. The 'sacred versus profane' is an opposition which corresponds to other

oppositions like 'other worldly versus worldly', 'extraordinary versus ordinary'. The sacred, says Durkheim (1912), is set apart and forbidden from the profane. The world 'profane' refers to unholy, secular, mundane. Rituals are occasions during which communication becomes possible between the profane and the sacred. If one wants to approach the sacred, one must purify the set by undergoing penance or by any other prescribed means. Many scholars have criticised this strict separation made by Durkheim between the profane and the sacred. Such a strict separation emerges out of a church or temple-entered understanding of religion. It has been widely pointed out by scholars that sacred impinges on many profane activities of everyday life. In turn, profane communicates with the sacred even during this-worldly activities.

1.3.3 Beliefs and Practices

Beliefs serves this purpose of revealing the existence of the supernatural or divine or the sacred. Belief explains the nature of the divine, the deeds, actions or words of the divine and prescribes ways in which human beings can communicate with the divine. Belief necessarily involves a sense of the past and speaks about a tradition, in the sense of a custom followed for a long time. It narrates the history of communication between the divine and human, and in doing so gives meaning to ritual.

Ritual is an act performed repeatedly and according to custom. It is ceremonial and formal. Most often rituals are invested with specific purposes. Rituals are series of symbolic actions which have a specific meaning in relation to religious beliefs. Rituals tend to be standardised, repeated and condensed. In pre-modern societies, rituals tend to be very elaborate and even minute details are observed carefully, in order to get full benefit. Rituals may be performed collectively, or individually. Where rituals are performed collectively, either every one performs or only the specialists perform while the believers participate. Shaman, *pujari*, priest are examples of ritual specialists. They recite extensive prayers or, chants (mantra) and simultaneously perform the ritual acts.

There is a debate in sociology or religion on the nature of the belief and ritual. Some scholars have argued that ritual emerged before an elaborate system of belief. Durkheim is one among them. Another group of scholars argue that people tried to explain the mysterious through belief first and then the ritual followed. Let us now talk about religious behaviour as a source of moral values.

1.3.4 Moral Prescriptions

In the previous section we stated that religious beliefs and rituals help human beings to communicate with each other. When human beings define their relationship with the 'sacred', they also define their relationship with fellow human being. Some behavioral patterns are prescribed as compulsory before one can related to god. This is how morals are born out of religion. As an example, it must be pointed out that the 'Ten Commandments' form an essential component of Jewish-Christian religion. Commandments are moral prescriptions for human beings to relate to god. Religion is the source of moral values, and religion without moral prescriptions is virtually not possible. Religion can distinguish between the right and the wrong, more powerfully than other social institutions.

There are many sources of moral prescriptions in a society, such a family, education and law. People who believe in a particular religion are also expected to adhere to its moral prescriptions. Thus more prescriptions come to be shared by all the members of

the group. Religion and certain of its moral prescriptions are more relevant today than ever before, because some people hold that science is increasingly becoming inhuman. Billions of dollars are poured into arms and weapon manufacture, military science and technology, when millions of human beings die of starvation in Africa, Latin America and many other parts of the globe. In this context, military-defence expenditure becomes a moral issue. For example, in order to follow the religious principle of non-violence, prevention of the increasing militarisation of science can become a moral commitment.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) What is a religious belief? Use five lines for your answer.
- ii) What is a ritual? Use five lines for your answer.
- iii) Why and how does, religion serve as a source of moral prescription?
- iv) List out, the sociological characteristics of religion. Use four lines for your answer.

1.4 DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

Scholarly interest in religion is not a recent one. The Veda, Upanishad and the treatises of Greek, philosophers, like Aristotle and Plato, are texts which show scholarly interest in religion. It has to be admitted that Theology (Have you heard about St. Augustine's 'Summa Theological'?) and Philosophy have gone far ahead in the study of religion than the relatively new and recent discipline of Sociology of Religion. Here, we are concerned with sociological interest in religion. Such classical sociologists as Durkheim and Weber studied in different ways the significance of religion. This interest is again revived in the present times. There are three observable trends in the sociology of religion.

- i) Sociological interest in religion began to emerge after the merchant-voyagers, missionaries and the colonialists 'discovered' the pre-modern societies. Here anthropologists and sociologists seemed to share an interest in religion.
- ii) Sociological interest in religion received an impetus following the industrial revolution in Europe. Industrial revolution followed the break-down of feudalism in the fifteenth century. Scholars of this stream were more interested in analysing the 'fate' of religion in the industrial world.
- iii) Sociological interest in religion is evident in those studies which trace the growth of religious revivalism in societies of late-industrial phase, and early post-industrial phase. Scholars of this stream are engaged in analysing the reasons for the survival of religion.

1.4.1 Pre-modern Societies

During the first phase of the development of sociology of religion, the interest was focused mainly to tracing the origin and evolution of religion. Explanations of two types can be identified: individualistic explanations and social explanations. Individualists explanations either emphasised the cognitive (intellectual) or the emotional aspects of religion. Both varieties of explanation of religion by anthropologists and sociologists were based on material related to primitive people around the world. Edward B. Tylor (1881) and Herbert Spencer (1882) can be called the intellectualists, because they opined that pre-modern man had to evolve religion in order to explain the phenomena

of dreams, echoes and deaths. In their view, religion might vanish when its explanatory function is taken over by science.

Some scholars, notably Paul Radin (1938), emphasised the emotional aspects of religion. According to this school of thought, religion is nothing but pre-modern person's emotional response to overcome a frightening situation. Religion, in this case, helps one to overcome one's feelings of powerlessness. Even Durkheim's (1912) understanding of religion emphasises the emotional component of religion. He holds that rituals and beliefs about the sacred emerge from the emotional outburst of the hunting tribes, when they come together after separation.

In addition, Durkheim's explanation of religion includes its social dimension and functional necessities. Durkheim (1961:52-6) says, "Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them". Durkheim identified totemism as the elementary form of religion. The 'totem' is a sacred object which is also the marker of a social group. This totem is exalted during the 'collective effervescence' generated when individuals come together as a group. Rituals and beliefs not only emerge from the group, but they also strengthen the solidarity of the group. Durkheim argues that religion has survived from the immemorial, although in various forms; because it has performed specific functions for the society—the main function being 'integration' of society. Some of these functionalist arguments have been affirmed, elaborated and reconstructed by many scholars including Radcliffe-Brown (1952), Talcott Parsons (1954) and Milton Yinger (1957).

1.4.2 Industrial Societies

Generalized map of world religions

Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Weber (1864-1920) are two important scholars who have explained religion in industrial societies in details. Both Karl Marx (1976) and Max Weber (1963) argue that religion is increasingly losing its reason or justification for existence and there will come a specific historical point after which religion will be no more. For Max Weber, rationalisation is the main theme and for Karl Marx, class conflict. According to Karl Marx (1979), religion in this world of exploitation is an expression of distress and at the same time it is also a protest against the real distress. In other words, religion continues to survive because of oppressive social conditions. When this oppressive and exploitative condition is destroyed, religion will become unnecessary. Marx denied a place for religion in his Utopian world of communism.

According to Karl Marx, religion is a component of superstructure (broadly, the world of ideas), which is a mere reflection of the base (broadly put, the mode of production comprising relations of production and forces of production). There have been wide ranging debates among scholars both Marxist and non-Marxist, whether base or material condition can determine the superstructure or realm of ideas. Some neo-Marxist scholars argue that, in some cases, the realm of ideas may become relatively independent and try to subvert the material conditions or the base.

Increasingly, religion has come to be accepted as a possible instrument of social change as well. Though Max Weber agreed that religion will vanish ultimately, he demonstrated the power of religious ideas to act as forces of development. By systematically analysing the doctrines of certain Protestant sects like Lutheranism, Calvinism and Pietism, Weber

came to believe that ethics generated by these sects have aided capitalist development in many European countries. The doctrine of predestination, perched by Calvin (1509-1564), said that god had chosen his people already, and one could live by faith alone. Calvin criticised all kinds of magical practices followed by Catholics. The doctrine of predestination aroused the question. “Am I one of the god’s chosen? in the minds of the believers. This question resulted in the hard work and asceticism. Work became an end in itself, for it was for the greater glory of god. Work was no more a means to obtain worldly pleasures and prosperities. Asceticism combined with hardwork resulted in accumulation of wealth (capital) which was reinvested to accelerate the pace of industrialisation. Thus religious ideas generated by the Protestant sects aided capitalist development, according to Weber.

1.4.3 Religious Revivalism

Though many of scholars predicted that religion would ultimately vanish, it has managed to survive. In fact, there has been a religious revivalism in many parts of the world. In recent times there has been a fresh growth of fundamentalist Protestant sects in the United States. There has been religious revivalism in many Asian countries and religion tends to increasingly become a tool of political mobilisation. Meanwhile, in some of the Latin American countries, Christianity has become the tool of resistance against exploitation. Even where religion seems to lose its hold in the sense of decreasing attendance in church ceremonies, a private religion is seemingly emerging. In other words, a personal interpretation of religious doctrines is tolerated. Some scholars raise doubts whether religion will vanish from the history of mankind. They have analysed the evidence of religion found in the forms of rituals and beliefs in the so-called secular system like the State, Communism and nationalism. To be specific, if communism is analysed as a form of religion, no one should be surprised.

Before concluding the section, let me quote the words of Turner (1967:48), for they summarise the secret of the survival of religion: “Religion is not a cognitive system, a set of dogmas alone, it is a meaningful experience and experienced meaning”.

Activity-2

Is religious revivalism on the increase in almost all parts of the world? Give some examples of this phenomenon in India and abroad. In addition, write, in 250 words, your views on why religion is again popularly accepted and vigorously defended.

1.5 RELIGION AND OTHER RELATED SOCIAL PHENOMENA

We shall now discuss the similarities and differences between religion, magic and science. Very often science is opposed to religion and magic is classified within religion. These arbitrary assumptions have to be clarified, for a better understanding of religion, science and magic.

1.5.1 Religion and Magic

Religion and magic reveal many similarities. Both of them deal with unobservable powers. They operate only, on the basis of faith of the adherent or believer. Both religion and magic can be explained as human attempts to cope with fears, frustrations

and uncertainties of day-to-day life. Both in religion and magic attempts are made to direct the supernatural power to achieve specific ends, using certain techniques. Malinowski and Frazer are well-known scholars who have contributed richly to the understanding of magic and religion.

Religion refers to ultimate problems and meaning of human existence (e.g. death, failures etc.), whereas magic is concerned more with immediate problem like control of weather, drought, victory in battle, prevention of disease. Within religion, one prays to gods and pleads with them, whereas in magic, the magical manipulates the supernatural power. Religion makes a person believes in the power of the supernatural. On the contrary, in magical practices, the adherent believes in the own power to manipulate the power of the supernatural. It needs to be pointed out that religion and magic are not completely distinct.

Vernon (1962:63) explains that magic is dispensed in a buyer-seller situation, whereas religion follows the pattern of flock and the shepherd. In religion, a person feels powerless before the sacred, and accepts the supreme power and omnipotence of the sacred. A devotee prays and begs to the supreme. Moreover, religion demands a strong emotional involvement its adherents and is very personal. In magic, the magician is business like and undertake to manipulate the power of the supernatural, only for a 'price'. A magical act is more impersonal and follows a fixed formula. Religion has more of collective-orientation. Religion pursue common goals; it has a set of beliefs and common practice; it units its adherents as a community. Indirect contrast, magic does not produce or even attempt to produce 'community' among the believers. Magic is more individualistic. Magic moreover does not provide a philosophy, a way of life or moral prescriptions, as religion does. A practitioner of magic, the magician represents only himself or herself. Whereas religious functionaries represent the religion or the community of believers. In view of its businesslike character, and reliance on magic formula magic was considered by Frazer, a renewed anthropologist, as a primitive form of science.

1.5.2 Religion and Science

Science is a search for knowledge as well as method for solving problems. Both religion and science are forms of human understanding. Thus science and religion and human ways of relating themselves to reality. On many occasions in the past as well as present, in many a war, science and religion have acted against humankind. Both religion and science prescribe qualifications for their personnel.

Science insists that all phenomena that is observed should not be accepted at face value. Its value and meaning can be discovered through experimentation. All factors (time, place, persons, equipment, etc.) that can affect the results of such experiments are controlled in laboratory condition. Science differs from religion because it believes in neutrality and objectivity. Scientific method is claimed to have annulled the subjective biases. Science believes in precision and measurement, which is not possible for religion. Science brings the unknown to the level of observable reality. Religion cannot bring god to the level of observable phenomenon. Scientific knowledge 'has more concrete application in the form of technology, which might help in manipulating nature. Religion cannot establish such concrete and immediate results. Scientific knowledge and method are valid universally, whereas principles of religious life differ from society to society.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) State briefly, in five lines, the individualistic view of religion held by the intellectualists.
- ii) Describe, in five lines, the origin and functions of religion, as explained by Durkheim.
- iii) What is the role of religious ideas, according to Weberian thought? How did Weber arrive at his thesis? Use five lines for your answer.
- iv) Mention, in five lines, any two differences magic and religion.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have explained the meaning of sociology of religion. First, it was established that religion is a social phenomenon because it is a system of shared beliefs and collective practices. Secondly, it was demonstrated that sociology of religion differs from philosophy and theology. Sociology brings to the fore certain issues not considered by philosophy and theology. Thirdly, Sociological characteristics of religion were listed and elaborated. Religion is a social phenomenon, that is it is a system of shared beliefs and collective practices. Religion provides moral prescriptions and it at its centre lies the idea of the sacred and supernatural. Fourthly, the unit provided a brief sketch of the development of sociology of religion. Three phases were identified and elaborated. Intellectualism and emotionalism were the early sub-phase of the first phase. The second phase examined the question of religion against the background of rapid industrialisation. Marx and Weber belonged 'to this phase. Finally, we stated the differences and similarities between religion, magic and science.

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1.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) a) Yes
- b) Yes
- c) Yes
- d) No
- e) Religion is woven into the social life in the form of beliefs, rituals and organisation.
Religion influences our understanding of the world and the pattern of our interaction with fellow human beings.
- f) Sociology of religion explains beliefs and rituals in their social context, whereas theology tries to understand the divine by probing the experiences of the believers. A sociologist need not necessarily be a believer in order to study religion, whereas a theologian is necessarily a believer.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Supernatural is considered to be beyond human senses. It is taken to be extraordinary, all powerful or infinite.
- ii) Religious beliefs refers to a system of knowledge about the divine and its relationship with the human. It gives meaning to a ritual.
- iii) A ritual refers to the performance of acts, usually ceremonial in nature. Ritual acts are the outward expression of religious beliefs.
- iv) When human beings attempt to relate with god, some behaviors are prescribed as a condition to relate with god. This is how do's and don'ts come to be prescribed as moral acts which govern the relations between fellow persons.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) According to the intellectualists, members of pre-modern societies evolved religion in order to explain the phenomena of dreams, echoes and deaths. Consequent

upon this view is the assumption that religion might vanish when the function of explanation is taken over by science.

- ii) Durkheim felt that totemism is an elementary form of religion. The totem is a sacred object which is also the marker of a social group. The totem is exalted and rituals arise during the 'collective effervescence' generated when the group assembles together.
- iii) Weber argued that religious ideas can be forces of development. He found that the 'doctrine of predestination' propounded by the Protestant sects had generated a life style of hard work and asceticism; self-denial in which people earned but did not spend money on luxury. This resulted in the generation of capital necessary for industrialisation.
- iv) Religion refers to ultimate problems (for example death, failures) and meaning of human life, whereas magic is concerned with immediate problems like good weather, good crops or cure of disease. Religion is collectively oriented, unlike magic, which is more individualistic.



UNIT 2 ELEMENTS OF RELIGION*

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Beliefs
- 2.3 Myths
- 2.4 Cosmology
- 2.5 Eschatology
- 2.6 Superhumans
- 2.7 Practice of Religion
 - 2.7.1 Household Rituals
 - 2.7.2 Ceremonial Rituals
 - 2.7.3 Life Cycle Rituals
 - 2.7.4 Sacred Words
- 2.8 Religious Symbols
- 2.9 Summary
- 2.10 References
- 2.11 Further Reading

2.0 OBJECTIVES

To understand—

- What aspects of social life can be included under religion?
- What is the relationship between the various elements of religion? and
- How do they synchronise with the rest of society?

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Religion is the most ubiquitous and the most unexplained aspect of our lives. Even from pre-historic times there is evidence from the cave paintings that ancient humans were also engaged with dimensions that were not merely of the material world. The practice of burial from Neanderthal sites indicates some conceptualization of an afterworld. One necessary aspect of religion is that it is a part of the social, it involves collective imaginations that are shared across a religious community or what Durkheim (1912) refers to as a Church. Religion is an explanatory system. According to Tylor (1871), primitive humans used religious explanations to explain the unexplainable, like death and dreams.

The persistence of religion in contemporary life continues because life remains full of questions. According to Clifford Geertz (1966), religion exists because it helps to

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transcend the three critical thresholds that every human encounters; the threshold of reason, there exists many phenomenon and happenings that cannot be explained, the threshold of suffering and the threshold of evil. Everyone in this world at some time or other encounter suffering that they feel is beyond endurance, and it is religion that often rescues from unbearable pain. As Durkheim had described, death rituals or piacular rituals, help to alleviate the suffering of loss at the death of a loved one.

The problem of evil is another factor that always raises doubt; how people who transgress norms, carry out evil deeds, still manage to lead successful lives. What then constitutes religion? It is a set of beliefs that include cosmology about the nature of this world and a set of practices, actual actions and behaviour that is linked to the beliefs. The beliefs are about the nature of the world, the nature of the superhuman beings and about any ultimate reality like God. Not all religions have similar kind of beliefs or believe in all the elements. The practices are related to the nature of the divine and then there are the practitioners or religious specialists who help the people to perform the rituals and practices that are part of religion. Let us now examine each of these elements one by one. The most important aspect of religious beliefs understood by sociologists such as Durkheim and Eliade, is that it concerns the sacred. Eliade calls the sacred, hierophanies (Eliade 1957), they are about power and about the real. All people of any faith, believe that religion tells us about the real truth, the profane on the other hand is quite often relegated to the unreal, for example the Hindu concept of Maya.

2.2 BELIEFS

The term belief is used from a sociological perspective, as a construct that is collectively made and participated in. From the point of view of the believers, these are the truths, a description of ontological existence. The most primary of the beliefs is about the nature of the universe, about its origin and its existence. Almost all religions have a creation myth that lays the foundation of that society and lays down the rules and norms of behaviour and creates a moral order. They also comprise an important element of all religions, namely myths.

2.3 MYTHS

Myths are stories and they have been always there; they carry on from ancient times and are believed by the people to be telling them about what happened in the beginning of time. They often tell about the lives of the divine persons; they constitute a kind of history and also explain the reasons for the performances of rituals. The recurrent themes of deluge for example, of caves and mountains probably reflect the retention of early experiences of the species. Some, like Malinowski treat the myths as functional tools of explanation, and like Levi-Strauss, as revealing the uniform structures of the human mind.

Origin myths are found in all societies and cultures, and apart from explaining the origins of the world, of human and non-human species, they also legitimize social hierarchies and formations. The book of Genesis of the Christians, condemn women to a secondary existence by narrating that God created Adam in his own image and that Eve was made from Adam's ribs. Also, the woman is blamed for the original sin of eating the forbidden apple. In the Purusa Sukta myth of the Rig Veda, the origin of the

human species is explained along with the primary hierarchy of the four Varna, that are arranged according to the parts of the divine being from where they originated; Brahmins from the head, the Ksatriyas from the arms, the Vaisyas from the thighs and the Shudra from the feet. Their origin assigns to the Varna their place in society. Regional cultures show similarities thereby affirming their affinity and possible common origins, like most Naga tribes have a myth of origin from a cave or the underground.

Myths justify the celebration of festivals and rituals, for example Christmas celebrates the birth of the Christ child and Janmashtami the birth of Lord Krishna. However, the relationship of myths and rituals is not a one to one relationship as there are many rituals without any myths and all myths do not call for celebration.

2.4 COSMOLOGY

Religion provides the cosmology by which a people understand the world around them. Most of the cosmology is provided by myths but some of it is taken as given. For example, some tribes believe that the earth is carried on the back of a tortoise, the Hindus believe it rests on the back of a large snake. The Christians believed that the earth was at the centre of the universe and that all of creation was made by God in a span of six days.

Life and death, as explained by Tylor, are at the roots of the human curiosity and understanding them is fundamental to all cosmologies. Almost every religious belief is centred on the belief in a non-material existence, both of the human and even non-human, in terms of a spirit, soul or ethereal body. The belief in spirit was coined by Tylor as Animism and at being the origin of religious beliefs. Even though not termed as Animistic most complex religions also have belief in spirits and souls, extending them to non-humans as well, like the Hindus. Some tribes believe in the oneness or contiguity of animal and human spirits. They believe that spirits can traverse from one body to another. The likeness and disparity between humans and non-humans are a core aspect of cosmological beliefs. Some people believe in an animated or living landscape. The religions that worship natural elements as deities are known as Naturism. Some doctrinal religions like Islam and Christianity give primacy to humans but many, including Hinduism, include non-humans as important parts of the universe.

2.5 ESCHATOLOGY

Beliefs about the after-world and the destination of the soul are again varying and important components of cosmology. Some like the Saoras (Vitebsky 1993) do not have any belief in death as it is known in other culture. They simply believe that people pass from one world to another, and there is free mobility between the two worlds. Others may believe that the soul remains in repose to rise finally at the end of time (Apocalypse) like the Christians. The Hindus and Buddhists believe in transmigration of the soul from one body to another, including into all life forms other than humans. Some believe in heaven and hell and some do not. Eschatology is closely related to the perception of time. Those that believe in linear, historical time like Judaism and Christianity, apply the same to the destination of the soul, while cyclical time supports notions of rebirth and transmigration. As Eliade (1957) explains, for those with belief in cyclical time, each cycle such as the beginning of a New Year is a throwback to the origin. It is not another year, but the resurrection of the same year but anew.

2.6 SUPERHUMANS

According to Spiro (1966), what all religions have in common is a belief in superhumans, being who have superior properties to humans. They have more power and can control the destinies of humans and affect them in many ways. Spiro was speaking in context of Buddhism that does not believe in God but in superior beings. The final destiny of the soul in Buddhism is liberation from the cycle of birth and death and from all sufferings. Some such beings still prefer to remain on earth to guide others towards liberation. The Buddha is the most exalted of them all, but not the only one. There is a lesser order of superhuman beings in Buddhism and they correspond to the many deities of the Hindu pantheon. Similarly, while Hindus worship many gods and goddesses, the Hindu philosophy tells that these are only different forms of the same Being, Atman, of which all other beings are but a part.

Ancient people attributed power to most natural phenomenon and worshipped them, like in ancient Greek and Roman religious beliefs. Their supreme god Zeus was the god of thunder and lightning, and Poseidon, the god of the sea and the underworld. Diana or Nike was the goddess of sports and Minerva the goddess of war. Similarly, in Hindu religious beliefs, Shiva the supreme god resides on the sacred mountain of Kailasa. Himalaya is a god whose daughter Parvati is the consort of Shiva. Among the more ancient Hindus who were mostly pastoralists, Varuna, the god of rain and thunder was a supreme god and so was Surya, the sun god. As is well known pastoral people are dependent upon the natural elements and worship them. Rivers, mountains, trees and animals are all considered sacred among the Hindus and worshipped. Change over to agriculture changed the nature of the gods, from warrior gods, the emphasis shifted to mother goddesses representing fertility of the earth and crops.

The relationship with the superhuman beings is either supplicatory or propitiating. People tend to keep the superhumans happy by doing according to their wishes and they also worship them explicitly to gain something from them. Adherence to the rules of the moral order is a way to keep the gods and goddesses in genial mood. Worship, making offerings and keeping vows are ways to obtain favours. People offer money and light candles in Churches, perform Mass and say prayers. At the Tirupati temple in South India, devotees offer the hair of their head to the deity. In some other places other kinds of offerings may be made and different kinds of rituals may be performed, but the goal remains the same. The ordinary people recognize that the deities or the superhumans have more power than they have and they can make things happen.

Sacrifice has been an age- old mode of worship and propitiation. There have been many kinds of analysis of sacrifice, a classic one given by Robertson Smith (1874) says that taking part in the sacrificial feast is sharing the table with the gods. The sacrifices are made to the gods as their food, but they are eaten by the devotees, symbolising a repast shared with divinity.

Religions that believe in only one God are called monotheistic, such as Christianity and Islam; but even though they may have only one God, they have many other superhuman beings, that are recognized and worshipped. Christianity has many saints who are worshipped in many churches across the world. The body of St. Xavier preserved in Goa for example draws thousands of devotees from across the world. While Buddhism has no God they worship the Buddha and also many other superhuman beings like Avalokiteshwar, Tara, Amitabha and others. They make splendid temples and perform

many rituals of propitiation and make offerings. Quite often among many people of the world, the highest deity or the Supreme God is recognized but not worshipped. It is the lesser beings, who are required for day to day needs who are made offerings to and worshipped.

In Europe one finds small groves in most villages and towns devoted to local saints who are worshipped by individuals for their limited and specific requirements. So also, in India there are temples devoted to many gods and goddesses but no one worships supreme God Brahman. The Nuer, as studied by Evans-Pritchard (1956) recognize a supreme all pervasive being they call Kwoth, but he is not worshipped. Offerings are made to the lesser superhumans who control specific parts of the universe. Although religions with more than one sacred deity are called Polytheistic, like the ancient Roman and Greek pantheons, several others are apparently polytheistic, but like Hinduism have belief in an ultimate and single truth.

At times sacredness is invested not in any being human or superhuman but in an object. Mostly these objects gain their sacred status from being in close contact with some sacred entity. For example, many Catholic Churches have what are known as relics, which are body parts of saints that are kept with great reverence and care and displayed on special ritual occasions. The hair of Prophet Mohammed is said to be preserved in a Mosque. Objects like amulets and bells etc, are called as fetishes. But they are only peripheral aspects of religions and play varying roles in performance of rituals. Therefore, beliefs about the universe, about superhumans and about the after-world are all part of religion and religious beliefs, the other important aspect of religion is the actions that are performed, the everyday or occasional practices that make religion manifest and real.

2.7 PRACTICE OF RELIGION

The practice of religion comprises of relationship with the superhumans, the acts that are performed to propitiate them and also for supplication. Some of them are precise and recurrent, and follow a pattern. They are called rituals. Not all rituals are religious but religious rituals play an important part in the practice of any religion.

Individuals may perform their own rituals at home, but individual actions are not part of the collective and not a concern of the sociologist. As social scientists we are concerned with the public domain alone. Rituals can be classified and understood in many ways. Commonly understood classifications are:

1. Household rituals
2. Ceremonial rituals
3. Life Cycle rituals

These are then sub-divided into several types, depending upon the time of their performance, the level of participation and the goals for which they are performed.

2.7.1 Household Rituals

These are part of what may be understood as the everyday practice of religion. Among many indigenous people, the daily ritual may comprise of making offerings to the ancestors, often these are enshrined near the family hearth, so whatever is cooked is

offered to them first. In the hills of India, there is the prevalence of lineage gods or *kuldevta*, who are seen as members of the family and kept appeased by various offerings on a regular basis (Channa 2013). Many Christian, Hindu and Buddhist families may have small shrines at their homes with a crucifix, an idol or an image and regular prayers or small offerings are made to them. Hindus light incense sticks and blow conch shells in the evening at the tulsi (basil) plant. These small and recurrent rituals have the role of keeping household members involved in the household as a unit. All these are done with the goal of the entire household prosperity and well-being in mind. They are a reminder that all members are both participating in and responsible for each other. Offerings made to the ancestors are to express gratitude for them handing over their property and in case of agricultural communities, they are the ones who hand over the seeds for future harvests. In Himachal, members of a household for example, pay extra attention to offerings made for those ancestors who did not marry, as they feel they received more from them than they would have if they had their own children.

2.7.2 Ceremonial Rituals

These are those that involve more people belonging to the larger society. In the smaller indigenous groups, the entire community may be involved, or any unit with a specific identity like a totemic clan, or a lineage group or a village. Many nations reaffirm their identities by large scale ceremonial rituals like the Republic Day parade in India, or the Bastille Day in France. Although these are not considered as religious rituals, they have all the characters of one. Religious rituals are marked by the involvement with the sacred entities (here the nation), but in many ways the nation too is a sacred entity. In the monarchies and ancient kingships, the person of the king or emperor is conceived of as sacred. All ceremonials of the state that are performed around the personage of the ruler have therefore a sacred or religious character. Geertz (1980) has described what he calls as a Theatre State, a state whose legitimacy is maintained by ceremonial rituals.

Annual rituals are performed for several reasons. In all agricultural societies, these annual rituals mark the harvest time, when the new crop is harvested and it is time for celebration. Even when societies have become urbanised, they continue to celebrate harvest festivals, like in India, one celebrates, Bihu (Assam), Pongal (South India), Lohri (Punjab) and Sankranti (Central, East and North India). According to Leach, annual rituals also have the function of marking time. In the times when there was no other way to know how much time had passed, the time from one cycle of ritual to another marked the passage of one segment of time. Leach compares it to the drops of water falling at regular intervals, where interval or pause or a reversal marks the limit of one segment of time as the other begins. In many societies and cultures, time is not seen as linear but as cyclical, and the cycle of time is marked by the annual festivals. So, when people in rural areas or where ever, they are not following the time by watch, need to know the interval that has passed, they measure it against an annual ritual, like from one Thanksgiving to another, or one Deepawali to another and so on. The festivities mark the interval by causing a pause in normal social life, sometimes even a reversal, where people reverse their social hierarchies or normal roles to enact contrary behaviour. Men and women, otherwise living sedate lives may engage in revelry like at Holi, or have pantomimes and masked dances that take them away from day to day life. This reversal created a strong impact that would help to remember and mark the time.

Another impact of collective ceremonies is what Durkheim referred to as raising the collective consciousness, essential for the maintenance of identity as well as for

maintaining the moral solidarity. According to Durkheim, in totemic rituals, the totemic lineage group, that traces its origin from a common ancestor, reaffirms its bonding with each other as well as to the ancestor. Since the ancestor is sacred, they also recognise that they are part of the sacred and therefore also obliged to maintain the moral order. The totemic community is not just a relational community bound by common ties of descent but also a moral community bound by common duties and obligations towards the totem who is ancestor. Since most totemic ancestors are non-humans, Durkheim could identify the unity of the human and non-human world as exhibited and enforced by the totemic rituals. According to Max Gluckmann (1954) who coined the term rituals of rebellion, these rituals that expressed rebellion were actually designed to dispel tensions and restore equilibrium, like staged fights and other kinds of aggressive behaviour.

Ceremonial rituals can be just a one-time ritual to mark any major and life-changing event. But quite often these tend to be replicated and continued in remembrance or commemoration of that event; like the birth of a new nation, the end of the World War or any other particularly significant event. These events must have a wide significance and social and political relevance for them to be remembered. Rituals can also have deep and significant political roles to play. In many situations of oppression and subjugation, rituals have been shown to play significant roles to register protest, to mobilise people into rebellion and to also inform the oppressors that their oppression cannot be tolerated. Some of these have been designated as Cargo Cults, or Millennial movements, where the people gathered under a belief that an apocalypse like situation was imminent, when the world would end, and their oppression with it. These movements were based on a kind of hope that things will overturn and the oppression would end. Sometimes these rituals helped to form and reinforce new identities like the Kalela dance studied by A.L Epstein in urban Africa, where labour migrated from different tribes recreated their tribal identity, even if they were of different origins.

2.7.3 Life Cycle Rituals

The human life is intercepted by transitional phases that are translated into status transformations in social terms. The physical developments that begin with birth and end with death, are marked by rituals that emphasize that along with any physical changes that an individual may be undergoing, there is a major change in the social position of the person. A change in social status involves significant changes in roles and responsibilities as well as access to resources and privileges as a member of society. Since there is considerable social significance, it is imperative that the individual is made aware of these changes, and the life cycle rituals are specifically directed towards this end.

The first most important life cycle rituals are of birth, a ritual that not only announces the addition of another member to the society, but also proclaims the value of that particular new-comer to the society. Birth rituals and types of celebration or lack of it, announces how much the new born can look towards as his or her claims by the mere fact of birth. In most parts of India, for example, the birth of a boy calls for celebration but there is silence when a girl is born, indicating that a girl child is going to be kept deprived in the future as well as compared to the boy child. Coming of age or puberty is another transition that is marked in many cultures and in some it is the most important of all rituals as it marks the transition to adulthood and becoming a full member of society. In many indigenous communities, initiation rituals are elaborate and full of symbolism and much has been written about them (Turner 1969).

Marriage, birth of first child, widowhood and death are the other transitions marked by rituals in most cultures. Death rituals had been designated as piacular rituals by Durkheim and according to him are more about the living than about the dead. These rituals allow the living to come to terms with life without a loved one or a very important member of their family and society. They also serve to absolve any guilt that the living may be feeling towards the dead. Rituals and sacred performances are almost never spontaneous but are performed under the guidance and scripts prepared by what are known in all cultures as Ritual Specialists.

2.7.4 Sacred Words

An important element of all rituals is the spoken word. It may be in the form of a Hindu mantra, a Christian Mass, an Islamic Namaz, or Buddhist Chants. Sound has important attributes and it seems to be vested with power and the capacity for influence. All religious rituals take great care to have the words spoke right, not only in terms of content but also in terms of intonations and pronunciation. The right kind of sound effect is necessary for the efficacy of the ritual. Sacred words can be oral traditions as in indigenous communities or as the Vedas and other texts of ancient India were learned by heart and passed down orally. Writing technology produced holy books. In some religions like in Sikhism, the holy book, The Granth Sahib, is worshipped in the place of any deity. It is the icon or the key symbol of their faith. There are specialists called Granthis who recite the verses of the Granth Sahib regularly.

Words or the oral traditions and narratives are specialized areas that need specialists.

2.7.5 Ritual Specialists

The conduct of a mass, to be a leader for prayers or to pronounce the mantra in the right manner, one needs to be a specialist. A religious specialist is one who is either born into it, like when the calling is inherited or one has to have the aptitude that may often be seen as a divinely ordained virtue. On the basis of whether they have an inner quality or if they are trained into being religious specialists, they are termed as shamans or as priests. Although shamans are located mostly indigenous and non-doctrinal religions and most organized religions like Hinduism, Christianity and Islam have their priests or professional specialists, it is not very uncommon to find unconventional practitioners in all religions, the mystics, the ascetics and the charismatic spiritual leaders.

Among Hindus, there is a specialized Varna category from which the professional category of priests is drawn, the Brahmins. However not all Brahmins are priests, and most sacred places, like shrines and temples have their own lineages of priests, in a way that all the specialists who serve in that temple are drawn from that particular kin groups of genealogically connected males, like the Pandas of Jagannath temple in Odisha. Here the priests learn from family traditions and by apprenticeship.

The Christian priests are trained pedagogically to become priests; it is an entire process of specialized education. Such formal learning to become priests is not found in many other religions, except in Islam. The more structured and organized a religion, the more formal are its institutions, and Catholic religion is the most organized in the world. Its clergy have a complex institutional hierarchy and distribution of power. Islamic priests also learn formally but the religion does not have organization and hierarchy like Christianity.

Shamans are found mostly in non-organized religions in less complex societies. They are both inspirational as well as sometimes hereditary. Inspirational shamans become so because of some inner urge, often triggered by dreams or extra-sensory experiences like getting a vision. Often in simpler societies, shamans and religious specialists are not full-time specialists but just ordinary people who carry out the work of shamans, like healing and conducting rituals. In the absence of hierarchy and surplus production it is difficult for a society that may be dependent on a subsistence economy like hunting food gathering and pastoralism to support a full-time specialist. As societies grow complex with systemic hierarchy the religious institutions also grow complex and develop hierarchies of which the Catholic Church with the Vatican at its apex is a prime example.

2.8 RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

Since religion is an aspect of culture, it is a system of symbols and signs whose meanings are known to the members of the culture and to the collective that comprises the Church for that religion. Symbols are symbols because they carry collectively recognized but arbitrary meaning, that make sense only in the context of the myths and cosmology that they represent and contain within themselves. The crucifix for example makes sense only to a Catholic and the image of goddess Kali to a Hindu. To others who are not conversant with the mythology, these symbols may be meaningless or gross.

According to Clifford Geertz, religious symbols by their very arbitrary nature and disjunction from instrumentality, are capable of evoking very powerful emotions that may also translate into powerful actions. Religious symbols, by their very location in the emotive rather than in the pragmatic are capable of producing strong and sustained moods and motivations, as Geertz describes them. Ortnor has used the term Key Symbols for the most pervasive and powerful symbols that produce such strong emotional response from most members of the Church. She divides key symbols into two types, Summarizing and Elaborating. The Summarizing are those that condense a vast amount of meaning into a short space, into a single motif or icon, like the Cross, or a flag or a single image or sound like the Om. The cross stands for the entire ideology of the Christian church as does the totem for the entire spiritual meaning system of the totemic clans.

Elaborating symbols are those that describe the entire meaning system in its entirety; they are divided into Root Metaphors and Key Scenarios. Root metaphors are those symbols that express the central and most succinct ideas of any religion, like for Christianity it would be the Church, the Pope and the sacred pilgrimages. For Islam it would be the pilgrimage to Mecca and the Koran. Key scenarios are scripts that describe the fundamental meanings of a religion. Like for example for the Hindus, the epic Ramayana is a Key Scenario that describes the major moral and ethical principles of Hinduism. All aspects of rituals are symbolic and most rituals create a symbolic universe to represent the real world. Anthropologists, sociologists and religious historians have done immense work on religious symbols and symbolism; Turner, Bateson, Ortnor. Eliade and Geertz among others.

2.9 SUMMARY

In this Unit the student has been introduced to all that we study when we do a sociological study of religion. This is an overview as religion covers a vast canvas as it overlaps with most of what is social. The three major aspects into which a study of religion can be divided is the Beliefs, Practices and Symbolisms. Each of them as we have seen can be subdivided into component elements. There are many ways in which these elements can be understood and different typologies can be created. Here we have tried to summarize from some of the most well-known sociological and anthropological works on religion. As we have seen throughout this chapter, all the elements are integrated with the society in which they occur. Most indigenous and traditional societies are religious systems in entirety, in that all aspects of society are both constituted in and constitutive of the religious elements. It should serve as a preliminary guide to the students of sociology of religion.

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UNIT 3 APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Evolutionism and its Roots
 - 3.2.1 Positivism
 - 3.2.2 Intellectualism
- 3.3 Intellectualist theories of Religion
 - 3.3.1 The Nature-Myth School
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- 3.4 The Origin of Religion in Psycho-biological Processes
 - 3.4.1 A Product of Fear
 - 3.4.2 Religious Feelings and Thrill
 - 3.4.3 Emotional Stress
 - 3.4.4 Feelings of Guilt
- 3.5 Functionalist Theories
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3.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the evolutionary theory and trace its roots in positivism and intellectualism;
- discuss the various intellectualist and psychological theories of religion; and
- discuss the functional theories.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we shall discuss two main approaches to the study of religion- the evolutionary and functional theories. First, we will discuss the theory of evolutionism and its roots in positivism and intellectualism. This will be followed by an account of intellectualist theories which assumed that human beings in their early stages of development created religion in order to explain natural phenomena in rational terms. Next, we will take up those evolutionists who believed religion to arise as a result of psycho-biological processes. We will then discuss the functionalist theories of religion.

3.2 EVOLUTIONISM AND ITS ROOTS

Evolutionism refers to a belief that societies everywhere have a common development pattern. Here it is also understood that mind as well as society progress in a straight line towards ever-increasing complexity and rationality. In this rectilinear progress there are definite stages, beginning from the 'origin' to the present state of human civilisation. Most evolutionists studied the world's primitive peoples for finding out the beginning and progress of social institutions and society. They did not, however, agree on any one theory of social development but presented widely varying schemes of development through which human societies were supposed to have passed.

Evolutionist way of thinking about human societies took final shape in the early nineteenth century. It left a great impact on many disciplines, particularly science, philosophy and anthropology/sociology. Under the influence of evolutionism, anthropologists began the search for the 'origin' of society, religion, finally and other social institutions. The term evolutionism came to be identified with the anthropological theories dealing with the origin and development of religion. These evolutionists were trying to identify, using what ever material was available about the pre-modern tribal societies, the stages through which society and its institutions developed over the years. The stages described by them can be listed as those of animism, animatism, etc.

Evolutionist understanding of religion seems to rest on two assumptions, namely positivism and intellectualism. We will briefly discuss the two as assumptions before studying in detail the evolutionary theories of religion.

3.2.1 Positivism

Positivism means a commitment to principles of natural science. It refers to a conviction that like other natural science, sociology can also offer scientific explanations of social phenomena. Scholars with a positivist assumption, very often, tried to contrast religion with science. For them, religion, when subjected to scientific analysis, ends up merely as something irrational. Positivists tended to assume that when belief in science, based on experiment and sensory perception, is widely held religion will lose its value. They argued that under the impact of rapid industrialisation, religion was losing its ground.

Spencer (1798-1857), believed that the theological stage was the beginning, metaphysical stage was the next and the scientific stage was the last in the evolution of human societies. Comte emphasised that religion will end after the further growth of science. Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), an English scholar, argued that religion arose from the practice of worshipping the ghosts of ancestors. This practice was universal, according to him, among primitive people. After this stage came polytheism (worshipping many gods) and finally monotheism (worshipping a single God). Spencer (1857) claimed in his essay, *Progress: Its Law & Cause* that, as science advances and a contract-based society develops, religion centered on god head will fade away. Consequently, agnosticism (belief that nothing can be known about god) will be the religion of the scientific age. We may say that Spencer (1876-1896) in his three volumes of *Principles of Sociology*, constructed first systematic theory of religion.

3.2.2 Intellectualism

Intellectualism refers to the exercise of reasoning for explaining something. Scholars with an intellectualist assumption argue that religion is a reasoned or rational response

of the individual to the natural phenomena. Evolutionism based on the intellectualist assumption claims that religion is a matter of knowledge. The emotional side of religion was ignored by the nineteenth century intellectualists as a non-essential addition. Later, in the twentieth century, the intellectualists were criticised for their one-sided approach to religion. Notwithstanding this valid criticism, we can say one thing that they were the first to establish that the primitives were not mindless and godless as the report of missionaries and adventures made them out to be. The intellectualists tried to prove that the primitives were rational though their efforts to explain the natural phenomena were somewhat crude.

Secondly, these nineteenth century intellectualists were the first European to conceptualise the entire human society as one unit. This resulted in challenging the assumed high position of the so-called European scientific mind. Further it resulted also in changing the nature and importance of classical studies and thereby in altering the view of European intellectual achievement.

It is good to remember that intellectualists were an odd mixture of positivism and evolutionism. The twentieth century anthropologists and sociologists subjected them to some very harsh criticism. For example, F.B. Jevon's (1896) influential and famous book, *Introduction to the History of Religion*, is described by Evans-Pritchard (1956:5) as 'a collection of absurd constructions, unsupportable hypotheses and conjectures'.

Having discussed the two assumptions on which the evolutionism rests, we will now discuss the various evolutionary theories of religion. First we will take up the intellectualist theories, dealing with the origin and development of religion and then we will also look at those evolutionary theories which trace religion's origin in psycho-biological processes.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Define evolutionism.
- ii) How do the intellectualists define religion?

3.3 INTELLECTUALIST THEORIES OF RELIGION

Ideas about the origin and development of religion were initially based on the reports of missionaries and adventures about the nature of religion among the primitives. For example, De Brosses (1760) advanced a theory that religion had its origin in fetishism (belief in magical fetishes or objects): The Portuguese sailor had reported that the coastal Negro tribes of West Africa worshiped inanimate things and animals. Comte (1908) took up this theory and wrote that in due course **Fetishism** was replaced by **Polytheism**. This theory was superseded by the ghost theory and the soul theory. These latter theories are known as intellectualist theories of religion, because both assume that the primitives are rational beings, although their efforts to explain natural phenomena are somewhat crude.

Before proceeding to discuss the intellectualist theories, we should, however, take note of another very strong theory about the origin of religion. This belonged to the nature-myth school which had to be challenged before the ghost and soul theories could be popular. In terms of the chronology of ideas on religion, the nature-myth school came before the above-mentioned theories.

3.3.1 The Nature-Myth School

The German School, dealing with Indo-European religions. It established that ancient gods were universal personifications of natural phenomena. Its main propounder was Max Müller who was a German linguist. He held that grand natural objects gave people a feeling of the infinite. At the same time these objects acted as symbols of the infinite. The celestial bodies, such as, moon, stars, dawn and their attributes were thought of by the people in terms of metaphor and symbol.

Max Müller (1878) argued that with the passage of time the symbolic representations came to gain an independent identity of their own and became separated from that which they represented. The attributes or the symbols became personified as deities. According to Müller human beings and nature stand in a relationship of awe, wonderment, terror, etc. Early human beings could not understand or explain the world of nature. They ended up worshipping it out of fear and awe. Müller held that we could study the religion of early man by looking into the linguistic etymological meaning of the name of gods and legends associated with them. Sometimes Max Müller and his followers reduced their theories to a farce. Because his interpretations could not be supported by historical evidence, his contemporaries brought many charges against the nature-myth school. Herbert Spencer, Edward Tylor and Andrew Lang were the main critics of nature-myth theories. Not only did they criticise the philological and etymological approach to religion, they took an altogether different approach.

3.3.2 The Ghost Theory

Unlike Max Müller, who was concerned with Indo-European religions, both Herbert Spencer and Edward Tylor focused on religious behaviour of the primitives. They believed that primitive societies offered an evidence of the earliest forms of religion. Their view on primitive beliefs is quite similar. Spencer published his views in 188, eleven years after Tylor published his book *Primitive Culture* in 1871. Spencer's views seem to have been independently worked out long time before their publication.

In a large part of his book, *The Principles of Sociology*, Spencer (1876-96) discusses primitive beliefs. He shows the primitives to be rational though with a limited quantum of knowledge. They make reasonable, though weak, inferences with regard to natural phenomena. By observing sun, moon, clouds and stars come and go, the primitives get the notion of visible and invisible conditions. Similarly, they get the idea of person's duality from dreams, which are considered as real life-experiences by the primitives. For them, the dream-self moves about at night while the shadow-self acts by the day. This notion of duality is reinforced by peoples' experiences of temporary loss of sensibilities. The event of death is also considered by the primitives as a longer period of insensibility. This idea of duality is extended by them to animals, plants and material objects. Such representations as that of spirit child are quite common among the aborigines.

According to Spencer, the appearance of dead persons in dreams is taken by the primitives to be the evidence of temporary after life. This leads to the conception of a supernatural being in the form of a ghost. According to Spencer, the idea of ghosts grows into the idea of gods and the ghosts of ancestors become divine beings. Spencer's (1876-96:440) conclusion is that 'ancestor worship is the root of every religion'.

It is however quite obvious that Spencer is himself a victim of the false reasoning which he attributes to the primitives. Without ever going near the primitives, he builds

his ideas about their way of reasoning. He is simply trying to think on behalf of the primitives.

However, we must keep in mind that early studies in the sociology of religion were instrumental in creating interest in the area of religion and of pushing the academic study of the same further.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Differentiate between the ghost theory and animism.

3.3.3 The Soul Theory or Animism

This theory considers both the origin and development of religion. The ghost theory explains the origin of religion in the idea of ghosts while the soul theory says the same thing in terms of the idea of soul. Experiences of death, disease, visions and dreams, according to Tylor, lead the primitives to think about the existence of immaterial power, i.e., the soul. This idea of soul is then projected on to creatures other than human and even inanimate objects. The soul exists independent of its physical home the body, and therefore arises the idea of belief in spiritual beings. This is exactly what is contained in Tylor's minimum definition of religion: that religion originated from a belief in spiritual beings.

We may point out here that the soul theory of Tylor has elements of the sacred and the supernatural. However, Tylor's definition is so general that all faiths and beliefs are likely to be labelled as religion.

Tylor says that these spiritual beings later develop into gods. They possess superior powers and control destiny of human beings. Swanton (1924:358-68) criticised Tylor for advancing unprovable causal theories. Tylor asserts that experiences of death, disease and dreams make primitives believe in the existence of an immaterial entity.

Secondly one does not understand the logical process by which the idea of soul leads primitives to the idea of spirits. As a matter of fact, the concept of soul and the concept of spirit are quite different and opposed to each other and Tylor was not able to see the difference between the two concepts.

Andrew Lang (1844-1912), a pupil of Tylor, criticised Tylor's theory of religion. Lang (1989:2) argued that the idea of God cannot have evolved out of reflections on dreams and "ghosts", because the two "have entirely different origins. For him, the belief in a God was first which later became degraded as animism.

R.R. Marett (1866-1943), another of Tylor's disciples, criticised the animistic theory. He referred to R.H. Codrington's Melanesian data and claimed that the primitive belief in an impersonal force preceded beliefs in spiritual beings. Marett called this impersonal force *mana* which may be considered as similar to the notion of *Bonga* (prevalent among many tribal groups in India) and argued that belief in *mana* had both historical and the ontological priority.

3.4 THE ORIGIN OF RELIGION IN PSYCHO-BIOLOGICAL PROCESSES

Evans-Pritchard (1965) provides a most readable discussion of the two streams of thought. Take a response and reaction to extreme intellectualist view points,

emotionalist theories provide a kind of balance and show that emotions are an important part of religion.

3.4.1 A Product of Fear

Tylor held that the idea of spirit grew out of the idea of soul and the idea of spirit later became the conception of God. Most of Tylor's contemporaries accepted this view of religion.

A.E. Crawley, questioned the logic of Tylor's view about the source of the idea of soul. According to Crawley (1909:78), the idea of soul cannot possibly arise from dreams. He argued that the idea of soul originated from sensation whereas the existence of spirits is only in the minds of people. He said that 'the world of spirits is the mental world'.

Wundt (1916:17) held that all the ideas which are not part of one's perception or which are mythological, have their genesis in emotions. These emotions are projected outwardly and then come the first stage of religion i.e., the belief in magic and demons. In the next phase of evolution, people begin to worship animals. This is what he calls the Totemic Age. It is in due course succeeded by the worship of ancestors. This is again replaced by the worship of heroes and then by the cult of the gods. This is the stage of the Age of Heroes and Gods. The final stage of this evolutionary cycle is the Humanistic Age which refers to religious universalism.

3.4.2 Religious Feelings and Thrill

R. H. Lowie (1925), basing his thinking on his study of the Crow Indians considers that for the primitives, religion is a matter of feeling. It is marked by 'a sense of the Extraordinary; Mysterious or Supernatural'. Instead of religious behaviour, he writes about emotional responses of amazement and awe. Anything that gives rise to those feelings is characterised as religion. Thus, for Lowie, if magic is associated with emotion, it is to be called religion. Without emotional content magic is, for Lowie, akin to science.

Paul Radin, who studied the Winnebago Indians also emphasised that religious feelings arise and are centered around beliefs and customs. This sensitivity to belief and custom is expressed in thrill. The religious thrill is generally manifested in time of crises. Paul Radin (1938) considered magic as religion only if it arouses the religious feelings. In the absence of religious emotion, magic is only folklore.

Similarly, Goldenweiser (1917:346) describes two spheres of religion, namely, magic and religion. He holds that in both magic and religion the thrill is experienced. Like the American anthropologists, other anthropologists, particularly in England, paid more attention to observation and recording of information about primitive peoples. One of the more well-known anthropologists among them was Malinowski who was very interested in the role of magic and religion in economic evolution.

3.4.3 Emotional Stress

Malinowski held that both religion and magic originate and function under conditions of emotional stress. Magic is used by the primitive as we use scientific knowledge today for overcoming practical difficulties in their day to day life. This relieves the tension which is built up because of a sense of weakness or inability of human beings to achieve success in their pursuits. In magic, the desired goals are acted out and magical rites

are an end and the practitioner of magic yet the feeling of confidence. They can then continue to pursue their normal activities.

Emotional stress in contemporary times is closely linked to the stress factor in modern life. Thus it would be a mistake to imagine that in modern life there is little emotional stress. Mental tension also sometimes makes the emotional stress very intense.

Though different from each other, religion and magic, for Malinowski, are also similar because the function of both is a purification that brings about release from tension. When the people face crises of life, the fear and anxiety cause tension. The performances of religious and magical rites help them to dispel their fears and emotional stress.

Malinowski's explanation of religion and magic in primitive societies has been followed almost blindly by his admirers. Prominent among them are Driberg (1932) and Firth (1955). In the early part of twentieth century, it was common to find scholars following this stream of thought about religion and magic. Evans-Pritchard (1965:40) calls it the Tylor-Frazer formula.

While talking about psychology, we should also look at what was said about religion by Freud who was influenced by anthropological writing on religion and who, in turn, influenced the writing of sociologists and anthropologists. His books contributed a great deal to evolutionist theory.

3.4.4 Feelings of Guilt

Writing about the thinking process among the primitive people, Van Der Leeuw (1928:14) points out that they have strong emotional needs which stand in the way of knowing the truth. They are not able to see any contradictions in their thinking. They then see just what they want to see.

Van Der Leeuw cites the case of magic. A person, faced with a difficult situation, can either try and somehow come out of it or withdraw and turn inwards. Turning inward takes the person to the world of fantasy where the difficulties can be overcome by working on magic spells. This psychological mechanism helps people to deal with all sorts of difficulties in life.

Freud (1913:145) also found that his neurotic (emotionally unstable) patients deal with harsh realities of life with the help of compulsive acts and protective wall of mere thought. Freud gives three phases of thought. The first one is the phase of narcissism, that is, love for one's own body. The second phase is that of object finding when one is dependent on one's parents. The third one is the phase of maturity. In this state, the person is at one with the reality and adapts to it without problems. Corresponding to these phases, Freud gives three states of intellectual development. These are the animistic (or the magical), the religious and the scientific. The child is unable to achieve every thing through motor activity and, as in magic, imagines she/he has achieved the desired goal by substituting thought for action. A neurotic person also behaves in the same manner, substituting thought for action. Such a person is then like a magician who considers thought to be omnipotent. Here again, the idea is that the tension, the sense of frustration leads to magical rites which in turn release tension.

Having thus explained the animistic stage, Freud discusses the second stage. For him religion, like magic, is an illusion and it comes out of the feelings of guilt. Freud has a very interesting story to account for the origin of religion. He refers to the ape-like phase of human development when the leader of the horde, a father figure, ruled over

the group, keeping all the females for his own use. His sons rebelled against the father and wanted the females for themselves. They killed the father and ate him up. Later they repented and suffered the feelings of guilt. As a result, they put a taboo in eating their totem (an animal or bird), which was also a sign for their father and his authority. They began to ceremonially worship the totem and thus originated religious rites. Secondly, the sons put a taboo on sexual relationship between mother and sons. This is known as the rule of incest. According to Freud's totemist theory of religion, the incest taboo is the origin of culture.

3.5 FUNCTIONALIST THEORIES

In their search for general laws governing society, earlier scholars were trying to construct conjecturally the historical development of human societies. Functionalists, on the other hand, tried to understand the functioning of contemporary societies. How does a society exist in an orderly manner, was the foremost question in their minds.

For a functionalist, society is a system with inter connected parts. Within this system, parts perform certain functions, so that the systemic whole can be maintained or run. Now, the above version is a very simplified notion of functionalism. It has been simplified so that you will understand it easily. However, there are many different variations within the functionalist thinking itself. In Sociology, functionalism is developed by scholars like Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Talcott Parsons and Merton.

When scholars were disillusioned about religion, Durkheim (1858-1917) arose to explain the positive functions of religion for society. Durkheim was not satisfied by the evolutionist explanations, which failed to give religion its meaning as a social institution. Durkheim's major arguments about religion came out in a book, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. It was published in French, first in 1912, and was later translated into English in 1915.

Durkheim wanted to demonstrate social functions of religion by taking totemism as the test case. Totemism among the central Australian tribes, as represented in the ethnography of Spencer and Gillen, came handy for Durkheim. He chose totemism for analysis due to two reasons: first, he considered totemism to be an elementary form of religion; secondly, he considered that the sacred-profane distinction arose from the totemic practice.

Durkheim (1961:13) says that all religions 'are true in their own fashion' for the believers. He questioned the assumption that religion had its genesis in a mistake, an illusion. He asked if it was so, how could religion be so widespread and enduring.

Secondly, he questioned also the assumption that animism was found only in primitive societies. He pointed out that it was also found in such societies as China and Egypt. On the contrary according to Durkheim, the primitive groups took for granted ever recurring natural events and showed little interest in natural phenomena. He called naturism or worship of natural phenomena as a false explanation of religious behaviour.

Thus, criticizing the arguments of evolutionism in general, and naturism and animism in particular, Durkheim began to explain how totemism gives rise to the distinction between 'sacred' and 'profane'.

Totemism is a system of beliefs and rites centered around the totem. The totem is very often an animal or a vegetable species or mythical ancestor. The totem is sacred; it is

held in respect. The totem cannot be approached without proper rites and ceremonies. To approach the totem which is sacred, one has to purify oneself both internally and externally. But the object at the centre of totemic religion is not an animal or vegetable as such. Rather it is the pictorial representation of the animal or vegetable which is worshipped. Totem also serves as a symbol of the clan-identity. Totem of the clan is also totem of its members.

Against the sacred world of totem lies the profane world. The profane world includes human beings and all that is not related with the sacred totem. Myths, legends, dogmas and beliefs represent the sacred totem, its power, virtues and relationship with the profane world. The sacred and profane are entirely different and the lines of separation are clearly demarcated. According to Durkheim (1964:38) the distinction between the profane and sacred is 'absolute'. These two worlds are even hostile to each other. Durkheim argues that, this type of sacred-profane dichotomy is common to all religions.

Durkheim tried to show the origin of religion. He argued that society gives rise to religion. Durkheim could not agree with scholars, who held that the origin of religion was based on what people thought as real. But traces of evolutionism are not completely absent in Durkheim's thinking. The fact that Durkheim has dealt with the functions of religion does not mean that he was a 'functionalist'. Durkheim's functionalism was simple one, very general in nature. It was after the 1920s, that functionalism came to be expounded systematically. The credit for that goes to Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Talcott Parsons.

We do not label Durkheim as a functionalist, but we do label some of those who were much influenced in one way or the other by Durkheim's ideas. Under the banner of functionalism, Malinowski criticised Durkheim's views on religion. Very much in the fashion of such evolutionists as Tylor and Frazer, Malinowski too wrote about the origin and development of religion. The difference was that they charged Durkheim with encouraging the acceptance of theories without much basis in ethnographic material. Here, we will first discuss, in brief Malinowski's ideas on religion; we then move on to a brief consideration of Radcliffe-Brown's approach to the study of religion. Unlike Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown was heavily influenced by Durkheim's ideas. Both scholars in their own ways were concerned with Durkheim's approach. Their views are discussed briefly.

Malinowski presented a slightly different argument from Durkheim. Again, you find that Malinowski, like Durkheim, was interested in the origin and development of religion. In so far as he asked questions about religion's genesis, he too was an evolutionist. He became a functionalist when he began to observe and record what role religion played.

Malinowski had studied the Trobriand Islanders in the Western Pacific. The people here were mostly from fishing communities and had to constantly deal with hazardous expeditions for fishing and underwent experiences that could not be explained by them. Malinowski argued that the feelings of fear, anger, sadness, etc. that arose in the mind of primitive people on such occasions were overcome by resorting to religious activities or the performance of certain rituals that would help get over such unsure feelings. Religion functioned here to essentially help one to regain one's stability of mind and readjust to situations of emotional stress that had arisen. In other words, religion functioned as a 'tool for adoption' to any given situation. For example, when the islanders would set out for a long journey, they would perform rituals and magic on the boat so that it would not give them trouble on the way. Such an exercise was carried out in all

kinds of situations of mental and physical instability. Ritual and magic have a very great influence on the activities of the society as a whole the rituals flourish greatly in times of acute stress and especially in all events that men are hard put to explain.

Asking similar questions which early evolutionists asked, Malinowski and his followers gave different answers. In this sense they understood religion in terms of its functions; their findings progressed beyond traditional answers to questions of origin and development of religion. They provided the functionalist alternative to evolutionist theories. Not content with simply observing and recording data about primitive societies, Malinowski's successor, Radcliffe-Brown, tried to analyse ethnographic data by using sociological concepts. He was attracted to the Durkheim sociology.

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown tried to make Durkheim's theory of totemism into a more comprehensive view of religion. In an article, 'The Sociological Theory of Totemism', Radcliffe-Brown (1929:295-309) showed totemism to be a particular form of universalistic law operating in human society. The universal law is that anything related to material or non-material well-being of a society is an object of religious attitude. For example, those who depend on dairy products have ritual attitude to dairy animals. Radcliffe-Brown did not accept explanations of the origin of religion in terms of psychology.

Evans-Pritchard (1965:74) is, however, critical of this position. He points out that in practice, while describing the occasions of dancing among the Andaman Islanders, Radcliffe-Brown explains religious behaviour mainly in terms of the personality of the dancer and mixture of feelings and actions in his dance which produce solidarity in the community. Secondly, on the basis of this case, Radcliffe-Brown generalises that a ritual attitude generates social cohesion and harmony. Evans-Pritchard (1965:74) objects to this tendency of generalising on the basis of one case. For example, the dances in Central Africa, he points out, often cause conflict and disharmony.

Thirdly, Radcliffe-Brown argues that religion function to keep society together and its forms vary in accordance with types of society. For example, ancestor worship is commonly found in societies with lineage systems. But, then, Evans-Pritchard (1956:75) again, as if to prove Radcliffe-Brown wrong, points out that among some African groups, ancestor cult is found where no lineage system exists.

Evans-Pritchard criticises Radcliffe-Brown's functionalist approach to religion on the following bases:

- i) Sociological explanations offered by Radcliffe-Brown did not take in to account any negative evidence.
- ii) Radcliffe-Brown's generalised statements are quite vague in nature. They have very little scientific value because it is not possible to either prove or disprove them.

Evans-Pritchard criticised the functionalist approach to the study of religion. In addition, he considered the possibilities for showing that certain religious systems are found in societies of a particular type. This was initially undertaken by Levy-Bruhl and later Evans-Pritchard also added new ideas to the sociological study of religion.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have discussed evolutionary and functionalist theories of religion. First, we discussed the theory of evolutionism and its roots in positivism and intellectualism.

We then discussed the intellectual and psychological theories of religion in relation to evolutionary approach. Finally, the functional theories of religion were discussed. Like evolutionary theory, there are several varying theories within functional approach to religion.

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UNIT 4 RELIGION AND RATIONALIZATION*

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Religion as understood in the West
- 4.3 Rationality and Religion
- 4.4 The Functional School
- 4.5 Are the Believers Right?
- 4.6 Being in the World
- 4.7 References
- 4.8 Further Reading

1.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to understand:

- The concept of religion in the context of the philosophy of rationality in the West;
- What is rational in a cross-cultural perspective;
- Problematic of religion as a concept against the cross-cultural perspectives on rationality; and
- The relevance of religion, beliefs and values in terms of their rational existence in this world.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

What is religion has been largely understood in terms of an opposition between what is instrumental and 'this-worldly' as against what is esoteric and 'other worldly'. Durkheim had evoked the notion of sacred and opposed it to profane. He defined religion in terms of its existence in the realm of the non-rational as against the profane world of the known and the rational. Religion was thus a matter of faith as against knowledge. The difference was not just about what was known and what was not known, but about what was knowable as against what was not knowable. In other words once something became 'explained'; it moved away from the realm of religion into the realm of 'science' or of 'knowledge'. The very power of religious beliefs lay in their mystic and non-rational nature, in being 'numinous' as against, 'phenomenal' in the words of Rudolf Otto. The awe inspired by religion was its power, the source of its hold over the human psyche and its capacity to move people to instill in them the 'moods and motivations' (Geertz) that has the potential to translate into the extreme forms of action that religion may inspire.

Yet to many scholars especially those engaged in study of non-western cultures, the separation/ opposition of religion from rationality appears to be a largely western notion

*This Unit has been written by Prof. Subhadra Channa.

and the result of a dichotomous way of thinking. It is not necessary that everyone everywhere considers religion to be 'set-apart' and opposed to the ordinary day to day world of mundane affairs. Thus Spiro had criticized the dichotomy of 'natural' and 'supernatural' as universal, saying that there are many peoples in this world for whom such an opposition is meaningless. Holy (1991) found the religion of the Berit, whom he studied to be more instrumental and practical, than symbolic and expressive (cf. Eller 2007:62). Let us first examine some of the western modes of understanding religion, as this has through the process of colonization, established itself across the globe as a near global understanding of the concept. Here we are using the term 'understanding' as it has been used by Winch (1990:x), "Understanding is the goal of explanation and the end product of successful explanations. But of course it does not follow that there is an understanding only when there has been explanation, neither is this in fact true". On other words in this chapter the student is led towards an understanding of religion, why it exists, what rationale or purpose, what it means to the believers as well as to the non-believers? But there is not likely to be an explanation of what religion is? Or what God is? Or about the ontological status of the supernatural, the other world and whatever else concerns religion.

4.2 RELIGION AS UNDERSTOOD IN THE WEST

The sociological understanding of religion can be traced to the beginnings of sociology itself, in the works of the classical evolutionists located in Renaissance Europe. Comte, often regarded as the father of sociology, had made a distinction between theology and metaphysics, relegating the former to a lower stage than the latter, and presuming that metaphysics belongs to the higher realm of abstract thinking while religion is more like blind faith and adherence to customs. Comte was in a way repeating what Hegel had said earlier, that there was a historical progression from the Age of Religion, the Age of Philosophy to the Age of Science; the basic assumption in these stage by stage theories being that 'rationality' in the form of 'scientific' thinking, comes later to humans and they usually start off as unthinking and custom ridden 'primitives' to whom faculties of deliberation and reflecting thinking come later in the course of civilization. James Frazer, another scholar of the evolutionary school had made a distinction between magic, science and religion; where magic and science were interestingly clubbed together as rational and religion as not. According to Frazer, magic could be regarded as 'primitive' man's science, as magic too relied on a cause and effect relationship and was oriented towards the achievement of instrumental ends. The only difference between magic and science was that the former was not informed by the superior knowledge of the scientific age and thus the causal relationships assumed by it were not real. But in terms of logic and rationality the manner of thought was the same. Religion became possible only when human beings became concerned with thought about the higher order of things and engaged in otherworldly philosophies, that according to the western scholars of that time, was not possible for the so-called 'primitives' who did not have the capacity for metaphysical thought and higher order of esoteric thoughts.

Social scientists were not alone in thinking about the concept of rationality. Philosopher saints of the Church, like Thomas Aquinas, born in Naples, Italy in the 13th century, had interrogated the relationship of reason and faith and postulated that the dichotomy between the two was false. According to Aquinas, it is also possible by reason and philosophical logic to demonstrate the existence of God, as was done by Aristotle. There is no essential difference between the truths discovered by logic and philosophy

and by divine faith and theology, as both pertain to truth. However the 'truth' that Aquinas and many other western philosophers and theologians were concerned with was the truth as viewed by the Church. Christianity set the standards for judging the existence of God, and those not following the Christian faith were seen as not likely to come to an understanding of the real truth.

However, a theologian like Aquinas probably had an inkling that if God could be assessed by reason then there had to be only one truth that revealed God. He does not however make any explicit arguments about the oneness of all faiths that we find in the Eastern philosophies, especially Hinduism. According to the western philosophers, even if there was one truth, it was accessible by reason that they presumed was located only in the Western Civilization. All truth was seen as accessible by the methodology of science like the postulate of "experimental sociology" put forward by Vilfred Pareto and criticized by Winch (1990:95).

The truth, even when it existed, was not available to all by the intellectual route. Only the more evolved and the 'civilized' could access it. Thus Aquinas equally defends the existence of faith, as it is the only way in which the ordinary, the young and the not so learned can get to God. Thus to come to a rational understanding of the truth was not possible for those who lacked the intellectual ability, the knowledge, the passion, the time and the intuition that would guide them towards the truth. Thus most people have to rely on faith. This perspective shows great similarity to the generally held Hindu world view of the various paths to truth, namely the Gyan(intellectual), Bhakti (faith and devotion) and the Karma (action) paths, and Hindu sages like Aquinas, agreed that the same path was not suitable for all.

Baruch Spinoza considered religion effective in enforcing morality in society and to Immanuel Kant the rationality of faith derived from the recognition of God as the source of human endeavor to lead moral lives, which in the long run are necessary for society more than for salvation.

A more recent philosopher to deliberate on the relationship of religion and rationality is Jurgen Habermas, a post- World War II, philosopher to whom questions of morality and of human life are of great concern. It is well accepted that most systems of morality draw upon religion but according to Habermas(2006), it is possible to have a moral community based on communication derived from specific languages delivered publicly, even without referring to God. Thus there may be a philosophical stand point that religion is necessary for social identity and social living, to create a stand against secularism that derecognizes the identities in modern and globalizing society. This is somewhat similar to point of view of sociologists like Durkheim who gave primacy to the concept of the moral community and the rationale of existence of religion for the continuity and reproduction of society as a community of solidarity and collective emotional effervescence.

Many scholars of religion focused on the ancient and classical religions of the world in order to broaden their perspective about religion and to get out of the ethnocentrism that Christianity or the Judeo-Christian religions were the only religions and all others were primitive modes of thought that did not have any real conception of the supernatural and of God. W. Robertson-Smith proposed that the ancient peoples of the world, had gods and religions that reflected their own societies and religious beliefs and practices were rooted in the nature of the society, tribal or ethnic characters of it. Thus, gods were like the people who believed in them and legitimized the ways of the society. In

this way Robertson Smith foreshadowed Durkheim's conflation of god and society to a large extent.

However, these sociological theories did not assume the theological existence of god, at least not for the non-western or the ancient (Pre-Christian) people. However, later with closer contact with the non-western people, the so-called 'primitives' as well as a change in theoretical orientation from evolution to functionalism, the perspectives changed considerably.

Belief in a superior transcendental being, a God, was found to prevail in most cultures, for example the Kwoth of the Nuer, studied by E.E. Evans-Pritchard. In his seminal work, *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, Paul Radin demonstrated that all societies everywhere had the same range of people, believers, skeptics, atheists, philosophers etc. It was also found through ethnographic studies that there were many common symbols and philosophies in religions of disparate peoples. However the issues pertaining to rationality and religion can be examined from several aspects and platforms.

4.3 RATIONALITY AND RELIGION

While examining the relationship of religion and rationality, there are several ways of looking at it.

1. Are the people who follow certain beliefs and ways of life rational? By this perspective scholars have examined the issues of universal and contextual rationality or raised the question about some people as being 'rational' and others as not.
2. Is religion rational as a form of belief and practice? This aspect has been examined from a functionalist point of view, where religious beliefs and practices have been shown to have functions for both the individual and for society at large. In other words from this perspective we understand the rationality of the 'existence' as well as the persistence of religion.
3. Do we examine the rationality of any system or practice from the point of view of the practitioners or from the point of view of the scholar who is analyzing from the outside? This aspect has given rise to debates regarding the universal or the contextual nature of the human mind and also the relative weightage we give to the actors and to the analyst. This also precipitates a debate between the phenomenological perspective that privileges the lived experience and the more positivist approach that 'objectifies' social reality.

The first question is the one that arose first in sociological and anthropological thinking, when the 'racists' and anti-racists' were in serious confrontation and scholars were deeply involved in finding out about the nature of Homo sapiens. There was a trend in the 19th century to regard all humans as equal and an influential voice in this respect was that of Adolf Bastian who put forward his idea of 'Psychic Unity of Mankind' implying that all humans think alike and there are some basic 'elementary ideas' that are shared by all but only differ in term of their local manifestations. Thus there was a notion of universal rationality, and all religions were to be examined, not for surface differences, but for deeper, more fundamental similarities. The concept of psychic unity was used by Tylor, to put forward his theory of origin of religions that he located in the exercise of universal rationality or the quest for answers to universal questions, such as those regarding life and death and dreams that should be common to all human beings.

His mode of thinking, labelled as "If I were a horse", hypothesis by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, regarded the practitioners of religions as rational, but did not have much say as to the nature of the beliefs.

Lucien Levy-Bruhl, who was at the same time as Bastian, believed on the contrary that the 'primitives' or the non-western people were "pre-logical" as they believed in the 'law of participation' that allowed them to think that different things could co-exist even if they were logically not possible, for example, a person could be a human as well as an animal at the same time, or be in two places at the same time; or two souls could co-exist in a body. The more advanced people believed in the 'law of exclusion' whereby they avoided such contradictions. This meant that by extension, most of non-western religion was 'pre-logical' or non-rational.

A second mode of scholarly thinking was about the rationality of religion or religious beliefs and practices that could be assessed by a positivist analysis that is from the outside by a rational and logical analyst. This implied that the practitioners were not necessarily, in fact almost never, aware of the actual rationality or efficacy of their actions. We have a voluminous amount of work, from the functionalist school on the relevance and functions of religious rituals and beliefs. Even when not taken in a positive sense, positivist analysis like that of Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx also rationalized the existence of religion but in their own ways.

Check Your Progress 1

- Q1. How did the European scholars generally judge the concept of rationality?
- Q2. How was the notion of rationality woven into the classical evolutionary theories?

4.4 THE FUNCTIONAL SCHOOL

The first recognized scholar of functionalism, considered a pioneer of the study of religion is of course Emile Durkheim with his classic work: *Elementary forms of Religious Life*. He began as an evolutionist by defining religion in terms of the division between the sacred and the profane, and the much greater power of the Sacred as compared to that of the profane. According to Durkheim, the very power of the Sacred derives from its 'non-rational' nature. To be rational is to be able to question and also doubt; but the nature of the sacred, set apart and powerful, negates all attempts at rationalization and demands blind acceptance and faith. We may refer back to Leibniz, according to whom, there are three distinct functions of reason: to comprehend, to prove and to answer objections. In the faith/reason controversy, Leibniz thought that the third function is more important, but the other two are also matters of consideration. Thus faith must not try to comprehend, to prove and raise questions, thus by disabling all these functions its power lies in being above them.

However the real power of the sacred lies in that it actually represents society or the social bonding that makes society possible. Whatever is good for social solidarity and continuity is presented as the moral, and the society is able to survive as a 'moral community'; where all moral rules that are believed to be derived from the supernatural are in reality derived from society itself. As Durkheim put it, God is nothing but society writ large.

Although the sacred is powerful and set aside, yet it is not too far from the human self, so that people feel that they too share the sacred as something inherent in them and therefore to be moral is inherent in being human. Society is thus able to reproduce itself as a moral community without too much requirement of external sanctions. For example in the totemic community the persons belonging to a totemic clan also know that they are descended from and related to the sacred totem, so they too carry a share of the sacredness within them that is also reinforced through the community totemic rituals. The power of the totem is felt collectively and creates an emotional bonding and sense of obligation towards the community as well as towards the totem. The totem is in the last analysis the symbol of the social group and its sacredness the sacredness of the social group itself. Similar sentiments are evoked during a Catholic Mass when the congregation imbibes in themselves the sacred blood and body of Christ, thereby internalizing and becoming one with the sacred, the community and the collectivity, namely the Church.

Durkheim was closely followed by A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, who demonstrated the efficacy of ritual elements such as taboos in maintaining and cementing social relationships, for example the taboos that are imposed on would be parents as well as other family members before the birth of a child, reinforce the relationships and remind people of their duties and obligations towards the new member of society. Radcliffe-Brown however asserted that at the level of individual's rituals and religious beliefs were not always functional as they induced feelings of dread and insecurity because of the fear of supernatural wrath. Thus his perspective was in contrast to that of Bronislaw Malinowski, who preferred to see the rituals as contributive to the functioning of individuals. According to Malinowski, the rituals provide a much needed support to individual persons towards mitigating their anxieties and relieving them of stress, especially in situations where they feel that everything cannot be under their control, like in seafaring and deep sea fishing, making a canoe or carrying out gardening. Even if the individual uses all the skills at his disposal in conducting these tasks, there is always the grey area of uncertainty like unpredictable weather, a sudden storm or unforeseen circumstances beyond one's control. It is precisely for these uncertain areas that help from the supernatural agencies is sought. By performing certain rituals a person enters into a positive state of mind and gains confidence that often achieves what the ritual is intended to achieve.

Religious rituals and beliefs make life livable by providing explanations where none are forthcoming through knowledge and logic, like an unforeseen illness, or an unfortunate accident. Thus when people are on the edge of despair it is only religion that provides the answer or the solace to calm a person down. Religion also provides answers for the problem of suffering that is universal. It does not take away suffering but provides a rationale that makes suffering bearable. Like for example, the Bible tells that it is not a curse to be poor as the doors of heaven open more easily for the poor than for the rich. A suffering Hindu will look for explanation in his or her Karma and a Muslim in the will of Allah and both will find solace in the fact that suffering was inevitable and must be borne stoically.

At the other end, the Marxists say that religion covers up for social inequalities by providing exactly these kinds of explanations. According to them most of these beliefs support the existing stratification and serve the interests of the power holders. For example the Hindu doctrine of Karma helps to legitimize the oppression of the lower castes by the upper castes. Thus Marxism also provides a rationale for the existence of religion although in a negative sense.

Check Your Progress 2

Q3. Discuss the functional approach to the legitimization of religious beliefs and rituals with examples from social scientists.

4.5 ARE THE BELIEVERS RIGHT?

Although functional analysis provided a rationale for the existence of rituals it did it from the outsider's point of view without giving the status of rationality to the belief itself. Evans-Pritchard had explained witchcraft among the Zande by demonstrating how the practice of witchcraft accusations and counter accusations as well as the related processes of divination and practice of anti-witchcraft rituals, suppressed actual aggression and allowed people to let out steam and come back to stability without actually any harm coming to anyone. The Zande belief in witchcraft is also based on the Zande being completely rational, in that they do not believe anything happens without a reason or that there is anything called an accident. For example if a person walking in the forest steps onto a snake and snake bites him, the Azande will not say the snake bit the person because of witchcraft, they are rational enough to know that if one steps on a snake it is likely to bite. So the snake bit because it was stepped on. But the Zande go a little further in their reasoning. They will not say the person stepped on the snake accidentally, as the concept of accident does not exist in their universe. The person stepped on the snake because he was bewitched. Thus witchcraft beliefs make their universe a perfectly rational system, where everything to happen must have a reason, even if it is witchcraft.

But according to the rationality of Evans-Pritchard driven by his own western belief system, witchcraft does not exist. So the Azande are not really rational people, they have a belief in a non-existing system. It is here that another school of thinking would criticize Evans-Pritchard in that their system of belief becomes rational only if explained from the outside but not as their own system of belief. Such a conclusion was reached by the exclusive reliance on the western scientific world view as being the sole indicator of truth.

As put forward by Winch (1990) the realm of the social is not comparable to the realm of the scientific logic; but science is not the only way to grasp the reality for the understanding of the social realm is only possible through the ideas that represent the observations of actions and persons. Thus the realm of reality is not a prerogative of science, if at all science makes such a claim. We understand something as real, including the world that we live in, is in terms of the language and the concepts that we have access to, through that language. If something has no word to describe it, then as members of a social world, that phenomenon does not exist. However the natural phenomenon such as thunder may exist in themselves, but they have no social existence, if they are never included within the cognitive world of language and its expressions. But most languages do express the lived world, but only as it is experienced by the people who inhabit that world socially, that is, in terms of the meanings they impute to it. Without situating one's self within that system, one will never grasp what is real to the people who live within that world.

Witchcraft of the Azande for example is not illogical or irrational as it operates within the social world of the Azande. In their context illogical or irrational would be some act that is contradictory to their own systems of belief; like if a person is careless in the

performance of a ritual and makes a mistake in the context of what it means for the successful completion of a ritual. But as long as a person is applying the rationality that makes his universe meaningful, the person is perfectly logical and rational. This may also be true for science, as all the laws of Physics, as they apply to our own world, are applicable only within a particular context; for example the laws of gravitation may not apply in the same way to Black Holes or to other unknown universes. This may be no different than the operation of witchcraft in a particular society. Thus to judge something by the tools and yardsticks that were developed in some other context altogether is not an acceptable idea. Therefore to say that there is no witchcraft among the Azande, is not correct as this statement derives from a Eurocentric point of view that takes another system of rationality as the only system; in itself a fallacy.

Thus Winch's critical of the positivist mode of explanation, which is done from the 'outside'. Victor Turner had defended this mode of analysis by saying that the analyst has an aerial view or a perspective that is not available to the actor who is participating from a particular situation and thus has only a partial perspective (his or her own) of the phenomenon. Thus the analyst is able to access all aspects of a phenomenon in its entirety. However the main criticism of the 'functional' school was that it denied the status of 'reality' to the phenomenon under study and imputed an external rationality to it. For the phenomenologists, this was not a valid position to take.

4.6 'BEING IN THE WORLD'

Merleau-Ponty put forward a theory of consciousness that was different from the earlier held assumptions about the placement of the consciousness within already existing coordinates of time and space. According to Merleau-Ponty, the consciousness is not outside of time and space but constituted within it, so that the embodied self is a situational self and cannot be extricated from its location. Thus when the pastoral people on the upper Himalayan villages, consider their environment to be composed of animate beings who are part of their universe; they are not talking about a 'belief' but a reality. Thus for them there is no 'religion' or supernatural as such (Channa 2013). They live in a world that is inhabited by real beings who they can converse and interact with and who are no different from them in many respects. Thus their consciousness is constituted in interaction with these beings and their reality is not to be questioned. The 'set apart' character imputed to the sacred does not apply here as the beings are not 'set apart' but very much a part of their day to day life. Thus Geertz points out that religion is as much a part of the common-sense world as anything that is taken for granted and not questioned (Geertz 1983:76). Thus, many of the questions that anthropologists have been asking about religion may be considered superfluous and redundant by the practitioners. For example there are many questions regarding, why such a belief exists? Or what purpose it solves? But for people who inhabit that world, these are not questions at all, for they *do not believe, they know*.

Eller (2007: 60) quotes Dan Sperber as to why we seek explanations of symbols, when we do not seek explanations of why someone is planting seeds in a farm? "False or impractical behavior.....requires a 'symbolic interpretation' whereas true or practical behavior does not". The villagers in the upper Himalayas (Channa 2013) for example always advised or rather insisted that I should not wear red, yellow or orange coloured clothes while I was residing there for it would make the spirits of the forest very jealous and cause harm to my health. This was a practical advice and it involved real beings inhabiting the forest. There was no question of any symbolism or sacredness about it.

I was told that a fair and beautiful person must camouflage his or her face with dirt, so not to appear too beautiful and incite the jealousy of the spirits. The spirits are just like human beings who do not appreciate other people looking better than them and have feelings of jealousy and spite just like humans.

Thus, the evolutionary and agency approach used by Pascal Boyer also states that human thought is not a unitary and homogenous entity but composed of interoperating thought modules, “confederacy” (Eller 2007:26) of explanatory devices of which the main ones are concept formation, attention to exception and agency. The supernatural entities which are essentially extensions of human intentionality also have minds just like humans and they are involved in social exchange, like getting jealous or angry or being pleased about things that are just the same as the things that please humans.

Many anthropologists across the world have recounted similar situations. For example Ladislav Holy, in his study of the Berti, found that for the indigenous people, ‘meaning’, ‘interpretation’ and ‘speculation’ are not terms that make any sense as what they are dealing with things practical and instrumental. Thus the ‘beings’ who are part of their social world, are neither symbolic nor metaphysical but very real, interactive, full of intentions and have to be dealt with for any practical activity like planting a garden or grazing sheep.

This again does not mean that in the way that Frazer had implied that many people do not have any idea of God or transcendence. It simply means that the beings that they deal with as every day part of their lives, should not be considered as unreal, mystical or symbolic by those whose consciousness cannot grasp them. If we go by Merleau-Ponty’s postulate that the consciousness is embodied time and space within itself and has no existence outside of it; then those embodied in mountain villages at a particular time will be able to see and hear things that another born and raised in an urban city may not. Thus, as Dan Sperber had asked, “Why should we look for symbolic meanings?” We can also ask, why do we raise questions of rationality? Why not take what we are told at face value? One way to understand religion would be to dissolve the why questions altogether but then we have to remember, this too is only one way among several.

According to Guthrie the rationality of “anthropomorphism” lies in it being a ‘good bet’ (c.f. Eller 2007: 26). In the course of evolution, humans have been conscious of powers and beings very near them, and have developed consciousness of these forces and given them anthropomorphic characters in order to deal with them. The villagers of the Himalayan villages live their lives in close proximity to such beings and are able to live fairly harmonious lives with these beings as part of their social world. There is no way in which anyone outside of that world can be definitive about the existence or non-existence of those beings. In a way this manner of thinking is close to philosopher, Blaise Pascal’s statement that the negative aspects of believing are few but the positive consequences are many (including a possible salvation of the soul). Thus it is more rational to be a believer.

The social aspect of the rationality of religion is also becoming apparent in the fast globalizing world where religion is coming back with a vengeance. May be somewhere the rationality of religion does tie up with the rationality of being, existence and identity.

Check Your Progress 3

Q4. Critically evaluate the question of science vs. religion.

Q5. Discuss the function of religion as providing a moral order for society and the contribution of various scholars to this aspect of religion.

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