

## Unit 5

# Marxian Theory

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### Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- describe the Marxian notion of religion;
- outline the dominant ideology - religion;
- examine religion as a superstructure; and
- give some criticisms to the Marxian approach to the study of religion.

## 5.1 Introduction

Although Karl Marx did not publish a specific monograph on religion, his analyses of religion are very significant. He can be said to be the first sociologist of religion. His interpretations of religion are mainly being drawn from *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction* (1844) and *German Ideology* (1845).

Marx was highly critical of religion. For him man makes religion, religion does not make man (Marx cf. Tucker 1978: 53). Marx considered religious sentiments as all other social institutions as a social product. He proposed that religion reflects society; therefore, any criticism of religion must *ipso facto* be a criticism of society itself. It is essentially a projection of social relationships involved in the process of production. He proposes that religion does not reflect man's true consciousness. Religion, as Marx sees it, is a false consciousness; religion is the product of men, the product of those in power – those who control the productive process and people fail to understand that religion is man made. Religion comes to divert people's attention from their miseries, which are the consequences of exploitation. He states that religion is only the illusory sun, which revolves round man as long as he does not revolve round himself (Pals, D.L. 1996). And he argues in a truly socialist communist society all illusions and distortions of reality disappear and need for any religion ceases.

The present unit will focus on the Marxian interpretation of religion. It will discuss on how Marx conceptualizes religious beliefs and values, how it

operates in the existing social system and also the role of religious conceptions in legitimising the existing social system. The unit also includes criticisms to Marxian interpretation of religious conceptions.

In order to understand Marx's perspective on religion it is necessary to know briefly his overall thesis about the working of the society. Marxian understanding of religion will be clearer when placed in his larger social thought. So let us have a brief look at his theory of economic determinism.

## 5.2 Marxian Social Thought

Marxian theory is exclusively based on the production of material objects in the society. For survival, human beings produce food and material objects and for doing so the individuals enter into social relationship with each other making the process of production a social enterprise. The mode of production was the focus of social analysis for Marx. Depending on the mode of production he classifies the history into different epochs; each epoch identified with a particular mode of production. In each of these historical periods the groups of people who own the forces of production rule the society and they exploit and oppress the rest of the society. This is his basis of classification of society into ruling and oppressed class. The relationship between these two classes are basically antagonistic and these antagonistic relationship lead to the conflict and finally to the change of the historical periods.

Marx identifies two components of the mode of production; the forces of production and relations of production. Forces of production are the technical component of production, which involves the technology, raw materials, and scientific knowledge employed in the process of production, the technical organisation of the production process and the labour power of the labourers. The forces of production in each of the historical epoch will correspond to particular relationships of production. The relations of production are the social relationships, which individuals enter into in order to produce goods (for example, in feudal society relations of production involves the relationship between the lord and vassal and the sets of rights, duties and obligations which make up that relationship). Marx argues in each of the historical epochs the essential structure of the society is shaped on the economy - the mode of production, which includes the forces of production and the relations of production and their relation to different classes in the society. These together form the base structure or the infrastructure of the society and the everything else in the society - the major institutions, value and belief systems, which make into the super structure of the society - are seen as shaped by the economic infrastructure of the society.

In all historical societies there are basic contradictions between the forces and relations of production and there are fundamental conflicts of interests between the social groups involved in the production process. The relationship between the major social groups is one of exploitation and oppression. Marx argues in all the historical societies with a possible exception of prehistoric society, there exists a basic contradiction; contradiction of the social groups of those who exploit and those who are exploited. For example, in feudal society the contradiction between lords - the exploiter group and the serfs - the exploited group. He believed the contradictions cannot survive in the existing form for long as it creates fundamental conflict of interest between social groups since one gains at the expense of others. This conflict of interests ultimately resolved bringing about a major social change to form the next historical period.

The superstructure in all historical societies derives largely from the infrastructure and therefore reproduces the relations of production, thus reflecting the interests of the dominant group in the relations of production. Marx refers the dominant ideas of each historical epoch as the ruling class ideology. He argues that the ruling class ideology distorts the true nature of society and serves to legitimate and justify the *status quo*. However, the contradictions in the infrastructure will eventually lead to a disintegration of the system and the creation of the new society. The ultimate society Marx talks about is the socialist communist society where all will be equal having same relationship to the forces of production and hence no contradiction.

### Reflection and Action 5.1

How will you place religion in the overall social theory of Karl Marx?

After having seen Marxian theory very briefly, let us turn to the Marxian notion of religion.

## 5.3 Marxian Notion of Religion

According to Karl Marx, religion is like any other social institutions in that it is dependent upon the material and economic realities in a given society. So also religion can only be understood in relation to other social systems and the economic structures of society since it is a creature of productive forces. For him the religious world is but the reflex of the real world. His interpretation of religion thus can be said as functional because he is concerned with the social purpose of religion and not on the religious doctrine or the religious beliefs as such (Wilson 1982).

### Box 5.1: Functionalist Interpretation of Religion

The functionalists explain any phenomena in terms of its role for the survival of the society as a whole. In terms of religion their analysis is primarily concerned with the contribution of religion makes to meet the functional prerequisites or basic needs of the society. From this perspective society needs a certain degree of social solidarity, value consensus, and harmony and integration between its parts. The function of the religion is the contribution it makes to meet such functional prerequisites, for example, its contribution to social solidarity.

**Source:** Haralambos, M. 1981.

In Marx's opinion religion is an illusion that provides reasons and excuses to keep society functioning just as it is. For him religion is irrational, alienating and hypocritical. Religion is irrational because it is a delusion and a worship of appearances that avoids recognizing underlying reality. It alienates people from their highest ideals and aspirations and projects them to an alien and unknowable being called God. It negates all that is dignified in a human being by rendering them servile and more amenable to accepting the *status quo*; the state of being oppressed. It is hypocritical in the sense that though it professes valuable principles, it sides with the oppressors. Jesus advocated helping the poor, but the Christian church merged with the oppressive Roman state, taking part in the enslavement of people for centuries. In the Middle Ages the Catholic Church preached about heaven, but acquired as much property and power as possible (Bottomore 1979).

**Box 5.2: Marx's Comments on Religion**

Marx' best-known comment on religion, comes from the "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction". It is as follows:

Religion is [the world's] general basis for consolation...The struggle against religion is...a struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion. Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition, which needs illusions. (Source: Tucker 1978).

Marx believed the abolition of religion, as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. And the demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition, which needs illusions. How religion acts as illusion and what is the social condition that needs this illusion?

Marx says that religion is meant to create illusory fantasies for the poor. The poor are dominated and ruled by the ruling class, which owns the forces of production. The economic realities that keep them suppressed prevent them from finding true happiness in this life. So religion gives them the illusion that this is correct or true because they will find true happiness in the next life. In the existing social system the people are in distress and religion does provide solace. Thus Marx says religion masks the actual social reality, provide them temporary relief, just as people who are physically injured receive relief from opiate-based drugs. Here Marx compares religion to opium - a sedative substance (Pals, D.L. 1996).

A sedative only helps to forget the pain for the time being, it fails to fix a physical injury. The pain could be healed only if one solves the underlying causes of the pain. Similarly, religion does not fix the underlying causes of people's pain and suffering – instead, it helps them forget why they are suffering and causes them to look forward to an imaginary future and accepts the social system in its existing form. It thus prevents working to change circumstances. The worse is as Marx puts it that the "opiate drug" i.e., religion is administered by the oppressors who are responsible for the pain and suffering or the actual oppression.

**Reflection and Action 5.2**

Do you agree with the Marxian view that religion masks social reality? Explain with the help of religious doctrines that you know best.

For Marx religion is an expression of more fundamental unhappiness and symptom of more fundamental and oppressive economic realities. He hopes humans will create a society in which the economic conditions causing so much pain and suffering would be eradicated and, therefore, the need for soothing drugs like religion will cease. To put in other words, what Marx expects is that in the ultimate society of socialist communism there will be no oppression of one group by other and hence there is no need for an illusory happiness and there ceases the requirement of any religious dogmas.

Marx believes that any religious beliefs survive in the society so long as people are not aware of their interests. People are not aware that religion serves the interests of the ruling classes. This is because people are socialised into believing that what they know is the truth. Marx proposes that religion internalises in people a set of beliefs that are contrary to their interest but are in the interest of the ruling class. In the Communist Manifesto, Marx suggests that religion, like morality and philosophy, must be eliminated if we are to achieve a new political and economic existence. "Communism," he and Engels write, "abolishes all religion, and all morality, instead of constituting them on new basis" (1968). The reason for this is the historical evidence that regardless of previous changes in the productive systems, religion has always supported the maintenance of the legitimacy of the exploiter and exploited. Thus, to create a truly free society, religion as a tie to the past must be eliminated.

So we have seen religion act as an illusion masks the social reality and perpetuates social injustice. How does religion masks the social reality of oppression and exploitation of one class by the other class? This is mainly done through the internalisation of religious preaching. Let us see more on this in the following section.

## 5.4 Religion - an Instrument of Oppression

Religion in Marx's opinion soothes the pains of oppression as well as act as an instrument of oppression. It dulls the pain of oppression, for example, in Christianity, by promising a paradise of eternal bliss in life after death. The appeal of Christianity to the oppressed classes lies in its promise of salvation from the bondage and misery in the after life. The Christian vision of heaven can make life on earth more bearable by giving people something to look forward. Religions also make a virtue of the sufferings produced by oppression. They preach that those who bear the deprivations of poverty with dignity and humility will be rewarded for their virtue in afterlife, in a way making poverty more bearable. Another way of religion to appease oppression is the offer of supernatural intervention to solve the problems on earth. Members of religious groups such as Jehovah's Witness live in anticipation of the day when the supernatural powers will descend form on high and create heaven on earth (Haralombos 1981) anticipation of this future can make the present more acceptable. Thus religion often justifies the social order as well as the oppressed state of the people within it. It perpetuates the inevitability of the social arrangements and social stratification by pronouncing that the poverty and misfortune are divinely ordained as punishment for sin.

Religion not only legitimizes oppression, according to Marx, but also acts as an instrument of that oppression. It acts as a mechanism of social control, maintaining the existing social system of exploitation on reinforcing the class relationships. It also discourages people from attempting to change their life by justifying their miseries in this worldly life. It offers an illusion of hope in the hopeless situation and it prevents the thoughts of overthrowing the system. It distorts reality and produce false consciousness, which blinds the members of the oppressed class to their true situation and their real interests. In this way it diverts attention from the real source of their oppression and so helps to maintain ruling class power (*Ibid*).

How religion operates as an instrument of oppression in any society?

Religion operates in any given society both as a dominant ideology and superstructure. Let us see these aspects in the following section.

## 5.5 The Dominant Ideology - Religion

In *German Ideology* Marx regarded ideologies as systems of misleading or illusionary ideas. He distinguishes between ideology, which is illusionary and non-verifiable, from science, which is real and verifiable. For him ideology is a process accomplished by an individual consciously with a false consciousness. He considered ideology as a negative and restricted concept. It is negative because it involves distortion, a misrepresentation of contradictions. It is restricted because it does not cover all kinds of errors and distortions. In his conception of religion as misrepresented ideas of social reality Marx was highly influenced by the religious conceptions of Feuerbach (Bottomore 1981).

### Box 5.3: Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach

Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach was a German philosopher who was influenced by Hegel and who himself influenced the work of Marx and Engels. He critiqued religion and Christianity in his 1841 book *Das Wesen des Christentums (The Essence of Christianity)*. Feuerbach defined religion as a sort of "dream" and argued that "spiritual development" was more about humans than about gods. Basically, his argument was that belief in gods is a product of anthropomorphism because humans project their own ideals and images upon nature. Feuerbach is well known as the author of *The Essence of Christianity*, first published in German in 1841 and *Lectures on the Essence of Religion* (1848). For him religion is a symbolic representation of man and that to eliminate human self-alienation religion has to be demystified and placed upon rational level.

Some key phrases from *Essence of Christianity* that express Feuerbach's thesis:

"God is man, man is God".

"Atheism is the secret of religion".

"Religion itself, not indeed on the surface, but fundamentally, not in intention or according to its own supposition, but in its heart, in its essence, believes in nothing else than the truth and divinity of human nature."

"Religion takes the apparent, the superficial in Nature and humanity for the essential, and hence conceives their true essence as a separate, special existence."

"Religion is the dream of the human mind...in these days, illusion only is sacred, truth profane."

Source: Harvey 1997.

#### a) Influence of Feuerbach on Karl Marx

Marx owes his philosophical awakening to Feuerbach. Two of Feuerbach's important works on religion are *The Essence of Christianity* and *Lectures on the Essence of Religion*. The central thought in *The Essence of Christianity* is that the superhuman deities of religion are actually the involuntary projections of the essential attributes of human nature. In Feuerbach's own words: "Man projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject". What the devout mind worships as God is accordingly nothing but the idea of the human species imagined as a

perfect individual. Once they are unmasked, shown for what they really are, religious belief and the idea of God can be useful instruments of human self-understanding, revealing to us our essential nature and worth. But taken at face value, they are alienating insofar as they betray us into placing our own possibilities outside of us as attributes of God and not of humanity, viewing ourselves as unworthy objects of a projected image of our own essential nature. Theology, as Feuerbach sees it, only reinforces the state of alienation by taking the objectifications of religion for real objects, and the theologians end up with dogmas that are self-contradictory and absurd (Harvey 1997).

In his *The Essence of Religion* he locates the subjective source of religion in human dependence on nature. The forces of nature on which our existence wholly depends are made less mysterious and more pliable by our perceiving them as personal beings like ourselves. "Nature, in reality, is not a personal being; it has no heart, it is blind and deaf to the desires and complaints of man". In short, religion is superstition, and science must eventually supplant it.

Marx was influenced by the arguments of Feuerbach, such as:

- humans make religion in their own image;
- they cling to religion so long as they feel the continued need to project themselves onto the universe, so long as they love the illusion of their dreams more than the reality of the waking world;
- one of the signs of human maturity is the self-conscious attempt to overcome human self-alienation, to be conscious of the projective impulse that gives rise to religion, and then to leave religion, as such, behind.

Thus the basic tenet of Feuerbach is that man makes religion and that the idea that God makes man is an inversion. Marx agreed with Feuerbach in that the religious and metaphysical ideas convey false views of the world and these false views arise from the aims and desires of man and from the social arrangements, which prevent these aims and desires from being realised. Feuerbach thought that once this was clearly recognised people would free themselves from their obsession with another world, and would endeavour all the more strongly to realise love, justice, goodness and wisdom in the human world. For Marx too religious conceptions are inversions that conceal the reality.

But Marx also pushes further than Feuerbach to give a precise analysis of human self-alienation, of the reasons why humans get involved in clinging to an illusory world of projections in the first place. For him humans and their self-alienation have to be understood in concrete social, political terms. According to Marx the idea that God makes man is more than a philosophical alienation or mere illusion. It expresses the contradictions and sufferings of the real world. For him the state and the society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world because they are an inverted world (*Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction*). The religious inversion compensates in the mind for a deficient reality; it reconstitutes in the imagination a coherent solution, which is beyond the real world in order to make up for the contradictions of the real world.

### Reflection and Action 5.3

Why did Marx consider religious conceptions as inverted ideas?

Marx later calls these inverted ideas as ideology (in *German Ideology*), something that starts from consciousness instead of material reality (Bottomore 1979). According to him the real problems of the humanity are not mistaken ideas but real social contradictions and that these mistaken ideas or ideology are actually the consequences of the social contradictions. And Marx argues that due to the limited material mode of activity the human beings are unable to solve the social contradictions in practice and hence they tend to project them in ideological forms of consciousness, which is to say, purely mental or discursive solutions which effectively conceal or misrepresent the existence and characteristic of these contradictions. Thus the religious ideology conceals the social contradictions and contributes to their reproduction and serves the interests of the ruling class. The ideological distortions manifested in the religious ideas cannot be overcome by criticism; they can disappear only when the contradictions, which give rise to them, are practically resolved.

Marx is therefore a fierce critic of religion, though he is aiming not primarily at religion as a cause of the problem, but only as a symptom that, once present, becomes part of the corrupt socio-political order and only perpetuates the very problem it professes to solve. He says "The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about its condition is the demand to give up a condition that needs illusions...Thus the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth...the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics". (Giddens).

#### **Box 5.4: Shift in the Conception of Ideology in Marxism (from Negative to Positive connotation)**

Soon after Marx' death the concept of ideology began to acquire new meanings. The new meanings took two main forms: conception of ideology as the totality of forms of social consciousness, which came to be expressed by the concept of ideological superstructure; and the conception of ideology as the political ideas connected with the interests of class. These new meanings finally displaced the original negative connotation of the concept of ideology. The thinkers after Marx even called Marxism as an ideology. With Lenin the process of change in the meaning of ideology reaches in its culmination. For him ideology is the political consciousness linked to the interests of various classes and in particular he focuses on the opposition between bourgeois and the socialist ideology. Thus for him ideology is not a distortion which conceals contradictions but becomes a neutral concept referring to the political consciousness of classes, including the proletarian class.

#### **a) The Origin of Religious Ideology**

In *German Ideology* criticizing Feurbach (for whom religion is just an illusion) explains the social and political origin of religious ideology. For Marx humanity or man is not uniform at all times of societal development. There are different sorts of 'men' existed at different times and places. Men for him are social beings whose nature changes with the sort of life they lead. The sort of life they lead changes according to the way in which they get their living, according to the tools and organisations of labour they employ to get food and shelter and to satisfy their other needs. With the development of human society division of labour appears among men and between men and work. The division of labour leads to class divisions and at different times different classes have dominated human societies in accordance with whatever was the predominant mode

of production. One class will dominate in every society depending on the mode of production and nature of division of labour. When division takes place in the dominant class there forms a sub class who specialise in production of ideas. Since these ideas are produced from within the dominant class, they will be imposed upon the whole society. They will in fact be the expression of the needs and aspirations of the dominant class although they will seem to those who frame them and many others to be of universal significance. Religious ideas (also other ideas like legal, political, artistic, philosophical etc.) are produced in the society in such way by specialists at the behest of a given class or within the framework of a given historical epoch and these ideas reproduce a false consciousness of things. Thus religion originates as a dominant ideology in any particular historical epoch gives the distorted views of the world as reality. (Aron 1965).

## 5.6 Religion as Super Structure

For Marx economy is the foundation of the whole socio-cultural system. The economic system of production and distribution or the means and relations of production in the Marxian sense constitute the basic structure of society. The production of immediate material means of subsistence and the consequent degree of economic development form the foundation upon which other institutions such as state, legal conceptions, aesthetic and religious ideas of the people concerned are developed. Hence for Marx like all other factors in the human experience, the foundation of religion too is dependent upon the economic factor.

Marx viewed religion as one facet of that whole which he calls the superstructure and that is based on and affected by the infrastructure. The shift in the historical epochs along with the change in the economic infrastructure there occurs transformation of the superstructure. So differences in religion occur with changes in the infrastructure. He proposed that earlier (pre-capitalist) religious beliefs arose from primitive man's helplessness in his struggle against nature, while in the class society it is rooted in his struggle against man. In man's quest and struggle against his exploiters, the working masses experience a different form of helplessness – and this experience is what changed religion and introduced the belief in a better life in a hereafter, the alleged reward for his earthly suffering.

Marx adds all the facets of superstructure such as religion, state, political, legal philosophical and artistic react upon one another as well as upon the economic base. Thus, it is not the economic situation is the sole active cause. The reciprocity among and between the economic institutions act as cause of change, though economic necessity always asserts itself. For him the human thought, human awareness and human consciousness were not self-originating but are derivatives of economic principle. And it is in this arena that the religions must be controlled and human consciousness brought under dominance. In that sense religion must be understood in terms of the conditions that produced (and produce) it.

## 5.7 Marx on 'Jewish Question'

Marx was a Jew by birth and later converted to Protestantism. He was critical of both Christianity and Judaism though his hostility to Christianity was mild compared to Judaism. Most of his religious interpretations were based on the religion of Christianity. He also did study Judaism, which gave him an opportunity to consider the role of a religion (other than

Christianity) in society. His hostile view of Jews and Judaism is expressed in 1843 under the title "On the Jewish Question" (Marx 1977). This essay is Marx's criticism of Bruno Bauer's study on the emancipation of Jews in Germany. This essay is among Marx's "pre-Marxist" writings since he wrote it before becoming a communist. Bauer took the position that the achievement of Jewish emancipation in Prussia could not occur until Jews had renounced their identity as a separate people. And Bauer also argued that it was not possible to grant emancipation to the Jews when Christians themselves were not free.

Marx criticised Bauer's stance, citing among other things the experience of the United States whose Bill of Rights and many of its state constitutions had established separation between church and state of state neutrality between religious faiths. For Marx, religion is a private matter and the state had no right to intervene other than on issues concerning the individual as citizen. Marx argued that the political emancipation of the Jews in Prussia would not require that the Jews give up their identity as a separate group or people. However, Marx then drew a distinction between political emancipation and human emancipation. Political emancipation for Marx meant the achieving of political rights under the bourgeois state.

Marx argued that this sort of emancipation was insufficient since these sort of rights were linked to egoism and private property. The sort of liberty that was possible under the bourgeois state was not to be equated with a genuine human emancipation which in his view required the transcendence of what he at the time called commercial society. For Marx whereas the achievement of political emancipation required that Jews be granted equal civil rights with Gentiles, human emancipation required the abolition of the distinction between Jews and Gentiles as a social distinction, which was rooted in commercial society (what he later called capitalism).

Marx in "On the Jewish Question" went to provide such a social analysis focusing on the material roots for the existence of a Jewish minority within Christian Europe. For Marx this material basis lied within the fact that Jews were disproportionately concentrated in trade and commerce, which gave them real economic and political power out of proportion to their actual numbers. This economic power made it possible for the Jews to press the demand for civil equality and to infiltrate their social and commercial values into civil society. The state in turn was dependent upon the Jews for its own financial integrity and so it required that the Jews perform their functions within the world of commerce. Thus civil society in Marx's view provided the material basis for the existence of the Jews as a separate group or caste, which needed them as traders, huckster, and moneylenders. Therefore, the Jews would not disappear until either they abandoned their roles as traders and hucksters or the state itself liberated itself from the need for commercialism.

## 5.8 Criticisms to Marxian Approach to the Study of Religion

Marxian theory of religion is not without criticisms. Let us see some of them here.

Marx draws most of his religious interpretations from the study of Christianity, the religion he was most familiar with. He is not taking into consideration the religions in general although his comments do hold for other religions with similar doctrines of a powerful god and happy afterlife; they do not apply to radically different religions. It is possible to say that

in this matter he was influenced by Hegel, who thought that Christianity was the highest form of religion and that whatever was said about that also automatically applied to “lesser” religions – but that isn’t true.

Another flaw of this theory is that he argues religion is wholly determined by material and economic realities. Not only is nothing else fundamental enough to influence religion, but also influence cannot run in the other direction, from religion to material and economic realities. This also proved to be false because if Marx were right, then capitalism would appear in countries prior to Protestantism because Protestantism is the religious system created by capitalism – but we don’t find this. The Reformation comes to 16th century Germany, which is still feudal in nature; real capitalism doesn’t appear until the 19th century. This caused Max Weber to theorize that religious institutions end up creating new economic realities.

Some argue with evidence that Marxian propositions about the role of religion in the society must be limited to the operation of religion at certain times and in certain places. So also one shall not restrict to the idea that religion is only dependent upon economics and nothing else, such that the actual doctrines of religions are almost irrelevant. Instead, we can recognise that there are a variety of social influences upon religion, including economic and material realities of society. By the same token, religion can in turn have an influence upon society’s economic system.

The contemporary period witnessed the breaking down of the communist society that Marx talks about. It is also true that religion never disappeared in the Marx’s communist utopia.

In spite of a number of problems with his ideology and personality, Marx’s theory of society and of religion, while in many ways controversial, has nonetheless provided great insight into the functioning of society. Whatever one’s final conclusion about the accuracy or validity of Marx’s ideas on religion, we should recognise that he provided an invaluable service by forcing people to take a hard look at the social web in which religion always occurs. Because of his work, it has become impossible to study religion without also exploring its ties to various social and economic forces. Even for those who find it difficult to accept his political views, his social theory based on the interaction between the social infrastructure and superstructure has been and continues to be an important departing point for the sociological approach to the study of society and religion.

## 5.9 Conclusion

The present unit looks into the Marxian interpretation of religion. His conception on religion cannot be seen in isolation, it has to be placed in the context of his entire theory of historical materialism and economic determinism. He viewed religion in terms of its social purpose. For him the primordial factor of analysis of the society is economic. And all other aspects are generated from and the manifestations of the economic aspects of the society. Religion is also no different; because for him it is emanated due to the economic necessity of all forms of society. He believed the ruling class are the creators and perpetuators of the religious notions and it manifest in the society as the dominant ideology, which is inverted reality. Religion is inversion of reality since it functions towards maintaining social system of oppressors and oppressed by justifying it through religious teachings. But he believed these notions would continue till people’s consciousness continues to be ‘false consciousness’. He argued when oppressed people (proletariat) realise social reality, they work towards the change of the existing system and thereby historical epochs move

from one phase to other. The final stage is the socialist communist society, which will be a classless society according to Marx. Since there is no question of oppression in a classless society, there is no need of religion too.

The unit provides a brief account of Marx' social theory so as to conceptualise his religious notions. Then it discusses his religious conceptualisations and his explanation on how religious notions operates in different societies. Marx's ideas on Judaism also been briefly discussed in the unit. The last section of the unit deals with the criticisms of Marxian theory of religion.

## 5.10 Further Reading

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## Unit 6

# Durkheim and Functionalism

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### Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- write about Durkheim and Functionalism;
- distinguish between sacred and profane;
- describe totemism; and
- analyze religion and construction of knowledge.

## 6.1 Introduction

Durkheim was a leading French sociologist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. His classic work *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* was published in 1912. In this work he developed his sociological theory of religion, and more generally, of knowledge. In this work Durkheim tries to explore the origins and causes of religion - form him a permanent and essential aspect of human life. He sought the origins of religion in society, rather than in the individual human mind. He considered that the social existence of men determines their social consciousness. Durkheim's main interest was the ways in which society is bound together. He investigated the role of religion in keeping society together, and sought the origin of religion in communal emotion. He thought the model for relationships between people and the supernatural was the relationship between individuals and the community (Durkheim 2001).

For him religion is a group phenomenon for it is group, which gives a religion its specific character and unity. On the other hand religion unifies the group and binds people together. Thus, he conclusively argues that religious ideas are derived from society and serve to bind the members of a society together. This essential and positive function of the religion, of solidifying a society, makes it a ubiquitous and permanent institution.

Durkheim develops this theory on religion by studying the aboriginal tribes of Australia.

The present unit elaborates on how he develops his sociological theory of religion. Before discussing on that let us see briefly the theoretical perspective of functionalism since his analysis of religion is in this approach.

## 6.2 Functionalism as a Sociological Perspective

Functionalism is the oldest and still the dominant theoretical perspective in sociology and other social sciences. In functionalist approach a social phenomena is analysed in terms of its functions towards maintaining the social unity. Functionalism as a theoretical perspective drawn heavily from the biological theories and functioning of human bodies. This perspective is built upon twin emphases: application of the scientific method to the objective social world and use of an analogy between the individual organism and society. The functioning of a human body is analysed in terms of the functioning of the various human organs in relation to each other as well as the organism as a whole. Functionalism adopts a similar perspective.

It is considered that the society is made up of various parts and the various parts of the society are seen to be interrelated and taken together, they form a complete system. Like biologists, the functionalists analyse any part of the society, such as family or religion etc. in terms of its contribution to the maintenance of the whole system. Thus, according to functionalist perspective society is regarded as a system, which is made up of interrelated or interconnected parts and each part has a function to fulfil for the maintenance of the whole system (Turner 1987).

### Box 6.1: Biopsychological or Organic Functionalism and Structural Functionalism

In anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown are viewed as the founders of modern functionalism. However, their functionalisms are dramatically different. While Malinowski's functionalism is based on human biology and psychology, Radcliffe-Brown's is a structural functionalism. The biopsychological approach pays close attention to the individual and de-emphasises the importance of the social system as having a reason of existence beyond that of the individual, i.e. for Malinowski functionalism is a metamorphosis of the seven needs of the individual nutrition, reproduction, bodily comforts, safety, relation, movement, and growth into the secondary needs of society. The needs of the individual are satisfied by the social structure of his culture, whose function is to satisfy those human needs. In other words, every social institution has a need to satisfy, and so does every item in a culture. Malinowski gives us the ultimate in a functional approach. Much as Malinowski was interested in the individual and biopsychological approaches, Radcliffe-Brown was interested in the functioning of the social structure. The functionalist dimension of Radcliffe-Brown's work with its structural underpinnings, constitutes the foundations of structural functionalism in social anthropology as well as in sociological thought. He was more interested in generalisation and theory. His two major methodological positions were: a) that the individual is of no account and that it is only the social system that matters, and b) use of the organic analogy. Radcliffe-Brown derived his concept of function from physiology. He believed that the term "function" in the social sciences meant the same process as in biology. A different way of

putting this is to say that function is the contribution an element makes to the whole social system. The difference between Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski is, then, that Malinowski started with the individual. Individual needs were incidental to Radcliffe-Brown, who regarded the system of human interactions rather than human beings as being central in a functionalist approach to society. "Structure" refers to a system or organised parts. These parts are individual persons who participate in social life, occupying statuses within the system. The social network is made up of social relationships between individuals of a society. The individual is in turn controlled by norms or patterns. His approach is markedly different than Durkheim's or Mauss' view. (<http://www.panam.edu/faculty>)

Functionalism begins with the pretext that the human behaviours in a society are structured. The relationships between the members of the society are organised in terms of rules. Social relationships therefore are patterned and recurrent, which form the basis of the social structure. The structure of the society is viewed as the sum total of the social relationships that are governed by norms. The various institutions of the society such as the family, religion, economy, educational and political systems etc. are the various aspects of the social structure. Thus, the institution can be seen as a structure made up of interconnected roles or interrelated norms.

As said earlier, like, biologists the basic consideration of the functionalists is with regard the functioning of the various parts of the social structure. This involves an examination of the relationship between the different parts of the structure and their relationship to the society as a whole or the function of that part to the maintenance of the whole system. Thus, in practice, function means the contribution an institution makes to the maintenance and survival of the whole system. Like, for instance, the function of the family is socialisation of the new members of the society.

This analogy between society and an organism focuses attention on the homeostatic nature of social systems: social systems work to maintain equilibrium and to return to it after external shocks disturb the balance among social institutions. According to them societies have some basic requirements or needs, known as functional prerequisites, which have to be met for the survival and maintaining the equilibrium of the social system. A primary concern of functionalist is the survival of the social system and they assume that a minimal degree of integration between its parts and certain degree of order and stability is essential for its survival. The major concern of the functionalists thus, is to explain the origin and the maintenance of stability of the social system.

#### a) Durkheimian Functionalism

The stream of functionalism that Durkheim developed is known as structural functionalism. He is one of the founders of structural functionalism. Whereas in functionalism the social structures are studied in terms of its functions for fulfilling the biological or individual needs, in structural functionalism the functions of social structures for maintaining the social unity is concentrated more. For Durkheim society is an entity in itself (*sui generis*), which consists of several constituent parts. Durkheim rejected reductionist arguments. He argued the society has its own identity different from its constituent parts. His focus was on studying the functions of social facts, social structures, cultural norms, and values, all of which he argued are external to the individual (Kenneth 1982).

Durkheim was more concerned about the social solidarity or cohesion and how a social unit holds its members together. Durkheim stressed the importance of studying social phenomena as they function to maintain the solidarity of social structures (Broce 1973). He used concepts such as organic solidarity and collective conscience to address this question. Society must be studied by studying social facts, which are parts of the shared awareness in a society. He tried to explain the apparent stability and internal cohesion of societies, which are necessary to ensure its continued existence over time. Societies are seen as coherent, bounded and fundamentally relational constructs, who function like organisms, with their various parts (social institutions) working together to maintain and reproduce them. The various parts of society are assumed to work in an unconscious, quasi-automatic fashion towards the maintenance of the overall social equilibrium. All social and cultural phenomena are therefore seen as being functional in the sense of working together to achieve this state and are effectively deemed to have a “life” of their own. They are then primarily analysed in terms of this function they play. Individuals are significant not in and of themselves but in terms of their status, their position in patterns of social relations, and their role, the behaviour(s) associated with their status. The social structure is then the network of statuses connected by associated roles (Layton 1997).

### Reflection and Action 6.1

Do you think that Marxian analysis of religion is a functionalist approach? How is this different from Durkheim’s functionalist approach to the study of religion?

Later Durkheim added another explication of social solidarity: that which centers around conscience collective. The meaning of this phrase in English is something like “shared awareness” or “common understanding”. For Durkheim social facts are what anthropologists understand to be culture. An example of this can be seen in the *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* where Durkheim claims that the totem the sacred object is a representation by which society symbolises itself. The totem is the society rationalised through religion. Such a belief implies that a totem, like any other symbol, is a collective representation. This value is given to the representation by the society itself. This results in an epistemology that claims that individual knowledge results neither from the “mind” nor from the senses; rather, we know what we know because we learn socially devised “collective representations”.

#### b) Religion: A Functionalist Perspective

Religion is a social institution. Functionalist analyse religion in terms of its functions or contributions that the religion makes for meeting the functional pre-requisites or basic needs of the society such as social solidarity, value consensus, harmony and integration between different parts of the society etc. According to them religion is functional and ensures the survival of the social system (Haralambos 1981).

Functionalists argue that religion is an integrating force in the society, a means of ensuring that people feel that they belong to the society. It gives the people the feeling of having something in common with others in the society. It is a means for the people to express collective beliefs concerning the social commitment and social solidarity. It provides a way for the people to affirm common values, beliefs and ideals. It is collective consciousness. It also serves as the central value system. Thus, for functionalists any social phenomena/institution that serves these functions can be called as religion (Fenn 2003).

### 6.3 Durkheim and Elementary Forms of Religious Life

Durkheim explores in detail the functional role of religion in society in his seminal work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. His underlying interest was to understand the basic forms of religious life for all societies and also to why it is a permanent social institution. This study deals with one case study in depth, the religion of Arunta tribe of Australian aborigines, which Durkheim calls 'the simplest and most primitive known today'. This was the last major work published (1912) by Durkheim, and is generally regarded as his best and most mature. The book contains a description and a detailed analysis of the clan system and of totemism of Arunta tribes. Based on the study he elaborates a general theory of religion. Besides that he also outlines the sociological interpretation of the forms of human thought, which is at the core of the contemporary sociology of knowledge.

This study aims to study the primitive religion and explain its basic structure, which Durkheim believed will lead to the understanding of religion and religious nature of the society. Such an analysis of the primitive religion according to Durkheim aid in arriving at an understanding of the contemporary religions. In this work Durkheim undertakes an examination of religion from the perspective of positive science rather than from a spirit-world as done by earlier theoreticians (e.g. Animism of Tylor, Naturism of Max Mueller). He believed a scientific investigation of the observable aspects religion would lead to the discovery of most basic elements underlying the religious life, which he calls the elementary forms. The study of these elementary forms will facilitate the discovery of what is fundamental to religious life in all societies.

Basic to his theory of religion is the stress on religious phenomena as communal rather than individual. For him religion is essentially social, a product of the collective life and an embodiment of the moral requisites of human social existence (Bellah 1983). For Durkheim, humans are religious because they are members of collectivities, and neither individuals nor groups can long exist without religious – that is to say, moral – constraint. For him religion was an expression of social cohesion. In *Elementary Forms*, Durkheim makes the argument that the totemic gods the aborigines worship are actually expressions of their own conceptions of society itself. This is true not only for the aborigines, he argues, but for all societies. Religion, for Durkheim, is not imaginary. Religion is very real; it is an expression of society itself, and indeed, there is no society that does not have religion. Religion is an expression of our collective consciousness, which is the fusion of all of our individual consciousnesses, which then creates a reality of its own. Thus, Durkheim provides a functional definition of religion, meaning that it explains what religion does in social life: essentially, it unites societies. Now let us turn to the definition of religion as given by Durkheim.

### 6.4 Durkheim's Positive Definition of Religion

Durkheim placed himself in the positivist tradition, meaning that he thought of his study of society as dispassionate and scientific. Durkheim's search for a definition of religion takes two important directions - the positive direction and the investigative direction. By positive Durkheim meant the ability to describe religion in terms of which are subject to observation, as opposed to the speculative thinking (such as belief in spirits etc.). The investigative direction pursues religion by reducing it to elementary parts, looking for what is common for all religions. To derive at a definition of

religion Durkheim looked for the observable common features found in various religious practices.

He defined religion “as 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 in one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (cf. Pickering 1975). The concept of church as Durkheim employs here refers to the existence of a regularised ceremonial organisation pertaining to a particular to a definite group of worshippers (not necessarily a specialised priesthood). This definition of religion has two central parts. First is that all religions can be defined in terms of a system of beliefs and rites. Beliefs refer to a set of ideas and attitudes held in relation to sacred things, whereas rites are defined as a system of action, which is developed toward the religious things or objects. Second is that all religions can be defined in terms of their tendency to divide the world into two regions, the sacred and the profane. For him the division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred and the other all that is profane is the most distinctive trait of the religious life (Morrison 1998).

#### **Box 6.2: Wider Interpretation of Durkheims Definition of Religion**

Durkheim’s definition of religion does not stipulate what exactly may be considered sacred. Thus, later sociologists of religion (notably Robert Bellah) have extended Durkheimian insights to talk about notions of civil religion, or the religion of a state. American civil religion, for example, might be said to have its own set of sacred “things”: American flags, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, etc. Other sociologists have taken Durkheim in the direction of the religion of professional sports, or of rock music. There are some Indian sociologists who give a religious casting to the game of cricket.

### **6.5 Sacred and Profane**

Durkheim stated that religion is primarily concerned with three kinds of activities: a) maintaining a separation between sacred and profane, b) laying down a system of beliefs for the faithful, and c) setting up a system of rules that forbids certain ways of acting. He argued that religious phenomena emerge in any society when a separation is made between the sphere of the profane - the realm of everyday utilitarian activities—and the sphere of the sacred - the area that is set apart, transcendental, the extraordinary. An object is intrinsically neither sacred nor profane. It becomes the one or the other depending on whether men choose to consider the utilitarian value of the object or certain intrinsic attributes that have nothing to do with its instrumental value. This division between sacred and profane is common to all the religions and according to Durkheim, this division is the most distinctive element of religious life since it forms the basis of religious life in several respects. “In all the history of human thought,” Durkheim emphasised, “there exists no other example of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated or so radically opposed to one another” (Pickering 1984).

While trying to find out the common observable features of religious life, Durkheim perceived that the belief in supernatural realm is not common to all the religions (like in Buddhism there is no common deity), but separation of different aspects of life, physical things, and certain behaviours into two categories of sacred and profane is common. Objects

and behaviours deemed sacred were considered part of the spiritual or religious realm. They were part of rites, objects of reverence, or simply behaviours deemed special by religious belief. Those things deemed profane were everything else in the world that did not have a religious function or hold religious meaning. In general, those aspects of social life given moral superiority or reverence are considered sacred, and all other aspects are part of the profane. For example, the Catholic Church respects the crucifix and the behaviours and actions performed during 'mass' as sacred, while other behaviours and objects are not.

### Box 6.3: Sacred as Symbolic

The wine at catholic 'mass' has sacred ritual significance to the extent that it is considered by the believer to symbolise the blood of Christ; in this context it is plainly not a beverage. Sacred activities are valued by the community of believers not as means to ends, but because the religious community has bestowed their meaning on them as part of its worship.

Thus, sacred may embody transcendental gods and deities or natural things and objects or beliefs, rites and practices or words, expressions or combination of words or anything socially defined as requiring special religious treatment. The sacred things are symbols that they represent something. "The Sacred thing", wrote Durkheim, "is *par excellence* that which the profane should not touch and cannot touch with impunity" (*Ibid*). The special character of the sacred is the manifestation of ritual prescriptions and proscriptions, which separate it radically from profane. The profane, according to Durkheim, is something subordinated in dignity to the sacred and therefore is seen as radically opposite to sacred. All that is not sacred is profane. Although these two categories are rigidly defined and set apart, they interact with one another and depend on each other for survival. Profane is the principle, which has the capacity to contaminate sacred and in that sense sacred is defined and distinguished in relation to profane. This division of things into two separate but interacting spheres is common among all religions.

### Box 6.4: Six characteristics of Sacred and Profane

Durkheim outlines six characteristics of Sacred and Profane. These are:

- the sacred is always separated from all other objects and therefore constitute things that set apart.
- a system of rites and social practices arise which sets out how the sacred to be approached and how members of the group are to conduct themselves in the presence of sacred objects.
- sacred things are things protected by interdictions which have the force of prohibitions or taboos acting to protect and isolate sacred.
- sacred things are segregated from profane things and thought to be superior in dignity.
- the sacred and profane represent a unifying principle which separates the natural from the spiritual world and in this way provides society with a model of opposites such as god and evil, clean and dirty, holy and defiled and so on.
- passage from the profane to the sacred must be accompanied by rites which are thought to transform one state into the other through rituals of initiation or rebirth.

## 6.6 Totemism: The Elementary Form of Religion

Instead of animism and naturism, Durkheim took totemism among the Australian tribes as the key concept to explain the origin of religion because he believed that Australian totemism exemplifies the most elementary form of religion and that the underlying system of beliefs best exemplifies the nature of religious life. He makes a sociological investigation to the totemic beliefs and the structure of totemism itself for isolating the factors underlying the origin of totemism and thus to discover the causes leading to the rise of religious sentiment in humanity (Ronald 1987).

Totemism is integrally connected with the clan system of organisation, which is characteristic of the Australian societies. A specific feature of the totemic clan is that the name that denotes the identity of the clan group is that of a material object - a totem - which is believed to have very special properties. The members of each clan consider themselves bound together by a special kind of kinship, based not on blood, but on the mere fact that they share the same totem. It is believed to have a mysterious or sacred force or principle that provides sanctions for violations of taboos and inculcates moral responsibility in the group. Two clans within the same tribe cannot have the same totem. A totem may be an animal, a vegetable, or an inanimate object. It is the axis of dichotomy between sacred and profane. The sacred character of the totem manifests in the ritual observances, which separate it from ordinary objects that may be used to utilitarian ends (Giddens 1992). The totem is the name of the object from which beliefs and rites flow, and in this sense it is also what Durkheim called an "emblem" which represents the group. The totem emblem designates the name of the group and stands for the group as its badge. The totem emblem takes the form of "churinga", which, according to Durkheim, is the physical embodiment of the totem and is typically a piece of wood or a polished stone on which there is a design representing the totem of the particular group. It is believed to have extraordinary sacredness and various ritual prescriptions and prohibitions surround them (Morrison 1998).

The same religious sentiments aroused by these designs, of course, are aroused by the members of the totemic species themselves. Clan members are thus forbidden to kill or eat the totemic animal or plant except at certain mystical feasts and the violation of this interdiction is assumed to produce death instantaneously. Moreover, the clan members themselves are "sacred" in so far as they belong to the totemic species, a belief which gives rise to genealogical myths explaining how men could have had animal and even vegetable ancestors. Totemism is thus a religion in which three classes of things - the totemic emblem, the totem (animal or plant or some other object), and the members of the clan are recognised as sacred.

### a) Clan, Totem and Cosmology

For Durkheim religions are cosmologies in that they are the primitive ways of ordering and classifying the world (Thompson 1993). He viewed all religions as systems of ideas that tend to embrace the universality of things and to give us a complete representation of the world. He concluded this from his observations of the religious practices among the Australian tribes. Among them the totem is classified and divided into sacred and profane and the divisions are projected into the nature. All things arranged in the same clan are regarded as extensions of the totemic animal, as "of the same flesh". From this arises the tendency to divide the natural world into classes, groups and categories and thus, to classify the nature itself.

In this view all the things in the natural world, including the sun, moon, stars, earth, planets etc. are understood to belong to different classes and groups. Thus, totemism constitutes a cosmology, in which all known things are distributed among the various clans and phratries, so that everything is classified according to the social organisation of the tribe. All objects classed in a given clan or phraternity are regarded as sharing qualities in common and such objects are believed by the members of the clan to be affiliated to the same flesh as themselves.

Durkheim believed that they could organise the nature because they themselves are organised socially; and they are able to organise things according to their societal model (Morison 1998). Thus, for Durkheim the principle of religious organisation is the model of group organisation, which in turn is the first model for classifying things in this world. Since all of these beliefs clearly imply a division of things between sacred and profane, they were called "religious"; and since they appear not only related, but inseparably connected, to the simplest form of social organisation known, Durkheim insisted that they are surely the most elementary forms of the religious life. Durkheim also deduced that all understanding of the natural and social world derives from a religious system of ideas, since there exists a strong connection between the religious beliefs and organisation of individuals into groups.

### Reflection and Action 6.1

What do you understand by tribal cosmology?

#### b) Totem and Society

The totemic emblem, the totem and the members of the clan all are considered sacred in totemism. So also everything in a clan and under totem is classified and everything including all objects have certain quality of religiosity and sacredness though in varying degrees. Then if everything is sacred, Durkheim tries to find out the origin of this sacredness. Durkheim observes it cannot be from either of others since all of them share a common religiosity. Their sacred character must therefore emanate from a source, which embraces them all, a force which they all partially share in, but which is nonetheless separate from them. The religious energy found in a diffuse (not differentiated as in Manaim among North American Indians) and all-pervasive form in Australian totemism, according to Durkheim, is the original source of all later more particularised incarnations of this general force which become manifest as gods, spirits and demons in more complex religions (Giddens 1992).

In order to find the source of the general energy, which underpins of all that is sacred, Durkheim found, it is not from the immediate sensations produced by the totems as physical objects because most of the times the totemic objects are often insignificant animals or plants, which could not intrinsically evoke the powerful feelings of religiosity that are attributed to them. Moreover, the representation of totem (emblem) is considered more sacred than the totemic object itself. Durkheim finds that the totem symbolises both the sacred energy and the identity of the clan group. Thus, Durkheim reaches the inference that totem at the same time represents both the God and the society, and hence both God and society are the same. He argued by worshipping God people actually worshipping society itself (Lukes 1973).

Society commands both obligation and respect, the twin characteristics of sacred. Whether it exists as a diffuse impersonal force or whether it is

personalised, the sacred object is conceived as a superior entity, which in fact symbolises the superiority of the society over the individual. This is how Durkheim draws his theory of religion.

### Reflection and Action 6.2

How did Durkheim reach the conclusion that by worshipping God people are in fact worshipping the society itself?

## 6.7 Categories of Religious Rites and their Social Functions

The beliefs and rites are found in all religions and it is one of the fundamental aspects of religion. Beliefs are the ideas and attitudes, which are held in regard to religious objects. Rites are the categories of actions taken towards sacred objects and they involve the important capacity of laying down the interdictions, which means limitations or restrictions on what is permissible with regard to the sacred. There are two broad important systems of interdicts or ritual practices; those, which proscribe things or objects which are incompatible and those which requires separation between the sacred and profane (Pickering 1975).

Durkheim identified four distinct categories of religious rites.

- i) Sacrificial rites, which are related to initiation and sacrifice. These are the class of rites, which specify and regulate the obligations individuals have toward objects of the group, which either serve the clan as a totem or are designated as fundamental to life. These include the objects related to survival such as essential foods and the powers related to regeneration. These rites involve ceremonies in which the productive powers of the natural world are celebrated. The system of rites related to sacrifice performs two important roles. They sanctify the individuals who take part in them and they re-enact and revivify the collective practices and social sentiments of the group.
- ii) Imitative rites, permitting the imitation of the totem animal for purposes of reproduction. These rituals imitate the various movements and habits of animals whose reproductive powers are desired. The actions of these rites entail ceremonies in which individuals decorate themselves in a ritual manner by imitating the figurative forms and actions of animals or insects. In the rites of imitation the members of the tribe assume that the condition and the qualities of the objects being imitated are transferred to the members of the group and along with this something new is created. By imitating the animal's being they create the belief that the animal will be reproduced.
- iii) Commemorative rites are rites, which relate to how the group represents itself to the group. These rites consist solely in recollecting the past and making it present by means of representation. The function of these rites is to represent the group by putting into practice the mythical history of the ancestors from the moment they emerge and they commemorate their actions and works faithfully in a ceremony. The rites serve to sustain the vitality of the beliefs and to keep them from being forgotten. This is way to renew the sentiments which society has of itself and its unity and strengthening the social nature of the group.
- iv) Piacular rites, which are rites performed to represent loss or suffering. This class of rites is reserved for assigning the ritual and religious

importance to everything that involves misfortune, loss and death. Whereas the other systems rites all celebrate positive events in group life, piacular rites affirm the religious significance and seriousness of misfortune and distress. Occasions of ceremonies where the dead are mourned or where a bad harvest threatens the survival of the group involve piacular rituals. These rites functions to renew the group to its prior state of unity preceding the misfortune and may involve all sorts of collective activity such as weeping, lamenting, kissing and wailing.

## 6.8 Religion and Construction of Knowledge

While trying to explain the causal origin of religion Durkheim relates religion to the origins of conceptual and explanatory thought. According to him the general tendency of religious beliefs is to classify the natural and the social world into distinct categories and this is ultimately social as it has origins in group life. He argued that since explaining universe is religious in origin, the intellectual categories must be products of social activity (Morrison 1998). Thus, his sociology of knowledge postulates that the categories of man's thought, his ways of conceiving space and time, for example, can be traced to his mode of social life.

Durkheim maintained that spatial, temporal, and other thought classifications of human beings are social in origin, closely approximating the social organisation of primitive people. Durkheim attempted a sociological explanation of all fundamental categories of human thought, especially the central concepts of time and space. These, he claimed, are not only transmitted by society, but they are social creations. Society is decisive in the genesis of logical thought by forming the concepts of which that thought is made. The social organisation of the primitive community is the model for the primitive's spatial organisation of his surrounding world. Similarly, temporal divisions into days, weeks, months, and years correspond to periodical recurrences of rites, feasts, and ceremonies. A calendar expresses the rhythm of the collective activities, while at the same time its function is to assure their regularities. (Coser 1977:139-140).

## 6.9 Critical Remarks on Durkheim's Sociology of Religion

The themes and hypothesis forwarded by Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* have stimulated the interest and excitement of several generations of sociologists irrespective of theoretical "school" or field of specialisation. Nonetheless, it is not without criticisms (Lukes 1973, Fenton Steve 1984). Let us try to point out some here.

- Durkheim largely ignores the role of individual religious leaders, as well as the way religion functions in social conflict and asymmetrical relations of power.
- The "collective consciousness" stimulated by religious assemblies infer more of a social psychology, which is never made explicit.
- Durkheim's theory of religion is based on the case study of a single tribe in Australia. He either ignored the counter-instances among the neighboring Australian tribes, or interpreted them arbitrarily according to some ad hoc, evolutionary speculations.

- Some argue that there is no evidence that Australian totemism is the earliest totemism, let alone the earliest religion; and, though technically less advanced than the North American Indians, the Australians have a kinship system which is far more complex.
- Even if it is limited to Australian tribes, it is found that the major cohesive force among aborigines is the tribe rather than the clan; that there are clans without totems (and totems without clans); that most totems are not represented by the carvings and inscriptions on which Durkheim placed so much weight; and that the “high gods” of Australia are not born of a synthesis of totems.
- Criticisms such as these have led some scholars to suggest that the Australian data were introduced simply to illustrate Durkheim’s theories, rather than the theories being constructed or adopted to account for the data.
- Criticisms similar to his sociology of religion is also placed against his argument that the most basic categories of human thought have their origin in social experience.

## 6.10 Conclusion

Durkheim studied the aboriginal tribes of Australia in an effort to understand religion and how it functions to hold society. He established that by worshipping the supreme God people are actually worshipping the society. For him the function of religion was to make people willing to put the interests of society ahead of their own desires. He proves his arguments with reasons. All members of the tribe gather together to perform periodic totem rituals; it is these rituals that set the rules for social order. It is forbidden to kill or harm the totem animal and it is therefore forbidden to kill or harm one’s fellow tribesmen who name themselves after the totem. Durkheim argues this is true for is true with modern religion too. In the modern Christian religion, he views the moral commandments such as The Golden Rule and The Ten Commandments are primarily social rules. These rules regulate human’s behaviour toward each other and serve to maintain a sense of social unity. People do not follow these rules out of their fear for heaven or hell but for their desire to be accepted by society. If they participate in the religious rituals they will feel a sense of belonging, whereas those who break the rules and avoid the rituals suffer from social isolation. To Durkheim, God is merely a symbol of society. This is Durkheim’s sociology of religion.

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## Unit 7

# Weber and the Question of Meaning

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### Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- describe method and meaning according to Weber;
- outline Weber's Sociology of Religion;
- analyse the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism; and
- describe the religious specialists.

## 7.1 Introduction

One of the major concerns of Max Weber (1864 -1920) was to explore various ways in which the economic aspects of social life can be studied. Towards that end he tried to distinguish social institutions into strictly economic, economically relevant or economically conditioned. Institutions that are predominantly economic are those, as Weber stated, which are deliberately created for economic ends, for example, bank, factory, stock exchange. But there are institutions which are in themselves non-economic but which may be nonetheless economically relevant. For Weber religions do not have any immediately obvious economic character; yet upon closer examination reveal certain consequences for economic conduct and development. Weber through his researches attempted to demonstrate the economic relevance of various religious ethics. He argues non-economic orders have a significant causal influence upon the economic orders of the society. How he interprets the causal relationship between the religion and the economic order is the focus of present unit. Before going in details of that let us have a brief look at Weber's methodology, which is important to understand how he explains the subjective meaning that people give to their religious actions.

## 7.2 Max Weber on Sociology and Social Action

Max Weber conceived sociology as a comprehensive science of social action. For him Sociology is a science, which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action. He tries to arrive at a casual explanation of its course and effects and seeks to formulate type concepts and generalised uniformities of empirical processes. Weber's primary focus was on the subjective meanings that human actors attach to their actions in their mutual orientations within specific social-historical contexts. Behaviour devoid of such meaning, Weber argued, falls outside the purview of sociology.

Though sociology is a scientific study of social actions of human beings, Weber makes a distinction between natural sciences and social sciences and argues that the methodological procedures employed in all sciences are not identical. For him sociologists study humankind - their behaviour and their explanations of behaviour - therefore necessarily bringing to their subject matter a special kind of understanding or participatory cognitive reflection. Since individuals in a social situation undergo certain experiences, the sociologists cannot avoid including in his purview the physiological causes and effects of these experiences. For Weber, the ability to grasp the subjective quality of human behaviour is dependent upon the scientist's ability to interpret the causal meaning of the human action. According to him a correct causal interpretation of a concrete course of action is arrived at when the overt action and the motives have both been correctly apprehended and at the same time their relation has become meaningfully comprehensible (Heydebrand 1994).

Action is social when, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual(s), it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby guided. Not all actions are social. If the action is not oriented to the behaviour of others, it is not social. Also, it is not merely action participated in by a crowd or action influenced by or imitative of others. Action can be causally determined by the behaviour of others, while still not necessarily being meaningfully determined by the action of others.

### Box 7.1: Weber's Typology of Social Action

Depending on the mode of orientation of the actors four major types of social action are distinguished in Weber's sociology. Men may engage in purposeful or goal-oriented rational action (*zweckrational*); their rational action may be value-oriented (*wertrational*); they may act from emotional or affective motivations; or, finally, they may engage in traditional action. In rational-action both goal and means are rationally chosen. Value-oriented rational action is characterised by striving for a substantive goal, which in itself may not be rational but which is nonetheless pursued with rational means. Affective action is anchored in the emotional state of the actor rather than in the rational weighing of means and ends, as in the case of participants in the religious services of a fundamentalist sect. Finally, traditional action is guided by customary habits of thought, by reliance on "the eternal yesterday"; the behaviour of members of an Orthodox Jewish congregation might serve as an example of such action.

Weber was primarily concerned with modern Western society, in which, as he saw it, behaviour had come to be dominated increasingly by goal-

oriented rationality, whereas in earlier periods it tended to be motivated by tradition, affect, or value-oriented rationality.

### 7.3 The Methodological Foundations of Sociology and the Question of Meaning

Weber's methodology depends upon his conviction that the social scientists can understand the meaningful social relationships. He used the term sympathetic introspection to designate the core of this approach. He argued that for the verifiable accuracy of interpretation of the meaning of the phenomena, it is of great help to put one's own self in the place of the actor and to sympathetically to participate in his experience. If the sociologist is to interpretively grasp the meaning of human behaviour, he must come to grip with the causal motivation behind the action itself. Using the same methodology as well as the analytical tool of ideal type Weber tries to orient religious actions towards the development of modern capitalism.

Like sympathetic introspection, another analytical tool he used for the sociological examination of social action is the typological analysis, where ideal types are constructed for the scientist to contrast with the actual type. There are two kinds of meaning for social action: a) actually existing meaning in a given concrete case of a particular actor, or average or approximate meaning attributed to a given number of actors; and b) theoretically conceived pure types of subjective meaning attributed to hypothetical actor(s) in a given type of action (like an ideal type).

The basis for understanding meaning may be either rational (logical or mathematical - clear intellectual grasp of things) or emotionally empathetic or artistically appreciative (though sympathetic participation we grasp the emotional context in which the action took place). There are two kinds of understanding: a) direct observational understanding of subjective meaning of a given act (e.g., if I start to shout at you, you could directly observe my irrational emotional reaction by virtue of my shouting). b) explanatory understanding: we understand motive, or, what makes an individual do a particular thing in a particular circumstance. Since we are interested in the subjective meaning of action, we must place an action in the complex of meaning in which it takes place.

In most cases, actual action goes on in a state of inarticulate half-conscious or actually unconscious of its subjective meaning. The ideal type case of meaning is where meaning is fully conscious and explicit: this rarely happens in reality.

### 7.4 Weber's Sociology of Religion

Max Weber's sociology of religion deals with the typological and objective understanding of the subjective meaning of the religious action or inaction by the social actors. In order to make such knowledge of the understanding objective, he founded the methodology of the ideal type and the elective affinity of causal relationships. Weber elaborated a set of categories, such as types of prophecy, the idea of charisma (spiritual power), routinisation, and other categories, which became tools to deal with the comparative material. (Ninian Smart. "The Study and Classification of Religions," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed). Weber holds that there is no universal law of society as supposed in natural science, or the law of history which determines the course of the dynamic mechanically. For Weber the (social) scientist's goal is to arrive at propositions of fact or at

relations of causality or at comprehensive interpretations that are universally valid (Aron, 1967). The goal of Weber's sociology of religion is to understand religious action from the subjective meaning of the actor rationally and also categorically; it is not to establish the laws of religion and society, or to extract the essence of religious action. He was not interested in formulating and evaluating the social function of religion (as done by Marx and Durkheim).

### Reflection and Action 7.1

How is Weber's analysis of religion is different from that of Marx and Durkheim?

Typological and comparative understanding of religious action depends on the theoretical construction of the ideal type through thinking or empathic experiments. Objective understanding of religious action, on the other hand, depends on the value-judgement free analysis of the subjective meaning of social action from the viewpoint of ideas as well as material and mental interests. To make a value-judgement free analysis, one has to distinguish the empirical recognition of "what is" from the normative judgement of "what should be". The validity of an ethical claim is not the matter of social analysis, but the matter of conscience and belief. The criteria of value-judgement is imperative, and does not depend on empirical reality. The understanding of "what is", on the other hand, involves not just empirical facts of social action, but also the subjective meaning of the social action. Social action is not mechanical reaction of the law of material interests, but the dynamic of ideas and interests, which give the actor the conscious or unconscious meaning of life and the world. In order to understand sociological reality of religion, Weber holds the importance of religious idea, which cannot be reduced to the component of material interests (Marx) or to the social nexus and function (Durkheim). According to Weber "Not ideas, but material and ideal (ideological) interests, directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the world images that have been created by ideas, like a switchman, have determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest" (Moriyuki Abukuma <http://www.ne.jp/asahi/moriyuki/>).

## 7.5 Weber's Central Thesis on Religion and Economy

Weber in his analysis on religion was concerned about the social change caused by religion rather than the functions of religion. As said earlier, he studies religion in terms of the subjective meaning of religious action or inaction of social actors. Based on that Weber propounds a new theory, different from what existed at his time about the rise of capitalism in the modern Western Society, relating the economic and religious spheres of society.

In his most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber examines the relationship between the rise of certain forms of Protestantism and the development of Western industrial capitalism. He wrote this essay between 1902 and 1903, and it was subsequently published as two essays in 1904 and 1905. Max Weber's central thesis of religion and economy is reflected in this masterpiece work. It represents Weber's theme of religion and religious ideas as well as his ideas on capitalism and the capitalist development.

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber examines whether the religious beliefs of the individuals affect their actions and tries to show how the beliefs influence individual actions by establishing a connection between patterns of belief and system of social action. He also shows here that there is a connection between religion and the commercial activities. He reaches these inferences based on certain observations of the modern western European society of his time (Zeitlin).

The commercial activities of many of the western European countries intensified along with a simultaneous popularity of Protestantism in these societies. The capitalism of those times were identified by two contradictory activities of amassing wealth beyond the personal uses of individuals and avoidance of use of these wealth for the purposes of personal pleasures and enjoyment. Thus, Weber noticed capitalism is not only the production and exchange, money making and profit, but an ascetic attitude towards life. These two contradictory characteristics led Weber to argue that if asceticism had found its way into commercial activity then a religious ethic must underlie capitalism. Asceticism, for him, is a conscious denial of worldly pleasure with the aim of reaching a valued goal and higher moral state. He used the word asceticism to pinpoint a way of living in the world in which the individual engages in self-denial for purposes of obtaining future rewards.

### Reflection and Action 7.2

What are the features of the 'spirit' of capitalism that Weber talks about?

Weber defined capitalism as modern phenomena; a very complex system of institutions, highly rational in character and the product of a number of developments peculiar to the western civilisation. The capitalism, he is talking about is the rational capitalism. The factors that produced this rational capitalism, according to Weber, are many other rational activities. The rational permanent enterprise, rational accounting, rational technology, and rational law. Not only these, but also a rational spirit, rationalisation of conduct of life in general, and a rationalistic economic ethic. Let us see what is this rational spirit.

## 7.6 The Origins of Spirit of Capitalism

For establishing the role of religious ethic in the development of western capitalism, Weber first tries to make some concrete ideas about some related phenomena. Weber tries to identify the 'spirit' of capitalism. He felt behind the development of western capitalism there underlies a philosophy or 'spirit', which is different from other systems of money making. He identified three overriding imperatives behind the spirit of capitalism; the devotion of amassing wealth and profit beyond the personal needs of the individual; the commitment to unrelieved toil and work coupled with self-denial; and the avoidance of the use of wealth for purposes of personal enjoyment. It is this spirit, according to Weber, forms the special nature of western capitalism.

In order to prove the manifestation of spirit in the economic activity, Weber turns to the works of Benjamin Franklin, a successful entrepreneur who provides some useful tips on how to make money. Weber finds Franklin's advices as a peculiar ethic and they refer to specific 'ethos' or 'spirit', which are ethical maxims for shaping the conduct of life.

### **Box 7.2: Benjamin Franklin's *Necessary Hints to those that would be Rich***

Weber quoted Franklin early in his work and based many of his ideas on Franklin's writings:

- For six pounds a year you may have the use of one hundred pounds, provided you are a man of known prudence and honesty.
- He that spends a groat a day, spends idly above six pounds a year, which is the price for the use of one hundred pounds.
- He that wastes idly a groat's worth of his time per day, one day with another, wastes the privilege of using one hundred pounds each day.
- He that idly uses five shillings worth of time, loses five shillings, and might as prudently throw five shillings into the sea.
- He that loses five shillings, not only loses that sum, but all the advantages that might be made by turning it in dealing, which by the time that a young man becomes old, will amount of a considerable amount of money.

Weber then said, "Truly what is here preached is not simply a means of making one's way in the world, but a particular ethic... It is not mere business astuteness, that sort of thing is common enough, it is an ethos." He continues, "the earning of money within the modern economic order is, so long as it is done legally, the result and the expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling; and this virtue and proficiency are, as it is now not difficult to see, the real Alpha and Omega of Franklin's ethic."

Weber maintained that the central spirit of capitalism had the effect of putting forward the expectation of the performance of the work as a moral duty and in doing so it made the non-performance of work as infraction of such duty.

#### **a) Modern vs. Traditional Capitalism**

Weber maintained that the spirit of capitalism was distinctive of modern western capitalism only; it was not found in the traditional capitalism. The characteristic feature of the western modern capitalism is the unique combination of devotion to the earning of wealth through legitimate economic activity, together with the avoidance of use of this income for the use of personal enjoyment. This is rooted in a belief in the value of efficient performance as a chosen vocation as a duty and virtue. Thus, the presence of ethical demands in the economic activity implies religious doctrine.

Weber shows the distinctiveness of the spirit of modern capitalism by contrasting with the attitudes of the labourers in the traditional capitalism. In the modern capitalism, according to Weber, the employer prices the jobs according to different rates and they do it in order to get as much more from the workers as possible. The workers earn more by increasing the intensity of their work, benefiting both employers and the workers by maximising the profit and the wages. Whereas in traditional capitalism raising the piece rates had the effect of less rather than more incentive to work. In traditional capitalism the workers preferred to work less than earning more. They were ready to work to earn as much as they were earning before, which was necessary to meet their traditional needs (Morrison 1998).

### Reflection and Action 7.3

Why according to Weber the 'spirit' of capitalism is not present in the traditional capitalism?

## 7.7 Ascetic Protestantism and Capitalism

The spirit of capitalism cannot simply be inferred from the growth of rationalism as whole in the western society. In *the Protestant Ethic* Weber was trying to unearth the religious beliefs that promoted the spirit of capitalism among the believers. After establishing the existence of correlation between the religious spirit and capitalist spirit in the modern western capitalist society, he attempt was to unearth particular religious ethos that promoted spirit of capitalism. He found an intellectual or spiritual affinity between the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism (Lowith, Karl 1993). He examined other religious groups also in an attempt to establish the correlation between the spirits of capitalism and religion.

Although capitalism was found in other societies too, the particular type of capitalism Weber talks about, the combination of unlimited quest for profit and rational discipline of work, developed in the modern western industrial societies only. He tries to find out whether or to what degree a particular attitude towards work determined by a religious conception has been the differential factor present in the Western societies or absent elsewhere, which accounts for the unique course of Western history (Aron 1967). He found that it is consistent with the spirit of certain kind of ascetic Protestantism to adopt an attitude towards economic activity, which is in turn consistent with the spirit of capitalism. There is a spiritual affinity between a certain vision of the world and a certain style of economic activity (*ibid*).

Weber differentiates four main types of ascetic Protestantism: Calvinism, Methodism, Pietism, and the Baptist sects. Weber was not concerned about the overall historical description of the dogma of ascetic Protestantism, but only those elements in their doctrines, which are most consequential affecting the practical conduct of the individual in their economic activity. For that purpose Weber found the doctrines of Calvinism as most closely related to the spirit of capitalism.

### Box 7.3: John Calvin and his Doctrines

John Calvin was a Protestant Reformer whose work came into prominence in sixteenth century. He studied religion and theology in early half of the sixteenth century and there developed an interest in ecclesiastical career. In 1534, Calvin took a critical stance in Catholic theology for its failure to stress the rejection of the worldly pleasures and its permissive doctrine of salvation. Rooted in the catholic thought was the idea that the path of salvation was clearly marked in the cycle of atonement, confession and forgiveness. Calvin thought that catholic teaching was too tolerant and he put forward a salvation theology that was too much restrictive. Shortly thereafter Calvin joined the Protestant reform movement in France and began to devise Protestant theology. After careful study of Bible he believed that he discovered a series of restrictive regulations related to worldly activity and, as a result, began to stress a strict interpretation of the Bible. After settling in Geneva, Calvin taught and wrote on theological matters until his

work began to have an impact in western Europe, especially in the development of Protestant ethic. Eventually, Calvin's ideas began to spread more widely throughout Europe, and influenced Protestant religious teachings by laying stress on the restrictive rules regarding personal freedoms and the Protestant attitude towards the world.

Weber identified as the center of the Calvinist's religious reform a body of ideas known as the doctrine of predestination, which was based on some essential decrees. They were:

- Before the world began the God divided all the humanity into two classes of persons; the saved and the damned. To those who had been elected to be saved, God gave everlasting life, salvation and eternal grace. God withheld salvation and gave everlasting death and dishonour to those who are condemned.
- No believer should or could not know their fate until it is revealed to them upon their death. Since the elect differ in no way from the damned, no physical signs or marks distinguished the elect from the damned.
- Nothing could be done to relieve, forgive or reverse the decrees; no priest, no prayer, no sacrament and no worldly forgiveness by confession or communion.
- God has abandoned all but the elect since Christ had endured suffering only for the elect.

Along with these decrees Calvin imposed two obligations of the believers; that they shall assume that they are among the elected and having any doubt about their salvation is a loss of faith in God. He also added that since one's fate is already decided there is no hope of appeal or change of fate through prayer and also since the God is transcendent and could not be called upon or approached.

Weber viewed the consequence of these doctrines for the believer as unprecedented inner loneliness forcing them to follow their path alone to meet the destiny, which had been decreed for them from the eternity. The eradication of the possibility of salvation through church or sacraments according to Weber is the most distinct difference which separated Calvinism from both Lutheranism and Catholicism. Weber argued that a feeling of abandonment and the withdrawal of religious support created a new form of self-reflection in Protestants. Weber reasoned that Protestants have only one avenue of action to combat anxiety and loneliness, to throw themselves into worldly work. Calvinists seek signs of election in this world and because of that they ended up finding in worldly success, even economic success, a sign of election. The individual is impelled towards work in order to overcome the anxiety inevitably resulting from his uncertainty about his eternal destiny. Work-rational, regular and constant - comes to be interpreted as obedience to a commandment of God (Aron 1967). Furthermore there were some coincidence between certain requirements of Calvinist and capitalist logic. Protestant ethic proclaims that it is essential to have this worldly asceticism. Since Calvinists belief that the attainment of wealth became a sign that one had been successful in worldly activity, coupled with their attitude of self-denial increased the likelihood of amassing wealth. It insists on rational work for making profit and restraints spending or consuming that profit for worldly pleasures, but demands reinvesting it. Here the spiritual affinity of Protestantism and capitalism comes in consonance.

## a) Other Worldly and Inner Worldly Asceticism

Although self-denial and asceticism was found in other religious ethos too, what the Protestants followed was unique. It introduced a thorough going regulation of everyday life, especially in worldly work; this commercial asceticism is what makes it distinct for the monastic and other asceticism. The monastic asceticism also requires its believers to isolate themselves from this world at large and reject the world as form of temptation. Weber identifies two historical types of asceticism, the Other worldly and Inner worldly Asceticism. Both the types of asceticism rejects the world, but for different reasons. Salvation is sought after in otherworldly asceticism by the path to the otherworldly through religious devotion and self-denial. It renounces the world because it presents temptation and it requires the formal withdrawal from the world. In contrary inner worldly asceticism requires its believers to focus their activities in the world on the understanding that the world is individual's responsibility and that they have the obligation to transform it in accordance with an ascetic ideal.

**Reflection and Action 7.4**

How did Weber demonstrate that the inner worldly asceticism encourages the 'spirit' of capitalism?

## b) Relating the Concept of 'Calling' to Capitalism

The concept of calling can be traced back to Catholic doctrine of Middle ages and essentially refers to being called to a 'life task' of serving God in a vocation by serving ethical acts of devotion (Morrison). Weber pointed out the concept of calling appropriates a different meaning within the Protestant theology (different from Catholicism and other Catholic sects). Protestants interpreted the 'calling' to signify service to worldly rather than the otherworldly services. Although in the earlier days the activities in this world viewed degrading and secular, because it was considered necessary for the everyday life the church tended to view it as morally neutral.

**Box 7.4: Concept of Calling in Catholicism**

The concept of 'calling' had taken a major role in reformation theology due to the influence of Luther. In Catholic theology the concept of 'calling' denoted to the services to God in the form of religious duties, which were above those of everyday secular world. Later the term took on the exclusive meaning of renouncing the temporal world for the monastic life. This was based on the idea that the temporal world of experience was valueless in relation spiritual world.

Protestantism gave the concept of 'calling' a thorough going worldly character. Combined with the worldly activity, Protestant asceticism provided an intense moral focus to transforming the world through labour and self-discipline. Also it perpetuated a connection between worldly activity, asceticism and a religious justification to action. By doing this, Weber feels, Protestantism made it clear that the 'calling' is to make worldly economic pursuits. Protestantism thus unites the world of spirit with the world of everyday commercial life, which according to Weber is a feature that is absent in other religions and unique to Protestantism only. The fulfilment of one's worldly duty became the only way for the Protestants could understand their actions are acceptable to God. The 'calling' of the

individual was to fulfil his or her duty to God through the moral conduct of toil. In this scheme toil became equivalent virtue and thus bringing a link between asceticism in economic activity as a worldly profession.

## 7.8 The World Religions

What Weber tried to prove by establishing an affinity between the spirit of capitalism and protestant ethic is that the way the people conceive the world orients action in the world. After establishing the role of Protestant ethic in the development of the Western Capitalism Weber made an attempt to unearth whether a worldly asceticism of which protestant ethic is a typical example exist outside the Western Civilisation. Weber found the modern capitalism with its unique features that developed in the western Europe did not develop in any other part of the world except there. Also he felt, all circumstances being the same between the West and the non-West, the only factor that was lacking in the non-West is a particular religious ethic. He gives the example of Chinese society, where according to Weber, many conditions necessary for the development of capitalism existed, and the one of the variable absent was the religious variable. Weber makes a comparative study of the world religions in order to find out what is absent in many of these world religions (that is present in protestant religious ethics), which could not help in the development of modern capitalism that was developed in the modern western societies.

### a) The Religion of China: Confucianism

As said earlier in studying the world religions the main concern of Weber was why rational capitalism emerged as an indigenous development only in the West. He studies and compares the religion in China to that of Protestantism as well as other social circumstances in China and the West to conclusively say that the aesthetic spirit found in Protestantism is the root cause for the emergence of rational capitalism. In traditional China there were at certain periods a number of important developments had happened, which Weber distinguishes as conducive for capitalism and a rationalised economy. These include the emergence of cities and of guilds, the formation of monetary systems, the development of law, and the achievement of political integration within the patrimonial state. But there were some significant differences, both in terms of secular and religious, between the nature of some of these developments in China and those, which played a role in the rise of European capitalism. Let us see here what the religious values that prevented the emergence of rational capitalism.

Weber found the religious and other conditions in China greatly limited the rationalisation of the economy. He observed that although private property emerged in China, it was never become truly private as in the West. The community or the 'sib' is powerful in China that true alienation of land from it was impossible. The power of the sib rested to a large degree on the ancestor cult; ancestral spirits acted as mediators between their decedents and God. The sib and the other traditional elements were in the long run stronger than the rational bureaucracy. Illiterate old age carried a higher status and authority than the most learned bureaucrat and Chinese justice far from being formal, legal and rational remained patriarchal justice. These all kept the kinship relationships tightly knitted and prevented the rational development of individual.

There were also other religious factors that inhibited the development of rational capitalism in Chinese society. In Confucianism - the Chinese religion, the social order is regarded as a particular case of the cosmic order in

general, which is considered as eternal and inevitable. What is most valued in Confucianism is the cultivated man, who behaves with universal dignity and prosperity, and who is in unison with himself and the outside world. Self-control, the regulation of emotion is demanded by this ethic since harmony of the soul is the ultimate good; passion must not be allowed to disturb this balance. The notion of sin and the corresponding concept of salvation were absent. While Confucianism emphasised on self-control, there was no specific emphasis on asceticism.

Orthodox Confucianism had renounced the beyond and facilitated the beliefs in magic and animism. For Chinese masses a successfully examined candidate and official (a bureaucrat) was by no means a mere applicant for the office qualified by knowledge. He was believed to be the holder of magical qualities just as in an ordained priest of an ecclesiastic institution of grace or to a magician tried and proved by the guild. It is not only were magic and animism tolerated, they were systematised and rationalised so that they become tremendous power in Chinese life. All the sciences, which had empirical and naturalistic beginnings, were completely rationalised as magical and supernatural practices and rituals. As Weber puts it, Chinese world, despite its secular, rational-empirical elements, remained enchanted. The secular bureaucracy too tolerated magic as a means of taming the masses and also they themselves believed in it. And that is the reason why they never strove to divest Chinese culture of magical beliefs and practices.

Weber compares Confucianism and ascetic Protestantism primarily on two interrelated criteria in terms of which the degree of rationalisation of a religion may be determined: how far magic has been eliminated and how far there has developed an internally consistent and universally applicable theodicy. In terms of elimination of magic ascetic Protestantism was more rational. In terms of the later both the belief systems attained rationality though in different ways. Whereas the puritan ethic introduced a deep tension between the religious ideals and the earthly world, Confucianism centered upon the harmonious adaptation of the individual to an inevitably given order. Thus, Weber argues in spite of the various factors which might have acted to promote the rise of rational capitalism; it did not rise spontaneously in China because of the absence of ethical code that was present in Puritanism. Or to put in other wise the religious norms prevailed in China precluded the spontaneous development of capitalism there.

#### b) The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism

Hinduism differed from other world religions in some important respects. It is an eclectic and tolerant religion. Hinduism is marked by caste system of vertical segregation of occupational categories. There exist in Hinduism some dogmas or beliefs that shared by most of the believers. The dogmas are certain beliefs the denial of which is considered to be heretical. The most important of these are those of transmigration of souls and the compensation (*karma*). Both these dogmas are directly bound up with the social ordering of caste system existed in Indian society. Karma is the belief that actions of this world/ this life have a consequence for the next life. Karma is a cycle of rebirth, which guarantees status mobility for the individual in the next birth on the basis of his performance of his duty in this birth. The social impact of the karma philosophy is that it prevents the individual from searching for better occupations; it confines him to what is assigned to him through his caste system.

Weber argues that Hinduism lacked an ethic conducive for the development of capitalism, though there existed in the Indian society the social and

cultural conditions, which should have given rise to modern rational capitalism. The caste system in the Hindu society tried to ritually stabilize the occupational structure and hampered the rationalisation of the economy. The Brahmins the highest of the caste group held the highest status and the status of other caste groups, which are actually hereditary occupational groups, depend on their proximity of distance from the Brahmins. The practical ethic of Hinduism was influenced by the Brahmins who kept the larger mass of the society servile to them with the help of magical (purity and pollution) and mystical elements.

These Hindu orthodox beliefs, according to Weber, acted as barriers to challenges to the existing social order. Although trade and manufactured flourished in India at a time when Hinduism firmly established here, the caste system and the ascendancy of Brahmin priesthood and strong beliefs in religious dogmas such as karma philosophy effectively prevented any further economic development in the direction that taken in Europe.

Based on the studies of Asiatic religions (that of India, China, Ceylon, Korea etc.). Weber concludes that although there existed economic strata and forms seemingly conducive to the emergence of a modern rational economy, the East remained in general an enchanted garden dominated by magical mentality. This acted as a brake on the economic developments in particular and on rationalisation of the culture as a whole. Whereas the western civilisation undergone a significant amount of disenchantment of rationalisation giving rise to modern capitalism.

#### c) Ancient Judaism

For Weber, the development of Judaism was important for the profound impact it had on the beginnings of the Western Civilisation. It is historically important being the source of Christianity and Islam. Weber finds the religious norms of Judaism as having rational-ethical character. It has a highly rational religious ethic of social conduct free of magic and all forms of irrational quest for salvation. According to the Jewish religious conception, God created the world and intervened in the history; the world in its present form was a result of God's reaction to the actions of men particularly the Jews. The present condition of toil, trouble, misery and suffering, the opposite of that promised for the future was temporary and would give away to the truly God-ordained order. The whole attitude of ancient Jewry towards life was determined by this conception of future God-guided social and political revolution (Zeitlen, Irvin).

Weber studied Judaism to explore the influence of religious ideas on social existence and development, but, as he done with the study of other religions, against the backdrop of social, economic and political structures. From his studies he concludes although the Jews had produced a rational religious ethic, which influenced Western culture at its roots, this did not lead to rational economic conduct, as did Puritanism. The reasons for this is different from those, which found in the Asiatic religions. The peculiar ethical dualism of the Jews, their in-group out-group morality, prevented this; for allegedly it permitted, or was morally indifferent to certain forms of behaviour toward the outsiders which were strictly with respect to brothers in belief.

## 7.9 Weber's Primordial Notions of Religion

Weber elaborates the basic tenets of sociology of religion in his work *Economy and Society*. He makes a distinction between magic and religion. Religions begin to take shape when people relate to the divine entities

through prayer, worship and supplication - activities that are different from magic. Magical forces are not worshipped, but are subordinated to human needs by the use of charms or formulae. The distinction between religion and magic corresponds to a status and power differentiation of considerable historical importance, between priests on the one hand and the magicians or the sorcerers on the other.

Weber observed that while participating in religion and magic people distinguishes between those objects and beings, which have special qualities (sacred) and those which belong to the world or ordinary (profane). He felt only certain objects possesses religious properties and certain people, though a few only, able to attain state of inspiration and grace which endow them with religious powers. These extra ordinary powers are the charisma.

## 7.10 The Religious Specialists

Max Weber in his comparative study on world religions talks extensively about the religious specialists as agents of social transformation or conservation of tradition. He makes distinctions between the roles and functions of religious functionaries such as priest, magician and prophet.

*Priest:* A priest according to Weber is a functionary who performs regular, permanent and organized functions that are related to divine. He does this usually through the act of worship either on behalf of an individual or for the society as a whole. The priest belongs to a social organisation and occupies a hereditary office. He is expected to have some specialised knowledge of texts and doctrines. According to Weber priest would have attained significant social and religious status through both rigorous training and by virtue of being born into a particular social group.

*Magician:* Weber believed the relationship between the human and the supernatural could be expressed not just through religious worship assisted by a priest but also through magical chants or sorcery. It is in the magic that the prayer and sacrifice have their origin. The magician is understood by Weber as dealing with evil spirits on an individual level. His efforts may have both positive and negative consequences. The magician is self employed though he may be the member of a hereditary caste or an organised guild. Rather than using a specialised doctrine of knowledge, magician may derive his influence by virtue of personal gifts and knowledge of the supernatural world. What makes the magician different from priest is the absence of large number of followers.

*Prophet:* For him prophet is an individual who is capable of proclaiming a religious doctrine or a divine commandment because of his charismatic qualities. The major difference between the priest and prophet is that the prophet regards his mission as a personal call and derives his authority from the personal revelation and charisma or an exceptional quality. The core of the prophet's mission is to carry forward the commandment or doctrine he has received as revelation.

Most of Weber's writings on prophets and prophecy are related to Judaism and Israeli society the place where the prophets of social justice emerged. In Israel prophets were a relatively autonomous stratum. They were religious practitioners with strictly religious interests. In Weber's view rationalisation was a consequence of the prophet's unceasing war against magical and orgiastic practices, which they did on the basis of their unswerving devotion to Yahwe - the God of Jews.

Critiques pointed out several questions on Weber's theory of development of modern economic system. Weber finds a correlation between the ascetic Protestantism and rational capitalism. One major criticism to this is that this correlation is so small as to be insignificant. Some even argued that there is no correlation at all. Kurt Samuelsson with evidence shows that, while there is some truth in the proposition that Protestant countries were more vigorous economically than the catholic countries, none of the regions reveals the symmetry Weber imputed to them. Furthermore, he argues, so many qualifications are necessary as to make Weber's hypothesis taken as a whole untenable.

Dickson and Mc Lachlan critiques of Weber argue that he misinterpreted Franklin's writings as moral ends when they were simply virtues to be practiced because of the benefits they will bring to those who practice them. They deny that Franklin was preaching a Protestant work ethic and assert that all Franklin was saying was that if a person is interested in being successful in life and commerce, here are some virtues to follow. Most of the other criticisms of Weber rest on his assertion that modern capitalism could not have flourished in Europe without an ethic or spirit, which had its roots in ascetic Protestantism. These criticisms themselves fall into two major categories: (1) that capitalism was a growing force before the Reformation and that it would have thrived as well under Catholicism as under Protestantism, and (2) that the driving force behind capitalism was not ascetism but rationality.

R. H. Tawney, Weber's most famous critic, agreed with Weber that capitalism and Protestantism were connected. However, Tawney saw the connection going in the opposite direction from that which Weber postulated. Tawney, in his 1926 work, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, states that Protestantism adopted the risk-taking, profit-making ethic of capitalism, not the other way around.

## 7.11 Conclusion

The unit starts with a brief discussion on Weber's methodology for studying human society - the methodology that Weber applies to economic ethic in the religious activities of human beings. Through his studies he tried to establish the relationship between modern rational capitalism and the religious ethics of Protestantism. For Weber, capitalism was more than simply an accumulation of wealth. He identified the "spirit" of capitalism, which in his view consists of a disciplined labor force, and the regularised (re)investment of capital. Weber asserted that this combination took place only in Europe and most strongly in Protestant nations, such as England, Holland, and Germany, where there were influential groups of ascetic Protestant sects.

Weber hypothesised that capitalism was a product of the western mind. According to him the Protestant Ethic spawned and encouraged what Weber called the "spirit of capitalism". For Weber the spirit of capitalism is more than simply capitalist activity. It is, in fact, the essence, which underlies the economic system. During the long 16th century, this spirit became embodied in European society and provided the impetus for capitalism, to emerge as the dominant economic system in the world.

Weber studied other world religion to establish the relationship between the protestant ethic and spirit of capitalism. The reason he gives why rational capitalism did not develop in other parts of the world is the lack

of this religious ethic in other religions around the world. The unit elicits these aspects elaborately. It also provides an account of the major criticisms put against the theorisations of Weber.

## 7.12 Further Reading

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