

Unit 12

Peter Berger: Phenomenology of Religion

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Learning Objectives

After you have studied this unit you should be able to:

- introduce Berger's theoretical framework;
- explain religion and world construction;
- outline existing perspectives in religion;
- describe secularization; and
- outline the future of religion.

12.1 Introduction

During the years of the Second World War, the authors we read the most on the sociology of religion were Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, Émile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel. Although they are still popular and read, the latter half of the twentieth-century brought to the fore some other authors whose work on the sociology of religion made a breakthrough. Among them are Talcott Parsons, David Martin, Robert Wuthnow, Robert Bellah, and of course, Peter Berger. In their respective writings, these authors have continued to combine a high-level of theorizing with close attention paid to empirical reality. But, of them, it is Berger who is believed to have contributed the most to the study of religion.

12.2 The Theoretical Framework

The basic aspects of Berger's theoretical framework were laid down in his book titled *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), which he wrote jointly with Thomas Luckmann. This book dealt with the sociology of knowledge, exploring the relationship between conviction, commitment, and social reality. How and why are people convinced by certain phenomena and beliefs? Why do they remain committed to them, even when certain groups of people or individuals may express serious doubts about their credibility and veracity? And, how convictions and commitments shape their view of social reality? The arguments that developed in this joint

publication, which was rather general in orientation than concerned with any specific institution, were applied to the realm of religion in his *The Sacred Canopy* (1967), which was later published (in 1969) under the title *The Social Reality of Religion*.

Berger used this theoretical framework in a number of his subsequent works; for instance, in understanding the 'modern condition' (in his books *The Homeless Mind*, 1973; and *Facing up to Modernity*, 1979), the dynamics of family (in *The War over the Family*, 1983); and to the issues of economy and development (in *Pyramids of Sacrifice*, 1974; and *The Capitalist Revolution*, 1987). But, religion (and its modern forms) has been one of Berger's life-time commitments, and it is for his academic as well as popular writings on religion that he is internationally known. His initial focus was on the fate of religion (particularly Christianity) in America and Europe (in his books, both published in 1961, *The Precarious Vision: A Sociologist looks at Social Fictions and the Christian Faith*; and *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies: Christian Commitment and the Religious Establishment*). Later, he broadened his scope of enquiry to include the spread of Islam and Charismatic Christianity. Interestingly, his books – particularly *A Rumour of Angels*, 1969; *The Heretical Imperative*, 1979; and *Redeeming Laughter*, 1997 – have exercised a profound influence within the churches, and are frequently cited. The appeal of his writings to a wide audience seems to lie in his starting point, which is empirical, beginning with everyday life experiences, and also the clarity of his prose. Moreover, in his role as Director of the Institute for the Study of Economic Culture (in Boston), a position he has held since 1985, he has been able to further his academic interests and test his ideas by advising researchers to undertake fieldwork in different parts of the world.

12.3 World-Construction

Berger's work on religion begins with locating its place in the enterprise of world-building. Every human society is concerned with the task of constructing a world around it – understanding the meaning of various phenomena, drawing relationships between them, formulating the theories of causality, endeavouring to control or supplicate the natural forces. Whatever and whichever world human beings construct has no other existence except what they collectively give it. Berger (1967:13) writes:

Society is a product of man. It has no other being except that which is bestowed upon it by human activity and consciousness. There can be no social reality apart from man.

Moving further, Berger pays considerable attention to understanding the relationship between human beings and society, which he finds dialectical, in the sense that 'society is the product of man and man is the product of society.' Man creates society, and in turn his 'product' defines, influences, and shapes him. His identity is known through society. His existence outside (or without) society is unthinkable. Society was there before he was born and it will continue to exist after his demise. And, at the same time, society does not change on its own terms; it is man who brings about changes in society, thereby modifying, perfecting, and making it more livable and meaningful. Berger's submission here is that no social reality can be comprehended empirically apart from the dialectic of man and society, including the phenomenon of religion.

The dialectic of 'man in society' and 'society in man' consists of, Berger says, three processes, which he calls 'moments or steps' (1967:14), namely externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Externalization is the 'ongoing outpouring of human being into the world, both in the physical

and the mental activity of men' (1967:14). In simple words, it means that 'man, the biological organism' becomes 'man, the social being' by ceaselessly interacting with the 'extra-organismic' or 'extra-somatic' environment, which consists of both the physical and the human world (society and culture). Objectivation takes place when the products of human physical and mental activities attain a reality of their own that confronts its creators as a 'facticity' (or 'factuality') outside themselves. This would instantly bring to our mind the writings of the German scholars, Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx, the authors who pioneered the concept of alienation.

Box 12.1 Internalization

The last process in Berger's scheme is internalization, which occurs when the 'objectivized reality' – the products of human physical and mental activities which stand outside human beings – are subjectively appropriated by them. Thus, the 'structures of the objective world' are transformed into 'structures of the subjective world'. In this scheme, society is created through externalization. It is through the process of objectivation that society becomes a reality *sui generis*, having its own laws and identity. And, through internalization the 'society-creating human agents' become the 'products of society'.

These processes create the world, objectively as well as subjectively. But how do individual human beings learn about the world and behave? Here, for Berger, the process of crucial significance is socialization, which is defined as the process by which society transmits its objectivized systems of knowledge (customs, values, norms) from one generation to the next. Through this process of learning, individuals imbibe the objectivized cultural meanings of a society, and come to identify with these meanings. Berger (1967: 33) says that it is through socialization that the 'taken-for-granted' quality of the society under consideration is internalized. It is not enough that the individual looks at these meanings as 'useful, desirable, and right'. He is expected to consider them as "inevitable, as part and parcel of the universal 'nature of things'", as what is correct and destined. The individual who internalizes these meanings not only possesses them but also represents and expresses them. The chief cultural meanings of a society (and religion is one of them) can be sustained only if they are internalized by most of the members of that society.

12.4 Religion and World-Construction

Berger's concept of religion follows from his understanding of society as a world-building and world-ordering activity. He says that society imposes upon the discrete experiences and meanings of individuals a meaningful order, for which he uses the term 'nomos'. When we say that society is a world-building enterprise, what we mean is that it is an 'ordering, or nomizing, activity' (1967:28). Berger distinguishes nomos from 'cosmos'; the former refers to the meaningful order that society imposes on its members, whilst the latter means the 'universe', the sphere around men, which is perennially enigmatic to them. All societies are concerned with evolving a relationship between nomos and cosmos.

At this juncture, Berger thinks in terms of a continuum of societies. At one end are those where the socially established nomos has the quality of being undisputed, almost 'taken for granted'. In this case, there occurs a merging between the meanings that the nomos gives and the fundamental meanings that are supposed to be inherent in the cosmos. In these societies, the nomos is regarded as a 'micro-cosmic reflection' of the universe. The fundamental meanings of the cosmos are revealed to people through their

nomos. This state of affairs one finds in simple and traditional societies. Thus, it is unsurprising that, for instance, the king in the traditional Chinese society was believed to have the 'mandate of heaven'. He was the representative of the divine forces on earth.

In complex societies, with the rise of science and technology, and causality of various phenomena being established objectively, there occurs, what Max Weber calls, the 'de-mystification of the universe'. The phenomena that aroused awe and wonderment at one time no more do so. What was a 'mystique' at one time is now very much within the realm of 'scientific thoughts', fully explainable and convincible. But it is not that the entire universe – with all its nuances and oddities – comes within the orbit of the scientific knowledge. In many cases, the stability of the nomos is supposed to derive from 'more powerful sources than the historical efforts of human beings' (Berger 1967: 34). Who and what are these 'powerful sources' that remain scientifically inexplicable and endow stability to society? At this moment, or occasion, Berger thinks, that religion enters into our argument. For Berger, thus, religion has to be seen in the milieu of the relationship between the 'socially constructed order' (i.e., nomos) and the 'fundamental meanings inherent in the universe' (i.e., cosmos).

12.5 Existing Perspectives on Religion

Firstly, Berger distinguishes his study of religion, which is within the framework of sociological theory, from the one that theologians undertake. He states clearly that no theological or anti-theological implications are present in his work. Neither is he proving nor disproving the reality of religion. Nor does he feel an intrinsic necessity of sociological theory to engage in a 'dialogue' with theologians, although it is possible that certain sociological perspectives may be 'relevant' to them (1967: 181). The difference between the two enquiries into the phenomena of religion should always be kept in mind: sociological perspectives on religion are empirically founded and tested, and they do not deal with the truth or falsity of religion. Theological enquiries are non-empirical and normative in orientation.

Action and Reflection 12.1

Point out the relationship between religion and world construction to your friends. Note down their comments in your notebook.

This distinction leads Berger to define religion. He submits that definitions are neither true nor false. They are useful or less so. Each definition of religion has a point to make, has some utility, although it might be based on erroneous assumption. As an example, Berger cites the case of Max Müller's definition, which is: 'religion is a disease of language'. It can be rejected as based on an 'inadequate rationalistic theory of language', but the great service it does is that it tells us that language is a very important component that human beings use in their endeavours of world-building (1967: 177).

Berger is not in agreement with Weber's position that the definition of religion could be postponed till the end of study. This stance or the one of avoiding the definition altogether in a study would make the area of research fuzzy, or one would work with implicit, and not explicit, definition. Weber certainly has an 'implicit' definition of religion, with reference to its 'substance' (or content). But, by contrast to Weber's place, Berger lends support to explication – there must be a properly-framed and thought out definition of any phenomenon under study, notwithstanding its complexity, and religion is no exception.

In comparison to Weber, Berger finds Durkheim's approach to religion 'radically sociological' (1967: 178). To Durkheim's credit are: (1) the definition of religion in terms of sacred things, that is, 'things set apart and forbidden'; (2) the social functionality of religion ('religion binds people in a moral community'); and (3) grasping of religion as a 'social fact', which is to be explained in relationship with the other, preceding, social facts. Berger observes that Weber's 'implicit' definition of religion is substantive in nature. Durkheim also begins with a substantive description of religious phenomena with reference to the dichotomy of sacred and profane, but in the end it becomes a functional definition – religion is what it does, the contribution it makes to the different institutions of society.

Following the tradition of Durkheim, a definition of religion in terms of its social function is in the work of Thomas Luckmann titled *The Invisible Religion* (1967). For him, religion refers to the capacity of human beings to transcend their biological nature by constructing a universe of objective, all-embracing, and morally-binding meanings. As a result, religion becomes not only a social phenomenon (in Durkheim's sense) but also the 'anthropological phenomenon', because it embraces the entire 'non-biological human existence.' Thus, for Luckmann, everything genuinely human is religious, and the non-religious phenomena are those which are grounded in the 'animal nature' of man.

Commenting on these ideas, Berger expresses his disagreement, as we noted earlier, with Weber for not formulating an explicit and operational definition of religion. Although Weber says that the definition would come at the end of his study he was engaged in, he could never reach the end, and so the readers keep waiting for the 'definitional pay-off' (1967: 178). Durkheim was more concerned with the functions of religion, and so the substantive aspects of religion remain rather not so developed. With respect to Luckmann, Berger questions an approach that equates religion with all human activities, with all that is human. Undoubtedly, religion is a 'mode of symbolic self-transcendence', but there are other human activities that have the same quality, yet they are vastly different from religion. For instance, one finds the same quality in modern science, but it would be erroneous to equate it with religion.

Berger looks for a substantive definition of religion, i.e. define religion in terms of its substance, in terms of what it has. He distinguishes it from those approaches that begin with an anthropological foundation of religion – religion is a human characteristic, not found at infra-human level – and also those that look for the functions of religion.

12.6 The Concept of Religion

Berger (1967:34) offers a substantive definition of religion by positing the idea of a sacred cosmos:

Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. Put differently, religion is cosmization in a sacred mode.

This definition is derived, Berger says, from the writings of Rodolf Otto and Mircea Eliade. Although Berger refers to Durkheim's distinction, he states clearly that the concept of sacred he uses is from the writings of the scholars on religion from the time of Otto. For him, sacred refers to a 'quality of mysterious and awesome power'. It is other than human beings, and at the same time it is related to them. Sacredness resides in the objects of human experience – thus, this quality is attributed to natural phenomena and objects, to human beings, and to things that men have

produced. There are sacred rocks, sacred clothes, sacred times, sacred tools, sacred spaces, and so on.

Box 12.2 Sacred Objectives

There is a great variety of sacred objects, which differ from one society to another. There are different historical manifestations of the sacred. Furthermore, sacredness is relative: what may be sacred in one setting may not be in the other. But, notwithstanding these cross-cultural differences, all sacred things share certain uniformities. Firstly, sacred is seen as 'sticking out' – as being different – from the normal routines of everyday life. It is conceptualized as 'extraordinary' and 'potentially dangerous'. It can cause harm, but its dangers can be domesticated, through means of ritual supplication or cajoling. Its potency can be harnessed to serve the needs of human life. Sacred is apprehended as a quality different from human beings, but it relates to them in a way in which no other thing does. People confront sacred as an immensely powerful reality other than themselves, which helps their everyday living, at the same time locating their life in a meaningful order.

Like Durkheim, Berger also thinks that the 'dichotomization of reality into sacred and profane spheres, however related, is intrinsic to religious enterprise' (1967: 35-6). The category of profane is negatively defined: it is the 'antonym to sacred' or the 'absence of sacred status'. The idea of 'left-over' may also be noted in the definition of profane: what is not sacred (or 'sticking out' of the normal) is profane. For Durkheim, it may be noted, the activities of everyday, mundane, life constitute the domain of profane, but they can become sacred if they come to be infused with extraordinary powers. The opposite is also true: the sacred objects may lose their power and become commonplace. For Durkheim, sacredness is superimposed on objects, an activity that *conscience collective* (collective consciousness) has carried out historically.

In addition to the dichotomy of sacred and profane, Berger also formulates another dichotomy of sacred and chaos. The sacred emerges out of the chaos, and then confronts it as its opposite, its antithesis. This idea emerges from a reading of a number of myths of human and nature creation. There was utter chaos in the universe before god brought everything under his control, created man and woman, handed over to them the repository of sacred knowledge, and blessed them to lead a happy life for themselves and their posterity forever, provided they followed the divine commandments. If they failed to subscribe to sacred knowledge, they would fall into chaos, and that would be their end. Religion teaches people that there are 'dangerous' powers inherent in sacred objects, which in case of not being treated properly can always withdraw their support and favour. Losing connections with sacred would mean being engulfed by chaos. Religion keeps the terror away. If order is the first (and the foremost) need of human society, the crucial function of religion is its ordering (or 'nomizing') capacity.

12.7 Secularization

One of the points that Berger makes is that the cosmos may not always be considered as sacred in some societies. For example, in modern society, there have been attempts to 'secularize' the cosmos, deprive it of its sacredness. Modern science has played a crucial role in this process. However, Berger thinks that originally all cosmic entities (or cosmoses) had a sacred character: 'Viewed historically, most of man's worlds have been sacred

worlds' (1967:37). It seems to Berger that in all likelihood, sacred was the only way by which human beings could have conceived the cosmos.

Until the 1980s, most social scientists thought that the concept of god was becoming increasingly slim in the modern world. Berger was influential in developing what has come to be known as the 'secularization thesis.' He wrote in his *The Social Reality of Religion* (p.130):

Probably for the first time in history, the religious legitimations of the world have lost their plausibility not only for a few intellectuals and other marginal individuals, but for broad masses of entire societies.

In 1974, he repudiated his own thesis. He wrote in his *Religion in a Revolutionary Society* (1974:16) that at one time, he (and many others) had 'overestimated both the degree and irreversibility of secularization.' In 1998, in an article that appeared in *The Christian Century*, he confessed to having made a mistake in his earlier writings that modernity necessarily led to a decline in religion.

To the secularization thesis, Berger has made two important contributions. First, he strengthened Weber's thesis on increased rationalization of the world – the 'world of white fairies' (gods, demons) gave way to the 'world of white coats' (laboratory-men, scientists). Berger, in his work on Israelite prophets, located the seeds of rationality in the monotheism of the Old Testament. In this way, he lent support to the argument held by Weber (and others, such as Troeltsch, Robert Merton, and Martin) that Judaism, Christianity, and Protestantism inadvertently and ironically contributed to their decline. They did this by simplifying the supernatural, by making god a routine and rational entity, and by stating that the operations of the divine were within the limits of predictability. This permitted the growth of rational thinking, science and technology, and also aided the rise of capitalism. It started creating conditions where most people could think of living godlessly.

Action and Reflection 12.2

Explain the Secularization thesis to your friends. Ask for their comments and note down your findings in a notebook.

Second, promoting the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz, Berger spoke of the impact of the 'pluralization of life-worlds' of people on their belief systems. His thesis was that the rise of pluralism undermines the set of stable beliefs. When a society has multiple beliefs, thoughts and notions, it means that it will not have any set of stable beliefs, since newer and newer 'products of mental work' will keep on surfacing, and also, will become outdated over time. It is a dialectical process. The forces that create plurality go hand-in-hand with that of modernity. Under the combined impact of plurality and modernity, the 'sacred canopy', i.e. the realm of religion, will become a 'less well-established entity, one of precarious existence'. Berger saw an intrinsic link between the processes of modernization and secularization, and what linked them was 'pluralism'.

12.8 The Future of Religion

We noted earlier that since 1974, Berger has given a number of reasons for doubting his initial thesis that modernity undermined religion. He has shown that religion has continued to exist as a strong and potent force, gripping peoples' imagination and ways of life, regardless of the rise of modernity, science and technology, capitalism, and rational thinking. He has offered the following reasons to revise his confidence in the secularization thesis:

- 1) There is a growth of conservative and evangelical churches in the United States of America.
- 2) There is a decline of liberal churches.
- 3) There is a persistence of interest in religion (if not church-going) in other Western societies.
- 4) There is a vitality of religion in other parts of the world.

Although Berger was criticized for viewing the world as having a resurgence of religion, he has successfully defended his thesis all these years. The basic debate has been that some have seen a necessary relationship between modernization and secularization – i.e., modernization leads to a decline in the hold of religion on society – whilst others are skeptical of such a link.

Berger focuses attention on the examination of religion in a given context, since what is true of one region may not for the other. What is happening to religion in, for example, the Middle East, may not apply to the South Asian societies. Both in the United States and Europe, there is what has come to be known as the ‘individualization of religion’, which means that the ‘rationality of religion’ is for the individual, who emerges either as a ‘believer’ or an ‘atheist’. Moreover, religion has lost most of its collective functions. The situation in this part of the world is what Robert Wuthnow calls a ‘patchwork religion’ or what Danièle Hervieu-Léger has described as *bricolage*, using a term from Claude Lévi-Strauss (c.f. Berger 2001:194), which would roughly mean some of a collage, a coexistence of several things. In this context, the meaning is that there are varieties of religious beliefs and experiences, and a continuum from staunchest and rabid believers to extremely rational and critical non-believers.

However, the difference between the United States and Europe is that the Americans continue to go to church and very often express their traditional beliefs. Almost forty million of them call themselves ‘born-again Christians’. One does not come across these things in Europe, but here also, churches continue to play an important role in society, despite the fact that church attendance has reduced and people do not profess their official creed. This is a phenomenon which Grace Davie (2001) calls ‘belonging without believing.’

By contrast, rest of the world is, Berger (2001:194) writes, ‘full of massive religious explosions.’ He has also noted that ‘some of the most impressive religious upsurges are occurring in relatively modernized milieus (such as militant Islamism and the remarkable expansion of Pentecostalism)’ (2001:194). This should not be interpreted as implying that the phenomenon of secularization does not exist. The point to remember here is that its structure and pattern varies from one part of the world to the other. Incidentally, the version of secularization that exists in Europe is termed Eurosecularity. Berger asserts that we should not assume that secularization wherever it exists is a ‘normal concomitant of modernity.’ Today, Berger’s position is that it is pluralism which is undermining the traditional beliefs and practices. In times to come, religion will continue to have its hold on society, but it will not be one, unified, monolithic religion. Rather, it will be ‘religion with pluralism’.

12.9 Conclusion

Berger has made a tremendous impact in the sociology of religion. He has contributed to debates in the domains of the sociological nature of religious commitment, religious changes in modern times, the relationship between

religious and economic institutions, secularization thesis and its revision, the Biblical studies, and the interface between theology and sociology. Woodhead (2001) writes that though Berger's career began four decades ago (his first book appeared in 1961), it is now that some of the themes on which he wrote earlier have been taken up into the mainstream of the sociology of religion. An outstanding example is of the concept of de-secularization, on which Berger started writing in 1977, which is now at the centre of the debate whether the world is becoming increasingly 'godless' or 'god-full'. Similarly, Berger has been interested in religion and globalization, a topic that has become popular in the last ten years or so. His concept of the 'pluralization of life-worlds' has also been picked up for further analysis. In fact, some scholars think that it provides a 'new paradigm' for understanding the contemporary world.

12.10 Further Reading

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Unit 13

Clifford Geertz: Cultural Analysis

Contents

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Learning Objectives

After you have read this unit you should be able to:

- outline the interpretive approach;
- provide a definition of religion;
- discuss the meaning of symbol; and
- explain faith in religious symbols.

13.1 Introduction

Clifford James Geertz is Professor Emeritus of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton (U.S.A.), where he has been on faculty since 1970. He is well known for moving away from the scientific study of social phenomena, as was promoted by Émile Durkheim and later A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, and introducing a more metaphorical and literary style to the field of anthropology. For him, anthropology is a 'literary enterprise', a kind of writing, which shares many similarities with literature, history, and philosophy (Inglis 2000).

13.2 The Interpretive Approach

Born in San Francisco (California) on 23 August 1926, Geertz served in the navy from 1943 to 1945, and then studied at Antioch College, where he majored in English, and then studied philosophy. After receiving the degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1950, Geertz studied anthropology at Harvard, from where he obtained his doctorate in Human Relations in 1956. From the Massachusetts, he moved to Stanford (1958-9), the University of California (Berkeley), the University of Chicago (1960-70), and then to the Institute of Advanced Study, where he has been ever since, with joint appointments at Oxford University (1978-9) and Princeton University (1975-). An author of twelve books, and the editor and co-editor of numerous others, Geertz has conducted his fieldwork in Java, Bali, Celebes, and Sumatra in Indonesia, as well as in Morocco. In May 2000, he was honoured at a conference held at Sefrou in Morocco, a country where he had done his fieldwork. Geertz found this gesture highly gratifying, for he thought

that 'anthropologists are not always welcomed back to the site of their field studies'.

Geertz is known for his interpretive approach (or what some call 'symbolic anthropology'), according to which the major task of anthropology is to 'make sense' of cultural systems. He has applied this approach for understanding various aspects of social reality (such as kinship, ideology, modes of livelihood, social change, distribution of power), but he is best known for his focus on the meaning of religious symbols and for his extensive ethnographic studies of religion in complex societies. Among his most significant publications that deal with religion are *The Religion of Java* (1960), *Islam Observed* (1968), *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), and *Local Knowledge* (1983). One of his oft-consulted essays on religion is 'Religion as a Cultural System', which was originally published in 1966 in a volume titled *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* that Michael Banton had edited and was later included in his collection of essays, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.

Criticism of Approaches

Geertz opens his essay 'Religion as a Cultural System' with an observation that the 'anthropological study of religion is in fact in a state of general stagnation'. To explain this, he makes a distinction between the anthropological works on religion that were done before and after the First World War and those that were done after the Second World War. He finds that the former made significant advancement, but the latter were rather sterile. No major theoretical advance has been made in the work produced after the Second World War, except for a repetitious rendering of the ideas of the founders of anthropology and certain empirical enrichments supporting or disputing those ideas. Secondly, this work has always looked at the writings of the scholars from sociology, anthropology, and psychology, particularly the works of Durkheim, Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, and Bronislaw Malinowski. None of them has considered the writings from other disciplines like philosophy, history, law, literature, or the so-called 'harder sciences'. In fact, the founders of both sociology and anthropology had closely read these disciplines for ideas and inspiration.

Box 13.1 Four Contributions

For a breakthrough of ideas in the study of religion, the point is not that we abandon the thoughts of our founders. Geertz says that four of their contributions have indeed enriched us, viz. Durkheim's distinction between sacred and profane, Weber's method of understanding social action from the point of view of the individual, Freud's parallel between personal rituals and collective ones, and Malinowski's distinction between religion and common sense. But they should be treated as starting points, and we have to go beyond them, placing them in the broader context of contemporary thoughts. At this juncture, Geertz sets out his agenda, choosing the direction in which he would like to contribute to the anthropology of religion.

The path Geertz chooses is to develop the cultural dimension of religious analysis. He thinks that the concept of culture has suffered a great deal because of the multiple meanings it has been given. When it becomes a 'put-it-in-all' concept, an 'umbrella concept', that is everything that human beings have made and thought is 'cultural', its analytical power is weakened. Thus, there is an urgent need to arrive at a definition of culture which is unambiguous and does not have multiple referents. In his essay titled 'Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture', he espouses a view of culture for which he is indebted to Weber. For Weber, man is an

animal who gives meaning to his actions. Man has spun around him the 'webs of significance', in which he is caught, which give him meaning. Culture, for Geertz, refers to these 'webs of significance'. The oft-quoted definition of culture that he has offered reads as follows:

[Culture] denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.

Our job as anthropologists is to discover the meaning of actions of people in different societies. Our approach, Geertz says, is not to discover laws as experimental scientists do, but to 'interpret' human actions, to understand their meaning. In other words, the concept of culture for Geertz is 'essentially semiotic.'

13.3 The Definition of Religion

Geertz begins with Durkheim's idea of sacred, which defines religion and sets it apart from other institutions that deal with 'profanity'. The idea of sacred is represented through symbols (material as well as non-material). Religious symbols function to "synthesize a people's ethos" and their world view. In other words, the sacred symbols condition the people's thought, tone and tenor of their life, their moral and aesthetic styles, the way in which they construct and order the universe around them, and the meaning they attribute to their existence. Religious symbols have power derived from some specific metaphysics or philosophy, which also presents to people a specific cosmic (or 'supernatural') order. Religion endeavours to adjust the human actions to the cosmic order and the images of the latter are 'projected onto the plane of human experience.'

That out of their collective imagination human beings have created a cosmic order – sacred and transcendental – which they think constantly influences them is not a new idea. Earlier theories have drawn up a relationship between the cosmic order and human actions. But, Geertz says, this has hardly been investigated from the point of view of how this is actually accomplished. What we know is that it is accomplished in communities annually, weekly, or daily – cosmic order is brought onto the human and the human order is transcended, with people feeling the power of the sacred cosmic order and feeling rejuvenated with new energy and force. The envisaged meaninglessness of life, which may otherwise bother people and make them anxious, is overcome – the cosmic order created with sacred symbols makes the life profoundly meaningful, mirth-giving, and worth-living. Geertz notes that the theoretical framework which would provide an analytical account of the relationship between the cosmic order and human experiences does not as yet exist in sociological studies of religion as they do in other studies, for example, of lineage segmentation, socialization, political succession, etc.

In order to reach such a framework, Geertz attempts a definition of religion. Notwithstanding the idea that definitions establish nothing, Geertz thinks that if they are carefully constructed, they can 'provide a useful orientation, or reorientation, of thought'. They can guide an analytical enquiry with the explicitness they are expected to have. With these introductory remarks, Geertz offers a definition of religion that, as we said previously, is one of the most oft-cited definitions. Religion is, according to Geertz,

- 1) a system of symbols which acts to

- 2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by
- 3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and
- 4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that
- 5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

Let us discuss this definition in detail, for it is central to Geertz's understanding of religion.

13.4 The Meaning of Symbol

As we see, the first concept to be explicated is that of the symbol. Religion is a system of symbols, but it does not imply that it is the only thing that deals with symbols. For Geertz, it is in fact culture which is a system (or complex) of symbols, and religion being a part of culture is 'symbolic'. But there is a difference between the religious symbols (which are sacred) and the symbols that comprise other realms of society. Like the concept of culture, symbol 'has been used to refer to a great variety of things'. It is a multi-meaning concept. From the forest of different meanings that the term symbol has been given, Geertz identifies the meaning he wishes to adopt for his study.

Symbol is used for any object, act, event, quality, or relation which represents an idea. It acts as a 'vehicle for a conception', which is the meaning of the symbol. The number six is as much a symbol as is the Cross. Symbols are 'tangible formulations of notions'. They are 'abstractions from experiences fixed in tangible forms.' Following Kenneth Burke's example of the difference between 'building a house' and 'drawing up a plan for building a house', Geertz distinguishes the symbolic dimension of social events from empirical totalities. In the examples given above, the former ('building a house') is the empirical totality, whereas the latter ('plan of the house') is the symbolic dimension.

Box 13.2 Instinct and Environment

Cultural patterns, Geertz says, are 'extrinsic sources of information', which means that they 'lie outside the boundaries of the individual organism'. Here, Geertz is referring to the same old distinction that anthropologists make between 'what is innate (instinctive) to human beings' and what they 'acquire from their external environment': in other words, culture does not have a bio-genetic base, is learned, shared among people, and transmitted socially from one generation to the next. What is transmitted over generations is the 'symbolic source', for it is in this that the entire knowledge is stored. Culture does not only act as a 'model for' but also 'model of' behaviour. While behaving according to the cultural demands, people also realize the shortcomings, the lacunae, of their culture, which they change. Culture is immensely modifiable.

13.5 Religion as a System of Symbols

In his other essay 'Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols', Geertz writes:

It is a cluster of sacred symbols, woven into some sort of ordered whole, which makes up a religious system. For those who are committed to it, such a religious system seems to mediate genuine knowledge, knowledge of the essential conditions in terms of which life must, of necessity, be lived.

Religion provides the blueprint of social existence. In many societies, religious symbols are uncritically held; they are beyond the pale of any skeptical enquiry. Here, Geertz says that those individuals who do not subscribe to the norms that the symbols formulate are regarded as 'stupid, insensitive, unlearned.' Giving an example from Java, where he had done his fieldwork, he says that small children, simpletons, boors, and the immoral people are regarded as 'not yet Javanese', which actually means 'not yet human'. Among them, the same word is used for 'science' and 'religion', which advises them to conduct their social life properly as dictated by the set of norms and values.

Religious symbols are extremely powerful. They inspire in human beings states that transcend them. Geertz gives the example of a Javanese mystic, who stares fixedly into the flame of a lamp, because such a practice instills in him self-discipline and control of emotional expression, which is essential for leading a style of life that is expected of a mystic. Or, to take another example, in a state of overwhelming emotions, a man in distress, cries inconsolably before the idol of a personal guardian spirit, seeking its favour, thinking that the true and candid display of one's mental condition is essential for divine intervention. States of this type induce in the believer or worshipper a certain set of dispositions that shape the quality of his experience. Geertz thinks that religion induces in people two sorts of disposition, respectively called moods and motivations.

Geertz discusses both these concepts. By motivation is meant, in his words, a 'persisting tendency, a chronic inclination to perform certain sorts of acts and experience certain sorts of feeling in certain sorts of situations.' The acts, experiences, and situations are widely heterogeneous as the two examples given above show. Motivations are not acts, i.e. pieces of intentional behaviour; they are also not feelings. They are 'liabilities to perform particular classes of act or have particular classes of feeling.'

Action and Reflection 13.1

Describe a religious symbol to your friends and ask them to give examples to elucidate your answer. Put down your findings in a notebook.

Motivations are distinguished from moods. Geertz notes that motivations have 'vectorial qualities', whilst moods are 'scalar'. Motives move in a particular direction, but moods 'go nowhere', they only vary in intensity. For example, the moods that sacred symbols induce, in different situations, range from exultation to melancholy, from a boisterous display of joy to listlessness, from self-confidence to self-pity. Moods result from certain circumstances but they do not respond to any ends. Geertz writes: 'Like fogs, they just settle and lift; like scents, suffuse and evaporate.' Thus, motivations are meaningful with respect to the ends they are supposed to achieve, whereas moods are meaningful with reference to the conditions from which they spring.

13.6 Chaos and World View

How do we know that a particular set of symbols happens to be religious, not secular, in nature? It is to be understood in terms of its purported goals. Geertz helps us to understand this with the help of some examples. A particular mood of awe will be interpreted as religious when it is inspired by a conception of an all-pervading supernatural force, rather than a visit to a Great Mall. Similarly, fasting is religious when the idea of a sacred month or day motivates it rather than the perennial desire to shed off excess weight. Religion comes into existence when its symbols formulate

the ideas of order, in fact a transcendental order. To quote Geertz: 'A man can indeed be said to be "religious" about golf, but not merely if he pursues it with passion and plays it on Sundays: he must also see it as symbolic of some transcendent truths.'

Why does the idea of the transcendental truth – morally higher, supreme and superior – come into existence? Why do human beings need the religious symbols at all times and at all places? That religion is a cultural universal is indisputable. The key to this question's answer, Geertz thinks, lies in the observations of S. Langer in his book titled *Philosophy in a New Key*. Langer writes: '[Man] can adapt himself somehow to anything his imagination can cope with; but he cannot deal with Chaos.' Defining chaos as 'a tumult of events which lack not just interpretation but *interpretability*', Geertz thinks that there are at least three points when human beings encounter such situation, a situation of chaos which brings them to the limits of their powers of endurance and analytical abilities. These three points are of bafflement, suffering, and a sense of difficult ethical paradox, and in case they are not managed, they may lead to a chaos which breaks in upon human beings.

Religious Paradoxes

Geertz thinks that of the three points that may drive human beings to chaos, it is the issue of bafflement that has been least investigated, with perhaps the sole exception of Sir E.E. Evans-Pritchard's work among the Azande. The truth is that human beings do not wish to leave the situations that cause bafflement unexplained, notwithstanding how simplistic (and overarching) their explanations and clarifications are. In his fieldwork, Geertz found that the Javanese were constantly using their beliefs to explain phenomena, howsoever eerie and strange they might be. By this process they were also convincing themselves that all events and phenomena were 'explainable within the accepted scheme of things', and they should not be left to themselves. Once, in Java, a peculiarly large umbrella-shaped mushroom (what is known as toadstool) grew in the house of a carpenter. Everyone from far and wide came to see it, and each visitor had an explanation for it, irrespective of the 'rightness' or 'suitability' of the explanation. The point is that the toadstool had important implications, for it challenged the people's cognitive ability, their understanding of the world, and people would never like to succumb to these challenges. They would come out with an explanation regardless of its veracity.

The second challenge to the meaningfulness of life is the problem of suffering. It has been investigated more than the issue of bafflement because the two main aspects of tribal religion, which anthropologists have studied in a detailed manner, are illness and mourning, and both of them involve a lot of suffering. The problem of suffering is not concerned with the subject of avoiding it. Paradoxically, it is concerned with 'how to suffer', how to bear physical pain, personal loss, defeats and betrayals, and the agony and pathos of one's nears and dears, without a wince. Suffering is to be 'suffered', so to say, for it is divinely ordained – god loves those who suffer. Suffering is not punitive; it is not a punishment; it is to be interpreted as one's *test* that the divinity periodically conducts. Religion provides people with the method and ideology to bear and withstand sufferings.

The discussion of the problem of suffering leads Geertz to the issue of ethical paradox. If a man is unflinchingly devoted to divine commands and subscribes conscientiously to the righteous way of life, then he should not suffer. Why should god 'subject a man to hell' if he does not deviate from divine instructions? But the truth is that sufferings descend on all, whether

or not they have been adhering to the right path. And, proceeding logically, one would say that it should shake the faith of people in divinity. But that does not happen. Religion renders 'satisfactory' answers to the presence of evil in society. It makes ethical paradoxes meaningful – why the righteous suffer, why simple fellows are deceived, why morally upright people are defamed, why do the honest die in penury, or, in other words, why 'rain falls on the just'?

All the three problems, though different, have a basic similarity. They intend to destroy the purported meaningfulness of the world by showing that there is 'no empirical regularity' (with bafflement all around), 'no emotional form' (with all suffering at one point or the other), and 'no moral coherence' (with ambivalences and paradoxes that evil causes). But what religion does at the face of these problems is to formulate, by means of symbols, the images of a 'genuine order of the world which will account for, and even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes in human experience'. Religion does not deny the presence of equivocalness in human life, but what it denies is that human events are unexplainable, life is unendurable, and justice is nonexistent. Religious symbols assert, time and again, with no grain of doubt that all events, unexceptionally, are explicable; life can be led peacefully in spite of sufferings; and justice never eludes the righteous. Religion both affirms and denies, by submitting that human life cannot escape from pain, ignorance, and injustice, but these states are ephemeral, they are fleeting, like passing whiffs. That they can be eminently transcended is the message of religious symbolism.

13.7 Belief and Faith in Religious Symbols

This leads us to a profound question: Why do people believe in religion? Geertz notes that this question is often avoided in anthropology, and is often relegated to a psychological enquiry. People come to believe in religion because of their socialization. Right from the beginning they are told of the moral worthiness and supremacy of certain beliefs, which solve their problems and lay to rest their doubts, and in course of time they are transmitted to the posterity. Underlying all this is the existence of some authority that defines what is 'worshipful' (worthy of faith and worship), and why it should be worshiped. Beneath every system of religious symbolism there is a system of authority which legitimizes and protects it. For example, in tribal religions, authority lies in the traditional imagery; in the mystical ones in the force of the supernatural experience, the experience of one-ness; and in charismatic ones in the attractive hold of an extraordinary person. Even revelations have the immediate authority of the person through whom they are communicated, besides of course the final authority of the divinity which selects a person through whom the 'truth' is revealed. Irrespective of its nature, the authority gives its people what may be called the 'religious perspective'. In other words, one who comes to 'know' must first *believe* in what he comes to know. Religion is 'real for the believers'; for the non-believers (and the faithless), it may be nothing more than mumbo-jumbo, a congregation of irrationalities.

Defining the term 'perspective' as a 'mode of seeing', Geertz states that the 'religious perspective' is one of the several perspectives that human beings have to look at and analyze the world inside and around them. He distinguishes the 'religious perspective' from the common-sensical, the aesthetic, and the scientific perspectives. The religious perspective differs from common sense because it moves 'beyond the realities of everyday life to wider ones which correct and complete them'. Religion does not act upon the 'wider realities', but accepts them, and develops faith in

them. With respect to the scientific, religious perspective relies upon commitment for wider realities, rather than subjecting them to a dispassionate analysis. And it differs from art because it does not disengage itself from the question of facts as art does, but considers the things – the wider reality – with which it is concerned as ‘real’, ‘factual’.

An important component of religion through which it establishes relations with the wider realities is ritual, which Geertz defines as ‘consecrated behaviour’. Through ritual performance, the veracity, the truthfulness, of religious conceptions is reinforced. The idea that religious directions are sound is also generated through rituals. They also produce the moods and motivations to keep religion intact. Here, one may notice that for Geertz also, as it has been for other anthropologists and sociologists, religious symbols comprise the aspects of both beliefs and rituals.

Action and Reflection 13.2

Describe a ritual performance of your choice to other students. Ask them whether it is related to religious conceptions of reality.

Individuals believe in the existence of powers beyond them. They have myths, beliefs, stories, fictions about the origin of these powers. They also know that the powers will influence their lives when some form of communication (through rituals) is established with them. But, this does not imply that people live in the world of religious symbols they have created for all of the time. In fact, most men live in it only at moments. The everyday world of common-sense objects and practical acts is the reality of paramount importance for human beings. Against this background, what religious rituals do is to ‘colour the individual’s conception of the established world of bare fact’. In other words, religion does not describe the world, and if at all it does, it does it obliquely and incompletely. What it actually does is: It *shapes* the world of human beings, giving it a new meaning.

One of the most common occurrences men face is their constant shift from their day-to-day life to the world of ritual performances. When men perform rituals, they are transported to a world that engulfs them almost totally. In this, their beliefs appear ‘pale’, a ‘remembered reflection of that experience’. So, while speaking of beliefs and rituals, we must keep a distinction between them, for their respective individual impacts on people differ greatly. Failure to keep this distinction has led to confusion, leading some to argue about the presence of a ‘primitive mentality’ and some to say that what science does in some societies is what religion does in some others. Actually, they are talking about different realms of religion, which though related have different implications for the experiences of people.

For the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, religion is viewed as a system of ideas and practices that offers a particular conception of the world that people inhabit. Geertz writes:

Religious concepts spread beyond their specifically metaphysical contexts to provide a framework of general ideas in terms of which a wide range of experience – intellectual, emotional, moral – can be given meaningful form.

From this conception – the world as it emerges culturally – follow the social and psychological aspects of religion. Indubitably, these different aspects are interrelated in practice, but they can be separated for the purpose of analysis, and scholars from different disciplines can pick up different aspects of religion for study.

13.8 Conclusion

One of the central points in Geertz's thesis is that religious beliefs do not merely interpret social and psychological processes in cosmic terms, they also shape them. Religions differ in terms of the complexity with which they do it. The complexity of religion is not dependent upon the scale of evolution of a society. It is incorrect to believe that socially differentiated and complex societies have complex religious system; the opposite might be quite true. Geertz submits that the anthropology of religion recommends two operations in its study: first, an analysis of meanings embodied in symbols that constitute the religious system; and second, relating the system of meaning with the other aspects of social structure and psychological processes. Geertz's objection to the contemporary anthropology of religion is not that it is solely concerned with the second aspect – that is, relating religion to the other parts of society, and examining the contribution one part makes to the other – but that it has totally ignored the first – that is, trying to understand the symbolic dimension of religion. His submission is not that what the contemporary anthropologists of religion are doing is wrong, but they are only providing a partial understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, their understanding becomes woefully repetitive because the categories in which they are explained are almost taken-for-granted types, say, for instance, the idea of social integration. So, rites of passage produce solidarity in society in much the same way as does the totemic worship. That is why, Geertz notes at the outset of his study of religion that there is stagnation in the sociological studies of religious phenomena. This stagnation can be overcome by infusing religious studies with a symbolic analysis. Notwithstanding the criticisms of Geertz's approach (see, Asad 1983), his idea that religion is a system of symbols and the job of anthropologists and sociologists is to understand the contextual meaning of these symbols has made a breakthrough in the study of religion.

13.9 Further Reading

Clifford Geertz 1973 *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Selected Essays. London: Fontana Press

Inglis, Fred. 2000. Clifford Geertz, *Culture, Custom and Ethics*. Cambridge: Polity Press

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Unit 14

Lévi-Strauss': Totemism

Contents

- 14.1 Introduction
- 14.2 Levi-Strauss' Totemism
- 14.3 The Method
- 14.4 The Analysis
- 14.5 Totemism and Classification
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- 14.7 Further Reading

Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- describe totemism;
- outline Levi-Strauss' method;
- provide Levi-Strauss' analysis; and
- discuss totemism and classification.

14.1 Introduction

Lévi-Strauss is a well-known French anthropologist known for his contribution to the development of structural anthropology, which incidentally also happens to be the title of one of his popular books (of 1969, published in two volumes). Born on 28 November 1908 in Brussels (Belgium) as the son of an artist, he belongs to an intellectual French Jewish family. Lévi-Strauss studied law and philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris. However, he did not pursue the study of law and got through the public service examination in 1931 studying philosophy. After that he taught at a secondary school. In 1935, he accepted the offer to be part of a French cultural mission to Brazil. From 1935 to 1939, he taught sociology at the University of Sao Paulo. During this period, he read the 1920 edition of Robert Lowie's *Primitive Society*, and decided to conduct his first fieldwork in the Mato Grosso and the Amazon Rainforest. First, he studied Guaycuru and the Bororo; and then, several years later, his fieldwork was with the Nambikwara and Tupi-Kawahib. During the Second World War, he spent most of his time in New York. From 1942 to 1945, he taught at the New School of Social Research. Along with intellectuals like Jacques Maritain, Henri Focillon and Roman Jakobson, he founded the École Libre des Hautes Études, a university-in-exile for French academicians. His friendship with Jakobson, who was one of the leading exponents of linguistic structuralism, helped him shape his own anthropological structuralism. In the U.S.A., he also came in touch with the anthropology and field notes (and other materials) of Franz Boas.

Further Biography

Lévi-Strauss returned to Paris in 1948. He then submitted 'two theses' (one 'minor' and a 'major') for the award of a doctorate from the Sorbonne. They were respectively titled *The Family and Social Life of the Nambikwara Indians* and *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. It was the latter that established him as an important anthropologist, for this book was reviewed favourably in a number of leading journals. In

1950, he occupied the Chair of the Religious Sciences of the École Pratique des Hautes Études, which he re-named 'Comparative Religion of Non-literate Peoples'. In 1959, he assumed the Chair of Social Anthropology at the Collège de France. He established the Laboratory for Social Anthropology (for training students) and a journal, *L'Homme*, for publishing their findings.

Lévi-Strauss was elected to the Académie Française in 1973, which is the highest honour accorded to an intellectual in France. The same year, he also received the Erasmus Award. The Meister-Eckhard Prize for philosophy was conferred upon him in 2003. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and has received several honorary doctorates from universities such as Oxford, Harvard, and Columbia.

For Lévi-Strauss, structuralism implies a search for deep, invisible, and innate structures universal to humankind. These unapparent and hidden structures manifest in surface (and conscious) behaviour that varies from one culture to the other. Conscious structures are a 'misnomer'. Therefore, we have to discover the underlying 'unconscious' structures, and how they are transformed into 'conscious' structures.

In his work on kinship, Lévi-Strauss proposed what has come to be known as the 'alliance theory' ('alliance' is a French word for marriage). It was set against the 'descent theory', which British anthropologists, particularly A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, had put forth. For Lévi-Strauss, incest taboo is the essence of culture. It leads to the formation of relations between groups that exchange spouses (the 'wife-givers' and 'wife-takers'). Lévi-Strauss distinguishes between two kinds of exchange – restricted and generalized. When two groups exchange their spouses over time, it is called restricted, but when more than two groups are related in a cycle of exchange, it is generalized. The implications of both the exchanges in terms of the formation of groups are different.

Lévi-Strauss's seminal work on kinship was succeeded by a widely read account based on his Brazilian fieldwork called *Tristes Tropiques* (1955). Then came two outstanding contributions to the study of classification: *Totemism* (1962) and *The Savage Mind* (1962). After that he devoted himself to the study of myths. Between 1964 and 1970, four volumes of *Mythologiques* appeared, respectively titled *The Raw and the Cooked*, *From Honey to Ashes*, *The Origin of Table Manners*, and *The Naked Man*. In these volumes, he followed a single myth from the tip of South America and followed all its variations from one group to another up through Central America, and eventually into the Arctic Circle. He thus traced the myth's spread from one end of the American continent to the other, and offered its structural analysis.

Lévi-Strauss created a stir in anthropology. Some scholars set aside their own line of enquiry for the time being to experiment with his method, whereas the others reacted more critically to his ideas. But nowhere was his impact total and complete – he could not create an 'academic lineage'. His idea of 'universal structures' of human mind has been labeled by some as his 'cosmic ambition', generalizing about human society as a whole. While British anthropologists (especially Edmund Leach, Rodney Needham) in the 1950s and 1960s were impressed with Lévi-Strauss, they were not in agreement with his abstract search for universal patterns. They tended to apply structuralism at a 'micro' (or 'regional') level. Another example is of the work of Louis Dumont, a student of Marcel Mauss, who in his work *Homo Hierarchicus* (1967) presented a regional-structural understanding of social hierarchy in India. The approach of applying structural methodology at a micro level is known as 'neo-structuralism'.

14.2 Lévi-Strauss' *Totemism*

Lévi-Strauss's *Totemism*, as mentioned earlier, was published in French in 1962. A year later came its English translation, done by an Oxford anthropologist, Rodney Needham, and it carried a more than fifty pages of Introduction written by Roger C. Poole. In appreciation of this book, Poole (p. 9) wrote:

In *Totemism* Lévi-Strauss takes up an old and hoary anthropological problem, and gives it such a radical treatment that when we lay down the book we have to look at the world with new eyes.

Before we proceed with Lévi-Strauss's analysis, let us firstly understand the meaning of totemism.

Box 14.1 Totemism

Totemism refers to an institution, mostly found among the tribal community, where the members of each of its clans consider themselves as having descended from a plant, or animal, or any other animate or inanimate object, for which they have a special feeling of veneration, which leads to the formation of a ritual relationship with that object. The plant, animal, or any other object is called 'totem'; the word 'totem', Lévi-Strauss says (p. 86), is taken from the Ojibwa, an Algonquin language of the region to the north of the Great Lakes of Northern America. The members who share the same totem constitute a 'totemic group'. People have a special reverential attitude towards their totem – they abstain from killing and/or eating it, or they may sacrifice and eat it on ceremonial occasions; death of the totem may be ritually mourned; grand celebrations take place in some societies for the multiplication of totems; and totems may be approached for showering blessings and granting long term welfare. In other words, the totem becomes the centre of beliefs and ritual action.

Reality of Totemism

Lévi-Strauss does not believe in the 'reality' of totemism. He says that totemism was 'invented' and became one of the most favourite anthropological subjects to be investigated with an aim to find its origins and varieties, with the Victorian scholars in the second half of the nineteenth century. By contrast, Lévi-Strauss's study is not of totemism; it is of *totemic phenomena*. In other words, it is an 'adjectival study', and not a 'substantive study', which means that it is a 'study of the phenomena that happen to be totemic' rather than 'what is contained in or what is the substance of totemism'. At his command, Lévi-Strauss has the same data that were available to his predecessors, but the question he asks is entirely new. He does not ask the same question that had been repeatedly asked earlier by several scholars, viz. 'What is totemism?' His question is 'How are totemic phenomena arranged?' The move from 'what' to 'how' was radical at that time (during the 1960s); and Lévi-Strauss's interpretation of totemism was a distinct break with the earlier analyses of totemism (whether they were evolutionary, or diffusionistic, or functional). It is because of this distinctiveness that Poole (p. 9) writes that with Lévi-Strauss, "the 'problem' of totemism has been laid to rest once and for all."

Action and Reflection 14.1

Describe what is totemism. Can you give an example of totem from your environment? Note down your answer in a notebook.

Lévi-Strauss offers a critique of the explanations that had been (and were) in vogue at that time. Firstly, he rejects the thesis that the members of the American school (Franz Boas, Robert Lowie, A.L. Kroeber) put forth, according to which the totemic phenomena are not a reality *sui generis*. In other words, totemism does not have its own existence and laws; rather it is a product of the general tendency among the 'primitives' to identify individuals and social groups with animal and plant worlds. Lévi-Strauss finds this explanation highly simplistic. He also criticizes the functional views of totemism; for instance, Durkheim's explanation that totemism binds people in a 'moral community' called the church, or Malinowski's idea that the Trobrianders have totems because they are of utilitarian value, for they provide food to people. Malinowski's explanation (which Lévi-Strauss sums up in words like 'totems are good to eat') lacks universality, since there are societies that have totems of non-utilitarian value, and it would be difficult to find the needs that the totem fulfils. Durkheim's thesis of religion as promoting social solidarity may be applicable in societies each with a single religion, but not societies with religious pluralism. Moreover, the functional theory is concerned with the contribution an institution makes towards the maintenance of the whole society, rather than how it is arranged. In other words, the functional theory of totemism deals with the contribution the beliefs and practices of totemism make to the maintenance and well-being of society rather than what is the structure of totemism, and how it is a product of human mind.

14.3 The Method

Lévi-Strauss's *Totemism* is principally an exercise in methodology. He does not look for the unity of the phenomenon of totemism; rather, he breaks it down into various visual and intellectual codes. He does not intend to explain totemism, rather he deciphers it – its arrangement. In the first chapter of his book (p. 84), Lévi-Strauss summarizes his methodological programme, which is as follows:

- 1) Define the phenomenon under study as a relation between two or more terms, real or supposed;
- 2) construct a table of possible permutations between these terms;
- 3) take this table as the general object of analysis which, at this level only, can yield necessary connections, the empirical phenomenon considered at the beginning being only one possible combination among others, the complete system of which must be reconstructed beforehand.

We may give here a simple example to understand this from the realm of kinship. Descent, for instance, can be traced from the father or the mother. Let us call the descent traced from the father 'p', and the mother 'q'. Now, let us assign them their respective values: if the side (whether the father's or the mother's) is recognized, we denote it by 1, and if it is not recognized, it is denoted as 0. Now, we can construct the table of the possible permutations: where (1) p is 1, and q is 0; (2) p is 0, and q is 1; (3) p is 1, and q is 1; and (4) p is 0 and q is 0. The first permutation yields the patrilineal society, the second, matrilineal, the third, bilineal, and the last possibility does not exist empirically.

Let us now move to how Lévi-Strauss applies this to totemism. He says that totemism covers relations between things falling in two series – one natural (animals, plants) and the other cultural (persons, clans). For Lévi-Strauss, the 'problem' of totemism arises when two separate chains of experience (one of nature and the other of culture) are confused. Human beings identify themselves with nature in a myriad of ways, and the other

thing is that they describe their social groups by names drawn from the world of animals and plants. These two experiences are different, but totemism results when there is any kind of overlap between these orders. Further, Lévi-Strauss writes: 'The natural series comprises on the one hand *categories*, on the other *particulars*; the cultural series comprises *groups* and *persons*.' He chooses these terms rather arbitrarily to distinguish, in each series, two modes of existence – collective and individual – and also, to keep these series distinct. Lévi-Strauss says that any terms could be used provided they are distinct.

NATURE	Category	Particular
CULTURE	Group	Person

These two sets of terms can be associated in four ways, as is the case with the example given earlier.

	1	2	3	4
NATURE	Category	Category	Particular	Particular
CULTURE	Group	Person	Person	Group

Totemism thus establishes a relationship between human beings (culture) and nature, and, as shown above, this relationship can be divided into four types, and we can find empirical examples of each one of them.

Box 14.2 Nature and Culture

Lévi-Strauss says that the example of the first is the Australian totemism ('sex totems' and 'social totems') that postulates a relationship between a natural category and a cultural group. The example of the second is the 'individual' totemism of the North American Indians. Among them, an individual reconciles himself with a natural category. For an example of the third combination, Lévi-Strauss takes the case of the Mota (in the Banks Islands) where a child is thought to be the 'incarnation of an animal or plant found or eaten by the mother when she first became aware that she was pregnant' (p. 85), or what has come to be known as 'incarnational totemism'. Another example of this category may come from certain tribes of the Algonquin group, who believe that a special relation is established between the newborn child and whichever animal is seen to approach the family cabin. The fourth combination (group-particular combination) may be exemplified with cases from tribes of Polynesia and Africa, where certain animals (such as garden lizards in New Zealand, sacred crocodiles and lions and leopards in Africa) are protected and venerated (the sacred animal totemism).

The four combinations are equivalent. It is because they result from the same operation (i.e., the permutation of the elements that comprise a phenomenon). But, in the anthropological literature that Lévi-Strauss examines, it is only the first two that have been included in the domain of totemism, while the other two have only been related to totemism in an indirect way. Some authors have not considered the last two variants of totemism in their discussion. Here, Lévi-Strauss observes that the 'problem of totemism' (or what is called the 'totemic illusion') results from the 'distortion of a semantic field to which belong phenomena of the same type.' The outcome of this is that certain aspects (or the first and second types of totemic phenomena) have been singled out at the expense of others (the third and fourth types), which gives an impression of 'originality' and 'strangeness' that they do not in reality possess.

14.4 The Analysis

The fourth chapter of Lévi-Strauss's *Totemism*, titled 'Towards the

Intellect', presents the work of Raymond Firth, Mayer Fortes, Edward Evans-Pritchard, and the second theory of totemism (of 1951) that Alfred Radcliffe-Brown gave, as containing the germs of a correct interpretation of totemic phenomenon making possible a fully adequate explanation of its content and form. Radcliffe-Brown's first theory of totemism was utilitarian and culture-specific, quite like Malinowski's theory. By comparison, Firth and Fortes do not succumb to an arbitrary explanation or to any factitious evidence. Both of them think that the relationship between totemic systems and natural species is based on a perception of resemblance between them. In Fortes's work on the Tallensi, animals and ancestors resemble each other. Animals are apt symbols for the livingness of ancestors. Fortes shows that among the Tallensi, animals symbolize the potential aggressiveness of ancestors.

Lévi-Strauss applauds the attempt of Firth and Fortes, for they move from a point of view centred on subjective utility (the utilitarian hypothesis) to one of objective analogy. But Lévi-Strauss goes further than this: he says 'it is not the resemblances, but the differences, which resemble each other' (p. 149). In totemism, the resemblance is between the two systems of differences. Let us understand its meaning with the help of an example: the relationship between two clans is like the relationship between two animals, or two birds, or an animal and a bird. It is the difference between the two series that resembles each other.

Action and Reflection 14.2

Read section 14.4 and point out the views of Firth and Fortes. How do they differ from Levi-Strauss' position? Write your answer in a note book.

Undoubtedly, Firth and Fortes make a good beginning in interpreting totemism. But we have to move from external analogy (the external resemblance) to internal homology (the identity at the internal level). For Lévi-Strauss, it is Evans-Pritchard's analysis of Nuer religion that allows us to move from the external resemblance to internal homology. Among the Nuer, the twins are regarded as 'birds', not because they are confused with birds or look like them. It is because, the twins, in relation to other persons, are 'persons of the above' in relation to 'persons from below'. And, with respect to birds, they are 'birds of below' in relation to 'birds from above'. The relationship between twins and other men is like the relationship that is deemed to exist between the 'birds of below' and the 'birds of above'. It is a good example of the 'differences which resemble each other' in the 'two systems of differences'. If the statement - or the code - 'twins are birds' directs us to look for some external image, then we are surely bound to be led astray. But if we look into the internal homology in the Nuer system, then we will be closer to the understanding of the code.

At this level, Lévi-Strauss introduces the second theory of Radcliffe-Brown that has taken a decisive and innovatory step in interpreting totemism. Instead of asking, 'Why all these birds?', Radcliffe-Brown asks: 'Why particularly eagle-hawk and crow, and other pairs?' Lévi-Strauss considers this question as marking the beginning of a genuine structural analysis. In fact, Radcliffe-Brown observes in this analysis of totemism that the kind of structure with which we are concerned is the 'union of opposites.'

Evans-Pritchard and Radcliffe-Brown, thus, recognize two principles of interpretation which Lévi-Strauss deems fundamental. In his analysis of Nuer religion, Evans-Pritchard shows that the basis of totemic phenomena lies in the interrelation of natural species with social groupings according to the logically conceived processes of metaphor and analogy. In his second theory, Radcliffe-Brown realizes the necessity of an explanation which

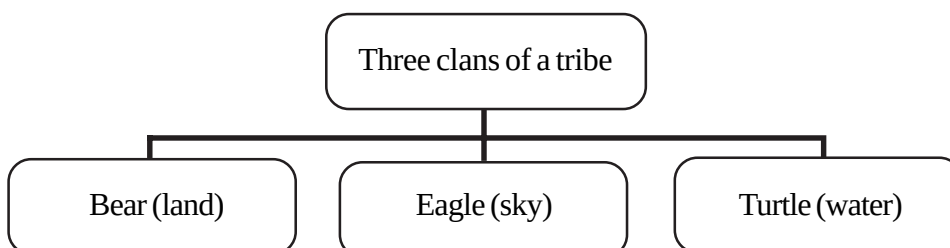
illuminates the principle governing the selection and association of specific pairs of species and types used in classification. These two ideas, Lévi-Strauss thinks, help in the reintegration of content with form, and it is from them that he begins.

14.5 Totemism and Classification

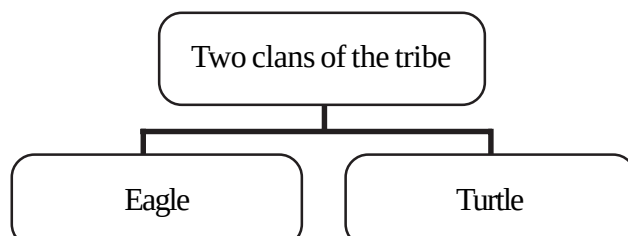
Totemism, for Lévi-Strauss, is a mode of classification. Totemic classifications are regarded as a 'means of thinking' governed by less rigid conditions than what we find in the case of language, and these conditions are satisfied fairly easily, even when some events may be adverse. The functions that totemism fulfill are cognitive and intellectual: 'totems are not good to eat, they are good to think'. The problem of totemism disappears when we realize that all humans, at all points of time, are concerned with one or the other mode of classification, and all classifications operate using mechanisms of differentiation, opposition, and substitution. Totemic phenomena form one aspect of a 'general classificatory ideology'. If it is so, then the problem of totemism, in terms of something distinct that demands an explanation, disappears. Jenkins (1979: 101) writes: 'Totemism becomes analytically dissolved and forms one expression of a general ideological mode of classification.'

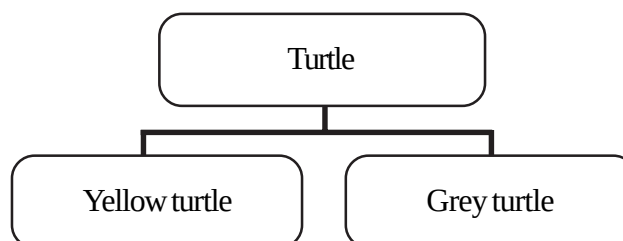
But it does not imply that totemism is static. Although the nature of the conditions under which totemism functions have not been stated clearly, it is clear from the examples that Lévi-Strauss has given that totemism is able to adapt to changes. To illustrate this, a hypothetical example may be taken up. Suppose a society has three clans totemically associated respectively with bear (land), eagle (sky), and turtle (water). Because of demographic changes, the bear clan becomes extinct, but the turtle clan enlarges, and in course of time, splits into two parts. The society faces this change in two ways. First, the same totemic association might be preserved in a damaged form so that the only classificatory/symbolic correlation is now between sky (eagle) and water (turtle). Second, a new correlation may be generated by using the defining characteristics of the species turtle to distinguish between two clans still identified with it. This becomes the basis for the formation of a new symbolic opposition. If, for example, colour is used, yellow and grey turtles may become totemic associations. Yellow and grey may be regarded as expressive of the basic distinction between day and night perhaps. A second system of the same formal type as the first is easily formed through the process of differentiation and opposition (see diagrams of the first and second systems below).

First System Three clans of a tribe



Second System





As is clear, the opposition between sky (eagle) and water (turtle) is split and a new opposition is created by the contrast of day (yellow) and night (grey). In this way, the problems caused by demographic imbalances (i.e., extinction of a clan or the enlargement of the other) are structurally resolved, and the system continues.

14.6 Conclusion

To sum up, totemic phenomena are nothing but modes of classification. They provide tribal communities with consciously or unconsciously held concepts which guide their social actions. Food taboos, economic exchanges and kinship relations can be conceptualized and organized using schemes which are comparable to the totemic homology between natural species and social characteristics. Lévi-Strauss (1962) also extends this analysis to understand the relation between totemism and caste system. Totemism is a relationship between man and nature. Similarities and differences between natural species are used to understand the similarities and differences between human beings. Totemism, which for people is a type of religion, is a way of understanding similarities and differences between man and nature. That is the reason why Poole says that with Lévi-Strauss, the problem of totemism has been laid to rest once and for ever. To quote Poole (p. 9):

If we talk about 'totemism' any more, it will be in ignorance of Lévi-Strauss or in spite of him.

14.7 Further Reading

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