

## **Unit 1**

# **Religion – Sociological Perspectives**

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### **Learning Objectives**

After studying the unit you should be able to:

- define the scope of religion;
- discuss the study of totems;
- describe economy and its relation with religion; and
- outline the rise of capitalism.

### **1.1 Introduction**

We have to get used to the idea that human societies have a long history, and the word sociology appeared only in the first half of the nineteenth century. Religion is as old as human societies have been in some form or the other; and human beings have reflected on the nature of religion for thousands of years. Man's quest for understanding nature and its forces with effects on his pursuits both in the positive and negative dimensions have been a part of his ways of feeling, thinking and acting for centuries. These have been worked upon elaborately and processes of religious practices developed in various forms. The great religions of the World had their beginnings in Asia and the part now included in Israel, China had its own variety. Such religions have their written texts, commentaries and rituals. These are parts of great civilizations. In addition non-literate peoples too had their own world view, defining the known and the unknown, and ways of dealing with them. In our school exercises in algebra, we used equations, and to know the relations among quantities not known definitely. We used to say, let this be X. The Value of X could vary with each specific calculation. If X is the age of the husband and wife is four years younger than the husband, and if the wife is of the age 25 years, then find the value of X can be posed as a question. Now it is easy to find the value of X, in this case 29 years. If the wife be 50 years of age, the value of X would then be  $50+4 = 54$  years. Thus human mind is busy finding the value of the unknown. That is of X. One of the anthropologists used this mode

of expression for understanding the nature of religion. He said it consists of X raised to the power of infinity, or  $X^\infty$ ; that is the unknown raised to the power of non-decipherable value. That is the idea of God, and the Hindu texts say that none can ever fully grasp His qualities. Krishna had to reveal the self to Arjuna, and that too when Arjuna's eyes had been given special treatment to be able to see the glare of 'the thousand suns'. All texts describe the Supreme Being as unknowable; and the pursuit for trying to understand Him as unending 'Neti Neti' "(or ever lasting)" 'Charaiveti Charaiveti'. Religion has a metaphysical base, what is true in it or what is its correct rendering or meaning are things that are discussed endlessly in religious discourses round the globe. What then Sociology, a subject of merely a century and three quarters in origin has to say on religion? Sociological understanding of religion takes two paths; (1) using the writings and explanations of religion given in the texts and practices of peoples by earlier writers as data, and (2) developing a perspective or a set of perspectives for understanding the central interest of sociological inquiries viz., the role of the religion in generating cooperation and conflict in society. Our effort is to acquire a minimum acquaintance of the institution and the process; the idea and practice of religion as a first step. In the second we use this information and relate it to social units, their interactions and consequences. Sociologists of religion do not become experts on religion; its intricacies and correctness of explanations belong to the activities that are covered under a different head. Theology, Sociology of religion can be practiced by sociologists belonging to any faith, or even no faith. In fact the most famous of the sociologists of religion thought of himself as an agnostic. We refer to Emile Durkheim of France. Sometimes this happens for other branches of studies too. The most well known writer on History of Human Marriages, Westermarck, to quote a class-room remark of Kingsley Davis, 'wrote on marriage throughout his life, and remained a bachelor throughout his life'. Hence, briefly again; sociology of religion, is not so much a study of religion, as it is about religion. It is a study of sociology and no religious expertise may be claimed for its practitioners or students. In this sense it is a secular enterprise. A proper understanding of it involves studying the relationship of society and religion in several societies and religions. Hence, in this course a familiarity with a number of religions will be acquired so that sociological processes could be studied under different situations. India having a multiplicity of religions provides additional scope for encompassing this variety almost ready at hand; but the contributions to the understanding of religion and society come from all parts of the world, and abstractions and theories arising from the same will be discussed throughout this course.

Here are a few statements: Identify which belong to the area of study of religion and which to Sociology of Religion:

- 1) Islam incorporates in itself teachings of the past Saints and faiths.
- 2) The Shia constitute the majority in the state of Iran.
- 3) Atman and Parmatama are in essence one.
- 4) Gurudwara is an important institution for guiding and organising collective activities among the Sikh.
- 5) The priest declares a young man and woman to live as husband and wife after the ceremony.
- 6) The Catholic have a lower rate of suicide than the Protestant.

(Statements: 1, 3 and 5 belong to Religion: 2, 4 and 6 to Sociology of Religion).

## 1.2 The Scope of Religion

Religion as a social force exerted influence in both the preliterate and literate societies. Its teachings and modes of worship got wide spread source of the early ways of remembering them consisted of hymns and poetic expressions that could be sung, at times in groups. These made religious performances attractive. A few story tellers could produce some dramatic effects in and through the *Hari Katha*. The devotional compositions of Nanak and Kabir were used to good effect. The ancient period had its *Shruti* and *Smriti* tradition. Life was nearer nature. Nature and its elemental forces become subject matter of these compositions, the Greeks and the Indian Thinkers even conferred divinity on nature. Groups of people began to identify themselves with the Sun, the Moon, and Fire as the *Kshattriya* lineages identified their ancestry. Among the tribals there were references to animals, like the Crow, the Eagle, the Kangaroo; in India, people used totemic connections with the Snake (*Nag*), Lion (*Singh*), deer (*Hiran*) etc. The totem represented the clan, or embodied its spirit. Water, air, earth, and fire were raised to that status, as also places like river, hills and mountains. So we have a *Kailash Parvat*, the sacred *Ganga*, and lakes with pious connections. In praise of these places, numerous songs and stories have come about. The great epics of India are described in various forms as the story of the Rama or Krishna; with ideas of good and evil, of gentleness and cruelty, of saints and devils expressed dramatically. Books embodying the quintessence of devotion and glory of God are composed in great literary styles. Almost everything worth knowing, preserving and being passed on from generation to generation seems to carry a religious flavour. Even discussions among the best of minds revolve round the true meaning and import of the text. Not surprising therefore the first formal schools took the form of mission schools, *madarsas*, or *ashrams* seminaries, and the intellectuals dealing with various forms of knowledge and its application come from such centres. Remembered knowledge, written and later published texts come into vogue. In and through these institutions developed grammar of various languages, styles of expression, methods of reasoning and elements of scientific pursuits. In a sense for the early man both pre literate and literate, things worth knowing about man and nature and the supernatural all combined into the broad sphere of religious enterprise, if one may use that phrase. In this sense also got described various social strata of society, the sense of public duties, and time place and persons got those associations. Religion was all pervasive, may the soul of society as Durkheim put it. Participation in collective activities generated a sense of group solidarity and a force different from unconnected actions.

## 1.3 Process of Knowledge

The process of knowledge as also of life began to develop along various dimensions with increasing division of labour and specialisations. We are all aware of the same in technical and technological matters; their multiplicity into academic pursuits dealing with diverse disciplines, branches, and sub-branches. Now religion is no longer the overarching feature of knowledge. It is possible for institutes of higher learning and technical skills to grow beyond the missionary fold. When this happens, religion itself becomes a specialised activity, so does its teaching and practice. Scientific growth in modern times got a fresh start with a series of discoveries by Newton, the law of gravity, laws of motion, and light are well known; and a scientific journal *Nature* appeared informing the scientists and general readers of the latest discoveries. The old saying

God said : "Let there be light, and there was light". was replaced by a statement that marked the top quote on the publication God said : "Let Newton be and all will be light" In humanities and philosophy there was a movement beginning with Renaissance two centuries earlier. In painting and art human figures could be depicted in their natural forms, common man become the subject matter of discourse. Divinity was withdrawn as the basis of legitimacy of rights of kings. Republican form of government in the formal and effective sense come into being. Sources of knowledge passed beyond seminaries and mission controlled institutions. Encyclopedias of knowledge appeared that summarized results of secular pursuits of knowledge. Humanism as an idea that put man at the centre of universe with the dictum 'Man is the measure of all things' grew as currency. The idea that God made man was reversed. Man's mental abilities had constructed the idea of God, or for that matter any idea, later writers thought, was a social construct. In this process of assertion of ideas and growth of specialisations, Religion, its theory and practice a encompassing our total knowledge. Even within Sociology, the theme sociology of Religion has grown into a specialisation that is offered as an optional course. Our next effort will be to see how have sociologists reflected upon religion and society.

### Box 1.1: Society and Religion

The relationship between society and religion is the central point in sociological studies of religion. Three dimensions can be traced:

- 1) Religion provides the overarching frame within which social life is organised and gives a meaning and value standards that guide social activities.
- 2) Religion is one of the major institutions of society that plays a defined and limited role in society.
- 3) Religion influences some aspects of social life, and in turn gets influenced by other sectors of life; and that there could be several aspects of life that are independent of religion and vice-versa.

There can be a set of inquiries that relate to time periods over which changes and modifications of the role of religion in society keep on occurring.

Durkheim (1859-1917) is foremost among twentieth century sociologists to have raised the issue of scientific approach to the nature of religion. Religion is found in all societies, primitive, medieval or modern. In primitive societies it is found in its simplest form. Developed societies are complex and religion too acquires complexities of ideas and procedures of worship. The simplest form is the purest he asserts, hence the essence of religion can be studied there. The difference between elements and complexes as used in chemistry would be useful here. A combination of the elements make for compounds and complexes, and in the last case properties of the elements are difficult to be separated. Hence for understanding the nature of something it is advisable to go to the elements and study their properties. Any social institution likewise can be understood the best at its most elementary form. The primitive societies contain the most elementary form of social life. Religion in such a society will then provide the elementary form of the institution, free from other influences or outgrowth. In this sense, such a study even through focused upon a single case would be sufficient to provide the picture of the purest form of religion. In that sense, one study would have the property of an experimental study.

Where could one locate such a society? On the island of Australia certain tribes were living before the British discovered that area. These people were illiterate. They could be studied on the basis of what early explorers wrote about them. Such accounts were available in the library in Paris. Durkheim used that material and produced a book with a title that in English can be described as *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. The Original in French was published in 1912 and was among his first works to be translated into English in 1915.

## 1.4 Study of Totems

Among the aborigines of Australia, the case of the ARUNTA tribal group attracted Durkheim's attention. These people were totemic in the sense that they considered themselves to be related to the spirits of plants and animals in such a way that they could be recognised by that connection. They would respect the totem animal, never harm it, organise public functions full of music and dancing in its honour; paint their faces and bodies to give the celebrations a look different from the ordinary. Some of the places associated with its movement too would be respected. In case, under very extraordinary circumstances, if they have to kill the animal, all sorts of excuses and public expressions of urgency or necessity would have to be enacted to convince people of the extraordinary contingency.

### Reflection and Action 1.1

Do you think that complex religions like Hinduism have any place for totemic thinking? Write down your answer and discuss with others.

In normal conditions, the tribe aligned itself with the spirit of the totem. The feeling of the group as a collection of people heightened the idea and sense of belongingness to a common totem. This was also defined as an exogamous group with no marriages occurring within it. The social definition got asserted with every collective activity. It is in this sense that Durkheim described these ceremonies and the spirit behind them as the soul of society (the group). It is in these celebrations and their contribution to the solidarity of the group that Durkheim said the essence of religion and its function for the society. Here was religion existing in full vigour among the simplest people, in its simplest form, its purest one, which did not worry even about the complex characterisation of God. Durkheim did not consider God to be an essential component of religion, and on this count even mentioned the case of Buddhism in support of his contention. A clarification is needed here. When Durkheim said that religion was the soul of society, and had the integrative function for society, the reference point was the simple society. He later clarified that religion began to amass all the body of knowledge of things worth knowing. Sciences developed later they began to interpret nature differently. A secular explanation of knowledge became possible. Schools and universities could grow outside the Church and he did visualize that the scope of explaining nature as well as human actions could increasingly become scientific and on that score of efficacy of religion as a power of explanation would decline.

## 1.5 The Secular Approaches

A few events and movements that preceded them need to be recalled. In the nineteenth century, Europe there was a general mistrust of the Jews;

and yet, they had great scholarly traditions and their material success had created a lot of jealousy against them which almost expressed itself in racial terms. In Germany quite a few scholars found their parents getting converted to Christianity; and the second, third generations of the like of Max Weber and Karl Marx found themselves in that category. Durkheim lived on the borders of France and Germany, and he too was brought up in a Jewish family. In his School days, this bright student was seen by others to becoming a trained priest. The loss of the territory to Germany in 1871 and of his father prompted Durkheim to move to Paris and he became an agnostic that is a person not practicing any faith. Thus his views on the nature of religions become even more significant. Secondly, after the defeat of France in the War. The despotic rule of Napoleon-II was brought to end, and the third Republic in France took shape. The Republic was normally opposed to the interests of the combined group of the monarchs and their families, the nobility and the Church. Hence there was a stake in making the Republican institutions of administration, army, and education qualitatively better than previous dispensations. Durkheim's help was taken to improve secular basis of education away from the control of the Church and as Professor of Education.

- a) he played his part in training qualified teachers; and
- b) in the field of sociology of promoting scientific studies of social phenomena. He had some views on the relative significance of science and religion in the explanation of social affairs of that a little later.

Among the writers towards the middle of the twentieth century. Merton commented upon the role of collective participation in the life of the tribal peoples, and the practices that seemingly appeared non-rational in terms of cause and effect, certainly acquired a significance when viewed in terms of their contribution to social solidarity. He thought this to be the latent function of religion. Merton further wondered if functional alternatives could be developed for religion, and whether communism itself shared the operational details of religious rituals.

Persons treated religion as a repository of the values of society (L). These provide the basis for legitimization of rules of conduct and discipline the very institution of law (I). Such modes of resolving disputes in a society enabled the polity to function and achieve common goals of the society (G); and these guided the manner in which the economy of the society got organised to make use of the natural resources through adaptation (A). In the famous paradigm of social system (A-G-I-L; the first activity is governed by the second, the second by the third, and the third by the fourth). It is to this last function (Latency) that religion belongs. In terms of sectors of a system, these are represented by economy, polity, legal arrangements, and Religion. Other set of writers have tried to look into the way religion and other specific aspects are related e.g., religion and economy, religion and polity, religion and legal arrangements.

## 1.6 Economy and Religion

Two views on the inter-relationship of economy and religion can be examined  
(i) that a concern with material welfare and this worldly development leads to a lack of interest or concern with other worldly matters that religion seems to promote. In this sense religion becomes gradually irrelevant to economic prosperity, or may even hinder the process of growth. Examples are given of the Asian religions, Hinduism, Islam and Confucianism where contentment with what one has got is emphasized

and blessings sought for either a better life in the next world or birth, or the day of judgement when the Almighty will seek a balance of deeds good or bad. Islam promotes the idea of making gifts of a proportion of income as zakat, forbids taking interest on loans, but allows profit sharing. These ideas have been taken to be not conducive to the growth of capital and its results. The Hindu view on the concern of better life in the next birth or the attainment of the *moksha* is considered to promote tolerance with existing set of circumstances not to try harder to earn more and lead a better material life in this world. On the other hand, a second view on religion holds that (2) the spirit of religion can encourage a man to work hard consider work as worship, earn more money, working for greater length of time, 'time is money' and go in for greater savings, money saved is money earned, and then make use of these savings for earning more 'money, that is converting it into capital'. Over a long period of time, material benefits, comforts and luxuries flow and the pleasures so defined are obtained in this world and this life itself. 'The heaven is brought to the earth' in this fashion. Among the Christians such an attitude is fully expressed in the Protestant sects, whereas the Catholics appears to be similar to other regions. In terms of paths to development, the protestants were found in the 19th century Germany itself to be going in more for studies in technologies and sciences, whereas the Catholics found greater satisfaction in humanities and arts. Such an examination of facts and reflection on the peoples attitudes towards material success paved the way of Max Weber (1864-1920) writing his famous treatise on *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (Eng. Tr. 1930). He had dealt with the role of civilisation in the shaping of human conduct which 'in western Europe and Western Europe alone' provided the basis of rational organization of life in all walks of which capitalism was a part. The time period he had in mind was the 19th Century, and the phenomenon he was trying to explain was the rise of capitalism. The facts of its early growth first in England, then in Holland and in Germany next in contrast to the late growth confirm his views seem to in other catholic countries like Spain, France, and Italy.

## 1.7 The Rise of Capitalism

The rise of capitalism and the corresponding decline in the significance of agriculture, and the transfer of surplus so generated for industrial growth are some of the common features to which prominent economists and social scientists of Europe had drawn attention. On this score Marx and Weber were treading on the same ground. The difference, however, got somewhat accentuated where Marx made a distinction between the basic structure and super structure of society. In the preface to the Critique of political economy, Marx mentioned that law, ethical standards, and their literary expositions were relative, in the sense that the social strata to which people belonged conditioned them. Religion too belonged to that sphere. Its role in society was clarified by Marx to be one where under difficult stresses and strains, man turned for solace to religion, which provided the last refuge for a tormented mind. This manner of dealing with a crisis was considered non-rational, a situation where one's creative faculties nearly went under sleep, as if taken over by opium a situation that does no grace to man and his human qualities. He saw in the people laying prostrate before a deity as the procession rolled on, as in the case of Jagannath of Puri, a surrender of human grace and merits. In a philosophy where man is the centre of the world, even the idea of God is treated as a social construct; and in Marxian perspective matter prevails over ideas. As such ideas, faiths, even legal systems follow the need for

sustaining material conditions of life, and cannot be treated as the driving force for economic transformation which Weber tried to establish. Marx belonged to the set of writers who would deny religion the central role for guiding rational human activity. On the other hand, those who accord religion the primacy in human conduct feel that scope of rational activities in life is limited, that questions of faith cannot be judged on the basis of reason and science, but faith and mystic experience hold the key to the understanding of religion. Max Weber's position is unique in the sense that he considers a particular form of religion to be the driving force of human efforts in the rational organisation of economy of a specific type of capitalism.

### **Box 1.2: Place of Religion**

What would be the place of religion in non-simple societies? The hold of organised religions on their followers during the middle ages has been commented upon by a host of historians and theologians. Effects of the spread of such religions to others peoples too talked about in case of Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam and Confucianism and Shintoism, besides their impact upon the tribal peoples. The two way process in which the great religions have also been affected by local religions has drawn attention of scholars. A few examples of the last process as it operated in India can be briefly mentioned.

G.S.Ghurye (1967) thought that the Mahabharata contained the essence of the Indian Society, that Sanskrit language was its clearest medium, and the brahmans the carriers of such a tradition (Inaugural Address to the 7th Indian Sociological Conference). In *Caste, Class and Occupation* he has traced the nature of the caste as it emerged through the Ages. Irawati Karve carried forward the analysis of Kinship Organisation in India from the Mahabharata days till the middle of the 20th century to trace continuities and modifications in the kinship organisation linking them to their regional spread. Folk tales and dramatic presentations and to the Sanskritic sources where they made sense. The Census Commissioner of India 1931, J.H.Hutton in his work *Caste in India* examined the pre-Aryan influences on the Hindu Social order and opined that the incorporation of tribal deities within the Hindu fold was best exemplified in Shiva being made of a part of the trinity, Later scholars have indicated how the Buddha was given the status of an Avtar within the Hindu cosmology.

## **1.8 Gods and Goddesses**

In the same context we may mention inclusion of a work in the curriculum of the open University in UK. *Gods of Heaven House of Gods— A Study of Popular Prints*, a work by an Indian Sociologist of Art O.P.Joshi (1994) written for a wider audience introducing the way popular prints mostly used in calendars and holy books have standardised the image and paraphernalia of objects associated with their worship. The initiatives taken by Raja Ravi Verma of Thiruananthpur at the turn of the 19th and beginning of 20th century are recalled in his oil coloured paintings depicting Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva, Ganpati, Gouri, Kali and the various Avatars of Vishnu, 89 such prints being brought out through lithograph printing press set up for the purpose. The prints became highly popular. The originals in bright oil paintings depicted gods and goddesses in dignified postures, amidst natural or courtly scenes, with aristocratic dress in quite a few cases.

## Reflection and Action 1.2

Do many gods and goddesses indicate that the religion is polytheistic not monotheistic? Discuss and note down in your notebook.

Later the popular prints covered scenes from puranic and epic stories, e.g., Krishna dancing on the Kalia nag, or Durga slaying Mahishasur and coronation of Rama etc. Scenes of Heaven and Hell, and personification of cosmic powers got depicted. Saints and *rishis* as well as political personalities also found the place. The pictures are used for sacred purposes at worship during festivals, and natural or courtly scenes and heroic deeds find a placement in drawing rooms. Modernised three dimensional versions are now printed in Shivkashi (Tamil Nadu) and Singapore. Brief introduction to Hindu religious sources are available for ready reference. The highly illustrative work with its colours and neat explanations has been found suitable by the Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK76RA, UK to be included among 'students text books' with permission to use in various formats for the staff and students for the course of world religions beginning 2006.

A different picture comes up when intensive studies are undertaken on a micro scale both in time and place and the way the interaction among different scales get attempted. Let us have a look into them briefly.

## 1.9 Ethnographic Accounts

The references to the works in the foregoing paragraph relate methodologically to the studies being attempted on a macro scale both in time and space, time from the Mahabharata or even earlier days to 20th century, and space covering India as a whole. Among the intensive studies conducted over a limited area in the twentieth century. Srinivas's work *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India* (1952) stands out as the path breaking one. He connects various social groups like the family, the caste, the village with certain deities specific to each, and mentions the public ceremonials associated with them in the nature of festivals. While these have been examined in the case of the coorg people, the contextual references make clear how some of the practices get related to Sanskritic sources and get modified in that direction. He calls this a process of sanskritization of rituals and behaviour which when adopted by a lower group becomes the medium through which the impure connections are given up and the pure ones as defined in the scriptures or by priests adopted. It is hoped that such a process of purification may ultimately lead to the removal of the stigma associated with the impure, and the group gain some upward mobility. Discussions on the concept have enlivened sociological deliberations for nearly a quarter of a century.

The question of links between the local traditions and their classical connections came to the fore as a group of Anthropologists from Chicago concentrated on the nature of Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilisation (Marriott 1955). Milton Singer examined Krishna Leela observations in the city of Madras (now Chennai) to see how the place and time of performance have become open or secular with theatre as a place, and any time of the year as a recreation programme. Mandelbaum commented on the same in the two volume studies of continuity and change. The idea of the pure and the impure no doubt traceable to Durkheim's classification of facts into the sacred and the profane, became central to the treatise on caste by Dumont: *The Homo Hierarchicus* (19). But back to Marriott who introduced the concept universalisation to the

process through which a local deity or a festival gets wider acceptance and incorporated into the greater civilisation; conversely the word Parodialization refers to the classical form getting local shape and meaning. In traditional Indian treatment of the subject, Poet *Tulsidas* continuously refers to a combination of the classical and the local forms through the words *Shastriya* and *Laukik*, the earlier one also called *Vidhi Purvak* or according to the prescribed procedure.

In relation to festivals and deities a classification has been evolved into (1) the All India (2) peninsular or regional and (3) the local spread. The upward and downward trends have been noticed and form exerting material for sociological inquiries. The rise of new centres and schools call for attention like the cult of *Sai Baba*, *Vaishnodevi*, or *Santoshi ma*, Society for Krishna consciousness have gained international stature, as also the *Gayatri Peeth*. The rise and fall of centres of alteration among the followers continues to be of interest to sociologists.

## 1.10 Conclusion

Max Weber's treatment of Hinduism as a religion concerned with the position of a person in the next birth and *moksha* in the final stage to the exclusion of efforts at gaining material rewards in this birth thereby holding the growth of economy along industrial capitalism have received sufficient notice. A phrase like 'a baniya cannot become a capitalist' got coined in the process to distinguish between non-rational and rational economic activities, a difference that related to tradition and modernity as two poles, that had earlier been described as systems based on custom rather than contract. The response of Indian Sociologists, particularly of Yogendra Singh, got articulated in the idea of continuity of tradition in the modern setting and others talked of modernising of tradition. Examples like electrification of temples, bureaucratic efficiency in temple management and sanskritizing items in media have been given to highlight the point. One sees cassettes and C.D.'s, serials ranging from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* to *Sai Baba*. The case of *charvak* philosophy with material emphasis, of specialised trading groups now excelling in management techniques, are also mentioned and a sort of a neutral statement summing up the inter-relationship of religion and economic growth in India arrived at by stating that religion is not a restrictive force in economic development and tradition and modernity coexist in the Indian setting.

## 1.11 Further Reading

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## Unit 2

# Anthropological Approaches

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### Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- discuss origin of religion theories;
- describe Durkheim and the sacred;
- see religion as a cultural system; and
- outline the Marxist viewpoint.

### 2.1 Introduction

Religion of the non-western societies was a matter of great scholarly preoccupation when social anthropology was established as a separate discipline at Oxford University. The roots of social anthropology were in the works of earlier scholars whose goal was to establish a scientific or scholarly study of human institutions in a comparative perspective. The primary objective of most of these studies was to look at the origin and evolution of social institutions and how human societies could be arranged on a scale of progressive evolution. Informed by the biological theory of evolution, these scholars were convinced that one could unravel the sequence of development of human institutions from their origin. The final stage in the process of evolution was always the European civilisation of nineteenth century Europe, the civilisation to which most of the scholars belonged.

In their search for origins the scholars looked into such societies as they considered the most primitive, which in terms of social evolution had transformed the least from their original stage of becoming human. The clue to identifying the most archaic of societies was either to look for those that still preserved what was recognised as a stone-age technology or those that seemed by appearance and habits the farthest removed from European civilisations. The student might be familiar with the stages of evolution put forward by the classical evolutionists namely scholars such as E.B. Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan.

The reason why in the initial stages of anthropological theory formulations, religion and kinship were the institutions that received the most attention

was that these were the only institutions that existed in some kind of identifiable forms in the so called primitive societies. In other words one could say that such people had a religion because one could see some forms of deities, modes of worship and faith. Even to give a basic definition of religion that would encompass much of what was universal across most of human societies was a problem for the early scholars. However, their main concern was to identify how religion had originated, the reasons for its existence and to trace a course of its development from archaic origins into the monotheistic form that characterizes civilized societies. Although many of the scholars believed that their own religion, Christianity, actually represented the truth, yet the anthropological approach to the study of religion is essentially atheistic as it does not look upon religion as revealed truth but as a human institution largely originating in human volition. Such a point of view could have developed from the scholar's reluctance to give "primitive" beliefs, the status of revealed truths that he may have given to his own religion.

The question that was raised primarily at this point of time was, why does every human group have something resembling religion even though it is not something essential to the basic conditions of human existence, like having shelter, food or even sex. Thus in many ways the very fact of having religion was tied up to the fact of being human. Even though humans were in the last analysis animals, yet they had a certain superior trait, the capacity for reflective thought, to think beyond their conditions of physical existence, to look for something transcending the material world. Primarily it was this thinking and questioning nature of humans to which most of the theories of origin of religion were directed. Such theories were based on a completely different paradigm from the theological approach that begins with the establishment of the sacred as a given truth. Let us have a look into some of anthropological theories of the origin of religion and the theoretical assumptions on which they are based.

## 2.2 Origin Theories

The origin theories of religion were not based on tangible data as available for biological or other physical sciences. There were no fossils or material evidence that could indicate beliefs. The only tangible things that indicated that there were some forms of worship or beliefs were in form of cave paintings or some figurines etc. But none of these could tell what the people were thinking and religion was definitely something in the realm of beliefs. Thus to get to origins one had to devise a methodology and for Edward Tylor (known as the father of social anthropology and credited with giving the first comprehensive anthropological definition of religion) it was the Psychic unity of mankind. What Evans-Pritchard has called, "If I were a horse "hypothesis. Informed by the intellectual climate of those times the scientific community believed strongly that humans were one species and in spite of morphological or other cultural differences were identical in their capacity for thought and intellectual reasoning. Thus Tylor, put himself in the place of the early human assumed to be endowed with reflective capacities, in order to decipher his thinking. Tylor reflected on the thoughts that would occupy the attention of the early man, the most. And to Tylor, the two phenomena that would be most thought provoking were the phenomenon of death and dreams. No doubt these are the two phenomena that may appear to intrigue humans even today but certainly to the early man they would be clothed in mystery.

Early man would have wondered what happens when a person dies? How come a talking, walking person suddenly becomes inert? Again what happens to a person in dream? How come even while the body appears to be inert,

a person experiences many journeys, meetings with people and activities that is apparently not done by him/her in physical form. From these reflections arose the belief in a spirit body, the belief in soul. Thus the soul or the unseen part of the body would also be endowed with power and the animate dimension of existence. It was this soul that made a person walk and talk. When the body is asleep the soul goes on its own journeys, meets people and acts in various ways. But the separation of soul from gross body is temporary in sleep. When we wake up it marks the return of the soul to the material body. But at the time of death, the separation is final. The soul never returns and the body, of no consequence without the soul just rots away.

Now this soul was also endowed with power, the power of animation and it was also not a tangible material thing belonging to the realm of the natural world. It was supernatural, over and above the natural. Thus through their powers of observation and thinking primitive humans came to believe in the existence of supernatural beings or souls, and this to Tylor was the basic definition of religion as well. All other dimensions of religion according to him arose out of this basic belief in soul or supernatural being that was also the first form of religion or Animism.

From Animism rose many other aspects of religion. For example, Tylor explains that the ritual of sacrifice, so widespread in all cultures also arises from a belief in soul. The process of sacrifice entails the separation of the soul from the body and the latter is directed towards certain goals. Thus the practice of sacrificing servants and even wives, horses and soldiers of a ruler was to enable all these people to accompany the dead man and to serve him as they had served him in material life. Such customs were widespread in China, among the Vikings and also in Egypt. The belief in heaven and hell and also in an after life are all linked to the idea of a soul. Since the soul is not visible and does not die it must have some destination, from there arises the belief in heaven or an after-world. Since the souls of the ancestors have the same character as them, in many cultures ancestors are looked upon as guardians and also kept appeased.

Herbert Spencer, also a scholar of the same mould, explained religion as arising out of a fear of ghosts. Rather than crediting primitive man with much reflective thought like Tylor, he said that they were simply frightened by the concept of a ghost. To keep them appeased they converted the ghosts of powerful men into deities and worshipped them and in the process managed to create a pantheon of Gods and Goddesses. Max Mueller, the famous linguist looked towards language for the origin of religion. His theory was that primitive man must have been in great awe of the splendours and wonders of the phenomena of nature. His entire being must have been awe struck to look at the moon, the sun and the storm and the floods. To express himself he must have used language that carried tropes and similes, as he could not have expressed the extraordinary emotions instilled into him with ordinary language. Thus awe struck by the sun's journey across the sky the early humans may have described him like a charioteer driving several horses, or looking at the splendour of the moon's beauty must have likened it to a beautiful maiden. However, over a period of time such language use must have become corrupted and what was earlier used only as a simile would have been converted to a reality. Thus instead of saying that the moon was *like* a beautiful woman, it would have become that the moon is a beautiful woman and since she is obviously not ordinary, she must be endowed with divine powers.

Other anthropological theories of origin of religion include the theory of Animatism and Mana. According to this theory that is similar to animism, not every one has a belief in anthropomorphic concepts of soul or spirits.

Some cultures have no concept of supernatural beings in human or animal form but may believe in some diffuse power that is found in greater and lesser degrees in various objects. Sometimes referred to as Mana such power or energy may be responsible for making some beings more powerful than others. Since this kind of energy can be acquired some magical practices may be directed towards acquiring this energy or power. Thus if a man is very good hunter he may have more Mana in him than others. However, some other persons through his or her magical practices may deprive or take away this Mana from him. Also there might be ways of acquiring such powers. Thus the story of Samson who had power in his hair is a good illustration of how there can be Mana in some special thing, even a part of one's body.

Another theory of origin is Naturism. According to this the genesis of religious beliefs is in the forces of Nature, as they are perceived by humans to be like humans. This anthropomorphic representation of nature can also be seen as an extension of animism. In their contemplation of nature humans could have regarded each natural phenomenon to have a soul and characters like humans. Thus among the Andaman islanders the two monsoon winds are regarded as husband and wife. The more steady and beneficial winds are male and the capricious and destructive winds are female. The representation of earth as mother or female and the sky as father or male is also very widespread.

As we shall see the theories of origins of religion were based on speculation. Many different explanations could be given for the same phenomenon and there was no proof except the deductive logic of the scholar as to the truth of these statements.

However, the definition of Tylor of religion as "belief in supernatural beings" is still valid and so is his definition of a kind of religious practices as Animism. Wherever we have belief in spirits and forces of nature the people and the culture is usually designated as Animistic. But the sequence of religious beliefs as stretching from Animism to Monothiesm is no longer acceptable. More acceptable is to believe that all religions have some elements of some kinds of beliefs including that of magic. Beginning from the early period however, the differentiation of Magic and religion was a major contribution of anthropological theories although the approach to the study of both varied considerably as theoretical approaches succeeded one another.

Most of the theories of the origin of religion apart from being evolutionary in character were also designated as the psycho-cultural theories as many of them traced the origin of religion in the deep recesses of the human mind, in the human psychological responses to the phenomenon of nature and to the facts of life and death. This was in the absence of any kind of field data and only secondary sources could be accessed and these provided only a deductive process of reasoning to the arm-chair anthropologists of that time. However, the contribution of these scholars was to treat religion as an institution like any other institution of society, to give it a non-theological character and to attempt to rationalize it by truths that were outside of the philosophical realm of absolute truths.

## 2.3 Magic and Religion

One of the most powerful theories of religion put forward in the early phase of anthropological thinking was by James Frazer, whose immense collection of myths, folklore and religious beliefs. The Golden Bough has been considered a classic of thoughts and practices of non-western religions.

Frazer, like Tylor, believed that there was no difference in the reasoning or rationality of humans across the ages. Like all evolutionists he too liked to put things in an evolutionary or stage- by- stage perspective. To him the earliest stage of human existence is marked by Magic, then comes Religion and then comes Science. Frazer also made a comprehensive analytical distinction between magic and religion, something not done before. To him magic and science are alike in being pragmatic and both do not contain the esoteric philosophical content of religion.

### Box 2.1: Magic and Religion

Some of the differences between Magic and religion as understood by Frazer can be summed as below:

<i>Magic</i>	<i>Religion</i>
This worldly	Other- worldly
Pragmatic	Non- pragmatic
Based on knowledge	Based on faith
Rational	Irrational
Seeks to control	Seeks to propitiate
Action	Prayers

Thus the earliest man was very aware of his needs and requirements and sought to control nature in order to fulfill his needs just like we do in the age of science. Thus magic does not believe in prayers but in action that is directed towards controlling nature and not appeasing her. Religion to Frazer also contains some superior mental values that one does not expect to find among the primitives. These superior values are to be found among the civilised people only. But his rationality was the same, thus where Tylor had used the concept of psychic unity and had tried to come to an understanding through the process of empathy. To Frazer, one can unearth the working of the primitive mind by assuming it follows the same principles of logic as modern humans and like modern scientists who look for cause and effect relationships or causal connection between phenomenon in order to explain them; the magician too looks for causal connections in order to control the phenomenon. This he describes as Sympathetic Magic. In the absence of efficient tools of modern science to establish the real causal relationships based on scientific investigations, the primitive man used his logic of associational causality, based on the common folklore of like affects like. There were two kinds of likeness or associations that can lead to a cause and effect relationship; the Law of sympathy and the Law of Contagion. According to the first, a morphological resemblance can be indicative of a causal relationship and according to the second, close physical proximity can lead to a causal relationship.

Thus to take an example of the first, many people believe that there is an association between jaundice and yellow things either in a positive or negative association. Thus while some folk beliefs forbid the eating of yellow things in jaundice some might advocate the use of yellow flowers etc. to cure the disease. Similarly many primitive magical beliefs believe that parts of a person's body like hair or nail parings can be used to harm a person. Since these have been in close contact with a person they have the power to affect the person. Many cultures require people to be very careful in the disposal of their bodily waste products including hair and nails. Also we have the famous instance of the Voodoo dolls that tell that an image of a person can be used to directly affect the person in a

negative way. Again some cultures are extremely cautious in letting people make any kind of images of them including photography.

Frazer equated magic with primitive science and put religion as a set of higher values that humans acquired only after gaining a few steps in the ladder of cultural evolution. In other words, although Frazer agreed with Tylor that there was no difference in the intelligence and rationality of humans in different stages of cultural evolution yet he was not ready to accord superior moral values and a capacity for spirituality to the primitive man. The picture of a brutish and less refined ‘primitive’ continued throughout his *magnum opus*, The Golden Bough. At the last stage of human social evolution Frazer advocated for the emergence of science as the dominant mode of thinking as in the present (that is nineteenth century) for him.

Spirituality would be replaced by rational thinking based on the acquisition of superior technology that would enable humans to perceive the right causal relationships rather than the false ones as in Magic. Thus modern western medicine would tell people correct reasons for falling ill as well as the right cures.

However, the positivism and faith is a scientific methodology continued in to the next era of anthropological theory building that professed to have done away with the ‘eurocentrism’ and bias of the evolutionists.

## 2.4 Durkheim and the Sacred

The major criticism of the structural-functional school was directed against what they considered the ‘ethnocentrism’ of the previous generation of scholars. The new generation that emerged at the beginnings of the twentieth century were convinced that there were no superior or inferior cultures, that all cultural institutions had their own functions in the own contexts and that it was wrong to grade religions or any other cultural traits as high or low. Thus Evans-Pritchard reframed Frazer’s grading of Science, Religion and Magic as Religion, Science and Magic where although religion and magic had more importance in earlier times, the importance of science increase with contemporary times. Yet all three are present in every stage of human society.

Later generations of anthropologists sometimes took the separation of the categories seriously, emphasizing the pragmatic nature of magic as against the esoteric and other worldly nature of religion, sometimes they disregarded the separation altogether. It was realised by many that this was perhaps a division not universal and also that elements of both kinds of reasoning may be present in what is considered religion and what is considered magic. Thus one may go to Church or the temple to request for a this worldly boon, like getting good marks in the examination or wealth; the magician may be brought in to perform a ritual for the general well being of the community or to exorcise evil.

### Reflection and Action 2.1

In your consideration what is the relationship between religion science and magic? Discuss and note in your diary.

But the work that had the greatest influence on scholarly thinking about religion and its separation from magic was Emile Durkheim’s Elementary Forms of Religious Life, a book that has almost become the bible for anthropological/sociological studies of religion. Like every one else of his

times Durkheim too began his career as an evolutionist. The title of his study itself suggests that his intention in studying the religion of the Australian Aborigines was to look for the most primitive form of religion, in other words he too began with a search for the original form of religion and its genesis. Like many others, including Sigmund Freud, Durkheim too believed Totemism to be the most primitive and original form of religion. However, his work went much beyond a search for origins when he put up a comprehensive theory of the functions of religion especially of rituals in simple societies.

Durkheim showed through his analysis of the totemic rituals that collective rituals serve to bring about the 'collective consciousness', the "We" feeling of belonging to a group or a community. Moreover, the notion of the sacred character of the totem that is also the ancestor of the clan makes the human descendants get a feeling of sharing in the nature of the sacred, thereby bringing about what Durkheim calls the 'moral community', a community that is one in its sharing of the sacred substance of the ancestor. Since the totemic ancestor is sacred, the totem that is the animal representative of the ancestor is also sacred, and the human descendants are sacred too. Because they are sacred they need to be morally responsible. Thus the acts of the humans voluntarily conform to the rules of the community and the rules of the community although clothed in sacred terms are actually those rules that must be conformed to if the community is to maintain its social solidarity or in other words survive as a group.

Thus, for example, the prohibition against marrying into the same totemic clan actually is essential to maintain the identity of the clan as solidarity of men and women descended from the same ancestor. The periodic totemic rituals also help reaffirm this social solidarity and to revive the collective consciousness. Thus ultimately in worshipping the totemic ancestor the people are worshipping society itself. The ultimate contribution of Durkheim was not to show that totemism is a primitive and original religion but that it was no different from any other religion as all religions have the same identity that is based in the community of believers or the moral community. Durkheim calls this the Church; the congregation of people sharing the same set of beliefs regarding the sacred.

It is this Church that according to Durkheim sets religion away from magic for magic does not necessarily involve the community or the collective. It may be performed individually for individual gain. Moreover, magic is more in the realm of the profane than in the realm of the sacred.

The magician unlike the priest is also not holding a formal office that is marked by approval of the community. He may be often working for a profit like any other professional. To Durkheim the very nature of magic is different from that of religion is that it does not have elements of what is considered sacred.

The sacred is defined as something set apart and forbidden, it has elements of the dangerous as well as the unexplained. The nature of the profane is pragmatic as well as based upon reason, the nature of the sacred is both esoteric and not supported by any reason. While the profane is justified by knowledge, the sacred is only matter of faith. It is entirely based upon belief. Therefore, the existence of the Church is so important for it is this community that lends credence to set of beliefs by its faith. Otherwise the sacred is neither supported by knowledge nor by proof. For example, all religions have their myths of origin that are only believed in by faith of the believers. They have no scientific backing or support of material proof. Even the sacred nature of say, a temple or a deity or stone or a river, is

only a matter of shared beliefs. Because all Hindus believe in the sacred nature of the river Ganga they belong to the same moral community, because all Christians believe in the virgin birth of Jesus they belong to the same Church.

Although Durkheim is regarded as the father of sociology his influence was considerable over the British anthropologists and the works of A.R. Radcliffe Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski are best examples of theories of the functions of religion.

However, neither Radcliffe-Brown nor Malinowski were very keen to draw a line between magic and religion. Based on their own field experiences they added their own analytical dimensions to the notions of the sacred and the magical.

## 2.5 Functional Interpretation of Religion

Radcliffe-Brown has added the notion of Taboo to his notion of the sacred. The word Taboo or Tabu is a Polynesian word that Radcliffe-Brown learnt during his fieldwork in this region. It applies to all things that are considered ritually dangerous. However, as Radcliffe-Brown has explained the notion of Tabu has nothing to do with the concept of good or bad or even holy; in fact among the Polynesians such notions are completely absent. The sacred nature of anything has to do with its ritual value and the danger lies in the changes in ritual value that may occur as a result of contact with anything of greater ritual value. Thus a corpse is as much a thing of taboo as is a sacred area like a temple. Both are tabooed because of their ritual value and ritual state.

To Radcliffe-Brown the function of all taboos as of all rituals had to do with the contribution they made to social solidarity. For example, in Polynesia a number of taboos (do's and don'ts) are imposed on the expectant mother and on her husband and a range of immediate kin such as sisters, brothers, parents of the expectant couple. Now as normally expected it is only the would-be-mother who has a biological and therefore psychological involvement with the child to be born. All other persons who have a social relationship with the unborn child are not likely to feel the same kind of bonding with it as they do not experience the fact of birth with their bodies. The function of taboos would be to make the kin, especially the father, aware of his social involvement in the birth of his child. Thus the taboos make people conscious of their kinship and social status even when they are not biologically aware. Some other practices such as that of *couvade* where the father fakes the physical symptoms of child-birth have the same function. They indicate that the father's role is more important than that of the mother although it is she who is physically giving birth it is the father who is becoming the more significant parent.

Radcliffe-Brown's analysis of rituals followed the same pattern as that of Durkheim. The collective participation on common rituals has the function of reminding people that they belong to the same group or community. The repetitive nature of rituals is thus linked to the fact that each time the ritual is repeated the sentiments associated with the ritual are reaffirmed and strengthened. Thus the performance of annual rituals has the outcome of maintaining social solidarity. The rituals also emphasize the significance of important social relationships and social events like marriage, death, initiation into adulthood and birth of a child. Each of those events that have great social implications are marked by public rituals; like the birth of a child means the addition of a new member to society, the death of a person means the passing away of a member of

society. In case the society is hierarchical the celebration of such rituals related to the life-cycle of important individuals also indicate social rank as well as contributes towards upholding such a rank e.g., the elaborate funerals of kings. Thus both Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown saw the meaning of religion reflected in society. However, Malinowski's point of view was a little different. To him function was centered to some extent around the psychological needs of the individual, although in his classic work *Coral gardens and their Magic*, he shows how the rituals conducted by the shaman serve the practical purposes of regulating gardening activities.

To Malinowski both magic and religion belong to realm of the mystical, the occult and the traditional. He traces the existence of magic to the belief in mana and also believes that it is the concept of mana and not animism that is the essence of religion in primitive societies. Criticizing Tylor's concern with reflective thought Malinowski is more ready to treat early man as practical and early forms of religion and magic as serving practical ends both at the individual and at the group level.

However, the main difference according to him between religion and magic is that the former is directed towards a divinity and spiritual experience that is an end in itself. Thus if a religious ceremony is performed to celebrate the birth of a child it is an end in itself as it celebrates the addition of a new member in the community, and may be an expression of gratitude towards a divinity. But if a ritual is performed to cure a sick child it is goal oriented in that it is directed towards some future achievement, namely the good health of the person for whom the ritual is performed.

According to Malinowski, the performance of magic serves an universal function, namely to provide a means of bridging the gap between uncertainty and success. Malinowski differs from Frazer in designating magic as primitive man's science. As far as science is a body of real knowledge and indicates the actual causal relationships between phenomenon that enables humans to survive and get a livelihood from their environment, all communities have a solid base of such practical knowledge. Thus the tribes know the real knowledge of cultivation, of soil types, of seeds, of how to plan gardens, of how to make canoes, of how to navigate etc.; without such real knowledge no people would be able to actually survive. However in spite of making the best efforts at planting the garden, to manure it, to weed and apply every known technology of getting a good crop a person is haunted by the fear of crop failure. In spite of making the best canoe, of having the best knowledge of navigation, of experience, every sailor faces the sea with a degree of uncertainty, of not knowing what will happen? All practical acts among the tribal people are interwoven with ritual acts of magical performance, of making offerings, of chanting spells and so on.

### **Box 2.2: Belief in Magic**

Now the primitive man has never separated the two dimensions of his life. To them the magical acts are as important as the practical acts of planting the gardens or going for fishing. But what is achieved by these magical acts is that they come in exactly at that point at which the practical knowledge fails. They cover up for those areas of uncertainty that are assured for by the practice of technical knowledge. Thus by making appropriate magical spells the gardener doubly ensures that he will get a good crop; he has used his practical skills as well as performed the magical rites. Malinowski is quite critical of the view of

Frazer, that primitive man has no real scientific knowledge. On the basis of his fieldwork experience among the Trobrianders, he knows that they know very well that gardens cannot grow by magic alone or that canoes can not be made by supernatural means.

He distinguishes magic from religion not by its methods but by its goals. The goals of religion are pious and those of magic are profane.

Another important contribution made by him to the study of religion and magic is the recognition of the individual's involvement in the rituals as an individual just as in the higher or universal religions. Although all rituals are conducted in public and involve group sentiments they can not be reduced to the collective entirely; for even while they may involve the collective they may be directed at the individual, to help them get over anxieties or grief. Sometimes the participation in group rituals may enable an individual to transcend his grief or anxiety. Thus private grief at the loss of a loved one is mitigated when the person or persons directly involved or closest to the dead person participate in group rituals that for one gives them a sense of sharing of their grief by others and also in the process of public performance of rituals they are able to transcend their grief and be consoled. In case of embarking on a hazardous activity like long distance fishing again participation in a group ritual may give a feeling of 'we are all in it together' and bring about confidence and a positive mind-set.

Thus Malinowski was able to steer his analysis of magic and religion beyond its reductionism to the "collective". He weaves integration between the individual and the group, giving importance in his functionalism to both. Going a little further he tries to explain why the people believe and continue to believe in magic even though it may not work. In addition to the psychological effects of creating a positive attitude the belief in magic stems from it being primordial. Magical beliefs have not been created in any one's memory; they have always been there. Moreover, there are myths that tell how they originated and also tell of their efficacy. They are also associated with powerful people, people for whom the magic worked so that they became great. Malinowski's analysis reflects to large extent his contact with real living people and therefore it is shown of much of the speculation that marked the earlier theories regarding religion.

Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski were followed by many other works of the functions of religion in simple societies. Important ones among them are the analysis of the functions of witchcraft among the Azande, by Evanspritchard, Clyde Kluckhohn's analysis of Witchcraft among the Navaho, an analysis of Nuer religion by Evanspritchard and M.N.Srinivas's study of the Coorgs. A very large number of studies were also devoted to the study of rituals and their functions in society; notably the work done by Gluckmann to show how rituals of rebellion actually served to maintain social order and those of Turner and Leach that looked into the symbolic dimensions of life cycle rituals such as initiation. In fact in the later part of the modernist era, symbolism became a central area of study related to religion.

## 2.6 Religion as a Cultural System

One of the most influential work on religion in anthropology is that of Clifford Geertz who ushered in a new generation of anthropologists interested in the symbols and the meanings associated with religion and rituals and moving beyond functional reductionism. To Geertz, human beings live within a system of meanings that is the culture of any group. All dimensions of human life are constructed through symbols that make sense only within the system of meaning of which they are a part.

In his own words he is interested in developing what he calls the “cultural dimension of religious analysis”. Culture is defined by him as “an historically transmitted patterns of meaning 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 towards life”.

Unlike the functionalists who concentrated on action, explaining the action through the way people thought about them; Geertz is primarily rooted in the deductive process of thinking about phenomenon, giving secondary place to the action that follows a particular state of mind that in turn is dependent on the powerful meanings emanating from the symbols. His view of religion is purely esoteric and supra-organic. He posits a circular relationship between a world-view and a way of life; because people have a particular view of the world they prefer to live a kind of life that in turn upholds the worldview by its practices.

However, the symbols are real and tangible and are representative of all the beliefs and meanings present in the culture. Religion is thus defined by Geertz as the 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 conception with such an aura of factuality that 5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

### Reflection and Action 2.2

What is a Symbol? How is it different from icon? Discuss and note down in your notebook.

In other words through the religious symbols whose power lies in their representing some of the most fundamental values of the people of that culture conditions are created that led to the performance of practices and acts that may be termed religious in content but that may have large ranging social significance; like people waging a holy war carrying flags that symbolize their religious meanings. The presence of the flag stirs powerful emotions and sets the moods for action. To Geertz the term ‘moods’ is static in content for in itself it does not lead to action but it sets the stage for acquiring a ‘motivation’ that is certainly action oriented. Moreover, the religious symbols makes sense only within a particular value system. Thus a saffron flag may stir emotions only in the people to whom this colour is linked to a larger system of meanings and it is this linking to this system of meanings that is responsible for the creation of powerful emotions.

An important point raised by Geertz is that while the symbol itself is abstract in nature, it is intrinsically linked to a way of life that is identical to the values represented by it. Thus the values practiced by the initiate in a vision quest are the same values by which s/he lives. The disposition that a symbol creates may not always be translated into action but it remains a potential source of action. Thus when we say a person is pious, it is not to say that she is always praying but that she would pray or is expected to pray. Thus s/he defines a “motivation” as a “chronic inclination” to perform certain actions not necessarily the actual performance.

The function that Geertz visualizes for religion is the imposition of some sort of order on reality, to drive away a sense of chaos, an assurance that “God is not mad”. And he is able to identify the three points at which

human capacity of interpretability tends to break down and the three points at which religion comes to the rescue to provide a meaning where no other source is so equipped. These are, first, at the limits of human analytical capacities, when it appears that no knowledge would provide an explanation. For example, how can one explain that while in an earthquake most people died, a baby of few months is able to survive or perhaps why a person died of lung cancer who has never smoked a cigarette in her entire life. Second, at the limits of the power of endurance, that is when suffering seems unbearable, religion can not make the suffering go away but it can provide an explanation that makes it bearable. Thus at the height of poverty one may be told that the gates of heaven are open only for the poor thus making even crushing poverty somewhat bearable. Third, at the limits of the power of moral insight or the problem of evil that assaults most of every day when we see the bad person thriving and the good person suffering. It is such 'chaos' or moral unreason from which only religion can rescue us by providing an explanation that 'he will suffer in the next life'.

Thus religion comes to the rescue when we are at the end of our explanatory apparatus and the power of religion lies in that it does not look for explanation in rationality but in faith, in the acceptance of things as they are. Thus the functions of religion lie in the cognitive rather than in the practical realm. It helps at look at the world in a particular way, a way that is less traumatic for our sensibilities; in this way Geertz is critical of Malinowski's reduction of all religion to practical sense.

Thus in primarily focusing on cognitive processes Geertz gets close to the psychological dimension in his analysis especially with regard to the moods and motivations. However, it is Melford Spiro who gets into a more elaborate definition as well as understanding religion that include both the cultural and psychological dimensions.

## 2.7 Defining Religion

Beginning from a criticism of Durkheim's definition of religion having to do with the sacred Spiro criticizes the concept of sacred as having no substantive content as "sacred" is anything that a society may deem as sacred. He disagrees also with Durkheim who does not consider "belief in supernatural beings" as a sufficient definition of religion as for one many simple people do not distinguish between the natural and the supernatural and also some religions especially Buddhism does not believe in any supernatural being at all. Spiro believes for a phenomenon as diverse and as diffuse as religion only an intra-cultural intuitive definition would do; and that for him is the 'belief in superhuman beings who have the power to help or harm humans'. Thus even though Theravada Buddhism may not believe in superhuman beings, yet the followers of this religion certainly believe in superhuman beings of one kind or the other, like the *nats* in Burma. Even Buddha can be considered in the category of a super human being for he is worshipped and certainly not regarded as an ordinary human being. The existence of a God conceptualised as God in the Judeo-Christian tradition need not be universal but the fact remains that people who follow Buddhism follow the teachings of the Buddha just as they follow the teachings of Jesus Christ in Christianity. The Buddha is also believed to influence positively the well-being of his followers.

Spiro is also not in agreement with Malinowski regarding the spiritual or other -worldly nature of religion; citing many universal religions as being 'this worldly' including Confucianism and some aspects of Hinduism. But superhuman beings are universally regarded as the medium for attaining

both this worldly and other-worldly goals, depending upon whatever it is that is prioritised in the culture.

Spiro regards religion as a cultural institution like any other and defines it as "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings". The interactions that mostly manifest themselves as rituals consist of those activities that are done in consistency with the value system of the superhuman beings and those that are directed towards pleasing or propitiating them for the benefit of the human believers. The superhuman beings are culturally postulated and find their validity through the collective belief system.

Spiro attempts to explain the existence of religion on two accounts, firstly the search from the grounds on which religious propositions are believed to be true and secondly the search for the basis for belief in superhuman beings, in other words why such a belief should exist in the first place and what sustains this belief.

Thus every religion has a cognitive dimension in that it believes in some kind of superhuman beings and also of a relationship of the human to the super human world. However, why there should be such beliefs can be traced to both Emile Durkheim and to Sigmund Freud and in both cases the primary causative factors are psychological in nature. For Durkheim the belief in God can be traced to the dependence on the collective and for Freud such a belief can be traced to the projection of the nuclear family relationships also arising from dependency.

But religion is not only a set of cognitive propositions about the nature of the cosmos, it also consists of a set of practices that are directed towards these cognitively constructed beings. But all practice being purposive in nature, all religious practices exist because they must be fulfilling some needs. For Spiro, the word need refers to both sociological wants and psychological desires. However, the need in itself does not produce action but the desire for its fulfilment. A need must acquire a motivational character before it translates itself into action. Spiro is critical of those scholars who put the unintended consequence of any action as its cause. Even if religious behaviour leads to social solidarity, the actors are not engaging in worship or rituals because they see the purpose of their action as culminating in social solidarity. The causes of the religious practices are in the final analysis to be traced to some need in the actor and the desire for its fulfilment.

Spiro categorizes the desires that lead to religious behaviour into three types; cognitive, substantive and expressive and the corresponding functions of religion can be called adjustive, adaptive and integrative. The first one refers to the desire for knowledge and religious explanations provide meaning for all kinds of unexplainable phenomenon. Here it must be made clear that one must distinguish between the unexplained and the unexplainable. Thus the former may be traced to lack of knowledge of a attainable kind, like if one does not know how to repair one's car one can learn; the knowledge itself is available. But for some other things no tangible system of explanation is available.

The substantive desires are those of which the actor is aware and in fact his/her motivation for religious action is exactly this; what is desired, like rain or fertility or wealth. However, even the substantive desires may be those for which no pragmatic source of fulfilment is available. Like if a person is suffering from cancer and wants to get over the suffering s/he may turn to religion when all possible medical care fails to be effective. The efficacy of such beliefs may be affirmed by the psychological states

that they bring about; like a patient may feel actual relief from pain through prayers.

The last set of needs, namely the expressive ones rooted to begin within the psychological sphere; they refer to anxieties, painful drives and fears by which people are plagued and for which there may not be any rational explanation. Since religious behaviour often provides the sublimation of these psychological drives they provide the unconscious basis for the existence of religious beliefs. However, Spiro concedes that although the drives may be psychological in nature they are produced by society that is by the nature of social relationships.

The one aspect in which Spiro differs radically from the functionalist explanations of religion is that he identifies the reasons for the existence of religion, not in its functions, for that makes the explanation teleological, but in its causes. And these causes are for the most part to be found in the deep recesses of the psychology of human beings. In fact these causes can only be indirectly related to society, as society (and religion is a social institution) is a means for fulfilment of desires, not a cause for their existence. Thus if religion, as a social institution, is the dependent variable then its existence can only be explained by a variable outside of this institution, therefore one must of necessity look into psychology.

By bringing in a psychological explanation for religion, Spiro was going against the entire tradition established by Durkheim, in sociology and social anthropology that all social facts are to be explained by other social facts and therefore psychological explanations were beyond the scope of anthropology. But a major criticism of functional explanation is that they are teleological in nature and do not give causal status to independent variables. Thus Spiro's work ushered in a new dimension in anthropological explanation of religion. His work on religion focuses on the explanation for religion and not for society as was evident in the works of the functionalists.

## 2.8 The Marxist Anthropological View-point

- As we see the definitions and explanations of religion from a functional and cultural point of view have largely focused specifically on the concept of the supernatural. However, Stephen Feuchtwang (1975), gives a fresh approach to defining religion as "a shared reality: it is both a system of ideas about reality and a means of communicating those ideas" in other words religion is a kind of ideology. He problematizes the postulate of a superorganic or supernatural, something that has been more or less taken as a given condition in all the other approaches. This idea is treated as an independent fact of social life largely because of its universal nature. But although the existence of superhuman beings is universal in the minds of most human beings, yet for a science that assumes the existence of anything to be contingent upon its proof by demonstration, thus this belief is subjectivity and not an objective verifiable fact. The questions then that can be raised within the Marxist framework of theory are what social formations provide the necessary conditions for the emergence of such subjectivities? Several prominent scholars, including Peter Worsley and Louis Dumont, have studied religion as ideology. The production of ideology is a social phenomenon and like all social phenomenon it has a tangible, material dimension. An ideology has a social and historical existence; but most ideologies express themselves as the final truth. Social experience then becomes the subject of investigation in terms of the manner in which a social formation appears to the subjects defined in the ideologies of that formation. In some ways the approach of Geertz is close

to the concept of ideology for it too is a set of symbols. But since all systems have their contradictions and change, these are misrepresented and disguised according to the very structure of the ideology. There are certain organisations and occasions, such as rituals and festivals that are specifically oriented towards reproducing ideologies that otherwise remain at the back of all social activities. Ideologies, however, are contested, there are struggles of supremacy of one, over the other and conflict of ideologies are actively present in the consciousness of the subjects. This is the manner in which social formations transform themselves. Feuchang supports his argument with a description of late imperial China, indicating how through the ideology of filial devotion and protection embodied in extended kin relationships and a structure of political loyalty and protection embodied in the peasants and the landlords and the royalty the system was maintained. The ghosts and demons act as a third category opposed to both these structures and the gods protect households against the demons. These are then conceptualised as higher orders of reality of the heaven and gods. Ultimately the ideological structures serve to protect the rule of the imperial and leisure classes. Capitalist and bourgeoisie ideologies invaded and transformed the existent ideologies naturally after a struggle.

The Marxist analysis is highly structural and objective in nature. A more contemporary generation of anthropology moved away from the realm of such objective, external analysis to be more than subjective and experiential, rather than reflexive of phenomenon. In fact Marxism within anthropology had limited appeal.

## 2.9 Conclusion

Anthropology has long since moved away from its concern with the so-called “primitive” or “other cultures”. The tendency to study only exotic is a thing of the past and the notion of the ‘primitive’ itself has been demolished. A greater emphasis on ethnography is combined with an effort to emphasize on the subjective experiential reality like the works of anthropologists with shamans and also taking part in possession rituals like Sax. Yet analysis has to build up to take the reality to a higher plane of analysis, thus religious rituals can be linked to formation of identities, but the anthropologist’s task is now seen as more interpretative and more as a spokesperson on behalf of the culture s/he is representing. Most importantly anthropology now refrains from casting doubt on the ‘scientific’ status of the reality as it appears to the actors. Thus the category of the supernatural is no longer a matter of explanation. With post modernism the status of truth is itself been situated away from the so-called validity of demonstration of western scientific thought.

Recent approaches to the study of religion are now focusing on the role of religion in the lives of people as a matter of tangible truth. William Sax has, for example, described how rituals are being used to consolidate identities. It is the interpretative trend set in motion by Clifford Geertz (1973), but now made more subjective by the disappearance of the objectivity of the scholar. Since the static view of the ‘bounded’ societies have disappeared, instead of describing timeless symbolisms like ‘Nuer Religion’, anthropologists are busy describing how religious beliefs have changed and transformed through time, the historical factors that shape and inform such beliefs and practices and the manner in which religion interfaces with such aspects of social life and gender and the environment.

As the idea about the existence of discrete societies is disappearing, the anthropologists are not averse to studying universal religions like Buddhism

and Hinduism even if in their local manifestations. But there is a clear understanding that at each situation is only a part of a larger process, historical and political in nature.

Even at much earlier times it was realised as by Redfield that a village is not an isolated universe and one can not study by closing one's analytical insights to the within the boundaries of the village. Thus the concepts of Little and Great traditions were formed and used extensively in the study of Indian communities; this model was further supported by concepts such as universalization and parochialization.

Today there are attempts to situate the field data in terms of wider political and historical frameworks. A study of this kind is Sherry Ortner's work on Tibet, 'High Religion'(1989). Beginning from Paul Radin's work, Primitive man as Philosopher, the attempt to classify religions and religious beliefs is totally given up. Radin had shown that every society contains every kind of people, there are the mystics, the middle level believers and the agnostics and the atheists in every culture, time and place. Today one also understands that the most modern of people may still have their own elements of magical beliefs, that there is no contradiction between the most modern of technologies and the most conservative religious ideas.

Contemporary works such as David Gellner's 'The Anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism'(2001) illustrate the manner in which religion is now viewed as a part of the larger historical, social and political processes that shape the lives of individuals and create and recreate identities, relationships and inform hierarchies and shape goals. Rituals such as possession can be a vehicle by which to contest identities, to create space for one's self; often done by women in conservative societies, also to create a contra-narrative to oppose the hegemony of a dominant group like the Pallars, described by Karin Kapadia (1996). Channa (2005), has shown how a small mountain community is using a possession ritual to assert their identity, not only within the local society but also in context of the national arena. Moreover, rituals can be used to both contest and make claims for social status within a local framework. Religious symbols and their manipulative social and political usage indicates how religion is not a separate institution of society with its separate agenda but a part of the overall set of social relationships that are both internal to a community as well as extend outwards and upwards from the community. Since there can be no isolated community, the methodology of studying 'a religion' has been replaced by looking at the religious phenomena as open, dynamic and multi-faceted.

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## **Unit 3**

# **Historical and Comparative Approach**

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- 3.1 Introduction**
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### **Learning Objectives**

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- provide earliest evidences and forms of religion;
- describe cosmologies and world-view;
- discuss the soul and sacrifice; and
- describe the religious experience.

### **3.1 Introduction**

Just as it is difficult to define what exactly is religion so it is difficult to say at what time, period, religion would have originated; for to begin with there is little agreement on what constitutes religion. In the section on the anthropological approach to the study of religion we have dealt with a few attempts to define religion but largely one has to rely on an intuitive definition. The earliest evidence of religion could thus be the pre-historic cave paintings, some of which date from a period earlier than the emergence of Homo sapiens and indicate that even proto humans like the Neanderthals indulged in some activities that were not purely directed towards subsistence or bodily requirements. One can speculate that one purpose of these paintings that often depict scenes of hunts, animals and human figures, could have been ritual in nature. Analysis of such early evidences of human culture is often done by the methods of ethno archaeology where comparison is made with similar practices among living human populations.

The commonsense understanding of religion that it has to do with the esoteric, the other worldly and with that which is not primarily material in nature, indicates that symbolism, representations and abstract thinking, all of which are necessary for anything like religion to exist were present in humans from the very beginning. There is every possibility that the cave arts could be representing what Frazer had called sympathetic magic, but that is mostly speculation.

## 3.2 Earliest Evidences and Forms

Archaeologists have discovered some figurines, mostly fertility figures of women (with exaggerated sexual features and quite often depicted as pregnant) in many prehistoric sites. There are quite a few theories to support an early earth mother or mother goddess worship in prehistoric civilisations like Mohenjo Daro and Harrappa. The fact that women could produce life out of their bodies while men could not must have put men in awe of women and they would have considered her even to be dangerous (having power). As Mary Douglas (1966) has pointed out what was dangerous could also be considered polluted. Thus the concepts of taboo and danger go hand in hand. Other evidences of some kind of concern with the afterworld or soul is found from burial sites, that often indicated that those who were buried were accompanied by some objects indicating belief in soul or after life. Material objects and culture cannot however indicate exactly what the culture bearers were thinking.

The earliest elements of religion can only be abstracted from existing material that cannot be dated, or in other words that seem to have existed from pre-historic times. In India both burial sites and rock paintings indicate some kind of ritualistic beliefs dating from the Mesolithic period (Thapar 2002: 73-74). Some of these archaic beliefs, myths, folklore and practices are often taken as continuities of the earliest stages of human existence, a proof of their antiquity is that certain types of beliefs, myths and practices are nearly universal; indicating that they are either a part of human cultural evolution or have been diffused from the early human societies. Thus one of the most common myths of genesis is the deluge myth found across the world like Noah's Ark, the story of Manu etc. and is traced to the earliest human civilization at Mesopotamia.

Worship of nature is again a part of very ancient beliefs and so are the merging of the animate and the inanimate. The Nagas not only believe that stones are animate, they also believe that stones procreate just like humans (Hutton 1968). In fact certain kinds of distinctions are part of a particular mode of thinking characteristic of the much later Judeo-Christian traditions, such as the separation of nature from culture, animate from inanimate, human from animals and good from evil. Few ancient and indigenous culture and societies follow these distinctions. Hinduism for example, has no concept of Satan or any kind of evil force. All the supernatural beings, Gods and Goddesses are like humans with mixed characters and there is no dualism between good and evil. The evolution of a definite evil force seems to have originated at a much later period and is very rare in any of the ancient and tribal belief systems. Ravana for example, who comes closest to being defined as evil was a Brahmin sage of great learning and a benevolent king. When he is dying both Rama and Lakshmana sit at his feet to learn many words of wisdom from him.

## 3.3 The God - Kings

The ancient States were all based upon the legitimacy of the rulers to rule because they were either the main religious functionaries, what Frazer has called the priestly Kings, or they were the mediators between the supernatural and the mortal men or they were divinity themselves. We are told the Egyptian Pharaohs were regarded as Gods incarnate so they could only marry their own siblings as gods could not marry mortals. Frazer (1947: 9) writes that, in ancient Rome and Athens (Greece) the priest was often referred to or carried the title of King. The kings of Sparta were regarded as descendants of the gods and offered sacrifices

on behalf of the State. The Teutonic kings, the emperor of China and the king of Madagascar were all regarded as high priests and offered public sacrifices and conducted state rituals.

The genesis of such Theosphic States can be traced to the primordial basis of stratification in human societies that was based on the concept of supernatural power. In the earliest stages of hunting and food gathering human societies display little notions of stratification. Even the shamans and medicine men in such societies are viewed only as the vehicles for supernatural powers and not having any special qualities in them. It is only at the stage of proto-agriculture that shamans and priests start holding some power as representatives of the divinity and only when stratification evolves to the stage of state formation does the rulers acquire the characters of being divine themselves. But the point of the argument is that in earlier times there was little belief in the inequality between human beings; only the supernatural powers were regarded as superior. Therefore, the very first forms of centralised states where power was concentrated in the hands of a few, were based on religion.

Thus Frazer has summarised the wide spread of the belief in divine kingship “The belief that kings possess magical or supernatural powers by virtue of which they can fertilise the earth and confer other benefits on their subjects would seem to have been shared by the ancestors of all the Aryan races from India to Ireland” (1947: 89) But the priest -Kings had their responsibilities also. They were responsible for the welfare of the State, the bounties of nature and the prosperity of the people. The divine identity of the king would be put to doubt if there was a famine or the king himself became old or ill. There were different kinds of beliefs. In one case it could be believed that the king’s body was the vehicle for the supernatural powers, often conceived of in the form of an energy or Mana; in the second case the king’s body could be sacred in itself. In the former case it was often believed that the priest - king should relinquish power if he failed in health and efficiency or if the country were struck by any disaster for that would mean that the king was losing his Mana.

However, if the body of the king were sacred then it would remain so no matter what he did. Even if he did things considered wrong by mortal standards, no blame would attach to him.

In India the collusion of the Brahmin priest and the Kshatriya king was the ruling nexus. The king was the secular power holder and the priest the sacred power holder and therefore, in a sense superior to the King. But the Kings in India were also quite often regarded as directly descended from some divinity such as the descendants of the Sun Line and Moon Line.

However, the Vedic culture established in India a supremacy of the Brahmins because of their exclusive control over the rights to perform the most important sacrifices of which the most important was the repetition of the Cosmic sacrifice described in the Rig Veda, that is regarded as the genesis of human society and the establishment of the Jati Vyavastha (The four varna system). The priest by repeating the primal sacrifice created the world anew, also the priest by the performance of the sacred thread ceremony bestowed the varna status on an individual. Thus a king could gain legitimacy to rule only if properly anointed as king by a Brahmin. In comparatively recent history we have the case of Shivaji Bhonsale, a Marhatta who got himself crowned by a Brahmin as a Kshatriya king; after a genealogy was invented for him by a learned Brahmin from Benaras who was duly compensated for his efforts. Thus Basham (2004: 245) writes “Thus the order of nature was on ultimate analysis not dependent

on the gods at all, but on the Brahmins, who by the magic of the sacrifice maintained and compelled them. The Brahmin was more powerful than any earthly king or any god; by his accurate performance of sacrifice he maintained all things, and was therefore the supreme social servant; by the slightest variation of ritual he could turn the sacrifice against his patrons and destroy them, and was therefore the most dangerous of enemies".

The power of the Brahmin to make or break a person's social and ritual status had been recognised by no less a person than B.R. Ambedkar when he wrote in one of his early books 'Who were the Shudras?' (1946) that the Shudras were Kshatriya kings who became degraded (lost Varna status) because the Brahmins due to personal enmity refused to perform the sacred thread ceremony for them. But Brahmanism was never the only form of doctrine that existed even in ancient India. Thus Thapar (1992: 62) writes "In terms of numbers there appears to have developed even greater support for the Saka sects which were in many ways antithetical to early Brahmanism. The essentials of Saktism are sometimes traced back to Harrapan times and some of these elements probably went into the making of popular religion from the earliest historical period". Thus it is almost well established that Shiva was a god from Harrapan times and so is the strong element of mother goddess worship in Hinduism. It is also to be noted that wherever the Sakti cult is strong as in eastern India the Brahmanical religion is less rigorous.

Thus Hinduism, like most ancient religions had many changing faces and was more of an amalgamation of multiple strands of thoughts and beliefs, than a monolithic religion. The Vedic and textual dimensions of Hinduism are very different from the folk religion practiced in the homes or in the local shrines. The cult of Jagannath in the famous temple at Puri in Orissa, is demonstratively derived from the Saora tribes of this region. There is much documentary evidence to support this, including the form of the deities who look more like tribal deities than the conventional Hindu gods and goddesses. The religious rituals and beliefs are often community based and differ from region to region; like the religion of the Aggarwal community of Delhi described by Channa (1984). In fact the concept of a bounded religion, with a specific doctrine and a holy book comes much later as all ancient systems of beliefs did not compartmentalize religion as a separate sphere of life. Thus beliefs regarding the supernatural were nothing less than the explanation for all dimensions of life, they were the foundations of beliefs regarding life, death and the universe. And as explained in the *jati vyavastha*, the food that one ate, the soil on which one was born and climate in which one lived; all went into one's worship and therefore the *Dharma* differs from place to place and so does one's *jati*.

### 3.4 Cosmologies and World - View

Few people across the world make any distinction between themselves and nature. As Durkheim (1915) had pointed out Totemic rituals presuppose continuity between man and nature, as Totemic ancestors are animals, plants and other aspects of nature like thunder, lightening, water etc. Not only tribes but also all ancient civilisations regarded as their ancestors and gods the various dimensions of the cosmos. Thus the most important father figure of the Greeks was Zeus, of the Romans, was Jupiter and of the Aryans was Dyaus; each one of them personified the heavens. But when the Aryan speaking people entered the Indian subcontinent, Indra, the god of both war and weather, replaced Dyaus; he was responsible for

bringing about rain and thunder. Along with Indra rode a host of lesser storms, called the Maruts, who assisted him in battle. Thus Indra of the Aryans, Zeus of the Greek and Tor of the Scandinavians are very similar, each personifying the sky, thunder and lightening.

The pastoral Aryan-speaking people had a great deal of concern with the sun, Surya as he was called. The vision of Surya riding across the sky on a chariot driven by seven horses is similar to that of the Greek god Helios. Even today the sun plays a very important role in the lives of pastoral people, like among the Bhotiyas of the Himalayas, the sun is referred to as the Mother - Sun (Channa: 2005).

The belief that the sun rides across the sky in a chariot is widespread among many ancient people. Frazer has written in his Golden Bough that the Rhodians who believed in the sun as their supreme deity dedicated a chariot and four horses to him in an annual ritual where these were flung into the sea for his use. The Spartans and the Persians also sacrificed horses to the sun god based on similar beliefs. The ancient Mexicans also worshipped the sun as their supreme deity and sacrificed humans to him in order to recharge the energies of heat, light and motion by which the sun kept the people alive, brought about night, day and the seasons and in general kept the universe going. But the Nagas in India have a diametrically opposed point of view. According to Mathur (1992:129) "The sun is regarded as the docile, fearful wife of moon. The dominance of her husband is attested by the fact that the sun never dares appear at night when he sails across the sky". Thus the same sun that appears as the proud rider of a chariot to some appears as a shy woman to another people.

Thus the major natural phenomenon and the heavenly bodies that were perceived as the very source of life, livelihood and procreation, were personified as gods and kept happy and propitiated. The ancient Greek, Roman, Egyptian and Indo-Aryan pantheons were mostly comprised of personified forces of nature. Sun, moon, rain, wind, volcanoes and mountains, trees and rivers are all personified as gods and goddesses.

Trees and animals were not only worshipped, they were supposed to have a soul and were having a consciousness akin to humans. Thus in ancient Greece there was widespread practice of worship of trees and sacred groves. The most famous tree was the oak tree at Dodona that had oracular powers. It was the object of veneration because of its huge size, its age and other properties. In India the Peepul tree (*Ficus religiosa*) is considered to be the abode of Shiva; but many other trees especially evergreen and large trees are widely worshipped. It is seen that those trees, plants and animals are usually worshipped that appear to have larger than human life force or are especially beneficent in some way. But this need not be always true as the Neem tree with all its medicinal value is not an object of worship at all.

#### **Box 3.1: The Idea of Mana**

Such beliefs were rooted in either the belief in a soul or belief in Mana (supernatural power), what scholars have called as Animism and Animatism respectively. Various aspects of nature was believed to be infused with power because the phenomenon of nature inspired the human beings with awe and for their survival the humans need to keep nature appeased. Mana, or the concept of power is best defined as, "Power is a spiritual energy or life force that enables an individual to interact with the forces of the natural and supernatural worlds.

Supernatural power derives from a variety of plants, animals and meteorological phenomenon. Once obtained, power gives one the ability to influence certain aspects of nature by virtue of a special relationship with the spirits responsible for them" (Carmichael 1994: 91).

People would thus pray to the god of the heavens to give them rain, to prevent famine and floods. They would pray to the earth to remain bountiful, to provide crops, fruits and trees. They would pray to the sea to remain calm, not to drown their boats and ships and allow them to go for fishing and for voyages. Thus these were transformed into gods with human characters for only then the humans would know how to handle them. When described as men and women with particular characters and identities, they became both accessible and malleable. Sometimes as in Totemism they were converted to kin and ancestors; thus bridging the gap even more. In fact the familiarity in ancient times of the gods and men had led Frazer to remark on the "world as a great democracy" in those times. In Indian mythology, Indra, the god of the heavens is often depicted as a lustful and deceitful person. Such close interaction and identification of gods and humans may be attributed to less complex societies with little sense of hierarchy. In more hierarchic societies with well-developed notions of centralised powers; the incarnate divinities in the form of rulers inspired awe and blind obedience. At the funeral of such monarchs, as in China, some times hundreds of lives would be sacrificed, that included his wives, retainers and even councillors. They commanded immense corvée labour and even without the help of sophisticated machine technology were able to build such architectural marvels as the pyramids.

Another way in which the belief in the sacred character of nature has played a very important role in human societies has been in the worship of nature itself, in its natural form. Such beliefs have given rise to the concept of sacred groves, trees, rivers and mountains. As recognised by environmentalists today, such beliefs may have been instrumental in preserving and conserving nature as well as maintaining the balance between humans and the non-human dimensions of nature. Thus forests would be preserved as the abode of ancestors, rivers and sources of water would be treated with respect; trees would not be cut for they might be regarded as god, as among the Bhotiyas of Garhwal, who regard each deodar tree to be a god. Such beliefs in the sacredness of nature have been viewed by contemporary authors to be a positive contribution towards the survival of the world system. "Protection of sacred places may also be seen as one part of a larger issue of environmental preservation. Modern science may, to a large extent, be in appropriate as a model, reducing nature to quantifiable and measurable elements, rather than focusing on the holistic and the interconnectedness of all of creation, which is the essence of cosmotheistic religions of many peoples" (Carmichael, Hubert and Reeves 1994: 6). The Judeo-Christian religions have often been criticised for not having any reverence towards nature. In fact the spread of Christianity has often been blamed for the destruction of nature as has the spread of western scientific beliefs of the nineteenth century that led to commodification of nature. However, even the belief in the sacredness of nature may backfire as has been demonstrated by Alley (2002) who has shown that the belief of Hindus in the sacred nature of the river Ganga is leading to its pollution as people believe that the Ganga can never be polluted, on the contrary anything thrown into it becomes purified. Thus it is not possible to persuade devout Hindus not to throw dead bodies, leaves, garlands and many other objects into the river, that objectively would pollute it but according to the belief of the devotees, it is the

objects that get purified by contact with the Ganga water. She thus distinguishes between the terms purity (*shudhata*) as different from clean (*swachata*) as they apply to the river, whose being clean is immaterial as it is always pure.

The phenomena of nature are also viewed as signs and omens. The star of *Bethlehem* was supposed to herald the coming of a god-king. There is widespread belief that the sighting of a particular comet brings about disasters like war. A ring around the moon is supposed to indicate a storm and the Nagas believe that a short rainbow is indicative of an impending disaster like war. A very special phenomenon that occurs but rarely like the flowering of the bamboo trees in the North-eastern India is also believed to lead to widespread famine. Thus many people read nature as they would a book, where every colour, change of shape, sight and sound are communicating something in a language that is understood only by those who are taught by their culture to understand it.

### 3.5 The Soul and Sacrifice

The concept of soul was introduced into social theory by Tylor, who traced the origin of religion to the belief in the soul. The so-called primitive concept of soul was seen as a little different from the western concept of soul. In ancient times, the concept of soul was like the belief in a dual body; a material body and another, the shadow self. To Tylor, it was believed to be the cause of animating the human body, hence the name Animism for this first form of religion. This belief in soul led to many associated beliefs like the after-world, heaven and hell, transference of soul from one body to another as in lycanthropy (transfer of human soul to a animal body) and transmigration of soul over various births. The soul was almost always conceived of as indestructible and passing on, either to another world, or to another body. Sometimes the soul was conceived of as a power, the soul-stuff that resided in some part of the body, like the naval or the head. In fact the practice of head hunting is derived from the magical power of the head. It was believed that by possessing the head of a person, one could transfer the power of the soul - stuff to one's self. Thus a warrior would become more and more powerful, the more heads he hunted.

The concept of sacrifice plays a very important role in all religions. Sacrifice may be taken in the sense of making an offering to the gods or it can be taken in the sense of giving up something, to deprive one's self. Of course in many instances they may coincide and the famous story of Abraham in the bible, where he is required to make an offering of his own son to God. In Islam, this myth is still followed in the ritual of Bakra, where a goat or animal reared in the household is sacrificed to god. Linked to the concept of soul, blood sacrifice is not viewed as a killing but as a way of releasing the soul from the body so that it goes up to the divinity to which it is offered. Therefore, quite often a sacrifice is guided by certain norms. Almost always when a blood sacrifice is to be made, the animal chosen must be of perfect quality and flawless. In many cultures, a sign is also looked for to see if the animal is acceptable to the divinity, if such a sign does not come about then the animal may be released. Quite often, when an animal is sacrificed it is symbolic of a human sacrifice and when a fruit or vegetable is sacrificed, then it is symbolic of an animal. The idea is to make an offering of something precious, of value to please the divinity.

However, since the sacrificed animals or even fruits and vegetables are actually eaten by the congregation and only symbolically by the gods,

there is another explanation of sacrifice, put forward by Robertson Smith (1894); that is as a repast, a feast that is shared by the gods and the humans. This sharing in established a kinship between gods and men and thus reaffirmed the divinity of humans as well. No doubt such values exist in Christianity where the holy- communion is the symbolic partaking of the body and blood of Christ, in the form of wafer and wine. Such a communion makes a human being also holy and purified. A parallel can be drawn with Durkheim's explanation of totemistic rituals where the ritual consuming of the flesh of the totem is seen as a kind of reaffirmation of the divinity of the humans and their kinship with the deity.

Another understanding of sacrifice is in the Hindu notion of *tyaag* that may be viewed as renunciation or withdrawal from some thing. Sacrificing worldly pleasures or giving up something for a certain period, like sexual abstinence or fasting can also be viewed as a mode of sacrifice. Here also the principle is the same, that is to make an offering to the deity or to imbibe the divinity in one's self by the process of purification that such sacrifice involves. Such abstinence may precede a more important ritual or worship as people who go for pilgrimage often do; like pilgrims to Mecca or to the forest shrine of Sabarimalai in Kerala.

### Reflection and Action 3.1

What is the concept of sacrifice? Is it the same in all the religions?  
Discuss and comment.

When the soul is conceived of as a shadow body, it could result in belief in ghosts or shadow images of a person that persisted after death. As Herbert Spencer has pointed out, such shadow selves could also be installed and worshipped as deities. Thus a person who was powerful or exemplary was expected to retain those characters even after death. Thus we have many instances of people being deified and worshipped as gods after their death. Many people believe that a person with exceptional ability has a stronger soul or greater soul power. In some cases the soul may be worshipped after death, but not always. But a real man-god, as Karsten (1935: 62) points out is a person who is seen to the incarnation of a divine spirit or a part of, like son- of- god. Thus Jesus Christ was seen as the Son of God; Rama and Krishna are seen as the incarnations of the god Vishnu. Perhaps the only way in which they differ from the medicine men of small- scale societies may be in the size and complexity of the culture itself and not in the essential principle of deification that is based in all cases upon the existence of some greater power within the individual being worshipped. And this power is not secular but divine power, whether one calls it *Mana*, or a spark of divinity or incarnation of god. One more category of incarnation are the Bodhisattva, who can not be incarnations of divinity as Buddhism does not believe in any god. Thus in Mahayana Buddhism, the great Buddhas are like the incarnations of gods but instead of divinity they contain the essence of liberation, the transcendence, the emptiness of Nirvana. As pointed out by Smart (1996:50)" Emptiness –is a quasi substance, and this filmy 'nothing' is found in the sacred human being". Thus we have sacred beings even without the belief in a god.

In some cases belief in soul power also leads to cannibalism as eating a part of a body is believed to transmit the power of the dead person to the eater. Such customs were found among the indigenous people of South America, the Australian aborigines and a few others. The belief regarding the location of the soul in the body differs across cultures. The ancient Hebrew believed that the soul, *nephesh* was located in the blood. Numerous

beliefs are found regarding blood, its shedding and its transmission across cultures based on the principle that blood contains the life energy or soul. In some cultures the loss of soul-power is supposed to lead to a debilitated condition of the physical body. Thus many kinds of illness, especially those that lead to weakness of body may be attributed to what is called 'soul-loss'. Some people like the Nagas, before they converted to Christianity, believed in what is known as lycanthropy, the transference of a human soul into an animal. There are two types of transfer, one in which the animal in question shares soul substance with the human and another in which the human is capable of transforming to an animal. The Nagas believed in the former type and it was believed that if any injury was done to the animal alter of the human, then he too will manifest same symptoms and if the animal dies, the man too will die. The Nagas believe that the tiger and the leopard have a common origin with humans. "A hunter never eats an animal he has killed because the natural malevolency that an animal feels towards its killer, is believed to harm the slayer, through the meat of the hunted animal. A man going for fishing, does not speak the whole day, otherwise the fish in water would hear him. Although the Naga eat all animals, they generally apologize to an animal before killing it, as its death was necessary. Naturally enough the Naga do not kill an animal without any purpose". (Channa 1992:33).

The belief in an after world, or heaven is also linked to the belief in a soul. For if there were nothing after death, there would be no need for an afterworld. Such beliefs are almost universal. In connection with beliefs about the natural world, it is also almost universal that the Heavens are located, 'above', in the skies or in the top of mountains. Hindus for example believe that the top of mount Kailasa (identified as the Himalayas) is the abode of the gods. The Nuer believe that divinity is located in the sky. In the English language the Heavens is a synonym for the sky. Cosmologically the sky is superior, often worshipped as a supreme god, like Varuna of the early Vedic Aryans or Ahura Mazda of the Persians, in fact these two are believed to be identical.

The beliefs regarding the soul also inform the manner in which funeral rituals are performed in any culture. The Hindus believe the body to be made up of the five basic elements, fire, earth, water, air and the sky (ether); and believe it should be returned to the elements, while the indestructible soul goes on its onward journey. This is the belief underlying the cremation of the body and the immersion of the ashes in water, so that the material body returns to the 'Pancha Bhoota' ( five elements). Some like the ancient Egyptians believed that the soul is inseparable from the body and hence preserved the body very carefully so that it would be resurrected as it is. Christians too believe that death is like sleep from which a person will rise on judgement day; they too do not separate the soul from the body and therefore bury it with care.

In later and more universal religions the concept of soul has been linked to the concept of consciousness. Thus while the body is mortal this consciousness may by being attached to a subtle body transmigrate into different forms. This was professed in the Samkhya philosophy in India. As Smart observes, "- much of what is seen as mental in the west is subtly physical in India". Among Buddhists the process of Nirvana is equivalent to the concept of soul as the individual in attaining Nirvana assumes the status of Buddha. Since the soul is timeless and is becoming Buddha the individual also becomes timeless, there is an identity between the two. In the non-dualistic philosophy of Ramanuja, there is an identification of God, the supreme soul and all individual souls that are manifest as individual consciousness. Once a state of liberation is reached the individual soul

realizes its true identity and merges with the supreme soul. Thus individual consciousness is the source of all suffering for as the individual merges with the supreme it remains forever in a state of bliss. This is very similar to the Buddhist notion of liberation.

The major south Asian systems of thought demonstrate considerable similarities in their conception of soul, its transmigration and its liberation. Unlike the Judeo-Christian traditions where the individual consciousness is believed to remain, the South Asian traditions believe that the true aim of the religious experience is to transcend individuality and in merger with a higher form whether Brahman or Buddha. This is also reflected in society, as western society and philosophy places a great deal of stress on individual achievement and non-western ones like in India minimize the importance of the individual. But both Buddhism and Hinduism stress on striving at the level of the individual through the doctrine of Karma for ultimately it is the individual that has to seek liberation through the actions in this world. But the fruits of Karma are ultimately directed towards freeing the individual rather than enhancing her this worldly or other-worldly prospect.

These philosophical doctrines of Hinduism do not have any notion of heaven or hell; although such may be present in folk beliefs and in the more dualistic forms of Hinduism that also professes the belief in a material conception of god than the Nirguna Brahman whom the ancient texts had described only in negative terms, 'neti', 'neti', 'neti'(not this, not this, not this). In contrast, the western people believe that the organic soul will remain till the end of historical time when it will be resurrected and sent to its permanent destination of heaven or hell. The western concept of god is also finite and bounded. For them god exists in a more finite way than the universal soul or ultimate nothingness of Hinduism and Buddhism. In the next section we shall discuss a little more about the concept of god in various religions.

### 3.6 God and Deities

Central to all forms of religion are the doctrines or philosophies that define what is worshipped and how it is to be worshipped and more importantly what is the goal of worship. And this depends to a large extent in how the divinity is conceptualised. Of all known religions of the world, indigenous as well as universal, there is some conception of a divinity or multiple divinities except Buddhism that is also regarded as an atheistic belief system that is one that does not recognise any god. This does not mean that Buddhism does not believe in spirituality, it is deeply spiritual in its quest for Nirvana but it does not believe that there is any god that created the world or who will help us out of trouble. There is no notion of worship but only self-improvement. However, such strict adherence to atheistic principles is found only in Theravada Buddhism. In the Mahayana form of Buddhism, the Buddha and the Bodhisattva are worshipped and regarded as divinity not as creator gods but as the saviours who show the light or the path to salvation. Moreover, as Spiro had shown in his study of Buddhist peasants in Burma, for the conduct of day to day life the peasants can not rely on a mystical philosophy but believe in concrete and ever present supernatural beings called the Nats, who are propitiated and communicated to just like gods and deities in any other religion. To Spiro the philosophy of Buddhism does not suffice to provide emotional relief to the peasants who need more concrete solutions to their sufferings. In Buddhism the cause of suffering is squarely placed on the individual himself, to his Karma. But belief in Nats and witches and

other supernatural beings allows the individual to shift blame on to another being and there are prescriptions for easing the suffering. "He can make restitution to the nat; he can call upon any number of supernatural practitioners to combat the witch; or, paradoxically enough, he can utilise Buddhist power, channeled through a variety of rituals, to combat his supernaturally caused harm" (1967:4).

A major difference is seen between monotheistic and polytheistic religions, that is ones that believe in one god or multiple gods. Even where people believe in multiple supernatural beings, the supreme deity or a creator god is usually one, who is usually the most superior as well as the farthest from humans. The daily rituals and concerns of every day life rarely involve him or her. For example, the Todas consider the goddess Terkizhy to be their creator yet no Toda ritual is directed towards her but concentrated on the Toda sacred dairies, which are also supposed to have been created by this supreme goddess. Similarly, Hindus regards Brahma as the supreme god and the creator, yet he is almost never worshipped and neither is Vishnu in his original form worshipped as much as his earthly incarnations of Rama and Krishna. In another doctrine of non-dualism the notion of god is no longer present and one is only conscious of the supreme soul, the Param- Atman, into which all the individual atman, or soul will merge. There is a strong resemblance between non-dualistic Hindu philosophy and Theravada Buddhism, yet none of these are actually followed by those who profess to be either Hindus or Buddhists and they all propitiate a number of deities, who are viewed as in specific control of certain parts of the universe.

### **Box 3.2: Aspects of Worship**

In discussing about gods one must not forget that religion also performs certain earthly functions for its devotees. People worship not only for esoteric goals like *mokhsa* or heaven but for daily needs like passing an examination, or getting a bride or growing good crops. Thus even though the idea of a supreme and distant god is present among most people, this god is supplemented by a host of other supernatural beings and even fetishes that fulfil the immediate desires of humans. For example, although Christianity is strictly monotheistic in principle, yet the Christians not only worship Jesus Christ and Mother Mary but also a host of other saints who are considered as divinities. Thus, a personified deity like Christ is closer to the people than an abstract god figure. Similarly, in Islam and Hinduism, the ideal of a distant all pervasive god is present, who may be remembered at all times, yet when a specific request is to be made, then a special being is usually invoked. Thus even though Islam strictly forbids the worshipping of any one else but Allah (Muslims do not worship even Mohammed) yet there are a number of saints at whose shrines prayers are regularly delivered and usually fulfilment of goals; for example, the Dargah of Salim Chisti is approached by all who desire to have children.

Hinduism too has its notion of an all pervasive, omnipresent god who is not named but may be symbolically referred to as Paramatman or Iswar or Bhagwan; but who is never the subject of vivid description like other gods. Such a god is also benign and distant.

The real objects of rituals are the gods who are well defined in terms of their characters so that one knows exactly how to deal with them. They have the character of social beings with their likes and dislikes, their favourite objects and their moods and whims, just like humans. For example, the Hindu god Shiva has many special characters, he is supposed

to be a renouncer, a yogi, appears dressed in a tiger skin and wears no ornaments except the snake coiled around his neck. He is easy to please and requires only offerings of water or milk. However on special occasions like Shivaratri (the night of Shiva), he is offered *bhang*, milk and water. Thus, the relationship with these gods is of a social nature, of a relationship with another being whose characters are known and predictable. Thus, every one will know how to please such a god or goddess and what will displease them and so on. On the other hand the supreme God is usually of undefined nature. One may pray to him in abstract but most people feel more comfortable with a deity closer to themselves.

The Vedic god Indra for example, is regarded as a moral and most myths and folktales dealing with these deities attribute to them, all qualities of human beings, like greed, anger, lust and magnanimity. They had to be kept appeased and sometimes as in the case of the Mexicans, fortified also. They were like humans in every respect except that they had the power of immortality and were superior in strength and power to the humans. In the great epic Trojan-war (The Iliad), the gods came down to earth and took sides with the humans displaying every human emotion like jealousy, anger, love and grief.

No matter how powerful these deities may be, the belief of humans, that they can control the forces of nature also abound. It is this aspect of man's attempts and belief in the ability to control nature that led Frazer to compare, Magic with modern science. Thus, while one dimension of belief in supernatural beings was their appeasement or propitiation, the other was also to control them. However, this element of control becomes less as the civilisations develop and the nature of religion becomes more revelatory and linked to the concept of a higher god or gods.

### 3.7 Myths

Myths have been recognised from the most ancient cultures and from the most ancient times. Their universality has led anthropologists like Levi-Strauss to explain them as emanating from the very structure of the human brain. Psychologists like Sigmund Freud have tried to trace the evolution of the human race through its myths and Jung has referred to myths as the collective memory of the human race. A reason for this attempt to relate myths to some pan-human condition whether of the human brain, or of its collective past, lies in the surprising similarities between myths across the world in different times and spaces.

Thus some of the myths that are very common are the myths regarding trees and snakes that play an important role in most cultures. Both these objects are believed to symbolize fertility, sexuality and regeneration, all of very primary concern to human societies. Psychologists have related myths to the sub-conscious symbolic associations, such as of snakes with fertility. Sociologists and anthropologists have looked more towards the functional dimension of myths, the role that they play in society. Myths have been widely used in the study of history of religions as they provided a concrete material not otherwise available for study of many ancient cultures. One of their main characters is that they are seen as passed down from time immemorial although modern myths also exist. Each time a myth is created it lends validity to something, like a deity, a ritual or an identity. For example, whenever a human being is elevated to the status of a deity there are number of myths to validate it; these often include stories of miraculous birth, performance of miracles, extraordinary feats and so on.

As Smart (1996:131) notes, "We would have to note that while all myths are stories, not all stories are myths". Myths usually refer to the collective past of a group and it is this sense of a collective past that helps create group identity. Thus, most tribes and people have their stories that usually tells us about their identity as a people; either from a story of origin, like emerging from a cave, very popular among the Naga tribes of North-eastern India; or the story of being the chosen people of god, like the Jews, and so on. Thus, the myth in the form of a narrative helps a group achieve a kind of togetherness that then helps them to develop as a congregation, to perform rituals together or to believe in the same gods. Thus each god usually comes with a biography that may often tell in details about the various aspects of the god including his/her creation; for example, the Devi Mahamaya, the Shiv Purana, the Bahgavat Purana and the Ramayana of the Hindus.

As Smart has pointed out there is a tendency of a dominant culture to treat their own stories as truth and that of the others as myth. Thus, in no anthology of myths we find the inclusion of the bible, for the Christians, dominating the world from the colonial period, and being responsible for most publications have never accorded the status of myth to their own religion. In fact what has always been treated as myths are the stories of the people usually studied by anthropologists, the marginal and the indigenous and therefore, the study of mythology has been popular in anthropology rather than in other social sciences. It is only recently that scholars like Roland Barthes have brought in the concept of modern myths and related them to post-modern societies.

Sometimes these stories provide what Sherry Ortner (1979) has called 'key scenarios' and serve as elaborating symbols for social action. They provide a kind of guideline for people to act. For example, the Ramayana provides a guideline for ideal family roles in India; the idea wife, the ideal brother, the ideal servant and so on. For most people the actions of the mythic characters who are also the revered characters, sometimes deities, informs right ways of doing things or come in handy when there is a confusion as to action. In other words they form a kind of ethical ideals as amply illustrated in the Jataka tales, where each incarnation of the Buddha is shown to take the right path towards Nirvana by upholding the ethical ideals. The Bhagvata-Gita is an exemplary example of a guide to action. They also make sense of the universe around us. Many myths serve the purpose of making sense of things clans, social organisations and the relationship between categories of people like men and women; for example, the myth of genesis in the Bible established for ever the inferior position of woman as compared to man and therefore justified patriarchy.

Myths are often complete histories of a people or region as they usually provide the entire story from the beginning to the end of creation.

Sometimes contradictory versions of the same myth may be symptomatic of a changing society or of different groups within the same society. There are for example, many versions of the Ramayana, including some written from the point of view of women, where the interpretations of the main characters are quite different. There is also difference between the North Indian and South Indian versions of the Hindu myths. Similarly, Franz Boas and other American anthropologists have shown how the myths change in character as they travel from one cultural region to another.

Myths have a close relationship to Nationhood and ethnic identities. A shared past is itself a great claim to unity or when a group wants a separate identity, it may claim that it has a different past. For example, the Nagas, who do not want to be part of the Indian nation claim that

they have completely different traditions and roots from the main land Indians. During the freedom struggle myths of a glorious Hindu past was built up to counter both centuries of Muslim rule as well as to provide a critique of western superiority. The Hindu nationalists tried to critique the British view of subjugated women in India by reconstructing mythological tales of a glorious womanhood during the Vedic period. It was claimed that it was Islam that had led to deterioration in the position of women and in society in general. However, such claims have often been refuted by scholars but continue to play an important role in the emotions and sentiments of the common people. Thus to Thapar (1992: 140) "The significance of myth to the historian lies more in its being the self-image of a given culture, expressing its social assumptions". It reflects more what people want to be than what they actually are. Thus myths have been instrumental in triggering of social and political movements at times.

### 3.8 The Religious Experience

There has been a generally recognised view that there are two major types of religions, the folk and the universal religions. The former are characteristic of smaller groups and are localised systems of belief often known by the name of the community to which they belong like Nuer religion, Azande religion etc. On the other hand the universal religions are usually traced to some prophet or messiah and are spread across a large portion of the world. They are known by their name often derived from the name of the originator of the religion; like Buddhism from Buddha and Christianity from Christ, however, this is not always the case as Sikhism is not derived from the name of its gurus and neither is Islam. Essentially most of them have a written text that makes it easier for communication and transmission. The folk religions can often be closely tied to the space and region in which they occur. For example, the Saoras of Orissa believe that people among them do not die but after death go to live on the hilltops found in their area. It is not uncommon for a Saora to meet and converse with a dead member of his tribe and it is considered nothing unusual. The Saora do not mourn for their dead. But it is believed that if any Saora leaves the native place then they will not find place in their own land after death. Therefore, they will die like other people. Similarly, many beliefs that rituals are tied up with the environment, with the locally existing trees, rivers and even stones. Such local beliefs can not be transferred to other places therefore, they can never become universal religions.

#### Reflection and Action 3.2

How influential is religion in your life? Do you think you could live without it? Discuss and note down the main points in your note book.

All religions, whether local or universal, produce deep-seated emotional responses in the followers of these belief systems. These "long lasting moods and motivations" as Clifford Geertz has called them can trigger off action and lead to highly inspired responses. But while the local religions are bounded by their internal uniformity and produce emotional responses of brotherhood and solidarity, the universal religions, that are part of complex, stratified and multi-religious societies can often trigger off conflict and even wars. The emotional content of religion is drawn from its non-rational nature; because it is a matter of faith and not of knowledge. Scholars like Rudolph Otto have discussed the nature of the numinous at

length. The numinous is derived from the word numina as opposed to phenomena that refer to anything that is perceived by the senses. The numinous is not bound by sensory perception and is regarded as a matter of experience rather than knowledge. The depth of the religious experience also leads to what is regarded as ecstatic experience or the entry into a transcendent stage of consciousness. The nature of the transcendent religious experience has also been a matter of deep study by both social anthropologists and social psychologists.

One of the most mystifying aspect of possession or trance has been the actual physiological transformations that is observed in people who actually go into this kind of an altered state of consciousness. As described and observed by many, such people are able to perform remarkable physical feats that they could never perform in ordinary times; like walking on burning coal and not getting burnt, having their body pierced in all kinds of ways and not bleed or get injured, licking burning hot objects and not getting their tongues burnt and so on. Such performances have continued to mystify scholars and the possibility of alternate realities than those professed by western systems of science is no longer dismissed as hocus-pocus.

At the same time sociological interpretations of such rituals explain them as counter-culture, breaking away from dominant values and forming an effective critique of textual traditions and ruling elites. Thus while describing the Gajan festival in West Bengal, Oster (1980: 141) mentions how the Gajan breaks through the distinction between high and low, and only the fact of *bhakti* (devotion) matters, not caste. Thus even low caste devotees don the sacred thread for the duration of the *puja*, not to become Brahmins but to become Shiva himself, in order to establish a direct communication with him. It is because they attain the status of divinity that the *bhaktas* are able to perform extraordinary feats. Kapadia (1996) has also described the use of the concept of *bhakti* or devotion to counter the establishment. She tells how the untouchables use possession rituals to demonstrate that their spirituality is superior to that of the Brahmin. Because of their devotion they are ready to suffer torture whereas the Brahmin only performs set pattern of rituals. Thus while the Brahmins look down upon them they prove their own superiority to them by enduring superhuman feats.

Thus religion is also used to convey social messages and the different kinds of religious practices of different groups not only establish their identity but also act as political statements.

### 3.9 Conclusion

One of the major transformations in the intellectual position towards the study of alternate systems of beliefs and practices has been to give them the same kind of respect and status as the Euro-American or western systems. Thus in the more recent post-colonial and post - modern a comparative approach no longer means that everything is compared with the western systems as a standard. Today there is much more readiness to analyse alternative systems whether of healing (as in Kakar's works) or attitudes towards nature of indigenous people or even phenomena such as altered states of consciousness with a more liberal attitude not constrained by blind faith in any particular system of thought. As Fiona Bowie (2000:5) points out "religious studies has embraced the phenomenological method, which in practice usually means describing other people's customs and doctrinal beliefs and translating their sacred texts with as little comment and judgement as possible". On the other hand

the non-western people have been credited with far more rationality and agency than they were earlier. Thus the study of rituals are not merely confined to them being studied as exotica to be analysed by the western scholar but as rational means to arrive at particular ends by the actors themselves. Thus, Sax (1995) in his study of performative rituals such as dance has shown how such may be studied as part of a politics of identity but at the same time convinced that the transcendent experience of ritual dancing is real as he himself experiences while dancing with the sacred weapons of the Pandavas. Channa (2005) has also shown in her work on the adoption of certain Hindu gods by the Bhotiya tribes that there is a move towards a different identity, mostly triggered off by certain historical processes but where ritual is playing an important role is validating the new identity.

Thus what is religion is still a part of experiential reality and the vast range of beliefs and practices that can be studied under it remains almost unlimited. But on an overall analysis we can distinguish between the this-worldly aspect of religion like its political and economic aspects and the role of religion as a social institution in shaping and transforming societies; and religion as other - worldly experience, that transforms humans and relates them to a less understood realm of the mystical. However, these two aspects can not be separated and the social, political and economic aspect draw their meaning from the fact that the sacred nature of religion still remains the single strongest motivation of the human beings across cultures and regions.

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## Unit 4

# RELIGION: PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES

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- 4.2 Freud's Reformulation
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### Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- describe Freud's approach to religion;
- give a critique of Oedipal theory;
- discuss the relationship between culture and self; and
- describe culture and psychoanalysis.

### 4.1 Introduction

The nineteenth century saw a complete turnaround in the intellectual climate in Europe where biblical concepts about genesis were questioned by the biological theory of evolution put forward by Darwin. Faith in religion was transformed into a faith in pure science and positivism became the modern scientific way of looking at the world. Religion assumed an ambiguous status as something that was both universal and also irrational going by the axioms of science. It was difficult to explain why the world over every human society and culture believed in the supernatural, something that was both not proven and by its very nature not provable.

Sigmund Freud, regarded as the father of psychoanalysis and a practicing physician in Vienna, was a staunch positivist theoretician. He looked for an explanation for religion, by the same method as the social evolutionists. He studied what he regarded as the most primitive religion in the world, namely, Totemism. In its essential elements Totemism is a set of beliefs and practices that constitutes of the following elements.

- 1) The division of the tribe into sections (called clans in anthropological language), that regard themselves as descended from a non-human ancestor mostly an animal but sometimes a force of nature like wind or thunder.

- 2) Strict rules that prohibit marriage between men and women belonging to the same totemic clan transgression of which may be punishable by death.
- 3) Prohibition on killing, eating and harming the totemic animal/bird / or natural thing.
- 4) Ritual killing of the totemic animal in annual ritual in which the ceremonial killing of the animal is often accompanied by grief like at the death of a kin.

Freud built up an explanation for the origin of Totemism through his analysis of the concept of taboo. His psychological explanation for Taboo is that they are “very ancient prohibitions which one time were forced upon a generation of primitive people form without”. They involve all those acts that are the focus of great desire yet forbidden, as they would be socially disruptive. They involve all such relationships that may have hidden or latent attractions, such as that between a mother-in-law and son-in-law, between, a man and his sister-in-law; the fulfillment of which would lead to complete breakdown of society. Freud it must be mentioned regarded ‘primitive’ man as little more than infants who cannot like the ‘civilized white people’ control their desires. According to him, mother and son, brother and sister in ‘primitive’ society would engage in sexual relationships if they could, since they lack the moral superiority of the Europeans. The only thing that prevents them is the imposition of severe strictures or taboos. Thus, “the basis for taboo is a forbidden action for which there exists a strong inclination in the unconscious”. The expression of the taboo in ritual is the way in which the neurosis resulting from the suppression of strong desires is released. The strong desire for example to kill and eat the totem is ceremoniously released when the totem is sacrificed. To Freud, ritual is nothing but the public resolution of a collective neurosis, a resolution for the ambivalent feelings towards the object, the one that is loved and respected but simultaneously hated. It is precisely the contradiction between love and the deep rooted hostility towards that very same object that is the seat of private neurosis and of public ritual especially what Freud identifies as the taboo ceremonial.

Freud identifies neurotic similarities between totemic rituals, the ceremonies associated with kings and the death rituals as well. To Freud, the ritual expression of grief is nothing but the expression of guilt of the relatives and other close associates towards the dead person as most of them had felt a death wish or hostility towards the person when alive. At the person’s death the feelings of guilt take over and are expressed in extraordinarily dramatic expressions of grief, the more the guilt the more dramatic its expression. In Freud’s own words “We have ascertained that these obsessive reproaches are in a certain sense justified and therefore are immune to refutation or objections. Not that the mourner has really been careless, as the obsessive reproach asserts; but still there was something in her, as wish of which she herself was unaware, which was not pleased with the fact that death came, and which would have brought it about sooner had it been strong enough” (1938 : 102).

It is this deep-seated and often unconscious guilt that also give rise to fear of the ghost or the soul of the dead.

Freud brings in another psychological process that is activated in such a situation of neurosis when a person is unable to resolve the contradictory emotions, namely, the process of Projection. The evil demon of our imaginations is nothing but the evil thoughts from within us that have been expelled and then separated from the self and given expression as demons and ghosts.

Projection is not always related to ambivalence or neurosis, it can happen otherwise also. The projection of from the unconscious mind to the outside is an ancient process. Even our senses are projected outside for perceiving the world.

However, to Freud this ambivalence disappears with civilisation so that modern man is not plagued by the unconscious feelings of guilt and repressed sexuality as superior moral values and high culture manage to resolve these conflicts in a modern grown person. But in the primitive these are not resolved and they express themselves in neurotic or ritual behaviour. Thus, Freud puts the western civilisation at a peak in terms of psychological maturity as a parallel to the notions of cultural development.

However, taboos although imposed externally in some ancient period become a part of the conscience so that compliance with taboos such as of incest becomes a part of the unconscious such that breaking of the taboos is felt as guilt and there is control from within on such behaviour. Through the process of displacement, the original forbidden desire is displaced on to another form; thus sexual desires are often translated into violence or the death wish as it is projected outwards. Thus, if we cannot access a person sexually we would instead like to see the person dead or have the sexual thoughts converted to violent thoughts.

Before giving us a theory of Totemism Freud formulates a theory for Animism that he breaks up into beliefs of sorcery and of magic. Sorcery to him is the belief of influencing anthropomorphic spirits with human characters. Magic on the other hand does not necessarily believe in spirits but in acts of controlling and directing nature. Freud likens magic to the imitative play of children that is directed by an inner desire for wish fulfilment. Thus, what Frazer called imitative magic appears to Freud to be a strong desire to influence the world by the power of thought. Thus a theory of misplaced rationality as given by Frazer became a psychological wish fulfilment in which the wish may also be displaced onto another object. The reason why primitive man behaves like children is that the libidinous stage in him has not been resolved and he has not got over his sexual impulses as in a normal western human being.

## 4.2 Freud's Reformulation

Freud reformulates the stages postulated by scholars of society and culture as savagery, barbarism and civilisation; into the phase of animism characterised by narcissism, when the love object is still the ego, the religious phase when the object of love is the parents and the scientific stage when humans renounce the pleasure principle and are completely directed outwards in the search of their love object. Thus, once again Freud compares primitive man to immature adults, yet to resolve their libido. His evolutionary schema of magic, religion and science is explained thorough psychoanalytic concepts, where Magic is the attempt at wish fulfilment through narcissistic attempts at the misplaced powers of the ego. Magic refers to people's attempts to make things happen by the sheer power of thought. Religion as explained in details is derived from the projection of parental figures on the external world of imagined reality, namely, the supernatural and science is the phase of mature sexuality when the love object is sought outside of self.

With regard to religion Freud discovers that Totemism is not just one kind of religious belief but that Totemism was the past of every culture. Thus, from a particularistic religion Totemism is elevated to the status of the Primary religion. It is stated that although Totemism in the present form

may have changed in some ways the oldest forms of totemism always had an animal as a totem and the animal was believed to have a soul. A second universal aspect of Totemism is the fact of exogamy.

Freud then transposes all these theories and observation to the primordial stage of human society that according to Darwin was a primate horde. Here the oldest and strongest male controlled the sexuality of all other males in the horde. Now to the story of this original horde, Freud adds the process of displacement of the father figure on to an animal that he had observed in his study of neurotic children. A boy hates his father at a stage when he is also deeply and sexually attracted towards his mother. The father appears as a rival and the unconscious hostility towards the father may be displaced to an animal and this may express itself in inordinate fear of a particular animal.

Now if by this logic of displacement the totem is the father then the rules of Totemism of not killing the totemic animal and not having sex with the women in one's own group; under conditions of the primitive horde resemble strongly the myth of Oedipus. According to this myth when Oedipus was born a divine message from the heavens warned his father, the king, that this boy would grow up and kill him and marry his mother, the queen. Alarmed by the divine oracle, the king orders that the child be thrown into the sea. He is however rescued by the queen of another kingdom who finds him on the sea-shore. He is adopted by the king and queen and grows up as their son. When he is an adult his kingdom goes to war with his original kingdom, ruled by his parents. In the course of the war he kills the king his father and as was the custom in those days marries his widow, the queen. The queen recognizes him by a birth-mark and when he realizes what he has done he kills himself out of guilt.

To Freud the oedipal myth is nothing but the projection of the inner sexual impulse of all small boys to have their mother as a love object with the consequent hostility towards the father that may appear as an unconscious death wish. In a normal adult, the Oedipus complex as he calls it disappears with proper socialisation and the development of the super ego. But in a neurotic adult it remains unresolved and since it cannot express itself directly is displaced onto some other object or directed towards the self as a destructive neurotic condition.

To Freud the totemic religion is nothing but the original screenplay of the Oedipal complex. The young males of the primitive horde are driven by desire for the females to kill the older male, the father. They also eat the flesh in order to acquire the properties of the father in terms of the primitive magical beliefs. Freud collaborates his thesis by saying that such feelings are universal in all male children and in neurotics. But the neurosis is traceable not to the feelings of hostility alone but to the ambivalence of loving and respecting the father at the same time. Thus, guilt and remorse sets in and the dead father figure assumes great importance. They therefore redeem themselves by putting a taboo on the animal figure on to whom the father figure had been displaced and also on the marrying of all women in the same horde, that had led to the killing in the first place. Thus, Totemism was born along with worship of the totem and exogamy.

In fact all religions were the projection of the guilt of the sons onto an external father figure, who was loved and worshipped and feared at the same time. At a higher level the prohibition on killing the totem was also extended to the brothers, and later extended in case of universal religions to all humanity. As Freud puts it "psychoanalytic investigation of the individual teaches with special emphasis that god is in every case modelled after the father and that our personal relation to god is dependent upon

our relationship to our physical father, fluctuating and changing with him, and that god at bottom is nothing but an exalted father" (1938: 225).

### **Box 4.1: God the Father**

Thus, while Emile Durkheim had equated god with society, Freud equated god with the father. In order to further elaborate on the god or the father figure being an animal, Freud looks into the fact that animals are considered sacred or god like in many religions. Thus, the displacement of the father figure onto an animal figure according to Freud, an universal psychological projection explains all forms of animal worship. "Thus, the father therefore, really appears twice in the scene of sacrifice before the tribal god, once as the god and again as the totem-sacrificial animal". In the course of social evolution the god figure becomes more and distant and powerful and can be approached only through a priesthood; he also becomes the powerful king, the theological state is born. Thus, in most ancient cultures the king is looked upon as both the father figure and the god figure. In the totemic rituals that father figure was transformed into an animal figure and therefore the sacrifice was of the animal; but in later stages of the evolution of religion, the father figure again becomes human, in the form of the god-king, or the god in heaven, then sacrificial victims often also becomes human. In many ancient societies we had human sacrifice.

Infact the figure of Christ too is explained as that of the son who sacrificed his own life to save his brothers from sin.

Thus, from the most primitive to the most advanced (in European world-view) Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex tries to explain all forms of religion. Through the psychological processes of projection and displacement one can explain all types of religious activities like death rituals, sacrifice and animal worship. Freud's theory of religion elaborated further in his book the 'Future of an Illusion' reduced religion to a neurosis. The projection of parental figures from the childhood onto the pantheon of gods led to the cross-cultural applicability of Freud's thesis to non-western cultures by the collaboration of psychologists like Abram Kardiner with anthropologists making use of the field data to illustrate the Freudian theory.

The heavy criticism that was faced by this theory came from people who saw the equating of tribals, the so-called 'primitives' with neurotics and children, both highly eurocentric and racist in character. But the situating of adult personalities in early childhood experience and the psychological processes of projection and displacement were freely used to explain religion and the nature of pantheons and rituals even up to the recent times. Freud's theory has been difficult to shake off and remains one of the most powerful theories of religion put forward till now.

### **4.3 Following Freud: Theodor Reik**

Theodor Reik, has used psychoanalytic theory as given by Freud in his attempts to study rituals. His goal was to indicate the nature of the repressing forces as well as the repressed material as one could learn from the study of rituals. His book contains a preface by Freud himself, acknowledging the contribution made by Reik to Freud's own theory. In analyzing ritual Reik also gives primacy to the myth that supports the

ritual. He refutes Robertson Smith, another reputed scholar of non-western religions who believes that the myth is secondary to the ritual and is of no importance in the analysis of the ritual. Reik is of the opinion that the myths reflect the psychological conflicts of the primitive people and they are the most primordial form of history available to us about the past of mankind. "It must indeed be recognised that myth in its original state, preserves in a far less disguised form the memory of the events which led to the institution of religion than do the other forms of phantasy formation..... Since psychoanalysis has succeeded in interpreting myths, their significance in folk-psychology has been more and more recognized" (1946: 18-19).

Reik analyses two of the most recurrent rituals found all over the world among the most simple people as well as more advanced ones; namely, couvades and initiation rituals. Both these have been the subject of many sociological and cultural interpretations. The analysis that Reik does is based upon Freud's theories, emphasising the Oedipus myth and the totemic rituals as well as his study of the neurotic symptoms of unresolved unconscious desires mostly sexual in nature.

Couvade refers to two kinds of rituals, one of strong taboos placed on the father both before and after the birth of a child, especially a son and the imitation by the father of the birth pangs suffered by the mother, when the mother exhibits no such pains, as would be normally expected. Reik using psychoanalytic concepts has explained both the transference of pain and the taboos and inflicting of pain on the father. Overtly the aim of the customs of imposing taboos on the father is to safeguard the child and the mother from the wrath of demons. But according to psychoanalytic theories these demons are nothing but the projection outside of the unconscious negative desires of the subconscious mind.

The conscious purpose of imitating the birth pains of the mother is to relieve her of her pains. But the father by doing so is actually getting rid of his secret guilt of unconscious wish to harm her and the baby. The sexual relationship between the father and the mother has an ambivalent content of attraction and hostility that is one of the fundamental thesis of Freud, the equation of sex with death and of love with the death wish. It is this ambivalence in the attitude towards his wife, overtly of love and tenderness but at the deep recesses of the unconscious, of hostility and desire to kill that finds expression in the imitation of her pains, "it will therefore not surprise us to find that exactly the same pains were felt by the men which they had wished for the woman in labour" (Reik 1946:53). The prolongation of this period also safeguards his wife from his sexual and violent desires that are directed towards her after childbirth and from which she must be protected.

Another aspect of Couvade is called the dietetic couvades consists of imposition of strict food taboos on the father. Again the analysis is derived from neurotic impulses of death wish and hostility. Thus, the father is not allowed to keep sharp objects in the house, not to kill certain animals and not to eat certain things because these actions substitute for the secret death wish that he harbours towards the child. However Reik goes a little further in the symbolism of the animals that are not be killed as well the animals that are sometimes required to be killed as an act of sacrifice at the birth of a child. The killing of the animals is seen as a substitute or displacement of the actual act of killing the child itself; a practice that has been widespread across the world. Child sacrifice, sometimes in the form of killing of the first-born, or offering of children to gods have been a part of religious rituals across the world.

**Reflection and Action 4.1**

Is killing of animals a sin? Why do some religions regard killing animals a sin? Discuss and note down in your book.

The deeper psychological explanation underlying these practices could not have been just the explanations given in the culture, to prevent famine or to save the life of the father. The offerings are made to god who is a father-figure for the sacrificer, so that there is a relationship of grandfather-grandchild between god and the sacrificed child. The oedipal myth assumes that the father was killed and the son atoned for the sin, but a return of the father in the form of the son relives the myth and the life of the father is endangered by the return of his father, who must be returned. The son would also harbour the same feelings of hostility towards his father, what the latter had felt towards his own father. Some people believe that the father is himself born as his son so that his life force is now in his son, who if he lives will endanger the life of his father. "At the sight of the child the savage must unconsciously remember the breach of prohibition to which the child owes its existence" (ibid: 77).

Another deep-rooted psychological fear that is resurrected is the fear of incest. For the father as a child had felt sexual impulses towards the mother, that are suppressed but the birth of his son brings back those memories at the unconscious level as the son is now threatening sexual possession of his wife (the son's mother).

The more drastic step of actually killing the son is mostly replaced by the widespread puberty rituals or coming of age rituals found all over the world. Most of these rituals are extremely violent putting the initiates through severe torture and blood letting rights. Moreover, there is usually a symbolism of a monster devouring up the initiates that is representative of circumcision or castration (both being psychologically equivalent). This monster is nothing but the projected hostility of the fathers towards the sons. Again the repressed death wish for the son has its roots in the insecurity felt by the father that the son is going to reenact the oedipal scene.

The initiation ceremonies emphasise that the youth are now going to leave the company of women and enter into the brotherhood of men. The separation from the mother in both physical and sexual sense is implied in the rituals. "We recognise in all these rites the strong tendency to detach the youth from their mothers, to chain them more firmly to the community of men, and to seal more closely the union between the father and son which has been loosened by the youth's unconscious striving towards incest".

Interestingly enough because Freud's theories are recognised to be universal the same unconscious strivings are manifested in the higher religions as in Christianity where Freud had equated the death of Christ as a self-sacrifice to atone for the sin of the son in killing the father, as in the Oedipal myth that represents the past of all human beings. Similarities are drawn between the puberty rituals of tribes, the death and resurrection of Christ and the myths of the ancient Greeks, making the Freudian theory truly universal.

#### **4.4 Critique of the Oedipal Theory**

Malinowski raised a most fundamental point in the critique of the theory of projection from the family to the outer world; namely, that the kind of

family assumed by Freud to be universal was only one of a number of varying family forms found across the world. The patriarchal nuclear family composed of father, mother, siblings and headed by the father, was typical of European, Middle classes in the nineteenth century, but this was certainly not the universal form of the family. Family has changed form over the years and is found in different forms in various cultures of the world; the families vary according to who wields power, father or mother or mother's brother, the line through which descent is reckoned, subsistence patterns, livelihood and so on. The Oedipus complex can be rightfully located in the patriarchal family only but would lose its meaning in the matrilineal society. Moreover, assumptions of group marriage and the primitive horde are speculative and not substantiated by any living data.

The two major objections made by Malinowski for the "primitive horde" hypothesis that lies at the heart of the grand theory of Freud regarding the origin of religion and society are firstly that Freud has presupposed the existence of culture in the horde, for the kind of emotions and relationships presupposed by him for this pre-cultural primate horde are not found among animals but in the patriarchal human family; "Remorse, mental conflict, ambivalent emotion-these are cultural, that is human, and not animal responses" (1927: 162). In Freud's theory the animal horde turns human when remorse sets in and exogamy and Totemism appear, but the beginnings of the feelings are cultural and based in animal instincts. Moreover, Malinowski is critical of the concept of a mass psyche and the inheritance of acquired psychic dispositions. As anthropologists have clearly demonstrated human groups pass on culture the dispositions inculcated in each generation is through the mechanism of cultural transmission of enculturation and not inheritance of qualities of the mind.

Again going back to the Oedipal complex itself, Freud had rooted the complex in the child's sexual attraction towards its mother and the incomplete resolution of this attraction leading to neurotic behaviour that stems from unconscious hostility towards father and repressed attraction towards mother. Among the matrilineal Trobrianders, the role of father in procreation of child is not known. The mother is recognised as a kin or blood relation but the father's relationship to child is only as mother's partner. The mother's brother is the blood relative through whom the child inherits his property and who is seen as the closest male relative of the parental generation. The relationship between brother and sister is of strict avoidance hence the mother's brother plays little role in the life of a child in early infancy where the father is the tender and loving figure who is grateful to his wife for her sexual favours that he shows by his great affection for her children. He has no economic contribution to the child's life and any social claim or control. Unlike the European child the Trobriand child is never forcibly separated from mother and grows up naturally to find his love interest in his companions. Love and sexual play between children is never forbidden and no repression regarding sex develops in a Trobriand child. There is no initiation ritual and no physical or social separation from mother. The relationship with father that is of love and care becomes less important as the child grows up and he comes under the authority of the mother's brother from whom he learns his work and from whom he will inherit. There is strict segregation from sister for whom he is expected to work in adult life and who remains a mystical and distant figure for him. In later life also the relationship with father is of love and emotional support. As girls grow up they form a close relationship with father and the father - daughter relationship is more like that in European societies where the Electra complex can develop. But there is no reason for the development of the Oedipal complex as the ambivalent

attitude towards the father is completely absent as so is the separation and longing for the mother.

As the data indicates the Trobriand child is more likely to develop a latent hostility and ambivalent attitude towards the mother's brother and a repressed attraction towards the sister. "Applying to each society a terse, though somewhat crude formula, we might say that in the Oedipus complex there is the repressed desire to kill the father and marry the mother, while in the matrilineal society of the Trobrianders the wish is to marry the sister and to kill the maternal uncle." (*ibid*: 80).

This deals a great blow to the myth of origin of religion. Again going into Trobriand myths Malinowski shows that the myths of origin only involve a woman and her brother or son; but there is never even the slightest mention of a husband or father. Thus, the theory of god the father also does not hold when one looks into the myths. If there is a demon it is the mother's brother and the sister's son has the task of killing this demon. Thus, even in projection and displacement the mother's brother emerges as the figure towards which ambivalence is directed as he is the most important and revered person in a boy's life. The contribution of Malinowski was to reinterpret Freud's work and to show that it could not have been an universal theory for all of mankind. The cultural variations across societies play crucial roles in the development of religion and psychological dispositions in humans and we need to take a cross-cultural perspective in psychology and psychoanalysis. He thus foregrounded the role of culture and later anthropologists took up this issue in their culture and personality studies done within the new-Freudian framework of theory. Like all functional theorists he too marginalized the search for origins and concentrated more on culture and society in its existent forms.

The psychoanalyst Ernest Jones, who defended Freud's theory of the universality of the Oedipal complex, promptly critiqued the thesis put forward by Malinowski. He said that it was present among the Trobrianders also as they lived in a nuclear family composed of father, mother and children. The lack of knowledge of the father's procreative role reduced the guilt of the son and the deflection of the hostility felt towards the father onto the maternal uncle actually protected the relationship. Thus, these cultural and social practices are actual creations of the unconscious affects as defense mechanisms. In other words he regarded culture almost as a byproduct of the psychological. Both the theses were regarded with ambivalence and a debate issued among the scholars as well as the laypersons.

Following Malinowski many other anthropologists had analyzed totemism but none except Meyer Fortes acknowledge any kind of debt to Freud. Fortes(1987: 142-143) draws attention to the fact that according to Freud totemism could only be understood if attention was paid to the component of taboo in it. The taboos represent the psychological pressures that arise when actors are told that what they want to do prompted by their desires are not correct or culturally acceptable. Thus, taboos are connected to the emergence of conscience as most people adhere to the normative not from external pressure but because they listen to the 'inner voice' namely, the voice of conscience, as represented by the primitive taboos. The repressed urges are then often projected onto the animal species that represents the father figure that in a culture stands for the restrictions on one's urges being the recognised authority. Thus, an actor is in fear of the father's authority and therefore harbours a latent feeling of hostility but the father figure is also revered because it is the root of one's identity especially in a patriarchal context. According to Fortes among the Tallensi

whom he had studied, the totemic animals are symbolic of the paternity perpetuated through the patrilineage, and the Tallensi consciously identify with the totem as a father figure and therefore it is subjected to taboo. The reverence manifested for the totem is the same as that for the ancestor. Moreover, taboos are not confined to tribal religions alone but are found in most universal religions such as among orthodox Jews, Hindus and Muslims. Each one of these religions strictly adhere to certain food taboos like beef for the Hindu and pork for the Muslims. These taboos are followed as they represent strictures handed down by remote ancestors and as a part of belonging to a community that traces ancient kinship through an ancestor, and are viewed as representative of the identity of the community. Thus, community identity, ancestors and taboos are all linked inextricable to each other. Fortes, adds a very rationalistic explanation to the fact that it is animals that are subject to taboo. The reason is very obvious that it is animals that are killed for food and are thus the object of desire as coveted food. If no one were interested in killing and eating them the taboo would make no sense.

## 4.5 Culture and Psychoanalysis

Meyer Forte's represents the community of anthropologists and social scientists who did continued to have faith in psychoanalytical paradigms to explain certain aspects of culture and vice versa. Talcott Parsons had suggested that what Durkheim has called the 'collective representation' is quite like what Freud has called the super-ego, as super ego or conscience is internalized by the child emanating from parental authority that instills the values and norms that are largely derived from culture and society. Thus, what the anthropologist can observe as norms and values of a culture are incorporated into the unconscious mind expressed in the attitudes and behaviour of persons belonging to the culture.

Psychoanalytic concepts were woven for example into the study of witchcraft where the control of men over economy and most dimensions of social life also instilled in them unconscious fear of the women as deep inside they feared the retaliation and rebellion of women against patriarchal domination. It is these fears and guilt that are sometimes projected outwards on to the form of the witch and it also explains why mostly women and marginal persons in society are accused of witchcraft for as Freud suggested it is the guilt inside us that is projected outside as demons. Infact witchcraft has often been related to the ambivalent relationships that exist within the family and kinship network, especially those between in-laws and certain relationships that are inherently contradictory or contain covert sexual overtones that are overtly forbidden.

Again psychoanalytic insights enabled the anthropologists to move beyond functional explanations of how particular cultural traits or social institutions contribute towards society and the individual to why they exist in the first place. By acknowledging the psychoanalytic roots of certain institutions one is also saved from the teleological trap of explaining every thing by its function.

Several anthropological works have explained religion and ritual practices through psychoanalytic explanations; example Gluckmann's (1954) explanation of Swazi First fruit ceremony where the ceremonial according to the scholar is actually resolves the ambivalence in the relationship between the king and his subjects, though overtly it is done to ensure prosperity for the king. Melford Spiro in his study of Burmese society has shown how the frequent witchcraft accusations among the Burmese

peasants are in effect a manifestation of the socially maladaptive impulses that have their origin in the depth of the unconscious mind. Thus, these accusations occur in a society that is Buddhist and does not otherwise sanction witchcraft.

Freeman (1968) has in his analysis of the Thunder God of the Semangs shown that many beliefs centered on the thunder. God and his wife are explained if we view them as projections of the parental figures. The gods are angry whenever there is a breach of taboos such as related to incest and prohibited sexual relationships and bring about destructive storm. Thus, the occurrence of these storms is related to the sense of collective guilt and the father figure is the collective representative of the super ego.

Psychoanalytic explanations have also been incorporated in symbolic analysis of rituals and related symbols; like the works of Victor Turner (1969). Thus, a barren woman among the Ndembu projects the guilt regarding the incomplete aspect of her personality, namely her inability to bear children as persecution by ancestor spirits. She in fact is guilty of not being able to fulfil the expectations of her ancestors and of her parents in the inability to bear children and this failure is projected in the form of persecuting demons (ancestral shades).

To Meyer Fortes the importance of psychoanalytic perspective in anthropology stems from the fact that anthropologists normally study customary behaviour and these are kept alive in any culture by the mechanism of the superego. Thus, to get a proper understanding one must try to reach the psychoanalytic roots of the practice.

#### **Box 4.2: Ancestor Worship**

In his study of the Tallensi, he found that ancestor worship plays a crucial role in their lives. All Tallensi trace their identity from lineal ancestors who are responsible for their well-being as well as their misfortunes and most significantly all Tallensi die because their ancestors kill them. This is not viewed by the Tallensi as acts of malevolence by the ancestors but as the rightful action taken by them to punish them for their lapses. The ancestors are to be kept appeased by making sacrificial offerings and food and any lapse in such offerings may lead the ancestor to cause death. However, Tallensi accept death with equanimity as it is seen as their own shortcomings and the ancestors are justified in the killing but what is most distressful is the death of a person without a son. For after death each man is reinstated as an ancestor but he can be made one only if his son offers sacrifices and performs ancestor worship. In other words at death a person leaves this world but is reinstated in the other world only by his son.

For a Tallensi his own personhood is a manifestation of his link to his ancestors and at death he himself will become an ancestor but only if he has a son. A son steps into his father's status after his death but he must perform the necessary rituals to make his father an ancestor and thereafter keep him appeased by regular offerings. The relationship between each man and his first child is ambivalent as the father sees in his first son his successor. The son must wait for the father to die before he gains all the status that will make him a complete social person. The father must have a son but sees in his son a replacement of his own self. Ultimately he as an ancestor would be responsible from his death.

## 4.6 Beliefs of the Tallensi

The Tallensi believe that if an ancestor does not kill one then one is not even human. The Tallensi ancestors are the projection of the jural authority vested in parents. When they kill their killing is justified as a sentence passed. The parents exercise their authority to incorporate the children especially the sons into the lineage that is the only basis of the identity of a Tallensi. After death the identity continues as they still occupy the same lineage but now as an ancestor. The ancestors have full personhood they are named and identified and located. Moreover, only direct lineal ancestors have power over a person's life, not collaterals. These ancestors also live in close proximity to the descendants and are in constant communication and occupy the same moral universe. However, although most misfortunes and death is attributed to ancestors, the Tallensi do not look upon them as misfortune, they are appeased only when they make their presence felt by some sign, but otherwise the Tallensi go about their day to day lives in a normal way and do not exhibit any undue anxiety. Thus, Fortes is of the opinion that Tallensi ancestors are comparable to 'externalised representation of conscience' and not some hostile and malevolent spirit.

Children are dependent on parents for proper upbringing that enables them to become complete social persons. But a man becomes jurally autonomous that is a complete person only at the death of his father. And only then he can deal with the ancestors. Thus, the relationship of father and son is ambivalent. A similar relationship exists between mother and first daughter although after marriage daughters move away from control by parents.

This covert conflict between father and first son is compared to the Oedipal conflict by Fortes and he demonstrates how this is culturally exhibited among the Tallensi. The first son is surrounded with taboos in respect of his father. He may not wear any of his father's clothes or use his tools. He must keep away from his father's body smell and this is linked to sexuality. Fortes points out that among the Tallensi there is a three year post-partum period of abstinence. This makes for a covert sexual antagonism between father and child as the father may look upon the child as coming between him and his wife's sexuality. As soon as the father dies however these tabooed objects are handed over to the son and he assumes in a way his father's identity. But he also then becomes responsible making offerings and satisfying the demands of his now dead father and through him to become morally responsible to all his ancestors. Thus, full personhood brings responsibilities and also the threat of death. For before the father stood between him and the ancestors and now he has to directly face them.

Thus, while paternal ancestors look after life, the maternal ancestors look after his destiny. But the judgmental nature of the ancestors leads one to think that not the entire personality of the parents but only the jural part of the personality that is directly connected with authority is enshrined as ancestor.

Thus the fact of latent conflict and ambivalent nature of parent child relationship is nearly universal and as Freud pointed out is projected onto the religion and of this ancestor worship is a widely prevalent example. Looking at it from a functional perspective it must be realised that only such formidable ancestors are able to keep people the right track, to ensure that the moral system is upheld and most importantly to rationalise suffering as something of one's own doing.

However, the projection of parental figures on to the supernatural world need not always take on the form of ancestor worship. As Fortes demonstrates it is only the outcome of a particular kind of family and kinship structure based strongly on the lineage.

## 4.7 Culture, Society and Religion

Even psychologists and psycho-analysts recognised the role of culture in the human psyche and the works of Eric Ericson uses the concept of ‘psycho-social’ growth giving its epigenetic sequence as a result of the individual’s reciprocal relationship with his/her social environment. To Ericson, one can trace to sequence of growth of the human personality from a stage of total dependence on the nurturing care of a mother figure and the young adults’ acquisition of a sense of identity and self-reliance. The concept of identity taken here in a sense of integration of the inner self and the outer world, also fuses three kinds of data cultural, historical and psychological that is required to describe what one means by a collective identity a sense of being this or that. Sudhir Kakar, a student of Eric Ericson has used this concept of identity as a methodological tool to describe what he understands as the “Indianess” of Indians, or in other words he attempts to explore a sense of the Indian or rather the Hindu concept of self and person hood. In his psychoanalytic method he uses the material of clinical evidence and the interpretation of myths to get an inside into the identity of the Hindu.

Kakar’s major source of data for this enterprise is the myths that he views as “individual psychology projected onto the outside world; they let what is actually going on ‘inside’ happen ‘outside’. Myths not only convey communal versions of the repressed wishes and fantasies of early childhood, functioning as a kind of deep freeze for socially unacceptable impulse; they also reflect the nature of an individual’s interpersonal bonds within his culture. They can be read as a kind of collective historical conscience”(Kakar 1978:4). Myths reflect all the basic preoccupations of a child’s mind that often lie deep in the unconscious but nevertheless have a strong presence in the outward projections, themes like, death, birth, sexual feelings etc. It is possible to identify the cultural from the universal in the collective projections, ‘the dominant psychological modalities’ the uniquely Indian from the world. Thus, Ericson’s approach and Kakar’s too is a shift away from the way in which Freud approached culture as opposed to the inner wishes, drives and impulses of a person. Now culture appears as a complementary process one that is responsible for the genesis of many of such drives and wishes. Thus, in describing a ‘national character’ one can demonstrate the fit between the psychological themes, culture and social institutions that in combination give rise to an identity.

Kakar isolates the major themes of Hinduism; *moksha*, *dharma* and *karma* and shows their psychoanalytical essence. The Hindu sense of reality is not perceived consciously through the medium of the ego but felt through the id, the primal archaic self in rhythm with the natural elements. Thus, the Hindu does not imbibe knowledge from the outside but through the inner self as realisation from within, an almost unconscious process. The aim of *moksha*, the prime objective of Hindu religion is to free the ego from definite boundaries through which its identity has been formed. In *moksha* this sense of boundary of the ego, the sense of being ‘me’ is reversed and the ego merged into the infinite. The concept of *dharma* is presented as the proper course of action for a human being but in a highly relativised way. There is no bounded definition of what is right or wrong but every thing is viewed in a relativistic perspective. This creates a doubt as to the correctness of individual initiative, the safe way to go

being doing what has been done before. Dharma is viewed in the spirit than in the content of the activity. Kakar emphasises the largely unconscious content of *dharma* imbibed during the socialisation process as “*dharma* in its social aspect, which influences the individual’s perception and evaluation of institutions in familiar, social, economic, and political spheres as well as his connection with these institutions, exists largely at a preconscious level and is rarely the subject of conscious scrutiny” (*ibid*: 41).

Karma is the third principle that mediates between moksha and dharma. The infant in Hindu beliefs is born with certain propensities called *gunas* that are a result of his *samskaras* that shape his unconscious inner dispositions and one is born with them. Thus, one with more *sattvic gunas* will follow dharma with less effort than one born with more *rajas* or *tamas gunas*. It is through karma that one can shape one’s destiny and rise above one’s *guna* but the notion of innate dispositions or *samskaras* plays a crucial role in psychology of the Hindus as even strict socialisation is not considered of any use as a child is likely to be guided by its *samskaras* to a large extent.

The Hindu concept of time too is highly relativistic. The term for time *kala* is polysemic and incorporates many layers of meaning including death, fate and a circular concept of time in which the same word is used from tomorrow and yesterday. To the Hindus real time is motionless and infinite and can be equated with the state of *moksha*. Thus, the Hindu fear of death is transcended by this concept of timelessness that is true reality. The feeling of actual time is dismissed as unreal as *maya*. This too adds to the Hindu psyche of fatalism. This world-view in its entirety is absorbed by the Hindu child from infancy through its primary care givers and later in life through the myths and folklores that it imbibes and gives the Hindu a definite psychic identity.

#### 4.8 Culture and Self

The positivist trend in psychology introduced by Freud had completely ignored the self-consciousness of human beings, the emic concept of ‘self’ as against the etic concept of ego. Contemporary approaches in both psychology and the social sciences like, anthropology and sociology have tended to focus more on the subjective experience than limit themselves to understanding human behaviour only from the outside or in an etic manner. George Devos, Anthony Marsella and Francis Hsu have attempted to compare the sense of self as it variously understood in the different philosophical systems of the world, Hinduism, Confucianism and Maoism in China and the mixed blend of views in contemporary Japan. Psychological studies of the classical tradition had tended to ignore self-consciousness as non-scientific. Western approaches to the study of behaviour had viewed it more in sense of social roles relatively free from religious/philosophical systems. But we cannot ignore the fact that inspite of socialisation to fulfil the expected social roles there is an inner sense of self that is often in conflict with the performance of the social role. The self is also an evolving concept transforming with external factors. Since the philosophical tenets of cultures vary, the conception of self is influenced by these philosophies and therefore evolves differently and also copes differently with the environment to form personality structures that vary across cultures. Self-perceptions have a causative effect on behaviour; like, a person would understand whether or not he/she is adapted or not adapted to the society depending of the expectations of behaviour that are socially determined. However, the self-consciousness can be at variance with the etic judgement of behaviour, like a person perceived as

maladjusted may not think so himself. Francis Hsu has made a distinction between the expressible conscious and the non-expressible conscious. Thus, different cultural forms create divergent forms of self-hood as result of a dynamic interaction between psychic demands and the requirements of the society on the individual. Each individual in the process of adaptation thus tries to find a balance between the two. To understand behaviour in any culture one must examine the meaning systems of the actors and how they have been formed in the society.

### **Reflection and Action 4.2**

How much does the conceptualisation of the self depend upon socialisation? Discuss and comment.

Without an understanding of such meanings one can never understand behaviour properly as only conditioned by etic or non-self conscious factors. Moreover, concept of self-hood of the individual is constantly being redefined as a result of interaction with others. Thus, the concepts of self and their meaning system should play more determining role in the understanding of personalities.

In the analysis of the western concept of self, that is an amalgamation of both psychology and philosophy, Frank Johnson identifies three levels. On the first level are those states where the mind communicates with itself in solitary communication, in other words what we consider as talking to one's self, this can take the form of introspection that is when one is making a judgement about one's self or analysing one's own behaviour or it can be pure fantasy or day dreaming. At the second level are the states of mind that arise when one is interacting in small face to face groups or with one or two persons only. On the third level are experiences that one comes across when facing a crowd or alone in a large group. Thus, in the second case one is acting upon others that is interacting but in the third case one feels as if one is being acted upon. In the first two cases the self is experienced as a subject but in the last case the self is felt as an object. These states may be differentially interpreted in different cultures. Like for the Japanese to be sincere means to act according to one's role expectation that is according to one's objective self. But to an American it may mean acting according to one's inner convictions that is according to one's subjective self.

The European philosophy is based upon a dualism between mind and body but the eastern philosophies may not follow such a distinction. Thus, western scientific methods as applied to psychology concentrated on studying the physiological basis of behaviour ignoring the subjective consciousness of the mind altogether.

The roots of western systems of thought arise in a monotheistic belief system where the world is dichotomised into this or that. Thus, in Christianity we have good vs. evil; God vs. Satan and one is either a believer or not a believer. The Judeo-Christian traditions tend to see the world in terms of black and white. In the polytheistic religions the belief systems are accustomed to accept variety and alternate view-points. For example in Hinduism there is no concept of Satan; also there is a highly relativistic concept of good and bad. Good and bad is situational and not absolute, as one knows from the discourse on *dharma* in the Bhagvat Gita. Even Japanese thought does not contain absolute and compartmentalised categories as in western thought. Even the concept of a religion as it is understood in western thought is absent in Japan. Thus, Christians were often subjected to a sense of alienation from their

being because they considered themselves as sinful. They have a greater chance of feeling isolated as they strive towards an objective reality.

The most complex sense of self is found in Hindu thought. The concept of the real self is the *atman* but the real existence of the *atman* comes about in the state of *moksha* when the *atman* is merged in the larger reality of the *paramatman*. Thus, as Agehananda Bharati puts it the Hindu sense of self is not one of the individual but of the individual, the incomplete self that must realise itself only in merging its identity in the larger Self. Thus, the actions at the level of the individual are really not that important hence the concept of sin in Hinduism is very diffuse. The actions of this lesser self, the *atman*, really do not matter when it is submerged in the larger self. However, actions or *karma* are the ways in which the *atman* realises itself. Thus, the western concepts of individualism are absent in Hinduism where the individual self is seen as inconsequential. More importantly in terms of actual behaviour Hinduism looks upon the material world as a lesser order of reality as it involves the lesser self. The Hindu looks upon the western concept of self as materialistic as it emphasises the individual identity of the self that is manifest in the material world. To the Christian this self is preserved till the end of time.

In Hindu thought the *atman* is clothed in layers that only obscure the ultimate reality; these consist of the material self, the physiological self, the intellectual self and even the self-conscious ego. Once these are all removed the *atman* is indescribable, has no material existence and no essence at all. Thus, to be a Hindu one does not even have to follow a particular course of action for ultimately, all is *maya* (illusion). The sense of self that consists of one's lineage, clan, village and personal identity is only valid for the social realm. For self-development spirituality takes one away from all forms of social identity. Thus, to attain spiritual liberation one has to dissociate from all forms of social and material identities.

Thus, contemporary psychological theory goes beyond objective reductionism to take into account various cultural and social situations that lead us towards a subjective understanding of the self and concepts of personhood that vary across time and space.

#### 4.9 Conclusion

An area that is of deep interest to both psychologists and those who study religious behaviour is the phenomenon of altered states of consciousness, found in shamans, possession rituals, American vision quests and demonic possession. Since psychology had avoided subjective states of consciousness to large extent there was no theory available for anthropologists to test on altered states of consciousness. Only in the 1960's a lively interest in altered states arose in the USA as a result of research on psychotropic drugs.

Rituals have made use of altered states almost from pre-historical times; perhaps even from the time of the Neanderthals as some evidences have shown. Possession is a means to communicate with spirits and sometimes the body is seen as invaded by a spirit. Altered states of consciousness involve alteration in perception, sensations, cognition and emotions are altered; sometimes people do not feel pain even if they indulge in acts that would normally cause unbearable pain, sometimes they see and hear things otherwise not visible to any one else, they also behave in strange fashion. Each time the acts are attributed culturally to the spirits. The altered states can be induced by the use of drugs, or by fasting and other

physiological means or by drumming. Every time the person is socialised into behaving in a manner that is predictable. Thus, as Bourguignon puts it “cultural patterning, social practice, learning and expertise all exist in ASC situations that we find in different cultures” (1979:239).

In 1959 Wallace did an experiment in which he compared Indians who took psychotropic drugs as part of a ritual and whites who took it only as an experiment. While both showed altered perceptions, yet the Indians behaved in culturally appropriate ways, showed reverence and had a patterned response. The whites on the other hand showed idiosyncratic behaviour, break down of social norms of behaviour and no particular pattern in response. The Indians showed therapeutic healing and feelings of well being while the whites showed no such response. Thus, the differences were due to the “cultural differences between the two groups, the mental structures with which they approached the experience, the group context, and the symbolic meaning.” Thus what happens during modification of consciousness is depending what is informed to the individual through culture.

In similar experiments where sensory deprivation was induced it was again found that the responses were also conditioned by the reaction of other people to the ones who have the experience and the social cues. In case the person goes into a trance by herself as in possession by drumming it may be compared to a process of self-hypnosis but done according to culturally prescribed expected behaviours. Thus, when possession trance appears in the context of religious experience it is guided by a learned model and group reactions factors. The audience provides cues that set the stage for the possession.

Altered states quite often are sources of visions that are often the reason for the origin of a religion if the person who has the visions is able to persuade others about their reality. In fact a study done by Bourgignon indicates that almost all religions have some concept of ASC in some context or the other.

The emic theories that explain several forms of ASC may be classified as ‘ethnopsychologies’, psychological theories characteristic of many traditional cultures. The occurrence of the possession trance is inextricably linked to the belief in it. This clearly indicates the psychological basis of such a trance but these are also related closely to the social and economic types of the societies as research by Bourgignon has shown. Not only economic types but there are gender related differences in the patterns of trance; as also symbolic associations that are culturally conditioned. Thus, the study of ASC is an area where the interaction of psychological, cultural and social variables is truly present.

## 4.10 Further Reading

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## 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 illusionary 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 be 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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