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# UNIT 1 MEANING AND NATURE OF RELIGION

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## 1.1 OBJECTIVES

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In this paper we try to understand the very meaning of religion leaving the discussions on definitions and the theories of the origin of religion since those are the topics of the subsequent units. However, meaning and nature cannot be dealt-with without touching both those topics as well. So, we will refer to them without going into the details of them. After going through the **etymological meaning** of the word, we will make a search into the **different meanings** of religion from the background of various disciplines like phenomenology, sociology, psychology etc. Thereafter, we will look into the **nature** and **developing stages** of religions.

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## 1.2 INTRODUCTION

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What is religion? A very complex question! We know religion and we live religion. But, how do we explain or define religion? Religion is one of the most sensitive and vulnerable aspects of human life from the very beginning. Though it looks simple, it is not a simple reality to be easily defined or explained. There are many theories proposed regarding the origin of religion as a result of the development of speculative, intellectual and scientific mind. However, in spite of the differences in the understanding of this important element, it is confirmed that it is purely a human activity and it has become an inevitable aspect of human life. In the West, under the influence of the inherited tradition of Judeo-Christian tradition, religion was understood more theistically while in the East, it was mostly a respond to the experience of the natural powers that are beyond human control and also to the inner urge for an ethical and moral reference.

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## 1.3 MEANING OF RELIGION

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

When we start thinking seriously on religion, naturally we fall upon thoughts of the definition of religion. There are numberless definitions of religion. The meaning and definition of religion differs according to the socio-cultural and psychological background of the person who reflects upon it. Even the political settings insert its influence on the understanding of the meaning of religion. Some of the definitions are *phenomenological* and try to expose the common elements that we see in the acknowledged world religions. For example, the human recognition of a superhuman power entitled to obedience and worship. Some others are *interpretative* definitions. Under this we may group the *psychological* definitions – the feelings, acts and experiences of the individual men in so far as they consider themselves to stand in relations to what they may call the divine; *sociological* definitions – a set of beliefs, practices and institutions which men have evolved in various societies; *naturalistic* definitions – a body of scruples which impede the free exercise of our faculties; and *religious* definitions – religion is the recognition that everything in the world is the manifestation of a power that is beyond human intellect.

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

Studying the primitive religion, the anthropologist Sir E.B. Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture* gives a short definition of religion where he understands religion as “the belief in spiritual beings.” There are many objections raised against such understanding of religion on the basis of its incompleteness. The critics argue that ‘besides belief, practice also must be emphasised. Another objection is that the faith and believes and the practices are not always towards spiritual beings. Or else, our scope of belief must be extended and widened to include even ‘nothing’. However, there are also positive side in looking at religion from that perspective. It makes very clear about the religious attitude of the believers and also the object to which the believers refer to. According to another anthropologist Sir J.G. Frazer, as presented in his book *the Golden Bough*, religion is a ‘propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life. This shows that powers referred to in this context are always of superior nature (superior to man). To cope with this supra-human powers, ancient religion made use of magic, sorcery, taboos, myth and mythological stories and so on.

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## 1.4 NATURE OF RELIGION

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### The Primitive Forms of Religions

The religion is often spoken in relation to something sacred. There is no religion without having such a notion. Now the various aspects/concepts used to express the general characteristics of this ‘sacred’ in the primitive religion were very simple. The notions like ‘unseen’, ‘unknown’, ‘infinite’ ‘immanence and transcendence’ etc. are notions of advanced theology. The ancient notions used are rather quasi-negative. Scholars trace the following general characteristics of the ‘sacred’ which may explain the nature of it in the primitive thought.

- i) *The sacred as the forbidden*: Polynesian term taboo in the primitive religion could be one that comes close and conveys the sense of ‘sacred’ – *scer* and

*sanctus*. This points to the idea that something is 'marked off' as to be shunned. Thus enforced a sense of mystic sanction or penalty if avoided. Because of this aspect of sanction and punishment added, taboo comes to stand for uncleanliness and sin on the one hand, and while it can also be interpreted as means of self protection on the part of the sacred against defying contact on the other hand.

- ii) *The sacred as the mysterious*: This is another quasi-negative notion regarding the sacred. What was strange and new was treated in the primitive time as sacred having non-normal nature. We cannot say it as abnormal rather it was non-normal nature. It was indeed a mystery, something beyond the human grasp, human understanding and control.
- iii) *The sacred as the secret*: The sacred was understood having a mystic and mysterious power and therefore, it was something secret. This sense of secret was emphasised and projected strongly through the insistence of exoticism, initiation, exclusion of women etc. from the religious moments of rites and rituals.
- iv) *The sacred as potent*: Perhaps one of the positive and most fundamental conception of the sacred is that the efficacy of the sacredness is identified with the magical and mystical power attributed to it. Everything is understood as having an indwelling potency, but whatever is sacred manifests this potency in an extra-ordinary degree.
- v) *The sacred as the animate*: There are lots of evidences to show that the primitive gods were conceived as personified anthropomorphic characters dwelling somewhere apart.
- vi) *The sacred as ancient*: another element found in the primitive religion is the practice of ancestor worship – the organized cult of ancestors marking a stage of development in the primitive way of thinking. The ancestor worship is found even in religions that are purely ethical like the Chinese primitive religions.

### Higher Forms of Religion

The higher forms of religions have developed on a pre-existing basis through a process of selection and development. Certainly it must have been in response to the demands of modern advanced thinking, need of better expressions, harmony between past and present experiences; and also to reach a position which shall satisfy the demands of feeling and reflexion and give confidence for facing the future challenges. The motive forces that urged for a better presentation of religion could be:

- i) The rapid progress on scientific knowledge and thought;
- ii) Changes in the Social order of man;
- iii) The enriched forms of ideas and expressions;
- iv) The deeper intellectual interest in the subject; and
- v) The modern tendencies to avoid superstitions and to substitute it with more rational and scientific thoughts

The higher forms of religions discuss reality in terms of transcendence, oneness, supremacy and absoluteness, and also about the ethical schemes in relation to social unity and harmony, justice, human destiny, human freedom, etc.

Ethical element is of fundamental importance in determining the quality of a religion. It is a powerful factor in elevating the object of worship, the religious relation, and the religious life. Another important aspect that the religion is concerned is the problem of eschatology. It is related to the ultimate destiny of man and the world. Eschatological motives may powerfully affect the working of religion. In the primitive religions, the eschatological ideas gather round the fate of the dead, and are unleavened by ethical elements while in the higher religions, it was accelerated by the quickened moral consciousness and the sense of the value of the individual. The very often accepted world religions are Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Sikhism.

In history we see that there were different approaches to God and religion. From the negative perspective, we see the trend of *atheism*. It is the belief that there is no God of any kind. Another trend is *agnosticism* which literally means ‘not-knowism’. That means, we are not able to affirm or deny the existence of God. This trend argues that our intellect is incapable of knowing God and making any kind of judgement on God. Still another stand is *scepticism*. This approach simply means doubting. That means, we cannot have certainty about anything, not even on material things. Then, of course, we cannot speak with surety about metaphysical and abstract realities. There is still another perspective, that is, *naturalism*. According to this theory, every aspect of human existence and experience including moral and religious life could be properly and adequately explained in terms of nature.

Coming to the positive approaches to God and religion, *deism* can refer to the trend of thought according to which this universe was created and set on motion by a God and left it alone to operate. The deists teach that natural theology is enough to explain the religious matters. Finally, perhaps not the last, the common stand, that is *theism*. Theism refers to a particular doctrine concerning the nature of a God and his relationship to the universe. It conceives of a God as personal and active in the governance and organization of the world and the universe.

**Check Your Progress I**

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

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

1) What is the meaning of religion?

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2) What are the various ways of defining religion?

### 1.5 DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF RELIGION

As we discuss on religion and its stages of development, certainly it is necessary to look at the beginnings of the thought. As it is mentioned already, transition to higher forms of religion was inevitable in the rapidly changing social situations. There was urgency for man to reconsider current and inherited beliefs and practices to gain some harmony between past and the present experiences. As a result we see the developments from the very basic worship patterns of the primitive man to that of the present age. The developmental stages of the evolution of religion could be enumerated as Totemism, Animism, Pantheism, Polytheism, Monotheism, Monism.

The terms of totemism and animism are used to explain the set of religious beliefs of the lower caste. The essential feature of **totemism** is the belief in a supernatural connection between a group of people and a group of objects like certain animal species, sometimes plants, or more rarely other objects. Usually there is a taboo on killing or eating an animal totem. In totemism we find that plant species may be totems just as animal species or rocks are. **Animism** denotes the collection of beliefs possessed by the Dravidian tribes who have not even nominally been admitted to the caste system. The general nature of animism may perhaps be explained as the belief that everything which has life or motion has also a soul or spirit, and all natural phenomena are caused by direct personal agency.

The theistic tradition recognizes and accepts the existence of God, more specifically a personal God. Therefore, theism is often understood as synonym for monotheism. It is a belief in a personal god. **Pantheism** is ‘God-is-all-ism’. According to this view all is God and God is all. God is identical with the world and nature. In other words, God and universe are one. God is not a reality separate from the world and remote from it. The particular individual objects have no absolute existence of their own, rather they are either the different modes of the universal substance or parts of the divine whole. **Polytheism**, according to the German Sociologist Max Müller, was the form of worship of God during the ancient times. Polytheism is the stage of development in the religious thought when the belief in and worship of many individual Gods existed. Indeed, it was the result of the anthropomorphic personification of the natural powers that was beyond the control of human. In other words, such natural powers were personified and attributed to them of the human powers and qualities but with maximum nature. The socio-political and cultural conditions and circumstances affected the forms assumed by the beliefs and worships of these many Gods. **Monotheism**

is the beginning of believing in one Supreme God even in the polytheistic situation. In the monotheistic tradition we see that there is a demand to abandon many older beliefs, hopes, fears and customs relating to many gods. Even though they have the concept of many gods, they believe in one Supreme God and other gods are only subordinate. Or they believed, as Max Müller observes, that the multiple gods are only the manifestations of the one supreme. **Monism** is the belief in one reality. The word was coined by Christian Wolf in the west though it was existed from the ancient times.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

Religion being an undeniable aspect of human life, any study on human life will remain half done if this particular aspect is not taken into consideration. Religion is being studied from different perspectives and it could be investigated from Sociological, Anthropological, Phenomenological, Philosophical, Ethical and Aesthetical perspectives. Today there is an added scope, that is, the field of comparative religion. It is an urgent need and demand of the present world community to promote mutual, mature and unprejudiced understanding of others and their religiousness.

We are living in a postmodern world. And our world is becoming a global village in every aspect. So, none can live in an isolated world of one’s own. This postmodern existential predicament in a way compels every person to learn more about oneself and also about others. It will certainly enhance one’s life and it will certainly facilitate the peaceful co-existence of human as a whole, promote mature and unprejudiced relations, and without doubt, it will help everyone develop an integral vision of life and to work for the welfare of the whole world.

**Check Your Progress II**

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

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

1) Which are the developmental stages of the evolution of religion?

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

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1.7 KEY WORDS

<b>Atheism</b>	:	it is the belief that there is no God of any kind.
<b>Agnosticism</b>	:	it means ‘not-knowism’ which implies that we are not able to affirm or deny the existence of God.
<b>Scepticism</b>	:	it means doubting. That means, we cannot have certainty about anything, either of material or of spiritual things.
<b>Naturalism</b>	:	it means every aspect of human existence and experience including moral and religious life could be properly and adequately explained in terms of nature.
<b>Deism</b>	:	it means this universe was created and set on motion by a God and left it alone to operate.
<b>Totemism</b>	:	it is the belief in a supernatural connection between a group of people and a group of objects like certain animal species, sometimes plants, or more rarely other objects.
<b>Animism</b>	:	it the belief that everything which has life or motion has also a soul or spirit, and all natural phenomena are caused by direct personal agency.
<b>Pantheism</b>	:	it is ‘God-is-all-ism’, which all is God and God is all and God is not a reality separate from the world and remote from it.
<b>Polytheism</b>	:	it is the belief in and worship of many individual Gods.
<b>Monotheism</b>	:	it is belief in one Supreme God and considers other gods as subordinate.
<b>Monism</b>	:	it is the belief in the existence of only one reality.

1.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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## 1.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) The word 'religion' is derived from the Latin root *religare* and it means 'to bind fast'. Then 'religion' has certainly a strong emphasis on community aspect. It is something that binds fast the members of it together. What we call religion is very complex and inclusive. It includes manifold elements and aspects of life like beliefs, feelings, experiences, values, symbols, worship, rituals, festivals, cult and cultures, myth and mythology.
- 2) The different ways of defining religion are *phenomenological, psychological, sociological, naturalistic, and religious*.

### Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) The developmental stages of the evolution of religion are - ***Totemism, Animism, Pantheism, Polytheism, Monotheism, Monism***.
- 2) The postmodern world in which we live is becoming a global village in every aspect. At the same time we encounter elements of social unrest and atrocities on the basis of religion in every part of the world. It is due to the fanatic thoughts that creep into the mind of people due to sheer ignorance about the true teachings of both one's own religion and of other religions. This compels every person to learn more about oneself and also about others. And the study of religions both of one's own and of others will certainly enhance one's life and it will certainly facilitate the peaceful co-existence of human as a whole, promote mature and unprejudiced relations, and without doubt, it will help everyone develop an integral vision of life and to work for the welfare of the whole world. Hence it is relevant and much needed in the modern world.