
UNIT 3 SOCIOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we review the sociology and psychology of religion with a special emphasis on the contributions made by the world's most renowned sociologists and psychologists of religion. We examine the general characteristics of the sociology and psychology of religion to have a better grasp of the meaning and significance of religion in the world today.

By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Understand the concept of sociology of religion;
- Identify and put forward the main ideas of the major sociologists of religion, such as Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber;
- Understand the concept of psychology of religion; and
- Identify and present the main ideas of the major psychologists of religion, such as William James, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung.

3.1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Religion is as old as humankind. It has been the subject matter of analysis and reflection right from the beginning of human history. It is an ineradicable part of human nature whose sources run much deeper than those of ordinary habits. There are, in fact, almost as many theories as there are religious thinkers, or thinkers about religion. Religion is concerned with a 'beyond', with man's relation to and attitude towards that 'beyond'. The human capacity for belief is limitless in effect. It is this capacity along with its striking diversity and strangeness of the beliefs and associated practices, which has stimulated the curiosity of many writers on religion, especially sociologists and psychologists. The following pages are an attempt to recapture the theoretical legacy of several scholars in the field of sociology and psychology who made indelible marks in their analysis and assessment of religion.

3.2 SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

Introduction

The main nucleus of sociology of religion is the relationship that exists between religion and society. It is the study of the beliefs, practices and organizational forms of religion using the tools and methods of the discipline of sociology. Sociology as a discipline has been very intimately associated with the study of religion ever since sociology surfaced as a distinct field in the nineteenth century. The sociologists from the very beginning saw religion as a nearly inseparable aspect of social organization, a necessary window to understanding the past and present.

Sociology of religion is a scientific approach to religion, which tries to be empirical and objective. The fundamental concern of sociologists of religion is to further understanding of the role of religion in society, to analyze its significance and impact upon human history, and to understand its diversity and the social forces and influences that shape it. In their objective investigation of religion and society, they include the use of both quantitative methods (surveys, polls, demographic and census analysis) and qualitative approaches (participant observation, interviewing, analysis of archival, historical and documentary materials). Sociology of religion studies every aspect of religion from what is believed to how individuals act while in worship and while living out their declared convictions. The sociology of religion poses the question of the role and significance of religion in general, as well as that of understanding the beliefs and practices of particular groups and societies. Global religious pluralism and divergence, the nature of religious cults and sects, the power of religion on racial, gender and sexuality issues, and the consequence of the media and modern culture has on religious practices are all issues of interest in sociology of religion.

Some Sociologists of Religion

Many sociologists ensured religion an immortal place among the celebrated branches of sociology. Historically, the study of religion was central to the discipline of sociology with early influential figures such as August Comte, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. Though there were several sociologists of religion who made their indelible mark in history, we are going to study at least three of these eminent thinkers.

Auguste Comte (1798-1857)

Auguste Comte was a French positivist, sociologist and philosopher. He coined the term 'sociology' and found his new science equally as religion and as science. His famous works are *Positive Philosophy* and *Positive Polity*. Comte envisioned sociology not only as the queen of the sciences but also as the scientific basis of the new religion of positivism, which would gradually push all existing religions out of sight. He even tried to construct a religion of humanity in which historical figures are worshipped according to their contribution towards the society.

In his *Positive Philosophy*, Comte set out his law of the three stages which states that in the intellectual development of humanity there are three distinct stages, namely, theological, metaphysical and positive. In the theological stage, the thoughts and ideas about reality are essentially religious in nature. They are dominated by ideas that make reference to the supernatural. The overriding belief is that all things are created by God.

The theological stage is further divided into three sub-stages. The first sub-stage is fetishism, in which all things, even inanimate objects, are believed to be animated by a life or soul like that of human beings. For Comte, this fact underlies all religious thought and is perfectly understandable when seen in the context of early human development. The second sub-stage is polytheism where material things are no longer seen as animated by an indwelling life or soul. Matter is seen subject to the external will of a supernatural agent. The supernatural agencies are increasingly seen as not attached to specific objects, but as manifesting in all objects of a particular kind or belonging to a given category. A pantheon of gods and goddesses with power to affect the world and human beings is worshipped and propitiated. At this stage, priesthood emerges whose task is to mediate between the human realm and the gods. The third sub-stage is monotheism. The process which led from fetishism to polytheism leads logically on to the last of the sub-stage of the theological stage. It is characterized by the development of the great world religions and the emergence of distinct religious organizations such as the Church. From this monotheistic stage, human thought passes through the transitional metaphysical stage in which spirits and deities give way to more speculative conceptions of general principles or forces which rule reality.

The metaphysical stage is a transitional stage between the theological and positive stages. Natural phenomena are explained and understood by likening them to human behavior. They are seen as having a will and as acting intentionally. It is a belief that abstract forces like nature, rather than personalized gods, explain virtually everything. The third stage is the positive or scientific stage, dominated by the positive philosophy of science and industrial patterns of social organization, dominated by industrial administrators and scientific moral guides. In this stage, observation predominates over imagination.

Comte did not think that with the arrival of science, religion would disappear totally. According to him, religion was not only an attempt to explain and understand reality but also the unifying principle of human society. If a traditional religion were to vanish with the growth of science, it would have to be replaced with a new form of religion based upon sound scientific principles. He further states that since the science which is concerned with understanding the principles of social unity and cohesion is sociology, then the new religion would be a kind of applied sociology and the sociologist would be the high priest of this new secular creed. Comte was so serious about his opinion that he even devised the robes and vestments that the sociological priesthood would wear, the rituals they would perform and actually founded a Church of Positivism. Comte believed religion to be a product of reason and of the human capacity to generalize in an attempt to understand and explain the world.

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)

Emile Durkheim is credited with making sociology a science, and is considered by many to be one of the founding fathers of sociology. His important works include *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, *The Division of Labor in Society* and *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. Durkheim declared that religion originated in primitive man's absolute dependence upon his community and therefore his worship of it.

Durkheim defines religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, namely, things set apart and forbidden which unite into one single moral community all those who adhere to them. Religion, therefore, has a community dimension and it entails a congregation or Church. A basic distinction found here is between the

sacred that includes all phenomena which are set apart and forbidden, and the secular or the profane. Sacred things are those things protected and isolated by prohibitions; while profane things are those things to which such prohibitions apply and which must keep their distance from what is sacred. The sacred is not defined by belief in gods or transcendent spirits. According to Durkheim, Sacred things should not be taken to mean simply those personal beings we call gods or spirits. A rock, a tree, a spring, a stone, a piece of wood, a house, in other words, anything at all, can be sacred. This disparity does not even necessarily correspond to the distinction between good and evil. In other words, sacred is not equal to good, and profane is not the same as evil. The list of sacred objects cannot be fixed once and for all; it varies from religion to religion. But Durkheim also admits that the profane may become sacred by means of rituals, and the sacred may become profane through erosion of values or dislocation of the deities. The erosion or disappearance of one set of the sacred is invariably followed by the appearance of new entities or states to which the sacred status is granted.

Religious practices or rites are central to Durkheim's conception of religion. He defines them as rules of conduct that stipulate how one must conduct oneself with sacred things. According to him, it is cults that enable believers to live and to act. In fact, anyone who has really practiced a religion knows very well that it is the cult that evokes these impressions of joy, of inner peace, of serenity, of enthusiasm, which the faithful retain as the experimental proof of their beliefs. The cult is not simply a system of signs by which faith is articulated outwardly. It is a collection of means by which it is created and periodically recreates itself. Thus, cults are cellular to religion and constitutive to society inasmuch as society would weaken without it. Even the gods would die if cults were not celebrated.

Max Weber (1864-1920)

Max Weber was an outstanding German classical theorist of sociology. Max Weber's scholarship in the world religions is proverbial. His most important works are *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (where he began his work in the field of sociology of religion), *Sociology of Religion* and *The Social Psychology of the World Religions*. He argued that religion was one of the non-exclusive reasons for the different ways the cultures of the West and the East developed, and stressed that particular characteristics of ascetic Protestantism influenced the development of capitalism, bureaucracy and the rational-legal state in the West.

Weber identifies three types of authority in the society: the charismatic, the traditional, and the rational-bureaucratic. The first is the kind of authority that emanates directly from the great individual, whether a Jesus in religion, a Caesar in warfare, or a Napoleon in war and government. Such authority is inseparable from the life of an individual. Often, as in Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism, the charismatic authority of the founder becomes 'routinized'. The words spoken by the founder eventually become tradition, dogma, injunction and liturgy. The second type of authority is the result of cumulation through the centuries of certain sanctions or admonitions or simple ways of doing things originally prescribed by some leader of charismatic power. The third type of authority is a rationalized, calculated and a designed structure in which the office or function becomes crucial rather than the individual. Weber and his followers see a large part of history as involving the passage of authority from the charismatic to the traditional to, finally, the rational-bureaucratic.

Weber has a tendency to see religious development in terms of ethical rationalization. According to him, the increase of social complexity demands more laws and procedures. Such a need is met by the emergence of professional priesthood. Unlike magicians concerned with achieving concrete material results for clients, the concern of priests is with intellectual matters and with the elaboration of doctrine which generally involves the development of ethical thought. Weber’s concentration was not on religion as a stabilizing power, but on religion as a source of the dynamics of social change. It is said that Weber spent much of his time studying religion. He tried to synthesize the insights of previous theoretical approaches in religion especially psychological and sociological. Weber made a distinction between magic and religion. According to him, magic is fundamentally manipulative and tries to intimidate gods and spirits, while religion involves worship of them. The gods and spirits of magic are more this worldly while those of religion are transcendental.

Conclusion

Religion is quintessentially a social phenomenon. Though religion has a private dimension, people experience religion in groups and movements. All the world’s great religions have created and are sustained by large institutions. Religion is a fertile field for the study of deviance in the strict sociological sense. A kind of symbiotic relationship exists between sociology and religion. It should not be overlooked that in many areas religion, quite independently of currents in the social sciences, took on a strong social consciousness.

It is true that many of the founding fathers of the social sciences believed religion would wither in the face of rationality in the modern world. Further, some believed that it was the responsibility of the new social sciences to hasten that process. However, contemporary sociologists of religion generally make much more modest claims, than the founding generation. Through the study of sociology of religion, an individual is brought to the awareness of the enormous diversity of religious traditions; the tremendous impact of culture on religion; and the reciprocal impact of religion on culture.

It should be noted that the study of sociology of religion is not an attack on religion. The realms of the supernatural and that of values cannot legitimately be attacked by scientific tools. It is neither an investigation of whether or not religious ideas are true. Again, it is not an attempt to establish the significance or insignificance of religion.

Check Your Progress I

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What do you understand by the expression ‘Sociology of Religion’?

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2)	Comment on the contributions made by Auguste Comte in the sociology of religion.

3)	Comment on the contributions made by Emile Durkheim and Max Weber in the sociology of religion.

3.3 PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION

Introduction

Psychology of religion is the psychological study of religious experiences, beliefs, practices and activities. It should be observed that religion and psychology are not two parallel areas of human life. Psychology is an academic discipline, while religion is a blanket term signifying the way of life of individuals and communities, including doctrines, ethical codes, cultic practices and community organization. It is far more than a field of study and research. The two fields of religion and psychology are poles apart even in age-wise too. The major religions of the world have thousands of years of recorded history. Compared to this, psychology is a mere child. It began to develop as a distinct academic discipline just a century ago.

It is generally said that when psychology and religion congregate, there is always an understandable excitement in the air, since both fields touch human beings at their deepest core. However, it should be recorded that religion is not a major area of interest in psychology. Many textbooks of psychology do not devote much attention to religious issues. In some cases, the attitude is one of suspicion and even hostility. One is inclined to judge the prevailing attitude of psychologists toward religion as one of guarded detachment or mild hostility. A better understanding of the psychology of religion can be had when we examine the views of the leading psychologists on religion.

Some Psychologists of Religion

Though religion is not a major concern of psychologists in general, there have been influential contributions on religion by psychologists and its role in human life. Many psychologists of religion have examined the changing role of religion both in the public arena as well as in intimate interpersonal relationships. Given below are some psychologists of religion who have taken many an individual towards the path of excitement through their analysis of religion from a psychological point of view.

William James (1842-1910)

William James, an American psychologist and philosopher, is considered as the founder of the field of psychology of religion. He tried to emphasize the notion of the individual self or person as a continuous stream of 'consciousness' capable of exercising free will. James' important work is *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, which is regarded as a classic work in the field of psychology of religion. It was one of the first studies on religious experience by a psychologist. His other important works include *The Principles of Psychology*, *The Will to Believe*, *A Pluralistic Universe*, and *Some Problems of Philosophy*. James was convinced that there was something in human consciousness different from the particular sensations.

He made a distinction between institutional religion and personal religion. The institutional religion refers to the religious group or organization, which plays an important role in the ethos and culture of a society. Personal religion, on the other hand, is where one opens oneself to mystical experiences. James was most interested in understanding personal religious experience. In studying personal religious experiences, he made a distinction between healthy-minded and sick-souled religiousness. Those individuals who are predisposed to healthy-mindedness have a tendency to overlook the phenomenon of evil in the world and focus on the positive elements. On the contrary, those who are predisposed to having a sick-souled religion are unable to ignore evil and suffering, and often look for a unifying experience, religious or otherwise, in order to reconcile both good and evil.

William James arrived at some crucial and relevant conclusions after his thorough analysis of religious experience. First, irrespective of whether the theories of religion are true or absurd, religious life is humankind's most important function. A person's religion becomes the deepest and the wisest thing in his/her life. It brings people a great sense of power. Second, the personal value and passion of religious experience will not convince others, but as thinkers we need to study this phenomenon. Third, an impartial study of religions might sift out from the midst of their discrepancies a common body of doctrine. Fourth, religious experience gives people also a sense of there being something wrong with us and makes people want to reach out towards a higher reality. Finally, in the fifth place, there is a struggle in human beings between a higher and a lower, between a better and a worse part. People seem to glimpse something they call their 'real being'.

According to him, any belief must remain an individual process and we may rationally choose to believe some crucial propositions even though they lie beyond the reach of reason. He was of the opinion that if an individual believes in and performs religious activities, and those actions happen to work, then that practice appears to be the proper choice for that particular individual. On the other hand, if the activities and processes of religion have little efficacy, then there is no rationality for continuing such practice, as far as that particular individual is concerned. For James, when the options of life are forced, then, human beings have a right to believe in something which is beyond the evidence.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)

Sigmund Freud was born to Jewish parents in the town of Freiburg, in Germany. He was a physiologist, medical doctor, psychologist and is considered as the father of psychoanalysis. He was interested in the study of religion throughout his life. He provided

explanations of the genesis of religion in his various writings such as *The Future of an Illusion*, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, *Moses and Monotheism: Three Essays*, and *Totem and Taboo*. However, the doctrine on religion was only a minor part of his vast contribution. His major influence was in the field of psychoanalysis.

But within the purview of religion, Freud is known for his critique of religion. He did not even say that religious ideas are errors. However, he considered religions as 'illusions', because he believed they were the results of mere human wishes rather than of rational inquiry. When he spoke of religion as an illusion, he maintained that it is a fantasy structure from which an individual must be set free if he/she is to grow to full maturity. He defines an illusion as any belief, true or false, which is held not because there are good grounds for holding it but because there is a strong desire or need to believe it. Religion is a form of wish fulfillment or self-delusion which derives from an overpowering will to believe, a will which is stronger than reason.

Freud considered religious practices as neurotic. Religion was an expression of underlying psychological neuroses and distress. He saw religious ritual as similar to the obsessional neurotic behavior of patients who did things for no apparent reason. He believed in a sort of phylogenetic theory of religion by accepting a kind of patricide theory of some anthropologists. It is about the sons who kill their tyrannical father and later, smitten by remorse worship him. This is also known as the Oedipus complex, which, for Freud is the basis of societal and religious functioning. He was convinced that any type of authoritarian religion is dysfunctional and it alienates an individual from himself/herself.

Regarding the origin of religion, Freud remarked that when people feel frightened before the powers of nature, the following possible reactions could evolve: first, the humanization of nature wherein these powers are imagined to be powers like themselves; and second, giving these powers the characteristics of a father. Consequently, gods are created to exorcise the terror of nature and to reconcile human beings to the cruelty of fate especially death.

Carl Jung (1875-1961)

Carl Gustav Jung, a well-known Swiss psychoanalyst, is noted for his study of archetypes and the impact of religion on the individual's life. Archetypes are basic images that are universal which reappear regardless of culture. According to him, the collective unconscious is the storehouse of human experience which contains archetypes. The irruption of these images from the unconscious into the dominion of consciousness is the foundation of an individual's religious experience. His major work is *Psychology and Religion*.

As a psychologist of religion, he has influenced several branches of research, especially transpersonal psychology. Jung does not admit or deny the truth claims of religious doctrines. In other words, he regarded the question of the existence of God to be unanswerable by the psychologist and adopted a kind of agnosticism. According to him, what matters is the 'psychological truth' or a statement, that is, the part played by this belief in an individual's life.

In *Psychology and Religion* he says that no one can know what the ultimate things really are. One has to take them as one experiences them. If such an experience helps to make one's life healthier, more beautiful, more complete and more satisfactory to oneself and to those one loves, then, one can safely say: this was the grace of God. In

his analytic psychology, Jung maintains that religion, which is an essential psychological function, symbolizes a deeper dimension of human existence, a vital layer of the psyche, recognition and integration of which are said to facilitate a harmonious and balanced human life. He further argues that it is the neglect of religion which would lead individuals into neurotic behaviour patterns, adversely affecting even the human species as a whole.

Conclusion

Psychology of religion is relevant in the sense that religion is very important for many people and secondly, religion and the life of an individual influence each other in an evident manner. Religious values influence their actions and religious meanings help them interpret their experiences. There are many more prominent psychologists who contributed much to the field of psychology of religion, such as Rudolf Otto, Erich Fromm, Erik H. Erikson, Gordon Allport, and Alfred Adler. Their contributions have taken this field of study into higher planes of human thought and practice.

One of the central focuses of psychology of religion should be individuals who must necessarily be balanced, integrated and religiously oriented. This challenges an individual to be open, tolerant, and constructive approach towards the religious reality. It should result in the process of integration or wholeness both at the personal as well as societal levels.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What do you understand by the expression ‘Psychology of Religion’?

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2) Comment on the contributions made by William James in the psychology of religion.

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3) Comment on the contributions made by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung in the psychology of religion.

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3.4 LET US SUM UP

Most human beings on the face of the earth are religious by nature or by nurture with specific differences regarding the way they look at their particular faith traditions. Many are passionately involved in a divine centrality in their life and are ultimately concerned with moulding a life in accordance with its dynamics. Sociology and psychology play a vital role in the re-making of this divine centrality in the life of individuals. At the same time, it is becoming ever more apparent that religion has many strands and contradictory features. Religion has to be understood in newer categories in the present-day context. Keeping up with the new visibility of religion in different contexts of today is one of the central tasks of sociology of religion as well as psychology of religion. Another challenge that is placed before sociology and psychology is a careful analysis of the phenomenon of religion, at the same time, avoiding simplistic or reductionist explanations.

It should be noted that today, the ‘sacred’ flourishes anew and in varied forms. New religious movements make their appearance, ‘other faiths’ flourish along with the phenomenon of global immigration and movement, the New Age has its devotees, and ‘spirituality’ continues its bid to replace institutional religion as the way to move into the depths where the technological society cannot reach. Religion seems to be still mired deep in trouble. When, religion, human kind’s oldest and probably deepest concern, is willing to face the challenges and insights of sociology and psychology, the results can be expected to be abounding and contentious, challenging and profound.

3.5 KEY WORDS

- Theology** : Theology is the study of a religion based on God’s revelation accepted in faith.
- Reductionism** : Reductionism can either mean (a) an approach to understanding the nature of complex things by reducing them to the interactions of their parts, or to simpler or more fundamental things or (b) a philosophical position that a complex system is nothing but the sum of its parts, and that an account of it can be reduced to accounts of individual constituents.
- Neuroses** : Neurosis is a psychiatric term that refers to a class of functional mental disorder involving distress but not delusions or hallucinations, where behavior is not outside socially acceptable norms. It is also known as psychoneurosis or neurotic disorder. The term continues to be employed in psychoanalytic theory and practice.

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3.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

- 1) Sociology of religion is basically dealing with the relationship that exists between religion and society. As a subject it refers to the study of the role of religion on society. It studies beliefs, religious practices and organizational forms of a society using the sociological methods such as surveys, polls, demographic and census analysis, interviews, participatory observation, analysis of archival, historical and documentary materials. From all these, we try to understand the role of religion in society, analyze its significance and its impact upon the shaping of human history. Sociology of religion, as a subject, also deals with issues such as the impact of religion on racial, gender and sexual discrimination, terrorism and religious pluralism.
- 2) Auguste Comte is a French philosopher, positivist and a sociologist. He is the one responsible for coining the term 'sociology'. He envisioned sociology to be the scientific basis for the new religion of positivism which according to him would

replace all existing religions. He observed that human history would pass through three stages, namely, theological, metaphysical and positive in a gradational manner. In the theological stage, the thoughts and ideas about reality are essentially religious in nature. The metaphysical stage is a belief that abstract forces like nature, rather than personalized gods, explain virtually everything. The positive stage is characterized by scientific philosophy and scientific moral guides with a precedence given to observation instead of imagination.

- 3) Emil Durkheim and Max Weber are two sociologists of religion who have contributed much to the study of religion from a sociological perspective. Emil Durkheim is considered as one of the founding fathers of sociology. He considered religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things. According to him, religion has a community dimension and it is the society which determines what is sacred and profane. All the more, these so called gods determined by the community need not be permanent. For Durkheim, religious practices and gifts are important, because it is these cults that enable people to live, act and conduct themselves in the society. Durkheim is also considered as a person responsible for making sociology a science. Max Weber is an outstanding German sociologist of religion. He regarded religion as one of the non-exclusive reasons for the different ways the cultures of the West and the East developed. He considered religion to be in a process of evolution in which it moves from a charismatic stage through traditional to natural bureaucratic stage. The first stage emanates directly from a great individual whose words and deeds eventually become dogma, injunctions, liturgy and tradition for his followers. The second stage is the result of a cumulation down through the centuries of certain injunctions or admonitions originally prescribed by some leaders. The third stage is a rationalized, calculated and designed structure in which the office or function is given preference to an individual.

Check Your Progress II

- 1) The psychological study of religious experiences, beliefs, practices and activities is termed as psychology of religion. Psychology, as an academic discipline, is not very old in comparison to religion. Psychology of religion tries to interpret the psychological meaning and patterns of collective as well as individual religious contents and practices. It projects religion as something that should pervade the inner recesses of human life which influences the ethos of an entire people.
- 2) According to William James, the human person is a continuous stream of consciousness capable of exercising free will. He made a distinction between institutional religions (organized and structured religions) and personal religions where the individual opens himself / herself to mystical experiences. For him, religion should be meant for pragmatic purposes. In other words, if an individual believes in and performs religious activities, and those actions happen to work, then, that practice appears to be reasonable. If on the other hand, the activities and processes of religion have little efficacy, then there is no rationality for the individual in continuing such a practice.
- 3) Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung have tried to analyze religion from a psychological point of view in order to observe the contribution of religion on human behaviour. Freud was a strong critic of religion. He considered religion as 'illusion' – the result of mere human wishes rather than of rational inquiry. For him, religious practices were neurotic. According to him, religion could be traced back to the

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period when people felt frightened of the natural powers and started worshipping them under various names. Jung studied the impact of religion on the individual. He did not admit or deny the truth-claims of religious doctrines. He believed that in psychology and religion, no one can know what the ultimate things really are. For Jung, religion symbolized a deeper dimension of human existence and integration which helps to harmonize human life.