
UNIT 1 SOCIOLOGY AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to

- appreciate the need to understand religion sociologically
- differentiate between Sociology of Religion, Philosophy of Religion and Theology
- trace the development of Sociology of Religion
- understand the difference between magic, science and religion
- sociologically analyse any religion, on your own.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of this course and we extend to you a warm welcome. Political parties use the appeal of religion to gain public support. Secularism debated on public platforms. In this context it is important for you to understand how religion influences social and political thinking and action today.

Broadly speaking, this Block introduces you to various approaches used in the study of religion. Evolutionism and functionalism are two well-known approaches which are discussed in Unit 2 and 3. Religion is also understood through the study of beliefs and symbols. This is explained in Unit 4 and 5. To appreciate any discussion of sociological thought in various theories of religion, we should first form an idea of religion as a field of sociological study. This is the main focus of Unit 1 which introduces the Course in general and the Block in particular.

Unit 1 begins with a discussion on how religion becomes a relevant field of sociological analyses. It also differentiates sociology of religion from philosophy of religion and

theory. Efforts are then made provide a sociological definition of religion by listing out and elaborating the characteristics of religion. This is followed by an outline of the development of Sociology of Religion. And before summing up, religion is differentiated from and related to magic and science.

1.2 RELIGION IS A FIELD OF SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

- How do sociologists study religion using the scientific method?
- Is it at all possible to study religion?
- How are 'gods' and 'heaven' connected with sociology?
- When there are philosophers and theologians to study religion, why should sociologists also study religion.
- Religion is something 'sacred'. How can we take it an object of study?
- Religion is a personal affair. Why should a sociologist intrude on an individual's privacy?

These are some of the queries, which come to mind. Your questions are absolutely genuine and if you try to find answers to them, you might very well end up a sociologist of religion, yourself.

Sociologists find religion a relevant field of inquiry because religion is a social phenomenon. Moreover, a sociologist concentrates on issues and questions which are not generally considered by theologians and philosophers. The sociologist of religion focuses on the links between religion and other social phenomena such as politics, economics, science and technology. The sociologist of religion is not bound in his/her professional writing to accept prescriptions of a particular religion. A recent book on religion by Lawson and MacCauley (1990:v) is dedicated to those who taught that "...religion need not be a force to be feared nor a dogma to be embraced, but simply a way of life". To the extent religion is a way of life, it is perfect field of sociological analysis. Now we will see what this means.

1.2.1 Religion is a Social Phenomenon

What do we mean when we say something is 'social'. It broadly refers to

- a) experience of **human beings as a collectivity in all parts of the world,**
- b) **relationships** between human beings, probably in all walks of their life, and
- c) to **all facets of everyday human life,** for example, education, politics, economy etc.

Every society has religious beliefs, rites and organisations. Religion very often affects our understanding of the everyday life. The way in which we relate to each other is very often influenced by our religious beliefs. Religions is also related to politics, and to economic activities like production, distribution and consumption. Religion can unite human being together, but also sow hatred among them. Religion may produce differing impacts in different places. At one end of the globe, it serves to justify oppression and unequal distribution of resources. The same religion, you may find, serves as a reason to resist and struggle against oppression, at the other end of the globe. If religious beliefs are the same, then how do we explain why people react differently in different parts of the world? All religions teach love and universal brotherhood. Even then, why do people 'fight' amongst themselves and 'die' in the name of religion? It is precisely these sets of question, and the like which sociologists study. In a book on *Religion, Society and the Individual,*

Yinger (1957:xi) wrote that religion is a social phenomenon, because it is “woven into the fabric of social life”.

Whether a believer or non-believer, a sociologist is supposed to observe without bias the way in which people experience religion. May be a sociologists curious to understand the different ways in which the rich the poor experience religion. Reality is not what meets our eyes alone. A sociologist most often tries to unearth the explicit, outwardly visible reality. But behind this lies the invisible trend—the increasing criminal trends of party politics. Further in times of acute crisis, there tends to emerge a strong fervor of religious revivalism. By research, a sociologist might possibly prove that the rich use religion during crises to exploit the masses. or, it may be that the masses recall and revive religion during crises, as a measure of hope.

By now, you would have understood that religion is a social phenomenon and hence it is legitimately a field of sociological study. Sociology of religion attempt to understand the relationship between religion and society. Religion and society have positive as well as negative effects on each other. Apart from this, sociologists also study the relationship between religion and various other social institutions like education, government and economy. They try to study the separate meaning of religion for various groups and levels in a society. This is certainly different from what is of concern to a philosopher of religion and theologians.

Let us now discuss the difference between sociology of religion, philosophy or religion and theology.

1.2.2 Sociology of Religion Differs from Philosophy of Religion and Theology

Clear-cut distinctions cannot be made between sociology of religion, philosophy of religion and theology. This is because they concentrate on the study of a singly social reality, that is religion, and no social reality can be separated like atoms. When we try do differentiate between disciplines, we do so in terms of their focus and specific issues. To be specific, though sociology of religion, philosophy of religion and theology differ in their focus and the issues of analytical interest, they have much to contribute to the development of each other. Let us see how they differ in their focus and the issues of analytical interest.

Box 1.01

A sociologist may be a believer, and need not necessarily study religion. But if one is interested in the mutual interaction between religion and society, there are a number of issues one can investigate, for example, rituals, sects, or different aspects of a religion or a whole of religion as it operates in different setting. In other words, a sociologist has a vast domain from which to choose the particular area of study. Whether good exists or not is not a question a sociologist is interested in. Sociology of religion cannot prove or disprove the existence of god, or judge whether a set of values are right or wrong. **Sociology of religion is not an agenda of socio-religious reform.**

The focus of the three disciplines is broadly as follows

- i) **Sociology of religion** does not ask, whcther god exists. Rather, sociology of religion asks, if **people believe** that god exists, ‘why do they believe’, ‘how do they come to believe?’, ‘how do they describe their god?’, and ‘is there any relationship between their description of god and their social conditions?’ Similarly, sacrificing goats or buffaloes for deities cannot be certified as right or wrong by the sociologist. To be precise, the question of ‘what ought to be?’ does not belong

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- iii) Mention any two differences between sociology of religion and theology. Use five lines for your answer.

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1.3 SOCIOLOGICAL DEFINITION OF RELIGION

A definition helps us to identify clearly the subject of our study. The primary task of sociologists, before undertaking any research, is that they should define the object of their study. Very often definitions tend to describe the content or substance of the object of study. But adequate care must be taken so that a definition provides the essential ideas of the object of study. Broadly, the following four characteristics of religion(s) have been identified in order to construct a sociological definition.

1.3.1 Religion is a Group Phenomenon

Religion involves a group of people. Religion is a shared system of beliefs and practices. Every religion emphasises the need for collective worship. Festivals and rituals are occasions which bring people together. M.N. Srinivas (1978:202) in his study of a Coorg village observes that the festivals of village deities include a village-dance, collective hunt and a dinner for the entire village. The collective dinner, in which the entire village participates, is called 'urome' (village-harmony). Durkheim (1912), equates god with society, so much so that, when you worship God you are worshipping your own society. According to Durkheim God is a human creation and a social creation at that. God is, in fact, born in the collective experience ("effervescence") of coming together, leading to rituals.

Some people may hold that one's religious affiliation should not be disclosed in public either through rituals or any religious marker. According to them religion belongs to the realm of the private life. Some parents are not bothered about the religious affiliation of their sons or daughters, because it is their personal affair. Some people may even declare that, 'Mera haath Jagannath' while some may say that 'my work is my religion'. Now, you might ask, whether these individual beliefs make a religions or not. The answer is that even these individual beliefs operate in the context of shared social values and norms and to that extent they can be treated like any other religion.

Many people may be critical about religion and some of us may reject it altogether. Yet the fact remains that since religion is an aspect of culture, we learn religious values, beliefs and practices as we grow up in a society.

1.3.2 The 'Supernatural' and the 'Sacred'

At the centre of almost every religion lies the idea of the supernatural. The supernatural is something beyond physical understanding. It is 'omnipotent', 'infinite',

or 'extraordinary'. 'Belief in supernatural beings' was the definition for religion, offered by Tylor (1871), a famous anthropologist. Belief in the supernatural beings might also include belief in other kind of beings like magic forces, angels or souls of dead ancestors. Believers might arrange the supernatural beings in a hierarchy according to their power or they may differentiate the supernatural beings in terms of their functions. It should be interesting to note that Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, three Hindu Gods, are said to perform the functions of creation of the cosmic order, its maintenance and destruction, respectively.

Though the supernatural is all powerful, 'infinite' and 'beyond senses', some people try to personify it as a human being. This can be considered as one's attempt to comprehend the supernatural. People also believe that favours can be extracted from the supernatural forces or being by pacifying them. Certain natural misfortunes may be explained with references to the anger or outrage of the supernatural. Moreover, it is not necessary that supernatural must be personified as human beings. Supernatural beings can be natural forces as well, such as wind, fire, mountain etc.

Yet the fact remains that the notion and experience of the supernatural is present in all religions across the globe. Indeed it is among the basic areas in which both religious specialists and laypersons happen to worship, respect, and propitiate the sacred.

Box 1.02

All supernatural beings are not 'sacred'. There are categories of supernatural beings, like devils, evil spirit, etc. which are considered as 'evil', are also powerful. For example, it can be pointed out from the Bible that Satan (devil) was powerful enough to tempt even Jesus, when he was doing penance in the desert. Certain other categories of supernatural beings are considered to be neutral—neither good nor evil. All categories of supernatural being create, in the minds of human being, a sense of 'fear' and 'respect'.

Some scholars have argued that there is a definite distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane'. The 'sacred versus profane' is an opposition which correspond to other oppositions like 'other worldly versus worldly', 'extraordinary versus ordinary'. The sacred, says Durkheim (1912), is set apart and forbidden from the profane. The world 'profane' refers to unholy, secular, mundane. Rituals are occasions during which communication becomes possible between the profane and the sacred. If one wants to approach the sacred, one must purify the set by undergoing penance or by any other prescribed means. Many scholars have criticised this strict separation made by Durkheim between the profane and the sacred. Such a strict separation emerges out of a church or temple-entered understanding of religion. It has been widely pointed out by scholars that sacred impinges on many profane activities of everyday life. In turn, profane communicates with the sacred even during this-worldly activities.

1.3.3 Beliefs and Practices

Religious belief is a system of knowledge about the divine and its relationship with the human. It is simply not enough to believe in the existence of a supernatural force. The knowledge of its existence must be explained to people and to generations to come. Beliefs serves this purpose of revealing the existence of the supernatural or divine or the sacred. Belief explains the nature of the divine, the deeds, actions or words of the divine and prescribes ways in which human beings can communicate with the divine.

Belief necessarily involves a sense of the past and speaks about a tradition, in the sense of a custom followed for a long time. It narrates the history of communication

between the divine and human, and in doing so gives meaning to ritual.

Ritual is an act performed repeatedly and according to custom. It is ceremonial and formal. Most often rituals are invested with specific purposes. Rituals are series of symbolic actions which have a specific meaning in relation to religious beliefs. Rituals tend to be standardised, repeated and condensed. In pre-modern societies, rituals tend to be very elaborate and even minute details are observed carefully, in order to get full benefit. Rituals may be performed collectively, or individually. Where rituals are performed collectively, either every one performs or only the specialists perform while the believers participate. Shaman, *pujari*, priest are examples of ritual specialists. They recite extensive prayers or chants (mantra) and simultaneously perform the ritual acts (see Unit 4 in this Block and Units 5, 7, 8 in Block 2).

There is a debate in sociology or religion on the nature of the belief and ritual. Some scholars have argued that ritual emerged before an elaborate system of belief. Durkheim is one among them. Another group of scholars argue that people tried to explain the mysterious through belief first and then the ritual followed. Let us now talk about religious behaviour as a source of moral values.

1.3.4 Moral Prescriptions

In the previous section we stated that religious beliefs and rituals help human beings to communicate with each other. When human beings define their relationship with the 'sacred', they also define their relationship with fellow human being. Some behavioral patterns are prescribed as compulsory before one can relate to god. This is how morals are born out of religion. As an example, it must be pointed out that the 'Ten Commandments' form an essential component of Jewish-Christian religion. Commandments are moral prescriptions for human beings to relate to god. Religion is the source of moral values, and religion without moral prescriptions is virtually not possible. Religion can distinguish between the right and the wrong, more powerfully than other social institutions.

There are many sources of moral prescriptions in a society, such as a family, education and law. People who believe in a particular religion are also expected to adhere to its moral prescriptions. Thus more prescriptions come to be shared by all the members of the group. Religion and certain of its moral prescriptions are more relevant today than ever before, because some people hold that science is increasingly becoming inhuman. Billions of dollars are poured into arms and weapon manufacture, military science and technology, when millions of human beings die of starvation in Africa, Latin America and many other parts of the globe. In this context, military-defence expenditure becomes a moral issue. For example, in order to follow the religious principle of non-violence, prevention of the increasing militarisation of science can become a moral commitment.

Now, before going on to the next section on Development of Sociology of Religion, complete Activity 1 and Check Your Progress 2.

Activity 1

Four characteristics of religion have been identified and developed in order to give a sociological definition of religion. Now you frame a sociological definition, yourself, after carefully reading the sections 1.2 and 1.3. Meanwhile, a specimen of the definition of religion is given to guide you.

Religion is a system of moral prescriptions, beliefs and practices, which aids a community of believers to communicate with the supernatural or the extraordinary.

Check Your Progress 2

i) Define, in five lines, the idea of the supernatural

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ii) What is a religious belief? Use five lines for your answer.

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iii) What is a ritual? Use five lines for your answer.

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iv) Why and how does, religion serve as a source of moral prescription?

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v) List out, the sociological characteristics of religion. Use four lines for your answer.

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1.4 THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

Scholarly interest in religion is not a recent one. The Veda, Upanishad and the treatises of Greek, philosophers, like a Aristotle and Plato, are texts which show scholarly interest in religion. It has to be admitted that Theology (Have you heard about St. Augustine's 'Summa Theological'?) and Philosophy have gone far ahead in the study of religion than the relatively new and recent discipline of Sociology of Religion. Here, we are concerned with sociological interest in religion. Such classical sociologists as Durkheim and Weber studied in different ways the significance of religion. This interest is again revived in the present times. There are three observable

- i) Sociological interest in religion began to emerge after the merchant-voyagers, missionaries and the colonialists 'discovered' the pre-modern societies. Here anthropologists and sociologists seemed to share an interest in religion (refer to Units 2 and 3 of this Block).
- ii) Sociological interest in religion received an impetus following the industrial revolution in Europe. Industrial revolution followed the break-down of feudalism in the fifteenth century. Scholars of this stream were more interested in analysing the 'fate' of religion in the industrial world (see Block 2 of this course).
- iii) Sociological interest in religion is evident in those studies which trace the growth of religious revivalism in societies of late-industrial phase, and early post-industrial phase. Scholars of this stream are engaged in analysing the reasons for the survival of religion. In this third stream, we witness the presence of a large number of third world scholars, who are concerned with questions of Islamic fundamentalism, and Sinhala-Buddhist and Hindu communalism (see Block 3 and 5 of this course).

1.4.1 Pre-modern Societies

During the first phase of the development of sociology of religion, the interest was focused mainly to tracing the origin and evolution of religion. Explanations of two



Religions, art, drama, and architecture influence society deeply world-wide.

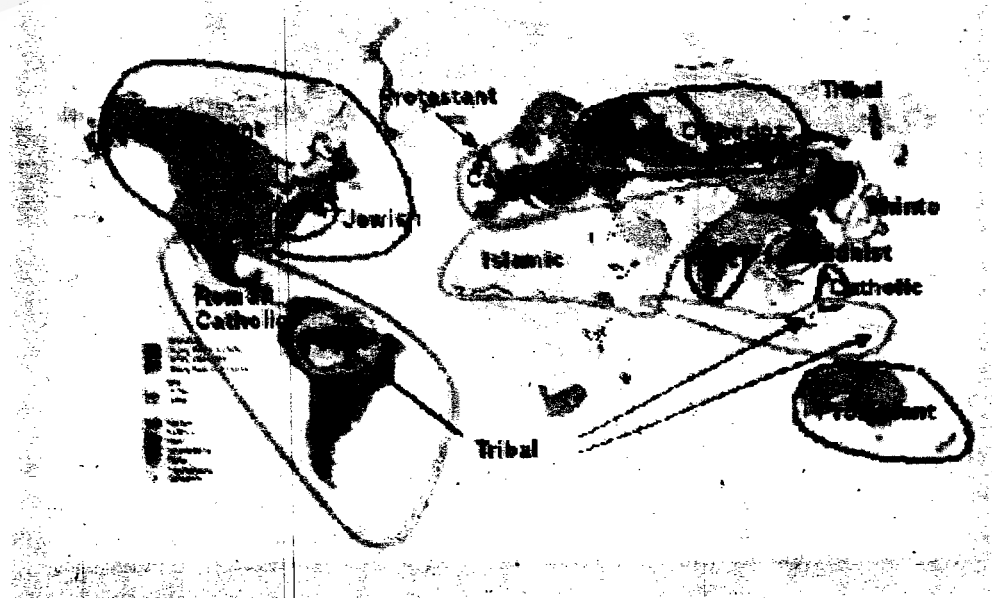
types can be identified: individualistic explanations and social explanations. Individualists explanations either emphasised the cognitive (intellectual) or the emotional aspects of religion. Both varieties of explanation of religion by anthropologists and sociologists were based on material related to primitive people around the world. Edward B. Tylor (1881) and Herbert Spencer (1882) can be called the intellectualists, because they opined that pre-modern man had to evolve religion in order to explain the phenomena of dreams, echoes and deaths (see Unit 2 of this Block). In their view, religion might vanish when its explanatory function is taken over by science.

Some scholars, notably Paul Radin (1938), emphasised the emotional aspects of religion. According to this school of thought (see details in Section 2.4 of Unit 2), religion is nothing but pre-modern person's emotional response to overcome a frightening situation. Religion, in this case, helps one to overcome one's feelings of powerlessness. Even Durkheim's (1912) understanding of religion emphasises the emotional component of religion. He holds that rituals and beliefs about the sacred emerge from the emotional outburst of the hunting tribes, when they come together after separation.

In addition, Durkheim's explanation of religion includes its social dimension and functional necessities (see Unit 3 of this Block). Durkheim (1961:52-6) says, "Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them". Durkheim identified totemism as the elementary form of religion. The 'totem' is a sacred object which is also the marker of a social group. This totem is exalted during the 'collective effervescence' generated when individuals come together as a group. Rituals and beliefs not only emerge from the group, they also strengthen the solidarity of the group. Durkheim argues that religion has survived from the immemorial, although in various forms; because it has performed specific functions for the society—the main function being 'integration' of society. Some of these functionalist arguments have been affirmed, elaborated and reconstructed by many scholars including Radcliffe-Brown (1952), Talcott Parsons (1954) and Milton Yinger (1957). Units 2 and 3 of this Block deal in detail with the issues discussed in this sub-section.

1.4.2 Industrial Societies

Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Weber (1864-1920) are two important scholars who have explained religion in industrial societies in details (in relation to issues discussed in this sub-section see Units 10 and 11 Block 2 of this course). Both Karl Marx (1976) and Max Weber (1963) argue that religion is increasingly losing its reason or justification for existence and there will come a specific historical point after



Generalized map of world religions

which religion will be no more. For Max Weber, rationalisation is the main theme and for Karl Marx, class conflict. According to Karl Marx (1979), religion in this world of exploitation is an expression of distress and at the same time it is also a protest against the real distress. In other words, religion continues to survive because of oppressive social conditions. When this oppressive and exploitative condition is destroyed, religion will become unnecessary. Marx denied a place for religion in his utopian world of communism.

According to Karl Marx, religion is a component of superstructure (broadly, the world of ideas), which is a mere reflection of the base (broadly put, the mode of production comprising relations of production and forces of production). There have been wide ranging debates among scholars both Marxist and non-Marxist, whether base or material condition can **determine** the superstructure or realm of ideas. Some neo-Marxist scholars argue that, in some cases, the realm of ideas may become relatively independent and try to subvert the material conditions or the base.

Increasingly, religion has come to be accepted as a possible instrument of social change as well. Though Max Weber agreed that religion will vanish ultimately, he demonstrated the power of religious ideas to act as forces of development. By systematically analysing the doctrines of certain Protestant sects like Lutheranism, Calvinism and Pietism, Weber came to believe that ethics generated by these sects have aided capitalist development in many European countries. The doctrine of predestination, preached by Calvin (1509-1564), said that God had chosen his people already, and one could live by faith alone. Calvin criticised all kinds of magical practices followed by Catholics. The doctrine of predestination aroused the question, "Am I one of the God's chosen?" in the minds of the believers. This question resulted in the hard work and asceticism. Work became an end in itself, for it was for the greater glory of God. Work was no more a means to obtain worldly pleasures and prosperities. Asceticism combined with hardwork resulted in accumulation of wealth (capital) which was reinvested to accelerate the pace of industrialisation. Thus religious ideas generated by the Protestant sects aided capitalist development, according to Weber. You will learn more about this in Unit 10 of Block 2.

1.4.3 Religious Revivalism

Though many of scholars predicted that religion would ultimately vanish, it has managed to survive. In fact, there has been a religious revivalism in many parts of the world.

In recent times there has been a fresh growth of fundamentalist Protestant sects in the United States. There has been religious revivalism in many Asian countries and religion tends to increasingly become a tool of political mobilisation. Meanwhile, in some of the Latin American countries, Christianity has become the tool of resistance against exploitation. Even where religion seems to lose its hold in the sense of decreasing attendance in church ceremonies, a private religion is seemingly emerging. In other words, a personal interpretation of religious doctrines is tolerated. Some scholars raise doubts whether religion will vanish from the history of mankind. They have analysed the evidence of religion found in the forms of rituals and beliefs in the so-called secular system like the State, Communism and Nationalism (see Unit 19 on **Civil Religion**, of Block 2). To be specific, if communism is analysed as a form of religion, no one should be surprised.

Before concluding the section, let me quote the words of Turner (1986:48), for they summarise the secret of the survival of religion, "Religion is not a cognitive system, a set of dogmas alone, it is a meaningful experience and experienced meaning".

Activity 2

Is religious revivalism on the increase in almost all parts of the world? Give some examples of this phenomenon in India and abroad. In addition, write, in 250 words, your views on why religion is again popularly accepted and vigorously defended.

1.5 RELIGION AND OTHER RELATED SOCIAL PHENOMENA

We shall now discuss the similarities and differences between religion, magic and science. Very often science is opposed to religion and magic is classified within religion. These arbitrary assumptions have to be clarified, for a better understanding of religion, science and magic. For a detailed review of this topic see Unit 23 of Block 6 of ESO-03. Our reason for including this section in this unit is related to the fact that many anthropological and sociological studies have conventionally discussed this topic to analyse religious phenomena.

1.5.1 Religion and Magic

Religion and magic reveal many similarities. Both of them deal with unobservable powers. They operate only on the basis of faith of the adherent or believer. Both religion and magic can be explained as human attempts to cope with fears, frustrations and uncertainties of day-to-day life. Both in religion and magic attempts are made to direct the supernatural power to achieve specific ends, using certain techniques. Malinowski and Frazer are well-known scholars who have contributed richly to the understanding of magic and religion.

Religion refers to ultimate problems and meaning of human existence (e.g. death, failures etc.), whereas magic is concerned more with immediate problem like control of weather, drought, victory in battle, prevention of disease. Within religion, one prays to gods and pleads with them, whereas in magic, the magical manipulates the supernatural power. Religion makes a person believe in the power of the supernatural. On the contrary, in magical practices, the adherent believe in the **own** power to manipulate the power of the supernatural. It needs to be pointed out that religion and magic are not completely distinct.



Magic attempts to direct the supernatural power to achieve specific ends

Vernon (1962:63) explains that magic is dispensed in a buyer-seller situation, whereas religion follows the pattern of flock and the shepherd. In religion, a person feels powerless before the sacred, and accepts the supreme power and omnipotence of the sacred. A devotee prays and begs to the supreme. Moreover, religion demands a strong emotional involvement its adherents and is very personal. In magic, the magician is business like and undertake to manipulate the power of the supernatural, only for a 'price'. A magical act is more impersonal and follows a fixed formula. Religion has more of collective-orientation. Religion pursue common goals; it has a set of beliefs and common practice; it units its adherents as a community. In direct contrast, magic does not produce or even attempt to produce 'community' among the believers. Magic is more individualistic. Magic moreover does not provide a philosophy, a way of life or moral prescriptions, as religion does. A practitioner of magic, the magician represents only himself or herself. Whereas religious functionaries represent the religion or the community of believers. In view of its businesslike character, and reliance on magic formula magic was considered by Frazer, a renewed anthropologist, as a primitive form of science.

1.5.2 Religion and Science

Science is a search for knowledge as well as method for solving problems. Both religion and science are forms of human understanding. Thus science and religion and human ways of relating themselves to reality. Science and religion try to make exploit the world of the unknown. Religion is more collectively oriented than science, but science too emphasises team-spirit and co-operation of the scientific community. Both science and religion claim access to truth. On many occasions in the past as well as present, in many a war, science and religion have acted against humankind. Both religion and science prescribe qualifications for their personnel.

Science insists that all phenomena that is observed should not be accepted at face value. Its value and meaning can be discovered through experimentation. All factors (time, place, persons, equipment, etc.) that can affect the results of such experiments are controlled in laboratory condition. Science differs from religion because it believes in neutrality and objectivity. Scientific method is claimed to have annulled the subjective biases. Science believes in precision and measurement, which is not possible for religion. Science brings the unknown to the level of observable reality. Religion cannot bring god to the level of observable phenomenon. Scientific knowledge has more concrete application in the form of technology, which might help in manipulating nature. Religion cannot establish such concrete and immediate results. Scientific knowledge and method are valid universally, whereas principles of religious life differ from society to society.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) State briefly, in five lines, the individualistic view of religion held by the intellectualists.

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- ii) Describe, in five lines, the origin and functions of religion, as explained by Durkheim.

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iii) What is the role of religious ideas, according to Weberian thought? How did Weber arrive at his thesis? Use five lines for your answer.

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iv) Mention, in five lines, any two differences magic and religion.

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v) Match the following

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| 1) Webber | a) Religion is an emotional response to overcome a frightening situation. |
| 2) Marx | b) Religious ideas can become forces of development. |
| 3) Durkheim | c) Religion explains the mysterious. |
| 4) Spencer | d) Religion is a mode of protest. |
| 5) Paul Radin | e) Religion integrates society. |

1.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit introduced the course (ESO-05) by explaining the meaning of sociology of religion. First, it was established that religion is a social phenomenon because it is a system of shared beliefs and collective practices. Religious experiences are social experiences, not only because they are experienced in a group, but religious beliefs and practices themselves are a part of culture.

Secondly, it was demonstrated that sociology of religion differs from philosophy and theology. Sociology brings to the fore certain issues not considered by philosophy and theology. Sociology, philosophy and theology. Though they differ among themselves, are interlinked disciplines. Sociology of religion explains religious beliefs and practices in their social context, philosophy of religion tries to explain the truth or untruth about god, and theology tries to know about god by studying human experiences.

Thirdly, Sociological characteristics of religion were listed and elaborated. Religion is a social phenomenon, that is it is a system of shared beliefs and collective practices. Religion provides moral prescriptions and it at its centre lies the idea of the sacred and supernatural.

Fourthly, the unit provided a brief sketch of the development of sociology of religion. Three phases were identified and elaborated. Intellectualism and emotionalism were the early sub-phase of the first phase. The second phase examined the question of religion against the background of rapid industrialisation. Marx and Weber belonged to this phase. Marx considered religion to be a mode of protest. Religion will lose

its relevance, when the present exploitative conditions justifying it are destroyed. Weber, developing his theory from the position of ethics of protestant sects, argued that religious ideas can be effective forces in development.

Finally, we stated the differences and similarities between religion, magic and science. Religion is more collectively oriented and other-worldly, whereas magic is more individualistic and this-worldly. It was also pointed out that both religion and science are ways of relating with reality, though they use different methods.

1.7 KEY WORDS

Beliefs: it is a tenet or body of tenets, held by a group. It refers to state or habit of mind in which trust or confidence is placed in some person or thing.

Faith: allegiance to duty or a person. Belief and trust in and loyalty to God. Belief in the traditional doctrines of a religion.

Magic: standardised series of acts performed as a means of manipulating the supernatural to reach the desired end.

Morality: prescriptions of conduct for human beings.

Protestant: one who makes a protest. Here, the term refers to non-Catholic Christians who deny the universal authority of the Pope and affirm the Reformation principles of justification by faith alone, the priesthood of all believers and the primacy of the Bible as the only source or revealed truth.

Revivalism: the spirit of methods characteristics of religious revivals. A tendency to revive or restore.

Rite of Passage: a ceremony which marks the passage of time and is associated with a crisis or change of status for an individual, such as marriage, illness or death.

Ritual: the established form for a ceremony, particularly a religious ceremony.

Theology: the study of God and God's relation to the world.

1.8 FURTHER READING

O'Dea, Thomas F., 1966. *The Sociology of Religion*. Prentice Hall : New Delhi

Robertson, Roland, 1970. *The Sociological Interpretation of Religion*. Basil Blackwell : Oxford

Yinger, J. Milton, 1957. *Religion, Society and the Individual*. Macmillan : New York

1.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i) a) Yes

b) Yes

c) Yes

d) No

- ii) Religion is woven into the social life in the form of beliefs, rituals and organisation. Religion influences our understanding of the world and the pattern of our interaction with fellow human beings.
- ii) Sociology of religion explains beliefs and rituals in their social context, whereas theology tries to understand the divine by probing the experiences of the believers. A sociologist need not necessarily be a believer in order to study religion, whereas a theologian is necessarily a believer.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Supernatural is considered to be beyond human senses. It is taken to be extraordinary, all powerful or infinite.
- ii) Religious beliefs refers to a system of knowledge about the divine and its relationship with the human. It gives meaning to a ritual.
- iii) A ritual refers to the performance of acts, usually ceremonial in nature. Ritual acts are the outward expression of religious beliefs.
- iv) When human beings attempt to relate with god, some behaviors are prescribed as a condition to relate with god. This is how do's and don'ts come to be prescribed as moral acts which govern the relations between fellow persons.
- v)
 - a) it is a social phenomenon
 - b) it is a system of shared beliefs and collective practices
 - c) supernatural or sacred is at the centre
 - d) religion provides moral prescriptions.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) According to the intellectualists, members of pre-modern societies evolved religion in order to explain the phenomena of dreams, echoes and deaths. Consequent upon this view is the assumption that religion might vanish when the function of explanation is taken over by science.
- ii) Durkheim felt that totemism is an elementary form of religion. The totem is a sacred object which is also the marker of a social group. The totem is exalted and rituals arise during the 'collective effervescence' generated when the group assembles together.
- iii) Weber argued that religious ideas can be forces of development. He found that the 'doctrine of predestination' propounded by the Protestant sects had generated a life style of hard work and asceticism; self-denial in which people earned but did not spend money on luxury. This resulted in the generation of capital necessary for industrialisation.
- iv) Religion refers to ultimate problems (for example death, failures) and meaning of human life, whereas magic is concerned with immediate problems like good weather, good crops or cure of disease. Religion is collectively oriented, unlike magic, which is more individualistic.
- v)
 - 1) b
 - 2) d
 - 3) e
 - 4) c
 - 5) a

UNIT 2 EVOLUTIONARY THEORIES OF RELIGION

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Evolutionism and its Roots
 - 2.2.1. Positivism
 - 2.2.2 Intellectualism
- 2.3 Intellectualist Theories of Religion
 - 2.3.1 The Nature-Myth School
 - 2.3.2 The Ghost Theory
 - 2.3.3 The Soul Theory or Animism
 - 2.3.4 Dependence on Magic
- 2.4 The Origin of Religion in Psycho-biological Processes
 - 2.4.1 A Product of Fear
 - 2.4.2 Religious Feelings and Thrill
 - 2.4.3 Emotional Stress
 - 2.4.4 Feelings of Guilt
- 2.5 A Critique of Evolutionist Theories
- 2.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.7 Key Words
- 2.8 Further Reading
- 2.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit primarily deals with one of the many attempts that have been made by scholars to study the nature of religious phenomena. After going through this unit, you should be able to

- describe the evolutionary theory and trace its roots in positivism and intellectualism
- discuss the various intellectualist and psychological theories of religion
- analyse the drawbacks of evolutionist theories and follow the gradual shift from the question of origin to functions of religion.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Unit 1 gave you a general idea of the scope of this block on *The Study of Religion*. Now, we focus on the main theme of the block i.e. the various approaches to the study of religion. Unit 2 will discuss the evolutionary theories of religion. These theories represent the first major attempt to explain the origin and development of religion.

First, we will discuss the theory of evolutionism and its roots in positivism and intellectualism. This will be followed by an account of intellectualist theories which assumed that human beings in their early stages of development created religion in order to explain natural phenomena in rational terms. Next, we will take up those evolutionists who believed religion to arise as a result of psycho-biological processes. Finally, we will explain how evolutionary ideas were doubted, questioned and a gradual shift was made towards functionalist explanation of religion.

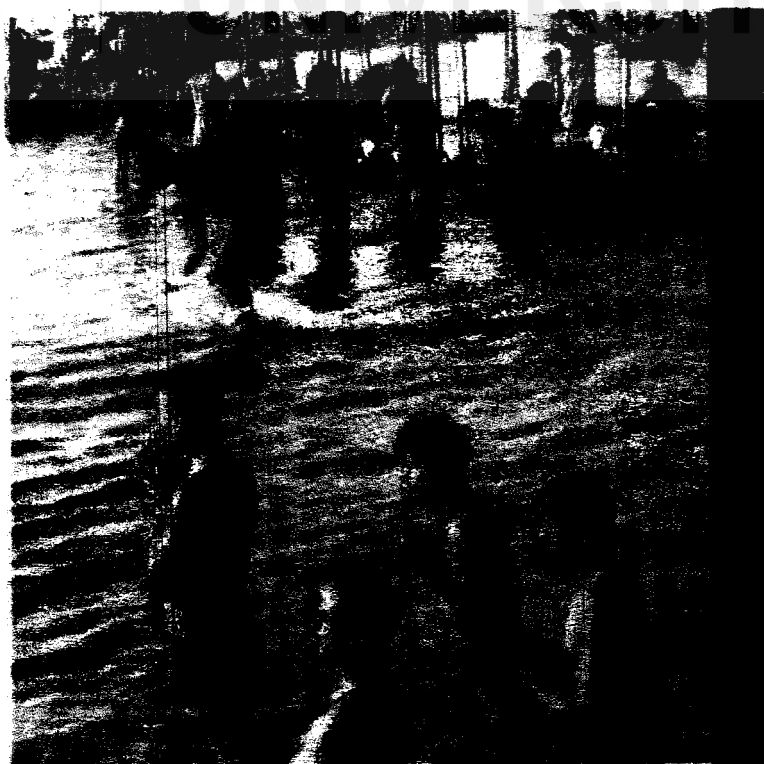
You should also bear in mind that it is not only in the study of religion that we find

evolutionary ideas coming before the functionalist explanation, in fact this has been the chronological order of the development of sociological thought. In the sociology of knowledge all social phenomena were first explained by early sociologists in terms of evolutionary theories. These theories were gradually replaced by functionalist theories. The debates about origins and development of religion were considered to be necessary for sociologists to understand and explain social phenomena. In other words, you can say that our study of the various approaches for understanding and explaining religion is located in the larger framework of sociology of knowledge. This link should always be borne in mind while critically evaluating any sociological theory of religion. This will save you from entering into unnecessary religious discourses. Those of you who do not have a background of sociology will benefit from reading our elective course on *Sociological Thought* (ESO-03) which has outlined the growth of sociological knowledge from evolutionism to functionalism.

2.2 EVOLUTIONISM AND ITS ROOTS

Generally speaking, evolutionism refers to a belief that societies everywhere have a common development pattern. Here it is also understood that mind as well as society progress in a straight line towards ever-increasing complexity and rationality. In this rectilinear progress there are definite stages, beginning from the 'origin' to the present state of human civilisation. Most evolutionists studied the world's primitive peoples for finding out the beginning and progress of social institutions and society. They did not, however, agree on any one theory of social development but presented widely varying schemes of development through which human societies were supposed to have passed.

Evolutionist way of thinking about human societies took final shape in the early nineteenth century. It left a great impact on many disciplines, particularly science, philosophy and anthropology/sociology. Under the influence of evolutionism, anthropologists began the search for the 'origin' of society, religion, finally and other social institutions. The term evolutionism came to be identified with the anthropological theories dealing with the origin and development of religion. These evolutionists were trying to identify, using whatever material was available about the pre-modern



Ritual ceremony performed by the devotees in Sangam, Allahabad

tribal societies; the stages through which society and its institutions developed over the years. The stages described by them can be listed as those of animism, animatism, etc.

Evolutionist understanding of religion seems to rest on two assumptions, namely positivism and intellectualism. We will briefly discuss the two assumptions before studying in detail the evolutionary theories of religion.

2.2.1 Positivism

Positivism means a commitment to principles of natural science. It refers to a conviction that like other natural science, sociology can also offer scientific explanations of social phenomena. Scholars with a positivist assumption, very often, tried to contrast religion with science. For them, religion, when subjected to scientific analysis, ends up merely as something irrational. Positivists tended to assume that when belief in science, based on experiment and sensory perception, is widely held religion will lose its value. They argued that under the impact of rapid industrialisation, religion was losing its ground. We give you two examples of scholars with positivist assumptions.

The French Spencer (1798-1857), believed that the theological stage was the beginning, metaphysical stage was the next and the scientific stage was the last in the evolution of human societies (for further details see Block 1, ESO-03), Comte emphasised that religion will end after the further growth of science.

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), an English scholar, argued that religion arose from the practice of worshipping the ghosts of ancestors. This practice was universal, according to him, among primitive people. After this stage came polytheism (worshipping many gods) and finally monotheism (worshipping a single God). Charles Darwin's famous book *The Origin of Species* was published in 1859 and it brought a revolution in biological sciences. Even before this, Spencer (1857) claimed in his essay, *Progress: Its Law & Cause*, that as science advances and a contract-based society develops, religion centered on god head will fade away. Consequently agnosticism (belief that nothing can be known about god) will be the religion of the scientific age. We may say that Spencer (1876-1896) in his three volumes of *Principles of Sociology*, constructed first systematic theory of religion.

2.2.2 Intellectualism

Intellectualism refers to the exercise of reasoning for explaining something. Scholars with an intellectualist assumption argue that religion is a reasoned or rational response of the individual to the natural phenomena. In other words, religion is a system of explanation offered by the primitive, with reference to supernatural beings. Evolutionism based on the intellectualist assumption claims that religion is a matter of knowledge. The emotional side of religion was ignored by the nineteenth century intellectualists as a non-essential addition. Later, in the twentieth century, these intellectualists were criticised for their one-sided approach to religion. Notwithstanding this valid criticism, we can say one thing in their favour that they were the first to establish that the primitives were not mindless and godless as the report of missionaries and adventures made them out to be. The intellectualists tried to prove that the primitives were rational though their efforts to explain the natural phenomena were somewhat crude and false.

Secondly, these nineteenth century intellectualists were the first Europeans to conceptualise the entire human society as one unit. This resulted in challenging the assumed high position of the so-called European scientific mind. Further it resulted also in changing the nature and importance of classical studies and thereby in

altering the view of European intellectual achievement. We shall not here discuss the specific examples of intellectual evolutionaries because in the following section we shall deal with their contributions in details.

It is good to remember that intellectualists were an odd mixture of positivism and evolutionism. The twentieth century anthropologists and sociologists subjected them to some very harsh criticism. For example, F.B. Jevon's (1896) influential and famous book, *Introduction to the History of Religion*, is described by Evans-Pritchard (1965:5) as 'a collection of absurd reconstructions, unsupportable hypotheses and conjectures....'.

Having discussed the two assumptions on which the evolutionism rests, we will now discuss the various evolutionary theories of religion. First we will take up the intellectualists theories, dealing with the origin and development of religion and then we will also look at those evolutionary theories which trace religion's origin in psycho-biological processes.

At this point it is apt to indicate that there were initially many theories of religion. Further these theories were gradually superceded and criticised and alternatives presented to this type of theorising above the sources and procedures of religion in society.

Check Your Progress 1

i) Define evolutionism, in about five lines.

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ii) What is positivism? Use five lines for your answer.

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iii) How do the intellectualists define religion? Use five lines for your answer.

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2.3 INTELLECTUALIST THEORIES OF RELIGION

Ideas about the origin and development of religion were initially based on the reports of missionaries and adventures about the nature of religion among the primitives. For example, De Brosses (1760), advanced a theory that religion had its origin in fetishism (belief in magical fetishes or objects) : The Portugese sailors had reported that the coastal Negro tribes of West Africa worshipped inanimate things

and animals. Comte (1908) took up this theory and wrote that in due courses **Fetishism** was replaced by **Polytheism**. This theory was superseded by the ghost theory and the soul theory. These latter theories are known as intellectualist theories of religion, because both assume that the primitives are rational being, although their efforts to explain natural phenomena are somewhat crude.

Before proceeding to discuss the intellectualist theories, we should, however, take note of another very strong theory about the origin of religion. This belonged to the nature-myth school which had to be challenged before the ghost and soul theories could be popular. In terms of the chronology of ideas on religion, the nature-myth school came before the above-mentioned theories.

2.3.1 The Nature-Myth School

It was a German School, dealing with Indo-European religions. It established that ancient gods were universally personifications of natural phenomena. Its main propounder was Max Müller who was a German linguist. Most of his life he lived at Oxford as Professor and a Fellow of All Souls. He was a great scholar of Sanskrit and was very interested in ancient Indian gods. He held that grand natural objects gave people a feeling of the infinite. At the same time these objects acted as symbols of the infinite. The celestial bodies, such as, moon, stars, dawn and their attributes were thought of by the people in terms of metaphor and symbol.

We must realize that at this stage of development the visions theories that were being forwarded were part and parcel of the overall development of the sociology of religion.

Max Müller (1878) argued that with the passage of time the symbolic representations came to gain an independent identity of their own and became separated from that which they represented. The attributes or the symbols became personified as deities. According to Müller human beings and nature stand in a relationship of awe, wonderment, terror, etc. Early human beings could not understand or explain the world of nature. They ended up worshipping it out of fear and awe. Müller held that we could study the religion of early man by looking into linguistic etymological meaning of the name of gods and legends associated with them. Sometimes Max Müller and his followers reduced their theories to a farce. For example, he considered the siege of Troy (an ancient city in north-west Asia Minor) to be only a solar myth. Because his interpretations could not be supported by historical evidence, his contemporaries brought many charges against the nature-myth school. Herbert Spencer, Edward Tylor and Andrew Lang were the main critics of nature-myth theories. Not only did they criticise the philological and etymological approach to religion, they took an altogether different approach. In the following sub-section we will deal with the ghost theory and the soul theory advanced by Herbert Spencer and Edward Tylor, respectively. We will also mention Andrew Lang's criticism of the views of Tylor.

2.3.2 The Ghost Theory

Unlike Max Müller, who was concerned with Indo-European religions, both Herbert Spencer and Edward Tylor focused on religious behaviour of the primitives. They believed that primitive societies offered an evidence of the earliest forms of religion. Their view on primitive beliefs are quite similar. Spencer published his views in 1882, eleven years after Tylor published his book *Primitive Culture* in 1871. Spencer's views seem to have been independently worked out a long time before their publication. We therefore first deal with Spencer's ideas on religion.

In a large part of his book, *The Principles of Sociology*, Spencer (1876-96) discusses primitive beliefs. He shows the primitives to be rational though with a limited quantum of knowledge. They make reasonable, though weak, inferences with regard

to natural phenomena. By observing sun, moon, clouds and stars come and go, the primitives get the notion of visible and invisible conditions. Similarly they get the idea of a person's duality from dreams, which are considered as real life-experiences by the primitives. For them, the dream-self moves about at night while the shadow-self acts by the day. This notion of duality is reinforced by peoples' experiences of temporary loss of sensibilities. The event of death is also considered by the primitives as a longer period of insensibility. This idea of duality is extended by them to animals, plants and material object. Such representations as that of spirit child, are quite common among the aborigines.

According to Spencer, the appearance of dead persons in dreams is taken by the primitives to be the evidence of temporary after life. This leads to the conception of a supernatural being in the form of a ghost. According to Spencer, the idea of ghosts grows into the idea gods and the ghosts of ancestors become divine beings. Spencer's (1876-96:440) conclusion is that 'ancestor worship is the root of every religion'.

Because the idea of ghosts of ancestors or other superior beings becoming divinities is commonly found among the primitives in many parts of the world, Spencer's theory may appear to have some plausibility. It is however quite obvious that Spencer is himself a victim of the false reasoning which he attributes to the primitives. Without ever going near the primitives, he builds his ideas about their way of reasoning. He is simply trying to think on behalf of the primitives.

However, we must keep in mind that early studies in the sociology of religion and were instrumental in creating interest in the area of religion and of pushing the academic study of the same further.

In the next subsection, we will see how another scholar follows more or less the same way of building up his ideas about religion. Rather than focusing on the idea of ghost, this scholar emphasises the idea of soul. His name is Edward B. Tylor, whose theory of religion is well known by the term 'animism'.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) What is the relationship between human beings and nature according to the theory of naturism? Use six lines for your answer.

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- ii) Differentiate between the ghost theory and naturism. Use six lines for your answer.

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2.3.3 The Soul Theory or Animism

As the word *anima* (a Latin meaning soul) shows, Sir Edward Tylor's theory of animism emphasises the notion of soul. This theory considers both the origin and development of religion. We can say that the ghost theory explains the origin of religion in the idea of ghosts while the soul theory says the same thing in terms of the idea of soul. Experiences of death, disease, visions and dreams, according to Tylor, lead the primitives to think about the existence of immaterial power, i.e., the soul. This idea of soul is then projected on to creatures other than human and even to inanimate objects. The soul exists independent of its physical home the body, and therefore arises the idea of belief in spiritual beings. This is exactly what is contained in Tylor's minimum definition of religion : that religion originated from a belief in spiritual beings.

We may point out here that the soul theory of Tylor has elements of the sacred and the supernatural. However Tylor's definition is so general that all faiths and beliefs are likely to be labelled as religion. As such while discussing Tylor's theory we must bear in mind that this theory was a bold pioneering attempt at social understanding of religion.

Tylor says that these spiritual beings later develop into gods. They possess superior powers and control destiny of human beings. This is in brief Tylor's theory of animism. Just as Spencer's theory of ghosts was criticised, Tylor's own thought was projected on to the primitives' thought processes. We have no means of knowing if this or something else is what was actually thought by the primitives. Swanton (1924:358-68) has criticised Tylor for advancing unprovable causal theories. Tylor asserts that experiences of death, disease and dreams make primitives believe in the existence of an immaterial entity. This inference which Tylor wants us to accept as an 'obvious inference' cannot be proved to be either an 'obvious' or the 'only one possible' inference.

Secondly one does not understand the logical process by which the idea of soul leads primitives to the idea of spirits. As a matter of fact the concept of soul and the concept of spirit are quite different and opposed to each other and Tylor was not able to see the difference between the two concepts.

Box 2.01

Tylor's theory of religion would not be complete without a mention of his views on magic. He thinks primitive religion to be rational and based on observations and obvious inferences from them, Tylor emphasises the element of rationality in magical practices as well. He argues that magic among primitives is based on observation and classification of similar elements. Failure of magic is explained by Tylor in terms of the magician's wrong inferences about a mystical link between various objects. A subjective supposition of some connection in terms of ideas is mistaken for an objective link. Tylor's discussion of magic is good example of intellectualist interpretation. If one asks Tylor how the primitives happen to make such mistaken connections, his answer would be that it is so because the primitives do not, for good reasons, see the futility of magic. Whenever magic fails, its failure is rationally explained in terms of the practitioner forgetting to perform some prescribed act, or ignoring to observe some prohibition or some hostile magic has checked it in the way.

Andrew Lang (1844-1912), a pupil of Tylor, criticised Tylor's theory of religion. Though Lang was an evolutionist, he did not accept that the idea of gods could have arisen as a late development from a belief in ghosts or spirits. In his book, *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, Lang stressed that many primitive peoples believed in what he

called high gods. These groups were described by Tylor-like intellectualists as not being able to abstractly think about the existence of an all knowing god. Lang (1989:2) argued that the idea of God cannot have evolved out of reflections on dreams and “ghosts”, because the two have entirely different origins. For him, the belief in a God was first which later became degraded as animism. He had a fantastic theory that the two streams, beliefs in monotheism (one God) and animism, came to Christianity through Hebrew and Hellenistic sources. Lang’s ideas on religion were not taken seriously because he was considered more as a literary person who dabbled in the study of religion. All the same Lang’s criticism of Tylor’s position inspired many scholars (one of them was Wilhelm Schmidt) to study the subject of primitive monotheism or the concept of an all powerful, creative god, among the primitives.

R.R. Marett (1866-1943), another of Tylor’s disciples, criticised the animistic theory. He referred to R.H. Codrington’s Melanesian data and claimed that the primitive belief in an impersonal force preceded beliefs in spiritual beings. Marett called this impersonal force *mana* which may be considered as similar to the notion of Bonga (prevalent among many tribal groups in India) and argued that belief in *mana* had both historical and theoretical priority. Marett (1915) wrote an article on *mana* in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* and established that a belief in *mama* and *tabu* (or taboo) together provided a definition of the magico-religious thinking. Though Marett did not as such speak against evolutionist theories, yet his criticism of Tylor’s work and other scholars question the correctness of evolutionist analysis of religion. It made them look more closely at material collected about primitive societies. Later this trend merged in the functionalist approach to the study of religion.

But before we learn in detail in Unit 3 about the functionalist theories of religion, we need to look at those evolutionist theories which claimed that religion originated in magic and superstition. An important study in this area was made by Sir James Frazer in his *magnum opus*, *The Golden Bough*.

The idea behind discussing spirits, soul, magic and sorcery as related to evolutionist theories is that you should be familiar with these currents of thought. Secondly, you should be able to examine critically these ideas and your own ideas about religion.

Activity 1

In India, it is common to come across the idea of soul. Given that Tylor’s theory of animism was several criticised by his own disciplines, as a sociologist, how would you like to account for the idea of soul? Write a short not of 250 words on your idea concerning the idea of soul.

2.3.4 Dependence on Magic

It is argued by some scholar that magic rather than religion is the more primitive way of dealing with crises. The basis difference between religion and magic is that in the former, one deals with a supernatural force by submitting to it through prayer, worship and rituals, while in the latter one tries to overpower or coerce the supernatural force through certain ‘magical’ activities. Sir James Frazer (1922) in his work, *The Golden Bough*, which developed ideas similar to Tylor’s, wrote about magic and primitive superstition. He argued that from a dependence on magic, one would turn to religion and then eventually to scientific thinking. Frazer also stressed the role of religious specialists such as magicians and priests in dealing with the world of the supernatural. But most important of all was Frazer’s emphasis on magic and its types and functions.

Frazer made a bold attempt to understand religion or magic and his work has inspired sociologists in the field of religion.

Frazer saw the operation of magic as a semiscientific activity—there was some kind of a rationale behind it. As a result he referred to it as the ‘bastard sister of science’. He distinguished between two types magic practised by primitive people. These were as follows

a) *Homeopathic or imitative magic*

This was a situation where magic was based on the principle that ‘like produces like’ or a law of similarity. For example, in some tribal groups of the Chotanagpur region in India, it is believed that thunder and its rumbling noise are direct cause of rain. Therefore, when the tribals want rain they go to hill top and sacrifice a small animal. Then, they throw down rocks and stones from the mountainside. As these will make a loud rumbling sound, the tribals believe since it is like the sound of thunder, rain will follow.

b) *Contagious magic*

The second kind of magic according to Frazer was based on the notion that things that came into contact would remain in contact always or the law of contagion operated here. The basic notion operative here is the belief among tribal people that any belonging of an individual, be it an article or clothing, somehow represents a part of the person. Even hair and nail clippings are believed to represent the person they once belonged to. Often these objects are used by the magician to influence the life of a particular person, by performing a ritual act on a piece of clothing or hair or nails. Usually this is used for negative purposes.

Thus, for Frazer, magic, like religion, was basically a means of coming to terms with the supernatural and gaining control over the environment that may have spelt danger or disaster for primitive people. It is when magic and associated rituals failed that primitive people’s thoughts, according to Frazer, turned to the possibility of a far greater force being operative in the world of nature; a force that they soon came to recognise as worthy of worship. Primitive people thus progressed from a reliance upon nature and magic to religious worship and activity. The important thing to, however, remember here is that for Frazer there was a stage beyond religion. This was science. When one started understanding these ‘forces’ with greater scientific rationality, Frazer believed that the evolution of the human intellect would be complete. It is important to realize that this ultimate relation and rejection of religion would be replaced by science. Yet we do not know how this would come about.

Check Your Progress 3

i) Briefly describe what is James Frazer’s evolutionary scheme of understanding the intellectual development of the primitive mind.

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ii) Match the following:

- | A | B |
|----------------|------------------------------------|
| a) Homeopathic | i) 'law of similarity' |
| b) Magic | ii) 'coercion of the supernatural' |
| c) Imitative | iii) 'once in contact' |

2.4 THE ORIGIN OF RELIGION IN PSYCHO-BIOLOGICAL PROCESSES

You would recall that in section 1.4.1 of Unit 1 we discussed religion in premodern societies. There we mentioned that some scholars stressed the emotional aspects of religion. In most text books on sociological study of religion, the cognitive (intellectualist) and emotional aspects of religion are discussed together. Evans-Pritchard (1965) has provided a most readable discussion of the two streams of thought. Taken as a response and reaction to extreme intellectualist viewpoints, emotionalist theories provide a kind of balance and show that emotions are an important part of religion. As we disagree with intellectualist explanations, so we may question analysis of religion in terms of emotion. All the same, we need to discuss it as the background which served as a base for later scholars, who came to be known as functionalists and structuralists. Here we will discuss some of the important and well-known theories which seek religion's origin in psycho-biological processes. First, we will talk about the view that religion is mainly a product of fear. Then, we take up Malinowski's thesis that religion arises and becomes active in conditions of emotional stress. And finally we discuss Freud's view that religion arises as a result of feeling of guilt.

2.4.1 A Product of Fear

Taylor held that the idea of spirit grew out of the idea of soul and the idea of spirit later became the conception of God. Most of Taylor's contemporaries accepted this view of religion. We have already mentioned that Taylor's pupils were among the best critics of his theory.

A classical scholar, a school headmaster, A.E. Crawley, questioned the logic of Taylor's view about the source of the idea of soul. According to Crawley (1909:78), the idea of soul cannot possibly arise from dreams. He argued that the idea of soul originated from sensation whereas the existence of spirits is only in the minds of people. He said that 'the world of spirits is the mental world'. This is again an intellectualist standpoint. But as Evans-Pritchard (1965:36) points out this is not all that Crawley had to say. Crawley gives us his theory of religion in his book, *The Mystic Rose*, published in 1927.

Crawley holds that religion or superstition pervades the mental make-up of primitive people who do not distinguish between religion and magic. They live in the world of mystery where subjective and objective realities are all mixed up into one. The main force behind primitive thought is fear of the danger in social relations. For example, while eating, the primitives feel particularly prone to danger. This is the reason why they have so many taboos around food. The idea of a world of spirits is the result of a sense of danger and the feelings of fear. In this way, his theory of religion is more or less built around taboo, a product of fear. For him, wherever people face greater dangers, they are that much more religious. Interestingly, according to him, women face more dangers than men do, they are therefore more religious than men are. For him, god is an outcome of processes of psychology and biology.

Another example of this stream of thought is the writing of Wilhelm Wundt. Like Crawley, he was both an intellectualist and an emotionalist. Wundt (1916:17) held that all the ideas which are not part of one's perception or which are mythological, have their genesis in emotions. These emotions are projected outwardly and then comes the first stage of religion i.e., the belief in magic and demons. In the next phase of evolution, people begin to worship animals. This what he calls the Totemic Age. It is in due course succeeded by the worship of ancestors. This again is replaced by the worship of heroes and then by the cult of the gods. This is the stage of the Age of Heroes and Gods. The final stage of this evolutionary cycle is the Humanistic Age which refers to religious universalism.

One notices in the analysis of Crawley and Wundt is such that "stages" of development of religion were posited by Crawley. This type of theory and conclusion is conjectural and cannot be proved or disproved.

Both Crawley and Wundt were evolutionists to the core. The ideas of Wundt belong more to philosophy of history than to sociology or anthropology. Such American anthropologists as R.H. Lowie, Paul Radin and Goldenweiser also wrote about religion in primitive societies. Let us see what they have to say.

2.4.2 Religious Feelings and Thrill

R.H. Lowie (1925), basing his thinking on his study of the Crow Indians (an Amerindian people of the region between the Platte and Yellow stone rivers), considers that for the primitives, religion is a matter of feeling. It is marked by 'a sense of the Extraordinary; Mysterious or Supernatural'. Instead of religious behaviour, he writes about emotional responses of amazement and awe. Anything that gives rise to those feelings is characterised as religion. Thus, for Lowie, if magic is associated with emotion, it is to be called religion. Without emotional content magic is, for Lowie, akin to science (note the similarity between the views of Lowie and Frazer).

Another American anthropologist, Paul Radin, who studied the Winebago Indians (located around Winebago lake in East Wisconsin in the U.S.A.), also emphasised that religious feelings arise and are centered around beliefs and customs. This sensitivity to belief and custom is expressed in thrill. The religious thrill is generally manifested in time of crises. Paul Radin (1938) considered magic as religion only if it arouses the religious feelings. In the absence of religious emotion, magic is only folklore.

Similarly, Goldenweiser (1921:346) describes two spheres of religion, namely, magic and religion. He holds that in both magic and religion the thrill is experienced. Like the American anthropologists, other anthropologists, particularly in England, paid more attention to observation and recording of information about primitive peoples. One of the more well-known anthropologists among them was Malinowski who was very interested in the role of magic and religion in economic evolution. Although Malinowski is famous for founding the functionalist school of British Social Anthropology, he was an evolutionist in his theoretical interests. For details about his contribution in the field of the study of religion and magic, see Units 22 and 23 of Block 6 of ESO-03. Here, we will briefly discuss Malinowski's views on religion and magic, because he was primarily trying to account for the origin of religion. This was a pursuit undertaken by many evolutionists.

Check Your Progress 4

- i) Explain how, according to Crawley, religion is a product of fear. Use six lines for your answer.

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- ii) Give the main arguments of those who explain religious behaviour in terms of feelings. Use six lines for your answer.

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2.4.3 Emotional Stress

Malinowski held that both religion and magic originate and function under conditions of emotional stress. Magic is used by the primitive as we use scientific knowledge today for overcoming practical difficulties in their day to day life. This relieves the tension which is built up because of a sense of weakness or inability of human beings to achieve success in their pursuits. In magic, desired goals are acted out and magical rites are an end and the practitioner of magic yet the feeling of confidence. They can then continue to pursue their normal activities.

Emotional stress in contemporary times is closely linked to the stress factor in modern life. Thus it would be a mistake to imagine that in modern life that there is little emotional stress. Mental tension also sometimes makes the emotional stress very intense.

Box 2.01

Malinowski has also differentiated religion from magic. According to him, religious rites have no future motives. Their objectives are achieved in the very process of holding religious rites. For example, Malinowski (1984:39) says that in birth, puberty and death rites, the very acts of holding these ceremonies fulfil their aims of giving 'a ritual and dramatic expression of the supreme power and value of tradition in primitive societies'. Further, they also serve 'to impress this power and value upon the minds of each generation'. Finally, they transmit tribal lore and therefore preserve tradition and maintain tribal solidarity.

Though different from each other, religion and magic, for Malinowski, are also similar because the function of both is a purification that brings about release from tension. When the people face crises of life, the fear and anxiety cause tension. The performance of religious and magical rites help them to dispel their fears and emotional stress.

Malinowski's explanation of religion and magic in primitive societies has been followed almost blindly by his admirers. Prominent among them are Driberg (1932) and Firth (1955). In the early part of twentieth century, it was common to find scholars following this stream of thought about religion and magic. Evans-Pritchard (1965:40) calls it the Tylor-Frazer formula. He points out that even the psychologist Carveth

Read (1920) writing about superstitions followed the same logic. In his book, *The Origin of Man and His Superstition*, Carveth Read concluded that a person's emotional states of fear, hate, love etc. produce magic whose function is to release tension and give confidence and hope to its practitioners.

While talking about psychology, we should also look at what was said about religion by Freud who was influenced by anthropological writing on religion and who, in turn, influenced the writing of sociologists and anthropologists. His books, *Totem and Taboo* (1913), *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) and *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1930), contributed a great deal to evolutionist theory.

2.4.4 Feelings of Guilt

Writing about the thinking process among the primitive people, Van Der Leeuw (1928:14) points out that they have strong emotional needs which stand in the way of knowing the truth. They are not able to see any contradictions in their thinking. They then see just what they want to see.

Van Der Leeuw cites the case of magic. A person, faced with a difficult situation, can either try and somehow come out of it or withdraw and turn inwards. Turning inwards takes the person to the world of fantasy where the difficulties can be overcome by working on magic spells. This psychological mechanism helps people to deal with all sorts of difficulties in life.

Freud (1913:145) also found that his neurotic (emotionally unstable) patients deal with harsh realities of life with the help of compulsive acts and protective wall of mere thought. Freud gives us three phases of thought. The first one is the phase of narcissism, that is, love for one's own body. The second phase is that object finding when one is dependent on one's parents. The third one is the phase of maturity. In this state, the person is at one with the reality and adapts to it without problems. Corresponding to these phase, Freud gives three stages of intellectual development. These are the animistic (or the magical), the religious and the scientific. The child is unable to achieve everything through motor activity and, as in magic, imagines she/he has achieved the desired goal by substituting thought for action. A neurotic person also behaves in the same manner, substituting thought for action. Such a person is then like a magician who considers thought to be omnipotent. Here again, the idea is that the tension, the sense of frustration leads to magical rites which in turn release tension.

Having thus explained the animistic stage, Freud discusses the second stage. For him religion, like magic, is an illusion and it comes out of the feelings of guilt. Freud has a very interesting story to account for the origin of religion. He refers to the ape-like phase of human development when the leader of the horde, a father figure, ruled over the group, keeping all the females for his own use. His sons rebelled against the father and wanted the females for themselves. They killed the father and ate him up. Later they repented and suffered the feelings of guilt. As a result they put a taboo in eating their totem (an animal or bird), which was also sign for their father and his authority. They began to ceremonially worship the totem and thus originated religious rites. Secondly, the sons put a taboo on sexual relationship between mother and sons. This is known as the rule of incest. According to Freud as totem is the origin of religion, He incest taboo is the origin of culture.

It is most interesting to note that this, allegory of Freud's has no basis in fact. It is a purely conjectural story which indicates that there is a sort of tension in the human family purely on the basis of gender differences. Yet these differences and desires do not usually erupt into homicidal violence.

Freud elaborates these ideas in his theories of Oedipus complex and Electra complex.

In the former, the son, in his unconscious, wants to have the mother for himself and wants, to kill the father while in the latter the daughter, wanting to have the father to herself, wants to till the mother. In the last analysis, the father is idealised and taken to be God. This is all illusion, so, for Freud religion is also an illusion.

We find that for Freud, both religion and magic are reducible to feelings of tensions, frustrations, emotions and complexes and illusion. As mentioned before, Freud has influenced anthropological writing. For example, M.E. Spiro (1984) has writing a book, *Oedipus in the Trobriands*, which shows that Freud's evolutionist ideas are still being worked on.

Let us now see how all these evolutionist theories accounting for the origin and development of religion could not remain in vogue forever. They were, in due course, replaced by new currents of thought. Over the years more information about the various human groups became available and in its light older theories were challenged by subsequent scholars. Also, new questions were asked and newer methods of answering those questions were discovered. In the following section there is a critique of evolutionist theories of religion.

Activity 2

Read once again sub-sections 2.4.3 and 2.4.4 of this unit and offer, in a note of 250 words, your criticism of the views of Malinowski and Freud on the origin of religion.

2.5 A CRITIQUE OF EVOLUTIONIST THEORIES

Many objections were levelled against evolutionist theories of religion. You have already come to know that such scholars as Lang and Marett criticised Tylor's idea of the soul the giving of soul-like qualities to animate and inanimate objects. **They argued that there was a religion even before animism, which attributed everything with life. This was called animatism.** Lang pointed to texts and sources of knowledge which showed that primitive people had belief in an abstract notion of a creative and all powerful god. This disproved the ther anthropologists' thesis that primitive people were too backward or underdeveloped to conceive in abstract terms of the notion of a God.

Secondly, as you have already learned in sub-section 2.3.3 of this unit, Marret drew attention to the religious belief called **manaism**. According to this belief, all animate and inanimate things were characterised by an impersonal and nonmaterial supernatural power. This supernatural force was called *mana* by the Melanesian people, among whom it was found. In other words, what was being argued was that Tylor was not saying anything new. Moreover, in levelling criticism against Tylor, his critics were able to shift attention from earlier efforts to study about the origin of religion to a closer review of actual ethnographic material about religion.

A major criticism against Tylor and Spencer was that they projected their own ideas regarding soul etc. into the mind of the primitive people whom they had not studied in their natural habital and environment. Thus the evolutionists were arm chair scholars.

It was argued that rather than religion and related beliefs and practices, primitive people were actually more inclined towards magic and superstition. Still representing evolutionary ideas, James Frazer's imposing book *The Golden Bough* attributed to the primitives a magical mode of thought. Frazer argued that it was later replaced by a religious and then a scientific mode. He stressed the role of such religious specialists as magician and priests, in dealing with the world of the supernatural.

As you would have noticed that the evolutionists wrote at length on religion and magic. Some argued for the primacy of religious beliefs while others supported the primacy of magical practices. Much of what was said by them on religion revolved around magic. Today, their theories indeed sound quite illogical and contrary to common sense. No doubt, these scholars were great scholars and their explanations about religion were based on the thinking and researches of their times. They assumed that they could learn the story of the origin and development of religion by studying primitive religions. This led them to explain religious phenomena in terms of primitive thought. The question arises—how were they to know the complexities of primitive thought? Some of them had never even seen even one primitive person. Most of their theories were plain guesses about primitive people's way of thinking. Their theories were quite simple in the sense that they reflected more the ideas then prevailing in the societies to which the respective evolutionists belonged rather than the beliefs and practices of the primitive peoples.

Box 2.02

James Frazer managed to collect information about primitive societies from the accounts of explorers, missionaries, administrators and traders. But the explanation of this information was still based on imagined associations made by 'arm chair' scholars who had never even exchanged a word with a native. The reports used by these scholars were both very poorly recorded and contained highly selective facts about primitive groups, as travellers merely recorded what seemed to them most odd, curious and sensational type of things.

Malinowski, who was the first anthropologist to have carried out a professional field study of the primitive way of life, made fun of the evolutionist way of theorising about religion. The scissor-and-paste kind of putting information together has been well ridiculed by Malinowski who emphasised meticulous recording of minutest details of day-to-day life among the primitives.

No doubt the study of religion by evolutionists provided a gradual building up of an understanding of the phenomenon and this is the reason why we study their ideas and theories. This does not, however, mean that we can fully accept their various schemes of development of religion in human societies. Most evolutionists were progressionists, that is, they believed in progress from less advanced to more advanced stages. For them the primitive societies were examples of crude phases of development. For providing their theories, they looked for appropriate examples from some corner of the world. They had no idea of historical truth. Then, to heap further misinterpretations on an already wrong picture, the evolutionists made special terms to describe religious phenomena among the primitives. Terms like animism, pre-animism, fetishism, manaism, to describe religious made it look as something very difficult to understand. It was quite perilous to take words from different languages without working out their connotations in the communications systems of those groups to which the words belonged. Translating words from other languages into our own can be sometimes quite dangerous and create misunderstandings (see Evans-Pritchard 1965:11-15).

In conclusion we may say that the intellectualist interpretations of religion applied 'if I were a horse' type of method of arguing. It means that they made guesses about what they **thought** the primitive people **thought** about religion. Later the emotionalist interpretations changed the thought part with 'feelings'. They said that the primitives did something because of one of the other type of feeling they were supposed to have. Just like the intellectualists, the emotionalists had very little proof to support their theories. Even those scholars, who made field studies by living among the people, gave interpretations which could not be supported by evidence.

For example, you have learnt that some scholars wrote about the feeling of awe, and thrill as a characteristic of religion. Some described it as a religious emotion, other said that there was no specific religious emotion. You may ask how does one recognise the feeling of awe? How can one measure this feeling? Secondly, emotional states cannot be made a basis of classification of facts about religion. If one was to do so, it would be a very strange list indeed.

Moreover, not all religious acts are results of emotional unrest. Not all religious performances are associated with crisis situations. Also, many a time, expression of emotional unrest is required in certain ceremonies, whether a person is feeling it or not. For example, in some societies, professional mourners are employed at the time of funeral.

We may say that each culture imposes its patterns on individuals who learnt to act in a certain manner. In this way, rites are basically a creation of society rather than a product of an individual's reasoning or feeling. This is the point that is emphasised by Durkheim who shared with the evolutionists the search for early forms of religion. As we shall see in Unit 3 of this block, Durkheim studied totemism which he thought was the earliest form of religion. In his explanation of the role of totemism in Australian aboriginal society, Durkheim differed completely from the evolutionists. His interpretation of religion encouraged new approaches to the study of religion. These approaches considered religion important because of the role it played in maintaining tradition and sense of community. Giving up intellectualist and emotionalist interpretations, these theories emphasised the functional aspect of religion and did not much dwell on its origin and progress from one stage of another. To understand this point further, you are advised to view the video programme on **Religious Symbols**, prepared for this Block.

Before explaining functionalist approaches to studying religion, we shall once again, in Unit 3, discuss the gist of evolutionist theories.

Check Your Progress 5

- i) What is animatism? Use about five lines for your answer.

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- ii) Is the belief in **mana** different from the belief in the idea of soul? Use five lines your answer.

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- iii) Did the primitive people actually think or feel about religion in the manner shown by the intellectualists and emotionalists? Use ten lines for your answer.

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iv) What was the basis on which evolutionists built their theories of religion? Use five lines for your answer.

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v) Describe the method of reasoning employed by the evolutionists in explaining religious behaviour. Use five lines for your answer.

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2.6 LET US SUM UP

We began this unit by discussing the concept of evolutionism and its roots in the ideas of positivism and intellectualism. Then, we described two forms of evolutionist theories of religion, namely, the intellectualist and the emotionalists. Finally, we gave a brief critique of evolutionist approaches to the study of religion. Thus we have seen clearly that religion has been studied by the early and classical sociologists. This has added greatly to the sociological understanding of religion.

2.7 KEY WORDS

Anima: this Latin word simply refers to the idea of the soul.

Animism: this is a reference to a later explanation of the nature of religious phenomena, found in the work of E.B. Tylor. This theory attributes the origin of religion to the belief that all inanimate objects and natural phenomena have a spiritual quality or soul (**anima**) which is the cause of source of some of the peculiar experience that primitives undergo and that create in them feelings of awe and wonderment.

Atheist: a person who does not believe in the existence of God.

Contagious magic: a type of magic that seeks to produce effects through contact

with any belonging, image or the person's body itself. This is usually done to harm someone or to act as a curse.

Contingency: this refers to an unexpected or chance occurrence.

Ethnographic: descriptive account of the way of life of a particular social group.

Etymology: the history of a word shown by tracing its development.

Evolution: a process whereby the form of things changes from a simpler one to a more complex one. The idea of evolution is mostly associated with the origin of the human/animal species but can also be applied to society.

Homeopathic magic: a type of magic that seeks to deal with contingent situation through the principle that the creation of a situation like the one being sought to overcome, would help to overcome the original difficulty.

Melanesian data: ethnographic material about the inhabitants of the islands in the Pacific.

Naturism: this is a reference to a particular understanding of the relationship between primitive man and the supernatural world as the world of natural forces. This theory propounded by Max Muller. It mainly traces the earliest form of religion to the worship of nature and is thus called 'naturism' by Muller.

Pseudo-science: since the word pseudo refers to something that is 'seemingly' like another, here magic is called a pseudo-science as it 'seems' to be scientific in some of its methods.

Sacred: something held in respect as it is considered to be consecrated and special.

Supernatural: this is a reference to certain unseen forces that are above the forces of nature and seem to have influence on humans.

Taboo: refers to a restriction or a number of restrictions, in terms of contact or sight or touch, with the thing that is tabooed. Actions not permitted by society according to custom, tradition and religion.

Totem: a wooden or stone representation of an animal or bird form that is believed to be a mythical ancestor of a community of people.

2.8 FURTHER READING

Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1965. *Theories of Primitive Religion*. Oxford University Press : Oxford, pp. 1-77.

Beattie, John, 1964. *Other Cultures*. Cohen and West: London Chapters on Magic and Religion, pp. 202-240.

International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences: Read the two articles on the "Sociological Approach to Religion" and "The Anthropological Approach to Religion". The Encyclopaedia is available in most libraries.

Majumdar, D.N. and Madan, T.N., 1986. *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*. National Publishing House: New Delhi, pp. 112-126 and 151-168.

2.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Evolutionism refers to a belief in a unilinear direction of change in societies.
- ii) Positivism refers to a commitment to the principles of natural science. In sociology, it means that sociology can, like natural science, offer scientific explanations of social phenomena.
- iii) The intellectualists believe that religion arose as a rational response of the individual to natural phenomena.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) According to the theory of naturism it is believed that human beings and nature stand in a relationship of awe, wonderment, terror etc. What is meant is that, for early human beings, the world of nature presents a world of experiences that they cannot understand or explain and thus end up worshipping it out of fear and awe.
- ii) The major differences between animism and naturism is that, in the case of naturism, early human beings come to worship objects of nature which appeared unusual and seemed to influenced life in some way beyond human control. In the case of animism, objects of nature come to be worshipped as they were all believed to have **anima**, or spiritual quality.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) James Frazer believed that an evolutionary scheme for human intellectual development could be observed in the course of the intellectual development of the primitive mind. According to this, primitive man develops intellectually from a dependence on magic to a dependence on religion to explain the phenomena. Finally, human intellectual development turns to scientific thinking to explain phenomena and human mind becomes rational rather than emotional in nature.
- ii) A B
 - a) i)
 - b) ii)
 - c) iii)

Check Your Progress 4

- i) According for the origin of religion, Crawley looked at the psychological aspects of human behaviour. He attempts to seek answers for associated prohibition and prescriptions in terms of emotions. For Crawley, the emotion of fear of danger in relations among the people led them to observe taboos around particular actions. This resulted in a set of religious beliefs.
- ii) Such American anthropologists as Lowie, Radin and Goldenweiser held that religion among the primitive people is characterised by emotional responses of awe and amazement towards mysterious forces of the supernatural. In fact, this visible and outward behaviour was made by them a basis of defining religion.

Check Your Progress 5

- i) Animatism refers to preanimistic stage in religious development. It attributes life to all animate and inanimate objects.
- ii) The belief in supernatural force called **mana** among the Melanesian people was discussed by R.R. Marett. He criticised Tylor's theory of animism which was only an imagined construction about the thought process of primitive people. Marett's analysis of religion in terms of the belief in **mana** was based on ethnographic material about a particular people. In this sense, we can say that the two sets of ideas are quite different from each other.
- iii) Both the intellectualists and emotionalists explained religion in terms of their respective speculations about the primitive people's way of thinking or feeling. They had no way of actually examining their theories because many of them had never even encountered a primitive person. Such scholars as Lowie and Radin who had studied the primitive communities relied heavily on outward expression of religious behaviour and viewed them as definition of religion.
- iv) The evolutionists built their theories largely on the basis of accounts of primitive societies.
- v) The method of reasoning employed by the evolutionists for explaining religion was to project one's own ideas to the way of thinking or feeling of the primitive people. It is known as 'if I were a horse' fallacy.

UNIT 3 FUNCTIONALIST THEORIES OF RELIGION

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Recapitulating Evolutionism
- 3.3 Functionalism
 - 3.3.1 What is Functionalism?
 - 3.3.2 Traces of Functionalist Thinking
- 3.4 Religion in Terms of its Functions
 - 3.4.1 Totemism : An Elementary Form of Religion
 - 3.4.2 Sacred versus Profane
 - 3.4.3 Functions of Religion
 - 3.4.4 Religion is Eminently Social : The Case of the Arunta
 - 3.4.5 A Critique of Durkheim's Understanding of Religion
- 3.5 Growth of Functionalist Approach
 - 3.5.1 The Role of Religion
 - 3.5.2 Social Continuity and Solidarity
- 3.6 The Coorg Religion
 - 3.6.1 Solidarity of Okka
 - 3.6.2 Village and Caste Solidarity
- 3.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.8 Key Words
- 3.9 Further Reading
- 3.10 Answers to Check Your Progress

3.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to

- understand what functionalism is
- differentiate between evolutionist and functionalist understandings of religion
- evaluate the functionalist theories
- do a functionalist analysis of religion of your choice.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

To begin with, let me congratulate you for deep and steady enthusiasm towards understanding religion in sociological terms. This course will help you in that endeavour.

Society is a complex reality. It is almost impossible to understand this reality wholly. Every one understands society in one's own way. All the same, we try to develop a commonly accepted way of explaining societal arrangements, known as institutions. Religion is a social institution. There are several ways of understanding religion. Evolutionism is one way of understanding it. In Unit 2 you came to know about it. In Unit 3, we shall discuss the functionalist way of analysing religion.

Let us commence by recalling evolutionism and critically analysing it; then you will be introduced to functionalism. Next, we will elaborate Durkheim's view of religion and try to identify it with the functionalist approach. Before summing up our discussion, we will present an example of the functionalist understanding of religion among the Coorgs of South India.

3.2 RECAPITULATING EVOLUTIONISM

Evolutionist understanding of religion, very much in fashion during the nineteenth century, rested on mixture of positivism, intellectualism and religious sentiments. The evolutionist theories serving from progressionist understanding of religions were most often unsupported by evidence. In other words, the history of religion in particular, and society in general, was constructed in a speculative manner with inadequate materials.

The evolutionist theories of religion explained religion in terms of individual thought processes or psychological assumptions (e.g. 'awe', 'wonderstruck', 'dream' etc.). This is unacceptable, said the critics of evolutionist theories. They considered religion a social phenomena. They argued that social phenomenon can be explained only in terms of social causes without using natural or individual psychological causes.

The evolutionists could not understand religion because they looked on religion as a mark of 'ignorance' and 'vehicle of irrationality'. They sought to explain the origin of religion and society by relying on the reports about or by observing the pre-modern or 'primitive' societies known in their times. Here there was an implicit assumption (which is also known as progressionist view) that the western industrialised societies (to which the scholars belonged) were more advanced and more civilised than the rest. The critics of evolutionism said that the assumption needed to be neutralised in order to build a universal theory. They questioned the correctness of haphazardly collected facts about primitive societies and gave importance to scientific collection of data. However, we should realize the significance of these early pioneering studies. They opened up a new area of research and made important statements upon which the later sociologists built their own theories to account for the presence of religion in society. You will learn more about this area of sociology as you read this unit further.

But the idea of function for assigning meaning to religious and other phenomena existed even before **ethnologists** and **ethnographers** published painstakingly collected data about primitive and nonprimitive societies. Early sociologists wrote about a functional relation between political, religious, economic and moral action. They argued that changes in any one of these areas brought corresponding changes in the others.

Later, with concerted efforts of Malinowski, and Radcliffe-Brown in England and Parsons and Merton in the U.S.A., functionalist approach gained popularity and made significant contributions to the study of religion. The concepts, which most functionalists used for their explanations of religious behaviour, were borrowed by them from Durkheim. He is not known to be a functionalist but his research on early forms of religion became a basis of functionalists to analyse the fieldmaterial collected by them. This is why in this unit we shall discuss in details the ideas of Durkheim and some of his contemporaries. But before taking up Durkheim's and his colleagues' approach to the study of religion, we shall briefly review the status of functionalism before Durkheim.

Activity 1

Read from page 7 to page 19 Block of ESO-03. If you do not have it acquire its copy from your study center and then write a note of 500 words on evolutionist and functionalist mode of understanding social phenomenon.

3.3 FUNCTIONALISM

In their search for general laws governing society, earlier scholars were trying to

construct conjecturally the historical development of human societies. Functionalists, on the other hand, tried to understand the functioning of contemporary societies. How does a society exist in an orderly manner was the foremost question in their minds.

3.3.1 What is Functionalism?

Let me ask you a question : How does a steam engine function? You might describe the functioning of steam engine as follows: Water is heated intensely to generate steam at a high pressure. The high pressure of steam in the tank moves the piston back and forth. Consequently, the wheel attached to the piston moves at a greater speed. Now, this is roughly, the way in which a steam engine functions or this is how the steam engine works. Now within this functionalist system, i.e., steam engine, there are various parts. These are all interconnected. In relation to the system these parts have specific functions to perform. If any of these parts gets damaged, the system, i.e. the steam engine, may not function at all or may function irregularly. The same story can be applied to society. As a functionalist would do, let us consider society as a system, within which there are various interconnected parts, i.e. institutions. For example, as an institution functions to 'produce' members for the society. The function of the school, which is another institution, is to train the members for future roles. Industry's function on the other hand is to produce goods necessary for the maintenance of society. If one of these institutions breaks down, the society will be in trouble. Isn't it?

For a functionalist, society is a system with interconnected parts. Within this system, parts perform certain functions, so that the systemic whole can be maintained or run. Now, the above version is a very simplified notion of functionalism. It has been simplified so that you will understand it easily. However, there are many different variations within the functionalist thinking itself. In Sociology, functionalism is developed by scholars like Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Talcott Parsons and Merton (for a detailed discussion on their theories of functionalism see Block 6 and 7 of ESO-03).

3.3.2 Traces of Functionalist Thinking

As explained in the earlier paragraph, if you want to do a functionalist analysis of any system, you have to ask as a starting point: What it does. What does a part



According to functionalism most ceremonies help to create and maintain order in society.

perform for the whole? How are the parts in the system interrelated? You must be wondering, why these questions were never asked, before the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly before Durkheim? As a matter of fact, before Durkheim, the question was already emerging in the writing of such scholars as Auguste Comte, Tocqueville and Herbert Spencer. They were already asking questions like, what can religion do for the maintenance and advancement of society? What kind of religion will perform necessary functions for the rapidly industrialising society?

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), a French Scholar, realised, very early that religion can perform certain important functions for society. During his time, it was widely accepted amongst scholars that religion does not foster or support democracy. However, in his study of American *Evangelical Protestantism*, Tocqueville established that it helped the growth of democratic spirit in America. Tocqueville proposed that Catholicism with modifications could foster democratic spirit in France. Auguste Comte, another French scholar, proposed a new 'religion of humanity' to develop greater commitment to society among French people.

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), an English philosopher, established functionalist thinking more systematically. He compared society to a human body. In the human body, as we know, there is natural co-ordination among the various organs. In the same way, in society various institutions must naturally cooperate amongst themselves. To be compatible with the rest of the institutions of the advanced, industrial society.

Malinowski, the famous functionalist, wrote about religion, science and magic and discussed their functions. Though he provided a wealth of material on primitive religious practices and beliefs, he did not add any new concepts to the study of religion. Radcliffe-Brown, another functionalist, talked about functions of religion. He relied heavily on the ideas of Durkheim (see Box 3.01). Durkheim's theory of religion is important for it gave impetus to further sociological research on religious phenomena.

Box 3.01

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), a French sociologist, is considered a father of modern sociology. He taught education and sociology at the University of Bordeaux later at Sorbonne. He was a leading intellectual figure in France and his influence was felt in such diverse field as law, history and economics. His work may be seen as a reaction to certain nineteenth century views about the nature of human affairs. For him, the society was prior to the individual and the social could not be reduced to the psychological. His most important works are. *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), *Society* (1897), and *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912).

Fustel de Coulange, a French historian and Robertson Smith, one time Professor of Arabic at Cambridge University, held their religion had its genesis in the very nature of primitive society. According to Robertson Smith (1927:227), all members of a clan of a tribe were thought to be one blood. The god of the clan was also thought to be of the same blood because he was conceived as the physical father of the clan-founder. In other words, the god was the clan itself. The concrete representation of this god was made in the form of totemic creatures. Sacrificing the totemic creation and partaking its flesh and blood was a sacred communion. Much influenced by this approach, Durkheim tried to show how religion arose out of the very existence of society. He described religion as a social fact (see Box 3.02).

Box 3.02

According to Durkheim (1895), the aim of sociology is to study social facts. He defines social phenomena in terms of those factors which are external to the individual and yet have a controlling effect on one's actions. He characterises social fact as

- i) being external to individual
- ii) exercising pressure on individual
- iii) being objective, in the sense that they cannot be defined by individuals to suit themselves.

As an example of a social fact we can take law which has all the above mentioned characteristics. When Durkheim says that in sociology we study social facts he means that we do not study individuals. This is so because he holds that societies cannot be a total sum of actions and intentions of individuals. Secondly he emphasises the moulding and constraining of individuals by their social settings. In his book *Rules of Sociological Method*, he has shown how law is a social fact. It is not dependent on individuals. It has to be followed and law breakers are punished.

He criticised those who explained religion in terms of individual psychology. He asked if religion had its origin in an illusion, how could it last for so long and how could it be found to exist universally? He argued that many primitive groups took for granted the so-called remarkable natural forces—sun, moon, sky, sea, etc. and looked on them as regular phenomena. He claimed that in contrast, in totemism, an early form of religion, rather ordinary creatures were worshipped. These were, for example, such small things as rabbits, worms, frogs, etc. which do not strike us as being awe-inspiring, mystical or impressive. In accounting for their significance he discovered the importance of religion in its social context. We shall in the following section see how Durkheim explained religion as a social phenomenon.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Give, in five lines two points of criticism of evolutionism.

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- ii) Explain, in five lines, the basic tenet of functionalism.

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3.4 RELIGION IN TERMS OF ITS FUNCTIONS

When scholars were disillusioned about religion, as we have seen in subsection 3.3, Durkheim (1858-1917) arose to explain the positive functions of religion for society. Durkheim was not satisfied by the evolutionist explanations, which failed to give religion its meaning as a social institution. Durkheim's major arguments about religion came out in a book, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. It was published in French, first in 1912, and was later translated into English in 1915.

Durkheim wanted to demonstrate social functions of religion by taking totemism as the test case. Totemism among the central Australian tribes, as represented in the ethnography of Spencer and Gillen, came handy for Durkheim. He chose totemism for analysis due to two reasons : first, he considered totemism to be an elementary form of religion; secondly, he considered that the sacred-profane distinction arose from the totemic practice.

3.4.1 Totemism : An Elementary Form of Religion

Totemism was an elementary form for Durkheim not because it came first historically. Totemism was simple in terms of its organisation and hence it came to be the elementary form. Also, totemism could be explained without borrowed features from any previous religion. In other words, features of totemism were unique to itself. It should be recalled that Durkheim rejected animism and naturism. Animism as well as naturism assumed that religion arose out of primitive people's ignorance about nature.

This in sociology the term 'totem' has a specific meaning. There are as we have seen several important aspects and conditions based upon which the totem is a symbol of the group or clan. That is to say that a 'totem' is pre-eminently Social and not an individual emblem.

Whereas Durkheim (1961:13) says that all religious 'are true in their own fashion' for the believers. He questioned the assumption that religion had its genesis in a mistake, an illusion. He asked if it was so, how could religion be so widespread and enduring?

Secondly, he questioned also the assumption that animism was found only in primitive societies. He pointed out that it was also found in such societies as China and Egypt. On the contrary according to Durkheim, the primitive groups took for granted ever recurring natural events and showed little interest in natural phenomena. He called naturism or worship of natural phenomena as a false explanation of religious behaviour.

Thus, criticizing the arguments of evolutionism in general, and naturism and animism in particular, Durkheim began to explain how totemism gives rise to the distinction between 'sacred' and 'profane'. Let us now examine what totem is and what the concepts of sacred and profane refer to.

3.4.2 Sacred versus Profane

Totemism is a system of beliefs and rites centered around the totem. The totem is very often an animal or a vegetable species or mythical ancestor. The totem is sacred; it is held in respect. The totem cannot be approached without proper rites and ceremonies. To approach the totem which is sacred, one has to purify oneself both internally and externally. But the object at the centre of totemic religion is not an animal or vegetable as such. Rather it is the pictorial representation of the animal or vegetable which is worshipped. Totem also serves as a symbol of the clan-

identity. Totem of the clan is also totem of its members.

Against the sacred world of totem lies the profane world. The profane world includes human beings and all that is not related with the sacred totem. Myths, legends, dogmas and beliefs represent the sacred totem, its power, virtues and relationship with the profane world. The sacred and profane are entirely different and the lines of separation are clearly demarcated. According to Durkheim (1964:38) distinction between the profane and sacred is 'absolute'. These two worlds are even hostile to each other.

Durkheim argues that, this type of sacred-profane dichotomy is common to all religions (see Box 3.03)

Box 3.03

Durkheim (1961:52) wrote about the sacred and the profane that All known religious beliefs... presuppose a classification of all things ... into two classes or opposed group, generally designated by two distinct terms.... profane and sacred.... by sacred things one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called gods or spirits; a rock, tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word, anything can be sacred.... The circle of sacred objects cannot be determined, then, once for all. Its extent varies infinitely, according to the different religions. That is how Buddhism is a religion: in default of gods, it admits the existence of sacred things, namely, the four noble truths and the practices derived from them....

.... we must now show by what general characteristic they (sacred things) are to be distinguished from profane things....

One might be tempted, first of all, to define them by the place they are generally assigned in the hierarchy of things. They are naturally considered superior in dignity power to profane things....

The opposition of these two classes manifests itself outwardly with a visible sign by which we can easily recognise the very special classification, wherever it exists.

It was earlier said that only under certain special circumstances, the profane can approach the sacred by performing certain. These rites are derived from beliefs. In other words, beliefs and rites are the two fundamental categories in which a religion is organised. This kind of dual organisation in terms of beliefs and rites has a special significance because it explains functions of religion, about which we shall learn in the next sub-section.

3.4.3 Functions of Religion

So far we have discussed how Durkheim criticised evolutionism, animism and naturism. Secondly, we discussed that defining totemism as an elementary form of religion, Durkheim found the sacred-profane dichotomy to be at the centre of any religion. The profane can contact the sacred only by performing certain rites. It must be made explicit that this division or opposition of the sacred and profane is such that it is found in different forms and degrees in various religions. These rites are derived from beliefs. The division of religious phenomena into two fundamental categories, namely, beliefs and rites, corresponds to the difference between thought and action. Hence we can speak in terms of cognitive and social functions of religion.

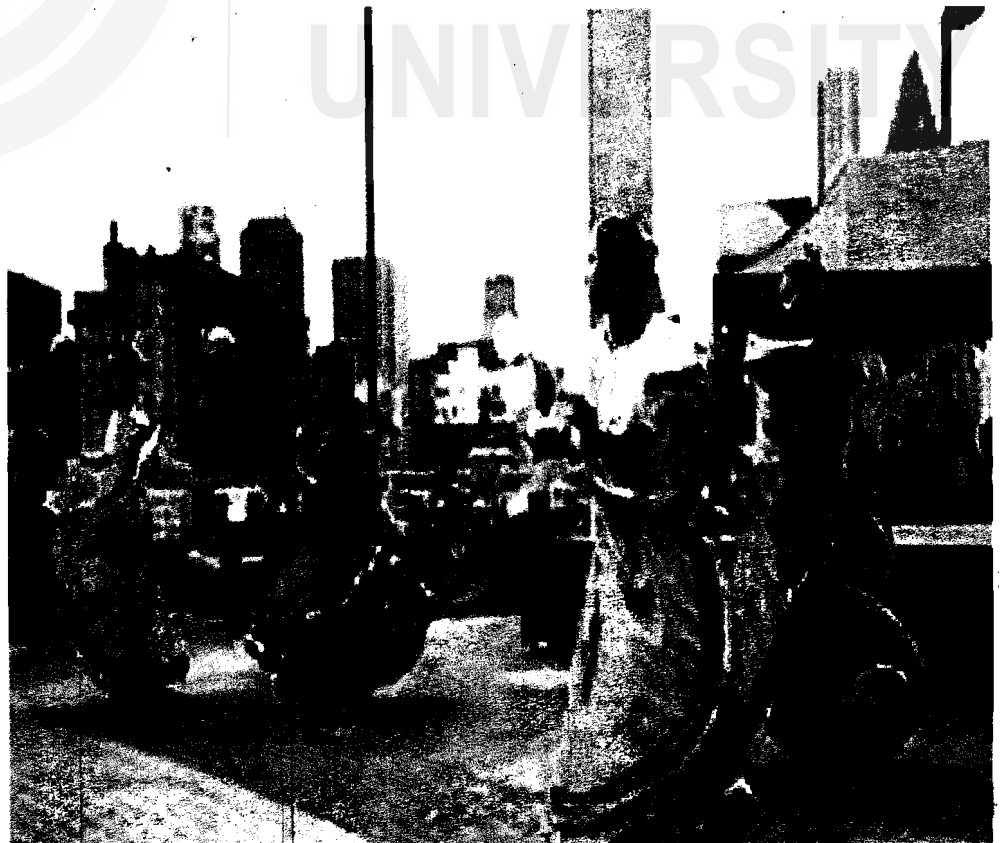
i) Cognitive Functions

Religion can mould people's thinking and so help them to live and adapt to their conditions of existence. One who participates in religious practices, emerges as a superior person with strength and vitality of face the world. This perception of religion has to be understood in the context of Durkheim argument that religious has continued to survive all along, because it has fulfilled certain needs. Religion generates a particular mental state within the individual, which raises one above oneself and helps us to lead a superior life.

Theories with science evoked a sharp criticism from Durkheim. He argued that the fundamental categories of science like time, space, number and cause, came out of one's religious quest. Said Durkheim (1964:9), "Philosophy and sciences were born of religion, it is because religion began by taking the place of the sciences and philosophy". Time, space and numbers in fact reveal the "rhythm of collective activity" towards the sacred. The categories like time, space, number, class, through which we understand the world, came out of the collective activities of the primitives towards the sacred. If that is so, these categories are collective representations. At the level of cognition, these emerge from collective response towards the sacred.

ii) Social Functions

According to Durkheim (1964:16) the collective representation are the result of 'an immense cooperation'. They emerge, when the whole community comes together, to enact certain rites in response to the sacred. The rituals are to two types: **positive** and **negative**. Negative rituals include a whole set of prohibitions to be observed to recreate the collective sentiment and worship the sacred. The positive rituals, on the other hand, indicate the meticulous 'preparations' to be undergone by the individual before approaching the sacred and participating in the community. For example, the initiation rites undergone by an individual, at the attainment of adulthood, denote a "total transformation" of the young person. Some of the initiation rites are



Colourful attire and stylized dance movements are a part of most rituals in world religions

painful but it is through the pain, one 'transforms' oneself and profane passes over to the sacred.

Now, let us try to understand what this 'sacred' means. 'Sacred' is something which is noble respected venerated and worshipped. Who creates this 'sacredness'? It is society which creates the 'sacredness' and sets the 'sacred' apart from the 'profane'. In other words, gods are derived from certain rites performed by human beings. Not only that, what is considered to be 'sacred' today may not be so tomorrow. Also it is a fact that when 'profane' approaches the sacred without due precautions, 'sacred' itself loses its value.

From the above, we understand that, the 'sacred' is the creation of society. If that be so, when society worships the sacred, it actually means that the society is worshipping itself. Isn't it? When a community comes together and performs certain rituals collectively, the collective sentiments are aroused. These collective sentiments are symbolised by the sacred object, set apart and venerated by the society. The set of rules and regulations, characteristics of the ritual, direct and transform the society into a 'moral' community.

3.4.4 Religion is Eminently Social: The Case of the Arunta

Let us now, support our discussion of the cognitive and social functions of religion thought the case study of the Arunta. The Arunta is a tribe in Central Australia. Spencer and Gillen had originally studied this tribe earlier. Durkheim used their ethnographic notes to construct his argument regarding religion.

The Arunta tribe is divided into several clans. The clan is a group of people united by a name, into a common bond. The clan is not a group based on blood-relations. The name of the clan indicates its totem. Not only the clan but also individuals of the clan bear the name of the clan totem.

Totem is an emblem. It helps in establishing the identify of a person or group. Totem is employed in rituals and other religious ceremonies. Most important of all, the totem has a religious character. It is a sacred thing. (See the video programme on *Religious Symbols*).

The totem is engraved on pieces of wood or polished stone. Now, the piece wood or the polished stone which bear the design of the clan totem becomes sacred. Its name is **churinga**. The **churinga** evokes religious sentiments. Women and uninitiated men should not even see the **churinga** from close distance. The place where the **churinga** is stored is called **ernatulunga**. The **ernatulunga** is a sacred spot. It is the sanctuary of the totemic group. It is a place of peace. If an enemy takes shelter in **ernatulunga**, he must be given asylum. The **churinga** heals the wounds. It cures diseases. It ensures the reproduction of the totemic species. It depresses or weakens the enemies. The power of **churinga** can be bestowed upon the efficient of rituals. The **churinga** is sacred because totem's design is engraved on it. In other words, the **churinga** is nothing but the soul or body of the ancestor. A totemic design is essentially a visual statement about the group membership and identity of those who engrave them.

In a sense totem is symbol. It represents something else. What is that? What does the totem stand for? Let us recall that totem helps in identifying the group. Totem is the emblem or sign representing the group. Ask Durkheim (1964:206), "If a totem is at once the symbol of god and society, is that not because God and Society are only one?". The meaning of the question is that the totem of the clan is nothing but the personification of clan itself. In other words, society is symbolised as the totemic God. This is possible because according to Durkheim, God is to worshippers, what society is to individuals. Both God and Society have overarching power over

the worshippers or the individuals. Hence Society, like God, comes to be worshipped. This analysis has had a great impact on the thinking of sociologists who were chronologically later than Durkheim. It was also the first contribution which explained religion as a social force and not just an illusion.

Religion finally functions for the society, i.e. transforms it into a moral community. In the guise of religion, it is the society which is being worshipped.

Activity 2

Write a short note of 500 words in order to show social functions of a religion, with which you are familiar.

3.4.5 A Critique of Durkheim's Understanding of Religion

By now, you would have understood that Durkheim tried to show the origin of religion. He argued that society gives rise to religion. Durkheim could not agree with scholars, who held that the origin of religion was based on what people thought as real. But traces of evolutionism are not completely absent in Durkheim's thinking. The fact that Durkheim has dealt with the functions of religion does not mean that he was a 'functionalist'. Durkheim's functionalism was simple one, very general in nature. It was after the 1920s, that functionalism came to be expounded systematically. The credit for that goes to Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Talcott Parson (see Block 6 of ESO-03).

Evans-Pritchard (1981) lists a number of criticism against Durkheim's thesis on religion.

- i) Sacred-profane dichotomy is not universal. Sacred and the profane are not always antithetical. Especially among the Vedda of Sri Lanka and Melanesians, sacred-profane dichotomy does not seem to exist.
- ii) Totem is not sacred to everyone in the community, it is sacred only for some.
- iii) Totem is not necessarily a clan religion.
- iv) Totem of the clan need not be the totem of the individual.
- v) Durkheim held that the origin and the cause of religion lie in the social domain and have nothing to do with sentiments of the individuals. He contradicted himself when he proposed that religion arises from collective sentiments aroused by community participation in rituals. Note the use of sentiments to account for the origin of religion.
- vi) In his theory Durkheim failed to give the weightage to individual and emotional aspects of religion.

As we look critically at Durkheim's work on religion, we need to also mention, though only in passing, the ideas of his contemporaries. More than contemporaries, they were his colleagues and students, the writers of the **annee Sociologique** school. Durkheim founded and edited the journal, *L'Annee sociologique*. Those who contributed articles to this journal came to be known as belonging to the **Annees Sociologique** school.

One of the well-known writers of this school was Marcel Mauss (1906) who wrote on the Eskimoes. In this study he showed sacred and secular dimensions of time by describing patterns of Eskimo life during the summer and the winter. He said that during the summer when ice in the sea melted away, the Eskimoes lived in smaller groups and pursued various activities. During the winter they could not

pursue hunting and lived in long houses. They had to form larger groups and live in a new social arrangement. During this phase of annual calendar, the Eskimos performed the religious ceremonies. Mauss argued that this pattern showed that religion was an outcome of social concentration and it was reinforced during the winter celebrations. This is exactly what Durkheim's thesis of religion is all about. So we can say that Mauss produced a perfect confirmation of Durkheim's ideas. But do remember that one illustration does not make a law and therefore we can treat this case only as an example of Durkheim's theory and cannot cite it as its proof.

In another essay, Hurbert and Mauss (1892) made a systematic study of Vedic and Hebrew sacrifice. Making study of the logical structure of the mechanism of sacrifice of animals, Hurbert and Mauss show how the act of sacrifice raises mental and moral energies of society. The act of renunciation in sacrifice strengthens social forces and the sacrifice receives the combined force of society. In a way, the social function of sacrifice is carried out for both the individual and the society. This is another example where we can see how conclusions are drawn from a certain social action. Here the conclusions are not derived from the analysis. This criticism should not, of course, stop us from appreciating the masterly analysis of sacrifice by Hurbert and Mauss.

Another member of the Annee Sociologique School, Robert Hertz (1960), made use of Durkheim's ideas of the sacred and profane. He related them to the opposition between the right and the left hands. The opposition right and left has its parallels in equally established opposition between the male and the female, the powerful and the powerless, the lucky and the unlucky.

Van Gennep (1960), who was a contemporary of Durkheim, was ignored by Durkheim and his colleagues. He criticised Durkheim's theory of religion and observed in his book *Les Rites de Passage* (*The Rites of Passage*) that all around the world the crises of human life involve a great variety of rites. These rites represent the writing of the self with the group and the universe. Van Gennep's contribution to sociology was to point out that every important event in society especially birth marriage and death had a complex of symbols and ritual activities surrounding it. Van Gennep's views on religion show that even the critics of Durkheim had much to contribute to the study of religion. The very process of criticising Durkheim's ideas gave new insights into religious phenomena.

Our next Section takes us to both traditions. Anti-Durkheimian stream was represented by Malinowski while pro-Durkheimian stream was carried forward by Radcliffe Brown. In fact, Durkheim continued to wield influences over sociological studies of religion even after Radcliffe-Brown. Such scholars as Evans-Pritchard who criticised Radcliffe-Brown, continued to draw inspiration from the writing of the members of the Annee Sociologique school. These scholars became interested in studying magical and religious beliefs in order to identify people's understanding of underlying order in their world. They wanted to find out their ways of discovering and expressing that order. Efforts of this nature to understand religion will be subject of Unit 4 of this block.

Check Your Progress 2

i) What are the basic arguments of Durkheim? Use ten lines for your answer.

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evolutionist. He became a functionalist when he began to observe and record what role religion played.

Malinowski had studied the Trobriand Islanders in the Western Pacific. The people here were mostly from fishing communities and had to constantly deal with hazardous expeditions for fishing and underwent experiences that could not be explained by them. Malinowski argued that the feelings of fear, anger, sadness, etc. that arose in the mind of primitive people on such occasions were overcome by resorting to religious activities or the performance of certain rituals that would help get over such unsure feelings. Religion functioned here to essentially help one to regain one's stability of mind and readjust to situations of emotional stress that had arisen. In other words, religion functioned as a 'tool for adoption' to any given situation. For example, when the islanders would set out for a long journey, they would perform rituals and magic on the boat so that it would not give them trouble on the way. Such an exercise was carried out in all kinds of situations of mental and physical instability. Ritual and magic have a very great influence on the activities of the society as a whole the rituals flourish greatly in times of acute stress and especially in all events that men are hard put to explain.

Asking similar questions which early evolutionists asked, Malinowski and his followers gave different answers. In this sense they understood religion in terms of its functions; their findings progressed beyond traditional answers to questions of origin and development of religion. They provided the functionalist alternative to evolutionist theories. Not content with simply observing and recording data about primitive societies, Malinowski's successor, Radcliffe-Brown, tried to analyse ethnographic data by using sociological concepts. He was attracted to the Durkheim sociology. Sub-section 3.4.2 deals with Radcliffe-Brown's attempts to organise his theoretical ideas around Durkheim's views on religion.

3.5.2 Social Continuity and Solidarity

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown tried to make Durkheim's theory of totemism into a more comprehensive view of religion. In an article, 'The Sociological Theory of Totemism', Radcliffe-Brown (1929:295-309) showed totemism to be a particular form of universalistic law operating in human society. The universal law is that anything related to material or non-material well being of a society is an object of religious attitude. For example, those who depend on dairy products have ritual attitude to dairy animals. Radcliffe-Brown did not accept explanations of the origin of religion in terms of psychology.

Evans-Pritchard (1965:74) is, however, critical of this position. He points out that in practice, while describing the occasions of dancing among the Andaman Islanders, Radcliffe-Brown explains religious behaviour mainly in terms of the personality of the dancer and mixture of feelings and actions in his dance which produce solidarity in the community. Secondly, on the basis of this case, Radcliffe-Brown generalises that a ritual attitude generates social cohesion and harmony. Evans-Pritchard (1965:74) objects to this tendency of generalising on the basis of one case. For example, the dances in Central Africa, he points out, often cause conflict and disharmony.

Thirdly, Radcliffe-Brown argues that religion functions to keep society together and its forms vary in accordance with types of society. For example, ancestor worship is commonly found in societies with lineage systems. But, then, Evans-Pritchard (1956:75) again, as if to prove Radcliffe-Brown wrong, points out that among some African groups, ancestor cult is found where no lineage system exists.

Evans-Pritchard criticises Radcliffe-Brown's functionalist approach to religion on the following bases

- i) Sociological explanations offered by Radcliffe-Brown did not take into account any negative evidence.
- ii) Radcliffe-Brown's generalised statements are quite vague in nature. They have very little scientific value because it is not possible to either prove or disprove them.

Evans-Pritchard criticised the functionalist approach to the study of religion. In addition he considered the possibilities for showing that certain religious systems are found in societies of a particular type. This was initially undertaken by Levy-Bruhl and later Evans-Pritchard also added new ideas to the sociological study of religion. Ideas of both Levy-Bruhl and Evans-Pritchard will be discussed in Unit 4. Here, we will discuss a case study, made by an Indian scholar, M.N. Srinivas. Srinivas was a student and colleague of Radcliffe-Brown and as such in his study of religion he used Durkheim's ideas via Radcliffe-Brown's theory of ritual (see Box 3.04).

Box 3.04

Beattie (1964:210) writes about Radcliffe-Brown's theory of ritual.

Since people's behaviour is largely determined by what they think to be important, the performance of ritual may have important social consequences. This was the central theme of Radcliffe-Brown's theory of ritual, which he derived from Durkheim. In *The Andaman Islanders* and elsewhere he argued that ritual's main social function is to express certain important social sentiments (or as we should now a days call them values), such as the need for mutual support and solidarity between the members of a community. Unless enough people held and acted on these values the society could not survive, and through the performance of ritual they are constantly in the minds of the performers, and so the maintenance of the social system is secured.

3.6 THE COORG RELIGION

It was pointed out in the last section of this unit, that religion is seen as strengthening solidarity in society. You also came to know that according to Durkheim, religion itself is a product of the collective sentiments aroused by the collective performance of rituals. This view was criticised by many scholars as being unsatisfactory in its explanation of the origin of religion. But Durkheimian understanding of religion via Radcliffe-Brown left a deep impact on M.N. Srinivas' study of religion among the Coorg. The Coorg are the inhabitants of the mountainous district of Coorg, in Karnataka. M.N. Srinivas, a pioneer Indian sociologist, conducted this study in the early 1940s.

Srinivas closely observed the social life of the Coorg, particularly their religious beliefs and practices. He argued that religious rituals and beliefs strengthen unity in the Coorg society at various levels. For a Coorg Hindu, there are three important social institutions. They are the *okka*, the village and the caste. Almost all Coorg are members of one or the other *okka*. *Okka* is a patrilineal group. The village is a cluster of several *okka* and within the village there are a number of hierarchically arranged caste groups.

Religion performs specific functions for these three social institutions. Most important function of all is the *solidarity function*. Each *okka* has a special set of rituals which are performed during festival and other ceremonial occasion. In the same way, village celebrate the festival of their patron deity and perform certain rituals. The village festival mark the differences between castes but also bring them together.

At the same time, they bring together several Coorg villages. Now let us elaborate on these functions of religion separately for the three social institutions listed above.

3.6.1 Solidarity of the *Okka*

Okka is a patrilineal grouping as mentioned earlier. Srinivas (1978:159) writes “A group of agnatically related males who descended from a common ancestor and their wives and children” constitute an *okka*. Only by birth one can become a member of the *okka*. In the society at large, individuals are generally identified by their *okka*.

Each *okka* has ancestral immovable property which is normally not divided. A person is prohibited from marrying within the *okka*. In other words, marriage is generally a bonding of two unrelated *okka*. The ancestral house of the *okka* is fairly large and has many rooms. Members of the *okka* live and grow together. They perform many rituals in unison, especially the rituals to propitiate the ancestors of the *okka*.

There are several occasions when, according to Srinivas (1978:125) “the unity and solidarity of an *okka* find expression in ritual”. Let me elaborate one such occasion i.e. marriage. A Coorg marriage involves two important rites. They are *murtha* and *sammanda* rites. *Murtha* is nothing but an auspicious occasion (time). The *murtha* is also indicated by rites performed by all relatives to the subject, groom or bride as the case may be.

A Coorg marriage has the *murtha*, performed on the most auspicious time of the auspicious day. At the centre of *murtha* rite lies the offering of milk by the relatives to the bride or groom in a *kindi* (a special type of vessel). If the mother of the groom or bride is not widowed, she is the first to offer milk. After the elaborate *murtha* rite is performed thrice, comes the *sammanda* ritual. The first two *murtha* rites bring at one place the groom/bride and his/her kindred. The third *murtha* rite brings the groom and bride’s kindred together for participation in marriage rituals.

The *sammanda* ritual marks the transfer of an individual from one *okka* to another. A person can be a member of only a single *okka* at a time. After marriage, the bride leaves her native *okka* and acquires the membership of the conjugal *okka*. If she becomes a widow, again a *sammanda* ritual may be performed and her membership transferred back to the native *okka*. The *sammanda* ritual comprises an elaborate system of rites. In a nutshell, it is a pledge undertaken publicly by two *okka*, involved in marriage, under the eyewitness of two friendly *okka*.

Apart from marriage, there are several festivals, feasts of village-deities, and occasions when ancestors of the *okka* are propitiated. During these celebrations, a complex set of rituals are performed, which express and strengthen the solidarity of the *okka*.

3.6.2 Village and Caste Solidarity

The social differences in the village community are expressed during village festivals, when members of different castes serve different functions. At the same time, the unity between *okka*, castes and villages also finds expression through religious customs and rituals.

During the harvest festival, every *okka* in the village sends all the adult males to participate in the collective dances. At the end of the festivals of the village deities, there is a collective hunt, to which all the *okka* send their adult males. The collective dance and hunt canalise the inter-*okka* rivalry present in the village,

d) Village festivals sometimes express caste differentiations.

T F

c) A Coorg marriage is necessarily a relationship between two different, unrelated *okka*.

T F

3.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit primarily aimed at grasping the functionalist understanding of religion. We started by recollecting the evolutionist theories.

Functionalism emerged as a sequel and challenge to evolution. The seeds to functionalist thought were traced to early sociologists. Then, the meaning of functionalism was elaborated. Functionalism is way of looking at social reality by tracing the functions or utility or religious practices in maintaining the unity and strength of a social group.

Next, Durkheim's understanding of religion was discussed in detail. Firstly, Durkheim chose totemism because the found it so bear relation to the social order, secondly, according to Durkheim totemism has features unique to itself, which are not borrowed. Dealing with the functions of religion it was shown that religion has a cognitive function, by which it helps one to adjust to the exigencies of everyday life. Religion performs many social functions. It transforms the society into a moral community. When society worships God (Whose creation God is), it worships itself. An illustration of the totemic practices of the Arunta tribe was given to explain the arguments. We discussed, in brief, the ideas of Durkheim's contemporaries.

Further, Durkheim's understanding of religion was critically evaluated. It was argued that his sacred-profane dichotomy does not seem to be universal, and his thesis about religion still rested on an individual-psychological explanation rather than on a social cause. This criticism was followed by an account of further growth of functionalist approach to the study of religion. We discussed the ideas of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown.

The concluding section described the functions of religious rituals and festivals among the Coorg. Among the Coorg, the domestic cult of 'okka' in general, and marriage rites in particular, strengthen the solidarity of the okka. The village festivals and festivals of village-deities were shown to strengthen inter-okka, inter-caste, inter-village solidarity in the Coorg society. This was given here as an example of a functional study of religion.

3.8 KEY WORDS

Agnatic: relationship through male descent or on the father's sided.

Agnosticism: belief that nothing can be known about God.

Animism: theory which holds that religion is belief in spiritual beings.

Belief: a state or habit of mind in which trust or confidence is placed in some person or thing. In this unit, it refers to a rule or body of rules about religion held by a group.

Catholicism: the faith, practice or system of Catholic Christianity.

Churinga: piece of wood or stone on which design of the totem is engraved.

Clan: groups of men and women united by the name of a totem.

Conjecture: statement without proof.

Coorg: a mountainous district in Karnataka

Ethnography: a descriptive account of the way of life a particular people.

Ethnology: the comparative study of the elements of culture in many societies.

Evangelical Protestantism: religious denomination of Christianity which emphasises salvation by faith in atoning death of Jesus Christ through personal conversion, the authority of scripture and the importance of preaching as contrasted with ritual.

Functionalist: one who believes that society is a system of interrelated parts; the functioning of the parts has consequences for the whole system.

Function: consequence of a part for the system.

Murtha: a Coorg ritual performed at the most auspicious time of the auspicious day.

Negative rites: interdicts or taboos to be observed before approaching the sacred.

Okka: group of agnatically related Coorg males, descended from a common ancestor, with their wives and children.

Positive rites: preparations or purifactory ceremonies undergone before approaching the sacred.

Profane: that realm which is kept away from and in opposition to the sacred. In other words, profane is the world of human beings.

Rites: prescribed modes of action for a ceremony.

Sacred: the world of the supreme, the venerated, the Holy. According to Durkheim, it is kept away from the profane.

Sammanda: an elaborate Coorg ritual which signifies the transfer of membership of an individual from one okka to another.

Totem: an animal or vegetable or a mythical ancestor. It symbolises the clan and is sacred.

Universal Theory: Theory which applies to the whole of humanity.

3.9 FURTHER READING

Picking, W.S.F., 1984. *Durkheim's Sociology of Religion*. Routledge and Kegan Paul:London.

Robertson, Roland, 1970. *The Sociological Interpretation of Religion*. Basil Blackwell:Oxford.

Srinivas, M.N., 1978. *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India*. Media Promoters:Mumbai.

3.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) a) evolutionism is based on conjectures and gives explanations without adequate evidences.
- b) evolutionism very often tries to give nonsocial and individual-psychological explanations.
- ii) Functionalism believes that society is a system of interrelated parts. The activity of the parts have consequences for the maintenance of the whole system.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Basic arguments of Durkheim are as follows
 - a) Sacred-profane dichotomy is at the centre of religion, particularly totemism. From profane's attitude towards the sacred emerged the fundamental categories of thought like time, member and class.
 - b) Religion helps human being to understand the world and to adapt to the crises of life.
 - c) Religion and God are creations of society. When society worship God, it worship itself and in the process becomes a single moral community.
- ii) Churinga is a wooden piece or stone on which the totem is designed. The churinga is sacred. It is the symbol of Arunta clan's identity. It can cure sickness and defeat enemies. It is the symbol of peace.
- iii) The sacred-profane dichotomy gives rise to fundamental categories of thought. Moreover, due to the rules and regulations to be followed before the profane can approach the sacred, society becomes a moral community.
- iv) A) (iv); B) (vi), C) (v) D) (i); E) (iii); F) (ii)

Check Your Progress 3

- i) *Murtha* is a ritual performed in a marriage at the most auspicious time. At the centre of *murtha* ritual lies the offering of milk in a *kindi* to the subject of the celebration. Three *murtha* are performed. The first unites the bride and her relatives, the second the groom and his relatives. The last *murtha* unites the bride and the groom's kindred. In a similar way, the *sammanda* ritual strengthens the solidarity between the two okka (the bride and the groom) and their friendly okka.
- ii) During the village-deity's festivals, there are several customs which bring different okka, castes together. For example, to the collective-hunt at the end of the festival, all okka have to send their adult males. At the festival, each okka and castes (low or high) have a definite role to play. At the end of the festival, there is a 'harmony-dinner' held for the whole village.
- iii) a) F
- b) T
- c) T

UNIT 4 THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Belief and Ritual
- 4.3 Levy-Bruhl and the Mode of Thought
- 4.4 Evans-Pritchard's Approach to Religion
 - 4.4.1 The Azande
 - 4.4.2 The Nuer Religion
- 4.5 Religious Beliefs in Literate Societies
 - 4.5.1 The Protestant Ethic
 - 4.5.2 The Religions of China, India and Ancient Palestine
 - 4.5.3 The Sociology of Religion: Weber
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Key Words
- 4.8 Further Reading
- 4.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit introduces you the study of religious beliefs in both preliterate (or primitive, as they used to be called) and literate societies. After studying this unit you should be able to

- distinguish between belief and ritual
- describe how European thinkers analysed primitive thought
- discuss Evans-Pritchard's approach to religion
- discuss Weber's study of religion in literate societies.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Block 1 on the **Study of Religion** aims at a general introduction to the various aspects of studying religion. In the last two units we discussed some approaches to the study of religion. This unit focuses on a major component of religious phenomena, namely, belief. Here we consider religious beliefs as a universal cultural phenomenon as they are found in all societies. The ideas contained in religious beliefs are mostly acted out in religious ceremonies. The major part of the ceremonies are taken up by rituals. These are performed with the purpose of influencing the human condition by seeking the support of the supernatural.

We begin the unit by first explaining the difference between a belief and ritual. Then we carry on with our discussion begun in Units 2 and 3. We have already shown how questions regarding the origins and functions of religious beliefs were asked and answered by the evolutionists and functionalists, respectively. Now we go on to the next stage when a shift was made from the function to discovering the meaning of religious beliefs and practices.

We first take up Levy-Bruhl's work on mode of thought of preliterate people. Secondly, we discuss Evans-Pritchard's works which explain the meaning of religious beliefs. Both Levy-Bruhl and Evans-Pritchard studied religious beliefs in primitive societies while Max Weber analysed religious systems of literate societies. Section 4.5 of this unit is devoted to Weber's interest in the study of religion. You may say that the earlier two scholars provide us an understanding of anthropological studies of religion and Max Weber takes us to the area of sociological studies of religion.

We have not maintained a rigid separation between the two disciplines. According to their extreme overlapping nature, we include both streams of sociological inquiry in our courses. From religious beliefs we will be, in our next unit, moving to the theme of religious symbols. Before proceeding to discussion of mode of thought, let us first explain the difference between a belief and a ritual.

4.2 BELIEF AND RITUAL

A belief refers to a state or habit of mind. In this state one places trust or confidence in some person or thing. You can say that a belief is a notion or idea which has the same value as statement of knowledge or truth. In this sense, religious beliefs refer to a religious tenet or body of tenets held by a group. Most religious tenets generally are concerned with the worship of God or the supernatural. For example, Tylor (1871) defined religion as the belief in supernatural beings (animism), such as ghosts, spirits, and gods. Marett (1909) defined religion as the belief in supernatural power (animatism), such as **mana**. Here, when we say that a particular belief is a supernatural concept we mean that it belongs to a region which is beyond that of the natural senses. Beliefs and rituals are interrelated and normally every ritual is based, directly or otherwise, on a series of beliefs. In fact we can point out that a ritual without a belief set is in fact not possible. This is because it is beliefs that set the stage for a ritual to develop or even to emerge. Ritual is a symbolic series of repeated actions and sacred words and we have to refer to the beliefs to interpret it rightly.

At its most basic level, you may say that a belief is a part of system of knowledge or a system of understanding reality shared by members of a group. It provides the individual with explanation and meaning of life thus helping one to understand the 'whys' of life, like death, suffering, social injustice, etc. A religious belief almost always provides an explanation for happening which are otherwise hard to explain.



A religious ritual is pontificated usually by a specialist i.e. priest. Note the many ingredients that often make rituals complex.

In studies of religion a distinction is made between belief and ritual. As implied above, you can say that belief is a mode of forming ideas while ritual is mode of action. About the former, we will discuss in detail in the following sections. The latter, that is, ritual, may be defined as a repeated act or a set of acts, usually ceremonial in nature, by means of which a community makes external its faith. It is a kind of patterned activity oriented towards the control of human affairs. Religious beliefs are made overt in rituals. An important example of ritual is the funeral ritual with which you may be quite familiar. A ritual provides an occasion for group assembly and reaffirms social value. According to Wallace (1966), the primary component of religion is the use of ritual to mobilise supernatural power. Rituals commonly portray or act out important aspects of religious myths and cosmology and often express anxieties and preoccupations which are commonly felt by members of a group adhering to a religion. In other words, beliefs and rituals are two sides of the same coin. In a way, it is difficult to talk about one without referring to the other.

The various categories of rituals are, among others, prayers sorcery, divination, magic, etc. Let us see what these terms mean. Prayer is a petition directed at a supernatural power. Sorcery is a conscious and overt intention to injure through the use of magical power. It involves the manipulation of special words or materials to cause harm. It is least likely to be found in those societies which are politically developed. Divination is a religious ritual to obtain hidden knowledge. It is a process of discovering the cause or agent of misfortune by decoding a communication from supernatural beings and forces. Magic is a method people use to control supernatural power. It differs from other forms of religious ritual in that it is more mechanical and involuntary in nature than other religious rituals. You will learn more about rituals in the first three units of Block 2 of this course. Here, we turn to the main theme of this unit, that is, the study of religious beliefs.

The study of religious symbols. Insofar as religious beliefs can be studied in terms of symbols, we will discuss the issue in Unit 5. Here we will confine ourselves to a consideration of ways of religious thought. We will see how religious beliefs represent a system of knowledge or a system of perception. For this purpose one can do no better than discuss the views of Levy-Bruhl on the mode of thought of primitive people. But before that complete Check Your Progress 1.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) What is belief? How is it distinguished from a ritual? Use five lines for your answer.

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- ii) Explain, in five lines, what rituals commonly represent.

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iii) Give, in five lines the various categories of rituals.

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4.3 LEVY-BRUHL AND THE MODE OF THOUGHT

Levy-Bruhl's works on primitive mentality deserve attention for an account of theories of primitive religious beliefs. His basic assumptions are sociological, yet he does not easily fit into the sociological category because his main concern are purely philosophical. Levy-Bruhl (see Box 4.01) held that one could just as well begin a study of social life by analysing ways of thought just as one would study ways of observable behaviour.

Box 4.01

Lucien Levy-Bruhl (1857-1939) was a French philosopher. He had written eight books on philosophy before he turned his attention to the study of 'primitive man' with the publication of his book *Ethics and Moral Science* in French in 1903. Although a contemporary of Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), the great French sociologist, his theory of primitive mentality owes very little to Durkheim. He was an arm chair theorist who had not seen nor spoken to a primitive. Therefore, his theory of primitive mentality is largely speculative. He is associated with a set of views about 'primitive' and 'modern' mentalities which he himself largely repudiated in his later years due to criticisms by scholars like Durkheim. His major books on primitive thought are *Primitive Mentality* (1923), *How Natives Think* (1926), and *The Soul of the Primitive* (1928). The first two books set forth the general theory of primitive mentality for which he became so well known.

Levy-Bruhl's best known book is *How Natives Think* which form the basis of our discussion here. In this books he outlined the view of the two broad mentalities—civilised and primitive which he considered as opposites. In terms of this dichotomy primitive cultures are marked by a 'prelogical' mentality which is blind to the law of contradiction. On the other hand, the law of contradiction is a characteristic of modern societies. The primitives substitutes for it a law of mystical participation. According to Levy-Bruhl (1912:30) the word 'mystical' means belief in the supernatural. The representations of primitive peoples have a quality of being mystical and the logical principle of these mystical representation is called by Levy-Bruhl the law of mystical participation. Further, he holds that as the representations are mystical, collective representations of primitives are a network of mystical participation.

This book contains a series of comparison between 'us' (Westerners) and 'them' (primitive people). Westerners, in comparison, appear logical and scientific. The primitive people, by contrast, appear to focus on the mystical rather than logical. This aspect of Levy-Bruhl's analysis makes it different from Durkheim's analysis of religious phenomena.

Levy-Bruhl, focused his attention on primitive thinking and root not on social institutions. He is outstanding in that he recognised that the origins of religion are impossible to explain. He recommended that primitive religious structures and mentalities are

what we should be looking at. He pointed out that every society has its own way of thinking and acknowledge that the mental content of the individual is derived from and explained by the collective representations of one's society. He insisted that these collective representations are functions of institutions of the society.

Levy-Bruhl clearly separated the content of thought of primitive people—his subject-matter, from the psycho-physical processes of thought as Tylor (1871) and Frazer (1890) before him had not. He dealt with the ideas held by the bulk of the members of a society what he called collective representations and what today would be called values. They are collective because they are way of viewing institutions (see key words). The most important point about Levy-Bruhl's theoretical position is that he wishes to emphasize the differences between civilised mentality and primitive mentality. Note that term mentality denotes mental power or capacity or mode of thought. It has no reference to a lower level of intelligence or feeble-mindedness.

Levy-Bruhl thinks that while the Europeans are logically oriented, primitive thought has an altogether different character. It is oriented towards the supernatural. Primitive people do not inquire into natural phenomena because they are prevented from doing so by their beliefs, which are prelogical and mystical. According to Evans-Pritchard (1956) who has saved Levy-Bruhl's ideas from being misinterpreted, what the latter meant by prelogical was prescientific, it does not mean the inability to think. It merely means that most of the beliefs of the primitives do not agree with a critical and scientific view of the universe. Levy-Bruhl does not say that primitives are unintelligent, but that their beliefs cannot easily be understood by the Westerners. When he says that primitive mentality or the primitive mind is prelogical, Levy-Bruhl is not speaking of an individual's ability or inability to reason, but of ways or categories in which one can reason. In fact this theory of Levy-Bruhl is very difficult to accent in its entirety. We cannot talk in terms of 'superiority of western logical scientific thought over the thought of primitive people. We can say however that primitive thought is certainly different that western logical thought. Each serves its own society best.

The word mystical, as it is used by Levy-Bruhl, refers to the belief in the natural-cum-supernatural world of magic and religion and so forth. He is perhaps the first to point out that the distinction between natural and supernatural is not made in most cultures. This lack of distinction he regarded as mystical. What he is saying is only that the primitives see in an event what their culture teaches them to see, and that they structure their perceptions as their cultures have taught them to structure. The logical principle of this mystical representation is what Levy-Bruhl calls the law of mystical participation. Evans-Pritchard (1965) point out that's terms 'participation' resembles the association of ideas of Tylor and Frazer, but Levy-Bruhl's conclusions are different from their conclusions. While, for Tylor and Frazer primitives believe in magic because they reason incorrectly from their observations, for Levy-Bruhl they reason incorrectly because their reasoning is determined by their mystical beliefs in supernatural and representations of those beliefs.

According to Evans-Pritchard, Levy-Bruhl's discussion of the law mystical participation is perhaps the most valuable part of his thesis. He was one of the first to emphasise that primitive ideas are meaningful when seen as parts of patterns of ideas and behaviour. Each part has an intelligible relationship to the others. He accepts primitive magic and religion as it is and uses it as a base to study its structure and what we learn about a particular kind of mentality is common to all societies of a certain type. In order to emphasise the distinctiveness of this mentality, Levy-Bruhl holds that primitive thought in general differs altogether from the Western thought in quality, and not just in degrees.

In conclusion, we can say Levy-Bruhl brings out a sociological fact of the greatest importance that our interests in phenomena are not the same as primitive interests

in them. This is so because our collective representations of our (or, in his sense, Western) culture differ widely from their collective representations. The main difficulty with his approach, however, as Evans-Pritchard (1965) has pointed out, is that Levy-Bruhl compared the scientific thought of the then Western world with the magical and religious thought of primitive societies, whereas he should have compared both from the same society.

Notwithstanding this criticism, Evans-Pritchard's approach to the study of religion is clearly influenced by Levy-Bruhl's insistence on understanding a particular group's religious ideas and behaviour as parts of its total culture patterns. Evans-Pritchard's studies of religion among certain African groups basically deal with systems of belief. For example, his study, *Nuer Religion*, is about the religious ideas and practices of the Nuer or the Southern Sudan. Undoubtedly Evans-Pritchard has taken into account the social contexts of the ideas and practices he talks about. But his study is primarily concerned with the system of beliefs rather than with that of social relations. Our next section is devoted to Evans-Pritchard's approach to religion. It shows how the study of religion shifted its emphasis from function to meaning of religious beliefs and practices.

Check Your Progress 2

i) Give, in five lines, the two broad categories of mentality as divided by Levy-Bruhl and describe their characteristic.

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ii) Give, in five lines, the difference between Durkheim's and Levy-Bruhl's approach to the study of primitive religion.

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iii) What, according to Evans-Pritchard, is the most valuable part of Levy-Bruhl's thesis on primitive mentality? Use one line for your answer.

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4.4 EVANS-PRITCHARD'S APPROACH TO RELIGION

The early works on religious and magical phenomena, especially those of Tylor and Frazer, offer explanation of religion in terms of origins. It is, of course, quite unrealistic to try to find the origin of some custom or belief in the absence of historical evidence. All the same we continue to read the books of Tylor, Frazer and Durkheim as classics. Considerable advance is made in this field by Evans-Pritchard (see Box 4.02) who explains religious facts in terms of 'the totality of the culture and society, in which they are found'.

For example, he argues that, "To try to understand magic as an idea in itself, what

is the essence of it, as it were, is a hopeless task". He holds that it would be more intelligible when magic is examined in relation to peoples's activities and also in terms of their other beliefs.

Box 4.02

Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973) was a British social anthropologist. He was trained in history at Oxford and in anthropology at the London School of Economics. Earlier in his career he taught at Cairo and later became a professor of social anthropology at Oxford in 1946. During the Second World War he entered active military service and for a period served with the Sudan Defence Force. In 1942 he became the Political Officer of the British Military Administration of Cyrenaica in North Africa. Between 1926 and 1939 he made six expeditions to Southern Sudan, most notably to the Azande and the Nuer peoples. His monograph on the Azande illustrated theories of the rationality of apparently mystical ways of thought. His important publications are *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937), *The Nuer : A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of the Nilotic People* (1940), *Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer* (1951), *Nuer Religion* (1956), *Social Anthropology* (1951) and *A History of Anthropological Thought* (1981, published after his death).

Evans-Pritchard already charted out his approach to religion in three early essays, 'The intellectualist (English) interpretation of magic' (1933); 'Levy-Bruhl's theory of primitive mentality' (1934); and 'Science and sentiment: an exposition and criticism of the writings of Pareto' (1936). He incorporated these articles in his *Theories of Primitive Religion* (1965). He held that everyday knowledge should be compared with everyday knowledge, technology with technology, and theology with theology. In this he followed Durkheim's methodological rule that social phenomena must be explained in terms of other social phenomena. For further details about Durkheim's sociological rules see Block 3 of ESO-03.

In his approach to religion, Evans-Pritchard adopted the task of explaining beliefs as sociologists facts. For this task, he determined that the proper method was comparative. According to Evans-Pritchard, comparative religion must be comparative in a relational manner, that is, we should see whether a common element of more than one religion being compared is related to any other social fact. As an example, he cited Weber's work in relating certain Protestant teaching to certain economic changes (see the section on Weber's approach to the study of religion).

Two of Evans-Pritchard's monographs, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937) and *Nuer Religion* (1956), exemplify his approach to religion, both comparative and structural (see Box 4.03). As for historical scope, both the works are based on his field work in the 1930s. The first book is an attempt to make understandable a number of beliefs, all of which are foreign to the mentality of a European. He shows how they form a complete system of thought and how this system of thought is related to social activities, social structure and the life of the individual. In the second book, Nuer reflections on God, sin, sacrifice, spirit, symbolism are collected together for analysing the meaning and significance of primitive beliefs and symbols.

Box 4.03 Azande and Nuer

Both these peoples are located in Southern Sudan in East Africa, neighboring Ethiopia. Evans-Pritchard studied the Azande (singular, Zande) between 1926 and 1940 and found the people generally hospitable and friendly. By contrast, the Nuer, whom he studied between 1930 and 1936, were a hostile and uncommunicative people.

4.4.1 The Azande

Like Levy-Bruhl, Evans-Pritchard believed that all systems of belief could be explained rationally. With regard to the Azande, he asked such a question as how can a people live with irrational beliefs and false premises without discovering that they are false? In brief, the Azande believe that witches are always evil and any misfortune can be attributed to witchcraft which is afopyschic activity. The witch, motivated by feelings of envy, causes damage to others. The victims place the names of possible witches before their various oracles who tell them which of the suspects are innocent and which may be guilty. The guilty is requested to withdraw his or her evil influence. If the with does not do so and the victim dies, the kinspersons employ vengeance magic to destroy the with. Witchcraft, oracle and magic thus form a complex system of beliefs and rites which make sense only when they are seen as interdependent parts of the whole system of belief. According to Evans-Pritchard, in sociological terms, these beliefs are mystical because they are distinct from empirical mode of belief and action.

Evans-Pritchard had the advantage over Tylor, Frazer, Levy-Bruhl and even Durkheim in that he did empirical research. Based on his field data he attempted to show that the beliefs of the primitives peoples, thought absurd to outsiders, can be explained reasonably once you accept the point of view of the believer. His focus was on understanding Azande beliefs as a system of ideas. Here, you can clearly see Levy-Bruhl's influence on his approach to religion. Also, Evans-Pritchard tried to correct Levy-Bruhl.

Evans-Pritchard wrote the Azande book specially with Levy-Bruhl in mind. According to Levy-Bruhl, as we discussed before, primitive people view the world in terms of mystical influences and give little scope to natural principles. He also held that primitives are comparatively simple in their thinking, having little tendency to think about the evidence for their ideas. Evans-Pritchard thought that Levy-Bruhl presented an incorrect image of primitive beliefs and in his book on the Azande he attempted to correct the latter's mistakes.

Evans-Pritchard argued that primitive systems of thought are not as thoroughly controlled by mystical elements as Levy-Bruhl believed. Evans-Pritchard described what he called the dual casualty in Azande beliefs, by which he meant that Azande thought contained both mystical and natural causation. He cites the case in which a group of people were sitting beneath a granary which had been weakened by termites. When the granary collapsed causing injury, witchcraft was blamed. The Azande were aware that the natural cause of the granary's collapse was the action of the termites, but to them this only explained how, and not why, the structure fell. Their question was : why was it **this** granary which collapsed, and why did it do so precisely when **these** persons were beneath it? As mentioned before, Evans-Pritchard shows that Azande witchcraft beliefs constitute a logically tight and wholistic system.

Thus it became clear that a primitive set of beliefs and rituals (in this case, primitive) of all the societies have a system of explanation that is as logical and wholistic as any other system of a modern type e.g. western logical mentality.

In addition to explaining what seemed like irrational beliefs of a primitive people, the Azande book also employs structural analysis to build a mode of abstraction. The structural approach involves not only the understanding of particular social system but also the analysing of the principles thought which the human mind operates. The decoding of abstractions from social life includes the principles of opposition, complementarily and analogy (see sub-section 4.4.2). As Kuper (1983) points out, at the heart of the Azande book is an opposition between mystical and empirical

beliefs and activities. Evans-Pritchard showed that the Azande do not make this contrast and that they believe mystical forces operate in much the same way as physical forces. It is sociologists who is able to perceive the opposition.

Activity 1

Write a note of 250 words on beliefs and practices relative to witchcraft in your culture. Try to isolate the mystical from natural causation of events in the cases of witchcraft described by you.

4.4.2 The Nuer Religion

Evans-Pritchard accepted the fact that religions are influenced by their social environment, but as in his study of Azande witchcraft, in his study of Nuer religion, too, he was more concerned to explore systems of thought and their logical interrelations. *Nuer Religion* is concerned not specifically with beliefs, but with a few Nuer conceptions. Evans-Pritchard attempts to convey the meaning of a few key terms or categories of thought, and particularly the concept of spirit, of **kwoth**. **Kwoth** is conceived by the Nuer as having an intangible quality like air. Everything in nature and society is the way it is because **kwoth** made or willed it that way. For example, **kwoth** gives and sustains life; it also brings death, largely by means of natural circumstances such as lightening.

The structural approach to religion is more prominent in *Nuer Religion*. Showing the operation of the principle of opposition Evans-Pritchard makes a distinction between sacred and secular. He demonstrates that the Nuer god is especially in the sky as people are on the earth. In plain language, this division means that the things of above are associated with spirit and those of below with people.

He treated the Nuer statement that human twins are birds as an example of analogy similarity. Because they are in the same class as birds, when Nuer twins die they are not buried but their corpses are laid across the forks of trees. He explained the classification by depicting the general structure of Nuer analogies by which god is to men as the sky above is to the earth below, as birds to land animals. Humans usually give birth to young singly. To the Nuer, twin births are a sign of divine intervention; so twins are to ordinary mortals as birds are to animals. Birds/twins are close to god and a manifestation of spirit.

An example of complementary (the quality of completing or filling up) is that when the Nuer speak of God in the singular form, the context refers to the creator, father, judge, owner, great spirit in heaven. But the plural form gods always refers to spirits of the air and to other spirits attached to particular places or lineages. God in the singular is the same great spirit for everyone, but these spirits in the plural have different importance for different people.

Evans-Pritchard's purpose in *Nuer Religion* is to build a theory and formulate problems on the basis of the study of primitive philosophies. He suggests that when a number of studies on primitive philosophies has been made, a classification can be made for comparative studies which may lead to some general conclusions.

In contrast with primitive religions, we find an entirely distinctive historical and dynamic approach to the study of religion in literate societies. In the next section, we give the German social historian Max Weber's approach to religious beliefs. His approach was mainly concerned with the rational and non-rational aspects of belief system. Sociologically speaking, he was interested in the problem of the meaning of social life. Secondly, he was also concerned with the identify of individuals and groups in relation to each other and their social-cultural environment.

Check Your Progress 3

i) Give, in five lines, the main characteristic of comparative religion according to Evans-Pritchard.

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ii) How does Evans-Pritchard describe the beliefs of the Azande? Use five lines for your answer.

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iii) What is the structural approach to the study of religion? Use five lines for your answer.

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4.5 RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN LITERATE SOCIETIES

Religion, insofar as it is to be effective either for the individual or for the social group, must be considered within the framework of society. The identity of the religious and the political, as in preliterate societies, is also to be found in an identity of the religious and the economic postulates of a literate society. The latter variety has been studied by Max Weber in relation of Western and Eastern civilisations. Weber (1958, 1963) studied the major features of world religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Catholicism and Protestantism, Islam, Confucianism and Taoism, and Judaism. He found that religion restated the basic postulates of a culture in new, vivid terms and reemphasised them in ritual. Weber (see Box 4.04) had a historical and comparative approach to explaining religious beliefs.

Box 4.04

Max Weber (1864-1920) was a German sociologist. Along with Durkheim, he is considered one of the fathers of modern sociology. He taught political economy at Freiburg and Heidelberg universities in Germany. Unlike Durkheim, who sought to develop elementary forms, Weber grounded his theoretical propositions in specific historical situations on the basis of a study of such great historic religions as those of India and China, Judaism and Christianity. Apart from the books discussed here, his most important work is *Economy and Society* (English translation 1968). For more details on life and works of Weber see Block 4 of ESO-03.

The concept of rationality (see key words) is the underlying theme of Weber's sociology of religion as well as the key to the understanding of modern economic activities. His interest in religion arose from a double source. One was the question why capitalism had developed in the West, rather than in other cultural areas, such as Asia where there were large resources and educated classes. The other was the question of status position of different social classes. He proposed the "Protestant Ethic" (see key words Unit 1) as a right answer to both the question. He argued that Catholicism (see key words, Unit 3) looked down upon economic activities and had held the profit-seeker in low social esteem. Protestantism, on the other hand, regarded all works as justified "calling". Let us elaborate this point in the next subsection.

4.5.1 The Protestant Ethic

We have mentioned before that Weber analyses the great religions of literate people in relation to economic institutions. He came to the conclusion that except Protestantism all the religions have laid special stress on religious practices. In his book on Protestant Ethic Weber (1930) mentions that Protestantism does not emphasise orthodox religious practices because it gives importance to the materialistic point of view, unlike the other-worldly views in the other religions. The adherents of Protestant ethic believe that doing one's duty means serving God. It emphasises the importance of time, labour and money. Owing to these traits some European countries with a large Protestant population witnessed the growth of capitalism.

This attempt of Weber's to study religion from the perspective of rationality was an important contribution and Weber found that certainly religion was not just an opinion but a social reality which had clear logic of its own.

In this work Weber holds that the present capitalistic system is based on rationality, savings, time management, competition, and a desire to earn money. He relates this spirit of capitalism to the Protestant Ethic. As against this, Weber believes that the religions of the East—Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Islam—did not encourage the economic goals and competition which are essential to the development of the modern industrial capitalistic system.

4.5.2 The Religions of China, India and Ancient Palestine

Weber's discussion of the religions of China (Confucianism and Taoism), India (Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism) and Ancient Palestine (Judaism) are a continuation of his initial interest in the influence of the Protestant Ethic on economic activities. His analysis centered on the relations between religious beliefs and the status and power structure of the group composing a society. These constitute the outline of a comparative sociology of the great religions. These studies are governed by certain questions, such as : Can one find outside Western civilisation a religious interpretation of the world which finds expression in economic behaviour which can be compared to the Protestant Ethic?

The objective proposed by Weber's comparative study is to discover the various fundamental types of religious conceptions and the attitudes towards life governed by these religious conceptions. In so doing he outlines a general sociology of the relations between religious conceptions and economic behaviour. This is known as the 'Weber thesis'. The point of his cross-cultural analysis is not to praise modern capitalistic society, but rather to explain the uniqueness of the modern Western form of social rationality by seeing it in the global context. The general observation that Weber makes is that religious values and social behaviour are related.

In the case of religions of China, Weber is primarily interested in the idea of material rationality which is characteristic of the Chinese image of the world. Material rationality is just as rational in the context of China as protestant rationality, but it is contrary and unfavorable to the development of typical capitalism. Parsons (1963) believes that Weber regards Confucianism as less radical than other religions. This religion stresses harmony, traditionalism and family obligations. This is quite different from the relentless pursuit of profit. Within its special framework it is a rational doctrine of adoption of the world.

In the case of the religion of India, Weber observes that a process of rationalisation has occurred in the context of a ritualist religion and philosophy whose central theme is the transmigration of soul. Weber calls Hinduism a kind of Indian Catholicism which reduces the hardness of the pure Buddhist-type doctrine by supplementing it with a ritual significance of caste observances. He holds that religious ritualism is the strongest principles of social conservatism which has hindered the growth of capitalism in India.

Weber regards Judaism as the religion of Ancient Palestine, as one which blocks the development of inner-worldly asceticism. It especially inhibits this development at the social level because it remains attached to a traditionally defined ethnic community. As Parson (1963) says, Judaism does not reject the world, but only rejects the prevailing system of social classes.

Activity 2

Do you agree with Weber's interpretation Hinduism as a kind of Indian Catholicism? Write a short note of 250 words on the link between ritual aspects of the caste system and stunted growth of capitalism in India.

4.5.3 The Sociology of Religion: Weber

At the outset of this work Weber (1963) interprets religion in a manner which is very close to Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. He considers the notion of charisma as the major concept in the study of primitive religions. Charisma is the quality which is outside the ordinary and which becomes attached to human beings, for example, as in the case of a charismatic leader. Weber recognises that there is no known society without religion. Every society possesses some conceptions of a supernatural order in the forms of spirits, gods, or impersonal forces which are different from and superior to those forces conceived as governing ordinary natural events.

Weber's view that a belief in the supernatural is universal has been confirmed by anthropological research (e.g. Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* which we discussed before). He combines his view of the conceptions of the supernatural with an insight into the symbolic character of supernatural beings and their acts. According to him, the help of the supernatural is sought by the primitives in the interest of everyday, worldly concerns such as health, long life, defeat of enemies, etc.

In keeping with the nineteenth century general intellectual interest in origins and evolution, Parson (1963) says that Weber's perspective in the sociology of religion is evolutionary. It is indeed evolutionary, as his sociology of religion does concern itself with the elementary forms of religious life and then the condition promoting the development of religious beliefs systems and institutions in various civilisations. From the starting point in universality of belief in the supernatural, his discussion of the sociology of religion proceeds to a systematic exploration of the directions in which breakthrough from the primitive religious state can occur. His primary interest

in religions is to locate a source of the principle of social change, and not religion as a reinforcement of the stability of societies. This is the basic difference of emphasis between the sociology of religion of Weber and Durkheim.

Check Your Progress 4

i) What is the central theme of Weber’s work on Protestant ethic? Use four lines for your answer.

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ii) What is the ‘Weber thesis’? Use two lines for your answer.

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4.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit focused on the study of religious beliefs as systems of knowledge. First, we clarified the difference between a ritual and a belief. Then, we discussed Levy-Bruhl’s studies of the mode of thought among the primitives. Inspired by Levy-Bruhl’s theories of primitive religion, Evans-Pritchard studied some African tribal religious beliefs in order to understand the underlying order in the world of those tribals. We gave brief notes on these studies by Evans-Pritchard. Next, we moved on from primitive societies to the study of religion in literate societies. Max Weber was primarily interested in the problem of meaning of social life and how individuals and groups defined their existence in the world in relation to each other and also in relation to socio-cultural and other conditions of life. Weber showed how social differences were related to different ways of religious expression and belief. Our study of religious beliefs leads us to the next logical topic. This is the study of religious symbols—the theme of our next unit.

4.7 KEY WORDS

Animatism: a pre-animistic stage in religious development. It attributes life as a characteristic of every phenomena.

Animism: belief in spiritual beings.

Belief: an idea or notion which refers to a state or habit of mind in which one places trust or confidence in some person or thing.

Charisma: the quality of an individual (usually a leader) rooted in some magical or religious basis, which is some person of authority.

Cosmology: a theory of the universe and its different parts, the beings that populate it and the nature and hierarchy of these beings.

Divination: foretelling the future by trying to contact the supernatural.

Empiricism: it emphasises experience as the source of what people think and believe.

Institution: in the context of anthropology and sociology it refers to familiar and

well-established social relationships. Social relationships are the ways in which people behave towards each other.

Magic: the performance of certain rituals that are believed to compel the supernatural powers to act in particular ways.

Mana: a supernatural, impersonal force which inhabits certain objects or people and is believed to confer success.

Myth: literary representation of social/religious symbolisation—a story which involves supernatural beings and explains how the world came to exist. The stories are built around heroes and gods and are passed down through tradition.

Oracle: a go-between between supernatural powers and ordinary humans.

Prayers: a petition directed at a supernatural power.

Rationality: a distinction should be made between the truth of beliefs and their rationality. Rationality refers to thought and action which are in accordance with the rules of logic.

Ritual: a patterned activity oriented towards control human affairs.

Sorcery: the use of certain materials to harm people through the manipulation of supernatural powers.

Structuralism: the theoretical approach that human culture is a surface representation of the underlying structure of the human mind.

Supernatural: powers that are believed to be not human or subject to the laws of nature.

Totem: a plant or animal given to a clan as a means of group identification.

Witchcraft: the practice of attempting to harm people by supernatural means through emotions and thought processes.

4.8 FURTHER READING

Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1937. *Witchcraft, Oracle and Magic among the Azande*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.

—1956. *Nuer Religion*. Oxford: University Press: Oxford

—1965. *Theories of Primitive Religion*. Oxford University Press: Oxford

Gerth, H.H. and Mills, C.W. (editors), 1969. *From Max Weber*. Oxford University Press: Oxford Chapter 11.

4.9 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) A belief is an idea or notion which refers to a state or habit of mind in which one places trust in some person or thing. It is mode of conception, whereas a ritual is a mode of action which is kind of patterned activity oriented towards control of human affairs.

- ii) Rituals commonly portray importance aspects of religious myths and cosmology.
- iii) The various categories of rituals, among others, are prayers, sorcery, divination, magic, etc.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Civilised mentality and primitive mentality. While the civilised mentality is logical and scientific, the primitive is prelogical and mystical.
- ii) Durkheim felt that the key to understanding primitive religion was through social relations. Levy-Bruhl, on the other hand, focused his attention on primitive thinking and not on institutions or relationships.
- iii) According to Evans-Pritchard, the law of mystical participation is the most valuable part of Levy-Bruhl's thesis on primitive mentality.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Comparative religion must be comparative in a relational manner, that is, we should see if a common element of more than one religion being compared is related to any other social facts.
- ii) Evans-Pritchard characterises the beliefs of the Azande as dual causality which means that Azande thought incorporates both mystical and natural causation.
- iii) The structural approach is a model of abstraction. It involves the decoding of the principles through which the human mind operates. The decoding of abstractions from social life includes the principles of opposition, complementarity and analogy.

Check Your Progress 4

- i) The adherents of Protestant ethic believe that doing one's duty means serving God. Thus, Protestantism emphasises the importance of rationality, savings, time management, competition, and a desire to earn money which are the basis of the capitalistic system.
- ii) The 'Weber thesis' is a proposition by Weber to study the relation between religious conceptions and economic behaviour.

UNIT 5 THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 The Nature and Meaning of Symbols
- 5.3 Symbols in Religion
- 5.4 Interpreting Religious Symbols
- 5.5 Understanding Symbols
- 5.6 Contextual Analysis of Symbols
- 5.7 Symbols and Meaning: Clifford Geertz
- 5.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.9 Key Words
- 5.10 Further Reading
- 5.11 Answers to Check Your Progress

5.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- define a symbol and discuss its affinities and dissimilarities with signal, icon and index
- understand and appreciate the various approaches to the understanding of religious symbols
- interpret the symbols of your own religion through an approach of your choice.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous four units of this block, we discussed the sociological understanding of religion, evolutionist and functionalist theories of religion, and the study of religious beliefs. In this unit, you will come to know the way of understanding religion through its symbols.

We begin the unit with a discussion of the nature and meaning of term 'symbol'. Then we focus on the communicative role of symbols in religion. Further, a discussion of the structuralist approaches and its variants is given in order to explain to you the current state of studies of religious symbols. Undertaking a historical journey from Tylor, Malinowski, Firth to Levi-Strauss, Leach, Douglas, Tuner and Geertz, we have attempted to show how communication is the central aspect of religion as understood via the symbols. You are also advised to view the video programme on **Religious Symbols** at your study centre. It will help you to understand better the meaning and role of symbols in our social life.

5.2 THE NATURE AND MEANING OF SYMBOLS

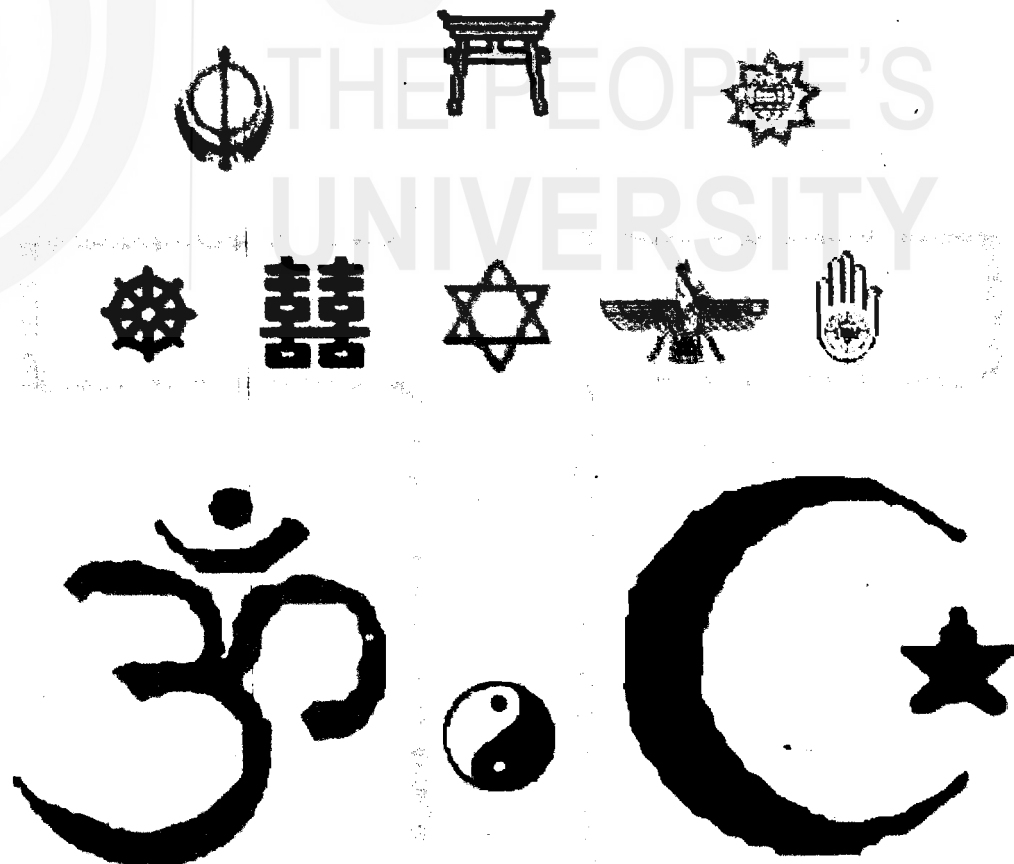
What is meant by the term 'symbol'? Radcliffe-Brown's definition is that everything that has a meaning is a symbol. Here the meaning refers to what is expressed by a symbol, or, what the symbol stands for. This is very wide definition. You are quite likely to come across many things which stand for something else. Regarding all such things as symbols is not very useful to a sociologist who wants to understand religion via symbols.

In order to define the term specifically, we need to examine its nature. It is common

to find in text books a discussion about differences between a signal and a symbol. We have also to show how a signal is different from a symbol. But so also is the case with an icon, index and allegory. In fact, all these terms serve to form an image or representation of something in the mind. Often, one comes across the words sign and symbol being used interchangeably. At times, sign is used when another person may find it more appropriate to use the word symbol or vice versa (for an interesting debate on this point refer to Daniels (1987:15-47).

Such scholars as Ernest Cassirer (1944) hold that symbolic representation is an essential function of human consciousness and it is fundamental to our understanding to human culture, including history, art, science, myth and religion. For Cassirer all these spheres are aspects of a 'symbolic universe'. He distinguished between sign and symbol. For him, a sign refers to the physical world of being and there is always a natural link between the sign and the thing that it signifies. He holds that a symbol is an 'artificial' indicator and refer to the human world of meaning. For Cassirer, human knowledge is essentially symbolic. He argues that symbol and the signified are merged in religion and myth and the two are differentiated in science.

We find that earlier writers generally discussed the similarities and differences between sign and symbol. Later, such scholars as Raymond Firth (1973) wrote about four different signs, namely, index, signal, icon and symbol. Let us follow Firth, who held that an **index** is a sign which is related to what is signified in the same way as a parts is related to the whole or particular is related to general. For example, incidence of smoke is an index of a fire. The dynamic aspect of an index is referred as a **signal**, for example, switching on of a red traffic light is a signal of danger and therefore a signal to stop movement of vehicles. A sensory-likeness



is represented by an **icon**. For example, the statue of a leader is iconic. A **symbol** is that kind of sign which has many associations of a complex nature. There does not exist a clear-cut likeness between a symbol and the thing which is signified. There is usually a kind of arbitrariness, based on convention, for example, the owl is the symbol of wisdom.

Edmund Leach (1976) regards both symbol and sign as subsets of index (see Morris 1987:219). He uses the terms sign to refer to symbols, which displays the part to whole relationship with what is signified.

Secondly, Leach also distinguishes between a sign and the thing signified is expressed by substituting the name of an attribute for that of the thing meant. For example, a crown may stand for king. In the case of symbol, the relationship between a symbol and the thing symbolised is metaphorical. This means there is an application of name to an object to which it is not literally applicable. According to Morris (1987:222) this distinction between a sign and a symbol is 'an elaboration of Frazer's distinction between homeopathic and contagious magic' (see Unit 2, subsection 2.3.4). A significant contribution of Leach's ideas is that symbols can not be interpreted in isolation and there are no universal symbols, though there may be some fairly common symbolic themes. **He argues that symbols usually carry multiplicity of meanings, that is, they are polysemic.** Further, they became meaningful only when seen in opposition to other symbols as parts of a cultural context. He considers it necessary to understand symbolism in a particular ethnographic context.

It is clear that the concept of symbol has been approached in various ways by the sociologists. However basically a symbol communicates indirectly.

At this stage of our discussion, you may not want to enter into the controversies about similarities and differences among different types of sign. It may suffice to say that a sign is a wider term which may share certain features with signal, symbol, icon, index and allegory (see Barthes 1967:35-38). But the context of the study of religion, it is customary to use the term symbol rather than sign. This is so because of the polysemic (multiplicity of meaning) nature of religious symbols.

Further we find that there is a reason or an underlying rationale for a particular symbol to be used in a particular case. In case of signals certain messages are carried through conventionally accepted means. For example, a green light is a signal for a driver to go ahead and a red light is a signal to stop. These signals are part of accepted conventions among all road-users. Similarly, in all languages, certain combinations of certain sounds stand for certain meanings because speakers of those languages have by convention accepted to recognise those sounds with particular meaning.

In the case of symbol, there is apparently no connection between the object which signifies and what is signified by it. But the bases for a symbol's appropriation to what is symbolised lie in some actual or imagined similarity between the symbol and what is symbolised. In some cases, the basis may lie in some past event.

You will also find that the rationale underlying a symbolic representation may not always be obviously so and may not be so easy to discover. Signals are easy to decipher because they generally stand for a concrete reality and refer to some observable action. Traffic lights are the best examples of signals. Symbols are, on the other hand, usually an expression of such abstract notions as power, authority, solidarity of the group. For example, the yam house. The debate thus is between symbols, which deal with the abstract notion, and signals which are 'concrete' and different from the role of the polysemic nature of symbols.

Symbols provide people with a means of expressing ideas of significance. This is why sociologists find symbols as something very important to study. We already know that Durkheim was interested in the study of 'totem' because he thought that it symbolised the idea of group solidarity among the Australian aborigines (see Unit 3 of this block).

In brief, we can say that the main characteristic of a symbol is that it expresses something significant. This indicates that one cannot remain neutral about something that is symbolised. Take the case of your national flag. It stands for your country. If someone insults your national flag, you feel offended. You can hardly be neutral to what happens to it. In other words, what is symbolised is also respected.

As mentioned before, language, art, history and myths are modes of human experience expressed through symbol. Earnest Cassirer holds that a human being is a symbol making animal (animal symbollicum). In this sense a cultural system is basically the nexus between the various ways of symbolising. This makes it important for a sociologist to identify symbolic elements in human activities. We are here concerned with symbol as means communicating something significant. The communicative role of symbol is very important for studying religion. Communication is the central aspect of religion is understood via the symbol. Both ritual and belief are two sides of the communication process. In Unit 4 we explained in a simplistic manner the differences between ritual and belief. Here we would like to emphasise the fact that ritual and belief as reflected in symbolic activities express both instrumental and expressive aspects. Let us clarify what we mean by the two terms. Before going on to these terms, complete Check Your Progress 1.

Check Your Progress 1

i) What is the main characteristic of symbol? Use five lines for your answer.

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ii) What sort of ideas are best communicated through symbols? Use one line for your answer

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ii) What is common between a sign and a symbol? Use one line for your answer.

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By instrumental we mean that action which produces some desired goal and it is directed to an end. By expressive activity we mean saying or expressing an idea. The instrumental action can be directly observed and can be explained in terms of what it is oriented towards. The expressive aspect of behaviour can be, on the other hand, studied by finding out what is being said or communicated. Both aspects of an activity are generally intermeshed and difficult to separate. But sociologists usually distinguish them for purposes of analysing human behaviour in general and rituals and beliefs in particular. In the following section, we will examine how they study the role of symbol in religion, and by doing so they try to understand religion via symbol.

5.3 SYMBOLS IN RELIGION

Both functionalists and structuralist, in their own ways, have tried to interpret the communicative role of symbols in religion. We have already noted in units 2 and 3 the criticisms of explanations by the evolutionists like Tylor and of functionalists like Malinowski and Firth. The evolutionists implied a division between symbolic structures of myths and rituals and concrete structures (kinship, politics and economics etc.). Even Durkheim resorted to this artificial division between religion (a symbolic structure) and society (a concrete structure).

The functionalists, on the other hand, asked the question: what rituals as observed via symbolism do for the society? Rituals are those formal actions which are expressed through symbol. The functionalists studied the process of transactions or regular patterns of interaction and explained them in terms of what a particular transaction or interaction did for a group of people. For example, according to Firth (1973:77), political symbols can be used as instruments of public control. Firth (1973) argues that that a person or a party can control the mobilisational efficacy of symbols by manipulating the meanings assigned to them. The manipulability of symbols arises mainly because system of symbols are not always consistent and coherent. It is the arbitration of association with meaning which makes symbols manipulable. Precisely due to this symbols become instruments of power struggle.

For the functionalist however the important fact is how a symbol or a 'set' of symbols relate to the totality of the symbolising complex of ideas.

Further, in unit 4 we focussed on the meaning aspect of religious beliefs. The shift from function of meaning of religion took into account communicative aspect of human actions. You would agree that every action is a communicative action. This position has now led us to a consideration of religion as a set of symbols which throws light on the communicative dimension of an action as well as the capacity of human beings to create culture through symbols. We find that the structuralists suggest interesting possibilities in the interpretation of religion. They all fasten on to the communicative aspect of such structuralists as Levi-Strauss and, to a lesser extent, Leach emphasise the mentalist (intellectualist) aspect and strive towards a natural science model in the interpretation of religious symbols. Finding it hard to sustain, Evans-Pritchard and others developed an approach which is more interpretive and 'humanities'-oriented. Examples of this approach are the symbolic analyses of Mary Douglas, Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz.

It is a well established notion that religion views human behaviour in terms of cosmic order and reflects that cosmic order in human actions. Geertz (1966) argued that in empirical terms not many tried to inquire as to how this is actually achieved. In sociology we have very good theoretical framework to analyse socialisation process of child, succession to political power, economic processes of production, distribution and consumption, etc. but for a long time little progress was made in the field of religion. It was the study of religion as a system of symbols that provided a break through. Let us first discuss the approaches of Levi-Strauss and Leach. This discussion will be followed by a more detailed examination of the symbolic analyses of Douglas, Turner and Geertz.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Who perceived a division between such symbolic structures as myths and ritual and such concrete structures as kinship, politic and economics etc.? Use one line for your answer.

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ii) State in four lines what the functionalists tried to ask while studying the communicative role of symbols.

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iii) Who tried to strive for a natural science model understanding religious symbols? Use one line for your answer.

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5.4 INTERPRETING RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS

Levi-Strauss (see Box 5.01) takes language to be a model for understanding social behaviour. Structuralists like Levi-Strauss try to relate consciousness to the unconscious, individual to the cultural, and objective analysis of experience to subjective experience of individuals. Levi-Strauss argues that mythic structures (symbolic structures) parallel social structure, not because myth mirrors society. But because, both myth and social structure share a common underlying structure of human mind. Put it differently, myths are more than the meaning they offer to an interpreter, and the functions they fulfil for the society which shapes them. Levi-Strauss argues that there are relatively stable mental structures (structures in mind) which give rise to permutations and combinations in the form of culture. These mental structures are universal human nature. These structures are union and opposition between ideas, better put as 'binary opposition'. Like a grammar beneath languages lies the logic or code beneath culture (any symbolic form, myth, for that matter).

Box 5.01

Claude Levi-Strauss has been the most influential thinker among anthropologists in France. He has a large following among scholars in Europe and the United States of America. His primary contribution is related to the study of human mind. He has attempted to identify the underlying patterns, regularities and types of human activities. His major works concern three areas, namely kinship theory, the analysis of mythology, and the nature of primitive classifications. In his analysis of myths he depends on structural linguistics (the study of human speech and cybernetics the science of communication and control theory). Levi-Strauss studies myth as a system of signs. For him, a myth accounts for the basic conceptual categories of the human mind. These categories are made of contradictory series of such binary opposition as raw and cooked, nature and culture, left and right etc. Thus, a myth is a version of a theme which is represented in specific combination of categories.

This logic or code needs to be deciphered for an understanding of that culture. It is important to note that the complexity of symbols makes them difficult and even intractable in certain cases. As such while attempting to work on interpreting the symbol or the set of symbols there is always room for an alternative explanation. While understanding structuralism we need to remember that.

- b) the mental structures are divorced from the actions and intentions of the particular individuals. From the above two aspects it emerges clearly that structuralism is least interested in the 'values' or 'ethos' which is symbol represents and it is unmindful of the use to which symbols are put (especially in the context of the power struggle).

We can say that this kind of structuralist interpretation of symbols denotes mental structures of structures in the mind. This why sometimes Levi-Straussian structuralism is labelled as 'though-structuralism. These mental structures flow out of our minds to create culture in their various combinations. If culture is set of symbolic forms and if we analyse them or decipher or decode them, we get to know the underlying mental structure. Levi-Strauss views it as a binary opposition between nature and culture. Thus, he would say, if raw food is nature, cooked food denotes culture.

Leach (1976) uses the structuralist method to decipher the various symbolic forms. To him, culture is only a manifest physical form and it originates in our mind. Within our mind, it begins as an "inchoate metaphysical idea". Inside our mind categories emerge as a set of opposing categories.

The structuralist model can be used for the analysis of a common a thing as a dress, or costume. You know we dress for certain occasions in a special way. To attend wedding banquets or receptions we wear a grand attire. Why? We inherently believe that our dress 'speaks' (communicates) a lot about us to the other. One's dress reveals one's rank and social status. Note the color of anybody's dress. Will anybody wear a black attire while going for a wedding banquet? No. You would have seen that black is always opposed to white. Black may indicate impurity whereas white indicates purity. Black indicates mourning whereas red colour in an appropriate context indicates joy.

Structuralism can be uses to study almost any sociological or anthropological area of interest or specialization. Levi-Strauss, Leach and other have demonstrated great skill and versatility in using the structuralist theory method and data. For example, Leach has done a structural analysis of traffic signals and their meaning.

Likewise, Leach (1976) applies structural model to 'bodily mutation'. For example, take shaving of the widow's head in certain cultures. This 'loss of hair' (albeit forced by society) indicates a change in the status of a woman. Possession of hair is opposed to lack of hair, and accordingly this idea is applied by the society to indicate change in social status.

I hope you remember, the Durkheimian classification of 'sacred versus profane'. This is a cognitive categorisation created by the society, argued Durkheim. For Levi-Strauss natural and universal to all cultures. If that is so then sacred and profane will be categories ever persistent irrespective of the advancements in science and technology. If you carefully reflect 'time' is a human invention; so is sacred time (for rituals and other religions activities) and sacred space. Sacred time and sacred space are concepts devices by human mind to classify the continuous time and space around us. Years, months, days, public private, drawing room, bed room—are human classifications which flow out from the binary opposition of human mind.

Take another example, 'sacrifice' is an act of communication with the other-world. At its heart lies our belief that we shall die one day, and yet we want to live. Hence the classification 'this world' versus 'other world', 'this-worldly' versus 'other-worldly being', 'this-worldly time' versus 'other-worldly tiem'. At the meeting point of these two worlds, i.e. this world and the other-world, lies the liminal zone in which beings of both the worlds can take part. A church or a temple or a mosque

is the meeting point of this-worldly and other-worldly. A sacrifice held at this spot in the form of killings a goat has a symbolic meaning. It indicates that the sacrifice is willing to undergo a transformation in order to reach the other-world. Leach (1976:71) writes, "Religion is concerned with establishing a mediating bridge between 'this world', and 'the other' through which the omnipotent power of deity may be channelled to bring aid to impotent men". We will now turn to a variant of the structuralist approach, followed by Mary Douglas.

Activity 1

Carefully read section 5.4 and following the concept of mental structures, given by Levi-Strauss, list some binary oppositions which you think are universal.

5.5 UNDERSTANDING SYMBOLS

Different from the Levi-Straussian notion structures, a variant of structuralism, followed by Mary Douglas (see Box 5.02), holds that symbols are not formed out of the structures of mind. In this approach we find a definite slide towards Durkheimian understanding in which social structures have key role in symbolic processes. There is also reflection of Robertson Smith's argument that symbols of divinity were originally drawn from natural symbols. **The 'universalism', advocated by Levi-Strauss for the structures of mind is sidetracked in this approach.** The argument is that meaning is not exhausted in the patterned categories of signs. Mary Douglas (1966, 1970) argues that the origins of symbolisation are related to social structure in general and to processes of human body in particular. Consequently, in her writing Mary Douglas describes the body as a medium through which social structure finds expression. Let us discuss in detail Mary Douglas's approach to the study of symbols.

Box 5.02

Mary Douglas was educated at Oxford where she obtained her D. Phil in 1951. She did fieldwork in the Belgian Congo from 1949-50 and again during 1953.

Mary Douglas has been described by Adam Kuper (1973:206) as one of the leaders of the new British 'structuralism'. She is concerned with the anomalies which imply loss of purity and therefore a source of danger. Influenced by her teacher, at Oxford, Franz Steiner's lectures on taboo and Levi-Strauss's structural method, Douglas (1966) has analysed the dietary rules by reference to system of classification. In her study, *Natural Symbols* (1970), she holds that society as an entity is expressed by ritual symbolism. Here, she focuses on finding structural correlations between symbolic patterns and social experiences.

Mary Douglas (1966) studied the pollution beliefs of Jews recorded in the Bible and also used the ethnographic notes from various societies of the world. Primitive people's understanding of pollution can be understood by exploring our own mentality, according to Douglas. She quotes Lord Chesterfield's definition of dirt, 'dirt is a matter out of place'. What is implied here is an order and contravention of that order. Take a simple example: Will any of us leave our footwear in a bookshelf? No, this is because footwear and books belongs to entirely different realms. We know of an order where footwear belong to footwear stand and a book belongs to a bookshelf. Now, if that order is disturbed, you will draw rebuke from your elders.

It would be most interesting to see what results desire from a study of purity and pollution in the Indian context. To some extent the anthropologist influenced by Levi-Strauss (e.g. Dumont) have already made in roads into this area.

Similarly, we can analyse pollution belief. In many societies, menstrual blood is polluting. Hence, menstruating women remain secluded. In case this rule of seclusion is contravened, grave danger is foreseen for the community and the person/community concerned has to undergo purification processes. Pollution beliefs are cultural and they imply an order and its preservation. Pollution beliefs are mostly related to the bodily processes and emissions: blood, menstruation, exertions and exhalations. Now, what is the significance of these pollution beliefs.?

- a) They imply an order and its preservation.
- b) Pollution beliefs and related sanctions check the deviations from the order.
- c) They help the individuals to clarify social definitions and re-order their experiences.
- d) Pollution beliefs reinforce the understanding of cosmos and the world of nature, as is held by the society.

These pollution beliefs are not universal. Menstrual blood is polluting in one society but in may not be in another. It is in this selection process that social structure intervenes. Douglas (1975:67) clarifies the role of social structure by distinguishing several levels of meaning in rituals which control the bodily conditions. Firstly, rituals have a personal meaning for one who undergoes it and those who witness the ritual. Secondly, there is a social meaning, where every society 'says' something public about its nature, social grouping etc. To quote Douglas (1975:67) "a public ritual is a graphic expression of social forms. In societies where marriage is weak, child-bearing mother will be secluded and father too will have to be secluded.

Otherwise danger might occur. Here, this child-bearing process of body is prescribed or selected as polluting, because, proof of paternity is needed and the marriage is weak. Bodily processes are attributed meanings with a view to defend and preserve the established social order. Says Douglas (1970:xiii), "Body is a symbolic medium which is used to express particular pattern of social relations".

Douglas (1970) explores the cosmology of various societies and their relations with the corresponding bodily symbols. Human body is used to express the experiences of social relations. We present our body in different postures and angles, depending upon the situation whether it is formal or informal. **According to Douglas, experienced social relations are structured in two ways: group and the grid.** Group is a bounded social unit whereas grid indicates a person-to-person relationship on an ego-centered basis.

In societies where group is strong, human body is guarded against attack from outside. The inside/outside definitions are clear cut. Social experience emphasises external boundaries of the body, ignoring the internal structure of the body. In such a society, the social philosophy is that the internal structure can remain undifferentiated. Such societies believe that injustice within the society can be removed by eliminating the internal traitors who ally with the outside enemies. Witch-fearing cosmology is an example. Here, the body symbolism values the boundaries, discourages mixtures and treats sex with caution. The social experience here tends towards austerity, interest in purification, and disregard for bodily function like ingestion. The society celebrates purity of spirit and holds that flesh could be corrupted.

Douglas (1970:ix) argues that in contrast, where grid is strong, a bounded human body cannot be used for expression of social concerns, since the individuals does not feel bound and committed to a social group. Individuals is not constrained by group, but by rules, which facilitate reciprocal transactions. There is no attempt to

secularise mind and matter, and neither they are revered nor despised. People remain secular in outlook.

Bodily concerns differ according to social experience. Applying her model to the student revolts, Douglas says that since the social relations are over structured by grid, the students begin to seek unstructured personal experiences, in the form of rampage and destruction of catalogues and classifications.

This is clearly an example of how wide an application or even series of applications can be a part of study research and analysis. Yet it must be cautioned here that the structuralist method requires deep study to be used adequately as a method to study any aspect of society.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) What is the place of body symbolism in Mary Douglas approach to the study of symbols? Use five lines for your answers.

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- ii) Explain in five lines Mary Douglas concepts of group and grid.

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- iii) Match the following

A	B
a) Binary opposition	1) Firth
b) Symbols have purposes	2) Cassirer
c) Body is medium of expression	3) Durkheim
d) 'Man is an animal symbolicum'	4) Levi-Strauss
e) 'Society is mirrored in symbol'	5) Douglas

5.6 CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF SYMBOLS

Victor Turner (see Box 5.03) is influenced by a version of structural functionalism which assimilated many ideas from conflict theories. Turner's understanding of symbol emerged from his study of rituals in Zambia. Symbols are operators in the social processes, because they help the actors move from one status to another and also to resolve social contradictions. Symbols bind actors to the categories and norms of their society. Turner argued that the meaning of symbols can be understood only in their "action-field" context.

Box 5.03

The tradition of cultural analysis, which resulted in translations of important essays of Durkheim, Mauss, Hubert and Hertz etc. by the Oxford anthropologists, was carried on by such scholars as Victor W. Turner. He was born in 1920, in Scotland and educated at University College, London. He obtained a Ph.D. degree at Manchester. A professor of anthropology, Turner has made significant contributions to the study of religion. Turner's approach to analysis of the function of ritual and symbols has elements from Freud, Radcliffe-Brown and Gluckman. According to Mary Douglas (1970:303), Turner has taken into account the psychic content of symbols and his ethnography of Ndembu life shows clearly how 'the cultural categories sustain given social structure'.

For Turner (1967:26), "symbol is always a best possible expression of relatively unknown fact, a fact which is nonetheless recognised or postulated as existing". He lists three properties of symbols.

- a) **Condensation:** many things and actions are represented in a single form;
- b) **Unification:** a dominant symbol within a ritual unites together many diverse ideas and phenomena;
- c) **Polarisation of meaning** at one pole of ritual, moral and social orders of the society, values and norms are represented by the dominant symbol, at the other pole, meaning related to the outward from the symbol are represented. Turner (1967:28) holds that the former is the **ideological pole** and the latter is the **sensory pole**. Turner (1967:50) identifies different levels in the meaning of ritual symbol.
 - a) **Exegetical meaning:** This meaning is obtained by questioning the laymen and ritual specialists involved in the ritual situation.
 - b) **Operational meaning:** This meaning is obtained by what they do with the particular symbol and how they use it.
 - c) **Positional meaning:** The meaning that a particular symbol acquires by its relationship with other symbols in a totality.

Turner relates the performance of rituals to social process, and also holds that the span and complexity of rituals may correspond to the size and internal complexity of the society. Rituals are divided into two classes, namely the rituals which check deviations and regulate and rituals which "anticipate division and conflict". The latter class of rituals include life cycle (initiation/circumcision rites) rituals and periodic rituals.

Going by Turner, rituals help the individuals to adapt to changing roles and statuses. Ritual symbols motivate people to act, maintain the social structure in spite of contradictions, adjust to the internal social changes and environment. Within the context of action, symbols are dynamic entities which relate human beings with ends, purposes and means, explicitly formulated or observed from behaviour.

Now that I have broadly elaborated the basic arguments of Victor Turner, let me present an illustration of his field work. Victor Turner did his fieldwork among the Ndembu people of Zambia, who live west of the Lunga river in Africa. The Ndembu people lead a simple life, but their ritual symbolism is elaborate and complex. The Ndembu are matrilineal (succession to property and office goes to the daughters from mother). After marriage, wives may have to go to their husband's village, since the husband lives with his **matrikin**. Among the Ndembu, boy's circumcision

ceremony is called Mukanda and girl's puberty rituals are called Nkang'a. Boys are collectively initiated before puberty. Girls are individually initiated with the onset of puberty.

Let us take one particular symbol from Ndembu girl's puberty ritual (Nkang'a), and follow Victor Turner's analysis. During the puberty ritual, a novice is wrapped in a blanket and laid at the foot of the Mudyi sapling. If its bark is scratched the Mudyi tree secretes a white latex and forms milky beads. The milk tree (mudy tree) is the dominant symbol in Nkang'a ritual. There are several meanings attributed to this 'milk tree' Ndembu women attribute the following meanings to the milk tree: (a) milk tree is the senior tree of the ritual; (b) it stands for breast and breast milk; (c) tree of 'mother and child' a place where all mothers of the lineage are initiated. If we closely look at the above responses, it emerges that at one level milk trees stands for matriliney, which is the governing principle of Ndembu social life. At another level, milk tree stands for the tribal custom itself—a total system of Ndembu social relations. Respondents tended to emphasise the cohesive, harmonising impact of milk tree. Like a child's suckling of the mother, the Ndembu drink from the breasts of tribal custom. Milk tree is short hand for Ndembu instruction in tribal matters which follow immediately after initiation.

When a contextual analysis is done, the milk tree seems to represent social differentiation and opposition between various categories of society. In a series of action-situations in the puberty ritual, groups mobilise around the milk tree and worship. These groups represent the differentiations in the society. In Kkang'a ritual, women dance around milk tree initiating the young girl. This group of women oppose themselves to men. Hereby, women come together as a social category. In some cases, the young milk tree will be sacralised by the women. The young tree represents the young girl. The opposition here is between the young girl and the adult women. In another context, the mother of child will not be allowed to join the ring of dancers. Here, the opposition is between mother and her child. Because, a mother is likely to lose her daughter through marriage after the ritual. At the end of the first day of ritual, the mother of the child cooks cassava and beans, brings it in a spoon and asks 'who wants it?' The women dancing around the milk tree rush to eat from the spoon. If women of same village eat from the spoon, the child may reside with the mother. Othereise, she will have to go to a distant village and die there. Here, the conflict between living in mother's village and moving to husband's village finds an expression through symbolic activity.

So far two types of interpretation have been listed. Interpretation of milk tree provided by the Ndembu and the behaviour which emerges from the action field context seem to contradict each other. Ndembu say that milk tree represents the bond between mother and child, but in the action-field context, milk tree separates mother from child. Ndembu tell that milk tree stands for unity of Ndembu society, but in action-field context, the milk tree separates women from men, one group of women from other group of women. The two interpretations whom that dominant symbol of a ritual is related to the social process in the society. On the one hand milk tree enables the child to cross over to adulthood, and on the other it helps the society to resolve social contradictions at various levels.

Activity 2

Follow Victor Turner's idea of contextual analysis of symbols and explain in a note of 500 words, a symbol of your choice in the context of your society.

5.7 SYMBOLS AND MEANING : CLIFFORD GEERTZ

interested in the cognitive dimension of culture. He emphasises its affective/emotional dimension. Geertz refutes the view that meanings are in the minds of people. According to him, symbols and meanings are shared by the actors between them. Meanings are public and are shared. Cultural patterns are things of this world, like rocks and streams. They are not ideas and hence metaphysical. For Geertz, meaning is embodied in public symbol and it is through the symbols that human beings communicate with each other their world view, ethos and value-orientations.

Box 5.04

Born in 1926 in U.S.A., Clifford Geertz was educated at Antioch College and received his Ph.D. degree from Harvard University. This American professor of anthropology represents the hermeneutical or interpretative approach to the study of religion. He draws on the writing of Dilthey and Weber. Geertz argues that religion should be studied as an aspect of interpretative sociology. His study abandoning the insights of his predecessors (Durkheim, Weber, Freud and Malinowski) he widens their perspectives on religion and interprets religion as a cultural system that provides meaning to human existence. According to Geertz (1957:95), symbolic structures 'both express the world's climate and shape it'. For a number of criticisms of Geertz's approach to religion see Asad's (1983:237-59) review article.

Geertz studies culture from the actor's point view. He rejects the structuralist position, which ignores the role of individual and favours the universal mental structures. For Geertz, culture is a product of social beings, who try to make sense of this world through their actions. If we want to make sense of culture, we have to situate ourselves in a position from where it was constituted. Geertz holds the view that culture is essentially particularistic and hence there cannot be a universal epistemology. In Geertz, we find an emphasis on the creative aspects of culture. Through culture, a cluster of symbols, we learn and interpret the world in which we live. Culture is not merely an inherited or unconscious learning pattern. It is created constantly in our everyday social interaction.

According to Geertz (1973:90), "Religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothe these conceptions with such an aura of factuality, that the moods and motivations, seem uniquely realistic". Let us take any religious symbol—feathered serpent, cross or crescent. These symbols are drawn from a myth or ritual. These symbols remind us about a world as it portrays the kind of emotional life it supports. The Cross, you know, is a Christian symbol. It reminds a Christian that Jesus Christ died on the cross. Cross means the sorrow of this life. Cross indicates that a Christian can reach happiness, glory through suffering. A believer is expected to behave in a particular way in the presence of a cross.

A religious symbol helps us to identify fact with value. 'what actually is' and 'what ought to be' are related through symbols. It is through symbols that we create an order, experience it and maintain it. 'what is' and 'what ought to be; reinforce each other in the ongoing process of making sense of this world. 'what is' is converted into a set of priorities for action, in an interaction with 'what ought to be'. In his studies of Javanese culture Geertz found that people were manoeuvring with their religious beliefs, in a bid to interpret the new economic and political situation in the post-revolutionary Java.

In Java of the 1950s, Geertz could see that endurance of tradition as well as the creative manipulation of tradition in the wake of changes. On the one hand, the Javanese peasants remained glued to inherited form of social and economic

organisation. On the other hand, Sukarno could manipulate the many symbols out of the elements of Javanese culture in a bid to forge a new notion of nationalism.

Check Your Progress 4

i) Which aspect of symbols is emphasised by Geertz when he argues that symbols are vehicles of meaning? Use one line for your answer.

.....

ii) What is the place of particularistic nature of culture in Geertz's study of symbols? Use three line for your answer.

.....
.....
.....

iii) To what use, according to Geertz, did the Javanese put their religious beliefs? Use one line for your answer.

.....

5.8 LET US SUM UP

We begin this unit by discussing the nature and meaning of symbols. We stressed on the communicative role of symbols. Then we discussed structuralist mode of understanding religion via communicative role of symbols.

After our discussion on how Levi-Strauss and Leach used the structuralist method to decipher the various symbolic forms of culture, we examined, how Mary Douglas developed a parallel approach to the study of symbols. She argues that body is a symbolic medium through which social experience finds expression.

In order to provide examples of actual studies of symbols, we discussed Victor Turner's study of symbols among the Ndembu of Africa. According to him, meanings are situated in contexts. He opines that symbols are related to social processes, in the sense that they take the individual from one status to another, and also resolve social contradictions. Our other example is from Geertz's approach to symbols who studied Javanese culture. Geertz argues that meanings of symbols are not in the actors' heads, but meanings are shared between human beings in a social context. Meaning are essentially public.

Thus, in this unit, we discussed the various ways in which scholars understand religion through symbols. Now you have to read further and develop skills in the approach of your liking, and apply it to a religion of your choice and its symbols. Our video programme on Religious symbols offers you an exposition of the three styles of studying religious symbols. These styles were evolved by sociologists over the last hundred years. Through visuals, we have tried to give you an experiential understanding of religious symbols. Hopefully, the visual communication will express more than the print-material can do and it will give you deeper appreciation of the world of symbolic representation.

5.9 KEY WORDS

Binary opposite: a union of two contrasting ideas in mind.

Cosmology: system of ideas about universal order.

Cybernetics: the science of communication and control theory. It is concerned specially with the comparative study of automatic control systems.

Grid: a person to person ego-centered relationship.

Group: a bounded social unit.

Linguistics: the study of human speech including the units, nature, structure and modification of language.

Pollution: a magical notion that uncleanness results due to violation of taboos.

Taboo: that which is prohibited.

Teleology: a doctrine which explains phenomena by final causes.

Totem: symbol of a clan.

Witch: one who uses magic for evil purposes.

5.10 FURTHER READING

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Turner, V. 1975. Symbolic Studies. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 4 : 145-62.

5.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) The main characteristic of a symbol is that it expresses something significant.
- ii) symbols usually express such abstract notions as power, authority, solidarity of group etc.
- iii) Both sign and symbol stand for something other than what they appear.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) The evolutionists implied a division between symbolic and concrete structures.
- ii) The functionalists tried to find out what rituals do for society. Rituals are basically practical aspects of religion and refer to regular patterns in interaction. These set patterns of interaction are expressed through symbols.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Mary Douglas describes body as a medium through which social structure finds expression. She argues that origins of symbolisation are related to processes of human body.
- ii) According to Douglas describes body as a medium through which social structure finds expression. She argues that origins of symbolisation are related to processes of human body.
- iii) a = 4, b = 1, c = 5, d = 2, e = 3

Check Your Progress 4

- i) Here, Geertz is emphasising the emotional or affective dimension of culture.
- ii) According to Geertz, the particularistic nature of culture places stress on its creative aspects. As culture is constantly created in our daily social interaction, only through learning particular cluster of symbols, we can understand the world we live in.
- iii) The Javanese were manipulating their religious beliefs to interpret the new politico-economic situation in post-revolutionary Java.



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