
UNIT 6 COMPARATIVE SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF RITUAL

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to :

- examine the phenomenon of ritual as it occurs both in the religion as well as everyday sphere,
- to understand what constitutes a ritual, especially as presented by sociologists and anthropologists,
- to appreciate the importance of ritual for those who participate in it as well as for the society.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In our earlier units, we sought to familiarize ourselves with certain sociological explanations in the field of religion. In this unit your attention and enquiry will be drawn to the various theories contributed by the sociologists for studying religious behaviour in the everyday life of a society.

The focus of discussion in this unit is rituals. It is one of the human activities which has drawn the attention of scholars. What is this behaviour displayed by human beings whenever they participate in a religious activity? How have sociologists and anthropologists sought to interpret these human practices as they occur in the religious behaviour of any human group? The present unit will attempt to answer some of these questions.

6.2 WHAT IS A RITUAL?

I am sure all of us, at some stage in life have participated in ritual activity. But we never really thought of interpreting this ritual. What do these rituals mean to the society and individual?

A systematic enquiry of the ritual phenomenon in human society is a field of investigation of fairly recent origins.

A host of scholars from sociology, anthropology, psychology are interested in the field of rituals. They have contributed varied theories and explanations to the understanding of ritual. They study of ritual does not find a distinct area in sociology. It usually forms part of larger studies that focus on religion.

Before we can get down to considering the various definitions of the term ritual, let us very briefly consider what is this activity that is identified as 'ritual'. Nowadays, one often attributes the term ritual to any human activity that is repetitive, patterned and perhaps even monotonous. One thus speaks of—'the ritual of examinations' or the 'ritual of Republic Day parades' or the 'ritualistic character of work'. In all these examples, and many other, the term ritual is used as an adjective to denote the sameness, or the repetitiveness of the particular activity that is being described. Using the term ritual in such a manner is not wrong, as we shall see, such usage of the term contains some important and essential characteristics of the term.

6.2.1 The Nature of Rituals

In the ethnographic description of rituals in diverse cultures given by scholars like Edward Tylor, James Frazer, Bronislaw Malinowski, Emile Durkheim and many others, the term ritual is used to denote two separate sets of activities.

- i) The first is strictly in the sphere of religious practice and refers to a wide range of religious activities viz. prayer, ceremonial worship, chanting, a range of gestures and movements, activities with sacred object, etc. all done with the specific intention of spiritual communication with a Supreme Being. Thus, the various religious activities and practices engaged in by the Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, etc. in their respective temples, mosques, churches and *gurdwaras*, etc. may be referred to as rituals.

Besides, in their respective homes, practitioners of a faith also conduct religious activities that are referred to as rituals. Thus the Hindu family performing '*pooja*' on certain occasions, the Muslims family performing '*namaz*' at the call of the muzeinin, or the Christian family reciting the '*rosary*' at the hour of prayers are all rituals performed by these believers in their respective homes.

- ii) A second set of human activities that are identified as rituals are those associated with individual life cycle as they move from one social setting to the next.

In all societies, from birth to death an individual passes through several stages demarcating a transition from one stage of life to the next. Such transitions, are often marked by activity which is ritualistic in character. Sociologists and anthropologists term such rituals as 'rites of passage'. The next two units of this block i.e. Unit 7 and Unit 8 will give you examples of such rituals as 'Rites of Passage' from African society and South-East Asia society.

Indian society with its diversity of communities and cultures reveals a rich variety of such rituals performed at birth, puberty, adulthood, marriage, death, etc. (See ESO-02, Block 4 and ESO-05, Unit 28 and 29 for a detailed discussion on this). One must however, note that even in such ritual activity, the spiritual or the sacred

dimension is very much present. Invocations are always addressed to some sacred beings for granting a smooth transition to the next stage in the cycle of life.

These two sets of activities are what scholars refer to as rituals in their descriptions of religious practices. In this specific usage of the term, rituals constitute a major component of any organised religion. It is this specific usage of term 'ritual' that will constitute the frame of reference in discussing the comparative theories of rituals. We shall begin our discussion on these theories by first working at some of the important definitions offered by scholars concerning the term ritual.

6.2.2 The Definitions of Rituals

Developing a definition of the term ritual is not something on which scholars agree. The reasons for this are many, for one, the theoretical orientation from within which the scholar is working would prompt one sort of definition as opposed to another from some other theoretical orientation. Secondly, depending on what the scholar wants to know about ritual, a definition of ritual would be developed to suit such a purpose. Thus for example, there are those who ask the question—What does a ritual do for those who participate in it? And there are others who would ask the question—What does ritual say for those participating in it? Both questions have a distinct difference in emphasis and would consequently develop distinctly different definitions of the term ritual.

Yet again, there is the added problem, that most scholars discussing rituals have in fact, dealt at greater length on the larger issue of ritual interpretation, rather than the actual phenomena of ritual. Thus in defining ritual these scholar's understanding of religion played a decisive influence.

Notwithstanding such difficulties, it is still possible to present some important definitions of rituals as put forward by some of these scholars working on the subject of religion and its relationship of society.

In the previous Block on **The Study of Religion**, both evolutionary and functional theories of religion were discussed. These theories must serve as background for our own discussion on the definitions of rituals.

1) The Evolutionist understanding of ritual

The early evolutionary scholars on religion like Tylor, Frazer, Morgan and others located religion like most other institutions of society within an evolutionary mould. Both Tylor and Frazer were inclined to explain religion as an evolving belief system. Rituals are understood as the first stage of this evolution. This original stage was termed as 'magic' or the pre-religious stage or the animistic stage by Tylor. He observed rituals as resulting from the cult of the dead—the early need of human beings understanding dreams, hallucinations, sleep and death led them to believe in a soul or an indwelling personality which became the object of ritual worship. This indwelling personality in the animistic stage is extended outwards to cover animals, plants and even inanimate practices. Tylor in his book **Primitive Culture** (1958) goes on to define rituals as practices in this animistic stage that are highly emotive, expressive to the point of being dramatic, non-rational and rooted in magical beliefs.

The evolutionist definition of ritual proved problematic in two important aspects. Firstly, it was an intellectual perception of rituals as perceived within the larger framework of religion itself undergoing evolution. According to Tylor this evolution involves the transition from magic and animism to religion and finally to science. Secondly Tylor restricted this observations of ritual practices to the first human forms of society, and from a scientific standpoint such conceptions were not only speculative and conjectural, they also failed to explain rituals as they existed in the organised religions of the world.

2) Functionalist understanding of ritual

Starting out from a different orientation to religion and ritual, Emile Durkheim began by asking—What does religion do to those who participate in its beliefs and practices? This functionalist approach (as discussed in Unit 3 Block 1) sought to establish an interrelationship between society and religion. Durkheim (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912-1954) pointed out that all human societies are divided into the opposing domains of 'sacred' and 'profane'. These two domains were separate and exclusive. The domain of the sacred consisted of things set aside and forbidden. The domain of the profane consisted of things not so regarded and belonging to the ordinary level.

According to Durkheim, ritual was that human behaviour that takes place in the domain of the sacred. By specifying the particular location within which religious activities occur, Durkheim laid the grounds for an empirical examination of the religious sphere as well as the relationship that practices and beliefs within this domain had with the larger human society.

It is this empirical emphasis to the study of religion, that brought about a substantive increase in anthropological field studies of the domain of the sacred. Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard and others all studied the religious beliefs and practices of various tribal societies with a view to further examining the inter-relationship between society and religion.

Improving on the definition of rituals offered by Durkheim, and orienting the meaning of rituals within the theory of the Social System, Talcott Parsons, reviewing the work done in the *Sociology of Religion* observes that rituals are human practices within the realm of the sacred that are characterized by their essential non-rational or transcendental nature. What Parsons means by this is that unlike human rational behaviour that occurs within a means-end relationship, ritual behaviour exists outside the means-end relations. They are an end in themselves.

3) Psychoanalytic understanding of ritual

Using almost the same ideas of means-end relationship in understanding human activity Sigmund Freud in his book *Totem and Taboo* (1918) defines rituals as those notably non-rational or formalised symbolic belief of any kind which are distinct from pragmatic, belief that is rationally linked to empirical goals.

Further, distinguishing ritual behaviour from both the scholastic and the common sense, Freud tried to bring out the essential neurotic component of ritual behaviour within religious practices. The basic emphasis in this Freudian perception of ritual is the understanding of how the conscious mind interacts with the world of the sacred. According to Freud, such behaviour is 'neurotic' because it defies any empirical pragmatic explanations. He even sought to see religion as a practice of 'obsessive collective neurosis'. Ritual behaviour was that practice in which both individual and group activity most explicitly brings out this neurosis in the realm of the sacred.

4) The symbolic component of ritual

Treating rituals as symbolic components of a culture, Social and Cultural Anthropology have tried to provide a new interpretation of religious practices. The Cultural Anthropologist, Edmund Leach defined rituals as culturally oriented behavioral patterns which seek to make a symbolic statement about human beings relationship with a Supreme Being.

The symbolic value of rituals was for long stressed by scholars of culture. Leach's definition is important because it stresses the fact that these cultural patterns serve as symbolic statements. In other words, besides looking at what rituals do, Leach is also trying to understand, what rituals say. In bringing out the significance of these symbolic statements, Leach points out that they were derived from the groups social and cultural life. In doing so, Leach, like Durkheim before him, is seeking to emphasise the close interrelationship between society and religion in the domain of religious practices.

Let us now understand the major characteristics of rituals in the next section (Section 6.3).

6.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF RITUALS

In this Section we will study the important characteristics of rituals and what components they include.

6.3.1 Ritual Needs

Let us begin by looking at the ritual at the manifest level i.e., at the level of the existing social reality. Let us know what are the various needs are, that anyone would be having when working at a ritual? Rituals needs includes :

- i) The ritual space
- ii) The participants
- iii) The ritual objects
- iv) Verbal and/or bodily actions

These four components are basic to all rituals in any religion. Let us briefly consider each of them.

i) The Ritual Space

This is a well-defined setting characterized mainly as the domain of the sacred. While in most cases such spaces are permanent and identified by members of the faith as such, there are also temporary settings defined as ritual spaces, during the occurrence of a ritual in such a space.

ii) The Participants

These include all the individuals participating in a ritual. In most ritual settings these would consist of a general audience made up of believers of the faith and the priest performing the main activities of the ritual together with their assistants or helpers. Each of the participant act or has a clearly defined role and is called upon to perform a specific function during the period of the activity.

iii) Rituals Objects

These generally refer to a range of objects that are used during any ritual. As objects whose meaning is basically centered around the fact that they exist in the domain of the sacred, these objectives also come to acquire a sacred character about them.

iv) Verbal and/or bodily actions

Every ritual involves a range of bodily actions from kneeling down, bowing, etc. to

verbal responses whether these be mere recitation of prayers or the chanting and singing of hymns. What is of important is these body actions and oral incantations is that they follow a definite pattern or sequence, and the adherence to such a pattern or sequence is quite rigidly maintained.

Activity 1

Read Section 6.3 and its subsections. Can you think of any other type of ritual? Discuss with students in the study centre and note down your findings.

There is yet another set of characteristics that have to be pointed out about rituals. These concern the nature of activity that occurs during a ritual. Four such characteristics have been mentioned by M. Eliade in his discussions on rituals (*The Sacred and the Profane*, 1959). He observes that rituals are those conscious and voluntary, repetitive and stylised symbolic body actions that are centered on cosmic structures and/or sacred presences. Verbal behaviour is also included in this set of body action.

Let us take some of the major aspects of this characteristics of rituals for further discussion.

6.3.2 Ritual as Conscious and Voluntary

Ritual behaviour is not part of the common behaviour of individuals in everyday life. On the contrary, participation in ritual behaviour demands a conscious engagement on the part of these believers to submit to very highly patterned rules and roles which conform the self to all others who have embodied these 'typical' roles in the past. Hence the self must consciously sacrifice its individual autonomy, its freedom to be except that which is demanded of it within the ritual. Consider for example the Christian ritual of 'Mass'—here what we observe that activity from moment to moment the participants share in a common pattern of gestures, movements, vocal responses, etc. Such involvement reflects the conscious nature of the believers participation within the religious experience. It must be kept in mind that there are many types of ritual activity. Yet the rituals generally involve a raising of consciousness to a greater or 'higher' level.

The voluntaristic component of ritual must be understood from the larger context of ritual being part of a religious system of beliefs and practices. The believer of a faith voluntarily submits to his/her personal will to be collective will of the group engaged in the ritual. It is only through this voluntaristic submission of the self that the believer can enter the realm of the sacred to achieve communion with that which is 'divine'.

6.3.3 Ritual as Repetitions and Stylised Bodily Actions

At the manifest level, rituals are clearly and evidently expression that the human body articulates in the act of worship. The human body becomes an extremely important organ of religious experience i.e. not only does it pattern itself in terms of movements and gestures within a given religious practice but it also becomes the subject of internalising the experience contained in the given religious practices. The importance of the human body is evident from the fact that from childhood onwards the infant builds up an understanding of the world, out of sensory motor experience. This understanding underlies and sustains the adult experience of space, time, number and personal identify. Therefore within ritual the stylised patterned and repetitious nature of actions (for e.g., the chanting of mantras in a temple or the offering of the 'Namaaz' by the Muslims) brings out not only the patterned movements of the body but also serve as vehicles or communication through which the body relates to the sacred. Further, while such repetitive patterns might seem

as being monotonous and meaningless for an outside observer, for the participants themselves they constitute both the form and substance i.e. the implicit meanings that the religious experience must have for them.

Box 6.01

This stylised and patterned behaviour that gets represented in ritual falls into a range of expressions at one end of the spectrum the stylised and patterned behaviour as gets represented with the limited experience of ritual in a set religious experience e.g., the offering of mass. At the other end of the spectrum is a form of ritual activity incorporating the stylised patterned behaviour and circumscribes the entire life of an individual. One observes this extreme form of religious practice when one sees certain religious groups like the monastic Christian orders or the Buddhist monks in their monasteries or the Sanyasis in Hinduism.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Freud tries to bring out the essential component of ritual behaviour within religions.
- ii) Which sociologist observed that ritual behaviour exists outside the mean end relations?

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- iii) Who said that ritual resulted from the cult of the dead?

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6.4 TYPES OF RITUALS

The occasion of rituals in human society are both varied and diverse. Human nature characterised by its weakness and limited capacities is constantly in need of supernatural intervention in the various activities humans are engaged in within their everyday lives.

The ethnographic literature on the subject provided various types of classifications to contain the various types of rituals in human society. Earlier on, it was pointed out, that two sets of activities are referred to as rituals by scholars studying ritual phenomena. These include :

- i) The rituals associated with the religious practices of any organised religions; and
- ii) The Rites of Passage or rituals performed by a community on various occasions in their life to mark the importance of a particular event in their lives such as rituals at the time of birth, marriage, death, seasonal ritual in nature such as sowing time, harvesting time, etc.

Both sets of ritual activities may be classified on the basis of intentions underlying the same. At the comparative level, in which classification are developed by observing general features of rituals in diverse cultures, we shall provide two such classificatory types.

According to the Social Anthropologist, Evans Pritchard, rituals can be classified into two main types, based on the intention and occasion during which they occur.

6.4.1 Confirmatory Rituals

These are rituals that are concerned with the changes of social status and those concerned with the interaction of social groups. Thus rituals performed at the time of birth, marriage, death, etc. tend to be present in all cultures of the world and they symbolise a change in the status of the individual in any social group. Further, rituals concerned with group interaction, are those that symbolically emphasise the solidarity and the interdependence of various groups for the continued existence of the community. Individuals and groups participating in such rituals display a high degree of emotional solidarity with the larger community. In modern times, rituals in a Temple, Mosque, Church, etc. emphasise such group solidarity. Confirmatory rituals as the term itself would suggest can be explained as rituals that emphasise the identity, integrity and solidarity of the social group.

6.4.2 Piacular Rituals

Evans Pritchard categorized this second type as rituals concerned with the moral and physical well being of the individual or the social group. The need to emphasise this state of moral or physical well being arises from the fact that occasions arise in the life of an individual and group when such a state of moral and physical well being is threatened. An individual faced with catastrophe, an epidemic, or the failure of rains, etc. are situations that call for the performance of Piacular rituals. Such rituals incorporate intentions such as appeasement and atonement. While modern societies with their growing dependence on science and technology, might to some extent diminish the existence of piacular rituals, in traditional folk societies, Piacular rituals form an important part of the ritual behaviour in the life of the individual and community.

6.4.3 Other Types of Rituals

Using a similar criterion of intention but developing a more descriptive classification of rituals, based on their functions, Anthony F. Wallace in his *Religion : An Anthropological View (1959)* proposed the following types :

A. **Technology Rituals** : The functions of these rituals is essentially aimed at controlling non-human nature. Among this type are :

Divination Rituals : seeking out the cause of affliction, injustice and whether human or otherwise, as well as suggesting remedies for the same.

Intensification Rituals : meant to increase material resources such as increase of food, success in hunting, fishing, etc.

Protective Rituals : meant to avert any form of affliction, misfortune or catastrophe, etc.

B. **Therapy and Anti-Therapy Rituals** : The function of these rituals is to promote the well being of individuals and groups and include :

Curative Rituals : meant to cure individual illnesses or afflictions.

Witchcraft and Sorcery : meant to cause affliction or injustice on others.

C. **Ideology Rituals** : The function of such rituals is aimed at the control of the Social Group, its values and traditions. Among these are :

Rites of Passage : Rituals marking the transition in Individual status within the life cycle. These rituals are ubiquitous and part of all religions. As we can see there are many types of ritual for different kinds of situations.

Social Intensification Rituals : Rituals meant to renew group solidarity life Friday prayers among the Muslims.

Rebellion Rituals : Rituals that are meant to allow for catharsis amongst group members.

D. **Salvation Rituals** : The function of such rituals is to help individuals to cope with personal difficulties. Among these are :

Shamanic Rituals : Rituals performed by individuals claiming supernatural powers that may be put to good or bad ends,

Expiation Rituals : meant for forgiveness and repentance of individual misdeeds.

E. **Revitalisation Rituals** : The function of such Rituals is to cure society's difficulties and identify crisis e.g. the millenarian movements.

It is important to note that while the classification provided above is extensive in its categorisation of rituals, it may so happen that a single ritual may come under more than one type of ritual. Such an overlap in the classification of rituals is unavoidable given the integrative thrust of ritual activity in human society.

6.5 THEORIES OF RITUAL

Developing a comparative theory is an attempt by scholars to search for generalisations and universals that go beyond the specific boundaries of a particular culture. Thus comparative theory establishes their generalisations after surveying a vast amount of empirical observations from a wide variety of cultures. It is the common threads or the essential features of a phenomena that finally get represented as a comparative theory.

In this section we will discuss various theories on ritual.

6.5.1 Evolutionary Theories

The earliest efforts at developing theories of ritual were the efforts of the 19th century cultural evolutionists viz. Edward Tylor and James Frazer. In both Tylor's '*Primitive Culture*' (1871) 1958 and Frazer's '*The Golden Bough*' (1890) 1950 there is an effort to provide for an intellectual approach to the understanding of ritual behaviour. Neither Tylor nor Frazer used the term ritual when referring to the practices that we have identified and labelled as rituals. But Tylor observed that the world of human beliefs as passing through three stages—viz. Magic, Religion and Science and it was the practices the primitive man engaged in the stage of magic that interested those scholars.

It is now recognized that these early scholars of religion made an important contribution by bringing religion into sharp focus. All the subsequent sociologists and anthropologists who wrote on religion after Frazer and Tylor had the task of refining the existing theories and providing further inputs into the area.

Such practices were identified by Tylor as being magico-religious practices and he attributed the reasons for these magico-religious practices to the fact that man's intellect needed some form of explanation to understand phenomena like sleep, death, fate, etc. Such a need led to the creation of what Tylor termed as animism. The original form of magico-religious behaviour.

Rituals within animism result from human beings tendency to attribute a spirit or indwelling personality to the world of animate and inanimate objects. It is the

practice evolved out of such an intellectual exercise by primitive man that gives rise to the forms of ritual. It is important to note that Tylor emphasised magic and magical practices as the basis through which ritual worship evolved because according to him there was a distinct difference between the stage of magic and that of religion. Magical practices according to Tylor formed the first cohesive institutional basis for the emergence of societies. In these magical practices or what Frazer called 'Pseudo Science', primitive man was developing systems of explanations through which both, individually and groupwise they could come to terms with the various unknown realities that they had to live with.

The institution of magical practices is thus very much located in the realm of the spiritual and in primitive man's efforts to understand this spiritual. Tylor's and Frazer's observations of rituals as magico-religious practices or pseudo-science are essentially based on a conjecture to explain the origin of religion. Very little ethnographic evidence exists to prove or disprove such theoretical conjectures. But it is important to note that by making distinctions between magic and religion, Tylor set the ground for a future enquiry on the scope and identity of religious practices.

6.5.2 Functionalist Theories

If the nineteenth century evolutionists who studied religion were criticised for an over emphasis on the origins of religion and ritual, scholars on religion who followed them were inclined to shift the emphasis on the study of religions and rituals to answering the questions—what do rituals do in human society or what they ought to do in human society. Such an enquiry which is also termed as functionalism in Sociological theory was an approach adopted by both Emile Durkheim and Malinowski. In his book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1954) Durkheim observed that in all human societies there exists a dichotomy between the world of the sacred and the world of the profane. Using this dichotomy of sacred and profane, Durkheim put forward a theory of religion in which religious beliefs and practices are seen to have a social function for the community that follow them, Durkheim identified this social function as the integrative function of society.

To illustrate Durkheim focuses on the Arunta Tribesmen of Western Australia whose elaborate religious ceremonies of worship of their totem symbolised the community worshipping itself.

The ritual thus took on the twin function of reinforcing collective values and reaffirming the community among individuals. In other words, Durkheim's emphasis on religion and rituals as an integrative force in society which must be seen as part of his idea of the 'collective consciousness of a society'. Religious beliefs and practices are the mechanism by which the collective consciousness of a society gets institutionalised and is reproduced from one generation to the next. Rituals in such a context must be seen as creating the ground for group solidarity amongst the individuals participating in them. The elaborate procedure in which individuals come to take upon themselves various roles performing various gestures and movements, engage in various forms of vocal recitations, chanting and so on are all means through which rituals bring about a sense of group solidarity among its participants. Through rituals, Durkheim tried to emphasise that the participants acquire the knowledge of what is good, required, accepted and desired by the community and in this sense brought the individual closer to the collective identity of the group.

Further Durkheim observed that at the symbolic level, rituals represented the collective identity of the social group. Thus, the sacred objects in ritual practices were sacred because they symbolized the collective identity of the group. Likewise the stylized pattern of movements and gestures should be perceived as symbolic forms whose

meanings and values were known to the members of the social group. These meanings may not be known to every member of a society. Instead there are usually priests whose specialization is in ritual, whose function it is to disseminate meanings. This emphasis on the importance of the social group in the understanding of ritual, is perhaps the most important aspect of Durkheim's explanation of rituals and their relationship to society. In doing so however, he argued that magic could not be in the domain of sacred as it was not obligatory on the part of the community. Magic does not have a set of beliefs which a church has—he argued further.

In general however, Durkheim's theory of rituals sought to establish a universal character of rituals in all human cultures. The domain of the sacred and the profane existed in all cultures that claimed to have a religion. The problem however, was that Durkheim never sought to elaborate on what exactly were the criterions on which the distinction between sacred and profane was to be made. Were there a set of sacred objects and symbolic forms that could be sacred to all cultures? Or was this distinction embodied in the mind of the individual participant taking part in the ritual? Or was the distinction a mere label of convenience developed by the European mind unable to explain the complex phenomenon as it occurred in non-European societies? Durkheim himself recognised a number of these problems in his distinction of sacred and profane. It was the fieldwork studies of later day anthropologists that sought to resolve some of these queries concerning the distinction of sacred and profane. Yet we must remember that later scholars have pointed out that the distinction between sacred and profane may not be absolutely distinct.

6.5.3 Field Work Investigations of Malinowski

Anthropological field studies of non-European cultures at the beginning of this century enriched the theory of rituals by actually investigating the domain of the sacred as it actually exists in the everyday life of tribal society. Important amongst such studies are the explanations offered by Malinowski and Evans Pritchard. Malinowski's Functionalist approach to the study of ritual is based on his field investigations of the Trobriand Islanders in the *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922). Malinowski's functional theory of religion has already been discussed in a previous unit. Like Durkheim, the basic thrust of Malinowski's approach to rituals is that rituals have a social function for the community in which they take place. He disagreed with Tylor's reasoning that rituals are the result of primitive man's rationality at coming to terms with unknown and unexplainable forces in nature. The rituals of the Trobriand Islanders were neither the result of speculation nor the product of an underdeveloped intellect. In their everyday life, the Trobriand people were quite capable at distinguishing between those acts that they considered magical and those that belonged to the realm of common sense or technological activities.

The magic practices of the Trobriand Islanders had also an accompanying set of beliefs which were very much a part of the community and even if they did not have anything like a church as perceived by the European mind, their magical beliefs did create a strong bond of solidarity within the community.

The social function of ritual according to Malinowski was to create and enhance emotional solidarity within the community. Every individual or group in their everyday life has to grapple with a range of anxieties, sufferings, fears, moral problems of good and bad, problems arising out of severe problems such as epidemics, death etc. In such moments of tensions and emotional strain, rituals helps reaffirm solidarity with the group by creating a sense of security and oneness with other members of the group. The experience of a ritual thus unites them through its systematized and symbolic actions, which create a new integrative state of mind for the members of the group.

Ritual in the above sense performed both explanatory and validating functions. As an explanatory function Malinowski pointed out that rituals explained the larger 'why' questions of life and existence, or explanations about the uncontrollable forces of nature, or explanations of providence concerning the maintenance and welfare of the group, or explanations of the life cycle concerning birth and death. Such queries are to be found in all cultures, in primitive societies. Rituals as symbolic expression offer explanations to such queries for members of the social group.

As a validating function, rituals support and affirm the continued existence of the structure of the social group. Thus, the social relations, the institutions, the values, the goals of the social group etc. are supported by ritual practices so that such aspects of the social group are seen as righteous and rituals uphold with the threat of sanctions what is considered as desirable in the conduct of individuals towards the social group.

Malinowski also emphasised the interrelated and interdependent nature of rituals in primitive society. In the Trobriand Islands, he observed that the rituals linked up to every facet of the social life of the community. In the political sphere there were ritual and ceremonies for the physical well-being and strength of the leadership. In the economic sphere, rituals represented the continuity of certain forms of property relations, or rituals seeking divine intervention for a successful harvest or to avert some natural catastrophe etc. In short we can say that in the life of these primitive societies, rituals play a prominent role at any point of time in the life of the individual or social group, that is recognised as being crucial.

There does exist a great deal of similarity in the ideas of both Durkheim and Malinowski with regard to rituals. It must be remembered however, that Malinowski laid the real foundation for the scientific examination of ritual practices by actually studying these in the context of the Trobriand Islanders. In doing so he was able to not only prove Durkheim's views on magic as wrong, he was even able to empirically prove the distinct domains of sacred and profane amongst the community of the Trobriand people. Further, while Durkheim sought to emphasise integration as the basic social function of ritual practices, Malinowski emphasised emotional solidarity as the key social function of rituals within a social group.

6.5.4 Evans-Prichard—The African Experience

Finally, at a time when fieldwork based studies were becoming more and more important to anthropological investigation, Evans Pritchard's study of witchcraft among the Azande came to a very different perception of ritual behaviour and the domain of the sacred as observed amongst the Azande tribe. (*Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande*, 1937). Pritchard's observations do not necessarily contribute to a theory of rituals but they certainly make an important difference to the distinction of the sacred and profane as provided by Durkheim and further proved by Malinowski.

Pritchard observed that amongst the Azande tribe the conception of 'ritual as well as the clear distinction between sacred and profane' is both vague and confusing. Seen from the individual point of view, Pritchard observes, it becomes very difficult to distinguish when a particular activities takes on the character of a ritual and when it is not. Thus, for the Azande tribe, blowing burning barkcloth smoke into a termite mound while holding magical plants in one hand might mean both an ordinary technological activity to keep away the termites, as well as a magical rite in which the tribe explain the barkcloth as being termite medicine. In such a situation Pritchard points out that much depends on how the anthropologist categorises his or her observations, this in turn is based on how the European mind has come to classify what is ritual and what is not.

Box 6.02

Concerning the distinction between sacred and profane, Pritchard observes that amongst the Azande, such clear cut distinctions simply do not exist. Categories of explanations that one would normally associate with the realm of the sacred are at the same time used in the very same way to denote a range of activities in the domain of the profane. Thus the Azande would use the term 'soul' when explaining what is happening during a magical rite, which is justified in that such an entity belongs to the domain of the sacred. But in the same manner they would use the term soul to explain the process by which a seed put in the ground germinates to become a plant. In fact, for Evans-Pritchard the rituals and the beliefs of the Azande clearly denote that for these tribes, the natural and the supernatural, the sacred and the profane, the ritual act and the non-ritual act are all inextricably intervened in their everyday life.

The observations of Azande witchcraft clearly question Durkheim's claim that the distinction between the sacred and the profane were universal to all human cultures. The problems of developing criteria to distinguish the sacred from the profane has continued to bother anthropologists and sociologists. What Evans Pritchard was able to do was to emphasise the culture-specific context of the activities being referred to as magic or rituals. It also stressed the need to find out how individuals from a community perceived and explained what they understood as the meaning and practice of activities others label as rituals, as well as, how they understood the meaning of sacred within their culture.

6.5.5 Symbolic Dimension of Ritual

One of the important aspect of rituals emphasised by Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim, Malinowski as well as other scholars working on rituals was the symbolic dimensions of rituals. As symbolic expressions, what do rituals have to say? This is an area in which structural anthropology has also attempted to provide some explanations. You have already discussed the structuralist approach to religion in a previous unit. Unlike the functionalist approach to rituals which understands them primarily in terms of the social functions they fulfil in a society, the structuralist points out that rituals need not be reduced to their social functions but they can be studied in themselves as systems of symbolic expressions that are internally consistent and reflect the logic of the primitive mind in its effort to explain the unknown. The structuralist would point out that the division of the world into the domain of sacred and the domain of profane, is in keeping with the structural rule followed by the primitive mind in naming and classifying the world. Thus, sacred and profane are binary opposites resulting from the structuring of reality by the unconscious. In other words, the underlying symbolic value of rituals must be understood in terms of their relationship with the sacred as opposed to the profane.

Edmond Leach goes on to add that within the context of these oppositions, rituals are symbolic statements derived from the social and cultural dimensions of a community.

Finally, there is one more approach that we must consider in this study of rituals and that is the Psychoanalytic approach.

Activity 2

Do you think that sacred and profane are absolutely distinct? Talk to other students at the study centre and note down your findings.

6.5.6 The Psychoanalytic Approach

The Psychoanalytic theory on rituals is best articulated by Sigmund Freud in his book *Totem and Taboo* (1918) wherein he discussed the primeval manifestations of the oedipal myth. According to Freud, totemism, the original form of religious behaviour comes into being as a result of patricide in the primitive groups. The 'father' in the primitive group was an authoritarian patriarch who reserved his rights over all the resources of the group both human and natural. This led to jealousy among the other male members of the group (sons), who then conspired to kill their father. Having committed the patricide they were overcome with horror and feeling of guilt and shame. To rid themselves of this collective guilt, they create a totem which is a personification of the father image and begin to worship it with the accompaniment of various rituals. The rituals then play the psychologically useful role of an elaborate laying out of the shame that had engulfed every individual in society. Freud observes that ritual behaviour is at the same time non-rational and exists outside a pragmatic objective consideration of means-end relationship. Thus, while rituals might be seen to have components of group solidarity they are in the final instance, a pathological outcome contained in the collective neurosis of a society.



The symbolic value of rituals must be understood in relation with the sacred as opposed to the profane.

Check Your Progress 2

i) Who wrote the book 'Totem and Taboo'?

.....

ii) Write five lines on what Evans-Pritchard had to say about rituals.

.....

.....

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.....
.....
- iii) Which sociologist emphasised the importance of social group in the understanding of ritual?
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6.6 THE IMPORTANCE OF RITUALS

We go back to a point we made in the introduction. In traditional agrarian societies where the social structure is comparatively less differentiated, religion tends to be intricately woven into the very fabric of the social order. We must consider the importance of rituals in the Indian society, against the background of such an observation. Despite the continuous growth of industrialisation and urbanisation, large sections of Indian society continue to exist as basically peasant societies guided by their traditions and customs. Even in the metropolises of the country, the majority of inhabitants continue to offer resistance to giving up their old traditions and practices. In such a society, religion plays a very dominant influence. Ritual behaviour tends to take place on various occasions and for a variety of purposes. They intervene at various moments in the everyday life of the individual and the group. Indian society is a mosaic of religious communities and hence the magnitude of ritual behaviour in our society is very great.

One way of appreciating the importance of rituals in such a society is to restate the views of Durkheim and of Malinowski. Rituals are important because they create social integration of the group and they provide for emotional solidarity amongst members of the group.

The transition of Indian society from a traditional agrarian society to a modern society, based on democratic secular pattern has brought to the foreground the problem of compatibility amongst various religious communities having to exist together within a larger secular framework maintained by the State. In its political manifestation the problem is witnessed in the way religious beliefs and practices are used for political ends by various political parties within the country. This has led to heightening of religious sensitivity amongst growing sections of the population. Thus we observe that in modern Indian society, besides the importance of both integration and emotional solidarity, ritual behaviour also reinforces a sense of



Holi festivities and rituals in Baarsana village near Mathura (U.P.)

religious identity amongst members of a given religious community. Such efforts at reinforcing the religious identity of a group through ritual behaviour has sometimes threatened the secular fabric of modern Indian society.

The fact of the matter however is that most scholars of Indian society and culture have maintained that the collective conscience of the Indian society is deeply religious in character. The various religious groups and communities have a life-style and world view that is replete with religious symbolism and ritual practices. In such a situation religion in the form of ritual activities may well be seen to serve as a moral guide to both the individual and the group. Such a moral guide or moral code has indirectly also served towards the continued maintenance of the social order.

Other units in this course will deal more in detail with various religions in the Indian society. You will have an opportunity there to appreciate the importance of rituals in each of these religions. For the present, it will suffice to note that in Indian society rituals are important in the every day life of the various communities because they act as mechanisms for social integration, offer emotional solidarity to group members, regulate moral life within a group and offer both the individual and the group, with a group identity.

6.7 LET US SUM UP

This discussion of comparative theories of ritual have sought to emphasise two major aspects of the discussion on rituals. Firstly we have highlighted the difficulty amongst scholars in defining the ritual activity. While Tylor and the evolutionist associated rituals with magic and animism, the functionalists perceived rituals as activities that take place in the domain of the sacred. The structuralists would see them as attempts of the primitive mind to structure human activity into that which belongs to the realm of the sacred and that which is part of the everyday world.

Secondly we have tried to highlight how the various scholars have tried to explain rituals. For the evolutionists rituals were seen as primitive attempts to rationally explain the various unknown forces acting upon them in their life. Among the functionalists rituals are seen as having social functions for the social group whether they are of social integration or of emotional solidarity. Amongst the structuralists rituals are seen as system of symbolic expressions derived from the social and cultural order. Finally Freudian psychoanalysis has explained rituals as expressions of collective neurosis resulting from feelings of guilt and shame amongst the group members.

6.8 KEY WORDS

Affliction : Serious, often chronic maladies.

Animism : A belief that animate and inanimate beings possess a soul.

Empirical : Verifiable experience by logical deduction and reasoning.

Neurotic : Disease of the nervous system.

Pragmatic : A thing or an idea has significance if it has useful or practical consequences.

6.9 FURTHER READINGS

Genep, Arnold van (1909) 1960, *The Rites of Passage*, London : Routledge.

Durkheim, Emile (1912) 1954, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, London : Allen and Unwin.

Leach, Edmund R. (1961), *Rethinking Anthropology*, London School of Economics and Political Science, Monographs on Social Anthropology, No. 22. London : Athlone.

David L. Sills (ed.), (1968) *Ritual*, pages 520-526 in '*International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*' Vol. 13, New York : Macmillan.

6.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Freud tried to bring out the essential **neurotic** component of ritual behaviour within religions.
- ii) Talcott Parson observed that ritual behaviour existed outside the means-end relations.
- iii) Tylor thought that rituals resulted from the cult of the dead.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Sigmund Freud wrote the book '*Totem and Taboo*'.
- ii) Questioning the claims of Durkheim that the distinction between the sacred and the profane were universal to all human culture, Evans-Pritchard argues that among the Azande tribe there is no clear distinction between sacred and profane. Pritchard observes that it is very difficult to distinguish when a particular activity takes on the character of a ritual and when it does not. Thus for Azande tribe blowing burning barkcloth smoke into a termite mound while holding a magical plant in one hand, might mean both an ordinary technological activity to keep away the termites, as well as a magical rite in which the tribe explain the barkcloth as termite medicine. In such a situation Pritchard points out that much depends on how the anthropologist categorizes his or her observations. This in turn is based on how the European mind has come to classify what is ritual and what is not.
- iii) Durkheim was one of the first few sociologists to emphasise the importance of a social group in the understanding of ritual and their relationship to society.

UNIT 7 RITUAL-I : A CASE STUDY FROM AFRICA

Structure

- 7.0 Objectives
- 7.1 Introduction
- 7.2 Ndembu Society
 - 7.2.1 Geographical Setting and Economic Life
 - 7.2.2 Matrilineal Descent and Virilocal Residence
 - 7.2.3 Types of Ndembu Rituals
- 7.3 'Mukanda'—The Rite of Circumcision
 - 7.3.1 The Stage of Induction
 - 7.3.2 The Stage of Seclusion
 - 7.3.3 The Rites of Return
- 7.4 Turner's Analysis of 'Mukanda'
- 7.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 7.6 Key Words
- 7.7 Further Readings
- 7.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

7.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you should be able to

- describe the physical and social setting of the Ndembu of Zambia
- describe the Mukanda or circumcision ritual practised by the Ndembu
- summarise Victor Turner's analysis of Mukanda.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The first unit of this block made you familiar with major sociological theories dealing with rituals. This unit, as well as the next one, will deal with case studies which will help you to appreciate the crucial role that rituals play in human society, particularly tribal society. In this unit, we shall be dealing with a case study from Africa. You must by now be familiar with the work of Victor Turner. Turner studied the social structure of the tribal group known as the 'Ndembu' inhabitants of North-West Zambia in South-Central Africa. His extensive field work, conducted mainly in early 1950, culminated in a number of important monographs and articles.

In this unit, we shall concern ourselves with the book entitled *The Forest of Symbols : Aspects of Ndembu Rituals* which is a collection of articles and papers dealing directly and indirectly with aspects of the Ndembu ritual system. Turner has aptly named this work a 'forest'; and it is not within the scope of this unit to examine all the 'trees' in this forest. We shall primarily concern ourselves with Turner's detailed analysis of one particular ritual, namely 'Mukanda' or the initiation rite of boys through circumcision.

Before we describe 'Mukanda', it is important to familiarize ourselves with Ndembu society and understand the different kinds of rituals observed by them. This is what we shall do in the first section. In the second section, we shall describe Mukanda in some detail. The third section will touch upon some of the analytical points made by Turner in his study.

Before we move to the first section, a word of advice is in order. Many of the

names and much of the information you will read about in this unit will seem unfamiliar and sometimes confusing. You should therefore read this unit slowly and carefully. If you do so, you are bound to find Ndembu rituals as fascinating and interesting as Turner did.

7.2 NDEMBU SOCIETY

As has been mentioned earlier, the Ndembu inhabit the North-West region of Zambia in South-Central Africa. (They believe themselves to be the descendants of the great chief 'Mwantivanvwa' of Congo.) In many parts of Zambia, contact with the European and their customs resulted in a disintegration of tribal religions which stressed values like tribal unity, kinship ties and respect for elders. The members of different tribes were increasingly interacting in a non-tribal environment and participating in a modern economic system, seeking employment in new industries and services. Turner was fortunate enough to do his research amongst a people and in a region where the process of religious disintegration as described above was not taking place so swiftly and completely.

7.2.1 Geographical Setting and Economic Life

Turner did his fieldwork in the Mwinilunga territory, which was then inhabited by 18,000 Ndembu. These people were dispersed in scattered villages, containing about a dozen huts each, in an area as vast as 7,000 square miles. This area was mostly woodland, cut through by numerous rivers and streams.

The Ndembu have a subsistence economy. By that we mean that they produce just enough food for their needs. Women grow 'cassava' the staple vegetable food, in addition to finger-millet and maize which is used for making beer. Men hunt—hunting is a strictly male occupation and a number of rituals and taboos are associated with it. Let us now briefly describe the major structural principles along which Ndembu society is organised, namely, matrilineal descent and virilocal residence. This will help us go deeper into the heart of Ndembu rituals and religion. We will then be able to put our attention to studying the type of descent and rituals that are peculiar to Ndembu religion itself.



**Tribal unity, kinship ties and respect for elders are the key religious values of
Zambian's tribals**

7.2.2 Matrilineal Descent and Virilocal Residence

The Ndembu reckon descent from the female line. In other words, a child belongs to the lineage of his/her mother. This is known as matrilineal descent. In most societies with a matrilineal mode of descent, residence tends to be matrilocal. However, in Ndembu society, virilocal residence is the cultural norm, i.e. a male takes his wife to reside in his own village. This combination of matrilineal descent and virilocal residence results in certain complications.

Since a man reckons descent from his mother's line, he is entitled to a share in the property of his matrilineal kin, primary or classificatory. Simultaneously, he has the right to take his wife away from her kin to reside in his village. Thus, women, on whom the social continuity of villages depends, do not live in these villages but their husband's villages. Divorce and widow-remarriage are highly prevalent. So a woman is constantly shifting from village to village. Men try to keep their sons with them as long as they can, and the father-son-relationship is highly ritualised, as we shall see later. Competition results between maternal uncles and fathers for the mother and her children, owing to the strong 'patrilocal' tendencies in this matrilineal society. Spatial mobility of individuals, families and villages is very high in the Ndembu society. Villages are not stable, enduring groupings as they are in Indian society, for example. They are constantly being formed and dissolved. They are in a state of flux. Having briefly described the physical and social setting of the Ndembu, let us now acquaint ourselves with the major subject matter of this unit, the Ndembu ritual system. It is clear then that the whole concept and ideology of the Ndembu is quite different from societies in which the village is a stable unit of analysis, and not in flux.

7.2.3 Types of Ndembu Rituals

Victor Turner did 21½ years of fieldwork in Mwinilunga, during which time he observed, attended and gathered information about many Ndembu rituals. As he says, "It was an astonishing and enriching experience to note the contrast between the relatively simple and monotonous economic and domestic life of these hunters and cultivators and the ordered arrangement and colourful symbolism of their religious life." (Turner, 1967:87), Ndembu rituals are basically of two types according to Turner, namely : 1) life crises rituals and 2) rituals of affliction.

1) **Life-crises rituals** : These mark "an important point in the physical or social development of an individual such as birth, puberty or death." (Turner, 1967:7). In all types of societies, a number of rituals exist which mark the shift from one stage of life and social status to another. These 'crisis' ceremonies are concerned not only with the individuals around whom they are centered, but they also mark changes in various social relationships. To take an example from Indian society, the rituals of marriage mark a change in a person's social status. He/she is no more just a son or daughter, but a husband or wife. Relationships with parents, with siblings and friends undergo subtle changes as a result of this life-crisis ritual. The phase of irresponsible childhood and adolescence is over and the individual becomes a 'family man or woman'. Life-crisis rituals of the Ndembu include the initiation ceremonies of boys and girls. The form and purpose of these rituals differs with gender. Boys are circumcised (the foreskin of the male sex organ, (the penis) is removed) but the corresponding procedure, clitoridectomy (cutting off the female's clitoris) is not performed for girls. The initiation ceremony for girls called 'Nkang's' involves a day-long ordeal, during which the girl has to lie absolutely still for an entire day, covered with a blanket beneath a tree known as 'milk-tree'. Boys are circumcised collectively. Boys are initiated before puberty whilst the girls are initiated at the onset of puberty.

The main purpose of the initiation rite for boys is the inculcation of tribal values, hunting skills and sexual instruction, whilst the girls' initiation rites symbolise preparation for marriage and motherhood. Initiation qualifies a man to enter hunting cults and a woman to enter fertility cults. Whilst men's role as hunters is highly ritualised, women's role as cultivators is not emphasised. In a nutshell, initiation rites stress productive activity for men and reproductive activity for women.

However, one of the tribal values that permeates both the rites is that of respect for elders.

Activity 1

Identify any one life crisis ritual in your society. Describe the ceremonies involved and the changes they mark in the life of the participants. Write an essay of about 500 words and compare it, if possible with the essays of other students at your Study Centres.

2) **Rituals of Affliction** : Rituals of 'affliction' are roots in the major theme of Ndembu religious life, namely that; classes or misfortunes are associated with the activities of the spirits of the dead of "shades". It is believed that shades of dead relatives come out of their graves to trouble or afflict their kinsfolk because they (the shades) have been forgotten, neglected or displeased. Being "caught" or afflicted by a shade makes an individual, the centre of a great ritual gathering. If cured, one can become a minor "doctor" and later help to cure other similarly afflicted. As Turner says, "the way to religious fame is through affliction" (Turner, 1967 : 10). There are three types of applications identified by the Ndembu. These are as follows:

- i) A hunter's shade may cause problems in hunting;
- ii) A women's shade may cause reproductive disorders (like excessive menstrual bleeding, repeated abortions and infertility) in her kinswomen;
- iii) Shades of both sexes may cause illnesses like pains, shivering, loss of weight etc. to kin of either sex.

To handle these afflictions corresponding sets of rituals exist, namely, 'hunters cults' for i) above 'fertility cults' for ii) and iii) curative cults. Let us briefly describe these cults :

- 1) **The Hunting Cult** : As has been hinted at earlier, hunting is invested with tremendous ritual significance for the Ndembu. It is more than a mere sport or an economic activity, it is a calling. It is believed that a supernatural force "tells" a Ndembu youth that he is to become a great hunter through dreams about the shade of a hunter relative. These dreams are followed by bad luck at hunting, in other words, affliction. The afflicted hunter enters the hunter's cult through the performance of rituals. As his performance of rituals increases, his bad luck at hunting is believed to decrease, and over a period of time, he gains mastery in the art of huntsmanship. Mastery in huntsmanship is thus linked to greater and greater involvement in the performance of hunting rituals which the Ndembu believe confer increasing supernatural powers on the young hunter. This power it is believed, enables the hunter to "see animals quickly", "to draw them where is" and "to become invisible to them".
- 2) **Fertility Cults** : Turner attended a number of rituals concerned with reproductive disorders. His wife was often requested to assist in cases of difficult childbirth or abortions. The Turners observed that many women suffered from anaemia (lack of blood) and their diet too was deficient in protein, which is essential for good

health. However, the Ndembu attributed reproductive disorders to affliction by female shades who come out of the grave and 'sit' in the bodies of their female kin until placated by the performance of rituals. Most frequently the offended shade was held to be that of the women's maternal grandmother or the women's mothers who had been forgotten by the afflicted women. Turner regards this as highly significant. He explains that "...women, through whom succession and inheritance are reckoned, go to their husbands villages after marriage, often far away from their own villages, and may, in the course of time cease to remember their older kin on the mother's side who have died...being "caught" by a matrilineal shade serves as a sharp reminder that their own first loyalty is to their matrilineal villages and that they bear children not for their husbands, but for their mother's brothers and brothers "back home". (Turner, 1967 : 15).

- 3) **Curative Cults** : According to Turner, the 'Chihamba' and 'Kalemba' cults are the only thinly indigenous Ndembu curative cults. Other cults noted by Turner include 'Kayong'u', 'Tukuku' and 'Masundu' which have been borrowed from other tribes. In these cults, doctors administer medicines both to themselves and the patient, after which both undergo fits of trembling. The Tukuku and Masundu cults have become very popular in Mwinilunga, and are performed for patients suffering from tuberculosis (T.B.). It is believed to be caused by shades of Europeans and other tribals. As part of the treatment, European food is served, European dress is worn and European songs and dances are mimed.

Thus we see that for the Ndembu, ritual informs every aspect of life, right from individual life-cycles to illness and productive activity. Having gained an insight into the nature of Ndembu society and central importance of ritual, let us now move to the next section. This section will focus upon one particular ritual, already referred to earlier, namely Mukanda or the initiation of boys.

We have chosen the particular ritual because through it we can observe the various tensions and strains in Ndembu society. Simultaneously, we can also gain an insight into the forces of cohesion which make for tribal unity and solidarity. But before we begin, why not check your progress?

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) State whether the following are 'True' or 'False'.
 - i) Hunting is a strictly female occupation amongst the Ndembu.
 - ii) Clitoridectomy is performed to initiate Ndembu girls.
 - iii) Male initiation rites emphasise tribal unity and sexual instruction.
- 2) Complete the following statements :
 - i) In Ndembu society, matrilineal descent is coupled withresidence.
 - ii) Competition between ...and ...exists for Ndembu women and their children.
 - iii) The first phase of fertility rituals comprises of ... and ...

7.3 'MUKANDA'—THE RITE OF CIRCUMCISION

Before we get down to describing the Mukanda ritual, let us acquaint ourselves with the manner in which Turner defines and plans to study ritual. Turner defines ritual as "prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings as powers". In other words, the elements present in a ritual situation are certain prescribed ways of acting, the belief, that the occasion is 'sacred' or out of the pale of the mundane, profane world and consequently, the propitiation or calling upon of supernatural forces.

Box 7.01

What are the criteria Turner keeps in mind while studying ritual? He identifies three; the first is the external appearance. This is a purely descriptive criterion. The second is 'exegesis' or the interpretation of the external appearance offered by the participants themselves. The third criterion is the analysis of the anthropologist, which may at times contradict the analysis or integration of the participants. The anthropologist, Turner believes, is in a unique position. He has access to knowledge about the society under study which may not even occur to the members of the society.

Turner's treatment of the Mukanda ritual exemplifies the criteria outlined above. He presents Mukanda as a series of episodes based on his observations (external appearance) along with comments and exegesis of its symbolism by Ndembu participants.

Muckona, one of Turner's Ndembu informants, narrated to Turner the myth which is the foundation of the Mukanda ritual. The story is that once upon a time, a child was left playing in the grass by his mother, the sharp grass blades cut the foreskin of his penis! When the men of the village saw what had happened they completely removed the foreskin with a razor. The wound healed, and all the men decided to adopt the practise. Mukanda is thus a 'healing' process. Uncircumcised men are regarded as polluting because dirt gathers under the foreskin. A circumcised man is "white" or pure because what was once hidden and unclean is made clean and visible. **The social significance of Mukanda is the separation of the boy from his mother and his ritual identification with the father.**

As you have read earlier in the unit, Mukanda has a group dimension, i.e., a number of boys are circumcised together from a cluster of neighbouring villages which may range in number of two to twelve. As you have read earlier, villages have short histories. Vicinages are therefore highly unstable groupings, as villages often dissolve and disperse and may later get linked up with another vicinage. In each vicinage, at least two villages claim more superiority over the others. The struggle for prestige by a particular village headman may be won if he manages to organise a Mukanda ceremony. The successful staging of Mukanda helps a headman gain moral and ritual superiority over the others. Turner keenly observed the rivalries and scheming at work in the vicinage which made Mukanda more than just an initiation rite, but a trial for strength. We will not go into the details of these rivalries, but it must be kept in mind that a Mukanda ceremony has strong political undercurrents. Let us now read about the ritual proper.

A Mukanda performance is broadly divided into three stages. These are (1) 'Kwing'ija' or the stage of induction; (2) 'Kung'ula' or the stage of seclusion and (3) 'Kwidisha' or the rites of return to normal life.

Mukanda begins with a formal invitation to the Senior Circumcisor once the elders of the vicinage agree to perform Mukanda and the decision is endorsed by their womenfolk. The oldest and best developed of the boys to be initiated (the novices) is sent to the Senior Circumcisor. The boy, known as the 'Kambanji', abuses the Circumcisor thus, "old man...you have become lazy and your knife is now blunt. Nowadays you are no use at circumcising boys. Why should we call you to circumcise us at Mukanda?" (Turner, 167 : 186). Pretending to be very angry, the circumcisor tells Kambanji to inform the headmen of the vicinage that they are to make preparations for Mukanda. The 'Establisher', whose job is to organise supplies of food and beer for the 'Kwingija' or induction phase gets down to business. Mukanda has officially begun. From now on, the novices are to maintain certain food taboos.

7.3.1 The Stage of Induction

Before the rites begin, food and beer are stocked at the sponsoring village, and a camp-site is cleared for the novices and their kin. On the day before circumcision, the circumcisors set about preparing 'Ku-Kolisha' medicine whose ingredients are the leaves and bark scrappings of certain species of trees. Kukolisha is used in several episodes in Mukanda. Its most important ingredient is the bark scrapping of the 'chikoli' thorn tree. The chikoli tree has tremendous ritual significance; it symbolises the penis and masculine virtues of courage, hunting skills and endurance. Whilst the medicine is being prepared, the circumcisors dance and sing songs. The words of these songs reflect their power over the novice and the separation of the novice from his mother.

While the medicine is being prepared by the Circumcisors, the novices arrive with their kin. That night, all participate in a grand dance. The novices are carried by their parents as their feet are not allowed to touch the ground. Remember, they are at the centre of one of the most important rituals of their tribe, and thus have a very special status. Early the next morning (this is the great day that all have been preparing for), Ku-kolisha medicine is applied to the novices, their mothers and all the officials who will participate in the ritual. After being fed a big meal of fish and cassava prepared by their mothers, the novices go down the path to the circumcision site. They must pass through on the Mukula poles, symbolically enacting the shedding of childhood and entry into manhood. A Mukulu log is placed at the circumcision site. Small beds of leaves are made for the boys to lie on. As they are carried in, their mothers cry and wail as if at a death. Interestingly enough, the circumcision site is known as 'if wilu' or 'chifwilu', the place of dying. The circumcisors work in teams of three on the boys. After the operation, the boys are carried and seated on the mukula log and the blood from their cuts is soaked up by grass pads. Their penises are supported by strings so that they don't rub painfully against their bodies. After being fed sweet beer cassava mush and beans by their anxious fathers, they are lead back to the camp where their weeping mothers greet them. It must be noted that women are strictly forbidden from going near the circumcision site. Note how the world of men and that of women and infants is symbolically separated by means of these rites. Before we move on to the next two stages of Mukanda, let us revise what we have just learnt.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Staging 'Mukanda' is a trial of strength between Ndembu headmen. Explain in about five lines.

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- ii) Why is the 'Chikoli' tree used in Ku-kolisha medicine? Explain in about two lines.

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- iii) What are the main themes in the songs of the circumcisors? Give your answer in two lines

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iv) What does the entry into the 'mukula' gate symbolise? Answer in five lines.

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7.3.2 The Stage of Seclusion

The stage of seclusion normally lasts for a period of three to four months. However, in the particular Mukanda ritual recorded by Turner, it lasted only two months. Such long lasting rituals which take from 2-4 months to complete are very much an important aspect of Ndembu society. It also indicates to us that such tribal customs are very important for societal cohesion and specific role playing e.g. the role of a 'headman'. The building of the novice's lodge is the first part of this stage. The lodge is a crude structure built out of twigs and grass. Novices enter the lodge and eat and sleep in groups based on friendship rather than kinship. They are in the charge of a Lodge Instructor, who takes care of them, ensures that they maintain feed taboos. The secrets of the lodge may never be revealed, although this rule is being increasingly violated. Until the wounds of the novices heal, neither they nor their parents may consume salt. Parents must also refrain from sexual intercourse. Salt, semen, blood and intercourse are symbolically linked, it is believed that consumption of salt or indulging in intercourse prevent's the novice's wounds from healing. In the lodge, the values of discipline and obedience to elders are instilled into the novices. As Turner describes, "they had to maintain a modest demeanor, only speak when spoken to, fetch and carry as required at the double, and run errands". (Turner, 1967 : 236). Novices are given instructions by lodge officials and visiting elders. They are told not to steal or lie, or jeer at the aged, courage and hospitality are prescribed. When they have fully recovered both physically and psychologically, 'chikula' rites begin. 'Makishi' masked dancers representing the shades of dead chiefs of the tribe perform a dance. This dance symbolises the healing of the boys. Salt is then distributed to the parents who may now resume sexual relations. After the chikula rites are completed, the boys are taught tribal lore; riddles, proverbs, hunting dances and songs. They learn how to dance the 'ku-tomboka' war dance which each boy must perform at the end of Mukanda.

Activity 2

Try and collect some information regarding initiation ceremonies practised by any one tribe of India. Compare your findings with those of other students at your centre.

7.3.3 The Rites of Return

After their period of seclusion is completed, novices are decorated with patterns of white clay for their public appearance after Mukanda. This decorative disguise marks the fact that they are changed persons, especially for their mothers. They are no longer children, they have entered the adult, more moral, community. They are taken to their parents camp and greeted with songs and rejoicing. There is a night long dance in which the novices participate. This is a sight tabooed to women and uncircumcised children. That night, the boys are carefully dressed and decorated for the final grand celebration. The Lodge Instructor makes a final speech, commanding the novices to maintain food and sex taboos. The 'Ku-tomboka' dance then begins. **The performance of the boys is discussed and evaluated.** The boys then go back to their own villages where further celebrations will take place. The Mukanda officials are given their payment. Mukanda is over.

7.4 TURNER'S ANALYSIS OF 'MUKANDA'

To gain an insight into Turner's analysis of Mukanda, it is important to acquaint ourselves with the theoretical orientations that he brought into the field. One orientation could be termed that 'social structural' orientation. In line with this, he gathered data pertaining to the structure of the social system, namely, genealogies, political ties and divisions and the social characteristics of the ritual participants. The second orientation tilted towards unearthing the cultural structure. In this case, he collected details pertaining to the ritual itself, interpretations or exegesis of laymen and experts and also those items of secular behaviour that bore a direct relation with the ritual system.

Box 7.02

Turner's analysis of Mukanda locates ritual behaviour within its social context. In his words, "...it became clear to me that the events both in and out of a ritual context I observed at Mukanda were influenced by the structure of a field that included both ritual and social components". (Turner, 1967 : 262). Let us now briefly review some of the important points brought out by Turner in his analysis.

- 1) **Mukanda helps redefine parent-child relationships** : Mukanda modifies the mother-son and father-son relationships. In Turner's words, "...after Mukanda the relationships between occupants of these three social positions are guided by different values and directed towards different goals than those that prevailed before that ritual. From being "unclean" children, partially effeminised by constant contact with their mothers... boys are converted... into purified members of a male moral community, able to take part in the usual, political and ritual affairs of Ndembu society". (Turner, 1967 : 266). This helps to reshape links outside the family. Through the mother, a boy is affiliated to the matrilineal core of a village. Through his father, however he gets linked up with another village and wider social units like the vicinage, chiefdom and tribe. In Turner's words, "Mukanda strengthens the wider and reduces the narrower loyalties" (Turner, 1967 : 266). Although matriliney governs descent, Mukanda emphasises the unity of males, irrespective of matrilineal ties.
- 2) **Mukanda as a mechanism for restoring equilibrium in society** : Mukanda is usually called for when there is a large number of young "unclean" uninitiated boys "hanging around" the women's kitchens, prolonged attachment to the mother is regarded as dangerous and the boys are sought to be brought under the control of their fathers by ritually separating them from their mothers through Mukanda.
- 3) **Mukanda as a struggle for prestige** : As we have already seen, the holding of Mukanda and the obligations and duties. It involves, providing a mechanism through which rivals may claim prestige and assert their leadership. This gives them certain rights and privileges in any future event of religious or secular importance.

In a nutshell, the entire elaborate ritual of Mukanda is viewed as more than a series of ritually prescribed behaviours and symbols. It is seen by Turner in relation to and as reflecting the social setting in which it is embedded. Social structure and cultural structure are thus viewed by Turner in terms of their intimate interconnections. This is what makes Turner's understanding of ritual meaningful and insightful.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) What are some of the values imparted to the novices in the lodge? Use five lines for your answer.

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- ii) How does Mukanda modify the relationships between parents and their son?
Use five lines for your answer.

7.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have learnt about the part that rituals play in the life of the Ndembu Zambia as described by Victor Turner. To begin with, you were familiarised with the physical and social setting of this tribal group. You learnt how the conflicting principles of matrilineal and virilocality made Ndembu villages highly mobile and unstable. You read about the two main categories of rituals; identified by Turner, namely, life-crisis rituals and rituals of affliction and their corresponding cults. You read about how the circumcision of boys ritually enacted a separation from the mother and an identification with the father and the male moral community. You saw how Turner studied both the social and the cultural structure of Ndembu society and showed how the two are interlinked. You studied Mukanda not merely as an initiation ritual, but an event which helped redefine parent child relations, which brought about social equilibrium and was used as a device for enhancing prestige.

7.6 KEY WORDS

Exegesis : Critical explanation as interpretation especially of scriptures.

Initiation : To admit an individual into a fraternity, and society.

Seclusion : To remove a person to an isolated or a private place.

Vicinage : The neighbourhood.

7.7 FURTHER READINGS

Evan, M. Zuess, 1987. 'Ritual' in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade, New York : Macmillan.

Leach, Edmund, R. 1961. *Rethinking Anthropology*, London : Athlone, 1968.
Ritual in *The International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences*, Edited by David.
L. Sills. Vol. 13, New York : Macmillan.

7.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) i) False ii) False iii) True

- 2) i) Virilocal
- ii) Maternal uncles, fathers
- iii) Treatment, dance.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Headmen of the villages in a vicinage compete with each other for moral superiority and prestige. By successfully staging 'Mukanda', a headman can claim moral superiority over the others.
- ii) The chikoli tree symbolises the male sex organ, the penis and the masculine virtues of courage, endurance and hunting skills. Hence it is used in Ku-kolisha medicine.
- iii) The main themes in the circumcisors songs are their power over the novices and the separation of the novices from their mothers.
- iv) Entry into the 'mukanda' gate symbolises the end of childhood and entry into manhood.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) In the lodge, the novices are taught discipline and obedience. They are told not to steal or lie, not to jeer at the aged and are taught to be courageous and hospitable.
- ii) Mukanda makes "unclean" children into purified members of a male moral community. No longer are they attached just to the mother and her matrilineal kin but are now in a position to get linked up with wider social units.

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UNIT 8 RITUAL-II : A CASE STUDY FROM SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Structure

- 8.0 Objectives
- 8.1 Introduction
- 8.2 The Setting
 - 8.2.1 Java's History—A Summary
 - 8.2.2 Society in Modjokuto
 - 8.2.3 Cultural Types in Java
- 8.3 'Slametan'—A Core Ritual in Javanese Religion
 - 8.3.1 The 'Slametan' Pattern
 - 8.3.2 The Meaning of 'Slametan'
- 8.4 'Slametan'—Two Examples
 - 8.4.1 The 'Tingkeban'
 - 8.4.2 Marriage—'Kepanggihhan'
- 8.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 8.6 Key Words
- 8.7 Further Readings
- 8.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

8.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to

- briefly describe Javanese history, society and culture
- explain the meaning and significance of the core Javanese ritual called 'Slametan' with the help of two examples.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 7 you learnt something about the ritual system of a simple, tribal society in Africa. In this unit, the focus shifts to a complex society characterised by immense diversity in occupation, economic status, cultural and social patterns in South-East Asia. We shall look at some aspects of rituals in Java whose religion has been studied in detail by Clifford Geertz in his monograph entitled 'The Religion of Java'. This monograph first published in 1960 was the first of a series of monographs dealing with various aspects of contemporary Javanese life. Geertz did his fieldwork in a town in east-central Java which he called 'Modjokuto'. (It is quite common for sociologists and anthropologists to give fictional names to the people and places they study for reasons of privacy) Geertz's monograph deals with Javanese religion, not just ritual, but for the purpose of this unit, we shall concentrate selectively on his description and analysis of ritual.

We will begin the unit by giving you a brief outline of the history of Java. We will then move on to describe the economic and social setting of Modjokuto, as given by Geertz, and describe the three major cultural complexes described by him. This will be the first section. The second section will describe 'slametan' or the communal feast, which Geertz regards as the core ritual in Javanese religious life. Some types of 'slametans' will be described in the third and final section.

8.2 THE SETTING

Human habitation in Java dates back to pre-historic times. Indeed, the remains of

primitive humans ('Pithecanthropus rectus' or 'Java man') were found here in 1891. Let us briefly review the history of this ancient civilisation.

8.2.1 Java's History—A Summary

The island of Java forms part of the nation-state of Indonesia. It is regarded as the cultural, economic and political nerve centre of Indonesia. Indeed, Indonesia's capital, Djakarta, is Java's largest city. In the 5th century A.D., Hindus entered and settled in eastern and central Java. The Hindu-Javanese state of Majapahit (founded in 1293) marked the peak of Javanese history. In the 13th century, Islam was introduced and the Muslim state of Mataram was founded. Contemporary Javanese culture bears the stamp of both, Hinduism and Islam. 90% of Java's population is Muslim. 1596 saw the arrival of Dutch traders in the form of the Dutch East India Company which gradually absorbed the remnants of the Javanese empire. The company was liquidated in 1798 and Java came under direct Dutch rule, which lasted until 1949, when Indonesia became a sovereign country. It became a republic in 1950 under the leadership of Sukarno. Let us now focus upon the town in east-central Java where Geertz did his fieldwork.



Indonesian men and woman working together in their rice fields

8.2.2 Society in Modjokuto

Modjokuto is the commercial, educational and administrative centre for 18 surrounding villages. It had a population of about 20,000 of which the bulk was Javanese, with a sprinkling of Chinese, Arabian and Indian elements. Surrounded by thousands of rice-fields, Modjokuto's economy was a blend of agriculture and trade. The core of native commercial life was the market where daily, hundreds of Javanese men and women bargained and struggled to earn a living, trading all manner of goods, from textiles to fish to medicines and dry goods for a profit. In Geertz's words, "For the Modjokuto Javanese, whether buyer or seller, the market is the very model of commercial life, the source of nearly all his ideas of the possible and proper in economic behaviour." (p.3). Apart from agricultural and trading activities, white-collar office work is the third major occupational type. White collar workers include teachers and government officials, who form the intellectual and social elite of

Modjokuto. As Geertz says, they are the "...inheritors of a political tradition in which the ability to read and write was confined to a hereditary court class born to rule and venerated for doing so." (p.3). There exists a general attitude of respect and subservience of the uneducated towards the educated.

Geertz identified three main social-structural nuclei in Java, namely, the village, the market and the government bureaucracy. Each of these has a corresponding world outlook in terms of their religious beliefs and political ideologies. In short, they constitute three distinct cultural types. Let us see what these are.

8.2.3 Cultural Types in Java

The three cultural types each associated with its distinct social-structural nuclei are as follows:

- i) 'Abangan' tradition—associated with the village. Javanese villages are originally inhabited by people professing animistic beliefs. With the arrival of the Hindus, and later the Muslims, a syncretic tradition combining animistic, Hinduistic and Islamic elements arose. Geertz describes it as "...the island's true folk tradition, the basic substratum of its civilisation..." (p.5).
- ii) 'Santri' tradition—associated with the market. The 'Santri' tradition is associated with a more puristic version of Islam. It consists of careful and regular performance of the major Islamic rituals, namely, the daily prayers, the Fast and the Pilgrimage to Mecca. A whole complex of social, charitable and political Islamic organisations form an important part of this tradition.
- iii) 'Priajati' tradition—associated with the white-collar elite. The white collar elite descendents of the hereditary aristocracy (which was the only group with access to education) whose roots lie in the pre-colonial Hindu-Javanese courts. The Priajati tradition thus stresses Hinduistic and Buddhist elements. It is marked by a complex art of dance, drama, poetry and mysticism. However, colonialism and the Western influence has lead to this group becoming highly secularised, westernised and anti-traditional. Yet, the elite priajati life-style still remains a model for the entire society.

In a nutshell, then, the Abangan tradition, broadly related to the peasant element of the population, stresses an overall Javanese syncretism. the Santri tradition related to the trading section is associated with more puritanical Islam and the Priajati tradition of the elite group stresses Hinduistic and mystical elements. Geertz points out that this diversity does not suggest that there is no underlying religious unity in Java. His stated intention is "...to bring home the reality of the complexity, depth, and richness of their religious life" (p.7).

In this unit, we shall mainly describe rituals as performed by the Abangan section. But before we do so, why not check your progress?

'Check Your Progress 1

- i) Name the various belief-systems that have contributed to Javanese folk religion. Answer in about five lines.

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ii) What are the major elements of the 'Priajati' tradition? Answer in about five lines.

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iii) What effect did colonialism have on the Javanese elite? Answer in about five lines.

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8.3 'SLAMETAN'—A CORE RITUAL IN JAVANESE RELIGION

The Slametan or communal feast lies at the heart of the whole Javanese religious system. The communal feast, Geertz points out, is probably the most common religious ritual in the world. The Slametan, in Greetz's words, "...symbolises the mystic and social unity of those participating in it. Friends, neighbours, fellow-workers, relatives, local spirits, dead ancestors, and near forgotten gods all get bound, by virtue of their commensality into a defined social group pledged to mutual support and cooperation" (p.11).

Amongst those belonging to the Abangan tradition, the Slametan still retains much of its original force and attraction, although its efficacy is no longer so great amongst the urban dwellers. Slametans can be given in response to any important occasion, be it a rite of passage (birth, circumcision, marriage, death) or affliction (illness, bad dreams, witchcraft etc.) or an occasion like shifting residence or starting a business. The emphasis, naturally, differs in each case. Let us now describe the usual pattern of the Slametan.

8.3.1 The 'Slametan' Pattern

Slametans are invariably held in the evenings, just after sunset and the completion of evening prayers. An auspicious day is chosen. During the day, the women of the household prepare food, sometimes taking help from women of the wider kin group. The ceremony is an all-male affair, women are expected to stay in the kitchen. The men invited are all close neighbours. The host's messenger (usually his son) calls them only 5-10 minutes before the actual ceremony. They must drop whatever they are doing and go to the host's home. Of course, it is usually a known fact that a slametan is going to be held, and the men are prepared for the invitation. At the host's house, the invitees sit in a circle, around the dishes of food that have already been placed in the centre of the floor.

The host opens the ceremony with an extremely formal speech. He expresses gratitude for the neighbours' presence and hopes that the benefits of the ceremony

may be shared by all. He then gives the reason for the ceremony (e.g. his daughter's marriage, his wife's pregnancy etc.). He gives the general reason for the rite, namely, to secure for himself, his family and his guests the state of 'Slamet'! **This means a state of physical and mental calm and equilibrium.** To achieve this stage, he appeals to the spirits of the village. Finally, he apologises for any errors he may have made in his speech, and for the inadequacy of the food he is providing to his guests. This formal speech is known as the 'udjub'.

At the end of his speech, the host requests one of his guests to give the Arabic chant prayer. On special occasions, the 'modin' or religious specialist may be invited to do so. When the chanting ends, the serving of the food begins. Each guest receives a cup of tea and a banana-leaf dish in which all the different types of food are served. The host does not eat. Each variety of food symbolises something special, as we shall see later in the unit. The host requests his guests to eat. They eat quietly (talking while eating is believed to bring bad luck) and quickly. After eating a few mouthfuls, they stop and ask the host for permission to leave. They go home quietly and eat the remaining food in the privacy of their homes with their families. Such community feasts and ritual are very much part of India's village traditions. Sociologists have discovered that such feasts are context-specific, addressing themselves to particular situations. The Slametan is over. What is the social significance of this ritual? Let us read Geertz's analysis of the meaning of Slametan, based on the views of his Javanese informers.

8.3.2 The Meaning of 'Slametan'

Why do the Javanese hold Slametans? A bricklayer told Geertz, "When you give a Slametan, nobody is any different from anyone else and so they do not want to split up. Also a slametan protects you against the spirits, so they will not upset you". (p.11). The wish for state of 'Slamet' earlier mentioned is defined by the Javanese as "gak ana apa-apa" which means "nothing is going to happen to anyone". The aroma of foods at the Slametan is considered as food for the spirits in order to pacify them, so that they do not trouble the living. It is important to note that spirits are seen as disturbing or disrupting to human and social activity. The Slametan represents what Geertz describes as "...a reassertion and reinforcement of the general cultural order and its power to hold back the forces of disorder..." (p. 11). **The Slametan also dramatises the values of traditional Javanese peasant culture.** The mutual adjustment of individual wills reflects in the way men leave aside everything else because they must attend a neighbour's Slametan. Self-restraint and careful control over outward behaviour can be seen in the formal interaction of host and guests. And, as Geertz suggests, Slametans tend to occur at just those points in Javanese life when the need to assert these values is at its strongest. In the following section, we will cite two examples of Slametan, both concerning life crisis rituals. These illustrations will bring not just the points mentioned above, but also the **rich syncretism** of Javanese peasant religion, that has been spoken about earlier.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) What do the Javanese consider the two main reasons for holding a slametan? Write your answer in about five lines.

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ii) What is meant by 'Slamet'? How do the Javanese describe it? Write your answer in about five lines.

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8.4 'SLAMETAN'—TWO EXAMPLES

As has earlier been stated, Slametans are held on almost any important occasion. Geertz categorises 4 types of slametans:

- i) those centering around life-crises (birth, circumcision, marriage, death),
- ii) those associated with the Muslim ceremonial calendar (e.g. birthday of Prophet Mohammed, day of sacrifice, the last day of Fast etc.),
- iii) the 'berish de's', concerned with promoting the social integration of the village by driving out evil spirits, and
- iv) intermittent slametans, which may be held on rare occasions like departure for a long trip, change of residence, illness, sorcery etc.

For reasons of space, it will be impossible for us to look at an example of each type of Slametan. We will select two. Both are life crisis Slametans, concerning two of the most significant events in human life, namely pregnancy and marriage. You will see that the Slametan provides a kind of framework around which the details of the special rites are woven. Life-crisis rituals, in the words of Geertz "emphasis both the continuity and underlying identity of all aspects of life and the special transitions and phases through which it passes" (p.38). Let us now deal with the first rite.

8.4.1 The 'Tingkeban'

The rites concerning birth involve four major Slametans. The first, called 'Tingkeban' is celebrated in the seventh month of pregnancy. The second one is held at birth, the third 5 days after birth and the fourth when the child is seven months old. We shall be describing 'Tingkeban'—the seventh-month ceremony for the pregnant woman.

Tingkeban represents the introduction of the Javanese woman to motherhood. It is only performed for the first day. It is held at the home of the pregnant woman's mother. The following major items are essential :

- i) A dish of rice for each guest with white rice on top and yellow rice beneath the white layer symbolising purity and love respectively. It is served in a banana-leaf basket held together with a needle so that the child will be strong and sharp of mind.
- ii) Rice mixed with grated coconut and a whole stuffed chicken meant to honour Prophet Mohammed and to secure 'Slamet' for all present. Two bananas are also offered to 'Dewi Pertimah'—or Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet. This is a

classic example of the syncretism we have referred to. Fatima is converted into a Hindu 'Dewi' or goddess !

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- iii) Seven small pyramids of rice symbolising the seven months of pregnancy.
- iv) Eight or nine rice balls symbolising the 'Walis', the legendary carriers of Islam to Java.
- v) A large rice pyramid to make the child big and strong.
- vi) A collection of fruit and vegetables which grow underground and which hang on trees. The former symbolise the earth, the latter the sky.
- vii) Three kinds of rice mush, white, red and a mixture of both. The white represents the 'water' of the mother, the red that of the father and their combination is believed toward off spirits.
- viii) 'Rudejak legi', a spicy fruit drink with pepper, spices and sugar. This is the most important Tingkeban food. If it tastes spicy to the woman its believed she will have a girl, if it tastes flat, a boy is believed to be in her womb.

You may have gathered, by now that Javanese peasants have a deeply-ingrained fear of spirits. At all Slametans, special offerings are made to spirits in the form of a 'sadjen'. The Tingkeban Sadjen offerings include string, incense, tobacco, betel nut, a weaving shuttle, an egg, etc. all placed in a large banana-leaf basket lined with bananas. This is kept aside for use in the ceremony proper. Once the introductory speech, the Arabic chant and tasting of the food is completed, the Tingkeban begins. It will be conducted by the midwife who will officiate at the delivery, the 'dukun baji'.

A tub of water (theoretically from seven different springs) is sprinkled with flower petals and scoopfuls are poured over the couple by the dukun baji who chants a spell for the well-being of their descendants.

The string is taken from the Sadjen and wrapped loosely around the pregnant women's waist. The husband then cuts it with a dagger (called 'Kris') while the dukun chants another spell for the easy passage of the baby from the mother's womb. Next, the weaving shuttle from the Sadjen is dropped into the woman's sarong (the sari-like garment worn by Javanese women). It is caught at the bottom by the husband's mother and cradled like a baby in her shawl. Next, two green coconuts, each decorated with the figures of a legendary couple Djanaka and Sumbadra are placed before the husband. He slides at each of them with a large knife. If both break open, an easy birth is predicted. If only one breaks, the unbroken one is said to indicate the sex of the child (a boy if Djanaka, a girl if Sumbadra). If neither coconut breaks, a long, difficult birth is predicted. We can thus see that the ceremony of Tingkeban is quite complex and very rich in the variety of food that is offered to the spirits and all those participating in it.

An interesting rite follows. The pregnant woman keeps putting on one sarong after another, pulling out the previous one from beneath. The seventh and final Sarong is made of heavy cotton which will not fade. It symbolises the lasting, life-long relationship between mother and child. In fact, the Javanese believe that keeping an item of their mother's clothing with them always helps keep a person 'Slamet'. This is because the child has rested for nine long months in his/her mother's womb, in a state of immobility which is compared to religious meditation.

The ritual ends with the couple serving the fruit drink (rudjak legi) to all present and receiving token payment. None of Geertz's informants seemed to know the

significance of this particular practice. Some said that the woman would use the money to buy medicines for her baby. Any other preparation (like making baby-clothes etc.) is frowned upon; it is believed to be unlucky. Thus we see that the Tingkeban ceremony stresses on those aspects which will pave the way for an easy birth and a healthy baby. Spirits are duly placated and deities called upon for this purpose. Let us now move on to one of the most elaborate of Javanese ceremonies, namely, the marriage ceremony. But first, check your progress.

Check Your Progress 3

i) When and why is Tingkeban performed? Answer in about five lines.

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ii) Keeping an item of the mother's clothing is believed to keep a person 'Slamet'. Why? Answer in about two lines.

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8.4.2 Marriage—'Kepanggih'an'

Until recently in Java, marriages were strictly arranged by the parents. But in recent times, personal choice and mutual understanding between the boy and girl concerned have become important. Nevertheless, the 'lamaran' or formal request by the boy's parents is still carried out for appearance's sake. Both sets of parents engage in a highly formal conversation and agree to a 'nontoni' or 'looking-over'.



The boy and his parents visit the girl's home, and more polite formalities are exchanged, whilst the girl coyly serves tea and the boy has a sly look at her. If he likes what he sees, he tells his parents on the way home, and the marriage is set.

The marriage or 'Kepanggih' ('the meeting') is always held at the girl's home. A girl's wedding is the most important ritual she is entitled to (like the boy's circumcision) and her parents are obliged to do the best they can for her wedding. On the evening before the marriage, a Slametan is given by her parents. The groom is not allowed to attend. After the Slametan, the girl is dressed in simple clothes and made to sit very still in the centre of the house for about five hours. It is believed that an angel enters her, which is why brides look so beautiful on their wedding-days. While she is seated, her mother performs the ritual of purchasing large decorations made up of various plants called the 'Kembang majang'. Two each are bought for the boy and girl, which symbolise their virginity. The mother places two of these by her daughter and the evening is over.

At an auspicious moment the next morning, the groom sets off with his entourage to the office of the 'naib', the government's religious officer who has the authority to legitimise and register marriages. The bride does not go; she is represented by her 'wali' (her legal guardian under Islamic law). At the naib's office, the groom is made to recite the relevant Arabic passages, (which he then repeats in Javanese) he then pays the wali the 5-rupiah 'mas Kawain' or 'marriage gold' and the naib concludes the ceremony by pronouncing the boy and the absent girl married.

Back at the bride's home, festivities are beginning. The assembled guests sip coffee, munch snacks and socialise with each other. The girl is dressed up by her female relatives. Traditionally, the bride and groom were dressed up like a princess and prince with elaborate dresses, jewellery and make-up. Such traditional attire is only used by the Prijaji elite these days. Abangan girls use either western dress or more elaborate versions of day-to-day attire with flowers and a little jewellery. Many of us have attended Hindu other marriage ceremonies. It is clear to the viewer that the marriage rituals are highly symbolic and their being present in great density indicates that this ritual is a central one in many societies.

In front of the house, an old sarong belonging to the girl is placed. Beneath it lies a yoke for a pair of oxen, and on top a bowl of flower-sprinkled water and an egg are placed. Sadjens are placed all around the house to ward off evil spirits. At the chosen auspicious moment (when the boy's procession has returned) the girl emerges from the house, followed by two virgin girls carrying her 'Kembang majang' (the plant decorations earlier mentioned). The boy advances from outside followed by two virgin boys carrying his 'Kembang majang'. As they draw nearer, they throw betel-nut at each other. The one who hits the other first is believed to be the dominant partner in marriage. Geertz points out that girls make sure they lose this contest. Both stand on the discarded sarong, which symbolises the girl's nakedness before her husband and touch palms in the Islamic handshake ('salaman'). The virgin girls and boys exchange 'Kembang majang'. This symbolises the mutual giving-up of virginity. The girl kneels and breaks the egg on the boy's foot, indicating her loss of purity. These days, many couples avoid this rite as it runs counter to the notion of gender equality. Both stand on the yoke symbolising their unity and inseparability.

The bride and groom return to the house where they sit immobile receiving their guests. As has been hinted earlier, immobility is associated in Java with meditation and spiritual force, as "the major road to inward strength and outward power" (p.59).

The marriage specialist chants a spell calling upon the spirits to keep the couple

and yellow rice symbolising purity and love are served. Bride and groom taste food from each other's dishes, and then the boy's dish is inverted into the girl's, making them one. This is kept aside and when it starts smelling bad a few days later, the marriage is believed to be consummated.

The Javanese cite marriage and circumcision ceremonies as ideal examples of the value of 'rukun', which Geertz translates as 'traditionalised cooperation'. By this is meant that peasants interact with each other, combine into a group, not just for the sake of group solidarity, but their own material interests as well. The amount of hard work and expense that go into holding such a ceremony would be back-breaking without the cooperation of kin and neighbours. 'Rukun' thus serves the purpose both of individual material needs and social integration.

Check Your Progress 4

- i) State whether the following are 'True' (T) or 'False' (F).
 - a) In a traditional Javanese marriage, boy and girl go to the 'naib's office and marry.
 - b) The girl's wali pays the boy to marry her.
 - c) White rice at the Slametan symbolises love.
- ii) What is meant by 'rukun'? Answer in two lines.

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8.5 LET US SUM UP

We began this unit by describing briefly the history of Java and the specific occupational social, structural and cultural types Geertz found in the town of Modjokuto where he did his field work. We say that Java's tremendous cultural diversity contributed to the richness of its religious life.

Next, we looked at the general pattern and meanings ascribed to the core ritual in Javanese religion, the 'Slametan'. We saw how Slametans are employed at all important occasions where the values of integration and solidarity have to be reinforced.

8.6 KEY WORDS

Auspicious : having a good fortune, success or favour. We often use the phrase 'auspicious occasion' to indicate a favourable or a lucky occasion.

Commensality : coming together or gathering of individuals as an act of goodwill. In this context commensality means eating together at the same table.

Puritanical : One who professes strict moral conduct.

Syncretism : reconciliation or attempts to reconcile different belief systems.

8.7 FURTHER READINGS

Leach, Edmund R. 1968. 'Ritual' in *International Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* edited by David L. Sills, Vol. 13, New York : Macmillan and Free Press.

Evan M. Zuess 1987. 'Ritual' in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion* edited by Mircea Eliade, Macmillan.

8.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Animism, Hinduism and Islam, all have contributed to Javanese folk religion
- ii) The Prijaji tradition stresses strict adherence to the Islamic rituals of prayers, fast and pilgrimage to Mecca. It also includes charitable, political and social Islamic organisations.
- iii) Colonization and Western influence lead to the elite becoming highly westernised, secularised and anti-tradition.

Check Your Progress 2

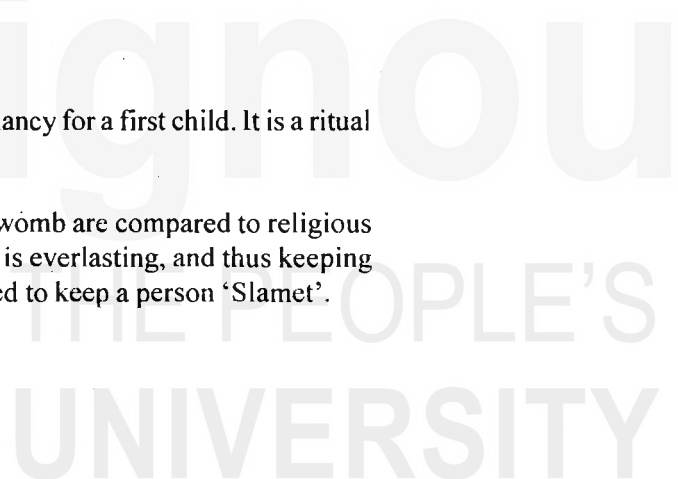
- i) According to the Javanese, the main reasons for holding a Slametan are (a) making everyone feel equal so that they do not split up and (b) getting protection against troublesome spirits.
- ii) 'Slamet' refers to physical and mental equilibrium. The Javanese describe it with a phrase which means "nothing is going to happen to anyone".

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Tingkeban is performed in the 7th month of pregnancy for a first child. It is a ritual to introduce a woman to motherhood.
- ii) The nine months a child spends in the mother's womb are compared to religious meditation. The bond between mother and child is everlasting, and thus keeping some item of her clothing with oneself is believed to keep a person 'Slamet'.

Check Your Progress 4

- i) a) F
b) F
c) F
- ii) 'Rukun' can be translated as 'traditional cooperation'. This means that peasants cooperate during important ceremonies not merely for the group but because their own material interests are also at stake. 'Rukun' serves both individual as well as social goals.



UNIT 9 CIVIL RELIGION

Structure

- 9.0 Objectives
- 9.1 Introduction
- 9.2 The Concept of Civil Religion
- 9.3 Characteristics of Civil Religion
- 9.4 Varieties of Civil Religion
 - 9.4.1 Ancient Greek and Roman Cities
 - 9.4.2 France
 - 9.4.3 America
- 9.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 9.6 Key Words
- 9.7 Further Readings
- 9.8 Answers to Check Your Progress

9.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit you will be able to

- define the concept of “Civil Religion”
- outline the nature and development of civil religion
- describe some of the varieties of civil religion.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit you have studied the comparative theories of rituals. The next two units have given you examples of rituals found in different societies through the two case studies on the rituals of an African tribe and of Javanese society in South East Asia.

The unit which you are going to study now is also closely related with the ritual and religious aspects of society. But how is this so? To answer this questions you must learn about the close inter-relation between rituals, both secular and religious, and the concept of civil religion.

In this unit, section 9.2 gives you the definition of the concept of civil religion. Section 9.3 briefly outlines the nature and development of civil religion and section 9.4 describes some of the varieties found in different societies during different periods of time. Finally, section 9.5 gives you the summary of this unit.

9.2 THE CONCEPT OF CIVIL RELIGION

What is civil religion? Why do we need to study this concept? Let us first learn about the meaning and definition of this concept. Civil Religion has been defined as “the religious or quasi-religious regard for certain civic values and traditions found recurrently in the history of the political states” (Nisbet, 1968 : 524-527).

This regard for the civic values and traditions of the political state is expressed through special festivals, rituals, creeds and dogmas which honour great personages and events of the past. These persons, such as freedom fighters and social and political reformers and eminent Presidents like Abraham Lincoln are some of these who have played a major role in the socio-political history of their society. The same is true about the events of great significance to the state and society.

We can give the example of the celebration of our Independence Day, 15th August when our Prime Minister unfurls the National Flag every year on the historical Red Fort in Delhi. Another example is the Republic Day Parade celebrated on the 26th January every year. This celebration too is marked by a semi-religious fervour. It serves to heighten the sense of national and political identity of the Indian citizens. It reminds them of the sacrifice made by our leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bhagat Singh, Chandra Shekhar Azad and several others who fought for our Independence.

This kind of semi-religious fervour in celebrating political events and birth days of great persons is found in all societies at all times. It is religious in the sense in which the eminent French sociologist, Emile Durkheim has defined religion.

According to Durkheim, a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things that is to say things that are set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them. He says that cities and nations are just as susceptible to the nomenclature, i.e., naming of the sacred as are the social bodies called church. He gives the example of France during the French Revolution at the end of the 18th Century (Nisbet, 1968 : 524-527).

Carlton J.H. Hayes' in his Book *Essays on Nationalism (1926)* writes that if we examine human history, we will find that the mainspring of frequency and the force of human movements have been of religious emotion. It is very clear that nationalism had become to a large number of persons a veritable religion which was capable of arousing a deep and compelling emotion which was essentially religious in nature.

He wrote that human history reveals that human beings have always been distinguished by what is called a "religious sense". In other words, they are moved by a mysterious faith in some power outside of themselves, a faith always accompanied by feelings of reverence and usually expressed by external acts and ceremonials (Hayes, Carlton J.H. 1926 : 95).

It is in this context of the sense of religion, the feeling of patriotism or nationalism, of belonging to a distinct socio-political group that we have to understand the concept of civil religion. Civil religion is the religion of an advanced modern society with higher technology. As Nisbet mentions, civil religion has been a highly visible aspect of the modern national state in the West.

In the contemporary period, the most distinct form of civil religion can be found in the American society. You will learn more about civil religion in America in the following sections. Let us first understand the characteristics of civil religion.

9.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF CIVIL RELIGION

The concept of civil religion is not a new phenomenon. It has been present in many societies from ancient Greece and Rome to the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance in Western Europe. The ancient sacred kingship of the Mediterranean world had elements of civil religion, such as, the worship of the King or Emperor as a God. This feature has been characteristic of many societies, including our own, in the pre-British period.

The king was supposed to be divinely ordained to rule over his subjects. This aspect was highlighted by rites and ceremonies held at certain times each year. The "rajyabhishek" or the religious ceremony to crown a prince is an example of such a fusion of the political and the religious.

A similar example of fusion of the political and the religious is found in Japanese

history also with respect to the Emperor till at least the World War II. The nineteenth century historian, Fustel de Coulanges, has described in his famous book **The Ancient City (1864)** the civil religions of the ancient Greek and Roman city states. You will learn more about them in the next section of this unit.

As stated earlier civil religion—the quasi-religious regard for certain civic values and traditions found recurrently in the history of the political state—has been a highly visible aspect of the modern national state in the West. Nisbet says (1968) that this was as a result of certain social, political and historical factors. During the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries destructive conflicts were taking place between the European Protestants and Catholics, the two main sects of Christianity. This period was followed by the period of the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment period refers to the Europe of the 18th Century which embodied the spirit of the French philosophers. It marked a radical change from the traditional thinking of feudal Europe (For more details see unit 1, block 1 of ESO-03 : Sociological Thought). During this period the traditional Christianity; as all other kinds of revealed religions; came under attack. This created a vacuum of belief among several groups in Western Europe. At this time efforts were made to establish faith in a deistic god, or a god of nature or progress. This was to replace the traditional conception of Christianity, but this move proved to be unsuccessful.

However, instead of this deistic god what proved to be more effective was the notion of **patrie**. This term was coined by the French philosophers. It refers to a new conception of the political state. For these philosophers a state was one which was paternal, that is, fatherly in its regard for its citizens. For many centuries, the state was considered more or less as a governing body which was the engine of warfare and taxation. Therefore, this new conception of state was a radical change.

Box 1.01

Rousseau, Jean Jacques (1712-1778) was born in Geneva. He spent a large part of his life in France but yet he always claimed a sense of belonging to his “fatherland” i.e. Geneva by using the title of “Citizen of Geneva” along with his name.

He lost his mother at a very young age. She died shortly after his birth. He received his education from his father, Issac Rousseau. Issac Rousseau was an able watchmaker but was an odd and temperamental man. He inculcated in his son at an early age the habit of reading.

At the age of 13, Rousseau by a chance of adventure left his native city for Turin where he became a Roman Catholic without being aware of what it entailed. He wrote at the end of his life that “I became a Catholic but I always remained a Christian”. In Turin Rousseau tried his luck to seek a new occupation from that of being an engraver. He got shelter and hospitality from one Mine de Warens in 1729 at Savoy. This was a decisive period in his life as a writer.

In his seminal work, **Social Contract** as in his other writings Rousseau reveals himself as obsessed with the demands of life in society, by the relationships of dependence and subordination which it creates among men. He was concerned about the rivalries and enmities which such dependence generates. Society which brings people together, in fact sets them apart and makes them enemies of each other. It is in these senses that he wrote the famous words by which he is well known till this day that “man is born free, but found in chains everywhere”.

Rousseau led a very turbulent life during that period of France when the intellectuals of France and other European countries were questioning each and every idea and conception of society. He wrote extensively and for a time was also known as a musician. His death came suddenly on July 2, 1778 in Ermenonville. He was a forerunner of the social sciences and perhaps even a founder. Emile Durkheim said that "Rousseau demonstrated a long time ago that if all that comes to man from society were peeled off, there would remain nothing but a creature reduced to sense experience and more or less undifferentiated from the animal".

Rousseau believed that to rise above this animal level human beings must relinquish the state of nature (Derathe, Robert 1968 : pp. 563-570. International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, Vol. 13 & 14, Macmillan and Free Press).

It was the concept of *patrie* that Rousseau had in his mind when he wrote his seminal work in political philosophy, **Social Contract (1762)**. He is one of the philosophers whose ideas inspired many of the French revolutionaries including Robespierre. Rousseau has glorified people and what he calls "the general will" in this work. It is in this work that we first find the mention of the concept of civil religion.

According to Rousseau, the religious need lies in everyone. He believed that all the existing religions, especially Christianity, were inadequate in the ideal state. Therefore, he proposed a systematic civil religion "of which the sovereign would fix the articles". In other words, the political head would determine the articles of this religion and these articles are, as mentioned by Rousseau "social sentiments without which a man cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject" (Nisbet, 1968 : 524).

Rousseau took the concept of civil religion very seriously since he even proposed sanctions against those who defaulted. These sanctions included banishment, that is, throwing the defaulters out of the community, and even death. These defaulters would be those who first accepted and then flouted the articles of belief which constitute the civil religion.

During the French Revolution, when it was at its height, from about 1793-1794 a civil religion was instituted. It was led by Robespierre and officially known as the religion of the Supreme Being. This religion worshipped the Revolution itself which was an event that had seized the minds of millions in the West. It has the political state, specifically the revolutionary state as the essence of belief and rite (Nisbet, 1968 : 524).

Activity 1

You have just read the section on the Concept of Civil Religion, nature and development of Civil Religion. From your own experience write a note of about two pages on civil religion in our own society.

Compare your note with those of other students at your study centre.

During the 19th Century the phrase or the idea of Civil Religion seems to have disappeared from the political discourse. However, the spirit or religion of nationalism continued to thrive according to C.J.H. Hayes. He believed that the most impressive fact of the present age, i.e. the nineteenth-century was the universality of the religious aspects of nationalism.

Hayes points out that there exists a parallel between the traditional Christianity and the new national or civil religion which emerged during this time. The "God" of this

civil religion is said to be the national state which itself had emerged in Europe primary due to the Napoleonic Wars. It was during this war that Napoleon spread the message of the nationalist slogan of the French Revolution to all the parts of Europe.

According to Robert Nisbet (1968) the flame of nationalist feelings found during the 19th Century Europe and United States carried with it an enthusiasm of a religious kind which differentiates this civil religion from the civil religions of the ancient and the medieval societies. He gives the example of Hegel, a German philosopher who declared the national state i.e. Prussia to which he belonged as “the march of God on earth”. This personal opinion of Hegel may or may not have been accepted by the nationalists of Europe and America but the majority of nationalists came to perceive their respective nations as being touched by divine.



Traditional dance in Republic Day parade

This rise of nationalism combined with militarism and racialism, to a certain extent, became the reason for several mass upheavals or reactions taking place during this time. This kind of phenomena has been observed in human history only during the religious wars of the 16th and the 17th centuries in Europe. Nisbet says that most probably World War I represented the culmination of the nationalist religious fervour in Europe.

This religious fervour for one's nation and what it stood for came under question after the Second World War when rise of Nazi nationalism and the Jewish holocaust brought an image of fear and revulsion in people's mind against excessive patriotism.

Today we find that patriotism of the kind found during the World War I and along with it civil religion had declined throughout the democratic world. However, we can still observe some form of religious-like sentiment associated with one's regard for the nation.

In the next section, we are going to discuss the varieties of civil religions found in different societies, with special emphasis on the American society.

Check Your Progress 1

i) Define the concept of civil religion in about 8 lines.

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ii) Describe Rousseau’s ideas on Civil Religion in about 10 lines..

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iii) What is the religion of the Supreme Being? Describe using about 8 lines..

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9.4 VARIETIES OF CIVIL RELIGION

Scholars of sociology of religion such as, R.N. Bellah and Peter Hammond (1980) have found the existence of some kind of common faith in different societies particularly in Japan, Mexico and Italy. These societies had different structures in which this common faith was reflected. Bellah and Hammond also discovered in their cross-cultural comparison that none of these societies possess the full structure of civil religion as found in America. Let us examine some of these varieties of civil religion found in some of the societies during different periods of time.

9.4.1. Civil Religion in the Ancient Greek and Roman Cities

During the history of human societies, the explicit forms of gods of archaic religion had emerged due to certain circumstances and religious understandings. Bellah pointed out that various forms of social organisation are necessary for the emergence of a certain type of religious organisation on the form that it takes.

In this same context Swanson, a scholar who studied religion during the cross

cultural comparison, showed that in statistical terms the presence of a pantheon of gods as characterised by the archaic religions is closely linked with the presence of a number of groups of specialists within the society (Swanson, G.D. 1960 : pp. 82-96). He discovered that there is a pattern of development of superior gods within territorial consolidation and social and occupational differential of society.

According to Swanson, and another scholar Murray, this pattern originates from the family which is the ultimate sovereign group. It is in the family that the first religious practice is directed towards the worship of ancestral spirits or family gods or deities who protect the interests of that particular family or clan. The particular interest of the family is the particular interest of that family's god. This interlinkage becomes more and more differentiated as the societies become increasingly complex. In this evolutionary perspective of religion, the god of one family become associated with a particular occupational speciality.

With the emergence of larger social groups, scholars feel that some local gods may have merged with others to form the single god of the same occupational speciality or particular season. But this emerging itself depended on a clear idea of the final entity so that the process of merging stopped at some stage. Where a clear conception did not exist, the archaic religion did not reach its final phase of religious development.

However, in places where this final merger of local gods could not take place there the social and political differentiation in that society made it more natural for religious expression to take the form of a pantheon of gods. This is where we find the case of civil religion of the ancient Greece and Rome (Hargrove, B. 1989 : 109-112).

Religious practices were held in the family first, then in the city government in both the Greek City-States, as well as, Roman City-States. Each and every family of citizens who belonged to these city-states had their own sacred fires and appropriate rituals to propitiate their gods, for maintaining, using, honouring and renewing this sacred fire. But this ritual activity was conferred to only the Patrician families who claimed full citizenship. The class of Plebians and strangers were left outside the body politic because they in essence did not belong to, that is, had no part in this civil religion.

The plebians shared the religious ceremonies only if they came under the protection of a patrician family in a client relationship, with the patrician family being the patrons. According to Bellah, the most characteristic feature of archaic religions was the presence of the strong two-class system as found amongst the Greek and later the Roman city-states. The religion of the two classes also were not the same.

The upper classes believed that they had higher religious expression. In the Greek mythology we find a dual system of gods. There are the gods who have obviously developed from the primitive ritual divinities such as the mother earth, corn goddess of agricultural people and the lower classes, on the one hand, and on the other there are in the pantheon the Olympian gods of classical Greece imposed over the gods of the lower classes. The nature of these Olympian gods indicate the source of the conquerors who formed the upper class of the Greek society. They were the Aryans who invaded ancient Greece from the north.

Thus, civil religion in the ancient Greek and later Roman society, as reflected in their respective mythologies, reveals the importance given to the state and citizens of that state.

9.4.2 Civil Religion in France

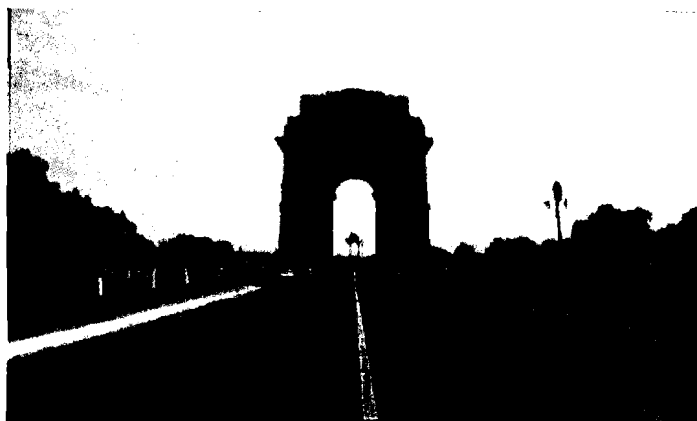
France during the 18th Century witnessed an age of not only socio-economic and political upheaval but also of religious skepticism and theological doubt. This period can be adjudged as the most crucial period in human history as it transformed the European society from a largely feudal to a democratic one.

It was this period of the French Revolution when intellectuals such as Voltaire and other “enlightened” literateurs came down heavily on “supernatural” religion and ecclesiastical institutions. They criticised and mocked Christian tradition as well as the Christian Bible.

Being influenced by the natural sciences, “reason” and scientific approach came to be held as a measure of judgement. In this mental framework, miracles, superstitions, traditional ways of thinking and believing all came to be questioned. Christianity was denounced as superstitious and its clergy as humbugs (You will get a clearer picture of this phase of French history and society if you go through the Unit 1, Block 1 of ESO-03 : Sociological Thought).

For the first time in the Christian history a large number of influential adherents to Christianity had come out openly in the criticism of the truth and the worth of its most fundamental tenets. As Hayes (1926 : pp. 93-125) pointed out, many of the 18th Century intellectuals perceived in the Trinity (i.e. the holy alliance of God, the Father; the son, Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost and in the Christian sacraments) only the vain imagining of dupes or hypocrites. They saw nothing in Christian Revelation or in any “supernaturalism” to which human beings could justifiably attach any sense of devotion or reverence.

The intellectuals of the 18th century Europe, especially France were logical in their arguments. They refused to follow Christianity. But yet, according to Hayes, these self same intellectuals did possess a religious sense which they have shown in many strong ways. They came to believe in a God of Nature who as he says “stated things which could not stop and who was so intent upon watching numberless worlds go round in, their appointed orbits and so transferred by the operation of all the eternal immutable. Laws which he had invented that he had no time or ear for the little entreaties of puny men upon a pygmy Earth” (Hayes C.G.H. : 1926 : 92-125).



Monuments such as India Gate in Delhi are respects of in icons in civil religion.

Box 9.01

Prof. Albert Einstein on religion :

The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed. It was the experience of mystery—even if mixed with fear that engendered religion. A knowledge of this existence of something we cannot penetrate, our perceptions of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which only in their most primitive forms are accessible to our minds—it is the knowledge and this emotion that constitute true religiosity; in this sense, and in this alone, **I am a deeply religious man** (Ref. Ideas and Options) (Points to Ponder, Reader's Digest, Oct. 1991 : p.127).

Hayes says that this God of Nature was very much inferior to the God of Christians but he was outside of man and these 18th Century intellectuals managed to develop a mysterious feeling about him.

The God of Nature was not the only power that these intellectuals felt a religious devotion about. Some of them also discovered and paid obeisance to a mysterious force outside of themselves called Science. Later it was found that when capitalised this Science proved to be but a theological hand maid to the God of Nature.

There was another “hydra headed monstrosity” which these intellectuals worshipped i.e. the Humanity. These intellectuals were especially devout people. This devotion could be because when the whole of Humanity is deified it will be having a far greater mystery and awe attached to it, than the conception of a single God, Man or even the Trinity.

Auguste Comte (1798-1857), the father of sociology too during the latter half of this academic career propagated a religion of the Supreme Being i.e. the religion of the Humanity amongst the intellectuals of France during the 18th century.

With the waning of faith in Christianity during this time and increasing devotion to Nature, Science, Reason, Progress, Humanity and so on, the intellectuals of this period were giving expression to their inherent sense of religion. During this very phase there was another sort of worship i.e. the worship of the Political State.

The French Revolution was a landmark in the development of nationalism as a religion. As you have already seen, the intellectuals of this period brought about a sea change in the ideas and perspectives of people regarding society, economy, polity and so on.

In the beginning these intellectuals tried to syncretise the 18th Century philosophy with Catholic Christianity in a state church so that it would become democratic in organisation and can be conducted in the national interests. A philosopher of this period Abbe Raynal said, “The state, it seems to me is not made for religion, but religion is made for the state. The state has supremacy in everything. When the state has pronounced, the church has nothing more to say” (Hayes 1926 : 101).

The twists and turns that the history and polity of France took during the revolutionary period too, reveals the nature of the development of the civil religion. It aimed to create a national clergy, under the control of the civil power, with the same standing as other state-officials. This move was however, resisted by the traditional clergy of France which had till then enjoyed very high status, and power.

The civil Constitution was condemned at Rome in April, 1791 and since then this issue was squarely combined in France between the religions of Catholicism and Nationalism. Christianity was not formally rejected but only the clergy who swore allegiance to the Civil Constitution were allowed to perform Christian services. According to Hayes, the Catholic churches in most parts of France were transformed into civic temples. By 1793 the persecution of the clergy who resisted the change began because in the minds of the French Revolutionaries the Catholic clergy as a whole had committed the greatest infamy of all of defying the national state.

Nationalism became a religion in the true sense of the word with the French Revolutionaries. These Revolutionaries believed that a miraculous regeneration would take place in France in the "new order" and this regeneration would extend to the whole human race. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was hailed as "the national catechism", and a sincere belief in this Declaration was prescribed by the Constitution of 1791, drawn in France.

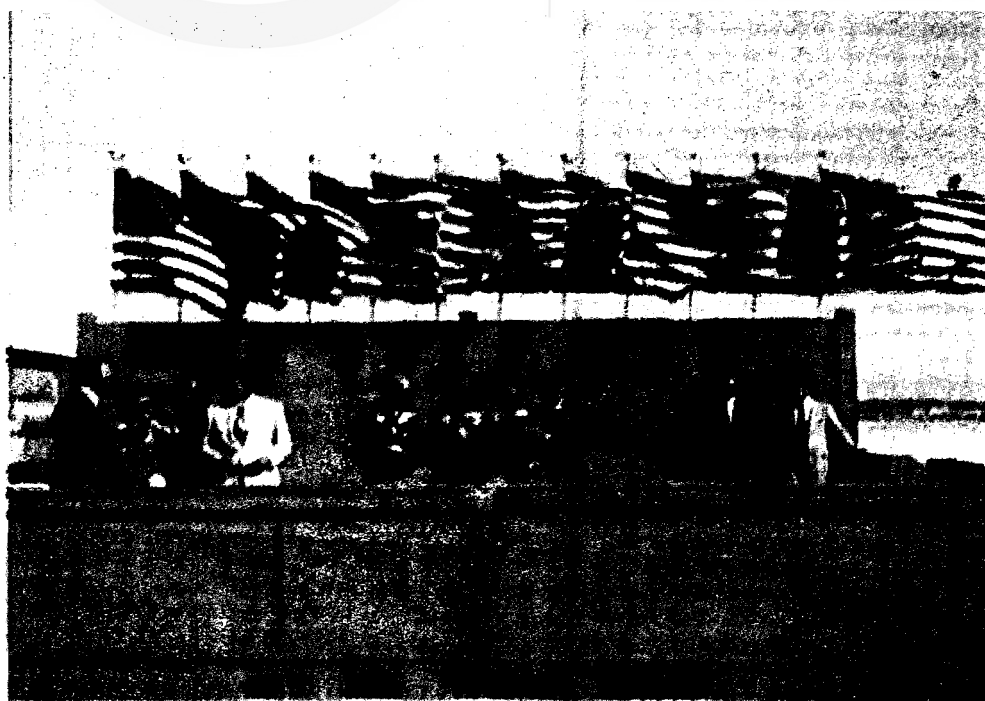
Those who refused to swear by this Constitution and what it stood for were cut off from the community by civil excommunication. The written Constitution embodying the Declaration, became holy writ.

Hayes writes that the religion of nationalism in France, and other countries of Europe, during this period, had lodged deep in popular consciousness. It emerged eventually in many strange forms opposed to the older philosophies and world religions as the most dominant religion of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.

9.4.3 Civil Religion in America

Civil religion in its most crystallised and evolved forms is found in the American Society. The American society represents, in the most dramatic way the *religion of nationalism in the West during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.*

The religion of nationalism led to the rise of a political clarity in every country in



The flag of a nation has a complex ritual along with other symbols of national amnity.

Europe which was devoted to the nation in the same way as the clergy i.e. the clergy was devoted to the church during the medieval period. Children were now born into, and received their primary identities from the national state, as they had once been born primarily into the church. Birth, marriage and death all became a concern of the civil state. In the areas such as, family, school, and charity i.e. social welfare measures, the civil government began to take charge instead of the church.

In America the great events like the birth-days of great political figures like Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln came to be celebrated as solemnly as the feasts of the Christian saints and martyrs were once celebrated. Likewise, the great events of historical significance for the nation were also given a religious regard. The fourth of July, just like our Fifteenth of August, took on some of the same religious kind of significance as the Feast of the Nativity did in Christianity (Nisbet, 1968 : 526).

R.N. Bellah (1967 : 1-20) in his article on "Civil Religion in America" writes that "Christianity is the national faith, and others that the church and synagogue celebrate only the generalised religion of "the American Way of Life", few have realised that there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well institutionalised civil religion in America".

Nisbet maintains that the American Civil religion had its widely recognised theology. One complete with creed, catechism and dogma. In America, as in many other nations too, a complex ritual surrounds the American flag and other symbols of national civil unity.

He says that during this period Protestants generally scorned the Catholics use of external adornments of faith such as, statues or idols of God, mural, portrait and so on. But yet they saw no harm in the use of these decorations where the worship of their nation was concerned. He says that in America it would be a rare public square which did not have at least one statue of some departed political saint. This is true of all European countries of that time.

We can find a resemblance to this in our own country. After Independence, the statues of Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose and others who sacrificed their lives for India's freedom stand testimony to the great historical event of the struggle for freedom of our nation.

Bellah has examined the way in which Americans treat religion on public occasions in community life. He has analysed the inaugural speech of American Presidents to show the great significance of civil religion in America. He pointed out that words and acts of the founding fathers of America, especially the first few presidents, shaped the form and tone of the civil religion as it has existed ever since then. Much of this religion is selectively derived from Christianity but yet it is itself clearly not Christianity. Presidents like George Washington, Adams or Jefferson have never ever mentioned Christ in their inaugural address and nor have any of the subsequent presidents. But it is very significant that none of these presidents have ever failed to mention God in their speeches.

According to Bellah, the God of civil religion is not only rather "unitarian" but is also on the austere side, much more related to order, law and right of people than to the question of salvation and love (Bellah 1967 : 1-20).

Bellah examined Kennedy's inaugural address of 20th January 1961 and found the Kennedy mentioned the name of God in two or three places. Similar references to God is also found in the speeches of other Presidents of America.

Bellah says that the reference to the term God reveals the essentially irrelevant role

of religion in a secular society like America. The reference of God in this speech as well as in public generally indicates that religion has “only a ceremonial significance” : it gets only a sentimental nod which serves largely to placate the more unenlightened members of the community before matters of great socio-political concern are discussed by the President.

Bellah says that a cynical observer of these proceedings might even say that an American president has to mention God in his speech otherwise he will risk losing votes. An appearance of religiosity is a kind of unwritten qualification for the office of the American President.

Kennedy’s speech and his references to God, which reveals the essentially vestigial place of religion in America, raises some important questions regarding the issue of how civil religion relates to the political society on the one hand and the private religious organisation on the other. Kennedy, in his speech mentioned God only in a general sense. He did not use the name of Christ although he himself was a Catholic Christian.

Bellah says that Kennedy did this because the specific reference to the Christian religion or any other for that matter, is the business of the Presidents’ own personal life. It does not in any way concern the conduct of his public office. Thus the principle of separation of church and state guarantees the freedom of religious belief and association but at the same time it also clearly segregates the religious sphere, which is essentially private, from the political one, which is public.

However, the reference to God in the President’s speech is justified in the sense that the separation of church and state does not rule out the religious dimension from the political spheres. Despite the specific elements of religious belief of every citizen, the Americans in general have certain common elements of religious orientation which they all share. These common elements play a crucial role in the development of American institutions and provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere.

Bellah says that this public religious dimension found in American society is expressed through a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals which as a whole constitutes the American Civil Religion. It is in this context that the inauguration of a president is an important ceremonial event which reaffirms the religious legitimation of the highest political authority of the President.

Kennedy, in his speech said, “I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebearers prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago”. Here the oath mentioned is the oath of office, including the acceptance of the obligation to uphold the Constitution. This speech shows that beyond the Constitution, the President’s obligation extends not only to the people but to God.

Therefore, Bellah maintains that in American political theory, sovereignty rests with the people but along with that, implicitly and often explicitly, the ultimate sovereignty has been attributed to God. Thus it shows that the will of the people is not itself the criterion of right and wrong. There is a higher criterion in terms of which this will can be judged. It is accepted that the will of the people may possibly be wrong. The President’s obligation, therefore, extends to this higher criterion i.e. God.

According to Bellah, the whole presidential address reveals the theme or meaning which lies deep in the American tradition. This theme is that of the obligation, both collective and individual to carry out God’s will on earth. This was the motivating spirit of the founders of America and it still continues till today in every generation.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Give in brief the salient aspects of civil religion in the Greek and Roman city-states. Use about 10 lines.

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- ii) Why did the intellectuals of the French Revolution period reject the traditional beliefs and ideas? Were they non-religious? Answer in about 8 lines.

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- iii) Nationalism became a religion in the true sense of the word with the French Revolution. Explain in about 8 lines.

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- iv) The public religious dimension found in American polity and society can be distinguished from the private religious dimension. Discuss using about 10 lines.

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9.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have explained the various dimensions of civil religion. Civil religion has been defined as “the religious or quasi-religious regard for certain civic values and traditions found recurrently in the history of the political state”. You learnt that this concept was associated with a semi-religious fervour or regard in which political events and birth days or martyr days of great personages are celebrated.

Civil religion is not a new phenomenon but was found as far back as the ancient Greece and Roman Societies. In Civil religion we find a fusion of the political and the religious elements. This could be seen clearly in Japanese history till the World War II.

During the French Revolution the notion of “patrie” emerged. It was coined by the French philosophers and refers to the new conception of the political state. For them the state was one which was paternal in its regard for its citizens. You learnt about Jean J. Rousseau who for the first time used the term “civil religion” which forms a chapter of his seminal work in political philosophy, **Social Contract (1762)**.

Finally, in this unit you have learnt about the nature and development of the concept of civil religion in human history briefly. We described to you the varieties of civil religion found in :

- i) ancient Greek and Roman City-states,
- ii) French Society during and after the French Revolution; and
- iii) American Society.

As such you are now in a position to understand and explain the concept and reality of Civil Religion.

9.6 KEY WORDS

Civic : It is related with being a citizen.

Clergy : All persons, such as priests who are in holy order associated with church.

Defaulters : One who goes against the accepted rules.

Holocaust : The large scale killing of Jews during the World War II by the Nazis.

Human Movement : Due to certain socio-political or economic or ecological reasons when a large number of people move from one geographical area to another.

Hydra : an organism which has many tentacles or branches.

Patriotism : The devotion or love that one has for one's country.

Regeneration : The regermination or emergence of new social institutions, body of norms, values and beliefs after a period of decline and decay in a society.

Social Contract : An understanding reached by mankind to accept the norms and values of each other for congenial social existence.

Trinity : The holy alliance of God, the Father, Jesus Christ, the son; and the Holy Ghost. It is part of the Christian belief and theology.

9.7 FURTHER READINGS

Hargrove, Barbara, 1989. *The Sociology of Religion : Classical and Temporary Approaches*, Arlington Heights. Illinois.

Nisbet, Robert, 1968. "Civil Religion" in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 1 pp. 524-527, Macmillan and Free Press.

Wuthnow, Robert, 1988, *The Restructuring of American Religion Society and Faith Since World War II*. Princeton University Press.

9.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Civil religion has been defined as that feeling of quasi-religious regard for certain civic values and traditions which are found recurrently in the political history of a nation. This regard has a religious or semi-religious nature and is expressed through special festivals, rituals, creeds and dogmas which bestow honour to great political leaders or historical events of great significance to the nation.
- ii) Rousseau, a French philosopher was the first one to use the concept of civil religion in his seminal work in political philosophy, **Social Contract (1762)**. He used this term as the title of one of the chapters in this book. He was influenced by the notion of "patrie", i.e. the new conception of the political state which implies a paternal or fatherly regard of its citizens by the political state as developed by the French philosophers. Rousseau took the concept of civil religion as fulfilling the need of human beings for the religious. He believed that traditional christianity did not fulfill this need adequately. Therefore, civil religion in which the political head would determine the components of this religion was an answer. This components would be the social sentiments without which a human being cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject.
- iii) The religion of the Supreme Being worshipped the French Revolution itself. As indicated, the civil religion emerged during the French Revolution when it was at its height (1793-1794). It was initiated by Robespierre, one of the French Revolutionaries and came to be known officially as the religion of the Supreme Being. It believed in the political state, specifically the revolutionary state as the main focus of and element of its belief and rites.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) In the Greek, and later Roman city-states the religious practices were conducted in the family first and then in the city government or the city-states. Each family of citizens of these city-states had their own sacred fires and gods and goddesses to propitiate. Family unit was responsible for performing the rituals for maintaining, honouring, using and renewing this sacred fire. However, as only the class of patricians i.e. those who were the lords and masters of the land were considered the rightful citizens of the city-state, only they had the right to participate in this civil religion. The class of plebians or the serfs were not considered citizens and as such could not participate in the ritual activity of propitiating their family Gods.

Sometimes they shared the religious ceremonies of their master but only as their clients.

- ii) The intellectuals of the French Revolution rejected the traditional beliefs and ideas as during the Enlightenment Period each and every idea came to be questioned. Nothing was accepted on its face value or because it was God given. Not only socio-economic and political ideas were critically evaluated but the religious ideas of traditional christianity also came to be questioned. However, as Hayes (1926) says this did not mean that these intellectuals were without religious feelings. For they developed a religion like regard for such concepts as “reason”, “progress”, “humanity”, “the Supreme Being” and so on.
- iii) Nationalism became a religion in the true sense of the word with the French Revolution because it was during this revolution that the worship of the political state emerged by the Revolutionaries. The Revolution itself came to be worshipped and the new Constitution and its symbols became part of this civil religion. A national clergy emerged under the powers of the civil state with the same status as that of the state officials.
- iv) The public religious dimension found that in the American polity and society can be distinguished from the private religious dimension. The first one is general and regards the nation and citizenship as the main goal of worship or religious rites and ceremonies while the second one is the private affair of each person as it is specific to their being members of a specific religion.

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UNIT 10 RELIGION AND THE ECONOMIC ORDER

Structure

- 10.0 Objectives
- 10.1 Introduction
- 10.2 Religion and Society
- 10.3 Religion and Economy
- 10.4 Religion and Capitalism
 - 10.4.1 Karl Marx (1818-1883)
 - 10.4.2 Max Weber (1864-1920)
 - 10.4.3 Comparison between Marx and Weber
- 10.5 Hinduism and Development
 - 10.5.1 Marx on Hinduism
 - 10.5.2 Weber on 'Hinduism and Capitalism'
 - 10.5.3 An Evaluation of Weber
- 10.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 10.7 Key Words
- 10.8 Further Readings
- 10.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

10.0 OBJECTIVES

On studying this unit you should be able to

- describe the relationship between religion and the economic order
- discuss the role played by religion in the development of capitalism
- ask if capitalism failed to originate in India, because of Hinduism
- infer if Hinduism stands as an obstacle in India's path of development.

10.1 INTRODUCTION

As you know this course is about society and religion. You learn from these sets of units, the way in which sociologists understand religion—in terms of its origin, function, and organisation. Relationship between various social institutions, usually attracts the special attention of sociologists. Particularly in this Block 2, after learning about rituals, rites and practices, you are appraised of the relationship between religion and economic order, religion and politics.

Unit 10, draws your attention to the various aspects of relationship between religion and the economic order. After learning about the general aspects in section 10.3, relationship between religion and a specific model of economic order, namely, capitalism, is explained in detail in 10.4. Karl Marx and Max Weber have made significant contributions in this area.

The views of Karl Marx and Weber have special significance for India, hence we discuss their views with special reference to India, in section 10.5. You should be able to reflect, if there is any relationship between India's economic development (or underdevelopment) and Hinduism, after reading this unit.

10.2 RELIGION AND SOCIETY

Have you seen the film 'The Gods Must be Crazy'? It is an interesting film, which gives rich insights on the origin and development of religion. Broadly speaking,

religion is the result of man's attempt to understand the unknown. Religion involves fear of powerful supernatural forces.

As you know, our life is surrounded by mysteries. Death, birth, creation and life itself is a mystery. Religion tries to explain the mysteries which surround us. Religion helps human beings in facing the uncertainties of everyday life. From the beginning of sociology, sociologists have been interested in understanding man and religion.

Religion stands as a basis for our life and influences our words and deeds to a significant extent. It gives meaning to our life, through myths, rituals and ceremonies. It gives us a sense of the past and a goal for the future.

10.3 RELIGION AND ECONOMY

Economics is generally a matter of production and distribution of goods. Human beings are directly involved in both the processes of production and distribution. What is produced and distributed depends much on the general pattern of consumption characteristic of a society. In the previous section it was pointed out that religion influences one's deeds and actions. Understandably, religious beliefs and values affect one's work ethic, business ethic and consumption patterns.

A religion, which prescribes 'hard work' for salvation, naturally inspires its adherents to be dedicated and committed workers. On the other hand, if work is considered to be a punishment for one's sins by a particular religion, then it is less likely that the believer would be a dedicated and sincere worker. However, there is another way of looking at the above situation. If any religion emphasises more on honesty and sincerity in work, the believer might fail to notice or ignore the exploitation in the factory site.

Consumption patterns too may be conditioned by one's religious belief. Meat may not find a market in a region dominated by people, whose religion strictly advocates vegetarianism. If conch shells are of much religious value in a society, they may be preserved or saved. If religious beliefs go against consumption of all forms of liquor, then there is a possibility that liquor distilleries may have to be shut down. True, religion influences the economic activities of people. It is also true that, religions themselves may arise out of crisis situations. Among many tribal communities in India, because of land alienation and poverty new cults emerged. New messiahs or prophets began to institute new cults to meet the crisis situation.

So far it has been demonstrated that religious beliefs and values affect the processes of production, distribution and consumption. Classical thinkers like Karl Marx and Max Weber have pondered over this relationship, with special reference to capitalism. We will elaborate upon their views, in the next section.

10.4 RELIGION AND CAPITALISM

Economic order varies from age to age. Feudalism, capitalism and socialism are three examples of the economic order. Nature and organization of production, distribution and consumption differ widely in various economic orders.

Under the impact of science, philosophy and renaissance, feudalism was breaking down in Europe during 15th and 16th centuries. The catholic church had strong roots in many of the feudal countries. On the transformation of feudalism, there are changes in the religious sphere too. The doctrines of the catholic church were challenged by new streams of thought. Among these were the supremacy of the Pope and the interference of the church in the affairs of the state which came under heavy criticism. As capitalism developed, many protestant sects arose in many European countries.

Many scholars tried to understand the relationship between capitalism and religion and in particular protestantism. Karl Marx and Max Weber are two scholars who shed significant light on this relationship.

10.4.1 Karl Marx (1818-1883)

Marx was concerned more with the understanding of capitalist order than with the understanding of religion per se. But in his general understanding of capitalism, Marx also developed a general theory of society extending over almost all social institutions, especially religion and politics. Marx's model of society had an economic base which constrains the superstructure constituted by religion, politics, arts etc. As a Jew from Germany, who had but long association with England, Marx owes much to his predecessors Hegel and Feuerbach, for his views on religion. In other words, Karl Marx's views on religion were largely a reaction to what Hegel and Feuerbach had written earlier on the subject.

i) Hegel

Hegel constructed the history of mankind as three stages in the development of the Absolute Spirit. What is this 'Absolute Spirit'? It is the force, which is the unity of the subjective (from within man) and the objective (that which exists outside man). To be simple, it is the dialectical unity of man with social and political order. In the first stage of historical development, the Absolute Spirit takes the 'art form', in the next stage it takes the form of 'religion' and in the third or final stage the form is 'absolute knowledge'. In the second stage, god appears to man. According to Hegel, during this stage, God's relationship with man is reflected in the relationship between man and man. It means two things : firstly, man's life is a material projection of the ideal realm (the divine); secondly, religion could be people's conception of themselves. Going by the first meaning, it can be understood that religion is the base on which many social institutions arise like superstructures. For example, Hegel opines that it was only due to the advent of christianity that a liberal political state became possible.

It seems there is a problem in Hegel's thought. It is true that Hegel dissolves the distinction between God and man. But, it also seems as though religious ideas are independent, as a superior guiding force which have an intrinsic value. This is questionable.

ii) Feuerbach

According to Feuerbach, religion is man's self-consciousness in an object form. God is a projection of purely human qualities in a distant beyond, which stands above and against the individual human reality. Knowledge of God is self-knowledge and consciousness of God is self-consciousness. Man's thoughts are his Gods. Through God, it is possible to understand man's god. Religion, in the thought of Feuerbach, reveals what a man thinks about himself. According to Feuerbach, the roots of religious ideas lie within individual psyche. Since man's capacity to attain what he wants is limited, he creates an omnipotent God, who is perfect and bears all superlatives. The misery of life impels man to seek for an after-life. Feuerbachian thesis, ultimately states that, man's consciousness has to be changed, so that the qualities he attributes to God can be restored back to him.

iii) Critiquing Hegel and Feuerbach

Karl Marx proceeded a step further than that of Feuerbach. He asks : "What are the social conditions which push the man to go in search of religion?". This question

is natural, considering the basic dictum of Marx's thought. As you know, according to Marx, society determines man's consciousness. Hence, the misery which necessitates religion comes not just from within the individual—but from specific exploitative social conditions. Thus religion is anchored in the society, in Marx's thought.

Broadly speaking, Marx's views on religion and its relationship with capitalism has three themes : Firstly, religion is an illusion which veils real exploitative conditions in society; Secondly, religion is a mode of protest albeit in a mild form and it is a form of alienation; Thirdly, religion can be discarded not through a critique of religion, but only changing the societal conditions which give rise to religion.

iv) Marx : Religion is an ideology

Religion has a double-function. It acts as an ideology (political ideas of a social class) of the ruling elite. It acts as an opiate of the masses. Much of Marx's understanding of religion seems to have arisen out of his experience of Protestantism of the Prussian state in the early nineteenth century. Marx was critical of the Prussian state which promoted Protestantism, because it helped the state to justify the economic inequalities. It can also be said that protestantism acted as an ideology of the new class which emerged at the break-down of feudalism.

v) Marx : Religion is a Form of Alienation

Marx also understood religion as a form of alienation characteristic of the commodity-producing, capitalist society. As you know, a commodity is a product of men's labour. In a commodity, the social character of labour appears as an object. Here, the relationship between producers and their own labour is presented as a relationship not between themselves, but between the **products** of their own labour. Commodities, then are social things whose qualities cannot be understood through the senses—the relationship between human beings become relations between things. Commodities thus become independent. In the same way, religion which is product of man's alienated labour, becomes independent and begins to reign over him. The social relations of man appear as relations of alien objects—both in the world of commodities and the in the world of religion. Thus out of man's alienation, relation arises.

Box 10.01

“Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and also the protest against the real distress”, says Marx (1975 : 39). This protest does not aim at real conditions of exploitation in society—rather it is directed towards an imaginary construction. Thus men become slaves of what they themselves produce as religion. Religion, here acts as opium because it is an escape mechanism from the misery; it gives illusory happiness; it veils effectively the conditions of exploitation in the society.

When all forms of exploitation are destroyed, there is no need for religion. When men enter into relationships as free individuals—there is no misery—and hence there is no need for religion, says Marx, “The struggle against religion is... indirectly a fight against the world of which religion is the spiritual aroma” (1975 : 38).

10.4.2 Max Weber (1864-1920)

Max Weber is another German scholar, who tried to understand the origins of capitalism, in Europe. Rationalization or Rationality is the unifying theme of Weberian scholarship. Rationalization indicates two almost simultaneous processes : firstly, the displacement of magical elements of thought and secondly, the process in which ideas attain systematic coherence and naturalistic consistency (Gerth & Mills 1952 : 51).

Weber applies his concept of rationalization to understand changes in religion, science, arts, administration and politics. For Weber, capitalism itself was born out of a highest degree of economic rationalization.

Weber argues and demonstrates that ideas can become motor forces in the development process. In the development of capitalism, the ideas supplied by the protestant sects played a major role. Max Weber's 'Protestant Ethics and Spirit of Capitalism' was published in German between 1904 and 1905. Since then it has been a subject of debate among social scientists all over the world. Especially, after the Second World War, the debate has earned the attention of third world scholars.

i) West and the East

When contrasted with the East, Weber finds that rationalization has reached a high degree only in the West. Take for example, science, Weber says that only in the Western civilization, science has reached a high stage of development. In his eyes, though India, China and Egypt had great traditions of knowledge, due to the lack of experimental method, they lagged behind in economic development. In various spheres such as music, architecture, legal system, printing system, bureaucracy and capitalism, the West has reached a higher degree of rationalization. Weber points to three aspects, which mark the emergence of rational capitalism : firstly, "rational capitalistic organization of free labour", secondly, "rational industrial organization tuned to regular market" and thirdly "technical utilization of scientific knowledge". Cost-benefit calculation, book-keeping, counting of balance are some indicators of capitalistic organization. Before the arrival of capitalism, there were many magical and religious forces. The protestantism gave rise to an economic spirit, which could overtake all the traditional magico-religious forces and thus paved the way for capitalism.

ii) Catholics and Protestants

Catholics and Protestants were deeply influenced by their religious beliefs in the choice of occupation and type of education. Citing data, Weber says that while protestants sent their children to technical institutions, industrial and commercial training institutes, the catholics sent their children only to humanities education. Protestants outnumber Catholics, among the skilled labourers and administrators.

iii) Spirit of Capitalism

Protestantism, especially Calvinism had an economic ethic conducive for the development of capitalism. "The term 'economic ethic' points to the practical impulses for action which are founded in the psychological and pragmatic contexts of religion" (Weber 1952 : 267). The words of Benjamin Franklin such as "Time is Money", "Credit is Money" and "Money can beget money" capture the essence of ascetic protestantism. Earlier in a traditional set-up, people earned for living. But now after the arrival of protestantism, earning becomes a virtue; an end in itself; it shows one's proficiency in his "calling". The labour too becomes an end in itself. After Protestantism, people earned a lot but did not spend lavishly, people worked hard but did not consume luxuriously. This 'spirit of capitalism', had its roots in ascetic protestantism, whose adherents mainly were the rising strata of the lower industrial middle classes.

iv) Sense of Calling

There are major differences in understanding 'calling' as well as 'labour', between catholicism, lutheranism, and calvinism. For the catholic church, calling meant the renunciation of the world in favour of monastic asceticism, whereas for Luther,

'calling' meant the fulfillment of obligations attached to one's position. 'Labour' is the 'product of selfishness' according to catholicism, and it is an 'expression of brotherly love' according to Lutheranism. Luther said that the division of labour, forces every individual to work for others. Luther's concept of 'calling' only means that one has to accept his position in the world and hence its 'economic ethic' was not progressive. It was Calvin, whose interpretation of 'calling', coupled with the 'Doctrine of Predestination', generated intense drive for development of capitalism in countries like Holland, Netherlands, Switzerland etc.

v) Calvinism and Wordly Asceticism

The 'Doctrine of Predestination' holds the key, to the understanding of capitalist spirit generated by calvinist ethic. The doctrine of predestination states that God has already chosen some men for eternal life (salvation) and some men for eternal death (condemnation). Those who are chosen by God form the invisible church of God. According to Calvin, it is impossible to know God's plan and it is not good to know that. Because, God's grace will not be available to those who are not chosen by them for salvation, whatever they might do. Man has to believe that he is chosen by God and has to work for the glory of God, and thus prove his 'faith'.

The doctrine of predestination creates many social psychological impacts : firstly, the individual is left alone because there is nobody to mediate between him and the God, neither the priest nor the church; secondly, the individual has to find his ways himself, for there is no magical way to attain salvation, like sacraments, religious ceremonies, etc. Now, every Puritan has only one question, at his heart, "Am I one of the God's chosen people?" But, there is no answer for this question; not even through one's deeds can you guess whether he or she is chosen.

The only option left for the Puritan is to believe that he is chosen. Believing so, he has to avoid all sensuous pleasures and enjoyments and has to fight against all sorts of temptations with confidence. The only way to gain this confidence, is hard work for the glory of God. In doing so, it is established that God is acting through the hardworking, confident, ascetic puritan. A puritan has to create the conviction of salvation for himself, and behave carefully at every step in life, for if he commits mistakes there is no place for repentance and rectification. A puritan practices self-control, but works tirelessly to demonstrate his 'faith' that he is one among the chosen.

When a puritan works hard and earns a lot of money, but avoids luxury, naturally capital accumulates. This can be used for further productive investment. Weber cites Holland, as a typical example of a country in which this process took place. Weber could trace, similar stands of asceticism in other protestant sects like Pietism, Methodism, Baptist Sects etc. but when compared to Calvinism, the impulses generated by their ethic was very weak.

Thus the protestant sects had an economic ethic, which helped the growth of capitalism, particularly in Western European countries.

10.4.3 Comparison between Marx and Weber

Birnbaum (1953) points to many similarities between Marx and Weber. Some of them are important ones and worth citing : Firstly, both Marx and Weber agreed that capitalism is not a mere economic system, but it permeates and spreads throughout the society; secondly, both of them agreed that 'social values' which were necessary for the growth of capitalism were not 'natural' but the outcome of historical development; thirdly, both of them agreed that the "new capitalist entrepreneurial classes did not come from the pre-capitalist financial or merchant classes... (rather) the new capitalist class was a rising one..." Apart from these,

it also seems that both Weber and Marx were convinced of the 'end of religion' in the future.

The major difference is that, while Marx considered ideas to be simple reflections of social and economic realities, Weber considered ideas to be important for development. Weber did not establish a one-to-one relationship between religion and development. Weber's thesis allows us to say that, after a certain stage of development, religion may serve as the ideology of those who benefitted out of the development. Another difference between Marx and Weber is that, while Weber asserted the criticism of religion from within, Marx ruled that out. For Marx, the criticism of religion is possible from outside the religion. Moreover, Marx's view of religion as a veiling mechanism applies to all ages, societies and cultural systems, whereas Weber's view of religion as a bearer of ideas for potential development applies to specific historical-cultural systems. In Weber's thesis, we find the emphasis on 'individual', in Marx we do not find the same.



Karl Marx (L) and Max Weber (R)

Apart from the above specific differences between Weber and Marx on understanding religion, there are several general differences. For Marx, history is divided into many epochs, characteristic of particular way of the distribution of ownership of means of production. Capitalism is one such epoch in history. Whereas for Weber, capitalism is the specific stage one long drawn out historical process called 'rationalization'. Capitalism is not just an economic system or social system alone for Weber, for him capitalism is also a cultural system marked by rationalization in all walks of life—namely, administration, judiciary, science etc.

Activity 1

Try to meet some wealthy businessman or traders in your area and ask them about their views on religion. Also observe their religious practices.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) State whether the following statements are true or false. Mark a T or F against each statement :
 - a) Economics is generally a matter of production and distribution.
 - b) According to Feuerbach, religion is outside the individual psyche.
 - c) Marx said that religion is a reflex of the real world.
 - d) It is possible to know, whom God has selected for 'eternal life (or) salvation'.
- 2) Give answers for the following questions. Follow the instructions carefully :
 - i) answers are hidden in the unit itself
 - ii) answers must be brief and precise

a) What is the similarity between commodity and religion? Use five lines for your answer.

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b) What is Marx's view on the end of religion. Use five lines for your answer.

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c) What are the social impacts of the doctrine of predestination? Use five lines for your answer.

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d) How does the concept of 'calling' differ between Luther and Calvin? Use five lines for your answer.

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e) Define rationalization. Use five lines for your answer.

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10.5 HINDUISM AND DEVELOPMENT

As you know, this unit appraises you about several strands of relationship between religion and the economic order. In the section 10.4, the ideas of Karl Marx and Marx Weber were presented to you. Karl Marx viewed religion as an effect of alienation and Marx Weber argued that the protestant sects were able to supply ideas to facilitate the growth of capitalism. India and Hinduism has earned considerable attention from both the scholars. Marx argued Hinduism as a natural consequence

of stagnant type of social organization and Weber postulated that Hinduism like many Eastern religions lacks an ethic, conducive for the development of capitalism. This section elaborates their views, and presents some of the reactions to their scholarship.

10.5.1 Marx on Hinduism

Karl Marx had a very limited access to knowledge about India. His sources were travelogues, diaries and reports written by British colonial administrators. From these sources, Marx understood Hinduism as Worship of nature and India as an aggregate of self-sufficient 'little communities'. What interested Marx, in Hinduism was its extreme sensualism on the one side and self-torturing asceticism on the other side. Marx explained these kind of extremes were a natural consequence of a stagnant type of social organization, characterized by community ownership of land—namely, 'village republics'. The type of social organization that India had, subordinated man to external forces and as a result there arose nature worship. He argued that the village republics were mainly responsible for committing Indian minds to superstition. Marx postulated that Hinduism might 'die' when the village republics will be dissolved under the impact of colonialism.

The 'bias' inherent in Marx's sources of data has been pointed out. Many studies have shown that India was not a 'stagnant society', or for that matter even the 'little communities'. The villages were never self sufficient and people had to move out of their village for marriage affiliations, market operations and pilgrimages. Village boundaries were always intersected by ties of kinship, occupational and religious contacts. In contradiction to Marx's prediction, Hinduism has survived for many centuries in this continent—though it changes its forms, as some scholars point out. Also, it is widely pointed out that Marx failed to see Hinduism as an instrument of exploitation or control as he did in the case of Western religions.

10.5.2 Weber on 'Hinduism and Capitalism'

In the sub-section 10.4.2 it was explained that Weber could see strands of ascetic protestantism supplying ideas conducive for the origin and development of capitalism. As a sequel to that Weber argued that, the Eastern religious including Hinduism lacked an ethic conducive for the origin of capitalism. Weber's view on Hinduism, was formulated through his understanding of 'power structure' in Indian society and the 'economic ethic' embodied in the 'caste system' and 'Karma Philosophy'.

Box 10.02

Weber believed that Brahmins dominated the power structure in Indian society. Only the Brahmins, who were educated in Vedas, were the highest status group. Brahmins were the ones, towards whom vertical division of society was oriented. Society was divided into hereditary, occupational groups whose statuses were determined as per their proximity/distance from the Brahmins. Since the Brahmins has the 'ritually' sanctioned dominance over the society, they influenced the practical ethic of Hinduism. The practical ethic, shaped by the Brahmins involved much mysticism and magical elements. Purity and pollution were the major magical elements introduced by the Brahmins. Mysticism, directed the attention of religion towards 'salvation' and inner-wordly (at heart) asceticism. With the help of mysticism and magical elements, Brahmins kept vast mass of people servile to them.

'Karma' and the 'caste system' further supplemented this power structure. 'Caste system' was irrational and hence prevented the origin of capitalism in India. How? Firstly, caste system fixed millions of people as servile labourers attached to their upper caste masters'. Secondly, caste system conferred status on one group and heaped multiple disadvantages for other groups; thirdly, the vertical division of humanity into occupational groups had ritual and religious sanctions. The religious sanction, **stabilised** the caste system; fourthly, since the caste system was hereditary and within it, the occupation, the occupational mobility was prevented. Occupational divisions become stable, when groups monopolies certain kinds of occupations. The Karma philosophy, as per the understanding of Weber, is the belief that actions of this-world/this-life has a consequence for the next-life. Karma is a cycle of rebirth, which guarantees status mobility for the individual in the next birth on the basis of his performance of his duty in this-life. If somebody sincerely carries out the duties assigned through his caste position, his position in the (ritual) status hierarchy will be better in the **next birth**. What is the social impact of Karma philosophy? It prevents the individual from searching for better occupations—it confines him to what is assigned to him through his caste position.

Thus the power structure, coupled with the caste system and Karma philosophy generate a 'spirit' which impedes the development of capitalism in India.

Activity 2

Try to find out which religious community or caste community is influential in business/trade in your town/city. Find out, in what/which trade they are influential and how?

10.5.3 An Evaluation of Weber

Weber's thesis on Hinduism has been refuted by many scholars. Rao (1969) points out many problems in Weber's analysis: Firstly, Weber's units of comparison were mistaken. Like he studied protestant sects, he should have studied a Hindu sect and tried a comparison secondly, Weber's understanding of 'Karma' is partial and it takes into account the interpretation of only a single school of thought, when there are many; fourthly, most of such views constructed from religious texts, consider ideas to be stable and unchanging throughout history, which is wrong.

Most of Weber's arguments have been defeated over the development in the past forty years of Indian independence. By now various studies have established that traditional institutions like joint family and caste have well adapted themselves to development. Caste associations have helped in spreading education, caste communities have helped in building textile industries in Western India. Joint family has adapted to the modern corporate sector (Singer 1972) in Madras. Many studies done in 1950s and 1960s, showed that Indian farmers were very receptive to modern methods of agriculture, especially the 'Green Revolution' technology.

Weber mistakenly held that 'Hinduism' is a homogenous, monolithic religion. Due to his mistaken view, he postulated 'one' spirit for Hinduism, which is again unacceptable. Hinduism is heterogenous, with diverse systems of philosophy, and culture. Within Hinduism itself, there have arisen many sects, which have some similarities with the protestant ethic. Veera Saivism or Lingayatism of the 12th century Karnataka, opposed the idea of ritual pollution, preached that 'work is heaven' and advocated self-control. Scholarly studies establish that Lingayats (members of the sect 'Lingayatism') are very active in many entrepreneurial ventures.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Match the following :

- a) Karl Marx : i) "Work is Heaven"
- b) Max Weber : ii) Joint family adapts itself to modern corporate sector
- c) Milton Singer : iii) Hinduism will die because of colonialism
- d) Veera Saivism : iv) Karma philosophy obstructs development.

2) Give answers for the following questions. Follow the instructions carefully :

- i) answers are hidden in the unit itself
- ii) answers must be brief and precise.
- a) Explain Marx's views on Hinduism. Use five lines for your answer.

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b) What is the social impact of Karma Philosophy? Use five lines for your answer.

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c) Can any one agree with Max Weber on his view on 'Hinduism and Development'? Give your own reflections. Use five lines for your answer.

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10.6 LET US SUM UP

Unit 10 had the basic objective of explaining the relationship between religion and the economic order. Section 10.2 demonstrated that religious belief and values affect our words and deeds, everyday. This basic importance of religion was further extended to the realm of economics, namely production, distribution and consumption. This was in Section 10.3.

In 10.4, we chose one particular model of economic life, namely capitalism and its

relationship with religion was discussed. Here, Marx and Weber came to our rescue. It was pointed out in 10.4.1 that Karl Marx's understood religion as a veil over the exploitative conditions of society. For him, religion is only imaginary and it will vanish, when real conditions of exploitation in the society are removed. In 10.4.2 Max Weber's famous thesis on the relationship between protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism was explained. It was pointed out that Calvin's new interpretation of certain doctrines had the potentiality to generate impulses for the origin of capitalism. Weber's analysis of the protestant ethic, made him realise that ideas can play an effective role in development.

In section 10.5, the focus of our discussion was the nature of relationship between Hinduism and the economic order. Here, our main concern was Weber whose statement is that Hinduism lacks an ethic conducive for capitalist origin and development. Weber's statement was elaborated and evaluations in the light of forty years of development experience in India, was prescribed. Both Marx and Weber had understood India, Hinduism in particular, in a partial way since they had very limited access to sources.

10.7 KEY WORDS

Asceticism : Intense self-control or denial of oneself.

Alienation : A process through which a person becomes subordinated to the product of his own activity.

Base and Superstructure (substructure) : A model used by Marx to show the importance of one institution when compared with others. Base generally means 'foundation'.

Calling : One's occupation or Profession.

Capitalism : A system where free wage labour is employed, whose productivity is maximized through machines, and profit is generated continuously, by sale in the market.

Feudalism : An economic system where labour is servile and attached to the master through ties of varying nature and production is only for subsistence.

Ideology : There are two meanings :

- i) Political ideals of any class, especially ruling class.
- ii) A kind of distorted image/thought.

Predestination : 'Chosen already'/'predetermined'.

Puritan : One who adheres to the doctrines any of the protestant sects.

Rationalization : Displacement of magical elements of thought, and systematic coherence and consistency of ideas.

Salvation : 'After-life' or redemption from misery.

Sect : A voluntary association, which gives new interpretation of sacred text.

Socialism : Society where private property is abolished.

10.8 FURTHER READINGS

Giddens, Anthony (1985). *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory*, Cambridge Cambridge University Press.

Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1976) *On Religion*, Moscow : Progress

Robertson, Roland (1987). 'Economics and Religion', in Elaide (M) ed. *Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York : Mac Millan, Vol. 6 pp. 1-11.

Singer, Milton, et al., (ed.) (1975). *Traditional India : Structure and Change*, Jaipur : Rawat.

10.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) a) True
b) False
c) True
d) False
e) False
- 2) a) Commodity and religion, both are men's creations. But they exist over and above men and sedate them.
b) According to Marx, when the real conditions of exploitation are destroyed there is no misery. Then, religion will whiter away.
c) The social impacts of the doctrine of predestination are as follows :
 - i) The individual is left alone, because there is nobody to mediate and their is no magical cure.
 - ii) Work becomes an end, in itself. A puritan has to work for the greater glory of God.
 - iii) Conviction of salvation has to be demonstrated through work and self-control.
 - iv) When a puritan earns but desists from spending, money accumulates, which can be productivity invested.
- d) For Luther, 'calling' is acceptance of one's social position as given by God. In the case of Calvinist, he/she has to work because that position is an opportunity to honour the glory of God.
- e) Rationalization denotes two almost simultaneous processes (i) Displacement of magical thought and action. (ii) The process through which ideas attain systematic coherence and natural consistence. Rationalisation is the unifying theme of Weber's scholarship.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) a) (iii)
b) (iv)

- c) (ii)
 - d) (i)
- 2) a) Marx understood Hinduism as nature worship. For him, this was a natural outcome of the stagnant type of social **organization**, characteristic of Indian villages.
- b) Karma Philosophy advocates that one should sincerely carry out the duties assigned to him (through his caste position), so that he can improve his status in **next-birth**. This tends to prevent an individual from searching for better occupations—it prevents occupational mobility.
- c) Go through the sub-section 10.5.3 carefully and present your own views on Weber's thesis on Hinduism.



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UNIT 11 RELIGION AND POLITICS/STATE

Structure

- 11.0 Objectives
- 11.1 Introduction
- 11.2 Understand Religion and Politics
 - 11.2.1 Meaning of Religion
 - 11.2.2 Social Significance of Religion
 - 11.2.3 Meaning of Politics
- 11.3 State and Secularization
 - 11.3.1 The Concept of State
 - 11.3.2 Secularisation
 - 11.3.3 The Process of Secularisation
- 11.4 The Nature of Politics
- 11.5 Religion of Politics
 - 11.5.1 Homogeneity/Heterogeneity
 - 11.5.2 Religious Groups and Other Divisions in Society
 - 11.5.3 Nature of Religion(s)
 - 11.5.4 Historical Process
- 11.6 Religion and Politics/State : An Overview
- 11.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 11.8 Key Words
- 11.9 Further Readings
- 11.10 Answers to Check Your Progress

11.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you should be able to

- understanding the meaning of religion and politics
- know how the secular state emerged
- explain and analyse the nature of politics
- discuss the factors influencing the relationship between religion and politics.

11.1 INTRODUCTION

In our previous unit we have discussed the interrelationship between religion and economy.

In this unit we will be discussing the relationship between religion and politics/state.

To bring out this interrelationship we first introduce you to an understanding of religion and politics. We then discuss the concept of state and process of secularisation which shaped the nature of the state that we now have.

Next we will discuss the nature of politics and the various factors influencing the relationship between religion and politics.

11.2 UNDERSTANDING RELIGION AND POLITICS

In this section we will discuss what we mean by religion and politics. This discussion, we hope will reveal, how religion and political phenomenon are not strictly restricted to the religious as well as political realm.

Religion is powerful force of group identity. These groups are an integral part of any political process.

11.2.1 Meaning of Religion

We all have questioned regarding the meaning life, our place in the world and whether there is supernatural force that controls events and we look for guidelines for our action. The beliefs and practices that emerge to deal with questions such as this take various forms (See Block 1, ESO-05). Some believe in an invisible force, some may regard trees and animals as holy. The beliefs and practices that deal with the ultimate question are a source of comfort in the face of uncertainty, a basis of social order. These systems comprised of a shared set of beliefs and practices is called religion. Religion thus can be defined as 'stable and shared set of beliefs, symbols and rituals that focus on the sacred' (Conklin 1984 : 296). Our definition also emphasises that religion is shared; a personal belief system of an individual or an individual's philosophy of life cannot be considered a religion because it is not shared. And finally religion focuses essentially on the sacred. Emile Durkheim has defined the sacred as the ideal and the supernatural that are set apart from daily life. The sacred as a superhuman force can reside in natural or artificial objects in animals or in people. Different religions have different beliefs in the sacred.

11.2.3 Social Significance of Religion

As students of sociology we are not seeking answers to the validity of the belief system, we would like to understand the social significance of religion and its relation to various social institutions. Sociologists treat religion as one institution in a complex web of institutions that form a society. One of the major consequences of religion is to strengthen ties among believers. Some critics have suggested, that **religion often becomes more important as a source of social identity than as a source of belief and practices dealing with the sacred.** Many people participate in religion, more to find a place in society rather than because of their convictions. As a result, one often finds that churches, temples, mosques and synagogues often become social centres. Religion is also a rallying point around which groups mobilise themselves towards a cause.

The presence of different religions in the some society can result in violent conflicts. Persecution of religious groups throughout history is something that we are familiar with. Religious wars wrecked both East and West, though often economics and politics had at least as much to do with the struggles as religion. Christians clashed with Muslims, Catholics with Protestants and so on. In India we have seen how millions became refugees in the Partition conflict between Muslims and Hindus.

For years Jews and Arabs have fought bloody battles in the Middle East. These, we must realise, are as much of religious conflicts as they are political. As we can see, religion is very often a vehicle of expression, a form of identity, around which a group gathers either for mustering more power for itself or any such similar cause. Politics fundamentally means how and where power is distributed in the pursuit of goals. In societies where there are different groups with different goals, there are bound to be conflicts. Each group then forges an identity, one of them being the religious identity, which helps them in the pursuit of their goals. Before we go on to analyse this interconnection between religion and politics, it will be useful, to understand what politics means.

11.2.3 Meaning of Politics

Politics and political process have been defined in different ways at different times. It will be useful in the present context to refer to two aspects of the understanding of the term politics.

One such definition refers to i) two opposing forces of conflict and integration that determine the nature of politics. Human societies have many types of layers of conflicts. Politics is concerned with such conflicts. While conflicts are inevitable, they are never the ends, or the ideals, to be achieved in society. Resolution of conflicts, and cooperation and integration of society remains the cherished ideal of all societies. Every analysis of conflicts ends up providing solutions to resolve them. Movement towards an integrated or united society is as inevitable as the emergence of conflicts or differences. Some conflicts are reduced, some persist, some regulated, and some new conflicts emerge as situations change. While diverse social and cultural processes help in achieving the objectives of a harmonious society, political process has an important role to play. **Integration and conflict, thus, are the two apparently opposite forces that constitute the process of politics.**

Social institutions are important from the point of view of both conflict and integration, and they are linked with politics and political process. These institutions, ideas and issues associated with them, often form the basis for an identity of individuals and leads them to conflicting situations. At the same time, social institutions bring about unity and integration with the institutions, as well as between them. These opposing forces operate within this complex interaction that constitute the process the politics. Managing the conflicts which arise out of competing situations where each individual has different interest and identities, bring about the much required integration or unity which constitute politics.

ii) The other aspects of the understanding of politics is the Distributive Approach, associated with the writing of Harold D. Laswell. We all know that there is a great deal of unevenness in the distribution of power and resources in society. Not all communities, individuals have equal access to resources, goods and distribution of positions. Some are deprived of these powers and access to goods and resources.

Political power is to allocate power and authority. This close relationship between power and resources led Laswell (1936) to observe that politics is 'who gets what, when and how'.

A group or a community may feel that it is deprived of access to resources and positions in society. This puts them at a disadvantage and makes them feel powerless. This group then, may challenge legitimacy of the state or the political regime which is vested with authority. **This sense of relative deprivation has been one of the important factors for group/community mobilisation, as well as political violence.**

Religion as we have already mentioned, is not just restricted to the supernatural realm. It has wider social significance. It provides moral, ethical vision and guides people and communities.

Any polity which derives its powers from the people, therefore acknowledges and accommodates the religious aspect. An aspect which is important to the individual and communities.

To put it simply, politics is major social institution involving the organisation of power in society. Political systems attempt to give the impression that their power is legitimate rather than coercive. If you recall your reading on Weber you will remember that authority or power that is legitimate is derived from (1) tradition (2) rationally enacted rules and regulations and (3) charisma.

Political authority in contemporary society gets its authority from the wider section of people. Therefore people's interest and demands effect the political authority. Religion is one aspect of community life which affects politics.

i) Write five lines on the social significance of religion.

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ii) Name the three perspectives of politics and political process.

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iii) Distributive Approach to the understanding for politics is associated with the writings.

11.3 STATE AND SECULARISATION

We have so far discussed the meaning of politics in very broad and general terms. In the section to follow, we will be discussing the term state, which is a political institution concerned with the distribution of power in society. We will also be talking of the concept and process of secularisation (see Unit 16, Block 7, ESO-05) the state as we understand today has emerged out of the need to separate the domain of authority from the secular and religious realm.

11.3.1 The Concept of State

Max Weber defined that states ‘as a human community which successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory’. Thus the state is one of the important agencies of social control, whose functions are carried out through the enforcement of laws which are invariably backed by the use of force.

Comte and Herbert Spencer regarded the emergence of state as a consequence of the increasing size and complexity of societies. There seems to be some validity to their observations. The study of simple societies by anthropologists and sociologists have revealed some correlation between the complexity, size of society and settled political authority. R.H. Lowie writing about the early communities says that must have been tiny and egalitarian and were like a ‘kindred group’. Thus kinship exercised a great influence in maintaining unity. The society was more or less undifferentiated, so there was no great distinction made between religious institutions and political institutions. The head of the community was both a religious as well as a political head. With increasing complexity of society, a need was felt to separate the religious and the non-religious domain, so as to democratize the domain of authority. The politics in Europe, specially in England played a significant role in the real separation of domain of power of the church and the king.

Let us see how this process of separation came about in our next section on the process of secularisation. But before we understand this process, let us try and understand what is meant by secularisation.

11.3.2 Secularisation

The decline in the political and social importance of any single religion in society

is considered as secularisation. Secularisation is commonly associated with modern, technologically advanced societies. The word is derived from the Latin word 'seculum' which means the 'present age'. The word secularisation, in its very general usage, came to convey a dominant social process, that is, a view of or understanding of the world "which is shift from a religious understanding of the world (based on faith in what cannot be directly proved) to a scientific understanding of the world (based on knowledge about what can be directly proved)" (Maconis, 1987 p. 438). Increasingly religion seems to have less and less pervading influences on us. The political dimension of 'secularism' essentially means the separation of the political from the religious authority. A secular state in this context is one which does not support or favour any single religion. It, on the contrary, attempts to treat all citizens as equal irrespective of religious considerations. To understand the separation of the religious and political realm, let us move on to the next section of process of secularisation

11.3.3 The Process of Secularisation

The process of modernisation was accompanied by (and if often included) many other developments. 'Differentiation' was one such process which meant that social institutions had exclusive functions and the different functions found their own institutions for effective performance. A distinction is often made between 'traditional' and 'modern' societies, from this point of view. While a traditional society is characterized by different functions being performed by the same institution(s) in a modern society different functions tend to be performed by institutions that are meant to perform specific functions. This process resulted in a distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'secular' realms of social life. The religious aspects is broadly included in the 'sacred'. Referring to the distinctive trait of religious thought, Durkheim clarifies that "the beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends are either representations or systems of representations which express the nature of the 'sacred things...'" (Durkheim, 1969 : 42). Coming back to the sacred-secular distinction, activities in society other than religion were included in 'secular'. Politics and political processes were included in the secular process of the modern society In this separation, the struggle for a dominance between the ruler, the king, and the organised Church (especially in England), played a significant role.

As pointed out earlier, the process of modernization engulfing the entire society also resulted in, what is called, 'differentiation' which, in a way, resulted in more 'secularization' of the political process. It was accepted, at least at the level of an ideal, that politics and religion should keep away from influencing each other.

While this has been the ideal of politics in modern societies, the very process of modern day politics has made such isolation a near impossibility.

Activity 1

Make clippings of articles on religion and politics from various newspapers and magazines after reading these articles write a two page essay. You can discuss this among your friends and students at the study centre.

11.4 THE NATURE OF POLITICS

Society and polity have always had an interactive relationship, but politics in the democratic framework had made such relationship mutually dependent to a greater extent. When we talk about democracy at the end of the 20th century, it is not just another form of government : it is a system of politics and government that is accepted and adopted by almost all the countries of the world.

Box 11.01

Democracy, as a way of life and as form of government, suggests equality and openness, where individuals and groups compete for power. The norms and rules for working of this system impose the values of healthy competition. The individual preferences which are naturally important in a democracy, are influenced by many forces and factors. The way in which these get intermixed and finally affect human behaviour is an extremely complex process where it is not at all easy to arrange the factors in terms of any fixed importance. At another level social groups play an important role in democratic politics.

Society, does not include individuals who are isolated from one another. Individuals are invariably members of social groups and not only of single groups, but of several such groups simultaneously. Every society is divided into groups in terms of the prevailing values and the number of such groups depends on the number of values. Caste, class, religion, ethnically, common profession, and finally, power, all these may, and do, form the basis for formation of groups. Individuals may be members of more than one group simultaneously. The importance of such groups for democratic politics is that the groups often constitute the organising blocks of the process of politics.

Religion has been one of the central factors for **group identity**, social basis for the formation of such groups having effect on other groupings and on individual behaviour. Religion has been strong motivating factor for **group mobilisation** as well. Democratic politics, concerned and affected as it is with individual and group behaviour, is affected by religion in an intimate manner. The influences vary from society, both in form and in intensity. We discuss this point later in section 11.6.

It has been suggested by some social theories that the “primordial” identities of individuals like religion, will be overshadowed by more powerful societal dynamics like modernisation and industrialisation, and may ultimately be replaced by more ‘modern’ or ‘enduring’ identities, technoprofessional groups, class etc.

The modernisation theory, especially of the earlier phase, had a definite suggestion that the processes of ‘modernisation’, with time and increasing scope, will result in replacement, if not disappearance, of ‘primordial’ or ‘traditional’ basis of individual and group identity, ‘Religious’ identity being one them.

The theory of ‘class’, similarly, puts much emphasis on the economic basis of social organisation and treats the economic class as the ‘real’ social groups and other groupings as, ‘false’ and, ‘illusory’. This theory is of the view that groups will eventually organize themselves on class basis. Social institutions rooted in considerations like religion and ethnicity, or what are often called “cultural enclaves”, are treated as casual, ‘disturbing’ factors rather than as integral elements of the system.

Theoretical positions cited above perceive changes in social conditions as going in one direction, while experiences of different societies have indicated different paths of change, having historical and culture-peculiarities. In some societies changes have been slowed down or even arrested at a particular stage. The actual process of group formation and their interplay is much more dynamic than what the above theories suggest.

Democratic politics, includes many groups that are regarded as ‘primordial’. In fact such groups have gained, both in number and in strength, because of the interplay of forces in democratic politics.

The situation has not been different in the socialist countries, where conscious and rigorous steps were taken to ignore religious groups. They have faced recurrent resurgences of religious identities posing problems from the theoretical ideological and even from practical points of view. Countries of the third world have faced the problems of religious identities and groups in more serious form. Thus religions are an important factor in politics in general, and democratic politics in particular, needs no further elaboration.

What we need to discuss at this stage is what are the factors that affect religious forces in politics. It has been noted earlier that while religion has not become insignificant in the politics of any country, its effect is greater in some countries than in others. There are many factors that result in such variations. We will discuss the variation in terms of the nature of society and the social formations and grouping in our next section.

Activity 2

Are you a member of a political party? Even if not, do you think politics and religion should be mixed? Write down your views and compare them with those of others at the study centre.

11.5 RELIGION IN POLITICS

Relationship between religion and politics depends on various factors i) homogeneity/heterogeneity of society, ii) the extent to which religious groupings coincide with other divisions in society based on economic status, ethnicity, etc. iii) the nature of religions, and finally iv) the historical context of such relationship. We will discuss these factors in the following section.

11.5.1 Homogeneity/Heterogeneity

A society is normally 'pluralist' in the sense that there are various kinds and levels of divisions—religious, economic, ethnic, tribal, and so on. But these divisions are more pronounced in certain societies than in others. It is in terms of these divisions that societies are described as 'homogeneous' and 'heterogeneous'. Divisions are sharper in a heterogeneous society. Religion, one of the primary basis of individuals identity and group formation and 7 divisions accordingly. In homogeneous societies, the impact of religion on politics is less pronounced, while in heterogenous societies such impact in more perceptible. As R.R. Alford suggests the connection between religion and politics arises as a problem only in nations which are not religiously homogeneous.

11.5.2 Religious Groups and Other Divisions in Society

The second important factor in this relationship between religion and politics is the extent to which the religious groups coincide with other divisions in society, e.g. class, ethnicity, immigrants, and so on. Empirical studies have suggested such relationships/associations among various divisions. A number of studies conducted in different parts of United States found concentration of certain religious groups (e.g. Catholics) among lower classes. Some religious minorities in India, similarly predominantly fall into lower class-economic classes. Ethnicity and migration relate to religion and class in a complex way The authors of the well-known account of the American culture, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1973) found that 'A close examination of Catholic-Jewish relations will reveal some of the tendency of ethnic relations, in that they have a form of class relations as well'. Examples from the U.S. have been mentioned to illustrate the existence of the division coinciding with one another, even in a society that represented **The Melting Pot**, where race,

religion nationality, class and all such cleavages are expected to be melted into a new race of men. The authors of this influential book had no hesitation in declaring that the next state of evolution of immigrant groups will involve a Catholic group in which distinctions between Irish, Italian, Polish, and German Catholic are steadily reduced. Among the Jewish group, in which the line between East European, German, and Near Eastern Jews would slowly become weak. The white Protestant groups, the Anglo-Saxon, Dutch, old-German and Scandinavian Protestants, as well as the white Protestant immigrants welcome together (Glazer and Mohr, 1973 : 314). The groups that have been mentioned above include grouping based on religious, racial, economic and immigrant consideration which coincide with one another. Under conditions of such concentration of factors, their impact on politics is stronger. Thus the authors quoted above declare that "Religion and race define the next stage in the evolution of the American peoples:" (Ibid).

11.5.3 Nature of Religion(s)

The third factor that is important is the nature of religion(s) and its attitude towards politics. R.R. Alford in his book *Party and Society* found a differences between the Anglo-American countries and the continental European countries, with regard to 'religious appeals' of political parties. Among different factors that R.R. Alford found important (for explaining) is the difference that the continental European countries are "predominantly Protestant", while the Anglo-American English-speaking countries and "predominantly Catholic" (Alford, 1963). Because of the history of the emergence of Protestantism, there is more emphasis upon Church and State. Max Weber's classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930) relates the nature of religion with 'secular' forces of industrialisation. There are certain religions that believe in the 'subordination' of all social processes to religion—and find it difficult to separate 'politics' from 'religion'. Put more sharply, 'politics' according to this view, is for religion. Certain other religions are more inclusive, and comparatively, more loosely organized. These religions are more 'tolerant' towards other processes in society and separation of 'politics' from religion finds more conducive conditions.

These differences in the nature of religion are partly in the religion itself. But the difference arise from the various historical forces which have shaped the religion.

11.5.4 Historical Process

The fourth factor, that is both important and complex, is the historical process, operating at two levels : i) the emergence of religion through various stages has followed different paths, providing a distinct character to them. ii) The historical process of the relationship between religion and other social groups and processes, specially the political authority, has influenced the actual place of religion in society. These two historical forces are inextricably linked with one another and the interaction is complex. The examples of the Anglo-American and the continental countries that has been mentioned earlier in the context of relationship between religion and politics, makes the contrast interesting. Explaining the historical reasons, R.R. Alford says that in the continental countries like France, Italy, Belgium etc. where religious parties are strong, religious freedom was won at the same time and was linked with the achievement of political freedom. The consequence was that to this day, religion, class and politics have been closely linked. In Britain, on the other hand, the issue of religion and politics emerged separately and were resolved separately; as a result, not only Church and state legally separated, the political parties were rarely organised on religious basis. Elaborating the historical process further, Alford, says, 'Certain features of Reformation in England in the 1500s, unlike those of Reformations on the continent, may have contributed to the relatively high degree of separation of the church and state and legitimacy of religious pluralism in British

culture'. Because of the specifications of the historical process, social groups belonging to certain religions exhibit distinct political behaviour.

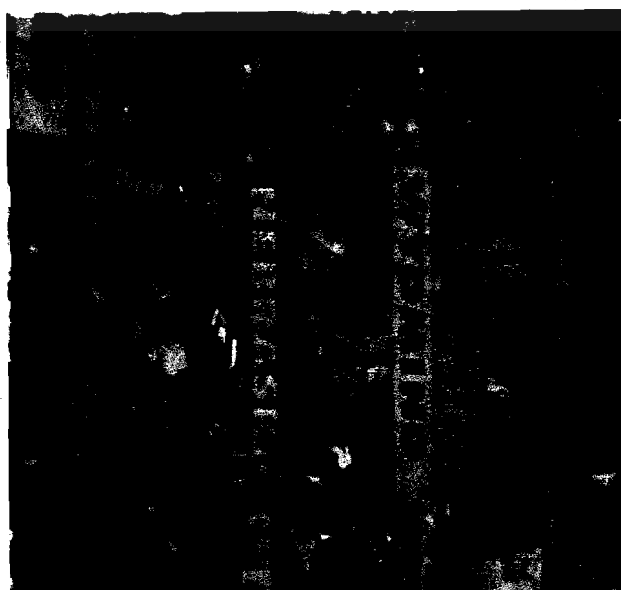
In some countries, the process of the shaping up of the political process itself has been such that religion became an important input factor. Independence in India coincided with division of the country on the basis of religion. While, on the one hand, it made the Indian society and the polity conscious of the importance of secularism in a multicultural, multi-religious country like ours, religious divisions (communal strife) keep reappearing on the Indian political scene at different levels, at times posing serious threat to social harmony and political stability.

11.6 RELIGION AND POLITICS/STATE : AN OVERVIEW

In the ordinary parlance, religion has nothing to do with politics. So also it is often presumed that politics has anything to do with religion. A very generalised understanding of religion equates religion with a set of beliefs and practices related to the supernatural, but we have seen that religion is not concerned with the supernatural realm only. It has a wider social significance, not only as an identity forging force but it also gives a moral and ethical vision and philosophy which guides people and communities.

Box 2

Politics refers to organisation and utilisation of power. The 'State' as an agency which enforces this power has the power to govern. But what exactly do we mean by power? Where does this power emanate from? Power is compound of many factors and influences. If you recall your reading of Weber, power has been described by Weber as the ability to control or coerce another person. Authority is the 'legitimized power—that is to say, people vest a particular authority with the 'right to command' and it is therefore 'expected' that such a command is obeyed (see ESO-03, Block 4). It is this element of power and legitimacy which inevitably links politics with religion despite their relative independence.



Political rally concerning religion.

Power not only entails the mobilisation of muscle, weaponry or police force. In order to have legitimacy, it must also have support from the people. People, as we know, will and always resist, subvert and disobey force, if they feel that their interest of vision of life is being threatened by that political system or a particular state. We only have to look into history to see that it is full of efforts to seize, dismantle, or build counter force against state regimes which are believed to be illegitimate—without the support of the people. Social scientists and scholars will agree that cultural, social and economical values and primordial loyalties like affinity for clan, tribe, caste, religion language etc. influence and delimit politics. Very often these views are held as sacred and important by people who hold them **whenever these** values are threatened the authority of the state is questioned; sometimes it is resisted and many times there is call or reconstitution. It is clear that politics is not composed only of political values; it is significantly influenced by non-political views and values. All these values in the final analysis are derived from the people. That is the reason why we find that even when a state proclaims to be secular, in actual day-day-day political practice, the leadership or authority continuously makes adjustments for pragmatic resolution of problems/affairs. The political authority adjusts itself in such way as to gain the support of the industrialist, the peasant, the worker, the teacher as well as the priest.

In our section on the nature of politics, we have discussed the nature of democratic politics which envisages equality for all and equal treatment of all. This ideal is something that cannot easily be achieved because there always exists competing groups with conflicting interests. The political authority on their part try to accommodate these interests. Religion is one of the important factors around which groups identify themselves and mobilise their interests. And hence these inevitable relationships between religion, and politics/state.

Check Your Progress 2

i) What is meant by secularisation? Write your answer in five lines.

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ii) Name the factors which affect their relationship between politics and religion. Write you answer in about five lines..

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iii) Name the two the theories which see the possibility of replacement of religious identity by class and secular identities..

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11.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we began by talking about the growing interrelationship between religion and politics. To understand this problem, we have discussed religion and politics in detail. We discussed how the secular state emerged out of a conflict for authority by the political authority and the religious authority. Our units also present the process of politics which essentially involves the struggle for power among various groups. Religion forms an important basis for group formation which among other factors influences politics.

Finally, our unit discussed some of the factors which are responsible for the shape of the relationship between religion and politics.

11.8 KEY WORDS

Conflict : A struggle or contest between two groups of people.

Integration : The act of process of unification into a whole.

Power : Legal authority which gives the right to and influence people.

11.9 FURTHER READINGS

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11.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

Religion is a set of beliefs and practices, shared by a community of people, which deal with the ultimate questions of life, death, etc. Religion invariably involves a belief in a supernatural force which is set apart from daily life. Durkheim calls this the sacred. Religion has a social significance for the individual as well as the community; it is a source of comfort in the face of uncertainty. It lays down and provides norms, ethics and code of behaviour. It thus provides a sense of identity to the group.

The three perspectives on politics and political processes are 1) the conflict integrative approach 2) the distributive approach and 3) the behavioral approach.

- ii) Distributive Approach to the understanding of politics is associated with the writings of Harold D. Lasswell.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) The word 'seculum' is derived from the Latin which means the 'present age'. The word secular hence is generally associated with modern, technologically advanced societies. A secular viewing of things or understanding of things is supposed to be based on rational basis as against religious faith. In the political context secularisation is associated with the process whereby a demarcation between political and religious authority was established. A secular state concerned

itself with matters which are civic and not sacred in the religious sense.

- iii) Some influencing factors affecting the relationship between religion and politics are 1) heterogeneity/homogeneity, 2) Relationship between religion and other divisions in society 3) Nature of religion and its attitude towards politics and 4) historical process.
- iii) The two theories which see the possibility of replacement of religious identity by class and secular identities are the 'class theory' and 'modernisation theory' respectively.



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