
UNIT 19 RELIGION: DURKHEIM AND WEBER

Religion: Durkheim and Weber

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19.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to understand

- Emile Durkheim's views on religion
- Max Weber's contributions to the sociology of religion
- the ways in which the views of these authors differed.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Religion, as you are aware, is something to which human beings attach a great deal of importance. It includes a system of beliefs and practices, which help human beings shape their actions and orientations. It binds people with other followers, bringing about a feeling of identification and unity. Sometimes it even makes people unite against followers of a different faith. Religion helps people to come to terms with the tragedies and crises of human life by providing explanations for these. It is a social phenomenon intimately connected with other social systems. The subject of religion has been one of great interest to sociologists and anthropologists. The contributions of Durkheim and Weber are very important in this regard.

In the first unit of this Block, we tried to understand the distinctive methodologies of the founding fathers of sociology. In this unit, we will see how Durkheim and Weber elaborated their respective methodologies through their studies on religion.

In the first section (19.1), we will examine the contributions of Durkheim to the study of religion by going over some important points made by him in his classic work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). The second section will briefly review Weber's main ideas pertaining to religion. In the third and final section, we will highlight the main points of difference in the approaches of Durkheim and Weber.

19.2 EMILE DURKHEIM'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

Durkheim's work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* is an important one. Its major ideas are discussed and debated by scholars and students even today. Before we go on to examine its major arguments, let us take up an important question. Why was Durkheim interested in the 'elementary forms' of religious life? Could he not have directed his attention to major religions like Hinduism, Islam and Christianity? Let us try to answer this question by taking a simple example from day-to-day life. If you can ride a bicycle, you will find it easier to balance on a motor-bike. Similarly, if the simplest form of religion is understood, it will be of immense use in understanding the complexities of 'organised' religions, in Durkheim's view. The most elementary or simple form of religion will be found in those societies with a correspondingly 'elementary' social organisation, namely, amongst the aborigines or primitive tribal communities. It is by understanding the aboriginal religion that Durkheim hoped to contribute to the understanding of complex systems of thought and belief. In the following sub-sections, we will try and see how he does this. Let us begin by examining how Durkheim defines religion.

19.2.0 Definition of Religion - Beliefs and Rites

To define religion, says Durkheim, we must first free the mind of all preconceived ideas of religion. Durkheim discards the notion that religion is concerned only with 'mysterious' or 'supernatural' phenomena, with gods, spirits and ghosts. He points out that religion is as concerned with the ordinary as the extraordinary aspects of life. The rising and setting of the sun, the regular patterns of the seasons, the growth of plants and crops, the birth of new life are as much a part of religious ideas as miracles and spectacular happenings. To define religion, he says, the various religious systems of the world must be examined in order to derive those elements, or characteristics, which they have in common. As Durkheim (1912: 38) puts it, "religion cannot be defined except by the characters which are found wherever religion itself is found".

According to Durkheim, all religions comprise two basic components, namely, beliefs and rites. Beliefs are the **collective representations** (about which you have studied in detail in Block 3 of this course) and rites are

determined modes of action, which are influenced by beliefs. As you have read earlier in Block 3 of this course, religious beliefs as studied by Durkheim presuppose the classification of all things into 'sacred' and 'profane'. There is an opposition between these two spheres which has to be carefully regulated through rites and ceremonies. The sacred is that which is set apart, considered holy and venerated or dreaded and avoided. The sacred is usually in a higher position, valued more than profane things, and its identity and power are protected by social rules. The profane, on the other hand, refers to the mundane, ordinary aspects of day-to-day existence. The sacred and profane are kept apart, says Durkheim, because they are heterogeneous (different), antagonistic (in conflict) and isolated (separated). Rites therefore exist to mediate between the two worlds. Let us take an example. Why are believers not allowed to wear their shoes inside a temple? Wearing shoes or chappals for walking is a routine, practical or profane act. The temple is considered a holy, pure place; it is sacred. The floor of the temple must therefore be protected from the polluting dirt of our shoes. The **sacred and profane** are kept apart.

Beliefs and rites, says Durkheim, unite to form religion. Beliefs are the moral ideas, the rules, the teachings and myths. They are the collective representations which exist outside of the individual, yet integrate the individual into the religious system. Through beliefs, human beings understand the sacred and their relationship to it. They can lead their lives accordingly.

Rites are the rules of conduct that follow from beliefs, which prescribe how human beings must behave with regard to sacred things. They can be positive, where the sacred is sought to be brought closer to the world of men, for example, through '*havan*' or sacrifice. Rites can be negative, which means the sacred and profane are sought to be kept apart, e.g. purification rites, fasts, penance or suffering. In Durkheim's view rites serve to sustain the intensity of religious-beliefs. They bring individuals together, strengthening their social natures. They are modes of expression of the collective conscience, which, as you have studied, refers to the commonly held values, beliefs and ideas of the community (see Giddens 1978: 84-89).

Defining religion in terms of beliefs and rites poses one problem. This definition would also include **magic**. Is there no difference between magic and religion? Following the ideas of the anthropologist Robertson-Smith, Durkheim holds that magic and religion are indeed different. Magic is a private, selfish practice, performed at the individual level. For example, if one wants to do better than one's neighbour, so one goes to the magician and by paying his/her fee, one asks him to cast a spell or perform '*jadoo-tona*' to kill your neighbour's cows or spoil his crops. Magic thus involves a bond only between the magician and his clients based on a selfish motive, in order to manipulate nature to suit individual purposes. Religion, on the other hand, is public and social. There are social bonds between followers, which unite them into a group leading a common life. Durkheim's (1912: 62) definition of religion taking into account these factors is as follows.

"A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden — beliefs and practices

which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.”

(It must be clarified that by the term ‘Church’, Durkheim does not refer to the Christian **Church** alone. He uses it in the sense of a moral community or an organised group of followers of all faiths.)

Let us now see how Durkheim grapples with the understanding of elementary forms by considering the institution of **totemism** amongst the aborigines of Australia. But before that, why not check your progress?

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Complete the following sentences
 - a) Durkheim studied ‘elementary’ forms of religion because
 - b) According to Durkheim, all religions comprise
 - c) The ‘profane’ refers to
- ii) How does Durkheim distinguish between magic and religion? Answer in five sentences.

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19.2.1 Durkheim’s Study of Totemism

As has been mentioned earlier, Durkheim believes that to understand the more complex religions, one must understand first the simple forms. Durkheim maintains that totemism is the most simple form of religion. He chose to study totemism as practised by the aborigines of Central Australia. Ethnographic information on these groups was available in plenty. Their social organisation was the simplest known to sociologists and anthropologists. Totemism is linked with the social organisation of clans. The members of the clan believe themselves to have descended from some common ancestor — an animal, a plant or even some non-living object. The “common ancestor” is the “totemic object”. It is the totemic object that gives the clan its name and identity. But it is more than just a name, it is an emblem. It is often carved, engraved or designed on other objects belonging to the clan, even on the bodies of the clan members. This makes otherwise ordinary or common objects special. They are endowed with sacredness. Many taboos or ‘don’ts’ are attached to the totemic object. It cannot be killed or eaten, it must be treated with reverence. All things arranged in the clan are connected with and extensions of the totemic object. The clan members may not be related by blood, but they have a common name, a common emblem. **Clan exogamy** is thus an important rule. Religion and social organisation are thus intimately connected in such simple societies.

The totemic object and all that is concerned with it is considered sacred. Why? Durkheim maintains that it is not actually the animal or plant itself that is worshipped or held sacred, but a nameless and impersonal force which exists throughout the world and is diffused amongst all the material objects of the world. This force is described by various names “mana” by the Samoans, “wakan” by the Melanesians, “orenda” by some North American tribes. The totemic object is merely a symbol of the ‘totemic principle’ which is nothing but the clan itself. The clan is given a reality of its own. It is personalised and represented through the totemic object. In Durkheim’s view, ‘god’ is nothing but society **apotheosised** or glorified and given a different shape and form. Why is society worshipped? Durkheim says that it is physically and morally superior to individuals. It is ‘sui-generis’, with a reality of its own. Its power is feared, its authority is respected. When a soldier gives up his life to defend the flag of the country, he is not worshipping the flag itself, but what the flag stands for, namely, the nation.

Society exists in and through individual conscience. It demands our sacrifices, it strengthens and elevates the divine or sacred within each one of us. This is particularly evident during important religious ceremonies and festivals, which require the participation of the whole clan. Rituals such as festivals help to produce “**collective effervescence**” or a feeling of collective enthusiasm and involvement which strengthens social bonds and promotes social solidarity.

Briefly, members of a clan venerate a certain totemic object from which they claim descent. This object gives them their identity. But according to Durkheim, it is not the object itself that is being worshipped, but the clan itself. Religion is nothing but giving society itself a divine form because it stands outside of individuals, exerting physical and moral constraints on them. Worshipping society produces in its members a feeling of oneness, solidarity and enthusiasm, helping them to participate in the collective life and expressions of the society.

Having given interesting insights on primitive religion, how does Durkheim use it to understand complex systems of thought? You have just seen how he locates religion in its most ‘elementary’ form in a society with a correspondingly elementary social system. Following his logic, we can say that complex systems of thought will be found in modern, heterogeneous societies. Complex, modern societies, it is observed, are characterised by the development of science. Are religion and science drastically different? Let us first complete Activity 1 and then see what Durkheim feels about this in the following sub-section.

Activity 1

Make a list of five beliefs and rites of any two religions practised in our country. Compare your list if possible with other students at your Study Centre.

19.2.2 Religion and Science

Durkheim maintains that scientific thought has its origins in religious thought. Both religion and science reflect on nature, human beings and

society. Both attempt to classify things, relate them to one another and explain them. Scientific thought is a more developed and refined form of religious thought. The terms used in modern science like force and power have a religious origin.

Durkheim writes that religious thought will ultimately give way to the advance of scientific thought. He points out that social sciences are in fact undertaking a scientific study of religion itself!

Both religious and scientific thought contribute to the collective representations of society. There cannot be any conflict between the two because both are directed towards seeking universal principles. Thus the goal of both systems of thought is to help human beings rise above the limitations of private, individual nature and lead a life which is both, individual and social. Individuals need society in order to be truly human, and religion and science both contribute to unifying individuals with society (see Jones 1986:149-152).

We have just seen how Durkheim focuses on the role of religion in forging social solidarity by unifying individuals in the worship of an entity far greater than themselves, namely, society itself. Durkheim's perspective has had a tremendous impact on sociologists and social anthropologists, particularly those in England and France. His nephew, Marcel Mauss was one of the leading social anthropologists who followed in the Durkheimian tradition. You can read more about him in Box 19.1

Box 19.1 Marcel Mauss

Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) was the nephew of Emile Durkheim. Born in Lorraine (France), he grew up with a close knit, pious and orthodox Jewish family. He himself was never a religious man, and broke away from the Jewish faith. He was very close to his uncle and studied philosophy under his supervision at Bordeaux. Durkheim took endless trouble guiding young Marcel's studies. The close relationship between uncle and nephew resulted in an intellectual collaboration yielding such important works as *Forms of Primitive Classification* (Durkheim and Mauss 1903). Mauss took a major part in editing the journal *Annee Sociologique* started by Durkheim. Working for the 'Annee', Mauss interacted and collaborated with a number of brilliant young scholars like Hubert, Beuchat and Fauconner and published some important articles on magic, religion, sacrifice, prayer, the concept of the self and so on.

Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function, by Hubert and Mauss (1899) analysed the religious practice of sacrifice as a means of communication between the sacred and profane worlds. The item or thing that is sacrificed is destroyed during the course of the ceremony.

The Gift (1925) is considered as Mauss's most influential work. Mauss focused on the systems of exchange of gifts and forms of contracts in archaic societies. The major hypotheses of this study are that (i) exchange, which includes the three obligations of giving, receiving and repaying, is common to all societies; (ii) the act of gift-giving maintains and strengthens social bonds of all kinds — cooperative, competitive and antagonistic. Mauss attempted to elaborate on the relation between patterns of exchange and the social structure.

The two World Wars brought tragedy in the life of Mauss. He lost a number of friends and colleagues in World War I. His beloved uncle, Durkheim, died grief stricken after the death of his son Andre in the War. The German occupation of France during World War II deprived him a second time of friends and colleagues and affected the balance of his mind. He never completed the books he had started work on and could not synthesise his many-sided and scattered work. He died in 1950, but left behind an important intellectual legacy. France and British anthropologists and sociologists, in particular were profoundly influenced by his work.

You will now read about Max Weber's contributions to the study of religion, but before moving on to Max Weber's views, let us complete Check Your Progress 2 to mark our understanding of the contents of this unit so far.

Check Your Progress 2

Answer the following questions in 2 sentences each.

- i) Why is clan exogamy a strict rule in totemic clans?

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- ii) Why is society worshipped, according to Durkheim?

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- iii) Why, in the view of Durkheim, there can be no conflict between religion and science?

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19.3 THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF MAX WEBER

Max Weber's sociological study of religion is rooted in his conception of human beings as actors, ascribing meanings to the world around them. Weber's studies of religion focus on the ethos or ethics of religions of the world and their mutual interactions with other social sub-systems like polity and economy. There is thus a historicity in Weber's approach. You have studied in detail Weber's understanding of the effects of religion on economy in Unit 16 of Block 4 of this course. Weber, as you know, published a number of studies on religion, including *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and comparative studies on the religions of India, China and the religion of the Jews. In this section, we shall highlight these studies of world religions in order to bring out Weber's interest in studying religion in a historical and comparative way.

In this unit, we will not discuss *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Although this is an important work, you have been exposed to it in detail earlier. It shall also be taken up in Unit 21 of this Block when

we speak of Weber's theory of capitalism. However, you are advised to go back to Unit 16, Block 4 of this course, and have a look once more at the 'Protestant Ethic' thesis before moving on to the next sub-section.

Let us now touch upon some of the points Weber makes in his study of the world religion. We will begin with a review of his work on the religions of India.

19.3.0 The Religion of India

Weber speaks of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism in *The Religion of India* which he wrote in 1916. Hinduism is to be understood in relation to the caste system. The caste system, which arose as a result of occupational specialisation which became hereditary over the centuries, was dominated by the Brahmin. It was the Brahmin caste that had access to the learning of the scriptures. This caste was the hereditary carrier of traditional ideas. The lower castes, particularly the Shudra faced a great number of socio-cultural disabilities. They were ritually 'impure' and were thus denied access to the scriptures. This automatically meant that they could not aspire to *moksha* or salvation, the Hindu ideal. The doctrine of '*karma*', according to Weber, is the central belief in Hinduism. A person's position in the present life is a consequence of good or evil deeds of '*karma*' in the past life. If the person's '*karma*' in this life is in accordance with his '*dharma*' or duty, he will be rewarded in future lives. The '*dharma*' of a Brahmin is to study the scriptures. The Kshatriya must defend his land and people, the Vaishya must engage in commerce, and the Shudra must serve the other castes. A person is born in a particular caste because of past '*karma*' and must dutifully carry out '*dharma*' in order to aspire to a better birth in the next life. The idea to aspire to was '*moksha*' or liberation from this cycle of birth, death and rebirth. It would be final freedom from the pain and uncertainty of life on earth.

Material prosperity was desirable, but it was temporary. It did not have permanent value. Spiritual prosperity, though, did have permanence. It could free an individual from the cycles of birth, death and rebirth. Pursuing spiritual goals would help in achieving '*moksha*'. Weber tries to show how it is this sort of 'other-worldly' ethic that worked against the rise of capitalism. Weber points out that medieval Indian cities were renowned centres of manufacture. Technology was at a fairly advanced level. Although material conditions were favourable, the Hindu religion made people de-emphasise material life.

Buddhism and Jainism, which tried to counter the rigidity of orthodox Hinduism, were according to Weber, pacifist or peace-emphasising religions. They were religions of contemplation and their followers were monks or people who rejected the world. The lay persons or ordinary followers could gain religious merit by offering alms to monks, but they could not achieve salvation through '*nirvana*' unless they gave up their occupations and became monks themselves.

The caste system, the religious beliefs of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism thus mutually reinforced each other and prevented the development of capitalism although medieval Indian cities were fertile ground for capitalism

to grow. India became a land of tradition, of a basically unshakeable social order (see Collins 1986: 111-118).

19.3.1 The Religion of China

Weber also wrote *The Religion of China* in 1916. Speaking of Confucianism, the traditional Chinese religion, Weber points out that like Protestantism, Confucianism too was marked by 'this worldly asceticism'. But whilst Protestantism sought to transform or attain mastery over the world, Confucianism emphasised harmony. The order of the world and the cosmos was to be maintained by carrying on the proper ceremonies that upheld the world order. Propriety in manners and behaviour was greatly stressed. The ruling classes, the Chinese 'mandarins' were the upholders of manners and morals. Maintaining social order meant that actively changing the world, an important aspect of capitalism, was discouraged. Thus, the Confucian ethic of propriety, restraint and harmony went against developing capitalism.

19.3.2 Ancient Judaism

Written between 1917 and 1919, this work of Weber is of crucial importance in understanding the changes that took place in the western world. Judaism is the seedbed from which the modern world-transforming religions of Islam and Christianity originated. As you have studied in Unit 16, Block 4 of this course, Judaism propagated the idea of creating a 'heaven on earth'. This idea has far-reaching implications. It encourages followers to actively transform the world and master it. The ethic of mastery over the environment is a key feature of modern western civilisation. The prophets of Judaism were ethical leaders who tried to unite their followers through their teachings. These prophets preached to the discontented and oppressed peasant classes of Palestine that the anger of God would destroy the land. They said that god was angry with the ruling classes living in the cities because of their sinful life-styles and their degenerate ways. Unless these groups were overthrown and a society that went according to the ways of god was established, Palestine could not hope to prosper. The existence of 'ethical prophets' who preach a certain programme of action is a characteristic feature of religions like Islam and Christianity as well. Weber's work on Christianity and Islam could not be completed. His death in 1920 prevented him from realising his plan of putting together his findings on the great world religions and using them to find an answer regarding the birth and growth of capitalism.

Activity 2

Collect some information about Prophet Mohammad and Jesus Christ. Write a note of about two pages covering (a) their life-histories, (b) their teachings (c) the impact of their teachings.

You may have found this section a repetition of Unit 16, Block 4 of this course. But the purpose has been to bring out Weber's central concern in his study of religion, namely, highlighting the relationship between religious ideas and human activity. Remember, Weber tries to interpret human action in terms of its meaningfulness to the actors themselves. Why would an

untouchable not rebel against the caste system in ancient India? Weber's explanation would have been to show that it was the religious belief system that prevented the person from trying to transform the world. Similarly, it was the doctrine of 'pre-destination' and 'calling' that made the Protestant work hard and accumulate money. Weber's approach to the study of religion has been drawn upon by several American and Indian sociologists.

Weber's study of religion brings out the role of prophets. He also shows how religious beliefs are connected with particular strata of society. Thus Confucianism is primarily connected with the ruling class, the 'mandarins', Hinduism is linked with the Brahmin orthodoxy trying to perpetuate the caste system; and Judaism is linked with a discontented peasantry striving to overcome oppression.

Having gone over the central arguments of Durkheim and Weber, it will be interesting to compare their perspectives. This is exactly what we will do in the next section after completing Check Your Progress 3.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Complete the following sentences.
 - a) According to Weber, the central belief in Hinduism is
 - b) The Hindu ideal was aspiring towards
 - c) Capitalism did not develop in China because of the Confucian ideal of
 - d) The ethic of is a key feature of modern western civilisation.
 - e) Weber tries to interpret human action in terms of its

19.4 DURKHEIM AND WEBER — A COMPARISON

Each thinker's methodology provides a certain framework with which he/she approaches substantive issues. In the first unit of this Block, you have seen how Durkheim stresses the exteriority of social facts, which he regards as 'things'. Society is 'sui-generis', it exists over and above the individual. Individuals are born and die, but society is more or less eternal. Society imposes certain constraints in order to make the individual a part of it. Weber focuses on the role of individuals as actors, orienting their behaviour-patterns in terms of their values and beliefs. It is the task of the sociologist to study these through "verstehen" or interpretative understanding. Durkheim's and Weber's studies of religion get their distinct foci or emphases as a consequence of their distinctive approaches to human beings and society.

Let us begin by looking at the different types of religious systems, located in very different social settings that they handle, i.e., their units of analysis.

19.4.1 Units of Analysis

As you have studied in the first section (19.2), Emile Durkheim studies religion in what he believes is its most elementary form. He focuses on tribal society where collective life is pervasive. Ideas are held in common by all individuals and there is an intensity of shared ideas and feelings. This is a society without written historical records. Religion and clan organisation overlap. Thus Durkheim emphasises the role of religion as a collective phenomenon which serves to strengthen social bonds.

Weber, on the other hand, studies the major features of the great world religions. He is interested in their historical roots and their capacity to guide and shape economic activity. These world religions are also seen as responses to the prevailing social situations. For instance, Buddhism and Jainism in India hit out against the caste system. Judaism was the religion of the oppressed Palestinian peasantry. Protestantism as you have seen in Unit 16, Block 4 of the course was a “protest” against the decadence of the orthodox Catholic Church. Thus, Durkheim’s emphasis on tribal religion visualises the role of religion in maintaining social order, Weber’s analysis looks at the creative role of religion in helping to shape new ways of thinking and acting.

19.4.1 The Role of Religion

Taking the above point further, we can see that Durkheim basically sees religion as an expression of the collective conscience. Worshipping the totem according to him is nothing but worshipping the clan itself. Ideas and beliefs cherished by the clan as a whole thus become part of the individual conscience. The separation between the sacred and the profane aspects of the world is mediated through certain rites. The participation of the whole clan in some important rites helps to bring about collective enthusiasm, linking individuals into social bonds and making them aware of the awesome power of society.

Weber, in contrast, wishes to understand religion in relation to economic, political and historical factors. How does it interact with other institutions of society? How does society shape and is in turn shaped by religious beliefs? Weber is interested in the unique culture patterns to be found in each society. He sees religion as part and parcel of a larger historical trend, namely, the move towards capitalism, industrialisation and **rationality**. He is concerned with the role of religion in making the world-view of individuals in different societies favourably or unfavourably inclined towards capitalism and **rationalisation**. We will take up this point in greater detail in Unit 21 of this Block.

You have seen how the units of analysis used by these thinkers differ. The role assigned to religion by both of them is also distinctive. Naturally, some of the concepts or categories they use also differ. Weber does not hesitate in using certain concepts that Durkheim strictly avoids. Let us examine this point further.

Activity 3

Locate the following on a world map: (a) India, (b) China, (c) Palestine (d) Australia.

19.4.3 Gods, Spirits and Prophets

Durkheim denies that religion is concerned with the mysterious, with gods and spirits. He holds that the object of worship is society itself, transformed and represented through certain symbolic objects. Weber does not hesitate to use the idea of gods and spirits. Remember, Weber is dealing with religions, which are of relatively recent origin as compared to the tribal religions. These religions discussed by Weber express certain personal qualities and display a certain level of abstraction. When individuals abstract, they engage in symbolic activity. Let us look at totemism in this respect. Durkheim argues that the totem is the symbol of the clan. Weber takes the example of a totem, which while worshipped as a symbol, is an animal that is sacrificially killed and eaten. The spirits and gods of the tribe are called to take part in the feast. Whilst eating the animal, clan members believe themselves to be united because the spirit of the animal enters them. They are united not merely by the totem as an emblem or a symbol, but they are united by sharing the substance of the sacred animal which is not merely flesh, but spirit.

Weber, unlike Durkheim, attaches great importance to prophets in propagating religious beliefs. Religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam are characterised by great ethical prophets who people revere as the representatives of god, or individuals who have directly spoken to god. They are the charismatic leaders like Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed who capture the imagination and fancy of the people.

Briefly, Durkheim denies that religion is basically concerned with spirits and gods. He maintains that it is society itself, which is worshipped in order to strengthen social bonds and make individuals who are born and who die feel the power and eternity of society. Weber speaks of religion in terms of its creation of abstractions. Thus spirits and gods are reflections of symbolic thought. The role of charismatic, ethical prophets in redefining and remaking religious beliefs is also accounted for.

Let us now compare the views of Durkheim and Weber on religion vis-à-vis science.

19.4.4 Religion and Science

You have seen how Durkheim views both religion and science as providing society with its collective representations. The classifications of science derive from those of religion. Thus there is no conflict or opposition between the two. Weber is not of this view. His comparative studies of world religion show how religious ethics in India and China prevented the growth of capitalism, which basically requires an ethic of mastery, of rational calculation. It is only the Protestant ethic, which provided the appropriate world-view for rational capitalism. Science, as Weber views it, is an expression of rationality and a challenge to the traditional and mystical claims of religion. Science provides **empirical** knowledge or verifiable factual information, which helps human beings to know and master the world. Thus science and religion, in Weber's view, exist in contrast to each other.

Comparing the views of these authors is not an easy task. They are dealing with such vastly different societies that their findings are bound to be different. But some points do emerge. Durkheim sees religion as a means whereby individuals acknowledge the physical and moral power of society. Religion is a way of classifying and ordering concepts and is thus the fore-runner of science. Weber studies religion in terms of its meanings for those who follow it, and how these meanings help them orient their actions in other social activities. Science arises as a challenge to religious ideas, driving out ghosts and spirits and replacing them with empirical observations and factual information. You can illustrate the difference between perspectives on religion, advanced by Durkheim and Weber as shown in figure 19.1

EMILE DURKHEIM	MAX WEBER
i) Studied primitive religion	Studied world religions
ii) Views religion as an expression of the collective conscience	Views religion in relation to political, economic and historical factors
iii) Strictly avoids using concepts like 'gods', 'spirit', 'prophets'	Makes use of these concepts
iv) Considers science as an extension of religion, sees no conflict between them	Considers science and religion in contrast to each other

Fig. 19.1 Perspectives on religion

Check Your Progress 4

- i) Complete the following sentences.
 - a) Durkheim sees the role of religion in whilst Weber sees it in
 - b) are examples of ethical prophets.
 - c) Spirits and gods according to Weber are reflections of
 - d) Science, as Weber views it, is an expression of and a challenge to
 - e) Science, according to Weber replaces ghosts and spirits with

19.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have tried to see how Emile Durkheim and Max Weber dealt with religion as a social phenomenon. We first tried to understand the views of Durkheim. We saw how and why he studied 'elementary forms' in simple societies. We examined how he arrived at his definition of religion,

how he understood totemism as an expression of clan worship and how he saw the continuity between religious and scientific thought.

Next we dealt with the work of Max Weber. We did not separately examine his 'Protestant ethic' thesis but we did make references to it. We saw how he treated the religions of India, China and ancient Palestine. We saw how his studies established links between religion and other social sub-systems, particularly in the context of the emergence of capitalism.

Finally, we compared the views of Durkheim and Weber in terms of the kinds of societies that they studied, the role they ascribed to religion, the concepts they used in their studies and their conflicting views on religion and science.

19.6 KEYWORDS

Apotheosis	Glorification, raising to a divine level
Calling	Regarding work as more than just an economic necessity, but a religious duty
Church	In the sense that Durkheim uses it, Church refers to a unified moral community sharing the same religious beliefs and practises
Clan exogamy	A kinship rule, which forbids marriage within the clan. Marriage partners must be members of another clan.
Collective effervescence	A collective feeling of enthusiasm and excitement, which serves to strengthen bonds between individuals who feel proud to be members of the same society.
Collective representations	Durkheim uses this term to denote the ideas, thoughts and concepts of a group which result from shared perceptions, e.g., ideas of beauty, truth, right, wrong etc.
Ethical prophets	These are persons who give people a powerful message, usually a religious one. They usually call for an overthrow of an existing social order, which they regard as evil and give their followers an alternative which they often claim has been revealed to them by god. Religions like Judaism, Islam and Christianity are 'prophetic' religions.
Empirical	Based on observed facts
Magic	An activity through which individuals try to manipulate nature for positive or negative reasons. It is found in almost all simple societies and persists even in more complex ones.

Pre-destination

The Calvinist (Protestant) belief that individuals are 'elected' to go to heaven not because of their own efforts, but due to the will of god which can neither be known nor influenced.

Religion: Durkheim and Weber

Rationality/rationalisation

Rationality in Weber's usage refers to a unique trend in Western Europe. It refers to the attempt at making human life more controlled by making it methodical and regularised. Human beings no longer see themselves as victims of the environment but as masters or controllers of it.

Sacred and profane

The two polar opposites into which the world is divided, according to Durkheim. The 'sacred' refers to holy, pure, superior things; the 'profane' refers to ordinary, mundane ones.

Totemism

A religion in which an animal, plant or some object is held as sacred and from which the group claims descent.

19.7 FURTHER READING

Aron, Raymond 1970. *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*. Vols. 1 and 2, Penguin Books: London, (see the sections on Durkheim and Weber).

Collins, Randall 1986. *Max Weber: A Skeleton Key*. Sage Publications: Beverly Hills.

Jones, Robert Alun 1986. *Emile Durkheim: An Introduction to Four Major Works*. Sage Publications: Beverly Hills.

19.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i)
 - a) this would help him understand the complex, organised religions
 - b) beliefs and rituals
 - c) mundane, ordinary aspects of day-to-day existence.
- ii) Durkheim distinguishes between magic and religion by pointing out that magic is a private, selfish practice. It is performed at the individual level for some selfish interests. Nature is sought to be manipulated for individual gains. The bond is only between the magician and the client. In religion, on the other hand, people are united by their faith. Religion is public and social, and followers lead a common life.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Members of the clan believe themselves to have descended from a common ancestor. They may not be blood relatives, but they share the same name and totem. Hence they cannot inter-marry.
- ii) Society exerts physical and moral force and authority on the individuals. It is 'sui-generis' and has a reality of its own. Hence it is worshipped.
- iii) Both religion and science contribute to the collective representations of society. Both seek universal principles which will help people lead lives that are both, individual and social. Since religion and science both seek the same goals, they cannot be in conflict.

Check Your Progress 3

- i)
 - a) the doctrine of karma
 - b) *moksha*
 - c) harmony
 - d) mastery over the environment
 - e) meaningfulness to actors

Check Your Progress 4

- i)
 - a) maintaining social order, helping to shape new ways of thinking and acting.
 - b) Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed
 - c) Symbolic thought
 - d) rationality, traditional and mystical claims of religion
 - e) empirical observations and factual information.