
UNIT 2 EVOLUTIONARY THEORIES OF RELIGION

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

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

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

2.1 INTRODUCTION

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

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

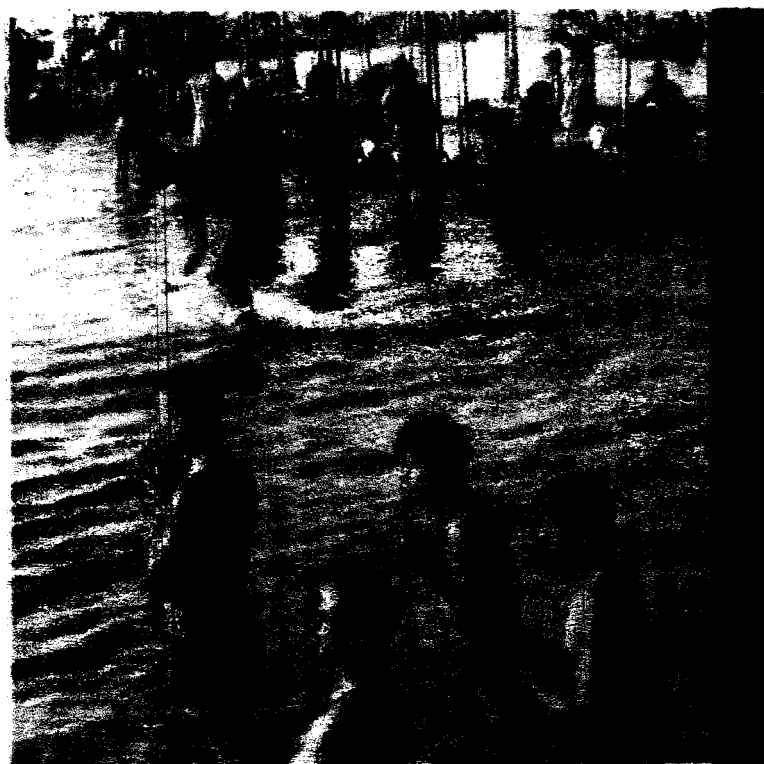
You should also bear in mind that it is not only in the study of religion that we find

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

2.2 EVOLUTIONISM AND ITS ROOTS

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

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



Ritual ceremony performed by the devotees in Sangam, Allahabad

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

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

2.2.1 Positivism

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

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

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

2.2.2 Intellectualism

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

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

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

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

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

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

Check Your Progress 1

i) Define evolutionism, in about five lines.

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

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

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2.3 INTELLECTUALIST THEORIES OF RELIGION

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

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

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

2.3.1 The Nature-Myth School

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

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

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

2.3.2 The Ghost Theory

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Check Your Progress 2

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

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

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2.3.3 The Soul Theory or Animism

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

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

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

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

Box 2.01

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

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

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

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

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

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

Activity 1

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

2.3.4 Dependence on Magic

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

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

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

a) *Homeopathic or imitative magic*

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

b) *Contagious magic*

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

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

Check Your Progress 3

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

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ii) Match the following:

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

2.4 THE ORIGIN OF RELIGION IN PSYCHO-BIOLOGICAL PROCESSES

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

2.4.1 A Product of Fear

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.4.2 Religious Feelings and Thrill

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

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

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

Check Your Progress 4

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

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

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2.4.3 Emotional Stress

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

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

Box 2.01

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

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

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

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

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

2.4.4 Feelings of Guilt

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Activity 2

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

2.5 A CRITIQUE OF EVOLUTIONIST THEORIES

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

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

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

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

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

Box 2.02

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Check Your Progress 5

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

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

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

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

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

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2.6 LET US SUM UP

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

2.7 KEY WORDS

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

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

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

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

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

Contingency: this refers to an unexpected or chance occurrence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.8 FURTHER READING

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

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

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

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

2.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

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

Check Your Progress 2

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

Check Your Progress 3

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

Check Your Progress 4

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

Check Your Progress 5

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