UNIT 20 RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

Structure

20.0 OBJECTIVES

On going through this unit you should be able to:

- describe the meaning of religion;

- analyse religion as part of the social organisation and its relation to the concept of faith;

- explain the simple, complex, and mixed forms of religion; and

- examine the changing aspects of religion in society.

20.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit you are going to learn about the meaning of religion and various ways in which religion affects society and how it leads to the maintenance of the social order. Here we have also mentioned the negative aspects of religion such as superstition,

fanaticism, etc. In this unit you will also learn about the culturally diverse forms of religion like the simple, complex and mixed forms. Finally, in this unit you will learn about the changing aspects of religion.

20.2 RELIGION : AN ASPECT OF SOCIAL ORGANISATION

Religion is concerned with the shared beliefs and practices of human beings. It is the human response to those elements in the life and environment of mankind which are beyond their ordinary comprehension. Most religions deal with the attempt of human beings to understand something or some power which is supernatural and suprasensory. It is pre-eminently social and is found in nearly all societies. Majumdar and Madan (1956 : 151) explain that the word religion has its origin in the Latin word **rel** (1) igio. This is derived from two root words. The first root is leg, meaning 'to gather, count, or observe'. The second root is **lig**, meaning 'to bind'. The first root refers to belief in and practice of 'signs of Divine Communication'. The second root refers to the carrying out of those activities which link human beings with the supernatural powers. Thus, we find that the word religion basically represents beliefs and practices which are generally the main characteristics of all religions.

20.2.1 Religion and Society

Religion has also been characterised as that aspect of human social and personal life which embodies the most sublime of human aspirations. It is the foundation on which the normative structure of society stands. It is the upholder of all values, morality and ethics of society. In this sense, it is the source of public order in society and provides the source of inner individual peace to men and women. It has both ennobling, as well as, civilising effect on mankind. Yet, it has also led to the creation of obstacles in the path of progress. Its negative effects amongst mankind have been of promoting fanaticism and intolerance, ignorance, superstition and obscurantism (O'Dea 1966 :20).

Religion has led to the unification of the members of a society. But, it has also led to religious wars and communal tensions. However, we must keep in mind that often non-religious issues and conflicts of interests are the root causes of communal tensions in a plural society such as India.

While most people consider religion as a universal and, therefore, a significant institution of societies, Marxist scholars do not see it as necessary component of society. In Karl Marx's words : "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people". He believed that religious beliefs act as an opiate which reduces the pain of poverty and oppression from the minds of the exploited masses. It is, therefore, required by human beings only so long as they are oppressed and exploited by a dominant class. It will cease to exist in the communist society which will be the ultimate stage of social development, according to him.

20.2.2 Religion and Faith

Central to all religions is the concept of faith. Religion in this sense is the organisation of faith which binds human beings to their temporal and transcendental foundation. By faith human being is distinguished from other beings. It is essentially a subjective and private matter. We share the belief of others. This elevates us to a wider human plane. Thus, faith is something which binds us together and is, therefore, more important than reason.

According to the classical Indian thought. "Man is made by faith : As the faith so the Man" **(The Bhagvad Gita)**. The Buddhist scriptures recognise faith as one of the five faculties of Man (the other faculties are energy, mindfulness, concentration and full knowledge). Faith is the foundation and guarantee of human relations. It is also a condition for love. Through faith the believer 'communicates' and fraternises with the non-believer. It makes possible the unity of life in one's daily existence.

20.2.3 Link Between Faith and Religious Life

Using the Biblical metaphor, we can say: faith is the bridge that links the termporal with the transcendental, the exterior with the interior. But how? Let us consider the mechanism.

All traditional societies constitute their faith in such order as may make interaction between individuals possible, and the movement from temporal to transcendental a reality. What follows is an inverted triangle ABC (Illustration 1), where:

A   represents the transcendental value

B   represents the temporal element

C   represents the human response of ethical value

R   stands for religion

What links B to C to A is faith.
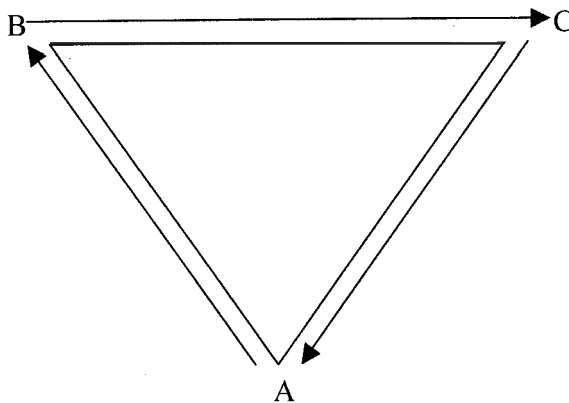
Illustration I

Let the significance of this triangle be elaborated further (Illustration 2).

(B)	(C)	(D)
Temporal element	**Human response**	**Transcendental**
Self →	Reverence →	Liberation
FAITH ← Marriage →	Fidelity →	Love
Family →	Ancestor →	Unity
Society →	Tolerance →	Perfection
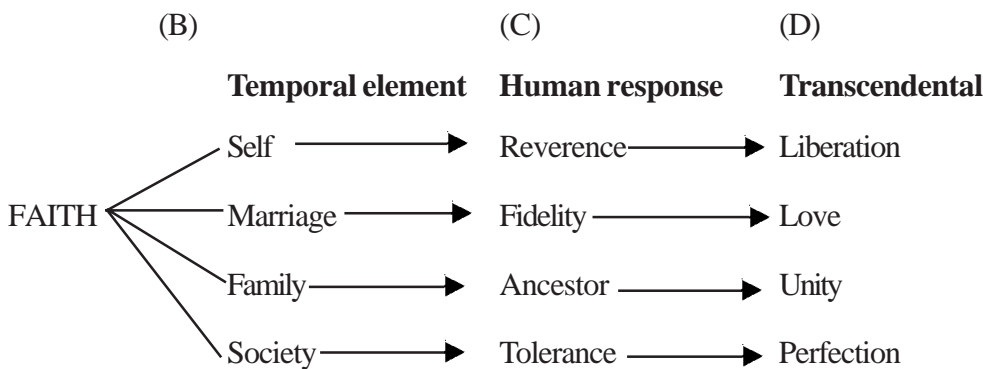
Illustrations 2

Self, marriage, family and society refer to the basic constitutions of social life. These correspond to human response and transcendental value, through faith. The individual (self) in deep faith develops reverence for life, the condition which liberates him from suffering. A married person endowed with faith observes fidelity, which is the state of highest love. A faithful man is duty-bound not only for the living members but also

for the deceased kins. Hence, performs ancestor-worship, the act of divine unity. He also cultivates ideological tolerance, whereby the society rests in peace and he himself reaches the highest stage of perfection. Now, if you recollect the experiences and sayings of your own tradition, you will find that what we have just explained is nothing very new. Such interpretations of religious life are available in all traditions, may be in many different ways. But in essence they all agree that faith is the foundation of religion. In other words, the thread that binds all forms of religious organisation is invariably the faith.

Activity 1

Talk to at least three people of different religious faiths about their religion. Identify the common features in all these religions and write a note of one page on "Religion: Belief and Practices". Compare your answer with other learners at your study centre.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: a)   Use the space given below for your answer.

   b)   Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1)   Define religion using about three lines.

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2)   What are the negative aspects of religion? Give an example. Use about three lines.

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3)   In what way is faith central to all religions? Describe in about three lines.

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20.3   CULTURALLY DIVERSE FORMS OF RELIGION

Human cultures in time and space have envisioned various articles of faith. So there are different forms of religion. Broadly we can classify them into three classes: (i) simple form of religion; (ii) complex form of religion; and (iii) mixed form of religion. Sociologically speaking category (ii) has evolved from the category (i); however, this development need not be unidirectional. It can be in the opposite direction too, just as it can be a mixture of both as in the case of (iii). In this part of the unit, you are going to learn about the characteristic features of all the three forms of religions.

20.3.1 Simple Forms of Religion

The simple forms of religion can be distinguished from the complex forms of religion. There are some important characteristic features which are found in the simple forms. These characteristic features of the simple form of religion are as follows:

i)   The archaic form of religion is ahistorical, that is timeless. It is believed as a divinely given form of life, which has been in existence since the appearance, or creation, of human being, the beginning of the World.

ii) As it is ahistorical, it is not founded or formalised by human being.

iii) In this form of religion, the knowledge of belief and ritual is trans,mitted orally from one generation to the next.

iv) In it, the religious experience is also an aesthetic experience, shared collectively in such performances as ritual dance and festivity.

v)   It is essentially descriptive, not explanatory. It is practised in 'good faith' a faith that needs no interpretation, no philosophical debate, no dialectical discussion.

In this description of simple forms of religion we can see that the tendency to philosophise does not exist here. The practical aspect of religion and magic are present. Therefore, there are no scriptures or Holy books present in such religions.

According to Emile Durkheim (1912) the simple form of religion forms the inner ring, as of a tree, of which the complex forms of religions form the outer, more evolved, ring. He says that in primitive societies there generally exist two

component elements in the supernatural field. One is the sacred element and the other is the profane. Durkheim calls the sacred element as religion and the profane element as magic or primitive science. As a contrast to Durkheim, Malinowski (1948) has classified religion and magic as the sacred part and science as the profane part.

Every society possesses its own set of religious myths. Myths actually are the carriers of beliefs from one generation to another in a simple sense. These beliefs are shared by the group in general whether this be a simple society or a modern society. However, the conception of the exact nature of the supernatural varies from one society to another. In the belief system of some societies "the supernatural may consist of ghosts and spirits, for others it may be a belief in the impersonal power which pervades everything in this world, while for some other people the supernatural may be manifested through a pantheon of anthropomorphic Gods and Goddesses, or through a simple God" (Majumdar and Madan 1956 : 152).

20.3.1.1 Varieties of Explanations Regarding Simple Religious Forms

It has been a major concern of evolutionary anthropologists to examine the content of various conceptions of the supernatural element found in different societies. Some of the major explanations are as follows:

i)   One of the first attempts to explain religious beliefs and its origin in the primitive society was made by Tylor (1871). He formulated the theory of animism which is the belief in the soul (anima). Therefore, he called this theory animism. He says that there can be multiple sources through which religion has originated but belief in the soul is crucial.

Tylor visualised the following phases in the evolution of simple form of religions:

a)   **Lower Animism:** It tends to be amoral, that is, the soul is continued after death in a condition which does not depend on its death during life.

b)   **Higher Animism:** It is based on the "retribution doctrine", that is, there are rewards and punishments for the soul, depending on the lifetime performance.

ii) According to the critics of Tylor, animism is a later development in the history of religion. Scholars like Preuss and Max Mueller propogated a pre- animistic theory or religion called Animatism. Animatism is the belief that everything in Nature has life and is animate. Manaism is a special form of animatism. According to Majumdar and Madan (1956: 156) this theory is based on the notion that the primitive religion is based on belief in an all- pervad1ng supernatural power. Though 'beyond the reach of the senses', it exists in all objects, including human beings and expresses as physical force or such other power. According to Marett, such -belief can be called Manaism after the Polynesian term 'mana' to represent this power.

To take an Indian example, amongst the Hos of Singhbhumi, Bihar, there exists a similar kind of religious belief which Majumdar (1956) has called 'Bongaism'. These people believe in the concept of 'bonga' which resides in trees, natural objects and sometimes in manmade articles like bi-cycles, etc. It is the manifestation of a vague supernatural power which is, according to believers, the cause of all energy.

iii) According to Frazer, religion and magic are the two ways of dealing with the major crises of life. In primitive societies men adopted two ways of facing the realities of life. One was through magic which is the belief in the suprerior supernatural power, which coerces it into service. For example, through chanting magical words supernatural spirits are made to obey the demands of the magician. The other way is to become subservient to the supernatural powers and worship it. This subservience to the supernatural forces is called religion. However, in Frazer's opinion, magic and religion existed together in primitive societies in simpler forms of religions. There is the last stage in the progress of knowledge called science which, like magic is based on the principles of cause and effect, but unlike magic is based on true correlations which can be proved. Thus, magic, religion and science- are the three phases of the same reality in society.

20.3.2 Complex Forms of Religion

This form of religion has the following main features, which are radically different from the simple form of religion.

i) It is historical, that is, its origin can be traced.

ii) It is also a founded religion. The founder is attributed with divine powers, recognised as the Incarnation of God, the Son of God, or the Messenger of 'God. The adherents look upon the founder as saviour.

iii) The knowledge of belief and ritual is codified and textualised. The scriptures are considered holy and believed to contain the sacred words of God, or of his representative, and worshipped as a deity.

iv) In this form of religion there is a large measure of personalism. The emphasis is on personal experience of religious phenomena. Faith is organised around the personality of the founder.

v) This is a highly intellectualised form of religion. It possesses a body of doctrine which the adherents are required to believe and follow. The new doctrines are added in course of scholastic development. New interpreters belong to the same spiritual lineage. This leads to the formation of cults and sects. To

continue the doctrinal system and to propagate a' particular ideology there comes up a class of specialists, preachers, monks and ascetics. who devote their lives exclusively for this purpose.

Religious Beliefs

20.3.2.1 Buddhism: An Example

Buddhism as a complex form of religion has the following features which put it in this category.

i) **Historical Origin:** 6th - 5th centuries B.C. First preached at Sarnath (near Varanasi).

ii) **The Founder:** Siddhartha Gautama or Sakyamuni Buddha, the son of King - Suddhodana and Queen Maya Devi of Kapilavastu (Nepal).

iii) **Main Tenets:** The Middle Path or the Eightfold Path: the practices of right view: right aim, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right meditation. These are the means of Nirvana, the release from the Wheel of Life. Those desirous of setting foot on the Eightfold Path have to take refuge in the Triple Gem: the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha (community of monks).

iv) **Distinguishing Features:** (i) **Materialism,** the doctrine of nonsoul : man is an aggregate of material factors and processes which at death, disintegrate without residue, (ii) **Atheism,** a religion without the concept of God (in practice its followers worship the gods who are lesser than the Buddha), (iii) Nihilism, the doctrine of impermanence, (iv) **Renunciation,** a religion of other wordly asceticism.

v) **Sects:** Main divide: (i): **Theravada** or Hinayana with Arhat ideal, emphasising salvation of the spiritually advanced individuals. Main concentration in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand. (ii) **Mahayana** with Bodhisatva ideal, preaching attainability of enlightenment by all, the householder as well as the recluse. Mahayana or Tantric Lamaism, further subdivided into Kadampa, Kargyupa, Sakyapa and Ningmapa. The sects of Kargypa (with two offshoots: Norpa

and Jonanpa) are regarded as semi-reformed. Main concentration in Tibet and the Himalayan region of India, especially Ladakh, Lahaul-Spiti and Arunachal Pradesh.

vi) **Scriptures:** The most important ones: **Dhammapada, Tipitaka** of the early school, and a large collection of Mahayanist scriptures called **Tanjur**.

20.3.3   Mixed Forms of Religion

This type of religion is characterised by the elements of both the simple and the complex forms. In particular, it is a religion with scholastic explanation but without history. One of the best examples of this type of religion is Hinduism, traditionally called. Sanatana Dharma or the Eternal Religion.

Hinduism as a mixed form of religion does not have a historical origin as found in Islam, Buddhism or Christianity. It has no founder and its source is not in space and time. Unlike the complex forms of religions, it does not possess an organised, bureaucratic religious order of the type present in Christianity or Islam. Even its sects are without ties. Though they are founded like Christianity, Islam, or any other historical religion, they do not form a self-governing system. Each sect defines its boundary, but all are together in Sanatana Hinduism. The basis upon which the Sanatana Hinduism and its sects are related is the principle of one-and-many.

20.3.3.1   Hindu Religion and Caste System

Hindu religion can not be understood apart from the caste system. It does not have an organised clergy or religious order as in the case of Christianity.

Therefore, the system of caste acts as a means of maintaining order in society.

This system derives its legitimacy from the Hindu religion, especially the Manu Smriti. The caste system consists of about 3,000 castes which are separated from each other in marriage practices, food habits, linguistic differences, etc.

The Indian caste system was originally derived from the four Varnas, but territorial, linguistic and occupational factors gave rise to numerous hereditary groups which came to be known as castes. Each caste has a set of beliefs and rituals. These differences are marked in the observance of domestic rites (marriage, funeral etc.).

For the Hindu, there are two important guides for practice: The **Dharmasutra** and **Grihyasutra**. These are the parts of the Vedas dealing with the rules or procedures for religious activity. The Grihyasutra (domestic rites) incorporate a number of specific features of the castes. Hence, the rules relating to domesticity are very elaborate. Many of the rituals are preserved in memory rather than recorded: The women are the repositories of informal rituals. So, apart from the priest who recites mantra there are family elders-mainly women who perform rites for the new born child, the newly-wed couple, for the dead members of the family, etc. Hence, Hindu religious practices contain both formal and informal rites. In the formation of informal rites the castes are a major source.

20.3.3.2   Notions About Dharma, Karma and Moksha

For the Hindus, and also Buddhists and Jains, the notions **dharma, karma and moksha** are important.

i)   Dharma stands for the balance between social and cosmic orders; in ordinary terms it stands for justice or fairplay. Both for individuals and groups, it is the guiding socio-religious principle. It is the first of the four Hindu principles, the

others being **artha, kama** and **moksha**. The two middle terms mean pursuit of material and social goals. Together, they are called the **purusharthas**.

These four principles are for individual's guidance. On the social plane, any imbalance in this system results in **adharma** or disturbance of social order.

The demons in Purana are the forces which create **adharma**, hence the gods and goddesses incarnate on this earth, often in human form, to destroy adharma and restore **dharma**.

ii)   **Karma** is the consequence of the individual's or group's action. It can be bad or good depending on the actions. Human beings pass through a long cycle of births and deaths during which they accumulate **karma** or the consequences of actions in one's life. The present status of an individual, good or bad, high or low, is the result of actions performed in the past life. If an individual accumulates **punya** (merit) through good actions then he enjoys happiness in this life, but if he accumulates **papa** (sin) through evil doing he suffers as a result. Karma is not fatalism. The individual can improve his destiny through his or her actions. An important outcome of Karma theory is that the individuals do not blame gods or blind fate or the society for their sufferings; they alone are responsible for their present status.

iii)   **Moksha** or liberation means cessation of births and deaths. Hindus, Buddhists and Jains firmly believe in **karma**. Usually Buddhist and Jain monks take more rigorous steps than lay people, to overcome **karmic** bondage and escape from the cycle of births and deaths to attain **moksha** or **nirvana**.

Therefore, dharma, karma and moksha are dynamic principles motivating people to action. Hence, in Bhagvad Gita, Krishna advises Arjuna to act firmly and dutifully. In caste system, all castes, high or low, had a sphere of duties. The performance of the duties in the prescribed manner conferred on individuals a better rebirth in the next round. Therefore, low caste members performing their duties correctly were regarded as worthy human beings. In the Mahabharata, there is a reference to the low caste hunter who was proud of his life style rather than regret it. For the upper-caste members also, ethical and religious norms were binding. Whether born high or low, all individuals were required to follow the caste rules and practices. Otherwise they were punished by suffering in this life or next.

Thus, in Hinduism, an example of a mixed form of religion, we see a combination of the features of simple forms of religion, as well as, complex forms of religion. It is complex in terms of its foundation in higher philosophical thinking. Its scriptures like the Veda, Upanishad, Bhagvad Gita, etc. are highly sophisticated.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: a)   Use the space given for your answer .

   b)   Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1)   Tick the correct answer:

   i)   Simple forms of religion are historical and creative.   Yes   No

   ii)   Animism is a form of simple religion.   Yes   No

   iii)   Simple forms of religions have an elaborate philosophical
          foundation.   Yes   No

   iv)   Complex forms of religion are ahistorical.   Yes   No

v) The knowledge of belief and ritual is codified and textualised in complex, form of religion.   Yes   No

vi) Hinduism is an example of complex form of religion.   Yes   No

2) Give an example each of a simple form, a complex form and a mixed form of religion in India.

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20.4 RELIGION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Change is the very essence of a living thing. A living religion must grow, must advance and must change. No form of religion is static. In some cases the change may he slow and minor, in others relatively rapid and major. Every religion claims its first principle supreme, original and eternal. Hence, there is also an element of censure for change. Change in religion may be compared with a growing tree. The dead branches wither away and new offshoots of fresh sap come up from the same tree. Change of religion is, on the other hand, an entirely different process. It implies rejection of the old form and acceptance of the new. It is technically known as conversion.

Broadly, there are three types of change in religion: (i) from simple to complex, (ii) from complex to simple and (iii) mixing of forms.

20.4.1 Simple to Complex Form

Contact with complex form of religion adds many new elements in the simple form of tribal religion For example. with'' the gradual spread of Vaisnavism in Chotanagpur, the Oraons, a tribe which lives in that region, began to re-organise their traditional faith.

The consequences were as follows:

i) The Oraons lost faith in the powers of their old spirits. , ..

ii) A few of the spirits such as the ancestor spirits and the clan-spirits, came to be shorn of much of their maleficence and came to be regarded as ordinarily beneficent.

iii) The original conception of the Spirit of Good developed into a small pantheon, which in turn evolved elaborate rites and ceremonies, actions and observations to please different grades of supernatural powers.

iv) The Oraons aspiring for a higher spiritual life imposed upon themselves the restrictions against the use of alcoholic liquors as drink or libation, and of fowls, pigs and oxen as food or sacrifice.

v) The institutions of temple and guru or spiritual guide, and loving adoration of a personal deity (bhakti) became acceptable.

vi) Religious life began to find expressions through different denominations. Some turned into Bhuiput Bhagat, some into Nemha Bhagat, some into Visnu Bhagat, some into Kabirpanthi Bhagat, and some into Tana Bhagat.

To take another example, the impact of Vaisnavism on the Meitei religion of Manipur has been much deeper. There were three distinct stages which marked the introduction of Vaisnavism into Manipur. The first emissaries of the new faith, which arrived in l704, belonged to the school of Nimbarka. The second quarter of the 18th century marked the arrival of the Ramanadi, and finally the school of Chaitanya replaced the earlier schools. There has been a remarkable coexistence of the old and the new forms of religion. This needs illustrations.

i) Some of the tribal gods, called **lai,** which were not very significant, disappeared from the scene. Household **lai** continue to be worshipped; but the public lai, those which were the common property of all the Meitei, became fewer.

ii) New Brahmanical gods became identified with the traditional deities. Panthoibi, the Meitei goddess, has become identified with Durga; Nongpok Ningthou with Shiva.

iii) Traditional **lai** came to be worshipped according to Brahmanic ritual prescription (for example in the substitution of bloodless offerings of animal sacrifice).

iv) The worship of the Vaisnava deities has developed and deepened. Krishna, in his cowherd aspect of Sri Govind, has become the dominant deity. This has caused strong emphasis on cow protection.

v) Growth in the Radha cult. Introduction of the **Ras Lila,** enacting the relationship of Krishna and the Gopis. This has caused the development of the most beautiful form of religious dancing; generally known as Manipuri dance.

(vi) Reading of the **Bhagavat Purana** and the **Mahabharata,** and singing **Kirtana.**

vii) Emphasis on Brahmanic purification rites, and puritanical sexual ethics.

20.4.2 Complex to Simple Form

There are also examples of simplification of the complex form of religion, specially of rituals and ceremonies. Buddhism, for instance, came as a revolt against the Vedic ritual which was both complex and expensive, .and also beyond the reach of ordinary people. It also required the services of the specialists, and knowledge of Sanskrit. The Buddha showed a path far simpler than this. He spoke to the people in everyday language and prescribed the Eightfold Noble Path. It is a different matter that in course of time his disciples, especially the Mahayanist, gave themselves up to the mystical Tantric form of complex religion. Later, the 19th century Brahmo Samaj again tried to simplify the complex nature of Brahmanic Hinduism. Its impact has been limited to Bengal. The Arya Samaj had also made a similar venture. It denied the Pauranic rituals and tried to establish the Vedic fire-sacrifice in a simple form. The impact of Arya Samaj can still be seen mainly in the western parts of north India.

20.4.3 Mixing of Multiple Form

Mixing of more than one form has caused development of new religious organisations. The most excellent example is of Sufism. It has evolved from Persian Zoroastrianism and Arab Islamism. The sublimity of this faith lies in its conception of the unity of Eternal Spirit and the intimate association of the Divine with the manifest. The Arab Muslims believe in a personal God. They also hold that mankind and the world are mere objects upon which the will of God is exercised. The Sufis approached nearer to the Christian sentiment embodied in the phrase "Christ in us". The Persian conquerors of India carried 'with them the mysticism and spirituality of Sufism.

Sikhism, Kabirpanth and many other Santa-Sampradayas of their kind are Sanatan Hinduism, modified by Buddhism and Sufism. In these forms of religion, the prime object of attainment is not Paradise but the total cessation of individual existence, or what is called Nirvana in Buddhism. Also there is no personal God. The Sufi idea of the unity of God is well-founded in most of the medieval religions. Guru Govind Singh, the last Guru of the Sikh Panth, was a staunch devotee of the goddess Durga. He established **khalsa** by which he bound his disciples into an army and conferred upon each of them the name Singh, or Lion. He asked his followers that after his death the **Granth Sahib** or "the Lord of the Book" was to be their guide in every respect. This holy scripture contains the devotional songs sung by practically all the Hindu saints of medieval India. It also contains 142 stanzas composed by Shaikh Baba Farid, the most celebrated Sufi . saint who accompanied Nanak, the illustrious founder of Sikhism, for more than twelve years.

The Bisnois of Rajasthan claim that their religious organisation is composed of twenty Hindu and nine Muslim tenets, and hence "Bisnoi" (**Bis** = twenty + **nau** = nine).

Activity 2

Find out whether in your region there exists worship of a Sufi Saint or Baba who is worshiped by people of more then one religion. Write a report on the religious practice and nature of religion of this Saint/Baba.

Compare your answer with those of your peers at your study centre and discuss with your Academic Counsellor.

20.4.4 Sects and Cults

Sects are like the various branches of a tree, which is a religion. They are a reaction to what is not acceptable in a religion. In fact, the sects rise as a protest movement against established religions. Protestant Christianity is a sect of Catholic Christianity; just as Jainism and Buddhism are some of the sects of Hinduism.

Sects often reject many of the norms and values of the main religion and replace them with beliefs and practices which appear to. be unusual to the people who are not members of that sect. They are insular to, and closed to others who have not gone through the initiation procedures for membership. In most sects a strict pattern of behaviour for members to follow is present. Membership demands extreme loyalty to the sect and it becomes the most dominant factor in the member's life.

Cult is another aspect of religion, which is an offshoot but unlike a sect it does not arise as a protest movement but remains part of the main religion. It is an acting out of feelings, attitudes, and relationships which are an end in themselves. For example, the cult of Devi, or the cult of Krishna etc. have a following of a large number of people who believe in it and sing the devotional songs, etc. for its own sake.

Sects and cults are the processual aspects of religion i.e., religion in the process of being practiced. Sect is much more formalised and definite, while cults are only minor expressions of variety within a religion.

20.4.5 Conversion

Conversion is the chief end of all teaching and preaching in some religions. It is a process of growing up in spiritual life. In protestant theology it is called "the rebirth

of the soul". As a constant challenge of faith, conversion is an ongoing discovery of the real nature of religion. In practice, however, such personal freedom of experience is hardly attainable. For, one is either born in a religious tradition to follow the prescribed way, or alternatively may give up 'the inherited tradition to adopt another prescribed way. In either case he is not involved in the discovery of faith. Religious missions are motivated by a desire to convert others to their faith. The supreme task of the Christian Church is the conversion of the World, making disciples from all nations. That is the objective of Islam also. The ethics of conversion grants moral rights to seek for more followers to one's way of religious beliefs. The missionaries believe that theirs is the best form of religion received from God and that it is their religious duty to impart to others who are not yet within it. When this pious motive gets distorted the method of coercion is employed only with a view to increasing the number of fellow religionists. It is no longer then a real conversion.

Many Hindus embraced Islam under different situations. The Mopla fisherfolk of Kerala were the first Indians to have accepted Islam. The Sufi saints and other religious faqirs or **darwesh** converted a large number of Hindus to Islamic faith. The Muhammadan rulers were also instrumental in conversion but more often than not they exercised force. Conversion to Christianity has generally been through missionaries, and largely among the tribes of India. Kerala again is the home of the first Indian converts to Christianity. Traditions die hard. Most converts to Islam and Christianity continue to follow some of their old beliefs and practices which are even against the tenets of the new faith. This they do either secretly, or openly. A proselytising religion wanting to hold on to the neophytes or new converts cannot do anything in this regard. Like Islam and Christianity, Buddhism also practises conversion. The Buddha had asked his mendicants to convert their adversaries to the Path not by reasoning but by reduction to the sublime. Sanatan Hinduism does not believe in proselytising, because in its view there are different paths to the Ultimate, each equally valid and worthy to follow: As there is no conversion, so also no reversion. The Arya Samaj theory of conversion was never accepted by the orthodox followers of Hinduism.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: a)   Use the space given for your answer.

b)   Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1)   Fill in the blanks in the following sentences:

i)   …………………… with…………………… form of religion has added many new elements in the simple form of tribal religion.

ii)   The impact of …………………… on the Meitei religion on Manipur has been very deep.

iii)   Buddhism came as a revolt against the …………………… ritual which was complex and beyond the common peoples reach.

iv)   Sects and cults depict the …………………… aspects of religion.

v)   In Protestant theology conversion is called "the rebirth of the ……………………".

20.5   LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have explained the social nature of religion and how religion forms a part of the social organisation of all societies? Here we have discussed the concept of faith and its relationship with religion and society. We have discussed the intimate relationship between the transcendental values, temporal elements arid human response which forms the basis of religion and which are linked with each other by the element of faith.

We have also described the crucial features of simple, complex and mixed forms of religions with some examples of each. Finally, we have discussed the concept of change within religion. We have analysed the process of change from simple to complex, from complex to simple, and the mixed forms found in the religions in India. The nature of sects and cults, and religious conversions have also been explained in this unit.

20.6   KEY WORDS

Ahistorical **:** anything which does not "have any history".

Dialectical **:** a logical discussion by question and answer as means of investigating truths in philosophy.

Embody   **:** to include.

Fraternise **:** to associate with people to make friends.

Normative **:** that aspect of social order which deals, with the norms of the society, such as the do's and don'ts.

Opiate   **:** anything which acts like a drug or alcohol which either deludes 'you or puts you to sleep.

20.7   FURTHER READINGS

Majumdar, D.N. and T.N. Madan, 1956. *An Introduction To Social Anthropology.* Asia Publishing House: Bombay-Calcutta.

O'Dea, Thomas F. 1966. *The Sociology of Religion,* Prentice Hall, Inc.: Englewood Cliffs.

Prabhu, P,N. 1971. *Hindu Social Organisation.* Popular Prakashan : Bombay

20.8   MODEL ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1)   Religion is an organisation of faith. It deals with the shared beliefs and practices of human beings.

2)   Some of the negative aspects of religion are that sometimes they create obstructions in the path of progress of a society. They promote fanaticism, ignorance and superstitions also.

3) Faith is central to all religions as it binds human beings to their temporal and transcendental foundation. It is faith which distinguishes human beings from all other living beings.

Check Your Progress 2

1) i) No (See section 20.3.1)

   ii) Yes (See section 20.3.1.1)

   iii) No (See section 20.3.1)

   iv) No (See section 20.3.2)

   v) Yes (See section 20.3.2)

   vi) No (See section 20.3.3)

2) Religion of some of the tribes in India, eg. "Bongaism" of Ho's of Kolhan, Bihar is an example of simple religion. Buddhism is a complex religion and Hindusim is a mixed form of religion.

Check Your Progress 3

1) i) Contact, complex

   ii) Vaisnavism

   iii) Vedic

   iv) Processual

   v) Soul

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Block

6

CULTURE AND RELIGION

ESO - 11
The Study of Society

Culture and Religion

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