
UNIT 4 THE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Structure

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

4.0 OBJECTIVES

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

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

4.1 INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

4.2 BELIEF AND RITUAL

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

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



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

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

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

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

Check Your Progress 1

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

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

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

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

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

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

4.3 LEVY-BRUHL AND THE MODE OF THOUGHT

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

Box 4.01

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Check Your Progress 2

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

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

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

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

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

.....
.....

4.4 EVANS-PRITCHARD'S APPROACH TO RELIGION

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

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

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

Box 4.02

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

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

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

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

Box 4.03 Azande and Nuer

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

4.4.1 The Azande

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Activity 1

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

4.4.2 The Nuer Religion

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

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

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

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

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

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

Check Your Progress 3

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.5 RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN LITERATE SOCIETIES

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

Box 4.04

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

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

4.5.1 The Protestant Ethic

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

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

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

4.5.2 The Religions of China, India and Ancient Palestine

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

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

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

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

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

Activity 2

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

4.5.3 The Sociology of Religion: Weber

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

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

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

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

Check Your Progress 4

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

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

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

.....
.....

4.6 LET US SUM UP

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

4.7 KEY WORDS

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

Animism: belief in spiritual beings.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prayers: a petition directed at a supernatural power.

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

Ritual: a patterned activity oriented towards control human affairs.

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

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

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

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

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

4.8 FURTHER READING

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

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

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

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

4.9 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

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

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

Check Your Progress 2

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

Check Your Progress 3

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

Check Your Progress 4

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