Unit 22
Religion and Culture

Contents

Learning Objectives

After reading this unit, it is expected that you will be able to:

- provide the definition and meaning of the concept of culture and religion;

- discuss the theoretical explanation of the bond between culture and religion;

- describe the three classical sociological approaches towards the understanding of the sacred and the secular or profane order;

- outline some of the other approaches to understand culture and religion; and

- explain the relationship between culture and religion in India.

22.1 Introduction

Both philosophy and sociology, prominently among social sciences, continue to explore why all cultures have religious beliefs and practices, and why they feel strongly about them. All societies - traditional, modern and postmodern - practice some form of religion and religion is held as an important component of society everywhere. Even in some 'socialist' states, where religion is expected to play only a marginal role if any, religion has shown a remarkable tenacity. It has been observed that notwithstanding ban on practicing religion in public life in such nation states, people practice some or the other type of religion here as well. Recent political and cultural developments in the leftist 'socialist' world have demonstrated the importance of religion as a significant social institution in no uncertain terms. For example in Poland during the 1990's a Catholic Political leader Les Walescha was instrumental in bringing down the communist regime.

In a society as diverse and heterogeneous as India, the multiplicity of religions cults, sects and divine belief systems. Indian culture has always placed high premium on its systems of faith and religious observance. Therefore, a systematic sociological discussion on the nature of relationship between culture and religion assumes significance in our context. Such a discussion, however, should take into consideration the wide-ranging and scholarly approaches and conceptual viewpoints on the nature of such relationships. This kind of a discussion becomes sociologically fruitful when it is placed within the global framework of sociology of religion from where lessons can be drawn to understand the Indian situation.

It is, of course, equally true that there is a notable number of non-believers in all societies including those where religion finds the political and economic support of the ruling elite. The moot question often raised by sociologists is *why some individuals and groups believe in and practice a religion devoutly, while others in the same society or culture are skeptical about religion*. This also raises the issue of the complex relationship between the two vital concepts in sociology, namely, religion and culture. Since a pretty long period of time it has been proved without reservation that religion is a complex phenomenon especially when considered in the total societal – rather than individual – context and hence this topic deserves a close and in-depth attention of social scientists. This unit intends to discuss the moot issues related to the multifaceted issue of the relationship between culture and religion at the conceptual level and then to understand the Indian scenario in the light of this belief.

The discussion on the topic 'religion and culture' has been an important debate simply because religion is understood to be a critical dimension of all societies today *as it always has been*. In spite of the processes of urbanisation, industrialisation and modernisation in the post-industrial context, religion and its practices touch almost all aspects of contemporary human life. The sociology of religion seeks to understand religion in its varied manifestations as a social institution, as a cultural practice, and as a pattern of beliefs and activities that are shaped by prevalent societal conditions and which, in turn, shape these conditions. Although recent developments such as secularisation and globalisation have challenged several aspects of religious practices all over the world, *religiosity* is still a dominant characteristic of contemporary society. In recent decades, it is not uncommon to realise that countries at times are divided into distinct blocks (such as Christian or Islamic nations) on the basis of religions they support and maintain. What is more, such a distinction also breeds inward animosity and acrimony, if not outwardly hatred, towards those who *do not belong*.

The sociological discussion on the relationship between culture and religion becomes important also for its historical worth. Many prominent intellectuals of the modern social science era opposed organised and institutionalised religion. In a sense, the basic identity of the modern intellectual advances in Europe was formed in the movement for liberation of society and culture from the dogmas of the church that had ruled medieval Europe. This movement was characterised then as the confrontation of scientific temper with doctrinaire character of religion and religious establishment. The progressive intellectuals of the period when sociology was born were solidly in revolt against dogmatic pursuit of religious belief system. They were ready to build a cultural system bereft of religious deliberations.

All these direct to the need for a concentrated debate on the relationship between culture and religion. Such a discourse should take place in the context of individual's functioning as a member of society. Such an attempt will be made in the next few pages with the help of vast sociological literature available on this topic.

The famous argument on the Indian 'sacred cow' by the cultural ecology school of anthropology is worth remembering in this context. The Hindu prohibition on cow slaughter much against the problem of severe malnutrition in India is the case in point. Marvin Harris (1975) demonstrated that live cattle play a very vital role in the Indian ecological system. Close association between religious practices on the one hand and cultural and ecological factor on the other are the issues that are presented here. This kind of sociological insight into the relationship between culture and religion in India needs to be augmented to understand this society more specifically. The exceedingly complex relationship between human behaviour and the nature can be understood

better if one attempts to understand the relationship between religion and culture. Essentially, both the cultural and the religious systems as subsystems of Indian society function within the broad social framework.

22.2 Culture : Meaning and Definition

The concept of culture has rightly received prime attention in sociological research owing to its centrality in understanding the nature and performance of the social arrangement called 'society'. Culture is probably one of the most discussed and debated topics in sociological literature because of its central location in the study of individual in society. This concept has attracted the attention of sociologists, cultural anthropologists, literature scholars and social psychologists among others in understanding human social behaviour. With its multifaceted and multidimensional features, the study of culture has gained increasing importance over the last few decades.

In ordinary speech the word culture is often used to refer to sophisticated tastes in art, literature, music, and so on. The sociological use of this term is much wider, for it includes the entire way of life of a society. Hence the relationship between culture and religion is very close. Culture sometimes is explained in terms of material and non-material. While artifacts such as books, pens, schools, factories, wheels, etc. represent material culture, more abstract creations such as language, ideas, religious belief, customs, myths and so on constitute the non-material culture.

Like the explanations, the definition of the term culture also is wide-ranging. Culture has been defined in broad terms as 'a design for living' (Kluckhon, 1949) or 'a set of mechanisms – plans, recipes, rules, roles, constructions or what may be described in the computer terminology as 'programming for social behaviour' (Geertz, 1978). Both the definitions point out to the vitality and significance of culture in society. Culture points out to the human way of adapting to the environment, a design for living acquired through learning.

Culture is achieved or acquired and not innate or ascribed. It is obtained through human socialisation – the continuous and ongoing process of interaction and learning through which we acquire a personal identity and social skills to adjust and develop. The content of this process of acquisition carried forward from one human collectivity to the next. In other words, culture is transmitted from one generation to another. It should be noted that what kind of individual we become is strongly influenced by enculturation – the immersion in a culture to the point where that particular design for living seems 'only natural' and given inevitably. Most of us do not question our cultural practices and do not view them critically because they are naturally ours and are not external to us.

Every individual is accidentally born into a family and he/she acquires a culture as the member of that particular collectivity. Because the cultural traits are specific to and identifiable within a given community, there cannot be a generalised and universal judgement on the desirability or undesirability of any cultural element or practice. In other words, cultural system is available only to its members and outside agents cannot judge the appropriateness of a culture by standards external to that culture. Justification for or critique of a culture and its practice can meaningfully emerge only from within.

Reflection and Action 22.1

List 10 items of material culture and 5 items of non-material culture which are related to your religion and are found in your society/community. Write an essay on "My Culture and My Beliefs" of about a page. Compare your list and essay with those of other students at your Study Center.

Culture is generally typified as material and non-material culture although that distinction has some notional overlapping. The many different sections that make up a group's design for living - from sophisticated science and technology to toys and children's games; from great works of art and music to kitchen utensils; from sacred ceremonies and worshipping acts to customs like shaking hands or saying 'namasthe'; from beliefs about what does and does not taste good; even sex - all are shaped by learning all through life. Learning is of central importance in cultural acquisition as noted earlier. The degree of this learning determines the rate and extent of understanding culture and related course of action within the group. Thus, culture defines the way of life of the individual. Of all the learning applications, acquiring religion has a very special place in individual's life. This provides a position to the individual in his/her social functioning within the group. Therefore, a sociological discussion on religion invariably leads to an elaborate discussion on culture and the reciprocal relationship between these two important elements of society.

Culture consists of all the shared products of human society, both the objects and subjective elements. Culture influences all aspects of individual's living in society. In fact, as Parsons pointed out, the social system and cultural system cannot exist independent of one another and any such distinction is made only for the sake of abstraction and analysis. Culture forms the platform for all other social institutions including, family, kinship, science, economy, polity, and religion.

Religion and culture are closely linked and cannot be separated within the complex social phenomenon called society. As Clifford Geertz observes, 'non-culture human beings do not, in fact, exist, never have existed, and most important, could not in the nature of the case exist. ' The unprecedented success of our species depends on the existence of human culture. We create culture, and culture in turn creates us. Our shared culture is what makes our social life possible. Without a culture transmitted from the past, each new generation would have to solve the most elementary problems of human existence over again. Without culture, we probably would have to invent fire every morning!

Cultures around the world vary widely and each culture is unique in its form and content. Cultural variations can be explained in terms of the functions that particular elements serve in maintaining the social system and in terms of their ecological significance as an adaptation to the total environment around us. It is true that human migration and mobility have lead to cultural exchange and sometimes interaction of people of different cultures for trade and commerce or pilgrimages and so on might also have resulted from diffusion from one culture to another.

In essence, all cultures consist of five basic elements: belief (ideas about how the world operates); values (ideas about the meaning of life); norms and sanctions (guidelines for behaviour) expressive symbols (material representations of ideas and values); and language.

22.3 Religion : Meaning and Definition

Indian culture in its traditional form has accorded great importance to religion. The concept of *dharma* (loosely translated as duty borrowing from its Sanskritic meaning) has been a guiding light to culture of the Hindus in India for thousands of years. Although the term *dharma* is considerably vast and expansive in its territory compared to the term religion, religious dictums have played vital role in shaping up all forms of cultural practices. Often it is pointed out that *vrutti dharma* (occupational duty), *raja dharma* (ruler's duty), *manava dharma* (duty as a human being), *samanya dharma* (general obligations) and the like are not strictly part of the ritualistic function of religion as described earlier.

In the Indian context, *dharma* describes the order of the world and not necessarily to some act referring to supernatural power. For instance, when Upanishads say: '*satyam vada dharmanchara*' (speak truth, follow your duty) the individual is advised to act according to the high values of the cultural system rather than being directed to perform some religious act. In other words, *dharma* is talked about in fulfilling the daily chores and is not always associated with religious acts and performances. Before we go further into this aspect of religion, let us be clear on the sociological concept of religion in its general sense.

India is the homeland for all major world religions. Hinduism is the major religion of the country, but practitioners of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Judaism, and a host of other religions of the world also dwell here. However, with the advent of secularism, especially as an integral part of Indian economy, polity, science and culture, major changes have taken place on the Indian religious scenario. In fact, the very connotation of religion has changed in India after we adopted a secular form of governance. The relationship between religion and other institutions of society has radically altered the place of religion in the life of the modern Indian. From a standpoint where it was taken that each member in the society has his/her own dharma, now India conceives of religion as any other social institution that requires some or the other form of social control.

By now we know that religion exists in all societies and cultures. The earlier Western idea that 'only the West was religious and other people have "fallen from grace" has been proved off beam quite a while ago. Ancient cultures like India, Egypt and China had highly complex and elaborate religious systems thousands of years ago. While theologians spoke of the existence of religions only in some parts of the world, sociologists and anthropologists have always assumed universality of religion as indicated in the classical writings of Comte, Spencer and later on Durkheim and Weber. However, settling the issue of globality of religion has given rise to the difficult problem of why all cultures should have some or the other form of religion and why should it play such a prominent role in individual's life.

There have been some plausible explanations on this topic. An early revelation of God to all peoples has been a conceivable theological explanation that gained prominence during the middle ages. But such an explanation is one outside the arena of scientific investigation, untenable in terms of validity, and thus cannot be accepted by the spirit of rational inquiry. As a scientific alternative to this uncertainty, sociologists have approached this question in a more rational and objective way, often borrowing insights and propositions from other sister disciplines like cultural anthropology, psychology and literature.

Box 22.1: Religion and Psychology

Psychological explanation of the pre-eminence of religion in culture heavily rests on the fact that religion acts as a reliever of stress, anxiety and frustration. All humans undergo stress, and it is argued that in many such instances religion can act as a consoler to reduce the tension of the sufferer. However, we know that in life it is not always the case. As commonly witnessed, in some cases, religion itself may become the source of tension and anxiety, far from acting as a consoler.

Religion is ubiquitous and universal in its presence. Sociologists and anthropologists have provided us with strong evidences to this effect. Prehistoric evidences clearly indicate religious practices dating back to very early time of human collectivity. More and more intense studies increasingly demonstrate that people, originally reported as having no religions, did possess religious beliefs and practices; many early reports in this direction are now

proved wrong, often because of observer's bias or due to superficial contacts with the community under investigation. Even conflict sociology does not discard the ever-present character of religion as a social institution. While Marxian conceptual premise dismisses religion as a mechanism of people with power to control people without power, there is no denial of the existence of different forms of religions in society as such.

Like many terms, the term religion also has changed its earlier plain denotation. The word religion is derived from the Latin word religion meaning 'good faith'. The word also indicates some form of 'ritual' in its original meaning. In general terms, the word religion is understood as a set of institutionalised beliefs and practices that deal with the ultimate meaning of life. Religion, like the essence of culture, provides a blue print for the behaviour of the individual member of society on the basis of principles sustained by divine, supernatural or transcendent order of morality. Religion is something that human beings follow as members of social groups and therefore the study of religion invariably leads to the study of people and culture.

As we have noted already, religion is one such central social institution that is found in all forms of society since the beginning of recorded human history although its form and content have been changing from time to time and from region to region. The great variety of its outward appearance makes it extremely difficult for sociologists to provide a satisfactory definition of the concept. Study of religion looks at the question of how different societies and cultures have different religious beliefs and practices, how cultural and religious differences across the globe can be understood meaningfully and put into their proper context.

In this sense, the study of religion is comparative, since comparisons are made between different religions and different types of religious practices within divergent cultural contexts. In fact, in modern sociological literature, religious studies are frequently labelled 'comparative religion'. There is a trend in contemporary social sciences now to go beyond the general understanding of religion as a universal social institution. Instead, now the attempt is also to understand it from two distinct but reciprocally related approaches: religion as an explanation of religious traditions, and religion as a universal social institution found in all human societies.

22.4 Theoretical Explanation : Bond between Religion and Culture

As social beings, individuals need one an other and share the pleasures and pains of life as they occur in the routine course of existence. Some of them can be explained in terms of logic, common-sense and the scientific logic available to him or her from his or her social position, but all of them cannot be logically deduced to his or her satisfaction. Individual, therefore, needs enlightenment for events, happenings and issues that cannot be explained by sheer common-sense or materialistic objectives accessible to her/him. Religion acquires importance in providing explanation to such unsolved enigmas and queries. That is why human beings create supernatural powers and start believing that these powers have created them. He or she also searches answers to inexplicable questions within the realm of the spiritual-mystical and receives moral order from such maxim. Putting it succinctly, individual in society, in a large number of cases, functions at two discrete levels of explanatory orders — the natural and the supernatural: the SACRED and the SECULAR or ordinary.

22.5 Sociological Explanation : The Three Approaches to the understanding of the Sacred and the Secular Order

The sacred and the secular are two important concepts that need to be seriously studied in the course of discussion on religion and culture in their sociological context. People everywhere divide their world into the realms of sacred and profane or secular. In this context three approaches to the sociological explanation of the relationship between religion and society may be discussed here for the benefit of the reader. Three great scholars provide these three explanations: namely (1) Karl Marx, (2) Emile Durkheim, and (3) Max Weber. We shall briefly look into these three theoretical viewpoints to understand the relationship between religion and culture in classical sociology.

i) **Karl Marx**, the German scholar, has provided a conflict perspective of religion. Marx saw religion as a reflection of society (not as an expression of "primitive'' or psychological needs as other theorists of his time presented). Unlike theorists like Durkheim who emphasised the positive functions of religion, Marx stressed the negative side or the dysfunction's of religion as a social institution. Whereas Durkheim saw religion as benefiting all segments of society by promoting social commitment (we shall look into this theoretical position in the next section of this unit), Marx saw religion as serving the interests of the ruling class at the expense of the powerless masses. "Religion," he wrote, "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" (1848/1964, p.42).

Marx argued that just as a painkiller masks the symptoms of disease, silencing the sick person into the illusory belief that he or she is hail and hearty, so religion masks the exploitation of workers, lulling them into the false belief that existing social arrangements are just - or if not just, inescapable. Thus Marx argued that religion as a social institution teaches that the individual's position on earth will be rewarded in heaven. In so doing, it obscures the exploitative tendencies hidden within the class structure and the elite's vested interest in the status quo. In this way, religion becomes a tool in the hands of the 'haves' to exploit and oppress the 'have-nots'.

Marx perceived religion as the personification of alienation: the self-estrangement people experience when they feel they have lost control over social institutions. The term 'alienation' was used by him to describe the modern worker's experience of being nothing more than a `cog in a machine.' He also employed this concept to describe what he saw as the dehumanising effect of religion. 'The more the worker expends himself in work the more powerful becomes the world of objects which he creates in the face of himself, the poorer he becomes in his inner life, the less he belongs to himself. It is just the same as in religion. The more of himself man attributes to God the less he has left in himself' wrote Marx in one of his famous articles (1844/1963), p.122).

As the above quoted citations indicate Marx's denunciation and rejection of religion in society was total. He argued that only when people give up the illusory happiness of religion will they begin to demand real happiness. In furthering his attack on religion as an exploitative social institution in the clutches of the bourgeois class, he wrote: 'The criticism of religion disillusions man so that he will think, act and fashion his reality as a man who has ... regained his reason'' (1844/1963, p.44). He predicted that in a classless society with communistic form of economic order, religion would become irrelevant and unnecessary. Like the capitalist class itself, religion would die its natural death.

Thus, Karl Marx considered religion as an uncalled for and manipulative institution forming an integral part of the exploitative superstructure. Both the religious and cultural institutions transform with the transformation of the economic foundation or the base. Religion and culture are the result of the existing power structure of society and religion would wither away once the class society revolutionises itself into a classless society.

Reflection and Action 22.2

Keeping the ideas of Karl Marx on religion in mind, think carefully about your own religious beliefs and values. Write an essay of two pages on "The Relevance of Religion in my Life."

Compare your essay with the essay of other students at your Study Center.

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ii) **Emile Durkheim**, the French scholar, is considered as having done pioneering work on sociology of religion. His classic book "Elementary Forms of Religious Life" as well as many other writings stand testimony to his great insights in the field of sociology of religion. Durkheim's reading of historical and ethnographic literature of his time convinced him that all societies make a clear distinction between the sacred and profane as mentioned above and such a distinction at the societal level is significant in understanding why people in groups and societies behave as they do. His theoretical distinction between the concepts of sacred and the profane stands as a classic contribution to sociology even today.

Durkheim proposed that sacred is anything that inspires awe, reverence or deep respect among the members. It has extraordinary, supernatural and sometimes even dangerous qualities and can usually be approached only through some form of ritual. Such a ritual may be in the form of simple prayer, incantation, hymns, ceremonial cleansing or offering of prey. Any thing can be sacred depending on social acceptance: an idol, rock, tree, book, the sun, the moon, the king or even an engine. The profane, on the other hand, is anything that is regarded as part of the ordinary rather than the supernatural world. Profane is something irreligious, ungodly and unspiritual. All objects in live situations, except those, which are considered by the community as sacred, are profane or sacrilegious objects. Individual's social behaviour is influenced by his relationship to the sacred and the profane during the course of his everyday life.

Durkheim, like his illustrious predecessors, recognised the universality of religion throughout human history. If religion is universal, he reasoned, it must perform some vital function in human society. Otherwise, this social institution could not have survived for thousands of years. Rejecting psychological explanation on universality of religion as consoler to the frustrated hearts (as mentioned earlier), Durkheim sought to find out the significant causes of religion. He observed that there are certain key social forces that maintain religion in all societies. He proposed that because religion performs some vital social functions, members accept this institution as an important element of social structure.

In the true spirit of objective scientific inquiry, Durkheim began his search of these key social forces in the descriptions of totemism in Australian aboriginal groups (which he believed represented the simplest and earliest form of human society). A totem is a sacred emblem that members of a group or clan treat with reverence and awe. The things chosen as totems (a lizard, a caterpillar, a fish, a tree) are not, in themselves, awe inspiring. But members of a clan see the object as their link to the supernatural. They call themselves by its name, observe taboos in approaching it, and

consider its appearance or behaviour as especially significant having sacred importance.

A totem is both a symbol of god and a symbol of the clan. This has clearly connected the cultural and the religious realms of the society. Durkheim saw this association between the sacred and the clan as a clue to the function of religion. In worshipping its totem, members of the clan were worshipping society. 'The god of the clan, the totemic principle, can be nothing less that the clan itself, personified and represented to the imagination under the visible form the animal or vegetable which serves as totem' wrote Durkheim (1912/1947, p.206).

Durkheimian logic in this instance has been simple and straightforward. . Many of the sentiments and experiences that people categorise as 'religious' are responses to unseen but powerful social forces. Because they cannot be explained by the ordinary rationalisation, the community provides a supernatural explanation to a natural social force. For example, the religious belief that human beings are the product of divine creation reflects the social fact that we are creatures of our culture and time. The religious sensation of perpetuity reflects the social fact that society existed before we were born and will continue after we die.

In supporting this position, Durkheim remarked: 'We speak a language that we did not invent; we invoke rights that we did not found; a treasury of knowledge is transmitted to each generation that it did not gather itself' (1912/1947, p.212). Going still further, 'is it any wonder', Durkheim asked, 'that we feel as if our lives are designed and controlled by outside forces? That we treat these forces with awe, as if our lives depended upon them? Durkheim strongly held, then, that religious beliefs arise from our experience of social forces. Religion helps us to give this experience a concrete form and expression in a socially acceptable form.

Elaborating on this basic insight, Durkheim argued that the primary function of religion in a society is to create and maintain a 'moral community.' Religious beliefs reinforce group norms and values by adding a sacred dimension to everyday social pressure. In this sense religion acts as a confirmer of cultural system. Religious rituals reinforce social solidarity by bringing people together to reaffirm their common bonds and recall their social heritage. Religion brings people together and unites them as a single community. Participation in rituals heightens the feeling of being part of something larger than oneself. This, in turn, helps individuals to adjust to loss and pain. Durkheim believed that if science were to undermine belief in the sacred, some functional equivalent would arise to replace traditional religion.

Durkheim's arguments regarding the relationship between religion, society and culture have undergone some changes. The Durkheimian conception of the division between the 'sacred' and 'profane' is sharper in the modern societies as compared to the traditional social set-up of the nineteenth century Europe. For example, in the modern Western societies citizens take pride in separating the religious beliefs and practices from their public life. As a result, the governments do not support any one religion against the other in their governance. Religious function, structures and roles segregated from the secular ones as far as possible. In contrast, traditional social set-up does not make any sharp segregation between the sacred and the secular. Hence, in such a system a sharp distinction between the two may look not only unfeasible but also undesirable. Yet, everywhere people do recognise that some occasions, places, persons or times are more sacred than others. The evidences for such recognition are seen in people's collective actions.

iii) **Max Weber**, the German scholar and sociologist par excellence, has provided an in-depth insight into the nature, functions and consequences of religion as a social institution. Max Weber's interest in religion was inspired to some degree by the arguments of Karl Marx. Like Marx, Weber also devoted much of his intellectual life to investigating the history of capitalism but his concentration was more on the social categories rather than the economic categories although he credited Marx with highlighting the role of economic arrangements in history. But whereas Marx believed that all history could be explained in terms of struggle between the oppressed and the oppressor classes, Weber viewed economy as only one of many influences on the course of human history.

In certain respects, Weber's sociology of religion has been a pathfinder. Contrary to the Marxian notion that religion is an obstacle to social change and progress, Weber argued that religion itself can become a powerful agent of social transformation. Weber's classic work, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" (1904/1958) has been described as a 'dialogue with the ghost of Karl Marx' (Coser, 1977, p.228). This model sociological classic still remains as a thesis in the comprehensive understanding of religion, a powerful social institution meeting not only supernatural needs but also performing pecuniary functions of society i e being closely related with the economic aspect of society.

Weber began this work by observing that in countries with both Protestant and Catholic populations, the business leaders, the bankers, even the highly skilled workers were 'overwhelmingly Protestant'. Weber tried to find out the sociological reasons for this unusual phenomenon. He asked questions regarding specifics such as what is there about Protestant beliefs and practices that fosters economic enterprise in comparison to other communities? Weber found an answer in the Calvinist phase of the Protestant Reformation. His explanation focused on two elements of Protestant belief: the redemptive value of work and worldly asceticism.

Weber found that the doctrine of predestination was central to Calvinist thinking. The Catholic Church taught that the route to salvation led through the church; that one earned a place in heaven through participation in the sacraments (mass, confession, penance, and so on). The Calvinist belief that god decided whether an individual would be 'elected to the saints' or 'damned to hell' much before the person was born, and that nothing he or she did on earth could alter that predetermination of God's will. This has helped Protestants to act freely and unchained individuals from the bonds of the church. But this belief also created intense anxiety in people's minds. How could a person know whether he or she was one of God's chosen few to be 'elected' to the heaven? The Calvinist answer was simple. This is clearly indicated in one's own lifetime through his/her worldly achievements. Good works might not earn one salvation (as Catholics believed), but they did ease the fear of damnation. As the Bible states, ``Seest thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings'' (Proverbs xxii, 29).

The Calvinist conviction in the redemptive value of hard work was combined with what Weber called 'worldly asceticism.' Calvinists condemned self-indulgence, the pursuit of luxury and lavishness, and the pleasures of the flesh. But they also rejected the belief that one could earn salvation by giving away one's possessions and living in poverty (something they associated with Catholic monks). What, then, was the successful entrepreneur to do with his wealth? Calvinism's answer here again was straightforward: engage in savings and put those profits to work. Calvin 'did not wish to impose mortification on the man of wealth, but the use of his means for necessary and practical things' wrote Weber (1904/1958, p.171). And so the Protestant ethic, with its peculiar combination of hard work and self-denial, was born. For centuries,

the Catholic Church had condemned the pursuit of profits, especially through money lending and trade. Calvinism elevated saving, investing, rational calculation, and profit making to a moral duty. Indirectly, then, Calvinism gave capitalism moral sanction and created a pool of dedicated entrepreneurs. In this way a religious ethos have given rise to a type of new economic system and a new way of looking at life. Religion, economy and culture – three major social institutions – have come together, mutually influencing each other in the process of creating a new way of living and thinking.

Weber did not maintain that these beliefs alone could explain why capitalism emerged in Protestant Europe rather than, say, china or India. Rather he saw Protestant beliefs as one of many factors that contributed to the rise of capitalism. Although he disagreed with Marx's economic determinism, he did not set out to disprove the role of economics in history. He stated: 'It is not … my aim to substitute for one-sided materialistic an equally one-sided spiritualistic causal interpretation of culture and history' (1904/1958, p.183) Rather his aim was to show that history could not be reduced to one-factor explanations and that religion could be an agent of social and cultural change.

In the conclusion to his book, Weber described the spirit of capitalism and the near-worship of rational instrumentalism in modern times as an 'iron cage' in which 'the technical and economic conditions of machine production… determine the lives of all individuals.' He continued, 'In the field of (capitalism's) highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport.' The religious spirit that had inspired the growth of capitalism has fled the cage, leaving behind 'specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart.' For Weber, a society in which human activities and relationships are governed by rational calculation and 'economic compulsions' is devoid of meaning. In this sense, a moral order, a system of ethos, which transcends the sheer pleasure principle of wealth and comforts, is something Weber aspired for the modern society. In so doing, Weber endeavoured to combine an elevated arrangement of culture with moral principles, linking religion and culture at a higher level of synthesis.

Some Other Sociological Approaches to the Understanding of Culture and Religion

Beside Marx, Durkheim and Weber, there have been other sociological perspectives explaining the nature of religion within the cultural framework. Most of these explanatory schemes examining the relationship between society, culture and religion suffer from the inadequacies of ignoring either the intellectual or the emotional content. The early evolutionists were generally misled by assuming that religion was solely a product of human mind and thinking. In this sense, they considered religion and spiritual order as purely personal and private affair. For example, psychoanalytic theory has considered religion purely as a product of human experience based on trauma or emotional pressure. We have noticed in earlier paragraphs how Durkheim rejected this explanation in his elucidation. The functional theory if you recall the previous unit 21, on the other hand, understood religion as having a relationship with virtually every human activity. This explication is so broad and extensive that specificity in analysis is lost. Owing to this difficulty of diffuseness, functional exposition with an eclectic viewpoint has failed to produce concrete development proposals in terms of a comprehensive social theory of religion. Structuralism (please refer back to unit-21) seems to have suffered by its heavy and superfluous stress on intellectualism although it has attempted to offer an alternative account to functionalist explanation of religion as meeting functional needs of the society.

Clifford Geertz, the American social anthropologist, has tried to resolve the problem of extremity in terms of emotion versus intellectual bias in the

explanation of religion. Geertz presented a scheme that requires focus on both the rational and the emotional content of religion. The term ethos is used to denote the feelings or the personality aspects that are a part of religion. The concept of worldview is employed to account for human reason. According to him the 'ethos' is made intellectually reasonable by being shown to represent a way of life implied by the actual state of affairs, at least as perceived by a particular 'worldview'. In turn, one's worldview must be made emotionally acceptable by being presented as an image of actual state of affairs. In this way, Geertz proposes, harmony between the emotional and intellectual aspects of religion can be conceived.

Looking at the development of religion as a social phenomenon historically, in a number of large and heterogeneous societies, a great change took place during a few hundred years before the Christian era. This was especially true with large societies like India, China, Egypt or Babylonia. This was the time when great religions namely, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism (and later its offshoots Christianity and Islam) emerged in the world. This has resulted in the change in the nature of human relationship to the physical and social worlds.

Such a change consisted of separating the idea of natural world from the idea of spiritual world. Instead of gods and supernatural powers intervening in the world around us routinely, they found place in an entirely different realm: heaven and hell, another sphere of reality, a world of ideal principles. This supernatural world stood as an ideal to the norms and values prevalent in culture, thus establishing a firm affiliation between the two. Needless to point out that the consequences of this change were far reaching for both the members and social institutions.

Settling the issue of the universality of religion as mentioned above raised the difficult question of why religion should be a part of all cultures. The explanation provided by Durkheim in his distinction between the sacred and the profane (discussed in earlier paragraphs) has not been accepted in social sciences fully. Anthropologists attempted to explore issues and concepts such as (1) sacred and secular (2) mana and taboo (3) priests and shamans and the like in this regard. Practices in health care and education have been closely linked to religion in many societies and these issues were also closely looked into. Traditional medicine men, witches and sorcerers have also been cultural part of society in a number of instances. Their ability to offer gratification to their group members was conceived as a possible explanation of the issue.

A number of societies have attempted not to use common sense and rational logic in interpreting religion as a part of culture. Supernatural powers of religion was used as an extraordinary elements in such an analysis. In those societies both magical and religious beliefs are frequently regarded as rational. They are treated as either relics for the past or the product of people with a pre-logical/illogical mindset. A common question in cultural studies has been: Why do people continue such practices even when desired goals are unfulfilled? Is it not irrational when people continue to pour water on 'lingam' or perform the practice of getting 'mules married ' even when such acts fail to bring rain? The question demands not a logical explanation bereft of societal context. It demands a culturally acceptable answer instead.

While rationalisation within cultural framework is characteristics of religion, parts of it are also rational explanations of events. Mythology is particularly noteworthy as explanation for questions about why, when, and where. Mythological explanations some times provide clues to repressed feelings due to cultural inhibitions. In this sense certain mythological practices may be considered as collective dream of a given culture in which people express feelings they cannot otherwise show. For the people involved religion allows

them to play with otherwise unexplained feelings kept at the unconscious level.

Sir James Frazer argued that religion is an integrated substructure of the culture. His argument that religion evolved from magic with a projected evolution of religion to science is not accepted by other social scientists. His arguments have been persuasive for a wide audience though of lesser concern in sociology and anthropology. Another evolutionist Herbert Spencer approached the problem of determining the origin of religion through examination of Australian aborigines who were considered the most primitive of living cultures. Since these natives paid much attention to their ancestors, Spencer reasoned that heroic ancestors were remembered and glorified by descendents. Over time, such grand parents assumed godlike qualities. In short long-dead ancestors became the realm of the sacred. These spirits began to govern the weather, health, education, family life and other vital areas of culture. Putting it succinctly, Spencer proposed that human beings intellectually created their religion, and that they progressed through rational, evolutionary stages. Incidentally, Spencer also noted a religious and political connection. He contented that while the fear of other living people was basic for political organisation, a fear of the dead was foundation of religious control.

Other theories on the origin and function of religion are also far from being adequate in their explanation. The historical method, psychological theories, functional theories of religion (especially of Malinowski and Radcliff-Brown) and structural theories have also been only partial in explaining the origin, the functions and the structure of religion as a social institution within the cultural milieu. It may be pointed out that most theories of religion are inadequate and suffer by ignoring either the intellectual or the emotional content. Of all the theoretical explanations, Clifford Geertz's explanation seems to be comprehensive. Although Geertz has not provided a thoroughly satisfying account of the mutual relation between ethos and world view, his presentation forces attention to both affect and thought in any analysis of religious phenomenon.

22.6 Culture and Religion in India

Indian sociologists have developed concepts such as Sanskritisation, parochialisation, little tradition, great tradition, and a number of concepts to explain how religious ideas and ideals have been guiding Indian society in depth.

India is a diverse and heterogeneous society in terms of culture as well as religious beliefs. The religious beliefs, forms of worship, objects of reverence, rituals, ceremonies of the people, places of pilgrimage and sacred books are all varied and numerous. But all of them are profound in their influence over the development of individual's personality as well as he feeling of community. The secondary institutions within religion in India include rites and rituals, forms and objects of worship, and organised groups for the propagation of religion. Each one of these factors influences the culture of the common people considerably. In this sense religious mores form firm foundation to the preservation of certain basic elements in the culture.

Religious groups in India, especially those adhering to major religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Jainism, Sikhism, have lived in partial harmony, together forming an Indian culture over the last several hundreds of years. As Mahatma Gandhi once said about Hinduism, 'it is more than a religion; it is a way of life.' The Indian culture enjoys the fact that Hinduism, its most ancient and powerful religious group, pervades every aspect of individual's life making this culture a highly complex one.

Indians, mainly Hindus, over the years have developed two streams of public life*: asthika* or the 'believer' and *nastika'* or the 'non-believer.' The complex Hindu theology is woven around the abstract spiritual concepts such as Brahma, atman, paramatma, punarjanma, karma, papa, and the like and they have lent an influencing hand to the nature, structure and functioning of pan-Indian culture.

Religion and culture work towards the same goal of four cardinal principles of humankind. These principles are:

1)   Survival of the species

2)   Security in the life span of individuals

3)   Material prosperity for ensuring survival and security, and

4)   Continuous expansion of the scope of wholesome living, and mental progress for unfolding the potential of every individual.

22.7 Conclusion

Religion, all over the world, is basically a matter of faith and emotion. Although there are religious leaders who argue otherwise, it is for certain that religion is not an issue to be dealt with in terms of information, reason and logical judgement. Culture, on the other hand, works within as well as outside the realm of faith and emotion. As Merton pointed out, there are 'cultural universals' and many elements of culture are found in almost all societies. The very fact, that religion is based on trust in some supernatural power, and that there are 'believers' and 'nonbelievers' within this construction proves its highly emotive nature of operation. In spite of these basic structural differences, religion and culture have many important goals in common.

Each one of these four standards is expected to lead the humankind to a healthier more secure and better future. Both religion and culture strive to achieve such a future to their members. **The survival of their members** to both these social institutions essentially means their own survival. That culture is considered supreme which leads to the welfare of all; in the same way, that religion is an eternal religion which hopes and prays for the well being of all species (The Hindu religious saying which is also reflected in the traditional Indian culture is '*sarve janah sukino bavanthu ….. sarve bhadrani pashyanthu……*'). In the same way, **life security and longer life span of the members** is the desired goal of both the cultural and the religious systems. Immediately next is the principle of **material prosperity of the members.** Ultimately a cultural system or a system of religion survives only when and if its members are 'healthy, wealthy and wise'. The individual members of a religion, as in culture, pray for and look forward to be blessed with corporeal and material wealth along with mental peace. Finally, members of both culture and religion look forward for a happy, peaceful and contented life and opportunity to unfold the human potential to its fullest extent. Functioning towards the fulfillment of these fundamental tenets of human life is the basic objective of both religion and culture. There is no scope for the nonbeliever

to assess and criticise religion unless he/she is an integral, internal member of that given culture or religion. Culture comprises of both the sacred and the secular. In that sense, culture covers a larger canvas on which religion finds a small but critical role.

As we have entered the twenty-first century, our problems and priorities have become divergent and individualistic. Today, human society in general comes upon three predispositions operating concurrently. They point at certain problems and possible solutions.

The first tendency is the homogenisation of culture in the global scale, along with the globalisation of economy and polity. Second one is the assertion of the homogenised culture in different configurations of human society, usually in respective nation-states. Thirdly and very significantly, the demand of ethnic groups, at discerning level of their power potential within a nation state for the recognition of their 'minority' status cultures.

In a document on culture, the International Centre for Development (1979) has abridged the essential elements of the institution of culture at the generic level. This precise statement would help us to sum up our understanding of the relationship between culture and religion succinctly. The precise statement is that "Culture is an aggregate of values and traditions which is deeply linked to the everyday life of the people, and in that sense, it is a matrix of perception which allows one to apprehend the world." This statement aptly summarises Indian position on the relationship between culture and religion.

In India, religion, as an integral part of culture in general, provides a foundation for mores of society even today. Hence, we find that since time immemorial, religious sanctions are sought for doing certain desirable patterns of behaviour by the individual in society. Hence, they become a part of both the cultural and the religious systems in India in the form of mores. In so doing, violation of the pattern of behaviour then becomes violation of the order of God-the Almighty. It also receives reprimand from the society. Thus many taboos in our culture have religious sanctions, for instance, the taboo against eating beef among the Hindus has precise and definite religious sanction. Hinduism treats the killing of holy cow as an unpardonable sin. In the same vein, in an agrarian society, killing cows leads to both economic as well as social disaster, and hence, Indian culture does not accept.

To conclude, religious system and cultural system in India have a lot of overlapping in their intent and consequences. Needless to point out that Indian religion promises 'ideals' to its believer whereas Indian culture concentrates more on the 'actual'. The uneven and stratified system of the Indian religious order seemingly contrasts with the relatively flat and less uneven cultural system of modern India.

22.8 Further Reading

Bellah, R.N. (Ed.) 1965 : Religion and Progress in Modern Asia, Free Press: New York.

Bainbridge, 1985 : The Future of Religion, University of California Press : Berkeley.