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# UNIT 1 CONCEPTS AND APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION (Evolutionary, Psychological, Functional and Marxist)

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## 1.6 Summary

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## Learning Objectives



This reading should enable you to understand:

- various concepts in the discourse of religion;
- development of anthropological perspective of religion;
- various approaches to study religion; and
- contribution of anthropology to the understanding of religion.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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The subject matter of religion is dealt with in anthropology differently from the other disciplines, such as philosophy, theology, comparative religion, religious studies and so on. It tries to explain not what religion is but why is religion important in the lives of the people. It basically takes people's perspective and seeks to find out how it is important to the people. There is no society that is known so far without any religious idea. As early as nineteenth century, anthropologists made attempts to search for earlier forms of religion and religious thoughts and the courses of change therein. Some intellectuals thought that religion will have no place where science and technology flourish, but the reality is to the contrary. Even today in the age of computers, robots and inter-planetary travel religion plays important roles in the lives of people. Anthropologists are trying to know the relevance of religion in human societies whether they are technologically advanced or primitive hunter and gatherers. This obviously raises the question of the significance of religion in human societies. This unit basically attempts to orient students to the anthropological perspective of religion.

Anthropological approach of studying human societies as integrated wholes, considers religion as a part of culture. Each culture is unique in its own way and each culture can be studied and described. The recent thinking is that the world can be viewed in multiple ways and, therefore, the representation of culture cannot be monological, authoritative and bounded. Thus, the anthropological perspective of religion is the way its practitioners see the world, interpret and see themselves different from others.

One may begin to have an understanding of the domain of religion with the question what constitutes religion? And how do we define religion? Anthropologists defined religion in different ways. But none of these well known definitions adequately cover all aspects of religion practiced by all human societies. There has been criticism on each of these definitions for their failure of accounting for one aspect or the other.

In this unit, the students will be introduced to basic concepts found in anthropological discourse on religion, and various approaches to study religion such as evolutionary, psychological, functional, Marxist and symbolic. First, each of the basic concept is discussed, followed by discussion on anthropological approaches to study religion.

### **Box No. 1 Definition of Religion**

For Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917) religion is the belief in spiritual beings (1871).

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) defines religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden - beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called Church, all those who adhere to them" (1961:62).

Clifford Geertz defines religion as (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men [and women] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (1973:90).

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## 1.2 CONCEPTS OF RELIGION

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The important concepts that appear in the study of religion include supernatural beings – of polytheistic and monotheistic beliefs, forms of religion – animism,

animatism, totemism, ritual, myth, religious symbolism, ancestor worship, magic, witchcraft and sorcery. Each of these concepts is briefly explained below:

### 1.2.1 Supernatural Beings

There is dichotomy of world into: natural and supernatural. The natural world is explained in terms of cause and effect relations, whereas the supernatural world cannot be explained in causal relations alone. Gods, goddesses, god-lings, dead ancestors, spirits who may be benevolent or malevolent; ghosts, demons, and other forms, which are usually malevolent, and are powerful than human beings in their movements and actions that constitute the world of the supernatural beings. The supernatural beings may be visible at particular point of time, not for all but for a few, or remain invisible. They are not subject to natural laws and principles, whereas the natural beings necessarily follow the natural or physical laws and principles. Theism refers to the beliefs and ideas that focus on supernatural beings within the religious practices. When the society holds belief in multiple supernatural beings it is called as polytheistic religion. Hinduism is the best example of having a number of gods and goddesses in its pantheon. Monotheistic religions are those having belief in one supreme supernatural being that may be called God or *Yahweh* or *Allah* as in case of Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

In several religious practices, the interaction between humans and spiritual beings are through spirit possession, vision and dreams. The spiritual beings possess some humans who become media through which other humans and spirit enter into dialogue. Sometimes, the spirits speak to the human agent who conveys the message to people. In some cases, the humans get visions or the spirits appear in dreams to interact with them. Also individuals get into trance for interacting with the spirits. Thus, links are established between humans and supernatural world.

### 1.2.2 Animism

The term is coined by E. B. Tylor (1871) to describe the belief in soul or life force and personality existing in animate and inanimate objects as well as human beings. Several of the tribal religions hold such beliefs. His theory is that human beings are rational beings, and attempt to interpret mysterious phenomena like sleeping, dreams and death with the idea of soul.

### 1.2.3 Animatism

R. R. Marett (1866-1943) considered that humans believed in impersonal forces in nature and certain objects. This sort of belief had created in humans religious feelings of awe, fear, wonder, respect, admiration, and other psychical effects. He believed that primitive man could not distinguish between the natural and supernatural and also between living and dead. This condition that prevailed before the development of the idea of soul is called animatism, which Marrett named after *mana* which means power in Polynesia.

### 1.2.4 Naturism

Max Muller contended that since the gods in various societies were originally from natural phenomenon, such as sun, thunder, trees, animals, mountains, forests, lakes, rivers, oceans and so on, the human perception of nature must have had very powerful agencies for origin of religion. Nature was the greatest surprise, a terror, a marvel, a miracle which has also been permanent, constant and regular occurrences,

and these could not be explained with the known facts. They are believed to have great influence on the affairs of human beings. The religious thoughts must have originated from the conceptualisation of nature itself and worship of nature.

### 1.2.5 Totemism

It is a system of belief in which certain objects, plants or animals have kinship relationship with social groups. Such animate and inanimate objects stand as emblems giving identity to the groups and form representations of the groups. They create religious feelings among the members and form the objects of worship, reverence and sacredness. According to Durkheim, totemism is the earliest form of religion and it is quite prominently found among the Australian tribes, and such phenomena are also noted among the American tribes as well.

### 1.2.6 Taboo

Taboo a Polynesian concept (*tabu/tapu*) but widely used in anthropological literature. It refers to something, use of which is collectively and strictly forbidden in religious context. The violation of a taboo has different consequences of temporary defilement, crime to be punished and attracts the sanctions of supernatural beings and so on. Taboo is associated with *mana* and Totems are considered taboos.

### 1.2.7 Sacred and Profane

According to Durkheim, these are central concepts of religion. The sacred refers to the things or spaces which are set apart for religious purposes, and against these the profane refers to those considered secular in nature. However, in several religions there are no equivalent terms and often they overlap also.

### 1.2.8 Ritual

Ritual, like religion, is difficult to define due to diverse forms and complexity of the phenomenon. However, one may understand it as a set of formalised actions performed with symbolic value in a socially relevant context or worshipping a deity or cult. It is also a customary observance involving stereotyped behaviour. Rituals vary in form and in content within a particular religion and across religions. They involve participation of one or more individuals, physical movements or actions, verbal and non-verbal or symbolic mode of communication based on certain shared knowledge. Often ritual actions are infused with certain moods and emotional states and the participants may inwardly assent or dissent from the ritual process.

#### Box No. 2

Victor Turner defines ritual as “prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technical routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical (or non-empirical) beings or powers regarded as the first and final causes of all effects” (1982:79).

Gluckman and Turner differentiate ritual from ceremony, though both of them are forms of religious behaviour. Ritual involves social status and transition of one’s status and, therefore, it is ‘transformative’, while the ceremony is associated with social status and ‘confirmatory’. But such fine distinction often gets blurred and difficult to maintain the difference. Rituals are classified as religious, magical, calendrical, sacred, secular, private, public, sacrificial and totemic and so on. Anthropologists most often use in their discourses on religion the ‘rites de passage’ of Arnold van Gennep, who analytically isolated a set of rituals called rites of passage. The rites are organised recognising the change of status of individual in

one's life time, and each of the rites employs three phases: separation; margin (or limen); and incorporation. Turner elaborates the transitional phase liminality in his study of Ndembu in Zambia.

### 1.2.9 Myth

Believed to be truthful accounts of the past, the narrative that gives religious sanctity and sacred character to the account, and is often associated with ritual is called myth. Well, all myths may not actually depend on the past and necessarily do not deal with sacred, yet they refer to or hinge upon such putative factors providing social credibility and acceptability of the account. Well-known myths are creation myths. Myth is different from legend as the characters in the myth are usually not humans. They may be supernatural beings or animals or other animate and inanimate objects and sometimes they are ambiguous characters. Myths generally offer explanations for the customs and practices. On the other hand, legends are about culture heroes, historical figures located in historical events, which are believed to have taken place, that very easily transit into the contemporary life. Folk tales are not considered sacred but regarded as stories or fiction meant basically for entertainment. These tales may also include supernatural elements, yet are essentially secular in nature. The characters in these tales may be human and/non-humans. The tales exist independent of time and space. There is a strong relationship between myth and ritual, and there was a debate as to which came first. It is so because some argued that ritual is the enactment of myth whereas others had argued that myth arises out of rites. The contemporary studies on myths find no strict correspondence between the two.

Franz Boas tried to understand the social organisation, religious ideas and practices of people from their myths. Malinowski argued that myth is a powerful social force for the native which is relevant to their pragmatic interests. It expresses and codifies beliefs and works towards efficacy of ritual and provides a practical guide. However, for Levi-Strauss, myth is a logical model, it is a cultural artefact. The human mind structures reality and imposes form and content on it. According to him, myth is an area where human mind enjoys freedom and unrestrained creative thinking expressed in it. Taking into consideration several limiting factors, humans think certain conceivable possibilities about the critical problems that they face. Therefore, myth provides the conceptual frame for social order, but it need not correspond with the ethnographic facts of social organisation. Levi-Strauss provided a method for structural analysis of myth. The latter studies of myth point out the fact that myth interprets the reality but does not necessarily represent the social order.

#### Reflection and Action 1

You can find rituals and myths in your own cultural lore. Try to find their relationship, if there is any.

### 1.2.10 Cult

The concept of cult is derived from French *culte* meaning worship or a particular form of worship. It has been used in both neutral and negative sense. In the neutral sense of the term it means 'care', 'cultivation' and 'tended', it is a deity or idol or image of a saint who is venerated and it is concerned with devotion. However, in the negative sense it refers to the practice of a deviant religious group or new religious dogma arising out of syncretism, cultural mix of ideas and practices of different religions. The Cargo cults of Melanesia and Papua New Guinea weave

Christian doctrine with native beliefs, in which it is believed that the spirits of dead would bring the manufactured European goods in ships and airplanes. Similarly, Caribbean *vodum* or 'voodoo', Cuban *santeria* and Afro-Brazilian *candomble*' deities are referred to as cults.

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### 1.3 RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM

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In a general sense of the term, symbol may be an object, picture, written word, sound, idea, and colour that represent something else in association, resemblance or convention. The religious symbolism refers to the idea of how symbols are employed in religious context. Cross or Swastika or Crescent Moon are religious symbols found in Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam, respectively. Symbols are communicative, convey meanings shared by the community. They are associated with human interests, purposes, ends and means. They are explicitly formulated. The symbols are dynamic as they evoke moods and emotions and create complex philosophical contexts in mind. Sacred art, pictures, drawings and designs used in ritual and religious context convey religious meanings. Turner identifies three properties of these religious or ritual symbols: condensation, unification of disparate significata, and polarised meanings. Condensation means representing many ideas, actions and meanings into a single symbol. For example, the Shiva Ling is representation of Lord Shiva, divine destruction, male potency, creation and so on. The unification of disparate significata means unifying diverse elements as in case of Ndembu ritual the milk tree representing women's breasts, motherhood, and principle of matriliney, learning and unity of society. Polarization refers to two distinguishing poles of meanings as matriliney and patriliney in case of Ndembu puberty ritual.

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### 1.4 RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICES

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Religious knowledge in most of the cases is institutionalised. It is developed and contained in the form of doctrines and practices which anthropologists categorize as little traditions and great traditions. The little traditions deal with the mundane issues, whereas the great traditions deal with the philosophical and other worldly issues. Different institutions are developed in these traditions; in the former case there is shamanism (a system of belief cantering on the shaman, a religious personage having curative and psychic powers), spirit possession, oracle or prophecy and in the latter case, there are institutions of formal learning of religious matters, priesthood of various orders, monasteries, and so on. In little traditions the knowledge is passed on orally and by subjective experience, whereas in great tradition the literature and sacred texts contain the spiritual knowledge. Thus, there is division between those who have specialised knowledge of supernatural things and those who are ordinary members of the community.

#### 1.4.1 Ancestor Worship

Worship of deities through rituals is though common practice, the ancestor worship is more often associated with the little tradition. The great tradition generally includes the worship of single or multiple deities. However, in Asia, Africa and other parts of the world, there is the common practice of venerating ancestors; it is believed that the ancestors continue to hold power over their progeny and affect the society. This may be understood under the premise that human soul continues to survive after the death. It is not the same as that of worshiping the dead; it is the respect given to the deified dead person or the transformed spirit of the dead.

The funerary rites are performed for this purpose. In many of the religious practices, only a few become ancestors and receive ritual attention. Where descent is through males, the ancestors would be male only. In matriliney, as in case of Nayar in India or Ashanti in Africa, the ancestorhood is bestowed upon the mother's brother who holds jurisdiction over lineage as lineage head. In some cases, ancestor shrines are built where regular offerings are made and sacrifices offered. Functionalists like Malinowski explain this phenomenon as emotional reassurance against the loss. Meyer Fortes offers explanation in structuralist framework and says that ancestor worship belongs to the domain of kinship and descent structure supported by the *jural* and political order. The ancestor worship is an extension of authority over successive generations; it is the supernatural idiom of supportive relationship manifested in religious ideology.

### 1.4.2 Magic and Magician

Often religious practices include or is supplemented by magic. Magic refers to certain activity or method by which the supernatural is believed to interfere in the affairs of humans and bring about particular outcome. Magic and religion are closely related to each other, though both can be distinguished. There are similarities between the two as both are related to supernatural, rich in symbolism and involve in rituals, and yet there are differences. While religion is supplicative, as one seeks intervention of supernatural and requests for favours, magic is manipulative, one uses set of formulas which force supernatural to intervene. Durkheim says while we do not find a single religion without a church (place of worship), there is no church for magic. Magic is frequently used for public good. According to Frazer, (1890) magic works on the Law of Sympathy which refers to the association or agreements of things and it has two parts: Law of Similarity and Law of Contagion. The Law of Similarity states that an effect resembles its cause. The Law of Contagion states that things that are once in contact will continue to be in contact. The Law of Similarity gives rise to homeopathic or imitative magic – like produces like - and the Law of Contagion gives rise to contagious magic. In imitative magic, the magician uses an image or figurine to represent a person or animal on which magical spells are cast or pricks pins to harm the victim. Sometimes, one imitates totemic species and symbolically acts out copulation for increasing the population of the species which is practiced among the Australian tribes. In Contagious magic, a body part of an animal or anything that belongs to a person under the magical spell affects the animal or the person. In some societies, the claw of tiger when worn as garland makes a man skilled hunter or an amulet having the image of god keeps away the bad spirits or demons.

Frazer believed that magic is closer to science, the primitive man's thinking was pre-logic. Malinowski observed that the Trobrianders possess sound empirical and rational knowledge about their environment, they use technology developed by them to grow gardens and crops and use skills to sail in the sea and involve in *kula* exchange. But despite all this knowledge the Trobrianders believe that there are agencies that influence the natural order. In order to control these forces and agencies, they use magic. According to him, the function of magic is to ritualise man's optimism over fear or ill-luck.

### 1.4.3 Witchcraft and Sorcery

Magic is mostly used for the public good, witchcraft and sorcery are used for harming the individuals, and seen as anti-social. Black magic is equated with witchcraft and sorcery, and these have negative sanction of the society and individuals

on whom it is practised. The witch is distinguished from the sorcerer by the fact that the source of supernatural in case of a witch remains in the body of the witch that is often inherited also. The sorcerer acquires the art and does not necessarily pass on to the next generation. The witch generally wills in death and destruction, whereas the sorcerer performs magical rites to achieve evil ends. Witchcraft is seen as an evil force bringing misfortune to members of a community. These religious phenomena are found in many parts of the world, including the scientifically and technologically developed countries. Christianity recognises the existence of evil spirits which function under the lordship of Satan or Devil who is hostile to God, and the witches and sorcerer maintain close liaison with Satan. Evans-Pritchard (1937) provides a classical example of witchcraft among the Azande in Africa. According to him, witchcraft provides explanation for the unexplainable events; it is cultural behaviour dealing with misfortunes; and it helps defining morality.

#### Reflection and Action 2

Try to find the differences among ritual, magic, witchcraft and sorcery. Do they overlap?

#### 1.4.4 Evil Eye

The belief in evil eye states that some individuals with an evil eye cause illness or some misfortune by simply looking at others. This explanation is mostly offered when children become sick in several societies. It is not only by looking but also praise or any complementary comments. The victims of evil eye are mostly children. In some cases when prosperous individual or household suddenly encounters misfortunes, people attribute it to evil eye. Dundes (1981:266-267) identifies some structural principles that operate in the concept of evil eye. Life depends on non-renewable resources like semen, milk, blood, saliva, etc. which are liquid, and drying them up cause illness, which is due to evil eye. There is limited amount of good, such as health, wealth, etc., and any gain of one individual can only come at the expense of the other. So, if a person of evil eye acquires more of limited good, the other will lose. In the equilibrium model of life the haves and have-nots co-exist in a balanced manner. But the have-nots when become envious, the haves lose their health or wealth. Further, eyes symbolise breasts or testicles and an evil eye threatens the supply of such precious liquids like milk or semen.

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## 1.5 ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO RELIGION

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After introducing various concepts found in religious discourses, we draw your attention to the anthropological theories about religion. These include evolutionary, psychological, functional, Marxist and symbolic perspectives.

John Lubbock (1834–1913), an English anthropologist, made an early attempt to combine archaeological evidence of prehistoric people, on the one hand, and anthropological evidence of primitive people, on the other, to trace the origin and evolution of religion (*Encyclopædia Britannica Online*). In this scheme, in the beginning there was absence of religious ideas and development of fetishism, followed by nature worship, and totemism (a system of belief involving the relationship of specific animals to clans), shamanism, anthropomorphism, monotheism (belief in one god), and finally ethical monotheism. This has foreshadowed, other forms of evolutionism, which were to become popular later. In the late nineteenth century with the influential works of Max Muller, W. Robertson Smith, Edward B. Tylor, Marrett, and Sir James G. Frazer, anthropological study



on religion grew at a fast pace. These scholars were first to suggest that tribal religions might be amenable to study, following the rules of scientific method, and to posit specific methodological procedures for the comparative analysis of religious beliefs and practices. All of them sought to understand religious belief and practices at most fundamental or basic level.

The anthropology of religion owes a great debt to Emile Durkheim who put forward the concept of sacred, profane orders, and the so-called supernatural and natural categories, which have proved to be more beneficial in better understanding the concept of religion. A strong impetus to subsequent application of Durkheimian theory is found among the British structural-functionalists, such as Radcliffe-Brown, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Meyer Fortes, and Melford Spiro, etc., who also made significant contributions towards understanding religion. They primarily focussed on the religion of tribal groups. However, many of the contemporary exponents of anthropology of religion like Clifford Geertz, Melford Spiro, Victor Turner, Sherry Ortner, Mary Douglas and Stanley Tambiah have devoted bulk of their attention to local variants of major world religions – Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity and the impact of the world religions in developing countries like Java, Indonesia, Morocco, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Nepal, and Burma, instead of the religions of isolated tribal groups. Contemporary ethnographers concentrate on examining religious diversity in complex societies rather than providing further documentation for uniformity in tribal religions. Herein, you are provided with a brief account of each of the dominant theoretical perspectives of anthropology on religion.

### 1.5.1 Evolutionary Perspective

Like so much else in anthropology, the study of the religious notions of primitive people arose within the context of evolutionary theory. Besides their evolutionary assumption about religion, the followers of evolutionary theory show overwhelming Eurocentric biases. But it is true that they made valuable contributions to the study of religion. Most of the nineteenth century anthropologists derive assumptions about religion from the Judeo-Christian heritage and from their own religious experiences within that tradition. E.B. Tylor, expounds in his book, *Primitive Culture* (1871), that animism is the earliest and most basic religious form. Out of this evolved fetishism, belief in demons, polytheism, and, finally, monotheism is derived from the exaltation of a great god, such as the sky god, in a polytheistic context. He defines religion in such a way that all forms of it could be included, namely, as ‘the belief in Spiritual Beings’. He firmly states that religion is a cultural universal, for no known cultures are without such beliefs. Belief in spirits began as an uncritical but nonetheless rational effort to explain such puzzling empirical phenomenon as death, dreams and possessions. Herbert Spencer advocated ancestor worship, a relatively similar system to Tylor’s animism.

The 19th century anthropologists were deeply influenced by the presumptions of their own society so called ‘Western’. R.R. Marrett (1909), on the other hand regarded animatism as beginning of religious ideas. As discussed earlier, his derivation is from ideas as *mana* (power), *mulungu* (supreme creator), *orenda* (magic power), concepts found in the Pacific, Africa, and America, respectively, referring to a supernatural power (a kind of supernatural ‘electricity’) that does not necessarily have the personal connotation of animistic entities and that becomes especially present in certain men, spirits, or natural objects. Marrett criticizes Tylor for an overly intellectual approach, as though primitive men used personal forces as explanatory hypotheses to account for dreams, natural events, and other

phenomena. For Marrett, primitive religion is ‘not so much thought out as danced out,’ and its primary emotional attitude is not so much fear as awe.

For Sir James Frazer human thought is best understood as a progression from magic to religion to science. By publishing his two volume book titled *The Golden Bough* (1890), he attempts to construct a universal theory of magic, religion and science. According to Frazer, *magic* is the primordial form of human thought. He further postulates early man was dominated by *magic*, which viewed nature as ‘a series of events occurring in an invariable order without the intervention of personal agency’. These magicians, according to Frazer, believed in nature and developed imaginary laws, which are of course, not real. However, in course of time the more intelligent members of the society, in the state of disillusionment, conceived of spiritual beings with powers superior to man, who could be induced by propitiation to alter the course of nature to his advantage. According to Frazer, this was the stage of *religion*. Later on this was seen to be an illusion and men entered the final, the *scientific* stage of development. Magic, according to Frazer, is based on the principle of contagion or on ‘sympathy’ or the notion of imitation, said to be the earliest form. In more advanced societies, Frazer contends, magic eventually is replaced by religion, and both are finally replaced by science.

For Durkheim, evolutionary advancement consists in the emergence of specific, analytic, *profane* ideas about the ‘cause’ or ‘category’ or ‘relationship’ from diffuse, global, sacred images. These ‘collective representations,’ as he calls them, of the social order and its moral force included such sacra as ‘*mana*’, ‘totem’ and ‘god’ (Sills, 1968). The above postulates on religion come from intellectual theorisation made from the existing reports, travelogues, and Christian missionary works. These anthropologists never had firsthand experience of non-western cultures nor did they theorise on the basis of systematic study of culture of the people in totality and, therefore, they were called armchair anthropologists.

Anthropologists like Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead and Alfred Kroeber discredit the speculative evolutionary perspective and seek explanations for similarities of rituals, myths and symbols found in different cultures through culture contact. For them cultural dispersion, instead of independent evolution of religious thoughts and actions, is the reason for such similarities. They emphasise need for understanding culture as an integrated whole and interpreting the cultural elements in that pattern, including the religious activities, in a meaningful way.

But, there are others like Emile Durkheim who thinks that emotions of the individuals and collective consciousness in social environment shape the individuals’ religious feeling. While, on other hand, Max Weber believes that the beliefs and emotions have evolved into rational religion and higher thinking in religion. Others such as Meyer Fortes and Clifford Geertz also recognise the psychological component in religious behaviour. However, after the evolutionary perspective, psychological approach to religion based on Sigmund Freud’s approaches of psychoanalysis and neurotic symptoms has become a dominant approach to understand religion in anthropology.

### 1.5.2 Psychological Approach

Few years before World War I, there was the rise of systematic psychologism of psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud. His thesis is that religious rituals and beliefs are homologous with neurotic symptoms (Eriksen, 1950). According to him, a deep subconscious psychological conflict within social groups is responsible for the

development of religion. He explains that the psychological conflict between the father and son, the hatred of son towards father, his desire for killing him and the guilt feeling are the reasons for the creation of totem based on the Oedipus myth. The worship or respect shown to the totemic animal is the reflection of subconscious conflict between the son and father and the latter's kinsmen. The psychological defence mechanisms involve projections to avoid conflict and reduce anxiety. This is like "I hate X because you hate X", which can be analysed at cultural level. Further, the childhood experiences carried out through out adult life in the forms of images and in this regard dependency of children on parents is significant. The dependency on parents by the children in the latter part of life is projected on the spiritual beings.

But Carl Jung takes a different approach taking the projections to cultural level of a group's collective consciousness and Oedipus is just one example, and others include the Trickster, the Hero, Orphan, the Creator, the Sage or Fool, etc. Following this line of thinking, Kardiner, who is considered as a neo-Freudian, sought to demonstrate that religious institutions of tribal people are projections of a "basic personality structures," formed not by the action of an unconsciously remembered historical trauma but by the more observable traumas produced by child-training practices.

Many others like Eriksen (1950) have also been influenced by Freud's concept. Eriksen, drawing upon developments in ego personality to be a joint product of psychobiological maturation, cultural context, and historical experience, interpreted the religious notions of the Yurok and the Sioux in terms of certain basic modes of relating to the world. The basic Freudian premise is that religious practices can be usefully interpreted as expressions of unconscious psychological forces, and this has become, amid much polemic, an established tradition of enquiry. Ruth Benedict (1934) in her work has provided a background for all later culture-personality studies using the same method. She explains cultural patterns of some American Indians in terms of configurations from certain personality types.

The psychological approach has been superseded by functionalist approach but recently the significance of psychology once again came to light in a different route as symbolic anthropology. The context is that there has been a considerable discussion on 'primitive thought' which is different from that of the 'modern rational thought'. The former is associated with lack of written language, technology, small in number and lack of uniformity, etc., and its religion is expressed in ritualistic activity and magic. The latter is associated with the scriptures, standard religious activities, rationalisation of behaviour and philosophical approach to life. However, there are commonalities and continuities in these two forms of thoughts and actions. In this respect, the approach of Clifford Geertz to religion is significant, as modern or primitive religion can be understood in an integrated system of thought through symbolism.

### 1.5.3 Functionalist Approach

Various forms of functionalism in anthropology—which focus on social patterns and institutions with reference to their functions in the larger cultural context—have proved illuminating for wider understanding of religion. This has helped to discover interrelations between differing aspects of religion as it connects various institutions. Functionalism emphasises on the interrelations between the various elements of a social system, and, therefore, pays less attention to evolutionary origins and the notion of "survivals" – the continuation of primitive elements in a

culture. Society is seen as a self-regulating system in which religion, economic organisation, and kinship form parts of an organic whole. The realm of the sacred is defined by the attitude people have towards it – rituals are sacred if they are performed with reverence and awe. Numerous functional aspects of religion include providing explanation or comfort; sanctions on social, economic and political norms and institutions; and aiding ecological adaptation and unifying the social group. Anthropologists like Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Radcliffe-Brown, etc., who approached religion from functionalist perspective provide explanation that satisfies human needs and solidarity of the group. Malinowski, for instance, in his work on the Trobriand Islanders emphasises on the close relationship between myth and ritual. He puts forward the idea of psychological functionalism, religious acts fulfilling the psychological need and satisfaction. A mortuary ritual, for instance, is intended to release the soul and prevent it from returning to haunt the living. Like Frazer, he distinguishes magic from religion which aims at something beyond itself. Its object is not performance of the rite. In magic the end is the efficacious magic itself. Evans-Pritchard observes that while emotions, desires, and impulses undoubtedly play a part in religion, the performance of a religious or magical act need not automatically produce the psychological effects, as Malinowski supposes. He argues in Azande religion that witchcraft has to be understood in social context. In this sense, he agrees with Durkheim but disagrees with the notion that religion is illusion.

Radcliffe-Brown (1922) provides an account of Andamanese religious beliefs and ceremonies. He asserts that the Andaman Islanders' main supernatural beings are spirits of the dead, associated with the sky, forest, and sea, and nature spirits, which are thought of as personifications of natural phenomena. Applying Durkheimian analysis he presents an organic picture of society; religion integrates society and rituals bring in solidarity of the group. Many anthropologists followed this stream of approach which however slowly has died out with the criticisms from the newer theorists. In India M.N. Srinivas' (1952) study of society and religion among the Coorgs is an outstanding contribution to the study of religion in functionalist perspective. He very innovatively integrates social structure with religion which he finds it operating at different levels – local, regional, peninsular and all India. Drawing the difference between Indological and sociological approach, he adopts the latter for a meaningful treatment of religion in relation with the social structure of the Coorg. He demonstrates that various rituals organised at family, patrilineal joint family (*okka*), village and *nad* level bring in solidarity and unity among different social segments.

#### 1.5.4 Structuralist Approach

Rejecting functionalist, sociological and psychological approaches as being too light in interpreting mythology, Levi-Strauss' (1958) new "structuralism" posited a universal logical pattern to the human mind and in this perspective religion is of a totally different phenomenon in nature. He has been unswerving in his search for the universal structures of human thought and social life. He points out that although anthropologists have tried studying mythology it has not been successful as myths are still widely interpreted in conflicting ways: as collective dreams, as the outcome of a kind of esthetical play, or as the basis of ritual. Mythological figures are considered as personified abstractions, divinised heroes, or fallen gods. He further laments that study of mythology has been reduced to either an idle play or a crude kind of philosophical speculation. His formalistic structuralism tends to reinforce analogies between "primitive" and sophisticated thinking and also provides a new

method of analysing myths and stories. Taking cue from structural linguistics, in particular the work of Ferdinand Saussure, Levi-Strauss has sought to reveal a grammar of the mind, a kind of universal psychology with a genetic base, which gives rise to social structures. He explains that myth is language: to be known, and to be told; it is a part of human speech. He further elaborates saying that in order to provide its specificity we must be able to show that it is both the same thing as language, and also something different from it. He interestingly analyses myth with Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*, one being the structural side of language, and the other the statistical aspect, *langue* belonging to a reversible time, *parole* being non-reversible. Just as there are limits to linguistic variation, so there are certain basic innate patterns of culture based on a series of binary oppositions. Thus, all societies distinguish between the raw and the cooked, the raw standing for nature (and women) and the cooked for culture (and men). Myths reveal common story lines that can be used to understand the limited number of ways in which human beings interpret the world. The structural analysis of myth, which is a pioneering work of Levi-Strauss in anthropology, has influenced many scholars in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Levi-Strauss contends that primitive religious systems are like all symbolic systems, fundamentally communication systems.

In Indian context Dumont (1959) takes the structuralist perspective of religion manifested in the worship of village deities. He finds the opposition between 'purity' and 'impurity' and interdependency of both the values in the religious thoughts. The 'purity' is strongly associated with vegetarian food offered to the *sanskritic* gods and 'impurity' associated with non-*sanskritic* gods and other spiritual beings that receive the offering of non-vegetarian foods. The purity is superior to impurity, and these values have transcended to form the basis of caste system.

### 1.5.5 Marxist Approach

Karl Marx has been an influential theorist who was very critical of religion, and his approach depicts religion and religious belief as fictions that support the status quo and that maintained class differences. Religion reflects false consciousness of people that diverts their attention from the miseries of their lives. It is the outcome of human distress that may have been the consequences of human's struggle with the nature in the past, but now it is a way to get along with capitalist culture. He said, "Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people." (1844 <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/df-jahrbucher/law-abs.htm> accessed on 2.5.2011).

Maurice Godelier finds Marx's view of religion as reflection of the real world in the human mind; the nature is personified unconsciously as objective realities, and it is both transcendent and independent of human mind. In dealing with the nature, he says, there is internal structure of relations in which humans alienate themselves. Godelier (1975) explains this position while analysing the Mbuti Pygmy's relation with the forest as hunters. The forest provides animal as well as plant food, but the Mbuti imagine the forest as kinsman and offer prayer of thanks, as forest is considered as omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient divinity as it yields food that sustain them. When a Mbuti dies, his or her breath leaves and mixes with the wind, which is the breath of the forest. Various rituals that they organise and their belief patterns show social and organic unity with the nature. Thus, he argues that the religion of the Mbuti represents both a real and a symbolic action upon the real and imaginary conditions. The real causes are transformed into the effects of

imaginary, and the transcendent causes personified into imaginary omnipotent being - god. In this nexus of forest, food and society, there is alienation of human agency. Further, with other examples, Godelier argues that the shamans in the simple societies mediate between the nature and society in the imaginary conditions set, and thus shamans acquire power over the equals. With some other examples he explains that the shamans or priests or the chiefs, who are also priests, exercise control over the nature and dominate over the people in their collective enterprise of political and economic dealings. Thus, the class differentiation and exploitative social relations are inherent in the small societies though such relations are unconsciously accepted as natural. The religion or ritual is basically used for maintaining this kind of social order.

Maurice Bloch (1986) views society and culture as natural and these are governed by general laws of the nature or earthly characters but not divine. Espousing Robertson-Smith's ideas on sacrifice, which is essentially social in nature, he begins his argument that the functionalist perspective of ritual to bring solidarity of a social group is only one aspect of ritual. The ritual which is very complex is more stable historically than the beliefs which continue over a period of time. Therefore, the historical construction of ritual unravels the social determination of ritual. The functionalists who followed Robertson-Smith reduced every aspect of religion or ritual to the purpose of providing solidarity to the group implying that ritual is the outcome of an intentional attempt of the group for solidarity. But for others, such as Durkheim, ritual is the device by which categories of understanding organising our perception of nature and of society is created. Thus, there is ontological problem of ritual, whether the ritual creates solidarity of the group or the group create the ritual for solidarity, and this has not been resolved so far. For some others such as Evans-Pritchard, religion offers explanation of the world and accommodates the things beyond the human perception; it is an intellectualist's exercise. Still there is a need to explain why rituals are powerful and why participation is so important? The Marxist writers offered the explanation of ideology created phenomenologically and historically by the dominant group. Bloch argues that ritual must be placed in social context. Symbolism with emotional content and sociological aspects are to be brought together. The link between the history of social formation and the ritual has to be established that can help understanding the social determination of ritual. Further, ritual has propositional force expressed in the special ritual communication through symbolism as well as speeches and narratives, and it is necessary to understand the contents of the ritual in order to grasp what ritual means to the participants and the onlookers.

### **1.5.6 Symbolic Approach**

Evans-Pritchard (1956) first recognised the symbolic aspect of religion, and this has inspired several anthropologists to approach religion through symbols, the meanings given by the participants to the elements of religion and rituals, and interpretations that anthropologists can offer. Victor Turner (1967), Mary Douglas (1970) and Clifford Geertz (1973) are the important anthropologists that have contributed for our understanding of religion from symbolic perspective.

Victor Turner's work on the Ndembu rituals provides a highly detailed and enormous work on Ndembu religious life which consists of rituals falling under these two categories – Life cycle crisis ritual and ritual of affliction. His work shows that the Ndembu society is greatly marked by different ceremonies replete with symbolic meanings in every act and performance. Along with that his powerful analytic concepts of 'structure' and 'anti-structure' in analysing the Ndembu society brought

about new dimension in looking at rituals and its symbolic relevance in ritual context.

According to Mary Douglas, there is an enormous literature on religion in the modern world, but little guidance on how to relate its understandings to the other branches of social thought. Douglas emphasises that the idea of the dangerous and powerful sacred is formed by living together and trying to coerce one another to conform to a moral idea. The sacred can be engraved in the hearts and mind of the worshippers in more than one way. It represents the society, as experienced; it is divine order, and what distorts it is unholy and polluting. Human body is the most appropriate symbol of the society; functioning of bodily parts represents the social order and disorder. For her, symbols fit well with the empirical experience of group and individual into a consistent whole. She also worked extensively in understanding about symbols. She says that symbol has meaning from its relation to other symbols in a pattern, the pattern gives the meaning. Therefore, no one item in the pattern can carry meaning by itself isolated from the rest. She further puts forward that a basic question for understanding natural symbolic systems will be to know what social conditions are the prototype for the one or the other set of attitudes to the human body and its fitness or unfitness for figuring godhead. What are the limits within which the disdain of organic processes can be used as an idiom for social distance? Douglas also has tried to show that dimensions of social life that govern the fundamental attitude to spirit and matter. According to her, symbolic acts accurately convey information about the intentions and commitment of the actor. She declares that anthropologists are in the habit of using ritual to mean action and beliefs in the symbolic order without reference to the commitment or non-commitment of the actors. Symbolic approach is one of the most popular approaches used by anthropologists to study about human religious behaviours.

Dissatisfied with earlier approaches, Geertz proposes religion as the part of the cultural system. For him, a symbol means any object, act, event, quality or relation that serves as a vehicle for a conception. His conception of religion rests on the notion that people act basically according to the systems of meanings that they have and the job of anthropologist is to interpret these meanings and provide for their description. The system of meanings engages continuous dialogue between the meanings acting upon people and people's actions upon meaning – the cultural system shapes and gets shaped by the people. He says, “For an anthropologist, the importance of religion lies in its capacity to serve, for an individual or for a group, as a source of general, yet distinctive, conceptions of the world, the self, and the relations between them, on the one hand—its model *of* aspect—and of rooted, no less distinctive “mental” dispositions—its model *for* aspect—on the other. From these cultural functions flow, in turn, its social and psychological ones” (1973:123).

The functional and symbolic approaches have dominated the anthropological study of religion in the late twentieth century as researchers have become increasingly concerned with the concept of meaning. Biological, neurological and cognitive approaches, which have not been dealt here, are gradually gaining popularity and may dominate the future studies in anthropology of religion.

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## 1.6 SUMMARY

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The anthropology of religion has been concerned with the significance of religion and its role in the lives of people in belief and practice, whether they are technologically less or more advanced. Given its complexity in forms, variations

and practices no precise definition could be given, and as such the anthropologists have developed new concepts and used some known terms with specific meanings in the discourse of comprehending religion. Some of the important ones considered in this unit are: supernatural beings, animism, animatism, naturism, totemism, ritual, myth, symbols, ancestor worship, magic, witchcraft, sorcery and evil eye. These are interrelated and often fine distinction has been made between some concepts. In order to explain this universal phenomenon, the anthropologists offered various theoretical perspectives, and some of them considered include evolutionary, psychological, functional, structural, Marxist and symbolism. While all these frameworks attempt to explain religion in their own terms and tried to grasp the reality, no single framework explains everything.

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### **Sample Questions**

- 1) How do you conceptualise religion with the help of various concepts presented in this chapter?
- 2) Based on the meanings associated with each of the religious concepts what is the relevance of religion in human societies?
- 3) Are humans rational or irrational with reference to religion? Make your point from the anthropological theories of religion.
- 4) Discuss how Marxist approach is closely related to functionalist theory of religion.
- 5) In what ways the symbolic approach is an extension of psychological approach to religion?