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## LESSON 29 RELIGION

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## 29. RELIGION

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### 29.0 Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to understand and learn about:

- Conceptual Understanding of Religion
- Components of Religion
- Functions of Religion
- Approaches to Religion

### 29.1 Introduction

Religion is considered as a belief in some supernatural power. Sociologists are not interested in knowing what this supernatural power is or how it works? Sociologists regard religion as a non-rational knowledge or an explanation system which 'believes in a unique truth and which believes itself to be in possession of it' (Gellner, 1992). Sociologists study religion as a system of ideas that have a great impact in directing human behaviour. For a sociologist, religion is a non-rational, collective and symbolic action which acts as a response to the human need for meaning. Sociologists have no access to 'divinity revealed truth' but they themselves try to seek to reveal their own math. Religious beliefs have social consequences and it is these sociology studies under the name 'sociology of religion'. Value is also associated with human behaviour and religious ethos. In this modern world religious ethics also works for controlling human behaviour. Religion is no doubts become an inevitable part of human life. So in this lesson you will study the religion, value and Indian Culture.

### Religion and Its Components

Though religion is a universal phenomenon it is understood differently by different people. On religion, opinions differ from the great religious leader down to an ordinary man. There is no consensus about the nature of religion. Sociologists are



yet to find a satisfactory explanation of religion. Writers have defined religion in various ways. A few definitions may be mentioned here.

- Durkheim in his book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* defines religion as a „unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden."
- James G. Frazer, in his *The Golden Bough* considered religion a belief in "powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life."
- Edward Sapir, an American anthropologist, says that "the essence of religion consists in man's never-ceasing attempt to discover a road to spiritual serenity across the perplexities and dangers of daily life".
- MacIver and Page have defined, "Religion as we understand the term implies a relationship not merely between man and man but also between man and some higher power."
- According to Ogburn, "Religion is an attitude towards superhuman powers."
- Max Muller defines religion as "a mental faculty or disposition which enables man to apprehend the infinite".
- Thomas F. O'Dea, a functional theorist, defines religion as "the manipulation of non-empirical or supra-empirical means for non-empirical or supra-empirical ends". He further adds, "Religion offers what is felt to be a way of entering into a relationship with the supra-empirical aspects of reality, be they conceived as God, gods, or otherwise".

### ➤ **Basic Components of religion**

- i) **Belief in Supernatural Forces-** Religion is a matter of belief. It is a belief in supernatural or superhuman forces. Some people believe in several kinds of forces and accordingly worship them all. They are called polytheists. Some others believe in only one force, or the God or the Almighty. He is formless and shapeless. They consider Him omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent. They worship Him in different ways. They are called monotheists.
- ii) **Man's Adjustment with the Supernatural Forces-** Man believes that he is at the mercy of the supernatural forces. He expresses his subordination to them by means of prayers, hymns, and other acts. Worship is the essence of religion. Man believes that his disrespect to and negligence of them would bring him disaster. He is, hence, engaged in endless endeavor to adjust himself with the divinity or the supernatural. His adjustment is one-sided.
- iii) **Acts, Defined as Righteous and Sinful or Sacred and the Profane-** Religion considers some acts as righteous and sacred and encourages such acts. It regards some other acts as sinful and profane and denounces such acts. Behaving in accordance with the religious code or standards is righteous; going against them is sinful. The good or the righteous acts are believed to bring man good results, while the sinful acts result in disaster. As Durkheim says, a distinction between the sacred and the profane is made in all the societies. The conceptions of heaven and hell are woven around the righteous and the sinful acts.
- iv) **Some Methods of Salvation-** Every religion has its own explanation regarding



salvation. It is regarded as ultimate aim of a devotee. The Buddhists called it Nirvana, a process of becoming one with God. The Hindus termed Mukti or Moksha- release from chain of birth and death. They have prescribed four paths for its attainment- the Yoga Marga, the Jnana Marga, the Bhakti Marga and the Karma Marga.

## 29.3 Characteristics of Religion

Following are the basic characteristics of religion:

- i) Belief in the supernatural power.
- ii) These beliefs are associated with emotional state of mind such as fear, awe, happiness, reverence etc.
- iii) There are many material objects involved in religious practices such as an altar, charms, cloth, leaves, sacrifice, cross, incense sticks etc.
- iv) The material objects involved in religious practices vary from culture to culture.
- v) Every religion involves its specific rituals such as playing, dancing, chanting, fasting and eating certain specific kinds of food and so on.
- vi) Religious rituals are generally performed in isolation but occasionally religion is ceremoniously practiced collectively.
- vii) Every religion has its specific mode of worship.
- viii) Every religion has its special place of worship.
- ix) The concept of heaven and hell and sacred and profane.

## Functions of Religion

Sociologically, religion plays several crucial roles:

First, it fosters social cohesion and solidarity. Religion achieves this by providing a common system of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that unite individuals into a moral community. This shared sacred worldview and moral framework cultivate a sense of collective identity and belonging. Durkheim argued that religious rituals, such as communal worship and festivals, strengthen the "collective conscience"—the shared norms and values that bind society. Participating in



these rituals evokes powerful emotions, reinforcing group solidarity. Rites of passage like birth, marriage, and death, along with communal prayers and festivals, bring people together, reaffirming their shared identity and commitment to the group.

Second, religion acts as a mechanism for social control and conformity. It offers moral codes and ethical guidelines, like the Ten Commandments or the Five Pillars of Islam, which regulate behavior and promote adherence to societal norms. These teachings often define right and wrong, discouraging deviance. Religious doctrines can also legitimize existing social orders, hierarchies, and norms, as seen in concepts like the divine right of kings or divinely ordained caste systems. This can maintain stability, though it can also justify inequality. Many religions also incorporate systems of divine rewards and punishments (e.g., heaven, hell, karma), which serve as powerful deterrents against anti-social behavior and incentives for moral conduct, even without secular laws.

Third, religion provides meaning and purpose, addressing profound existential questions. It offers explanations for fundamental queries about life, death, suffering, the meaning of existence, and the origins of the universe, bringing a sense of order and predictability to an often chaotic world. In times of crisis, loss, or uncertainty, religion offers emotional support, comfort, and hope. Rituals surrounding death, for example, help individuals and communities cope with grief and find meaning in loss. Belief in an afterlife, divine justice, or a purposeful universe can also provide individuals with hope and resilience in facing life's challenges.

Fourth, religion is a significant force in socialization. Religious institutions are vital in transmitting culture, values, traditions, and norms to new generations. Children learn moral lessons, stories, and practices that shape their worldview. Religion also often provides a strong sense of personal and collective identity, influencing how individuals perceive themselves and their place in the world.

Finally, religion can be an agent of social change, and paradoxically, resistance to change. While often seen as a conservative force, religious leaders and movements have historically driven reforms, such as the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. or liberation theology in Latin America. Conversely, religion can also be a source of intense conflict, division, and violence, both within and between societies, when differing belief systems clash or when religious groups seek political dominance.

## Approaches to Religion in Sociology

Sociologists utilize various theoretical approaches to understand religion. Let's explore the evolutionary, psychological, and functional perspectives.



## 1. Evolutionary Approach to Religion

The evolutionary approach to religion, drawing from evolutionary psychology, cognitive science, and anthropology, investigates how religious thought and behavior might have emerged and persisted through human history. It seeks to understand why humans are predisposed to religious belief and practice.

The core idea is that religion is a universal human phenomenon with deep roots in our evolutionary past. Explanations often include the concept of cognitive by-products, suggesting that religion isn't a direct adaptation but a side effect of other evolved cognitive mechanisms. For instance, our hypersensitive agency detection device (HADD)—the tendency to perceive intentional agents even when none exist—might lead to beliefs in supernatural beings. Similarly, our "theory of mind," the ability to attribute mental states to others, could extend to imagining supernatural agents with similar minds. Intuitive dualism, the cognitive bias to separate mind and body, might also predispose belief in souls or spirits.

Other theories propose that religion provided direct adaptive benefits by fostering social cohesion and cooperation within groups. Costly signaling, where religious rituals involve public displays of commitment (like fasting), signals sincerity and trustworthiness, promoting cooperation. Belief in omnipresent, morally concerned deities can also incentivize prosocial behavior and deter deviance, strengthening group solidarity and enhancing survival. Religion can also create strong in-group identities, facilitating collective action.

Additionally, some argue religion evolved as a coping mechanism for unique human challenges like awareness of mortality, unpredictable natural events, and suffering, offering comfort and reducing anxiety.

Critics, however, argue that this approach can be reductionist, oversimplifying complex religious phenomena to biological or cognitive mechanisms. It also struggles to account for the vast diversity of religious beliefs and practices and doesn't fully address the social and cultural construction of religion.

## 2. Psychological Approach to Religion

The psychological approach focuses on the individual's mind and personal experience of religion, exploring internal motivations, emotions, cognitive processes, and personal development related to belief and practice. Its core idea is that religion serves various psychological needs for individuals, influencing their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Sigmund Freud, from a psychoanalytic perspective, viewed religion as a neurosis or an illusion stemming from unresolved childhood conflicts. He suggested belief in God was a projection of an idealized father figure, offering comfort and protection, and that religion controlled primal instincts, contributing to civilization but also to repression.



In contrast, William James, in "The Varieties of Religious Experience," took a more empirical stance, focusing on the subjective experience of the individual. He argued that religious experiences, especially conversions, could have profound and positive psychological effects, leading to meaning and personal transformation. For James, the positive outcomes of religious experience were more important than their origins.

Carl Jung saw religion as deeply rooted in the collective unconscious, a reservoir of universal human experiences and archetypes. He believed religious symbols and myths emerge from these archetypes and are crucial for individuation, the process of becoming a whole self. For Jung, religion could be a healthy path to psychological integration.

Abraham Maslow, from a humanistic perspective, suggested that "peak experiences"—moments of intense joy and transcendence—often have a spiritual quality, contributing to psychological growth and fulfillment as individuals strive for self-actualization.

Critics of this approach often find it reductionist, explaining religious belief away as mere psychological defense mechanisms or projections. They also argue it may not fully account for the broad social, cultural, and historical variations in religious phenomena.

### **3. Functional Approach to Religion**

The functional approach (primarily associated with Émile Durkheim, and later built upon by Bronisław Malinowski and Talcott Parsons) views religion as a social institution that contributes to the stability, integration, and survival of society. Its core idea is that religion serves specific, vital functions for the maintenance of social order and the well-being of the group.

Durkheim distinguished between the sacred (set apart, awe-inspiring) and the profane (ordinary, mundane), arguing that sacred objects and rituals express society's collective power and moral authority. His study of totemism suggested that worshipping a totem was, in essence, worshipping society itself. He emphasized religion's functions in social cohesion, social control, and providing meaning.

Bronisław Malinowski focused on religion's psychological functions for individuals during crises, arguing it helps people cope with unpredictable events like death or natural disasters by providing rituals and beliefs that reduce anxiety and offer a sense of control.

Talcott Parsons highlighted religion's role in providing ultimate meaning and legitimizing societal norms, helping maintain social order by integrating cultural values into individual personalities.





However, the functional approach faces criticism for its overemphasis on stability, often overlooking religion's dysfunctional aspects, such as its role in perpetuating inequality, justifying oppression, or inciting conflict. It is also seen by some as having a conservative bias, implicitly justifying the status quo. Furthermore, it struggles to fully explain the decline of religious belief and practice observed in some modern societies.

Understanding religion from these diverse sociological perspectives allows for a comprehensive appreciation of its complex roles in shaping human experience, social structures, and societal dynamics.

## Conclusion

Religion, as a multifaceted concept, transcends mere personal belief to stand as a pivotal social institution, deeply interwoven into the fabric of human societies across history and geographies. Sociologically, it is less about divine truth and more about its profound impact on collective life, individual experience, and social structures.

The very concept of religion, from a sociological lens, refers to a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, which unite into one single moral community all those who adhere to them. This definition immediately shifts focus from individual piety to communal participation and shared meaning-making.

Different theoretical approaches offer unique insights into why religion exists and persists. The evolutionary approach suggests that religious tendencies might be hardwired into human cognition, either as beneficial adaptations promoting group cohesion and survival or as by-products of other cognitive functions that helped our ancestors navigate the world. This macro-level view highlights the deep historical and biological roots of religious inclination. In contrast, the psychological approach delves into the individual mind, exploring how religion addresses deep-seated psychological needs – whether as a coping mechanism for existential anxieties (Malinowski), a neurotic expression of unresolved conflicts (Freud), or a path to personal integration and meaning (Jung, James). This micro-level perspective emphasizes the internal, subjective experience of the sacred. Complementing these, the functional approach (most notably Durkheimian functionalism) stands as a cornerstone of sociological analysis, asserting that religion serves indispensable functions for societal stability and integration. It highlights religion's role in fostering social solidarity through shared rituals and beliefs, enforcing moral norms through social control, providing meaning and solace in the face of life's uncertainties, and acting as a crucial agent of socialization.





Collectively, the functions of religion illustrate its profound influence on society. It binds people together into cohesive communities, transmitting shared values and norms that form the bedrock of collective conscience. It acts as a powerful informal mechanism of social control, guiding behavior through moral codes and transcendental sanctions. Moreover, in an inherently uncertain world, religion offers a framework for understanding life's ultimate questions, providing comfort, purpose, and hope in times of crisis. While primarily viewed as a conservative force upholding tradition, religion can also be a potent catalyst for social change, mobilizing individuals for collective action and reform.

In conclusion, the sociological study of religion reveals its intricate nature: it is a universal human phenomenon shaped by evolutionary predispositions, fulfilling profound psychological needs, and performing indispensable functions for social order and collective well-being. While its forms and specific beliefs are diverse, its fundamental roles in structuring society, defining morality, providing meaning, and fostering solidarity remain central to understanding human civilization.

## 29.7 References and Suggested Further Reading

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