



# RELIGION AND SOCIETY

## DEFINITION AND CONSTITUENTS :

In the primitive days there were mysteries and queries that the men experienced which remained unknown and unexplained for a long time. The people began to believe in some supernatural spirit beyond the control of man and this was conceived as the all powerful divinity. Religion is generally understood as a belief that explains supernatural spirit which is over and above everything else. E.B. Tylor defined Religion : 'Religion is the belief in supernatural beings'. This simple definition is not always accepted as an absolute one.

Durkheim offered the definition of religion from another angle. He categorised everything in this world into two—sacred and profane. To him sacred is related to supernatural. And he feels all the sacred things are also found inside the society, so to him, "*religion at its most profound level means society's worship of itself.*"

Malinowski defined religion taking a functional position, 'Religion is a mode of action as well as a system of belief and a sociological phenomena as well as a personal experience.'

A shift and development took place in respect of definition of religion in the end of twentieth century.

**Clifford Geertz** in his essay 'Religion as a cultural system' gave an elaborate definition: "Religion is a (1) system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivation in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an area of factuality that (5) the mood and motivations seem uniquely realistic."

Thus, in recent anthropological studies religion is being seen from some other aspects, the interest in understanding cosmologies is developing.



While modern man aims at investigations into the causal connections between natural phenomena and human history, by observing every details logically, the early man was tied to dogmas based on emotional beliefs which were blind in most occasions. Belief, emotion and superstitions were the early substitutes for modern rationalism. Hence, early religions revolved around these elements.

The constituents of religion are as follows:

### **BELIEFS :**

Durkheim's social theory of religious life provides that religion is mainly composed of 'belief' and 'rites' i.e. 'beliefs' about sacred things and rites addressed to them. Primitive religion was based on belief in an impersonal, invisible, unknown power. The conception of power varies from one group to another. For example, The Ho people believed in an all pervading life force that flows behind every object of nature, be it good or evil. Lodhas on the other hand believe in the existence of a 'God' who has a humane appearance—He is as tall as a human being, his body is covered with hair, he has wide eyes and he carries an axe in his hand. Whereas, The Korwa of the Sarguja forests believe that man can transform himself into animals, that the ancestors whom they imagine in stones, rivers and trees, that all these can speak with man and everything is actually living beings. Thus, belief is some understanding which can not be empirically proved or argued, it is just kept and maintained in the mind of the people through rituals and customs practised in society.

### **RITUALS :**

Ritual is understood as the practical aspect of religion. D.N. Majumder and T.N. Madan observed, "Ritual consists in the observance, according to a prescribed manner, of certain actions designed to establish liaison between the performing individual and the supernatural power, or powers". Religious beliefs are concerned with sacred things, their origin, behaviour and significance for man, while the 'rituals' are actions performed in relation to those sacred things. For example, Mahalis worship 'Gorum Thakur' and 'Jugini Devi' in the month of Magh (in winter), prayers are offered to them so that, there is no outbreak of epidemics and they can live peacefully. This special prayer is a 'ritual' and the faith that the respective God will ensure their peaceful existence is the 'belief'. The Bhumij people perform 'Dhulla Puja' in the first month, every year, For the benefit of the village. chickens, goats, sweets, milk etc, are offered in the name of 'Gram Thakur'. In the same community, there is another ritual to be performed by the head of the family in each home. 'Garai Thakur' is worshipped in the month of Kartik (in Oct-Nov.) for the growth of cattle power, a teak pole is planted in the cowshed and head of the family offers a chicken in the name of the God. In every religion, ritual and belief supplement each other, both are equally important to understand the meaning and implication of specific religion.

### **SUPERSTITIONS :**

The term implies faith in supernatural and a related fear for the unknown. Rituals are the practical aspects of religion and superstition means blind and repetitive practice of rituals without always considering the relevance of those or understanding the relations between the ritual and



philosophy of the religion. Erroneous conception of reality by primitive man has clouded his vision and the superficial association of things in primitive mind causes errors of action. Another point to be noted that, superstition is not always related to the concept of religion only, it may have socio-cultural implications without any direct religious implication. Also superstition is having a negative impact on society, rituals are to respect the positive power of invisible spirit. Superstition leads to unnecessary fear, negative feeling, loss of confidence etc. Superstition usually ends up in the formation of a taboo. An example can be taken from the Kharia tribe. Once a Kharia woman came back from her father's place at night, and next morning it was found that her child and husband were caught with a serious illness. This gave birth to a superstition that whenever the women return from their father's place they may bring some infections. This led to the emergence of a ritual that without ceremonial purification no woman is to be accepted in the family after she comes from her father's place. Ultimately, among them, it is a taboo that any person coming from some other village should pass through the process of purification.

## TABOO

The word 'taboo' has been taken from Polynesian vocabulary, meaning 'to forbid' and 'forbidden'. In every group of tribal people some behaviour is forbidden so that social order remains intact. These are almost like verbal laws which were having three major functions— a) Protective, b) Productive and c) Prohibitive.

The protective taboo is generally applied on the weak children, women or old people so that they do not fall in any problem. In some cases men also remain away from certain places, actions or objects so that they can be secured to certain extent. Among some of the tribes the killing of a particular animal is forbidden because those animals are useful for the society, and those should be protected and the entire group can be protected from being led towards danger due to the loss of that animal.

Productive taboos are those which are mainly connected with agricultural production. If the women are not allowed to touch the plough it may indicate that, this particular agricultural work can not be done properly without physical strength which is available in men only. Thus, for the perfection in production such productive taboos are made.

Protective and Prohibitive taboos are almost the same. Prohibitions are made to protect people from some evils or to protect that particular animal or plant from the interference of man. Often the question of purity is raised in respect of a behaviour or action which is prohibited for a particular individual or a group. the Todas of the Nilgiri hills do not permit their women to enter the dairy and Gonds of the Madhya Pradesh do not touch a woman during her menstruation period, for they believe in the first case the dairy products will be spoiled and in the second case the prospects of harvest will be destroyed. Probably, on a particular occasion the involvement of women with such action spoiled the job and from then the prohibitive measures have been taken or initially the prohibition was implemented to protect the women during the time of their physical weakness and of late it turned into a taboo. The exact reason is not known to us but prohibitive taboos are more or less similar to protective taboos.



There are several examples of protective, productive and prohibitive taboos. When the new crop is tabooed before it is ceremonially offered to the goddess of corn, it is the productive taboo. When the tribal chief is tabooed so that no person can touch him or come in contact with him, it protects him person against harm. A kharia woman who is married outside the village cannot enter the cattleshed of her parents house or of any other's house, this is a prohibitive taboo to safeguard the animals from any disease or other harm.

Taboos are meant to safeguard ritual operation from the religious side. These protect religious persons and places of worship and to prevent any pollution in religion. It is believed among Nagas of Assam that a place or a person is made taboo by supernatural displeasure. From social aspect, taboo is having a special use. Often we find the taboo is aimed to create a desirable situation. For example the taboo forbidding social and sexual relationships between brother and sister saves the society from some major complications. The elder brother is taboo to younger brother's wife, he is 'fear' to the korwas, the elder brother under no circumstances can approach the younger brother's wife, and can never be on speaking terms with the latter. The marriage timings are fixed in many tribal societies considering the climatic condition and the harvesting season. Marriages in other times are tabooed in those societies. Among the Mundas a custom of divine marriage between Sun God and the nature is observed in the spring, after this only the other marriages are celebrated, the period of marriage comes to an abrupt end immediately before the rains set in and the sowing operations begin. Thus a taboo regarding marriage dates are present there which is having a material purpose to serve in the life of local people.

The utilisation aspect of taboo provided the basis of social control among the primitive people. The sanctity of the taboos could be maintained by associating with religion and the supernatural forces. The concept of power shaped by the priests, magicians Sorcerers and sometimes the tribe chiefs provided the sanction of taboo, though it originated out of fear, imagination, illusion ultimately it began to serve some useful social purpose. The mechanism of social control could easily be operated by taboo as in small, localised societies, the identification of the offender was not at all difficult. Other correctives to social behaviour in primitive cultures like omens, oaths, ordeals, dreams, divination and the like do not have similar sanction like the taboos, but these are also visited for the purpose of social control.

All the social ceremonies like birth, pregnancy, sowing and reaping etc. are carefully protected against the 'evil eye' by wearing amulets, charms, fixing auspicious hours and in other ways. The failures, sufferings, disappointments are also believed to have happened due to some evil forces and the situations in which those happened are attempted to be avoided. The Veddhas of Ceylon leave the hut where death has occurred. Fever among the Korwas of Mirzapur is caused by Bhowani and promise of some sacrifice or offering to this malignant spirit is expected to effect a complete cure. A diseased person or a pregnant woman may sometimes be tabooed as it is believed that their presence may cause discomfort to others.

Radcliff- Brown opined taboo is one of the various social mechanisms by which social order and stability can be maintained. These are essential for the survival of the society as restrictions imposed on people develop values and awareness among them. These are the symbols of negative actions and influences in society and with the help of such symbolic practices the people can develop social solidarity, faith in power and sometimes economic needs of the society are taught to them.



## THEORIES OF RELIGION

### ANIMISM :

Religion and beliefs about religion vary from one society to another. There are differences in attitudes of people to consider and understand the role of spirit in life as well as the nature of supernatural. The earliest anthropological theory regarding religion was presented by E.B. Tylor. He believed religion originated and was maintained on the beliefs of soul, ghosts, ancestral spirit and some more things which are imagined and illusioned without much real rationality, in them. And he named this as 'ANIMISM'. The presence of vitality and life force is not a monopoly of human beings and other animals, according to some primitive people, rather every sound and shadow, dream and pleasure, imagination and hallucination reflect life in some or the other way. So, this animism prevailing in the real and ethereal world is turned into a religion among one group of early men.

The concept of 'soul' varied from one place to another, from one tribe to another but a universal faith in the existence of 'soul' can be found. Tylor proposed an essential connection between this 'animism' and religion of the early men while the later scholars like R.H. Lowie argued that animism and religion largely overlap and they are not identical at all.

Tylor observed, as the primitive people could not explain some of their activities which were almost real for them but not so real as hunting, fighting, eating or sleeping. For example, due to heat they might have seen something just in hallucination, out of fear they might have been hypnotised by some animal, in dreams they might have seen something very realistic, out of love and respect they might have imaginably met some dead ancestors—all these gave them the idea that a second soul is at work somewhere—this gave birth to the concept of animism. Even the modern man while arguing and explaining various things, sometimes faced the challenge of mystery and loss of logic. Thus, Tylor believed that an attitude of reverence towards something intangible and non-material spiritual beings forms the core of the earliest form of primitive religion '*Ancestor worship was the earliest form of worship and tombs the earliest temples*' as conceived by Madan and Majumdar. Tylor believed out of this basic concept lately religion was evolved. He cites some examples from the primitive people, who practised some rituals that reflect their faith in 'double soul'—some primitive tribes had the ritual of ceremonising 'Green funeral' 'Just after the death takes place and 'dry funeral' after few days' observation of mourning. Tylor opined, the tribal people had in mind the idea that, a dead body is not leaving the soul immediately for ever, rather it may be resettled in the body and so they waited before they could accept the final departure of the soul from the body of the loved ones. Thus the belief was there that, the soul may come and go to and from a living person.

Tylor was criticised for being so certain about the logical mind of the primitive people or identifying a philosopher in the primitive men. Tylor's theory over emphasised one side of the primitive religion i.e. '*belief in soul and spirit*'. However, we can not entirely overlook the role of this aspect, rather it could have been formed one important part in developing religion.

### ANIMATISM :

Codrington coined the term 'Mana' as he found the idea while he was working among the Melanesians. This word implies force that is present in all animate and inanimate objects. In a person



or in an object some form of supernatural power may be believed to exist. The theory evolved by Marett on this concept of 'mana' is known as animatism theory. This force is beyond the reach of the senses, but this can be manifested through some physical force also.

Animism was concerned with soul or ghost or some other form of existence of the dead ancestors etc. 'animism' is designating something more real, which can be visible also. For example Ho people believe in an all pervading life force and behind every object of nature there is the presence of God as well as of evil spirit. so they try to please this spirit for their own benefit and betterment. Their chief deity based on this belief is known as 'sing Bonga'. This Ho concept of Bonga is reflecting the theory of animatism or manaism. Some North American tribe calls this power as Orenda.

## NATURISM :

Supernatural power is often identified with natural objects like thunder, sun, earthquakes etc. And any change in the nature is believed to be the expression of the God or supernatural force. It is also felt that the force can be satisfied only through sacrifice from the part of the people. Generally animal sacrifices are offered.

Max Muller, the German scholar and Indologist was the main propounder of the theory of naturism. The primitive man, according to him, was inspired by the natural phenomena to find out the reason behind some natural calamities and catastrophies. This description of the phenomena of nature in terms of human or quasi-human activities led to their interpretation in anthropomorphic terms, and divine personality were invented to account for the activities of natural phenomena. The origin of religion, thus, according to MaxMuller lies in this attempt to explain and describe the reasons behind and implications of natural phenomena. Some religions are very close to this naturalism, specially the vedic literature of Hindu religion has references about dawn, ocean, sun, moon as Gods and Goddesses. Among the Mundas a practice was prevalent, as a Munda goes to the tops of hills and throw down stones of all sizes and shapes, so that the rumbling sound of stones falling would resemble the rumbling of thunder, and they believe that rains would follow. The Ho would burn faggots so that smoke may cover the sky resembling cloud and they believe this symbolic cloud is capable of bringing real cloud and rain. Thus, the outward events that affect life have been explained and accounted for by primitive people on the basis of knowledge that they gained through experiences and gradually this helped them to develop religion. Nature, thus, acted as a catalyst in creating the idea of religion though it was not the only one. Among the Mundas, there is 'Burubonga', the deity of the hills and mountains and 'Tkir Bonga' is the God of ponds and lakes or Nage-era is the deity of canals and streams.

## TOTEMISM :

Totemism implies a tribal social organisation of the sib or clan pattern which is associated with a form of supernaturalism consisting of some typical attitude towards animals, plants or some other natural objects. Totem is related both to religion and clan organisation.

Regarding the religious aspect of totem, many scholars like Tylor, Durkheim etc, have their opinions and writings. Tylor opined totemism emerged in the form of religious worship and ancestor worship. Durkheim saw in totemism the collective emblem of society and worship of society is the



source of totemism according to him. The other scholars such as Boas, Swanton etc. who regarded totemism as an extension of the personal relation of an individual with an animal and plant. Goldenwieser regarded totemism as a socio-religious institution. Herbert Risley pointed out, in India the religious aspect of totemism is almost dead to a considerable extent, and the social aspect is more operative.

Radcliffe Brown suggested two important words in respect of the idea of totemism—(a) Ritual relations between persons and their totems and (b) Ritual attitude, where every society adopts and imposes upon its members certain objects. The primary reasons behind the development of totemism is a social order.

Traditions regarding the origin of certain clans among the Tamaria, indicate that the totemic animal or plant has helped to protect the human ancestor of the clan. Most of the explanations in relation to the origin of clans among Ho, Munda and the santhal conclude that totems originated out of necessities at a time when human help failed to provide required relief. Thus in most cases totems have been conceived as the substitute or representative of the divine spirit thereby linking them with religion.

We can take the example of Santhals who are identified with totems and totem worship is very popular and it is often obligatory for them. We find Hansda clan with a totem duck, Pansia clan with totem pigeon etc.

## **FETISHISM :**

If a particular natural object is imaginatively attached with some supernatural power and individual being to have faith in it directly, this type of association is known as fetishism. The objects used for this purpose is known as 'fetish', It may be a feather, a shell, a bone etc. For example, if some one has touched a skull and felt the flow of power in his body and with the help of that power, he might have saved a patient's life or brought the rain in time etc. This idea of fetishism is much related with magic. This is entirely a faith in something unexplainable and uncontrollable in general. It's test is it's efficacy, i.e. for how many times or in how many occasions the object could be used successfully—This consideration and understanding may fetish character of the respective object.

## **FUNCTIONALIST THEORIES**

Durkheim, Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown have proposed the functional explanation of primitive religion. Malinowski considers religion as a device to secure mental and psychological stability in an individual's life. He feels when functioning for a social life people fail to cope up with problems they search for an absolute power which can help them to overcome all problems and offer them solutions in even an unexplicable manner. Human mind always suffers from pain and tension and it seeks a relief from the same, then religion is made to bring about a readjustment between man and the supernatural in upset states of existence. He cited the example that, Trobriand Islanders organise religious ceremonies mainly during the time of fishing expeditions which is the main activity for the tribe and around which the pressures and tensions revolve all the time.



Radcliff-Brown observes from a different angle as he says religion is emerged to instill a sense of dependence in it. To him, the individual should learn to depend on society through some rituals and behavioural norms.

He feels religion is not a device to save individual from his individual stress and strain rather it is to assure a social solidarity and homogeneity. All the members of a particular society come close to one another and share their failures and expectations by practising religion. For example, Mahalis worship 'Surji Devi' or Sun God sacrificing chickens, pigeons, goats etc. and after the rituals they take the food together. After every twelve years the Mahalis worship 'Surji Devi' for the welfare of the village. Also they worship 'Dharam God' together to show their gratitude towards the soil after harvesting the crops. Their practices show religion is the instrument to combine the people on some common cause and they show reverence to the supernatural spirit being united thereby accepting the functional role of religion.

Durhkeim also emphasises the functional aspect of religion and he stresses on the beliefs and rites. He offered two important concepts viz. sacred and profane. In every tribe a distinction is made between these two. He is of the opinion that the positive beliefs referred to God is related to sacred and profane consists of magic or pseudo-science. Some activities are performed as compulsory in every religion and some others are forbidden so the first one is the sacred and the second one is the profane. For example, Mahalis worship Surji Devi as a joint performance and offer several animals—this is sacred. On the other hand in each family it has its own deity 'Orak Bonga,' nothing is told to the outsiders about this deity, thus telling anything to others is profane.

Thus according to him religion is a part of social activities comprising right or wrong, good or evil and guiding the functions of the respective societies. While studying Australian tribes he discovered the youngmen among them are taught normal laws through sacred ceremonies.

Thus, religion has a definite purpose to train the people with social behaviours and religion is not related only to supernatural forces which do not have any direct contact with real social life.

### THE THEORIES

<b>Animism—</b>	Tylor's theory indicating the power of soul, ghosts, illusions, imaginations hallucinations etc.
<b>Animatism or Manaism—</b>	Every object, both animate and inanimate are rich with a force of life. Propounder was Marett.
<b>Naturism—</b>	All the natural objects are to be worshipped as they have enormous power to bless or curse man. The main theoretician in this respect was Max Muller.
<b>Functionalist School —</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Malinowski—Religion helps man to get rid of stress and strain.</li> <li>2. Radcliffe Brown—religion is for social cohesion and stability.</li> <li>3. Durkheim—Religion is a social practice to develop a 'right society' in place of a wrong one.</li> </ol>



## FUNCTIONS AND DYSFUNCTIONS OF RELIGION

Religion has been a subject of study and reflection for a very long time. The Sociology of Religion is, by contrast, a very young subject. Religion has been addressed and discussed in various ways by the sociologists as they interpreted society from varying aspects of its existence and action. Most prominent group of sociologists discussing about the role and place of Religion in society are the Functional-structural analysts of society. William Robertson Smith, Emile Durkheim, A.R. Radcliff-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski and their followers among English and American Anthropologists attempted a detailed study of the subject. All these sociologists and anthropologists assume that society is an emergent whole determined by the organization of its parts and that, being something different from the mere aggregation of these parts, can never be understood and analyzed without considering each of the parts with equal importance. They believed that Sociology and Social Anthropology could be developed in the manner of natural science. Their strategy was to proceed in a systematic way through observation, description and comparison to generalization. Now the study of Religion has a large body of data on religious beliefs and practices from all parts of the world. Sociological studies of Religious beliefs, practices and institutions vary enormously in scope and emphasis. Some are based on the analysis of literary material relating to large populations over long stretches of time; others are based on direct observation of life in small communities. Some deal mainly with religious phenomena; others deal with them only in so far as they bear upon some other aspect of life which is the primary object of attention. Functional- structural school of sociological thought specifically dealt with the functions of Religion in society. Each society approaches Religion for some specific reasons and fixes criteria for developing and practising religion accordingly. We may identify some universal functions of religion as emphasized by Durkheim, for which people in every society seek to frame and follow a religion for them.

- Religion is one of the forces that helps and guides individual to adhere to the demands of society. From early childhood an individual gradually becomes a social being maneuvering individual instincts to the extent that may settle him/her in the societal set up. In this process of being 'social' one need some external guidance to understand and accept the needs of the society of which the individual is a part. Religion practised around an individual develops the sense of morality and obligation towards the society. This way religion guides forward an individual to grasp his/ her obligations toward the society.
- Individuals are expected to be adjusted in the society and at the same time raise themselves above their own 'self'. They not only accommodate with the society but also need to be one with it. They are to be devoted to community and work for its collective objective. An individual should think of the good of the society as a whole and contribute to it. Otherwise the individual can never be well adjusted in the society. Religion inspires communal devotion and ethical ends so that individual can go beyond 'self' and be one with the greater collectivity.
- Religion initiates a process of separating 'sacred' and 'profane' thereby instilling a sense of morality among the members of a society. 'Profane' relates to everyday utilitarian activities and 'sacred' explains something above this. Common people are not always aware of something above everyday utility but if they are to be parts of a collective identity they have



to know about it. Religion identifies certain objects or practice which have some intrinsic value. If individual is bound to accept certain objects or practice as 'sacred', it becomes easy for them to develop a sense of unity observing others of the community doing the same thing or showing respect towards the same things. An object is never 'sacred' or 'profane' but one community may attach some extra importance to certain objects or it may refuse to acknowledge the objective importance of it. It becomes the one or the other depending on whether men choose to consider the utilitarian value of the object or certain intrinsic attributes that have nothing to do with its instrumental value. In India the members of the Hindu community believes that water of river Ganges is holy and they even do not mind to drink it though the same person may otherwise drink mineral water and may never drink water of any other river. Thus water of the Ganges is accepted as 'sacred'. Sacred activities are valued by the community of believers not as means to ends, but because the religious community has bestowed their meaning on them as part of their worship. Distinction between the spheres of the sacred and the profane are always made by groups who band together in a cult and who are united by their common symbols and objects of worship. Thus Religion through its power to identify objects for group loyalty binds group members together.

- Religious ceremonies bring people together and thus serve to reaffirm their common bonds and to reinforce social solidarity. Religious observance maintains and revitalizes the social heritage of the group and helps transmit its enduring values to future generation. People meet with each other on Religious occasions to reassure his /her own existence and confirm own behavior. Even style of dressing, food habit, gestures everything is reaffirmed when people get the sanction of other members of his/her known group members. Religion plays an important role in ensuring a regular interaction among members of a group.
- Religion has a euphoric function in that it serves to counteract feelings of frustration and loss of faith and certitude by reestablishing the believers' sense of well-being, their sense of the essential rightness of the moral world of which they are a part. By countering the sense of loss, which, as in the case of death, may be experienced on both the individual and collective level, religion helps to reestablish the balance of private and public confidence. Religion helps man to be connected with not only the fellow human beings but also something beyond this real world, to feel a kind of union with eternity to overcome the sense of insecurity and fear of being lost from this real world. Religion gives people a faith that even beyond this world there is a space where his/her existence will never be lost.
- The impact of religion on society enriches society helping culture to have new dimensions. Religion inspires a whole range of literature, music, architecture. Sufi and Bhakti songs of different parts of India gave birth to a new branch of literature which is the product of religious reform movement. Innumerable mosques, temples, Stupas or Churches reflect fines of artistic works. Religion is a great inspiration for man to develop his aesthetics, devotion enlightens man not only to reach God but also to refine his own abilities. Brahma movement initiated 'Raiissance' in Bengal that is a revolutionary change in the realm of Art, Culture and Literature.



- Religion is an important contributor to the process of Socialization. It controls the behavior pattern of its followers through preaching, teaching, festivals and community activities. People meet each other during religious celebrations accepting it as a means of developing connection with others. While connecting with other members of society people learn traditions and culture of the existing society and find a root to communicate with his/ her society. Education and social welfare activities are also related to Religious practices. Every religious organization encourages charity and contribution to the poor and underprivileged ones of the society.

Durkheim pointed out three major functions of religion for the operations of society :

1. **Social Cohesion:** Religion unites people through shared symbolism, values and norms.
2. **Social Control:** Every society uses religious ideas to promote conformity, both for social and political systems to be established and continued.
3. **Providing meaning and purpose:** Religious beliefs strengthens people's interest in life, they can have faith in their existence as it is justified by religion that their living serves a greater purpose. The major life course transitions are marked with religious observances including birth, marriage and death.

Max Weber claimed that religious beliefs transform with time and requirement of the society thereby reinforcing new ideas in society. It not only controls society and strengthens existing norms of the society but also determines new thoughts transforming society. He believed, it was religious doctrine of Calvinism, for example, that sparked the Industrial Revolution in Western Europe. According to Calvin, an all-powerful and all-knowing God predestined people for specific purpose. This way he justified that people should work for prosperity as it is a glory to live a prosperous life and God has sent us to this earth to work hard to live a glorious life. Each Individual's fate, sealed even before birth and known only to God, was either eternal glory or endless hellfire. Religious conviction and a rigid devotion to duty led Calvinists to work all the time, and many amassed great wealth. Calvinists believed that as agents of God on earth, people are to reinvest their profits for greater success and prosperity. This way they paved the way for Industrial Revolution.

Historically Christianity has reached out to suffering and oppressed people, urging all to a stronger faith in a better life to come. In the late 1960s, numerous clergy in Latin America's Roman Catholic Church liberate the poor from abysmal poverty ensuring their education and employment. The message of Liberation Theology is, social oppression runs against Christian morality, so as a matter of faith and justice, Christians must promote greater social equality.

Though in recent years a trend of Secularization is taking the scene, an alternative attempt of reviving the old religious beliefs is also present. Thus, it is difficult to deny the role and importance of Religion in social life.

## DYSFUNCTIONS

Religion plays a positive role in maintaining social fabric, but it imparts some negative impact as well. Durkheim's Theory downplayed Religious Dysfunctions, especially the fact that strongly held beliefs can generate social conflict. In human history, it has been seen several times that nations



marched to war under the banner of their God. Few would deny that religious beliefs have provoked more violence in human history than differences of social class have. If not war, even within societies people fight for religion. India was divided into pieces only in the name of religion. People living side by side observing different religion but suddenly they might be infuriated in the name of respective religions causing death and disaster. If the entire society could be united on single religious belief then only the cause of social cohesion could be accepted. However, people practise different religions, specially emphasizing on rituals and ceremonies rather than higher philosophy.

- The social conflict paradigm highlights religion's support of the social hierarchy. Karl Marx claimed that Religion serves ruling elites by legitimizing the status quo and diverting people's interest from social inequalities. Religion also encourages people to endure without complaint social problems of this world as they look hopefully to a "better world to come." Here we may recollect Marx's statement about Religion as "the sigh of oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people." Religion is a shelter for poor and underprivileged section of the society to overcome this worldly pain and often an excuse to remain inactive and non responsive to social problems. Common people justify their condition in the name of religion and never try to remove the cause of social injustice.
- John William Draper and Andrew Dickson White, authors of the 'Conflict Thesis', have argued that when a Religion offers a complete set of answers to the problem of purpose, morality, origins of Science, it often discourages exploration of those areas suppressing curiosity, denies its followers a broader perspective. This way it prevents social, moral and scientific progress. Examples cited in their writings include the trial of Galileo and Glordano Bruno's execution.
- During the 19<sup>th</sup> century a belief was spread by the 'Conflict Theories' that any interaction between Religion and Science inevitably lead to open hostility, with Religion unusually taking the part of the aggressor against new scientific ideas. Recent examples of tensions have been the creation - evolution controversy, controversies over the use of birth control, opposition to research into embryonic stem cells or theological objections to vaccination, anesthesia and blood transfusion.
- Religion and social inequality are also linked through gender. Virtually all the world's major religions are patriarchal. In some cases Goddesses are worshipped locally but that is more ritualistic than philosophical in essence. Godly attributes are linked with power, courage and wisdom which are socially accepted as male characteristics. Every religion finally asks for obedience and unconditional acceptance of social dictates from the women. Religion has ever utilized as an instrument of domination by the society in general and by the dominant group of society in particular. As in most of the societies male members dominate, religion reinforces male domination which gives birth to social inequality.
- For centuries, the Christian nations of Western Europe justified the conquest of Africa, the Americas and Asia by claiming that they were "converting heathens". In the name of Religion many battles had been fought in different corners of the world. It has been the cause of for innumerable civil wars separating people within a nation. Even smaller sects in a single



Religion struggled against one another to prove each other's superiority. In most of these battles common people were involved and sacrificed; the leaders justified these acts in the name of God's wish. Hitchens and Dawkins found that 'Religion' sometimes encourages war (crusades and jihad), violence and terrorism to promote their religious goals. On the other side, Religious leaders contribute to secular wars and terrorism by endorsing or supporting the violence. Most often, religious fervor is exploited by leaders of even secular nations to support the cause of war or violence.

- Religion is cherished for group solidarity in society but in most of the cases as Hartung claimed, major religious moral codes can lead to 'us versus them' group solidarity denying the virtues of 'others' are not in the group. Even this denial may lead to a tendency of dehumanizing individuals outside their group as 'not fully human' or less worthy. Results can vary from mild discrimination to outright genocide.
- Religion makes people fatalistic and in most cases so blind towards a faith that they close themselves from all possible intrusion to their shells constructed around a myth of 'God' or specific rituals. A detailed study in 1998 found 140 instances of deaths of children due to religion based medical neglect. Most of these cases involved religious parents relying on prayer to cure the child's disease and withholding medical care. Religion often justifies ignorance and denial to modern knowledge.
- Rituals related to different religions restrict people from applying logic to actions. Thus most of the evil practices prevailing in society are fallen out from religious superstitions. Religion only encouraged people to carry on with evil practice like honour killing, stoning to death, blood and human sacrifice. Even in the present world these are not extinct. Dogmatism created by religion leads to denial of freedom of thought.

Religion is inseparable from the life of social man. It ties and tears, enlightens and blinds, evolves and retards the society simultaneously. However, in recent years a tendency of reasoning and exploring philosophical background or meaning of religion is prevalent in modern society. We are to remember that the practitioners of religion, the common people often rely more on rituals than on the spirit of religion resulting in blindness or separatism. As all other social forces, religion can be utilized to unite society as well as to break the same into pieces.

## COMMUNALISM

The term Communalism is commonly used to mean fight between more than one community mainly due to strong differences in religious faith and understanding. This concept is almost essentially connected to violence and other negative forces. Communalism is an aggressive political ideology linked to religion. Communal rivalry is common in all pluralistic societies but it bears a special meaning for Asian countries and India is definitely an actor in this sphere. In the English language, "communal" means something related to a community or collectivity as different from an individual. This neutrality in the concept is absent in its Indian connotation. We should be very clear about the fact that communalism is directly nurtured by Politics and it is never to be understood as a religious action or reaction. A communalist may or may not be a devout person; neither a devout