

Block

# 6

## **RELIGION**

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## BLOCK 6 RELIGION

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### Introduction

Since the inception of the discipline Anthropologists have been eliciting the relationship between religion and society. In traditional societies it has regulated the lives of the people in different aspects that included economy, polity, life cycle crisis, etc. Some Marxist structuralists, like Maurice Godelier and Meillassoux, believed that in societies where religion was predominant, it was regarded as a mode of production, as is also the case with societies that are predominantly kinship based, which controlled the production, distribution and relations of production. The classical example that can be cited is that of the Inca and Hindu society during the ancient times. In many societies religion is one of the main social control mechanisms. Even in the present day societies, it plays a very significant role in controlling and regulating lives of people. Put differently, religion and society are intricately related, be it tribal, rural, urban, traditional or modern. By and large, what we notice in traditional societies is that religion is community oriented, while in the modern societies it is, to a certain extent, individual driven. It is, therefore, important to understand the way religion and society are intertwined. This Block on Religion, which contains three Units, acquaints you to the theoretical and empirical aspects of the relationship between the two. It will provide a good understanding about the religious specialists, their role in healing, social control, etc.

**Unit 1:** *Concepts and Approaches to the Study of Religion*, introduces the concept of religion as evolved in anthropology differently from the other disciplines that deal with the subject matter of religion. Anthropological perspective of religion, unlike the others, reflects the subjects' perspective or what is aptly known as the 'field view'. This Unit acquaints you to different concepts involved in the study of religion from an anthropological perspective. It further assists you in understanding the anthropological perspective of religion and different approaches to study religion. In a way, it makes you analyse religion from an anthropological lens.

**Unit 2:** *Rituals and Symbolism*, reflects upon the anthropological studies of rituals replete with symbolism. Anthropologists have immensely contributed to the studies on symbolism and this unit discusses vividly the perspectives on rituals and symbolism. It further delineates the way anthropologists analysed rituals as symbolic communication, as a mark of protest, the use of symbols of rituals in social life of communities, etc. It also discusses the concepts used in the analysis of rituals and symbols.

**Unit 3:** *Religious Specialists*, outlines the significant role played by the religious specialists in different societies, be they the agents of social control, health specialists or mediators (healers), ritual specialists, etc. The unit discerns the role of religious specialists in a community or society. As part of this, it appraises you to different types of religious specialists, religious specialisations, and functional differences among the specialists, besides the relationship between religious specialisation and the scale of society.

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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 centering 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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### **Suggested Reading**

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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?

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## UNIT 2 RITUALS AND SYMBOLISM

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### Contents

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Symbols and Social Life
  - 2.2.1 Ritual
  - 2.2.2 Key Symbols
- 2.3 Functional Study of Rituals
- 2.4 Rituals of Liminality
- 2.5 Rituals as Protest and Change
- 2.6 Rituals as Communication
- 2.7 The Nature of Rituals
- 2.8 Summary

References

Suggested Reading

Sample Questions

### Learning Objectives



After reading this unit, you would be able to understand the:

- typology of rituals;
- relevance and functions of rituals; and
- continuity and dynamism of rituals.

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this unit, we shall discuss the significance of rituals as the performative aspect of religion. We shall define rituals, discuss their functional aspects and see how they operate as vehicles of symbolic communication. To be able to describe rituals in a symbolic frame, we will also understand what symbols mean, how they operate within human social life. The student will thus gather understanding of the utilitarian as well as abstract nature of rituals.

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### 2.2 SYMBOLS AND SOCIAL LIFE

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Human life consists of a series of symbolic communications that enables us to weave a meaningful world around us. If we reflect, there is almost nothing in our lives that is not symbolically constructed – our language, our relationships, our material culture and the environment. Everything is made meaningful by us and not by any intrinsic property that it may have, but by the meaning bestowed on it by the cultural system.

According to Clifford Geertz (1973), sacred symbols instil deep emotional moods in people that in turn may lead to strong motivations for action. Even in the present day world when humans have made great advances in the field of science, the

most extreme forms of action and even wars are undertaken for the sake of religion.

Geertz (1973) has given his theory of thresholds to explain this deeply motivating power of religious symbols. Humans look towards religion to overcome three critical thresholds of every human's life experience, the threshold of reason or the limits of analytical ability, where on so many occasions we are left only with the question, "Why?". It may be when a loved one dies an untimely death or some event not foreseen takes place. The second is the threshold of suffering; religion does not give us relief from suffering but only a support to enable us to bear it. Thus, every religion in its own way tries to explain the reason for suffering thereby giving the sufferer a psychological strength to bear it, it may be one's *karma* or it may be a promise to inherit the kingdom of heaven. The third threshold is that of evil or the lack of explanation of not only why evil exists but that it also gives good dividend. The explanation of why the evil and corrupt prosper in this world can only be given by religion and nothing else. It is only when we are told about the separation of Satan from God or about bad *karma* leading ultimately to a bad return even if it is in another world that most people feel committed to leading a moral life.

The power of rituals, therefore, lies in the strong impression they make on the minds of people. They evoke awe, commitment and a sense of accomplishment. Rituals are enactments that without apparently accomplishing any instrumental end, nevertheless, have been analysed as having multiple functions and serving several ends. Let us first see how we can define ritual.

### 2.2.1 Ritual

A ritual is first of all a performance and to be socially meaningful, it must have a public content. In other words, as Spiro (1966) points out, the private rituals of the compulsive neurotic do not qualify to be studied by anthropologists, they are the subject matter of psychologists. Thus, even if a person is performing a ritual individually, he/she follows a pattern that is publicly recognised and followed, like a Hindu woman blowing the conch shell and lighting a lamp under the *tulsi* (basil) tree in the evening. Every culture prescribes a format for performance of rituals that must be followed by everyone whether or not the ritual is actually performed publicly. In other words, there is both public recognition and approval within any culture for any ritual that is performed. Yet, rituals are rarely seen to have an instrumental function. As Gilbert Lewis puts, the rituals are a "category of standardized behaviour in which the relationship between the means and the end is not 'intrinsic', i.e. is either irrational or non-rational" (Lewis 1980:13).

Edmund Leach has defined rituals as culturally defined behaviour that can be regarded as a form of social communication, such a view of ritual as a cognitive category has been taken up by other scholars such as Rappaport (1999). Mircea Eliade (1987) and Rudolph Otto (1958) who have emphasised the sacred dimension of rituals, in that rituals express an encounter with the supernatural and, therefore, have a numinous character that sets them apart from the ordinary actions of the world. Eliade (1987) has emphasised upon the bodily aspect of ritual, in that the bodily movements and the ritual status given to it recreate the cosmological conceptions and give meaning to them. Thus, rituals often recreate the archetypical conceptualisations by which people give meaning to the world and rituals recreate the cognitive dimensions like in Totemic rituals. The primordial relationship with

the totemic ancestor is recreated and gives meaning to the existing relationships, such as clans and ecological relations.

Eliade divides rituals into two types, the confirmatory, that is those that recreate existing world views, and transformatory, that is those that bridge gaps and serve to renew the world order when it is threatened by internal or external conflicts. We shall take up these aspects in the later part of the unit.

Rituals also must have a structure, in that they follow a given script and adhere to some very stringent rules and regulations. They also follow a time frame and are usually repetitive or occur at specific designated points in a life cycle or natural processes, like a birth or an eclipse. The structure also includes a designated space and time, spatial organisation, personnel, their ritual status and a material infrastructure. Most of these have no apparent rational content and, if any explanation exists, it is always mythical, like the myths associated with rituals, such as pilgrimage to Mecca or Sabarimalai or the myths associated with Totemic or annual rituals like Dussehera. The verbal dimensions of rituals likewise have no specific meaning and, especially as Bloch points out, are not comprehended by the lay public, and because of their mystical and authoritative rendering serves to establish the power of the ritual specialists. However, to many analysts the rituals have symbolic significance in that they convey both condensed and elaborated meanings, either encapsulating dense meanings like in the Christian mass or elaborating social scripts in a manner in which the entire social normative structure is presented as a social drama as in the Ramayana or similar story enactments. Here, it is highly relevant to take a look at what Sherry Ortner has defined as Key Symbols.

### 2.2.2 Key Symbols

According to Ortner (1973), a key symbol is that which plays a central role in any culture. From the point of view of the anthropologist, a key symbol can be identified if it is prominently and publicly displayed in many places, if it frequently occurs in conversation, or is referred to in public discourses, events and occasions, and, if it plays a central role in language, in the form of metaphors and tropes. The Key symbols can be of two types: the Summarizing Symbol and the Elaborating Symbol.

Summarizing symbols are those in which a wide range of meaning is condensed and which evokes a range of emotions when encountered. The summarizing symbols are both multidimensional and multi-vocal, like the Christian cross, the Nazi swastika, the Hindu swastika (with its opposed meaning to the Nazi symbol), the Japanese chrysanthemum and the various national flags. The elaborating symbols are those that expand and clarify symbolic meanings to the audience; they are again of two types: key scenarios and root metaphors.

The former refer to enactments, or narratives that simplify and chalk out lines of action or values that are contained in the key symbols that in turn are interconnected to the world view and values contained in the culture. Let us take, for example, the enactment of the Ramayana, where through a narrative all possible values contained in Hindu society are worked out clearly. For instance, the story of king Dasarath inadvertently killing Sravan Kumar indicates the inevitability of the *karma* cycle, as you sow so shall you reap, at the same time the same story upholds the virtue of filial devotion. The life of Rama designated as the most perfect man (*purushottama*), indicates the values and virtues of a son, a mother, a wife, a brother, a servant, a friend and so on through the various episodes and sub-plots.

Root metaphor is a metaphor or central symbol that may be used in various situations and various occasions serving as both metaphor and simile to indicate the multidimensional aspects of any culture. A good example of a root metaphor is the Bible for the Christians, where we find that biblical references are found in every aspect of western culture, like considering the number thirteen as inauspicious or keeping Sunday as a holiday. The cattle among the Nuer can be taken as another example of a root metaphor. The daily routine of the cattle set the time for the Nuer daily activity, the colour of the cattle set the metaphors for Nuer aesthetics and relationship with cattle set the norms for Nuer emotions.

Thus, these symbols both manifest themselves in rituals and also make the enactment of the rituals meaningful to the participants. The functions of rituals have been understood by various scholars in various ways.

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## 2.3 FUNCTIONAL STUDY OF RITUALS

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Foremost among the functional interpretation of rituals is the work of Emile Durkheim, whose work *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) set the stage for functional analysis from the earlier emphasis on evolution. Durkheim showed how the totemic rituals establish within the participants a sense of oneness with the sacred totemic ancestor, thereby creating a consciousness of the sacred as within and not outside of the self. It is because of this that the people belonging to a clan claiming descent from a common totem feel a sense of solidarity with each other and also a sense of commitment to the norms governing the totem, thereby establishing a stable society that has internal coherence and a sense of morality that upholds the very sentiments out of which the society is forged, namely the system of clans. Thus, Durkheim was led to comment that God is nothing but society writ large. He also showed how the totemic rituals led to a harmonious relationship between humans and nature where humans were committed to preserving some parts of nature that was important to them. Every time the totemic rituals were performed all the values became reemphasised and reaffirmed, thus the repetitive nature of rituals was to recreate the collective sentiments of the people, a process necessary for the survival of society.

Durkheim also gave a name to certain kind of rituals that are universal and which perform a very significant function, namely the rituals associated with death, that he calls *Piacular* rituals. In every human society, death rituals are very important and among the most elaborate of all life cycle rituals. The reason given by Durkheim is that *piacular* rituals enable human beings to overcome any sense of guilt that they may have with respect to the dead person and also to overcome grief. By the time a mourner has exhausted himself or herself by performing all the elaborate rituals, he/she feels that they have not only done as much as they could for the dead person but also undergo catharsis to come to a sense of closure and overcome grief to carry on with day to day living. Thus *piacular* rituals perform a social function of returning the mourner to normalcy and rehabilitate him or her as a functioning member of society.

### Reflection and Action

Critically assess *piacular* rituals. Do you agree with Durkheim's view?

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown followed Durkheim to give a structural-functional analysis of collective rituals that uphold the social structure by reinforcing sentiments and also by the emphasis given to socially important aspects like food, relationships and events that reintegrate these within the social fabric so that society remains



harmonious. Radcliffe–Brown used the term social solidarity to denote this stage of harmony. He introduced the terms ritual value and ritual status to describe the symbolic significance of collective rituals.

He showed the significance of taboos or prescriptions and prohibitions in creating a ritual status and thereby giving a ritual value to an object that could be anything, including a person. This ritual value is nothing but a social value necessary for maintaining necessary sentiments essential for social reproduction and solidarity. Thus, the rituals and taboos surrounding a puberty ritual have many functions. They emphasise the sense of responsibility that a child who is becoming an adult must feel in order to fulfil his or her role in society. Thus contained within the puberty rituals are many messages that initiates future roles and responsibilities, like fertility, being a good husband or wife, etc. Also he showed that for the Andaman Islanders, for example, the enhanced ritual value of some food created through taboos is to show the value of conserving such rare and precious foods in the environment; in other words, to have a respectful attitude towards them. The value of rituals such as *couvade*, where the husband of a pregnant woman simulates the symptoms of pregnancy and pretends to go into labour pain, instils the importance of fatherhood in the man, who may not otherwise feel it, as he is not physically pregnant like his wife. Such is also the function of various taboos imposed on various kin of the unborn child, who through the practices of avoidance and many constraints put on their actions begin to realise the importance of the social relationships that they have with the coming child. In other words, Radcliffe-Brown put forward the hypothesis that rituals by their restrictions on action create anxiety that is just right to make a person realise the importance of a relationship. While in this analysis importance is given to the function of rituals for social structure, in the analysis of B. Malinowski rituals have been seen in the perspective of their function for individuals.

In a sense Malinowski's analysis is opposite to that of Radcliffe-Brown as it explains rituals as relieving rather than creating anxiety. All human beings have certain amount of rational knowledge about tasks that they are required to do, but in spite of even the most extensive knowledge and skill, a certain degree of uncertainty prevails for all the tasks that we undertake. The role of rituals is to take care of this grey area of uncertainty that no amount of skill or knowledge can cover, take for example the failure of space missions, such as the *Challenger*, in spite of the best material and intellectual resources to back it up. Therefore, one is not surprised when one hears of space scientists offering rituals at Tirupati or otherwise invoking supernatural help for their missions. The more dangerous the result of failure, the greater is the anxiety. For example, in his study of the Trobrianders, a seafaring community of the Pacific islands, Malinowski showed that when they are fishing in back waters, or otherwise safe zones, the fishermen perform little rituals, but they always perform elaborate rituals when they are venturing out in the deep sea or on any long distance voyage where the risk factor is high. The performance of rituals can be rationalised by the positive mind set or confidence it builds up in the individual, who feels satisfied at having done all that he or she could do, to take care of all the aspects, including those that are beyond human control and which only the supernatural can take care of.

In his famous work, *The Coral Gardens and their Magic*, (1935) Malinowski has also shown how the rituals performed by the magician help to regulate agricultural work and imposes a rational time schedule that actually helps in the scientific management of productive activities. Once activities are projected as sacred duty there is greater compliance and less chances of people defaulting.

## 2.4 RITUALS OF LIMINALITY

The concept of liminality in rituals was introduced by Van Gennep (1909) and elaborated by Victor Turner and Edmund Leach. A liminal period is 'a betwixt and between' period where normal life and time stands still or is reversed. According to Van Gennep, who analysed the role of lifecycle rituals for individuals and for society, these rituals such as those of birth, puberty, marriage and death, mark stages of transition in an individual's life, where a person makes a transition from one status to another. Beginning from birth where one enters society as an individual and has pre-existing relationships like with one's parents, aunts and cousins, etc. The birth of a child also changes the status of many others too, from being husband and wife a couple become parents, and some may become grandparents, aunts and uncles, etc. In the same way, social statuses change with marriage and even with death. Puberty rituals make an adult member out of a child. According to Van Gennep, every such ritual has three stages, a stage of separation, a liminal stage and a final stage of incorporation. Thus, in the first stage an individual is removed from normal life, often giving up on normal daily activities, is surrounded by taboos and often enters a ritual status of sacredness. For example, just before getting married a person may take leave from work, a girl is not allowed to go out of the house, and they are treated like special people. In India, girls and boys may be given oil baths, confined to the house, surrounded by relatives and restrictions placed on activities, dress and food. This is then the liminal period when a person is kept away from society. Sometimes they may be physically hidden away, almost a person is kept away from normal day to day activities. Thus, they are in society but not a part of it, this is the betwixt and between situations when one is suspended as it were in social space and time. After the transition is made, say, for example, one gets married one gets back to ordinary life and comes out of the liminal period. This is the ritual of incorporation, like, for example, a new bride may be asked to cook a dish in her in-law's house, thereby incorporating her into the daily routine of everyday life.

Almost all life cycle rituals, rituals that mark life stage transitions, are marked by these three stages. Edmund Leach has used the concept of liminality to describe what he calls the marking of structural time, or intervals where important social events mark the oscillations of time, from one period to another. For example, harvest rituals mark the interval between one agricultural cycle and another. Thus, time begins with one sowing and ends with the reaping of the crop, then going back to a new season of sowing. This sowing-reaping-sowing cycle is marked at each phase by a ritual. Leach calls this oscillating time as against the concepts of lineal time and even cyclical time.

Since this kind of liminality is compared to the swinging of a pendulum, there is a sense of reversal, where ordinary life is reversed or stopped, a typical example being a carnival celebrated during harvest festivals and such annual cycles as the coming of spring. For example, during the festival of Holi in India, we find that all social norms are reversed, people perform revelry where normal social distances are abandoned. The young people take over and the old look on indulgently. In the festival of Gajan as described by Okos Astor, the strict observances of caste norms of purity and pollution are abandoned. Such rituals have also been analysed as having a cathartic effect, where hostilities and inequalities are abandoned and the injustices suffered in every day life are acted out in reverse. For example, in one kind of Holi celebrations in India, the women take brooms and beat men, who are not supposed to protest. This is a reversal of usual role play where women

may be subjected to abuse by men in a patriarchal set up. Thus, at least on one day in a year the role reversal allows women to vent their pent up resentment.

#### Reflection and Action

Discuss liminality taking cues from the works of Van Gennep and Leach.

## 2.5 RITUALS AS PROTEST AND CHANGE

In situations of change and oppression, people may resort to some kinds of rituals to register their protest and also to address the injustice they feel they are subjected to. Jean Comaroff's (1985) work in colonised South Africa among the Tshidi is a classical example of the interpretation of the use of rituals to express both contradictions and transformation. Thus, as Comaroff puts it, while in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Tshidi expressed their universe, their collective values and predispositions through the symbolic management of their bodies in ritual, by the twentieth century under the impact of colonial rule and the influx of capitalism collective rituals themselves became arenas of contestation of the 'real' and the 'valued' and was an effort to transform the world. Thus, the church in Africa combined biblical symbolism with African nationalism. The "Zionism" that was constituted, was in opposition to Protestant orthodoxy and the rationalist dualism inherent in it that had constituted the 'scientific' world view of the West. It was replaced in Africa with the use of the Church to reconstruct a holistic community by which to resist the imposition both of a colonial and a capitalist market dominated social order. These Zionist organisations were composed mostly of illiterate congregation as well as leaders who were viewed more as healers than priests. Rather than follow the bureaucratic organisation of the Christian Church, the Africans followed a more personalised relationship in tune with their own social organisation. The rituals were marked by special dresses where the men wore gleaming white skirts following the Tshidi colour code, where white represents active power (Zion) and black represents normative control. Thus, the Zionist rituals emphasised the regenerative and active exercise of power, therefore, representing resistance, rather than the usual normative function, of the church.

As a result, while the people in the third world often accepted Christianity from the colonisers, they used it in opposition to orthodox Christianity in a way that their rituals were a protest and symbolic communication of opposition to the imposition of the market and global industrial culture.

Hence, the rituals enable the performers to act upon an external source of power to construct themselves as moulded but not in a determinate way. Therefore, rituals can manipulate and present a difference that serves to give strength to a self constructed and dissenting identity.

## 2.6 RITUALS AS COMMUNICATION

The cognitive dimension of ritual as communication was made explicit in the works of many scholars, of which Roy Rappaport is one of the foremost. He identifies both form and structure in ritual and is of the opinion that the ritual form is a distinctive and unique mode of expression that cannot be conflated with any other medium. Although, in essence, a ritual is, according to him, an invariant sequence of formalised acts and utterances, the substance of which distinguishes a specific ritual from a generalised form. Thus, the form is what distinguishes ritual as a general category, while the substance of this form is the substantial instances, say the initiation ritual of a particular tribe or the rain making ritual of a community.

Consequently, while the ritual contents can be infinite, the ritual form is a generalised universal that defines the ritual. The ritual form is “frame” (Goffman: 1967) or meta message. Also, while no single feature of ritual, such as invariant sequence, formalisation, stylisation, etc., are unique to it, the combination is unique and is found only in ritual. Another important feature of ritual is that the performers follow more or less a given blueprint and innovations, if any, are on an existing pattern. Completely new rituals are very rare.

The performative aspect of ritual emerges as the most important, as the meaning communicated through performance cannot be conveyed by any other means. Yet theatre is also a performance but what sets ritual apart from theatre is that those who are present at a ritual are all participants, even if they appear as spectators; but in a theatre (especially the conventional ones) the separation of performer and audience is radical. Moreover, a ritual is not really efficacious, only assumed to be so. For example, a rain making ritual does not actually produce rain. Yet, rituals are often taken by the performers to be means of producing a result, of altering the world, of making an impact upon the universe.

The power of ritual as communication lies in its uniqueness in conveying meanings that are powerful, being clothed in the aura of the supernatural or the sacred. It is the very formality and non-instrumental nature of ritual that contributes to its power of communication. But this communication can only be received by the community of believers, or for whom the message is meaningful. It does not have a universal scope, and meaning conveyed is not encoded by the performers but by the participants. Thus, tourists who form an audience for a performance of ritual are not receivers of any message for they are not a part of the system of meanings shared by the participants, both as performers and as audience.

Let us take, for example, the performance of Ramlila in Ram Nagar, as described by Schechner (1987). The cosmological dimensions of space, the use of that space by the local ruler and by the audience that belongs to that culture and system of meanings is very different than if one were to enter that space as an outside tourist. The audience participates as performers of story as it unfolds, they are the subjects of the king Rama, they are the part of the army of Rama, and they are the members of the king’s court and so on, as they move within the symbolic space of the performance.

Lewis (1980) has also described rituals as vehicles of expression, where all three parties to the communication, the emitter, the message and the recipient are involved in a system of symbols, where the meaning conveyed may be both public and private, and not self evident, thus, to him, rituals express more than what seems apparent or represent something other than what is manifest. It is their very ambiguity that invests rituals with deeper significance and meaning, that cannot even be conveyed by linguistic usage, as much of it is in the emotional content, what Geertz has distinguished as ‘perception’ and ‘disposition’.

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## 2.7 THE NATURE OF RITUALS

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While ritual is usually seen as action and dichotomized from thought, it is at the same time, especially as a tool of cognition or communication, seen as integrating thought and action. Thus, the ritual in its communicative or functional dimension is often seen as communicating or transmitting some values, norms or principles. It may also, as Schechner has shown for the Ram Lila, transmit values, such as nationalism, or the power of the king, spatial integrity and social hierarchies.

Victor Turner (1969) has shown how rituals may provide a creative space for the creation of an anti-establishment or anti-structural space that communicates a criticism of the established social norms and values. Thus, ritual may act either way both to functionally establish values and to create a situation by which the tensions of oppression are released. According to Clifford Geertz, ritual is also a point of entry for the observer, for, while the participants perform, those observing them think. Here, the role of the theorist also becomes clear for it is the scholar who creates a meaning system that is his/her own construction, not necessarily that of the performer. For example, the analysis of ancestor worship rituals of the Tsembaga, have been analysed by Roy Rappaport as a negative feedback system where the rituals act as a thermostat to regulate the human environment relationships. Such is, of course, the way the performers look upon their rituals. Thus, the communicative dimension of the rituals is different for the community of participation and for the outside observer.

Bell (1992: 31) makes a three level classification of rituals, 1) ritual as a separation of activity and thought, 2) ritual as a fusion of thought and activity, and 3) one “where the dichotomy between a thinking theorist and an acting actor is simultaneously affirmed and resolved”. However, critical thinking would see this as an imposed hierarchy where the analyst is privileged over the actor. For example, Levi-Strauss’s analysis of ritual is his own and not the actor’s view.

A more subjective point of view, like that of Marcus and Fischer, suggests that rituals can be read like a text, as they are public performances. Through ritual the ordinary acts become special and communicate the significance of the situation. The knowledge of converting something to a ritual is a socially acquired knowledge that is present in all of us. Thus, an ordinary tea party can become a birthday party when someone brings in a cake and candles and every one sings “Happy Birthday”. It is a shared system symbols, a socially acquired knowledge when put in practice makes it a ritual.

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## 2.8 SUMMARY

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Rituals may appear to be meaningless in a rational framework yet on analysis as presented in this unit, we find them not only to be full of symbolic meaning but also linked to practice. Rituals may help to maintain existing structures of society or they may challenge them. They may appear in many forms and sometimes be a script for reading the deep seated values of society. They merit in all instances of a study of any society, deep and focussed attention on both their symbolic and performative dimensions.

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### **Suggested Reading**

- Lewis, Gilbert. 1980. *Day of Shining Red: An Essay on Understanding Ritual*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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**Sample Questions**

- 1) Give a broad definition of rituals as described by various scholars.
- 2) Describe the role of rituals in maintaining social order.
- 3) What are taboos? How do they help maintain social relationships?
- 4) What is liminal phase in a ritual? What is its significance?
- 5) What do you understand by dynamism of rituals? Explain with examples.



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## UNIT 3 RELIGIOUS SPECIALISTS

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### Learning Objectives



Once you have studied this unit, you will achieve familiarity with:

- various religious specialists;
- functional differences among specialists;
- relationship among the specialists; and
- specialisation in relation to the scale of the society.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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Religious knowledge is neither possessed uniformly nor equally shared among all the members of a society. It cannot be the monopoly of one individual. Similarly, no one can claim total expertise in the ways the religious performances or rituals are ought to be organised. Some individuals are more knowledgeable than the others, and similarly some have acquired special knowledge or special training to carry out religious performances or impart religious knowledge to others. Not all rituals require the presence of religious experts, but in some their presence is



indispensable. Those who are trained or have acquired special knowledge are qualified to perform certain religious activities. They may also have certain distinctive personality traits that make them capable of performing such works. Such persons have ritual authority, esoteric knowledge or spiritual gifts and are considered competent to find religious solutions. They are authorized to interpret religious codes, holy laws and ecclesiastical rules and even social norms. These religious specialists or leaders may be one of these different types – shaman, medium, witch, sorcerer, prophet, priest, clergy, saint, monk, missionary, etc. They are given certain status in the society. In reality, some individuals may at times perform the functions of more than one of these specialists and change roles depending on the circumstances and need. These are religious intermediaries that mediate between the super-humans and humans. Religious intermediaries may be part-time or full-time specialists. This unit is devoted to examine the characteristics and interrelationships among these religious specialists.

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## 3.2 CATEGORIES OF SPECIALISTS

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Shamanism is most common, and is duly recognised among localised religions but it has not attained reputed status in the world religions which are more organised and it is often relegated to the folk religion. In the modern industrial societies or those developing where the organised world religion dominates, religious specialisation takes place. There are two broad categories of specialists, formal and informal: the specialist who has been conferred by religious authority, which, in turn, has various ranks, are formal specialists which include priests, clergy, saint or seer, monk and missionary. The specialists of informal category are client oriented, such as faith healers, prophets, mediums, etc. Herein, first we will take up shaman's followed by informal and formal specialists.

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## 3.3 SHAMAN

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The term shaman seems to have been derived from the Tungus language of Central Siberia, but some claim its origin to be *Sanskrit*. Whatever be its roots, the concept covers many disparate things rather than a clear unified concept. There are some who restrict the term to the northern-Arctic phenomenon, but others use it broadly to cover any ecstatic behaviour. It has, however, been accepted in anthropology as the term for a unique sort of spiritual-medical-political specialist. These specialists are found among the Siberians, Greenlanders, North American tribes, Chinese and other Asian societies. From around 1970s new shamanistic movements have sprung in USA and Europe among the urbanised people with the motifs of western culture drawing upon the indigenous “other” and ancient wisdom which may be called neo-shamanism. Different shamanistic practices are discussed below:

### 3.3.1 Siberian Shamanism

In the Arctic shamanism, the shaman is a master or mistress of spirits. She or he uses hand-held drums, performs dance and uses elaborate costumes and engages in rituals which are dramatic aided by the use of various theatrical techniques of shaman. The ritual is meant to contact and establish a relationship with a supernatural entity, and the success of a shaman lies not in memorisation of prayer or performance of ritual but in the ability to successfully establish contact and exercise control over the supernatural. Each shaman keeps in control a few spirits who give powers or particular qualities to the shaman. The world is divided into

three realms: the upper realm is one of good spirits; the middle realm is the home of the people of the earth; the lower realm is one of darkness and evil spirits. In the altered state of consciousness, the shaman journeys to one of the other realms with the help of spirits. The main function of the shaman is healing; the disease is believed to have been caused due to loss of soul that has been snatched away by a spirit. The shaman deals with the disease causing spirit or retrieves the lost soul with the help of his familiar or favoured spirits. The ritual is also conducted for successful hunt; the shaman contacts the spirits of an animal species and makes a deal with them; the animal spirits supply food to the humans by enriching hunting, and the humans supply the spirits with human flesh and blood which is the cause of sickness and death. Shamans are frequently chosen by the spirits to become shaman (Stein and Stein 2008:124-126).

### 3.3.2 Tapirape Shamanism

The unseen world of the Tapirape Indians of Central Brazil consists of spirits known by generic term *ancunga* that consist ghosts – *iunwera*, the disembodied souls of the dead and malevolent beings of many classes and descriptions. The former live in abandoned villages but they visit the inhabited villages in rainy season, and the ghosts also die and become changed into animals. The other class of spirits live deep in forests and these kill those who visit their habitations. The shaman of Tapirape derives power by dreaming and he travels to the world of the spirits; the soul, *iunga*, frees itself from the body in sleep and move freely in time and space. The power of shaman depends upon the number of demonic familiars and their strength; he also seeks support of the spirits from the attacks of the spirits of other shamans. Treating sickness is the most common duty of the shaman. The curing is most frequently done by extraction of a malignant object by sucking which is aided by ‘eating the tobacco smoke’ and vomiting of the stomach. Another important duty of the shaman is protecting the members from the ghosts, and some shamans control and increase the bands of pigs by travelling to the ‘home of wild pigs’ and by copulating with the female pigs. The wild pigs are believed to be pets of the spirits and the shaman brings the pigs of the familiar spirit to the vicinity of the habitation. Shamans often are destructive by sending familiar spirits against another shaman or any member of the society out of jealousy or for revenge (Wagley 1971).

### 3.3.3 Korean Shamanism

The Korean society believes in the spirits that possess individuals and trouble them causing illnesses to the living. Even though the Koreans are converted to Buddhism that has no place for pre-Buddhist beliefs, the traditional beliefs have not been totally replaced by Buddhist beliefs. The shamanism here is known as Muism or Sinism (religion of gods) and encompasses a variety of Korean indigenous religious beliefs and practices, and the shaman is called *mudang*, usually a woman who acts as intercessor between god(s) and people. The shaman is chosen by spirits, and experienced shaman performs initiation ritual for transforming the novice into a full-fledged shaman, who organises services independently. These are public performances organised for clients for curing illnesses by exorcising lost spirits that cling to people, or propitiate local or village gods. Such services are also held to guide the spirit of a deceased person to reach heaven. For some shaman women it is a good source of income and the practice gives certain degree of influence over the community also.

### 3.3.4 Neo-shamanism

Urbanites of United States of America and Europe started showing interest in shamanism since 1970s. Its popularity is drawn largely from Native American traditions. The drug culture of 1960, interest in non-Western religions, environmentalism, the New Age, self-help, self realisation movement, etc., have contributed to this development. Anthropologists Carlos Castaneda and Michael Harner who studied Yaqui of Arizona (USA) and Jivaro of Amazon have promoted neo-shamanism by publishing relevant material and organising workshops in USA, Europe and Latin America and also training interested people. The aim is to achieve altered states of self consciousness using drugs or drums and have the experience of meeting spirits and power animals. Here bits and pieces of different cultures are put together by each practitioner for such an experience.

Shamans or similar religious specialists are also found in major religions of the world such as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity. In India and many south Asian countries, where Hinduism and Islam are commonly professed, there is belief in *Pir*/holy man or Baba or Ma/Matha who acts as a mediator between God/spirits and man. Both Hindus and Muslims revere the *Pir* whereas Baba and Ma/Matha is well respected by Hindus. In the Philippines and in some American Philippine communities, there are individuals who perform “spirit surgery.” Evangelical Christian “faith healers” can be fitted into the definition of shaman also. It depends on what they believe in the source of their “power.” They are shamans if they personally have power to compel their God to cure people. They are intermediaries having independent authority, and use altered state of consciousness to directly contact the supernatural world for healing or solving problems of another individual. They are not associated with any formalised religious institutions. They may or may not engage themselves in or organise any ritual.

Finally, it may be concluded that a shaman is a kind of intermediary who has independent authority, and is not part of an organised religion and is in direct contact with the spirit world, usually through a trance state. One who has charisma and ability to deal with the supernatural powers becomes shaman. There is a special relationship between a shaman and the society. A successful shaman can amass a significant degree of social authority. A shaman is essentially a religious entrepreneur who acts for human clients. She or he intervenes on behalf of a human client to influence supernatural beings to perform some acts such as curing an illness or discovering the cause of an unexpected suffering. One acquires Shamanic power individually, mostly in physical and/or mental solitude and isolation from other humans.

Questions in shamanistic experience can be difficult to answer – such as, are there really animal guardian spirits with which human beings can make contact? Is psychic healing a reality, and, if so, what is the relationship between the capacities of the human mind and external forces? Bowie (2000) agrees that this type of question is not easy to assess empirically, but acknowledges that anthropologist can study what people say and think about their beliefs and practices, and the role that these beliefs and practices play in structuring, people’s lives. Shamans belonging to different communities would use different means to achieve their ends. Certain factors are, however, found in common. They are as follows: a) usually the office is hereditary but occasionally a person’s personality can also make him the chosen one to the office, (b) The shaman may possess a unusual mental state or even a physical shortcoming so that he may be considered neurotic or epileptic, (c) The above abnormal qualities make him the chosen one (d) One takes up apprenticeship

under an older shaman to learn and develop the skills, (e) the shaman may go into a trance or enter into an excited condition to make her/his predictions, or to cure the illness or get rid of a spirit, and (f) hallucinogens, such as drugs or weeds or smoke, are used to go into trance.

One becomes shaman in various ways. In case of Siberian or Korean shamanism the spirit(s) choose the shaman; among the Tapirape one has to dream. Among the Zulu of South Africa the spirit troubles the person chosen to be a shaman with sickness and an experienced shaman finds it through divination and confirms the selection as shaman by the spirit. Among the Zinacanteco Indians one gets a call when one looks into the realms of gods and ancestors in dreams and visions. Often shaman combines, in some cases, the functions of priest, prophet and magician, all in one. Shaman also performs rituals of sacrifice and appeases the gods or spirits once they have been forced to submit to the shaman's needs. Because of the power possessed, the shaman acquires a charismatic personality and leadership similar to a prophet. In order to enhance the image of supernatural powers, one wears unusual jewelry and clothing, sport long and matted hair, paint the body with colour or ash and carry either musical instruments or bones etc. The typical methods for inducing a trance or altered consciousness involve: fasting, the use of narcotic drugs, tobacco, dancing, singing or drumming to a hypnotic rhythm, etc.

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## 3.4 INFORMAL SPECIALISTS

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### 3.4.1 Medium

Close to shaman is medium. A medium is a human channel of either sex through which god or ancestor or spirit communicates with the living members of the society. The supernatural being possesses the human agency, the medium, that goes into trance or enters an altered consciousness of ecstasy, and the spirit publicly speaks to the living, and that whatever is spoken is attributed to the spirit but not to the human agency. It is believed that the spirit suppresses the human spirit and uses the body of the human agent to communicate directly with the living, and listens with the ears of the human agent whatever spoken by the living. The medium does not recount the revelation and does not even remember what has been uttered after the dispossession of the spirit. The speech of the spirit would be different from the agent with shrill or squeaking voice and delivered with convulsions, rhythmic or frenzy body movements and so on. The message given by the spirit is called oracle, which also means a device used in divination. Even a medium is often called as an oracle.

Mediums existed among the Greeks and Romans of ancient times and they are present in several contemporary societies as well. The temple of Apollo at Delphi was an ancient place of mediums in Greece which dates back to 1400 BC. The famous Oedipus myth mentions the oracle at Delphi about killing his father and marrying the mother Jocasta. The oracle was delivered through a medium called Pythia. In Brazil, the Candomblé and Umbanda religious forms are based on the *orisha* deities of Yoruba religion of Nigeria that have mediums. These forms are developed within the last fifty years, which have been heavily influenced by Catholicism. The phenomenon is now called as Spiritism. The Brazilians visit these medium to find out solutions to their problems, mostly related to their romance (St. Clair 1971), healing, overcoming financial difficulties, etc.

The Western society has been witnessing new mediumship in the latter half of the 20th century. This is called channel and the channeler goes into a trance, or leaves

the body or get possessed by a specific spirit, who then talks with the living through the channeler. The spirit answers the questions of those present. A widely known channeler is Jane Roberts who gets the spirit of Seth, Esther Hicks, Margaret McElroy of Maitreya, Grandbois of Kris (Klimo 1987 referred by Van Rheezen 1996).

#### Reflection and Action

Shamanisms are of various kinds. Sometimes they overlap. Distinguish between the shaman and medium.

### 3.4.2 Witch and Sorcerer

As pointed out by Evans-Pritchard, a Witch is different from a Sorcerer in Africa. But it may not be the case everywhere. Witches have antisocial characters or behaviour; may practice cannibalism or incest in order to enhance their powers. They show deep sense of greed, jealousy and hatred. A witch is always a woman in Nupe, whereas in Gwari, a neighbour with similar culture, a witch can be man or woman. The witch's power is internal and inherited whereas the sorcerer uses external power to harm others. Both are believed to be causing untimely death. The sorcerer is a magician, an evil figure; in many religions healers use black magic, but a sorcerer is internally evil that works for illegal and antisocial ends. Some ailments are attributed to sorcery, such as *kuru* in Fore of New Guinea. Usually the sorcerer employs contagious magic with hair, nail, clothes, etc., of the victim. The sorcerer learns the art and uses different techniques and rituals for causing an effect of the power on others. Another sorcerer is engaged to undo the sorcery or a witch may be allowed to do the same. The practices of witch differ from society to society and even within the same society. In Cameroon, witchcraft is known as *ekong* or *kupe* or *famla* and is practiced across ethnic lines. Even rural France is no exception to the belief in witches. The occurrence of a series of misfortunes to an individual or family is attributed to the works of a witch (Bowie 2000). In Kipsigis of Kenya there are various kinds of sorcerers and witches, and the most powerful one who could perform sorcery against the whole tribe is called *orgoiyat* and the less powerful one is *bonnindet*. There is another specialist called *chepsogeyot* that determines who is the *bonnindet* in a particular case. The acts of a witch are attributed when no explanation is readily available. Even in modern times, as in case of Sub-Saharan Africa, HIV/AIDS is termed as consequences of witchcraft. In Christian theology the witches and sorcerers are the agents of the Devil or Satan.

#### Reflection and Action

Distinguish between witch and sorcerer; they are not the same. These specialists may be found in every traditional society. Find out if there are such specialists in your own society.

### 3.4.3 Prophet

In his book on religion, Weber has devoted a whole chapter to the understanding of what a prophet is. He defines the prophet as an individual who is capable of proclaiming a religious doctrine or a divine commandment because of his charismatic qualities. The major difference between the priest and prophet is that the prophet regards his mission as a "personal call" and derives his authority from personal revelation and charisma or an exceptional quality. The core of the prophet's mission is to carry forward the commandment or doctrine he has received as revelation. Often the prophet may use magic to establish his authority. The prophet is usually

successful and respected till his ability to convince and prove his uniqueness of purpose is intact. One may say a prophet is a person who receives divine revelation concerning a restructuring of a religion and usually society as well. Prophets are usually outside the priesthood and are seen by priest as irritating, disruptive trouble makers. The prophet could be of either sex and as a charismatic innovator may reject traditional rituals and improvise or advocate those right in her or his sight. The rise of prophets is seen during the adverse times, cultural stress and anxiety. The prophet speaks at the spiritual as well as this worldly level in correcting the society, and, thus, becomes an agent of social change. Evans-Pritchard says in the priest man speaks to God and in the prophet God speaks to man.

Among the African tribes there are prophets among the Nuer, as noted by Evans-Pritchard, that are believed to have been chosen by God to predict future, cure the sickness and ensure fertility of women. Among the Bantu, Zulu, the Zionists of Ethiopia the impact of Protestant Christianity and colour discrimination in the Church brought out the prophets who assumed leadership in the society to establish separate churches. Similar situation is observed among the Housa of Nigeria with the impact of Islam. Orunmila is prophet of Yoruba religion who has tremendous role in organising religion that has been spread to Brazil and other South American societies. Christian prophets established new churches in Yoruba having got separated from the church of the Whites.

When Jews or Christians think of prophets, people like Moses, Noah, Isaiah, Jeremaih, Eziekiel, and Daniel usually come to mind. However, the most striking example of a biblical prophet was Jesus which is a debated reality as the Jews and Muslims consider him to be a prophet while the Christians take him to be God. If a prophet is successful in convincing enough people that he or she is right, a new religion is usually established. The case in point is Joseph Smith's divine relation and subsequent prophetic teaching in the 1830's and early 1840's led to the creation of the Church of the Latter Day Saints (the Mormons) in USA. To put it simply, the prophet may be seen as an individual who is an instrument for carrying forward the will of God and he/she is obeyed because of the ethical nature of his mission. He/she may also be a person who individually sets an example of attaining salvation, as did Buddha. This latter form of exemplary prophetism has been found particularly in India.

In Islam it is believed that God sent several prophets at different times and places to communicate his message, and they are human beings who are not God incarnates. The Quran mentions a total of 1 lakh 24 thousand prophets (124000), and of them the last is Prophet Muhammad. There are no prophets in Hinduism the way the concept finds its place in Judaism, Islam and Christianity. There are scriptural texts that contain prophetic message such as Vedas and Bhagavad Geeta about *kaliyug*, the dooms day and seers who prophesied the future of the world events as in case of Sri Potuluri Veerabramham of 18<sup>th</sup> Century who lived and is much venerated in Andhra Pradesh. One of the modern day prophets in India can be Sathya Sai Baba whose predictions are believed to have come true, and they had advocated for social harmony and spiritual equality. However, these seers have claimed themselves as Gods.

#### 3.4.4 Diviner

One who engages in techniques that inform about the unknown causes or future is known as diviner. The divination is magical and involves in rituals. It is based on the belief that the world consists of things and events that are interconnected

and as such the magic is to manipulate things and observe the connections. The diviner often interprets the dreams and omens, contacts the spirits and ancestors through trance. Sometimes the viscera of animals or birds are examined to find out the cause of illness. In many ways the diviner gets to know the unknown causes or future events that affect the individuals and community. The diviner could be an ordinary member of the society or has a position of shaman or medium or prophet or priest or healer.

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## 3.5 FORMAL SPECIALISTS

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### 3.5.1 Priest

A religious leader who is authorised to be part of an organised religion is considered to be a priest or priestess. Different religions have different terms for these individuals. They may be known as Rabbis, Ministers, Mullahs, Lamas, Imams, or something else. These individuals are the keepers of the sacred law and tradition. They are found mostly in large-scale societies. Priests are initiated and ceremonially inducted members of an established religious organisation as a full-time specialist. Priests are sometimes distinguished from people by the way they dress, etc. The training of a priest can be rigorous and long, which includes not only fasting, prayer, and physical labour but also learning the dogma and the rituals of his religion. Priests are authorised to perform religious rituals designed to influence the supernatural world and to guide the believers in their religious practices. They personally do not have supernatural power of their own by the rituals but the rituals that they perform are believed to be effective. In societies where there is a hierarchy of spirits and gods and the chief gods, they must not be approached directly but through the priest.

The community deals with deity or deities through the priest who acts as a representative of the community. The latter performs various rituals on behalf of the community, which include periodical or rituals of calendar usually related to agricultural cycles and seasons, disasters, epidemic diseases and well being of the community. Priests also perform the rites of passage associated with birth, puberty, wedding and death. They are also to legitimize authority of the community through rituals, as in case of coronation and they are usually taken as protectors of ethics and morals of the community and set high standard for the entire community. By virtue of this and their association with the sacred place which may be a shrine or sacred space where deities or spirits dwell, they remain symbols of sacred. Sometimes priests may have received divine unction (anointing of the sick) through dreams, visions or trance. The priests usually enjoy highest status in the society because of the above which are special to them. Usually the priests undergo rigorous training, memorising texts, obtain religious knowledge, skills of performing rituals and so on. Such training may have been institutionalised or informal, as the case may be. While in some cultures both men and women can be priests but in some, such as Islam or Hinduism, women cannot be priests. As in Catholic Christianity and Buddhism the priests remain unmarried but in several other religions priests are married.

Anthropologists have observed that societies with full-time religious specialists (priests) are likely to be dependent on food production rather than food collecting. They are also likely to have economic exchange involving the use of money, class stratification, and high levels of political integration. These are all features indicative of cultural complexity. Female religious specialists are likely to be found in those

societies where women are acknowledged to contribute in a major way to the economy and where gods and goddesses are both recognised. In Western Europe and North America, for instance, where women are now wage earners, in almost every profession they occupy leadership position in the work force and they have an increasing presence in the leadership of many Judeo-Christian religious groups (Lehman, 2002).

In Aztec society, the priesthood was very complex and the priests were arranged in a hierarchical order. In Nahuatl language, the word priest, *tlamacazqui* means “giver of things” to gods for their favour. They were engaged in human sacrifice, especially to Sun, providing the sacred food. Most of the rituals involve in animal or human sacrifices. It was believed that the humans who were sacrificed would become deities. The priests enjoyed great respect in the society. The Zuni, the Pueblos of America, are very ceremonious people. There are different types of priests in Zuni society – Sun priest, Bow priests, Rain priests, etc. The Sun Priest is considered to be the most respected holy man. Women are also included into the category of priests. The rituals and ceremonies are held in *kevas* and plazas. In Okinawa society of Ryukyu Islands women lead the religious matters and the women specialists or priestesses are called *kaminchu*. They communicate with and make offerings to the ancestors, local gods and more powerful deities. Their primary duty is to officiate at community wide festivals and rituals which take place in a sacred space, usually in a grove or *ong*, at a cave or by the sea, and men are not allowed to enter these sacred spaces. Their duty includes the protection and fuelling of the communal fire, which was used to establish new households. They would also perform divination to determine the best days for sacred ceremonies, for social functions, such as marriage or funeral, and for agricultural pursuits.

Priesthood is not open for every one as in case of Hinduism where it is restricted to Brahmin castes. The priest in traditional India may assist in the performance of a ritual-at home, or in a temple. In Hinduism, he is born into a priestly caste, by virtue of which he gains these functions. The Vedas say that the social group of Brahmana is the priestly class, and the Rig Veda describes the priestly activities of some of the families of the Vedic tribes. Priests are most often found in hierarchical societies and generally hold a higher status in their societies than those they preside over. A Hindu priest performs the *pujas* (rituals) such as Sri Satyanarayana Katha, Rudrabhisekam, Chandi Patham, Navgrah, Vastu pooja, Bhoomi pooja, Grih Pravesh, Mool and Graha shanty, Sundar Kand Path, Kaal Sarpa Yog Shanti, Garbhadan, Punsavana (foetus protection), Simanta (satisfying the wishes of pregnant mother), Jaat Karma (child birth), Naam Karma (naming child), Nishkramana (taking child outdoor), Anna Prashana (Giving the child solid food), Mundan or Choula (hair cutting), Karnavedh (ear piercing), Yagyopaveet (sacred thread), Vidyarambha (Study of Vedas and Scriptures), Samaavartana (completion of education), Vivaah (marriage), Sarvasanskaar (preparing for renouncing), Sanyas (renouncing), Antyesti, Ayush homam, Sudarshan homam, Maha Mrityunja homam, Navgrah homam, Ganpati homam, Maha Lakshmi homam, Santan Gopal homam, Grih Shanti homam, etc. Priests hold power due to their association with their respective religious institutions. The traditional Judaism also restricts it to Levites.

Similarly, in the widespread practiced rituals of Catholicism, the role of priest is to officiate or organise baptism (the first sacrament of Christian initiation), penance (confession and reconciliation), confirmation (the second sacrament of Christian



initiation), Eucharist (the third sacrament of Christian initiation), marriage, unction (anointing of the sick) and sacrament, etc. Buddhist priests are to perform certain roles required of their calling.

### 3.5.2 Clergy

Though the term clergy is closely associated with Christianity, the social scientists have also been using the term to include full time religious functionaries in major world religions. Clergy is a broader category that includes priest or priestess and the priesthood is attached to the status conferred by the religious authority within the religious institutional framework. But the priesthood is not same in Christianity or Islam. In these cases clergy do not mediate between God and people. However, in Judaism there are roles of priest and rabbi, and, in fact, the latter means a teacher and they were divided into Sadducees and Pharisees. In Christianity the clergy is divided into several ranks as bishop, pastor, deacon, etc. Islam does not accept priesthood but there are specialists who are known as ‘men of God’ like *ulema*, which mean who knows or who has knowledge of Quran and God, learned and are proficient in *sharia* law. This category include *imams*, and in the Shiite branch there is the category of *ayatollah*.

In Christianity, the pastor is one of clergy ordained functionary of the Christian church. Though it was restricted to men, it has been extended to women also, and the church in the West is now struggling to accommodate the clergy with same sex orientation. The pastors do not mediate between a person/group and God as in case of priests. Their main responsibility is to provide spiritual leadership and help the congregation developing deep personal relationship with Jesus Christ. They go beyond the spiritual realm to help in social life of the church members for the spiritual and social dimension are dependent on each other and well being of the members of the church are his concerns too. In Orthodox Judaism women are forbidden to become a *rabbi*. Traditionally, in Islam women have not been the *imam* or teacher, but gradually the change is taking place as in Morocco.

### 3.5.3 Saints or Seer

Saints are a specific group of individuals who maintain pious, ascetic or austere and devote life found in all religions, but more significant part of Catholicism. They are individuals who led devout Christian life who had done amazing things with their lives and performed miracle during their life time and believed to have caused miracles after death. They are recognised by the Church as Saints and the sainthood is instituted by Pope. The Jehovah’s Witnesses, a Protest organisation, recognises the Latter-day Saints who are no more, and contemporary saints as well.

In Hinduism the equivalent concepts are *rishi* or sage or seer, who has acquired rightful vision accomplished actions. They see things through spiritual eye, perceives the hidden truth and bear truth. They are model of religion and role models for others to lead spiritual life. Besides the *rishis* of Vedic times, there are well known seers and saints such as Kabir, Tulsi, Surdas, Tuka Ram, Srikrishna Chaitanya, Eknath, Narsi Mehta, Tyagaraja, Dhyaneswar, Tiruvalluvar, Namdev, Mirabai, Dayanand, Guru Nanak, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Vivekananda, Swami Ram, Shri Sai Baba of Shirdi, Ramana Maharishi, Sri Satya Sai Baba, and Sri Aurobindo. Sufism of Islam and Sikhism honours saints and seers. In Islam too saint worship is practised. *Pir* reverence is found widely practised all over the Islamic world.

### 3.5.4 Monk

The term “monk” has Greek origin meaning single or solitary. It is used to describe a religious specialist who conditions the mind and body in favour of the spirit. This conditioning often includes seclusion from those who do not follow the same beliefs, abstinence, silence, and prayer. Monk symbolises asceticism and austere life. The concept is ancient and can be found in many religions and philosophies. It seems Monks were originally present solely in Christianity, but through a looser definition created by modern westerners, the term has been applied to more religions (for example *bhikkhu* in Buddhism, hermit in Hinduism). The term is also often used interchangeably with the term “ascetic,” which describes a greater focus on a life of abstinence, especially from sex, alcohol, and material wealth. In Ancient Greece, “monk” referred to both men and women. Though in modern English, the term “nun” is used to describe a female monk. The monks living together under one roof and under the rule of a single person is known as monastery and the way of life is called monasticism. Separate monasteries are maintained for males and females. In Christianity, the monastery of females is called convent. The Christian monasteries are spread throughout the world. There is a wide variety of monasticism across various Roman Catholic Churches where monastery is the common feature, which is absent among the Protestant Christianity.

Before becoming a monk in a monastery, nearly every monk must take some sort of vow, the most famous being the Roman Catholic vow of “poverty, chastity, and obedience.” It is also common to have a hierarchy within a monastery through which a monk can rise over time with the growth of spiritual excellence. Monks are often confused with friars. Although they are very similar, the main difference between the two is that the friar is associated with community development and aid to the poor.

Though the term monk is applied in Buddhism also, the situation of asceticism is different. There is a trial period before one is ordained as monk. There are male and female monks in Buddhism that live separately. In Theravada Buddhism the monks live the life of mendicancy and collect alms. In Chinese Buddhism, the monks are linked with the Chinese martial art, Kung fu. In Thailand and Myanmar the young boys live for some time in monastery and may not return to the monastery but remain as celibate and monks. The contemporary example of monk can be the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama is the head monk of Tibetan Buddhism and traditionally he has been responsible for the governing of Tibet. The Dalai Lama belongs to the Gelugpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, which is the largest and most influential tradition in Tibet. The institution of the Dalai Lama is a relatively recent one. There have been only 14 Dalai Lamas in the history of Buddhism, and the first and second Dalai Lamas were given the title posthumously. According to Buddhist belief, the current Dalai Lama is a reincarnation of a past lama who decided to be reborn again to continue his important work. The Dalai Lama essentially chooses to be reborn again instead of passing onward. A person who decides to be continually reborn is known as *tulku*. Buddhists believe that the first *tulku* in this reincarnation was Gedun Drub, who lived from 1391-1474, and the second was Gendun Gyatso. However, the name Dalai Lama meaning Ocean of Wisdom was not conferred until the third reincarnation in the form of Sonam Gyatso in 1578. The current Dalai Lama is Tenzin Gyatso.

There are monks in Jainism also in both the traditions of Shvetambar and Digambar. They are of different orders such as *acharya*, *upadhyaya*, *muni*, *ailak*, etc. Both male and female monks renounce all relations and possessions, practice strict and

complete non-violence, and follow strict vegetarianism avoiding root vegetables. They travel from city to city crossing forest and desert bare foot.

In Hinduism Madhvaacharya, the *dwaita* philosopher that propagated the love of Lord Krishna established eight *mathas*, monasteries. Each *matha* is headed by a swamiji who may be called as monk. It is known popularly through Hare Krishna movement and International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), monks outside India. The Ramkrishna mission has monastic organisation shaped by Swamy Vivekananda, chief disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, the founder of the mission. Like the Christian monasteries, the Ramakrishna mission is concerned not only with the Hindu religion and philosophy but also engaged in Educational works, Healthcare, Cultural activities, rural upliftment, Tribal welfare, Youth movement, etc.

#### Reflection and Action

Differentiate between saint/seer and monk. They appear to be the same but functionally different.

### 3.5.5 Missionary

Though the term missionary is closely associated with Christianity, the function of missionary has been found in all major world religions. Whoever has been engaged with the spread of a particular faith across the national or cultural boundary can be termed as missionary. Thus, there are Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic missionaries. They are advocates of God or divine being and teach how one should come into personal relationship with the divine being(s). The missionary is different from prophet whose focus is the same society, but are involved in change. While the former is concerned with the change of the foreign society, the latter is engaged in the change of the same society. A missionary will have to necessarily know and understand the beliefs, practices, cosmology and religious dogma of others before she/he teaches one's own faith to others. In case of the Christian missionaries they learned the language of others in order to translate Bible or gospel of Jesus Christ and also propagate the Christian faith. Their learning of other's language and interest in the religion led to production of 'pagan' religious beliefs which had facilitated anthropologists in theorising religion. The missionary after planting church could become or known as a pastor or one of the ranks of the clergy.

## 3.6 MODES OF RELIGIOUS SPECIALISATION

The above mentioned religious specialists are not found in all societies but some are present everywhere. Victor Turner (1989) notes certain socio-cultural correlates existing with these specialists and are also found related to the scale and complexity of the society. He draws distinction among priest – prophet, priest – shaman, and shaman – medium. The priest is mainly concerned with the conservation and maintenance of beliefs and practices and mediates between the transhumans and people. Her or his powers rest with the religious knowledge. The prophet is charismatic and maintains personal relation with the transhumans and as a result acquires personal power and is able to bring change in the religious practices, and may even well stand outside the cultural system to propose new doctrines, ethics, etc. Shaman is a sub-type of priest, flexible and mobile. She or he acquires power for the ability of controlling the spirits and provides profound role in curing rites. The shaman is not radical and does not bring change in the social or cultural system. There is a thin margin between shaman and medium; the former exercises control over the spirits, the later gets possessed by the spirits and becomes vessel

or oracle of the spirit and delivers oracles. Turner notes that sometimes the two functions of priest and shaman are found in the same individual and similarly mediums, shamans and prophets also form a single subtype of religious functionary. While the priest communicates with the transhuman entities through ritual along with cultural objects and activities, the medium, shaman, and prophet communicate in a person-to-person manner. Between the priest and the deity intervenes the institution. As the priest presides over a rite, the shaman or medium conducts a séance.

According to Turner, as the scale and complexity of society increases, the division of labour develops and, accordingly, the degree of specialisation changes in the religious domain. In simple societies all adult men and women have some religious function, and particularly women tend towards more religious function with their capacity to enter the state of altered consciousness. The knowledge of herbs gives some special knowledge and such of them are known as medicine men. Therefore, the specialists lead normal life as other men and women in the habitation. In this type of society we find shamans and mediums.

In a complex society where there is advanced division of labour, religion no longer pervades all social domains; it is rather limited to its own domain. There is considerable specialisation in the religious activities. There exists impersonal social relations, bureaucratization, rationality in decision making, etc. In this society there is ranking of religious specialists and organised established religious institutional system. Priests, clergy and other religious orders are found. It also supports the missionary activities with the support of the state or individuals. Different religious cults, sects, religious movement, etc., are found in these societies.

There are intermediaries between the small scale and complex societies which exhibit religion with certain degree of bureaucratisation, specialised roles and functions. These are found in Africa, Asia, Central and South America. In these cases, religious dichotomy has been found where national and tribal gods are worshipped in larger towns whereas in villages minor deities, demons and ancestral shades are worshipped. The national level gods are being mediated by the priests and official religious servants in the temples or shrines. The mediums and priests coexist but the latter control the former.

In many small scale societies, religion and politics are inseparable. In centralised political systems chiefs and kings also take up the role of the priests engaged in rain making, sowing and harvest rites. The duties of priests are also bound up with the office of the kinship with specialised ritual functions. Among the Bemba of Zambia, priests of shrines undertake the burial rituals of the king. These priests called the *Bakabilo* constitute a council that exerts check on the powers of the king (Turner 1989:7). In stateless societies, certain ritual positions have functions of maintaining order and resolution of conflicts as in case of Nuer's "leopard-skin chief" or "priest of the earth" (Evans- Pritchard 1956).

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### 3.7 SUMMARY

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Religious specialists are important personnel that hold authority in religious domain. They are also charismatic, uphold the faith attending to various needs of the faithful and keep the flock together by their leadership. Since studying religion is relatively new in anthropology, various concepts developed in course are often overlapping and strict distinction cannot be maintained. This is true particularly in case of religious specialists. The difficulty gets compounded when the same person engages

in more than one special activity. Religion is so interconnected with several aspects of life and institutions that it gets influenced externally and influences various aspects of life. Therefore, the anthropologists could identify certain socio-cultural correlates with religion, and certain religious forms and institutions are found in certain levels of social forms and societies. The world religions are more associated with the state societies than the tribal societies.

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### **Sample Questions**

- 1) What are the general characteristics of a shaman?
- 2) Trace connections among shaman, medium and priest.
- 3) How would you conceptually differentiate medium, oracle and prophet?
- 4) How priest, clergy and monk are interrelated?
- 5) Discuss the relationships between the scale of society and the religious specialisation.