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## UNIT 4 RELIGION AND RATIONALIZATION\*

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### Structure

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### 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit you will be able to understand:

- The concept of religion in the context of the philosophy of rationality in the West;
- What is rational in a cross-cultural perspective;
- Problematic of religion as a concept against the cross-cultural perspectives on rationality; and
- The relevance of religion, beliefs and values in terms of their rational existence in this world.

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### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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What is religion has been largely understood in terms of an opposition between what is instrumental and 'this-worldly' as against what is esoteric and 'other worldly'. Durkheim had evoked the notion of sacred and opposed it to profane. He defined religion in terms of its existence in the realm of the non-rational as against the profane world of the known and the rational. Religion was thus a matter of faith as against knowledge. The difference was not just about what was known and what was not known, but about what was knowable as against what was not knowable. In other words once something became 'explained'; it moved away from the realm of religion into the realm of 'science' or of 'knowledge'. The very power of religious beliefs lay in their mystic and non-rational nature, in being 'numinous' as against, 'phenomenal' in the words of Rudolf Otto. The awe inspired by religion was its power, the source of its hold over the human psyche and its capacity to move people to instill in them the 'moods and motivations' (Geertz) that has the potential to translate into the extreme forms of action that religion may inspire.

Yet to many scholars especially those engaged in study of non-western cultures, the separation/ opposition of religion from rationality appears to be a largely western notion

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\*This Unit has been written by Prof. Subhadra Channa.

and the result of a dichotomous way of thinking. It is not necessary that everyone everywhere considers religion to be 'set-apart' and opposed to the ordinary day to day world of mundane affairs. Thus Spiro had criticized the dichotomy of 'natural' and 'supernatural' as universal, saying that there are many peoples in this world for whom such an opposition is meaningless. Holy (1991) found the religion of the Berit, whom he studied to be more instrumental and practical, than symbolic and expressive (cf. Eller 2007:62). Let us first examine some of the western modes of understanding religion, as this has through the process of colonization, established itself across the globe as a near global understanding of the concept. Here we are using the term 'understanding' as it has been used by Winch (1990:x), "Understanding is the goal of explanation and the end product of successful explanations. But of course it does not follow that there is an understanding only when there has been explanation, neither is this in fact true". On other words in this chapter the student is led towards an understanding of religion, why it exists, what rationale or purpose, what it means to the believers as well as to the non-believers? But there is not likely to be an explanation of what religion is? Or what God is? Or about the ontological status of the supernatural, the other world and whatever else concerns religion.

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## 4.2 RELIGION AS UNDERSTOOD IN THE WEST

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The sociological understanding of religion can be traced to the beginnings of sociology itself, in the works of the classical evolutionists located in Renaissance Europe. Comte, often regarded as the father of sociology, had made a distinction between theology and metaphysics, relegating the former to a lower stage than the latter, and presuming that metaphysics belongs to the higher realm of abstract thinking while religion is more like blind faith and adherence to customs. Comte was in a way repeating what Hegel had said earlier, that there was a historical progression from the Age of Religion, the Age of Philosophy to the Age of Science; the basic assumption in these stage by stage theories being that 'rationality' in the form of 'scientific' thinking, comes later to humans and they usually start off as unthinking and custom ridden 'primitives' to whom faculties of deliberation and reflecting thinking come later in the course of civilization. James Frazer, another scholar of the evolutionary school had made a distinction between magic, science and religion; where magic and science were interestingly clubbed together as rational and religion as not. According to Frazer, magic could be regarded as 'primitive' man's science, as magic too relied on a cause and effect relationship and was oriented towards the achievement of instrumental ends. The only difference between magic and science was that the former was not informed by the superior knowledge of the scientific age and thus the causal relationships assumed by it were not real. But in terms of logic and rationality the manner of thought was the same. Religion became possible only when human beings became concerned with thought about the higher order of things and engaged in otherworldly philosophies, that according to the western scholars of that time, was not possible for the so-called 'primitives' who did not have the capacity for metaphysical thought and higher order of esoteric thoughts.

Social scientists were not alone in thinking about the concept of rationality. Philosopher saints of the Church, like Thomas Aquinas, born in Naples, Italy in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, had interrogated the relationship of reason and faith and postulated that the dichotomy between the two was false. According to Aquinas, it is also possible by reason and philosophical logic to demonstrate the existence of God, as was done by Aristotle. There is no essential difference between the truths discovered by logic and philosophy

and by divine faith and theology, as both pertain to truth. However the 'truth' that Aquinas and many other western philosophers and theologians were concerned with was the truth as viewed by the Church. Christianity set the standards for judging the existence of God, and those not following the Christian faith were seen as not likely to come to an understanding of the real truth.

However, a theologian like Aquinas probably had an inkling that if God could be assessed by reason then there had to be only one truth that revealed God. He does not however make any explicit arguments about the oneness of all faiths that we find in the Eastern philosophies, especially Hinduism. According to the western philosophers, even if there was one truth, it was accessible by reason that they presumed was located only in the Western Civilization. All truth was seen as accessible by the methodology of science like the postulate of "experimental sociology" put forward by Vilfred Pareto and criticized by Winch (1990:95).

The truth, even when it existed, was not available to all by the intellectual route. Only the more evolved and the 'civilized' could access it. Thus Aquinas equally defends the existence of faith, as it is the only way in which the ordinary, the young and the not so learned can get to God. Thus to come to a rational understanding of the truth was not possible for those who lacked the intellectual ability, the knowledge, the passion, the time and the intuition that would guide them towards the truth. Thus most people have to rely on faith. This perspective shows great similarity to the generally held Hindu world view of the various paths to truth, namely the Gyan (intellectual), Bhakti (faith and devotion) and the Karma (action) paths, and Hindu sages like Aquinas, agreed that the same path was not suitable for all.

Baruch Spinoza considered religion effective in enforcing morality in society and Immanuel Kant the rationality of faith derived from the recognition of God as the source of human endeavor to lead moral lives, which in the long run are necessary for society more than for salvation.

A more recent philosopher to deliberate on the relationship of religion and rationality is Jurgen Habermas, a post-World War II, philosopher to whom questions of morality and of human life are of great concern. It is well accepted that most systems of morality draw upon religion but according to Habermas (2006), it is possible to have a moral community based on communication derived from specific languages delivered publicly, even without referring to God. Thus there may be a philosophical stand point that religion is necessary for social identity and social living, to create a stand against secularism that derecognizes the identities in modern and globalizing society. This is somewhat similar to point of view of sociologists like Durkheim who gave primacy to the concept of the moral community and the rationale of existence of religion for the continuity and reproduction of society as a community of solidarity and collective emotional effervescence.

Many scholars of religion focused on the ancient and classical religions of the world in order to broaden their perspective about religion and to get out of the ethnocentrism that Christianity or the Judeo-Christian religions were the only religions and all others were primitive modes of thought that did not have any real conception of the supernatural and of God. W. Robertson-Smith proposed that the ancient peoples of the world, had gods and religions that reflected their own societies and religious beliefs and practices were rooted in the nature of the society, tribal or ethnic characters of it. Thus, gods were like the people who believed in them and legitimized the ways of the society. In

this way Robertson Smith foreshadowed Durkheim's conflation of god and society to a large extent.

However, these sociological theories did not assume the theological existence of god, at least not for the non-western or the ancient (Pre-Christian) people. However, later with closer contact with the non-western people, the so-called 'primitives' as well as a change in theoretical orientation from evolution to functionalism, the perspectives changed considerably.

Belief in a superior transcendental being, a God, was found to prevail in most cultures, for example the Kwoth of the Nuer, studied by E.E. Evans-Pritchard. In his seminal work, *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, Paul Radin demonstrated that all societies everywhere had the same range of people, believers, skeptics, atheists, philosophers etc. It was also found through ethnographic studies that there were many common symbols and philosophies in religions of disparate peoples. However the issues pertaining to rationality and religion can be examined from several aspects and platforms.

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### 4.3 RATIONALITY AND RELIGION

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While examining the relationship of religion and rationality, there are several ways of looking at it.

1. Are the people who follow certain beliefs and ways of life rational? By this perspective scholars have examined the issues of universal and contextual rationality or raised the question about some people as being 'rational' and others as not.
2. Is religion rational as a form of belief and practice? This aspect has been examined from a functionalist point of view, where religious beliefs and practices have been shown to have functions for both the individual and for society at large. In other words from this perspective we understand the rationality of the 'existence' as well as the persistence of religion.
3. Do we examine the rationality of any system or practice from the point of view of the practitioners or from the point of view of the scholar who is analyzing from the outside? This aspect has given rise to debates regarding the universal or the contextual nature of the human mind and also the relative weightage we give to the actors and to the analyst. This also precipitates a debate between the phenomenological perspective that privileges the lived experience and the more positivist approach that 'objectifies' social reality.

The first question is the one that arose first in sociological and anthropological thinking, when the 'racists' and anti-racists' were in serious confrontation and scholars were deeply involved in finding out about the nature of Homo sapiens. There was a trend in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to regard all humans as equal and an influential voice in this respect was that of Adolf Bastian who put forward his idea of 'Psychic Unity of Mankind' implying that all humans think alike and there are some basic 'elementary ideas' that are shared by all but only differ in term of their local manifestations. Thus there was a notion of universal rationality, and all religions were to be examined, not for surface differences, but for deeper, more fundamental similarities. The concept of psychic unity was used by Tylor, to put forward his theory of origin of religions that he located in the exercise of universal rationality or the quest for answers to universal questions, such as those regarding life and death and dreams that should be common to all human beings.



His mode of thinking, labelled as "If I were a horse", hypothesis by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, regarded the practitioners of religions as rational, but did not have much say as to the nature of the beliefs.

Lucien Levy-Bruhl, who was at the same time as Bastian, believed on the contrary that the 'primitives' or the non-western people were "pre-logical" as they believed in the 'law of participation' that allowed them to think that different things could co-exist even if they were logically not possible, for example, a person could be a human as well as an animal at the same time, or be in two places at the same time; or two souls could co-exist in a body. The more advanced people believed in the 'law of exclusion' whereby they avoided such contradictions. This meant that by extension, most of non-western religion was 'pre-logical' or non-rational.

A second mode of scholarly thinking was about the rationality of religion or religious beliefs and practices that could be assessed by a positivist analysis that is from the outside by a rational and logical analyst. This implied that the practitioners were not necessarily, in fact almost never, aware of the actual rationality or efficacy of their actions. We have a voluminous amount of work, from the functionalist school on the relevance and functions of religious rituals and beliefs. Even when not taken in a positive sense, positivist analysis like that of Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx also rationalized the existence of religion but in their own ways.

### Check Your Progress 1

- Q1. How did the European scholars generally judge the concept of rationality?
- Q2. How was the notion of rationality woven into the classical evolutionary theories?

## 4.4 THE FUNCTIONAL SCHOOL

The first recognized scholar of functionalism, considered a pioneer of the study of religion is of course Emile Durkheim with his classic work: *Elementary forms of Religious Life*. He began as an evolutionist by defining religion in terms of the division between the sacred and the profane, and the much greater power of the Sacred as compared to that of the profane. According to Durkheim, the very power of the Sacred derives from its 'non-rational' nature. To be rational is to be able to question and also doubt; but the nature of the sacred, set apart and powerful, negates all attempts at rationalization and demands blind acceptance and faith. We may refer back to Leibniz, according to whom, there are three distinct functions of reason: to comprehend, to prove and to answer objections. In the faith/reason controversy, Leibniz thought that the third function is more important, but the other two are also matters of consideration. Thus faith must not try to comprehend, to prove and raise questions, thus by disabling all these functions its power lies in being above them.

However the real power of the sacred lies in that it actually represents society or the social bonding that makes society possible. Whatever is good for social solidarity and continuity is presented as the moral, and the society is able to survive as a 'moral community'; where all moral rules that are believed to be derived from the supernatural are in reality derived from society itself. As Durkheim put it, God is nothing but society writ large.

Although the sacred is powerful and set aside, yet it is not too far from the human self, so that people feel that they too share the sacred as something inherent in them and therefore to be moral is inherent in being human. Society is thus able to reproduce itself as a moral community without too much requirement of external sanctions. For example in the totemic community the persons belonging to a totemic clan also know that they are descended from and related to the sacred totem, so they too carry a share of the sacredness within them that is also reinforced through the community totemic rituals. The power of the totem is felt collectively and creates an emotional bonding and sense of obligation towards the community as well as towards the totem. The totem is in the last analysis the symbol of the social group and its sacredness the sacredness of the social group itself. Similar sentiments are evoked during a Catholic Mass when the congregation imbibes in themselves the sacred blood and body of Christ, thereby internalizing and becoming one with the sacred, the community and the collectivity, namely the Church.

Durkheim was closely followed by A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, who demonstrated the efficacy of ritual elements such as taboos in maintaining and cementing social relationships, for example the taboos that are imposed on would be parents as well as other family members before the birth of a child, reinforce the relationships and remind people of their duties and obligations towards the new member of society. Radcliffe-Brown however asserted that at the level of individual's rituals and religious beliefs were not always functional as they induced feelings of dread and insecurity because of the fear of supernatural wrath. Thus his perspective was in contrast to that of Bronislaw Malinowski, who preferred to see the rituals as contributive to the functioning of individuals. According to Malinowski, the rituals provide a much needed support to individual persons towards mitigating their anxieties and relieving them of stress, especially in situations where they feel that everything cannot be under their control, like in seafaring and deep sea fishing, making a canoe or carrying out gardening. Even if the individual uses all the skills at his disposal in conducting these tasks, there is always the grey area of uncertainty like unpredictable weather, a sudden storm or unforeseen circumstances beyond one's control. It is precisely for these uncertain areas that help from the supernatural agencies is sought. By performing certain rituals a person enters into a positive state of mind and gains confidence that often achieves what the ritual is intended to achieve.

Religious rituals and beliefs make life livable by providing explanations where none are forthcoming through knowledge and logic, like an unforeseen illness, or an unfortunate accident. Thus when people are on the edge of despair it is only religion that provides the answer or the solace to calm a person down. Religion also provides answers for the problem of suffering that is universal. It does not take away suffering but provides a rationale that makes suffering bearable. Like for example, the Bible tells that it is not a curse to be poor as the doors of heaven open more easily for the poor than for the rich. A suffering Hindu will look for explanation in his or her Karma and a Muslim in the will of Allah and both will find solace in the fact that suffering was inevitable and must be borne stoically.

At the other end, the Marxists say that religion covers up for social inequalities by providing exactly these kinds of explanations. According to them most of these beliefs support the existing stratification and serve the interests of the power holders. For example the Hindu doctrine of Karma helps to legitimize the oppression of the lower castes by the upper castes. Thus Marxism also provides a rationale for the existence of religion although in a negative sense.

**Check Your Progress 2**

Q3. Discuss the functional approach to the legitimization of religious beliefs and rituals with examples from social scientists.

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## 4.5 ARE THE BELIEVERS RIGHT?

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Although functional analysis provided a rationale for the existence of rituals it did it from the outsider's point of view without giving the status of rationality to the belief itself. Evans-Pritchard had explained witchcraft among the Zande by demonstrating how the practice of witchcraft accusations and counter accusations as well as the related processes of divination and practice of anti-witchcraft rituals, suppressed actual aggression and allowed people to let out steam and come back to stability without actually any harm coming to anyone. The Zande belief in witchcraft is also based on the Zande being completely rational, in that they do not believe anything happens without a reason or that there is anything called an accident. For example if a person walking in the forest steps onto a snake and snake bites him, the Azande will not say the snake bit the person because of witchcraft, they are rational enough to know that if one steps on a snake it is likely to bite. So the snake bit because it was stepped on. But the Zande go a little further in their reasoning. They will not say the person stepped on the snake accidentally, as the concept of accident does not exist in their universe. The person stepped on the snake because he was bewitched. Thus witchcraft beliefs make their universe a perfectly rational system, where everything to happen must have a reason, even if it is witchcraft.

But according to the rationality of Evans-Pritchard driven by his own western belief system, witchcraft does not exist. So the Azande are not really rational people, they have a belief in a non-existing system. It is here that another school of thinking would criticize Evans-Pritchard in that their system of belief becomes rational only if explained from the outside but not as their own system of belief. Such a conclusion was reached by the exclusive reliance on the western scientific world view as being the sole indicator of truth.

As put forward by Winch (1990) the realm of the social is not comparable to the realm of the scientific logic; but science is not the only way to grasp the reality for the understanding of the social realm is only possible through the ideas that represent the observations of actions and persons. Thus the realm of reality is not a prerogative of science, if at all science makes such a claim. We understand something as real, including the world that we live in, is in terms of the language and the concepts that we have access to, through that language. If something has no word to describe it, then as members of a social world, that phenomenon does not exist. However the natural phenomenon such as thunder may exist in themselves, but they have no social existence, if they are never included within the cognitive world of language and its expressions. But most languages do express the lived world, but only as it is experienced by the people who inhabit that world socially, that is, in terms of the meanings they impute to it. Without situating one's self within that system, one will never grasp what is real to the people who live within that world.

Witchcraft of the Azande for example is not illogical or irrational as it operates within the social world of the Azande. In their context illogical or irrational would be some act that is contradictory to their own systems of belief; like if a person is careless in the

performance of a ritual and makes a mistake in the context of what it means for the successful completion of a ritual. But as long as a person is applying the rationality that makes his universe meaningful, the person is perfectly logical and rational. This may also be true for science, as all the laws of Physics, as they apply to our own world, are applicable only within a particular context; for example the laws of gravitation may not apply in the same way to Black Holes or to other unknown universes. This may be no different than the operation of witchcraft in a particular society. Thus to judge something by the tools and yardsticks that were developed in some other context altogether is not an acceptable idea. Therefore to say that there is no witchcraft among the Azande, is not correct as this statement derives from a Eurocentric point of view that takes another system of rationality as the only system; in itself a fallacy.

Thus Winch is critical of the positivist mode of explanation, which is done from the 'outside'. Victor Turner had defended this mode of analysis by saying that the analyst has an aerial view or a perspective that is not available to the actor who is participating from a particular situation and thus has only a partial perspective (his or her own) of the phenomenon. Thus the analyst is able to access all aspects of a phenomenon in its entirety. However the main criticism of the 'functional' school was that it denied the status of 'reality' to the phenomenon under study and imputed an external rationality to it. For the phenomenologists, this was not a valid position to take.

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#### 4.6 'BEING IN THE WORLD'

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Merleau-Ponty put forward a theory of consciousness that was different from the earlier held assumptions about the placement of the consciousness within already existing coordinates of time and space. According to Merleau-Ponty, the consciousness is not outside of time and space but constituted within it, so that the embodied self is a situational self and cannot be extricated from its location. Thus when the pastoral people on the upper Himalayan villages, consider their environment to be composed of animate beings who are part of their universe; they are not talking about a 'belief' but a reality. Thus for them there is no 'religion' or supernatural as such (Channa 2013). They live in a world that is inhabited by real beings who they can converse and interact with and who are no different from them in many respects. Thus their consciousness is constituted in interaction with these beings and their reality is not to be questioned. The 'set apart' character imputed to the sacred does not apply here as the beings are not 'set apart' but very much a part of their day to day life. Thus Geertz points out that religion is as much a part of the common-sense world as anything that is taken for granted and not questioned (Geertz 1983:76). Thus, many of the questions that anthropologists have been asking about religion may be considered superfluous and redundant by the practitioners. For example there are many questions regarding, why such a belief exists? Or what purpose it solves? But for people who inhabit that world, these are not questions at all, for they *do not believe*, they *know*.

Eller (2007: 60) quotes Dan Sperber as to why we seek explanations of symbols, when we do not seek explanations of why someone is planting seeds in a farm? "False or impractical behavior.....requires a 'symbolic interpretation' whereas true or practical behavior does not". The villagers in the upper Himalayas (Channa 2013) for example always advised or rather insisted that I should not wear red, yellow or orange coloured clothes while I was residing there for it would make the spirits of the forest very jealous and cause harm to my health. This was a practical advice and it involved real beings inhabiting the forest. There was no question of any symbolism or sacredness about it.



I was told that a fair and beautiful person must camouflage his or her face with dirt, so not to appear too beautiful and incite the jealousy of the spirits. The spirits are just like human beings who do not appreciate other people looking better than them and have feelings of jealousy and spite just like humans.

Thus, the evolutionary and agency approach used by Pascal Boyer also states that human thought is not a unitary and homogenous entity but composed of interoperating thought modules, “confederacy” ( Eller 2007:26) of explanatory devices of which the main ones are concept formation, attention to exception and agency. The supernatural entities which are essentially extensions of human intentionality also have minds just like humans and they are involved in social exchange, like getting jealous or angry or being pleased about things that are just the same as the things that please humans.

Many anthropologists across the world have recounted similar situations. For example Ladislav Holy, in his study of the Berti, found that for the indigenous people, ‘meaning’, ‘interpretation’ and ‘speculation’ are not terms that make any sense as what they are dealing with things practical and instrumental. Thus the ‘beings’ who are part of their social world, are neither symbolic nor metaphysical but very real, interactive, full of intentions and have to be dealt with for any practical activity like planting a garden or grazing sheep.

This again does not mean that in the way that Frazer had implied that many people do not have any idea of God or transcendence. It simply means that the beings that they deal with as every day part of their lives, should not be considered as unreal, mystical or symbolic by those whose consciousness cannot grasp them. If we go by Merleau-Ponti’s postulate that the consciousness is embodied time and space within itself and has no existence outside of it; then those embodied in mountain villages at a particular time will be able to see and hear things that another born and raised in an urban city may not. Thus, as Dan Sperber had asked, “Why should we look for symbolic meanings?” We can also ask, why do we raise questions of rationality? Why not take what we are told at face value? One way to understand religion would be to dissolve the why questions altogether but then we have to remember, this too is only one way among several.

According to Guthrie the rationality of “anthropomorphism” lies in it being a ‘good bet’ (c.f. Eller 2007: 26). In the course of evolution, humans have been conscious of powers and beings very near them, and have developed consciousness of these forces and given them anthropomorphic characters in order to deal with them. The villagers of the Himalayan villages live their lives in close proximity to such beings and are able to live fairly harmonious lives with these beings as part of their social world. There is no way in which anyone outside of that world can be definitive about the existence or non-existence of those beings. In a way this manner of thinking is close to philosopher, Blaise Pascal’s statement that the negative aspects of believing are few but the positive consequences are many (including a possible salvation of the soul). Thus it is more rational to be a believer.

The social aspect of the rationality of religion is also becoming apparent in the fast globalizing world where religion is coming back with a vengeance. May be somewhere the rationality of religion does tie up with the rationality of being, existence and identity.

### Check Your Progress 3

- Q4. Critically evaluate the question of science vs. religion.
- Q5. Discuss the function of religion as providing a moral order for society and the contribution of various scholars to this aspect of religion.

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