UNIT 1 MEANING AND NATURE OF RELIGION*

Structure

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will try to understand

- the etymological meaning of religion,
- different meanings of religion from the background of various disciplines like phenomenology, sociology, psychology etc.,
- nature and the developing stages of religions.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

What is religion? This is a very complex question! Religion is an intrinsic part of our lived reality, but, how do we explain or define religion? There are many theories proposed regarding the origin of religion, that have emerged in part, as a result of the differences in the understanding of the development of the mind as either speculative, intellectual, or scientific. However, in spite of the differences in the understanding of this important

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element, it is generally accepted that religion is purely a human activity, and it has become an inevitable aspect of human life. In the West, with the dominance of the inherited tradition of the Judeo-Christian faiths, religion is largely understood theistically, while in the East, it is mostly seen as a response to the experience of the natural powers that are beyond human control, although both take into account the inner urge for an ethical, and moral reference with regards to the practice of religion.

1.2 MEANING OF RELIGION

Etymologically, the word 'religion' is derived from the Latin root *religare* and it means 'to bind fast', thus establishing that religion certainly has a strong emphasis on the community and society. It is meant to be something that binds the members of a community together.

When we start thinking seriously about religion, we naturally ponder about the definition of religion. There are numerous definitions of religion. The different points of view based on whether a sociological, psychological, political, or any combination of these, and other perspectives is being espoused, influences the meaning and understanding of religion. Some definitions are *phenomenological*, and try to expose the common elements that we see in the acknowledged world religions. For example, 'the human recognition of a superhuman power entitled to obedience and worship'. Some others are *interpretative* definitions. Under this we may group the *psychological* definitions – the feelings, acts and experiences of the individual men, in so far as they consider themselves to stand in relation to what they may call the divine; *sociological* definitions– a set of beliefs, practices and institutions which men have evolved in various societies; *naturalistic* definitions – a body of scruples which impede the free exercise of our faculties; *and spiritual* definitions – religion is the recognition that everything in the world is the manifestation of a power that is beyond human intellect.

None of these definitions, nevertheless, are complete and exhaustive. The word religion is not an exclusive word, rather it is inclusive. It includes manifold elements and aspects of life like beliefs, feelings, experiences, values, symbols, worship, rituals, festivals, cult and cultures, myth and mythology.

Studying the primitive religion, the anthropologist Sir E.B. Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture* gives a short definition of religion where he understands religion as "the belief in spiritual beings." There are many objections raised against such an understanding of religion on the basis of its incompleteness. The critics argue that 'besides belief, practice also must be emphasised.

Another objection is that the faith, belief, and practices are not always towards spiritual beings, our scope of definition must be extended and widened to include even 'nothing'. However, there are also positive sides in looking at religion from this perspective. It makes the religious attitude of the believers quite clear, and also the object to which the believers refer to. According to another anthropologist Sir J.G. Frazer, as presented in his book *the Golden Bough*, religion is a 'propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life'. This shows that powers referred to in this context are always of superior nature (superior to man). To cope with this supra-human powers, it is argued ancient religion made use of magic, sorcery, taboos, myth and mythological stories, and so on. Philosophically, religion is seen as offering a diagnosis of the human condition in the world, and it also, offers a path towards remedying that condition.

1.3 NATURE OF RELIGION

1.3.1 The Primitive Forms of Religion

Religion is often spoken in relation to something sacred. There is no religion without having such a notion. The various aspects/ concepts used to express the general characteristics of this 'sacred' in terms of traditional anthropological analysis in the primitive religions were very simple. The notions like 'unseen', 'unknown', 'infinite' 'immanence and transcendence' etc. are not generally found in these faiths. Scholars trace the following general characteristics of the 'sacred' which may explain the nature of it in the primitive thought.

i) ***The sacred as the forbidden***: Polynesian term 'taboo' in the primitive religions could be one that comes close, and conveys the sense of 'sacred' – *sacer* and *sanctus*. This points to the idea that something is 'marked off' as to be shunned, thus, an enforced sense

of mystic sanction or penalty, if avoided. Due to this aspect of sanction and punishment added, taboo comes to stand for un-cleanliness and sin on the one hand, and while it can also be interpreted as means of self-protection, against defying the norms of the sacred, on the other hand.

ii) ***The sacred as the mysterious***: What was strange and new was treated in the earlier times, as sacred, having a non-normal nature. It cannot be called abnormal, rather it was non-normal nature. It was seen as mysterious, something beyond the human grasp, human understanding, and control.

iii) ***The sacred as the secret***: The sacred was also understood as having a mystic and mysterious power, and therefore, it was something secret. This sense of secret was emphasized, and projected strongly through the insistence on practices of initiation, exclusion of women etc. from the religious moments of rites and rituals.

iv) ***The sacred as potent***: Perhaps one of the positive and most fundamental conceptions of the sacred is that the efficacy of the sacred is identified with the magical and mystical power attributed to it. Everything is understood as having an indwelling potency, but whatever is sacred manifests this potency to an extra-ordinary degree.

v) ***The sacred as the animate***: There is a lot of evidence to suggest that the primitive gods were conceived as personified, anthropomorphic characters, dwelling somewhere apart.

vi) ***The sacred as ancient****:* Another element found in primitive religions is the practice of ancestor worship. Ancestor worship is found even in various other religions such as the Chinese primitive religions, and aspects of Hinduism as well.

1.3.2 Higher Forms of Religion

Religion has evolved over time, and it has largely been in response to the demands of modern thought. Certain concepts, and practices have developed over time in need to satisfy the life of the modern man. Some of the motive forces that urged for a different presentation of religion could be:-

i) The rapid progress of scientific knowledge and thought;

ii) Changes in the social order of man;

iii) A deeper intellectual interest in the subject; and

iv) The modern tendencies to avoid magic and mystery, and to substitute it with more rational and scientific thought. The higher forms of religion discuss reality in terms of transcendence, oneness, supremacy and absoluteness, and also about the ethical schemes in relation to social unity and harmony, justice, human destiny, human freedom, etc.

The ethical element is of fundamental importance in determining the development of a religion. It is a powerful factor in elevating the object of worship, the religious relation, and the religious life. Another important aspect that religion is concerned with is the problem of eschatology. It is related to the ultimate destiny of man, and the world. Eschatological motives may powerfully affect the working of religion. Major world faiths such as Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Sikhism have strong eschatological articulations.

We see different approaches to God and religion; from a negative perspective, we see the trend of ***atheism.*** It is the belief that there is no God of any kind. Another perspective is ***agnosticism,*** which literally means 'not-knowing', which implies we are unable to affirm or deny the existence of God. Still another stand is ***scepticism***. This approach simply means doubting – we cannot have certainty about anything in the world, then, obviously, we cannot speak with surety about metaphysical and abstract realities. There is still another perspective of ***naturalism***. According to this theory, every aspect of human existence, and experience, including moral and religious life could be adequately explained in terms of our understanding of nature. Coming to the more affirmative approaches to God and religion, ***deism*** refers to the view according to which, this universe was created and set in motion by a God and then left alone to operate. The deists teach that natural theology is enough to explain religious matters. Finally, though perhaps not the last, a stand commonly understood is that of ***theism.*** It refers to a particular doctrine concerning the nature of God and its relationship to the universe. It conceives of God as personal, and active in the governance and organization of the world and the universe.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit.

1. What is the meaning of religion?

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2. What are the various ways of defining religion?

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1.4 DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF RELIGION

Religion has taken various forms in its development, and it is necessary to investigate some of these forms, in order to understand religion better. These forms of religion can be enumerated as Totemism, Animism, Pantheism, Polytheism, Monotheism, and Monism.

The essential feature of **totemism** is the belief in a supernatural connection between a group of people, and objects such as certain animal species, plants, or more rarely some other thing. Usually there is a taboo on killing or eating an animal totem. **Animism** denotes the belief that everything which has life or motion also has a soul or spirit, and all natural phenomena are caused by direct personal agency.

The theistic tradition recognizes and accepts the existence of God. Theism is often understood as a synonym for monotheism, though that is not the case. Theism manifests itself in several forms. **Pantheism** is 'God-is-all-ism'. According to this view all is God and God is all. God is identical with the world and nature. In other words, God and universe are one. God is not a reality separate from the world and remote from it. The particular individual objects have no absolute existence of their own, rather they are either

the different modes of the universal substance, or parts of the divine whole. **Polytheism** is the belief in and worship of many individual Gods. Indeed, it was the result of the anthropomorphic personification of the natural powers that were believed to be beyond the control of humans. **Monotheism** is the belief in one supreme God, whereas, **Monism** is the belief in one reality, and does not necessarily involve the conception of a personal God.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

Religion being an undeniable aspect of human life, any study on human life will remain half done if it is not taken into consideration. Religion is studied from different perspectives, and it could be investigated from sociological, anthropological, phenomenological, philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic perspectives. In the contemporary scenario there is an added scope, that is, the field of comparative religion. It is an urgent need, and a demand of the present world community, to promote mutual, mature and unprejudiced understanding of others, and their religions. We are living in a world marked by globalization, that consistently brings up predicaments for peaceful co-existence. In such a scenario, it becomes imperative for us to understand and accept the plural ways of living, and religions across the world. Such forms of knowledge can mitigate prejudices, and promote an integrated way of living with other communities.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. What are the various forms of the evolution of religion?

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2. Why is the study of religion, especially the comparative study of religion relevant and urgently needed today?

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1.6 KEY WORDS

***Agnosticism* :** it means 'not-knowing' which implies that we are not able to affirm or deny the existence of God.

Animism : it the belief that everything which has life or motion also has a soul or spirit.

Atheism : it is the belief that there is no God of any kind.

Deism : it means this universe was created and set in motion by a God, and left alone to operate.

Monism: it is the belief in the existence of only one reality.

Monotheism : it is belief in one supreme God.

Naturalism : it means every aspect of human existence, and experience including moral and religious life could be adequately explained in terms of our understanding of nature.

Pantheism : it is 'God-is-all-ism', which means that all is God, and God is all, and God is not a reality separate from the world and remote from it.

Polytheism : it is the belief in and worship of many individual Gods.

Scepticism : it means doubting. That means, we cannot have certainty about anything, either of material or of spiritual things.

Totemism : it is the belief in a supernatural connection between a group of people, and objects like certain animal species, sometimes plants, or more rarely some other things.

1.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

1. The word 'religion' is derived from the Latin root *religare* and it means 'to bind fast', thus establishing that religion certainly has a strong emphasis on the community and society. It is meant to be something that binds the members of a community together.

   What we call religion is very complex and inclusive. It includes manifold elements and aspects of life like beliefs, feelings, experiences, values, symbols, worship, rituals, festivals, cult and cultures, myth and mythology.
2. The different ways of defining religion are *phenomenological, psychological, sociological, naturalistic, and religious.*

Answers to Check Your Progress II

1. The various forms of the evolution of religion are - *Totemism, Animism, Pantheism, Polytheism, Monotheism, Monism.*
2. We are living in a world marked by globalization, that consistently brings up predicaments for peaceful co-existence. We encounter elements of social unrest and

atrocities on the basis of religion in every part of the world. It is due to the fanatic thoughts that creep into the minds of people due to sheer ignorance about the true teachings of both one's own religion, and of other religions. In such a scenario, it becomes imperative for us to understand and accept the plural ways of living, and religions across the world. Such forms of knowledge can mitigate prejudices, and promote an integrated way of living with other communities. Hence it is relevant and much needed in the modern world.