
UNIT 11 RELIGION AND POLITICS/STATE

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11.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you should be able to

- understanding the meaning of religion and politics
- know how the secular state emerged
- explain and analyse the nature of politics
- discuss the factors influencing the relationship between religion and politics.

11.1 INTRODUCTION

In our previous unit we have discussed the interrelationship between religion and economy.

In this unit we will be discussing the relationship between religion and politics/state.

To bring out this interrelationship we first introduce you to an understanding of religion and politics. We then discuss the concept of state and process of secularisation which shaped the nature of the state that we now have.

Next we will discuss the nature of politics and the various factors influencing the relationship between religion and politics.

11.2 UNDERSTANDING RELIGION AND POLITICS

In this section we will discuss what we mean by religion and politics. This discussion, we hope will reveal, how religion and political phenomenon are not strictly restricted to the religious as well as political realm.

Religion is powerful force of group identity. These groups are an integral part of any political process.

11.2.1 Meaning of Religion

We all have questioned regarding the meaning life, our place in the world and whether there is supernatural force that controls events and we look for guidelines for our action. The beliefs and practices that emerge to deal with questions such as this take various forms (See Block 1, ESO-05). Some believe in an invisible force, some may regard trees and animals as holy. The beliefs and practices that deal with the ultimate question are a source of comfort in the face of uncertainty, a basis of social order. These systems comprised of a shared set of beliefs and practices is called religion. Religion thus can be defined as 'stable and shared set of beliefs, symbols and rituals that focus on the sacred' (Conklin 1984 : 296). Our definition also emphasises that religion is shared; a personal belief system of an individual or an individual's philosophy of life cannot be considered a religion because it is not shared. And finally religion focuses essentially on the sacred. Emile Durkheim has defined the sacred as the ideal and the supernatural that are set apart from daily life. The sacred as a superhuman force can reside in natural or artificial objects in animals or in people. Different religions have different beliefs in the sacred.

11.2.3 Social Significance of Religion

As students of sociology we are not seeking answers to the validity of the belief system, we would like to understand the social significance of religion and its relation to various social institutions. Sociologists treat religion as one institution in a complex web of institutions that form a society. One of the major consequences of religion is to strengthen ties among believers. Some critics have suggested, that **religion often becomes more important as a source of social identity than as a source of belief and practices dealing with the sacred.** Many people participate in religion, more to find a place in society rather than because of their convictions. As a result, one often finds that churches, temples, mosques and synagogues often become social centres. Religion is also a rallying point around which groups mobilise themselves towards a cause.

The presence of different religions in the some society can result in violent conflicts. Persecution of religious groups throughout history is something that we are familiar with. Religious wars wrecked both East and West, though often economics and politics had at least as much to do with the struggles as religion. Christians clashed with Muslims, Catholics with Protestants and so on. In India we have seen how millions became refugees in the Partition conflict between Muslims and Hindus.

For years Jews and Arabs have fought bloody battles in the Middle East. These, we must realise, are as much of religious conflicts as they are political. As we can see, religion is very often a vehicle of expression, a form of identity, around which a group gathers either for mustering more power for itself or any such similar cause. Politics fundamentally means how and where power is distributed in the pursuit of goals. In societies where there are different groups with different goals, there are bound to be conflicts. Each group then forges an identity, one of them being the religious identity, which helps them in the pursuit of their goals. Before we go on to analyse this interconnection between religion and politics, it will be useful, to understand what politics means.

11.2.3 Meaning of Politics

Politics and political process have been defined in different ways at different times. It will be useful in the present context to refer to two aspects of the understanding of the term politics.

One such definition refers to i) two opposing forces of conflict and integration that determine the nature of politics. Human societies have many types of layers of conflicts. Politics is concerned with such conflicts. While conflicts are inevitable, they are never the ends, or the ideals, to be achieved in society. Resolution of conflicts, and cooperation and integration of society remains the cherished ideal of all societies. Every analysis of conflicts ends up providing solutions to resolve them. Movement towards an integrated or united society is as inevitable as the emergence of conflicts or differences. Some conflicts are reduced, some persist, some regulated, and some new conflicts emerge as situations change. While diverse social and cultural processes help in achieving the objectives of a harmonious society, political process has an important role to play. **Integration and conflict, thus, are the two apparently opposite forces that constitute the process of politics.**

Social institutions are important from the point of view of both conflict and integration, and they are linked with politics and political process. These institutions, ideas and issues associated with them, often form the basis for an identity of individuals and leads them to conflicting situations. At the same time, social institutions bring about unity and integration with the institutions, as well as between them. These opposing forces operate within this complex interaction that constitute the process the politics. Managing the conflicts which arise out of competing situations where each individual has different interest and identities, bring about the much required integration or unity which constitute politics.

ii) The other aspects of the understanding of politics is the Distributive Approach, associated with the writing of Harold D. Laswell. We all know that there is a great deal of unevenness in the distribution of power and resources in society. Not all communities, individuals have equal access to resources, goods and distribution of positions. Some are deprived of these powers and access to goods and resources.

Political power is to allocate power and authority. This close relationship between power and resources led Laswell (1936) to observe that politics is 'who gets what, when and how'.

A group or a community may feel that it is deprived of access to resources and positions in society. This puts them at a disadvantage and makes them feel powerless. This group then, may challenge legitimacy of the state or the political regime which is vested with authority. **This sense of relative deprivation has been one of the important factors for group/community mobilisation, as well as political violence.**

Religion as we have already mentioned, is not just restricted to the supernatural realm. It has wider social significance. It provides moral, ethical vision and guides people and communities.

Any polity which derives its powers from the people, therefore acknowledges and accommodates the religious aspect. An aspect which is important to the individual and communities.

To put it simply, politics is major social institution involving the organisation of power in society. Political systems attempt to give the impression that their power is legitimate rather than coercive. If you recall your reading on Weber you will remember that authority or power that is legitimate is derived from (1) tradition (2) rationally enacted rules and regulations and (3) charisma.

Political authority in contemporary society gets its authority from the wider section of people. Therefore people's interest and demands effect the political authority. Religion is one aspect of community life which affects politics.

i) Write five lines on the social significance of religion.

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ii) Name the three perspectives of politics and political process.

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iii) Distributive Approach to the understanding for politics is associated with the writings.

11.3 STATE AND SECULARISATION

We have so far discussed the meaning of politics in very broad and general terms. In the section to follow, we will be discussing the term state, which is a political institution concerned with the distribution of power in society. We will also be talking of the concept and process of secularisation (see Unit 16, Block 7, ESO-05) the state as we understand today has emerged out of the need to separate the domain of authority from the secular and religious realm.

11.3.1 The Concept of State

Max Weber defined that states ‘as a human community which successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory’. Thus the state is one of the important agencies of social control, whose functions are carried out through the enforcement of laws which are invariably backed by the use of force.

Comte and Herbert Spencer regarded the emergence of state as a consequence of the increasing size and complexity of societies. There seems to be some validity to their observations. The study of simple societies by anthropologists and sociologists have revealed some correlation between the complexity, size of society and settled political authority. R.H. Lowie writing about the early communities says that must have been tiny and egalitarian and were like a ‘kindred group’. Thus kinship exercised a great influence in maintaining unity. The society was more or less undifferentiated, so there was no great distinction made between religious institutions and political institutions. The head of the community was both a religious as well as a political head. With increasing complexity of society, a need was felt to separate the religious and the non-religious domain, so as to democratize the domain of authority. The politics in Europe, specially in England played a significant role in the real separation of domain of power of the church and the king.

Let us see how this process of separation came about in our next section on the process of secularisation. But before we understand this process, let us try and understand what is meant by secularisation.

11.3.2 Secularisation

The decline in the political and social importance of any single religion in society

is considered as secularisation. Secularisation is commonly associated with modern, technologically advanced societies. The word is derived from the Latin word 'seculum' which means the 'present age'. The word secularisation, in its very general usage, came to convey a dominant social process, that is, a view of or understanding of the world "which is shift from a religious understanding of the world (based on faith in what cannot be directly proved) to a scientific understanding of the world (based on knowledge about what can be directly proved)" (Maconis, 1987 p. 438). Increasingly religion seems to have less and less pervading influences on us. The political dimension of 'secularism' essentially means the separation of the political from the religious authority. A secular state in this context is one which does not support or favour any single religion. It, on the contrary, attempts to treat all citizens as equal irrespective of religious considerations. To understand the separation of the religious and political realm, let us move on to the next section of process of secularisation

11.3.3 The Process of Secularisation

The process of modernisation was accompanied by (and if often included) many other developments. 'Differentiation' was one such process which meant that social institutions had exclusive functions and the different functions found their own institutions for effective performance. A distinction is often made between 'traditional' and 'modern' societies, from this point of view. While a traditional society is characterized by different functions being performed by the same institution(s) in a modern society different functions tend to be performed by institutions that are meant to perform specific functions. This process resulted in a distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'secular' realms of social life. The religious aspects is broadly included in the 'sacred'. Referring to the distinctive trait of religious thought, Durkheim clarifies that "the beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends are either representations or systems of representations which express the nature of the 'sacred things...'" (Durkheim, 1969 : 42). Coming back to the sacred-secular distinction, activities in society other than religion were included in 'secular'. Politics and political processes were included in the secular process of the modern society In this separation, the struggle for a dominance between the ruler, the king, and the organised Church (especially in England), played a significant role.

As pointed out earlier, the process of modernization engulfing the entire society also resulted in, what is called, 'differentiation' which, in a way, resulted in more 'secularization' of the political process. It was accepted, at least at the level of an ideal, that politics and religion should keep away from influencing each other.

While this has been the ideal of politics in modern societies, the very process of modern day politics has made such isolation a near impossibility.

Activity 1

Make clippings of articles on religion and politics from various newspapers and magazines after reading these articles write a two page essay. You can discuss this among your friends and students at the study centre.

11.4 THE NATURE OF POLITICS

Society and polity have always had an interactive relationship, but politics in the democratic framework had made such relationship mutually dependent to a greater extent. When we talk about democracy at the end of the 20th century, it is not just another form of government : it is a system of politics and government that is accepted and adopted by almost all the countries of the world.

Box 11.01

Democracy, as a way of life and as form of government, suggests equality and openness, where individuals and groups compete for power. The norms and rules for working of this system impose the values of healthy competition. The individual preferences which are naturally important in a democracy, are influenced by many forces and factors. The way in which these get intermixed and finally affect human behaviour is an extremely complex process where it is not at all easy to arrange the factors in terms of any fixed importance. At another level social groups play an important role in democratic politics.

Society, does not include individuals who are isolated from one another. Individuals are invariably members of social groups and not only of single groups, but of several such groups simultaneously. Every society is divided into groups in terms of the prevailing values and the number of such groups depends on the number of values. Caste, class, religion, ethnically, common profession, and finally, power, all these may, and do, form the basis for formation of groups. Individuals may be members of more than one group simultaneously. The importance of such groups for democratic politics is that the groups often constitute the organising blocks of the process of politics.

Religion has been one of the central factors for **group identity**, social basis for the formation of such groups having effect on other groupings and on individual behaviour. Religion has been strong motivating factor for **group mobilisation** as well. Democratic politics, concerned and affected as it is with individual and group behaviour, is affected by religion in an intimate manner. The influences vary from society, both in form and in intensity. We discuss this point later in section 11.6.

It has been suggested by some social theories that the "primordial" identities of individuals like religion, will be overshadowed by more powerful societal dynamics like modernisation and industrialisation, and may ultimately be replaced by more 'modern' or 'enduring' identities, technoprofessional groups, class etc.

The modernisation theory, especially of the earlier phase, had a definite suggestion that the processes of 'modernisation', with time and increasing scope, will result in replacement, if not disappearance, of 'primordial' or 'traditional' basis of individual and group identity, 'Religious' identity being one of them.

The theory of 'class', similarly, puts much emphasis on the economic basis of social organisation and treats the economic class as the 'real' social groups and other groupings as, 'false' and, 'illusory'. This theory is of the view that groups will eventually organize themselves on class basis. Social institutions rooted in considerations like religion and ethnicity, or what are often called "cultural enclaves", are treated as casual, 'disturbing' factors rather than as integral elements of the system.

Theoretical positions cited above perceive changes in social conditions as going in one direction, while experiences of different societies have indicated different paths of change, having historical and culture-peculiarities. In some societies changes have been slowed down or even arrested at a particular stage. The actual process of group formation and their interplay is much more dynamic than what the above theories suggest.

Democratic politics, includes many groups that are regarded as 'primordial'. In fact such groups have gained, both in number and in strength, because of the interplay of forces in democratic politics.

The situation has not been different in the socialist countries, where conscious and rigorous steps were taken to ignore religious groups. They have faced recurrent resurgences of religious identities posing problems from the theoretical ideological and even from practical points of view. Countries of the third world have faced the problems of religious identities and groups in more serious form. Thus religions are an important factor in politics in general, and democratic politics in particular, needs no further elaboration.

What we need to discuss at this stage is what are the factors that affect religious forces in politics. It has been noted earlier that while religion has not become insignificant in the politics of any country, its effect is greater in some countries than in others. There are many factors that result in such variations. We will discuss the variation in terms of the nature of society and the social formations and grouping in our next section.

Activity 2

Are you a member of a political party? Even if not, do you think politics and religion should be mixed? Write down your views and compare them with those of others at the study centre.

11.5 RELIGION IN POLITICS

Relationship between religion and politics depends on various factors i) homogeneity/heterogeneity of society, ii) the extent to which religious groupings coincide with other divisions in society based on economic status, ethnicity, etc. iii) the nature of religions, and finally iv) the historical context of such relationship. We will discuss these factors in the following section.

11.5.1 Homogeneity/Heterogeneity

A society is normally 'pluralist' in the sense that there are various kinds and levels of divisions—religious, economic, ethnic, tribal, and so on. But these divisions are more pronounced in certain societies than in others. It is in terms of these divisions that societies are described as 'homogeneous' and 'heterogeneous'. Divisions are sharper in a heterogeneous society. Religion, one of the primary basis of individuals identity and group formation and 7 divisions accordingly. In homogeneous societies, the impact of religion on politics is less pronounced, while in heterogenous societies such impact in more perceptible. As R.R. Alford suggests the connection between religion and politics arises as a problem only in nations which are not religiously homogeneous.

11.5.2 Religious Groups and Other Divisions in Society

The second important factor in this relationship between religion and politics is the extent to which the religious groups coincide with other divisions in society, e.g. class, ethnicity, immigrants, and so on. Empirical studies have suggested such relationships/associations among various divisions. A number of studies conducted in different parts of United States found concentration of certain religious groups (e.g. Catholics) among lower classes. Some religious minorities in India, similarly predominantly fall into lower class-economic classes. Ethnicity and migration relate to religion and class in a complex way The authors of the well-known account of the American culture, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1973) found that 'A close examination of Catholic-Jewish relations will reveal some of the tendency of ethnic relations, in that they have a form of class relations as well'. Examples from the U.S. have been mentioned to illustrate the existence of the division coinciding with one another, even in a society that represented *The Melting Pot*, where race,

religion nationality, class and all such cleavages are expected to be melted into a new race of men. The authors of this influential book had no hesitation in declaring that the next state of evolution of immigrant groups will involve a Catholic group in which distinctions between Irish, Italian, Polish, and German Catholic are steadily reduced. Among the Jewish group, in which the line between East European, German, and Near Eastern Jews would slowly become weak. The white Protestant groups, the Anglo-Saxon, Dutch, old-German and Scandinavian Protestants, as well as the white Protestant immigrants welcome together (Glazer and Mohr, 1973 : 314). The groups that have been mentioned above include grouping based on religious, racial, economic and immigrant consideration which coincide with one another. Under conditions of such concentration of factors, their impact on politics is stronger. Thus the authors quoted above declare that "Religion and race define the next stage in the evolution of the American peoples:" (Ibid).

11.5.3 Nature of Religion(s)

The third factor that is important is the nature of religion(s) and its attitude towards politics. R.R. Alford in his book *Party and Society* found a differences between the Anglo-American countries and the continental European countries, with regard to 'religious appeals' of political parties. Among different factors that R.R. Alford found important (for explaining) is the difference that the continental European countries are "predominantly Protestant", while the Anglo-American English-speaking countries and "predominantly Catholic" (Alford, 1963). Because of the history of the emergence of Protestantism, there is more emphasis upon Church and State. Max Weber's classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930) relates the nature of religion with 'secular' forces of industrialisation. There are certain religions that believe in the 'subordination' of all social processes to religion—and find it difficult to separate 'politics' from 'religion'. Put more sharply, 'politics' according to this view, is for religion. Certain other religions are more inclusive, and comparatively, more loosely organized. These religions are more 'tolerant' towards other processes in society and separation of 'politics' from religion finds more conducive conditions.

These differences in the nature of religion are partly in the religion itself. But the difference arise from the various historical forces which have shaped the religion.

11.5.4 Historical Process

The fourth factor, that is both important and complex, is the historical process, operating at two levels : i) the emergence of religion through various stages has followed different paths, providing a distinct character to them. ii) The historical process of the relationship between religion and other social groups and processes, specially the political authority, has influenced the actual place of religion in society. These two historical forces are inextricably linked with one another and the interaction is complex. The examples of the Anglo-American and the continental countries that has been mentioned earlier in the context of relationship between religion and politics, makes the contrast interesting. Explaining the historical reasons, R.R. Alford says that in the continental countries like France, Italy, Belgium etc. where religious parties are strong, religious freedom was won at the same time and was linked with the achievement of political freedom. The consequence was that to this day, religion, class and politics have been closely linked. In Britain, on the other hand, the issue of religion and politics emerged separately and were resolved separately; as a result, not only Church and state legally separated, the political parties were rarely organised on religious basis. Elaborating the historical process further, Alford, says, 'Certain features of Reformation in England in the 1500s, unlike those of Reformations on the continent, may have contributed to the relatively high degree of separation of the church and state and legitimacy of religious pluralism in British

culture'. Because of the specifications of the historical process, social groups belonging to certain religions exhibit distinct political behaviour.

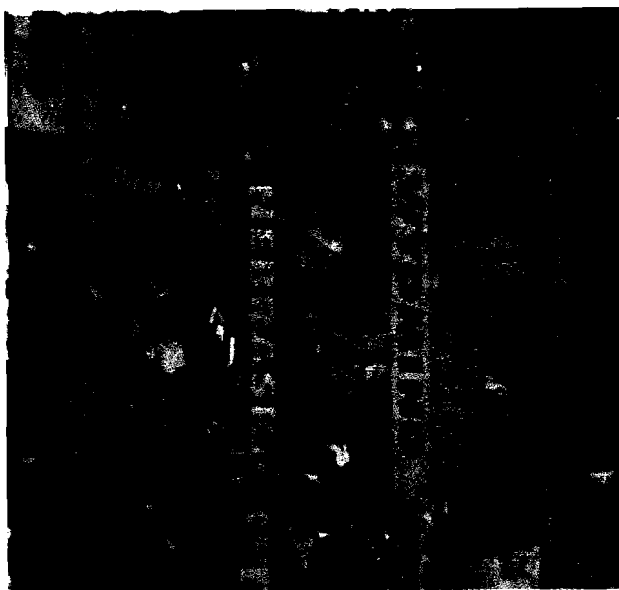
In some countries, the process of the shaping up of the political process itself has been such that religion became an important input factor. Independence in India coincided with division of the country on the basis of religion. While, on the one hand, it made the Indian society and the polity conscious of the importance of secularism in a multicultural, multi-religious country like ours, religious divisions (communal strife) keep reappearing on the Indian political scene at different levels, at times posing serious threat to social harmony and political stability.

11.6 RELIGION AND POLITICS/STATE : AN OVERVIEW

In the ordinary parlance, religion has nothing to do with politics. So also it is often presumed that politics has anything to do with religion. A very generalised understanding of religion equates religion with a set of beliefs and practices related to the supernatural, but we have seen that religion is not concerned with the supernatural realm only. It has a wider social significance, not only as an identity forging force but it also gives a moral and ethical vision and philosophy which guides people and communities.

Box 2

Politics refers to organisation and utilisation of power. The 'State' as an agency which enforces this power has the power to govern. But what exactly do we mean by power? Where does this power emanate from? Power is compound of many factors and influences. If you recall your reading of Weber, power has been described by Weber as the ability to control or coerce another person. Authority is the 'legitimized power—that is to say, people vest a particular authority with the 'right to command' and it is therefore 'expected' that such a command is obeyed (see ESO-03, Block 4). It is this element of power and legitimacy which inevitably links politics with religion despite their relative independence.



Political rally concerning religion.

Power not only entails the mobilisation of muscle, weaponry or police force. In order to have legitimacy, it must also have support from the people. People, as we know, will and always resist, subvert and disobey force, if they feel that their interest or vision of life is being threatened by that political system or a particular state. We only have to look into history to see that it is full of efforts to seize, dismantle, or build counter force against state regimes which are believed to be illegitimate—without the support of the people. Social scientists and scholars will agree that cultural, social and economical values and primordial loyalties like affinity for clan, tribe, caste, religion language etc. influence and delimit politics. Very often these views are held as sacred and important by people who hold them **whenever these** values are threatened the authority of the state is questioned; sometimes it is resisted and many times there is call for reconstitution. It is clear that politics is not composed only of political values; it is significantly influenced by non-political views and values. All these values in the final analysis are derived from the people. That is the reason why we find that even when a state proclaims to be secular, in actual day-day-day political practice, the leadership or authority continuously makes adjustments for pragmatic resolution of problems/affairs. The political authority adjusts itself in such way as to gain the support of the industrialist, the peasant, the worker, the teacher as well as the priest.

In our section on the nature of politics, we have discussed the nature of democratic politics which envisages equality for all and equal treatment of all. This ideal is something that cannot easily be achieved because there always exists competing groups with conflicting interests. The political authority on their part try to accommodate these interests. Religion is one of the important factors around which groups identify themselves and mobilise their interests. And hence these inevitable relationships between religion, and politics/state.

Check Your Progress 2

i) What is meant by secularisation? Write your answer in five lines.

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ii) Name the factors which affect their relationship between politics and religion. Write you answer in about five lines..

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iii) Name the two the theories which see the possibility of replacement of religious identity by class and secular identities..

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11.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we began by talking about the growing interrelationship between religion and politics. To understand this problem, we have discussed religion and politics in detail. We discussed how the secular state emerged out of a conflict for authority by the political authority and the religious authority. Our units also present the process of politics which essentially involves the struggle for power among various groups. Religion forms an important basis for group formation which among other factors influences politics.

Finally, our unit discussed some of the factors which are responsible for the shape of the relationship between religion and politics.

11.8 KEY WORDS

Conflict : A struggle or contest between two groups of people.

Integration : The act of process of unification into a whole.

Power : Legal authority which gives the right to and influence people.

11.9 FURTHER READINGS

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11.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

Religion is a set of beliefs and practices, shared by a community of people, which deal with the ultimate questions of life, death, etc. Religion invariably involves a belief in a supernatural force which is set apart from daily life. Durkheim calls this the sacred. Religion has a social significance for the individual as well as the community; it is a source of comfort in the face of uncertainty. It lays down and provides norms, ethics and code of behaviour. It thus provides a sense of identity to the group.

The three perspectives on politics and political processes are 1) the conflict integrative approach 2) the distributive approach and 3) the behavioral approach.

- ii) Distributive Approach to the understanding of politics is associated with the writings of Harold D. Lasswell.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) The word 'seculum' is derived from the Latin which means the 'present age'. The word secular hence is generally associated with modern, technologically advanced societies. A secular viewing of things or understanding of things is supposed to be based on rational basis as against religious faith. In the political context secularisation is associated with the process whereby a demarcation between political and religious authority was established. A secular state concerned

itself with matters which are civic and not sacred in the religious sense.

- iii) Some influencing factors affecting the relationship between religion and politics are 1) heterogeneity/homogeneity, 2) Relationship between religion and other divisions in society 3) Nature of religion and its attitude towards politics and 4) historical process.

- iii) The two theories which see the possibility of replacement of religious identity by class and secular identities are the 'class theory' and 'modernisation theory' respectively.

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