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# UNIT 14 RELIGION : SOCIAL STABILITY AND CHANGE

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## 14.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this unit, you should be able to

- explain the relationship between religion and the social order
- assess the impact of religion on society, keeping in mind sects, cults and denominations
- appreciate the fact that religion can preserve the existing social order, as well as change it drawing instances from the various facets of social order viz. political, economic and cultural
- comprehend the factors and contexts which determine impact of religion on society: stabilisation or change.

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## 14.1 INTRODUCTION

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Are you finding this intellectual voyage through religion, guided by the sociologists, interesting? We are sure most of you will. Religion is such a complex reality, that even as you explore yet another mystery unfolds. Through this course, we are only introducing you into this voyage, and it is out of your own interests you have to sociologically explore religion using wherever necessary, the concepts and theories which are provided to you.

So far you have read and understood thirteen units on religion spread over three blocks. Block three deals with various aspects of religion like religious organisations, religious specialists, fundamentalism, secularisation and so on. One of the very interesting properties of religion is that it can justify, explain and conserve the social order as well as it can demystify, de-legitimise and change the social order.

This important property of religion will be explained to you, in this unit. In 14.2, we shall recapitulate the basic ideas like religion, social order, stability and change with which you are already familiar with. In 14.3, we shall demonstrate to you that sects

and cults arise due to the impact of religion on society. The main task here will be to give you instances where sects have changed the social order as well as established a new social order. Assuming that social order has various facets, for example economic order, cultural order, political order, in the section 14.4 we shall explain that religion can preserve, stabilize or change each one of these facets of social order, drawing various instances.

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## 14.2 RELIGION AND THE SOCIAL ORDER

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Religion, social order, stability and change are four conceptual tools required to grasp this unit. In this sub section we shall learn the nitty gritty of these conceptual tools. Though you are already familiar with them, go through sub sections 14.2.1, 14.2.2 and 14.2.3 in order to understand better the nature and complexity of interaction between religion and the social order.

Religion is a system in itself and it is also a sub-system of the larger society. It is constantly in interaction with other sub-systems of the society like family, education, state and economy. As you know there are specific manifestations of this interaction between religion and the social order. Sects and cults are specific and explicit manifestations of this interaction. Religion in the course of its interaction with social order can stabilize the social order — justifying and legitimising it through explanations. On the other hand religion can also change the existing social order. Religion can be status-quo or revolutionary. The nature of the interaction and its fall out depends on a number of factors, which we shall outline in sub-section 14.2.3.

### 14.2.1 Interaction between Religion and Social Order

What is social order? More discerning learners amongst you will recall that ‘social order’ is a concept within the functionalist understanding of society. The origin of this idea, can be traced back to the medieval ages, when people were searching for ‘order’ amidst chaos generated by devastating feudal wars, and catastrophic natural calamities and endemic plagues. In our times, this idea has been popularised by the thinkers who advocate a functionalist understanding of society, drawing at the same time a comparison between the dynamics of human body and society, in short, organismic analogy.

‘Social Order’ as a concept may imply one or many of the following meanings: (i) Arrangement of institutions in the society; (ii) Arrangement of roles and statuses in the society; (iii) A smooth, well-coordinated functioning of this ‘structure’. In other words, ‘structure’ and ‘function’ are the twin dimensions of any social order. Individual and society held together in a harmonious relationship, is the crux of a social order. A most significant but questionable assumption behind the idea of social order is that, social order is a ‘self-regulating’, ‘self-balancing’ order in equilibrium almost like the natural Order.

An important issue which arises from the functionalist interpretation of social order is like this : the social order also contain inequalities of power, wealth and life opportunities and a struggle between various groups to gain access to these resources. Are these inequalities to stay and accepted as ‘natural’ or ‘given’ or ‘consensus-determined’? Shouldn’t we change this conflict-ridden social order? These are questions of perennial debate among sociologists. There is a specific group of sociologists who tend to conceptualize social order as a conflict between groups which aspire for resources.

What does religion say about the social order? Does religion accept the social order of the day as it exists with its inequalities of power, wealth and life opportunities? Does religion say that social order is natural and given and hence beyond change?

Does religion say that an unjust order is the manifestation of divine will and creation? Does religion say that human beings have to accept the social order, because it is the result of individual commissions and omissions (sin, karma etc.) and hence they cannot change it?

Before deliberating on these important questions, let us recapitulate some of the salient features of religion.

- i) Religion has a cognitive function: It provides us the categories of understanding, in other words a framework of intelligence (ideas of time, space, class, person, etc.) (Durkheim, E. 1965 (1912):9).
- ii) Religion has an intellectual function: It explains the meaning and purpose of human life. It gives and supports values and norms governing the society. To be more specific, religion plays a significant role in goal-setting and value-orientation in a society. Apart from this religion explains the natural processes like birth, death, misery and evil.
- iii) Religion is a social institution because community of believers constitute the basis of any religion. Religion is an organisation because it consists of a hierarchy of deities, priests, prophets and believers.
- iv) Religion is an ensemble of rituals and beliefs centering around a notion of the sacred.

### 14.2.2 Social Stability and Social Change

In the previous section, 14.2.1, the twin ideas of religion and social order were explained in detail for you. That illustration along with the questions posed, should have helped you in grasping why and how does religion interact with social order. Thus after comprehending the nature and complexity of the interactive relationship between religion and social order, let us now proceed to analyse the impact/result of the relationship.

When religion and social order interact, two broad effects may result: (i) Religion can change the social order or religion can stabilise the social order: (ii) Social change can lead to changes in religion itself at various levels or existing social order can defend and justify the religion which at times is oppressive and atrocious. Stabilisation and change are not the only likely fall-out of interaction between religion and social order. Sometimes at certain specific places, even a continuity may result. In other words some of the features of the bygone era can be retained, changing few others. New emergent situations may necessitate the adaptation of some of the principles of the past.

Religion stabilises the existing social order by its explanations of human misery and social inequalities. It can stabilise the society by socialising individuals within a specific moral framework. A particular religion explains doctrines which explain inequalities as natural and God-given. Some religions revolve around the concept of personal salvation so much that, they explain human misery in terms of 'sin' or the 'fallen state of humankind'.

#### Activity 1

Recall your childhood experiences, and reminiscence how your father/mother/grandparents taught you 'good'/'bad' through stories, particularly religious myths.

of the old scriptures, rituals or dogmas in the light of sweeping changes in the society at large, provide valuable inputs. Religion itself may re-emphasize hitherto marginalised or forgotten principles, in a changed context. This worldly misery (persecution, oppression, slavery, etc.) of the community of believers, may force religion to downplay its otherworldliness, in a specific socio-political, socio-economic context. Most often religious sentiments and symbols are invoked, new meanings are attributed to rituals and beliefs, and in the process religion becomes a vehicle of collective mobilization, for a group of believers who would like to be 'liberated'. This group of believers may form a sect and break away from the parent religion itself as protest. Religion also interprets what is an ideal family, best education etc. and this may bring change or stability in these institutions.

As interesting view which emerges from the above discussion is that religion is not necessarily a backward-looking or conservative force as assumed by many people. Rather religion could be a progressive, modern and revolutionary force as well, contingent upon certain factors, a few of which are explained below.

### 14.2.3 Determining Factors

Whether religion stabilizes the existing social order or changes it, depends upon a host of factors. Some of them are:

- New evidences/researches which cast the message of the scriptures/holy books/ founder of the religion in a new light.
- Social origins (social class, ethnicity etc.) of the clergy, clerics, priests and the community of believers.
- Medium through which stabilisation or change is disseminated.
- Reinterpretation of the Holy Books/Scriptures/Tests in the light of scholarly debates or movements.
- Political status of the religions community-ruled by a colonial regime or themselves.
- Nexus of the religious hierarchy with other sections of the society. In other words, position of power within and outside the religion.
- Emergence of prophets, impact of other cultures, political subordination, economic exploitation of the believers.
- Just as changes in religion may initiate changes in the social order, changes in the society in various realms like education, family, science, industry, stratification may compel religion to explain the social order in a new light.

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## 14.3 SECTS, CULTS AND DENOMINATIONS

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Sects, cults and denominations, largely speaking are manifestations of dissent within the parent religion. For example, within the universal church you find numerous protestant sects, denominations, and cults. At a certain point of history, owing to changes in the society and when religion becomes a mere stabilization agent of society, there arise groups of dissent which interrogate the dogmas, rituals and practices of the parent religion.

### 14.3.1 Characteristics of Sects, Cults and Denominations

The origin of sects can be attributed to the dissent among certain sections of clergy and the community of believers. They may feel that the parent religion (for example,

the church) has failed to articulate adequately the teachings of the founder or the prophet and has just become part of the social order. Urge for change, reconstruction and reinterpretation are at the root of sects.

Through an example, it will be demonstrated before you how a sect attempted to change the social order. But before coming to that let us quickly recapitulate the finer variations between these three levels of religious organisations, viz. sects, cults and denominations. At this point, take care to read Unit 12 (Block 3). It may help you further to understand what is a sect and what is not. Church and the sect have different kind of relationship to the world. Churches accept the social order and lend credibility to its stats, whereas sects are marked by a motivation to dissociate from the existing social order, the status quo. Sects are in a sense non-conformist bodies. **Sect is marked by voluntary membership, whereas membership to the Church is natural, i.e. by birth.** Sects are more autonomous than the church.

The fully developed Church utilises the state and the ruling classes and weaves these elements into its own life; it then becomes an integral part of the existing social order. Thus church stabilizes the social order. Sects generally are connected with lower classes, or at least with those elements who are opposed to state and society; they work upward from below, argues Earnest Troeltsch in his famous work *"The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches"*.

Sect is an idealistic community, and is small in size comparatively. Members seek direct personal fellowship. However, sects after a certain stage may themselves be institutionalised and become denominations. Put differently, denominations are sects in an advanced stage of development and adjustment to each other and secular world. Cult is essentially centered around an individual living or dead. The emphasis on personal fellowship is minimal. Followers of the cult, which is a loosely knit structured form of religious expression seek personal ecstatic experience, salvation and comfort.

### 14.3.2 Sects Change the Social Order

Let us now learn about a Hindu sect which attempted to change the social order. Veera Saiva movement is a twelfth century Hindu sect, which staunchly advocated protest against the Brahminical ethos of those times. It is this strong element of protest, which makes Veera Saiva movement, a sect per se, though scholars are, hesitant to use the term 'sect' outside the western context.

During the 12th century, Brahminical Hinduism dominated the social order. Rigid caste and ritual systems were the order of the day. Social intercourse between various caste groups were highly restricted and regulated, through an elaborate system of rules which inhibited inter-dining and inter-marriage. Non-Brahmins were subjected to bondage, humiliation and de-humanizing existence.

The Veera Saiva Movement was headed by Basaveshwara, who was the Chief Minister and Treasurer to Bijjala II, the Kalachuri King. The Veera Saiva movement fought a relentless struggle against the oppressive Brahminical Hindu order. It challenged the norms and values advocated and enforced by the Brahmins. The adherents of Veera Saiva movement, held Siva as the supreme God. All those who submit themselves before Siva, are equal irrespective of sex, caste and class, preached Basaveshwara. The Veerasaivites regarded untouchability as an evil and hence restrained from observing caste pollution. They rejected the doctrine of rebirth and believed in jivan-Mukthi. Work (Kayaka) was sanctified. Veerasaivites followed Bhakti Marg in their quest for ultimate reality. The Veerasaiva movement, owing to its ideology of protest against the then prevailing Brahminical Hindu order, attracted many followers, most of them from lower castes. By about 1162 A.D. the movement had gathered momentum and Basaveshwara Chenna Basava Alatha

Prabhu and Siddharam were leading it. The ethical code of Veerasaivas called Pancacaras, was based on egalitarian principles.

**Box 1**

The leaders of the movement created an organisational framework, to sustain, uphold and preach the Veerasaiva doctrines. Maths were established and a priestly order of Jangamas was created. King Bijjala and Basaveshwara came into conflict, and this led to the subsequent emergence of radicals and moderates among the Veerasaivas. Basaveshwara was a charismatic leader, and after his death the Veerasaiva movement had to rely on an extensive order of Mathas and priests. When the Mathas took the leadership after Basaveshwara and priests (Jangamas) replaced the lay leadership, the movement began to consolidate, evolve a wide set of rules and regulations. This Matha-priest institutions were responsible for preservation and propagation of the tenets of Veerasaivism, its canonical scriptures and literature.

After the movement, began to institutionalise itself through an order of mathas, a hierarchy of priests, and sect of rules and regulations, it began to lose its sectarian character, particularly the ideology of protest. Veerasaivism slowly institutionalised itself into an order parallel to that of the Brahmins. Though the Veerasaiva movement aided the emergence of Lingayats (one who wear Lingas on their body as a political group and also propagated education among non-Brahmins, the fact is that it stands reduced to another caste in modern day Karnataka (India).

So far, in subsection 14.3.1, a Hindu sectarian movement which emerged as a protest against the dominant Brahminical Hindu order was discussed. True, the Veerasaiva movement brought a sea change in the social order of twelfth century Karnataka. But eventually it had to succumb to institutionalisation and established a parallel order. Sects emerge as a protest, but in the course of time they routinise and accommodate the social order.

**Check Your Progress 1**

- i) Discuss the nature of relationship between religion and the social order, in about five lines.

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- ii) Cite an example to illustrate that sect can change the social order, in about five lines.

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- iii) Fill in the blanks:

- a) Religion can change the social order or stabilise it; also there is a possibility of .....

- b) A particular way in which religion stabilizes the social order, is through its explanation of ..... and .....
- c) A sect is essentially a ..... movement.
- d) Interpretation of Scriptures/Holybooks may ..... from time to time contingent upon many social factors.

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## 14.4 RELIGION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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Let us assume that economic order, political order and cultural order are three different facets of the social order. In this sub section 14.4, you will learn specifically how religion can change or stabilize the economic order, political order and the cultural order. As you are aware, the economic order primarily refers to the arrangement of individuals and institutions in a relationship of the production, distribution and consumption of goods. Political order refers to the exercise of power and authority. The cultural order largely includes the configuration of symbols and their meanings. To begin with, let us understand how religious ideas can mould the economic system — changing or stabilizing it as a result.

### 14.4.1 Religion and the Economic Order

By now, you would have thoroughly understood Unit 10, and you can anticipate many of those arguments in this subsection. Broadly speaking, we can draw insights from Max Weber (1864-1920) to demonstrate that religious ideas can change the economic order. On the other hand, if we carefully understand Karl Marx (1864-1883), it is possible to argue that religion can stabilize an exploitative, miserable economic order. That is to say that the role of religion in society, of which it is an important subsystem, is capable of great harmony and integration; but it can also be a major factor in creating conflict as in fundamentalism.

#### 1) Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism : Max Weber on Religion

In the eyes of Max Weber, religious ideas can act as powerful force in determining the course of the economic order. Through his '*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*' (1958, 1905), Max Weber proposed the thesis that various Protestant sects that emerged during the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe, aided through their doctrines, the emergence of modern rational capitalism. Max Weber's thesis was part of a larger intellectual debate among scholars, regarding the role of ideal and material factors in historical development.

The doctrines of the Protestant sects, in particular Calvinism, created new attitudes toward work, money and pleasure. These new doctrines marked a significant departure from what has been hitherto preached by the Catholic Church. These doctrines were accepted by the emerging classes in Europe, after the break-down of feudal order, which combined hard work with asceticism. In other words, believers of these Protestant doctrines worked hard but restrained themselves from material pleasures and luxury. This resulted in the accumulation of wealth (capital), which spurred the growth of rational industrial capitalism.

The doctrines of 'calling' and 'Predestination' are the twin ideas, which left a tremendous impact on the believers. According to the doctrine of Predestination, preached by Calvin, God has already chosen some human beings and angels into everlasting life, for his own glory and in his own interests. Those who are not selected are predestined to everlasting death. The most significant aspect of this doctrine is that human beings cannot know the will of God. 'Am I one of the elect?' 'Am I one among the God's predestined invisible church?' 'Am I one among those

chosen by God for Heaven?' may be questions which haunt the believers. But there is no answer for them. On the contrary, believers have to trust in God that they are one amongst the 'chosen' or the 'elect'. To attain this trust, intense wordly activity was recommended as the most suitable means.

A Calvinist has to prove his faith through wordly activity. He has to understand himself as a tool of divine will, and has to indulge in wordly activity for the greater glory of God. The concept of 'calling' elevated wordly activity to a highest form of moral activity which can be attained by any individual. 'Time is money' and 'Credit is money', are the twin cliches which capture the spirit of those times aptly. 'Time is money' implies that waste of time is sinful and to the same time earning money is a sign of God's grace. For a puritan, who earned money but abstained from luxury and pleasure, generating wealth was an end in itself. Prosperity was an end in itself and it was sign of God's grace. It is clear that doctrine of Calvin created a situation where abstemious values and norms meant that there was a great saving of wealth which was put back into the work. This resulted in a tremendous economic boost to the society concerned and made Calvinism a set of beliefs which were very positive towards economic growth.

Thus certain doctrines of Protestant sects changed the attitude of believers towards work, money and pleasure which in turn led to the accumulation of capital, necessary for the emergence of rational industrial capitalism. Whereas Max Weber viewed religious ethic of the Protestant sects as having aided the spirit of capitalism, Karl Marx argues that religion is an ideology of the ruling elite.

## 2) Religion is an illusion : Marx on Religion

Marx developed his understanding of religion mainly from Prussia. In Prussia, the state defended the Protestant Christian religion. Protestant Christian religion, in that context, acted as an ideology for the new class which arose at the break-up of feudalism in Europe. Since Protestantism helped the growth of capitalism, the State of Prussia supported it.

Marx also argued that religion is an illusion which **veils the real exploitative conditions in society**. At the same time, religion is a mode of protest, albeit a misdirected protest, adopted by those who are oppressed and exploited. To add further, religion is a form of alienation, characteristic of the capitalist society. Religion is a direct outcome of the exploitative conditions in society, and hence religion can be discarded only by changing the exploitative social condition (i.e. capitalism) which gives rise to the need for religion.

Thus for Karl Marx, religion is an illusion, a form of alienation and misdirected protest. Religion stabilizes, the social order, by veiling the exploitation and misery of the capitalist economic order.

### 14.4.2 Religion and the Political Order

Religion can change the political order as well as preserve it. Assuming that political order includes the mode of exercise of power and authority, various categories like the State, Nation and Sovereignty creep into our analysis. Every religion has a political idea, a sense of community; a mode of power and authority; a particular understanding of sovereignty. In other words, 'Kingdom of God' and 'Darul Islam' are political ideas. Every religion has a specific conception of politics, whose interpretation may change from time to time, no matter whether this conception is actualised in reality or not. In this sense, **there cannot be a strict separation of religion from politics** for religion at times has to be this wordly as well. (See Unit 11 — Religion and Politics/State for a discussion on this).



As you are aware, in the Hindu caste system, Kshatriya is the ruler and his dharma is to protect and conserve the social order. The Brahmin has to uphold the system of knowledge, and values. At a theoretical level, one finds a clear separation of spirituality and power, and power being subordinated to spirituality. But at the level of practice, this is a questionable postulate. In fact, the tension between spirituality and power, State and the religion, can be presented as a universal dilemma. During the medieval ages in Europe (8th to 15th century), many kings (and by implication, their kingdoms) clearly remained subordinated to the authority of the Pope (who is the spiritual head of the Roman Catholic Church). The situation changed in Europe, after the Reformation, and rulers became the head of their respective national churches. For example, Queen of England is the head of the Protestant Anglican Church of England.

The many fundamentalist and revivalist movements which are arising all over the world are also defining their own idea of a political state. The fundamentalist and revivalist are reinterpreters of religion. They go back to, what they consider to be pure, original code of religious behaviour, which involves a total world-view. With the intention of restoring these authentic values the fundamentalists ignore all other values.

Islam, for example, is particularly clear about the conduct of the Muslim community. The universe of a Muslim is circumscribed by his or her religion, where politics and religion are inseparable. The resurgence of Islam in recent decades witnesses this linkage.

In our next unit on fundamentalism, we have discussed the various socio-political and historical reasons which has given rise to Islamic resurgence.

Most often, it is the oppressed communities which use religion as a tool to change the political order. The oppression of Jews, and the consequent diaspora does not prevent them from considering themselves as a nation — Israel. This incipient nationalism of Jews, has its basis in the Bible. Israel has a specific identity, which can be traced to the Bible. And in India, many scholars opine that, Gandhi effectively used Hindu symbols of self-sufficient, autonomous ideal-village communities as Ram Rajya. Numerous tribal uprisings and revolts against the colonial rule, has an explicit religious tinge. For instance, Birsa Munda who led a movement against the exploitation of Mundas by outsiders, began by saying that he has obtained a 'revelation' from God. He claimed himself to be a God (Dharti Aba, means 'father of the world') and tried to perform miracles.

**Box 2**

Here is an example where religion involves itself with politics to bring about social justice.

Christianity has long addressed the suffering of the oppressed people of the world. Through a belief in a better life to come for the faithful. However a number of religious leaders in Latin America, in a radical move, are emphasising on social justice. This movement in Christianity is called liberation theology. Liberation theology developed in the late 1960s within the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America. In simple terms, liberation theology believes that the church has responsibility to help people liberate themselves from poverty.

The movement is based on three general principles which are:

- 1) Human suffering exists in the world on a scale that is barely imaginable by

secure and the rich. Liberation theology is based, first of all, on the recognition of this reality of human suffering.

- 2) Human suffering on such a mass scale is inconsistent with Christian moral principles that there be equality.
- 3) Liberation theology asserts that as an expression of faith and conscience, Christians must act to relieve this suffering which entails political action and practical strategies.

Thus a growing number of liberation theologians have allied themselves with the poor in a political struggle against the ruling class in whose hands the wealth is concentrated.

Liberation theology has been strongly resisted by the rich ruling class as well as the Roman Catholic Church. Many liberation theologians have been killed in the widespread violence that engulfed Latin America. The Roman Catholic Church has strongly opposed the mixing of religion and politics. The Roman Catholic authority believes that liberation theology diverts the attention from other worldly concerns of Christianity to get involved in political controversy. Nonetheless, the liberation theology movement continues to grow in Latin America with the firm belief that both Christian faith and a sense of human justice demand efforts to change the plight of world's poor. (Taken from J.J. Macionis, *Sociology*, Prentice Hall : New Jersey, 1987).

Religion can stabilize the power structure and at the same time, it can be used to change the power structure also. So far this has been elaborated vividly. However, understanding certain limitations of the relationship between religion and political order is imperative. For instance, in the case of religions spread over the world, there could be differences between the various local/national religious communities on specific political issues. In other words, you should desist from understanding religions as a monolith, since contingent upon various local factors, religions may differ in their relationship to the power structure.

The Universal Roman Catholic Church stabilizes the power structure everywhere almost, by weaving a network of relationships with other secular spheres. But in Latin American countries, the Catholic Church is radical enough to join hands with the oppressed sections of the society to wage a war against the exploitative local power structures. This radicalism has been the offshoot of a particular modern interpretation of Christian doctrines, known as the liberation theology. In a somewhat similar vein, upon observing closely you will find that Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia supports the process of modernization, whereas Islam in Iran is conservative and backward looking upon comparison.

#### 14.4.3 Religion and the Cultural Order

Assuming that cultural order is an intermesh of symbols which are potent with meaning, it emerges that religion might change the meaning of symbols, and thus the cultural order. As you are aware, religion is something eminently social, in the eyes of Durkheim (1965 (1912)). Religious representations are collective representations, and they express collective realities. Totem, which is an object of worship and veneration is an emblem. The totem symbolizes the tribe. In the case of the Arundas of Australia, whom Durkheim selected for analysis, the 'Churinga' is the symbol of a clan. Rituals arise from the 'Collective effervescence' generated by the society. Moreover, religion supplies the categories, classifications required to understand the world. Rituals maintain the solidarity of the group. From the discussions of Durkheim, it broadly emerges that religion is strongly related to the social structure.

Now the interpretation is that, whenever there is change in social structure, there could be a corresponding change in religion and vice-versa. To be more specific, religious symbols could be acquiring new meanings when there is a change in the social structure. Also it is possible that, when religion undergoes rapid change, the non-religious symbols like kinship can acquire a new meaning. For instance, when a simple society is under the onslaught of a colonial power which incidentally is also of a different religion, it happens that the whole simple society re-order its myths, symbols, rituals, beliefs and world view. Let us understand this example: During the year 1810, in Mexico, there arose a revolt of local people against Spanish Overlordship. During this revolt, a particular religious symbol, Our Lady of Guadalupe, acquired meaning from pre-Columbian religious sources, especially from the Aztec mother of the Gods Tonantzin as well as from the Mother of God in Catholic Christian theology and folk practice.

Religious symbols evoke powerful and deep sentiments and everlasting moods. Even then, due to social change, one dominant symbol may acquire different meanings in various socio-historical, socio-political, social-structural contexts. The Eastern Orthodox empty cross stresses on the doctrine of Christ risen, the Catholic Crucifix (with its corpus) emphasizes Christ's humanity and sacrifice, while the Protestant empty Cross implicitly denies the continuing sacrificial character of the Eucharist. Religious symbols are most often manipulated, to facilitate mobilization of a collectivity, around a cause. For instance, when there is an upsurge militant Hinduism, the elephant-headed, auspicious God of the Hindu Pantheon Lord Ganesh is represented as holding trishuls, spears and swords. When there is social change, we find a corresponding change in the representation of religious symbols, and the interpretation of their meaning. Moreover, protest groups may appropriate the symbols and impute new meanings to them. During the Veerasaiva movement, which came to contest the subordination of non-Brahmins to Brahmins in the Hindu social order, 'Linga' becomes a symbol of protest. Every Veerasaivite was supposed to wear the Linga on his body, in order to claim purity equivalent to that of a Brahmin.

The term cultural order, includes our mental classifications (e.g. 'good' and the 'bad'/'evil'), our understanding of time, space and personality. It becomes evident that, when there is a change in religion, one's idea of 'good' and 'evil', time, space and personality may undergo corresponding alteration. And the reverse is also true. When there is a change in our understanding of good and evil, time, space, and personality due to various forces including media, education etc., there is every likelihood that our attitude towards religion also might change.

**Activity 2**

Collect newspaper clippings on Buddhism in Japan and Sri Lanka; Islam in Algeria and Malaysia. Draw comparisons, to understand the impact of religion on social order, especially politics.

**Check Your Progress 2**

- i) How does religion stabilize the economic order, i.e. capitalism, according to Karl Marx? Use five lines for your answer.

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ii) Do religious symbols change their meaning owing to social change? Illustrate your answer with an example. Use five lines for your answer.

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iii) Match the following :

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|------------------------|---|
| A. Karl Marx           | a. Cognitive function of religion                       |
| B. Max Weber           | b. Religion stabilizes the economic order               |
| C. Durkheim            | c. Religious ideas can change the economic order        |
| D. Liberation Theology | d. Manipulation of religious symbols for political ends |
| E. Militant Hinduism   | e. Religion can change the power structure              |

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## 14.5 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit, the relationship between religion and the social order was explained. Religion can change the social order or stabilize the social order. This is possible because of the cognitive and intellectual functions of religion. Many of our concepts, which we use to understand the everyday world around us flow from religion. Apart from stability, and change, continuity is yet another possibility. By continuity, adaptation of old principle to new situation is implied. Factors which influence the outcome of the interaction between religion and social order were listed in 14.2.3.

In section 14.3, it was pointed out that, sect which is a protest movement emerging from the parent religion, can change the social order. In this sense, a sect emerges out of an interaction between religion and social order. A sect essentially represents a protest against the dogmas, rituals of the parent religion and hence an urge for change. The twelfth century Veerasaiva movement, which emerged as a sectarian movement within Hinduism, challenged the Brahminical Hindu order and advocated an egalitarian social order.

Section 14.4, establishes that religion can change or stabilize the economic, political and cultural order. Protestant ethic of 16th and 17th centuries gave an impetus for spurt in modern rational industrial capitalism; religion, being a misdirected protest, stabilizes the social order by veiling the misery and exploitation. By veiling the exploitation, religion prevents conflict between the exploiters and the exploited. This is an argument from Marx. Religion can change the power structure or justify the existing mode of exercise of power. As far as cultural order is concerned, religious symbols may undergo a change in meaning in tune with social change. Religion may resist when there is an onslaught on people's understanding of time, space, good, evil and person.

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## 14.6 KEY WORDS

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**Social Order :** (i) Arrangement of institutions in the society, (ii) Arrangement of roles and statuses, (iii) A smooth, self-regulated, balanced, well-coordinated functioning of this 'structure'.

**Cultural Order :** A mesh of meaningful symbols.

**Economic Order** : A set of dynamic, co-ordinated institutions involved in production, distribution and consumption of goods.

**Cognitive Functions** : Religion's capacity to generate classifications, and concepts which human beings use in everyday understanding of the world.

**Intellectualist Function** : The propensity of religion to explain natural events like rain, famine, birth, death, menstruation etc.

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## 14.7 FURTHER READINGS

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Robertson, Roland 1970. *The Sociological Interpretation of Religion*, Oxford : Basil Blackwell.

Singer, Milton 1957. *Religion, Society and the Individual*, New York : Macmillan.

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## 14.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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- i) Religion can change the social order or stabilize it. This is because religion explains the natural processes like birth, death, menstruation, climate, rain and also supplies the concepts and categories to understand the world. Religion can justify misery, exploitation and oppression or it can be used to mobilize people against them.
- ii) Veerasaivism is a fine example, to illustrate that religion can change the social order. this 12th century movement, arose in protest against the Brahminical Hindu social order. This movement preached equality, fought against untouchability, and disseminated a positive attitude towards work.
- iii)
  - a) continuity
  - b) misery and inequalities
  - c) protest
  - d) change

### Check Your Progress 2

- i) According to Karl Marx, religion is a protest against exploitation and misery characteristic of the capitalist economic order, but it is a misdirected protest. Religion is a form of alienation, which also veils the misery and exploitation of the capitalist economic order. By veiling the exploitation and misdirecting protest, religion prevents conflict between the exploiter and the exploited. In this sense, religion stabilizes the social order.
- ii) Yes, meaning of religious symbols undergo change in tune with the social change. Especially this is the case, in political mobilization. For instance, when a militant interpretation of Hinduism comes to vogue, the auspicious Lord Ganesh of the Hindu Pantheon is given Spears, Trishuls and Swords in his hands.
- iii)
  - A) (b)
  - B) (c)
  - C) (a)
  - D) (e)
  - E) (d)