
UNIT 3 FUNCTIONALIST THEORIES OF RELIGION

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to

- understand what functionalism is
- differentiate between evolutionist and functionalist understandings of religion
- evaluate the functionalist theories
- do a functionalist analysis of religion of your choice.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

To begin with, let me congratulate you for deep and steady enthusiasm towards understanding religion in sociological terms. This course will help you in that endeavour.

Society is a complex reality. It is almost impossible to understand this reality wholly. Every one understands society in one's own way. All the same, we try to develop a commonly accepted way of explaining societal arrangements, known as institutions. Religion is a social institution. There are several ways of understanding religion. Evolutionism is one way of understanding it. In Unit 2 you came to know about it. In Unit 3, we shall discuss the functionalist way of analysing religion.

Let us commence by recalling evolutionism and critically analysing it; then you will be introduced to functionalism. Next, we will elaborate Durkheim's view of religion and try to identify it with the functionalist approach. Before summing up our discussion, we will present an example of the functionalist understanding of religion among the Coorgs of South India.

3.2 RECAPITULATING EVOLUTIONISM

Evolutionist understanding of religion, very much in fashion during the nineteenth century, rested on mixture of positivism, intellectualism and religious sentiments. The evolutionist theories serving from progressionist understanding of religions were most often unsupported by evidence. In other words, the history of religion in particular, and society in general, was constructed in a speculative manner with inadequate materials.

The evolutionist theories of religion explained religion in terms of individual thought processes or psychological assumptions (e.g. 'awe', 'wonderstruck', 'dream' etc.). This is unacceptable, said the critics of evolutionist theories. They considered religion a social phenomena. They argued that social phenomenon can be explained only in terms of social causes without using natural or individual psychological causes.

The evolutionists could not understand religion because they looked on religion as a mark of 'ignorance' and 'vehicle of irrationality'. They sought to explain the origin of religion and society by relying on the reports about or by observing the pre-modern or 'primitive' societies known in their times. Here there was an implicit assumption (which is also known as progressionist view) that the western industrialised societies (to which the scholars belonged) were more advanced and more civilised than the rest. The critics of evolutionism said that the assumption needed to be neutralised in order to build a universal theory. They questioned the correctness of haphazardly collected facts about primitive societies and gave importance to scientific collection of data. However, we should realize the significance of these early pioneering studies. They opened up a new area of research and made important statements upon which the later sociologists built their own theories to account for the presence of religion in society. You will learn more about this area of sociology as you read this unit further.

But the idea of function for assigning meaning to religious and other phenomena existed even before **ethnologists** and **ethnographers** published painstakingly collected data about primitive and nonprimitive societies. Early sociologists wrote about a functional relation between political, religious, economic and moral action. They argued that changes in any one of these areas brought corresponding changes in the others.

Later, with concerted efforts of Malinowski, and Radcliffe-Brown in England and Parsons and Merton in the U.S.A., functionalist approach gained popularity and made significant contributions to the study of religion. The concepts, which most functionalists used for their explanations of religious behaviour, were borrowed by them from Durkheim. He is not known to be a functionalist but his research on early forms of religion became a basis of functionalists to analyse the fieldmaterial collected by them. This is why in this unit we shall discuss in details the ideas of Durkheim and some of his contemporaries. But before taking up Durkheim's and his colleagues' approach to the study of religion, we shall briefly review the status of functionalism before Durkheim.

Activity 1

Read from page 7 to page 19 Block of ESO-03. If you do not have it acquire its copy from your study center and then write a note of 500 words on evolutionist and functionalist mode of understanding social phenomenon.

3.3 FUNCTIONALISM

In their search for general laws governing society, earlier scholars were trying to

construct conjecturally the historical development of human societies. Functionalists, on the other hand, tried to understand the functioning of contemporary societies. How does a society exist in an orderly manner was the foremost question in their minds.

3.3.1 What is Functionalism?

Let me ask you a question : How does a steam engine function? You might describe the functioning of steam engine as follows: Water is heated intensely to generate steam at a high pressure. The high pressure of steam in the tank moves the piston back and forth. Consequently, the wheel attached to the piston moves at a greater speed. Now, this is roughly, the way in which a steam engine functions or this is how the steam engine works. Now within this functionalist system, i.e., steam engine, there are various parts. These are all interconnected. In relation to the system these parts have specific functions to perform. If any of these parts gets damaged, the system, i.e. the steam engine, may not function at all or may function irregularly. The same story can be applied to society. As a functionalist would do, let us consider society as a system, within which there are various interconnected parts, i.e. institutions. For example, as an institution functions to 'produce' members for the society. The function of the school, which is another institution, is to train the members for future roles. Industry's function on the other hand is to produce goods necessary for the maintenance of society. If one of these institutions breaks down, the society will be in trouble. Isn't it?

For a functionalist, society is a system with interconnected parts. Within this system, parts perform certain functions, so that the systemic whole can be maintained or run. Now, the above version is a very simplified notion of functionalism. It has been simplified so that you will understand it easily. However, there are many different variations within the functionalist thinking itself. In Sociology, functionalism is developed by scholars like Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Talcott Parsons and Merton (for a detailed discussion on their theories of functionalism see Block 6 and 7 of ESO-03).

3.3.2 Traces of Functionalist Thinking

As explained in the earlier paragraph, if you want to do a functionalist analysis of any system, you have to ask as a starting point: What it does. What does a part



According to functionalism most ceremonies help to create and maintain order in society.

perform for the whole? How are the parts in the system interrelated? You must be wondering, why these questions were never asked, before the beginning of the twentieth century, particularly before Durkheim? As a matter of fact, before Durkheim, the question was already emerging in the writing of such scholars as Auguste Comte, Tocqueville and Herbert Spencer. They were already asking questions like, what can religion do for the maintenance and advancement of society? What kind of religion will perform necessary functions for the rapidly industrialising society?

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), a French Scholar, realised, very early that religion can perform certain important functions for society. During his time, it was widely accepted amongst scholars that religion does not foster or support democracy. However, in his study of American *Evangelical Protestantism*, Tocqueville established that it helped the growth of democratic spirit in America. Tocqueville proposed that Catholicism with modifications could foster democratic spirit in France. Auguste Comte, another French scholar, proposed a new 'religion of humanity' to develop greater commitment to society among French people.

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), an English philosopher, established functionalist thinking more systematically. He compared society to a human body. In the human body, as we know, there is natural co-ordination among the various organs. In the same way, in society various institutions must naturally cooperate amongst themselves. To be compatible with the rest of the institutions of the advanced, industrial society.

Malinowski, the famous functionalist, wrote about religion, science and magic and discussed their functions. Though he provided a wealth of material on primitive religious practices and beliefs, he did not add any new concepts to the study of religion. Radcliffe-Brown, another functionalist, talked about functions of religion. He relied heavily on the ideas of Durkheim (see Box 3.01). Durkheim's theory of religion is important for it gave impetus to further sociological research on religious phenomena.

Box 3.01

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), a French sociologist, is considered a father of modern sociology. He taught education and sociology at the University of Bordeaux later at Sorbonne. He was a leading intellectual figure in France and his influence was felt in such diverse field as law, history and economics. His work may be seen as a reaction to certain nineteenth century views about the nature of human affairs. For him, the society was prior to the individual and the social could not be reduced to the psychological. His most important works are. *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), *Society* (1897), and *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912).

Fustel de Coulange, a French historian and Robertson Smith, one time Professor of Arabic at Cambridge University, held their religion had its genesis in the very nature of primitive society. According to Robertson Smith (1927:227), all members of a clan of a tribe were thought to be one blood. The god of the clan was also thought to be of the same blood because he was conceived as the physical father of the clan-founder. In other words, the god was the clan itself. The concrete representation of this god was made in the form of totemic creatures. Sacrificing the totemic creation and partaking its flesh and blood was a sacred communion. Much influenced by this approach, Durkheim tried to show how religion arose out of the very existence of society. He described religion as a social fact (see Box 3.02).

Box 3.02

According to Durkheim (1895), the aim of sociology is to study social facts. He defines social phenomena in terms of those factors which are external to the individual and yet have a controlling effect on one's actions. He characterises social fact as

- i) being external to individual
- ii) exercising pressure on individual
- iii) being objective, in the sense that they cannot be defined by individuals to suit themselves.

As an example of a social fact we can take law which has all the above mentioned characteristics. When Durkheim says that in sociology we study social facts he means that we do not study individuals. This is so because he holds that societies cannot be a total sum of actions and intentions of individuals. Secondly he emphasises the moulding and constraining of individuals by their social settings. In his book *Rules of Sociological Method*, he has shown how law is a social fact. It is not dependent on individuals. It has to be followed and law breakers are punished.

He criticised those who explained religion in terms of individual psychology. He asked if religion had its origin in an illusion, how could it last for so long and how could it be found to exist universally? He argued that many primitive groups took for granted the so-called remarkable natural forces—sun, moon, sky, sea, etc. and looked on them as regular phenomena. He claimed that in contrast, in totemism, an early form of religion, rather ordinary creatures were worshipped. These were, for example, such small things as rabbits, worms, frogs, etc. which do not strike us as being awe-inspiring, mystical or impressive. In accounting for their significance he discovered the importance of religion in its social context. We shall in the following section see how Durkheim explained religion as a social phenomenon.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Give, in five lines two points of criticism of evolutionism.

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- ii) Explain, in five lines, the basic tenet of functionalism.

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3.4 RELIGION IN TERMS OF ITS FUNCTIONS

When scholars were disillusioned about religion, as we have seen in subsection 3.3, Durkheim (1858-1917) arose to explain the positive functions of religion for society. Durkheim was not satisfied by the evolutionist explanations, which failed to give religion its meaning as a social institution. Durkheim's major arguments about religion came out in a book, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. It was published in French, first in 1912, and was later translated into English in 1915.

Durkheim wanted to demonstrate social functions of religion by taking totemism as the test case. Totemism among the central Australian tribes, as represented in the ethnography of Spencer and Gillen, came handy for Durkheim. He chose totemism for analysis due to two reasons : first, he considered totemism to be an elementary form of religion; secondly, he considered that the sacred-profane distinction arose from the totemic practice.

3.4.1 Totemism : An Elementary Form of Religion

Totemism was an elementary form for Durkheim not because it came first historically. Totemism was simple in terms of its organisation and hence it came to be the elementary form. Also, totemism could be explained without borrowed features from any previous religion. In other words, features of totemism were unique to itself. It should be recalled that Durkheim rejected animism and naturism. Animism as well as naturism assumed that religion arose out of primitive people's ignorance about nature.

This in sociology the term 'totem' has a specific meaning. There are as we have seen several important aspects and conditions based upon which the totem is a symbol of the group or clan. That is to say that a 'totem' is pre-eminently Social and not an individual emblem.

Whereas Durkheim (1961:13) says that all religious 'are true in their own fashion' for the believers. He questioned the assumption that religion had its genesis in a mistake, an illusion. He asked if it was so, how could religion be so widespread and enduring?

Secondly, he questioned also the assumption that animism was found only in primitive societies. He pointed out that it was also found in such societies as China and Egypt. On the contrary according to Durkheim, the primitive groups took for granted ever recurring natural events and showed little interest in natural phenomena. He called naturism or worship of natural phenomena as a false explanation of religious behaviour.

Thus, criticizing the arguments of evolutionism in general, and naturism and animism in particular, Durkheim began to explain how totemism gives rise to the distinction between 'sacred' and 'profane'. Let us now examine what totem is and what the concepts of sacred and profane refer to.

3.4.2 Sacred versus Profane

Totemism is a system of beliefs and rites centered around the totem. The totem is very often an animal or a vegetable species or mythical ancestor. The totem is sacred; it is held in respect. The totem cannot be approached without proper rites and ceremonies. To approach the totem which is sacred, one has to purify oneself both internally and externally. But the object at the centre of totemic religion is not an animal or vegetable as such. Rather it is the pictorial representation of the animal or vegetable which is worshipped. Totem also serves as a symbol of the clan-

identity. Totem of the clan is also totem of its members.

Against the sacred world of totem lies the profane world. The profane world includes human beings and all that is not related with the sacred totem. Myths, legends, dogmas and beliefs represent the sacred totem, its power, virtues and relationship with the profane world. The sacred and profane are entirely different and the lines of separation are clearly demarcated. According to Durkheim (1964:38) distinction between the profane and sacred is 'absolute'. These two worlds are even hostile to each other.

Durkheim argues that, this type of sacred-profane dichotomy is common to all religions (see Box 3.03)

Box 3.03

Durkheim (1961:52) wrote about the sacred and the profane that All known religious beliefs...presuppose a classification of all things ...into two classes or opposed group, generally designated by two distinct terms.... profane and sacred.... by sacred things one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called gods or spirits; a rock, tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word, anything can be sacred..... The circle of sacred objects cannot be determined, then, once for all. Its extent varies infinitely, according to the different religions. That is how Buddhism is a religion: in default of gods, it admits the existence of sacred things, namely, the four noble truths and the practices derived from them.....

.... we must now show by what general characteristic they (sacred things) are to be distinguished from profane things....

One might be tempted, first of all, to define them by the place they are generally assigned in the hierarchy of things. They are naturally considered superior in dignity power to profane things.....

The opposition of these two classes manifests itself outwardly with a visible sign by which we can easily recognise the very special classification, wherever it exists.

It was earlier said that only under certain special circumstances, the profane can approach the sacred by performing certain. These rites are derived from beliefs. In other words, beliefs and rites are the two fundamental categories in which a religion is organised. This kind of dual organisation in terms of beliefs and rites has a special significance because it explains functions of religion, about which we shall learn in the next sub-section.

3.4.3 Functions of Religion

So far we have discussed how Durkheim criticised evolutionism, animism and naturism. Secondly, we discussed that defining totemism as an elementary form of religion, Durkheim found the sacred-profane dichotomy to be at the centre of any religion. The profane can contact the sacred only by performing certain rites. It must be made explicit that this division or opposition of the sacred and profane is such that it is found in different forms and degrees in various religions. These rites are derived from beliefs. The division of religious phenomena into two fundamental categories, namely, beliefs and rites, corresponds to the difference between thought and action. Hence we can speak in terms of cognitive and social functions of religion.

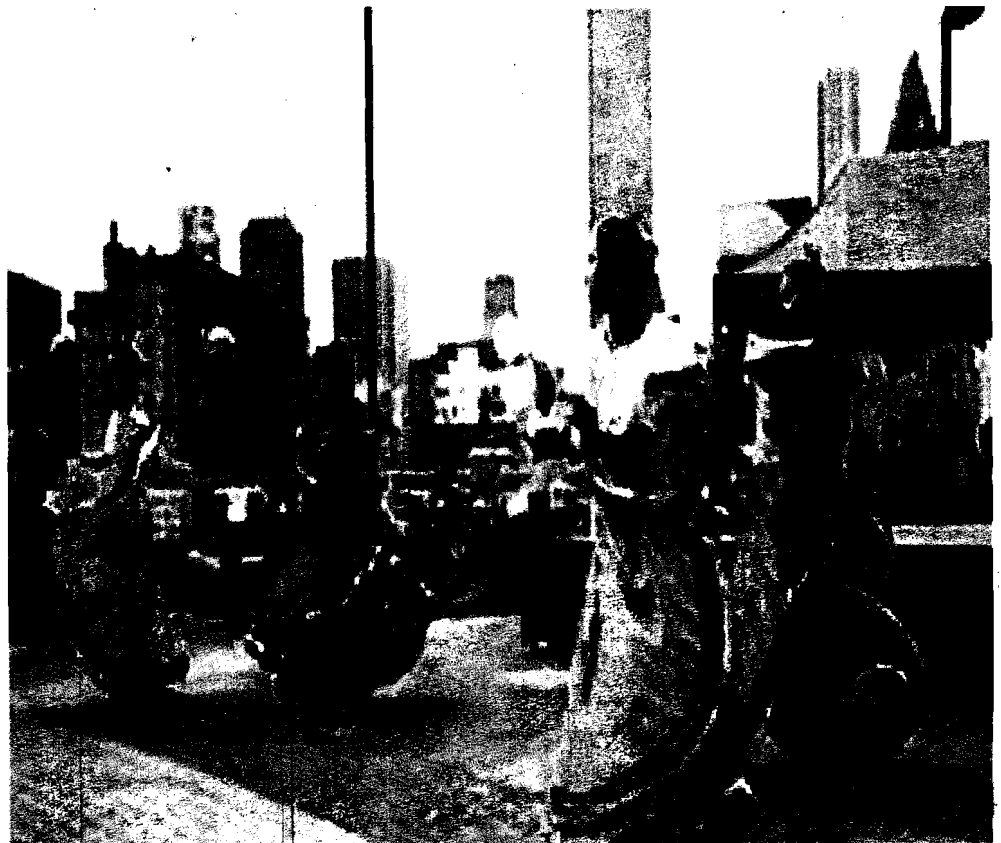
i) Cognitive Functions

Religion can mould people's thinking and so help them to live and adapt to their conditions of existence. One who participates in religious practices, emerges as a superior person with strength and vitality of face the world. This perception of religion has to be understood in the context of Durkheim argument that religious has continued to survive all along, because it has fulfilled certain needs. Religion generates a particular mental state within the individual, which raises one above oneself and helps us to lead a superior life.

Theories with science evoked a sharp criticism from Durkheim. He argued that the fundamental categories of science like time, space, number and cause, came out of one's religious quest. Said Durkheim (1964:9), "Philosophy and sciences were born of religion, it is because religion began by taking the place of the sciences and philosophy". Time, space and numbers in fact reveal the "rhythm of collective activity" towards the sacred. The categories like time, space, number, class, through which we understand the world, came out of the collective activities of the primitives towards the sacred. If that is so, these categories are collective representations. At the level of cognition, these emerge from collective response towards the sacred.

ii) Social Functions

According to Durkheim (1964:16) the collective representation are the result of 'an immense cooperation'. They emerge, when the whole community comes together, to enact certain rites in response to the sacred. The rituals are to two types: **positive** and **negative**. Negative rituals include a whole set of prohibitions to be observed to recreate the collective sentiment and worship the sacred. The positive rituals, on the other hand, indicate the meticulous 'preparations' to be undergone by the individual before approaching the sacred and participating in the community. For example, the initiation rites undergone by an individual, at the attainment of adulthood, denote a "total transformation" of the young person. Some of the initiation rites are



Colourful attire and stylized dance movements are a part of most rituals in world religions

painful but it is through the pain, one 'transforms' oneself and profane passes over to the sacred.

Now, let us try to understand what this 'sacred' means. 'Sacred' is something which is noble respected venerated and worshipped. Who creates this 'sacredness'? It is society which creates the 'sacredness' and sets the 'sacred' apart from the 'profane'. In other words, gods are derived from certain rites performed by human beings. Not only that, what is considered to be 'sacred' today may not be so tomorrow. Also it is a fact that when 'profane' approaches the sacred without due precautions, 'sacred' itself loses its value.

From the above, we understand that, the 'sacred' is the creation of society. If that be so, when society worships the sacred, it actually means that the society is worshipping itself. Isn't it? When a community comes together and performs certain rituals collectively, the collective sentiments are aroused. These collective sentiments are symbolised by the sacred object, set apart and venerated by the society. The set of rules and regulations, characteristics of the ritual, direct and transform the society into a 'moral' community.

3.4.4 Religion is Eminently Social: The Case of the Arunta

Let us now, support our discussion of the cognitive and social functions of religion through the case study of the Arunta. The Arunta is a tribe in Central Australia. Spencer and Gillen had originally studied this tribe earlier. Durkheim used their ethnographic notes to construct his argument regarding religion.

The Arunta tribe is divided into several clans. The clan is a group of people united by a name, into a common bond. The clan is not a group based on blood-relations. The name of the clan indicates its totem. Not only the clan but also individuals of the clan bear the name of the clan totem.

Totem is an emblem. It helps in establishing the identity of a person or group. Totem is employed in rituals and other religious ceremonies. Most important of all, the totem has a religious character. It is a sacred thing. (See the video programme on *Religious Symbols*).

The totem is engraved on pieces of wood or polished stone. Now, the piece of wood or the polished stone which bear the design of the clan totem becomes sacred. Its name is **churinga**. The **churinga** evokes religious sentiments. Women and uninitiated men should not even see the **churinga** from close distance. The place where the **churinga** is stored is called **ernatulunga**. The **ernatulunga** is a sacred spot. It is the sanctuary of the totemic group. It is a place of peace. If an enemy takes shelter in **ernatulunga**, he must be given asylum. The **churinga** heals the wounds. It cures diseases. It ensures the reproduction of the totemic species. It depresses or weakens the enemies. The power of **churinga** can be bestowed upon the efficient of rituals. The **churinga** is sacred because totem's design is engraved on it. In other words, the **churinga** is nothing but the soul or body of the ancestor. A totemic design is essentially a visual statement about the group membership and identity of those who engrave them.

In a sense totem is symbol. It represents something else. What is that? What does the totem stand for? Let us recall that totem helps in identifying the group. Totem is the emblem or sign representing the group. Ask Durkheim (1964:206), "If a totem is at once the symbol of god and society, is that not because God and Society are only one?". The meaning of the question is that the totem of the clan is nothing but the personification of clan itself. In other words, society is symbolised as the totemic God. This is possible because according to Durkheim, God is to worshippers, what society is to individuals. Both God and Society have overarching power over

the worshippers or the individuals. Hence Society, like God, comes to be worshipped. This analysis has had a great impact on the thinking of sociologists who were chronologically later than Durkheim. It was also the first contribution which explained religion as a social force and not just an illusion.

Religion finally functions for the society, i.e. transforms it into a moral community. In the guise of religion, it is the society which is being worshipped.

Activity 2

Write a short note of 500 words in order to show social functions of a religion, with which you are familiar.

3.4.5 A Critique of Durkheim's Understanding of Religion

By now, you would have understood that Durkheim tried to show the origin of religion. He argued that society gives rise to religion. Durkheim could not agree with scholars, who held that the origin of religion was based on what people thought as real. But traces of evolutionism are not completely absent in Durkheim's thinking. The fact that Durkheim has dealt with the functions of religion does not mean that he was a 'functionalist'. Durkheim's functionalism was simple one, very general in nature. It was after the 1920s, that functionalism came to be expounded systematically. The credit for that goes to Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Talcott Parson (see Block 6 of ESO-03).

Evans-Pritchard (1981) lists a number of criticism against Durkheim's thesis on religion.

- i) Sacred-profane dichotomy is not universal. Sacred and the profane are not always antithetical. Especially among the Vedda of Sri Lanka and Melanesians, sacred-profane dichotomy does not seem to exist.
- ii) Totem is not sacred to everyone in the community, it is sacred only for some.
- iii) Totem is not necessarily a clan religion.
- iv) Totem of the clan need not be the totem of the individual.
- v) Durkheim held that the origin and the cause of religion lie in the social domain and have nothing to do with sentiments of the individuals. He contradicted himself when he proposed that religion arises from collective sentiments aroused by community participation in rituals. Note the use of sentiments to account for the origin of religion.
- vi) In his theory Durkheim failed to give the weightage to individual and emotional aspects of religion.

As we look critically at Durkheim's work on religion, we need to also mention, though only in passing, the ideas of his contemporaries. More than contemporaries, they were his colleagues and students, the writers of the **annee Sociologique** school. Durkheim founded and edited the journal, *L'Annee sociologique*. Those who contributed articles to this journal came to be known as belonging to the **Annees Sociologique** school.

One of the well-known writers of this school was Marcel Mauss (1906) who wrote on the Eskimoes. In this study he showed sacred and secular dimensions of time by describing patterns of Eskimo life during the summer and the winter. He said that during the summer when ice in the sea melted away, the Eskimoes lived in smaller groups and pursued various activities. During the winter they could not

pursue hunting and lived in long houses. They had to form larger groups and live in a new social arrangement. During this phase of annual calendar, the Eskimos performed the religious ceremonies. Mauss argued that this pattern showed that religion was an outcome of social concentration and it was reinforced during the winter celebrations. This is exactly what Durkheim's thesis of religion is all about. So we can say that Mauss produced a perfect confirmation of Durkheim's ideas. But do remember that one illustration does not make a law and therefore we can treat this case only as an example of Durkheim's theory and cannot cite it as its proof.

In another essay, Hurbert and Mauss (1892) made a systematic study of Vedic and Hebrew sacrifice. Making study of the logical structure of the mechanism of sacrifice of animals, Hurbert and Mauss show how the act of sacrifice raises mental and moral energies of society. The act of renunciation in sacrifice strengthens social forces and the sacrifice receives the combined force of society. In a way, the social function of sacrifice is carried out for both the individual and the society. This is another example where we can see how conclusions are drawn from a certain social action. Here the conclusions are not derived from the analysis. This criticism should not, of course, stop us from appreciating the masterly analysis of sacrifice by Hurbert and Mauss.

Another member of the Annee Sociologique School, Robert Hertz (1960), made use of Durkheim's ideas of the sacred and profane. He related them to the opposition between the right and the left hands. The oppositions right and left has its parallels in equally established opposition between the male and the female, the powerful and the powerless, the lucky and the unlucky.

Van Gennep (1960), who was a contemporary of Durkheim, was ignored by Durkheim and his colleagues. He criticised Durkheim's theory of religion and observed in his book *Les Rites de Passage* (*The Rites of Passage*) that all around the world the crises of human life involve a great variety of rites. These rites represent the writing of the self with the group and the universe. Van Gennep's contribution to sociology was to point out that every important event in society especially birth marriage and death had a complex of symbols and ritual activities surrounding it. Van Gennep's views on religion show that even the critics of Durkheim had much to contribute to the study of religion. The very process of criticising Durkheim's ideas gave new insights into religious phenomena.

Our next Section takes us to both traditions. Anti-Durkheimian stream was represented by Malinowski while pro-Durkheimian stream was carried forward by Radcliffe Brown. In fact, Durkheim continued to wield influences over sociological studies of religion even after Radcliffe-Brown. Such scholars as Evans-Pritchard who criticised Radcliffe-Brown, continued to draw inspiration from the writing of the members of the Annee Sociologique school. These scholars became interested in studying magical and religious beliefs in order to identify people's understanding of underlying order in their world. They wanted to find out their ways of discovering and expressing that order. Efforts of this nature to understand religion will be subject of Unit 4 of this block.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) What are the basic arguments of Durkheim? Use ten lines for your answer.

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ii) What does that 'Churinga' represent for the Arunta? Use four lines for your answer.

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iii) Explain, in four lines, the significance of sacred-profane dichotomy.

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iv) Match the following:

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| A) Belief in spiritual beings | i) Durkheim |
| B) That which is set apart from Profane | ii) Initiation |
| C) Categories of time and space emerged from | iii) Churinga |
| D) The Elementary Forms of the Religion Life | iv) Animism |
| E) Wooden piece on which design of totem is engraved | v) Religious quest |
| F) Rite which transforms an adult | vi) Sacred |

3.5 GROWTH OF FUNCTIONALIST APPROACH

We do not label Durkheim as a functionalist, but we do label some those who were much influenced in one way or the other by Durkheim's ideas. Under the banner of functionalism, Malinowski criticised Durkheim's views on religion. Very much in the fashion of such evolutionists as Tylor and Frazer, Malinowski too wrote about the origin and development of religion. The difference was that they charged Durkheim with encouraging the acceptance of theories without much basis in ethnographic material. Here, we will first discuss, in brief, Malinowski's ideas on religion; we then move on to a brief consideration of Radcliffe-Brown approach to the study of religion. Unlike Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown was heavily influenced by Durkheim's ideas. Both scholars in their own ways were concerned with Durkheim's approach. Their views are discussed briefly.

3.5.1 The Role of Religion

Malinowski presented a slightly different argument from Durkheim. Again, you find that Malinowski, like Durkheim, was interested in the origin and development of religion. In so far as he asked questions about religion's genesis, he too was an

evolutionist. He became a functionalist when he began to observe and record what role religion played.

Malinowski had studied the Trobriand Islanders in the Western Pacific. The people here were mostly from fishing communities and had to constantly deal with hazardous expeditions for fishing and underwent experiences that could not be explained by them. Malinowski argued that the feelings of fear, anger, sadness, etc. that arose in the mind of primitive people on such occasions were overcome by resorting to religious activities or the performance of certain rituals that would help get over such unsure feelings. Religion functioned here to essentially help one to regain one's stability of mind and readjust to situations of emotional stress that had arisen. In other words, religion functioned as a 'tool for adoption' to any given situation. For example, when the islanders would set out for a long journey, they would perform rituals and magic on the boat so that it would not give them trouble on the way. Such an exercise was carried out in all kinds of situations of mental and physical instability. Ritual and magic have a very great influence on the activities of the society as a whole the rituals flourish greatly in times of acute stress and especially in all events that men are hard put to explain.

Asking similar questions which early evolutionists asked, Malinowski and his followers gave different answers. In this sense they understood religion in terms of its functions; their findings progressed beyond traditional answers to questions of origin and development of religion. They provided the functionalist alternative to evolutionist theories. Not content with simply observing and recording data about primitive societies, Malinowski's successor, Radcliffe-Brown, tried to analyse ethnographic data by using sociological concepts. He was attracted to the Durkheim sociology. Sub-section 3.4.2 deals with Radcliffe-Brown's attempts to organise his theoretical ideas around Durkheim's views on religion.

3.5.2 Social Continuity and Solidarity

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown tried to make Durkheim's theory of totemism into a more comprehensive view of religion. In an article, 'The Sociological Theory of Totemism', Radcliffe-Brown (1929:295-309) showed totemism to be a particular form of universalistic law operating in human society. The universal law is that anything related to material or non-material well being of a society is an object of religious attitude. For example, those who depend on dairy products have ritual attitude to dairy animals. Radcliffe-Brown did not accept explanations of the origin of religion in terms of psychology.

Evans-Pritchard (1965:74) is, however, critical of this position. He points out that in practice, while describing the occasions of dancing among the Andaman Islanders, Radcliffe-Brown explains religious behaviour mainly in terms of the personality of the dancer and mixture of feelings and actions in his dance which produce solidarity in the community. Secondly, on the basis of this case, Radcliffe-Brown generalises that a ritual attitude generates social cohesion and harmony. Evans-Pritchard (1965:74) objects to this tendency of generalising on the basis of one case. For example, the dances in Central Africa, he points out, often cause conflict and disharmony.

Thirdly, Radcliffe-Brown argues that religion functions to keep society together and its forms vary in accordance with types of society. For example, ancestor worship is commonly found in societies with lineage systems. But, then, Evans-Pritchard (1956:75) again, as if to prove Radcliffe-Brown wrong, points out that among some African groups, ancestor cult is found where no lineage system exists.

Evans-Pritchard criticises Radcliffe-Brown's functionalist approach to religion on the following bases

- i) Sociological explanations offered by Radcliffe-Brown did not take into account any negative evidence.
- ii) Radcliffe-Brown's generalised statements are quite vague in nature. They have very little scientific value because it is not possible to either prove or disprove them.

Evans-Pritchard criticised the functionalist approach to the study of religion. In addition he considered the possibilities for showing that certain religious systems are found in societies of a particular type. This was initially undertaken by Levy-Bruhl and later Evans-Pritchard also added new ideas to the sociological study of religion. Ideas of both Levy-Bruhl and Evans-Pritchard will be discussed in Unit 4. Here, we will discuss a case study, made by an Indian scholar, M.N. Srinivas. Srinivas was a student and colleague of Radcliffe-Brown and as such in his study of religion he used Durkheim's ideas via Radcliffe-Brown's theory of ritual (see Box 3.04).

Box 3.04

Beattie (1964:210) writes about Radcliffe-Brown's theory of ritual.

Since people's behaviour is largely determined by what they think to be important, the performance of ritual may have important social consequences. This was the central theme of Radcliffe-Brown's theory of ritual, which he derived from Durkheim. In *The Andaman Islanders* and elsewhere he argued that ritual's main social function is to express certain important social sentiments (or as we should now a days call them values), such as the need for mutual support and solidarity between the members of a community. Unless enough people held and acted on these values the society could not survive, and through the performance of ritual they are constantly in the minds of the performers, and so the maintenance of the social system is secured.

3.6 THE COORG RELIGION

It was pointed out in the last section of this unit, that religion is seen as strengthening solidarity in society. You also came to know that according to Durkheim, religion itself is a product of the collective sentiments aroused by the collective performance of rituals. This view was criticised by many scholars as being unsatisfactory in its explanation of the origin of religion. But Durkheimian understanding of religion via Radcliffe-Brown left a deep impact on M.N. Srinivas' study of religion among the Coorg. The Coorg are the inhabitants of the mountainous district of Coorg, in Karnataka. M.N. Srinivas, a pioneer Indian sociologist, conducted this study in the early 1940s.

Srinivas closely observed the social life of the Coorg, particularly their religious beliefs and practices. He argued that religious rituals and beliefs strengthen unity in the Coorg society at various levels. For a Coorg Hindu, there are three important social institutions. They are the *okka*, the village and the caste. Almost all Coorg are members of one or the other *okka*. *Okka* is a patrilineal group. The village is a cluster of several *okka* and within the village there are a number of hierarchically arranged caste groups.

Religion performs specific functions for these three social institutions. Most important function of all is the *solidarity function*. Each *okka* has a special set of rituals which are performed during festival and other ceremonial occasion. In the same way, village celebrate the festival of their patron deity and perform certain rituals. The village festival mark the differences between castes but also bring them together.

At the same time, they bring together several Coorg villages. Now let us elaborate on these functions of religion separately for the three social institutions listed above.

3.6.1 Solidarity of the *Okka*

Okka is a patrilineal grouping as mentioned earlier. Srinivas (1978:159) writes “A group of agnatically related males who descended from a common ancestor and their wives and children” constitute an *okka*. Only by birth one can become a member of the *okka*. In the society at large, individuals are generally identified by their *okka*.

Each *okka* has ancestral immovable property which is normally not divided. A person is prohibited from marrying within the *okka*. In other words, marriage is generally a bonding of two unrelated *okka*. The ancestral house of the *okka* is fairly large and has many rooms. Members of the *okka* live and grow together. They perform many rituals in unison, especially the rituals to propitiate the ancestors of the *okka*.

There are several occasions when, according to Srinivas (1978:125) “the unity and solidarity of an *okka* find expression in ritual”. Let me elaborate one such occasion i.e. marriage. A Coorg marriage involves two important rites. They are *murtha* and *sammanda* rites. *Murtha* is nothing but an auspicious occasion (time). The *murtha* is also indicated by rites performed by all relatives to the subject, groom or bride as the case may be.

A Coorg marriage has the *murtha*, performed on the most auspicious time of the auspicious day. At the centre of *murtha* rite lies the offering of milk by the relatives to the bride or groom in a *kindi* (a special type of vessel). If the mother of the groom or bride is not widowed, she is the first to offer milk. After the elaborate *murtha* rite is performed thrice, comes the *sammanda* ritual. The first two *murtha* rites bring at one place the groom/bride and his/her kindred. The third *murtha* rite brings the groom and bride’s kindred together for participation in marriage rituals.

The *sammanda* ritual marks the transfer of an individual from one *okka* to another. A person can be a member of only a single *okka* at a time. After marriage, the bride leaves her native *okka* and acquires the membership of the conjugal *okka*. If she becomes a widow, again a *sammanda* ritual may be performed and her membership transferred back to the native *okka*. The *sammanda* ritual comprises an elaborate system of rites. In a nutshell, it is a pledge undertaken publicly by two *okka*, involved in marriage, under the eyewitness of two friendly *okka*.

Apart from marriage, there are several festivals, feasts of village-deities, and occasions when ancestors of the *okka* are propitiated. During these celebrations, a complex set of rituals are performed, which express and strengthen the solidarity of the *okka*.

3.6.2 Village and Caste Solidarity

The social differences in the village community are expressed during village festivals, when members of different castes serve different functions. At the same time, the unity between *okka*, castes and villages also finds expression through religious customs and rituals.

During the harvest festival, every *okka* in the village sends all the adult males to participate in the collective dances. At the end of the festivals of the village deities, there is a collective hunt, to which all the *okka* send their adult males. The collective dance and hunt canalise the inter-*okka* rivalry present in the village,

thereby preventing the destruction of social order, observed Srinivas.

The festival of village deity commences when the villagers take a vow collectively to observe certain restrictions till the end of festival. The restrictions include prohibition of today drinking and slaughter of animals within the village boundary. The prescriptions include keeping the houses clean, lighting the sacred wall-lamp of the house, and joining the singing and dancing. At the end of the village festival, there is a dinner for the entire village. This village dinner is called *urorme* or village harmony. These fact of solidarity of the Coorgi *okka* is found reflected in other village studies in India. In fact village solidarity requires the frequent meeting of members of a village society and also dealing with occasions of stress, tension, and trauma. On such occasion it is religious explanations and ritual which have to be involved and practiced.

Caste finds an expression in the village festival. Srinivas point out the instance of Ketrappa festival in Bengur. During the festival the high caste members bring fowls and pigs as offering to the deity. The fowls are beheaded by a Coorg and the pigs by a Panika. But the animals offered by the lower castes like Meda and Poley, are not decapitated by either a Coorg a Panika. Only a Meda can decapitate the offerings presented by the lower castes. Their are several such instances where caste hierarchy is expressed and Srinivas mentions several of them in his study.

Calender festivals like the harvest festival require the cooperation from several *nad*. *Nad* is a cluster of villages. Rites necessary to prevent epidemics are performed at both the *nad* and village level. To rouse the wrath of a *nad* or a village, it is enough to attack its temple. To take another example, when festivals of certain deities are celebrated, it is customary for certain temples located in other villages to send gifts. Thus religious festivals and rituals unite caste, *okka* and village of the Coorg society.

Check Your Progress 3

i) Explain briefly the significance of *murtha* and *sammamda* rituals.

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ii) How does the festival of village-deity strengthen the solidarity of the Coorg village?

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iii) Mark T for True and F for False against the following statements.

a) *Sammamda* ritual strengthens the solidarity between two villages.

T F

d) Village festivals sometimes express caste differentiations.

T F

c) A Coorg marriage is necessarily a relationship between two different, unrelated *okka*.

T F

3.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit primarily aimed at grasping the functionalist understanding of religion. We started by recollecting the evolutionist theories.

Functionalism emerged as a sequel and challenge to evolution. The seeds to functionalist thought were traced to early sociologists. Then, the meaning of functionalism was elaborated. Functionalism is way of looking at social reality by tracing the functions or utility or religious practices in maintaining the unity and strength of a social group.

Next, Durkheim's understanding of religion was discussed in detail. Firstly, Durkheim chose totemism because the found it so bear relation to the social order, secondly, according to Durkheim totemism has features unique to itself, which are not borrowed. Dealing with the functions of religion it was shown that religion has a cognitive function, by which it helps one to adjust to the exigencies of everyday life. Religion performs many social functions. It transforms the society into a moral community. When society worships God (Whose creation God is), it worships itself. An illustration of the totemic practices of the Arunta tribe was given to explain the arguments. We discussed, in brief, the ideas of Durkheim's contemporaries.

Further, Durkheim's understanding of religion was critically evaluated. It was argued that his sacred-profane dichotomy does not seem to be universal, and his thesis about religion still rested on an individual-psychological explanation rather than on a social cause. This criticism was followed by an account of further growth of functionalist approach to the study of religion. We discussed the ideas of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown.

The concluding section described the functions of religious rituals and festivals among the Coorg. Among the Coorg, the domestic cult of 'okka' in general, and marriage rites in particular, strengthen the solidarity of the okka. The village festivals and festivals of village-deities were shown to strengthen inter-okka, inter-caste, inter-village solidarity in the Coorg society. This was given here as an example of a functional study of religion.

3.8 KEY WORDS

Agnatic: relationship through male descent or on the father's sided.

Agnosticism: belief that nothing can be known about God.

Animism: theory which holds that religion is belief in spiritual beings.

Belief: a state or habit of mind in which trust or confidence is placed in some person or thing. In this unit, it refers to a rule or body of rules about religion held by a group.

Catholicism: the faith, practice or system of Catholic Christianity.

Churinga: piece of wood or stone on which design of the totem is engraved.

Clan: groups of men and women united by the name of a totem.

Conjecture: statement without proof.

Coorg: a mountainous district in Karnataka

Ethnography: a descriptive account of the way of life a particular people.

Ethnology: the comparative study of the elements of culture in many societies.

Evangelical Protestantism: religious denomination of Christianity which emphasises salvation by faith in atoning death of Jesus Christ through personal conversion, the authority of scripture and the importance of preaching as contrasted with ritual.

Functionalist: one who believes that society is a system of interrelated parts; the functioning of the parts has consequences for the whole system.

Function: consequence of a part for the system.

Murtha: a Coorg ritual performed at the most auspicious time of the auspicious day.

Negative rites: interdicts or taboos to be observed before approaching the sacred.

Okka: group of agnatically related Coorg males, descended from a common ancestor, with their wives and children.

Positive rites: preparations or purifactory ceremonies undergone before approaching the sacred.

Profane: that realm which is kept away from and in opposition to the sacred. In other words, profane is the world of human beings.

Rites: prescribed modes of action for a ceremony.

Sacred: the world of the supreme, the venerated, the Holy. According to Durkheim, it is kept away from the profane.

Sammanda: an elaborate Coorg ritual which signifies the transfer of membership of an individual from one okka to another.

Totem: an animal or vegetable or a mythical ancestor. It symbolises the clan and is sacred.

Universal Theory: Theory which applies to the whole of humanity.

3.9 FURTHER READING

Picking, W.S.F., 1984. *Durkheim's Sociology of Religion*. Routledge and Kegan Paul:London.

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

Srinivas, M.N., 1978. *Religion and Society Among the Coorgs of South India*. Media Promoters:Mumbai.

3.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) a) evolutionism is based on conjectures and gives explanations without adequate evidences.
- b) evolutionism very often tries to give nonsocial and individual-psychological explanations.
- ii) Functionalism believes that society is a system of interrelated parts. The activity of the parts have consequences for the maintenance of the whole system.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Basic arguments of Durkheim are as follows
 - a) Sacred-profane dichotomy is at the centre of religion, particularly totemism. From profane's attitude towards the sacred emerged the fundamental categories of thought like time, member and class.
 - b) Religion helps human being to understand the world and to adapt to the crises of life.
 - c) Religion and God are creations of society. When society worship God, it worship itself and in the process becomes a single moral community.
- ii) Churinga is a wooden piece or stone on which the totem is designed. The churinga is sacred. It is the symbol of Arunta clan's identity. It can cure sickness and defeat enemies. It is the symbol of peace.
- iii) The sacred-profane dichotomy gives rise to fundamental categories of thought. Moreover, due to the rules and regulations to be followed before the profane can approach the sacred, society becomes a moral community.
- iv) A) (iv); B) (vi), C) (v) D) (i); E) (iii); F) (ii)

Check Your Progress 3

- i) *Murtha* is a ritual performed in a marriage at the most auspicious time. At the centre of *murtha* ritual lies the offering of milk in a *kindi* to the subject of the celebration. Three *murtha* are performed. The first unites the bride and her relatives, the second the groom and his relatives. The last *murtha* unites the bride and the groom's kindred. In a similar way, the *sammanda* ritual strengthens the solidarity between the two okka (the bride and the groom) and their friendly okka.
- ii) During the village-deity's festivals, there are several customs which bring different okka, castes together. For example, to the collective-hunt at the end of the festival, all okka have to send their adult males. At the festival, each okka and castes (low or high) have a definite role to play. At the end of the festival, there is a 'harmony-dinner' held for the whole village.
- iii) a) F
- b) T
- c) T