CHAPTER II
THE PRIEST: CONCEPT AND EVOLUTION

1. The Concept of the Priest/Priesthood

In most common parlance, the priest is a religious functionary whose role is to administer an established religion - to celebrate the traditional rituals, practices, and beliefs. Two essential features characterize him, namely regular cult, and inherence in a religious institution. Weber explains that "It is more correct for our purpose, in order to do justice to the diverse and mixed manifestations of this phenomenon, to set up as the crucial feature of the priesthood the specialization of a particular group of persons in the continuous operation of a cultic enterprise, permanently associated with particular norms, places and times, and related to specific social groups." The first feature implies that "The main function of the priest ... is cultic... Worship, as the very expression of religious experience, however primitive or rudimentary its form may be, is the main concern of the priest. He guarantees the right performance of formalized acts of worship." The priest mediates between God and humans; he not only interprets the divine will but also regulates and strengthens the relation between God and his fellow human beings. The basis of his existence and authority is a continuous and regular communion with the Divine. "For the priesthood regular ritual (liturgical) observance and a fixed theology are essential." Weber reiterates that there can be no priesthood without a cult,

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50Ibid., pp. 360-2.
although there may well be a cult without a specialized priesthood because a rationalization of metaphysical views and a specifically religious ethic are missing in the case of a cult without priests.\textsuperscript{51}

The second essential characteristic of the priest is his linkage with an organized religion, and legitimation by religious authorities. An extended, cross-cultural description of the priest is, "any religious specialist acting ritually for or on behalf of a community."\textsuperscript{52} The priest inheres in a religious organization as a representative of that establishment, and his actions mediate between its traditions and the people.\textsuperscript{53} Differing from other related role types, "the priest serves the altar, in the temple or shrine, as the representative of the community in his relations with the gods and the sacred order by virtue of the status and its functions that have been conferred upon him at his ordination, bestowing its sacredness and attendant taboos."\textsuperscript{54} Bendix interprets Weber, and reiterates that the priest serves in a holy tradition, and "even when the priest possesses a personal charisma, his function is legitimate only by virtue of a regular organization of worship."\textsuperscript{55} About the Levitical priests of Judaism, Brown points out that even "if a man was born into the priestly tribe, he still had to be installed


in the priestly office. Often the priest is the official representative of a religion. Greenwood, while affirming that the priest is called to be a witness, says, “The priest is required personally to be the representative of all the other members of the local church within which she (the priest) presides to the wider community.”

Preparation and education play an important role in priesthood. The systematic training of priests is intended to help them to develop the faculties and abilities required for the performance of cults. It centres in the development and maintenance of the proper communion with the numen, from which the mana or ‘sanctity’ of the priests results. While ascetic practices are to bring body and will under the necessary control, meditation and prayer are destined to prepare the soul, and instruction and study to train the mind. History of the development of religions evidences that great systems of knowledge and schools of learning of various disciplines have emerged in association with centres of the training of priests. The rational training and discipline of priests is distinguished from the combination of partly “awakening education” using irrational means and aimed at rebirth, and partly training in purely empirical lores of magicians.

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The Priest and Related Role Types

The identity of the priest may be better comprehended by differentiating it from other related role types. The priest is distinct from the shaman. The term shaman comes from Siberian Tungus noun saman which signifies "one who is excited, moved, raised." As a verb it means "to know in an ecstatic manner." Shaman is a man with "a high degree of nervous excitability" (frequently an epileptic). He is the charismatic figure par excellence - one who actually displays the presence of the sacred while in a state of ecstatic trance. Weston LaBarre writes, "the real difference between shaman and priest is who and where the god is, inside or out."62

The Priest is not the magician. The Magician in present-day society is one who makes visible things disappear, or invisible things appear as a means of entertainment. But that has not been the case always. According to Wach, magic connotes forcing the numen to grant what is desired, while religion, with which priests are associated, means submission to and worship of the divine power upon which man feels dependent. Magician's authority is proportionate to his fulfilment of the expectations of his clients. His prestige is less firmly

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61 Charisma denotes "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader." Cf. Max Weber, The Theory of Social and Economic Organization, trans. A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947; Free Press Paperback Edition, 1964; 1966), pp. 358-9.

established and more dependent upon his professional 'success' than that of the prophet. On the one hand Weber observes that in many religions, including Christianity, the concept of the priest includes a magical qualification. But on the other hand, he concurs with Wach in asserting that the priest is a functionary of a regularly organized and permanent enterprise concerned with influencing the gods by means of worship, in contrast with the individual and occasional efforts of magicians who coerce gods by magical means. While the priest operates in the interests of his organization, the magician is self-employed. Moreover, the professional equipment of special knowledge, fixed doctrine, and vocational qualifications of the priest bring him in contrast with sorcerers, prophets and other types of religious functionaries who exert influence by virtue of personal gifts (charisma) made manifest in miracle and revelation.

The priest is distinct from the prophet. The prophet is someone who confronts the powers that be and the established ways of doing things, claiming to be taken seriously on religious authority. Weber finds that "the personal call is the decisive element that distinguishes the prophet from the priest. The latter lays claim to authority by virtue of his service in a sacred tradition, while the prophet's claim is based on personal revelation and charisma. It is no accident that almost no prophets have emerged from the priestly class..." The priest, in

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65 Differing from Weber, Wach observes that, "It should be remembered that frequently spiritual and prophetic characters in the highest degree are found among priests. Several Hebrew prophets have emerged from their ranks (eg., Ezekiel and Zechariah)." He adds that prophets usually come, not from the aristocracy, the learned, or the refined; but from the simpler folks, and are marked by frugality and simplicity. Cf. Wach, *Sociology of Religion*, p. 361; p. 302.
clear contrast dispenses salvation by virtue of his office. Emphasising the distinctness of prophetic call, Wach opines, "The consciousness of being the organ, the instrument, or mouthpiece of the divine will is characteristic of the self-interpretation of the prophet." Furthermore, Weber distinguishes between two types of prophets: exemplary prophets who point out the path to salvation by exemplary living, usually by a contemplative and apathetic-ecstatic life, and the emissary prophets who address their demands to the world in the name of a god. Naturally these demands are ethical, and often of an active ascetic character. Vernon observes that prophets usually appear during periods of unrest, when the established value systems are being challenged. They find little welcome at peaceful times.

According to Nisbet, the prophet and the magician have certain common features, namely, secret powers and assumption of importance in times of collective crisis or personal difficulty. But they do differ.

But whereas the central function of the prophet is that of interpretation of the sacred tradition and of gaining access to the deity in ways denied the bulk of populace, the central function of the magician is that of effecting exceptions to the natural order... The magician's role is that of the doer - but what he does is reserved for times of crisis and for activities which are affected by risk or uncertainty of outcome. His role is the outcome of special knowledge that he holds to himself and to his legitimate descendants.

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67 Wach, Sociology of Religion, p. 347.


knowledge that he holds to himself and to his legitimate descendants.\(^7\)

It is not viable either to make categorical distinctions among these role types, or even to grade them in ways universally acceptable to all religions. At any rate, Wach detects the uniqueness of priesthood in the comprehensive nature of the activities of priests. "The institution of the priesthood is inferior to the great types of personal religious charisma, but the priestly is the most comprehensive of all specifically religious activities in the history of man. The sociological implication and import of this activity is accordingly very far-reaching."\(^7\)

A healthy, or at times even unhealthy, competition is noted in certain religious traditions among these role types. This may occur between two persons belonging to different role types, for instance, the priest and the prophet, or it may even be within one person, challenged with a role-set or multiple roles. In Buddhism tension has existed between holy men (monks), given to cultivation of wisdom, mental concentration and ethical virtue, and priestly ritual specialists. The Sanskrit and Pali terms, *Bhiksu* and *Bhikku*, meaning beggar or mendicant, do not connote a priestly role as such.\(^7\) Weber speaks of a similar problem between monasticism and hierocratic charisma in Christianity. "... the inherent tensions emerge, the more genuine monasticism


is independent of institutional charisma because its own charisma is immediate to God. The combination of three role types - the priest, the king and the prophet - in the role type of the Christian priest today seems to leave room for a similar conflict.

2. The Evolution of Priesthood

It is not easy to ascertain exactly the evolution of the role of priests in different religions, a chief difficulty being cross-cultural use of the terms the priest and priesthood. Often terms with European meanings and linguistic derivations have been applied to a range of phenomena worldwide. Besides, the division of labour that existed among the priestly class in early societies is not sufficiently clear to us. However, a glance at the history of religions rather easily brings home to us certain similar features and stages in the process of the evolution of priesthood.

The Journey From the Natural Priesthood to the Professional Priesthood in Religions

Priesthood is said to owe its origin to the universal need of mediation of superhuman assistance, felt by humankind in the struggle of life. In its evolution we note two phases, namely the phase of the natural priesthood and the phase of the professional or regular priesthood. There are indications to affirm that originally everyone invoked the gods each for oneself. In the early times, worship was confined to the deified members of the kindred, and later to those of tribes. Then the heads of families or tribes most spontaneously performed the

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worship was confined to the deified members of the kindred, and later to those of tribes. Then the heads of families or tribes most spontaneously performed the priestly role because they as the oldest and most experienced members of the family stood closest to the ancestors. When powers of nature also began to be worshipped and the group of worshippers extended beyond a family, the regular priesthood was initiated. As everyone is not equally proficient in mediation, the expertise of professionals, supposed to possess greater knowledge and power is sought to secure better results. But to a very great extent both the forms stayed intermingled. Gradually those proficient in interpreting the wishes of gods and practising magical arts won the confidence of people and attained a certain pre-eminence, and formed a special class.

Among some peoples certain classes who had unmistakable priestly affinities - those who, when in a state of ecstasy, are believed to be inspired by the gods, those ministering in famous shrines or sanctuaries, those who work miracles - were the forerunners of a regular priesthood. When rituals lost their simplicity, professional priesthood became even more necessary.

Priestly functions are exercised among identical groups by their heads or leaders; such as the father in the family, the chieftain in the clan or tribe, the king in the nation or people. With the growing development and differentiation of social organizations and stratification, certain cultic functions of the leader are associated with special individuals or professional groups, and as a result, professional magicians, diviners, and even prophets emerge in the more highly differentiated “primitive” societies. [These functions are referred to as semi-priestly.] ... With the increasing complexity of cultural and sociological conditions, professional differentiation takes place, and a professional priesthood appears. ²⁴

²⁴Wach, Sociology of Religion, p. 364.
The history of several religions testifies to an evolution of priesthood from the natural to the regular or professional. In the case of Hinduism, for example, Dr. Radhakrishnan maintains that,

The original Aryans all belonged to one class, every one being priest and soldier, trader and tiller of the soil. There was no privileged order of priests. The complexity of life led to a division of classes among the Aryans. Though to start with each man could offer sacrifices to gods without anybody's mediation, priesthood and aristocracy separated themselves from the proletariat... When sacrifices assume an important role, when the increasing complexity of life rendered necessary division of life, certain families, distinguished for learning wisdom, poetic and speculative gifts, became representatives in worship under the title of Purohita, or one set in front. In view of their great function of conserving the tradition of the Aryans, this class was freed from the necessity of the struggle for existence... The Brahmins are not a priesthood pledged to support fixed doctrines, but an intellectual aristocracy charged with the moulding of the higher life of the people.  

It is pertinent to remark here that priests and cults had not been a sine qua non in all religions at all times. In the case of early Buddhism, for instance, the possibility of cultic priesthood was very remote. "Buddhism had no order or ritual of sacrifice to require the services of an officiating priest, with expert knowledge of the modes and significance of the rites." In fact Buddhist scriptures do mention instances wherein the Buddha himself ridiculed ritualistic practices of Brahmin priests. But already during its early history in China, when confronted by the strong cultic traits of Confucianism, Buddhism adopted cultic

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76 A.S. Geden, "Priest, Priesthood (Buddhist)," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1994).
practices. Hinduism speaks of the Teacher-Brahmin, the Priest-Brahmin, and the Superman-Brahman.

Professional priesthood exists in two forms, namely the hereditary and the vocational. According to the former, priesthood is the privilege of a particular family or tribal lineage. The Jewish Levitical priesthood, the Hindu Brahmanical priesthood and Zoroastrian priesthood are a few examples. Vocational priesthood recruits candidates from the pool of its promising young members, on the basis of devotional, intellectual and moral qualities. Professional priests distinguish themselves by special costumes, long hair, separate language and some ascetic regulations such as sexual control and fasting. Along with institutionalization, elements such as initiation rites and training assumed importance. While in the past most religions - Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity - have reserved priesthood to male members, recent trends in certain sections of religious membership such as the Anglican Church have been found to advocate women priesthood. While many religions in their history have been found to move to and from priestly celibacy for various reasons, the Latin Rite of Roman Catholicism is one of the strongest in its favour in contemporary times.

As history evolves, in the great world religions, the representatives of the priesthood are organized into a highly complex structure in which a more or less

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differentiated order of groups corresponds to the priestly hierarchy with its various activities. At the start the divisions were on simpler grounds such as the natural group (clan, tribe, people), the local group (village, town, district), and the political group (nation). Later, priests are connected with the formation of specifically religious organizations, temporally integrated by the personal charisma of the priestly leader alone, or organized as institutional units like the parish.80

**The Sacred Versus the Secular Powers**81

According to the nature of the governance of a country, Weber identifies three types of relation between the secular and the sacred powers in the history of the world. While in the first type, a ruler is legitimated by the priests, in the second the high priest is also the king, and in the third, the secular ruler exercises supreme authority in sacred matters too. Thus while some countries had kings who were also priests, some others had priests who were also kings.82 Even in Islam that, unlike most other religions, does not have a class of priests or clergy, in the strict sense of the term,83 we find that there was a time when the roles of *imam* (the leader of the prayers in the worship rites in mosques) and ruler of the place were assigned to the same individual.

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When a governor was appointed to a province, he was also appointed as Imam to lead the prayers, and this practice continued for a long time. In fact, the honour of leading the prayers (imamat) in Islam was great as the honour of kingship, and the two offices, the office of the spiritual leader and that of the temporal leader were combined in one person for a long time. As the ruler himself was the Imam at the centre, so were his governors the Imams in the different provincial headquarters. The priest and the present-day mullah had no place in early Islam.  

According to Weber, in hierocratic domination, priestly power seeks ascendancy at the cost of the political power. Often the latter is presented as an inevitable evil, permitted by God due to the sinfulness of the world, and which believers should resign to but refrain from. At times it is projected even as a God-given tool for the subjection of anti-ecclesiastic forces. “In practice, therefore, hierocracy seeks to turn the political ruler into a vassal and to deprive her/him of independent means of power ...” Meanwhile, hierocracy makes every attempt to protect itself: an autonomous administrative apparatus, a tax system (tithes), legal forms (endowments) for the protection of ecclesiastic landholdings, bureaucratization of administration, and development of office charisma at the cost of personal charisma.

In Weber’s mind, the extreme opposite of any kind of hierocracy is Caesaro-papism - the complete subordination of the priestly to the secular powers. Herein religious affairs are but a branch of political administration. The political rulers fulfill these obligations either directly or with the assistance of the state-maintained priestly professionals. Caesaro-papism is nowhere found in

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its purest form. As a rule priestly charisma compromises with the secular power either tacitly or even through a concordat. On the whole, the general picture of the relationship between the two, as portrayed by Weber is one of a cold war. "Everywhere state and society have been greatly influenced by the struggle between military and temple nobility, between royal and priestly following. This struggle did not always lead to an open conflict, but it produced distinctive features and differences."  

According to Aberbach, even though there are important differences between the sacred and the secular, history of religion testifies to a close parallel between the two: while even in its secular forms, charisma has a religious dimension, traditional religious charisma is rarely devoid of political and other significance. "Political charisma draws on the language, the spirit and even the ideological conviction of religion. Charismatic religious leadership is no less infused with politics. The devotees of religious charismatics are inspired not only by their message but also by their political skill and military success."  

The major religions of the ancient world were all official State religions. Many of the great political charismatics were born into families at least nominally religious, were educated in religious schools, and had their outstanding qualities associated with religious leadership: Washington's personal humility, Garibaldi's asceticism, Robespierre's propensity for solitude and meditation. He concludes that, "the many parallels between religious and political charisma mean that in

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96 Ibid.

practice the two are often indistinguishable.\textsuperscript{88} The linkage between charismatic political leaders and figures of religious authority - priest and prophet, saviour and messiah - though varying in intensity, is little surprising.\textsuperscript{89} R. Robertson notes the two simultaneous processes of quite drastic politicization of religion during the past fifteen years, and the 'religionization' of government which denotes the involvement of the modern state in 'deep' issues of human life, and the ways in which the state-organized society has become, in varying degrees, an object of veneration and 'deep' identification.\textsuperscript{90}

It is challenging to note here that in the evolution of most, if not all, religions, priesthood was seldom always confined to cultic activities. Priests perform many other functions, directly or indirectly related to cultic functions. He is the guardian of traditions and the keeper of the sacred knowledge and of the technique of meditation and prayer. He is the custodian of the holy law, corresponding to the cosmic moral and ritual order. As an interpreter of this law, the priest may function as judge, administrator, teacher, and scholar, and formulate standards and rules of conduct. Since he performs the sacred rites, he contributes towards the development of sacred song, writing, literature, music, dance, sacred painting, sculpture and architecture. As the guardian of tradition, the priest is also the wise man, the adviser, educator, and philosopher. In the extent of the performance of these multifarious functions, there exists

\textsuperscript{88}ibid., p. 39. 

\textsuperscript{89}ibid., p. 42

difference among religions according to their stage of evolution from primitive civilizations to the highly developed ritualistic religions.  

The Babylonian priests had much to do with the interpretation not only of moral and religious law, but also with many of the civil enactments. It was the duty of some of them to receive the tithes, and to certify that they had been paid. It is said of the Shinto priests that they “not only serve in the performance of formal shrine rituals but also bear responsibility for such administrative tasks as the upkeep and management of shrine facilities and finances... (After the Second World War), great expectations are placed on them as well for activities in the areas of social welfare and education.” Among the Indo-Aryan-speaking invaders of Northwestern India in the middle and late second millennium BCE, the priestly social class was “responsible not only for a wide range of cultic functions but also for the composition and preservation of the sacred traditions of oral poetry.” The Rigveda mentions the purohita (the domestic priest of the king or of some wealthy noble) who was not only in the constant and intimate service of the king, but was closely concerned with the king in his more worldly functions. The ethic of compassion (karuna) was the

91 Wach, Sociology of Religion, pp. 365-6.
95 Visvamitra, Vasistha, and others appear to have taken part in their priestly capacity in the wars of their kings and the hymn x. xcvi. records the activity of Devapi for his master Santanu and its success. Cf. A. Berriedale Keith, “Priest, Priesthood (Hindu),” Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics (1994).
fundamental motivating force of Buddhism. So the Buddhist monks have traditionally filled the role of spiritual advisers and teachers of the laity. Now it is not uncommon to find sangha social services in Theravada countries like Thailand and Sri Lanka.95

In Judaism, besides cultic functions, priests had oracular functions, therapeutic functions, instructional and juridical functions, and administrative and political functions. In fact, history testifies that during the period of the Second Temple, when Judaea and Jerusalem were under the domination of foreign empires, the priesthood of Jerusalem played an important political role, the priests serving also as leaders of Jewish communities.97 In Islam there is properly no caste, class, or profession which monopolizes the performance of religious rites: when these were at first performed in public, the leader was properly the chief of the community, and name imam, 'leader in prayer' is therefore used for 'sovereign,' 'chief authority,' and the like. The sovereign of the capital took the lead in prayer.98

On account of the direct and immediate contact that priests have with those who depend on him for mediation of the divine, priests come to exert tremendous influence on them. Not only in hierarchically graded ecclesiastical bodies but also in religious groups of more or less egalitarian bodies, the religious leader may become implicitly trusted, rightly revered, and

indispensable guides of their followers. From originally a primarily religious influence, the influence extends to moral, social, cultural, and political spheres.99

The history of religions has sufficient evidence to show that a degeneration of priests and priesthood has been part and parcel of almost all religious traditions at one time or other. Scholars of Indian thought have observed the shift from the simple offerings of the early Vedic times to the complicated and ritual-ridden sacrifices of the Brahmana period. Persuasion of gods give way to compelling of gods while the sacrifice was exalted even above the gods. Introducing a distinctly magical element into the rituals, "priest and prayer henceforward become transformed into magician and spell."100 Speaking of Nambutiris who were the temple priests in Kerala, Thulaseedharan says that it was remunerative services that attracted them. They lived in exuberant comfort and luxury. Though they were to be guardians of the ethics of society, they did nothing of that sort. "On the contrary, they were eager only to drink life’s sweet honey to the lees, not leaving even a drop to the lower castes."101 Some historians detect a similar state of affairs among Christian priests during the time preceding the Protestant Reformation. The practice of simony, corruption, sale of indulgences and craving for money were marks of the age.102

100M. Hiriyanna, Outlines of Indian Philosophy (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1993), pp. 36-7.
Nevertheless, priests have often been throughout history regarded as the official go between the sacred and the profane. "Throughout the long and varied history of religion, the priesthood has been the official institution that has mediated and maintained a state of equilibrium between the sacred and the profane aspects of human society and that has exercised a stabilising influence on social structure and on cultic organization."^103 But the various administrative duties derive from the cultic activities of priests. Therefore, the less the communion with the numen expressed in formalized cult, the closer he is to a magician.^104 "As long as the mediation of the priest is desired to secure material or ideal advantages (do ut des), religion is still close to magic, but a higher stage is reached where it becomes the function of the priest to thank and to adore in his own and other's name."^105

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