CHAPTER III

SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO RELIGION
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The religious institution is said to be universal as it has existed in one form or the other in every society. Sociologists study and analyse religion to determine its effects on human behaviour and interaction. They examine religion objectively to discover the social consequences that emerge from the association in any religion. Thus, sociology of religion focuses on the beliefs and practices of different religions, and how such beliefs affect human life and social relationships, and how various societies produce various beliefs.

All religions contain a concept of the supernatural, a belief in the sacred quality of the supernatural, a set of rituals, and a moral code. Through these qualities, religion enables people to relate both supernatural and the real world.

The sociologist regards all religions as social products and sees religious faith arising from socialisation or resocialisation into a particular set of beliefs. The sociological approach does not mean, however, that the sociologist cannot personally believe in the doctrines of a particular religion. Many sociologists of religion combine a
sociological approach with personal religious commitment.¹
What the sociological approach does imply is that the sociologist, as a sociologist, cannot be concerned with the truth or falsity of religious faith. Sociology is a science, dealing with verifiable facts; in their professional roles, sociologists are not competent to pronounce questions of faith that cannot be scientifically investigated.

Some of the features of religion are defined:²

Religion is that part of culture composed of shared beliefs and practices which not only identify or define the supernatural and the sacred and man’s relationships thereto, but which also relate them to the known world in such a way that the group is provided with moral definitions as what is good (in harmony with or approved by the supernatural) and what is bad (contrary to or out of harmony with the supernatural).

Emile Durkheim’s concept of religion³

Durkheim was one of the first distinguished sociologists to become interested in the study of religion.

1. Peter L. Berger, A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural, New York: Doubleday, 1969. (This book argues that there is still a place for religion in the modern world and that a sociological approach to religion can be combined with religious faith).


According to him, the religion had three elements: sacred things, beliefs and practices, and a moral community. He separated all sacred phenomena into 'sacred things' and 'profane things'. Sacred things are rare, extraordinary, and even dangerous, and awe-inspiring. Profane things are ordinary and common place. Things are either sacred or profane, not due to any intrinsic qualities, but due to the fact that people define them so. For example, a caste-mark on the forehead of a Hindu woman, or a sacred-thread worn by a Brahmin priest, is in keeping with tradition and religious belief. Another citation may be referred to sacred things among preliteral societies known as Totem. It may be a plant, an animal, or a piece of sculptured wood, or even a stone imbued with human characteristics that the group believes to have supernatural powers.

According to Durkheim, religious beliefs are convictions held by people concerning things which they consider sacred. They explain the nature and meaning of sacred things on both intellectual and emotional levels. Religious practices are the means by which people express their religious beliefs which may vary from people to people.

By 'moral community,' Durkheim meant all the members of one faith having a sense of kinship and integration with one another. They share the same beliefs
Religion, Durkheim contends, has several positive functions: First, it binds people together into a cohesive group; second, it is a means of social control, as it establishes a moral code, that is, what is right and what is wrong; third, it gives a meaning to life by providing rituals that mark passages through the life cycle; fourth, it explains incomprehensive phenomena, such as death, evil, or catastrophe. Finally, religions serve the society in practical ways of establishing and maintaining humanitarian services, such as provided by Tirupati-Tirumala Devasthanam.

On the negative side, religion serves to divide people into hostile camps, for instance, Christians and Muslims, or India and Pakistan, to mention a few instances. Religion is used as a psychological crutch, allowing people to deny responsibility for their actions, saying, "what is to happen will happen" putting the blame on fate, or on "karma", wherefrom there is no escape.

Karl Marx's Conflict Perspective in Religion

Marx analysed religion from a conflict perspective, unlike Durkheim. He saw religious belief as a form of 'alienation', and argued that the dominant religion
tends to support the status quo in any society. Religion does play the role in many societies, and is often an element in social conflict. It sometimes may also be a source of social change. Max Weber allows a greater role for ideas in social change than Marx's theory does. Marx saw ideas as reflecting rather than causing change.

The conflict approach to religion mainly stem from the writing of Karl Marx, who saw religion as a form of false consciousness and a tool of the powerful in the struggles among the competing social classes. To him, belief in religion was the profoundest form of human alienation about which Marx meant the process through which people lose their sense of control over the social world that they have created. Marx claimed that the dominant religion in any society is always the religion of its economically and politically dominant class, and provides a justification for existing inequalities and injustices. The dominant religion, Marx contends, legitimates the interest of the ruling class. The most rigid of all stratification, for example, may be observed in India, where each person in Hindu society, is believed to be born and dies as a member of a particular caste. The system is intertwined with the Hindu religion and its doctrine of reincarnation. A person's duty is to perform his or her caste obligations; failure to do so will result in reincarnation as a member of lower caste, or even as an
animal. People who believe in this theory are likely to 
challenge the social order. That is why the caste system 
persisted in India for several thousand years. So also the 
feudal system in Europe was justified by the concept of the 
'Divine Right' of kings to rule, and to delegate some of 
their authority to the nobles. Religion also served to 
legitimate the interests of the dominant class in the 
United States. Slavery and social segregation in the 
Southern United States were justified by some churches as 
being in accordance with God's will, as Kenneth Stampp 
notes: 4

Through religious instruction, the (slaves) learned that slavery had a 
divine sanction, that insolence was a much an offence against God as against 
the temporal master. They received the biblical command that servants should 
obey the masters, and they heard of the punishments awaiting the disobedient 
slave in the hereafter.

Max Weber's Concept of Protestant Ethic

Max Weber linked religion with economic 
developments. He posed a question as to what extent have 
religious conceptions of the world influenced the economic 
activities of people in different societies at different 
times in history.

4. Kenneth Stampp, The Peculiar Institution, 1956, 
    Alfred A. Knopf, New York.
Like Karl Marx, Weber also wanted to explain some of the reasons for the emergence of modern capitalism. But unlike Marx, he believed that religious values and attitudes played a major role in explosive capitalism's growth. To advance his point of view, Weber compared the religions of Western and non-Western societies.

In one of Weber's principal works, the Protestant Ethic and the spirit of Capitalism, he concluded that a certain Protestant outlook - Calvinism - was seen favourable to the rise of the 'spirit of modern capitalism'. Two basic tenets of Calvinism led to this conclusion. First, any self-indulgent expenditures beyond basic necessities were forbidden. According to the Calvinists, extreme self-denial glorified God. The second tenet was a basic anxiety about "pre-destination". Calvinists held that it was decided before birth whether one would go eventually to heaven or hell. Thus, during one's life time one could only try to discern one's fate. (i.e., making a lot of money through hard work was a good sign of Calvinism)

If one looks anxiously for a sign of salvation by working hard to make profit, and cannot spend such profits on pleasure, then what does one do with extra money? Weber

said that the capitalists reinvest these profits (capital) into the business, making more profits, which would be reinvested creating even more profits. This combination of elements, Weber argued had created a unique situation that gave rise to ever-growing productive facilities and later to the Industrial Revolution. Weber recognised that although people always sought profits, the religious outlook of Calvinism had enabled them, for the first time, to accumulate profits in greater amounts due to the high rate of reinvestment. Thus the emergence of modern capitalism was the end result. Countries like China or India, that did not have ethnic or religious beliefs similar to European Protestantism did not develop the same kind of capitalism that arose in the seventeenth century Europe.

Such religious perspective was necessary only in the beginning and early stages of modern capitalism. Weber felt that once modern capitalism was established, its own internal requirements would ensure its continuation and growth.