

Religion is in biblical
language the
substance



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Religion as a System of Belief: All religious organisations depend upon beliefs, knowledge, and training to exercise influence upon their members.

Religious belief is the cognitive aspect of religion.

It tries to explain the nature and origin of sacred things. It assumes that the sacred things do exist. It tells us what this world is like, what kind of creatures inhabit it, and what their past history and present interests are. It gives us information about the universe, creation, life and death, future of the world and such other deep but subtle matters. This is the information that belief gives about the superempirical world. It also tells us how the world is related to the one we actually live in. It tells us what the nature of sacred objects is and how these objects relate to the superempirical world. This is the knowledge that belief gives us about the so called sacred objects and their links with the superempirical world.

But in both the cases belief rests upon an attitude, not upon observation. “ It is belief based on faith rather than upon evidence; it is in Biblical language the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” The sacred character is not observable to the sense. Hence, even a visible and touchable sacred object would be just an ordinary object if it were not for the belief. For example, there is nothing to distinguish a sacred cow from any other animal except the faith of the Hindus who regard the cow as sacred.

Religion as a System of Ritual: Religious ritual is the practical side of religion.

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Douglas in his *Purity and Danger*, 1966, says ritual refers to symbolic actions concerning the sacred. Kingsley Davis says that ritual is behaviour with

reference to superempirical entities and sacred objects. Like the belief itself, it has a sacred character. “ It expresses in internal attitude symbolic of the unseen powers.” It can include any kind of behaviour known, such as the wearing of special clothing, the recitation of hymns or special formulas, and the immersion in certain rivers.

It can also include singing, dancing, weeping, bowing, prostrating, crawling, feasting, reading, etc. The religious character of the behaviour does not come from the behaviour itself, but from the attitude taken towards it. The same actions, the same motions or the same behaviour may be holy in one context but ordinary or unholy in another. Ritual is a means to remind the individual of the holy world. It strengthens and supports his faith in this world. It helps him to give expression to his religious sentiments and emotions. This brings him emotional ecstasy.

Ritual when performed together (as when the Muslims do Namaz together in a Mosque and Christians their Prayers in a Church, and Hindus their Bhajanas in a Temple) by several individuals becomes effective as a unifying factor. This collective aspect of religion was very much stressed by Durkheim. He said that “ The function of religious rituals is to affirm the moral superiority of the society over its individual members and thus to maintain the solidarity of the society”. “ The god of the clan can be nothing but the clan itself.” Religion as a social system can be understood only if both belief and ritual are understood.

The early thinkers gave more importance to the intellectual aspects of religion and ignored the ritual aspect. They were more busy in discussing

whether or not religious beliefs are true; if not true, how they came to be established. This question is only secondary for us. We are more interested in the social function of religious beliefs and rituals. Religious beliefs may not be scientific even. Their non-scientific character by no means lessens their social relevance and human significance.