

## **The meaning, definitions and components of Religion!**

Like marriage, family and kinship, religion is another important social institution. It is also one of the earliest institution of human society. Since ancient days religion has been influencing human life and human society both primitive and modern. Each and every aspect of human life and human society bears the influence of religion. It is very difficult and almost impossible to trace the exact origin of religion.

Different scholars put forth divergent view about its origin. Still one-thing is sure that when the mysteries and perplexities of life plagued man's mind at that moment he thought of some super natural and super-sensory power which marks the origin of religion. However, as an institution religion plays an important role in society and imparts beliefs and patterns of behavior.

Since the days of its arrival man has been intrigued by questions such as why and how this world was created and what is birth and death when he fail to get an accurate answer to all his questions he began to believe on the existence of some supernatural power which marks the origin of religion.

### **Meaning:**

Explaining the origin of the term religion Madan and Mazumdar says that the term religion is derived from two root words such as 'Leg' means to gather, count or observe and 'Leg' means 'to bind'. Accordingly religion is a belief in supernatural power or it refers to the performance of practices which binds together or links human beings with the unseen super power. Religion is related to the mysteries of human existence.

Religion is a belief in God. In other words religion is the human response to the apprehension of something of power, which is supernatural and supersensory. It is the expression of the manner and type of adjustment effected by the people with their conception of the supernatural. Belief and rituals are two main component parts of religion. Beliefs are a charter for rituals. Rituals consist in the observance according to a prescribed manner of certain actions designed to establish liaison between the performing individual and the supernatural power. Religion involves a set of symbols invoking feelings of reverences or awe are linked to rituals practiced by a community of believers.

Religion is a complex Phenomenon. It includes a complex of emotion feelings and attitudes towards mysteries and perplexities of life. But the meaning of religion in a strict sociological sense is much wider than that of the meaning used in religious books and scriptures. In a strict sociological sense religion is defined as "those institutionalized systems of beliefs, symbols

values and practices that provide groups of men with solutions to their questions of ultimate being. Thus religion comprises of systems of attitudes beliefs, symbols which are based on the assumption that certain kinds of social relations are sacred or morally imperative and a structure of activities governed or influenced by these systems.

### **Definitions of Religion by Sociologists**

Because religion is complex and multifaceted, sociologists and anthropologists have offered diverse definitions emphasizing different aspects.

#### **1. R.M. MacIver :**

**According to MacIver, “Religion as we understand the term implies a relationship not merely between man and man but also between man and some higher power.”**

MacIver views religion primarily as a relationship. His definition highlights that religion is not only about social relations among individuals but also about the connection between human beings and a transcendent or higher power.

This perspective emphasizes the relational dimension of religion — it shapes moral behaviour, social obligations, and personal conduct because individuals believe they are accountable to a divine or higher authority. Religion therefore reinforces social cohesion by providing shared moral standards grounded in sacred authority.

MacIver emphasizes that religion establishes a relationship between humans and a higher power, which in turn shapes social relationships and moral behaviour.

For example, in many Assamese households, daily prayers before the household altar or offerings to deities reflect a perceived relationship with divine power. This belief influences ethical conduct such as respect for elders and community harmony. During festivals like Bihu, prayers for prosperity symbolize this connection between humans and divine forces while strengthening social bonds within the community.

MacIver’s approach is largely sociological and ethical, focusing on how belief in a higher power influences social relationships and moral order.

#### **2. Émile Durkheim:**

**According to Emile Durkheim, “Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relating to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden.”**

Durkheim defines religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things, meaning things set apart and forbidden. His definition introduces the crucial distinction between the sacred and the profane.

The sacred refers to objects, symbols, or ideas treated with reverence, while the profane refers to ordinary aspects of everyday life. According to Durkheim, religion is fundamentally social because sacred beliefs and rituals unite people into a moral community (which he called a church).

Durkheim's sacred–profane distinction can be clearly seen in Indian religious life where certain objects, spaces, and times are treated as sacred.

For example, the Kamakhya Temple is considered a sacred space where rituals are performed with reverence, and certain behaviours are restricted. Festivals like Durga Puja transform ordinary spaces into sacred ones, bringing people together and reinforcing collective identity — illustrating Durkheim's idea of religion as a source of social solidarity.

Durkheim's definition highlights the functional role of religion — it promotes social solidarity, collective conscience, and social integration. Religion is therefore less about supernatural belief and more about its role in maintaining social cohesion.

### **3. William F. Ogburn:**

**According to Ogburn, “Religion is attitudes towards superhuman powers.”**

Ogburn takes a psychological and behavioural approach by defining religion as attitudes toward superhuman powers. His focus is not only on belief systems but also on the mental orientation and emotional responses individuals have toward supernatural forces.

This definition emphasizes the subjective dimension of religion — feelings such as reverence, fear, devotion, and dependence. It suggests that religion shapes behaviour because individuals develop certain attitudes toward perceived higher powers. Ogburn focuses on the emotional and psychological attitudes people hold toward supernatural powers.

For example, many people in Assam express devotion, fear, or gratitude toward deities through practices like lighting lamps, fasting, or making vows (mannat). During times of illness or uncertainty, individuals may pray or visit temples, reflecting attitudes of dependence and reverence toward perceived superhuman powers.

Ogburn's view highlights religion as a cultural and psychological phenomenon influencing human behaviour and social norms.

### **4. James George Frazer:**

**According to J.M. Frazer, “Religion is a belief in powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature of human life.”**

Frazer defines religion as belief in powers superior to humans that are believed to control nature and human life. His perspective is rooted in evolutionary anthropology, where religion is seen as an attempt to explain natural phenomena and human destiny.

According to Frazer, religion arises from human efforts to understand and influence forces beyond their control, such as weather, fertility, disease, and death. His definition highlights religion’s explanatory and adaptive functions in early societies.

For example, in agrarian communities of Assam, rituals are performed before sowing or harvesting crops to seek blessings for favourable weather and good yield. Celebrations like Magh Bihu include rituals thanking divine forces for agricultural prosperity, reflecting belief in supernatural control over nature.

This approach places strong emphasis on belief in supernatural control over natural and social processes. Frazer’s perspective is evident in practices where natural events are interpreted through religious belief.

#### **5. A.W. Green:**

**According to A.W. Green, “Religion is a system of beliefs and symbolic practices and objects, governed by faith rather than by knowledge which relates man to an unseen supernatural realm beyond the known and beyond the controllable.”**

A.W. Green views religion as a system of beliefs and symbolic practices governed by faith rather than empirical knowledge, relating humans to an unseen supernatural realm beyond control.

This definition stresses the symbolic and faith-based nature of religion. Religious rituals, myths, and symbols express meanings that cannot be verified scientifically but are accepted through faith. Green highlights the symbolic and faith-driven aspects of religion.

For example, religious symbols such as tilak, sacred threads, or the lighting of diyas during festivals carry meanings understood through faith rather than scientific reasoning. During Diwali, the lighting of lamps symbolizes the victory of light over darkness, illustrating how symbolic practices convey moral and cultural meanings.

Green highlights how religion provides meaning, orientation, and a sense of connection to a reality beyond the observable world. His approach underscores the cultural and symbolic dimensions of religion.

#### **6. H.M. Johnson:**

**According to H.M. Johnson, “Religion is a more or less coherent system of beliefs and practices concerning a super-natural order of beings, forces places or other entities.”**

Johnson defines religion as a more or less coherent system of beliefs and practices concerning a supernatural order of beings, forces, or entities.

His definition emphasizes structure and organization. Religion is seen as an integrated system where beliefs, rituals, and institutions are interconnected. The phrase “more or less coherent” acknowledges that religious systems may vary in consistency and organization across societies. Johnson’s definition can be seen in the organized structure of religious traditions with doctrines, rituals, and institutions. His approach highlights religion as a structured social institution that shapes norms, values, and collective behaviour.

For example, Hinduism in India includes a structured set of beliefs (karma, dharma), rituals (puja, fasting), and institutions (temples, priesthood). Similarly, Vaishnavite traditions in Assam, especially the satra institutions associated with Srimanta Sankardev, illustrate a coherent system integrating beliefs, practices, and community organization.

#### **7. Bronisław Malinowski:**

**According to Malinowski, “Religion is a mode of action as well as a system of belief and a sociological phenomenon as well as a personal experience.”**

Malinowski defines religion as both a mode of action and a system of belief, emphasizing that it is simultaneously a social phenomenon and a personal experience.

From his functional anthropological perspective, religion helps individuals cope with uncertainty, anxiety, and crises such as death, illness, or danger. Rituals provide psychological comfort while beliefs provide meaning.

Malinowski highlights the dual nature of religion — it operates at the individual level (emotional and psychological support) and at the social level (shared practices and cultural norms).

Malinowski emphasizes how religion helps individuals cope with uncertainty and emotional stress while also functioning socially.

For example, during times of crisis such as illness, exams, or natural disasters, people often turn to prayer, rituals, or visiting religious places for comfort and hope. In Assamese society, community prayers or naam-kirtan gatherings provide both psychological reassurance and social support, demonstrating religion as both personal experience and collective practice.

Thus, different scholars define religion according to their own view but it is very difficult to agree upon a universally accepted definition that will satisfy everyone. Because religion is a very complex phenomenon.

The wide range of definitions demonstrates that religion cannot be captured by a single universally accepted definition. Different scholars emphasize different dimensions — belief in supernatural powers, sacred symbols, social functions, emotional experiences, or systems of practices. This diversity reflects the inherently complex nature of religion as both a personal and social phenomenon.

In essence, religion can be understood as a comprehensive system of beliefs, rituals, symbols, and values that helps individuals and societies interpret the mysteries of life, maintain moral order, and establish a relationship with the sacred or supernatural.