

## Understanding Religion

Religion is not only a body of belief but it is practiced. Almost all major religions of the world are found in organized form.

A religious organization grows out of and after the religious experience of a charismatic personality (as for example, Christ, Mohammed, Buddha). The religious experiences of the charismatic personality gets organized and institutionalised.

Sociologists generally talk about four types of religious groups

1. The ecclesia (The Church)
2. The sect
3. The denomination
4. The cult

Known as the Church-Sect Typology, this differentiation of religious groups is based mainly on the pioneering work of Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch and on the basis of development of Christianity in the West.

In India, we identify religious groups as Mat, Marg, Sampradaya, Sangh, Panth, Samaj, Ashram and Akhara, etc

There is a suggestion of a seven point criteria of variables to compare religious groups:

1. Group Membership: Compulsory or Voluntary
2. If voluntary: exclusive or relatively open to new members
3. Group's attitude towards other religious groups.
4. Whether the group proselytizes or not.
5. Clergy: Whether clergy regarded as necessary or not.
6. Internal organization : autocratic or democratic.
7. Attitude of the group towards the secular affairs of the society as a whole.

These criteria are used for comparative study of religious groups .

In very general terms, religion can be defined as a system of beliefs and practices shared among people and also sustain over time. The genesis of religious organization lies in social groupings which are a part of the society. It also lies in the routinisation and institutionalisation of Charisma and in the structural differentiation of the society. The solid foundations of a religious organization are often laid down by the disciples and not by the founder. His religious experiences provide a breakthrough.

Formation of cult is one of the levels in the process of development of religion, the other being the formation of myths and theology. The formation of the groups is the third level. These levels operate simultaneously and inter-relatedly.

Myth is a dramatic story in which the supernatural interacts with humans in the human form. The myth reinforces belief in the cultic pattern.

Theology rationalizes the belief system. Both constitute 'the intellectual level of rationalization of religion'.

Theology has a strong propensity to develop into a body of dogma.

A cult develops and standardizes norms and ritual worship, initiation and membership, of resolving the problems of continuity and succession and doctrinal matters and of managing its expansion.

A religious group originates as a primary group, dividing the humanity between believers and non-believers. It also grows and multiplies because of inner differentiation of the total society and the group itself and growing enrichment of religious experience.

Symbolised by its rituals, beliefs and organization, a religious group displays a new spirit of coherence and unity. Nevertheless, it adjusts with the differences based on position and function and often tolerates the order system of statuses which it desires.

A religious group may recognize and accept the established society, or it may reject the established society in the spirit to promote the attitude of equality within the group (as was the case of Buddhism). The internal structure of religious group is a dynamic process.