

source of conflict and a hindrance to human development, as erroneous and unfounded.

INTRODUCTION

The story of religion begins from the time when Adam and Eve (Ḥawā) descended on earth. Since then religion has played an important role in human life and yet many deny this fact. Since the eighteenth century, the term "religion" has been widely examined and the views of scholars regarding its role and significance have varied widely. Agnostics, secularists, humanists and atheists show disbelief in religion but not all of them deny its significance. Those who do not believe in religion and deny its significance argue, among other things, that it is antagonistic to freedom; that it aggressively promotes war, conflict, aggression and prejudice; and that it stifles progress in all areas of science and society. They think that freedom, peace and progress are to be attained by the total destruction of religion! In the following paragraphs, an attempt has been made to counter these claims with the explanation of the role and significance of religion in human life. Our starting point is the definition of religion and secularisation. These two terms are ambiguous; therefore, understood differently by different people. Thus, one needs to have a "working definition" when talking about these two terms.

I. DEFINITION OF RELIGION

Etymologically, the term "religion" is believed to be a derivative of a Latin word. However, it is unclear whether the word is *religare*, *relegere*, or *religere*. *Religare* means "to bind together."¹ It also means to have a "close relationship

¹Ronald L. Johnstone, *Religion in Society: A Sociology of Religion* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., fourth edition, 1992), p. 7. Hereinafter

to the supernatural."² *relegere* means "to rehearse, to execute painstakingly."³ *religere* means, "the conscious fulfillment of duty, awe of higher powers and deep reflection."⁴

Due to its multifaceted nature, the term "religion" has been technically defined in a wide variety of ways.⁵ One may categorise the definitions of religion into two: narrow and broad. Narrow definitions are those which are either functional or substantive. A definition is functional when it states what religion does for individuals or for social systems and it is substantive when it states what religion consists of.⁶ A definition is also narrow when it excludes certain beliefs and practices that many people passionately defend as religious.⁷ Broad definitions are those which are both functional and substantive. An example of a narrow definition of religion is that of Johnstone. He writes: "Religion is a set of beliefs and practices, centered around a belief in the supernatural and an orientation toward the sacred, that are shared by members of a group."⁸ It should

referred to as *Religion in Society*. Belief in the supernatural being is a common characteristic of all religions regardless of whether they are revealed or non-revealed. However, what is supernatural is differently conceived.

²See, Sajiwan Prasad, *Religion and Reason* (Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers, 1987), p. 30.

³Johnstone, *Religion in Society*, p. 7.

⁴Prasad, *Religion and Reason*, p.30.

⁵Because different people define religion differently, it has been contended that there cannot be a universal definition of religion. [See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Johns Hopkins University Press)].

⁶Religion consists of narratives, symbols, institutions and so on. [See David Herbert, *Religion and Civil Society: Rethinking Public Religion in the Contemporary World* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003), p. 30.]

⁷Deity, morality and worldview are some of the aspects or elements often associated with religion.

⁸Johnstone, *Religion in Society*, p. 59.