
UNIT 15 RELIGION AND ECONOMY

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15.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you should be able to

- discuss the meaning of religion and economy and their interconnections
- understand the influence of the Protestant ethic on the development of modern capitalism as discussed by Weber
- review Weber's comparative studies on three world religions, i.e. Confucianism in China, Judaism in West Asia and Hinduism in India
- evaluate Max Weber's studies on religion and economy.

15.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous units, you have studied Weber's concept of ideal type. In this unit you will see the application of this idea in Weber's analysis of religion and economy.

The unit starts by clarifying the meaning of the terms ‘religion’ and ‘economy’. It then goes on to examine the inter-relationship between religious beliefs and economic activity.

To bring out the inter-relationship clearly, there is discussion of the major argument in Max Weber’s famous book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

Next the unit goes into what Weber meant by the “spirit of capitalism” and contrasts it with “traditionalism”. We then discuss certain aspects of the “Protestant ethic” which according to Weber, contributed to the development of capitalism in the West.

This unit further clarifies the relationship between religious beliefs and economic activity by describing three of Weber’s ‘comparative religious studies’, namely those of Confucianism in China, Judaism in ancient West Asia and Hinduism in India. Lastly there is evaluation of his views on economy and religion.

15.2 RELIGION AND ECONOMY — MEANING AND INTER-RELATIONSHIP

In this section there is brief discussion of what is meant by the terms religion and economy. After defining these two terms, the following sub-section (15.2.2) provides preliminary ideas about the relationship between religion and economy as formulated by Weber.

15.2.0 Religion

The term ‘religion’ refers to a set of ideas and beliefs about the “supernatural” and its impact on the lives of human beings. Human beings have always been confronted with certain problems and crises, which seem to defy logical explanation.

Why is it that a loved one dies? Why does a good man suffer and an evil one prosper? Why do natural calamities happen? Religious beliefs provide supernatural answers to these difficult questions. For instance, suffering may be explained by saying that it is “God’s way” of testing a man’s faith or that it is a punishment for sins committed in past lives. Religious beliefs give meaning to life. They help answer questions about oneself and the world one lives in. They provide certain guidelines of behaviour, certain codes of conduct which individuals are expected to follow.

15.2.1 Economy

What do we mean by ‘economy’? In order that society may survive, certain basic physical needs have to be met. Food, clothing and shelter are essential for life. The economy or economic system refers to those arrangements made by society for the production, consumption and distribution of goods and services.

What is to be produced? How much of it is to be produced? How are goods made available to those who want them? How is work to be divided? These are some of the concerns of the economic system.

15.2.2 Inter-relationship between Religious Ethics and Economy

This is a brief outline of the meaning of religion and economy. Superficially, they seem poles apart. Religion concerns itself with the beyond, whereas economy deals with the practical business of working, producing and consuming. Are these two seemingly diverse systems related?

Max Weber thought so. According to him, it was the ideas, beliefs, values and world-view of human societies that guided the way their members acted, even in the economic sphere. As has already been mentioned, religion prescribes certain guidelines of behaviour. It is in accordance with these guidelines that followers direct or orient their activities. These guidelines are incorporated in the body of religious ethics of each religious system. Let us illustrate Weber’s view with an example from our society.

A health expert might suggest that if Indians would eat beef, the problem of hunger and malnutrition might be lessened. But the very idea of cow-slaughter is revolting to most Hindus and would probably be rejected outright. So even though cow-slaughter may seem economically rational or logical, values and ideas (in this case, the idea that the cow is sacred) definitely influence the making of certain decisions. It is our beliefs and values, which help to shape our behaviour. It was this link between religious beliefs and economic behaviour that Weber tried to bring out in his work. In order not to confuse religion with ethics, see Box 15.1 to learn about ethics and ethical behaviour.

Box 15.1

Ethic

The term “ethic” is not restricted to religion alone. You can speak of business ethics, political ethics and so on. Ethics is related to social structure because it affects in some way the social behaviour of individuals in society. Ethics is important because it sets certain standards of thought and behaviour, which are used to evaluate or judge actual behaviour. Ethical codes, in other words, represent what “ought” to be done. They reflect the particular values and beliefs of the social groups of which they are part.

According to Max Weber, there were certain affinities between the Protestant religious ethics and the economic system known as capitalism. These affinities, said Weber, helped capitalism to grow in the western world.

The next section (15.3), describes the major argument contained in Weber’s thesis.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) What is meant by “religion”? Answer in three lines.

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- ii) Mention two functions of religion.
 - a)
 - b)
- ii) Describe, in two lines, how religious beliefs affect economic behaviour.
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15.3 THE PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM

Weber located a positive relationship between the Protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism. Western capitalism, according to Weber, assumed its shape because it was supported by a certain belief system, namely, the “Protestant ethic”. Weber argued that the Protestant ethic is closely associated with the spirit of capitalism. In order to bring out this inter-relationship, Weber constructed ideal types of both, the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. Let us now understand what Weber meant by the term ‘the spirit of capitalism’.

15.3.0 The Spirit of Capitalism

Why do people work? Most of us would answer, “to earn money, of course”, in order to feed, clothe and shelter ourselves and our families. We also earn so that we may have certain comforts and luxuries, which make life more enjoyable.

The desire for wealth or profit is as old as human history. Wealth has long been regarded as a symbol of power, status and prestige. But never before in human history did the desire for wealth assume the organised and disciplined form that it did in modern or rational capitalism. It is this rational capitalism that Weber wanted to study. He distinguishes between traditional or adventurist capitalism of former times and rational capitalism of modern times (see Box 15.2).

Box 15.2

Traditional Capitalism and Rational Capitalism

Traditional or adventurist capitalism existed at many times and many places. It was particularly noticeable in the Italian cities. Traditional capitalism was a risky business, involving the import of luxury items from distant places. Foreign silks, spices, ivory etc. were sold to buyers at exorbitant prices. The aim was to extract as much profit as possible because no one knew when and where the next business deal would occur. It was thus a series of one-shot deals. Rational capitalism on the other hand depends on mass production and distribution of goods. This became possible with the Industrial Revolution and factory

production. What is important is to note that rational capitalism does not deal with a few luxury items but with almost all the daily material requirements from bread to cloth to cars. Rational capitalism is constantly expanding and looking for new methods, new inventions, new products and new customers. Involving methodical work and regularised transactions, it is thus qualitatively and quantitatively different from traditional capitalism.

According to Weber, the capitalists desired wealth not for enjoyment or luxurious living. They wanted it so that they could use it to make more wealth. The thirst for money-making for its own sake is the very essence of modern capitalism. Capitalism is an economic system which aims at the unlimited **accumulation** of profit through the rational organisation of production.

Capitalism arose in the Western nations like England and Germany, which experienced what we call the “**Industrial Revolution**”. The growth of the factory system, new techniques of production, new tools and machines made it possible for the capitalists or the owners to earn vast amounts of money. The production process had to be rationally organised; in other words, efficiency and discipline were essential.

The worker was a means to an end, the end being profit. The attitude towards work was that it should be done well not because one had to do it, but because it carried an intrinsic reward. The popular American saying, “Anything that’s worth doing is worth doing well”, sums up this attitude. Hard work and efficient work was an end in itself.

Weber contrasted this work-ethic with another type which he termed traditionalism.

Here, workers prefer less work to more pay, relaxation to exertion. They are either unable or unwilling to take up new work-methods and techniques.

As has been mentioned before, in capitalism, the worker is regarded by the capitalist as a means to an end. But under traditionalism, the worker-employer relationship is informal, direct and personal.

Traditionalism hampers the growth of capitalism. Capitalism stresses individualism, innovation and the relentless pursuit of profit. Traditionalism, as described above, is characterised by a much less disciplined and efficient system of production. You have just seen that the spirit of capitalism is a work-ethic which calls for accumulation of wealth for its own sake. To do so, work has to be organised in an efficient, disciplined manner. Hard work is a virtue that carries intrinsic rewards.

Unlike “traditionalism”, the spirit of capitalism demands individualism, innovation, hard work and the pursuit of wealth for its own sake. It is thus an economic ethic unlike any in the past.

Let us now try to understand what Weber meant by the Protestant ethic, in other words, the major tenets or principles of the Protestant religion. But before doing so, just complete Check Your Progress 2.

Check Your Progress 2

i) Tick the correct answer.

The essence of capitalism according to Weber is that

- a) capitalists exploit workers.
- b) capitalists aim to increase profit so that they can lead a luxurious life.
- c) making money is an end in itself.
- d) all of the above.

ii) Tick the correct answer.

Capitalism arose when the western nations went through

- a) the French revolution.
- b) the Green revolution.
- c) the Industrial revolution.
- d) none of the above.

iii) Tick the correct answer.

“Rational Organization” of production requires

- a) efficiency, discipline and hard work.
- b) Less work and more pay for workers.
- c) large amounts of money.
- d) all of the above.

iv) Place the following items, under the correct heading.

- a) informal relationship with owner
- b) work as an end in itself
- c) innovation and individualism
- d) resistance to change
- e) worker as a means to an end
- f) unlimited pursuit of profit

| Traditionalism | Capitalism |
|----------------|------------|
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15.3.2 The Protestant Ethic: Features Influencing the Development of Capitalism

Let us first clarify a few historical details. What is Protestantism? As the name suggests, it is a religion of protest. It arose in the sixteenth century in Europe in the period known as the **Reformation**.

Its founding fathers like Martin Luther and John Calvin broke away from the **Catholic Church**. They felt that the Church had become too immersed in doctrines and rituals. It had lost touch with the common people. Greed,

corruption and vice had gripped the Church. Priests had a life-style more suitable for princes.

The Protestant sects that sprang up all over Europe tried to recapture the lost spirit of the Church. They stressed simplicity, austerity and devotion. Calvinism founded by the Frenchman John Calvin was one such sect. The followers of Calvin in England were known as the Puritans. They migrated to the continent of North America and were the founders of the American nation. Weber observed that in the West, it was by and large the Protestants who had made greatest progress in education and employment. They were the top bureaucrats, the most skilled technical workers and the leading industrialists.

Was there something in their religion that inspired them to make such progress? Weber thought so, and attempted to prove it. The brand of capitalism that Weber was most interested in was Calvinism. An examination of its main features would show us how there is the link between religion and economy.

15.3.3 Main Features of Calvinism

As said before, for showing the link between religion and economy or in this particular case between the spirit of Capitalism and Calvinism, let us first discuss the main features of Calvinism.

Calvin's Image of God

God, said Calvin, was all powerful, transcendent. His Divine Will was unknowable. It would be foolish of any human being to try to understand God's Will. It could not be understood simply because it was God's Will!

Doctrine of Pre-destination

At the core of Calvinism is the belief that certain persons are chosen or 'elected' by God to enter Heaven while the rest are damned. The 'chosen' will reach Heaven no matter what they do on Earth. We cannot bribe God to give us a place in Heaven through prayers or sacrifice. As this Will is unknowable, we cannot change it. Imagine the insecurity of the followers of this stern religion! He did not know whether he was elected or damned. They could not turn to a priest for solace and help because no mortal man could understand God. What could they do to cope with the anxiety of an uncertain destiny? How could they prove to themselves that they were the chosen ones?

They could do so by prospering on Earth. Their material prosperity would be the symbol or token of their election. He would work for the glory of God.

Calvinism and "this-worldly asceticism"

By 'asceticism' we mean strict self-discipline, control and conquest of desires. In Protestantism, particularly Calvinism Weber detected this-worldly asceticism. It stressed rigorous self-discipline in order to master the environment. A simple, frugal life-style was recommended along with hard work. Worldly or sensual pleasures were viewed with horror; fine clothes, dance and music, theatre and novels came from the Devil as they would

divert a person from working for the glory of God. Even the very human expression of laughter was frowned upon!

This emphasis on hard work was not confined to Calvinists alone. It was a common feature of all Protestant sects. The idea that ‘honesty is the best policy’ was the principle of early capitalism. Weber (1948:313) gives us the example of the ‘Methodists’ a sect who forbade their followers

- a) to haggle when buying and selling.
- b) to trade with commodities without paying the necessary taxes and tariffs.
- c) to charge rates of interest higher than the law of the country permits.
- d) ‘to gather treasures on earth’ (meaning the transformation of investment capital into ‘funded wealth’).
- e) to borrow without being sure of one’s ability to pay back the debt.
- f) “luxuries of all sorts”.

The fruits of hard labour could not be spent on worldly pleasures. Thus there was only one outlet for money. It was reinvested and hence used to make more money.

Not a moment was to be idled away as “work is worship” and “time is money”.

See Figure 15.1: Spirit of Capitalism that illustrates the ideas mentioned above.



Figure 15.1: Spirit of Capitalism

The notion of “calling”

Would a University graduate accept a sweeper’s job? Probably not. Most of us would consider the job of a sweeper or garbage-collector too “low”

or too “dirty” for us. The Calvinist ethic, on the other hand, holds that all work is important and sacred. It is not mere work, it is a calling or a mission and should be performed with devotion and sincerity.

At this point let us complete Activity 1 that deals with some of the point discussed in sub-section 15.3.2.

Activity 1

Write two page note on any religious sect in India in terms of its guidelines for shaping one’s day-to-day behaviour. Compare your note, with those of other students at your study centre.

We have so far looked at how Weber described the strong relationship between the spiritual vision of the world and a certain style of economic activity. This relationship is conspicuous among the Calvinists. Weber summarised the Calvinist ethic in five points (Aron 1967: 221-222).

- a) There exists an absolute transcendent God who created the world and rules it, but who is incomprehensible and inaccessible to the finite minds of men.
- b) This all powerful and mysterious God had predestined each of us to salvation or damnation, so that we cannot by our works alter a divine decree which was made before we were born.
- c) God created the world for His own glory.
- d) Whether he is to be saved or damned, man is obliged to work for the glory of God and to create the Kingdom of God on earth.
- e) Earthly things, human nature, and flesh belong to the order of sin and death and salvation can come to man only through divine grace.

This helped to create a disciplined and dedicated workforce without which capitalism could not have emerged.

Hard work, saving and re-investment and the desire to prosper have a strong affinity with the “spirit of capitalism” which you read about earlier in sub section 15.3.0.

Let us see the link that Weber was trying to establish. Ideas impinge upon or affect human conduct and human conduct can be understood in the context of the ideas lying behind it. Working day and night and not enjoying the fruits of that labour might seem very irrational to most of us. But if we keep in mind the doctrine of “pre-destination” and the need to prosper to prove one’s “election” by God, this irrational behaviour makes sense. As we have earlier stated, religious beliefs set guidelines for action, they motivate us to behave in a certain manner.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Why did Max Weber try to establish a link between the Protestant ethic and capitalism? Answer in about five lines.

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ii) Why did the followers of Calvin stress so much on hard work? Answer in about four lines.

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iii) Why no work was regarded as “low” by the Calvinists? Answer in about four lines.

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15.4 WEBER’S COMPARATIVE STUDIES ON RELIGION

You have just studied the link that Weber tries to establish between religious ethics on the one hand and economic behaviour on the other. Let us now see how Weber further tries to substantiate or validate this idea with the help of comparative studies of various world religions. In this section, we shall describe Weber’s studies of Confucianism in ancient China, Hinduism in ancient India and Judaism in ancient Palestine (West Asia).

15.4.0 Confucianism in China

Ancient China had a well-developed economy. Trade, commerce, finance and manufacture were quite advanced. Despite the presence of these material conditions, Western-style of capitalism did not develop there. Why? According to Weber, the Confucian ethic would not permit this. Confucian ideas can be summed up as follows.

- i) Belief in the order of the Universe, the cosmos.
- ii) Man should aim at being in harmony with nature and the cosmos.
- iii) Behaviour is to be guided by tradition. All wisdom lies in the past.
- iv) Family and kin ties and obligations were never to be neglected.

The stress on harmony, traditionalism and family obligations are quite contradictory to the relentless pursuit of profit for its own sake. Indeed,

the “spirit of capitalism” would probably have been considered to be bad manners.

15.4.1 Judaism in West Asia

This is the religion of the Jews who originally inhabited the land of Palestine in West Asia. Judaism is the oldest of the monotheistic religions. It is a religion that speaks of one, all-powerful and almighty God. The Jews believe themselves to be the chosen ones of God or “Yahweh”. Their prophets united them in the belief that they were the chosen ones of God and must help to establish God’s Kingdom on Earth. Judaism, unlike Confucianism and Hinduism speaks of an ethic of mastery over the environment, not harmony.

Judaism, says Weber, could have generated the “spirit of capitalism”. However, certain historical forces prevented this. The **Exodus** or mass migration of the Jews from their homeland due to persecution left them scattered all over the world.

Their economic participation was restricted to money-lending, which they did very successfully.

15.4.2 Hinduism in India

While dealing with the Religion of India Weber expressed a strict negative attitude towards the possibility of rational capitalism existing within the ethos of Hinduism. To him, it is extremely unlikely that the organisation of modern capitalism could have originated in a caste-based society like India. Nor could capitalism imported from the West hope to flourish in India.

India like China was economically fairly advanced. You probably know that ancient India made valuable contributions to science. Manufactured goods found world-wide markets and trade links were established in various parts of the world.

But Hinduism, says Weber, did not provide a suitable ethic for the development of capitalism. The ideas of “*Karma*”, “*dharma*” and “*punarjanma*” (the cycle of births and rebirths) made Indians defeatists, fatalists. You have probably heard the statement “I am being punished for my deeds in my last life”. Since one’s present condition is believed to be the consequence of past deeds, Weber feels that Hindus have no motivation to improve their economic condition. Hindus, says Weber, would not consider it worthwhile to put in the sort of hard work that capitalism demanded.

The Hindu ideal of “*moksha*” or salvation states that our souls can be liberated only when we empty ourselves of worldly desires or “*vasana*”. The material world is an illusion or “*maya*”. True bliss is ours when we free ourselves from this web of desires or “*maya-jaal*”. Hinduism preaches “other-worldly asceticism”. The material world is de-emphasised. Material prosperity is not given importance, as it is temporary and illusory.

It is welfare of the spirit or soul or “*atma*” which is imperishable that is more important. Religions that place more stress on otherworldly asceticism

and de-emphasise the material world can hardly foster attitudes that promote capitalism.

So, as we can see, mere material conditions like finance, trade and technology are not enough to promote capitalism. India and China had both of these, yet the value-systems of these societies were such that the pursuit of wealth for own sake and rational organisation of work to achieve this purpose did not make sense. It did not fit in with the ethos or the ideals of these societies.

Before reading about critical evaluation of Weber's studies on religion and economy, complete Activity 2.

Activity 2

You must have seen the popular tele-serial Mahabharata. How is the Hindu ethic depicted in this serial? To what extent does it differ from the 'Hindu ethic' as described by Weber? Write down your observation in about two pages. Compare your note, if possible, with your co-learners at the Study Centre.

15.5 CRITICAL EVALUATION OF WEBER'S STUDIES ON RELIGION AND ECONOMY

Weber's work on religion and economy has often been subjected to criticism. Some scholars feel that he has concentrated very selectively on certain aspects of religious ethics and interpreted them very narrowly so that they may fit in with his theory.

For instance, in his studies on the Hindu ethic, Weber has seen only one aspect of the Hindu ethic and has over-emphasised the fatalistic and passive aspect of it. Some scholars and students would argue that the notions of "*karma*" and "*dharma*" actually spur individuals to act, to perform their duties, to live up to their obligations. It is pointed out that the concept of calling which forms the very foundation of the spirit of capitalism is also prevalent in Hinduism. The principle in the Bhagwad Gita of doing one's duty without thinking of benefit is similar to the doctrine of calling which is the focal point of material progress in West.

Milton Singer has presented a functional equivalent of the Protestant ethic in India in his study of the leading industrialists of the city of Madras. To him caste background and tradition may equally be fitted for the industrial development in India. Caste based division of labour has been used successfully in the specialisation of industrial workers. Singer observed that through the process of "compartmentalisation", many industrialists kept their business obligations and ritual obligations separate or in distinct compartments. Hence there was no conflict between an individual's role as a businessman, on the one hand, and a religious person on the other.

According to Milton Singer (1969) if capitalism is to be developed in India then it must not be an aping of the west that destroys the traditional way

of life. Capitalism in India can rather develop within the given cultural norms and institutions of our society.

Now at the end of the unit on Religion and economy, you need to complete Check Your Progress 4.

Check Your Progress 4

- i) Confucianism stressed on
 - a) individualism
 - b) harmony with the universe
 - c) fatalism and passiveness.
- ii) According to Weber, Hindus were not motivated to work hard because
 - a) their religion made them silently accept their fate
 - b) their technology and manufacture were well developed
 - c) they were lazy.
- iii) Capitalism did not develop in ancient Palestine because
 - a) Judaism stressed “other-worldly asceticism”
 - b) the Jews were dispersed all over the world
 - c) Jewish prophets preached mastery over the environment.

15.6 LET US SUM UP

The unit began with explanations of the concepts of ‘religion’ and ‘economy’. It tried to see the link between the two as described by Max Weber. Then it discussed the major argument put forward by Weber for the development of rational capitalism in the West. It presented his argument for the non-development of capitalism in China, in West Asia and in India. Finally, it looked at some criticisms of Weber’s theory raised in the context of Indian society.

15.7 KEYWORDS

Catholic Church

It is also called the Church of Rome. Its headquarters are in the Vatican City and the head of the Church is the Pope. Before the Reformation, it was the central Church of the Christian religion. After the Reformation, a number of sects broke away from it, e.g. Calvinists, Lutherans, Baptists etc.

Capital Accumulation

This means the stock piling of resources, which can be reinvested into industry so that industry may expand.

Exodus

It relates to the departure of the Jews from West Asia because of religious persecution.

Religion and Economy**Industrial Revolution**

This term refers to the striking changes in the economic sphere in the period 1750-1850. England was the home of this Revolution, which then spread to all parts of Europe. New discoveries like steam power, inventions like the power loom, spinning frame etc. revolutionised production. The factory system and capitalism rose in this period.

Reformation

Religious revolution in Western Europe in the sixteenth century protesting against the corruption of the Church. It led to the formation of Protestant sects, which broke away from the Catholic Church.

15.8 FURTHER READING

Aron, Raymond 1967. *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*. Volume 2, Penguin Books: London pp. 210-237.

Haralambos, M. 1980. *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*. Oxford University Press: London.

15.9 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) By 'religion', we mean certain ideas and beliefs about the 'supernatural' or those phenomena that defy explanation. Religion refers to certain values, ideas and guidelines of behaviour that help people to understand themselves and the world around them.
- ii)
 - a) Religion helps man to come to terms with events beyond his control.
 - b) It provides certain guidelines of behaviour that help followers to orient or direct their activities.
- iii) Religious beliefs prescribe certain values which followers are expected to adhere to or stick to. Thus economic behaviour is shaped by the values or guidelines provided by the religious system of a society.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) c)
- ii) c)
- iii) a)

| iv) TRADITIONALISM | CAPITALISM |
|--------------------|------------|
| (a) | (b) |
| (d) | (c) |
| | (e) |
| | (f) |

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Max Weber observed that in Europe, it was the Protestant community that had made great progress in the economic field. They were the leaders in industry, education and bureaucracy. Weber tried to see whether it was their religion that contributed to their success. Thus he tried to see if there was a link between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism.
- ii) The Calvinist teachings said that people were pre-destined to be saved or damned. The Calvinists tried to prove to themselves that they were chosen or elected to be saved by prospering on earth. The only way they could prosper was by working hard and saving. Hence they stressed on hard work and discipline.
- iii) The Calvinists regarded work as a calling or a mission. It was to be performed with utmost sincerity and devotion. Work carried intrinsic rewards, it was to be done for its own sake. Work is worship, hence no job was regarded as low or dirty.

Check Your Progress 4

- i) b)
- ii) b)
- iii) b)