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A2 Sociology for AQA

Chris Livesey & Tony Lawson

Hodder Arnold

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Finally, to paraphrase the mighty Arcade Fire:

Consider this text a tunnel.

Yeah, a tunnel – From my window to yours.

Meet me in the middle, the empty middle ground.

And since there's no one else around,

We'll let our time grow long,

And remember everything we've come to know.

Chris Livesey

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About This Book

About This Book

In writing this book we have tried to satisfy two main aims:

First, we wanted to retain a sense of continuity between this and our previous (AS) text in terms of both overall structure and scope, mainly for the benefit of those students and teachers who've used the AS text in their first year of the A-level course. In terms of structural continuity, therefore, the general layout will be familiar to anyone who has used **AS Sociology for AQA** (although it's not, of course, necessary to have used this AS text to get the most from the A2 text). More specifically, we've once again chosen to tie the text closely to the **AQA Specification** (highlighting, where appropriate, **synoptic links** within and between the A2 and AS Modules) and we've retained the basic structure of the AS text by dividing the sections into two parts: introductory material ('**Preparing the Ground**') provides a general overview of a section and is broadly aimed at students of all abilities, while more challenging material ('**Digging Deeper**') is included to both develop the initial material and stretch the more able student.

In addition, we've retained a couple of features we believe worked well in the AS text:

The **Key Word** focus, whereby the text is structured around significant concepts – a system designed to both help students to

focus on the most important ideas in a particular area and encourage planned examination answers.

Integrated exercises designed to achieve a variety of aims (mainly relating to the development of the interpretation, analysis and evaluative skills required at A2). These exercises involve three main types:

- **Warm-up** exercises appear at the start of a section and are designed to ease students into a topic by getting them to think about it in a way that builds on their existing knowledge. The basic idea here is to identify the knowledge students already possess about a topic or issue, something that provides a foundation for building a more sociological level of understanding. This type of exercise also serves as a whole-class ice-breaker for each new section of the course.
- **Growing It Yourself** exercises are more focused and, in general, they're designed for small group work. They usually require students to generate and discuss information, although, reflecting the increased demand for evaluative skills at this level, many of these exercises require students to make decisions about the information generated through discussion. This type of exercise is normally closely integrated with the surrounding text and is designed to complement student reading and note-taking by requiring

them to reflect on – and expand – the information presented through the text. Each exercise has been designed to flow naturally from the text and generally requires little or no prior preparation by students or teachers. Having said this, some of the exercises take the form of **simulations** that require students to take on various roles as part of the overall discussion process; these, reflecting the fact they are slightly more complex than the standard exercises, require a relatively simple level of prior organisation and preparation.

- **Discussion Points** provide opportunities for students to discuss or debate different ideas – something we felt would be useful to build into the overall design to help students clarify and express their thinking in a relatively structured way. Some of the discussion points are tightly-constructed around a particular issue, while others are more loosely constructed to allow students greater scope for discussion and debate.

In terms of our **second** aim, although structural continuity was important when designing this text, we also wanted to reflect the fact that A2 study involves both greater theoretical and evaluative depth.

In relation to the former we were conscious of the need to strike a balance between classical (Marx, Durkheim, Weber and the like) and contemporary sociological theory (writers such as Luhmann, Baudrillard and Foucault), on the basis that, while it's important for students and teachers to have access to contemporary material, we shouldn't lose sight of the classical origins of sociology (something we

feel is generally reflected in the structure of AQA A2 examination questions).

In terms of the latter we decided to add a couple of extra features to the A2 text.



The Potting Shed involves questions that reflect the structure of the smaller-mark exam questions (requiring students to 'identify and explain' something, for example). These short, relatively simple, questions have also been designed to help students make **synoptic links** between, for example, A2 and AS modules (once again reflecting the general structure of the smaller-mark AQA exam questions).



Weeding the Path: The most significant change between the A2 and AS text, reflecting the fact that A2 study requires students to use evaluation skills more rigorously than at AS, is the addition of clearly-signposted evaluation material. Although such material runs throughout the text (at its most basic, of course, being by juxtaposition) we felt it would be helpful to draw students' attention more specifically to this type of information.

Finally, although this A2 text, like its AS counterpart, is focused around helping students work their way successfully through the AQA A-level Sociology course, we hope we've managed to produce a text that, while informative and challenging to all abilities and interests, is one you will enjoy reading – not only because (we trust) it will help you achieve the best possible grade in your examination but also, more importantly perhaps, because we firmly believe that Sociology is a fascinating subject to study in its own right.

Religion

In this chapter we're going to examine the concept of religion from a variety of angles, from thinking about different types of religious organisation (such as churches and sects), through the role of religion in society (as a force for conservation or change, for example), to the relationship between religious beliefs and behaviours. In the concluding section we will examine the question of whether or not religion is a declining force in contemporary societies.

In this opening section, however, we're going to look at two broad areas. First, how we can define religion, and second, different explanations for the existence and persistence of religious beliefs and practices in human societies.

1. Different theories of religion

WARM-UP: THE MEANING OF RELIGION

Individually, take a few minutes to think about:

- what religion means to people (including yourself)
- how people practise their religious beliefs
- how people join together to celebrate and affirm their religious beliefs (through ceremonies and festivals, for example).

Make brief notes about your thoughts and, as a class, discuss the different beliefs and practices involved in the concept of religion (identifying, if possible, any 'core themes' to religious behaviour – possible beliefs or behaviours that might be a fundamental aspect of religion).



Preparing the ground: Defining religion

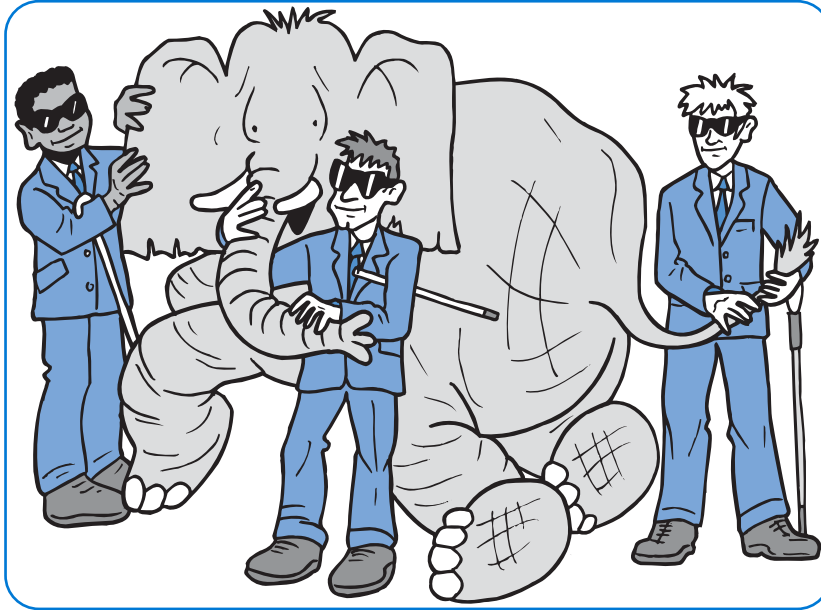
As you will probably have discovered, identifying different features of religion is relatively easy; defining the 'essential features' of religion – the things that make it different to other kinds of social behaviour – is, however, more difficult. **Hutchinson** (1981) suggests: 'Definitions of religion are as numerous . . . as there are students of religion. Often such definitions illustrate the oriental parable of the blind men describing the elephant, each taking hold of part of the beast and defining the whole in terms of this part. Like the elephant, religion is a large and complex phenomenon'.



Weeding the path

The difficulties involved in defining religion can be summarised in a couple of ways:

- **Diversity:** Although it's tempting to see religion as a single (*homogeneous*) entity,



in reality there are wide variations in both *beliefs* and *practices*:

- **historically** – in the same society over time
- **contemporaneously** – in the same society at the same time
- **cross-culturally** – between different societies.

For example, in terms of:

Beliefs, some forms (such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam) involve the worship of a single god (*monotheism*), whereas other forms (such as paganism) involve the worship of many different gods (*polytheism*) – and some forms don't involve worshipping 'god' at all (the North American Sioux, for example, understood the world in terms of *Waken* Beings or Powers – the expression of anything 'incomprehensible'). In terms of:

Practices, some forms allow direct communication with God through prayer, but others do not.

- **Constituency:** McGuire (2002) suggests

religion is difficult to define because of its 'dual character' – it is, for example, both:

- **Individual** in that it involves a diversity of beliefs and practices and a variety of ways to 'be religious', some of which involve the communal practice of religious beliefs, such as attending religious ceremonies; others of which do not (it is possible, for example, to consider yourself a 'Christian' without ever setting foot inside a church).
- **Social** in the sense that religions perform certain *functions* for the society in which they exist – things like *socialisation* (*moral values*, for example), *social solidarity* (giving people a sense they have things in common) and *social control*.

The potting shed

Identify and briefly explain one function of religion for individuals and one function for society.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Theory and methods: McGuire's distinction reflects what Leming (1998) characterises as the idea that people both create and are created by society. This reflects a common theme throughout the A level course – the distinction between structure and action.

Ideas of concept diversity and constituency are reflected in the fact that we can outline three standard types of definition of religion.

Substantive

Substantive definitions focus on the content (or *substance*) of religion – the things (beliefs, ceremonies and the like) that are distinctive in religious behaviour and which, in turn, mark religious behaviour as different to other behaviours (such as shopping or going to school).

Beckford (1980) characterises this type as '... restricting the term "religion" to phenomena displaying definite properties which do not occur together in other phenomena. The strongest form of substantive definitions holds that religion has an essential nature'.

Normally, this 'essential nature' involves a concept of 'the *sacred*', something **Maguire (2001)** defines as 'the word we use for that which is utterly and mysteriously precious in our experience'. In other words, the single (or essential) characteristic that separates religion from other forms of belief is that something should be *venerated* (respected or revered in some way). We can develop this type of definition by noting some of the 'essential characteristics' of religion suggested by different writers.

Eliade (1987) suggested that religion involved:

- distinguishing between 'the sacred' (or special) and 'the profane' (or everyday) – a distinction originally made by Emile **Durkheim (1912)**
- a code of values with a sacred origin
- communication with the supernatural (through mechanisms such as prayer).

Bilton et al. (1996) added the idea of:

- a system of beliefs about the individual's place in the world, providing order to that world and a reason for existence within it.

Giddens (2001) additionally noted that religion involved:

- symbols invoking feelings of reverence or awe linked to rituals or ceremonies (such as church services) practised by a community of believers
- ceremonials practised collectively by believers that normally occur in special places – churches, temples or ceremonial grounds.

Functional

Functional definitions focus on what religion *does* as a way of identifying its general characteristics. **Cline (2005)** notes: 'For those who focus on functional definitions ... if your belief system plays some particular role either in your social life, in your society, or in your psychological life, then it is a religion; otherwise, it's something else.'

Haviland et al. (2005) identify examples of two types of religious function when they note the significance of:

Religious rituals (such as christenings, marriages and funerals). These 'ritualistic

aspects' of social life play a significant role in 'marking important life transitions'. In some forms of Judaism, for example, the *Bar Mitzvah* (for boys aged 13) and *Bat Mitzvah* (for girls aged 12) symbolise a *rite of passage* (a ceremony marking the passing between life stages) between childhood and adulthood.

Intensification rites, meanwhile, function to 'mark *group* occasions' and involve the 'expression and affirmation of common values' – in other words, religious ceremonies (such as church services) or festivals (such as Christmas) have an *integration* function, binding people together through the beliefs and practices they share.

In this respect, functional definitions are broader in scope and include a wider range of ideas and beliefs under the general heading of religion than their substantive counterparts.

Interpretive

Interpretive definitions focus on how people (in different societies and at different times) 'define a situation' as being religious or not religious. In other words, rather than a sociologist, for example, creating a 'definition of religion' against which to measure the extent to which some forms of behaviour are considered 'religious', definitions develop, according to Blasi (1998), out of how people define their behaviour. In this respect, 'religion' and 'religious behaviour' are effectively whatever people claim them to be.



Digging deeper: Defining religion

Sociological approaches to understanding the role of religion can be broadly classified in terms of two general categories (*inclusive* and *exclusive*):

Inclusive approaches consider religion in the broadest possible terms, in order to explore the forms and functions of 'religious-type' belief systems (*ideologies*). This approach, therefore, focuses on identifying and explaining the social and individual purposes religious beliefs and organisations exist to satisfy, which would include ideas like:

- **social integration** – exploring, for example, how religious-type beliefs promote common norms and values
- **social solidarity** – examining, for example, how a common religious-type belief system serves as a source of personal and social identity.

This approach, therefore, considers religion both in terms of how we see it conventionally (a belief in the existence of god, for example) and in forms we generally *don't* consider to be 'religious'; political ideologies (such as communism) could, for example, be included as 'religious-type' belief systems here, mainly because they involve elements of:

Faith: Like conventional forms of religion, political ideologies require their followers to obey certain articles and principles of faith, often in return for some promised goal. For some religions the promised goal might be a place in heaven (Christianity) or rebirth into a higher social position (Hinduism) whereas in a 'political faith' such as communism the promised goal is a fairer, more equal (*egalitarian*) society.

Function: The way beliefs differ in terms of their specific content is less important than the fact that they function in similar ways – sharing beliefs, for example, promotes the idea of belonging to a community of

'like-minded individuals' bound together by what they have in common (their beliefs, norms and values).

* SYNOPSIS LINK

Theory and methods: Some inclusive approaches classify science as a form of religion because it involves the idea of faith – a belief, for example, that the natural world is governed by particular physical laws of development.

Although inclusive approaches are generally associated with functionalist theories of religion, they extend into many other theoretical areas. The interactionist sociologist Thomas **Luckmann** (1967) argues that *any* system of belief that explains the nature of the social or natural world is a form of religion.

Exclusive approaches consider religion in a narrower way, insisting on a more selective (*substantive*) range of beliefs – such as a belief in god or the supernatural – as being representative of religions. In this respect, religious beliefs are considered *qualitatively* different to other forms of belief and this approach is generally characteristic of Marxist and Weberian explanations of religion.

Different approaches to defining religion impact, to some extent, on explanations of religious behaviour, and to reflect the distinction we can examine a range of theories broadly divided into *inclusive* approaches (such as functionalism, interactionism and postmodernism) and *exclusive* approaches (such as Marxism).



Preparing the ground: Functionalist theories of religion

Classical functionalist theories, associated with the work of writers like **Durkheim** (1912), **Malinowski** (1926) and **Parsons** (1937), generally see religion as a:

Cultural institution – religion is mainly concerned with the creation, promotion and maintenance of cultural values – something that it relates to ideas about:

Social order: Cultural institutions (that in contemporary societies include education and the mass media) help to create and maintain a sense of order and continuity in society – their main function (or purpose) being to provide people with a set of meanings (beliefs and values, for example) that help them make sense of both the social world and their place in that world. Religions serve to both originate new ideas and categories of thought and reaffirm existing social values.

Cultural institutions, therefore, primarily function to encourage people to believe they belong to that collective group we term 'society'; they promote, in other words:

Social solidarity – the belief that we are connected into a larger network of people who share certain beliefs, identities and commitments to each other. For such feelings of *solidarity* to develop, however, societies have to create mechanisms of:

Social integration: A sense of solidarity and commitment has to be nurtured and encouraged (through socialisation processes, for example) to create a sense of social purpose and cohesion.

Functions

For **Alpert** (1939), religion served four major functions:

Discipline: Religions require various forms of self-discipline and adherence to moral rules and codes (*common values*), which translate into wider social relationships by creating both a sense of *commitment* (the individual connected to a greater whole – ‘society’) and an understanding of the individual’s place in society. For **Parsons** (1937), religion is a social mechanism for originating and propagating common values for two reasons:

- **Authority:** When people follow ‘a god’ they submit to a ‘higher authority’ and power – something that translates into the idea of observing society’s norms/laws.
- **Collective ceremonies:** Common values are reinforced and given meaning through collective behaviour (such as the singing of hymns in the Protestant church).

Cohesion: Religious ceremonies bring people together in situations where they ‘put into practice’ their shared norms, values and experiences, thereby cementing and reinforcing *social solidarity*. In addition, ceremonies – such as a marriage or funeral – involve:

Symbols with shared meanings (a wedding ring, for example). Thus for **Ricoeur** (1974) a symbol ‘... by expressing one meaning *directly*, expresses another *indirectly*’.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Theory and methods: This idea of symbolic meaning is related to semiological research methods.

For **Durkheim** (1912), religious symbols reflected a significant distinction between:

- **the sacred** – that which is ‘special’ or important, and
- **the profane** – the ‘everyday’, the commonplace and the unimportant.

For **Durkheim** the form taken by ‘the sacred’ was not significant; anything – from *things* (such as a book or an animal) to *ceremonies* (like a wedding) or *places* (a building, for example) could be considered sacred. The function of ‘the sacred’ was simply to help people develop shared values – the things on which they could agree and, by so doing, be drawn closer together as a group or society.

Vitalisation: Common values and beliefs represent *vital* dimensions of culture, socialisation and, of course, social control. This follows because groups – and societies – can use the ‘ideas that bind them together’ as sources of:

- **Identity** (‘*vitalisation*’): People ‘understand who they are’ through their membership of social groups.
- **Revitalisation** – a common culture can be transmitted from one generation to the next, thereby providing social continuities through things like traditions and customs.

Euphony (*soothing* or *harmonious*) reflects the idea that people may undergo periods of pain and crisis, requiring an individual or collective need to re-establish a sense of normality. The *euphonic function* of religion is expressed in terms of things like:

Tension management: Both **Parsons** (1937) and **Malinowski** (1926) noted how the religious rituals surrounding death serve

to manage this potentially tense and traumatic situation by, for example, providing a social structure (the funeral) that permits and encourages certain forms of *social action* (such as grieving for a certain length of time).

Meaning: In his study of the Trobriand Islanders, **Malinowski** (1926) noted how religion provided ‘explanations for the inexplicable’, an idea **Thompson** (1986) expresses in the following terms: ‘In a society full of dangers and uncertainty . . . where there was a continual threat of injury, disease and death, there was always an element of the inexplicable, the “unknowable”. Religion and magic served to offer an explanation of the events for which other frameworks could not account.’

More recently, **Luhmann** (1977) argues that a major function of religion in modern societies is to ‘explain that which is not currently known or understood’ or, to use

Bežovan’s (2004) wonderfully unintelligible phrase: ‘the transformation from indeterminable to determinable complexity’.

Neo-functionalism

More recently, neo-functionalists have explored how the functions of religion have evolved in *postmodern* society – for example, in terms of the way our society has changed, economically, politically and culturally, over the past 50 years or so. Two initial points can be usefully noted here:

- **Diversity:** As our society has become more culturally diverse, the focus of interest for neo-functionalists has generally been on the role of religion considered in terms of its functions for individuals and groups rather than ‘society as a whole’.
- **Decline:** As our society has evolved in terms of diversity, the social significance



Growing it yourself: Death of a princess

Although widespread expressions of grief and mourning are relatively rare in our society, the death of **Diana, Princess of Wales** in 1997 provoked a vast outpouring of public grief for a number of days.

Use Alpert’s four functions of religion (discipline, cohesion, vitalisation and euphony) to write a brief analysis (around 100 words for each function) of how this public display of national mourning could be explained by functionalist approaches to religion.



Thousands of wreaths and flowers were left outside Buckingham Palace as a final tribute to Princess Diana

of organised religion (such as the Church of England) has declined and, according to **Kung** (1990), the functions of religion have similarly evolved in terms of:

Identity: **Gans** (1971) suggests the theoretical focus has changed from thinking about how religion may be functional for some groups but not necessarily others, so that: ‘In a modern heterogeneous society few phenomena are functional or *dysfunctional* for society as a whole, and most result in benefits to some groups and costs to others.’ Membership of a religious group or organisation may, therefore, confer certain benefits to individuals (by defining who they are, promoting clear moral guidelines and satisfying psychological, social and spiritual needs, for example) – things, as **Perry and Perry** (1973) note, ‘... particularly important in times of rapid social change, in which problems of identity are critical’.

Dysfunctions: **Merton’s** (1957) argument that something in a society may be harmful (*dysfunctional*) further suggests religion is not inevitably functional. In a culturally diverse society it can be dysfunctional when it creates conflict – some Christian groups in the USA, for example, are violently opposed to abortion. As **Bruce** (1995) observes: ‘Social scientists have long been aware of the role of religion as social cement; shared rituals and shared beliefs that bind people together ... What is not so often noted is the logical accompaniment to the idea that a commonly worshipped God holds a people together: religion often divides one group from another.’



The potting shed

Identify and briefly explain one additional way religion may be dysfunctional to the individual or society.

Social change: Religion can be a mechanism for change, in that membership of a religious organisation may provide oppressed people with the social solidarity and sense of purpose they need to challenge unjust laws. The Black Civil Rights movement in the USA in the 1960s was partially organised and articulated through Christian church membership.

Psychological support: **Farley** (1990) notes how ‘religion serves as a source of psychological support during the trying times of a person’s life. Not only do religious rites mark the most stressful and major transitions throughout a person’s lifetime, but they offer tremendous support during unexpected crises’.



Digging deeper: Functionalist theories

Although various forms of functionalist theory have been influential for our understanding of religion, this is *not* to say the perspective is without problems. For example:

Methodologically an initial question is how it is possible to test or measure (*operationalise*) the concept of function: how, for example, do we know whether something like religion is functional? We can illustrate this problem using **Merton’s** (1957)

distinction between different types of function:

- **Manifest functions** represent the *intended consequences* (the consequences people see or expect) of behaviour. Thus, the manifest function of prayer is to communicate with or influence the behaviour of a deity.
- **Latent functions**, however, represent *unrecognised and unintended consequences* (in the sense that the effect of behaviour may be unplanned). A classic example is **Durkheim's** (1912) argument that the worship of 'God' is actually the unintended worship of 'society'; as **Adams and Sydie** (2001) note: 'For Durkheim, the sacred comes from society, from the members of the society who collectively believe the object or ritual to be sacred and endow it with meaning. Thus religion becomes ... the "worship of society".'

A *latent function* of religion therefore is that religious behaviour is, ultimately, directed towards the creation, maintenance and policing of 'society' – but the problem here is, how can this be proven or disproven? Similar methodological problems arise with the concept of:

Dysfunction: For classical Functionalism, something like religion was functional 'because it existed' – an assumption, not unreasonably perhaps, based on the idea that if religion had no purpose it would have little or no point in existing. The task, therefore, was to explain the purpose of something (like attendance at religious services) by identifying and understanding its benefit for the individual and/or society. However, the introduction of the concept of *dysfunction* – some forms of behaviour, rather than contributing to social *order* could

contribute to social *disorder* – raises a further problem, namely how to disentangle functional behaviour from dysfunctional behaviour: is religion, for example, functional or dysfunctional to atheists? And are Islamic beliefs functional or dysfunctional for Christianity?

* SYNOPSIS LINK

Crime and deviance: The problem of how to disentangle *function* from *dysfunction* is illustrated by **Durkheim's** (1897) argument that 'too much criminality' in society was potentially *dysfunctional*, even though crime itself was broadly *functional*.



Weeding the path

Any process of social interaction may, by definition, be potentially both functional and dysfunctional. Crime, for example, may be *functional* to me if, by stealing some money from you, I profit – you, on the other hand, may feel my act to be *dysfunctional*. The question here, therefore, is not who is right or wrong (we're both right in our different ways), but how can you differentiate between the 'functions' and 'dysfunctions' of behaviour in any objective way?

* SYNOPSIS LINK

Crime and deviance: The evaluative problems we've identified can be equally applied to functionalist explanations of crime and deviance.

A further problem we can note involves the idea of:

Inclusive theory: Functionalist theories

generally focus more on what religion *does* (its functions) than on what it *is* (what features, for example, makes religion a unique cultural institution?). This means that any social institution can be considered 'a religion' if it performs the functions associated with religious institutions. This idea is both *confusing* – it's not clear why religion (considered in the conventional sense of spiritual beliefs, and so forth) should be considered a distinct object of study – and *convenient*, because it allows functionalists to explain seemingly *contradictory* or *mutually exclusive* observations by using the concept of:

Functional alternatives: For example, if religious observance and practice is widespread in a society, this is evidence for the function of religion. However, if such things go into decline (in the UK, for example, Christian church attendance has declined steeply over the past century), the general theory is *not* considered false because it can be saved by reference to 'other social institutions' (or *functional alternatives* to religion) that take over the role it previously performed – an example being something like football performing a *social solidarity* function (large numbers of people sharing and showing their support for the national team).



The potting shed

Identify and briefly explain one way the mass media or education might represent a 'functional alternative' to religion.



Preparing the ground: Interactionist theories

For interactionist sociology the general focus is on understanding what religion *means* (interpretively), considered on two levels:

- **The individual:** This examines the 'meaning of religion' for individual social actors – to study, for example, the motivations, behaviours and beliefs of those who classify themselves as religious.
- **The social:** This might involve looking at the 'collective religious beliefs' existing in a particular society and how these beliefs influence the development of cultural identities, legal systems and the like.

Although the individual level of analysis is important, the focus here is on the social level, mainly because we're generally interested in the role of religion in *society* and, in particular, the idea that the main thing 'religions' have in common is their organisational power, based around the concept of:

Belief systems (or **ideological frameworks**) – ways of organising knowledge and understanding. **Berger** (1973) views religion as a framework for the interpretation and understanding of the world: in pre-modern (pre-scientific) societies, religion provided a comprehensive framework for the interpretation and imposition of meaning in a (potentially) chaotic and threatening world – a means by which people imposed a sense of order on their world when threatened by 'inexplicable' phenomena (such as death, disaster and disease).

By its ability to 'explain the inexplicable' (something that's similar to **Luhmann's** (1977) ideas about religion), an important

role of religion is to encourage *certainty* – there is nothing that cannot be explained by religion which, in **Berger’s** terms, makes it a:

Cosmology – a complete body of knowledge about the world supported by various forms of practice and expression (ceremonials and the like – which links, to some extent, with **Durkheim’s** (1912) ideas about the functions of religion). On a more specific level, we can understand how this organisational framework works in terms of:

Culture mapping: This represents ‘mental maps’ of the world and our place in that world articulated through, for example, religious beliefs and practices. Such organisational maps enable us to:

- **explain** our experiences
- **interpret** their meaning and significance
- **create** shared, stored (cultural) meanings.

Jarvis (1995) notes how mental mapping helps people build ‘... an objective and moral universe of meaning’. In other words, for interactionists the world is:

Socially constructed – without clear and strong instincts to guide behaviour we create a sense of order and predictability through other means (such as the socialisation process) and, as such, we’re all socialised into some form of universe of meaning (religious, political, magical, scientific or, in modern societies, a possible mixture of these) that explains the world. We can understand this idea a little more easily by the use of an analogy.

Interactionists like to compare people to actors, so imagine ‘life as a television soap opera’ (such as *Coronation Street*). In this world, scriptwriters are powerful social actors – they write the lines spoken by the actors. The actors too are powerful, in their own way, since their job is to bring a script to life and make it believable.

The ‘soap opera world’ is a clearly defined one, tightly controlled by the participants (by the writer in particular), and is subject to various conventions (which are like traditions and customs). The actors and writers are also socialised into obeying these



Growing it yourself: Cultural maps

In small groups, use the following table as a template to identify some of the ways religious beliefs and practices help people create ‘cultural maps’ of their world (we’ve given you some examples to get you started).

Explain our experiences	Interpret meaning	Create shared meanings
What happens when we die?	Why is there suffering and unhappiness?	Murder is wrong
Further examples?		

conventions (a western soap opera has different conventions to a hospital-based soap opera). In this small world there is only one universe of meaning and the actors 'take this world for granted'. Actors in a police drama, for example, do not suddenly start acting as if they were in a western. To do so would be inconceivable within the conventions set by the particular *genre* (type). We can apply these ideas to the distinction developed by **Weber** (1905), when he talked about different types of society:

Traditional or **pre-modern** societies may involve only one universe of meaning because they are *closed systems* – societies where one belief system is continually emphasised and socialised into individuals, to the exclusion of all other belief systems. The role and behaviour of the Roman Catholic Church in Britain in the Middle Ages is an example here since it was able to monopolise knowledge about the world (in the absence of alternative belief systems such as science) and, most importantly, *use* this knowledge to suppress alternative belief systems. **Boronski** (1987) notes how the Catholic Church tried to prevent the spread of **Galileo's** scientific ideas about the nature of the universe because they posed a threat to the prevailing religious *cosmology*.

Modern societies, such as contemporary Britain, involve many possible 'universes of meaning' – religion, science, politics, and so forth. These 'universes' are not necessarily:

- **separate** – political ideas may be rooted in religious beliefs – or
- **homogeneous**: There are a variety of religious universes, both *within* religions like Christianity (Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, for example) or Islam

(Sunni and Shia) and *between* religions (such as Hinduism and Sikhism).

Inclusiveness

For interactionists, religion in modern societies is but one cosmology in an increasingly diverse system of competing cosmologies, and in this respect they tend to adopt a generally:

Inclusive approach to religion by focusing on the role of religion as a belief system; for example, their interest lies in exploring how religious ideologies provide an organising structure to our lives. The specific content of religious beliefs is, consequently, not of primary significance. One reason for this, perhaps, is expressed in the concept of:

Plausibility: For interactionists (as, to some extent, with postmodernists) religious beliefs persist only for as long as they are believed (*plausible*). In this respect, **Luckmann** (1967) suggests we should distinguish between two 'plausibility spheres':

- **The public** – where religions are forced to 'compete' with other belief systems in terms of how they explain the social and natural worlds.
- **The private** – the realm of individual beliefs. In this sphere, questions of personal identity, what happens when you die, and so forth, are reduced to private, personal concerns to which religion may provide plausible answers (sometimes in the absence of any other sort of answer).



Digging deeper: Interactionist theories

The inclusive nature of interactionist approaches leads **Berger** (1967) to argue that religion takes on the form of a:

Sacred canopy, an idea that involves ‘... an all-embracing sacred order ... capable of maintaining itself in the ever-present face of chaos’. Religious beliefs and practices, in other words, resemble a *shield* people use to protect themselves from psychological harm. As **Wuthnow** (1992) puts it: ‘Religion is a symbol system that imposes order on the entire universe (“cosmos”), on life itself, and thereby holds chaos (disorder) at bay.’ Alternatively, **Leming** (1998) characterises this view of religion as ‘... the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant’.

Social change: From this position, the persistence of religion in human society is *not* tied to specific notions of *functionality* (the purpose religion is supposed to serve). There is, for example, no sense of religion performing functions that no other cultural institution can perform. By tying religion into *beliefs*, interactionists can explain both the:

Persistence of religion in human societies (its ability to provide a ‘universe of meaning’) and

Change (how and why religious forms of belief and expression change). Unlike functionalist inclusive approaches, interactionists do not necessarily see ‘competition’ between different belief systems as being *oppositional* (based on conflict); scientific beliefs, for example, do not automatically cancel out religious beliefs, and different belief systems may coexist by:

- **explaining** different things in different ways (religion, for example, is arguably better placed than science to explain ‘life after death’)
- **changing** their form to accommodate

different belief systems. As **Luckmann** (1967) argues, the form taken by religion in modern societies is more privatised and individualistic (*fragmented*) than in the past – something that reflects the way it evolves to meet new challenges from alternative belief systems.



Weeding the path

Despite these ideas, there are weaknesses and inconsistencies in this general perspective we can usefully note.

Plausibility structures: Although ‘plausibility’ represents a way of comparing one form of knowledge against another (for example, does theory X explain something better than theory Y?), it’s not so useful when considering the *internal plausibility* of something like religious belief.

The main problem here is that we have no way of knowing which comes first – the ideas that sustain a ‘plausibility structure’ or the structure itself. In other words, do people continue to hold religious beliefs *because* these beliefs are plausible (they explain something no other belief system can explain) or are such beliefs plausible simply because they are believed? This leads us to consider the concept of:

Social structures and the idea that interactionists underplay the role of social structures (and overplay the role of *social actions*) in the persistence of religion. As **Wuthnow** (1992) notes: ‘Social interaction is surely important in maintaining religious realities, but putting the matter in these terms leaves the influence of social conditions largely indeterminate. For example, when research finds Christian friendships reinforce Christian convictions, the question still remains why some people

choose Christian friends and others do not.’ In other words, the suggestion is that specifically religious beliefs persist because they serve important and significant functions for both the individual and society.

Conflict: Although we’ve talked about conflicts between different belief systems (such as those of religion and science) it is clear there are also conflicts within religion as a belief system. New Age religions (involving things like crystal healing) have little or nothing in common with traditional religions (such as Christianity or Islam), aside from their general classification as ‘religions’, and this makes it difficult to support the idea of religion as a single belief system or universe of meaning.



Preparing the ground: Postmodernist approaches

As **Grassie** (1997) notes, ‘postmodernism represents a great range of philosophical points of view’ and reflects what he terms ‘a broad and elusive movement of thought’. It is, in other words, an *approach* to thinking about the social world that encompasses a wide range of different viewpoints gathered under the theoretically convenient (but potentially misleading) banner of postmodernism. This does present us with a couple of problems, of course, the main one being that, when thinking specifically about religion, postmodernism doesn’t present a particularly unified face to the world. This ‘lack of theoretical unity’ is reflected in **Taylor’s** (1987) observation that ‘for some, postmodernism suggests the death of God and the disappearance of religion, for others, the return of traditional faith, and for others still, the possibility of recasting religious ideas’.

Although this makes it particularly difficult to talk convincingly about postmodernist approaches to religion, there are arguably a range of general concepts employed by postmodernists that can be applied to an understanding of such behaviour. In this respect, a couple of concepts are initially significant.

Narratives: This idea holds, rightly or wrongly, that knowledge consists of *stories* that compete with one another to explain something. From this position religion represents just another form of *narrative* – one that, more importantly, can sometimes be considered a:

Metanarrative (or ‘big story’): Narratives sometimes break out of small-scale storytelling and become all-encompassing stories that seek to explain ‘everything about something’ (or, in some cases, ‘everything about everything’, to paraphrase **Vaillancourt-Rosenau’s** (1992) characterisation of the ‘religion metanarrative’). Religious metanarratives, in this sense, represent a general structure or framework around which individual beliefs, practices and experiences can be orientated and, of course, ordered. It also follows from this that metanarratives invariably involve a claim to *exclusive truth* about whatever it is they’re explaining.

The idea of religion as a metanarrative has two significant implications. First, for **Lyotard** (1979), the postmodern condition involves an ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’ – a general disbelief that any single set of beliefs has a monopoly of truth. Second, **Ritzer** (1992) argues that postmodern approaches represent an ‘assault on structure . . . and structural approaches’ to understanding and explanation.

In general terms, therefore,

postmodernists argue that the structural frameworks that in the past supported *organised religions* (their ability to explain the nature of the world, for example) increasingly come under attack from competing world views – from the sixteenth century onwards in Western Europe, for example, this has involved the rise of scientific explanations. Many things that were once plausibly explained by religion are now *more plausibly* explained by scientific narratives – and, in consequence, the metanarrative foundations of organised religions are undermined by competing explanations and systematically:

Deconstructed: That is, broken down, in two ways: a decline in the ability of religion to exert power and control over people's lives and a gradual retreat into what are termed 'local narratives', or small stories about people's situations and circumstances. In other words, religion, where it continues to exert influence, does so in terms of individual:

Identities: In postmodern society people are exposed to a variety of sources of information and ideas that compete for attention – the world is no longer one where meaning and truth can be imposed and policed by elites, for example. On the contrary, people are increasingly presented with a range of choices and critiques that encourages:

- **scepticism** towards metanarratives – for every 'big story' there is a multitude of 'alternative stories'
- **hybridity:** Postmodern society encourages the development of *cultural hybrids* – new ways of thinking and acting that develop out of the combination of *old* ways of behaving.

In this respect, Jencks (1996) notes how 'the Post-Modern Age is a time of incessant choosing. It's an era when no orthodoxy can be adopted without self-consciousness and irony, because all traditions seem to have some validity . . . Pluralism, the "ism" of our time, is both the great problem and the great opportunity'.

The outcome of choice – and a plurality of opportunities, meanings and behaviours – is that religious symbols, for example, lose much of their original meaning and power as they are adopted into the everyday (*profane*) world of fashion and display. An example here is the co-option of Rastafarian religious signs and symbols (such as dreadlocks) into some parts of mainstream fashion.

Religious practice, therefore, no longer holds a central place in people's everyday life or identity; instead, it lives on as a set of accoutrements and adornments to the construction of identity – something that occurs not only in the world of *objects* (rings



Dreadlocks were originally popularised by the Rastafarian movement in the 1960s – although their origins seem to go back to places such as Ancient Egypt . . .

and pendants, for example), but also in the world of *beliefs*.

New forms of religious belief develop *not* as metanarrative but as part of *individual narratives*. These, as with the objects that accompany them, are ‘picked up, worn for a time and then discarded’, much as one might wear a fashionable coat until it becomes unfashionable.



Digging deeper: Postmodernist approaches

Postmodernism reflects (or possibly encourages) a contradictory set of ideas about the significance of religious ideas, practices and organisations in both the past and the present. At one and the same time, for example, we see the ideas of religious:

Decline – as organised religions lose their ability to control and influence events in the *secular* (non-religious) world, and

Development – in that religious beliefs and practices shift and change, reflecting

Discussion point: Lifestyle shopping?

Wearing Kabbalah

Source: <http://www.metronews.ca>

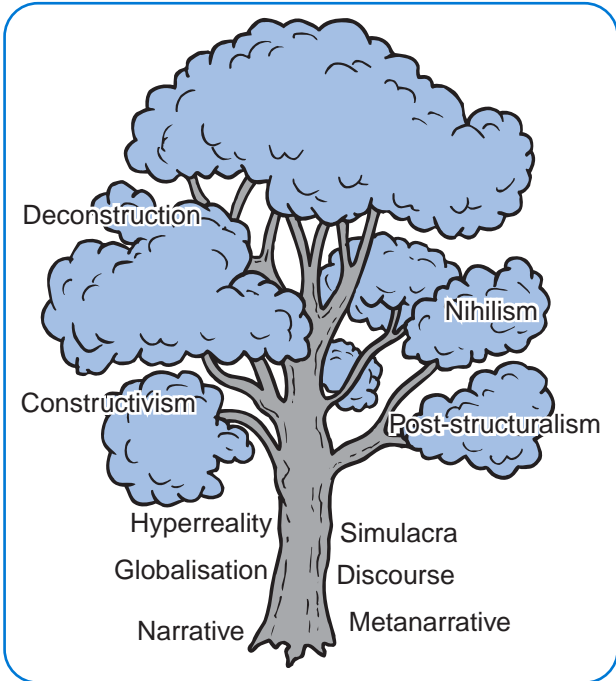
Fashion designers going with religious flow

Shopping for Kabbalah is the newest new age mantra of anyone who wants to attach themselves to the craze, but doesn't necessarily want to invest years in earnest study. While most of us will never fully appreciate the intimacies of the ancient mystical Jewish religion, enthusiastic consumers often argue that the ritual and the ecstasy of shopping is nothing short of a religious experience.

Sharon Chalkin-Feldstein describes the lounge-wear collection as versatile ‘lifestyle dressing’ perfect for yoga, mediating and shopping ... Take your cue from the flock of A-list celebrities, from Madonna and David Beckham to Demi Moore, who wear their devotion to Kabbalah on their wrists (always in the form of a red string, believed to ward off evil).

The above suggests some forms of religious belief and practice are bound up with the idea of consumption – that religion, for example, has meaning in terms of fashion and lifestyle. Think about and discuss the following:

- What examples of ‘religious lifestyle shopping’ can you identify?
- To what extent do you think ‘religious symbols’ have become fashion items to adorn a particular lifestyle?
- How does the combination of religious beliefs and individual lifestyle choices reflect postmodern ideas about the role of religion in contemporary societies?



The postmodern tree of knowledge

perhaps basic beliefs in ‘supernatural phenomena’, but expressed in ways that are far removed from organised religious services. In this respect, religion (or, perhaps more correctly, *religions*) is viewed as being constantly *reinvented* to reflect the ways people choose and discard different forms of *personal identity* (the currently fashionable Kabbalah religion being a case in point).

In addition, further contradictions are evidenced in relation to the:

Privatisation and deprivatisation of religion: Although there are clear signs of a move towards *privatised* forms of religious belief (religion as something practised in the private rather than the public sphere), organised religion stubbornly refuses to disappear. On the contrary, there is evidence (with some forms of Islam and Christianity in particular) of a contrary process of organised forms of religion re-emerging as significant aspects of public life.



Weeding the path

This diversity of thought makes it difficult, in some ways, to evaluate postmodern approaches to religion because, as we’ve suggested, a common set of unifying principles is absent. This is not to say, however, that we can’t offer up some observations about postmodern approaches.

Metanarratives: Callinicos (1991) argues that postmodernism is itself a form of the ‘metanarrative thinking’ postmodernists claim to dismiss as being unsustainable. More significantly, postmodernism’s *inclusive approach* to metanarratives – placing scientific ideologies (such as *positivism*) on a par with religious ideologies – has the (unintended) effect of actually *strengthening* the position of religion; if both science and religion have the same metanarrative status (and postmodernists such as Lyotard (1997) suggest we should be equally sceptical about the respective claims of both), it follows that religious beliefs and explanations are *no less valid* than scientific beliefs and explanations. Something like *creationism* (or ‘intelligent design’, a belief about how the earth was created based on a literal interpretation of the Christian Bible), for example, can claim the same explanatory status as something like *evolutionary theory*.

This idea leads us to consider a further question, namely:

Resacralisation: One of the enduring contradictions described by postmodern approaches is noted by McLeod (1997) when he observes that postmodernity is an ‘era of religious fragmentation, characterised by religious pluralism and conflicting evidence of both secularisation and sacralisation’. In this respect, a general

decline in overt forms of religious practice (such as attendance at religious ceremonies) sits alongside a *reinvigoration* of both public and private religious practice (in the USA, for example, church attendances are generally rising). The basic idea here, therefore, is that religion actually becomes *less important* to people in terms of *practice*, but *more important* as a source of personal and social identity. In a world that appears increasingly confusing and unstable, religions become beacons of order and stability by their ability to produce moral certainties.

Thus, in a world of *moral relativism* – where one set of beliefs and values is as good (or bad) as any other – religions are reinvigorated precisely because what they have to offer is no worse than any other form of explanation (and, possibly, a good deal more attractive than some). In this respect, **Bauman** (1992) argues, ‘postmodernity can be seen as restoring . . . a re-enchantment of the world that modernity tried hard to disenchant’. **Bauman** (1997) also addresses the issue of religious:

Fundamentalism: This represents a form of religious belief and organisation that advocates a strict observance of the ‘fundamental beliefs’ of a religion, whether it be of the Christian variety in the USA or the Islamic variety in Iran. For **Bauman**, fundamentalist religions draw their strength from the ability to provide *certainties* in an uncertain world – from a belief in the principles laid down in the Old Testament of Christianity (an ‘eye for an eye’, for example) to the clear specification of how men and women should dress and behave in Islam. **Bauman’s** ideas, in this respect, link to **Beck’s** (1992) concept of:

Risk in the sense that fundamentalist

religions, by removing *choice*, also remove *risk*. The individual, by being given clear moral guidelines, has the ‘dread of risk taking’ (and the consequences of those risks) removed.



Weeding the path

Ideas about the relationship between postmodernity and religious fundamentalism need to be considered in relation to two ideas; first, that such fundamentalism is not necessarily new (it has existed at various times throughout history) and second, whether contemporary forms of fundamentalism are actually linked with postmodernity, per se, or some other socio-economic processes.

The final idea we can note is:

Meaning: For many postmodernist writers, religious signs and symbols have lost their ‘original’ meaning – they become, in **Baudrillard’s** (1998) terms:

Simulacra, or things that simulate something that may once have been real. These simulations are *not* imitations; they are just *as real* as the things they simulate – televised religious services, for example, give the *appearance* of participation in a real religious service, although, of course, the two experiences are quantitatively and qualitatively different. For **Baudrillard**, *religious simulacra* give the appearance of religiosity (wearing a cross, for example), but are, he argues, actually empty and devoid of any original meaning they once had – they ‘simulate divinity’, as he puts it, and in so doing devalue both the meaning and substance of religion. **Sedgwick** (2004), meanwhile, suggests this argument is overstated when he notes the distinction between:

- **organised religions**, such as the Catholic Church, and
- **‘disorganised’ religions** which involve a certain level of *spirituality* – a belief in the supernatural, for example – but which are not always explicitly practised in the same way as organised religions.

As he notes: ‘We are often told that people are wide open to the idea of the spiritual – the religious, the numinous, call it what you like – but have no time for organised religion. And so the churches are emptying while they pursue their quest elsewhere.’ He suggests people are ‘... looking for private religion – that is, religion they can practise with minimal interruption to their normal routine and without having to bother about burdensome responsibilities. “I want the feel-good factor, but not the cost of commitment” – that, in reality, is what such people are saying. Putting it bluntly, private religion is essentially selfish religion’.

Bauman (1997) is equally scathing of ‘the new spiritualism’: ‘Postmodernity is the era of experts in “identity problems” of personality healers, of marriage guides, of writers of “how to reassert yourself” books; it is the era of the “counselling boom”. Business executives need spiritual counselling and their organizations need spiritual healing. Uncertainty postmodern-style begets not the demand for religion ... [but] the ever rising demand for identity-experts.’

Having covered a range of inclusive approaches, we can turn now to consider some *exclusive* approaches to understanding religion.

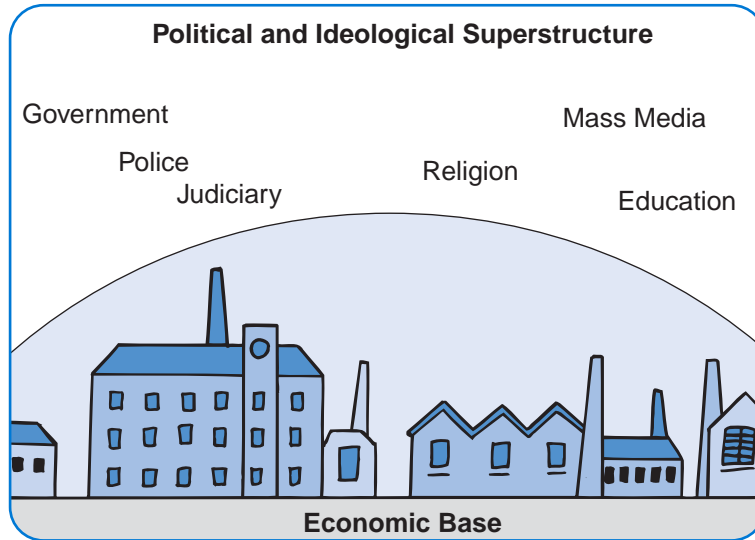


Preparing the ground: Marxist theories

Marxists generally (and **Marx** in particular) take an *exclusive* view of religion, preferring to study its impact on society by focusing on the particular qualities of religions – most notably the experience of ‘the sacred’ (what **Eliade** (1969) called the ‘irreducibly religious’ element of religion) that can only be found in ‘religious experience’. In this sense, therefore, Marxists have examined how religious beliefs and practices are *qualitatively* different to other forms of belief and practice. Thus, for Marxists religion is an important object of study in its own right, albeit one located in the general structure of (capitalist) society. To understand the significance of religion, therefore, we need to think about its:

Institutional role as part of the general structure of society, which involves thinking about how Marxists theorise the relationship between economic, political and ideological institutions (such as religion). In this respect, capitalist societies are theorised in terms of the relationship between ‘base and superstructure’:

- **Economic base:** This is the foundation on which any society is built. It is the world of work and involves particular types of *relationships* (owner/manager/wage labourer, for example) and *organisation* (based on things like wages in capitalist societies).
- **Political and ideological superstructure:** This ‘rests’ on the economic base and represents things like *government* and formal agencies of social control (political institutions) and *cultural institutions* like religion, education and the mass media



It can help to think about society as a dome resting on economic foundations – the dome itself involves ideological institutions such as religion.

(which Marxists call ideological institutions).

Our focus here is on the ideological role of religion in society.

*** SYNOPTIC LINK**

Stratification and differentiation: These ideas are explained in greater detail in the section on Marxist theories of stratification.



Growing it yourself: Not rocking the world?

In small groups, identify some of the ways religions have supported the status quo (especially, but not exclusively, in the past). For each idea you identify, briefly note how it tries to prevent social change. We've given you a couple of examples to get you started (because we're nice).

Ten Commandments	Not stealing or being jealous of the things owned by others
God	All powerful – He made the world for a reason
Reincarnation	In the Hindu religion, if you obey religious law in this life you will be reborn in a higher social position in your next life

Further examples?

From this position religion is seen as an:

Ideological framework (or belief system) that helps to shape the way people see the world; its role, in capitalist society, is to ‘represent the world’ in a way that reflects and supports the existing economic order. In other words, religious ideologies represent:

Legitimising myths about the world – ‘propaganda stories’, in other words, whose ultimate aim is to explain and justify the way society is ordered. Its role, in common with other cultural/ideological institutions in capitalist society, is to uphold the *status quo* (to keep things as they are).

In this respect, therefore, the role of religion in society is seen as both *oppressive* and *repressive*.

- **Oppressive:** As **Marx** (1844) argued, religion represented an ‘illusory happiness’ that prevented people finding ‘real happiness’. The ‘need for illusions’ about the world, he argued, stemmed from the conditions under which people lived. For most people living in Victorian Britain, conditions were grim, and for **Marx** the solution to their unhappy situation was to remove the conditions that caused this (economic exploitation).
- **Repressive:** Although, like **Durkheim** (1912), **Marx** saw religion as having an *integrating* function, he also saw it as an (ideological) agency of social control – one that teaches people to accept both the world ‘as it is’ and, of course, their position in that world. Religion, therefore, served the interests of a ruling class by enforcing their ideological domination of other classes – in Victorian Britain, for example, religion promoted these interests by:
 - **upholding the status quo:** The social

world could legitimately be portrayed as ‘god-given’ and consequently beyond the power of people to change

- **legitimising economic exploitation:** If God made the world, it was not the place of people to question this scheme
- **justifying poverty and inequality:** Poverty could be portrayed as a *virtue* – something to be endured in an uncomplaining fashion, since it was a means of achieving true spiritual riches in the afterlife (heaven).

The power of religious ideology, for **Marx**, wasn’t simply that it was ‘believed uncritically’ – its real power to convince was based on the fact that it could ‘do something’ for believers, such as ‘dull the pain of oppression’ with its promise of eternal life (Christianity) or reincarnation into a higher social *caste* (Hinduism) – as **Marx** (1844) expressed it: ‘Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.’

Discussion point: Drugged up?

In small groups, think about the following:

- What do you think Marx meant by the phrase ‘religion is the opium of the people’?
- Identify some ways religion is like a powerful drug.
- If the religious are like (metaphorical) drug addicts, who supplies the drug and how do these ‘drug dealers’ profit from religion?

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Stratification and differentiation: The caste system is discussed in more detail as a form of social stratification in the 'Theories of stratification' section.

For traditional forms of Marxism, therefore, religion represents a form of:

False consciousness – people are *unaware* they are being tricked into accepting a situation that exploits them. By believing religious ideas people fail to see or understand the real causes of their misery and oppression – an exploitative economic system. **Foucault** (1983) captures this idea quite neatly when he notes: 'People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what they do does.' (Think about it – but not for too long.)

Marx didn't simply believe that by exposing the oppressive role of religion people would come to see their true interests. Religious beliefs, like any form of ideology, don't just exist as ideas imposed on the gullible. On the contrary, such beliefs are rooted deeply in the condition under which people live in capitalist society:

Alienation: In a competitive, exploitative society people gain little or no satisfaction or fulfilment from either the work they do or the relationships they form – they are, in this respect, alienated from both themselves and each other. In this situation, **Marx** (1844) argued, religion provided – at least at the time he was writing – a sense of meaning and purpose to life (albeit a false and illusory meaning).



Weeding the path

At this point, you may be thinking that even if alienation is 'part of the problem' it no longer seems very plausible (when thinking about Britain in the twenty-first century) to see religion playing the kind of role described by **Marx** – and you'd probably be right (which is as good a reason as any to look at both an evaluation of classical Marxism and some more-modern (neo) Marxist thinking about religion).



Digging deeper: Marxist theories

When we dig deeper into classical Marxist theories of religion we can identify two major problems, the first of which is:

False consciousness: There are a couple of critical dimensions here:

- **Historical:** For false consciousness to be a factor in people's oppression it is necessary for 'the oppressed' to be 'religious' in terms of their beliefs and practices. **Turner** (1983), however, has argued that, historically, the working classes have never been particularly religious (if you measure religious conviction in terms of church attendance, involvement in and membership of religious groups and the like).
- **Contemporary:** Although there is a diversity of religious beliefs and practices in modern Britain, it's arguable that, in terms of Christianity at least, religion plays a relatively *peripheral* and *superficial* role in the lives of most people (one restricted, in many instances, to attending things like weddings and funerals). In this

respect, it's difficult to see religion as having much ideological significance for the majority of people.

The second problem is that, for classical Marxism, religion was a largely *conservative force* (in the sense of broadly supporting the status quo). However, this is not necessarily the case, as the following examples show:

- **The Iranian Revolution** in 1979 involved the overthrow of the (secular) regime of the Shah of Persia.
- **Liberation theology: Boff and Boff** (1987) note the involvement of Roman Catholic clerics in revolutionary political movements in parts of South America from the 1960s onwards.
- **The Civil Rights Movement:** In the USA, from the 1960s onwards, social change was promoted and supported by Black religious activists and leaders (such as Martin Luther King).



Weeding the path

Seiler (2004) argues that the overall picture of the relationship between religion and its ability to promote social change is complicated – he notes, for example: ‘Freedom is relative because it has its limits. In the case of Liberation Theology, for example, the Catholic Church hierarchy has not welcomed this ideological form and has tried, with varying degrees of success, to limit its impact.’

Neo-Marxist theories of religion attempt to resolve these problems through, initially, the concept of:

Hegemony – an idea put forward by **Gramsci** (1934) and elaborated by, among others, **Poulantzas** (1974). *Hegemony*

involves the idea that beliefs about the world are not simply imposed ‘from above’ (by a ruling class onto all other classes). Rather, as **Strinati** (1995) suggests, dominant groups are able to maintain their dominant position through the ‘consent’ of subordinate groups. This ‘consent’ (for the leadership in society by those who are led) is created through *socialisation* and *force*.

Socialisation: Consent is ‘manufactured’ through ideological institutions (of which religion is but one). **Althusser** (1972) argued that we should see this aspect of ‘consent manufacture’ in terms of the concept of:

- **ideological state apparatuses (ISAs)** – socialisation processes carried out by cultural institutions such as religion, education and the media.

Force: This aspect may come into play *directly* (through agencies such as the police playing a repressive role in society), but one of the subtleties of hegemonic arguments is that ‘consent to leadership’ doesn’t actually have to involve support for ‘dominant ideas’. On the contrary, it’s possible to *oppose* dominant ideas – but if you’re unable to do anything to change them you are effectively lending them your consent. **Althusser** argued we should see this aspect of ‘consent manufacture’ in terms of:

- **repressive state apparatuses (RSAs)**, involving groups such as the police, social workers and the armed forces.

The concept of hegemony makes it possible for ‘religious ideas’ to be seen as influential in contemporary societies without necessarily having to show that ‘the majority’ of people either believe or

support them, an idea **Strinati** (1995) expresses thus: ‘... **Gramsci’s** theory suggests subordinated groups accept the ideas, values and leadership of the dominant group not because they are physically or mentally induced to do so, nor because they are ideologically indoctrinated, but because they have reason of their own.’

We can build on the concept of *hegemony* by noting that, for traditional Marxist theory, religion formed part of a:

Dominant ideology – a set of ideas, sanctified by God, that explained and justified the nature of the social world. Consequently, it represented an:

Integrating social force: By providing a set of beliefs and practices to which everyone was either subject or to which they could aspire, religion helped provide the ‘social glue’ binding people together in terms of shared norms, values, traditions, customs and the like.

For neo-Marxists, as **Turner** (1983) notes, the ideological impact of religion is more subtle in that, rather than seeing religious ideas and rationalisations as an instrument of ideological oppression, they suggest it represents a:

Cohesive force for a *ruling class* in capitalist society. In other words, religion represents one way (significantly more important in the past, perhaps) that the various elements and members of a ruling class are integrated *as a class*. Religion, in this respect, provided a set of universal, moral guidelines for ruling-class behaviour – in relation to areas such as marriage and the inheritance of property (Christianity, for example, laid down the rules for legitimate relationships and hence for the inheritance of property).



Weeding the path

Although neo-Marxism provides a different view of the role of religion in capitalist society to its traditional counterpart, a significant criticism of this position involves the idea of:

Reductionism: That is, the explanation for the existence and role of cultural institutions like religion ultimately comes down – or is *reduced* – to what **Pals** (1996) calls ‘the material facts of the class struggle and alienation. Since these burdens form the reality behind the illusions of belief, [Marxists] explain religion best only when [they] reduce it to the forces of economic life that have created it’. In other words, whether from a traditional or a neo-Marxist position, the significance of religion is ultimately judged in terms of how it performs an ideological role in support of a capitalist economic system.

Moving on

We have, at various points, touched on the question of whether religion acts as a *conservative social force* – limiting and inhibiting social change in support of the political and economic status quo – or as a potential *force for change*. In the next section, therefore, we can look at both sides of this argument in more detail.

2. The role of religion as a conservative force and as an initiator of change

The relationship between religion and social change is interesting because it provides an insight into the dynamics of religious beliefs, practices and organisation and enables us to look at religion in terms

of its influence on a range of societies, as a possible initiator of change or as a conservative social force. Before we explore these ideas in more detail, however, we need to clarify a few ideas.

Social change: This idea can be interpreted in a couple of ways (*historically* and *localised*).

Historical movements refer to large-scale, far-reaching changes to the way of life in a society. Examples here might include the French and American revolutions in the eighteenth century, the Russian Revolution(s) in the twentieth century or the transition from feudal to capitalist societies that began, in Western Europe, in the seventeenth century.

Localised movements refer to the relatively small ways a society changes over time. Britain in the twenty-first century, for example, is a substantially different society to Britain in the middle of the twentieth century. Although there have been no great historical changes of the type just noted over this period, changes in terms of technological developments, social class, gender relationships and the like have certainly taken place.

The meaning of ‘social change’ is, in this respect, not always clear and precise and different writers make different assumptions about what it involves. In this section, however, we’re going to focus on the former meaning of social change in order to

WARM-UP: PERSPECTIVES ON CHANGE

When we looked at theories of religion we considered some of the implications of each in terms of whether or not religion was likely to support the status quo in society. In small groups, use the following table as the basis for identifying how each theoretical perspective mainly sees the role of religion.

Perspective	Does this perspective suggest religion is mainly:		
	Conservative?	Initiator of change?	Possibly both?
Classical Marxism	✓	✗	✗
Neo-Marxism			
Functionalism			
Interactionism			
Postmodernism			

Once you’ve done this, briefly discuss among the group the reasons for your choices.

As a class, discuss your choices and reasons to arrive at a general picture of the role of religion in society from a variety of sociological perspectives.

examine a range of ‘classical sociological perspectives’ on the relationship between religion and social change.

Conservative force: There are two basic meanings we need to note for this idea. The first, relatively straightforward, one is the role of religion in:

- **Preventing social change:** In other words, its role in maintaining the status quo in society.

The second, less straightforward, meaning involves the idea of ‘conservative’ in the sense of promoting a set of:

- **Traditional values and beliefs:** This involves religion asserting or reasserting a set of values and practices that belong ‘to the past’ and an example here might be attempts to recreate a way of life based on traditional values and morality (real or imagined). A classic illustration of this idea is the 1979 Iranian Revolution, involving the replacement of a secular regime with an Islamic political, legal and moral order. Although religion was involved in promoting social change, it was a *conservative* form of change, designed to assert a particular (non-Western), socially conservative political order.



Preparing the ground: Marxist perspectives

As we’ve suggested in the previous section, the general Marxist view of the relationship between *economic* institutions (such as work and the production process) and *cultural* institutions (such as religion) is that the latter are supportive of – and in some respects dependent upon – the former. For neo-Marxists like **Balibar** and **Althusser**

(1970) or **Poulantzas** (1973), the economic sphere should always be considered *determinant* ‘in the last instance’ (in other words, in any final reckoning over a clash of interests, those holding economic power would always triumph over those wielding ideological power alone). What this means is that Marxists generally view religion as a *conservative social force*, expressed in two main ways:

- **False consciousness**, which we’ve already discussed in relation to classical Marxism (religion is partly responsible for mystifying the nature of the social world), and
- **System maintenance:** There are times when capitalist societies undergo economic crises that threaten their stability. In such moments, the conservative role of religion may actually act as a channel for social dissent that, somewhat ironically perhaps, helps to *preserve* the overall status quo in society by promoting a (limited) but crucial amount of social change. If this is a little unclear, an example should help.

The black Civil Rights Movement: In the USA in the 1950s the systematic oppression of black minorities by the white majority threatened the stability of American society (and, perhaps more significantly, American capitalism) as black discontent and unrest was manifested in civil unrest. A number of factors, as **Farley** (1990) notes, ‘heightened the black sense of relative deprivation’. These included:

- **Urban ghetto life**, which ‘facilitated communication and organisation’, and
- **Military service** in the Second World War where ‘... African-American soldiers



Rosa Parks' protest in 1955 was a potent symbol of the American Civil Rights Movement

fought for their country, only to return to a society that did not regard them as full citizens'.

In this situation we have a conventional Marxist scenario – economic and political deprivation leading to a sense of injustice and unrest – that required a *catalyst* to produce change. This, arguably, came from the experience of **Rosa Parks** ‘... arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white person on a bus’.

Farley suggests ‘... black churches were largely responsible for organising the massive bus boycott that followed ... **Parks** had discussed her plans and their possible consequences with church leaders and civil rights organisations’, including Dr **Martin Luther King** (who, you might be interested to learn, was a sociology graduate) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In the wider context, **Pyle** and **Davidson** (1998) suggest: ‘Perhaps more than any other institution, religion illustrates the diversity of strategies that African

Americans have adopted in attempting to address racism and class inequality.’

From a Marxist position, therefore, religion played a role in social change by functioning as a:

Channel through which protest was organised and focused; this resulted, eventually, in major changes to the relative social positions of black and white Americans. However, it could also be argued that such change was, essentially, *conservative* in that it left the economic structures of US society largely untouched.



Digging deeper: Marxist perspectives

Although Marxists traditionally see religion as a broadly conservative social force, there are, as we've suggested, differences of interpretation within this perspective. These stem partly from the way our society has developed historically and partly from a change of theoretical emphasis within

Marxism itself. We can illustrate both this idea and the different preoccupations of classical and neo-Marxism in the following way.

Classical Marxism has traditionally focused on the analysis of:

Social transformations – large-scale, widespread change that transforms, in some way, the nature of a society. This may occur slowly, as in Britain from the seventeenth century onwards (the change from a feudal to a capitalist system), or rapidly, as in the French Revolution (the change from a monarchy to a republic) or the Iranian Revolution (the change from a Westernised dictatorship to an Islamic republic).

Neo-marxism

Neo-Marxism, while not neglecting this area of study, has tended to focus more on:

Social transitions – situations where, although the basic (economic and political) structure of society doesn't change, the relative positions of people and groups within a society does. The civil rights illustration we've just used is an example of this type of change. Similarly, in our society we could think of *social transitions* in terms of areas like gender or age and changes in the position of different groups over the last 50 years or so.

In terms of *social transformations*, therefore, we can look briefly at the classical Marxist analysis of the change from feudalism to capitalism in Britain from the seventeenth century onwards (a good example of how classical Marxists saw religion as a conservative social force and useful as a point of comparison when we examine Weberian perspectives on religion and change). In the transformation of British society – over a period of 200 years or more, beginning around the middle of

the seventeenth century – we see a major social change:

Feudal society was characterised by:

- **stratification** – a rigid (closed) system of social stratification that involved little or no movement up or down the class structure
- **land ownership** (the main source of income and power) concentrated in a relatively small number of aristocratic hands
- **an obligatory system** involving rights and responsibilities, mainly concerning the exchange of land rights for service
- **monarchy** – a dictatorship based around a king or queen who was an absolute ruler (their authority derived from God).

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Stratification and differentiation: The structure of feudal society is outlined in more detail in relation to theories of stratification.

Capitalist society, meanwhile, was characterised by:

- **stratification** – a fluid, open system of stratification
- **technology** – factory ownership and machine production became the main source of income and power
- **contract** – economic and social relationships based on exchange (money) involving owners and non-owners, employers and employees
- **democracy** – political power and representation was increasingly spread throughout society, based eventually, over a few hundred years, on a system of universal suffrage ('one person one vote').

Marx characterised feudalism as a system in which one section of a ruling class (an old feudal aristocracy) was supported by the Catholic Church – a powerful force in this society – in three main ways:

- **economically** – as a major landowner
- **politically** – because of its relationship with – and power over – the monarchy and aristocracy
- **ideologically** – its teachings stressed an acceptance of the ‘natural order’ in society (involving respect for and deference to ‘social superiors’) that was God-created and immutable (impossible for people to change).

Technological development (the invention and application of machinery and new forms of power such as gas and electricity – the Industrial Revolution) led, according to **Marx**, to the development of a *new section* of the bourgeoisie – a ‘merchant class’ that took advantage of the opportunities created by emerging technologies to advance their economic power (at the expense of both the old feudal aristocracy and the peasantry). For **Marx**, as this ‘class within the ruling class’ became economically powerful, it needed an:

Ideology that allowed it to challenge the ‘old existing social order’ – one that would allow the emergent bourgeoisie to legitimately translate their *economic power* into *political power* – and two different forms of the Protestant religion (*deism* and *Calvinism*) fitted the bill quite neatly in this respect:

- **Deism:** A form of religious belief that argued that although God had made the world, He gave people the freedom to find their own way to ultimate salvation. In this respect, people were to be finally

judged on the basis of their good works – and their sins – during their lifetime.

- **Calvinism** (named after its founder, John **Calvin**) was based on the concept of:
 - **Predestination** – the idea that an individual’s life was predetermined by God. Nothing the individual did in life could change or influence a decision that had already been made. However, Calvinism also argued that leading a successful and productive life was a sign, from God, that the individual would go to Heaven when they died (on the not unreasonable assumption, perhaps, that those who were unsuccessful and unproductive were not likely to be predestined for Heaven).

Both deism and Calvinism, in their different ways, provided a set of ideological tools that supported the efforts of the bourgeoisie to develop the political power and influence to reflect their emerging economic power.



Weeding the path

Although a major social transformation (between feudalism and capitalism) clearly occurred in Britain, **Marx** argued the Protestant religion did *not* initiate social change; rather, one set of religious ideas was used by one section of the ruling class (the bourgeoisie) as a *rationalisation* for their economic and political dominance over another section – the aristocracy. The *cause* of social change was *economic* – changes in the way things were produced, distributed and exchanged led to changes in the way society was organised.

Thus, for classical Marxists, ideas about the nature of the world arose out of people’s *experience* in the world (not the other way

round) and social change arose out of economic conflicts between and within social classes. Religious ideas played a significant role *only* in relation to the differing abilities of powerful economic classes to use such ideas as a rationale for change.

In a contemporary context, **Azad** (1995) has applied a similar analysis to social transformations such as the Iranian Revolution (1979). The overthrow of the 'old order' (a tyrannical, secular dictatorship, supported by countries such as Britain and the USA) was seen to occur through an alliance of 'progressive elements' among the working classes and (Islamic) religious organisations. Only *after* the Shah of Persia was deposed, **Azad** argues, did a power struggle for control emerge in which religious leaders proved the stronger. However, even in this particular context, **Azad** suggests that, fundamentally, no major transformation took place in Iran: 'In 1979 the Iranian economy was a capitalist economy. Sixteen years later, despite many religious edicts, that is still its essence.'

For neo-Marxists, greater emphasis in recent times has been placed, as we've suggested, on the analysis of *social transitions* where, although religion is still seen as an essentially conservative force, it may, at certain times, become a popular channel for dissent and social change. In addition to the civil rights movement illustration we mentioned earlier, a further example to support this particular interpretation of the role of religion is:

Northern Ireland: The conflict between, on the one hand, Roman Catholics who wanted a united Ireland and, on the other, Protestants who wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom, appears, on the face of things, to be a clear-cut example of religious

identification and affiliation playing a major role in social change. However, the general Marxist interpretation of this conflict suggests *social class* was the prime mover – the majority of Catholics, for example, were drawn from the working classes while the majority of Protestants were middle or upper class.

Finally, it's useful to note **Robinson's** (1987) argument that there are 'six conditions that shape the likelihood of religion becoming a force for social change':

- A **religious world view** shared by the revolutionary classes.
- **Theology** (religious teachings and beliefs) that conflicts with the beliefs and practices of the existing social order.
- **Clergy** who are closely associated with revolutionary classes.
- A **single religion** shared by the revolutionary classes.
- **Differences** between the religion of the revolutionary classes and the religion of the ruling classes (such as one being Catholic and the other Protestant).
- **Channels** of legitimate political dissent blocked or not available.



Weeding the path

We can identify a couple of problems with the general Marxist position on religion and social change:

- **Reductionism:** As we've previously noted, everything is ultimately reduced to (economic) class struggle. Thus, even in a situation such as Northern Ireland in the 1980s (where religious affiliation played a role in establishing group cohesion and sense of identity), social change is seen in terms of *class* rather than *religious identity*.

- **Religion and revolt:** MacCulloch and Pezzini (2002) question the relationship, suggested by Marxists, between religious beliefs and acceptance of the prevailing social order – their research, for example, found that in democratic societies there was little or no difference between religious believers and non-believers on the need for major social change. This suggests that, at best, there is no simple link between levels of religious belief and acceptance or rejection of the status quo.



Preparing the ground: Functionalist perspectives

As with Marxism, we can consider functionalist accounts of religion and social change in terms of its classical and newer variations.

Classical functionalism: For Durkheim (1912), one of the fundamental features of human behaviour was the idea of:

Homo duplex: In basic terms, this involves human beings (*homo*) having ‘two sides’ (*duplex*): an ‘individualistic’ or ‘selfish’ side (similar to what the interactionist sociologist G.H. Mead (1934) called the ‘unsocialised self’) and a ‘social’ or ‘communal’ side (the ‘socialised self’). In other words, we all have two aspects to our lives; while we are all biological animals, we become ‘recognisably human’ only through our relationships with other people. Without ‘society’, therefore, we can’t express our unique, human, individuality. Thus, in order to ‘become human individuals’ we must immerse ourselves in *social groups*, and to achieve this we must give up some aspects of our ‘selfish side’ (the desire to behave as we want, when we want)

to ‘society’ – to create what Bental (2004) terms ‘... a strong attachment to society ... to guide [our] behaviour’, and which, for Durkheim, was represented by the:

Collective conscience – the ‘will of society’ people experience as an ‘external force’ that controls and coerces our behaviour. Just as each individual has a conscience, so too society has a ‘conscience’ – the ‘collective presentations’, as Bental puts it, ‘that hold society together’ – expressed through a range of norms and values (such as prescriptions against murder). For classical functionalism, religion plays an important role in maintaining the collective conscience through:

- **Moral codes:** Religion provides a source of morality that cannot be realistically challenged, since it derives from a power higher than the individual (such as ‘God’).
- **Collective ceremonies:** Through participation in ceremonies (such as religious services) society is given substance or ‘made real’; through collective behaviour we gain a necessary sense of our relationship to – and dependence on – others. Bental also notes that ‘participation in rituals brings about the psychological phenomenon of *collective effervescence*’ – an emotional high and feeling we are part of something bigger than ourselves’.



Weeding the path

Some functionalists argue that in modern, diverse societies, traditional forms of religion no longer have a ‘monopoly of faith’ and therefore cannot integrate people into society as a whole. Bellah (1967) developed the concept of:



Growing it yourself: Civil religion in Britain

In small groups, use the following table as a template to identify some possible components – both religious and non-religious (secular) – of a ‘civil religion’ in Britain.

Religious components?	Secular components?
The existence of a ‘higher power’ Prayer	Democracy National anthem
Further examples?	

Civil religion to refer to a set of common ideas, shared by the vast majority of people in a society, that have both religious and secular aspects. In Britain, for example, there are a variety of religions, but the one thing they all arguably have in common is a belief in some form of ‘god’; this general belief – rather than specific beliefs about the actual form and nature of god – represents an aspect of *civil religion*. In a different way, ideas like ‘innocent until proven guilty’ or a belief in the ‘democratic process’ can all be considered part of a British civil religion.

As **Wimberley and Swatos** (1998) note, **Bellah’s** definition of civil religion represents ‘an institutionalised collection of sacred beliefs’, whether these beliefs be overtly religious or overtly secular.



Digging deeper: Functionalist perspectives

Classical functionalism generally views religion as a *conservative social force* (on the basis that it functions as both a source of:

- **social solidarity** (by providing moral codes, a common value system, and so forth), and
- **social integration** through such things as collective ceremonies.

Neo-functionalist writers, such as **Alexander** (1985), however, suggest that religion may, under some conditions, initiate social change in contemporary societies. Drawing on (and revising) the work of **Parsons** (1951), **Alexander** sees societies in terms of:

Functional subsystems – groups of institutions carrying out different, but interrelated, functions. The *cultural subsystem*, for example, includes institutions such as education, the media and religion, and is related to subsystems such as work, the family and the political process. This subsystem is seen – borrowing from (neo-Marxist) writers such as **Althusser** (1972) and **Poulantzas** (1973) – to have a degree of:

Relative autonomy (or freedom) from other parts of the social system, mainly because it involves institutions whose primary function is *socialisation* and the

creation/propagation of cultural values. Under certain conditions, therefore, cultural institutions have the potential to instigate social change. This follows, for **Alexander**, because religion contains theories not just of the *past* (where we've been) and the *present* (how we've got here), but also of the *future* (where we are ultimately going), which means religions are not just concerned with questions of social order and stability, but also social change. We can illustrate this idea using the:

Jehovah's Witnesses: This particular religious group has a theory of the:

- **Past:** The world was created by Jehovah ('God'): 'The very existence of the intricately designed wonders in the universe surrounding us reasonably argues that a supremely intelligent and powerful Creator produced it all.'
- **Present:** We now live in the 'time of the end' in which 'Satan is the invisible ruler of world'. Witnesses believe the Earth will never be destroyed, but the people who populate it can die (and, mainly, go to Hell).
- **Future:** Witnesses believe in the 'Second Coming' of Christ, a time when human beings will be destroyed and True Believers (i.e. Jehovah's Witnesses) will be resurrected to enjoy the Kingdom of Heaven ('paradise') on earth.

In this respect, many (not necessarily all) religions contain the possibility, not always realised, of initiating social change, either:

- **transformative:** For Jehovah's Witnesses, the aim is to transform society. For some followers of Islam, the aim is to create societies based on Islamic Law (the Sharia), or

- **transitional** – for example, changing Christian attitudes to homosexuality or the ordination of female priests.

In this respect, neo-functionalists generally characterise modern societies as being in a state of:

Moving equilibrium: That is, they are constantly changing in a variety of ways, normally – but not exclusively – in the form of structural adjustments and realignments; a classic example here is the development of education systems in modern societies. In Britain, for example, formal schooling developed during the nineteenth century as a structural response to changes in the workplace (such as the need for a literate and numerate workforce).

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Education: This idea (and the one that follows) represents a functionalist explanation for the development of formal systems of education.

Social change, for neo-functionalists, is explained in terms of:

Structural differentiation – an idea borrowed from **Parsons** (1937) that argues that social institutions have progressively lost many of the functions they performed in the past; they become differentiated ('separated'), but in the process also become more *specialised*; that is, more tightly focused on the ('core') functions they perform most effectively. For example, in the past in our society religion (in the shape of Christianity) performed a range of functions (such as education) that have increasingly been taken over by specialist institutions (such as schools). The Christian Church, although still involved in education ('faith

schools'), mainly focuses on serving the spiritual needs of its parishioners.

Writers such as **Luhmann** (1977) and **Bettinger** (1996) have developed the idea of *core functions* to suggest social change may come about through:

Negative feedback – an evolutionary process that sees social change resulting from the clash of (cultural) ideas and experiences. A classic example here might be the 'ideological clash' between the ideas of Western secular societies and Islamic religious groups.



Weeding the path

We can note some general criticisms of the functionalist approach in terms of:

- **Social change:** This is generally theorised as being slow, gradual and evolutionary and this perspective has difficulty explaining rapid, revolutionary social transformations and the development of new value systems.
- **Tension management:** Although societies are considered to evolve and adjust through *structural differentiation*, it's not always clear how and why tensions arise in society. If a society is 'balanced', then how and why do tensions appear?
- **Evolution:** Social change, when it occurs, is generally viewed positively – mainly because there is no real way, within this perspective, to evaluate such change.



Preparing the ground: Religion as an initiator of social change

We can begin by outlining the arguments put forward by **Weber** (1905) in his analysis of *social transformations* (in this instance from feudal to capitalist society) to support his argument that religion could be an initiator of social change. In this respect, **Giddens** (1993) notes: '**Weber's** writings on religion differ from those of **Durkheim** in concentrating on the connection between religion and social change, something to which **Durkheim** gave little attention. They contrast with **Marx** because **Weber** argues that religion is not necessarily a conservative force; on the contrary, religiously inspired movements have often produced dramatic social transformations.'

Unlike the Marxist analyses at which we've just looked, **Weber** was interested in developing a:

Multi-causal analysis of change. In other words, he explored how a multitude of possible factors – economic, political and ideological – could, at certain times and under certain conditions, *combine* to promote change. He chose to explain, as an example of this approach, the social changes that first occurred in Britain from the seventeenth century (the development of capitalist society).

Weber wanted to understand how and why capitalism developed in some societies but not others, even though they had reached similar levels of economic and technological development. Both China and the Roman Empire once developed sophisticated technologies hundreds of years in advance of anything seen in Britain, yet neither developed beyond a feudal economic and political system.



Growing it yourself: The problem of predestination

In small groups, your task is to relate general observations about Calvinism to technological developments in seventeenth/eighteenth-century Britain to understand how religion could potentially be a source of social change. Read the following statements:

Calvinism	Economic opportunities
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. God was omniscient ('all-knowing'). He knew both an individual's past and their future – who would go to Heaven and who would not. 2. Predestination: God predetermined every individual life. It was not possible for people to influence how their life developed or know whether they would achieve salvation (in Calvinist terms, whether they were one of God's 'Elect'). 3. Church ministers had no 'special relationship' with God; they could not 'absolve sins' and could not act as an intermediary between God and the individual (through prayer, for example). 4. God would allow only those who had led a spiritually pure life to go to Heaven. Those who were 'God's Elect' would, therefore, show signs of their 'chosen status' during their lifetime. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In feudal society, land ownership (mainly by the aristocracy) was the main source of economic and political power. 2. Calvinists had few opportunities to acquire land. 3. Technological developments – the invention of machines, for example – created opportunities for enterprising individuals to generate wealth through the application of 'new technologies'. 4. Wealth creation involved the investment and reinvestment of money and effort in the productive process. Exploiting new developments was a means towards creating, keeping and expanding wealth. 5. Making profits – and becoming wealthy – was a sign of success. The continued reinvestment of profits in a business ensured its continued success.

Think about/discuss the following:

1. What picture of 'the Calvinist' is portrayed here?
2. How did technological developments produce new opportunities for moneymaking?
3. Why were Calvinists in a good position to exploit the opportunities presented by technological innovations?
4. How do these ideas show religion to be a potential initiator of social change?

What **Weber** suggested was that religion (or a particular form of Protestant religion – *Calvinism*) provided the 'final push', allowing a society with a particular level of technological development to 'break

through' the invisible barrier dividing relatively poor, agriculture-based, feudal dictatorships from the relatively affluent, industry-based, capitalist democracies.

Calvinism, Weber argued, provided the necessary ‘spirit of capitalism’ – a set of ideas and practices that promoted a strong and lasting social transformation.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Theory and method: Weber’s analysis of the relationship between Calvinist religious ideas and capitalist economic forms is an example of how a causal relationship might be established in the social sciences.

Weber concluded religion was a potential source of social change because, in this instance, two things came together at the right moment: *technological changes* that provided opportunities to create wealth in a new and dynamic way, and a group of people with *the ideological orientation* and impetus to exploit these opportunities. As **Bental** (2004) puts it: ‘Here we have a category of people – the early Protestants [Calvinists] – who associated morality and Godliness with hard work, thriftiness, and reinvestment of money. Given that Western Europe and America served as home for these people, should we be surprised capitalism took off in the West?’



Digging deeper: Religion as an initiator of social change

We can look a little more closely (and critically) at **Weber’s** general analysis in a range of ways.

Methodology: Criticism here focuses on the question of whether or not the development of Calvinism was a ‘cause of capitalism’. **Tawney** (1926) argued that capitalism developed in places like Venice

and Germany *prior* to the development of Protestantism. This led him to argue that capitalism developed in Protestant countries like Holland and England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries due ‘not to the fact they were Protestant powers but to large economic movements, in particular the discoveries and the results which flowed from them’. **Fanfani** (2003) supports this general argument when he notes: ‘Europe was acquainted with capitalism before the Protestant revolt. For at least a century capitalism had been an ever growing collective force. Not only isolated individuals, but whole social groups, inspired with the new spirit, struggled with a society that was not yet permeated with it.’ If these arguments are valid they call into question – in this context at least – the role of religion as an initiator of change.

Calvinism: **Viner** (1978) argues that where Calvinism was the dominant religion in a society it acted as a largely *conservative social force* that put a *brake* on economic development and change. **Marshall** (1982), however, disputes this interpretation (especially in relation to Scotland, where he argued Calvinism provided an impetus for social change that was held back by a variety of localised factors, such as the lack of capital available for investment).



Weeding the path

Although these ideas call into question both the causal relationship between Calvinism and the development of capitalism and the role of religion in social change, **Pierotti** (2003) argues we should not ignore or necessarily reject Weber’s analysis: ‘None of the critics I have read managed to destroy the basic premise by which **Weber** sought to

explain the growth of capitalism. Something happened in the long sixteenth century that saw an explosion of capitalist economic activity, free thought, and religious rebellion. Whether the relationship among these is causal or coincidental will be grounds for conjecture for years to come.'

If this particular example of the role of religion as an initiator of social change is, at best, inconclusive, there are other, contemporary examples that suggest the main role of religion in social change is as a:

Focus for dissent: Although religion itself is not necessarily the prime mover for change, it is a *channel* through which dissent can be expressed and thus find an outlet that results in some form of social change. We can explore this idea a little further through:

Liberation theology: We've previously referred to the development of liberation theology in South American countries such as Brazil – a situation (to oversimplify somewhat) that involved *some* Catholic priests forming political alliances with revolutionary groups to oppose government policies (normally against the wishes of the Catholic Church hierarchy). **Bruneau** and **Hewitt** (1992) argue in the case of Brazil: 'For its proponents, the theology of liberation becomes the only way to understand the church and its mission ... the church must be involved, it must opt for the poor, and it must use its resources to assist the poor in their liberation. Churches, for their part, become the privileged vehicle to work with the poor and promote their awareness, mobilization, and organization.' Although it's difficult to evaluate the success or otherwise of liberation theology in bringing about social change, its existence does demonstrate that, in theory at least,

religions may play a role in the (multi-causal) explanation of change.

Contradictions

Canin (2001) argues it's a mistake to see religion and its relationship to change as *either* conservative *or* radical. Instead, he suggests it may play a:

Contradictory role: His research into the Santo Domingo fiesta in Nicaragua suggested religious organisations have in recent years faced the dilemma of pursuing their:

- **Conservative role** – the 'traditional paternalistic control of the faithful ... focusing their attention away from poverty and suffering in this world and toward miracles and salvation in the next world', and a
- **Liberation role** that grew, at times, out of peasant discontent. As **Canin** argues: 'Beyond merely functioning as an "escape valve" for dissent against the status quo, this ritual rebellion [the Santo Domingo fiesta] has exploded into actual rebellion ... at specific historical moments that have preserved a historically forged culture of rebellion. More than providing the sensation of liberation, rituals such as the ... fiesta provided the framework, if not the material conditions, for the transformation of the social order.'

The material in this section suggests that, in many different ways, religious organisations are intimately involved, at various times and in various contexts, in both the promotion of change and the maintenance of social order – and, as we've seen with the example of liberation theology and the Catholic Church, the two processes may occur within the same religious organisation. We can develop



Growing it yourself: Channel for dissent

We can develop a synoptic link between religion/crime and deviance by applying a theory (originally formulated to explain deviance) to explain the role of religion as a possible channel of dissent and social change. In small groups:

1 Familiarise yourself with Lea and Young's (1984) New Left realist theory of deviance that used three related concepts (for more information see 'Different explanations of crime'):

- **Subculture:** A group of people in a similar social situation – a political dimension to people's social situation.
- **Relative deprivation:** A feeling that, in relation to the rest of society, a group is economically disadvantaged – an economic dimension to people's social situation.
- **Marginalisation:** A situation where a group of people find themselves pushed to the edges of society, where they lack any real form of political representation or expression for their needs – an ideological (or cultural) dimension to people's social situation.

2 Each group should choose one of the following situations:

- Northern Ireland: The relationship between Catholics and Protestants
- Brazil: Liberation theology
- Nicaragua: Before and after the Sandinista revolution
- America: Civil Rights Movement
- Iran: The Islamic revolution
- Poland: Solidarity movement
- South Africa: Apartheid

Discover as much as possible about the society, role of religious organisations and types of social change that occurred in each.

Explain how social change was related (or not) to the three concepts identified by Lea and Young.

this idea a little further through the concept of:

Religious fundamentalism: Sahgal and Yuval-Davis (1992) suggest some basic features '... common to all fundamentalist religious movements' which, in combination, define this type of religious ideology:

- **Truth:** Fundamentalist religious movements 'claim their version of religion to be the only true one'.
- **Fear:** The movement feels threatened by alternative (secular) views of the world and, by extension, alternative religious interpretations.
- **Social control:** Such movements use a

variety of political means – some democratic and some not – ‘to impose their version of the truth on all members of their religion’. For some fundamentalist groups this desire for control extends outwards to a desire to control the behaviour of all aspects of secular society.

In this respect, **Sahgal** and **Yuval-Davis** see fundamentalist movements as ‘... basically political movements which have a religious imperative and seek in various ways ... to harness modern state and media powers to the service of their gospel’ and in this respect they make an interesting distinction between religion as a form of belief and practice and *fundamentalist religion*, which seeks – forcibly or otherwise – to change society in ways that accord with the particular ideological interpretations of the movement. Thus: ‘By fundamentalism we are not referring to religious observance, which we see as a matter of individual choice, but rather to modern political movements which use religion as a basis for their attempt to win or consolidate power and extend social control.’

Berer and **Ravindran** (1996) develop this when they point out that ‘fundamentalism’ was originally used to describe nineteenth-century ‘Protestant religious and political movements, which attempted a literal or “fundamental” interpretation of Biblical scripts’. In modern-day usage the term has been both widened – to include a large range of religious groups which possess ‘fundamental beliefs’ – and loosened (especially in the media) following the attack on the World Trade Center (9/11), where the association is with ‘terrorism’ rather than any other form of political protest or change.

Giroux (2004) talks about the rise of the religious right in contemporary America ‘imbued with theocratic certainty and absolute moralism’ in a situation where ‘right-wing religion conjoins with political ideology and political power’ to ‘legitimate intolerance and anti-democratic forms of religious correctness and lay the groundwork for a growing authoritarianism ... How else to explain the growing number of Christian conservative educators who want to impose the teaching of creationism in the schools, ban sex education from the curricula, and subordinate scientific facts to religious dogma’. He explains the contemporary development of fundamentalist religious movements in both the USA and elsewhere in terms of globalisation.

Globalisation

In this context, globalisation has two main consequences. First, it creates a situation (postmodern society) where people are exposed to different views and belief systems. In such a situation, to use **W.B. Yeats’** (1921) famous poetic phrase, ‘things fall apart; the centre cannot hold’ – the things that seemed to bind people in modern society, such as faith in science and progress, no longer seem either attractive or believable.

One consequence of this ‘loss of faith’ is a moral vacuum (filled, as critics of postmodernism claim, with a *moral relativism* – the idea that ‘anything goes’ and no one form of explanation can be shown to be superior to any other), expressed neatly by **Yeats** with the phrase: ‘Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.’ The world, in other words, appears a more frightening and dangerous place once the great centres – religion, science, politics, and so forth – can no longer hold centre stage.

Giroux expresses this ‘sense of loss’ in terms of two main ideas:

- **Isolation:** The ‘collapse of the centre’ in postmodern society leaves people feeling alone, vulnerable and largely unconnected with those around them. In this situation, ‘fundamentalism taps . . . into very real individual and collective needs’. In other words, it provides a sense of belonging based on the ideas of:
 - **Tradition:** As **Berger** and **Ravindran** (1996) put it, fundamentalist religions seek to raise their adherents ‘above the political on the basis of divine sanction or by appealing to supreme authorities, moral codes or philosophies that cannot be questioned’, and
 - **Social solidarity** (or ‘community’): **Giroux** argues that fundamentalist movements give people a sense of *identity* by providing – through their literal interpretation of religious texts as expressions of ‘God’s will’ – a clear and incontestable sense of meaning based on the rigorous enforcement of a particular moral code. As **Castells** (1997) puts it, religious fundamentalism involves ‘the construction of [a] collective identity [by] the identification of individual behaviour and society’s institutions [with] norms derived from God’s law, interpreted by a definite authority that intermediates between God and humanity’.

Moving on

How we interpret the meaning of religious behaviour – as a conservative force, a radical force or, as in the case of fundamentalist groups, a ‘radical conservative’ force – affects

our perception of the role of religion in modern societies. For this reason, the next two sections focus on exploring different types of religious organisation and the ways religious beliefs relate to questions of identity (such as class, gender and ethnicity) in contemporary societies.

3. Cults, sects, denominations and churches and their relationship to religious activity

In previous sections we’ve looked at the concept of ‘religion’ in a *relatively undifferentiated* way. That is, we’ve talked about religion in terms of its general features, how it differs from non-religious world views, and so forth. In this section, however, the focus is on some major differences *within* religions; we are, in other words, going to examine some of the ways religions can be *differentiated*, mainly – but not exclusively – by outlining different types of *religious organisation*. There are two main reasons for this:

Firstly, religious organisations involve a range of ideas, from things like how they are physically organised to the general view of the world they seek to propagate.

Secondly, it allows us to identify ‘essential differences’ between various religious types – to think, for example, how a church might be different to a cult (even though they are both, nominally, religious organisations).

WARM-UP: RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS

We've just identified four basic types of religious organisation and it would be useful to discover what you already know about each.

In small groups, use the following table as a template to identify what you know/think are the main features of each type – we've given you an example of each to get you focused/stimulate some thoughts.

Church	Denomination	Sect	Cult
(Catholicism)	(Methodism)	(Jehovah's Witnesses)	(Astrology)



Preparing the ground: Religious organisations – church, denomination, sect and cult

Church-type: This refers to a particular *organisational type* whose defining features involve:

Size: This type is, almost by definition, *large* when considered in terms of membership and attendance. According to **Barrett et al.** (2001), Christian churches worldwide have around *2 billion* adherents (around 30% of the world's population).



Weeding the path

We can note a couple of qualifications to these statistics:

Reliability: Precise measurement of 'church size' is notoriously difficult and involves a range of factors and qualifications discussed throughout this section. For the

moment, the figures just quoted should be considered, at best, *rough estimates*.

Validity: Church-type membership figures, for example, don't differentiate between *active members/attendees* and those simply counted as members on the basis of being born in a country where a particular church is the official (*state or established*) religion. If you're born in England, for example, you're classed as a member of the Church of England unless you – or your parents/guardian – decide otherwise.

Scope refers to the reach or influence of the organisation on both secular authorities and other religious organisations. According to **Bruce** (1995), church-type organisations have traditionally tried to *dominate* the religious – and frequently the secular – sphere in society. They have, in other words, traditionally assumed a:

Monolithic form, where the aim was to be the *only* form of religious organisation recognised and allowed in a society (think,

for example, about British history and the battles between the Protestant and Catholic Christian churches). Alternatively, in countries such as Iran, Islam represents this type of organisation – the church is involved in both religious matters and the affairs of state.

In modern societies, however, religious influence in secular matters has generally declined in a way that reflects a changing role for religion. As **Bruce** notes: ‘The gradual distancing of the state churches from the state ... allowed the British churches to rediscover the prophetic role of religion ... but that freedom has been bought at the price of the government listening to them.’

Authority structure: As befits a large (national and *transnational*) organisation, the church-type is characterised by a relatively formal internal structure that may include:

- **Bureaucratic structures:** In **Weber’s** (1922) terms, this involves a rational organisation of a church in terms of specifying such things as the dates of religious services, the organisation of ceremonies and the collection of ‘taxes’ (or donations) from congregations. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, has a centralised structure based around the figure of the Pope, the authority of Cardinals, and so forth.
- **Hierarchies of power** that derive from this bureaucratic organisation. This can involve paid officials (who may or may not have a religious function), organised in terms of their different statuses.

Traditional church-type organisations are generally:

Exclusive in terms of both their ministry (who is authorised to tend to the religious

needs of a particular population) and their relationship to other forms of religious organisation (such as cults). In recent times, this exclusivity has generally weakened, leading to a toleration of (and, at times, active cooperation with) other, similar church-types. In general, however, church-types tend to oppose some forms of *sect* and *cult* organisation (although the situation is complicated by some church types being tolerant of sects – although rarely cults – within their overall organisation). **Staples** (1998) notes how the Protestant Church is characterised by what he terms ‘substantial levels of internal pluriformity’ – different groups, with varying degrees of autonomy, existing within the same general organisation.

Inclusiveness: Church-types are inclusive in the sense that they generally allow anyone to join and membership is often *assumed* rather than the result of a conscious individual choice (as we’ve noted with the Church of England).

Inclusion is further encouraged by ceremonies such as baptism and confirmation (in Christian churches), and conversions from one religion to another are normally welcomed, if not always actively pursued. Consequently, there tend to be few, if any, membership tests or entry qualifications (something shared with *denominations* but not with sects).

Social capital refers to the ways people are connected (or disconnected) from *social networks* and the implications these connections have for what **Putnam** (2000) calls ‘norms of reciprocity’ (what people are willing to do for each other). Many forms of religious organisation and behaviour involve social capital (as writers such as **Durkheim** (1912), for example, have recognised).



Benedict XVI calls for the unification of Christians

At his first Mass, Pope Benedict extended the notion of inclusiveness to all forms of religion: 'I would like to greet all those, including those who follow other religions ... to reassure them that the Church wants to continue with its open ... sincere dialogue looking for the true good of man and of society.'

(Source: www.cnn.com, 21/4/05)

However, Putnam makes a distinction between *two types* of social capital relevant to our present analysis:

- **Bridging capital** relates to ideas about *inclusiveness* involving notions of cooperation, trust and institutional effectiveness. Church-type organisations are more likely than sects and cults to utilise this type of social capital. This, as Zmerli (2003) argues, has the effect of making them 'outward-oriented and their composition can be more heterogeneous. They enhance broader identities and reciprocity. Examples of these networks are civil rights movements and ecumenical [cross-church] religious organisations'.

- **Bonding capital** is a more *exclusive form*, one that, while serving to bond particular group members, sets an organisation apart from other organisations – cult members, for example, form strong bonds with each other that set them apart from wider society.

Ideology: Church-type organisations are more likely to be in tune with the secular values of the society in which they exist than organisations such as sects or cults. In other words, because of the way they operate in modern societies, church-type organisations are more *accommodating* than either sects or cults to secular cultures. Historically, this has meant churches have frequently aligned themselves with the ruling powers in society by offering their support to the political and economic objectives of ruling groups.

Orientation: The ideological attachments of churches, in this respect, tends to see them integrated into the secular world; sects and cults, however, tend to maintain a certain level of detachment from the world.

Examples: Most of us are probably quite familiar with examples of the church-type organisation (just as many of us, either through choice or inertia, will be members of this type of organisation). The Protestant and Roman Catholic versions of Christianity qualify, as does Islam, and, in some respects, Judaism.

Denomination-type

The denomination-type is normally well established in a society and shares many of the features of the church-type, which is not too surprising given that, in many cases, church-types are also denominations: Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, for

example, are denominations of Christianity, while Sunni and Shia are denominations of Islam. Hinduism, on the other hand, doesn't recognise a single set of beliefs or practices and involves a multitude of groups built around the central idea of a 'universal soul'. In this sense, therefore, a denomination is a subgroup that forms within a religion, characterised by a number of features.

Ideology: Denominations frequently begin as a breakaway group within a church for reasons that may include ideological/political differences or geographic isolation and separation leading to differences in beliefs and practices – differences that result in a split (schism) from the main church. Examples here are Christianity (with the development of Protestantism in the sixteenth century) and Islam (with the Sunni/Shia split in the seventh century).

Scope: Denominations generally tend to be looser-knit groups than churches; they may, for example, unite a geographically (and in some cases ideologically) dispersed group of congregations (people who generally share similar beliefs and practices). In some ways, a denomination represents an administrative system – one that links and serves a relatively disparate set of religious organisations – that enables cooperation between the various elements of the denomination for activities such as missions, welfare efforts, and so on. Denominations – partly perhaps because of their 'looser structure' – rarely claim a monopoly of religious truth. Consequently, they tend to be more tolerant of alternative religious organisations, beliefs and practices.

Inclusiveness follows the general church-type line in that people may choose to join or they may be born into an organisation (through their parents' membership, for

example). Denominations do not have membership tests and make similar demands on their members to churches – all they generally require is some form of implicit commitment to the organisation (which may be as little as a 'belief in God') rather than the overt demonstrations of commitment demanded by sects and cults.

Authority structure: Although there are variations in the organisation and distribution of power and authority within and between denominations (Baptist congregations, for example, have generally been allowed to develop different beliefs and practices within the overall structure of the organisation), denominations normally develop a professional clergy with responsibility for tending to their members. Some denominations are more democratically organised than others (some allow all members to contribute to discussion about church affairs, others do not), but generally denominations are a more democratic type of organisation than churches, sects or cults.

Examples: Denominations are a common form of religious organisation across the globe and examples aren't hard to find (think in terms of Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists within the Protestant Christian religion or Wahhabi and Alawite for Islam). This diversity, it could be argued, is indicative of:

Religious pluralism – a situation where, although different denominations compete for members, there is a general *tolerance* of other forms of religious behaviour (both within and between religions), just as there is a general tolerance for those who hold no religious beliefs (*atheists*). **Bruce** (1995) argues this 'pluralist feature' of denominations represents a major difference

between this type of organisation and sects (which, ironically perhaps, tend to be the initial origins of a denomination – *sectarian* disputes leading to schisms within churches, for example). He also sees *tolerance* and *respectability* (especially in the eyes of the media) as significant ways of distinguishing denominations from sects and cults.

Sects

Although sects and denominations share some general organisational features (*Methodism*, as **Cody** (1988) points out, originated as a sect before evolving into a denomination), we shouldn't overstate the similarities between the two forms; sects are sufficiently different in organisation and outlook to be considered a separate form of religious organisation. We can, therefore, examine some of their essential characteristics in the following terms.

Development: **Glock** and **Stark** (1965) argue the emergence of a sect is normally based around two types of *dissent*:

- **Religious**, which involves either dissatisfaction (or *disenchantment*) with the prevailing religious orthodoxy or the 'compromising' of religious ideals by a religious organisation's contacts with secular authorities. This type relates to the schismatic development to which we referred earlier.
- **Social**, which involves, at either an individual or a collective level, feelings of discontent, deprivation and protest.

This 'dissent explanation' is tied to what **Niebuhr** (1929) identified as the *Church–Sect dynamic*; as a religious organisation becomes established, it's forced to compromise with the secular order. A

classic example is the Mormon religion and its initial advocacy of:

Polygamy (a man being married to more than one woman). According to **Lyman** (1986), Mormon polygamy was a major political stumbling block in Utah's quest for statehood (and a measure of independent government) in mid-nineteenth-century America. Luckily – and probably coincidentally – a 'new revelation from God' banned polygamy within the religion and statehood was granted. This resulted, however, in the breakaway from the main body of Mormonism of a number of *polygamous sects*.

In terms of sects that develop out of social dissent, **Glock** and **Stark** identified five kinds of:

Deprivation that, if experienced, may contribute to the decision to join or establish a sect:

- **economic** – both real (as in 'being poor') and *relative* (as in 'compared with others')
- **social** – when desired cultural assets, such as status, prestige and power, are unequally distributed
- **organismic** – refers to *status differences* in physical and mental ability (those classified as 'mentally ill', for example, may have a different social status to those not so classified)
- **ethical** – refers to the idea of value conflict. More specifically, such deprivation occurs when the values of the individual are not compatible with those of the group or society in which they live
- **psychic** – refers to a 'search for meaning' – the idea, for example, that 'there must be more to life than working in an office, nine to five'.

For **Glock** and **Stark** ‘deprivation’, although a *necessary* precondition, was not in itself *sufficient* to lead to the development of a religious sect. They argued the latter would develop only if certain other conditions were present, which included:

- **shared** feelings of deprivation
- **alternative** channels for problem resolution being unavailable
- **leaders** with an ‘innovative solution’ to the problem emerging.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Crime and deviance: Note the similarities between **Glock** and **Stark’s** conditions that lead people into religious sects and **Lea** and **Young’s** (1984) argument about the conditions that lead to deviant behaviour (a link further enhanced by **Stark** and **Bainbridge’s** (1987) argument that a sect is a ‘deviant religious organization with traditional beliefs and practices’).

Wilson (1982) suggests sects are more likely to develop in situations of *social change* and *disruption* – conditions, in other words, related to:

Anomie, where rapid social and/or technological changes disrupt traditional social norms and create, in some people, feelings of confusion and despair. Sects offer a ‘solution’ by providing a stable belief system to the one disrupted by change. In this situation, sects are more likely than established denominations to attract adherents because they are less likely to be associated with the secular order seen as responsible for disruptive change.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Crime and deviance: Anomie has also been

put forward (by **Merton** (1938), for example) as an explanation for crime and deviance.

Wilson points us towards some basic characteristics of sect-type organisations:

- **Exclusiveness** in terms of the demands they make on their members (such as levels of group commitment and their claim to ‘exclusive knowledge’ – a monopoly on religious truth). Part of this exclusivity also relates to the demand for complete allegiance of members and sanctions (including expulsion) against those who break the rules.
- **Organisation** tends to be less formal than with church- or denomination-types and is characterised by the absence of a division of labour in religious practice (no clergy, for example).
- **Authority:** Sects generally place more emphasis on the role of *leaders* (many of whom claim *divine authority*) than on a professional clergy. Individual behaviour tends to be highly regulated (and while this sometimes involves the development of an administrative class, more usually control is exerted through strict rules enforced by sect members on each other).
- **Protest:** **Wilson** argues sect development occurs as the result of different kinds of protest, be it at the group level (a protest against the way a church-type religion is developing, for example) or on an individual level (such as a protest against status denial).
- **Size:** Sects are traditionally comparatively small religious organisations when compared with churches or denominations, although, as ever, we need to keep in mind the difficulty of

measuring levels of affiliation. Both sects and cults present their own slightly different ‘problems of measurement’ for a couple of reasons:

- **Attendance:** Many sects don’t hold the type of services common to churches and denominations, something that makes counting members or attendees difficult.
- **Membership:** For a variety of reasons sects may decline to disclose their membership numbers. Where they do provide such information we have to take its accuracy on trust.
- **Inclusiveness:** Sects are fairly exclusive organisations in terms of membership, which is generally characterised by:
 - **choice**, rather than birth
 - **commitment** shown to the values and goals of the sect.

Entry often involves a ‘probationary period’, followed by some form of testing before full sect membership is granted. *Scientology* is a good example here – people (*‘preclears’*) are *invited* to join, but their continued membership is dependent on moving through the various ‘levels of knowledge’ available. Scientology students (such as the US film stars John Travolta and Tom Cruise) buy courses of instruction and submit to tests (called ‘audits’) of their abilities and understanding before being allowed to pass to the next knowledge level.

Ideology: Sects generally lay claim to either knowing the ‘one true way to the afterlife’ or to some special religious knowledge denied to non-members. For Scientology, this ‘special knowledge’ is actually knowledge of oneself – how the

problems of an individual’s ‘past lives’ have created problems in their current life that need to be identified (‘audited’) and removed (‘cleared’). Although sects are diverse organisations, familiar ideological themes include:

- **Heaven on Earth** for the ‘chosen’ (Jehovah’s Witnesses)
- **catastrophe** – usually involving an ‘end-of-the-world’ scenario (The People’s Temple)
- **millenarianism**, involving ideas such as a belief in a return to a spiritual homeland (Rastafarians).

Types

Much of the writing on sect membership and activity, in this respect, has focused on the way the different needs of sect members produce different religious responses to the satisfaction of such needs. **Yinger’s** (1957) classic (and idealised) categorisation of sects involves the idea that sect members seek answers to the problem of an undesirable situation that can be resolved in one of three basic ways:

- **Acceptance** sects are largely middle class and life has been personally good to them. The ‘key problems’ sect members face are more philosophical (‘the meaning of life’) than economic (poverty) and, consequently, members tend to see the resolution of social problems in terms of individual and collective faith, self-help, and so forth.
- **Opposition** (sometimes called **aggression** sects) are a radical reaction to problems of poverty and powerlessness; their membership is usually drawn from the lower social classes.

- **Avoidance** sects downgrade the significance of this present life by projecting their hopes into the supernatural world; they address problems by appealing to a higher social order and, in consequence, cannot be so easily confronted by failure. They also avoid direct contact with secular society – *Exclusive Brethren*, for example, physically separate themselves from both secular and other religious society.

Authority structure: Sects can be differentiated from cults in terms of what **Price** (1979) calls:

Epistemological authoritarianism, where ‘the beliefs of members derive from the dictates of their leader’.

Classification

Orientation: **Wallis** (1984) argues we can classify sects into three broad (ideal) types, based around their orientation to and relationship with the ‘outside world’:

- **World-rejecting** sects are critical of the secular world and withdraw, as far as possible, from contact with that world. This usually involves sect members in some form of communal living. An example here is the Heaven’s Gate sect, whose members believed they were extra-terrestrial beings ‘using’ human form as a ‘vehicle’ through which to carry out their studies on Earth. In 1997, they believed a spaceship, shadowing the appearance of the Hale-Bopp comet, had arrived to transport them away from Earth and their earthly forms were duly ‘discarded’ in the mass suicide of 39 sect members. In a similar way to **Yinger’s** ‘opposition type’, **Smith** (2005) notes how this type ‘... always find themselves in a



The home page of the Heaven’s Gate sect.
Last update: 27 March 1997

confrontation with the ‘evil world’ they despise and this normally ends with tears before bedtime in terms of the confrontation between their world and that of an increasingly secular society’.

- **World-accommodating** sects, according to **Björkqvist** (1990), ‘draw a clear distinction between the spiritual and the worldly spheres’ and neither reject nor promote the secular world.
- **World-affirming** sects: **Björkqvist** suggests this type may not possess the kinds of things we normally associate with religions – ‘may have no ritual, no official ideology, perhaps no collective meetings whatsoever’. However, its key characteristic is its claim to ‘unlock people’s hidden potential, whether spiritual or mental, without the need to withdraw from or reject the world’ – a classic example being Scientology.

Marczewska-Rytko (2003) offers a more contemporary take on what she calls ‘religious communities’ and ‘their attitude to the outside world’. She treats them as:

Interest groups – goal-orientated groups, pursuing some form of incentive or benefit for group members. People derive benefits from their membership and they attempt to

‘share’ such benefits with the rest of society (Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example, whose task in life is to give people the opportunity to be saved from damnation). This relates to **Stark and Bainbridge’s** (1987):

Rational choice theory of religious group membership, when they argue that sect members, for example, consciously weigh up the likely costs and potential benefits of group membership. *Incentives* to join might involve feelings of superiority through access to ‘hidden knowledge’, while *benefits* might involve the feeling of belonging to a strong, supportive, moral community.

Orientation

Marczewska-Rytko identifies four main sect orientations:

- **Reformative:** The objective here is to change people (in terms of their spiritual awareness) and, by so doing, ‘reform the secular world’. The main focus is to convert as many people as possible to the sect’s world view.
- **Revolutionary:** The objective here is to change a condemned social order, usually by awaiting some form of ‘divine intervention’ in the form of an apocalyptic, ‘end-of-the-world’ scenario. Some sects are happy to await Doomsday (Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example) whereas others are equally happy to try to help things along a little – in 1995 members of the *Aum Shinrikyo* sect (whose leader, Shoko Asahara, had issued a number of ‘doomsday prophesies’) released Sarin nerve gas in the Tokyo underground system, killing 12 people and injuring around 5000 more.
- **Introvert:** This type generally looks inwards to the spiritual well-being and

welfare of members, who derive strength from feelings of ‘moral superiority’ over the outside world. These sects focus on personal development as members strive for spiritual enlightenment.

- **Manipulative:** This type of community – sometimes seen as a cult – focuses on the manipulation of things like the occult (magic, for example) for the benefit of its practitioners. In some ways these communities are *acceptance sects* because practitioners desire ‘success’ (economic, personal, and so forth), which they feel can be achieved through the mastery and practice of rituals and ceremonies. Included in this group might be various forms of paganism, neo-paganism, and so on.

Cults

A cult is a loose-knit social group that collects around a set of common themes, beliefs or interests, where religious experience is highly individualistic and varies with an individual’s personal experiences and interpretations. Cults differ from sects (which they loosely resemble) on the basis that they lack a clearly defined, exclusive belief system for all their followers.

Size: The general lack of formal organisational structures (clerical hierarchies, meeting places, official records and the like) makes it difficult to specify a minimum or maximum size for a cult – a difficulty compounded by the fact that cult followers resemble *consumers* rather than members. There is rarely any formal joining mechanism and those interested in a particular cult activity (Transcendental Meditation, for example) are encouraged to buy into the cult to varying degrees (Transcendental Meditation sells stages to

spiritual enlightenment the consumer can buy as and when they want).



Weeding the path

The diversity of cult-type relationships (Lewis (1998) identifies more than 1000 such groups worldwide) means there is also room within this general definition for ‘communities of believers’ to exist in an organised relationship that, in some respects, resembles a sect. The very looseness of the definition is both a strength – it encompasses a wide range of different beliefs, behaviours and practices – and a weakness, since it makes it difficult to pin down the ‘essential characteristics’ of a cult and, in some respects, difficult to disentangle cults from sects (a problem we’ll address in a moment when we explore New Religious Movements).

Scope: Hume (1996) notes ‘various scholars have attempted to give definitions of the term “cult” but there has been little agreement to date’ and Robbins and Anthony (1982) warn against seeing cults in terms of an ‘illusionary homogeneity’ that characterises them as ‘authoritarian, centralized, communal and “totalistic”’ (a ‘total institution’ is one, like a prison, that attempts to control all aspects of an individual’s life). Classifying cults is, therefore, difficult; the table on the following page, however, identifies the main features of two different examples of cult classifications.



Weeding the path

It’s possible to identify some general features of cults that distinguish them from other religious organisations, although we need to

keep in mind a couple of potential problems, both:

- **practical** – cult diversity and the fact that many cults have little or no obvious organisational structure make it difficult to actually research their behaviour – and
- **methodological:** Some forms of religious organisation (such as Scientology) cut across both the ‘cult/sect’ dynamic (Scientology, it could be argued, shows features of both) and the various categories defined by writers like Stark and Bainbridge.

Scientology has elements of all three types, reflecting perhaps the internally diverse nature of its teachings and practices. Some members are highly committed (*movement*); others show less commitment but take some of the courses on offer (*client*); while others simply share a general interest in the kinds of ideas Scientology seeks to popularise (*audience*).

Giddens (2001) argues that cults ‘resemble sects’, although there are differences in areas like:

- **Values** that reject those of mainstream society. In some cases rejection is outright (as with survivalist cults in North America, some of which have their own websites where practitioners can buy maps, guns, a handbook on *How to Survive a Nuclear Blast . . .*), whereas in others the cult simply uses alternatives to conventional values – using magic, for example, to get that new car rather than the more usual methods.
- **Individual experience** is a major area of difference; cults are focused on the individual (their rights and responsibilities, for example) within a

Cult classification		
Stark and Bainbridge (1987)	Examples	Van Leen (2004)
<p>1. Movement Well organised and often highly centralised, with a particular philosophy to ‘sell’ (sometimes literally)</p>	<p>Many cults (sometimes called syncretic) gather ‘the best bits’ of different philosophies to create something ‘new’. Characteristic of groups such as Hare Krishna or the Divine Light Mission</p>	<p>1. Explicitly religious Includes cults offering interpretations of Christianity to those offering a mix (<i>‘syncretism’</i>) of different philosophies</p>
<p>2. Client Focus on providing a ‘service’ to members/practitioners, usually with a ‘provider–client’ relationship between different followers</p>	<p>No concept of a deity external to people. Instead, focus on ‘inner spirituality’ revealed through the right teachings and practices (as with Transcendental Meditation)</p>	<p>2. Human potential Exists to help individuals ‘fulfil their potential’, either in terms of an <i>immanent</i> view of religion (‘God’ is inside us) or as a way of leading a ‘better, happier, more fulfilled’ life</p>
<p>3. Audience Rarely have any organisational structure and involve a ‘producer–audience’ relationship where ‘cult members’ share a general interest about something (such as astrology)</p>	<p>Audience cults involve people with a common interest in some aspect of religious experience, such as ‘alternative medicine’ or tarot reading.</p> <p>New Age cults embody beliefs that can be picked up – and discarded – almost at will (syncretic philosophies such as Eastern Mysticism are popular and people may follow these ideas without ever formally joining a cult)</p>	<p>3. New Age/Mystical A very diverse category with a wide range of teachings and practices united only by their general foundation in various forms of ‘ancient’ religions and beliefs</p>
	<p>The use of magic can involve loose communal organisation (group ceremonies, for example) and some groups have hierarchical organisational structures (different levels of priesthood or ability, for example). In the main, however, occultism is mainly practised individually. Examples here include paganism, neo-paganism and satanism</p>	<p>4. Occult groups A category that doesn’t fit particularly neatly with Stark and Bainbridge’s classification, but which involves the attempt to influence the world – for good or bad – by a range of magical means</p>

loose, supporting framework of ideas over which there may be discussion and dispute. Cults also tend to attract people looking for relatively short-term solutions to specific problems.

Inclusiveness: In one sense cults are highly inclusive – they rarely have any formal joining conditions. ‘Members’ could more accurately be described as practitioners who subscribe to particular beliefs and perform certain practices – from tantric sex (don’t ask) to witchcraft or the ever-popular ear-candling.

Their appeal, for **Zimbardo** (1997), is simple: ‘Imagine being part of a group in which you will find instant friendship, a caring family, respect for your contributions, an identity, safety, security, simplicity, and an organized daily agenda. You will learn new skills, have a respected position, gain personal insight, improve your personality and intelligence. There is no crime or violence and your healthy lifestyle means there is no illness . . . Who would fall for



Ear-candling – performed to relieve a wide range of ear-related problems. Obviously.

such appeals? Most of us, if they were made by someone we trusted, in a setting that was familiar, and especially if we had unfulfilled needs.’

Ideology: Cult diversity makes it difficult to pin down definitive ideological content, but one unifying theme is reflected in **Price’s** (1979) concept of:

Epistemological individualism – ‘individualism’ is a *necessary* characteristic of the cult-type.

Authority structure: In terms of **Stark** and **Bainbridge’s** (1987) classification we can note differences in authority structures between different types of cult.

Movement cults generally conform to **Robbins** and **Anthony’s** (1982) characterisation of their internal authority structure as:

- **Authoritarian:** **Enroth’s** (1993) study of US cults revealed situations where ‘the leaders have justified the use of abusive authority in order to follow Jesus. They demand submission even if the leaders are sinful and un-Christlike’.
- **Centralised:** Authority is concentrated in a relatively small group at the top of the organisation. **Van Leen** (2004) characterises this as being ‘leader, or leadership, centred, usually by persons claiming some divine appointment or authority – while members are accountable to the leadership the leadership is not accountable to anyone else and often make significant decisions for members’.
- **Total:** Communal living – often isolated, both geographically and philosophically, from the secular world – is a control mechanism where all aspects of the member’s life can be regulated. **Van Leen**



Growing it yourself: Compensation culture

Stark and Bainbridge’s *Exchange Theory* is based around the idea of compensators – something that compensates the individual for their failure to receive desired rewards. Evans and Company (1985) argue ‘entry to heaven’ is a *compensator* for death. Hak (1998) suggests ‘religious people want rewards against low costs, and if rewards are scarce or not there at all, they will take compensators or IOUs for rewards’.

In small groups, use the following as a template to identify possible compensators for participating in cult activity (we’ve provided an example of each to get you started).

Movement cults	Client cults	Audience cults
Belonging to a group	Taking control of your life	Influencing the future
Once you’ve completed the above, do the same for the following:		
Denomination	Sect	Football club
		Feeling part of a group

argues control often extends to ‘criticism of natural parents and family members’ and the depiction of the cult as a ‘family’.

Brainwashing

Some critics have argued that cults use:

Brainwashing techniques to recruit and keep members. Galper (1982) notes how ‘allegations of coercive brainwashing have been made by concerned parents whose children have been exposed to cult recruitment’. In addition, Singer et al. (1996) claim: ‘Cults have used tactics of

coercive mind control to negatively impact an estimated 20 million victims [in America]. Worldwide figures are even greater.’ Richardson and Ginsburg (1998), however, suggest ‘brainwashing’ is not a particularly useful or convincing explanation of the attraction of cults. They argue that although there’s *anecdotal* and *emotive* ‘evidence’ for brainwashing, *empirical* evidence is generally lacking.

Zimbardo (1997) also argues ‘cult methods of recruiting, indoctrinating and influencing their members’ are little different

to the socialising methods employed in *any* group or organisation. The attraction of cults, he suggests, can be explained by the fact that ‘cult leaders offer simple solutions to the increasingly complex problems we all face daily . . . the simple path to happiness, to success, to salvation by following their simple rules, simple group regimentation and simple total lifestyle’.

Audience and **client cults** often have little or no organised authority structure, mainly because, as we’ve noted, they involve ‘producer–consumer’ type relationships. Authority, in this respect, relates to the way cult promoters provide a ‘design for living’ or advice relating to a way of life. **Fraser** (2005) argues that ‘spirituality shopping’ ‘offers a language for the divine that dispenses with all the off-putting paraphernalia of priests and church . . . it’s not about believing in anything too specific, other than some nebulous sense of otherness or presence. It offers God without dogma’.

Orientation: Where a cult sells some special aspect of spiritual enlightenment, ‘customers’ are rarely retained in the long term (although a general interest in the ideas being sold may continue) for two main reasons:

- **Socialisation:** Cults lack the socialising mechanisms available to other religious organisations and, consequently, their ability to exercise social control or recruit new members is curtailed.
- **Knowledge:** Once someone has learnt the basics required to do something (how to relax using Transcendental Meditation or yoga, for example) they may have little reason for continued formal involvement.

With more aggressive cults, their general orientation to both members and the outside

world is more *defensive*. Hostility to criticism is a frequent feature (**Enroth** (1994), for example, details the harassment he suffered at the hands of the Jesus People in America). **Price** (1979) also notes the (ambivalent) orientations of cults such as the Divine Light Mission: ‘Without doubt the beliefs of members of DLM derive from the dictates of their leader, indeed the knowledge they possess is his knowledge.’ Even in such a situation, however, ‘many adherents hold a more idiosyncratic position, accepting only parts of the belief system and choosing the degree to which they conform to accepted practice’.



Digging deeper: Religious organisations (New Religious Movements)

Although we’ve just noted differences between different types of religious organisation and activity (as well as similarities), the usefulness of thinking in terms of church, denomination, sect and cult is open to question in a couple of ways:

Typologies: How useful, for example, are these categories ‘in the real world’ (where religious organisations develop, evolve and disappear)? In particular, there are two main areas of concern.

- **The church–denomination** distinction: We need to think about how useful – in an increasingly global and diversified world – the concept of ‘church’ (as opposed to denomination) is likely to be. Although we can talk generally about ‘Christianity’ or ‘Islam’, the *differences within* these broad organisations are probably of more significance. For

example, within some categories of church the ‘unity of beliefs and practices’ is more apparent than real. **Levinson** (1998) notes how ‘Hinduism’ consists of ‘thousands of different religious groups that have evolved in India since 1500 BCE’ – it has no single founder, theology, morality or central organisation.

- **The sect–cult distinction:** The diversity of sects and cults makes it difficult to maintain a clear separation between the two forms – some sects act in some ways, but not others, like cults, and vice versa.

Diversity and homogeneity: It’s difficult to sustain the sect–cult distinction in the face of empirical evidence from the behaviour of different religious groups and movements – they are increasingly sophisticated in the way they recruit and retain members, and internally diverse in terms of how they operate. The internet (as well as the more traditional recruitment methods) allows movements to diversify in terms of what they offer to converts and how they offer it. Scientology has been particularly sophisticated in this respect, marketing itself by forging many different types of relationship with members.

In addition, there are huge organisational and behavioural differences within categories like ‘sect’ and ‘cult’ – they are not homogeneous classifications and it may be more useful to reflect this diversity by being more selective in our (sociological) categorisation. We also need to consider the way labels such as ‘sect’ and ‘cult’ have acquired, over the years, a negative (*pejorative*) meaning, especially in the media. **Barker** (1999) suggests we strip away the cultural and emotional baggage surrounding

these labels and develop a different way of classifying these religious organisations in terms of:

New Religious Movements (NRMs), a classification system developed for two main reasons:

- **Stigma:** As **Barker** argues: ‘... The media and the general public tend to employ the word “cult”, which has negative overtones, often implying bizarre beliefs, sinister and deceptive practices, mind control or psychological coercion and, perhaps, sexual abuse and violent tendencies.’
- **Theoretical clarity:** Such is the overlap between sects and cults that the distinction ‘on the ground’ (when studying their activities) is less than useful. In this respect, ‘NRM’ becomes a kind of generic (umbrella) term for a range of religious organisations that don’t fit easily into the church or denomination category.



Weeding the path

The term ‘NRM’ has itself been questioned. Religious historians such as **Melton** (1993) and **Miller** (1995) suggest ‘alternative religions’ or ‘non-conventional religions’ would be more accurate because some ‘new’ religious movements simply involve a reworking of traditional religious ideas and practices. **Barker** (1999) justifies the use of NRM when she argues they can be ‘... defined as groups which have become visible in their present form since the Second World War, and which are religious in so far as they offer an answer to some of the ultimate questions traditionally addressed by mainstream

religions: Is there a God? What is the purpose of life? What happens to us after death?' **Chryssides** (2000), however, points to a number of problems with this categorisation:

New: The starting point for classification is important because it may arbitrarily exclude movements (such as Jehovah's Witnesses) that are worthy of classification and study. **Chryssides** suggests 'a more liberal 150 year time scale'.

Religious: The objection here is 'there must be something plausibly religious about a movement . . . for it to count as a religion and hence an NRM'. He suggests we should include as NRMs only movements that satisfy four basic criteria:

- **answering** fundamental questions (like those posed by **Barker**)
- **rites of passage** that mark 'key life events'
- **life-coping strategies** that address 'problems of existence' rather than simply personal life issues (such as how to be more successful in business)
- **ethical codes** that set out how one's life should be lived.

To be defined as an NRM, therefore, a movement should be 'substantively' (rather than functionally) religious.

Movements: **Chryssides** suggests there are groups which reject the label of 'religion' and which, as a consequence, should not be classified as an NRM: 'The New Age Movement is one such example. It is nebulous, with little formal organization or membership, and its followers often explicitly reject organized religion, particularly traditional Christianity.'

The above notwithstanding, we can

examine NRMs in terms of two ideas: *characteristics* (defining features) and *explanations* for their existence.

Characteristics

Following **Barker's** (1999) lead ('There are . . . some characteristics which tend to be found in any movement that is both *new* and *religious*'), we can identify a number of NRM features in terms of:

Converts: With 'new movements' many recruits will be first-generation converts; they were neither born into the religion nor have a family history of involvement. 'Early adopters' tend to be committed, highly enthusiastic and, in many cases, *proselytizing* – keen to sell their movement and convert others to their faith (groups like Scientology and Hare Krishna use a variety of techniques to spread the word, from street selling to mail drops).

Membership: Recent (post-1970) NRMs attract young, middle-class recruits in disproportionate numbers to other religious organisations. This is partly because the young, in particular, are more open to – and desirous of – new experiences, while this age group is also more likely to be targeted for recruitment by NRMs.

Authority: Many NRMs are led by a founder with the *charisma* to attract followers in the first instance, something that often gives such movements an autocratic, rather than democratic, structure. A leader may control all, some or very little of the day-to-day life of converts, but many NRMs have the characteristics of a:

Total institution, which **Goffman** (1961) defines as 'a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead

an enclosed, formally administered round of life'. However, unlike some other total institutions (prisons, for example) an important characteristic of NRMs is their:

Voluntarism – how people make choices about their behaviour and, although, as **Francis and Hester (2004)** note, choices are always made against a social background that gives them meaning and context, converts may *consciously choose* to become part of a total institution for many different reasons. In *Shopping for Faith (2002)*, one of **Cimino and Lattin's** respondents stated: 'If all the gospel of Jesus Christ is going to do is change my Sunday schedule, then I'm not interested. I want something that is going to change my finances, my sex life, the way I work, the way I keep my house and the way I fix my yard.'

Certainty: NRMs normally promote a particular version of 'truth' that is more dogmatic and less open to questioning than the 'truths' promoted by their older counterparts.

Identity: A sharp distinction is invariably made between 'Us' (the movement's members) and 'Them' (non-members or unbelievers), partly on the basis of the certainty and truth underpinning the faith of members. This concept of group and, by extension, individual identity is based on a distinction between the members' sense of:

- **self** (who they are, what they believe and so forth), and their perception of
- **the other** (people, in effect, who are 'not like us').

In this respect, a sense of 'ourselves' as 'homogeneously good and godly' is arguably sustained by a sense of 'others' as 'homogeneously bad'. If this is the case, it is not particularly difficult to see why the final characteristic of NRMs is:

Antagonism (and suspicion) between a particular NRM, wider society and other religious organisations. This follows, perhaps, because an important way for an NRM to both carve out a clear identity in an increasingly crowded 'religious marketplace' and maintain a strong sense of self once a niche has been created is to, in Old Religious Movement terms perhaps, 'demonise your competitors'.

Typology

Daschke and Ashcraft (2005) suggest a typology of NRMs based around 'five interrelated *pathways*', each of which identifies the unique features of a range of NRMs:

- **Perception:** This identifies movements that involve a *new way* of looking at the 'problem of existence and understanding'. Their focus – and attraction – is on philosophical questions (like the meaning of life).
- **Identity** overlaps with *perception* in the sense it focuses primarily on the Self. However, 'identity movements' are less likely to address questions relating to 'the cosmos' (the scheme of things) and more likely to focus on human potential – in particular, the development of new personal identities. These movements attract those who seek personal enlightenment through the mastery of certain techniques and practices designed to release their 'inner spirituality'.
- **Family** types focus on the *social solidarity* aspect of religious practice; their primary attraction is the offer of a sense of community and well-being through the development of close, personal relationships with like-minded



Growing it yourself: Building a brand

'We are building a religion,
We are building it bigger
We are widening the corridors
and adding more lanes
We are building a religion.
A limited edition'

Cake 'Comfort Eagle': Columbia Records, 2001

In this exercise, the task is to create and market a New Religious Movement. In small groups, design a campaign aimed at publicising the new product and attracting converts. You can do this in any way you decide, but you should include the following information:

- **Product name:** Time to think of a catchy title . . .
- **Content:** What is it you're trying to sell? Identify some features of the NRM you think will make it attractive to potential converts – the only proviso is that content must have some religious basis.
- **Unique selling point:** What features of your brand make it different to what's already available?
- **Target audience:** To whom are you marketing your brand (and why)?
- **Marketing:** How will you sell your new product (word of mouth? Advertising? The internet?).

Once this stage is completed, each group should 'pitch' their ideas in turn to the class as a whole.

individuals. In this category people want to explore different ('alternative') ways of living and working, usually by distancing themselves, as a group, from wider society.

- **Society movements** focus group solidarity outwards rather than inwards – a major attraction here is the possibility of changing society to align it more closely with the (spiritual) beliefs of the group. This involves transforming social institutions (such as work, school and the family) through the application of a particular moral or ethical code (a 'design for living', if you like).
- **Earth movements:** The goal here is to transform the whole *world*. Some of these movements focus on:
 - **Planet transformation**, usually through beliefs in an *apocalyptic* end to the earth and, from the ruins, the creation of a new 'golden age' (whether this is through supernatural or human intervention). Other variations focus on:
 - **Group transformation** – the idea, for example, that the group will be transported to a new planet (what are sometimes called 'exit-orientated' movements).

Explanations

The final question we need to consider is how to explain the existence and development of NRMs – something that links with the work we've done on religion and social change by reversing the focus of that work. Rather than looking at the role of religion in promoting social change, however, we can consider the *role of social change* in the development of religious movements.

Technological change: Wuthnow (1986) explains the rise of NRMs in the post-Second World War period (in Western Europe and the USA in particular) in terms of the effect of rapid developments in science and technology. The strong development of a secular ideological framework ('science'), he argues, challenged the *hegemonic* role of religion and forced changes in the way mainstream churches and denominations interpreted their relationship to the secular world, resulting in established religions becoming increasingly *liberal* in their interpretation of religious scriptures. These changes within religious organisations produced *schisms* ('counter-movements') whereby those who opposed liberalisation split from established religions, leading to an increase in NRMs. As the rate of technological and educational growth declined, NRM growth and activity also declined (or 'solidified').

Globalisation: Rapid forms of political, economic and cultural change at the end of the twentieth century have created, according to Baudrillard (2001), a situation of 'postmodern uncertainty' that has led some to seek certainties in the teachings and moralities of both traditional and non-traditional religions – a situation that has

arguably led to a *revitalisation* of NRMs in the 'postmodern age'.

Economic change: Arjomand (1986) considered the impact of social change on non-Christian religions (such as Islam) and identified processes 'which are likely to strengthen disciplined religiosity [levels of religious commitment] and, under favourable conditions, give rise to movements of orthodox reform and renewal of Islam':

- **Social integration:** As Islamic societies become integrated into the international economic system they face increasing competition from Western secular and religious ideas and philosophies.
- **Communication:** The development of transport, communication and the mass media (including the internet) exposes populations to a range of new – and in many cases radically different – ideas.
- **Urbanisation** creates pressure for change where people react to worsening economic situations by developing new responses – which include both NRMs and a reinvigoration/reinterpretation of traditional religious movements.
- **Education:** As populations become more literate and formally educated they are exposed to a range of ideas that promote the development of new ways of interpreting the world.

Social unrest: Eyre (1996) suggests, in relation to the USA particularly, that NRM growth during the 1960s resulted from *disillusionment*, especially among the young, with both involvement in the Vietnam War and a general questioning of the materialistic values of US society. One aspect of this 'rebellion' was to explore a range of alternative lifestyles and beliefs.

Immigration: The movement of people across different cultures and the introduction of new – and different – ideas into the host culture challenges *religious orthodoxy* ('the things people have always believed') and leads to the development of 'new religions' through a process of:

Cultural hybridisation – the idea that different cultures meet, mix and produce something different. In the 1960s, for example, **Eyre** notes how a range of Eastern 'faiths and philosophies' met Western faiths and resulted in hybrid philosophies that subsequently developed into NRMs.



Weeding the path

'Social change/social unrest' explanations have been criticised on the basis that the major period of NRM growth occurred in the 1950s, a period of relative political and economic stability. More importantly, perhaps, we can question the extent to which NRM 'growth' is actually an *illusion*. **Beckford** and **Levasseur** (1986) suggest this when they focus on the development of:

Communication technology:

Improvements in the means of communicating ideas in the post-war period allowed NRMs to reach a mass audience. Effectively, this meant the overall *visibility* of various NRMs was increased, without there necessarily being an increase in their number. The development of internet technologies – *websites* and *email* in particular – may have accelerated or amplified this process.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Crime and deviance: Beckford (1994) suggests the behaviour and activities of

NRMs are subject to a process of 'media amplification', similar to that relating to the amplification of deviance.

Beckford and **Levasseur** argue there hasn't been a 'sudden, significant, explosion of NRMs' that needs to be explained. Rather, NRMs were simply following a 'traditional path' of emergence and growth; their *apparent* development can be explained by the fact they were able to 'get their message' across to a larger audience – the 'growth' of NRMs was the result of improvements in publicity and advertising.

The traditional audience for NRMs – mainly the urban young – are precisely the people most affected by technological/social change and, in consequence, most receptive to 'new' ideas about the nature of the world. For **Beckford** and **Levasseur** (as for writers such as **Bruce**, 2002), NRM membership was – and remains – relatively small and *transient* (people move into – and out of – these groups with great frequency). This suggests, perhaps, that a more useful question here is not *why* people are attracted to NRMs, but rather why so many people are *not* attracted to the kinds of 'solutions' they appear to offer.

New Age Movements (NAMs)

NAMs are often confused with NRMs, partly because they are both relatively recent phenomena and partly because NAMs sometimes have a 'religious' frame of reference. **Melton** (2001) argues that 'the term New Age refers to a wave of religious enthusiasm that emerged in the 1970s ... only to subside at the end of the 1980s'. We should, however, note that the 'religious' aspects of NAMs are subtly different to those of NRMs, which is why we need to



The potting shed

Typing the name of different religious movements into the Google search engine (www.google.co.uk) produced the following:

NRM	Page hits
'Divine Light Mission'	4600
'Unification Church'	121,000
'Children of God'	676,000
'Scientology'	1.5 million

Identify and explain one reason why these results support **Beckford** and **Levasseur's** argument and one reason why they might be evidence against their argument.

explore them as a separate – but interrelated – aspect of the 'new religiosity'. In this respect, NAMs, according to **Cowan** (2003), have a couple of defining characteristics:

Salvation is interpreted in terms of 'this world' with the focus of involvement being on finding solutions to problems through *personal agency* – in **Brown's** (2004) terms, a commitment to the 'transformation of both self and society'. **Brown** identifies a range of disparate movements within the general 'New Age' category ('astrology, channelling (direct communication with spirits), work with one's "inner child" ... and a laundry list of unconventional healing techniques') and suggests: 'Some scholars have labelled the New Age an *'audience cult,'* rather than a kind of religion in the conventional sense, because of its diffuse, networklike quality.'

Focus on 'personal salvation' is a key element of NAMs, expressed, as **Cowan** argues, through different preoccupations and concerns, including:

- peace of mind
- positive self-image
- physical health
- personal empowerment
- enlightenment/insight.

Brown further notes that NAMs have a couple of qualities *not* shared by other types of religious movement/organisation:

Orientation: The focus is on the ability (or otherwise) to influence future events (both personal and social).

Individualism: **Brown**, like **Fraser** (2005), argues that NAM adherents are 'less inclined to accept the personal compromises needed to maintain a stable group', something that gives NAMs the appearance of 'consumerist movements' – loose collections of individuals whose most cohesive feature is the desire to buy into a particular belief system.

Langone (1993) identifies four main 'streams' within New Age Movements:

- **Transformational training** that involves the ability to transform personal life through a range of techniques and practices.
- **Intellectualism**, where the main interest lies in the exploration of 'alternative beliefs' rather than the practice of such beliefs.
- **Lifestyle**, with a focus on the transformation of society through behavioural changes (such as anti-globalisation movements or environmentalism).

- **Occult** that involves both ‘conventional’ beliefs and practices such as witchcraft (‘Wicca’) and areas such as astrology, palmistry, crystal healing and so forth.

These categories may in some instances overlap (occult practices, for example, might involve beliefs about lifestyle changes), but **Langone** argues that one feature common to all NAMs is the belief that ‘... spiritual knowledge and power can be achieved through the discovery of the proper techniques’.

NAMs appear to represent a variety of disparate beliefs and practices that are rarely, if ever, organised into a stable ‘community of believers’. We could, therefore, argue that NAMs (and possibly NRMs) epitomise a postmodern perspective on the world. NAMs in particular seem to fulfil a range of requirements for a postmodern religion:

- **Diversity:** There are numerous variations on a New Age theme available.
- **Fragmentation**, in the sense of diversity *between* and *within* different NAMs (think, for example, of the possible differences between pagans and neo-pagans, white Wicca and black Wicca, etc.).
- **Metanarrative breakdown:** Organisational diversity makes it difficult to identify – or sustain – a consistent world view among NAMs. In addition, the overwhelming sense of individualism – different people seeking personal solutions to their particular problems – makes the idea of a ‘New Age metanarrative’ difficult to pin down.
- **Choice**, not only in terms of ‘ready-made’ movements, but also in a kind of ‘pick-and-mix’ approach where, if you don’t like what’s on offer, you can start your



Pagans? Neo-pagans? Or just people who like to get dressed up on a Saturday night?

own movement by choosing whatever philosophical bits and pieces take your fancy – something that leads to the idea of NAM consumers as:

Spiritual shoppers – people looking to buy solutions and willing to consider whatever particular movement happens to take their fancy. There is, unlike with traditional churches or denominations, little sense of ‘brand commitment’ or consumer loyalty. This suggests one feature of the ‘new age of religion’ is the consumer experience – religion is:

Experiential – you ‘go with the flow’ and if it ‘works for you’ then you don’t question the rationality of the experience; consumers buy into a brand, use it as and when they want and discard it when it no longer serves its purpose. Whether or not this is a particularly accurate representation of ‘postmodern religion’, the idea of:

Shopping for faith is an interesting one. **Cimino and Lattin (2002)** express the essence of this idea when they note: ‘Whether soul-shaking experiences and religious conversions are the true action of the Holy Spirit, hypnotic trance states, or some other psychological trick makes little difference. They feel real. They inspire people to change their lives and commit

themselves to another power, whether it's a higher power outside themselves or an inner voice crying out from the depths of their soul.'



Weeding the path

Some features of NAMs give substance to this idea. **Langone**, for example, argues that 'New Age mysticism' appeals to a wide range of consumer groups, from secularists who want to explore aspects of 'spirituality' without necessarily committing to traditional religions, to those searching for 'meanings' religions have failed to supply.

New Age ideas about magic, personal fulfilment and the like have also found their way into modern business practices – from salespeople who buy into 'transformational training' to improve their self-esteem and ability to sell, to 'management gurus' (note the religious terminology) who sell whatever version of 'business wisdom' happens to be in fashion at the time, using a variety of New Age techniques.

Ammerman (1997) captures the overall flavour of this particular NAM discourse when she argues: 'Rather than either/or categories like sect/church ... we may begin to imagine ways of describing the much more complicated reality we encounter in a world where actors are constantly choosing their ways of being religious.' She also argues:

Mediated religious influences such as books, magazines, television and the internet

'... provide models of behaviour, pieces of rhetoric, bits of belief, from which individuals construct the routines they enact' – what **Roof** (1996) labels 'pastiche religion', to reflect its fundamental character as an individual 'construction'.

Alternatively, we might apply the concept of:

Bricolage religions (the idea of making something new by combining different sources) to the concept of NAMs to reflect both their postmodernity and, more importantly, the idea of their construction and reconstruction at the hands of different individuals and groups.

Moving on

In this section we've touched on the relationship between religious organisations and beliefs. In the next section, we can develop this relationship in terms of social groups based around concepts such as class and age.

4. Explanations for the relationship between religious beliefs, religious organisations and social groups

This section is based around the key variables of **class**, **age**, **gender** and **ethnicity**. We can begin by looking at how and why religious beliefs and organisations are related to these social categories.

WARM-UP: INDICATORS OF RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT

In this exercise we're going to look, individually at first and then as a class, at four basic types of religious indicator, partly to explore your religious beliefs, attachments and practices and partly to introduce some problems involved in the identification and measurement of such things.

Listed below are some selected indicators of religious commitment. Tick (✓) any you feel apply directly to you and put a cross (✗) against any you feel do not apply to you.

Disposition	Orthodox belief	
Do you: Often think about the meaning of life Think life is meaningless Often think about death Often regret doing wrong Need moments of prayer, etc. See yourself as a religious person Draw comfort/strength from religion Think God is important in your life Have spiritual experiences Have superstitions Believe in predestination	<i>I believe in:</i> God Sin Soul Heaven Life after death A spirit or life force The devil <i>I accept commandments demanding:</i> No other gods Reverence of God's name Holy Sabbath	
Moral values	Institutional attachment	
Absolute guidelines exist on good and evil <i>I accept commandments against:</i> Killing Adultery Stealing Lying Terrorism may be justified <i>The following acts are never justified:</i> Claiming benefits illegally Accepting a bribe Taking illegal drugs Homosexuality Euthanasia I always respect those in authority Capital punishment is wrong	I have great confidence in the church/synagogue/temple/mosque <i>Church/synagogue/temple/mosque answers my:</i> Moral problems Family problems Spiritual needs I attend a religious service monthly at least I identify with a particular religion <i>I believe religion:</i> Is important for my society Will be more important in future Will be less important in future I believe in one true religion Religious faith is an important value to develop in children People should marry only in a religious setting Religion has a political role in society	

Once you've completed the table, as a class discuss the following:

- Judging by the results, how religious are the people in your class?
- What problems did you discover in terms of completing the table and interpreting the results?

Source: Adapted from **Abrams et al.** (1985)



Preparing the ground: Religiosity

This exercise has introduced:

Religiosity – a concept that suggests the possibility of identifying and measuring the various qualities involved in 'being religious' ('religiousness') and the exercise will have sensitised you to two aspects of *religiosity*:

- **Social indicators** are areas (such as whether people attend religious services) that can be observed and measured as indicators of people's thoughts and behaviour.
- **Belief and belonging: Davie (1994)** makes this distinction to suggest we need to recognise that people can hold religious *beliefs* while simultaneously showing little or no commitment to religious *organisations* or *practices*. We can, for example, quite happily believe in God without ever attending a religious service. People may also attend religious services without necessarily having any strongly developed sense of religious belief; religious practice may have secular functions, with people attending services for reasons of friendship, social status, tradition and so forth.

This difference between *belief* and *belonging* is an important distinction since it suggests that to understand patterns of religious commitment we can't *simply* look at

indicators like membership of religious groups or attendance at religious services as *prima facie* ('at first sight') evidence of *religiosity* – although these may, of course, be important dimensions of any explanation of religiousness.



Digging deeper: Religiosity

Glock and Stark (1965) argue that religious behaviour has *five dimensions* which reflect **Davie's (1994)** contention that it's possible to 'believe without belonging' (someone may, for example, have a deep (*intellectual*) interest in religious texts without necessarily having any *emotional* or *ritualistic* interest in religion).

- **Ritual** activities include things like attending religious services and ceremonies.
- **Ideological** refers to the commitment someone has to the essential beliefs of a religion.
- **Experiential** represents a measure of 'emotional' identification and attachment on the basis that religion is not simply about 'thinking' and 'doing'; it's also about 'feeling' – and this dimension considers things like the extent to which people identify with a particular religious group (the *solidarity* function of religion).

- **Intellectual** dimensions measure people’s knowledge and understanding of their religion’s beliefs and practices.
- **Consequential** dimensions look at how all of the above affect the individual’s life. In other words, it’s a (complicated) measure of the impact religious beliefs, practices and attachments have on everyday life.


Smith (1996) fine-tunes Davie’s (1994) distinction ‘to allow for other forms of relationship between the two terms’.

This type of multidimensional grid increases the range of commitments and attachments it’s possible to identify in a particular community. Something like New Age (religious) movements involve very

high – often evangelical and proselytising (actively trying to convert others) – levels of belief without adherents necessarily having a strong sense of belonging to a religious organisation: As **Smith** argues: ‘Belonging if it exists at all is to loose, ever-changing networks, or to the electronic church.’

Engs (2002) suggests that a more general measure of religiosity in the twenty-first century needs to take account of a number of ideas:

- **Belief** refers to the extent to which someone accepts the ‘traditional beliefs’ of a religion.
- **Difficulty** refers to how individuals relate to a religion – do they, for example, have difficulties and anxieties about certain

Greg Smith (1996): The Unsecular City				
	Believing 			
	Low			High
Belonging ↓	1	2	3	4
	No belief in God	Common or folk religion	Formulaic orthodoxy	Committed/life changing
A. Minimal (by birth or ascription)	Never go to church	‘C of E’	Lapsed Roman Catholic	New Age activist
B. Nominal allegiance/ occasional participation	‘Not religious’ (‘weddings only’)	Christmas/ Easter	Weekly mass	TV congregation
C. Active involvement/ paid-up membership	Humanist society	Parish work	Cynic	Evangelist preacher

aspects of doctrine (such as abortion, female clergy and homosexuality)?

- **Apathy and boredom** consider an individual's willingness to withdraw from a religion when it loses its relevance – a measure, in effect, of *religious attachment*.
- **Satisfaction** represents an assessment of whether people feel they gain something from involvement in religious activities, ceremonies and relationships.
- **Conscience** looks at the feelings people have about the general role of their religious organisation in society – should it, for example, involve itself in secular affairs or concentrate on spiritual matters?

* SYNOPSIS LINK

Theory and methods: Engs suggests an 'inventory' of religious commitment can be constructed using a **Likert scale** – a questionnaire technique designed to measure attitudes that involves asking respondents to express their level of agreement/disagreement about a statement on a five-point scale (from 'Strongly Agree' at one end to 'Strongly Disagree' at the other).

The variety of typologies available suggests there's no real agreement about how to *reliably* and *validly* measure a concept like religiosity – something we need to keep in mind as we look at how this idea relates to different social groups.



Preparing the ground: Social class

Much of the information we have about the relationship between class and religiosity is based on survey material from sources such as:

- **Government departments** like the **Home Office's** citizenship survey and the ten-yearly census.
- **Private polling organisations** – **YouGov**, the internet-based polling organisation, for example.
- **Religious organisations:** Organisations like the Church of England produce yearly attendance and membership figures.

When thinking about these and other forms of data we need to keep in mind, as always, the basic methodological questions of:

- **Reliability:** How data are collected – and for what purpose – are always important questions. Data from religious organisations, for example, often involve different definitions of what constitutes 'membership' and 'attendance'. Church of England attendance figures are 'based on average Sunday attendance, collected over a four-week period each October' (**Barley**, 2005). For comparative purposes, however, we need to be aware, as **Bates** (2005) notes, that in the past attendance figures have been compiled by 'accepting a vicar's assessments or headcounts on a particular day'.
- **Validity:** Opinion poll or interview data are a snapshot of people's opinions at a particular time and the data produced may be subject to a variety of interview/interviewer effects. **Hadaway** and **Marler** (1998) note how poll data in the USA about 'religious attendance' showed significant discrepancies between the numbers 'claiming to attend services' and those who actually attended.

We can note some features of the relationship between class and Christian religiosity (mainly because 70–80% of the UK population identify their religious affiliation – ‘a present or past personal or familial connection to a religion’ (O’Beirne, 2004) – in such terms), as reported by YouGov (2004).

Belief: There is little significant class difference in beliefs surrounding ideas such as:

- **God/gods/supreme being.**
- **Religious affiliation:** The working class are slightly more likely to describe themselves as Protestant or Roman Catholic, whereas the middle classes are slightly more likely to describe themselves as ‘other Christian’ (Jews, however, are three times more likely to be middle class than working class).
- **Prayer:** Slightly more middle-class people believe in praying.
- **General beliefs:** There seems to be no significant class difference in terms of belief in things like heaven, life after death, the devil and hell.

Practice: In terms of attendance at religious services:

- **Regular attendees** (weekly or monthly): Approximately three times more of the middle classes classify themselves in this way.
- **Occasional attendees:** Little significant class difference.
- **Never attend** (outside of ceremonies such as weddings and funerals): The working class are slightly more likely to ‘never attend’.

To keep this in context, in a 2003 Mori opinion poll (‘Faith in the UK’, 2003) only

18% of respondents classified themselves as a ‘practising member of an organised religion’.

Characteristics

When we look at the general social characteristics of different faith groups (O’Beirne, 2004), we can note:

- **Occupation:** *Christians* were more likely than any other faith to be employed in middle-class (managerial and professional) occupations. *Muslims* were most likely to report never having worked (something, as we will see, that relates to class, gender and age – 35% of Muslim women, for example, reported never having worked, a figure that increased to 63% of those aged 50+).
- **Education:** General levels of education were higher among those with no religious affiliation than among their religious counterparts. Among faith groups, *Jews* and *Hindus* were more likely to have higher-level qualifications (such as a university degree). *Christian* and *Muslim* faiths had the ‘smallest proportions of respondents with the highest educational qualifications’ and were most likely, of all faith groups, to have no formal educational qualifications.
- **Civic participation** (such as membership of voluntary groups): With the exception of ‘Christian respondents of black or mixed race ethnicity’, religious affiliation made no appreciable difference to participation levels.

One important point to keep in mind here is that the differences and similarities we’ve identified largely relate to those who profess some form of religious belief and a significant number of people in our society *do not* define themselves as ‘religious’.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Stratification and differentiation: Both polling organisations and government departments use 'class scales' to define and categorise social class. However, different scales may be used by different organisations. **YouGov**, for example, uses a variation of the Registrar General's scale whereas the **Home Office** use the much-newer NS-SEC categories.



Digging deeper: Social class

O'Beirne (2004) notes that 'respondents affiliated to particular faiths share certain socio-economic experiences and characteristics', and we can dig a little deeper into this idea by examining some possible explanations for the relationship between religious affiliation and social class.

Status: In the past, in our society, religion was a source of status for both the upper and middle classes – the former in terms of their positions within powerful religious institutions (such as the Church) and the latter in terms of using things like church attendance as a synonym for 'respectability'. It's arguable whether either of these class functions of religion applies any more.

Identity: The decline, noted by Bruce (2001), in the significance of religion as a source of *group* (as opposed to *individual*) identity is important in terms of the 'uses of religion' for things like status, social control and the like. When Colls (2005) talks about 'a post-industrial, post-colonial, post-masculine, post-Christian world of fluid identities ...', he argues that the 'religion and respectability' *class markers* of the past no longer have the power and resonance

they once had. O'Beirne found little evidence of religious belief/practice forming a significant part of self-identity – only 20% of respondents considered religion 'an important part of their personal description' (and even then religion came somewhere down the scale of significance after family, age, work and interests).

If religion as a source of class identity has little or no resonance for Christians, it was, according to O'Beirne, significant for some minority faith communities (Muslims and Hindus, for example). However, this broadly cut across class boundaries – it was mainly a source of *ethnic* identity for all social classes.

Deprivation: With one major exception, O'Beirne's respondents with religious affiliations '... lived in places with low-to-moderate levels of area deprivation' – something that suggests both the changing nature of class relationships (these are not presently played out – unlike in the past perhaps – in relation to strong concepts of social inequality and deprivation) and the changing nature of established religions; they no longer represent a source of 'hope' for the most deprived in our society. The exception, however, is the Muslim faith – associated with 'the highest levels of area deprivation'.

This suggests UK Muslims largely inhabit the lowest social strata and that religious belief, practice and commitment are an integral part of 'Muslim life' in terms of providing moral codes for a community and as a mode of group/individual identity represented by a strong and vital religious organisation.



Weeding the path

Although people are generally less inclined to 'join organisations', the fact that some

Discussion point: Deprivation and deviance?

The relationship between 'deprivation' and 'religiosity' is interesting for two reasons:

- 1 Deprivation alone doesn't explain why people are religious (working-class Muslims have higher levels of religiosity than working-class non-Muslims).
- 2 Deprivation – although significant – combines with other social factors (such as political marginalisation and a sense of (sub)cultural identity) to produce certain kinds of cultural response (whether this be deviance, religious behaviour or, in some cases, both).

It would be useful, therefore, to discuss the following questions:

- What parallels are there between deviance and religious belief/behaviour as 'responses' to an individual or group's social situation (how is deviant behaviour sociologically similar – or different – to religious behaviour)?
- What factors can you identify to explain why some people/groups embrace religion?

religious organisations can demonstrate increased levels of membership and attendance might suggest the 'problem' lies less with society and more with what (Christian) religions are currently offering people.

Fragmentation: Postmodern societies are different in terms of two kinds of relationship:

- **Individual:** People are less likely to define themselves in terms of class and, consequently, less likely to behave in ways that (perhaps) reflect their perception of class relationships. **Petre** (1999) encapsulates this idea when he quotes Douglas Bartles-Smith, the Archdeacon of Southwark, explaining the repeated fall in Christian church attendance and membership in the UK: 'There has been a general flight from institutions. Trade union membership is down, as is that for political parties and voluntary organizations. It is difficult to find any institution that has not suffered.'

- **Institutional:** This dimension is taken up, in their different ways, by both postmodernists and *exchange theorists* (such as **Finke** and **Stark**, 2004). The basic idea here is that *religious pluralism* is a feature of contemporary societies in terms of the choices available to the 'religious consumer' – both *between* religions (Christianity or Islam, for example) and *within* religions (such as liberal or fundamentalist Christianity). If we include NRMs, the range of consumer choices is even greater.

The argument here is that religious affiliation now relates to 'individual, personal identities' rather than the 'collective, social identities' of the past. The weakening of 'traditional class associations', coupled with increased consumer choice, explains why social class no longer correlates very closely with affiliation. As **Bruce** (2001) argues, the logic of this argument is that 'competitive free markets [in religion] are supposed to be better at meeting not only material but also spiritual needs'.

Fragmentation and *pluralism* also have consequences for:

Partisan dealignment, which can be related to the association between religious organisations, social groups and voting behaviour. In the past, for example, we find quite strong correlations between class, religious affiliation and political affiliation. Catholicism in the UK drew large numbers of adherents from the working classes who tended to support left-of-centre political parties, and **Dogan** (2004) argues that ‘social changes in the last few decades’ have altered this situation to one where both class and religion have declined in significance as explanations for political alignments.

Lifestyle: **Stark** and **Bainbridge** (1987) argue that cults draw their members from the higher social classes, whereas **Kelly** (1992) has suggested that NRMs are founded and populated by the educated middle classes. **Adler’s** research (1979) has drawn attention to the fact that, in the USA at least, members of witch covens are drawn predominantly from the professional middle classes. On a different note, **Bader** (2003) notes how two-thirds of those who claim to have been abducted by aliens previously held middle-class occupations.

The last word here should perhaps go to **Bruce** (1995) for his amusing – if dismissive – explanation for middle-class affiliation with NAMS and, to some extent, NRMs: ‘Spiritual growth appeals mainly to those whose more pressing material needs have been satisfied. Unmarried mothers raising children on welfare tend to be too concerned with finding food, heat and light to be overly troubled by their inner lights, and when they do look for release from their

troubles they prefer the bright outer lights of bars and discotheques.’



Preparing the ground: Age

The relationship between religiosity and age is, as you might expect, rather more methodologically straightforward and there’s a range of interesting data available relating to religion and age. On a *nominal* level (in terms of what people *say* they believe), identification with religious beliefs, practices and organisations varies considerably in terms of:

Intergenerational differences (between age groups): If we look at Christian affiliation (the primary UK faith community):

While data like this don’t tell us much about either the relative strength of people’s beliefs or the extent to which ‘Christians’ are committed to their faith, they broadly accord with both **Hunt’s** (2002) observation that Christian affiliation tends to rise with age and **O’Beirne’s** (2004) research which found those affiliated to a religion were generally older (50+), on average, than those who had no affiliation.

All major UK faith communities (Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh and Buddhist) showed increasing affiliation with age. However, this should be qualified by noting that, with the exception of Jews, these communities currently have fewer elderly (50+) than younger (25–50) adherents, a discrepancy that can be explained *demographically* (see table on the following page):

Immigration: With the exception of Jewish communities (who share a similar demographic profile to Christians), other

Christian and no religious identification by age (Great Britain)				
Age group	Christian		No religion	
	%	Millions	%	Millions
0–15	18	7.3	19	2.1
16–34	22	8.9	23	3.3
35–64	41	17.0	12	2.7
65 and over	19	7.8	4	0.4

Source: Census 2001: Office for National Statistics, 2003; General Register Office for Scotland, 2003

faith groups tend to have a lower age profile because, as the **Office for National Statistics** (2001) notes, ‘migrants are mainly young adults’. Between 1997 and 1999 the average age for the majority population was 37, whereas for ethnic minority groups it was 26.

Fertility: The birth rates for many minority ethnic groups are higher than the norm for the UK population. **Office for National Statistics** (2001) data show that between 1997 and 1999 ‘... the number of people from minority ethnic groups grew by 15% compared to 1% for white people’.

Beliefs show marked generational differences. **YouGov** (2004) found belief in God was highest in the 55+ age group and lowest among the young (18–34). The reverse was true for non-belief. Nearly twice as many elderly as young respondents expressed a belief in prayer and personal experience of praying. In terms of ‘basic Christian beliefs’ there was little appreciable age difference.

However, one of the most striking features of ‘belief’ is arguably that a

significant and consistent *majority* of young people (60+% in this survey, 60+% according to the **British Social Attitudes Survey** (2000) and 65% according to **Park et al.**, 2004) expressed no positive religious belief or affiliation. **Park et al.** also note the growth (from 39% to 43% in the past 10 years) in the number of adults with no religious affiliation. This suggests there is no simple relationship between *age* and *affiliation* per se (although religiosity increases with age for believers, young ‘non-believers’ don’t become elderly ‘believers’).

Practice: **Brierley** (1999) concludes that not only are churchgoers ‘considerably older than non-churchgoers’, but the age gap, as **Bruce** (2001) confirms, has widened over the past 25 years. This trend, he argues, is consistent across all major Christian faiths.

One explanation for this decline, **Bruce** argues, is the inability of the established church to socialise young people into religious belief and behaviour. The decline in Sunday School membership, for example – from 55% of the population in 1900 to 4% in 2000 – is indicative of the inability of

established churches to capture and keep young adherents. **Petre** (1999) also suggests the numbers of those under 15 who attend church services is similarly declining (under 20% at present), with fewer than 5% of people in their twenties classifying themselves as ‘churchgoing’. The **British Social Attitudes survey** (2001) found the average age of churchgoers is older than that of the general population and, perhaps more significantly, is rising (from 38 in 1989 to 43 in 2000).



Digging deeper: Age

The ‘*generation gap*’ refers to age-related differences in attitudes and behaviour, and when it comes to religiosity there’s a clear, persistent and (arguably) widening gap between the religious behaviour of different generations in our society. As **Jowell and Park** (1998) put it: ‘All the differences between age groups ... are minor in comparison with those on religion. The fact is the young are overwhelmingly less religious than their elders.’ There is a range of possible explanations for generational differences.

Disengagement: The argument here is that as people get older they progressively ‘retreat’ from a society that, in turn, disengages from them. The ageing process, for **Cumming and Henry** (1961), involves a (functional) ‘coming to terms’ with death – the ultimate disengagement – and religious belief (if not necessarily practice) increases as a means of psychological *coping* with the trauma of death. A decline in religious *practice* in our society among the 65+ age group can be explained in terms of reduced physical mobility.



Weeding the path

When we look at the relationship between age and religious belief we consistently find that the elderly are more religious than the young. The question here, however, is whether religious belief *increases* with age (that is, whether people who were non-believers in their youth ‘start to believe’ as they age) and the evidence, according to **Hunsberger** (1985), is that this is not the case.



The potting shed

Identify and explain one way we could test the argument that religious belief increases with age.

De Geest (2002), however, relates elderly disengagement to:

Identity: Religion ‘... may especially impact on older adults, as many may be disengaging from formal group connections ... the older adult still may require some form of group connection and may find it through religion’. **Stuckey’s** (1997) research into older female involvement in Sunday School classes suggests this may be the case.

Lifestyle: Traditional forms of belief and practice appeal less to the young than to the elderly, which may reflect lifestyle situations and choices. **O’Beirne** (2004) argues the young have less time to commit to religious practice – ‘declining activity or interest in work, sports or school-related matters has been identified as a possible explanation for more engagement with a faith community’.

Alternatively, the perception of traditional religion among the young (in the



The potting shed

Identify and explain two reasons why evangelical religious services are attractive to young people.



words of one respondent (**Robins et al.**, 2002), ‘It’s not cool to be a Christian’) may also be a factor here – an explanation supported, in some respects, by the attraction of evangelical missions within the Church of England. The most notable of these in recent times is St Thomas’ Church in Sheffield where, as **Cooke** (2003) describes it: ‘Every Sunday night, between 800 and 1,000 people – the vast majority under the age of 35 – pile into this . . . warehouse in the heart of the inner city. Once inside, they celebrate the love of Jesus with the help of synthesisers and guitars, light shows and overhead projectors, a nightclub-style production masterminded by the church’s “worship director”’.

Alternative ideologies: Organised religions no longer have a ‘monopoly of knowledge’ and have consequently lost some of their ability to control how people think about and see the world.

Scientific/rationalist narratives, for example, effectively compete against – and in many ways undermine – religious explanations, making them both less mysterious and, potentially, less attractive as explanations.

Fanaticism: Although the absolutes and certainties of religion can be attractive for some (as a source of social and psychological stability), the reverse may also be true; prescriptive moral codes (such as the anti-abortion, anti-contraception and anti-gay teachings of some religions) may, in the words of another of **Robins et al.’s** (2002) young respondents, become ‘a big turn-off’.



Weeding the path

Not all sociologists agree with **Bruce’s** (2001) claim that there is ‘compelling evidence of a general and persistent decline in religiosity’ across all age groups. For some writers, seeking evidence of a lack of religiosity is like looking for the wrong things, in the wrong places in the wrong ways. Instead, they emphasise the idea of:

Resacralisation: **Stark** (1999) argues that religiosity in contemporary societies is less likely to be expressed through ‘traditional forms of association and membership’ and, therefore, is less likely to be reliably picked up by surveys (both *qualitative* – opinion surveys – and *quantitative* – attendance surveys) that focus on traditional faiths such as Christianity and Islam. NRMs, in particular, are notoriously difficult to research, although as **Bader** (2003) notes, what research there is generally shows affiliation to NRMs and NAMs is more popular among the young. **Stark** and **Bainbridge** (1987), however, found evidence that NAMs were popular among

older age groups, and **Francis and Robbins** (2004) have produced extensive survey data (among males aged 13–15 years) to show evidence of what they term:

Implicit religion – the idea that ‘believing without belonging’ is an increasingly significant trend in contemporary societies among the young, for reasons like:

- **lifestyle:** Being too busy to attend religious services and having other things to occupy their time
- **peer group** pressures that see overt forms of mainstream religious practice as ‘uncool’.



Preparing the ground: Gender

Walter and Davie’s (1998) observation that ‘in western societies influenced by Christianity, women are more religious than men on virtually every measure’ is a useful starting point for any examination of the relationship between gender and religiosity. As with the two previous categories, we can look at patterns in a similar way, focusing first on:

Affiliation: According to **O’Beirne** (2004), across the major UK religions, more women (83%) than men (74%) claimed some form of affiliation. Within the major UK faith communities, the split is 54–46% in favour of women; however, apart from Christians (54% female) and Sikhs (53% female), men are in the majority across the remaining major faith communities. Of those classed as non-religious, 60% were men.

These figures confirm a trend, noted by successive **British Attitudes Surveys**

(1983–1999), that men are less religious in terms of their affiliation levels. Affiliation is also declining among men – from 61% in 1983 to 43% in 1999.

According to **Census 2001**, women also have greater levels of involvement in non-traditional religions such as spiritualism and Wicca (both nearly 70% female), although variations were evident (Rastafarianism, for example, was 70% male).

Belief: Although the validity of data about religious beliefs is often questionable – **Furlong** (2002) noted, ‘... people questioned about how much they go to church, give figures which, if true, would add up to twice those given by the churches’ – the general evidence from opinion polls (such as **YouGov**, 2004) is that women have higher levels of belief in:

- **God:** **Crockett and Voas** (2004) found 36% more women than men believed in the certainty of God’s existence
- **prayer** – 44% of women (and 29% of men) personally believe in prayer
- **life after death, heaven, the devil and so forth.**

O’Beirne also notes more women (57%) than men (42%) affiliated to a faith community defined themselves in terms of their religion. However, we shouldn’t ignore the fact that the majority of men and women in our society professed little or no religious belief (in other words, religion was of little or no importance in terms of identity).

Participation: Women generally participate more in religious activities (such as attendance at services and clubs) than men:

- **Attendance:** **Crockett and Voas** (2004) estimate that women in the 21–40 age

group were far more likely (40%) than their male counterparts to attend services.

- **Participation:** O’Beirne’s research found Christian women slightly more likely (24–17%) than men to participate ‘in groups or clubs with a religious link’. Although the reverse was true for Muslims (30–40% respectively), this may reflect *gender norms* – Muslim women not being allowed to participate independently of men in religious activities, for example – rather than any significant difference in religiosity.

This pattern of attendance and participation is not restricted to the UK and Western Europe. Among Americans, **Barna** (1996) noted that the difference was even more marked, with ‘women twice as likely to attend a church service during any given week [and] 50% more likely than men to say they are “religious” and to state they are “absolutely committed” to the Christian faith’. Similarly, if we include NRMs, **Bader** (2003) suggests NRMs (and NAMs) generally have a higher ratio of female-to-male participants.

Finally we can note that men, by and large, hold positions of power and authority within the major world religions. As **Malmgreen** (1987) points out: ‘In modern Western cultures, religion has been a predominantly female sphere. In nearly every sect and denomination of Christianity, though men monopolized the positions of authority, women had the superior numbers.’



Digging deeper: Gender

Traditional sociological explanations for the greater levels of female religiosity focus on

the concept of *gender socialisation*, which examines how the behaviour of cultural groups is conditioned by the values and norms developed by – and taught to – different group members. In this respect, the idea that men and women in our society develop different cultural identities has been used by feminists in particular to explain gender differences in participation in ways related to the concept of *patriarchy*.

Roles: Christianity, **Steggerda** (1993) notes, promotes concepts of love and care that are more attractive to women who ‘interiorise the role of the mother’ and translate their general family role into religious behaviour, whereas levels of religiosity between *working* males and females are very similar.

Participation: **Daly** (1968) argues that patriarchal forms of religion have a certain attraction (for both men and women) in terms of offering the prospect of things like:

- **order:** Religious beliefs and institutions provide *certainties* in an increasingly ‘senseless and confusing world’
- **rules** that clearly specify the limits of acceptable behaviour.

In this respect, as long as both men and women ‘understand, know and accept’ their place in this moral order, religions also provide:

- **shelter** – a ‘home and haven’ in a male-dominated world
- **safety** in a threatening world
- **belonging**, which incorporates all of the above into a sense of finding personal identity through group membership.

These ‘benefits’ come, according to **Daly** (1973), at a price for women; the price they pay is submission to *patriarchal control* since,

she argues, religions are male-dominated, hierarchical institutions that ‘... serve the interests of sexist society’. This applies to:

- **Traditional religions**, such as Islam and Christianity, where women are rarely found in positions of power and influence (although the Church of England has allowed women priests since 1992) and
- **NRMs**, which are similar to traditional religions in their general male domination. **Palmer** (1994) says the type of women they attract are not particularly seeking power and, like **Daly**, suggests that ‘women join NRMs to bring order to their lives’. In some ways, therefore, the price women are willing to pay for a sense of cultural identity and stability is patriarchy. **Palmer** suggests this ‘patriarchal order’ is played out in terms of three basic types of NRM, based on their views relating to sexuality, bodies and gender roles:
 - **Sex complement**: Each gender has different spiritual qualities which, when combined (in marriage, for example), serve to complement each other.
 - **Sex unity** groups emphasise ‘inner spirituality’ as being ‘sexless’ – a belief that rests on recognising traditional forms of gender/sex division in the ‘non-spiritual’ world.
 - **Sex polarity** groups emphasise essential, different and non-complementary qualities in men and women with, **Palmer** argues, men being seen as the superior sex.
- **Fundamentalist** sects and denominations, the majority of which – Christian and non-Christian – emphasise an

exaggerated form of ‘traditional’ gender roles and relationships. A classic example here might be something like:

Promise Keepers: Bartkowski (2000) notes the driving theme behind this US-based sect is the ‘rejuvenation of godly manhood’ united around two forms of masculinity:

- **Instrumentalist**, involving the development of a religious organisation as a ‘tool’ benefiting men at the expense of women. This type of masculinity emphasises ‘traditional masculine roles’ as breadwinner and provider.
- **Expressive** in the sense that both genders see male control as being the medium through which to understand ‘natural roles and responsibilities’. ‘Masculinity’, in this sense, is expressed through the ability to perform ‘traditional male roles’.



Weeding the path

We need to keep in mind that very few men or women in our society actually *practise* their religious beliefs. Of the 37 million who identified themselves as ‘Christian’ in **Census 2001**, around 3% (1.1 million) on average attend a weekly service.

Partial participation: An alternative way of looking at participation is, following **Nason-Clark** (1998), to see some forms of female involvement in religious organisations as ‘challenging the institution from within’. In other words, we shouldn’t simply see ‘participation’ in terms of what postmodernists call:

Binary oppositions (in this instance, participation/non-participation or

patriarchal/non-patriarchal). Rather, as **Winter et al.** (1994) argue, we should look at how both women – and men – are involved in changing the nature of religious faith and practice through what they term:

Defecting in place – the idea that various forms of feminist theology (such as critiques of patriarchal practices and images) are promoting changes *within* traditional religions, such as female-centred:

- **Spaces** within religions – the idea that women are able to carve out areas of religious belief and activity that relate specifically to female interests and concerns.
- **Religions** and the development of ideologies supporting female authority within religious movements. Some forms of ‘ecofeminism’, for example, link a range of themes (such as environmentalist politics, spirituality and animal rights) to what **Spretnak** (1982) terms concepts of ‘prepatriarchal myths and religions that had honoured women’. **Neitz** (1998) notes how such NRMs are ‘... oriented primarily to ... female deities ... exploring how these woman-affirming beliefs, symbols, and rituals may be empowering to women’.



Weeding the path

Matriarchal/matrifocal religious movements are small in number even in the context of those who actually practise their religious beliefs. Of more immediate significance, perhaps, is a process that **Swatos** (1998) calls the:

Feminisation of religions – the idea that religions in Western Europe and the USA

are currently undergoing a ‘fundamental orientational change’ in which ‘feminine (rather than masculine) images of the nature of deity and the role of the clergy come to predominate. God is seen as loving and consoling rather than as authoritarian and judgemental; similarly, members of the clergy are seen as ‘helping professionals’ rather than as ‘representatives of God’s justice’.

A different perspective on gender differences in religious belief and behaviour is provided in terms of:

Physiology and faith: The general argument is that sex-role socialisation fails to explain adequately gender differences in religious/irreligious belief and behaviour. As **Stark and Finke** (2000) note: ‘Traditional explanations are that women are more religious because they are more involved in socialising children, less involved in their careers, and more likely to join social groups’, whereas **Miller and Stark** (2002) argue there is little empirical evidence to support the idea that ‘gender differences in religiousness are a product of differential socialization’. In its place, Stark and others draw on a variety of New Right Realist perspectives and apply a range of:

Evolutionary psychological ideas, put forward by writers such as **Kanazawa and Still** (2000). One essential difference between males and females, from this position, is that ‘like crime, *irreligiousness* is an aspect of a general syndrome of short-sighted, risky behaviours’. In other words, men are more likely to indulge in *risky behaviour* (such as not believing in God) because of their biological evolution – a conclusion drawn by **Stark** (2002) on the basis that ‘in every country and culture men were less religious than women’.



Weeding the path

Lizardo and **Collett** (2005) reject the general conclusion that a ‘gender difference in risk preference of physiological origin might explain’ male and female religiosity and, as evidence, they point to the work of **Hagan et al.** (1988) in relation to:

Power control theory: Although there are differences in ‘risk-taking behaviour’ between men and women, there are also differences in such behaviour between different groups of men and between different groups of women. What this theory argues is that ‘... gender differences in risk-preference’ are closely related to ‘... class-based differences in the socialization of children, with women raised in patriarchal families more likely to be risk-averse than men raised in the same type of households and women raised in more egalitarian households’. **Lizardo** and **Collett’s** research demonstrated that:

- women raised by highly educated mothers show lower religiosity than those raised by less-educated mothers
- mother’s education has little effect on men’s chances of being irreligious
- father’s education has little effect on gender differences in religiosity.

In other words, levels of gender religiosity could be explained in terms of (class-based) differences in socialisation and, contrary to **Stark’s** argument about the lack of evidence for secular attitudes in modern societies, young people as a group (or *cohort* if you prefer) appear to have *converging* gender attitudes to religion (something that shouldn’t happen if religious belief is based

on fundamental evolutionary differences between the sexes).



Preparing the ground: Ethnicity

We can begin by outlining the general relationship between different ethnic groups and religiosity in terms of their religious affiliations.

The data in the table on the following page comes from the *decacentennial* (ten-yearly) national **census** (2001) and are based on the question ‘What is your religion?’ We can use this data to explore some important methodological issues relating to data reliability and validity.

Although this type of data doesn’t tell us a great deal about people’s beliefs or the strength of their affiliation (the 76% of ‘White British’ who classify themselves as ‘Christian’ are unlikely to share similar levels of affiliation), there are some useful points that can be drawn from it.

Diversity: Our society has a range of ethnicities and religious affiliations, considered not just in terms of different ethnic groups associating themselves with different religions, but also in terms of the diversity of affiliation *within* some ethnic groups (Indian, for example). This leads us to note the:

Heterogeneity of religious affiliation within and between different ethnic groups. This raises questions about:

Ethnicity: In particular, when comparing two apparently ‘similar’ ethnic groups (such as Indian and Pakistani, often grouped as ‘South Asians’), wide disparities of affiliation exist. The different forms of affiliation (Hindu, Muslim and Sikh, for example) found among Indian respondents suggests a

Selected UK ethnic groups and religious affiliation							
	Christian	Hindu	Muslim	Sikh	Jewish	Buddhist	None/ Unstated
Ethnic group	Percentage Thousands						
White British	76 38,100		0.1 25		0.4 225		23 11,500
White Irish	86 592						14 100
Other White	63 896		08 117		02 33		25 350
Black Caribbean	74 417						24 130
Black African	69 333		20 97				10 49
Indian		45 472	13 133	29 307			06 67
Pakistani			92 686				07 50
Bangladeshi			92 261				
Chinese	21 51					15 37	62 150

Note: A blank box means less than 5% of respondents affiliated themselves with a particular religion. This does, of course, highlight data discrepancies. For example, 25,000 White British respondents (0.1%) identified themselves as Muslim, whereas 4.9% of Indians identified themselves as Christian (8,000 respondents).

Source: Census 2001 (Office of National Statistics, 2004)

higher level of ethnic *fragmentation* among this group than among Pakistanis, for example. How significant this might be, in

terms of study and behaviour, needs to be related to questions of:

Identity: Questions of *ethnic identity* are



Growing it yourself: Methodological issues

In small groups, think about the following questions in relation to the data provided in the ‘religious affiliation’ table and explain how they relate to issues of reliability and validity:

- 1 Completion:** The questionnaire is completed by the ‘head of household’, not individual family members.
- 2 Optional:** The question was not compulsory (why, for example, might people decide not to state their religion?).
- 3 Ethnic (self-) classification:** What potential problems might there be with people of different generations classifying themselves in terms of their ethnic background?
- 4 Phrasing:** Answers to questions on religion are sensitive to how such questions are worded and, as the Office for National Statistics notes: ‘Slight differences in question wording can produce large differences in the proportion of people who say they are Christians or have no religion, although the proportion of people from other religions tends to be more stable.’ How might this and other possible factors have affected data validity?

frequently conflated with *religious identity*. This can have serious consequences (the tendency for many national newspapers, for example, to equate ‘Muslims’ with both ‘religious fundamentalism’ and ‘terrorism’). In addition, just as we’d avoid claiming that the white majority, as Christians, share similar norms, values and beliefs, we should also be wary of attributing this to ethnic

minority groups. **O’Beirne** (2004), however, has noted that religion is a relevant factor ‘in a person’s self-description, particularly for people from the Indian subcontinent’.

O’Beirne (2004) suggests ‘religion is important to migrant minority ethnic groups because it is integral to their cultural and ethnic identity’. However, when we break down identity in terms of *religion*, differences

Top things important about respondents’ identity by ethnicity

Rank	White	Black	Asian
2	Work	Ethnicity/culture	Religion
3	Age	Religion	Ethnicity/culture
10	Religion	Nationality	Skin colour

Source: Census 2001 (Office of National Statistics, 2004)

Things saying something important about respondents by religious affiliation						
Rank	Christian	Muslim	Hindu	Sikh	Jewish	Buddhist
1	Family	Family	Family	Family	Religion	Work
2	Work	Religion	Religion	Religion	Family	Family
3	Age	Ethnicity/ culture	Ethnicity/ culture	Ethnicity/ culture	Education	Religion
7	Religion	Nationality	Age	Age	Age	Education

Source: Census 2001 (Office of National Statistics, 2004)

between faith communities are fairly negligible – except in relation to Christians.

We need to note there are significant variations in affiliation (and strength of belief) based on categories such as gender and age – the latter, in particular, is significant when comparing the experiences of different generations within (recent immigrant) ethnicities; although Cook (2003) notes: ‘Collecting data on ethnicity is difficult because . . . there is no consensus on what constitutes an “ethnic group”.’

Generational differences among minority groups are present in the different ways young and old (or first- and second-/third-generation groups) classify themselves. First-generation immigrants are more likely to identify with their country of origin, whereas third-generation individuals are more likely to classify themselves in:

Hybrid terms – the use, by some young Asians, of the term ‘Brasian’ (British Asian) is a case in point here.

Non-religious affiliations: The optional nature of the census question means it’s impossible to know exactly how many of those who chose not to state their religion

did so because they considered it a private matter, didn’t know how to classify themselves or whatever. However, it’s interesting to note both the relatively high number in some ethnic groups who claim no affiliation (British and Chinese, for example) and the relatively low number in other groups (Pakistani, for example) who claim to be non-religious.



Weeding the path

The census classifies NRMs as ‘other religions’ involving relatively small numbers (approximately 160,000 respondents across all ethnic groups – 115,000 White British being the largest group). However, we need to be aware that NRM respondents may not see their beliefs in ‘conventional religious’ terms or they may have used the ‘not stated’ category as a way of recording their beliefs.



Digging deeper: Ethnicity

There are a range of explanations for the relationship between ethnicity and religiosity we can explore, starting with:

Deprivation: As we've seen, the highest levels of religious affiliation are found among Pakistani (92%) and Bangladeshi (92%) minorities. Both **Dorsett** (1998) and **Berthoud** (1998) have shown these ethnic groups to be among the very poorest in our society.

While this correlation is interesting, deprivation of itself is not a sufficient explanation for higher levels of religiosity (measured in terms of both affiliation and practice). Although Christians generally profess high levels of affiliation, this does not translate significantly into religious practice. As **Crockett** and **Voas** (2004) put it: 'All major ethnic minority populations are more religious than British-born whites.' Since high levels of deprivation exist in places among the white working class, the question here is why do some ethnic groups – but not others – display high levels of religiosity under similar economic circumstances?

The answer is bound up in ideas and issues related not simply to ethnicity, but also to the *experience* of being an 'ethnic minority' within a society; in other words, the key to understanding levels of ethnic group religiosity (both majority and minority) is found in two areas:

- **Inter-group relationships:** How, for example, different minority groups relate to both other minorities and to the ethnic majority.
- **Intra-group relationships:** Differences, for example, within ethnic minority groups (such as those of class, gender and, in particular, age) that relate to how these groups interact with, for example, the ethnic majority.

These different experiences, therefore, relate to questions of:

Identity – considered in terms of both the self-perception of different ethnic groups and, of course, the various social factors that go into the 'constructive mix' of such identities. We can illustrate this idea by contrasting the experiences of the 'White British' majority ethnic group in the UK, following a predominantly Christian faith, and the Pakistani minority, following a predominantly Muslim faith. The measured differences in religiosity between these two groups are explained conventionally in terms of a distinction between two types of believer:

- **Nominal:** A situation where people are 'born into a religion' (such as the Church of England) and generally, when asked, associate themselves with this religion without having much of a firm faith or commitment to it. The majority of UK Christians, by and large, fall into this category.
- **Authentic:** People who demonstrate their firmly held beliefs through various forms of practice and commitment. Pakistani Muslims generally fall into this category.



Weeding the path

This distinction begs the question of why *nominal belief* should be considered 'less authentic' than *overtly practised* beliefs – to argue that the latter group are *necessarily* 'more religious' ignores two things:

- **Private beliefs** may be sincerely held without the need to have them continually and publicly affirmed and reaffirmed.

- **Public practice** may be indicative of social processes (such as status considerations or peer pressure) other than strict religious belief.

Bruce (1995) develops these ideas by arguing that in modern, secular societies a distinction arises between two spheres of behaviour and practice that involve different basic values and norms:

- **The public sphere** is governed by ideas of rationality, instrumentalism and, most importantly, universal values and norms (as he argues: ‘Supermarkets do not vary prices according to the religion, gender or age of the customer’). This sphere can be described loosely as that of the *community* – a space where people meet, greet and interact according to a set of shared ideas and beliefs.
- **The private sphere** is characterised by ideas of expression and affection. It is also private in the sense of not being wholly part of the communal sphere – it represents space where the individual is, to some extent, set apart from the communal, public sphere.

Using this distinction, Christianity has evolved to accommodate itself to *secular* changes, especially in the *public sphere* (the development of secular politics, the demands of economic globalisation and cultural diversity, for example). In so doing, it has slowly retreated from the public sphere of religious *practice* into the private sphere of religious *belief*. This is not to say that services and ceremonies are no longer attended (around 1 million Christians attend church services each week); rather, it’s to argue that the Church has had to come to terms with the idea that, for the

ethnic majority, the role and function of organised religion has slowly changed. This group no longer (if indeed it actually ever did, as a society) needs religion to perform functions like:

- **Communality**: Bringing people physically together to promote:
- **Social solidarity** – the idea that people have things in common which bind them together as a group or society, and
- **Identity** – the idea that we become ‘centred’ (reasonably secure in the knowledge of ‘who we are’) through something like communal religious practices.

Private religion

Although we still require these things, they are increasingly satisfied by other institutions and activities (from the media, through shopping, to sport). Thus, as the Christian Church loses its *public functions*, attendance and practice also decline – but religion doesn’t necessarily disappear from people’s lives; rather, Christianity has, **Bruce** (1995) argues, been ‘... reworked so as to confine it to the private sphere’.

Davie (2001), however, argues that religious practice often remains important even in situations where religiosity has become largely confined to the private sphere – people still feel the need to make public affirmations, the most obvious and widespread being the classic ‘christenings, weddings and funerals’ trinity in our society. These are important:

Life events that require *both* private and public acknowledgement.

For minority groups, **Bruce** (1995) suggests the situation is somewhat different; such groups in the UK have moved from a

Discussion point: A church without walls?

A Church of Scotland Report, 'Church without Walls' (2001), identifies a number of ways the Christian Church should adapt to meet the changed needs of its potential parishioners. These include:

- focusing on getting the Christian message across in ways other than attending church
- going where people are rather than waiting for people to come to church
- encouraging churches to work together
- putting the local church at the centre of the community.

Thinking about these ideas:

- Does this type of report reflect a change in the way churches see their own organisation and the changing needs/requirements of potential and actual adherents? If so, in what ways?
- Do you think these types of changes will be successful in 'bringing Christianity to more people'? Why/why not?
- What changes in religious organisations can you suggest to 'make them more attractive' to potential religious consumers?

Source: www.churchwithoutwalls.co.uk

situation in which 'their religion was dominant and all-pervasive to an environment in which they form a small, deviant minority, radically at odds with the world around them'. Recent immigrant groups especially find themselves in, at best, an indifferent world, and, at worst, one that's hostile and uninviting.

In such a situation, it's hardly surprising that Pakistani minorities, for example, look to the things that are familiar and certain in their lives. These involve various traditions, customs, particularistic values and norms, which in turn require affirmation and reaffirmation through communal gatherings that promote both social solidarity and a sense of ethnic identity. Religion, through communal practices and beliefs, provides an outlet for such things, and it can also be

argued that religious practices are a source of protection – both physical and psychological – in a hostile and challenging world.

Religions such as Islam, therefore, are articulated in the public sphere (as Davie (2001) notes: 'Islam is not a religion that lends itself to private expression') and relate to a sense of:

Belonging – not just in the literal sense of 'belonging to a religion or organisation', but also of belonging to a specific, definable group, membership of which is affirmed through public practices.

In this respect we can note how, for ethnic minority groups in particular, religiosity performs significant services and functions in terms of:

Social identities: As we've suggested, one function of religious organisations for many

ethnic minority groups is that of providing a sense of homogeneity, shared purpose and, indeed, a sense of permanence for a particular group. The concept of identity implies both a sense of *self* ('who we are') and, by definition, a sense of *other* ('who we are not') that is sustained both:

- **internally**, in terms of the particular beliefs and practices of the group, and
- **externally**, by contrasting these beliefs and practices with groups who are 'not like us'.

Emotion refers to the psychosocial sense of belonging and well-being created by membership of – and acceptance within – a particular group (such as a religion). For some minority groups the emotional aspect of religious belief and practice is valued in a world that may, at various times, seem hostile and dangerous.

Power: In the type of situation just described – especially among politically and economically marginalised groups – belonging to a coherent group in which you are valued confers a sense of power and sustenance through which to face the world.

Moving on

In this section the discussion of the relationship between religious beliefs, organisations and social groups has laid the ground for the final section that explores the concept of secularisation – the question of whether or not religious beliefs, practices and affiliations are in general decline in modern societies.

5. Different definitions and explanations of the nature and extent of secularisation

At various points throughout this chapter we've touched on the question of whether or not 'religion' is in decline in modern societies. In this final section, therefore, we address the question head-on by examining the concept of 'religious decline' in terms of the different ways secularisation has been defined, measured and explained.



Preparing the ground: Defining secularisation

Secularisation is a concept that's easier to describe than it is to operationalise and explain – as **Sachs** (2004) notes: 'The origin of the word is one of the few things about it that is relatively un-muddled.' It refers to the idea that the 'influence of religion' has declined – and continues to decline – in contemporary societies. As **Swyngedouw** (1973) puts it, the concept represents a '... generic term to designate the whole process of change occurring in contemporary society, with special regard to what has traditionally been called "religion"'.



Weeding the path

The general problems surrounding the concept of secularisation can be summarised in terms of:

Measurement: Ideas like 'decline' have a certain *quantitative* substance to them, given that they involve *comparing* some feature of 'past behaviour' with the same feature of 'present behaviour'. However, for this we

WARM-UP: SECULAR EVIDENCE

Divide the class into two groups (four if the class is large). Each group should brainstorm ideas about *one* of the following for our society (we’ve given you a couple of ideas to get you started).

Once you’ve done as much as you can, each group should take it in turns to state – and discuss – the evidence they’ve identified. Once the discussion is complete, group the different ideas you’ve identified into categories (for example, those dealing with the Church as an institution, attendance patterns/levels etc.).

Evidence for/indicators of a decline in significance of religion	Evidence for/indicators of the significance of religion
Fewer people attending Christian church services	Some forms of religion (such as Evangelical Christians) seem to be flourishing
Further examples?	

need access to accurate, reliable and valid information about people’s behaviour – something can’t be taken for granted in either the past or the present. In addition, two further dimensions of measurement include:

- **what** features of religion we measure to test ‘decline’
- **how** we go about measuring such features (what, for example, counts as religious practice).

Definitions of secularisation are many and varied, which makes it difficult to identify a ‘definitive definition’. We can, however, identify some *common themes* running through the debate and a classic starting point for this is **Shiner’s** (1967) argument that secularisation – if it exists – would be manifested in areas such as:

Religious decline

The most obvious meaning of secularisation

is that religion has become less important in contemporary (usually Western) societies. There are, as you might expect, different versions of this general view, with the emphasis on either:

- **Decline**, in the sense of religion continuing to exist within broadly secular societies but relegated to the role of ‘minority interest’, much as certain sports and pastimes attract a small but highly specialised audience. The majority of pro-secularisation sociologists probably fall into this camp.
- **Disappearance**, in the sense that society becomes truly secular. Very few, if any, sociologists subscribe to this particular view however.
- **Conformity**: In this scenario, religions gradually come to lose their ‘supernatural’ preoccupations; rather than disappearing, religions ‘accommodate themselves’ with secular society, turning their attention

and ministry to looking after secular needs. The Church of England, for example, has in recent times examined areas like poverty – the ‘Faith in the City’ report (1985) was highly critical of the **Thatcher** government’s policies towards the poor.

- **Disengagement:** In this scenario, secularisation involves a progressive distancing of the institutions of secular society (government, education and so forth) from religious organisations. Religions lose their role in the public sphere (the power to either govern in their own right or to influence or dictate the direction of secular policies). Religion doesn’t disappear, as such, but is instead largely restricted to the private sphere of personal beliefs – it becomes purely a matter for individual conscience.
- **Transposition** involves the idea of ideological challenge and change, the classic example of which, in modern times, has been the rise of *scientific* forms of explanation. What was once explained in religious terms is explained, increasingly, in ways considered more plausible by secular society.



The potting shed

Identify and explain two examples of things which in the past were explained by religion but which are now more plausibly explained by science.

Desacralisation points to the idea that the social and natural worlds become

progressively ‘demystified’; in the natural world, for example, sciences like chemistry explain the world in a rational way that leaves no room for *metaphysical* (religious) explanations. Social sciences, such as sociology, meanwhile, provide explanations for individual and group development that similarly leave little or no space for religious explanations. On a political level, *desacralisation* involves the removal of religious authorities and religious laws from secular affairs.

Movement relates to the way societies develop – from the simple to the complex and the sacred to the secular. In other words, where small-scale, relatively simple and undifferentiated societies were once dominated by notions of ‘the sacred’, large-scale, complex and relatively differentiated societies place the secular at their centre.

Dimensions

Although **Shiner’s** observations are nearly 40 years old, they point the way to the subsequent development of the ‘secularisation debate’ in the sense that they help to identify three major *dimensions* of religion around which the debate has been framed:

- **Institutional:** This dimension looks at the role played by religious organisations in the general governance of (secular) society and its focus is on the power wielded by religious organisations. We can think of this dimension, in terms of **Shiner’s** categories, as relating to ideas such as *institutional disengagement*, religious *movement* and *conformity*.
- **Practical:** This dimension looks at the extent to which people practise their religious beliefs through things like

attendance at religious services or membership of religious organisations. This, in **Shiner's** terms, involves ideas about religious *decline* and the *desacralisation* of society.

- **Ideological:** The final dimension is the extent to which people hold religious beliefs – either in tandem with or separated from – religious practice. As we've seen, it's possible for people to hold strong religious beliefs without ever wanting or needing to practise such beliefs. In terms of **Shiner's** argument, this involves ideas about *disengagement* and *transposition*.

Themes and issues

Wilson (1982) echoed the above categories with his characterisation of secularisation potentially involving a number of interwoven themes and issues.

Institutional themes involved the extent to which there is a secular takeover of powers formerly exercised by religious institutions (such as definitions of crime and punishment). Alternatively, the development of the welfare state in Britain is an example of the way secular institutions might effect a shift of power and control away from religious institutions, in the sense that the state, rather than the Church, assumed responsibility for the poor.

Organisational issues involved questions of whether there was a general decline in the time and energy people devoted to religious practices and concerns and the extent to which behaviour was governed and controlled by secular, as opposed to religious, norms and values.

Ideological: **Wilson** argued an important

(individual) dimension of secularisation was whether the level of people's understanding about the natural and social world changed, moving away from a *magical* (spells and charms) or *religious* (prayer) consciousness towards a secular, rational consciousness.

Processes

Similarly, **Casanova** (1994) argues secularisation involves the study of three different processes:

- **Differentiation** involves thinking about the extent to which religious institutions become separated from secular institutions and spheres of influence.
- **Decline** examines whether or not religious beliefs have any great influence over the individual or society. In addition, we need to consider whether religious practices decline in terms of both the numbers involved and their social significance. Weddings, for example, may be seen more as secular, as opposed to religious, occasions.
- **Distance** relates to whether religion has retreated into the private sphere and, if so, whether it signals disengagement between religious ideas/practices and the secular world.

Bruce (2002) echoes the above and takes them slightly further when he argues that '... secularisation is a social condition manifest in' two different types of decline:

- **Institutional** – reflected in religious organisations having little or no involvement in areas such as government and the economy. In addition, 'the social standing of religious roles and institutions' declines as secularisation takes hold.

- **Organisational** – measured in terms of a fall in the significance of religious conduct, as covered by ideas relating to behaviour, practice and beliefs. In this respect, the general plausibility of religious ideas and practices would, if secularisation is taking place, be generally called into question.



Weeding the path

These definitions generally focus on the idea of secularisation operating at the level of institutions, practices and behaviours (as **Wilson** (1966) puts it: 'Secularisation is a process whereby religious thinking, practices and institutions lose their significance in society'). **Marshall** (1994), however, argues that the focus should be on the concept of beliefs, considered in terms of their:

Nature: Traditionally, sociologists have looked at 'religious beliefs' in terms of how they have been reflected in religious practice – to put it crudely, the number of people attending religious services. **Marshall** argues, however, that to understand the secularisation question we must take account of possible changes to the nature of religious belief. We need to consider, therefore, the 'privatisation of belief' as a measure of secularisation.

Extent relates to how widely – or narrowly – we define both religion and religious practice. For example, whether we hold *inclusive* or *exclusive* definitions of religion or see evidence of religious practice in either overt terms (such as attending ceremonies) or implicit terms (such as moral beliefs) will affect our perception of secularisation.

Intensity: Finally, we need to consider how strongly individual religious beliefs are

The potting shed

Identify and briefly explain one example of an overt religious practice and one example of an implicit religious practice.

held (both in the past and in the present). For **Marshall**, therefore, the focus of secularisation theory is that of people's 'core beliefs', expressed in terms of 'three causally related things':

- the **importance** of religion in any society
- the **number** of people who take it seriously and, most significantly
- **how seriously** people take it.

These ideas open up a range of possibilities and problems when we consider how to operationalise the concept of secularisation.



Digging deeper: Operationalising secularisation

Although it's not possible to directly measure 'religious decline', we can identify *indicators* of decline by comparing changes to institutional, organisational and individual religious behaviours and beliefs. In this respect we need to consider how we can *quantify* ideas like religious decline:

Indicators: A major question here is which indicator – among many – is most important. **Dobbelaere** and **Jagodzinski** (1995) suggest 'a *quantitative* decline in the number of people attending religious services' – but although it's possible to show that fewer people attended religious services in Britain in 2005 than they did in 1805,

does this mean secularisation has occurred?

Alternatively, we have to consider the question of whether or not it's necessary to show that all possible indicators (institutional, organisational and individual) have declined in order to conclude secularisation has taken place.

Timescale: Comparisons can turn on the timescale used. Do we, for example, pick a date from the distant past (if so, which one?) as the starting point for our comparison? Alternatively, do we sample a range of dates to see whether it's possible to arrive at an 'average view' of secularisation?

Levels of secularisation: Dobbelaere (1981) notes three basic levels that could be investigated, reflecting the institutional/organisational/individual distinction we've made previously:

- **Macro:** This examines society as a whole, with the focus on institutional processes and changes (such as changes to religious involvement in government).
- **Meso:** The organisational ('middle') level that focuses on changes in religious organisations and practices.
- **Micro:** The level where the focus is on individual religious beliefs.

Dobbelaere, while seeing these levels as 'inextricably linked', suggests the *macro* level is most significant as an indicator of secularisation, mainly because it involves behaviour that impacts on *all levels* of society.



Weeding the path

Bruce (2002) suggests that fundamental arguments over which indicators to use to operationalise secularisation means there is no longer a single 'secularisation theory', but

rather a series of theories – a problem compounded by the fact that any attempt to measure secularisation involves comparing the past with the present. This, in turn, raises practical problems of:

Reliability: On a basic level there is a lack of accurate data about people's behaviour and beliefs 'in the past', and even contemporary records, such as levels of church attendance, suffer from problems relating to who to count and when to count them. There are, for example, three areas in which data reliability about religious practice is questionable:

- **availability:** Some religions collect attendance and membership data, some do not
- **distribution:** Some organisations make this data freely available, others do not
- **counting:** Statistics are collected and counted in a variety of ways (and the way something like attendance is counted may also change over time).

Although it's not difficult – as we've seen – to quantify people's current beliefs (using methods like questionnaires and interviews), this is not true of even the recent past. As Hadden (1987) notes: 'Public opinion polling has only existed for about sixty years. Much of the archived literature is difficult to assess because different methodologies and different sampling techniques do not make the data directly comparable.'

Validity: One problem that may be overlooked when considering quantitative data is that it still needs to be *interpreted*. Even if we could be certain church attendance figures over the past 200-odd years were totally reliable (and, for the sake of argument, we could assume the figures showed a significant decline in attendance),



Growing it yourself: Counting converts?

1 In the following extracts, find examples of the following issues:

Reliability differences

- definitions
- counting techniques
- time periods.

Validity differences

- interpretations of attendance
- measurement of attendance
- accuracy of measurements.

2 Write a paragraph on each of the differences you've identified, detailing and describing how such issues relate to the measurement of secularisation. Each paragraph should have the following format:

- opening statement of the issue
- explanation of why it is a potential problem
- outline of the evidence to support your argument
- brief conclusion about how your argument relates to secularisation.

Parishes attack Church's 'greed and arrogance': Jonathan Petre

Source: www.telegraph.co.uk, 2 July 2000

There was also a feeling among parishes . . . that 'the Church of England has not been entirely honest about declining congregations'. Officials suspended the Sunday church attendance statistics for two years, saying they did not fairly reflect the changing patterns of worship. When they were finally released they showed the figure had fallen below a million for the first time, which officials said was an underestimate.

Counting sheep: Paddy Benson

Source: www.tfh.org.uk

Newspaper headlines would have us believe that Christianity is a spent force in this country and our days of influence, or even existence, are numbered. However, this survey of church attendance statistics shows that the announcement of our demise may be premature. Regular weekly numbers are declining but there are also a growing number of . . . 'casual attendees'. Over a two-month period, typically half of the total congregation may only come on a single Sunday. We need to recognise that these people make up a substantial part of our flock.

Vital statistics 2002: Stephen Cottrell and Tim Sledge

Source: www.evangelism.uk.net

Cottrell and Sledge helped organise detailed registers of all people attending church over an eight-week period in a Deanery in Wakefield Diocese . . . the actual attendance was 37% higher than the average attendance – people's pattern of attendance varied. Across a whole Deanery, only 144 people attended church on each of the eight Sundays. Across the Deanery over eight Sundays there were 1776 one-off attendees.

If the figures for total regular attendance are taken (rather than Average Sunday Attendance) is church growing? Or, what about those who cannot or will not attend on Sunday (work, leisure, sports, family, shopping) – are there ways in which they can embrace Christian community and worship at other times or in other ways?

a validity problem remains – namely the assumption that people in the past and the present attended religious services for the same reason. Thus, it's possible for the same data to demonstrate two mutually exclusive things:

- **Decline:** An absolute decline in the number of people attending services could be taken as evidence of secularisation (at least in relation to organisational practice). **Bruce** (2001), in his analysis of pre-industrial Britain, and **McLeod's** (1993) research into Victorian Britain both suggest religious attendance was significantly higher in the past than it is in the present.
- **Increase:** **Coleman** (1980) argues 'Victorian England, and in particular its cities, experienced a breakdown of religious practice and what amounted to a secularisation of social consciousness and behaviour'. In other words, although religious attendance may have been significantly higher in the past, the *quality* of present-day attendance is significantly greater – people nowadays, it could be argued, show greater levels of religiosity because attendance has been stripped of many of its earlier, non-religious attributes (compulsion, entertainment, leisure and so forth).



Weeding the path

Thus far we've looked at some 'practical problems' of methodology, but this isn't the only dimension we need to consider. The secularisation debate involves two other types of question.

Ontological questions refer to different basic groups of beliefs – those broadly 'pro'

and 'anti' the secularisation thesis in this context. Where a writer stands in relation to this debate conditions how they interpret data; **Bruce** (2002), for example, is broadly pro-secularisation, whereas **Finke** and **Stark** (2004) (anti-secularisation) dispute **Bruce's** interpretation of the *same* evidence.

Epistemological: This type of problem revolves around two ideas: what we claim to know and the general proof we will accept in support of this claim. Consideration of this problem leads us, therefore, into some slightly murkier waters when we consider a range of 'operational problems'.

Problems

Definitions: The most obvious *epistemological* problem here is how to decide which of the many competing definitions to accept as definitive for measurement purposes. Although there is a general agreement that issues like institutional, practical and ideological decline are significant, there is little agreement about which of these areas (if any) are *most* significant. In epistemological terms, therefore, the 'problem of operationalisation' turns not so much on the existence of different definitions, but on different forms of:

Interpretation: In other words, even where a general agreement exists over what needs to be studied, tested or measured, there is little or no agreement over the meaning and significance of changes in areas such as religious practice. As **Taylor** (2000) argues, many interpretations of secularisation 'depend largely on church attendance statistics', and their steady decline '... is still read as conclusive evidence' of the decline of religious practice and the privatisation of religious belief 'in a vicious spiral of inevitable demise'.

Alternatively, **Glasner** (1977) has observed: ‘The assumption is that, since a common usage definition of Christianity, for example, is concerned with Church attendance, membership and the presence of rites of passage, these constitute significant elements of a definition of religion and that any move away from this institutional participation involves religious decline.’

Controversies

Secularisation theory, in this respect, has been dogged by controversies of interpretation leading some, such as **Spickard** (2003), to question whether it’s possible to measure secularisation empirically. **Spickard**, from a broadly postmodernist position, rejects the idea we can see secularisation as a ‘paradigm, theory or any other scientific-sounding word’; instead, he argues, we should view it as:

Narrative because, he suggests, ‘scholars . . . are led by their imaginations. Not that they ignore data . . . But isolated data do not make sense all by themselves. No, data make sense only when they are imbedded in a story that gives them meaning’.

To support this argument he notes how the same ‘secularisation data’ can have different meanings, depending on the interpretation of a particular observer. Thus: ‘The membership declines of American mainline Protestant denominations, for example, can be interpreted as the result of growing secularisation or as the result of increased fundamentalism . . . or as a sign of growing religious individualism, or as the result of these denominations’ failure to deliver a religious product that appeals to American consumers. Or, it can be all of these . . .’

At the centre of this overall debate, therefore, is not the extent or quality of specific forms of secularisation data, but rather the idea that ‘data alone do not tell us which of these is the “correct” story. Getting from data to narrative requires an imaginative leap: the discernment of a pattern that makes various data hang together. Most scholarly conflicts arise from different leaps, not from different facts’.



Preparing the ground: Explaining secularisation

In general terms, the ‘secularisation debate’ is broadly organised around three basic positions

- **Pro-secularisation:** Religion has declined in significance – from the past, when it dominated all aspects of political, economic and cultural life, to the present where its influence is marginal to the first two ideas and increasingly marginal to the third.
- **Anti-secularisation** theorists dispute this interpretation, from a variety of positions:
 - **Overstatement:** The influence of religious organisations and beliefs in the past has been *overstated* and the contribution made by religion to contemporary societies *understated*.
 - **Religious influence** in modern societies is still strong. It provides, for example, the basic rationale for moral codes underpinning political life and takes the lead in arguing for *ethical* practices to inform economic life. There is also a strong undercurrent of individual religious beliefs even in secular societies.

- **Evolution:** Religion has changed, rather than ‘declined’ in influence. People are, for example, less likely to follow the overt practices common in the past because these served functions that are either no longer needed or are performed by other institutions.
- **Post-secularisation** theories cover a range of positions, a number of which acknowledge both the previous positions – ‘pro-secularisation’ in the sense of seeing a decline in the influence of religion in *some areas* of social life (such as government and economic activity), but ‘anti-secularisation’ in the sense that religion still makes significant contributions to other areas of social life (culture, personal morality, beliefs and so forth). **Yip** (2002) characterises this general position as being one where religion is seen to be ‘... in a constant state of transformation (and persistence)’.

Having broadly sketched these three basic positions, we can look at each in a little more depth.

Pro-secularisation

Crockett and **Voas** (2004) argue that *social change* and, in particular, the gradual transformation of *pre-modern* society into *modern* society creates a situation where ‘the social significance of religion, and religious participation as a result, declines as modernity advances’, due mainly to three things:

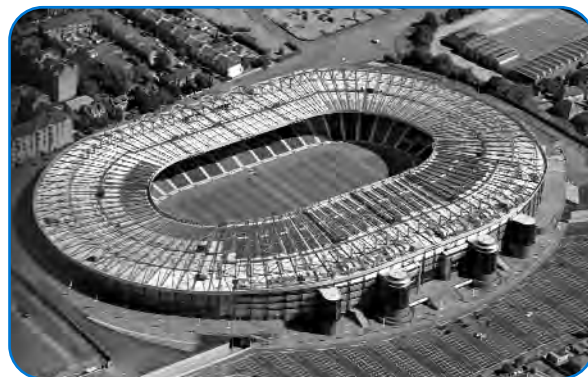
- **Social transitions** – from small-scale communities, where informal social controls held sway over people’s lives, to large-scale, complex societies in which people could both develop a range of ideas

and behaviours and exercise choice over what they believed and how they behaved.

- **Knowledge** – in particular the ‘increasing sense of mastery over fate’ that came with the development of science-based knowledge.
- **Religious pluralism:** As people developed a more individualistic outlook, their choices of behaviour and belief were (and indeed remain) reflected in different forms of religious and non-religious belief.

Modernisation, Crockett and Voas argue, undermines the ‘plausibility of any single religion’, leading to a general decline in religious influence. This follows because *religious diversity* means religious organisations can no longer present a ‘united ideological front’ to the world – their ability to impose religious discipline and sanctions, influence social and economic policies or challenge scientific rationalism is, therefore, seriously weakened.

Hadden (2001) argues that although early sociological theorists (such as **Marx** and **Weber**) tended to view *modernisation* as ‘impacting the totality of human culture’ (that is, affecting all areas of society



Are football grounds like Hampden Park, Glasgow, the ‘new cathedrals’ of the twenty-first century?

equally), we can best understand secularisation by thinking in terms of its impact on three main dimensions of behaviour in which the influence of religion is either seriously weakened or in general decline:

- **Cognitive** dimensions focus on how information and beliefs are organised. People in *modern society* think very differently about the nature of god, the social and natural worlds and the like, to people in *pre-modern society*. From this perspective, the plausibility of religious explanations declines inexorably.
- **Institutional** dimensions: Increasing institutional development and differentiation in the modern world results in many of the functions performed by religion in pre-modern society being taken over by secular institutions. As **Hadden** argues: 'Corporate structures and the secular political state appear as the locus ['centre'] of power and authority in the modern world.'
- **Behavioural** dimensions: Religious behaviour retreats from the public to the private sphere.

Evidence

For *pro-secularisation* theorists, therefore, religious decline is evidenced in terms of:

- **Participation:** In the UK there has been a long-term decline in attendance since the nineteenth century (with a particularly sharp decline since the 1950s).
- **Membership:** A minority (around 10%) of the general population are, for example, members of the Church of England.

- **Privatised beliefs:** 'Religion' is relegated to ad hoc beliefs about 'God' and 'Heaven' that have little or no meaning outside of 'personal crises' (such as illness and ill health).
- **Loss of functions,** such as the ability to provide social cohesion or the monopoly of knowledge in society.

Bruce (2001) suggests further reasons for believing that secularisation has been – and continues to be – a defining movement in *Western Europe*:

- **Clergy:** Over the past 100 years in the UK – a period when the general population has doubled – the number of full-time, professional clergy has declined by 25%.
- **Rites of passage:** The trend here, in relation to areas such as baptisms, confirmations and weddings, is one of decline. **Brierley** (1999) notes: 'In 1900, 67% of weddings in England were celebrated in an Anglican church; in 2000, it was 20%.'

New Religious Movements are frequently cited as evidence of both religious:

- **transformation** – people expressing their religiosity in non-traditional ways – and
- **revitalisation** – a growth area in terms of numbers.

However, **Bruce** argues that if NRMs were 'religious compensators' we should have seen 'some signs of vigorous religious growth'. This hasn't happened since 'the new religious movements of the 1970s are numerically all but irrelevant'.

Belief: Although 'believing without belonging' is sometimes seen as evidence

against secularisation, **Bruce** argues the evidence for a general decline in religious beliefs is strong – it simply ‘lags behind’ the decline in religious practice.

Gill et al. (1998), in their analysis of British survey data over the past 70 years, conclude: ‘The results show an increase in general scepticism about the existence of God, the related erosion of dominant, traditional Christian beliefs, and the persistence of non-traditional beliefs.’



Weeding the path

The relationship just suggested between modernity and secularisation has, in recent times, been challenged. **Brown** (2001) argues that ‘modernity’ is too broad an explanation for secularisation within Christianity and that, in its place, we should understand changes in Christianity based around:

Gender and, in particular, *female religiosity*. **Brown’s** research, for example, shows that from the late eighteenth century, the Christian Church in Britain was predominantly supported and maintained by *women*. The post-1945 decline in church attendance is explained by changes in female lives and self-perceptions, which resulted in a questioning of both religious practice and beliefs as the lives and experiences of this social group changed. In other words, any ‘decline in religiosity’ could be explained in terms of ‘a remarkably sudden and culturally violent event’ in the shape of feminism.

Anti-secularisation

Although **Hadden** (2001) notes, ‘secularization theory was the dominant theoretical view of religion in the modern

world for most of the 20th century’, over the past 30 years, a number of writers, especially – but not exclusively – in the USA, have challenged the notion of secularisation itself, in terms of both empirical and interpretive evidence.

Empirical evidence: **Warner** (1993) proposed a reassessment of traditional secularisation theory based on the fact that ‘... the proportion of the population enrolled in churches grew hugely throughout the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, which, by any measure, were times of rapid modernization’; and Peter **Berger** (1999) – significantly, given his earlier support for secularisation theory – has noted that declining congregations in Western Europe was not a trend replicated in the USA. **Kelley** (1972) added a controversial idea into the general mix when he argued that secularisation, where it had occurred, was the result *not* of modernity and rationality but rather the outcome of:

Accommodations made by religious organisations to the secular world. In other words, religious practice *declined* only in organisations that were:

- **image conscious** – appealing to the widest range of people
- **democratic** in their internal affairs
- **responsive** to people’s needs
- **relativistic** in terms of their teaching and morality.

Religious growth, according to **Kelley**, was found in religious organisations that offered their adherents a set of basic ideas and principles that were:

- traditional
- autocratic

- patriarchal
- morally absolute.

Although not empirically convincing – **Roozen** (1996), for example, has linked increases in religious attendance to *demographic factors* such as the post-war ‘Baby Boom’ (more people in a population, allied to the elderly being more religious, means a (temporary) increase in religiosity) – **Kelley** introduced a significant element into the discussion of secularisation, namely the idea that religious practice has a:

Consumer orientation – the idea that people will ‘buy into’ things they find attractive and useful. This relatively simple idea, however, opened the door to a different way of approaching the secularisation debate by thinking about religion as both a:

- **cultural institution**, in terms of propagating values, and an
- **economic organisation** – one that was actively engaged in ‘selling religion’ and, in consequence, could be studied in a similar fashion to non-religious business organisations.

Theory

The idea of analysing religion in this way developed, in the 1990s, into a specific form of theory related to:

Interpretive evidence: The most influential and wide-reaching current forms of anti-secularisation analysis are based around:

Religious economy theory (and its variations *rational choice/supply-side* theory): Rather than deny ‘secularisation theory’, as such, this theory suggests secularisation is *inadequate* as a theory for explaining

developments in contemporary (*postmodern*) society. The basic ideas underpinning a theory made popular by writers like **Iannaccone** (1994) and **Stark and Finke** (2000, 2004) are:

- **Religious pluralism** – encourages organisations to compete for ‘customers’ in the religious marketplace.
- **Competition** – encourages both *innovation* (religious organisations have to find new ways to appeal to customers) and *reinvigoration* (organisations are continually reinventing both themselves and their services as a way of ‘keeping ahead of the competition’).
- **Monopolies:** In societies where one religious organisation has a ‘monopoly of belief’ (such as, for example, in Britain where the Church of England is the ‘official state religion’), competition is discouraged (new religious organisations find it difficult to break into the religious market) and state religions become ‘lazy’ (they take their customers for granted). In other words, they stop being *innovative* in the face of declining congregations and focus their efforts on retaining their monopoly position rather than finding new ways to attract adherents.
- **Schisms** or **sectarian** movements represent a ‘natural’ form of market adjustment – breaking up moribund, stagnating organisations and breathing new competitive life into the marketplace.
- **NRMs:** Their role takes two basic forms. First, they offer ‘non-mainstream’ alternatives to potential customers; second, they provide a radical alternative

to traditional religious organisations. Their ‘innovative methods’ also serve as testing grounds for ideas that can subsequently be exploited by mainstream religions (as with evangelical movements within the Church of England).

Crockett and Voas (2004) note the use of economic concepts like:

- **Supply and demand** – religious organisations, if they are to survive and prosper, have to meet the (changing) demands of their actual and potential customers – and
- **Rational choice:** People are attracted to (or turned off by) religious organisations on a cost/benefit basis. If the perceived benefits of joining outweigh the costs, then an individual will join; if they do not, they won’t. The task of religious organisations, therefore, is to orientate themselves towards making the benefits of membership more attractive than the costs.



Weeding the path

This ‘theory of *resacralisation*’ has caused a great deal of controversy and argument.

Proponents argue it explains things like the growth of fundamentalist religious movements (Christian and Islamic, for example), as well as the fact that, as **Greeley and Jagodzinski (1997)** note, in many countries around the world religious beliefs and practices are, at worst, not declining, and, at best, flourishing.

Antagonists, however, point to a number of problems. **Crockett and Voas (2004)** note that in the UK ‘British religious markets have become more competitive’ through the influence of ethnic groups, but there has

been little or no corresponding rise in overall religious practice or belief. **Norris and Inglehart’s (2004)** research goes further to argue that in Europe, countries with the *closest* links between Church and State have the highest levels of practice (contrary to supply-side theories).

Given the differences between both sides of this particular argument, you may be forgiven for thinking that the ‘secularisation thesis’ is one bound up in the value systems of different sociologists – either you believe secularisation is occurring or you don’t. There are, however, possible ways out of this theoretical impasse we can explore briefly in the final part of this section.



Digging deeper: Explaining (post-) secularisation

The work we’ve just done suggests two things:

Non-linearity: Secularisation is not a simple, linear process (a movement from ‘the religious’ to ‘the secular’).

Dimensions: The institutional, organisational and individual dimensions of religion are interconnected. For example:

- **Pro-secularisation** theory takes a ‘top-down’ approach, whereby institutions become secularised, followed by organisational practices and, eventually, individual beliefs.
- **Anti-secularisation** theory effectively reverses this process, with individuals seen as being ‘prone to religion’; in other words, religion is a cultural universal serving some form of human need (think in terms of something like **Maslow’s (1943)** ‘hierarchy of need’, for example, where the ‘safety’ people derive from religion is a

significant *psychological* need). In situations where people are able to express their religiosity, religious organisations exist and develop and, in turn, this behaviour spreads throughout political and economic life. A classic example, here, might be contemporary US society.

Post-secularisation

This theory attempts to resolve this argument by redefining secularisation and simultaneously severing the (causal) links between different dimensions. **Phillips** (2004) argues that this position is based initially around the idea of:

Differentiation: Social structures and institutions that were, at one time, heavily under the influence of – or, in some instances, controlled by – religious organisations and ideas become secularised. In other words, a *separation* between religious and non-religious institutions occurs in modern societies. However, the general thrust and extent of secularising tendencies is limited to institutions and practices. In other words, *post-secularisation* theory argues that differentiation also involves a:

Separation between social structures and individual sociologies. This makes it possible to chart the secularisation of two dimensions of religiosity (social institutions and religious organisations/practice) by arguing that a third dimension (individual beliefs) should be left out of the equation, for reasons relating to:

Social actions: The question of whether, in an institutionally secularised society, people hold religious-type beliefs is considered relatively unimportant. These beliefs are significant only if they inform people's general social actions; in other

words, it's not the fact of people saying they believe in such ideas as 'God' that's significant; rather, it's what they do – or fail to do – on the basis of such beliefs that is sociologically significant. If, for example, religious beliefs are so strongly held that they form the basis for *social action* – such as the creation of, and active involvement in, political parties that advocate strict religious laws and observances – then this becomes a matter that must be addressed by secularisation theory. However, in such a situation the question of 'individual beliefs' is transformed into a *structural question* (relating to areas such as group identities, how and why they are created and the functions they perform), not an 'individual question', and hence becomes a matter for study and explanation.

If, however, religious beliefs are 'simply' matters of *personal preference* that have little or no impact on social structures, then for post-secularisation theory they are effectively considered irrelevant. **Casanova** (1994) notes that secularisation, under these terms, involves the liberation of secular spheres (politics, economics, etc.) from the influence of religious organisations, values and norms – it does not necessarily involve the disappearance of personal religious beliefs. Similarly, **Tschannen** (1994) suggests that, for post-secularisation theory, the main object of study is the changing position of religion, as an institution, in society; whether or not people 'believe' or 'disbelieve' religious ideas on a personal basis is conceptually unimportant – or, as **Sommerville** (1998) argues, institutional differentiation is not something that 'leads to secularisation. It is secularisation'.

Phillips (2004) characterises this general position as one where 'post-secularization is

an attempt to lift the baby of differentiation from the bathwater of predicted declines in personal religiousness' – an idea that leads us to consider briefly what **Crockett** and **Voas** (2004) note as an interesting development in post-secularisation theory.

Social capital

The **Putnam Thesis**: In his influential article (and book) *Bowling Alone* (2000), **Putnam** reworks the concept of 'believing without belonging' (and, if we're being picky, **Bourdieu's** concept of *cultural capital*) to interesting effect. His basic argument is that:

Social capital refers to the extent to which individuals are connected. In other words, it represents the idea of:

- **social networks** and, most significantly, the extent to which people:
- **participate** in social/communal activities and trust each other.

Social capital, therefore, refers to what **Durkheim** (in another context) referred to as the '*social glue*' that binds people together as a *society* (rather than as a collection of isolated individuals) – the roles, values, norms and so forth developed to facilitate communal living. More technically, **Cohen** and **Prusak** (2001) suggest that social capital '... consists of the stock of active connections among people: the trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviours that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible'.

Modernity

The basic idea here is that the 'decline of religion' is related to *modernity*, as traditional

secularisation theorists argue. However, more specifically, any *decline* in religious *participation* is linked to wider questions of social participation across all social groups (such as trade unions, political parties and the like). The *secularisation of participation*, therefore, is not simply a question of religious transformation, but one of a general social transformation.

In other words, we can explain the relative decline in religious participation in terms of a general 'process of withdrawal from the public sphere' in modern societies – hence **Putnam's** use of the *Bowling Alone* metaphor to describe how the traditionally social activity of ten-pin bowling in US society has, in his view, been transformed into an individual activity. This metaphor has, it should be noted, been challenged in a variety of ways, especially by **Crockett** and **Voas'** (2004) observation that 'unlike bowling, people are not "praying alone"'.

The implication of this idea (one shared, with some crucial differences, by **Davie**, 2002) is that post-secularisation theorists do not need to account for any decline – or increase – in religious practice/participation in *religious* terms (the activities of religious organisations, the influence of secular ideas and so forth). Rather – and somewhat counter-intuitively perhaps – it can be explained in terms of *social capital* and a decline in general social cohesion (measured in various ways, such as through participation rates in voluntary work and the like).

Problems

Putnam's (2000) thesis is not, of course, without its critics. Both **Turner** (2001) and **Wuthnow** (2002) have questioned the

extent to which social capital in the USA, for example, has declined. **Wuthnow** argues: ‘There has been some decline in social capital in the United States over the past two or three decades; however, evidence does not indicate that social capital has declined drastically or to radically low levels, nor does it show that social capital of all kinds has declined.’ In addition, questions remain over the extent to which the apparent revival in religious participation in some parts of the USA and in some religious organisations can be related to different levels of social capital – but this is probably an area that requires further investigation rather than being something that necessarily falsifies the general argument.

Beyond secularisation

To conclude we can note a couple of further ideas about the secularisation debate. First, referring to both the secularisation thesis and the nature and extent of religiosity, **Harper and LeBeau (1999)** note: ‘The evidence is pervasive and clear; religion has disappeared nowhere but changed everywhere’ – and this, as far as we’re concerned, perhaps, is part of the problem. Both religion and secularisation frequently have different:

- definitions
- measurements
- interpretations.

For this reason, therefore, rather than try to come to firm conclusions about the secularisation thesis, it might be useful to note **Spickard’s (2003)** observation that the sociology of religion generally consists of six main *narratives*:

- **Secularisation:** The ‘decline and loss of influence’ story, backed up to some extent by evidence relating to ‘European religion (and its decline), the relative decline of American mainline churches, and a biographic loss of religiosity on the part of many intellectuals...’
- **Fundamentalisms:** The idea, mainly perpetuated through the media, that religion is becoming ‘increasingly Fundamentalist – A resurgent Islam certainly makes this story plausible. So does the intrusion of American right-wing religion into national politics. But these are only two views’.
- **Reorganisation** suggests the shape of religious organisations is changing, rather than declining or becoming more fundamentalist. The phenomenon of ‘cell churches’ (where people meet in small groups in each other’s houses rather than in a church) is an example here.
- **Individualisation** sees religion as increasingly ‘a matter of personal choice’ – not only in terms of things like worship and practice, but also in terms of a ‘pick-and-mix’ approach to religions (combining various ideas and philosophies to create personalised forms of belief). Such individualisation evolves to satisfy religious yearnings in situations where individuals ‘can no longer rely on social institutions’.
- **Religious markets:** This story, as we’ve seen, relates to a resurgent anti-secularisation message that involves a plurality of organisations servicing a range of religious needs.

- **Globalisation:** In a sense, a catch-all type of story that sees the ease of communication coupled with economic and cultural globalisation contributing to

the rise – and decline – of religious organisations, fundamentalism and the like around the globe.

Discussion point: Operationalisation

Read the following parable (in which you may, incidentally, be able to spot examples of different religious/secularisation narratives). What difficulties does the parable illustrate relating to how we can define and operationalise the concepts of:

- religion?
- secularisation?

Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the jungle were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, 'Some gardener must tend this plot.' The other disagrees: 'There is no gardener.' So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. 'But perhaps he is an invisible gardener.' So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds (they remember how H. G. Wells's 'Invisible Man' could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen). But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give a cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. 'But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.' At last the Sceptic despairs. 'But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?'

Source: Antony Flew (1971)

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