

**Introduction.**

- As far as it is possible to know, given an incomplete knowledge of human history, some form of religious experience or activity has been common to all societies. This is not to say that all types of religious activity take the same form, since it is evident that we live in a world where Christianity (in its various forms) exists alongside Hinduism, Judaism, Islam and so forth.
- However, the fact that religion seems to have continually played an important role in every known society should sensitise us to the idea that religion serves some sort of purpose and it is the various sociological explanations of this purpose that concerns us in this section of the syllabus.
- In this section of the course, however, we are not so much concerned with the **variety** of different religious forms that exist today and have existed in the past (we will consider these at a more appropriate point). Here, our concern is with explanations for the existence, persistence and decline of religions. Our concern, therefore, is with an understanding of the **social purpose** of religion. That is:
  - Why people believe in "gods", "spirits" and "supernatural beings" and
  - The reasons for the existence of religious beliefs and practices.
- Sociologically, we are not concerned with the question of whether or not "god" (or "gods") exists, since this is not a question that sociology is equipped to answer. Rather, the sociological objective is to try to provide an answer the question "what does religion do for the individual and society", rather than to make judgements about the rationality or otherwise of religious beliefs.
- When we look at theories of religion, therefore, the focus of interest is mainly on the way religious behaviour differs between and within societies and, most importantly, the consequences for social interaction of religious activity and organisation.
- Bearing the above in mind, therefore, we can start to look at sociological explanations of religious behaviour put-forward by various writers. Although what follows adopts a rough **perspective** theme (in order to convey the flavour of what different theorists have argued), it needs to be remembered that writers supposedly working within the "same" theoretical perspective may have very different views about the nature of religious behaviour. As always, sociological perspectives should be seen more as convenient ways of teaching the subject than as a hard-and-fast way of categorising sociologists...

## Issue: How Do Functionalists Explain Religious Belief and Practice?

### 1. WHAT theories / concepts might explain this idea [Knowledge]?

- Functionalists use a range of concepts to explain religion. These include:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Social Institutions.</b></li> <li>• <b>Institutional (Structural) Differentiation.</b></li> <li>• <b>Social system / Cultural Sub-system.</b></li> <li>• <b>Social Integration.</b></li> <li>• <b>Social solidarity.</b></li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Collective consciousness.</b></li> <li>• <b>Sacred / Profane.</b></li> <li>• <b>Manifest and Latent Functions.</b></li> <li>• <b>Central Value system.</b></li> <li>• <b>Structural imperative.</b></li> <li>• <b>Civil religions.</b></li> <li>• <b>Secularisation.</b></li> </ul> |
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### 2. WHY are these theories / concepts significant [Interpretation]?

- Functionalist sociologists focus their attention on the nature of **institutional relationships** in society. This **Structuralist** perspective (**Functionalism**) concentrates on the various ways individual behaviour results from the nature of institutional relationships in society. **Social action** is a **reaction** to the various forms of **social stimulation** that an individual is subjected to as part of the process of living in a particular society.

### 3. HOW is this theory / concept significant [Application]?

- According to **Parsons**, for example, all **institutions** in society (family, work, education, religion and so forth) have a particular set of **functions** (economic institutions, for example, develop to meet the requirements of social survival).
- In addition, from a Functionalist perspective we can group various **related institutions** into what **Parsons** calls **four related functional sub-systems**:

~~**An economic sub-system** – various institutions that develop to ensure human survival.~~

**A political sub-system** - various institutions (such as government, legal systems and so forth) that develop to regulate political activity.

**A kinship sub-system** - various institutions (the most important of which is the family) that develop to socialise the individual into society.

**A cultural sub-system** - various institutions (such as religion, education, the media) that develop as a way of giving people a sense of belonging to a particular society.

It is this latter sub-system - the cultural - that is the main focus of our attention here, mainly because it is into this group that religion falls.

- Cultural institutions, from a Functionalist perspective, develop to create and maintain of a sense of order and continuity in society. Their main **function** is to provide the individual with a set of **meanings** (values, for example) that help him / her to make sense of society. Religions, as cultural institutions serve to originate new ideas and categories of thought and to reaffirm existing values.

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- Because societies do not have an **empirical existence** (they cannot be physically sensed - seen, touched, tasted, heard or smelt), people have to be encouraged to **feel** that they belong to a society; they need to be integrated into society. One way this is achieved is by "making society real" to people. By creating a system of **common values**, people see themselves as having things in common and this helps to develop **social cohesion** (a sense of belonging to a society).
- Religion is a very important source of **cohesion** and **integration** in society, since it can provide people with such things as:
  - Common values (a belief in some form of god),
  - Common experiences (communal ceremonies, for example),
  - Common interpretations (the world created by God, for example).
- In very simple, **relatively undifferentiated** (that is, a society with very few institutions that are, therefore, multifunctional), **pre-industrial societies**, the role of religion is likely to be very important since it will be the only institution that can perform the functions of social **cohesion and integration**.
- Educational and media institutions only develop in complex societies. Educational institutions, for example, develop to serve the needs of a complex form of economic organisation, whereas a mass media develops, when the technology is available, in a society that can no longer communicate simply by word of mouth. Religion develops in all known human societies because:
- If people need to be given a sense of belonging to society (having something in common with their fellow human beings) - a **functional imperative** if society is to exist - it is not surprising that religious institutions start to develop as the best initial means of providing a sense of social belonging and cohesion.
- This follows precisely because of the essential nature of religion, namely the worship (veneration) of something (a God or Gods) that is more powerful than and superior to mere mortals, lends itself to these functions.
- God(s), therefore, represents a **symbol** about which everyone can more or less agree and, by so doing, start to develop common values and beliefs (what **Parsons**, for example, calls a **central value system** in society).
- We can develop the above ideas by looking at a number of Functionalist writers concerned with the explanation religious organisation and practice..

**Emile Durkheim** ("The Elementary Forms of Religious Life", 1912).

- **Durkheim** was one of the first Functionalist sociologists to write at length about the **role of religion** in society. The reference to the "elementary forms" of religious life means a concern with the basic, fundamental, aspects of all forms of religion and it is here that we find the basis for Durkheim's analysis and understanding of the development and role of religion in any society.
- For **Durkheim**, any analysis of the role of religious practice had to be formulated in terms of the **social purpose or function** of religious activity (in simple terms, the analysis of what religion does for the individual and, most importantly, society).
- In this respect, he was primarily concerned with understanding religion in terms of the way it served an integrating function in any society, rather than with an analysis of specific differences in religious practice. As he noted ("On the Future of Religion"):

"There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which make its unity and personality...this moral remaking cannot be achieved except by the means of reunions, assemblies and meetings where the individuals, being closely united to one another, reaffirm in common their common sentiments".

- Some of the key themes in Durkheim's analysis of religion include:
  - Religion as an **integrating force** in society (a means of ensuring that people felt they belonged to a society. A feeling of having something in common with others).
  - The need for periodic, **collective**, expressions of **social commitment** and **social solidarity** (people had to demonstrate, to both themselves and others, this sense of belonging to society. This was achieved through meeting in a common cause).
  - The need for individuals to understand their place in society in terms of **collective** relationships and responsibilities (people had to be made to understand the importance of their social relationships for the continuation of social life).
  - Religion as an affirmation of **common values, beliefs, ideals** and so forth (a way of providing people with ideas they could hold in common).
  - Society as theoretically separate from the actions of particular individuals (society seen as having some kind of existence of its own. One that can be separated from the individuals in that society).
  - The existence of a **collective consciousness** that needs regular reinforcement (the idea that society has an overall sense of will and purpose; one that is separate from the will of individuals in that society).
  - Durkheim wanted to explain the purpose of religion for the individual and society. He wanted to show how the fact that religions exist in all known societies is related to problems of **social integration** and **solidarity**.
  - Societies consist of individuals with their own individual consciousness, yet in order to exist as individuals we have to bond with others to create a sense of

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society. Durkheim used the fact that in any form of religious belief there is a distinction to be made between the **sacred** (special symbols and ceremonies involved in overtly religious activity and the **profane** (everyday ("non-sacred") life as it is separated from religious activity).

- This distinction in all religions between the sacred (or special) and the profane (or everyday) was significant because Durkheim could relate it to the distinction between the individual and society. In this respect, the **sacred symbolises society** whilst the **profane symbolises the individual**.
- Thus, in worshipping the sacred (a **manifest function** of religious activity), people were also - more importantly - worshipping society (a **latent function** of religious activity). Just as the sacred is more important than the profane, so too is society more important than the individual - it is something that has to be venerated and continually reaffirmed as special if order and continuity is to be maintained.
- In basic terms, therefore, by worshipping God(s) people were, in reality, worshipping society. In metaphorical terms, for "God" read "Society".
- For Durkheim the **primary function** of religion was the **celebration of society**. It served the social purpose of both specifying the relationship of one individual to all others ("society") and, most importantly, underscoring the idea that society is more powerful and more significant than the individual.

In this respect, it is not accidental that religions involve:

- a. The distinction between the sacred and the profane (this represents the distinction between individual (profane) and society (sacred)).
  - b. Collective ceremonies. By meeting in common practice, people effectively reinforced their collective identity.
- Thus, Durkheim argued that in taking the individual out of the "everyday" (profane) world, the celebration of a "higher force" expresses the influence of the collective over the individual. Such celebrations, as we have just seen, are to be found in all areas of social life (not just the religious) and their function is to reaffirm group solidarity - especially, but not always necessarily, in times of change, social uncertainty and crisis.
  - Durkheim used an **inclusive** definition of religion because he looked at "religion" in terms of the functions it performed rather than in terms of what it actually is. Given his emphasis upon the function of religion as an **integrating force**, he argued that, in modern societies:
    - The influence of **manifestly religious** forms of belief and behaviour (for example, worship in a Church) tends to **decline**.
    - Different forms of ceremony may replace religion in everyday life.
  - Thus, as we have seen, what is stressed here is that the **function of ceremonies** (the need for **collective reaffirmation of group solidarity**) is their most significant aspect, rather than the specific form they take. In Functionalist terms,

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therefore, what is important is the **latent functions** of religion rather than the **manifest** form through which these functions are expressed.

- In **pre-modern societies** these functions are performed by religion in the absence of other ideologies and cultural institutions.
- In **modern societies**, scientific ideologies arise to question the nature of religious truth and certainty. In addition, the latent functions performed exclusively by religion in pre-modern societies can be performed by more **secular** cultural forms (education, the mass media and so forth).
- Thus, Durkheim's interpretation is based upon the assumption that for society to exist, certain latent functions have to be performed. All societies, for example, need to develop mechanisms that foster social solidarity. Whether these functions are carried-out by organised religions or by other cultural institutions (what Functionalists tend to call "**civil religions**") appears to be of little consequence. In modern societies the mechanisms that exist to promote social integration and social solidarity simply take a different form.
- Shared values can only be upheld by constant, collective, repetition. Without this collective activity, **central value systems** would cease to exist. This need for reaffirmation has to find its expression in some form of collective ritual and it is clear that, in small-scale societies the mechanism of collective ritual is perfectly served by religious belief and experience. Religion exists in all societies because it represents a rational solution to the problem of social integration and solidarity (but only until more rational solutions develop).
- The **structural imperative** for the constant reaffirmation of central values means that people must devise means of expressing group solidarity (or society will collapse). Collective ceremonies arise to meet this imperative (or social need). In societies where scientific forms of explanation are underdeveloped (such societies cannot provide scientific explanations for crop failures, disease, etc.) "mystical" or religious explanations are used to fill the knowledge gap.
- As scientific knowledge develops, the content of religious ceremonies loses some of its significance, but the structural imperative remains - therefore, new forms of collective ceremony arise to fulfil this social imperative.
- Religious ceremony - based upon hundreds of years of collective observation persists (as a form of tradition) - but is gradually replaced in the collective consciousness by other forms of collective ceremony.

#### 4. BUT what criticisms have there been of this idea [Evaluation]?

- There seems to be a certain plausibility in Durkheim's argument that just as society needs to be collectively reaffirmed from time to time, so too does the sacred aspect of religion. However, we also need to be aware that there is a kind of **circular argument** involved here (sometimes referred-to as a **tautology**) and this represents an initial point of criticism of Durkheim's argument.

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- For Durkheim, the collective affirmation of the sacred functioned to draw people together (to promote integration and social solidarity). It existed to meet the (cultural) needs of the people involved. However, in order for religion to have this function, society must exist prior to its establishment. Thus, we have a peculiar form of reasoning in which society needs to develop cultural expressions of solidarity, whilst these expressions function to create society...
- Anthropologists have criticised Durkheim for his incomplete knowledge of religious practice and his reliance on secondary sources (he did not observe personally the religious practices about which he wrote, for example).
- Durkheim - while justified in seeing the integrating aspects of religion - is not justified in seeing it as the "celebration of society". To view it in this way neglects the ideological content of religion; that is, it may represent not just a means of social control, but one that serves the interests of the powerful.
- By stressing the integrating aspects of religion (religious practice as the basis for social solidarity, conformity to group values, etc.), Durkheim has neglected to look at religion as a source of conflict and social change.
  - For example, if we look at religious fundamentalism in the form it has taken in Iran or the USA, it is clear that religion can be harnessed to the interests of various groups within society. Thus, religion as a force for conflict and change can be set against the interests of an established (in this example, non-fundamentalist) social order.
- Finally, there is no possible way of testing Durkheim's theory that by worshipping God we worship Society. It is, therefore, an interesting theory that can be neither proven nor disproven.

**Bronislaw Malinowski:** "Crime and Custom in Savage Society", 1926

**1. WHAT** theory / concept might explain this idea [**Knowledge**]?

- **Tension and anxiety management.**

**2. WHY** is this theory / concept significant [**Interpretation**]?

- Malinowski developed some of Durkheim's basic ideas in relation to the specific functions of religion in small-scale societies. In his study of the Trobriand Islanders of New Guinea, Malinowski agreed with Durkheim that religion functioned to:
  - Reinforce social norms and values and
  - Promote social solidarity.
- However, in looking at the specific function of religion for the Trobriand Islanders, he argued it served the social purpose of "easing emotional stress, tension and anxiety".

**3. HOW** is this theory / concept significant [**Application**]?

- Although the Trobriand Islanders were reasonably advanced technologically, there were times when their *scientific knowledge* (or *scientific frame of reference*) could not account for such things as crop failure. In such situations, recourse was frequently made to a frame of reference that could provide explanations - namely, religion and magic. As **Thompson** ("Religion", 1986) notes:

"In a society full of dangers and uncertainty and in which 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."

- Thus, in this addition to **Durkheim's** work, **Malinowski** adds the idea one of the major functions served by religion is that of "explaining the inexplicable".
  - In this respect, although the Trobriand Islanders had some scientific knowledge (they were, in effect, starting to develop a scientific belief system), there were times when this belief system was unable to explain events. When this happened the Islanders turned to a belief system (religion) that could provide some sort of explanation.
  - We will develop this idea further in a moment when we look at the work of **Talcott Parsons** in this area.



**1. WHAT theories / concepts might explain this idea [Knowledge]?**

- **Stages of social development**
- **Positivism** (scientific thought and methodology).
- **Empirical observation.**

**2. WHY are these theories / concepts significant [Interpretation]?**

- **Comte** was one of the founders of sociology (he gave the discipline its name). He lived and wrote during a period of great social upheaval (the French revolution) and scientific development in Europe. As an engineer by training, Comte understood the various ways that developments in the natural sciences of physics, chemistry, biology and so forth were changing how people thought about the world in which they lived, in a number of ways:
  - a. **Natural scientists**, through the use of **scientific methods** that stressed careful **observation** and **experimentation**, were increasingly producing knowledge about workings of the natural world.
    - This knowledge was based on principles of **cause and effect**, rather than simple faith.
  - b. As this knowledge was produced, more and more evidence was presented to show that the natural world was governed by **laws** of development (for example, laws of motion, gravity and so forth). Natural science, in effect, showed that rational knowledge could be discovered through the application of rigorous scientific principles.
    - The main strength of this knowledge was that it could be demonstrated to be true. It was not simply dependent upon people believing it to be true.
- Comte's contribution to the development of intellectual thought was to argue that if the natural world was governed by laws that could be discovered by rigorous investigation, this **methodology** could also be applied to the social world in order to discover what he believed to be the laws governing human social development.

**3. HOW is this theory / concept significant [Application]?**

- Through his knowledge and understanding of natural science, Comte saw that knowledge appeared to progress from the confusion and ignorance of pre-modern societies to the enlightenment and understanding of modern societies.
- In pre-modern societies, tradition, custom and religion were the dominant means of explaining the nature of the world. In modern societies, however, the light of scientific reason would become the dominant means of explaining the world.
- Comte's argument was that social development should be seen in terms of the human quest for knowledge and understanding about the nature of the social world. There were three distinct stages to this quest, namely:

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- a. The **religious**,
- b. The **metaphysical** and
- c. The **scientific** (or positive).

- In this respect, human understanding involved a **natural progression** from ignorance to enlightenment - from a lack of scientific understanding about the principles on which, according to Comte, both the social and natural were based, to a situation of fully scientific understanding.
- For example, pre-modern people needed to understand the nature of the world, but they lacked the (scientific) knowledge and tools to bring about true understanding. Religious ideas, attributing natural phenomena such as thunder and lightning to the actions of supernatural powers, initially served to fill the knowledge gap (the gap between wanting to explain something and the ability to explain it plausibly).
- However, as science developed, people began to understand the logical principles on which the natural world was based. As their scientific knowledge grew - very slowly at first - the need for religious explanations declined. In simple terms, religious knowledge was no-longer useful and was progressively discarded in favour of scientific knowledge (the metaphysical stage in human understanding was simply seen as a transition period between the religious and scientific stages).
- For Comte, therefore, religion was little more than a (necessary) **stage** in human development, characterised by superstition and primitive theorising. It was destined to decline in importance as a society developed. In this respect, we can see that Comte employed an **exclusive definition** of religion and, by implication, saw the gradual decline of religion and religious thought as an inevitable feature of human existence (**secularisation**).

### 4. BUT what criticisms have there been of this idea [Evaluation]?

- The rise of scientific explanations may have forced changes in religious thought, but religious explanations of the social and natural world still exist in modern societies. The fact that religion has not disappeared as Comte predicted means that religion is not just a form of knowledge - it must play an important role in social life. By focusing on religion as a way of thinking (rather than also being a way of acting), Comte largely ignored the idea that religion functions to fulfil various social needs.
- b. There is little evidence to suggest that the social world is governed by laws of development in the way that Comte believed.

Talcott Parsons: "The Structure of Social Action", 1937

### 1. WHAT theory / concept might explain this idea [Knowledge]?

- **Parsons'** views on the nature of religious belief and practice start from the idea that all societies require a **central value system** if they are to exist and develop as a society. That is, a society-wide system of common values and norms to which everyone in society can be encouraged to subscribe.
- In relation to religious activity, **Parsons** understood religion as part of the ideological structure of beliefs in any society. In this respect, religion provides:
  - Moral guidelines for action.
  - Standards against which our own and others' actions can be evaluated.
- Thus, for **Parsons**, beliefs provide an overriding, society-wide, basic framework for social actions, insofar as they are organised into ideologies (as we have seen from our earlier work, ideological frameworks can be understood in terms of the way in which they structure our beliefs about the world). Just as an **ideology** presupposes a set of **related beliefs**, beliefs themselves presuppose some form of **related structure of norms**.
- The basic **function** of this **central value system**, therefore, was to promote **social integration** (a feeling amongst people of belonging to a recognisable social group) and **social solidarity** (a sense of togetherness - having things in common with other people in society). In basic terms, one of the main ways that people develop a common sense of social identity is to develop common values.
- However, societies needed to develop **social mechanisms** whose main purpose was to originate and propagate common values, since without these mechanisms integration and solidarity could not develop across society as a whole.
- Using the **organismic analogy** common to Functionalism:

**The brain needs oxygen to function**

**A biological mechanism for pumping oxygen to the brain is needed**

**The heart is the mechanism that serves this purpose.**

- In social terms:

**Societies need a central value system**

**A social mechanism for pumping values around the social system is needed**

**Religion - a common feature of all societies - performs this function.**

### 2. WHY are these theories / concepts significant [Interpretation]?

- Religions are a social mechanism for originating and propagating common values for a number of reasons:
  - They involve a belief in a power that is higher than individual people (that is, a higher authority).
  - This higher authority can be used to represent and develop common moral codes.
  - Common values can be reinforced and given meaning to people through the organisation of collective practices and ceremonies. By making people meet to practice their common beliefs, social integration and solidarity is created.
- The main point to note here is that people must develop common values / beliefs in order to create a sense of shared meaning and purpose. It does not matter what these values actually are, however, since all that is functionally important is that:
  - a. Common values exist and
  - b. Social mechanisms exist for propagating these values.
- In pre-modern societies, therefore, religion represents an obvious solution to the problems of **integration** and **solidarity** (getting people to live and work together) for the reasons already noted.
- In modern societies, however, religious belief systems can be progressively undermined by the development of **scientific belief systems**. The concept of a Higher Power, for example, may be questioned by science, leading to a decline in the power of religious beliefs to create consensus.
- When and if this happens, societies are faced with a problem since the **structural framework** for **integration** and **solidarity** may start to crumble (leading to **anomie**). The solution is the development of new social mechanisms (such as **cultural institutions** like **education** and the **mass media**) which serve a similar function - the promotion of common moral values and their practice through various forms of communal gatherings and events.
- The broad structural frameworks that **Parsons** sees in any society (and of which religious belief and organisation is a good example) serve two main purposes:
  - They explain the basis of social consensus (that is, they provide a basic structure within which social interaction can take place.
  - They allow people some individual leeway in the personal development of specific norms of behaviour. That is, while these structural frameworks do not determine people's behaviour, they condition that behaviour because people make reference to ideological frameworks as the basis for their behaviour.
- Finally, therefore, Parsons' basic view of religion is an inclusive one, since he sees it as a social mechanism for the promotion of integration and solidarity. In this respect the actual content of peoples' beliefs is relatively unimportant (it

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doesn't matter if they all believe in a God, a Monarch, sport or whatever). What matters is that such mechanisms are able to develop to resolve the problems of integration and solidarity.

### 3. HOW is this theory / concept significant [Application]?

- In broad terms, therefore, Parsons saw the decline of exclusive forms of religion as a cultural institution as more or less inevitable in modern societies, once a scientific belief system started to develop and become widely accepted. However, since he employed the widest possible definition of "religion" it is not true to say that he saw modern societies as secular.
- Religious ideas about morality and behaviour, for example, become entrenched in the collective consciousness and effectively form the basis for legal norms (beliefs about not killing people, for example).
- In addition, in times of personal and social crisis explicit forms of religious belief frequently arise since in such situations scientific belief systems cannot cope with or provide explanations for such events.

### 4. BUT what criticisms have there been of this idea [Evaluation]?

- Rather than specifically criticise the ideas that we have just discussed, it will be more useful to contrast Functionalist theories of religion with other sociological perspectives, such as Marxism and Interactionism. We will do this at a latter point.

### 5. CONCLUSION [Evaluation].

To summarise this section, we can note the following ideas relating to Functionalist perspectives on religion.

- Initially, people always face the same kinds of problem as a society develops, namely, how can a sense of culture, tradition and belonging be socially transmitted?
- One obvious way of doing these things is through people:
  - a. Meeting together and
  - b. Believing in ideas that everyone can hold in common.
- In small-scale societies (for example, Britain 2 - 3 thousand years ago), religion meets these two basic functional needs by:
  - a. Involving collective ceremonies.
  - b. Creating values about God(s).
- For Functionalists, therefore, religion has to be considered in terms of two types of function:
  - a. The **manifest function** of religion (that is, the actual things that are clearly involved when people practice religion) which involves things like worshipping God, finding answers to social problems and the like.

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b. The **latent function** of religion (that is, a purpose that is hidden from view) which involves things like giving people a feeling that they have something in common with each other (for example, a shared belief in a common God) and **integrating** people into a sense of belonging to the same society.

- As societies develop into more complex forms, it is clear that these **latent functions** still have to be met - people still need to be made to feel that they have something in common with each other, for example. However, other **institutions** and **ideologies** start to develop that effectively compete with religious institutions in relation to the performance of these **latent functions** (media, education, sport and so forth).
- On a **manifest** level, therefore, religious institutions should gradually lose their attraction to people (society should become less overtly religious and more **secular** in its beliefs and practices) - for as long as other institutions are able to perform these manifest functions. In situations where other institutions fail to perform the latent functions required by a society, however, we should see a resurgence of religious belief and practice.

### Issue: Will modern societies become secularised?

- The significance of religion as a part of the broad **cultural framework** of society must, in terms of Parsons' conception, **decline** in modern societies. This follows because one of the most powerful aspects of religion is its ability to "explain the

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inexplicable". As more and more of the natural / social world can be explained in terms of non-religious ideological frameworks, so the significance of religion declines.

- In modern societies, where scientific knowledge is greater, events that in the past could only be explained by reference to the supernatural have increasingly been explained as the workings of natural laws governing the physical development of the world.
- However, although there should be a decline in the significance of religion in broad cultural terms, we must be careful not to make Comte's mistake of assuming that religion, in modern societies, will disappear altogether.
- Even in modern, scientifically-advanced, societies, some things (such as the meaning of life, what happens when someone dies) cannot (as yet, perhaps) be satisfactorily explained by science. In these cases, a religious form of explanation may suffice to fill the gap between wanting / needing to understand and our scientific ability to produce explanations.
- More importantly, we also need to understand more clearly the role of ideas (ideology) in relation to social change. For example, as scientific knowledge developed in Britain in the 19th century, religious ideas did not simply wither away under the relentless onslaught of "scientific truth". The reason for this is that the ideas people hold about the world are supported by a whole structure of social relationships. Ideologies do not simply support a particular way of looking at the world, it is equally true to say that they grow out of people's experiences, hopes and desires.
- Thus, in order to replace one ideology with another (religion by science, for example) it is necessary to replace the network of organised social relationships that gave birth to an ideology in the first place. In simple terms, if people, for whatever reason, still need to believe in the existence of a supernatural being (because that belief serves some important purpose), then no amount of evidence casting doubt on the existence of such a being is going to convince them otherwise.
- The main reason why scientific ideologies did not suddenly replace religious ideologies, according to Functionalist writers such as Parsons, is the fact that religious beliefs were supported by an organised framework of social relationships (Churches, a priesthood, religious ceremonies and so forth). The actual reason for the observed decline in organised forms of religious behaviour is less clear-cut.
- As scientific ideas became more popular (these theories began to explain many things that had hitherto been largely explicable only in religious terms), religion itself was forced to change in order to save itself. That is, it was forced, under the weight of scientific theories, to accommodate itself to the increasingly rational basis of social life.

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- Thus, from a modern Functionalist viewpoint, the significant part of this process is the undermining of religious organisations - their increasing **fragmentation** into a number of very different, inevitably competitive, groupings. Once a religion can no longer show a unified face to the world in the face of competing ideologies we find a major reason for the "decline" in religious practice. Whether or not this represents a decline in religious belief (and a process of secularisation) is something we will investigate more thoroughly at a later point.
- Parsons, therefore, does not subscribe to the simple belief that, as societies develop their scientific knowledge, the significance of religion necessarily declines - what he argues is that as societies become increasingly differentiated (that is, for example, as different structural frameworks arise and compete with one another), religious frameworks and forms (Churches, sects, etc.) become more specialised - but no less important in terms of their ability to explain certain things and satisfy certain desires...
- Two further observations can be usefully made before we move on to a summary of the Functionalist perspective and criticisms of this general approach to the understanding of religion:
  - a. Whilst it should be generally true that overt religious activity should decline in modern societies, there will be times when, according to Durkheim, people either fallback upon religious certainties or appeal to "higher powers" when secular powers fail
  - b. Religious institutions, whilst declining in importance in relation to such structures as education, politics and so forth, will, according to Parsons, still have a significant influence in terms of the norms and values followed by many individuals. Thus, in "Social Structure and Personality" Parsons notes:

"The influence of the Church is not directly through organisational jurisdiction over certain aspects of life now structurally differentiated from them, but through the value-commitments and motivational commitments of individuals."
- Thus, in the above respect, whilst we might expect to see a decline in the importance of religion as an institutional aspect of modern societies, religious beliefs, values and ideologies will persist because religion is such a flexible, adaptable, structural framework for the explanation of "inexplicable" social phenomena.