

## Revision Notes

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**Syllabus Section:** Religion

**Syllabus Area:** Religion and Social Position

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**Issue:** Religion: class, age and gender

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## Introduction

As we have seen throughout this series of Notes, religious practice (if not necessarily beliefs) has been variously associated with different social classes in Britain and in this final section, I want, to briefly outline the way in which religious practice (and to some extent religious belief - something that is rather more difficult to quantify reliably and validly) has been associated with social position (considered here in terms of class, age and sex).

In this respect, in order to organize this section in a coherent way, we can consider the relationship between religion and social position in terms of the above principles as they relate to different types of religious organization (specifically, denominations, sects and cults).

### 1. Religions and social class.

In relation to denominations, we have seen that, in both the recent and more-distant past there was a fairly clear-cut relationship between social class and religious practice. In simple terms, the upper and middle classes showed the most voluntary commitment to religious practice, whilst the peasantry / working classes showed the least commitment (although they were often forced to attend Church services, this was rarely on a purely voluntary basis). In Victorian Britain, for example, the least religious social group, considered in terms of religious practice, was urban working class adult males...

In more contemporary times, the relationship between social class and religion has become more fragmented, but it is still possible to see a clear class-basis to religious practice. A number of broad patterns of behaviour are evident in relation to religion and social class. These can be noted as follows:

As the following table shows, the middle classes (non-manual workers) are slightly more likely to attend Church services than the working classes (manual workers). However, such broadly-based figures hide a number of clear class differences in the social composition of various types of denomination. For example:

Participation in the Church of England has tended to involve the middle classes. Members of the Anglican Church, for example, are more-likely to vote Conservative (which is why this denomination is sometimes described as the "Conservative Party at Prayer").

The Roman Catholic Church in Britain, in the other hand, attracts a greater working class participation.

Amongst various denominations, Quakers are more-likely to be middle class, whereas Methodism (drawing perhaps upon its origins in the industrial heartlands of Victorian Britain) attracts greater numbers of working class participants.

Comparing the above with participation levels amongst American religious groups, we see much the same general patterns emerging.

Roman Catholicism, for example, is overwhelmingly a working class religion, whereas the more conservative protestant denominations tend to appeal more to the middle and upper classes.

Given the available evidence from both Britain and America, such figures tend to confirm both Marx and Weber's observed relationship between the Protestant religion and the development of Capitalism (see the "Religion and Social Change" Study Pack).

Overall, if we divide the class structure crudely into three main strata (upper, middle and lower) the evidence across a range of societies points to the greatest active involvement in religious affairs occurring amongst the middle classes.

### **1. How might you account for this observation sociologically?**

One immediately obvious reason for this pattern of behaviour across different cultures (but very similar economies) is the relationship between religious participation and social status - the idea we have noted previously that people participate in religious matters for a wide variety of reasons, one of the most important being the way in which apparent piety (there is no guarantee that those who attend church are actually more religious than those who do not) can be seen as a desirable social characteristic.

#### **Sects:**

As with denominations, the wide variety of different sects tends to make it difficult to talk with any degree of certainty about the overall class composition of sects. What we can note, however, is that as with denominations, sects tend to attract an "either / or" class membership - either they are mainly middle class or they are mainly working class.

The main reason for this is that sects tend to focus their attention and activity on more specific areas of concern to individuals than is the case with denominations (whose wider social base is reflected in their primary concerns). For example:

Black Muslims in America draw their membership predominantly from the working class for two main reasons:

1. The sect leadership is largely antagonistic to the white Bourgeoisie.
2. Middle class blacks have done reasonably well from the economic system and are consequently less likely to be attracted to sects that are critical of the economic structure.

The Unification Church ("The Moonies") on the other hand, have tended to target and attract the younger middle classes (University students, for example). One reason for this might be the fact that the Moonie philosophy involves vows of poverty (at least for the ordinary member - the position of the sect's leader Sun Myung Moon requires aggrandisement since he is considered, by the sect's members, to be the sin of God). The middle classes, who have experienced a comfortable lifestyle, tend to be rather more willing to renounce it than the working classes who have never experienced such a lifestyle...

**Cults:**

The class composition of New Age cults is overwhelmingly middle class. As Bruce ("Religion in Modern Britain", 1995) argues,

**"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".**

Bruce further maintains that New Age cults appeal specifically to,

**"University-educated middle classes working in the 'expressive professions': social workers, counsellors, actors, writers, artists, and others whose education and work cause them to have an articulate interest in human potential".**

**2. Religions and age groups.****Denominations:**

The following table illustrates the age profile of religious attendance in England and Scotland.

A number of broad patterns of behaviour are evident in relation to age and religious practice and it is evident that those under 15 and those over 65 are, in our society, more-likely to be involved in religious organizations than young adults (as measured in terms of their respective proportions in relation to population age group membership). In our society, religious practice peaks in two age-groupings:

**a. Up to the age of 15.**

For this grouping, the influence of parents is evident, as is the fact that religious commitment is not particularly high (it is probable that Church attendance, for example, is related more to the "social activities" organized by denominations for this age group - Sunday schools and playgroups, for example - than to any long-lasting commitment to religious beliefs and practices).

**b. Between the ages of 45 and 65.**

The drop-off in religious practice after the age of 65 can probably be explained more in terms of reduced physical mobility, than in terms of a decline in religious belief. In terms of religious beliefs, the 65+ age group is probably amongst the most religiously committed in our society, as the following table demonstrates.

**Sects:**

Amongst sects, the age profile tends to be much younger than for denominations. There are perhaps two possible reasons for this:

- a. Young adults are more likely to be economically active than older or retired adults (and important factor in sects where vows of poverty are taken and income is given to the sect).
- b. This age group is less likely to have the social responsibilities (marriage, children, mortgage...) of older age groups. In addition, this age group is less likely to have established firm social ties that make religious commitments more difficult. In sociological terms, anomie may also be a significant factor. Many sects target the young because their message of friendship, companionship and the like is more-likely to appeal to young adults who may be experiencing a mild form of anomie as they move out of the family group and into education or work.

**Cults.**

For cults, the same type of age profile is evident, with the young being more attracted to cult activities than the old. There are a couple of reasons for this:

- a. The young are more likely to be involved in such things as counter-culture drug use which makes them more susceptible to the attractions of esoteric religious beliefs and fringe-culture ideas.
- b. The same kind of anomie argument relating to sect membership may also apply to cults. Cults that offer to release the "inner spirituality" of the individual also tend to appeal more to the young than the old, mainly because they offer the opportunity for success in work and personal relationships that are less likely to have been experienced by the young.

**3. Religions and gender.****Denominations:**

While it is difficult to know precisely whether or not religious beliefs differ in relation to males and females, it is evident that religious practice and participation does show relatively clear gender differences. This is true across all forms of religious organization (denominations, sects and cults).

Almost two-thirds of church-goers (both frequent and rare) are women. However, as with social factors like class and age, it is clear that there is no overall pattern of male / female religious attendance, since there are evident differences between denominations. For example:

For the (Protestant) Anglican Church, the male - female ratio is approximately 50 - 50%

For Christian Scientists, the male - female ratio is approximately 20 - 80% .

Both age and social factors affect the level of religious commitment within and between gender groups.

## 2. What social factors might explain the low commitment on non-working females under the age of 25?

While women are more-likely than men to be involved in religious organizations, it is relatively clear that, in hierarchical terms, men tend to dominate the most significant positions in any religious organisation. This tends to hold true across the majority of the world's major religions (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and so forth).

Feuerbach ("The Essence of Christianity", 1841) has argued that religion in human societies represents the "projection of human ideals" onto a supernatural being deity and if we accept this argument (which, you may recall, is similar to Marx's concept of religion as an expression of the alienation of the individual from their true self) it should not be too surprising to note that, since men, as a social group, tend to be more socially-powerful than women in all societies, they tend to dominate in the religious sphere just as they dominate in the secular sphere.

We can see this in relation to two main ideas:

### a. The nature of religious imagery and

In most religions, women tend to be portrayed in terms of their "traditional" social characteristics. The "Virgin Mary" / "Madonna" in Christian religion is a good example here. Although a powerful figure - as the Mother of Christ - her power, is ideological rather than political - the virtues of purity, chastity, motherhood and so forth are personified through her as ideals for womanhood.

In relation to non-Christian religions, Giddens ("Sociology") notes:

**"Females appear as important figures in the teachings of some Buddhist orders...but on the whole Buddhism, like Christianity, is an overwhelmingly male-created institution dominated by a patriarchal power structure in which the feminine is most closely associated with the secular, powerless, profane and imperfect."**

An obvious example drawn from Christianity might be Mankind's expulsion from the Garden of Eden - the result of female duplicity. As Morgan ("The Descent of Woman", 1972) has noted (with a great deal of sarcasm):

**"According to the book of Genesis, God first created man. Woman was not only an afterthought, but an amenity. For close on two thousand years this holy scripture was believed to justify her subordination and explain her inferiority for even as a copy she was not a very good copy. there were differences. She was not one of his best efforts".**

**b. The nature of religious organization.**

While women, as has been noted above, feature strongly in both religious participation and, to a certain extent, imagery, it is evident that there has tended to be a very marked inequality between males and females in terms of positions of power and authority within religious organizations. Although some sects have allowed women to "preach and teach", the majority of the world's major religions have tended to relegate women to relatively minor roles (considered in terms of their power, authority and influence) in their organization (which, once again, tends to mirror women's experience in the social world generally).

In relation to Christianity, the decision, in November 1992 (subsequently put into practice in 1994) by the Church of England to ordain women as priests (that is, to allow them to take charge of Church services) is a significant development to note. This decision was not taken lightly and has led to a great deal of conflict within the Church. A threatened schism (the threat of setting-up an alternative organization by those opposed to the ordination of women) has not developed, but there have been instances whereby members of the Church of England have left the Church and been accepted into Roman Catholicism. The most prominent Church figure to take this course is arguably the Conservative Cabinet Minister John Gummer.

While the Church of England has traditionally been more "liberal" regarding the position of women within its organization, the Roman Catholic Church has resisted pressure to ordain women, tending to fall back upon the argument that to do so would be blasphemous (Christ "ordained" twelve disciples, none of whom were women - therefore, women should not be allowed to be ordained).

**Sects:**

Once again, within a wide variety of sects, women tend, in the main, not to feature in the highly at the top of organizational hierarchies - although there are exceptions to this general rule. The diversity of sects perhaps makes it difficult to generalize about participation along gender lines. However, given that women tend to become involved in all types of religious activity with greater frequency than men, there is little reason to suppose that, in broad terms, sect membership does not conform to this norm.

**Cults.**

If it is difficult to estimate the numbers involved with New Age cults, it is doubly difficult to estimate with any degree of certainty the ratio of male to female involvement.

**3. Suggest one reason for the difficulty involved in estimating the numbers involved in New Age cults.**

However, allowing for the obvious inaccuracy involved, it does seem that women are more likely than men to become involved in this type of religious activity (Bruce, for example, suggests that involvement may be along the lines of a 2:1 ratio - two women to one man).

We can try to explain this higher level of involvement in the following terms:

Cult activity tends, as I have suggested, to involve a highly-individual, privatised, version of religious activity. It is mainly (although not exclusively) involved with the promotion of a personal notion of "improvement". Even where communal notions are addressed (such as in relation to "social problems" such as crime, unemployment, the environment and so forth), the solutions offered tend to be couched in personal terms (meditation, greater consciousness and so forth).

This "private sphere" of cult activity relates to traditional forms of gender roles for women (motherhood, the home, child-rearing and so forth). As you will recall, much New Age philosophy contrasts the concept of Nature (always portrayed as feminine in folklore - Mother Nature, for example) unfavourably with a modern technological world (which, interestingly enough, tends to be characterised as masculine).

Historically, where concepts of Nature have been employed, the role of women (as Earth Mothers, spiritual healers and so forth) has tended to be seen in terms of their "essential femininity"; that is, as naturally different creatures to males - more attuned to the supposed natural rhythms of life and so forth. Thus, within New Age cults, women tend to be afforded a much higher status than men in terms of the various philosophies on which these cults are based, which is one reason that explains higher female involvement.

That, in class terms, cults appeal far more to middle class women than to upper class women is not difficult to explain. Middle class women are far more likely to be involved in non-manual work than their working class counterparts. In this world (a male-dominated one) two things become apparent:

Firstly, it is a potentially powerful world (it involves the exercising of more power than is found within the home, for example).

Secondly, Middle class women, although involved in this world, are still largely excluded from it. It is men who dominate and control this world. It is men who dominate the real positions of power in our society.

In this situation, it is a small step from recognizing male domination - and the basic unfairness of female exclusion - and entrance into a world that:

- a. Offers women the possibility of empowerment through the exploitation of the "natural superiority".
- b. Allows them to continue participating in this sphere of the social world, if they so desire (since cults rarely demand withdrawal from the secular world).



**Religion and Stratification.**

To complete these Notes we can look briefly at the historical relationship between religious institutions and social stratification.

Although Christian religions in particular have variously promoted social equality, (if the phrase "All Men are equal in the eyes of God" is not taken literally in terms of gender) such religions have, historically, been associated with various systems of social stratification.

Whilst the fit between religion and economic organisation is by no-means a perfect one, it appears that, historically, the Protestant religion has been more closely associated with Capitalism (see, for example, the Study Pack "Religion and Social Change"), whereas Catholicism has been more-closely associated with Feudalism.

This is not accidental, in that the basic philosophy of Catholicism stresses a communal relationship with a God who created the world in his image (therefore tending to encourage a relatively passive acceptance of the social order - this religion is well-suited to societies which have a relatively closed system of social stratification and mobility).

Protestant religions, on the other hand, have tended to stress a more individualized relationship between God and the individual. In this respect, Protestants have tended to adopt a philosophy that argues (to over simplify the situation somewhat) that whereas God clearly made the world, individuals were given "free will". In basic terms, it is up to the individual to decide whether or not they want to be saved. We can, in short, choose to obey the word of God and receive our reward in heaven, or we can choose not to obey and, effectively, consign our soul to Hell.

Whilst this way of interpreting religion has certain philosophical advantages (for example, it enables the Protestant to explain such things as the existence of evil in the world, the fact that tragedies happen in a world that is governed by a "loving God", for example), it does mean that the Protestant religion is not well-suited to economic systems that are inflexible (closed systems of social mobility). As both Marx and Weber have argued, Protestantism and Capitalism fit reasonably well together, since both stress individual achievement and flexibility.

It should also be noted that the Hindu religion, with its system of castes, is probably most closely associated with closed (that is, involving no individual social mobility) systems of social stratification. This follows because the concepts of reincarnation and karma lend themselves easily to social conformity - by obeying the laws of the world (both religious and secular - the individual is promised a superior social position in their next life).

One of the consequences of the cultural relationship between religions and systems of social stratification has been the close association between secular morality and religious morality. When can see this in two main ways:

Firstly, in secular terms, the most economically successful in society (for example, the aristocracy in Feudal society and the bourgeoisie in Capitalist society) have tended to dominate the religious hierarchies. For Marxists, the explanation for this is relatively simple:

a. In Feudal society, the Church represented the main cultural institution in society (in Marxist terms, the main means of mental production) and its control enabled the ruling class to control the way in which people saw and interpreted the world. In this type of society, control of a powerful institution such as the Church was necessary to the ruling class.

b. In Capitalist society, the Church is no-longer the main means of mental production (this has been superseded by cultural institutions such as education and the mass media), hence ruling class involvement is much reduced.

In our society, for example, religion may be the vessel in which social morality is contained, but the vehicle of its delivery is much more likely to be the education system or the mass media.

#### **4. How might the above explain the recent emphasis on schools as the vehicle through which a Christian social morality is to be delivered?**

Secondly, in religious terms, this has tended to lead to the equation of lower class behaviour with "sin". For example, the Protestant / Calvinist emphasis on hard work, sacrifice and so forth had a down-side:

Those that did not accumulate wealth are not in God's grace.

Lower-class social characteristics therefore became associated with "sin".

The poor became characterized as "lazy, drunkards, fornicators, lacking in self-control" and so forth precisely because they were unsuccessful in life.

In this way, middle class social characteristics became associated with religious virtues. Poverty was seen as a condition to be deplored, vilified and censured - not remedied. A basic philosophy that holds the poor to blame for their condition.

Finally, in terms of religious participation, in both Britain and America the upper and working classes are least likely to participate in Church activities. This would suggest that one of the functions of religion is to confer respectability, a sense of social identity and so forth. Because of their respective economic situations,

The Upper classes don't need religion to achieve this...

The Working classes cannot achieve respectability through religion alone...

The Middle classes want both respectability and a sense of social identity and use religion to get it...