Introduction: What is religion

Substantive definitions

These focus on the content or substance of religious belief, such as belief in God or the supernatural. For example, Max Weber (1905) defines religion as belief in a superior supernatural power that is above nature and cannot be explained scientifically. Substantive definitions are exclusive - they draw a clear line between religious and non-religious beliefs. To be a religion, a set of beliefs must include belief in God or the supernatural. Substantive definitions conform to a widespread view of religion as belief in God. However, defining religion in this way leaves no room for beliefs and practices that perform similar functions to religion but do not involve belief in God. Substantive definitions are also accused of Western bias because they exclude religions such as Buddhism, which do not have the Western idea of a god.

Functional definitions

Rather than defining religion in terms of specific kinds of belief, functional definitions define it in terms of the social or psychological functions it performs for individuals or society. For example, Emile Durkheim (1915) defines religion in terms of the contribution it makes to social integration, rather than any specific belief in God or the supernatural. Another functionalist, Milton Yinger, emphasizes the functions that religion performs for individuals, such as answering 'ultimate questions' about the meaning of life and what happens when we die.

An advantage of functional definitions is that they are inclusive - allowing us to include a wide range of beliefs and practices that perform functions such as social control. Since they do not specify belief in God or the supernatural, there is no bias against non-Western religions such as Buddhism. However, just because an institution helps integrate individuals into groups, this does not make it a religion. For example, collective chanting at football matches might give individuals a sense of integration, but this doesn't mean it is a religion.

Social constructionist definitions

Social constructionists take an interpretivist approach that focuses on how members of society themselves define religion. They argue that it is not possible to produce a single universal definition of religion to cover all cases, since in reality different individuals and groups mean very different things by 'religion'.

Social constructionists are interested in how definitions of religion are constructed, challenged and fought over. For example, Alan Aldridge (2007) shows how, for its followers, Scientology is a religion, whereas several governments have denied it legal status as a religion and sought to ban it. This shows that definitions of religion can be contested and are influenced by who has power to define the situation.

Social constructionists do not assume that religion always involves a belief in God or the supernatural, or that it performs similar functions for everyone in all societies. Their approach allows them to get close to the meanings people themselves give to religion. However, this makes it impossible to generalise about the nature of religion, since people may have widely differing views about what counts as a religion.
Religion as a conservative force 1: the functionalist perspective

The functionalist perspective sees religion as mainly a conservative force, promoting social harmony, social integration and social solidarity through the reinforcement of the value consensus — a widespread agreement around the main values of a society which is the basis of social order.

The functionalist perspective is essentially concerned with analysing the role of religion in meeting the functional prerequisites or basic needs that society has in order to survive. For example, society can only survive if people share at least some common beliefs about right and wrong behaviour. Religion is seen by functionalists as part of the culture or way of life of a society, and it helps to maintain cultural traditions and establish the basic rules of social life.

Durkheim

1. Totemism

Durkheim studied the practice of totemism among the central Australian Arunta tribe of aborigines. He argued that totemism — the practice of worshipping a sacred object, known as a totem (usually named after the name of a tribe or group) — represented religion in its most basic form.

Durkheim argued that the totem is created by society and is so sacred because it is a symbol of the group or society. When worshipping the totem, people are really worshipping society. Religious beliefs, such as totemism, and accompanying ceremonies and rituals, act as a kind of social glue, binding people together and building bonds between them. By sharing beliefs, giving them a sacred quality and worshipping together, people develop moral ties between themselves, and a sense of shared identity, commitment and belonging — what Durkheim called the collective conscience. This helps to bind society together and therefore religion acts as a conservative force in promoting social cohesion.

However, while it is possible to see a common religion bringing people together, establishing a value consensus and integrating small-scale communities, it is hard to see how it can perform this role in contemporary societies, where there is a wide diversity of different beliefs and faiths. Indeed, religion can often, and perhaps more often than not, do the opposite. Different religions and religious beliefs and values can tear people and communities apart, and pose threats to social order and stability.

2. The collective conscience

The collective conscience is the shared norms, values, beliefs and knowledge that make social life and cooperation between individuals possible. For Durkheim, shared regular religious rituals reinforce the collective conscience and maintain social integration, therefore preventing any damaging rapid social change.

However, religion can only fulfil some of the functions that functionalists claim if people actually hold and practise religious beliefs. However, there is diminishing religiosity and growing secularization in many Western European countries. Religious thinking, practice and institutions are becoming less important both in the lives of individuals and in society as a whole, and those involved are a declining group. This is shown, for example, by dramatic declines in attendance at services in all the main Christian churches in the UK; less than half of the population now say they believe in God; Religion can be a disruptive and socially divisive influence.
Religion as a conservative force 2: the Marxist perspective

Marx saw religion as part of the dominant ideology - the ideas or belief system of the ruling class which shape people’s view of the world and reproduce and reinforce the false class consciousness (or lack of understanding) by the working class of the fact that they are being exploited. The French Marxist Althusser saw religion as an ideological state apparatus - an institution spreading the dominant ideology and manufacturing what Gramsci called hegemony - consent and acceptance by people that their positions were unchangeable and inevitable.

Marx thought religion did two main, interrelated things:

- It acted as the ‘opium of the people’, cushioning the pain of oppression and exploitation in unequal societies.
- It legitimized and maintained the power of the ruling class.

Religion as the ‘opium of the people’

The Marxist approach suggests that religion eases the pain of oppression and exploitation in three main ways:

1. Religion promises an eventual escape from suffering and oppression in this life with promises of an ecstatic future in life after death.
2. Religion sometimes offers hope of supernatural intervention to solve problems on earth. For example, the Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that survivors of the battle of Armageddon between God and Satan will form a new paradise on earth where they will live forever ruled by a heavenly government. This promise, found in many of the world’s religions, can encourage people to accept their position and not act to change society.
3. Religion provides a religious explanation and justification for inequality. For example, the Hindu religion provides a religious justification for the inequalities of the Indian caste system and an individual’s position in the social hierarchy.

However, like any drug, religion can only act like opium, performing an hallucinating and pain-relieving role, if people actually take it. In other words, religion can only perform the role Marxists suggest both if people believe and if religion has some institutional power - neither of which is true of the majority of people in Britain or most contemporary Western capitalist societies.

Religion and the power of the ruling class

Traditional Marxists see religion as an instrument of social control and oppression, used by the ruling class to legitimize (justify) their power and material wealth. Inequalities of wealth, income and power are presented as God-given and therefore legitimized and inevitable. The inequalities between rich and poor can’t be challenged or changed without questioning the authority of religion or God itself.

The Hindu caste system referred to above is one example of this, which protects the position of those in the highest castes. In the past, religion has justified the power of kings through a doctrine called the ‘divine right of
forbidden from receiving any education after the age of eight, and all women were excluded from employment, even widows.
Long essays (33 marks)

Evaluate functionalist views on the role and functions of religion today.

Assess the extent to which Marxist and feminist theories help our understanding of religion in society today.

‘Religion is more a cause of conflict than of harmony in society.’
To what extent do sociological arguments and evidence support this view?

Assess the view that religion was once mainly a conservative influence but today is more of a force for social change.
Also, sects can maintain strict standards, including expelling those who fail to conform to these standards, over long periods of time. Furthermore, he points out that many sects have been successful in socializing their children into acceptance of the sect’s beliefs and practices, while also converting adults.

Barker suggests that, in new religious movements, as younger people grow older, the reasons that drove them into the sect begin to disappear, and they begin to look for more normal lives. This may mean that the sect disappears, or that it loses its world-rejecting features and becomes more like a denomination.

However, Wilson questions whether world-rejecting and introversionist sects can ever survive in denominational form. This is because to become a denomination there will be a need to convert people by going outside the sect to preach. This is likely to be a polluting and corrupting experience, and would compromise and destroy the fundamental beliefs of the sect. Such sects therefore cannot survive in denominational form.

Sociologists are also interested in the influence that sects, cults and New Age movements have on contemporary society. For example, Wilson argues that the growth in the number of sects, cults and New Age movements is evidence of the declining influence of religion. He argues that sects are the last outpost of religion in a secular society. Competition between these groups for members means that their overall influence on society is declining. However, studies by Greeley and Nelson argue that the growth of sects, cults and New Age movements is evidence of a religious revival, therefore suggesting that the influence of these groups is increasing.
Long essays

Evaluate sociological explanations of the relationship between gender and religious belief and practice.

Candidates should explore a range of issues relating to gender and religious belief and practice. These may include membership of different religious groups, other religious activity, changing forms of worship and belief, the needs of individuals in society today, ethnicity, social class and age. Many candidates may focus predominantly on women, but better answers may look also at the religious behaviour of men. Many answers may deal with this question using mainly empirical material. However, relevant views from different perspectives such as feminism, functionalism, Marxism and postmodernism will be integrated into better answers.

In answering this question, candidates may refer to some of the following sources and/or relevant alternative ones: Bruce, Wilson, El Saadawi, de Beauvoir, Armstrong, Parsons, Weber, Marx, Engels, Wallis, Heelas, Hamilton, Martin.
Evaluation of the secularization debate

The debate about secularisation is often complex and involves a wide range of different views and issues, which require careful evaluation and the ability to understand and use concepts in a flexible manner. The precise nature of your evaluation of these issues will depend on the specific question, but there are a number of evaluative issues that may be useful to consider in your conclusions:

Religious decline or change?

Most sociologists would agree that the evidence suggests that traditional religious thinking and beliefs, practice and institutions are declining, at least in the UK and much of Europe. However, the key disagreements are over whether this represents a decline in the importance of religion or simply a change in its nature.

Definitions of religion

Conclusions about the secularisation debate are only possible if there is agreement over the nature of religion and what we should include within this definition. Some sociologists define religion in terms of adherence to traditional religious beliefs and institutions – such a definition is likely to lead to the conclusion that religion is in decline.

However, more inclusive definitions of religion are likely to question the secularisation thesis because they can include ideas about belief in some form of ‘spirit’ or ‘life force’ in their definitions of religious beliefs. You should remember though that some sociologists such as Bruce, argue that these vaguer claims to some sort of religious belief are themselves an indication of growing secularisation, not of continuing religiosity – it simply represents a halfway house in which people place themselves as they move away from religious belief, but can’t yet bring themselves to admit that they are non-believers.

Definitions of secularisation

One of the most fundamental difficulties for reaching conclusions on the secularisation debate is agreeing what secularisation means. Sociologists are likely to reach different conclusions according to whether they are looking at secularisation in terms of a decline of religious belief and practice, declining influence of religion in other spheres of life or secularisation within religious institutions themselves.

Variations between and within societies

Conclusions about secularisation will also be influenced by where sociologists are looking at it. Lots of the evidence in the UK and Western Europe might be seen as supporting the secularisation thesis (depending on how we define secularisation) but the evidence is much less clear in the USA and religion can be seen as dominating society in some parts of the world. It should also be remembered that certain groups within society are more religious than others (e.g. minority ethnic groups in the UK), which can raise further questions about the extent of secularisation in the UK.
What is clear is that secularisation is not a universal process but, on the other hand, few supporters of the secularisation thesis would argue that it is. It can therefore be argued that the national, regional, ethnic and social class differences in the role of religion make it necessary to relate the debate about secularisation to specific contexts.
Religion and Globalisation

Key themes

- Religion and its relationship to economic development
- The nature of religious fundamentalism
- Religion as cultural defence against an external threat
- Religion and the ‘clash of civilisations’

The big picture

Religion may contribute to development. In India, Hinduism legitimates middle-class prosperity and ultra-nationalism. In East Asia and Latin America, post-Confucian and Pentecostalist ideas perform a similar role to the Protestant ethic, encouraging hard work and self-discipline. Pentecostalism has achieved global success by incorporating local beliefs.

Fundamentalism believes in the literal truth of scripture. It is seen as a reaction to globalisation or a quest for certainty in response to postmodernity. It may be a response to changes from within or from outside a society.

Similarly one function of religion today is cultural defence, in the case of Poland and Iran.

Huntington argues that globalisation is leading to a ‘clash of civilisations’ associated with the major religions and especially between the West and Islam.
Questions that could be asked on this

Long essays

Assess sociological explanations of the relationship between globalisation and religion.

This question carries 12 AO1 marks (knowledge and understanding) and 18 AO2 marks (9 for interpretation and application and 9 for analysis and evaluation). You need to look at a range of ways in which religion may be related to its global context and how sociologists explain them, making reference to different religions. Begin by examining how Hinduism legitimates the rising prosperity and success of India under the impact of globalisation. You can also consider religion’s role as a new ‘Protestant ethic’ in Asia and South America (and evaluate by mentioning the role of non-religious factors in development). Examine fundamentalism as a response to globalisation and related trends, e.g. as offering certainty in an uncertain world, and evaluate using Beckford. Link this to religion as cultural defence against the external changes that are a feature of globalisation, and to the ‘clash of civilisations’ that are brought into closer contact as a result of globalisation. Evaluate this role using Jackson, Armstrong or others.