A2 Sociology Essay:  
‘Does Religion Inhibit Social Change?’

The question of whether religion acts as a conservative force or as a force for change in terms of society shall be examined. The phrase “a conservative force” can be viewed doubly: conservative in terms of upholding traditional beliefs; conservative in terms of functioning to preserve the status quo i.e. the stabilisation of society. Many religions have traditional beliefs about moral issues and opposé changes that would grant individuals more freedom in personal and sexual matters. For example, the Catholic Church forbids divorce, abortion, artificial contraception and homosexual behaviour. Additionally, many religions reinforce ‘family values’ and favour the patriarchal domestic division of labour. Evidencing this is the Church of England marriage ceremony including the bridal vow to ‘obey’, though brides have been capable of rejecting this since 1966. Supporting this is Hinduism endorsing male domestic authority and the restriction of choice for a life partner through the practice of arranged marriage.

Functionalisits view religion as a conservative force since it promotes social solidarity through creating value consensus, thereby decoupling the likelihood of society disintegrating from individuals pursuing hedonistic goals. Marx viewed religion as preventing social change through legitimating exploitation, resulting in a false consciousness for the Proletariat, thus maintain capitalist society’s stability, reinforcing the Bourgeoisie’s power, and preventing revolution. On the other hand, feminists view religion as an ideological tool legitimating patriarchal power and maintaining the subjugation of women in wider society. In essence, Structuralist theories such as Marxism, functionalism and feminism provide the basis for the argument of religion upholding society’s status quo.

Neo-Marxist Maduro criticises the viewpoint of status quo maintenance, pointing to Latin America, whereby several priests separate from the Catholic Church during the Somoza regime and subsequently preached ‘liberation theology’, which subverted the status quo and resulted in revolution in Nicaragua. Engels (a Marxist) pronounces that religion has a dual character in being capable of encouraging and suppressing social change. This is supported by Bloch, who believes religious beliefs can imbue utopian imagery, thereby stimulating social change in combination with effective political organisation. On the contrary, whilst Gramscì views religion as having a dual character, he states that the ruling class uses hegemony to maintain control over the working class as substantiated by the conservative ideological power of the Catholic Church in garnering support for Mussolini’s fascist regime.

Withal, Haley studied Methodism and found that in Britain, many of the middle-class businesspeople started as supporters of radical, non-conformist movements and then converted to Methodism. This change was democratic, allowing for increased social mobility and prevented violent changes in society’s class structure similar to that which occurred during the French revolution.

An example of religion striving for change yet failing to do so is found with The New Christian Right, a morally and politically conservative Protestant fundamentalist movement opposed to the liberalisation of American society. Seeking to make abortion, homosexuality and abortion illegal, this movement organised several campaigns utilising the media, most notably televangelism. Ultimately, the group has largely been unsuccessful in their aim to change society including: its campaigns finding it difficult to cooperate with people from other religious groups; and facing opposition from groups such as Planned Parenthood which stand for freedom of choice. Bruce delineates the New Christian Right as a failed movement for change. Contrast with the Civil Rights Movement suggests that success is rooted in a protest movement retaining values consistent to those of wider society.

The notion of religion serving as an impetus for social change has been studied by Bruce. He notes the Civil Rights Movement, led by Martin Luther King, in which religious organisations contributed to engendering social equality: the Black clergy identified the white clergy’s hypocrisy in preaching ‘love thy neighbour’ yet supporting racial segregation; religion provides channels to express political dissent e.g. the funeral of Martin Luther King was a rallying point for the civil rights cause; Churches provided a place to negotiate social change due to being respected by both sides; Black Churches in the south successfully mobilised public opinion through campaigning for support across America. Bruce views the movement as an example of religion engaging in secular struggle and bringing about change. He claims it was successful since its values paralleled those in wider society (it preached the principle of equality embodied in the American Constitution).

Millenarian movements are foregrounded by the belief in coming significant social change. Worsley studied the movements known as cargo cults in Melanesia, wherein islanders felt deprived when material goods arrived for colonists. He notes that the movements combined elements of traditional beliefs with facets to Christianity (such as Christ’s imminent second coming to earth), and ultimately, united native populations in mass movements that spanned tribal divisions. Many of the secular nationalist leaders that overthrew colonial rule in the 1950s and 1960s were born from Millenarian movements, evidencing the capacity of religion for promoting social change.

Corroborating this view is fundamentalism in Iran. Under the last Shah in Iranian society, an aspect to this change was the liberalisation of traditional Islamic attitudes to women; Islamic fundamentalism became prominent and reversed these attitudes, hence exemplifying religion as a conservative force in terms of maintaining traditional moral values yet simultaneously evincing it as a force for social change. To add to this, Archbishop Tutu was a prominent opponent of apartheid in South Africa. Moreover, Weber contends that religious beliefs of Calvinist Protestantism facilitated major social change i.e. bringing about capitalism in Northern Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. Weber proposes the ‘spirit of capitalism’ – the pursuit of profit for its own sake; not for consumption. He asserts this spirit had an elective affinity (an unconscious similarity) to Calvinist beliefs: predestination, divine transcendence, asceticism and the