

New Religious Movements (NRMs)

Since the 1960s, there has been an explosion in the number of new religions and organisations, such as the Unification Church or 'Moonies', the Children of God, Transcendental Meditation (TM), Krishna Consciousness and many more. This has led to new attempts to classify them. Roy Wallis (1984) categorises these new religious movements (NRMs) into three groups based on their relationship to the outside world - whether they reject the world, accommodate to it, or affirm it.

World-rejecting NRMs

These are similar to Troeltsch's sects. Examples include the Moonies, Krishna Consciousness, Children of God, the Manson Family, the Branch Davidian and the People's Temple. They vary greatly in size, from a handful of members to hundreds of thousands. They have several characteristics:

- They are clearly religious organisations with a clear notion of God.
- They are highly critical of the outside world and they expect or seek radical change.
- To achieve salvation, members must make a sharp break with their former life.
- Members live communally, with restricted contact with the outside world. The movement controls all aspects of their lives and is often accused of 'brainwashing' them.
- They often have conservative moral codes, for example about sex.



World-accommodating NRMs



These are often breakaways from existing mainstream churches or denominations, such as neo-Pentecostals who split from Catholicism, or Subud, a offshoot of Islam. They neither accept nor reject the world, and they focus on religious rather than worldly matters, seeking to restore the spiritual purity of religion. For example, neo-pentecostals believe that other Christian religions have lost the Holy Spirit. Members tend to lead conventional lives.

World-affirming NRMs

These groups differ from all other religious groups and may lack some of the conventional features of religion, such as collective worship, and some are not highly organised. However, like religions, they offer their followers access to spiritual or supernatural powers. Examples include Scientology, Soka Gakkai, TM and Human potential.

- They accept the world as it is. They are optimistic and promise followers success in terms of mainstream goals and values, such as careers and personal relationships.
- They are non-exclusive and tolerant of other religions, but claim to offer additional special knowledge or techniques that enable followers to unlock their own spiritual powers and achieve success or overcome problems such as unhappiness or illness. They have been described as *psychologising* religions offering this-worldly gratification.
- Most are cults, whose followers are often customers rather than members, and entry is through training. The movement places few demands on them and they carry on normal lives.

Social change

A third explanation for the recent growth of religious movements is social change. Thus Wilson (1970) argues that periods of rapid change disrupt and undermine established norms and values, producing *anomie* or normlessness. In response to the uncertainty and insecurity that this creates, those who are most affected by the disruption may turn to sects as a solution. For example, the dislocation created by the industrial revolution in Britain in the late 18th and early 19th century led to the birth of Methodism, which offered a sense of community, warmth and fellowship, clear norms and values and the promise of salvation. Methodism succeeded in recruiting large numbers of the new industrial working class.



Similarly, Bruce (1995; 1996) sees the growth of sects and cults today as a response to the social changes involved in modernisation and secularisation. In Bruce's view, society is now secularised and therefore people are less attracted to the traditional churches and strict sects, because these demand too much commitment. Instead, people now prefer cults because they are less demanding and require fewer sacrifices.

The Growth of NRMs

Explanations have been put forward for the growth of both world-rejecting and world-affirming NRMs.



World-rejecting NRMs Wallis points to social changes from the 1960s impacting on young people, including the increased time spent in education. This gave them freedom from adult responsibilities and enabled a counter-culture to develop. Also, the growth of radical political movements offered alternative ideas about the future. World-rejecting NRMs were attractive in this context because they offered young people a more idealistic way of life. Bruce (1995) argues that it was the failure of the counter-culture to change the world that led to disillusioned youth turning to religion instead.

World-affirming NRMs Bruce argues that their growth is a response to modernity, especially to the rationalisation of work. Work no longer provides meaning or a source of identity - unlike the past, when the Protestant ethic gave work a religious meaning for some people. Yet at the same time, we are expected to achieve - even though we may lack the opportunities to succeed. World-affirming NRMs provide both a sense of identity and techniques that promise success in this world.

Wallis also notes that some 'movements of the middle ground' such as the Jesus Freaks have grown since the mid - 1970s. These have attracted disillusioned former members of world-rejecting NRMs (which have generally been less successful) because they provide a halfway house back to a more conventional lifestyle.



Postmodernity and the New Age

Several explanations for the popularity of the New Age have been offered. For example, John Drane (1999) argues that its appeal is part of a shift towards postmodern society. One of the features of postmodern society is a loss of faith in *meta-narratives* or claims to have 'the truth'. Science promised to bring progress to a better world but instead it has given us war, genocide, environmental destruction and global warming. As a result, people have lost faith in experts and professionals such as scientists and doctors, and they are disillusioned with the churches' failure to meet their spiritual needs. As a result, they are turning to the New Age idea that each of us can find the truth for ourselves by looking within.

The New Age and Modernity

By contrast, Bruce (1995) argues that the growth of the New Age is a feature of the latest phase of *modern* society and not postmodernity. Modern society values individualism, which is also a key principle of New Age beliefs (e.g. the idea that each individual has the truth within themselves). It is also a particularly important value among those in the 'expressive professions' concerned with human potential, such as social workers or artists - the group to whom the New Age appeals most.

Bruce notes that New Age beliefs are often softer versions of much more demanding and self-disciplined traditional Eastern religions such as Buddhism that have been 'watered down' to make them palatable to self-centred Westerners. This explains why New Age activities are often audience or client cults, since these make few demands on their followers. Bruce sees the New Age eclecticism or 'pick and mix spiritual shopping' as typical of religion in late modern society, reflecting the consumerist ethos of capitalist society.

Similarly, Heelas (1996) sees the New Age and modernity as linked in four ways:

- **A source of identity** In modern society, the individual has many different roles (at work, in the family, with friends etc.) but there is little overlap between them, resulting in a fragmented identity. New Age beliefs offer a source of 'authentic' identity.
- **Consumer culture** creates dissatisfaction because it never delivers the perfection that it promises (e.g. in advertising). The New Age offers an alternative way to achieve perfection.
- **Rapid social change** in modern society disrupts established norms and values, resulting in anomie. The New Age provides a sense of certainty and truth in the same way as sects.
- **Decline of organised religion** Modernity leads to secularisation, thereby removing the traditional alternatives to New Age beliefs. For example, in the USA, the New Age is strongest where churchgoing is at its lowest, in California.



Summary

The main types of religious organisations are churches, sects, denominations and cults. The growth of sects can be seen as a response to marginality, relative deprivation and social change. Weber sees sects as providing a theodicy of disprivilege for the poor. Wallis identifies three types of new religious movement – world rejecting, world affirming and world accommodating. Niebuhr describes a sectarian cycle leading to denominationism. Wilson identifies established sects as a separate type. Bruce sees sects and cults as resulting from secularisation where Stark and Bainbridge explain them as a response to different sorts of deprivation. New Age cults (audience and client cults) have grown since the 1970s, reflecting characteristics of modernity and postmodernity.

Check your understanding

- 1) Explain what is meant by a 'theodicy of disprivilege'.
- 2) Identify one similarity and one difference between churches and sects.
- 3) Suggest two examples of established sects.
- 4) Explain what is meant by an 'audience cult'.
- 5) Suggest two ways in which the New Age might be linked to modernity.
- 6) How may religion be important for 'cultural transition'?





EXAM QUESTION



Practice Questions on Religious Organisations

Item A

Sociologists are interested in the reasons why particular groups and individuals are attracted to different religious organisations. Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch were among the first to identify different patterns of membership for churches, denominations, sects and cults. Troeltsch observed that churches are large, establishment-oriented organisations attracting mainly middle-class members. By contrast, members of religious sects are frequently at odds with the world and unwilling to compromise with the beliefs of wider society. For example, Weber argued that religious sects often provide the poor with a theodicy of disprivilege.

Questions

- 1) Identify and briefly explain **three** differences between churches and cults. (9 marks)
- 2) Using material from **Item A** and elsewhere, assess the view that religious sects always compromise with wider society and become denominations. (18 marks)
- 3) Assess sociological explanations for the increasing number of religious and spiritual organisations and movements in society today. (33 marks)

The examiner's advice

Question 2 carries 6 A01 marks (knowledge and understanding) and 12 A02 marks (interpretation, application, analysis and evaluation).

Start by explaining Niebuhr's model of sect development, and why he sees sects as inevitably either becoming denominations or dying out. Make sure you use material from the item, for example about the nature of sects' beliefs and the theodicy of disprivilege that they offer the poor. You can assess the view in the question by using Stark and Bainbridge, Wilson and Wallis on sect development. Consider some specific examples of sects that have and those that have not become denominations.

Question 3 carries 15 A01 marks (knowledge and understanding) and 18 A02 marks (9 for interpretation and application, and 9 for analysis and evaluation). You can begin by identifying the different types of religious and spiritual organisations and movements (e.g. church, sect, denomination and cult, different types of NRMs), identifying which types have increased. Then consider explanations for their growth in popularity, such as marginality, relative deprivation and social change, as well as factors such as immigration and globalisation. You should also consider views on how the increase is related to modernity and postmodernity, e.g. Drane, Bruce and Heelas, and on their development by referring to Niebuhr, Stark and Bainbridge and Wilson. Note that the question refers to spirituality as well as religion, so it's important to discuss reasons for the popularity of New Age movements. Use a range of examples of Christian and non-Christian groups.



[2] THEORIES OF RELIGION

The AQA Specification

Different theories of ideology, science and religion, including both Christian and non-Christian religious Traditions

- Theories of religion: Functionalist, Marxist, neo-Marxist and feminist.

Introduction

An important question for sociologists is the role of religion in society. What functions does it perform, and who benefits from them – society as a whole, or just the powerful?

Sociologists are also interested in how religion may meet individual needs, for example by giving answers to questions about the meaning of life and helping people to cope with misfortune.

In this Topic, we focus on the main sociological theories of the functions of religion – functionalism, Marxism and Feminism.

Functionalist Theories of Religion

For functionalists, society is a system of interrelated parts or social institutions, such as religion, the family and the economy. Society is like an organism, with basic needs that it must meet in order to survive. These needs are met by the different institutions. Each institution performs certain functions – that is, each contributes to maintaining the social system by meeting a need.



Society's most basic need is the need for social order and solidarity so that its members can cooperate. For functionalists, what makes order possible is the existence of value consensus – a set of shared norms and values by which society's members live. Without this, individuals would pursue their own selfish desires and society would disintegrate.

Durkheim on Religion

For functionalists, religious institutions play a central part in creating and maintaining value consensus, order and solidarity. The first functionalist to develop this idea was Emile Durkheim (1858-1917).

The sacred and the profane



For Durkheim (1915), the key feature of religion was not a belief in gods, spirits or the supernatural, but a fundamental distinction between the sacred and the profane found in all religions. The *sacred* are things set apart and forbidden, that inspire feelings of awe, fear and wonder, and are surrounded by taboos and prohibitions. By contrast, the *profane* are things that have no special significance – things that are ordinary and mundane. Furthermore, a religion is never simply a set of beliefs. It also involves definite rituals or *practices* in relation to the sacred, and these rituals are *collective* – performed by social groups.

- 2 **At times of life crises** Events such as birth, puberty, marriage and especially death mark major and disruptive changes in social groups. Religion helps to minimise disruption. For example, the funeral rituals reinforce a feeling of solidarity among the survivors, while the notion of immortality gives comfort to the bereaved by denying the fact of death. In fact, Malinowski argues that death is the main reason for the existence of religious belief.

Parsons: values and meaning

Like Malinowski, Talcott Parsons (1967) sees religion helping individuals to cope with unforeseen events and uncontrollable outcomes. In addition, Parsons identifies two other essential functions that religion performs in modern society.

- It creates and legitimates society's central values.
- It is the primary source of meaning.

Religion creates and legitimates society's basic norms and values by sacralising them (making them sacred). Thus in the USA, Protestantism has sacralised the core American values of individualism, meritocracy and self-discipline. This serves to promote value consensus and thus social stability.

Religion also provides a source of meaning. In particular, it answers 'ultimate' questions about the human condition, such as why the good suffer and why some die young. Such events defy our sense of justice and make life appear meaningless, and this may undermine our commitment to society's values. Religion provides answers to such questions, for example by explaining suffering as a test of faith that will be rewarded in heaven. By doing so, religion enables people to adjust to adverse events and circumstances and helps maintain stability.

Civil religion

Like Parsons, Robert Bellah (1970) is interested in how religion unifies society, especially a multi-faith society like America. What unifies American society is an overarching *civil religion* - a belief system that attaches sacred qualities to society itself. In the American case, civil religion is a faith in Americanism or 'the American way of life'.



Bellah argues that civil religion integrates society in a way that individual religions cannot. While none of the many individual churches and denominations can claim the loyalty of all Americans, civil religion can. American civil religion involves loyalty to the nation-state and a belief in God, both of which are equated with being a true American. It is expressed in various rituals, symbols and beliefs; such as the pledge of allegiance to the flag, singing the national anthem, the Lincoln Memorial, and phrases such as 'One nation under God'.

However, this is not a specifically Catholic, Protestant or Jewish God, but rather an 'American' God. It sacralises the American way of life and binds together Americans from many different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Marxist Theories of Religion

Unlike functionalists, who see society as based on harmony and consensus, Marxists see all societies as divided into two classes, one of which exploits the labour of the other. In modern capitalist society, the capitalist class who own the means of production exploit the working class.

In such a society, there is always the potential for class conflict, and Marx predicted that the working class would ultimately become conscious of their exploitation and unite to overthrow capitalism. This would bring into being a classless society in which there would no longer be exploitation.

Marx's theory of religion needs to be seen in the context of this general view of society. Whereas functionalism sees religion as a unifying force that strengthens the value consensus and is a feature of all societies, Marxism sees religion as a feature only of class-divided society. As such, there will be no need for religion in classless society and it will disappear.



Religion as ideology

For Marx, ideology is a belief system that distorts people's perception of reality in ways that serve the interests of the ruling class. He argues that the class that controls economic production also controls the production and distribution of ideas in society, through institutions such as the church, the education system and the media.

In Marx's view, religion operates as an ideological weapon used by the ruling class to legitimate (justify) the suffering of the poor as something inevitable and God-given. Religion misleads the poor into believing that their suffering is virtuous and that they will be favoured in the afterlife. For example, according to Christianity, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Such ideas create a *false consciousness* - a distorted view of reality that prevents the poor from acting to change their situation.



Similarly, Lenin (1870-1924) describes religion as 'spiritual gin' - an intoxicant doled out to the masses by the ruling class to confuse them and keep them in their place. In Lenin's view, the ruling class use religion cynically to manipulate the masses and keep them from attempting to overthrow the ruling class by creating a 'mystical fog' that obscures reality.

Religion also legitimates the power and privilege of the dominant class by making their position appear to be divinely ordained. For example, the 16th century idea of the Divine Right of Kings was the belief that the king is God's representative on earth and is owed total obedience. Disobedience is not just illegal, but a sinful challenge to God's authority.

[3] RELIGION & SOCIAL CHANGE

The AQA Specification

The relationship between religious beliefs and social change and stability

- Functionalism: conservative force, inhibition of change, collective conscience, Durkheim and totemism, anomie; civil religions
- Marxism: religion as ideology, legitimating social inequality, disguising exploitation etc
- Weber: religion as a force for social change: theodicies, the Protestant ethic
- Neo-Marxism: religion used by those opposing the ruling class, liberation theology
- Feminism: religious beliefs supporting patriarchy
- Fundamentalist beliefs: rejecting change by reverting to supposed traditional values and practices.

In the previous topic we examined functionalist, Marxist and feminist theories of religion. In different ways, these theories all see religion as maintaining the status quo, stabilising society as it is and preventing change. Religions have also often been supporters of traditional conservative values, especially in relation to the family, sexuality and personal morality. However, many sociologists argue that religion can also be a powerful force for social change, at least under certain circumstances.

In this Topic, we examine some of these circumstances. The evidence comes from four continents, ranging from the role of 17th century Calvinists in bringing about capitalism in Europe and the 'cargo cults' and anti-colonial movements of the Western Pacific, via the American black civil rights movement and the struggles of Kentucky coalminers, to liberation theology and political change in Latin America. We examine the theories sociologists have developed to account for the role of religion in bringing about change.

Religion as a conservative force

Religion can be seen as a conservative force in two different senses:

- It is often seen as conservative in the sense of being 'traditional', defending traditional customs, institutions, moral views, roles etc. In other words, *it upholds traditional beliefs* about how society should be organised.
- It is conservative because *it functions to conserve or preserve things as they are*. It stabilises society and maintains the status quo.

Religion's conservative beliefs

Most religions have traditional conservative beliefs about moral issues and many of them oppose changes that would allow individuals more freedom in personal and sexual matters. For example, the Catholic Church forbids divorce, abortion and artificial contraception. It opposes gay marriage and condemns homosexual behaviour.

Similarly, most religions uphold 'family values' and often favour a traditional patriarchal domestic division of labour. For example, the belief that the man should be the head of the family is embedded in the traditional marriage ceremony of the Church of England dating from 1602. The bride vows to 'love, honour and obey', but the groom is only required to 'love and honour'. Since 1966, the bride has been allowed to drop the vow to 'obey' her husband if she wishes.

Criticisms

Berger (1999) has changed his views and now argues that diversity and choice actually stimulate interest and participation in religion. For example, the growth of evangelicalism in Latin America and the New Christian Right in the USA point to the continuing vitality of religion, not its decline.

Beckford (2003) agrees with the idea that religious diversity will lead some to question or even abandon their religious beliefs, but this is not inevitable. Opposing views can have the effect of strengthening a religious group's commitment to its existing beliefs rather than undermining them.

A spiritual revolution?

Some sociologists argue that a 'spiritual revolution' is taking place today, in which traditional Christianity is giving way to 'holistic spirituality' or New Age beliefs and practices that emphasise personal development and subjective experience. Increased interest in spirituality can be seen in the growth of a 'spiritual market', with an explosion in the number of books about self-help and spirituality, and the many practitioners who offer consultations, courses and 'therapies', ranging from meditation to crystal healing. Table 1A identifies the key differences between religion and spirituality.

In their study of Kendal in Cumbria, Heelas and Woodhead investigate whether traditional religion has declined and, if so, how far the growth of spirituality is compensating for this. They distinguish between two groups:

- **The congregational domain** of traditional and evangelical Christianity.
- **The holistic milieu** of spirituality and the New Age.

They found that in 2000, in a typical week, 7.9% of the population attended church and 1.6% took part in the activities of the holistic milieu. However, within the congregational domain, the traditional churches were losing support, while evangelical churches were holding their own and faring relatively well. Although fewer were involved in the holistic milieu, it was growing. Heelas and Woodhead offer an explanation for these trends:

- New Age spirituality has grown because of a massive *subjective turn* in today's culture. This involves a shift away from the idea of doing your duty and obeying external authority, to exploring your inner self by following a spiritual path.
- As a result traditional religions, which demand duty and obedience, are declining. As Heelas and Woodhead put it: *'Religion that tells you what to believe and how to behave is out of tune with a culture which believes it is up to us to seek out answers for ourselves.'*
- Evangelical churches are more successful than the traditional churches. They both demand discipline and duty, but the evangelicals also emphasise the importance of spiritual healing and personal growth through the experience of being 'born again'.

In the spiritual marketplace, therefore, the winners are those who appeal to personal experience as the only genuine source of meaning and fulfilment, rather than the received teachings and commandments of traditional religion. Nevertheless, Heelas and Woodhead argue that a spiritual revolution has not taken place. Although the holistic milieu has grown in popularity since the 1970s, its growth has not compensated for the decline of traditional religion. They therefore conclude that secularisation is occurring in Britain, because the subjective turn has undermined the basis of traditional religion.



EXAM QUESTION



Practice Questions on Religion in a Global Context

Assess sociological explanations of the relationship between globalisation and religion.
(18 marks)

The examiner's advice

This question carries 6 A01 marks (knowledge and understanding) and 12 A02 marks (interpretation and application, and 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 Latin America (and evaluate by referring to 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 view using Jackson, Armstrong or others.



Cultural defence

Bruce (2002) argues that religion in such situations offers support and a sense of cultural identity in an uncertain or hostile environment. As Bird (1999) notes, religion among minorities can be a basis for community solidarity, a means of preserving one's culture and language, and a way of coping with oppression in a racist society. In the case of black African and Caribbean Christians, many found that white churches in the UK did not actively welcome them and some turned to founding or joining black-led churches, especially Pentecostal churches.



Cultural Transition

Religion can also be a means of easing the transition into a new culture by providing support and a sense of community for minority groups in their new environment. This is the explanation Will Herberg (1955) gives for high levels of religious participation among first-generation immigrants in the USA. Bruce sees a similar pattern in the history of immigration into the UK, where religion has provided a focal point for Irish, African Caribbean, Muslim, Hindu and other communities. However once a group - such as Irish Catholics, for example - has made the transition into the wider society, religion may lose its role and decline in importance.



Ken Pryce's (1979) study of the African Caribbean community in Bristol shows both cultural defence and cultural transition have been important. He argues that Pentecostalism is a highly adaptive 'religion of the oppressed' that provided migrants with values appropriate to the new world in which they found themselves. Pentecostalism helped African Caribbeans to adapt to British society, playing a kind of 'Protestant ethic' role in helping its members succeed by encouraging self-reliance and thrift. It gave people mutual support and hope of improving their situation. On the other hand, Rastafarianism represented a different response for some African Caribbeans radically rejecting the wider society as racist and exploitative.

Age and Religiosity

The general pattern of religious participation is that the older a person is, the more likely they are to attend religious services. However, as Table 3 shows, there are two exceptions to this pattern - the under 15s and the over 65s:

- **The under 15s** are more likely to go to church than other age groups because they may be made to do so by their parents.
- **The over 55s** are more likely to be sick or disabled and thus unable to attend. Higher death rates also make this a smaller group, which also reduces the total number 'available' to attend.

Open belief systems

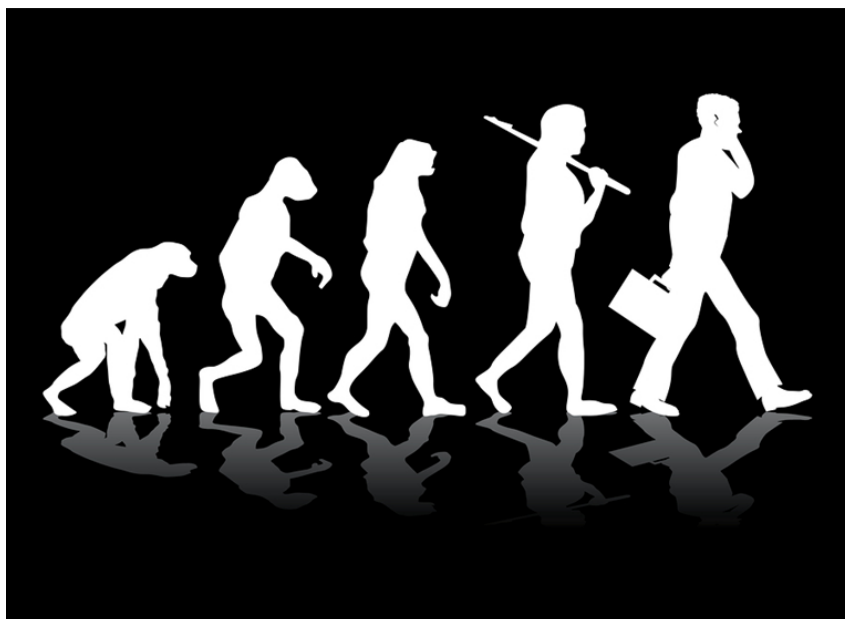
Why has science been successful in explaining and controlling the world? According to Sir Karl Popper (1959), science is an 'open' belief system where every scientist's theories are open to scrutiny, criticism and testing by others. Science is governed by the principle of *falsificationism*. That is, scientists set out to try and falsify existing theories, deliberately seeking evidence that would disprove them. If the evidence from an experiment or observation contradicts a theory and shows it to be false, the theory can be discarded and the search for a better explanation can begin. In science, knowledge-claims live or die by the evidence.

In Poppers view discarding falsified knowledge-claims is what enables scientific understanding of the world to grow. Scientific knowledge is *cumulative* - it builds on the achievements of previous scientists to develop a greater and greater understanding of the world around us. As the discoverer of the law of gravity, Sir Isaac Newton, put it, 'If I have been able to see so far, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants' - that is, on the discoveries of his predecessors.

However, despite the achievements of great scientists such as Newton, no theory is ever to be taken as definitely true - there is always a possibility that someone will produce evidence to disprove it. For example, for centuries it was held to be true that the sun revolved around the earth, until Copernicus demonstrated that this knowledge-claim was false. In Popper's view, the key thing about scientific knowledge is that it is not sacred or absolute truth - it can always be questioned, criticised, tested and perhaps shown to be false.



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In a different sense, postmodernists also reject the knowledge-claims of science to have 'the truth'. In the view of Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984), for example, science is one of a number of *meta-narratives* or 'big stories' that falsely claim to possess the truth. Other meta-narratives include religion, Marxism and psychoanalysis. In Lyotard's view, science falsely claims to offer the truth about how the world works as a means of progress to a better society, whereas, in reality, he argues, science is just one more 'discourse' or way of thinking that is used to dominate people. Similarly, rather like Marxists, some post-modernists argue that science has become *technoscience*, simply serving capitalist interests by producing commodities for profit. (For more on postmodernism, see Chapter 4, Topic 5).

Ideology

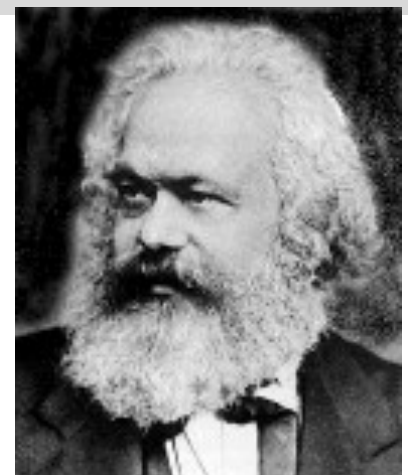
A basic definition of ideology is that it is a worldview or a set of ideas and values - in other words, a belief system. However, the term is very widely used in sociology and has taken on a number of related meanings. These often include negative aspects such as the following:

- Distorted, false or mistaken ideas about the world, or a partial, one-sided or biased view of reality.
- Ideas that conceal the interests of a particular group, or that legitimate (justify) their privileges.
- Ideas that prevent change by misleading people about the reality of the situation they are in or about their own true interests or position.
- A self-sustaining belief system that is irrational and closed to criticism.

Therefore, very often when someone uses the term ideology to describe a belief system, it means they regard it as actually and/or morally wrong. There are a number of theories of ideology. We focus here on three of them.

Marxism and Ideology

Marxism sees society as divided into two opposed classes: a minority capitalist ruling class who own the means of production and control the state, and a majority working class who are propertyless and therefore forced to sell their labour to the capitalists. The capitalist class take advantage of this, exploiting the workers' labour to produce profit. It is therefore in the workers' interests to overthrow capitalism by means of a socialist revolution and replace it with a classless communist society in which the means of production are collectively, not privately, owned and used to benefit society as a whole.



For this revolution to occur, the working class must first become conscious of their true position as exploited 'wage slaves' – they must develop *class consciousness*. However, the ruling class control not only the means of material production (factories, land etc.); they also control the means of production of ideas, through institutions such as education, the mass media and religion. These produce *ruling-class ideology*– ideas that legitimate or justify the status quo (the existing social set-up).

Summary

Science has transformed society but also causes 'manufactured risks'. Popper sees science as an open belief system based on criticism and testing, while religion and witchcraft are self-reinforcing closed systems.

Others argue that science is a closed system that does not permit challenges to its paradigm. Interpretivists argue that scientific knowledge is socially constructed. Marxists and feminists see it as serving dominant interests. Postmodernists regard it as a meta-narrative.

Ideology is a one-sided worldview, legitimating a group's interests or creating false consciousness. Marxists see institutions such as religion and education producing ruling-class ideology and maintaining capitalist hegemony.

Mannheim distinguishes between ideological and utopian thought. He sees the need to create a free-floating intelligentsia. Feminists see patriarchal ideology in science and religion as legitimating gender inequality.

Check your understanding

- 1) What does Popper mean by 'falsificationism'?
- 2) What are the four CUDOS norms?
- 3) In what sense is witchcraft among the Azande a closed belief system?
- 4) Why does the case of Dr Velikovsky suggest that science may be a closed belief system?
- 5) Explain Mannheim's distinction between 'ideological thought' and 'utopian thought'.
- 6) What is false consciousness?
- 7) According to Mannheim, why is there a need for a 'free-floating intelligentsia'?
- 8) What does Gramsci see as the two sides of workers' dual consciousness?





EXAM QUESTION



Practice Questions on Ideology and Science

Assess sociological explanations of science and ideology as belief systems. (33 marks)

The examiner's advice

This question carries 15 A01 marks (knowledge and understanding) and 18 AO2 marks (9 for interpretation and application, and 9 for analysis and evaluation). Start by explaining what is meant by a belief system and giving one or two examples. In dealing with science, begin with Popper's views of it as an open belief system based on falsificationism, and with Merton's CUDOS norms. Contrast this with belief systems such as witchcraft and religion, explaining why they are regarded as 'closed'. You can evaluate Popper by using Kuhn and Interpretivist views of science, and the case of Velikovsky, to suggest that science too is a closed system. You can use Marxism and feminism to link science to ideology, since they see it as a belief system serving the interests of powerful groups. Examine different theories of ideology, such as Marxism, Mannheim and feminism, using appropriate examples (e.g. ideas that justify class or gender inequality)

