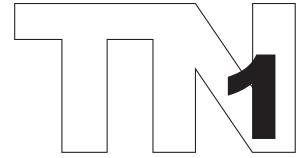


Topic 1

Religion in modern society



This lesson is designed to be given by a sociology teacher. However, if there is no teacher present, students can complete all the worksheets and briefly work through the feedback with a supply teacher, using the answer sheets. The answers can then be discussed in more depth with a sociology teacher in a later lesson. If a sociology teacher is not present, students should have access to a textbook.

Aims

- To introduce students to some of the problems of defining religion
- To introduce students to Marxist, feminist and functionalist perspectives on religion
- To develop students' ability to use contemporary material to evaluate these perspectives
- To get students to think about their own religious beliefs and experiences, and to apply them critically to these perspectives

Resources

- WS1a–WS1d, AS1
- Lined A4 paper
- Sociology textbook

Introduction

25 minutes

- 1 Explain to students that this lesson has four main aims, as above.
- 2 Issue each student with a copy of WS1a and some paper. Ask students to tackle question 1, then give them 5 minutes to think about questions 2–5 and to note down their initial answers on a separate sheet. Give students 5 minutes to compare answers and share ideas. Finally, put students into groups of three or four and give each group 5 minutes to jot down all their ideas for one of the questions 2–5 (one question per group, so you need four groups).
- 3 Go round the groups of students, asking for their answers and writing key points on the board. Students should note these collective answers on their copies of WS1a as feedback is given. Use AS1 for guidance. This feedback section should take 10 minutes.



Main

35 minutes

Session 1

10 minutes

- 4 Issue each student with a copy of WS1b and ask them to work through the sheet. Inform students that they should draw on their knowledge of sociological perspectives from the AS year. Remind students that functionalists tend to see institutions as performing positive functions, while traditional Marxists and feminists tend to see institutions as performing negative functions, since they are run in the interests of the bourgeoisie and men, respectively.
- 5 Go round the class and feed back using AS1 as guidance.

Session 2

15 minutes

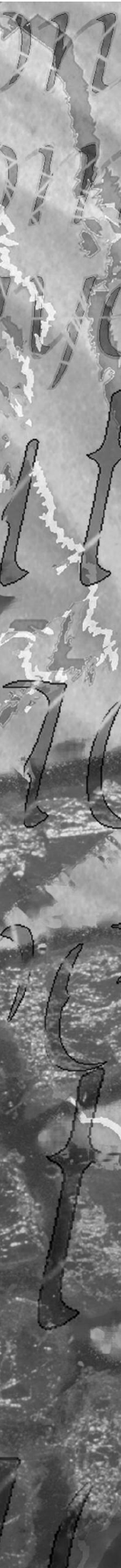
- 6 Issue each student with WS1c. Tell students to get into groups and to discuss their ideas about where religion works in the way that functionalists, Marxists and feminists suggest it does. Tell students not to worry if they draw a complete blank, as they will come across plenty of supporting and opposing evidence later in the course, and they can return to WS1c later to complete the table.
- 7 Go round the groups and get brief feedback from each, putting sensible suggestions on the board. Use AS1 for guidance.

Session 3

10 minutes

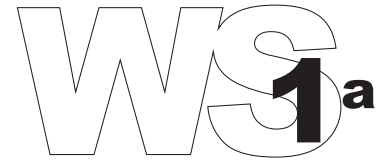
- 8 Issue each student with WS1d and tell them to tick the answers they think are correct.
- 9 To feed back, discuss question 8. Comments that the students should come up with are on AS1.





Topic 1

Religion in modern society



The problem of defining religion

1 Which of the following do you regard as religious events? Tick one box for each event.

Event	Religious	Not religious
a A Sikh family on an outing to the Golden Temple in Amritsar		
b A group of Chelsea supporters going to see Chelsea in the Champions League final		
c Zen monks on a retreat during the week in which Buddha attained enlightenment		
d A non-Sikh family on an outing to the Golden Temple in Amritsar		
e An American family celebrating American Independence Day		
f A Jewish family attending their son's bar mitzvah		
g Druids celebrating the summer solstice at Stonehenge		

Now spend 5 minutes answering the following questions on a separate piece of paper (You will fill in the spaces on the worksheet after class discussion). Work quickly and try to write down at least one idea for each question. After 5 minutes, share your ideas with the person next to you.

2 What distinguishes religious events from non-religious events?

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3 What features are essential when defining religion (for example, 'A belief in God')?

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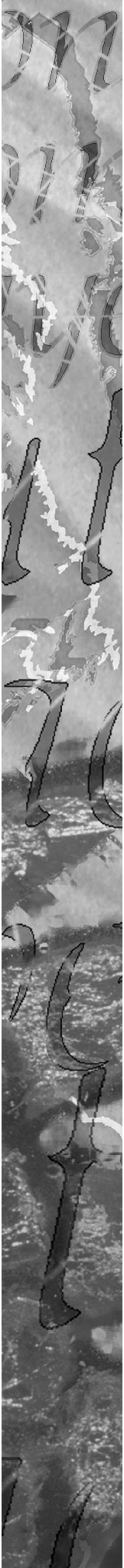
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Topic 1 Religion in modern society

4 Are any of the above features likely to be controversial?

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5 In your own words, suggest one reason why it is difficult to define religion.

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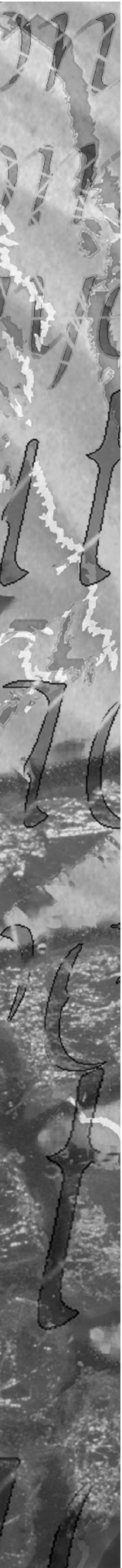
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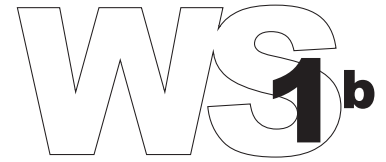
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Topic 1

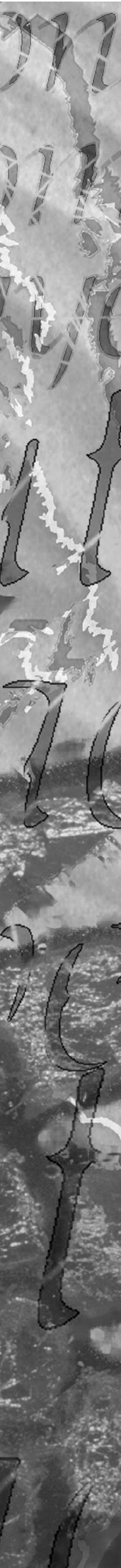
Religion in modern society



Sociological perspectives

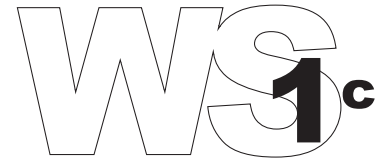
Sort the following statements into functionalist (F), Marxist (M) or feminist (FEM) perspectives.

Statement	F/M/FEM
a Religious worship reinforces a sense of belonging and shared identity because individuals act together and they are reminded that they are all part of the same group.	
b Religion is controlled by the bourgeoisie and reflects their interests.	
c Religion helps people deal with times of major life change, such as marriage, birth and especially death when they might experience anxiety.	
d Christianity is inherently patriarchal, claiming that men are made in the image and glory of God, and women are made for the glory of man.	
e The real cause of the misery of the proletariat is the fact that they are exploited by the bourgeoisie. Religion mystifies this real cause of misery by suggesting that inequality and suffering are the will of God, rather than being man-made.	
f Many religious practices are aimed at curtailing the freedom of women to control their own bodies. The wearing of the hijab in Islam and the position of the Catholic Church on abortion and contraception are two examples of this.	
g Religious rituals help the individual to cope with anxiety. At funerals, for example, close friends and family gather to provide emotional support for the bereaved.	
h Religion provides people with core values that regulate behaviour. The Ten Commandments give us general principles such as 'thou shalt not kill' which govern the way we do things in our day-to-day lives.	
i Religious worship reinforces the idea that society is more important than the individual. While worshipping, the individual is reminded that the group should be put ahead of selfish individual desires.	
j Some of the most prominent characters in the Bible can be interpreted as reinforcing patriarchal ideas through, for example, promoting the virtues of motherhood and warning us of the dangers of female sexuality.	
k Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.	
l Religion helps to relieve anxiety caused by events that people cannot control or that disrupt life. In this way, threats to social order are nullified.	
m Religion legitimates class inequality by suggesting that inequality is the will of God.	
n Religion has answers to big questions such as 'where do we go after death?' and 'why does evil exist?'	



Topic 1

Religion in modern society



Sociological perspectives: contemporary evidence

In A2 sociology, even more than at AS, you are required to think of evidence to support your arguments. There are many examples that offer support for the perspectives on WS1b.

In pairs, briefly discuss your ideas and fill in the table below. Spend 5 minutes on this activity and try to write down at least two ideas for each perspective. The statements on WS1b will help you. Don't worry if there are gaps — there will be many examples to add later, as you work your way through the module. Some examples are provided to start you off.

Perspective	Examples of where religion functions in this way
Functionalism Religion can perform positive functions for the individual and society.	For many ethnic minorities in the UK, religion provides a sense of identity and belonging.
Marxism Religion legitimates class inequality.	According to the Hindu belief in reincarnation and karma, one's position in this life is determined by one's actions in a past life.
Feminism Religion reinforces a patriarchal system of norms and values.	The Catholic Church is against abortion and contraception, denying women control of their own bodies.

Topic 1

Religion in modern society



WS1a The problem of defining religion

The following answers are for guidance only.

1

Event	Religious	Not religious
a A Sikh family on an outing to the Golden Temple in Amritsar	✓	
b A group of Chelsea supporters going to see Chelsea in the Champions League final		✓
c Zen monks on a retreat during the week in which Buddha attained enlightenment	✓	
d A non-Sikh family on an outing to the Golden Temple in Amritsar		✓
e An American family celebrating American Independence Day		✓
f A Jewish family attending their son's bar mitzvah	✓	
g Druids celebrating the solstice at Stonehenge	✓	

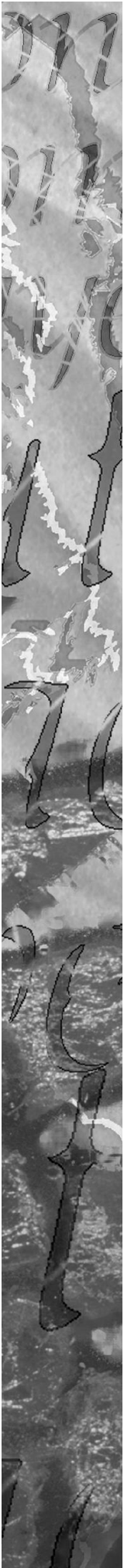
- 2 Religious events can be distinguished from non-religious events in several ways:
- For something to be religious it has to have a special meaning to the participants. There is a sense of the sacred or the holy, set apart from daily life.
 - There is normally a 'deeper meaning' behind taking part in a religious ceremony that relates back to the core beliefs of that person's religion. The term 'bar mitzvah', for instance, literally means 'one to whom the commandments apply'.
 - These beliefs often answer 'big questions' such as 'what is the meaning of life?' and 'what happens after death?'
 - Of course, you may legitimately argue that all of the events listed in question 1 could be regarded as religious by their participants. To do so, your definition of religion would need to be very broad.
- 3 Answers could include the following:
- belief in God or higher power
 - shared institutions
 - a set of rules/moral guidelines
 - shared practices
 - a sense of the sacred
- 4 The following characteristics may be controversial:
- the belief in 'a creator' God, because there is no such God in Buddhism
 - the sense of the sacred because some people hold things such as football sacred

Topic 1 Religion in modern society

AS1

- 5 The main point to begin with is that there is such a huge variety of religious beliefs and practices that it is difficult to come up with one definition that encompasses them all. More specifically, the following points can be made:
- You have to be careful not to be so prescriptive that you exclude things that should be included, such as Buddhism.
 - You have to be specific enough not to include things that shouldn't really be included such as a belief that football is sacred.

It would be useful at this stage to refer students to Durkheim's definition of religion as a good working definition (in M. Haralambos and M. Holborn, 6th edn (2004) *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*).



WS1b Sociological perspectives

Statement	F/M/FEM
a Religious worship reinforces a sense of belonging and shared identity because individuals act together and they are reminded that they are all part of the same group.	F
b Religion is controlled by the bourgeoisie and reflects their interests.	M
c Religion helps people deal with times of major life change, such as marriage, birth and especially death when they may experience anxiety.	F
d Christianity is inherently patriarchal, claiming that men are made in the image and glory of God, and women are made for the glory of man.	FEM
e The real cause of the misery of the proletariat is the fact that they are exploited by the bourgeoisie. Religion mystifies this real cause of misery by suggesting that inequality and suffering are the will of God, rather than being man-made.	M
f Many religious practices are aimed at curtailing the freedom of women to control their own bodies. The wearing of the hijab in Islam and the position of the Catholic Church on abortion and contraception are two examples of this.	FEM
g Religious rituals help the individual to cope with anxiety. At funerals, for example, close friends and family gather to provide emotional support for the bereaved.	F
h Religion provides people with core values that regulate behaviour. The Ten Commandments give us general principles such as 'thou shalt not kill' which govern the way we do things in our day-to-day lives.	F
i Religious worship reinforces the idea that society is more important than the individual. While worshipping, the individual is reminded that the group should be put ahead of selfish individual desires.	F
j Some of the most prominent characters in the Bible can be interpreted as reinforcing patriarchal ideas through, for example, promoting the virtues of motherhood and warning us of the dangers of female sexuality.	FEM
k Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.	M
l Religion helps to relieve anxiety caused by events that people cannot control or that disrupt life. In this way, threats to social order are nullified.	F
m Religion legitimates class inequality by suggesting that inequality is the will of God.	M
n Religion has answers to big questions such as 'where do we go after death?' and 'why does evil exist?'	F

WS1c Sociological perspectives: contemporary evidence

Below are just a few suggestions; students may well have more.

Perspective	Examples of where religion functions in this way
Functionalism Religion can perform positive functions for the individual and society.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ For many ethnic minorities in the UK, religion provides a sense of identity and belonging. ➤ The Ten Commandments still form the basis of the law and ordinary morality for most people. ➤ The Church is a source of belonging for many elderly people in the UK.
Marxism Religion legitimates class inequality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ According to the Hindu belief in reincarnation and karma one's position in this life is determined by one's actions in a past life. ➤ Some 80% of bishops in the UK went to public schools. ➤ The sixth verse of 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' justifies inequality by stating: 'The rich man in his castle; the poor man at his gate; God made them high and lowly; To each their own estate' although this verse has been removed from modern hymn books.
Feminism Religion reinforces a patriarchal system of norms and values.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Religion reinforces a patriarchal system of norms and values. The Catholic Church is against abortion and contraception, denying women control of their own bodies. ➤ Women cover up in Islam more than men. ➤ Most of the major figures in the Bible are men.

WS1d Religion in the UK

- 1 C
- 2 C. 'Jedism' comes from the Jedis in the *Star Wars* films. You could point out that 390,000 people recorded this as their religion, which means it would be the fifth biggest religion in the UK if it were officially recognised — which it isn't!
- 3 B, C and D
- 4 A 5 A 6 A 7 C
- 8 Answers may include the following:
 - There are many religions in the UK, so we should be careful not to over-generalise about the role of religion.
 - Very few people attend Christian churches any more, so it is unlikely that Christianity continues to provide a sense of belonging.
 - Religion in the UK is changing, so we should use caution when concluding anything about its role in modern Britain.
 - Belief in God is still strong but people do not seem to act on their religious beliefs. This suggests that Christianity may still be used to answer big questions, but it probably does not restrain people in the way it once did.