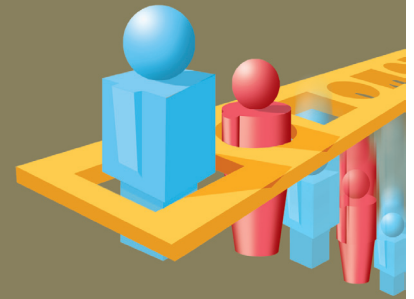# Chapter 9

Sociology of religion

By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

➤ understand inclusive and exclusive definitions of religion and be aware of their uses and limitations

➤ examine religious belief, participation and membership as dimensions of religiosity and commitment

➤ compare different types of religious organisations and movements

➤ understand and evaluate functionalist, Marxist, Weberian and postmodern approaches to the role of religion in society

➤ understand and explain the relationship between religiosity and the social categories of class, age, gender and ethnicity

➤ explain the appeal of new religious and New Age movements to different social groups

➤ evaluate arguments for and against the secularisation of society

Key concepts and the changing nature of religious movements in society

What is religion?

The question 'How do we define religion?' initially seems quite straightforward. Most of us would probably begin with the idea that religion involves:

➤ a set of beliefs

➤ a set of practices through which belief is expressed

➤ some form of organisation that allows both practices and beliefs to be collectively expressed

An initial problem, however, is that this could apply to many institutions in our society. A school, for example, involves beliefs about what education is, practices of how we 'do education' and organisation through taking place in classrooms.

To put some religious flesh on these bones we need to qualify these ideas:

➢ **Beliefs**: These might include a belief in 'God' (or at least some kind of 'supernatural force or being' that exists over and above human beings).
➢ **Practices**: These might involve things like collective worship and prayer, which could include ceremonies (such as weddings or funerals) and festivals (such as Christmas).
➢ **Organisation**: Here we could point to 'special places' reserved for the expression of religious beliefs and practices (such as a church, mosque or meeting hall) and also people (such as vicars, priests and imams) employed in some capacity (paid or voluntary) by a religious organisation to take services or generally look after the well-being of the religious.

While this gets us closer to answering our initial question — we have identified some features of religion that make it different to institutions like education or the family — this formulation has a number of problems.

In terms of beliefs, some forms of religion are:

➢ **monotheistic** — with a belief in a single God (**Christianity**, **Judaism** and **Islam,** for example)
➢ **polytheistic** — with a belief in many gods (such as **paganism**)
➢ **non-theistic** — they do not involve worshipping a 'god' or 'gods'. The North American Sioux, for example, understood the world in terms of Waken Beings or Powers — the expression of anything they found 'incomprehensible'

For some religions 'god' is:

➢ **external** to the individual (as in Christianity)
➢ **internal** to the individual (the ultimate aim of some religions is to reveal our 'inner spirituality')

In terms of practices, some religions involve, for example:

➢ **personal communication** with God through prayer
➢ **communal worship** (for example, Christianity)
➢ **exorcism** — whereby 'evil spiritual entities' are evicted from a person or place they 'possess' (the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, for example)
➢ **baptism of the dead** (for example, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — 'Mormons')

In terms of organisation, some forms of religion are:

➢ **Highly organised**: Catholicism has a highly developed structure with paid workers employed at various levels in a **corporate hierarchy** (with the Pope at its head supported by cardinals). Catholicism also has a strict form of **doctrine** (a set of beliefs

and principles to which the practitioner must adhere (for example, contraception is forbidden).

➤ **Loosely organised**: Hinduism is a **religious belief system** involving a multitude of groups, some connected, some not, built around the central idea of a 'universal soul'. It does not recognise a single set of beliefs or practices.

? Identify and explain two features of religion.

In these respects, religion is characterised by **diversity**. Although it is tempting to see religion as a single (homogeneous) entity, the reality is one of wide variations in beliefs, practices and organisation:

➤ **historically** — in the same society over time
➤ **contemporaneously** — in the same society at the same time
➤ **cross-culturally** — between different societies

These differences help to explain why religion is difficult to define. McGuire (2002) suggests definitional problems arise because of the 'dual character' of religion, which is:

➤ **Individual**: Religions involve a diversity of beliefs and practices in addition to a variety of ways to 'be religious', some of which involve the communal practice of religious beliefs (such as attending religious ceremonies), others of which do not (it is possible, for example, to be a 'Christian' without ever setting foot inside a church).
➤ **Social**: Religions perform certain **functions** for society:
  ➤ **socialisation** (into a range of moral beliefs and values)
  ➤ **social solidarity** (giving people a sense that they have things in common)
  ➤ **social control** (both direct controls — such as Islamic codes defining what people may wear or eat — and indirect controls — Christian moral values provide a template for how you are expected to lead your life 'in accordance with God')

In this light, Hutchinson (1981) argues 'Definitions of religion are as numerous as there are students of religion' and they 'illustrate the oriental parable of the blind men describing the elephant, each taking hold of part of the beast and defining the whole in terms of this part. Like the elephant, religion is a large and complex phenomenon'.

? Suggest two reasons why religion can be difficult to define.

If we follow the logic of the elephant analogy, any definition of religion has to avoid focusing too closely on any particular part of religious behaviour (such as beliefs, practices or organisational forms) in isolation from other parts. As a 'large and complex phenomenon', religion has to be defined and understood in terms of how the various parts of the whole both relate to and impact on each other. There are two distinctive approaches to understanding religious behaviour, inclusive and exclusive.

Inclusive approaches

Inclusive approaches see religion in the broadest possible terms by focusing on the **needs** (both social and individual) that they see religious beliefs, practices and organisations as existing to satisfy.

Rather than define religion in terms of 'what it is' (a precise set of beliefs and practices specific to 'religion'), this approach focuses on 'what it does' for both the individual (such as providing answers to the question 'what happens when we die?') and, equally importantly, for society. Durkheim (1912), for example, saw religion as fulfilling two important functions:

➢ **Social solidarity**: How religion creates a feeling of 'belonging' to a particular society or social group — by providing individuals with **shared beliefs and values** (they all worship the 'same God', for example) or acting as a source of personal and social identity (by specifying a moral code to follow, such as the Ten Commandments in Christianity).

➢ **Social integration**: The specific ways social solidarity is created, through **social mechanisms** like shared practices and experiences such as church services and ceremonies (weddings, christenings and funerals).

Inclusive approaches generally involve a **functional** definition of religion: they focus on what religion does as a way of identifying its general characteristics as a **system of beliefs**.

System of beliefs

The specific content of someone's beliefs is not important (it does not matter, for example, if they pray to the 'One True God', supernatural forces that control the movement of the planets, a race of hyper-intelligent aliens from the planet Zog or Manchester United Football Club). What is important is that they hold beliefs that influence how and why they behave in particular ways. Worshipping in a Christian church or Muslim mosque is no different to worshipping at the cathedral of Old Trafford; as Cline (2005) puts it: 'If your belief system plays some particular role either in your social life, in your society, or in your psychological life, then it is a religion; otherwise, it's something else.'

Football has many features of a religion in its beliefs, practices and organisation

Inclusive approaches, therefore, see religion in both:

➢ **conventional** ways, such as a belief in the existence of God

➢ **unconventional** ways, in forms people do not normally consider to be 'religious'; political ideologies (such as capitalism or communism) can be included as 'religious-type' belief systems, because their overriding characteristic is **faith**

Faith

Like conventional forms of religion, political ideologies require their followers to obey certain articles and principles of faith, often in return for some promised goal. For some religions this is a place in heaven (Christianity) or rebirth into a higher social position (Hinduism), whereas in a 'political faith' such as communism the promised goal is a fairer, more equal (*egalitarian*) society.

Function over form

For inclusive approaches, the way beliefs differ in terms of their specific content is less important than the fact that they function in similar ways. Sharing beliefs — religious or non-religious (**secular**) — promotes the idea of belonging to a community of 'like-minded individuals' bound together by common beliefs, norms and values.

As we have seen, Durkheim suggested that religion functioned in ways that promoted social solidarity and integration (and he took the inclusive approach to what is probably its most extreme position when he argued that 'in worshipping a god' what people are really doing is worshipping the idea of 'society' — an idea to which we will return). In this respect, Haviland et al. (2005) identify examples of two types of religious function:

➢ **Religious rituals** (such as christenings, marriages and funerals). These 'ritualistic aspects' of social life play a significant role in 'marking important life transitions'. In some forms of Judaism, for example, the bar mitzvah (for boys aged 13) and bat mitzvah (for girls aged 12) symbolise a religious **rite of passage** (a ceremony marking the passing between life stages) from childhood to adulthood.
➢ **Intensification rites** function to 'mark group occasions' and involve the 'expression and affirmation of common values'. In other words, religious ceremonies or festivals have an integration function, binding people through the beliefs and practices they share.

An extension to this general approach is one that focuses on how people (in different societies and at different times) 'define a situation' as being religious. In other words, rather than a sociologist creating a 'definition of religion' against which to measure the extent to which some forms of behaviour are 'religious', definitions simply develop, according to Blasi (1998), out of how people define their own behaviour. Religion and religious behaviour, from this viewpoint, are effectively whatever people claim them to be. Luckmann (1967), for example, considers any system of belief that explains the nature of the social or natural world to be a form of religion.

Evaluation

Uses

➢ **Diversity**: Inclusive approaches overcome the problem of producing a definition that covers all aspects of religious behaviour. We do not have to account for every tiny variation in beliefs and behaviours to develop a workable definition of religion.

➢ **Purpose**: The focus is always on understanding what religion does for the individual and society, rather than simply documenting varieties of belief, behaviour and practice.

➢ **Scope**: By combining a workable definition with an understanding of why societies develop religious beliefs and practices, we have a starting point for the analysis and explanation of why many people are religious.

Limitations

➢ Religion is 'everywhere and nowhere'; we can see 'religious-type' behaviour in everything (from football to shopping to church attendance) yet not be able to identify precisely those aspects of behaviour that are uniquely religious.

➢ **Secularisation**: We have no way of telling whether society is becoming less religious or more religious (resacrilisation).

➢ **Measurement**: Religion effectively becomes whatever people say it is, which again impacts on our ability to measure religious behaviour (**religiosity** — see below) in any meaningful way.

Exclusive approaches

Exclusive approaches consider religion in a narrower way, usually in terms of beliefs (god or the supernatural) and behaviours (praying, collective worship) that we would conventionally see as 'religious'. They exclude 'quasi-religious' behaviour that might serve a similar purpose or function to religion but which is not actually religious in the strict sense of the term.

For example, the worshipful behaviour we see in a church and at Old Trafford when Manchester United are playing Liverpool might look similar: both congregations are paying homage to beings ('God' on the one hand, Wayne Rooney on the other) seen as special and worthy of veneration — but the similarity is superficial. If we dig deeper into this behaviour we get at the essence of religion — the idea that religious beliefs are *qualitatively* different to other forms of belief.

Exclusive approaches involve a **substantive definition** focused on the content (or substance) of religion — the things (beliefs, ceremonies and the like) that are distinctively religious behaviours and which, in turn, mark religious behaviour as different to other behaviours. In this respect, Beckford (1980) characterises exclusive approaches as 'restricting the term "religion" to phenomena displaying definite properties which do not occur together in other phenomena'.

Substantive definitions hold that religion has essential characteristics. Eliade (1987), for example, argues religion involves:

➢ the **sacred** (or special — what Maguire (2001) defines as 'that which is utterly and mysteriously precious in our experience') and the **profane** (or everyday), seen as important religious distinctions

➢ **codes of values** with a sacred origin (such as the Ten Commandments given to Moses by God)

➢ **communication** with the supernatural (through mechanisms such as prayer)

Luckmann (1967) argues region is a unique **belief system** (an **ideology** or way of explaining something) because it:

➢ explains the individual's place in the world

➢ provides a sense of moral and political order

➢ explains 'why we are here' (and what happens when we die)

Durkheim (1912), in addition to the distinction between the sacred and profane, noted how religion involves:

➢ **symbols** invoking feelings of reverence or awe linked to rituals or ceremonies practised by a community of believers

➢ **collective ceremonies** that occur in special places, such as churches, temples or grounds, that have been religiously dedicated

Evaluation

Uses

Exclusive approaches key into what people conventionally think about 'religion' in the sense of seeing it as behaviour that is both special and different.

Where we can substantively define religious behaviour, we are able to measure levels of religious behaviour in a society — to test whether society is becoming secularised or resacrilised.

Limitations

The question is whether religion does have unique and exclusive features. As we have just seen, there doesn't seem to be a great deal of agreement over what they might be.

Exclusive approaches simply adopt a definition of religion that fits mainstream world religions (such as Christianity or Islam). 'Religion' is defined as whatever these religions say it is in terms of their beliefs, practices and organisation. This creates two problems:

➢ Such organisations have a vested interest in ensuring the product they are 'selling' (religious experience) is both unique and has limited competition.

➢ To identify the 'unique characteristics' of religion the definition is drawn so narrowly it not only excludes behaviours not conventionally seen as religious but also behaviour that has some characteristics of mainstream religion. Scientology, for example, makes no distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane' and has

no concept of 'God' as understood by Christianity. It does, however, focus on ideas about spirituality that are religious in nature.

> **?** Suggest and explain two differences between inclusive and exclusive approaches to religion.

Religiosity

One reason for defining religion is to help us gain some idea about levels of religious belief and behaviour in a society (**religiosity**), and to do this we need to identify **indicators** of religiosity that can be measured. Following McGuire's (2002) notion of the 'dual character' of religion, these need to be:

➢ **individual** indicators, such as whether someone holds religious beliefs and whether these are orthodox (believing in a single all-powerful deity, for example) or unorthodox (such as believing in witchcraft)

➢ **social** indicators that measure things like religious participation (attendance at religious services) and membership.

While there are many different indicators, Cornwall et al. (1986) identify three broad dimensions of religiosity that, taken as a whole, represent an overall level of religious **commitment**:

➢ **knowing** (or *cognition*) — the '**belief dimension**' to commitment

➢ **feeling** (or *affect*) — a specific measure of commitment to both an individual's beliefs and any religious organisation they identify with

➢ **doing** (or *behaviour*) — a measure of religious **participation/membership** as an indicator of commitment

C ognition
A ffect
B ehaviour
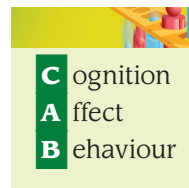
> **?** Define the concept of religiosity

We can examine each of these dimensions of religiosity and commitment in turn:

Religious belief

When measuring religiosity we have to take into account the fact that it's possible, as Davie (1994) has argued, to:

➢ **Believe without belonging**: People can hold religious beliefs while showing little or no commitment to religious organisations or practices. Millions of people in our society quite happily believe in 'God' without ever attending a religious service.

➢ **Belong without believing**: People can attend religious services without necessarily having any strongly developed religious belief; religious practice may have **secular functions**, with people attending services for reasons of friendship, social status, tradition and so forth.

While uncovering religious beliefs involves **reliability** problems (for example, do 'religious beliefs' mean the same thing to everyone?), one good indicator we can use, as Hughes and Church (2010) note, is whether people believe in a 'higher being':

➢ If they do, this indicates that they hold some form of religious belief.
➢ If they don't, this suggests they are unlikely to hold further beliefs we could classify as religious.

YouGov (2007) reported that for adults aged 18 and over:

➢ 26% 'believe in "something" but I'm not sure what'
➢ 16% agreed they were atheist ('The whole notion of a supernatural God is nonsense')
➢ 22% 'believe in a personal God who created the world and hears my prayers'
➢ 6% 'believe in a God who created everything but then left us to get on with it'
➢ 30% 'didn't know', envied 'those who did believe' or were agnostic (they 'don't think it is possible to know if there is a God or not').

Overall, 54% expressed a belief in some kind of 'higher being'.

The British Social Attitudes Survey (2008), on the other hand, found that 47% agreed 'religion played a somewhat, very or extremely important part' in their life:

➢ 32% somewhat important
➢ 10% very important
➢ 5% extremely important

Over 50% of respondents, therefore, did not feel religion played any kind of role in their life, while only 15% felt religion played a significant part in their life.

The evidence suggests, therefore, that while religion does play a part in some people's lives — and 'most people' seem to have a concept of some kind of 'God' or 'force' — these beliefs are neither particularly strong nor based on a particular set of religious convictions (such Christianity or Islam).

Religious participation (attendance and membership)

The idea of 'belonging' to a particular religion can be expressed in terms of the extent to which people participate in religious activities through **attendance** and **membership**.

Attendance

Knowledge of attendance at religious services/meetings relies on data supplied by religious organisations, such as counting people who attend services or meetings. Hewitt (2010), for example, argues that comparative rates of religious attendance for mainstream religious organisations in Britain show: 'The church in this country is no longer in decline. The latest statistics...clearly show stability in church attendance and even signs of growth'. Hewitt notes:

➢ Church of England monthly attendance in 2008 was 1.67 million compared with 1.71 million in 2001

➤ Catholic Church weekly Mass attendance in England and Wales was 919,000 in 2008 (a slight rise from 915,000 in 2007)
➤ Baptist Church attendance has risen from 149,000 per week in 2002 to 154,000 in 2008.

Reliability

Although this type of data is useful, it cannot simply be taken at face value. It hides a range of methodological problems relating to both how it is created and how we interpret its meaning and significance.

Definitions

Counting religious attendance is not straightforward. There are many different religious organisations in Britain (the 2001 census identified around 170 distinct religions, ranging in size from 42 million Christians to 99 Voodoo practitioners, and they frequently use different ways of defining and counting attendance.

Some definitions use weekly and/or monthly attendance figures (some of which are simply estimates which, as Bates (2005) notes, have been compiled by 'accepting a vicar's assessments or headcounts on a particular day'). They may also involve counting regular attendees repeatedly, rather than 'unique attenders'.

Others use an 'average attendance' figure based on the number attending throughout the year. Such figures can be inflated by higher attendances at Easter and Christmas, for example.

Samples are frequently used to generalise monthly or yearly averages; they are a snapshot of attendance rather than a precise and accurate count of all attendances.

Hewitt argues there is evidence to suggest 'unconventional' forms of attendance (such as meetings attended by evangelical groups within mainstream religions) are not accurately counted.

Comparisons

The lack of a standard way to count attendance means that it is difficult to track changes over time, even for the same organisation, which makes estimates of changing religious attendance unreliable.

An alternative way of estimating attendance is through social surveys — asking people about their attendance. This should give us a picture of attendance that has greater validity for two reasons:

➤ Questions can be **standardised** and this increased level of reliability gives us greater confidence that attendance figures measure what they claim to measure.
➤ Attendance can be **objectively** measured; people simply have to record whether they attended a religious service or meeting.

In terms of 'attendance at church services or meetings' (excluding 'special occasions' such as weddings, funerals and baptisms), Hughes and Church (2010) note that 57% 'never or practically never' attend. Of the 43% who do participate:

➤ 20% attend regularly (at least once a month)

➤ 17% attend irregularly (at least once or twice a year)

➤ 6% attend 'less often than once a year'

Other surveys broadly support some of these figures. Tearfund (2007), a Christian research agency, found:

➤ 59% 'never or practically never go to church'

➤ 10% of the UK adult population go to church at least weekly (which could be in line with Hughes and Church's analysis)

Evaluation

Surveys are not without their problems. Hadaway and Marler (1998) note American opinion poll data about 'religious attendance' showed significant discrepancies between the numbers 'claiming to attend services' and those who actually attended.

In Britain, the National Secular Society (2010) noted 'people tend to "over-claim" when asked about virtuous behaviour'; around 1.3 million Catholic respondents claimed to attend church services at least once a month — compared with a figure of around 840,000 calculated by Christian research (Hewitt). Furlong (2002) has also noted: 'people questioned about how much they go to church, give figures which, if true, would add up to twice those given by the churches'.

In this respect, it is interesting to note the Tearfund survey also found:

➤ 15% attend church at least monthly

➤ 26% attend church at least yearly

These figures are significantly different to those reported by Hughes and Church, which suggests that while data for those who attend frequently or not at all is broadly reliable, it becomes less so for those who attend infrequently.

> **?** Suggest one problem with using religious beliefs as a measure of religious commitment.

Membership

Membership figures should be a more *reliable* and *valid* measurement of participation because they count those who actually join a religious organisation. However, these figures are complicated by different interpretations of the 'meaning of membership'.

The 2001 census, for example, suggests around 72% (41 million) of the British population self-identify as 'Christian'; the figure for 'Muslim' is 1.5 million and 'Jewish' 270,000. The **methodological** problem here is that 'membership' is confused by **cultural factors** — such as identifying 'religious membership' with **ethnic identity**. In the case of Christian identification, people are likely to self-identify as belonging to this religion on the basis that 'Christianity' is equated with 'being British' or 'British identity'. When questioned about religious identity outside this particular context, the British Social Attitudes Survey (Crabtree, 2009) found around 50% of the population say they have 'no religion'. It's important, therefore, to distinguish between active members

and those simply counted as 'members' on the basis of being born in a country where a particular church is the official (state or established) religion.

Membership figures are further complicated by:

➤ **Size**: Smaller religious organisations are more difficult to research (there are many, with relatively small, but active, memberships).
➤ **Organisation**: Some religious organisations do not hold services or enrol members. They may, instead, have:
  ➤ clients — people who buy a particular course of teaching
  ➤ customers who purchase a particular product or service from time to time

While we may not define these as mainstream religions, they nevertheless claim to be religious organisations whose 'membership' we can only estimate or take on trust.

➤ **Secrecy**: Smaller religious organisations are more reluctant to divulge their membership numbers to 'outside researchers' (where such figures are available they have to be 'taken on trust').

S ize
O rganisation
S ecrecy

> **?** Suggest one problem with using religious membership as a measure of religious commitment.

Religious commitment

The indicators of commitment we have outlined are subject to such a range of qualifications that to gain a valid understanding of religiosity in our society we need to look further at the substance of 'belief and belonging', in terms of specific indicators of religious commitment ('feeling') — the extent to which people feel they belong to a particular religion.

One way to do this is through a **commitment scale**, an example of which is provided by Abrams et al. (1985) when they suggest we can measure commitment in terms of four key variables (Table 9.1).

Table 9.1 Measuring religious commitment

1 Disposition	2 Orthodox belief
Do you:	I believe in:
…often think about the meaning of life?	…God.
…think life is meaningless?	…sin.
…often think about death?	…soul.
…often regret doing wrong?	…heaven.
…need moments of prayer, etc.?	…life after death.
…see yourself as a religious person?	…a spirit or life force.
…draw comfort/strength from religion?	…the devil.
…think God is important in your life?	I accept commandments demanding:

1 Disposition	2 Orthodox belief
…have spiritual experiences?	…no other gods.
…have superstitions?	…reverence of God's name.
…believe in predestination?	…the holy Sabbath.
3 Moral values	**4 Institutional attachment**
Absolute guidelines on good and evil exist.	I have great confidence in the church/synagogue/temple/mosque.
I accept commandments against:	The church/synagogue/temple/mosque answers my:
…killing.	…moral problems.
…adultery.	…family problems.
…stealing.	…spiritual needs.
…lying.	I attend a religious service at least monthly.
Terrorism may be justified.	I identify with a particular religion.
The following acts are never justified:	I believe religion:
…claiming benefits illegally.	…is important for my society.
…accepting a bribe.	…will be more important in the future.
…taking illegal drugs.	…will be less important in the future.
…homosexuality.	I believe in one true religion.
…euthanasia.	Religious faith is an important value to develop in children.
I always respect those in authority.	People should marry only in a religious setting.
Capital punishment is wrong.	Religion has a political role in society.

Source: Abrams et al. (1985)

Additional indicators of commitment could include:

➢ **Charitable giving**: Jones (2001), for example, argues: 'Giving is highly responsive to religious commitment as measured by either the frequency of attendance at religious services, the perception of being "very religious" or membership in religious groups.'

➢ **Religious styles**, such as the Muslim hijab (a style of female clothing) or Sikh turban. We should, however, keep in mind that this type of indicator may, for some groups, owe more to *cultural practices* (including notions of patriarchy and social control) and *ethnic identity* than religious commitment as such.

Different types of religious institution and movements

In this section we can identify differences within religions in terms of their general organisation and purpose.

Church

This type, examples of which include the Church of England, Roman Catholicism and Islam, can be differentiated from other types in the following ways.

Size

A church is large in terms of membership and attendance. Barrett et al. (2001) note Christian churches worldwide have around 2 billion adherents (around 30% of the world's population), although we need to qualify these statistics in terms of **validity**: they make no real distinction between *active participants* and those simply counted as adherents on the basis of a particular church being the official religion in a country.

Capacity

Capacity refers to the church's ability to influence governments and other religious organisations. Bruce (1995) argues churches have traditionally tried to *dominate all areas of society*, from the way people dress, through how they worship, to the beliefs they hold. Historically in Britain, for example, Christian churches were the only religious organisations recognised and allowed by government. Bruce argues the church's secular influence has generally declined (although there are exceptions, such as Islam in countries like Iran or Saudi Arabia). The gradual separation between church and state has meant a refocusing— away from trying to influence government and back to strictly religious matters.

Organisation

As befits large (national and transnational) organisations, churches are characterised by:

➢ a **formal** internal structure based around paid officials (who may or may not have a religious function), organised in terms of their different **statuses**; the Roman Catholic Church, for example, has a hierarchical structure based around the Pope, the authority of cardinals, and so forth

➢ a **centralised** organisation that specifies things like the dates of religious services, the timing of ceremonies and the collection of 'taxes' (or donations) from congregations

Membership

Membership is **inclusive**. Churches generally allow anyone to join and membership is often assumed rather than necessarily being the result of a conscious choice. Inclusion is encouraged by:

➢ **ceremonies** such as baptism and confirmation (in Christian churches)

➢ **conversions** from one religion to another; these are normally welcomed, if not always actively pursued (ex-Prime Minister Tony Blair, for example, converted to Roman Catholicism from the Church of England in 2010)

➢ no membership **tests** or **entry qualifications**

Membership of a church can be an assumption rather than a conscious choice

Social capital

Social capital refers to how people are connected to (or disconnected from) *social networks* and the implications these connections have for what Putnam (2000) calls 'norms of reciprocity' (what people are willing to do for each other). Contemporary churches use social capital to build:

➤ **Bridges** between the church and other religious and secular organisations. They strive, in other words, for inclusiveness — something that involves organisational cooperation and trust. Zmerli (2003) argues this makes contemporary churches:
  ➤ outward-looking — not just concerned with religious matters
  ➤ heterogeneous — they tolerate a range of different beliefs and religious groups; Staples (1998) argues the Protestant Church is characterised by **pluriformity** — by different groups, with varying degrees of freedom, existing within the same general church organisation

Examples of these networks include civil rights movements and ecumenical (cross-church) religious organisations.

➤ **Bonds** between their members. This is a more *exclusive* form of social capital because its main objective is to bind members of a particular organisation together.

Ideology

Churches tend to be in tune with the secular values of the society (they are well **integrated** into secular society). Churches are generally **accommodating** to secular values and authorities. Historically, this has meant aligning themselves with ruling secular powers by offering their support to the political and economic objectives of ruling elites.

> **?** Identify and explain two features of church organisations.

Denomination

Denominations are normally well established in a society and share many of the features of churches. This is not surprising given that, in many cases, churches are also denominations:

➤ Roman Catholicism and Protestantism are denominations of Christianity
➤ Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists are denominations within the Protestant Church
➤ Sunni and Shia are denominations of Islam

A denomination can be broadly characterised as a subgroup within a religion usually created through:

➤ **Schism**: a split between different factions within a church, developing out of:
  ➤ ideological differences — such as how religious beliefs should be interpreted
  ➤ political differences — such as how a church should be organised
  ➤ geographic isolation and separation from the main church that leads to differences in beliefs and practices

- ➤ **Scope**: Denominations are generally loose-knit groups that may, for example, unite geographically dispersed congregations of people who generally share similar beliefs and practices. They rarely claim a monopoly of religious truth and tend to be more tolerant of alternative religious organisations, beliefs and practices.
- ➤ **Inclusiveness**: People may choose to join or they may be born into a denomination (through their parents' membership). As with churches, there are no membership tests; all that is generally required is commitment to the organisation (which may be as little as a 'belief in God').
- ➤ **Organisation**: Although there are variations in the organisation of power and authority (individual Baptist congregations, for example, are generally allowed to develop different beliefs and practices within the overall structure of the denomination), denominations normally develop a **professional clergy** with responsibility for tending to their members. They also tend to be more democratic than other types of religious organisation, although again variation exists; some allow all members to contribute to discussion about denomination affairs, others do not.

> **?** Identify and explain one difference between a denomination and a church.

Sect

Although sects and denominations share some general organisational features (Cody (1988) notes that Methodism began as a sect before evolving into a denomination), we should not overstate the similarities between the two.

Development

Glock and Stark (1965) argue sects normally develop around:

- ➤ **Religious dissent**, which involves things like dissatisfaction (disenchantment) with the prevailing religious orthodoxy or a belief that the 'purity' of a religious organisation's ideals are compromised through contacts with secular authorities.
- ➤ **Social dissent** relates to feelings of individual **deprivation**. Glock and Stark suggest various types of deprivation that lead people to form or join sects:
  - ➤ social — membership can provide status, prestige and power
  - ➤ economic — looking for monetary benefits from membership
  - ➤ ethical — where the values of the individual are not compatible with those of the group or society in which they live, a sect can provide a community of 'like-minded individuals'
  - ➤ psychic — people 'searching for meaning and direction' in their lives find it in the sect's strict religious teachings

S ocial
E conomic
E thical
P sychic

Wilson (1982) relates sect development to rapid **social changes** that disrupt traditional norms and create feelings of confusion and despair for some individuals and groups. Sects offer a 'solution' to these problems by giving people something 'solid and lasting' in which to believe (an idea we'll examine further in terms of religious fundamentalism).

Organisation

Organisation tends to be less formal than with churches/denominations. Sects place more emphasis on:

➤ **Leaders** (who may claim **divine authority**) rather than a professional clergy.
➤ **Regulation** — members' behaviour tends to be highly regulated, usually through strict rules enforced by sect members on each other. Depending on sect size, a leader and his (they are normally men) trusted followers may also take responsibility for rule enforcement.

Size

Sects are small compared to churches or denominations, although size can be difficult to measure reliably:

➤ **Attendance**: Many sects don't hold the types of services common to churches and denominations, something that makes counting members or attendees difficult.
➤ **Membership**: For a variety of reasons sects may decline to disclose their membership numbers. Where they do provide such information we have to take its accuracy on trust.

Exclusivity

Sects are exclusive organisations with membership characterised by:

➤ **choice** rather than birth
➤ **commitment** shown to the values and goals of the sect

Full membership is normally granted after a:

➤ probationary period
➤ testing of commitment

Scientology, for example, initially invites people ('preclears') to join, but continued membership is dependent on moving through various 'levels of knowledge'. Students (including Hollywood celebrities John Travolta and Tom Cruise) buy courses of instruction and submit to tests ('audits') before being allowed to pass to the next level.

Ideology

Sects often claim special religious knowledge (such as the 'one true way to salvation') denied to non-members. For Scientology, this special knowledge is knowledge of oneself — how the problems of an individual's 'past lives' have created problems in their current life that need to be identified ('audited') and removed ('cleared'). Familiar ideological themes include:

➤ **salvation** for the 'chosen' (Jehovah's Witnesses, Heaven's Gate)
➤ **catastrophe**, usually involving an 'end-of-the-world' scenario (The People's Temple)
➤ **millenarianism**, involving ideas such as a belief in a return to a spiritual homeland (Rastafarians)

Types

Although sects are very varied, Yinger's (1957) typology classifies sects in terms of how they see and react to the secular world (Table 9.2).

Table 9.2   Sects as reaction to the secular world

Type	'Problem' and its resolution
Acceptance Example: Christian Science	Members are largely middle class and life has been personally good. The 'key problems' they face are personal and philosophical — such as searching for 'the meaning of life'. The resolution of social problems involves individual and collective faith, self-help and so forth.
Opposition ('aggression') Example: Branch Davidian (Seventh Day Adventists)	Develop as a radical reaction to problems of poverty and powerlessness; membership is usually drawn from the lower social classes. They both oppose secular society and adopt a generally antagonistic attitude towards it.
Avoidance Example: Exclusive Brethren	The significance of members' present life is downgraded by projecting their hopes onto the supernatural world; problems are addressed by appealing to a 'higher social order'. They avoid direct contact with secular society.

Source: Yinger (1957)

Marczewska-Rytko (2003) offers a more contemporary take on sects (Table 9.3) by classifying them as **interest groups** — goal-orientated groups that offer incentives or benefits for members. Such groups try to 'share' these benefits with the rest of society, sometimes benevolently (Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, are tasked with giving everyone the opportunity to be saved from damnation) and sometimes more aggressively.

Table 9.3   Sects as interest groups

Type	Sect orientation
Reformative Example: Transcendental Meditation (TM)	The objective is to change people (in terms of their spiritual awareness) and, by so doing, 'reform the secular world'. The main focus is to convert as many as possible to the sect's world view.
Revolutionary Example: Aum Shinrikyo (Japan)	The objective is to change a condemned social order, usually by awaiting some form of 'divine intervention' (usually an apocalyptic 'end of the world'). While some are happy to await Armageddon (Jehovah's Witnesses, for example), others are equally happy to try to help things along — members of the Aum Shinrikyo sect released Sarin nerve gas in the Tokyo underground in 1995, killing 12 and injuring around 5,000.
Introvert	This type looks 'inward' to the spiritual well-being and welfare of members, who derive strength from feelings of moral superiority over the outside world. The focus is on personal development as members strive for spiritual enlightenment.
Manipulative Example: Neo-paganism	Focuses on the manipulation of things like the occult (magic, for example) for the benefit of practitioners.

Source: Marczewska-Rytko (2003)

This relates to Stark and Bainbridge's (1987) **rational choice theory** of religious groups; they argue sect members weigh up the likely *costs and benefits* of membership:

➤ Costs might include separation from former friends and family.
➤ Benefits might involve feelings of superiority through access to 'hidden knowledge' or the feeling of belonging to a strong, supportive, moral community.

? Suggest two differences between a sect and a church.

New religious movements

Although the term 'new religious movement' (NRM) has been questioned (some 'new' religious movements simply involve a reworking of traditional religious ideas and practices and represent a new label for 'sects' or 'cults'), Barker (1999) argues the label is justified because NRMs can be:

> ...defined as groups which have become visible in their present form since the Second World War, and which are religious in so far as they offer an answer to some of the ultimate questions traditionally addressed by mainstream religions: Is there a God? What is the purpose of life? What happens to us after death?

However we choose to label them, NRMs have a range of distinctive features:

➤ **Converts**: Many recruits will be first-generation converts; they were neither born into the religion nor have a family history of involvement. 'Early adopters' tend to be:
  ➤ highly committed
  ➤ highly enthusiastic
  ➤ proselytising — keen to convert others to their faith (groups like Scientology and Hare Krishna use a variety of techniques to spread the word, from street selling to mail drops)
➤ **Membership**: Recent (post-1970) NRMs attract more *young, middle-class* recruits than other religious organisations. This is partly because the young are more open to and desirous of new experiences and partly because this group is more likely to be targeted for recruitment.
➤ **Influence**: Many NRMs are led by a founder with the **charisma** to attract initial followers ('charisma' is the force of personality which enables someone to exert power over others — people want to obey charismatic individuals because they see them as attractive, forceful, exciting and so forth). This often gives such movements an **autocratic** structure involving an all-powerful leader who may directly control all or some of the day-to-day life of converts. A particular form of 'truth' is promoted that is less open to questioning by converts than the 'truths' promoted by churches and denominations.
➤ **Total institution** (arising from autocratic structure): Goffman (1961) defines this as 'a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals,

cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life'.

➤ **Voluntarism** (how people make choices about their behaviour): Unlike in some other total institutions (prisons, for example), converts may consciously choose to become part of a total institution, for various reasons. For example, one of Cimino and Lattin's (2002) respondents in *Shopping for Faith* states: 'I want something that is going to change my finances, my sex life, the way I work, the way I keep my house and the way I fix my yard.'

➤ **Identity**: A sharp distinction is invariably made between 'Us' (the movement's members) and 'Them' (non-members or unbelievers).

➤ **Suspicion** (and antagonism) between NRMs, secular society and other religious organisations. Antagonism towards non-members can be an important way for an NRM to:

  ➤ carve out a clear identity in an increasingly crowded 'religious marketplace'
  ➤ maintain a strong sense of self once a niche has been created, by 'demonising the competition'

Wallis (1984) classifies NRMs in terms of their relationship to the secular world (Table 9.4).

Table 9.4   Typology of NRMs

Type	Orientation to and relationship with the outside world
World-rejecting Example: Heaven's Gate	Critical of the secular world and withdraw, as far as possible, from contact with it — usually in some form of communal living.
World-accommodating Example: Jehovah's Witnesses	Although this type draws a distinction between the spiritual and the secular spheres, they neither reject nor promote the secular world.
World-affirming Example: Scientology	This type claims to unlock people's 'hidden potential', spiritual or psychological. They see no need to withdraw from or reject the world (in some cases, quite the opposite — the objective is to achieve material success through spiritual means).

Source: Wallis (1984)

? Identify and explain two features of new religious movements.

Explanations

We can outline a selection of explanations for the development of NRMs, many of which focus on how various types of **social change** promote their development:

➤ **Technological change**: Wuthnow (1986) argues that the development of scientific ideas and technological changes in society challenge the hegemonic or leadership role of religion and force changes to the way mainstream religious organisations interpret their relationship to the secular world; this results in established religions becoming increasingly liberal in their interpretation of religious scriptures as they try to reach out to and retain members. These changes within religious organisations

produce **schisms** ('counter movements') as those opposed to liberalisation split from established religions, leading to an increase in NRMs.

➢ **Globalisation**: Rapid forms of political, economic and cultural change at the end of the twentieth century have created, according to Baudrillard (2001), a situation of 'postmodern uncertainty' that has led some to seek certainties in the teachings and moralities of both traditional (especially fundamentalist) and non-traditional religions — a situation that has arguably led to a **revitalisation** of NRMs in the 'postmodern age'.

➢ **Economic change**: Arjomand (1986) considered the impact of social change on non-Christian religions (such as Islam) and identified processes that both 'strengthen orthodox religiosity' and give rise to new religious movements within Islam:

 ➢ **Cultural integration**: As Islamic societies become integrated into the international economic system they face increasing competition from Western secular and religious ideas and philosophies. The response, among some groups, is a hardening of attitudes toward the West, expressed through radical Islamic movements.

 ➢ **Deprivation: Urbanisation** creates pressure for change where people react to worsening economic situations by developing new responses — which include both NRMs and a reinvigoration/reinterpretation of traditional religious movements.

 ➢ **Education**: As populations become more literate and formally educated they are exposed to a range of ideas that promote the development of new ways of interpreting the world.

➢ **Social unrest**: Eyre (1996) suggests that, particularly in America, NRM growth during the 1960s resulted from *disillusionment*, especially among the young, with both involvement in the Vietnam War and a general questioning of the materialistic values of society. One aspect of this 'rebellion' was to explore alternative lifestyles and beliefs.

➢ **Immigration**: The movement of people across different cultures and the introduction of new ideas into the host culture challenges religious *orthodoxy* ('the things people have always believed') and leads to the development of new religions through a process of **cultural hybridisation**. In the 1960s, for example, Eyre notes how a range of Eastern 'faiths and philosophies' met Western faiths and resulted in hybrid philosophies that subsequently developed into NRMs.

? Identify and explain reason for the development of NRMs.

Evaluation

Social change/social unrest explanations have been criticised because the major period of NRM growth occurred in the 1950s, a time of relative political and economic stability. More importantly, perhaps, we can question the extent to which NRM 'growth' is actually

a **statistical illusion**: Beckford and Levasseur (1986) argue that recent improvements in the means of communicating ideas allowed NRMs to reach a mass audience. This meant the overall *visibility* of NRMs was increased, without there necessarily being an increase in their number. The development of internet technologies — websites, email and social networking in particular — may have accelerated or amplified this process.

They argue there hasn't been a 'sudden, significant, explosion of NRMs' that needs to be explained. Rather, NRMs were simply following a 'traditional path' of emergence and growth; their apparent development can be explained by the fact they were able to get their message across to a larger audience. The traditional audience for NRMs (the urban young) are both those most affected by technological/social change and most receptive to 'new' ideas about the nature of the world. Bruce (2002) argues NRM membership was and remains relatively:

➤ small
➤ transient (people move into and out of these groups with great frequency)

This suggests a more useful question is not *why* people are attracted to NRMs, but rather why so many people are *not* attracted to the 'solutions' they offer.

New Age movements

New Age movements (NAMs) are an interesting and relatively recent development (Melton (2001), for example, argues: 'the term New Age refers to a wave of religious enthusiasm that emerged in the 1970s...only to subside at the end of the 1980s'). They illustrate two ideas:

➤ The '**new religiosity**': NAMs represent new ways of 'doing and being' religious, with the focus on finding solutions to problems through 'personal transformations' (which may or may not lead to wider social transformation). Brown (2004) suggests the range of New Age movements includes, for example:
   ➤ astrology
   ➤ channelling (direct communication with spirits)
   ➤ work with one's 'inner child'
   ➤ unconventional healing techniques
➤ **Spiritual consumption**: the idea that rather than being 'members' or 'believers' people 'shop for spirituality' — a search for personal salvation expressed, Cowan (2003) argues, through various individual preoccupations and concerns:
   ➤ peace of mind
   ➤ positive self-image
   ➤ physical health
   ➤ personal empowerment
   ➤ enlightenment/insight

NAMs focus on '**transformations**', meaning ways of improving your life through personal changes. Langone (1993) identifies four main 'streams' within NAMs that involve different ways to 'transform the self' (Table 9.5).

Table 9.5   Streams of transformation

'Stream'	Transformation
Transformational training	Transforming personal life through a range of techniques and practices.
Intellectualism	Personal transformations through the exploration of 'alternative beliefs' rather than the practice of such beliefs.
Lifestyle	The transformation of society through behavioural changes (such as anti-globalisation movements or environmentalism).
Occult	Personal transformations through beliefs and practices such as witchcraft ('Wicca') and areas such as astrology, palmistry and crystal healing.

Source: Langone (1993)

NAMs (and possibly NRMs) reflect changes within religious organisations characteristic of postmodern societies:

➤ **Fragmentation**: There are wide diversities both within and between different NAMs based around concepts of choice. 'Spiritual shoppers' are looking to buy solutions to problems and willing to consider whatever movement takes their fancy. Choice exists in terms of different 'ready-made' solutions and a 'pick-and-mix' approach; 'consumers' pick bits they like from different NAMS (meditation, channelling, ear candling, etc.) and mix them to create something new and personal.

F ragmentation
I ndividualism
N arratives

➤ **Individualism**: Sedgwick (2004) sees NAMS as a reflection of the individualistic tendencies of postmodern society — people 'want the feel-good factor, but not the cost of commitment. Putting it bluntly it is essentially selfish religion'.

➤ **Narratives**: NAMs do not 'speak with one voice' beyond a general belief in 'personal transformation'. The individualistic nature of NAMs makes the idea of a 'New Age **metanarrative**' difficult to pin down. All we have are a wide range of personal religious narratives.

? Suggest two differences between an NAM and a church.

Evaluation

A major question is whether NAMs are 'religions' in the conventional sense. Although there is a general concern with 'spirituality' (in a very wide and loose way), they have little or nothing in common with traditional forms of religious belief, experience and practice. The problem here, therefore, is whether we classify and explain them as

something other than religion, or expand how we define 'religion' in postmodern society to include NAMs.

Perhaps they are 'disorganised religions'. Rather than seeing NAMs as organised religions, Sedgwick (2004) suggests we see them as 'private religions' that people can practise 'with minimal interruption to their normal routine and without having to bother about burdensome responsibilities'.

Religious fundamentalism

'Fundamentalism' refers to any religious groups with 'fundamental religious beliefs' based on **literal** interpretations of religious texts. Sahgal and Yuval-Davis (1992) suggest fundamentalist religious movements have three common features:

- ➢ **Truth**: They claim their version of religion to be 'the only true one'.
- ➢ **Fear**: The movement feels threatened by alternative (secular and religious) views of the world. **Christian fundamentalism**, for example, sees both 'atheists' and 'Islam' as enemies.
- ➢ **Control** over members and non-members:
  - ➢ ideological — over what members believe
  - ➢ internal — over how members behave
  - ➢ external — how people in secular society should behave

Fundamentalist movements 'reach outward' from their pool of believers to change the behaviour of non-believers (sometimes violently, sometimes peacefully). This control feature leads Sahgal and Yuval-Davis to make an interesting distinction:

- ➢ **Traditional religions** focus on the spiritual message which may or may not 'filter out' to secular society and lead to political changes. They are *religious movements with a political message*.
- ➢ **Fundamentalist religions** try to impose political changes on secular society using a variety of religious ideas. They are *political movements with a religious message*. Fundamentalist movements, the authors argue, are 'modern political movements which use religion as a basis for their attempt to win or consolidate power and extend social control'.

Giroux (2004) also sees Christian fundamentalism in America as closely aligned to the '**religious right**' (involving loose-knit groups such as the Moral Majority and, more recently (2010), the Tea Party movement). This alignment attempts to legitimise a particular political ideology (intolerant of difference, authoritarian and anti-democratic) with specific and selective forms of 'religious correctness'. The two meet in areas like:

- ➢ teaching creationism in schools
- ➢ bans on sex education
- ➢ subordinating scientific ideas (such as evolution or global warming) to religious dogma

Giroux explains the contemporary development of fundamentalist religious movements, Christian and Islamic, in terms of **globalisation**. Global economic and cultural processes expose people to different views and belief systems. This sometimes leads to a feeling of moral relativism, where nothing is wholly good and nothing wholly bad.

Without moral certainties the world appears a more frightening and dangerous place that leaves some people feeling 'alone, vulnerable and largely unconnected with those around them'. In this situation, 'fundamentalism taps…into very real individual and collective needs' by providing moral certainties 'given by God'.

Berer and Ravindran (1996) argue that fundamentalist religions appeal to 'supreme authorities, moral codes or philosophies that cannot be questioned'. They exist to impose a sense of order and stability on a world that, to some, has become disorderly, unstable and confusing. In postmodern societies, therefore, fundamentalist religions of all types provide believers with a sense of:

➢ **Identity**, based on literal interpretation of religious texts as expressions of 'God's will'.

➢ **Community**: What Castells (1997) calls a 'collective identity' based on a set of fundamental and unchanging moral certainties shared by believers and imposed on non-believers. As Bauman (1992) puts it, fundamentalist religions draw their strength from the ability to provide certainties in an uncertain world — from a belief in the principles laid down in the Old Testament of Christianity (an 'eye for an eye', for example) to the clear specification of how men and women should dress and behave in Islam.

OCR examination-style questions

1 Identify and explain two difficulties in measuring religious commitment. (17 marks)

2 Identify and explain two difficulties in measuring religious belief. (17 marks)

3 Identify and explain two characteristics of religious fundamentalism. (17 marks)

4 Outline and evaluate the view that the rise of religious fundamentalism is a sign of religious revival (33 marks)

The role of religion in society

In this section we explore a range of structural and action perspectives on the role of religion in society.

Functionalism

Traditional **functionalist** theories focus on understanding how religion contributes to the maintenance of social order. In this view religion functions as a **cultural institution** charged with the creation, promotion and maintenance of **cultural values**.