



This is reflected in ideas like the **privatisation** and **deprivatisation** of religion. Although there are clear signs of a move towards privatised forms of religious belief (religion as something practised in the private rather than the public sphere), organised religion stubbornly refuses to disappear. On the contrary, there is evidence (with some forms of Islam and Christianity in particular) of a contrary process of organised religion re-emerging as a significant aspect of public life.

? Suggest one reason for seeing religion as a metanarrative.

Evaluation

- > **Metanarratives:** Callinicos (1991) argues that postmodernism itself is a form of the 'metanarrative thinking' postmodernists claim to dismiss as being unsustainable.
- > **Inclusiveness:** Rtizer (2008) argues it is a mistake to consider different types of belief (such as science and religion) as being more or less the same simply because they are both metanarratives. Theories of evolution, for example, are backed up with logical, empirical, evidence; creationism (or 'intelligent design', a belief about how the earth was created based on a literal interpretation of the Christian Bible) is based on little more than faith in biblical texts and a lot of wishful interpretation.

OCR examination-style questions

- 1 Outline and evaluate the functionalist view of the role of religion in society. (33 marks)
- 2 Outline and evaluate Marxist views of the role of religion in society. (33 marks)
- 3 Outline and evaluate the view that religion is a conservative force. (33 marks)

Religion and social position

This section explores the relationship between religiosity and social position considered in terms of four variables: class, age, gender and ethnicity.

Much of the information we have about the relationship between social position and religiosity is based on survey material from sources such as:

- > **government departments** like the Home Office's citizenship survey and the ten-yearly census
- > **private polling organisations** such as YouGov, the internet-based polling organisation
- > **religious organisations**, some of which produce attendance and membership figures

As we have previously noted when looking at beliefs and participation, we need to keep questions of data **reliability** and **validity** in mind here. Data about sects, new religious and New Age movements in particular tends to be patchy and partial. This

means anything we say about the relationship between religion and social position must be considered in the light of the methodological difficulties in collecting reliable and valid data.



Identify two ways of gathering data about religion and social position.

The four variables

Social class

We can outline a range of associations between class and religiosity.

Belief

There is little significant class difference in beliefs surrounding ideas such as:

- **Religious affiliation:** The working classes are slightly more likely to describe themselves as Protestant or Roman Catholic, whereas the middle classes are slightly more likely to describe themselves as 'other Christian' (Jews, however, are three times more likely to be middle class than working class).
- **Prayer:** Slightly more middle-class people believe in praying.
- **General beliefs:** There seems to be no significant class difference in terms of belief in things like heaven, God, life after death, the devil and hell.

Practice

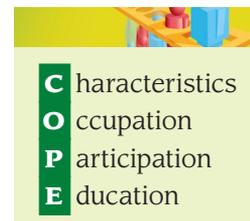
In terms of attendance at religious services:

- **Regular attendees** (weekly or monthly): Around three times more of the middle classes classify themselves in this way.
- **Occasional attendees:** Little significant class difference.
- **Never attend** (apart from ceremonies such as weddings and funerals): The working classes are slightly more likely to 'never attend'.

Characteristics

O'Beirne (2004) suggests there are general social characteristics of different faith groups involving:

- **Occupation:** Christians were more likely than any other faith to be employed in middle-class occupations.
- **Civic participation** (such as membership of voluntary groups): With the exception of 'Christian respondents of black or mixed race ethnicity' (an important indication of the way social class combines with other statuses, in this case ethnicity), religious affiliation made no difference to participation levels.
- **Education:** General levels of education were higher among those with no religious affiliation. Among faith groups:





- Jews and Hindus were more likely to have higher-level qualifications (such as a university degree).
- Christian and Muslim faiths had the 'smallest proportions with the highest educational qualifications' and were most likely, of all faith groups, to have no formal educational qualifications.

If we change the focus slightly, O'Beirne notes those 'affiliated to particular faiths share certain socioeconomic experiences and characteristics' in terms of:

- **Status:** In the past, religion was a source of status for both the upper and middle classes — the former in terms of their positions within powerful religious institutions and the latter in terms of using things like church attendance as a way to demonstrate 'respectability'.
- **Group identity:** It is arguable whether, in contemporary Britain, religion functions as a source of group identity in quite the same way (if at all) as in the past. Colls (2005), for example, argues that in postmodern society the relationship between 'religion and respectability' that was once a feature of class identity markers (to be middle class meant attending church) no longer holds true.
- **Individual identity** O'Beirne found little evidence of religious belief/practice forming a significant part of self-identity; only 20% of 'Christians' considered religion 'an important part of their personal description' (and even then religion came somewhere down the scale after family, age and work). For some minority faith communities (such as Muslims and Hindus) religion was more likely to be seen as a significant part of their identity — but this was true for all social classes within the community.
- **Class cohesion:** We noted earlier the neo-Marxist argument that religion serves as a cohesive force for a ruling class in capitalist society, rather than as a means of keeping the lower classes in their place. O'Beirne found the highest levels of religious affiliation amongst respondents with the lowest levels of social deprivation, except for one significant exception: Muslim faith was associated with high levels of deprivation — a finding that suggests the relationship between ethnicity and class is perhaps more significant than social class alone.



Identify and explain two ways in which religion is related to social class.

Explanations

In general, there seems to be no *strong* relationship between class and religiosity in contemporary British society. We can examine a number of explanations for this. One argument is that in relation to **identities**, postmodern societies are different to those of the past in two ways:

- **Individuals:** People are less likely to define themselves in terms of class. Religious belief and behaviour is, consequently, less likely to have a strong association with individual class identities.

- **Institutions:** Finke and Stark (2004) argue that religious pluralism is a feature of contemporary societies: the 'religious consumer' enjoys a wide range of choice between and within religions. They argue religious affiliation now relates to 'individual, personal identities' rather than the 'collective, social identities' of the past. The weakening of 'traditional class associations', coupled with increased consumer choice, explains why social class no longer correlates very closely with affiliation. As Bruce (2001) notes, the logic of this argument is that 'competitive free markets [in religion] are better at meeting not only material but also spiritual needs'.

Age

The relationship between religiosity and age is methodologically more straightforward because we can reliably measure age.

In terms of what people say they believe, identification with religious beliefs, practices and organisations varies **intergenerationally**. Christian affiliation generally rises with age (Table 9.6).

Table 9.6 Christian affiliation by age from 2001 census

Age group	% of Christians
0–15	18
16–34	22
35–64	41
65 and over	19

Source: *Census 2001 (Office for National Statistics, 2003)*

O'Beirne (2004) found all major UK faith communities (Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh and Buddhist) show increasing affiliation with age. She also found those affiliated to a religion were older on average than those who were not.

In relation to **beliefs**, YouGov (2007) found:

- Belief in God was highest in the 55+ age group.
- It was lowest among the young (18–34).
- The reverse was true for non-belief.
- Nearly twice as many elderly as young respondents expressed a belief in prayer.
- In terms of 'basic Christian beliefs' there was little appreciable age difference.

One of the most striking features of 'belief' is that a significant and consistent majority of young people have expressed no positive religious belief or affiliation:

- 60+% in YouGov (2007)
- 60+% in British Social Attitudes Survey (2000)
- 65% in Park et al. (2004)

Park et al. also note the trend of an increasing number of adults with no religious affiliation.



In relation to **practice**, Brierley (1999) concludes that not only are churchgoers 'considerably older than non-churchgoers', but the age gap has widened over the past 25 years — a trend consistent across all major Christian faiths. One explanation, Bruce (2001) argues, is the inability of the established church to **socialise** young people into religious belief and behaviour. The decline in Sunday school membership, for example — from 55% of the population in 1900 to 4% in 2000 — is indicative of the inability of established churches to capture and keep young adherents.

Explanations

Generation gap

The '**generation gap**' refers to age-related differences in attitudes and behaviour; and when it comes to religiosity there's a widening gap between the religious behaviour of different generations. As Jowell and Park (1998) put it, 'All the differences between age groups...are minor in comparison with those on religion. The fact is the young are overwhelmingly less religious than their elders.' There are various possible reasons for this.

Lifestyle

Traditional forms of belief and practice appeal less to the young than to the elderly, which may reflect lifestyle situations and choices. O'Beirne argues the young have less time available to commit to religious practice. Religion also has to compete for time with many more alternative activities than in the past (watching popular professional sports like football, for example, is now as likely to take place on a Sunday as the traditional Saturday).

While traditional forms of religion have declining appeal to the young, the same is not necessarily true, as Bader (2003) notes, of **NRMs** or **evangelical missions** (which have a strong resemblance to some NRMS) within established churches. These offer, as Cooke (2003) notes, nightclub-style services, complete with flashing lights and rock music, overseen by a 'worship director'.

Anti-fundamentalism

Although religious certainties can be attractive for some, the reverse may also be true; prescriptive moral codes (such as the anti-abortion, anti-contraception and anti-gay teachings of some religions) may be, in the words of one of Robins et al.'s (2002) young respondents, 'a big turn-off'. Where organised religions no longer have a 'monopoly of knowledge', they have consequently lost some of their ability to control how people think about the world.

Stark and Bainbridge (1987) found evidence of **NAMs** being popular among older age groups, while Francis and Robbins (2004) found evidence among young (13–15) males of **implicit religion**: the idea of 'believing without belonging' is an increasingly significant trend in contemporary societies among the young.

Disengagement

As people get older they progressively 'retreat' from a society that, in turn, disengages from them. The ageing process, for Cumming and Henry (1961), involves a (functional) 'coming to terms' with death, the ultimate disengagement; and religious belief (if not necessarily practice) increases as a way of coping with death psychologically. A decline in religious practice in our society among the 65+ age group can be explained in terms of **reduced physical mobility**. While this may be true for believers (religiosity increases with age), Hunsberger (1985) argues there is little evidence that 'young nonbelievers' become 'elderly believers'.



Identify and explain two ways religion is related to age.

Gender

Walter and Davie (1998) argue 'women are more religious than men on virtually every measure', including:

- **Affiliation:** O'Beirne (2004) notes that across the major UK religions more women than men claimed some form of affiliation. Of those classed as non-religious, 60% were men.
 - British Attitudes Surveys (1983–1999) show men are both less religious than women and their affiliation is rapidly declining.
 - Census 2001 showed women have greater levels of involvement in non-traditional religions such as spiritualism and Wicca (both nearly 70% female), with some variations — Rastafarianism, for example, was 70% male.
- **Belief:** The British Social Attitudes Survey (2008) found women demonstrate higher levels of belief in:
 - God
 - prayer
 - life after death, heaven, the devil

Men were also more likely to be atheist and agnostic.

- **Participation:** In terms of Christian religions:
 - Crockett and Voas (2004) suggested young women were more likely to attend services.
 - O'Beirne found women slightly more likely than men to participate 'in groups or clubs with a religious link'.

Only Muslim men showed higher participation levels and one reason for this may be cultural norms relating to gender — women not being allowed to participate independently of men in religious activities.



In relation to **power and authority**, Malmgreen (1987) points out 'In nearly every sect and denomination of Christianity, though men monopolized the positions of authority, women had the superior numbers.'

Explanations

Gender socialisation

One explanation for greater levels of female religiosity involves the idea that men and women develop different cultural identities. This has been used by feminists in particular to explain participation differences based on **patriarchy**. Christianity, Steggerda (1993) notes, promotes concepts of love and care that are more attractive to women, and Daly (1973) argues that in a 'male-dominated world' religions provide women with a sense of:

- > shelter (a 'home and haven')
- > safety in a threatening world
- > belonging (a sense of personal identity)

The price women pay for these benefits, she argues, is submission to patriarchal control.

Fundamentalist sects and denominations generally emphasise an exaggerated form of 'traditional' gender roles and relationships. Bartkowski (2000), for example, notes the driving theme behind the American-based Promise Keepers sect is the 'rejuvenation of godly manhood'.

Feminisation

Swatos (1998) argues many contemporary religions are undergoing fundamental changes that make them more 'female friendly'. God, for example, is portrayed as loving and consoling rather than as authoritarian and judgemental, and clergy are seen as 'helping professionals' rather than as 'representatives of God's justice'.

Evaluation

Miller and Stark (2002) argue there is little hard evidence to support the idea 'gender differences in religiousness are a product of differential socialization'.

In terms of **evolutionary psychology**, Kanazawa and Still (2000) link a lack of religiosity in men to their predisposition towards 'risky behaviours' (such as not believing in God); as Stark (2002) notes, 'in every country and culture men were less religious than women'.

Lizardo and Collett (2005), however, argue that although there are differences in 'risk-taking behaviour' between men and women, there are also differences between different groups of men and different groups of women. They suggest 'gender differences in risk preference are closely related to class based differences in the socialization of children; women raised in patriarchal families are more likely to be risk-averse than men raised in the same type of households and women raised in more egalitarian households'.



Suggest and explain two ways in which religion is related to gender.

Ethnicity

Although we need to keep in mind Cooke's (2003) warning that 'Collecting data on ethnicity is difficult because...there is no consensus on what constitutes an 'ethnic group', Table 9.7 outlines religious affiliation in Britain by selected ethnic groups (very small percentages of some faiths are not included: around 0.5% of white British are Jewish, for example).

Table 9.7 Ethnicity and religious affiliation from 2001 census

	Christian	Hindu	Muslim	Sikh	Buddhist	None/ Unstated
Ethnic group	Percentage of each ethnic population					
White British	76					23
Black Caribbean	74					24
Indian	5	45	13	29		6
Pakistani			92			7
Bangladeshi			92			7
Chinese	21				16	62

Source: *Census 2001 (Office for National Statistics, 2004)*

Although this data doesn't tell us a great deal about beliefs or affiliation strength (the 76% of 'Christian white British' are unlikely to share similar levels of affiliation), there are some useful points we can note.

Our society has a range of ethnicities and religious affiliations, considered not just in terms of different ethnic groups associated with different religions, but also in terms of the **diversity** of affiliation *within* some ethnic groups (Indian, for example).

When comparing two apparently similar ethnic groups (such as Indian and Pakistani, often grouped as 'South Asians'), wide disparities of affiliation exist. The different forms of affiliation found among Indian respondents (Hindu, Muslim and Sikh, for example) suggest a higher level of ethnic *fragmentation* among this group than among Pakistanis.

How significant this might be, in terms of study and behaviour, is related to questions of **identity**. Just as we would avoid claiming that all 'white Christians' share similar norms, values and beliefs, we should be wary of attributing this to ethnic minority groups. O'Beirne (2004), however, has noted religion is a relevant factor 'in a person's self-description, particularly for people from the Indian subcontinent', mainly because immigrant groups use religion as a way of hanging on to a sense of cultural and ethnic identity when moving to a different country. In the 2001 census, for example:

- White British ranked religion as the tenth most important aspect of their identity; Asians ranked it second.
- Christians ranked religion the seventh most important aspect of their identity; Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus ranked it second.



The optional nature of the census question means it's impossible to know exactly how many of those not stating a religion did so because they considered it a private matter, didn't know how to classify themselves or whatever. However, there were wide ethnic differences in **non-religious affiliation**: a relatively high number in some ethnic groups (British and Chinese, for example) and a relatively low number in others (such as Pakistani).

We need to note a problem of **validity**. Those self-classifying as belonging to various new religious movements/sects may not see their beliefs in the 'conventional religious terms' defined by Census 2001; they may also have used the 'not stated' category as a way of recording their beliefs.

Explanations

As we've seen, the highest levels of religious affiliation are found among Pakistani (92%) and Bangladeshi (92%) minorities, and Berthoud (1998) notes these groups are among the very poorest in Britain.

Deprivation alone is not, however, a sufficient explanation for higher levels of religiosity since, as we've seen, the highest levels of Christian affiliation are found in the higher social classes. Crockett and Voas (2004) also note that, regardless of class, 'All major ethnic minority populations are more religious than British-born whites.' The question, therefore, is: 'Why do some ethnic groups but not others display high levels of religiosity under similar economic circumstances?'

The answer can be found by returning to the idea of **identity** — and, in particular, the idea that minority ethnic groups (especially those of recent origin in Britain) are more likely to use religion as an important component of identity. Bruce (1995) explains the reasoning behind this association in terms of the idea that in contemporary secular societies a distinction arises between two spheres of behaviour and practice involving different values and norms:

- > The **public** sphere is governed by ideas of science, instrumental relationships and, most importantly, universal values and norms (as he argues, 'Supermarkets do not vary prices according to the religion, gender or age of the customer'). This sphere is that of the **community** — a space where people meet, greet and interact according to a set of shared ideas and beliefs.
- > The **private** sphere is characterised by ideas of expression and affection. It is also a space where the individual is set apart from the communal, public sphere.

Bruce argues that Christianity has evolved to *accommodate* itself to secular changes in the public sphere (such as secular politics, globalisation and cultural diversity) and, by so doing, has slowly retreated from the public sphere of religious practice into the private sphere of religious belief. The church has been forced to come to terms with the idea that, for the ethnic majority, the role and function of organised religion has changed. Religion is no longer needed to perform functions like:

- > communality (bringing people together)

- social solidarity
- identity

As the Christian church loses its public functions, attendance and practice also decline — but religion doesn't necessarily disappear from people's lives; rather, Christianity has, Bruce argues, been reworked into the *private sphere*. It has become a largely private matter, even though there are times when, as Davie (2001) argues, religious practice is important, usually in terms of **life events**, such as marriages and funerals, that require both private and public acknowledgement

For minority groups, Bruce argues the situation is different; they have moved from a situation in which 'their religion was dominant and all-pervasive to an environment in which they form a small, deviant minority, radically at odds with the world around them'. Recent immigrant groups frequently find themselves in, at best, an indifferent world, and, at worst, one that's hostile and uninviting — and they look to the traditions, customs, values and norms that are familiar and certain in their lives. These need to be affirmed and reaffirmed through public religious practices because they relate to the solidarity and identity of social groups rather than individuals.

Similarly, religions such as Islam, Davie suggests, are articulated in the *public sphere* and create **belonging** — not just in the sense of 'belonging to a religion or organisation', but also of belonging to a specific, definable *group*, membership of which is affirmed through public practices. Religiosity performs significant services and functions for ethnic minority groups:

- **Social identities**: it provides a sense of homogeneity, shared purpose, history and permanence. This involves both a sense of *group self* ('who we are') and, by definition, a sense of the *Other* ('who we are not').
- **Emotion** involves a psychosocial sense of belonging and well-being created by membership of a particular religion. For some minority groups the emotional aspect of religious belief and practice is valued in a world that appears hostile and dangerous.
- **Power**: For politically and economically marginalised minorities, belonging to a group in which you are valued confers a sense of power with which to face the world.



Identify and explain two ways in which religion is related to ethnicity.

The appeal of modern movements to different groups

New religious movements

When considering the appeal of new religious movements to different social groups we can note two **methodological problems**:

- 1 Reliability**: Our knowledge of NRM affiliation is limited by the fact some organisations are **secretive** about their memberships; many of those that are not, Miller (2003) suggests, 'exaggerate their numbers, sometimes wildly'. This makes



precise statements about the appeal of NRMs difficult, because our knowledge of adherents is limited.

- 2 Diversity:** Miller argues 'Counting NRMs and their members precisely is impossible. Groups come and go steadily, as do their members.' This again makes it difficult to identify their appeal to specific social groups.

While these problems are important, they are not insurmountable. We can, for example, broadly group NRMs around a number of **key themes** (what Daschke and Ashcraft (2005) call 'interrelated pathways'), which, in turn, give us a general indication of their appeal to adherents.

Perception movements

Perception movements appeal to those searching for a **new way** of looking at the 'problem of existence and understanding'. Their focus is on philosophical questions ('the meaning of life') and they are particularly attractive to **young and middle-aged, middle-class males** — mainly because they allow individuals to separate their secular existence (work and leisure routines, for example) from their spiritual.

This pathway is similar to Wallis's (1984) **world-affirming** category in which he argues this type provides:

- > **spirituality** for those disillusioned by or questioning of the secular world
- > **techniques** that can be used to increase personal happiness and become more successful in life
- > **opportunities** for people to work on their 'inner selves'

Identity movements

Identity movements focus on human potential and the development of new **personal identities**. They appeal most to those seeking personal **enlightenment** through the mastery of techniques and practices designed to release their 'inner spirituality'. Saliba (2003) suggests this type appeals to **young** people looking for a spiritual grounding to their life because they provide a:

- > **safe haven** from the pressures of mainstream society
- > **sense of self** — a way of taking time out to reflect on identity and future plans

The appeal of identity movements to the young is also explained by their **moral certainties** — something especially attractive to those occupying the borderlands between childhood and adulthood.

Community ('family') movements

Community movements focus on the **social solidarity** aspect of religious practice by offering a sense of community and well-being through the development of close personal relationships with like-minded individuals. The appeal is to those who want to explore 'alternative' ways of living and working (especially, but not exclusively, **women**), usually by distancing themselves, as a group, from wider society.

The Unification Church ('Moonies'), studied extensively by Barker (1984), is an example of a family NRM that has particular appeal to **young, middle-class** adherents (university students in particular), partly because they are targeted for recruitment (Barker refutes the idea they are 'brainwashed'). The young are more open to new experiences, and having no dependents makes it easier to live 'as a family'. The Moonie philosophy is, for the ordinary member at least, 'anti-materialist', and young, middle-class converts are more likely to be economically active than older or retired adults — a significant consideration where income is given to 'the family'.

Family NRMs are also attractive to the young because their message of friendship, companionship and communality is more likely to appeal to those searching for an identity as they move out of their personal family group into the wider world. Westley (1978), however, argues that the roots of the NRM appeal to the young go deeper than a simple quest for community.

Where social upheavals (such as those in 1960s Britain and America) bring an increased sense of liberty and freedom, religious movements can 'fill the void' left by the retreat of traditional ideas and values; religious communality, in other words, provides a sense of order and values attractive to some young people.

Society movements

Society movements focus group solidarity *outwards*. Their major appeal is the possibility of changing society to align it more closely with the (spiritual) beliefs of the group. This involves transforming social institutions (such as work, school and the family) through the application of a particular moral code or spiritual design for living. NRMs such as Black Muslims or Nation of Islam (particularly in America) draw their membership predominantly from the **black working class**, mainly because:

- Their leadership is antagonistic to the white bourgeoisie.
- Working-class blacks have least to lose and most to gain from social changes that place them at the centre of a new social order.

Earth movements

The goal of Earth movements is to transform the whole world. Some of these NRMs focus on:

- **Planet transformation:** Usually through belief in an **apocalyptic** end to the earth and the creation of a new 'golden age' (through supernatural or human intervention).
- **Group transformation:** A characteristic of some 'exit-orientated' movements is the idea the group itself is the centre of any transformation. Members of Heaven's Gate (which fits Wallis's 'world-rejecting' category), for example, believed themselves to be 'extraterrestrials' whose task was to study the human race. In 1997, the appearance of the Hale-Bopp comet was taken as a sign that their mother ship had returned to transport them to a new planet and their earthly forms were duly 'discarded' in the mass suicide of 39 members.



Suggest two reasons why NRMs appeal to young people.

Explanations

To put the appeal of NRMs into context, Beckford and Levasseur (1986) argue their membership is tiny compared to both old religious movements and the number of people who subscribe to neither. While we should, perhaps, be asking why their appeal is not greater, for those who do subscribe (mainly the **young, white, female middle classes**), NRM appeal is based around what Chryssides (2000) suggests is the search for the satisfaction of different *needs*:

- > **meanings**: providing answers to fundamental questions (such as the meaning of life)
- > **life strategies** that address 'problems of existence' rather than simply personal life issues
- > **ethical codes** that set out how to live your life..

This, however, begs the question of why traditional religious organisations (which address much the same needs) are not attractive to those who choose NRMs.

One answer might be **deprivation**: some NRMs make a deliberate appeal to the 'dispossessed' — those who have experienced both social and economic deprivation. Wuthnow (1976), however, argues that NRMs actually appeal to very few older, working-class and ethnic-minority adherents (the kinds of groups we would expect to be most attracted by religious organisations offering a 'spiritual solution' to deprivation).

Further, NRMs in Britain have a relative lack of appeal to ethnic minorities (many of whom are among the most deprived groups in society). Szerszynski (1992), for example, notes 'Only the Rastafarian movement has recruited mainly from ethnic minorities in Britain.'

Another suggested answer is **relative deprivation**. This argues that adherents are those who, while not objectively deprived (such as the poor), experience 'feelings of deprivation' when compared with other social groups (a sense of *subjective deprivation*). Relative deprivation can be both physical and, more importantly, spiritual. Japp (1984), however, casts doubt on this type of explanation when he notes: 'grievances are everywhere, movements are not'. The problem, here, therefore, is why only a very small minority of 'relatively deprived' people seek solutions in NRMs.

More contemporary explanations focus on **postmodern societies**. The general argument here is that ORMs represent the kinds of top-down, inflexible organisation that are no longer a successful feature of postmodern societies. Postmodern organisations are increasingly open, flexible and more responsive to individual needs, and NRMs fit this model more neatly because they offer greater levels of choice.

Wallis (1984) suggests NRMs appeal to those who seek new ideas and solutions tailored to their individual circumstances (rather than the 'one-size-fits-all' approach of ORMs). In this respect, ORMs are **producer-led** — believers must accept whatever the organisation is offering in terms of beliefs and practices.

Many NRMs, on the other hand, are **consumer-led** — they offer, for example, mix-and-match opportunities, whereby spiritual beliefs can be tailored to individual needs. Instead of the ‘One True Way’ to spiritual enlightenment offered by ORMs, there are many paths to truth in postmodern society — and the concept of spirituality is sufficiently loose and ill-defined to accommodate each and every path the individual wants to explore.

Wallis also suggests two further reasons for the fit between NRMs and postmodernity:

- **Pluralism:** Where choice is not only tolerated but *demande*d, a diverse range of ways to ‘enlightenment’ open up. Where the idea of ‘truth’ is questioned in postmodernity, this can be easily turned to mean that any interpretation of ‘truth’ is as valid as any other.
- **Uncertainty:** Where societies no longer provide clear guidance on ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways to achieve desired goals, NRMs ‘fill the moral vacuum’ by providing not only ‘something to believe in’, but a something that can mean whatever the practising individual wants it to mean.



Suggest and explain two ways NRMS are consumer-led.

New Age movements

Understanding the appeal of NAMs to different social groups also involves **methodological problems** in terms of:

- **Organisation:** Many NAMs do not have conventional organisational structures or members, which makes it difficult to identify the groups to which these movements appeal. As Chryssides (2000) suggests: ‘The New Age Movement is nebulous, with little formal organization or membership.’
- **Spirituality:** This covers a huge range of ideas, the majority of which are not conventionally religious (which, for Chryssides, is an important part of their appeal). Some could arguably be more properly classified as *leisure activities* — yoga, for example (which despite claims for its ‘ancient philosophical origins’ is probably a relatively modern practice) is something people practice rather than join.
- **Diversity:** Although NAMs are many and varied, which makes them difficult to classify, Miller (1989) suggests each movement is ‘a loosely structured network of organizations and individuals’ bound by common:
 - values — based around things like mysticism or magic
 - vision — ranging from near-religious beliefs in the coming of a ‘New Age’ of peace/enlightenment to simple self-improvement

On this basis, van Leen (2004) suggests a **typology** of NAMS based on three types.

Explicitly religious movements

This type is probably the closest to an NRM. Movements such as Hare Krishna and the Divine Light Mission are well organised, often highly centralised and have a particular philosophy to 'sell' (often literally). The appeal is to:

- > the spiritual/religious — this type tends to be **syncretic**: picking and mixing elements of different, frequently Eastern, philosophies to create something new
 - > those looking for a 'family type' experience
- Zimbaro (1997) argues these groups appeal on a number of levels:

Imagine being part of a group in which you will find instant friendship, a caring family, respect for your contributions, an identity, safety, security, simplicity, and an organized daily agenda. You will learn new skills, have a respected position, gain personal insight, improve your personality and intelligence. There is no crime or violence and your healthy lifestyle means there is no illness... Who would fall for such appeals? Most of us, if they were made by someone we trusted, in a setting that was familiar, and especially if we had unfulfilled needs.

Human potential movements

These movements help individuals 'fulfil their potential' by realising their 'inner spirituality' and are generally what Stark and Bainbridge (1987) call **client movements** because they focus on providing a 'service' to members/practitioners based around a 'provider-client' relationship. The individual can, for example, achieve spiritual enlightenment by following a set of teachings and practices (Transcendental Meditation being a good example).

Human potential movements work on three related levels:

- > **Individual**: Lasch (1979) suggests these are based on the idea 'the individual will is all powerful and totally determines one's fate'; by following a set of teachings and practices, individuals experience improvements in their personal life and circumstances.
- > **Social**: The NAM claims that if enough people follow its principles, society itself will be transformed. Transcendental Meditation, for example, claims collective meditation produces changes that 'radiate into society and affect all aspects of society for the better'.
- > **Appeal to organisations**: A recent development has been a



Practitioners of Transcendental Meditation see it as a path to both individual spirituality and social transformation

move into 'applications for organisations', with some movements expanding their interests into the idea of transforming organisations. The Lausanne Movement, for example, offers 'transformational business' courses that hold out the promise of creating 'profitable businesses' through a transformation at three combined levels, of individual, organisation and wider society — at a price, of course.

Szerszynski (1992) argues the appeal of this type is based on the idea that 'sacred power comes from within the individual'. Its application is in everyday life: clients learn techniques designed to realise their human potential, with an assumption something like 'success at work is indicative of spiritual development'. This type is particularly attractive to a **young, middle-class** clientele; as Szerszynski argues: 'the pressure and competitiveness of the middle-class career' becomes the vehicle for spiritual development 'modelled along the same lines as career development in modern societies; courses, seminars, training, management, the learning of techniques'.

Explanations for the appeal of this type of movement are, therefore, focused around the workplace:

- Bruce (1995), for example, argues their appeal is to 'university-educated middle classes working in the "expressive professions"...whose education and work cause them to have an articulate interest in human potential'.
- Yankelovich et al. (1983), on the other hand, see the appeal as more individualistic; despite the evidence of their current social role, people believe they have 'more to offer' — something that can be realised through the release of an 'inner, real, self'.

New Age/mystical movements

The third type reflects what Start and Bainbridge call an '**audience**' approach to spirituality. The movements rarely have a central organisational structure but instead represent a *range of interests* (astrology or tarot reading being good examples). Their audience can be serviced by providing/selling teachings, practices and paraphernalia designed to help the individual achieve greater levels of expertise and hence understanding.

These are again 'spiritual' movements, embodying beliefs that can be picked up, modified and discarded almost at will (with ideas drawn from a mix of 'ancient' religious, secular and philosophical teachings). One appeal is that involvement can be as deep or superficial as the individual desires — hence the idea of audience or 'leisure' movements; they don't involve deep commitments and can be practised in ways that don't interfere with everyday life and responsibilities. As Szerszynski suggests, 'they tend to separate off their spiritual activities into a private realm, distinct from their working life'.



Suggest two problems we face when studying NAMs.



Explanations

There are clear differences between various New Age movements, mainly expressed in terms of what people are supposed to do with the knowledge they gain (*client* movements, for example, focus on secular success whereas *leisure* movements focus on 'self-understanding'). However, they have a number of themes in common that unite them as a different kind of movement to both NRMs and ORMs.

Clients

Anyone, regardless of age, class, gender or ethnicity (although not many ethnic groups seem interested) can join — and, just as easily, leave. In this respect members can be seen more as *practitioners* who subscribe to particular beliefs and perform certain practices — from tantric sex through witchcraft or the ever-popular ear-candling. As Szerszynski puts it: 'Membership is typically part-time, voluntary, and revocable.'

While women have a greater involvement in religious behaviour than men, their involvement in NAMs is greater still. As König (2000) suggests, women — and middle-class women in particular — are over-represented in New Age movements, for three main reasons:

- > **Organisational:** Where they generally lack the solid, centralised structure of ORMs and NRMs there are few, if any, positions of male power that exclude women.
- > **Ideological:** Whittier (1995) suggests many of the ideas propagated by NAMs are 'female friendly' (they don't, for example, involve sexist language or male deities).
- > **Practical:** Commitment levels can be as involved or superficial as the individual desires (which is important when the individual is trying to juggle family, work and spiritual commitments).

More generally, Heelas (1996) argues the appeal of NAMs is rooted in:

- > **Postmodern individualism:** A situation in which individuals place themselves at the centre of all interaction: the world revolves around them and their 'needs' and the solution to all problems is found by 'changing the person' rather than the system that produces the person — a situation Marin (1975) has called the 'new narcissism'. This aversion to collective organisation is part of the postmodern condition.
- > **Spirituality shopping:** This postmodern individualism lends itself to what Fraser (2005) calls 'spirituality shopping'. NAMs 'offer a language for the divine that dispenses with all the off-putting paraphernalia of priests and church...it's not about believing in anything too specific, other than some nebulous sense of otherness or presence. It offers God without dogma.'

NAM adherents resemble consumers encouraged to buy into whatever form of 'spiritual enlightenment' is being offered. The appeal here is that if the individual perceives no benefit they simply move on to the next movement.

Similarly, the long-term appeal of NAMs is limited by **knowledge**: once someone has learnt the basics required to do something (how to relax using Transcendental Meditation or yoga, for example), they may have little reason for continued involvement.

This aspect of NAMs defines both their general and, paradoxically, short-term, appeal in the sense that they involve **meaning without motivation**. Middle-class, disillusioned and middle-aged people may turn to NAMs that promise to help them live more harmoniously or successfully in a world that seems to largely pass them by, their 'talents' variously undervalued and unfulfilled. While NAMs offer meaning to life, without the need to make any great break with routine or personal sacrifice, this is both a strength and a weakness:

- If individuals feel their involvement produces benefits, they will consume more of what's on offer (buying into 'new and deeper levels of enlightenment', for example).
- For the majority there is likely to be no great life change — which produces **consumer disenchantment** and a desire to move on to the next product in the shop.

Finally Bruce (1995) suggests the general appeal of NAMs to the middle classes in the following terms:

Spiritual growth appeals mainly to those whose more pressing material needs have been satisfied. Unmarried mothers raising children on welfare tend to be too concerned with finding food, heat and light to be overly troubled by their inner lights and when they do look for release from their troubles they prefer the bright outer lights of bars and discotheques.

OCR examination-style questions

- 1 Identify and explain two reasons for the appeal of New Age movements in the contemporary UK. (17 marks)
- 2 Identify and explain two ways in which religiosity is influenced by ethnicity. (17 marks)
- 3 Identify and explain two ways in which religion may be seen as patriarchal. (17 marks)

The strength of religion in society

Secularisation refers to the decline of the influence of religion in contemporary societies. While this may seem a relatively straightforward idea to test — a simple