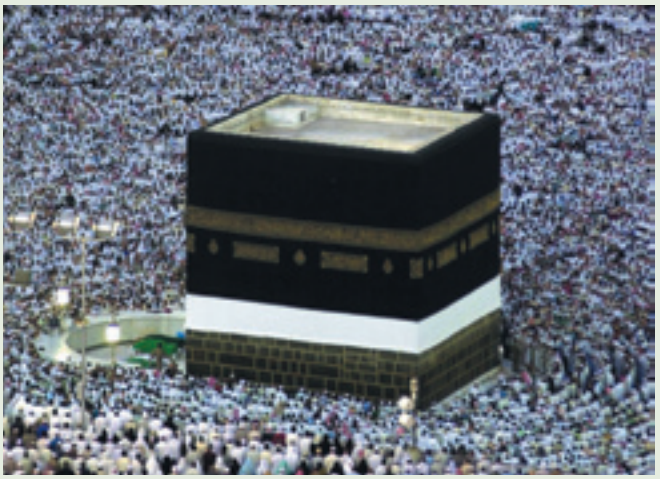
1 Beliefs in society

Introduction

A belief is something that a person holds to be true. It may be a conviction that the world is flat *or* that the world is round. It may be a conviction that human beings were created by a supernatural power *or* that they evolved from other organisms by a process of natural selection.

This chapter looks at sociological explanations for beliefs. It is concerned with beliefs held by large numbers of people - hence the title Beliefs in Society. It starts from a standard sociological approach that many beliefs are shared, they are learned as part of society's culture, and just as culture varies from society to society, so do beliefs.

Religious beliefs form the main focus of the chapter. Beliefs based on science and ideology are also considered. In each case, sociologists argue that beliefs are formed in social contexts, that they are socially constructed.



Over two million Muslim pilgrims gather in Mecca to perform the annual hajj ceremony. Islam is now the world's second largest and fastest growing religion.

chaptersummary

- **Unit 1** looks at the social construction of science.
- **Unit 2** outlines theories of ideology.
- **Unit 3** examines sociological theories of religion.
- **Unit 4** assesses the role of religion, both as a conservative force which maintains things the way they are and as a radical force which encourages social change.
- **Unit 5** discusses different types of religious organisation, including churches, denominations, sects, cults and New Religious Movements.
- **Unit 6** looks at explanations of the relationship between religious beliefs, religious organisations and social groups.
- **Unit 7** investigates the secularisation debate – whether or not societies are becoming increasingly secular or non-religious.
- **Unit 8** examines contemporary religion from a global perspective.

Unit 1 Science and society

keyissues

1. How are belief systems constructed?
2. How are scientific beliefs constructed?

1.1 The social construction of reality

In an influential work entitled *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann argue that human beings construct their beliefs in a social context. They manufacture *universes of meaning* which organise their experiences and make sense of their lives. They construct their own social worlds and work to maintain them against the threat of uncertainty and disruption.

A universe of meaning requires constant *legitimation*. It needs repeated reinforcement and justification. Members of society must be told and re-told that their universe of meaning is legitimate – right, true and correct. Without this support, a universe of meaning would tend to crumble, life would become meaningless and the stability of society would be threatened.

Belief systems are socially constructed. They form the basis of universes of meaning. And they feed back and reinforce the society that constructed them. This applies to the whole spectrum of beliefs. In this respect, there is little difference between scientific theories, political beliefs and religious doctrines. They are all socially constructed, they all help to make sense of the world and they all form a part of and legitimate universes of meaning. Here are some examples.

Religious beliefs provide answers to basic questions such as the meaning of life, the origin of the human species and what happens after death. They also provide justification for the legal system. For example, many laws are based on religious beliefs about right and wrong. Religion provides

ultimate support for universes of meaning – it places them within a supernatural reality which believers do not question. By comparison, science offers support for universes of meaning by grounding them in reason and evidence. For example, the origin and evolution of the human species is explained in terms of Darwin's theory of evolution which is based on evidence from the fossil record.

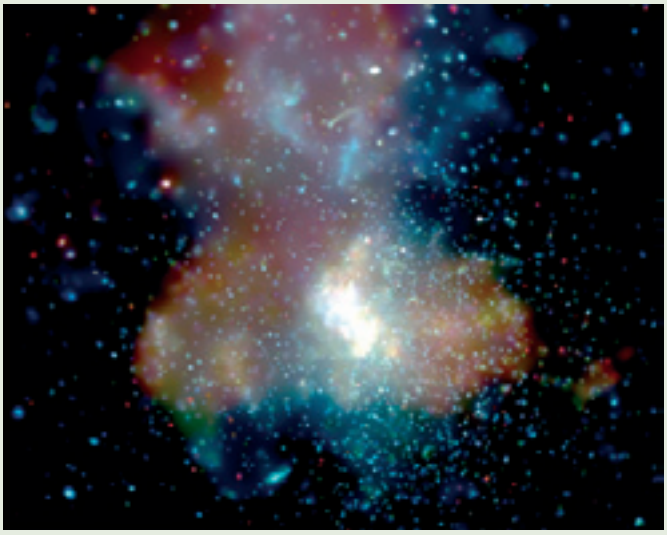
Berger and Luckmann argue that the certainty provided by universes of meaning has a precarious foundation. Universes of meaning are real because people believe they are real. Life is meaningful because of the meaning people give to it. However there is no universal standard or yardstick against which reality can be shown to be real, that beliefs can be shown to be true. One society's truth may be another society's falsehood. Common sense in one society may be nonsense in another. Universes of meaning are insecure and easily shattered.

key terms

Universe of meaning A socially constructed belief system which gives meaning to people's lives.
Legitimation To make right, true, correct.

activity 1 science and the construction of reality

Item A Galileo's telescope

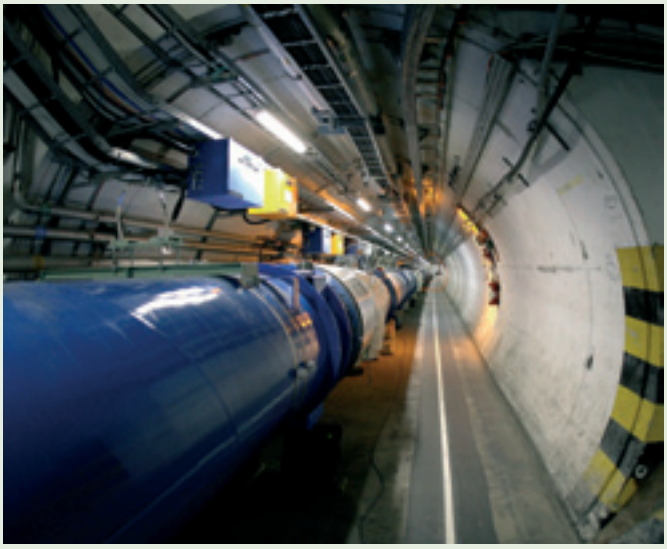


The centre of the Milky Way galaxy taken from NASA's Chandra X-ray Observatory

The telescope built in 1609 by Galileo had the magnifying power of a cheap pair of binoculars. Yet it opened up a new world. Galileo could see that Jupiter had four moons and the Sun had spots – which led him to conclude that the Sun was rotating. His telescope provided evidence that the Sun rather than the Earth was the centre of the solar system. As more powerfultelescopes were built, people became aware of a vast universe in which they were inhabitants of an insignificant dot, part of a galaxy of billions of stars, each carrying their own solar systems.

Source: *Ledermann*, 2008

Item B The Large Hadron Collider



Part of the Large Hadron Collider

The Large Hadron Collider was completed in 2008 at a cost of 10 billion. It is built in a 17 mile circular tunnel, 100 metres below ground near Geneva, Switzerland. It is a particle collider – it will crash subatomic particles together.

The aim of the Large Hadron Collider is to re-create the conditions that existed one trillionth of a second after the Big Bang which many scientists believe created our universe 13.7 billion years ago. Scientists hope that this will reveal the origins of the forces of nature and unlock the secrets of time and space.

Source: *The Guardian*, 11.09.2008

questions

1. How has Galileo's telescope helped to produce a new universe of meaning?
2. How might the Large Hadron Collider help to produce a new reality?

1.2 The social construction of science

In today's society, many of our beliefs are based on the observations and theories of science. Modern genetics has unravelled the human genome and Darwin's theory of evolution has provided an explanation for the origin and evolution of the human race. In 2008, the Large Hadron Collider, a particle collider, was built near Geneva, 100 metres beneath fields in a 17 mile circular tunnel. It aims to reveal the origins of the universe and the forces of nature by simulating aspects of the Big Bang.

The origins of modern science

Researchers have placed the origins of modern science in 18th century Europe during a period known as the Enlightenment. Scholars from a number of countries contributed to a publication know as the *Encyclopédie*. It was based on two principles. First, the belief that reason could provide an understanding of the world. And second, the belief that this understanding could be used to improve the lives of human beings. Knowledge was based on reason and observation. This formed the guidelines for the *scientific method* – the procedure for 'doing science'.

These beliefs directly challenged the view of the world provided by the Roman Catholic Church. According to the Church, knowledge was based on divine revelation – eternal truths revealed by the word of God. In contrast, science claimed that reason and observation formed the basis for knowledge and the foundation for many beliefs. (See pages 000-000 for further discussion of science and the Enlightenment.)

The traditional view of science

The traditional view of science in modern society is fairly straightforward. Science is based on systematic observation and measurement. Ideas about the behaviour of matter in the natural world can be tested and shown to be true or untrue. In the laboratory, for example, the scientist observes the behaviour of matter under various conditions, measuring variables such as temperature and pressure. These observations are objective – they are not influenced by the values or religious beliefs of the scientist. They can be shown to be accurate by *replication* – by the repetition of the experiment under the same conditions. If the results are the same, then the observations are seen to be accurate.

Theories are then constructed to explain the behaviour observed. If later observations show that behaviour differs from that predicted by the theory, then the theory is modified or changed. In this way science progresses – it provides an increasingly accurate and comprehensive understanding of the behaviour of matter.

In modern society scientists have had high status. Their findings have generally been accepted and seen as beneficial to humankind. For example, scientific advances in medicine have been welcomed and seen as a major factor in improving health and increasing life expectancy.

However, the view of science described above is overly simple. And the belief that science brings benefits to humankind has been increasingly questioned.

Science and falsification

How do we know that scientific theories provide accurate explanations? According to Karl Popper in his influential book *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959), theories can be tested through observation and experiment. In this respect, they are superior to 'everyday' knowledge and beliefs. However, Popper argues, we can never know with certainty that a theory is true. All we can say is that so far the theory has not been shown to be false. For example, many scientists accept the Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe – it is supported by a range of observational data. However, evidence yet to be discovered may disprove or *falsify* this theory. Scientists therefore accept theories 'for the time being' because there is general agreement that to date they are supported by observations. As a result, 'science does not rest upon a solid bedrock' (Popper, 1959).

According to Popper, science is based on the systematic testing of theories in an attempt to disprove them. If theories withstand this attempt, then they gain acceptance. However, they can never be finally proven. In practice, theories are eventually modified or overturned by new theories. (For further discussion of Popper, see pages 000-00.)

The fabrication of facts

Popper argued that scientific theories 'do not rest on a solid bedrock'. Karin Knorr-Centina, in an article entitled *The Fabrication of Facts* (2005), makes a similar point about the 'facts' used to test scientific theories. In her words, 'facts are not something we can take for granted or think of as the solid rock upon which knowledge is built'. She argues that the systematic observations and measurements made by scientists are not the objective 'facts' they are often seen to be.

So-called 'facts' are *fabricated* – they are constructed by scientists. The 'facts' they observe in the laboratory or the natural world are shaped by their theories and by their measuring instruments. Theories direct scientists what to look for and how to see it. For example, the theory of evolution directs scientists to examine fossils to see how they fit into an evolutionary sequence and to look for 'missing links' in order to fill gaps in that sequence. And measuring instruments construct the 'facts' available to scientists. For example, Galileo's telescope was essential to provide the observations that supported his theory that the Earth went round the Sun. As new measuring instruments are invented, new observations are possible and new 'facts' can be manufactured. In this respect, science is based on the fabrication of facts.

The social construction of scientific knowledge

Thomas Kuhn's book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) challenged the traditional view of science. He saw science as socially constructed within scientific communities. This rejects the view that science is based solely on rationality and objectivity.

According to Kuhn, scientists work in communities centred on particular branches of science and particular research projects. They operate in terms of shared *paradigms*. A paradigm is a framework stating which theories should be developed, what kinds of data should be collected and which research methods are appropriate. Scientists tend to look for data which supports the paradigm and refine theories contained within the paradigm. The paradigm shapes the way they see the world. This outlook is supported by communities of scientists. In this respect, the paradigm is socially constructed and socially legitimated.

Kuhn argues that for most of the time scientists conduct *normal science,* that is within the framework of the current paradigm. Normal science develops and refines the paradigm rather than challenging it. Most scientists are committed to the existing paradigm – their career has been based upon it, their reputation has been built in terms of it and they find it difficult to see the world in any other way. There is a tendency to ignore or explain away contradictory evidence which challenges the paradigm of the day.

According to Kuhn, significant changes – *scientific revolutions* – occur when sufficient evidence accumulates which cannot be explained in terms of the existing paradigm. A new paradigm which appears to explain this evidence then develops. However, there is often considerable resistance to a new paradigm. For example, Newton's theories, which formed the basis of a new paradigm in physics, took over 50 years to become established. Once accepted, a revolutionary paradigm becomes the order of the day and normal science is then conducted within its framework.

key terms

Scientific method The accepted method for conducting scientific research.
Replication The repetition of a piece of research using the same methods.
Falsification Showing a theory to be incorrect.
Fabrication of facts The social construction of things seen to be true.
Paradigm A framework within which scientists work which states what kinds of theories, methods and data are acceptable.
Normal science Science conducted within the framework of the existing paradigm.
Scientific revolution The overthrow of an existing paradigm by a new paradigm.

activity2 scientific revolutions

Item A Galileo (1564-1642)

Galileo demonstrating his telescope to the nobles of Venice

Galileo, an Italian mathematician and astronomer, challenged the accepted view that the Earth was the centre of the universe. Based on mathematical calculations and observations using an advanced telescope, which he designed, Galileo argued that the Earth went round the Sun. This was in direct conflict with the views of astronomers, mathematicians and philosophers of the day, and with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Galileo was put on trial in a church court, found guilty of heresy – going against the word of God – and punished with house arrest. He continued his work and his book had to be smuggled out of Italy and taken to Holland for publication.

Item B Charles Darwin (1809-1882)

The British naturalist Charles Darwin published his theory of evolution in *The Origin of Species* in 1859. Today, his idea of natural selection forms the basis of the biological sciences. However, it was condemned by many of the leading scientists of his day. Darwin's tutors at Cambridge University rejected his theory, as did Richard Owen who headed the Victorian scientific establishment.

Darwin was ridiculed by the popular press who poked fun at the idea that human beings, apes and monkeys were descended from a common ancestor.

This cartoon shows Darwin (on the left) with an ape's body.

question

1. What support do Items A and B provide for Kuhn's views on scientific revolutions?

1.3 Science in late modern and postmodern society

A number of sociologists argue that societies like the UK have moved from the *modern era* to the *postmodern era* during the last quarter of the 20th century. Other sociologists see this change as less dramatic, arguing that we have entered *late modernity*, an extension of the modern era. However, both groups agree that this has involved important changes in attitudes towards science.

Anthony Giddens – science in late modern society

Giddens (1991) argues that people in late modern society have serious doubts over Enlightenment beliefs about the promise and potential of science. No longer is science seen as bringing certainty and 'securely founded knowledge'.

This change of outlook is based on the realisation that no matter how well established a scientific theory, it will probably be revised or discarded in the light of new ideas and findings. Many people find this uncertainty troubling.

The Enlightenment view that science will improve the human condition is now treated with increasing scepticism. Science may bring benefits to humankind but it also brings risk and danger – for example, the dangers of nuclear energy as revealed by the explosion of the nuclear power station at Chernobyl in the former Soviet Union in 1986 (see Activity 3, Item D).

According to Giddens, these negative views of science are balanced by more positive ones. In late modern society, science is seen as creating risk and danger but also as promising benefits for humankind. Attitudes towards science are often contradictory – 'approval and disquiet, enthusiasm and antipathy'.

Ulrich Beck – risk and globalisation

According to Ulrich Beck (1992), late modern society is characterised by uncertainty and risk. Risk is magnified by the process of globalisation – the increasing interconnectedness of parts of the world. This can be seen by the global nature of financial crises, terrorism and nuclear accidents, all of which cross national boundaries.

Many of the risks and uncertainties of late modern society are see to be associated with science and technology. This has led people to be suspicious of so-called 'scientific advances' such as genetically modified food crops and stem cell research. Their suspicion has been heightened by disagreements between scientists – for example, about the advantages and disadvantages of GM food (see Activity 3). As a result, the credibility of beliefs based on scientific research has been reduced.

Jean-Francois Lyotard – science in postmodern society

According to the French writer Lyotard (1984), people in postmodern society have lost faith in the *metanarratives* of modern society. A metanarrative is a 'big story' like the Enlightenment view of progress, Christianity's view of life and Marx's view of history. In postmodern society, metanarratives no longer inspire, they no longer direct action, they no longer form the basis for beliefs. Science is a metanarrative – a big story about the origin of the universe, behaviour in the natural world, and the evolution of species.

Lyotard believes there is widespread disillusionment with science in postmodern society. Science has failed to deliver on the Enlightenment promise of progress. People no longer trust scientists and have lost faith in the grand claims of science.

Rather than being concerned with human betterment, science is becoming the servant of industry and commerce. Scientists are increasingly concerned with technology, focusing their attention on producing goods for sale. This can be seen from the rapid advances in electronic goods. From this point of view, science is becoming *technoscience*, concerned with producing commodities for the global marketplace (Irwin & Michael, 2003).

summary

1. Berger and Luckmann argue that beliefs are socially constructed.
2. Science can be seen as a social construction.
3. Many of today's beliefs are based on theories produced by scientists.
4. The Enlightenment view of science was based on two principles:
   - The belief that reason could provide an understanding of the world
   - The view that this understanding could be used for the betterment of humankind.
5. Traditionally, in modern society, science was seen to be based on objective observation and measurement.
6. According to Popper, scientific theories can be falsified but cannot be proved.
7. So-called facts can be seen as fabricated or socially constructed. As such, they are not objective.
8. According to Kuhn, science is directed by paradigms constructed within communities of scientists.
9. Giddens argues that in late modern society there are serious doubts about the objectivity and value of science.
10. According to Beck, late modern society is characterised by uncertainty and risk. He sees science as contributing to this situation.
11. Lyotard sees science as one of the metanarratives which are increasingly dismissed in postmodern society.

key terms

Metanarratives The 'grand' explanations or 'big stories' of modern society provided by science, religion and political ideas.
Technoscience The application of science to technical commodities.

activity3 science in late modern society

Item A Monsanto

Monsanto are the world's leading producer of GM crops. 'We're excited about the potential for genetically modified food to contribute to a better environment and a sustainable, plentiful and healthy food supply.'

- Here are some of the benefits of GM crops.
- They produce more food on less land at lower cost.
- This helps farmers by increasing profits and helps consumers by reducing prices.
- Genetic engineering can produce food plants that are resistant to pests and drought and require fewer fertilisers.
- Insecticides and chemical fertilisers can harm the environment. Almost all GM crops reduce the need for these.

Source: www.monsanto.com

Harvesting genetically modified corn in California.

Item B Greenpeace

Greenpeace are an environmental agency and pressure group. 'Our goal is to protect the environment and biodiversity – the many different varieties of plant life on the planet.' GM crops can threaten this goal in the following ways.

- They can reproduce and interbreed with natural crops and spread to new environments in an unpredictable and uncontrollable way.
- They can threaten biodiversity if they replace the variety of existing crop plants.
- If we become dependent on one type of GM crop – for example, GM maize or soya beans – and it is attacked by a new disease, then widespread starvation may result.
- Crop diversity is essential to resist new pests, diseases and changing climatic and environmental conditions.
- Farmers can become dependent on biotech companies. They must buy fresh seeds from them each year. They are likely to be prosecuted if they save seeds from the previous year's crop for re-planting.
- We do not know the long-term effects of GM foods on people's health.

Source: www.greenpeace.org.uk

Greenpeace activists in Italy attempt to prevent the unloading of GM soya (GMOs are genetically modified organisms).

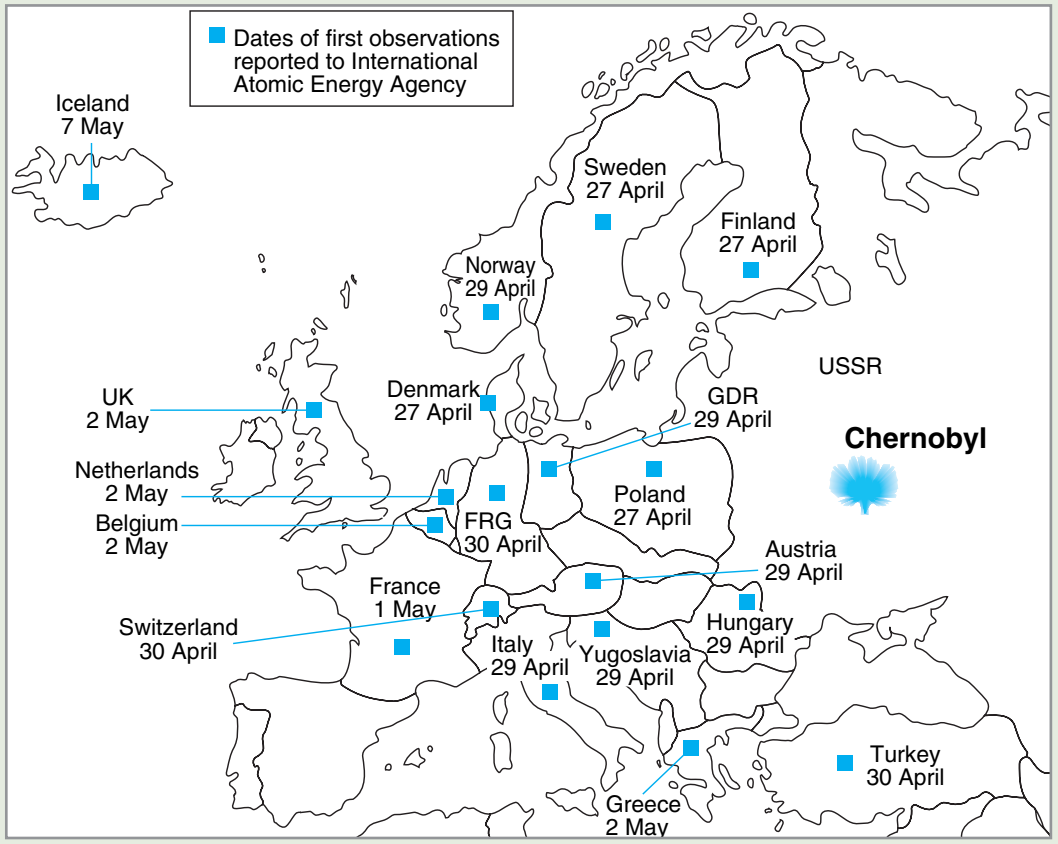
Item C The National Centre for Biotechnology Education (NCBE)

NCBE is an educational institution. Evidence from thousands of field trials suggests that GM plants will behave just like non-GM plants.

- There is evidence that genetic material from GM plants can be transferred to non-GM plants. It is not clear how frequently this occurs or how significant it is. Caution is needed.
- There is no evidence that GM crops are harmful to human health. However, new varieties should be examined carefully to guard against this threat.
- Biotechnology may encourage the production of a wider variety of new crops, so increasing biodiversity.
- Great benefits may come from GM foods, especially for the Third World where there are often food shortages.

Source: www.ncbe.reading.ac.uk

Item D Chernobyl



FRG = Federal Republic of Germany (the former West Germany)
GDR = German Democratic Republic (the former East Germany)
Dates of first measurement of radiation fallout from Chernobyl in various countries, 27 April to 2 May 1986. Map based on information from the International Atomic Energy Agency.

On 26th April 1986, the nuclear power station at Chernobyl in the former Soviet Union exploded as a result of human error. 31 workers and firefighters died within days (of radiation burns) and 50,000 square kilometres of surrounding land was contaminated. The nuclear fallout reached 20 countries, including Britain. Scientists have estimated that between 280,000 and 500,000 deaths will result worldwide from this accident.

Greenpeace, *Nuclear Power*, 1992

question

What support do the items in this activity provide for the views of Giddens and Beck?

Unit 2 Ideology

keyissues

1 What is ideology?
2 What are the main political ideologies?

2.1 What is Ideology?

The term ideology has many meanings. This section gives a brief outline of some of the more common usages of the term.

A closed system of thought The philosopher Karl Popper (1959) saw ideology as a closed system of thought. By this he means that ideologies are closed to evidence which challenges their beliefs. Ideologies reject alternative views, they do not tolerate opposing ideas. They are immune to rational argument. Their version of the truth has an answer for everything.

Popper's view of ideology was largely based on his analysis of systems of fascist and communist totalitarian regimes in the 20th century. As a result, he also saw ideology as an instrument of social control and oppression.

A distortion of reality Ideology is often used in a negative sense to describe a set of ideas which distort reality. Marxists use the term in this way. When they refer *to ruling class ideology*, they are talking about beliefs which produce a *false consciousness*, a picture of the world

which is false and distorted. Some feminists use ideology in this way when they talk about *patriarchal ideology*.

A justification for inequality From this perspective, ideology not only distorts reality, it also provides a justification for inequality. Thus ruling class ideology justifies the position of the ruling class and supports its dominance. And it blinds members of the subject class to the truth about their situation. For example, the emphasis on freedom in capitalist society – the free market, free democratic societies, individual freedoms – projects an illusion which disguises the oppression and exploitation of the subject class.

The term patriarchal ideology is used in a similar way. It presents a false picture of the characteristics of males and females. And this picture serves to justify and maintain gender inequality.

Neutral views of ideology

The views of ideology outlined above are all negative. Ideology seen as bad, false and oppressive. Neutral views see ideology as neither good nor bad, true nor false, liberating nor oppressive.

The term 'political ideology' is often used in a neutral way. It refers to viewpoints such as liberalism, conservatism, and socialism.

The various types of ideology outlined in this section will now be examined in more detail.

2.2 Marxism and ideology

Karl Marx (1818-1883)

Marx saw society as a structure divided into two major parts. The first and most important part is the economic base of *infrastructure*. The second major part, known as the *superstructure*, consists of the rest of society – the political, legal and educational systems, religions, the mass media and beliefs and ideas.

Marx claimed that the infrastructure shapes the superstructure – in other words, the economic system shapes the rest of society. For example, from a Marxist viewpoint, the education system in modern industrial society has been shaped by the requirements of a capitalist economy for a literate and well-disciplined workforce.

Social classes Marx saw conflict between social classes as the basic characteristic of all known human societies. Every society has two main social groups, a *ruling class* and a *subject class*. The power of the ruling class comes from its ownership of what Marx called the *means of production*. This includes the land, raw materials, machinery, tools and buildings used to produce goods. Thus in Western industrial society, *capitalists* – those who own private industry – form the ruling class. The subject class – the *proletariat* in capitalist society – is made up of workers who sell their labour in return for wages.

There is a basic conflict of interest between capitalists and the proletariat. Workers produce wealth in the form of goods yet a large part of that wealth is taken in the form of profits by the capitalist class. Thus one group gains at the expense of the other.

Marx believed that this conflict could not be resolved within the framework of capitalist society. It would eventually result in the overthrow of the capitalist class. A workers' revolution would lead to a communist society in which the means of production would be owned by everyone, classes would disappear, and exploitation and oppression would end.

Ruling class ideology This, however, would only happen when workers became fully aware of their exploitation. But this awareness will not occur overnight because of the way society is structured. Since the infrastructure largely shapes the superstructure, the relationship of dominance and subordination between the ruling class and subject class will be reflected in the superstructure. Thus, the political and legal systems will support ruling class power – for example, laws will protect the rights of capitalists to own industry and take profits. In the same way, the beliefs and values of society will support ruling class domination. Thus, capitalism will be seen as reasonable and just, rather than exploitative and oppressive. In this way, beliefs and values will disguise and distort the true nature of society.

In Marxist terms, beliefs and values form a ruling class ideology. This produces a false consciousness which prevents people from seeing the reality of their situation. However, Marx believed that ruling class ideology can only slow down the eventual overthrow of capitalism. The conflicts of interest within the capitalist system will inevitably lead to its downfall. In the classless society that will follow, there will be no ideology. (See pages 000-000 for further discussion of Marx's views.)

key terms

Infrastructure In Marxist theory, the economic base of society which shapes the superstructure.
Superstructure The rest of society - the political, legal and educational systems, the family, religion, beliefs and ideas.
Means of production This includes the land, raw materials, machinery and buildings used to produce goods.
Ruling class Those who own the means of production
Subject class Those who do not own the means of production and are subject to the power of the ruling class.
Capitalists The ruling class in capitalist society who own and control the means of production.
Proletariat the subject class in capitalist society who sell their labour for wages.
Ruling class ideology A set of beliefs which support the position of the ruling class by distorting reality.
False consciousness A false view which prevents people from seeing the reality of their situation.
Patriarchal ideology A set of beliefs which support male domination by distorting reality.

activity4 pictures of Marxism

Item A

This Russian cartoon from 1900 shows a social pyramid from the Tsar (monarch) at the top to the proletariat (workers and peasants) at the base. The text from the top downwards reads:

- We reign over you (the Tsar)
- We rule you (the nobles)
- We fool you (the priests)
- We shoot you (the army)
- We eat for you (the middle class)

The banner held by members of the proletariat reads: 'To live in freedom, to die in struggle'.

Item B

A Soviet poster of 1919 showing a bloated capitalist.

question

What aspects of Marxist theory are illustrated by the cartoons?

Antonio Gramsci (1891- 1937)

According to the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, beliefs and ideas can change society. They are not simply a reflection of the infrastructure - to some extent they have a life of their own.

Gramski used the term hegemony to describe what he called the 'intellectual and moral' dominance of the ruling class. Hegemony is maintained partly by force - for example, the army and police - and partly by ideology - by persuading the subject or working class that the dominance of the ruling class is in everybody's interest and therefore justified.

Ideological persuasion could not be total and, as a result, hegemony could never be complete. This is because the working class have a dual consciousness - a set of contradictory beliefs. Some of their beliefs are shaped by ruling class ideology and some are shaped by their own experience of work in a capitalist economy - in particular, their experience of low wages and poor working conditions. To a limited extent, this allows them to see through the smokescreen of ruling class ideology. Gramsci believed that capitalism could only be overthrown by

key terms

Hegemony The 'intellectual and moral' dominance of the ruling class.

Dual consciousness A set of contradictory beliefs.

working-class intellectuals who must sweep aside the false consciousness produced by ruling class ideology. To do this they must produce a general awareness of exploitation and oppression and lead the working class to revolution.

The dominant ideology thesis

In a study entitled *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (1980), Abercrombie, Hill and Turner reject the view that there is a ruling class ideology that dominates capitalist society. They surveyed a variety of studies and found little evidence of acceptance of the beliefs that Marxists see as forming this ideology - for example, that capitalism was a just system and that wealth and income were fairly distributed.

Instead, Abercrombie et al. argue that the working class are 'kept in their place' primarily by economic necessity - they have to work to survive. The alternative for most is unemployment and poverty.

Evaluation

Marxism has been criticised in term of both theory and evidence. Abercrombie et al. argue that there is little evidence of widespread acceptance of a ruling class ideology. And Marxist predictions of a workers' revolution and the end of capitalism have been rejected as wishful thinking, especially since the downfall of communism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Despite these criticisms, some of the key elements of Marxist views on ideology remain influential. Many researchers agree that in certain places at certain times ideology can distort, it can broadcast false beliefs, it can disguise oppression and exploitation , and it can justify and legitimate inequality.

2.3 Feminism and ideology

Marxists see the class system as the main source of oppression and inequality. For many feminists, the gender system - the social divisions between women and men - are just as, if not more, oppressive. There are many versions of feminism. The account which follows is brief and partial.

Feminists often start from the following observations. In practically every known human society there is a division of labour based on gender – there are men's jobs and women's jobs. And in most cases, men's jobs bring higher rewards – in terms of status or prestige, in terms of power, and in terms of pay. Even when men and women have the same jobs, men still tend to receive the highest rewards. As a result, there is a system of social inequality which benefits men at the expense of women.

This system of gender inequality tends to permeate the whole of society – it is not simply limited to occupational roles. For example, it may be reflected in religious beliefs which see men as superior to women, or in marriage vows which state that the duty of a wife is to serve her husband. It may be reflected in the education system if parents support their sons at the expense of their daughters. It may be seen in top jobs such as MPs, judges, barristers and surgeons, where despite equal opportunity laws, men still

activity4 pictures of Marxism

question

How might these advertisements be seen as examples of patriarchal ideology?

predominate. And it may be seen in family life if boys and girls are socialised to expect and accept male dominance.

The term *patriarchy* is sometimes used to describe a social system based on gender inequality. It describes a system in which male dominance is present in people's working and family lives, and is reflected in social norms and values, roles and institutions. In this sense, patriarchy has been defined as 'the combination of economic and cultural systems which ensures male supremacy' (Coote & Campbell, 1982).

Patriarchal ideology

Some feminists use the term patriarchal ideology to describe the beliefs which justify and support male domination and disguise and maintain female subordination. According to Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* (1970). It is 'the most pervasive ideology of our culture'.

Here are some examples of patriarchal ideology.

- A woman's place is in the home.
- Men should be head of the family.
- Women should be primarily responsible for housework and childcare.
- Part-time employment is suitable for women because of their domestic responsibilities.

According to many feminists, beliefs such as these make male domination appear normal and natural and obscure women's position as second-class citizens, both at home and in the workplace.

key term

Patriarchy A social system based on male dominance.

2.4 Political ideologies

Definitions

Researchers who use the term *political ideologies* do not necessarily see ideologies as a justification for inequality or as a false view of reality. Here are some definitions of political ideologies.

- They 'map the political and social worlds for us'. They are 'aimed at the political arena' and seek to shape 'public policy' (Freeden, 2003).
- They are 'interrelated sets of ideas that in some way guide or inspire political action' (Hewood, 2002).
- They are 'reasonably coherent structures of thought shared by groups of people. They are 'a means of explaining how society works and how it ought to work' (Dobson, 1992).

This section looks at three major political ideologies - liberalism, conservatism and socialism. There are many versions of these ideologies. This section focuses on the key ideas of each.

Liberalism

In its broadest sense, liberalism is the ideology of modern Western democracies. The following are some of the key ideas of liberalism.

Individual freedom The aim of liberalism is to create a society in which every individual is free to develop their own unique talents. Individual freedom is central to liberal thinking. Each person should be able to act as they please, so long as they don't threaten the freedom of others to do likewise.

Equality of opportunity Each individual should have an equal opportunity to develop their talents to the full. This does not mean that everybody should be equal in terms of wealth, income and social status, only that they should have an equal chance to attain positions of power and status.

Liberals believe in equal rights – for example, equality under the law and political equality in the sense of one person, one vote.

Government by consent Government should be based on the consent of the governed – a representative democracy translates this ideal into practice. One of the main tasks of government is to protect individual freedom. Many liberals believe in a form of limited government that protects but does not infringe on the rights and liberties of the individual.

Conservatism

Conservative ideas emerged in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. They have been seen as a reaction to the rapid economic, social and political changes brought about by industrialisation (Heywood, 2002).

Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published in 1790, provides an early illustration of conservative views. Burke saw the French Revolution as a threat to order and stability. Change should not be sudden, it should not be based on a brand new model which swept away the past. Instead, it should be gradual, built on institutions which have stood the test of time, and based on the accumulated wisdom of the past. In Burke's words, the way forward is 'change in order to conserve'.

Tradition Burke's views illustrate the key theme of conservative thought – the importance of tradition, of tried and tested ideas, experience and institutions. What has been shown to work in the past should be conserved for the present and the future.

Change It follows that change should be built on the best of the past. It should not be based on a brand new blueprint which sweeps away everything that went before. Change should proceed gradually and be approached with caution.

Human nature Conservatives tend to see human beings as imperfect and flawed. They can be selfish as well as unselfish, irrational as well as rational, greedy as well as generous.

The state In view of the imperfections of human nature, society needs a strong state to maintain law and order and ensure social stability. People need leadership and guidance from above.

Society Where liberalism tends to focus on the individual, conservative thought stresses the importance of the family and the nation. The family is seen as the cornerstone of society, transmitting shared values and contributing to social stability. The nation provides people with a common identity and a collective purpose. Symbols of the nation such as the flag, the national anthem and the monarchy help to make individuals feel part of something greater than themselves.

Socialism

Socialism emerged in the early years of the 19th century in response to the development of capitalist industrial society. Some of the key ideas of socialism are outlined below.

Collectivism The ideal society is based on collectivism, where everybody works for the common good rather than individual self-interest. To this end, private property should be abolished and economic resources used for the benefit of the whole community.

Equality This is a guiding principle of socialism. The extremes of wealth and income between the rich and poor are seen as evil. Equality brings out the best in human nature. And it brings cooperation, stability and cohesion in human society.

Capitalism Capitalism exploits and dehumanises wage earners. It generates widespread social inequalities, and a range of social problems including poverty, unemployment and crime.

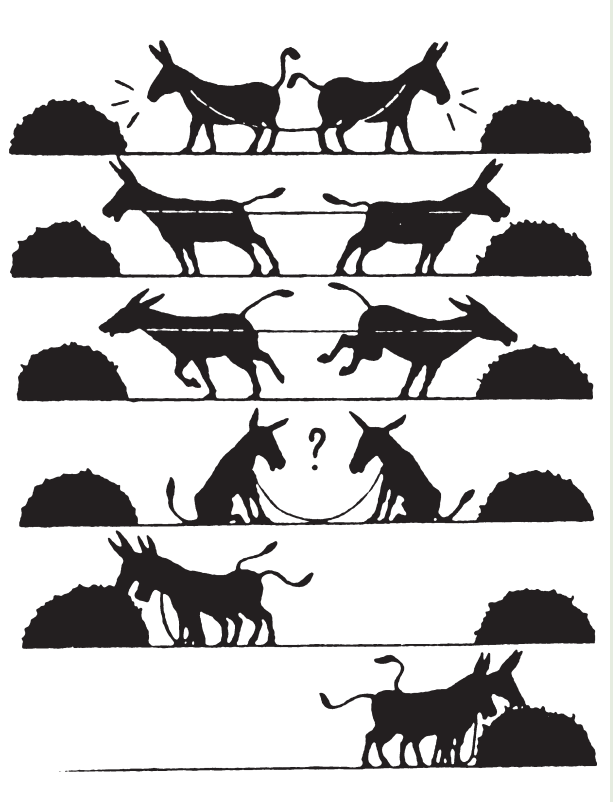
Social class Socialists see social class as the main division in society – for example, the capitalist ruling class who own and control private industry and the subject or working class who sell their labour in return for wages. Socialists tend to support the working class who they see as exploited and oppressed.

Human nature Socialists, as their name suggests, see humans as social beings. They see people as shaped by their social situation rather than being essentially good or bad, generous or selfish. They look forward to a society based on cooperation rather than competition, on collectivism rather than individualism. This will bring out the best in people (Heywood, 2002).

summary

1. The term ideology has many meanings
2. According to Popper, ideology is a closed system of thought which rejects alternative views.
3. According to Marx, ruling class ideology:
   - Distorts reality
   - Produces a false consciousness
   - Justifies inequality
   - Support the position of the ruling class
   - Reflects the economic relationships in the infrastructure
4. Gramsci argues that beliefs and ideas can change society - they are not simply a reflection of the infrastructure.
5. Gramsci claims that the working class have a dual consciousness which allows them a limited view through the smokescreen of ruling class ideology.
6. According to Abercrombie et al., there is little evidence that the working class accept the dominant ideology.
7. Despite the rejection of many aspects of Marxism, Marx's views on ideology remain influential.
8. Some feminists claim that patriarchal ideology justifies and maintains male dominance and makes it appear normal and natural.
9. Political ideologies are sets of beliefs which guide political action and seek to shape public policy.
10. Liberalism emphasises individual freedom, equality of opportunity and government by consent.
11. Conservatism emphasises tradition, a strong state and the family as the cornerstone of society.
12. Socialism emphasises collectivism, equality and cooperation.

activity6 socialism



question

How does this cartoon illustrate socialist ideas?

Unit 3 Theories of religion

keyissues

1 What is religion?

2 What are the main theoretical approaches to religion?

3.1 Defining religion

Religion has been defined in many ways:

- As a belief in some kind of supernatural power
- As an expression of this belief in collective worship
- As a set of moral values which guide action
- As a force which brings people together and unifies society.

These definitions let in a variety of activities under the heading of religion. For example, people talk about football as 'the new religion'. Many fans are devoted to the game. They are united in support of their team and, in some ways, a football match can be seen as a religious ritual.

There are many activities which can be seen as supernatural – astrology, palmistry, fortune telling, witchcraft and a belief in ghosts. Should these be regarded as religious?

As a starting point, most sociologists would probably agree that religions typically involve:

- an organised collectivity of individuals, with
- a shared system of beliefs and
- a set of approved activities and practices.

There are, of course, serious questions about the extent to which members of any of the world's religions agree with fellow members' beliefs and practices. Indeed, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism all experience divisions into often rival groupings. There are even questions about how organised a collectivity of individuals has to be to constitute a religion – especially since the advent of the Internet.

Most sociological definitions of religion focus on what religion is – *substantive* definitions – or the roles religions play in society – *functional* definitions.

Substantive definitions of religion

Belief in the supernatural Sociologists adopting substantive definitions have tried to identify what is distinctive about religious *beliefs*. For example, Max Weber saw religion as involving a belief in the *supernatural*, that is some power above the forces of nature. This suggests a belief in a being or beings, powers or forces, which are in some ways superior to humans, and which cannot be verified or explained by Western science.

Relating to the sacred An alternative substantive definition is provided by Emile Durkheim. For him, the key to religious beliefs is not that they relate to a supernatural power or being, but that they relate to things which a society's members perceive as *sacred*.

Durkheim argued that, in all societies, people divide the world about them into things which are regarded as sacred and those which are considered *profane* – non-sacred, worldly, ordinary. Sacred things are 'things set apart and forbidden'. Things, or people, seen as sacred evoke strong emotions of awe, respect and deference. For instance, in some societies, the monarch has inspired a sense of what Durkheim calls the sacred. Things regarded as sacred both draw the believer towards them while at the same time maintaining their distance. Part of the appeal of Princess Diana was that she was seen by many admirers both as someone 'ordinary' and as someone who was 'very special' (Jones, 1998).

In practice, a supernatural being (such as a god) is likely to be regarded as sacred. However, it seems as though anything could be regarded as sacred, however ordinary and mundane it may appear to outsiders – the Black Hills of South Dakota to the Dakota Sioux, the bone of a saint to medieval Christians, a cow to a Hindu. People or things regarded as sacred do not, therefore, have to be supernatural.

Functional definitions of religion

Functional definitions stress the ways religions contribute to societies. They focus on the *role* or *function* of religion in society. For Durkheim, as we have seen, religion refers to beliefs and practices concerning sacred things. These religious beliefs and practices 'unite into one single moral community … all those who adhere to them'. Thus, a key component of religion, he suggests, is that it encourages *social solidarity* or *social unity* between the fellow-believers who make up a society.

That, of course, isn't the only function that religion may perform in society. Other suggested functions are discussed shortly. Nevertheless, in Durkheim's view, it is because religion plays this crucial role of strengthening social solidarity that it occurs in all societies.

Definitions of religion – some criticisms

Supernatural beings or forces One criticism made of the widely-held view that religion involves belief in the supernatural is the recognition that not all cultures see a distinction between the 'natural' and the 'supernatural'. Angels, spirits and gods can be a 'real', 'lived' and 'natural' part of people's experience. Indeed, it can be argued that what is meant by supernatural may be nothing more than what is currently beyond Western scientific understanding.

Also, if religion always involves belief in the supernatural, is every supernatural belief, by definition, religious? For example, are astrology, fortune telling and

witchcraft religious?

The sacred Durkheim's notion of the sacred has also been challenged as not universally applicable – that is, not present in every society. For example, anthropologists found that no distinction was made between the sacred and non-sacred amongst the Azande of southern Sudan and in some West African societies (Hamilton, 2001).

It has also been pointed out that what people regard as sacred does not always command respect and awe. For instance, as Hamilton (2001) notes, 'In Southern Italy, a saint who does not respond in the desired manner after long and repeated prayers may be severely admonished, the statue turned upside down, even whipped or discarded and replaced with that of another saint'.

Durkheim's view of the sacred has been criticised for being too broad and including too much. It allows other belief systems, such as nationalism or communism, to be seen as religious. For example, a nation's flag can be defined as 'sacred' when it is regarded with respect, deference and devotion. Even sport can be seen as 'sacred' – for example, the hallowed turf of certain football and cricket grounds and the respect and devotion given to the team's colours.

Functional definitions – a criticism Functional definitions have also been criticised on precisely the same grounds as Durkheim's focus on the sacred. Such definitions would again include belief systems such as communism and nationalism, and even activities such as sports, where shared beliefs and rituals also encourage unity among 'believers'.

key terms

Supernatural A being or beings, power or force beyond the laws of nature.
Sacred According to Durkheim, things which are 'set apart and forbidden', things which evoke feelings of awe, respect and deference.
Social solidarity Social unity which results from the bonds that draw members of society together.

3.2 Functionalist interpretations of religion

Functionalists see society as a system – a set of parts which work together to form a whole. These parts are the institutions of society – for example, the family, the religious system and the political system.

Functionalists assume that society has certain basic needs which must be met if it is to survive. First and foremost is the need for social order. It is assumed that social order requires a certain degree of cooperation and social solidarity. This is made possible by shared norms and values – a consensus or agreement about society's norms and values. Without this consensus, people would be pulling in different directions and conflict and disorder would result. Because of this emphasis on consensus, functionalism is also known as *consensus theory.*

When analysing any part of society, functionalists often ask, 'What is its function?' By function, they mean what is its contribution to the maintenance and wellbeing of the social system.

The functionalist approach can be seen clearly in the French sociologist Emile Durkheim's analysis of religion – *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, first published in 1912.

Emile Durkheim – religion and the worship of society

As noted earlier, Durkheim recognised that things held 'sacred', which often appear 'ordinary' to non-believers, evoke in believers powerful emotions of awe, deference and respect. Therefore, he inferred, it seems their significance is as symbols – they must represent something. And what they represent, he concluded, is the *collective consciousness* – the basic set of shared beliefs, values, traditions and norms which makes social life possible. And in worshipping a society's sacred symbols, its members are unwittingly worshipping the society of which they are a part.

Durkheim's analysis was largely drawn from studies of the religion of Australian Aborigines, which he called *totemism*. Aboriginal society was divided into clans, whose members shared various duties and obligations towards each other. Each clan had a totem – a symbol, usually either an animal or plant – by which it distinguished itself from other clans. The totem was regarded as sacred and was carved on the bullroarer, the most sacred of Aboriginal objects. According to Durkheim, the totem was both the symbol of the Aborigines' god and of the clan. Though the Aborigines consciously worshipped their god, the society was the real object of their veneration. And, Durkheim surmised, 'Primitive man comes to view society as something sacred because he is utterly dependent on it'.

Reinforcing the collective consciousness Without a collective consciousness, a society cannot survive. And for Durkheim, regular acts of collective worship and shared ritual play a crucial role in ensuring society's survival. In effect, the society's members are repeatedly re-affirming their support for their shared values and beliefs.

Strengthening social solidarity Durkheim also claimed that the shared experience of the community's oft-repeated rituals further functions to unify and bind together a society's members. Whether celebrating the group's myths or history in commemorative rites, or coming together in marriage or mourning rituals, society's members are renewing their sense of membership and unity. The very act of communal worship and the practice of rituals raises people's awareness of their common situation and strengthens the bonds between them.

Although participants in societal rituals are unlikely to be consciously aware of it, Durkheim claimed that they are also expressing their sense that the society, the collective, is of supreme importance. The shared, ritualised

activity6 defining religion

Item A Saluting the flag

President Clinton flanked by athletes saluting the American flag at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996

Item B A Christian saint

Catholics carry a statue of their neighbourhood's patron saint in Havana, Cuba.

Item C A clairvoyant

A clairvoyant and spiritualist in Whitby, Yorkshire

Item D Witchcraft

A white witch conducts a ceremony at the Long Man of Wilmington, Sussex.

Item E Remembrance Sunday

Remembrance Sunday service at the Cenotaph, London to remember Britain's war dead

Item F The World Cup

England vs Argentina, World Cup, Japan, 2002

questions

1 How can the activities illustrated in Items A and B be seen as religious? Refer to the definitions of religion outlined in the text.

2 Briefly criticise the view that all of the activities pictured above should be seen as religious.

experiences encourage an awareness that they, as individuals, are relatively insignificant and dependent. But together they are strong. In this respect, one of the main functions of religious is to strengthen social solidarity.

Supporting individuals' adaptations Though he saw the social functions of religion as of primary importance, Durkheim was not blind to its importance for individuals. Hence, he recognised that religious belief and practice can provide individuals with a sense of renewed strength, confidence, serenity and enthusiasm, and help them 'either to endure the trials of existence, or to conquer them' (Durkheim, 1968).

Conclusion In Durkheim's view, therefore, all religions fulfil certain functions for the individual and for society. For the individual, religion provides continuing motivation to face up to life, and social support based upon a sense of belonging. For society, religion unifies members around the shared values, norms, meanings and traditions of the collective consciousness and thereby encourages social integration and social solidarity. The symbols which members of the group worship may or may not be regarded as supernatural. But, to committed believers, they inspire the devotion and awe appropriate to sacred things.

key term

Collective consciousness Shared beliefs and values which direct and control behaviour, and contribute to social solidarity.

Bronislaw Malinowski – religion and situations of emotional stress

Malinowski was one of the first anthropologists to live for a long period in a small-scale society. His interpretation of religion placed more emphasis on its psychological functions for the individual. He accepted that religion played a central role in promoting social solidarity, but argued that it had developed as a response to the psychological needs of individuals in specific situations of emotional stress. Situations which provoke anxiety, uncertainty and tension threaten social life and it is with such potentially disruptive situations that religion is

activity7 the functions of religion

Item A The Promise Keepers

A Promise Keepers' rally in Denver, Colorado. The Promise Keepers are dedicated to introducing men to Jesus Christ.

Item C Bar Mitzvah

A Jewish boy carries the Torah, a scroll containing God's laws, during his Bar Mitzvah (initiation ceremony) at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

Item B Christmas blessing

The Pope gives his annual Christmas blessing in St Peter's Square.

question

How might the activities shown in Items A, B and C reinforce the collective consciousness and strengthen social solidarity?

typically concerned. In particular, Malinowski identified two types of event with which religion is characteristically involved.

In all societies – but perhaps most acutely in small-scale societies with few members – *life crises* such as birth, puberty, marriage and death are potentially disruptive and typically involve religious ritual. In particular, religion minimises the potential disruption of death by creating 'valuable mental attitudes' towards it. Religion's forceful assertion of immortality comforts the bereaved, and the religious rituals of the funeral ceremony bind together the survivors and counteract the sense of meaninglessness which might otherwise undermine social life.

The second type of event which Malinowski identified as

activity8 further functions of religion

Item A Individual and social stress

Soldiers of the Irish Guards praying during the Gulf War, 2003

Funeral of Princess Diana, 1997

Item B The problem of meaning

Buddhism

'Bad human beings think it is to their advantage to prevail over their fellow men, to use any method which seems expedient, no matter how cruel, in order to achieve this advantage. The advantage will not last – the methods used only create more problems, more suffering, more mistrust, more resentment, more division. The result is not good for anyone.'

'Better it were to swallow a ball of iron, red-hot and flaming, than to lead a wicked and unrestrained life eating the food of the people!'

Christianity

'You who oppress the poor and crush the destitute, the Lord has sworn by his holiness that your time is coming.'

Judaism

'The righteous suffer for the sins of their generation.'

Hinduism

'Great souls who have become one with Me have reached the highest goal. They do not undergo re-birth, a condition which is impermanent and full of pain and suffering.'

Islam

'Or do you think that you shall enter the Garden (paradise) without such trials as came to those who passed away before you?'

'For those nearest to God will come rest and satisfaction and a garden of delights, and peace. But if you are one of those who have gone wrong, then your entertainment will be boiling water and hellfire. Truly, this is the absolute truth and certain.'

Adapted from Cole, 1991

questions

1 Malinowski argued that certain situations threaten psychological and social stability. Using the examples in Item A, show how religion might function to reduce this threat.

2 According to Talcott Parsons there are situations which can make life appear meaningless. Using Item B,

   a) Give examples of these situations.

   b) Show how religion addresses them.

   c) Suggest how, in doing so, religion contributes to the wellbeing of the individual and society.

creating anxiety and involving religion concerns activities whose outcome is important but uncertain and uncontrollable. In his study of the Trobriand Islanders in the western Pacific, Malinowski noted that when they fished in the calm, safe waters of the lagoon, where they used the reliable method of poisoning the fish, they felt no need for religious ritual. But, when they fished beyond the barrier reef in the open sea, where success and even survival were much less certain, fishing was preceded by rituals. Again, Malinowski suggested the use of religious ritual increases people's sense of control, diminishes anxiety and unifies the group (Malinowski, 1954).

Talcott Parsons – religion and 'problems of meaning'

Another influential interpretation of religion in the functionalist tradition was developed by Talcott Parsons (1965). In his view, religion is the primary source of meaning for members of a society. In addition, it provides and legitimises the core values of a culture and thereby promotes social solidarity and stability.

Religion provides meaning by furnishing answers to the 'eternal' questions about humanity and the world, such as those concerning suffering, justice and death. Why do people suffer? Why do villains prosper? Why do some people die at an early age? Often there appears no justice in such happenings. As a result, they threaten to undermine people's sense that life has meaning. Yet religion offers answers. Suffering tests a person's faith, punishes them for their sins and gives dignity to those who struggle on in the face of adversity. Villains get their just desserts in the afterlife, and so on. By providing explanations of events – particularly those which threaten our sense of meaning – religion makes sense of the apparently meaningless, helps people adjust to their situation, and promotes social stability.

Religion also provides core values and norms, which it sacralises (makes sacred) and legitimises. For instance, Parsons argues that Protestantism in the United States encouraged and sacralised values such as individualism, democracy, self-discipline and equality of opportunity. Religion also sacralises and supports the web of norms which are derived from such values – norms such as universal access to legal rights and life-chances and the formal separation of the state and religion. So, by establishing and legitimising values and social norms, religion further promotes the social consensus which Parsons argues is essential for order and stability in society.

key terms

Core values The central values of society.
Life crises Events which are common to most people, which can disrupt both their lives and the wider society – for example, birth, puberty, marriage and death.

Robert Bellah – civil religion

Durkheim's interpretation of religion's traditional function – to bind together members of a society by encouraging awareness of their common membership of an entity greater then themselves – was largely based on an analysis of small-scale, pre-industrial societies. However, it may still provide a powerful insight into the collective rituals of people in modern societies.

The concept of *civil religion* was popularised in sociology by the American Robert Bellah (1967), who drew upon the ideas of both Durkheim and Parsons. Parsons had argued that Americans were unified by values and orientations derived from Protestantism, such as individualism and self-discipline. Durkheim's insight – that any human group may be unified by a shared system of 'sacred' beliefs and practices – led Bellah to conclude that, despite America's social divisions, what largely unified them was an overarching 'civil' religion: a faith in Americanism. Unlike the 'conventional' religions of Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism, which are unable to claim the allegiance of all Americans, civil religion generates widespread loyalty to the nation state. And, though a nation's civil religion would not necessarily involve supernatural beliefs, in American civil religion, Bellah argues, it does.

God and Americanism appear to walk hand in hand. American coins tell the world 'In God We Trust', American Presidents swear an oath of allegiance before God, and the phrase 'God Bless America' ends speeches given by dignitaries across the USA. This is not the particular God of Catholics, Protestants or Jews – it has a more general application as 'America's God'. In this respect, the faith in Americanism helps to unite the American people.

Does the UK have a civil religion?

According to Gerald Parsons (2002), 'the most widespread and visible expression of British civil religion' is probably the events and ceremonies which annually surround Remembrance Sunday – the Sunday closest to November 11th, on which day, in 1918, the armistice ended the appallingly bloody First World War. On that Sunday, in thousands of communities across the country, people gather to remember and honour those killed in all of Britain's wars since that 'Great War'. And at the Cenotaph in Whitehall, London, the royal family leads the nation's official, nationally broadcast, act of remembrance. The previous evening, there is a now-traditional Festival of Remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall, also televised, 'culminating in the emotional intensity of the descent of a million poppy petals on the heads of a new generation of young servicemen and women' (Parsons, 2002). Millions wear red or white poppies and observe a short period of silence at 11am. Taken together, such rituals and symbols function 'as a means of transcending divisions and unifying what might otherwise be a deeply divided national community' (Parsons, 2002).

Clearly, in the UK, the monarchy has provided a focus for sentiments of what may be called civil religion. This has perhaps been most evident at times of war and national threat – for example, when King George VI and Queen

Elizabeth the Queen Mother went walkabout in bomb-blasted, Second World War London. However, changes in attitude towards the royal family raise questions about the extent to which the monarchy is now capable of playing such a role.

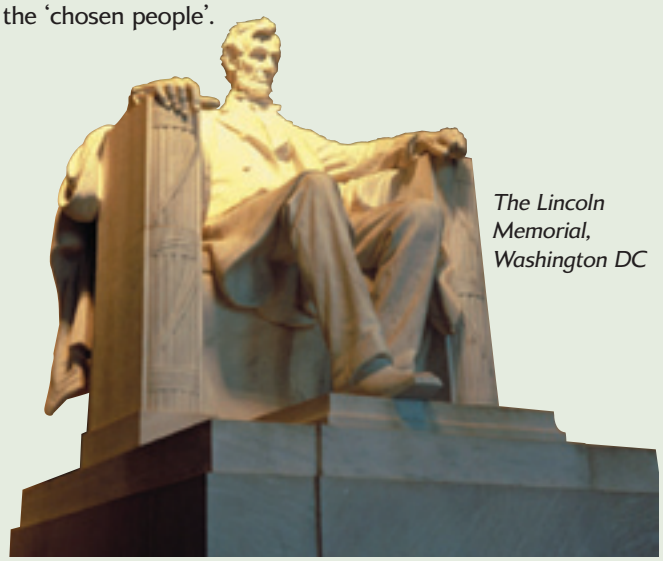
James Beckford (2003) recognises that there are occasions when the nation is drawn together by rituals and observances such as the funeral of Princess Diana in 1997 and the Queen's Golden Jubilee in 2002. However, he believes 'it is doubtful that these occasions can compensate for the UK's deep social divisions and high rate of religious diversity and indifference. If the country has a civil religion, it is at best occasional – and at worst weak.'

activity9 civil religion in America

Item A Symbols of Americanism

A modern commemoration of a wagon train heading West

In the 19th century there was a vast migration to new lands in the West. Many migrants travelled in wagon trains, pushing back the American frontier and opening up new land to White settlement. These 'heroic treks' are pictured in books, paintings and on postage stamps, featured in films and commemorated in statues. Sometimes the 'virgin territory' of the West is pictured as the 'promised land' and the settlers as the 'chosen people'.



The Lincoln Memorial, Washington DC

Every American knows the story of Abraham Lincoln who was born in a log cabin and rose from these humble origins to live in the White House as President of the United States before dying from an assassin's bullet in 1865. Pictured on coins, sculpted in marble in the Lincoln Memorial, he has become an almost mythical figure.

Item B America's national faith

While some have argued that Christianity is America's national faith, few have realised that there actually exists alongside the churches and synagogues an elaborate and well-institutionalised civil religion in America – a collection of beliefs, symbols and rituals with respect to sacred things which are an established part of American society. This religion – there seems no other word for it – while not opposed to, and indeed sharing much in common with, Christianity, is not in any specific sense Christian.

Behind this civil religion at every point lie Biblical models – the Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land and New Jerusalem, Death and Rebirth. But it is also genuinely American and genuinely new. It has its own prophets and its own martyrs, its own sacred events and sacred places, its own solemn rituals and symbols.

Adapted from O'Toole, 1984

Item C Shrines, saints and ceremonies

Many American civil ceremonies have a marked religious quality. Memorial Day, which remembers Americans killed in war, the Fourth of July, which commemorates the American Declaration of Independence from Britain, and the anniversary of presidential inaugurations, all celebrate national values and national unity. There are national shrines such as the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC, the birthplaces of key presidents, war memorials and other 'special' places. It is not their age or even historical significance that inspires awe and reverence, but their ability to symbolise the nation as a 'people'.

Likewise, there are sacred objects of the civil religion – especially the flag. The extent to which these ceremonies, shrines and objects are set apart as sacred can be seen in the intensity of outrage at inappropriate behaviour or 'desecration'. Some people were arrested during the 1960s for wearing or displaying a copy of the American flag improperly, for example, on the seat of their pants.

American civil religion also has its myths and saints. Lincoln is an historical figure who particularly symbolises the civil religion, and his life from humble birth to martyrdom, typifies its values. Other 'saints' include key presidents such as Washington and Kennedy, folk heroes such as Davy Crockett, who died in 1836 fighting for Texan independence from Mexico, and military heroes such as Eisenhower, commander-in-chief of the Allied Armies in World War Two, who defended

democracy and freedom against the fascist governments of Germany and Italy. Similarly, there are stories that enshrine American values such as individual achievement and upward social mobility. Lincoln's story of log cabin to White House is one. So is Davy Crockett's earlier history when, after years of hunting bears and fighting Indians on the frontier, he was elected to Congress where he was known as the 'Coonskin Congressman'. Socially important myths include America as the land of plenty, unlimited social mobility, economic consumption and achievement.

While these shrines, saints and ceremonies are not religious in the same sense as, for example, Greek Orthodox shrines, saints and ceremonies, they are still set apart as special and not to be profaned.

Adapted from McGuire, 1981

questions

1 Read Items A and B.
   a) How are the symbols of Americanism linked to Biblical models? Why might this make them more effective?
   b) Why have the wagon train and Abraham Lincoln become symbols of Americanism?
2 How can the symbols of Americanism in Item C be seen as 'religious'?
3 What are the social functions of civic religion in America?

Functionalist views – an evaluation

Positive functions From a functionalist perspective, religion is good for society and good for individuals. It performs positive functions for society – reinforcing social solidarity and value consensus – and for the individual – reducing anxiety and stress. This emphasis on positive functions ignores the many examples of religion as a negative force – as an instrument of oppression – and as a divisive force – conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland being a case in point.

The origins of religion Functionalism fails to explain the origins of social institutions. Where does religion come from, how did it arise in the first place? Identifying the functions of religion does not necessarily tell us anything about its origins.

Religion today Durkheim examined religion in small-scale, non-literate societies. Today's large-scale, complex societies usually contain a variety of different religions – a situation known as *religious pluralism*. It is difficult to see how religion can perform its traditional functions of reinforcing social solidarity and value consensus in modern societies with a plurality of religions.

The idea of civil religion gets round this problem. Robert Bellah (1967) makes a strong case for civil religion providing social unity and integration in societies characterised by religious pluralism. But is civil religion really religion? Does it involve worship and the supernatural? Can Abraham Lincoln and Davy Crockett be compared to saints in the Catholic Church? This brings us back to the problems of defining religion outlined in Section 1.1.

3.3 Marxist views of religion

In contrast to consensus or functionalist perspectives, Marxist theories are sometimes known as *conflict theories*. This is because they see a basic conflict of interest between the two main classes in industrial society – the capitalist or ruling class, and proletariat or subject class. From a Marxist perspective, religion is one of the institutions which maintains capitalist rule – it is an instrument of domination and oppression which keeps the proletariat in its place.

For Marx, people's religious beliefs reflect their *alienation*. In pre-communist societies, people are alienated or cut off from their work, from the products of their work and from each other. For example, in capitalist societies, they work for capitalists rather than for themselves. They do not own the products of their labour, and they work as individual wage earners rather than with each other for the benefit of the community. They have little control over their work and are exploited and oppressed by the capitalist ruling class.

Religious beliefs and practices arise in response to, and as a protest against, people's lack of control of their destiny and their dehumanisation and oppression. In a much-quoted passage, Marx argues that religion is both 'the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. It is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.'

In Marx's view, 'Man makes religion, religion does not make man. In other words, religion is the self-consciousness and self-feeling of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again.' Truly liberated individuals have no need of religion. Thus, if the alienation and exploitation associated with classes are eradicated, and people are freed to develop their human potential and 'find themselves', religion will no longer be needed and will cease to exist.

Religion and ideology Although religion represents a protest against a dehumanising social world and human alienation, it leads people in a false direction – the hopes and 'solutions' it promises are illusory. Religion, for Marx, is part of *ideology* – a pattern of beliefs which obscures

and distorts the true nature of reality in ways which benefit the ruling class. Insofar as members of subject classes accept religious ideas, they suffer *false consciousness*. Thus, although religious ideas appear to express social consensus, those ideas are essentially tools in the domination of one class by another.

Religion and social control The argument that religion functions to maintain ruling class domination may be developed in a number of ways. First, religion distorts reality by encouraging the belief that people are dependent upon supernatural beings or sacred powers. For example, the belief that events are controlled by supernatural powers means there is little people can do to change their situation, apart from trying to influence the supernatural powers by prayer, sacrifice or some other means. In this way, religion obscures the human authorship of, and responsibility for, social inequality and thereby discourages the realisation that working for social change may be possible and desirable.

Second, religion often appears to lend sacred support to the current social order, and in so doing reinforces prohibitions against actions which would challenge those in power. Thus, in his letter to Christians in Rome, St Paul wrote:

'Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.'

'Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.'

(*Romans*, Ch13, vs 1-2)

Likewise, in medieval Europe, the Church taught that the various unequal 'estates of the realm' – monarch, barons and bishops, knights, freemen and serfs – were God's creation. This meant that attempts to change the social order would not only be acts of treason against the monarch, but also a rejection of God's plan, punishable by eternal damnation.

In modern capitalist societies, however, in which change, innovation and high rates of social mobility are required for the success of capitalist enterprises, such religious teachings have been largely abandoned. Nevertheless, it can still be argued that mainstream religion continues to legitimise privilege and inequality – by giving its blessing to rituals involving royalty, such as the Coronation, and by the continuing presence in the House of Lords of the Archbishops and Bishops of the Church of England. Indeed, the relationship between the supernatural, inequality and national wellbeing may be neatly summarised in the phrase 'God, Queen and Country'.

Religion as compensation While religion operates primarily as a means of social control for the exploiters, for the exploited it has psychological functions as a source of solace and compensation for the misery of their alienation. So, where Durkheim sees religion as an expression and celebration of people's solidarity, Marx sees it as a consolation for experience which lacks the genuine solidarity of which people are capable.

The specific compensations religion offers vary. In Christianity, Judaism and Islam, for example, religion offers the fantasy escape of heavenly rewards – and, in Christianity, the intriguing promise that the poor would have less difficulty gaining access to heaven than the wealthy. In Hinduism and Buddhism, followers are taught that life may be better in later incarnations.

Many religions offer their followers hope by promising supernatural intervention into human affairs. In the religious history of the Jews, for instance, God is believed to have intervened many times to assist or protect his chosen people – as in parting the Red Sea to allow the Jews to escape their Egyptian pursuers.

According to Marx, religion promises happiness, but the happiness it promises is an illusion. True happiness and fulfilment are possible only when the exploited shake off the chains of their oppression and seize and practice their freedom.

key term

Alienation A key Marxist idea which states that the nature of work in capitalist society cuts the worker off from themselves, from others, from their work and what they produce.

3.4 Neo-Marxist interpretations of religion

For Marx, religion, as part of the superstructure of society, is largely shaped by the infrastructure or economic base. As such, it reflects the interests of those who own and control the economy – the ruling class. Some neo-Marxists ('new' Marxists) have modified this view.

Antonio Gramsci

One of the most influential figures in the neo-Marxist reassessment of religion is the Italian, Antonio Gramsci. He rejected the traditional Marxist view that the cultural superstructure merely reflected society's economic base. In his view, the superstructure is more autonomous and independent than Marx acknowledged, and beliefs are no less real or important than economic forces.

For Gramsci, if the communist age were to come, it would require proletarian (working-class) action. But this action must be guided by theoretical ideas. And, just as intellectuals of the Roman Catholic Church had shaped the minds of its followers over centuries, so must the industrial working class produce its own intellectuals who can articulate working-class experience and help shape working-class consciousness.

As an Italian, Gramsci was well aware of the control over consciousness which the Catholic Church had traditionally exercised over its members. This control he referred to as

activity10 monarch and God

Item A The divine right of monarchy

Henry IV at his coronation in 1399 receiving a blessing from archbishops

> 'Kings are called Gods by the prophet David because they sit on God's throne on earth. Kings exercise divine power on earth. They have the power of life and death, they are judges over all their subjects and yet are accountable to none but God only.'
>
> *James 1, King of England from 1603-1625.*

Medieval monarchs ruled by divine right – they were seen to have a God-given right to rule. Although modern British monarchs no longer claim divine right, Elizabeth II's coronation in 1953 was in many ways similar to that of Henry IV. She too was crowned and blessed by archbishops.

Item B The Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II

Queen Elizabeth II shortly after she was crowned by the Archbishop of Canterbury in Westminster Abbey, 1953

Although it is often assumed that there is a moral consensus in society, and that this consensus is personified in the person of the monarch, our evidence shows that societies like our own are arenas for conflicts of belief and moral standards unmatched in history.

I would argue that it was the very absence of shared values in Great Britain which accounts for some of the attention paid to the Coronation. The Coronation provided, for some sections of the populace, some measure of respite and relief from that condition of conflict which is more or less permanent for complex societies of a capitalist type.

From this viewpoint, the role of the press in stirring up popular enthusiasm for the Coronation is understandable. In response to the class interests it generally represents, the press continually seeks to minimise awareness of the real conflicts characteristic of British society. In this context, the personality of the Queen and her family functioned as the object of various fantasies and identifications in a way not much more 'sacred' than the cult of adulation built up around certain film stars. But the tawdry baubles of the Coronation celebration constitute no adequate substitute for the lost faith of millions.

Adapted from Birnbaum, 1955

questions

1 Analyse the information in Item A from a Marxist view.
2 Why does Birnbaum (Item B) argue that it is 'the very absence of shared values in Great Britain' which accounted for the attention paid to the Coronation?
3 How and why, in Birnbaum's view, did the press encourage false class consciousness through their coverage of the Coronation?

hegemony. He was highly critical of what he regarded as the Church's characteristic subservience to the state and ruling-class interests. Nevertheless, he did not assume that religion must inevitably play such a role. He argued that, at different historical times, popular forms of religion had emerged which expressed and supported the interests of oppressed classes. Thus, he accepted the possibility that religious beliefs and practices could develop and be popularised, particularly by working-class intellectuals, to challenge the dominant ruling class ideology and support working class consciousness and liberation.

Otto Maduro

The possibility that religion may play a progressive role in the political struggles of oppressed classes has been taken up by a number of modern Marxists, including Otto Maduro (1982). Writing about developing countries, Maduro argues that, in societies in which religion remains a dominant and conservative institution, social liberation can only be achieved if significant change occurs within the churches. This could occur if the oppressed, finding that all possible forms of protest are blocked by the central power, take their discontent to the churches – as in certain

Latin American societies, in South Africa, and in Poland before the abandonment of communism. In this situation, Maduro argues, the anguish and aspirations of the oppressed may be reflected and voiced by members of the clergy. Thus, the clergy may then fulfil the functions of Gramsci's proletarian intellectuals, by expressing the discontents of the oppressed, by shaping their consciousness of the situation, and by working with them to devise strategies of action. Evidence to support this view is given in Activity 11.

Marxist views – an evaluation

Religion as ideology Marx saw religion as a form of ideology which helped to maintain ruling class power. Critics agree there is evidence to support this view from certain times and places. However, they reject the claim that this is the primary role of religion.

To some extent, neo-Marxists avoid this criticism by admitting the possibility that religion can open the eyes of the oppressed to the reality of their situation. And this, in turn, can encourage them to take action to end their oppression.

Religion as compensation Is religion simply a compensation for oppression, a crutch which helps people to live with their situation, a balm for their wounds and a drug to give them false happiness? Again, there is plenty of evidence that can be used to support this view.

But, critics argue that this is a very one-sided view – that there is a lot more to religion than compensation. For example, as Parsons states, religion can give meaning to and make sense of birth and death – events which affect *all* people in *all* societies.

Marxism and values To some extent, the reader must 'buy into' Marxist value judgements to fully accept Marxist views. Capitalism, and the class societies which went before, are seen as unjust and evil. Communism is the ideal society – a society in which social classes disappear, oppression ends and, as a result, religion disappears. However, there are plenty of examples of religion thriving in the communist societies of the 20th century – for instance, Poland under communism was a strongly Roman Catholic country.

Advantages of Marxism Despite these criticisms, Marxism has provided important insights. Religion has often supported the interests of the powerful. It has often provided solace and comfort for the oppressed. It has often been influenced by economic factors. And Marxism has provided a useful balance for functionalist perspectives which have tended to take a one-sided view of religion as a positive force in society.

3.5 Feminist views of religion

There are several versions of feminism, but they have a number of things in common. Most use *patriarchy* as a key idea. This refers to a social system which is organised for the benefit of males, a system in which male dominance is supported by beliefs, values and norms.

Many feminists claim that religion is a patriarchal institution. Teachings and practices from a range of religions suggest that they systematically benefit males over females. Here are some of the main feminist concerns.

activity 11 liberation theology

Item A Liberating the poor

Liberation theology is a religious justification for the liberation of oppressed peoples. It developed in Latin America in the 1950s and 60s as an alternative to the standard view of the West's duties towards the Third World. It criticised the view that the West could end the poverty of the Third World by transferring economic resources from one to the other. The theology of liberation said that, far from being the passive objects of aid, it was essential that the poor take control of their situation and accept the responsibility for ending their poverty.

That meant understanding their own condition and the reasons for it, and responding accordingly. In liberation theology's purest form, the sort the Vatican was most worried about, those conditions and the reasons for them are analysed in Marxist terms, and so is the remedy.

What the theology of liberation has to say is that the only escape from poverty which does justice to human dignity is that engineered and struggled for by the poor themselves.

Adapted from Longley, 1986

Item B Father Camilo Torres

Father Camilo Torres was a Roman Catholic priest in Colombia in South America. The vast majority of Colombian people are desperately poor. Sixty-five per cent of the land is owned by a handful of powerful families. Father Torres believed this was unjust – his solution was a Christian revolution. In his words: 'Revolution is necessary to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked and procure a life of wellbeing for the needy majority of our people. I believe that the revolutionary struggle is appropriate for the Christian and the priest. Only by revolution, by changing the concrete conditions of our country, can we enable men to practise love for each other.'

The Catholic Church did not support Torres. Believing that the government would crush peaceful protest, he joined a guerrilla movement. Torres was killed fighting government forces in 1966. The peasants saw him as a martyr and in 1968 many priests followed his example and pledged their support for revolutionary struggle against the state.

Adapted from Jenkins, 1987

Item C Archbishop Romero

Mourners in El Salvador gather round the corpse of Archbishop Romero. He was shot dead in his cathedral in 1980 by four gunmen, allegedly members of a right-wing death squad. Archbishop Romero was a champion of social and economic reforms to improve the lot of the poor.

Item D Father Rogelio Cruz

Father Rogelio Cruz, a Catholic priest, leads 200 families, left homeless in December when police bulldozed a squatters' village, in a nightly protest mass at a temporary tent camp in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, 2000.

questions

1 'Liberation theology sounds like a Christian version of Marxism.' Comment on this statement.

2 Use the information in this activity to assess the differing views of Marx and Maduro on the role of religion in society. Does the information disprove Marx's view?

The sacred texts

- In almost all the world religions, the gods are male. Hinduism comes closest to being an exception, with its female goddesses.
- The sacred texts overwhelmingly feature males and male activity.
- They were also written, and have been interpreted, by males. They incorporate many traditional male stereotypes and biases. For instance:

1) In the creation story (shared by Judaism and Christianity) God created Adam and then 'the fowl of the air' and 'the beasts of the field'. Only later did he decide to create Eve, as a 'helpmate' for Adam, observing that 'It is not good that the man should be alone'. And, as is well known, Eve was created out of one of Adam's ribs.
2) Having been commanded by God not to eat the fruit from the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil', it was Eve whom the serpent persuaded to disregard God's command. Having also fed it to Adam, Eve and he both then experienced sin and shame and covered their naked bodies (*Genesis*, Ch.2, v.15-Ch.3 v.7).
3) In the Christian tradition, the two central women – the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene – are typical female stereotypes. The 'Holy Mother' Mary is chaste (a virgin), giving, caring, self-sacrificing, suffering. Mary Magdalene, a prostitute who became one of the few women very close to Jesus, represents woman as temptress and seductress.

Religious professionals In all world religions, the majority of religious professionals are male. In Christianity, females

are not eligible to become priests in the Roman Catholic, Greek or Russian Orthodox churches, and only became eligible since 1992 in the Church of England. Nor can they become rabbis in Orthodox Judaism.

Worship In most religions, women are likely to be the main attenders. Yet their role tends to be secondary – they don't often participate actively in the service. Orthodox Jewish women, for instance, can't read from the Torah scroll or participate in symbolic actions at festivals.

Limitations and exclusions In many religions, females are limited in where they may go, both at home, and outside the home, and in centres of worship. In Orthodox Judaism, the women sit in the balconies at the back of, and above, the main space, or behind screens, so as not to distract the males. Sometimes they can't see or hear properly (Swale, 2000).

In everyday life, too, female followers of world religions are often significantly more limited than males with regards to where they can go, and with whom they may associate.

Differential treatment In a number of religions, or in cultures heavily influenced by religion, women have fewer options or receive less favourable treatment than men in daily life.

- In Western Christianity, for a significant part of its history, a wife was the property of her husband. She lost her property to him on marriage, was required to promise him life-long obedience, and was unable to divorce him.
- In some versions of Islam, the male is allowed up to four wives. In some Islamic countries, a male may divorce a wife by declaring so three times, though the female may not divorce her husband.
- In Islamic Iran, though such practices have significantly diminished since Ayatollah Khomeini was in power, females may still be flogged for dress-code violations and stoned to death for adultery. In Afghanistan, 'girls are still given away in marriage against their will, women who "dishonour" their families are routinely murdered and, although rape is widespread, offenders usually go unpunished as few women dare speak out' (Amnesty International, 2003).
- However, such inequalities are by no means found solely in some Islamic countries. They exist, too, in some predominantly Christian and Hindu cultures. For instance, in parts of (Christian) South America, (Hindu) India and the (Muslim) Middle East, sexual norms are more strict for females. Also, the transgression of such norms results in more frequent, and more severe, punishment for females than males. Moreover, such punishment is often applied unofficially – not infrequently physically, sometimes fatally – by males, who are often family members.

Feminist views – an evaluation

Goddesses According to many feminists, religion has been a major institutional means for controlling women – perhaps, for much of history, *the* major means. Yet, in many ancient and folk religions, females have had key positions. In ancient Greek and Roman religion, for example, goddesses were neither uncommon nor unimportant. The Greek goddess Athena, for instance, was god of war, wisdom and the arts. Goddesses remain important in Hinduism. And modern followers of pagan Wicca (witchcraft) worship a goddess of the moon and of the woodlands, whom they claim was worshipped throughout Celtic Europe.

Leadership roles Religion has also been a means through which some women have developed leadership roles. In Christianity, a few have created religious faiths and organisations, some of which now number millions of followers around the world. In 19th century America, Ellen White founded the still-flourishing Seventh Day Adventist Church, and Mary Baker Eddy, the Church of Christ, Scientist (Christian Science).

Today, thousands of women around the world have assumed positions of leadership in the fast-growing Christian Pentecostal movement and in other apparently patriarchal and conservative religious movements. Moreover, these important roles – at least within the Pentecostal movement – often lead on to leadership roles in the wider community (Martin, 2003).

Freedom within religion In all religions, there are those who argue that freedom and fulfilment for women can only be found *within* a religious tradition. Evidence which may provide support for this view is provided in Activity 12.

Advantages of feminism Feminists have often been criticised for being preoccupied with gender inequality and ignoring other aspects of society. While there is some truth in this, the sharp focus of feminism does have some advantages. In terms of religion, it highlights those aspects of belief and practice which support male dominance and keep women in their place.

key term

Patriarchy A social system which systematically benefits males over females.

3.6 Weber's views on religion

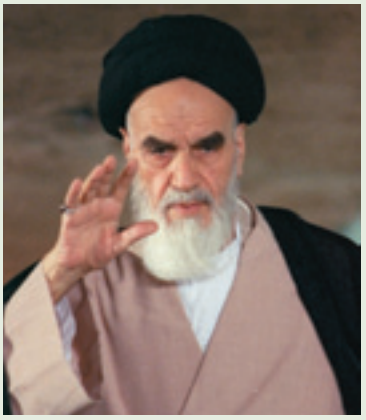
Marx paid little attention to the specific religious beliefs of different groups and cultures. Durkheim based his general statements about religion on a small number of examples. The German sociologist Max Weber's studies, however, involved an ambitious series of detailed analyses of major religions – Confucianism and Taoism (in China), Hinduism and Buddhism (in India) and ancient Judaism (in Palestine). Additionally, in his most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* first published in 1904, he analysed the influential Calvinist tradition within Christianity.

activity 12 women and religion

Item A Religious leaders

Pope John Paul II

Rev. Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Church (the 'Moonies')



Former Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini

Item B Gender roles and Orthodox Jews

Instead of the feminist programme of broader gender definitions and options, sexual liberation, an emphasis on careers, and the acceptance of a variety of family patterns, Orthodox Judaism proposed clear and firm gender norms, the control of sexuality, assistance in finding partners, and explicit guidelines for nuclear family life.

In the USA, many women were converted to Orthodox Judaism because it supported and legitimated their desires for the 'traditional' identity of wives and mothers in nuclear families. The rabbis told the recruits that women's role was highly valued in Orthodoxy and that women's primary place in the home, where a majority of the rituals took place, gave her special status within the Jewish religious world. In addition, women gained an extra benefit – strong support for a view of men's roles that placed great stress on men's involvement in the home and with their families.

Adapted from Davidman, 1991

Item C The veil

Increasing numbers of women in Islamic countries are wearing the veil in public places. At the same time, growing numbers of women are entering university and the professions and participating in life outside the home.

The veil can be seen as a restriction on their freedom. On the other hand, it can be seen as a way of making the transition into the public sphere more comfortable. From this perspective, Islamic dress can be seen as the uniform of transition.

Adapted from Ahmed, 2000

An Afghan woman in Kabul

questions

1 What support do the pictures in Item A provide for feminist views on religion?

2 How can Items B and C be used to a) support and b) criticise feminist views?

Although Weber accepted that religion often functioned to justify social inequality, as Marx had argued, he was also concerned to show that religion did not inevitably function in this conservative manner. Religion existed, he believed, because people everywhere needed a system of basic beliefs to make sense of their existence and to have a sense of their identity. Religion provided people with *meaning*. However, Weber's major argument was that societies developed differently partly because the religious beliefs and ideas about the ethical conduct of their members were different. In other words, religious beliefs and religious movements *can* help shape social change.

Calvinism and the 'spirit of capitalism'

The major question which Weber addressed in much of his writing about religion was why the capitalism which had developed in some Western countries had not also emerged in the East. He concluded that while Eastern religions, for example Hinduism and Buddhism, embodied certain key teachings and values which had discouraged the development of capitalism, Judaism and Christianity, and especially the Calvinist and Puritan varieties of Christianity, had encouraged it.

Protestantism and capitalism Weber argued that although individual greed and the pursuit of gain may be found in all societies, only in the West did entire societies develop, and come to accept, *rational capitalism* – a system which encouraged the methodical pursuit of profit by legal means, involving calculation, book-keeping and long-term planning, and which relied on the creation of free markets and a free labour force. In Weber's view, modern capitalism had been able to develop in the West, and particularly in predominantly Protestant areas, because it was compatible with the Calvinist teachings which guided many of the early Protestant movements such as the Puritans, Presbyterians, Baptists and Quakers. And it was among these movements, he argued, that capitalism flourished. It was much less compatible with religions such as Hinduism which taught that if believers accept their lot in this life and act in accordance with tradition, they will gain the reward of a higher caste position in the next life. Such beliefs discourage rational calculation and innovation and therefore the development of capitalism.

A question of salvation The most significant teaching of John Calvin (1509-64) was that of *predestination*. According to this doctrine, even before their birth, God has selected some for *salvation* and others for eternal damnation. Neither the saved nor the damned could influence the decision, either by the strength of their faith or by their earthly actions. And moreover, no-one could be sure whether he or she had been pre-selected for heaven or for hell.

Such terrifying beliefs could well have driven followers into an attitude of helpless fatalism, resignation and inactivity. Instead, Weber argued, the 'salvation anxiety' with which they were plagued, provoked the opposite response. Despite Calvin's teaching that people's behaviour could not influence God's decision, some followers developed doctrines which held out a measure of hope that individuals could discover reassuring 'signs' that they were among those chosen for salvation.

Work as a 'calling' While none could be sure of their salvation, all were required to pursue an intensely active life of labour. Work was a 'calling', and God was most effectively worshipped through a rigorously disciplined life of work, and a denial of indulgence. Any activity which unnecessarily detracted from work was evil. Mere socialising, sleeping longer than strictly necessary, or even religious contemplation if it interfered with a person's daily labours, were regarded as sins, for they detracted from the active performance of God's will. But if a person's work was rewarded with material success, this may be a sign of God's grace and indicate that they were among the elect – that they had been chosen by God for salvation.

Thus, to cope with the chronic anxiety of damnation, Calvinists energetically threw themselves into highly disciplined economic activity and a lifetime of 'good works'. Those in business pursued profit and wealth, not as ends in themselves, but as Christian obligations to make the best use of their God-given gifts and talents and as indications of God's favour. And, because they were limited in how they could spend their wealth – they could not 'waste' it on expensive 'luxuries' – they tended to save and reinvest in their businesses.

According to Weber, the Calvinist idea of the calling affected not just the employer but also the worker. For capitalism to take root, drastic changes were needed in the attitudes of workers who traditionally were concerned merely to earn the wage necessary to meet their modest expectations and otherwise to spend their time in leisure. The Calvinist notion of the calling transformed the traditional, easy-going, undisciplined workforce into 'sober, conscientious, and unusually industrious workmen, who clung to their work as to a life purpose willed by God' (Weber, 1958). Thus, the Protestant ethic encouraged not merely the 'spirit of capitalism' but a new 'spirit of labour' as well, without which the spirit of capitalism could not have been translated into action.

Religion and rationality In these ways, Weber concluded, Calvin's influential religious teachings, popularised and interpreted by generations of Puritan successors, had significant, though unintended, consequences for the economic system of capitalism. For, alone among the teachings of the world's major religions, they encouraged among believers a rational, calculating, efficient and highly committed approach to work which provided capitalism with a fertile soil in which to take root. And it is the growth of *rationality* which provides a key, perhaps *the* key, to understanding the nature of modern societies.

In developing his argument about the significance of Calvinist teachings for the development of capitalism, Weber believed that he had successfully challenged Marx's somewhat deterministic view that religious ideas merely reflect a society's economic base. Weber was careful to

make clear that he was not claiming that Calvinism was the sole cause of capitalism – he acknowledged that, even in countries with a significant Calvinist population, such as Scotland or Switzerland, capitalism would not develop if economic conditions were not right (for example, if there was a shortage of skilled labour or investment capital, as was the case in Scotland). Nevertheless, he could reasonably claim to have demonstrated that religious beliefs can have a significant role in influencing a society's economic system and development.

Evaluation of Weber's argument

Which came first, Calvinism or capitalism? There are a number of challenges to Weber's argument. The most central is the challenge to Weber's claim that Calvinism preceded capitalism. Eisenstadt (1967) argues that the first great upsurges of capitalism occurred in Catholic Europe – in Italy, Belgium and Germany – *before* the Protestant Reformation. The historian Tawney (1938) claims that society had already changed radically, in a capitalist direction, before the advent of Calvinism. New technologies had been invented and introduced, a capitalist class had emerged and new ways of viewing society had developed. In this view, as Calvinism emerged, it was adopted by the rising capitalist class and, with some changes in emphasis, provided a religious justification for a rational capitalism which was already established and developing.

Other religions and capitalism Another important criticism, voiced by some writers on Hinduism and Islam, is that Weber misunderstood those religions and failed to recognise the many elements in them which could have been supportive of rational economic action. Weber has also been criticised for underestimating the capitalist spirit of the Jews. Because they were openly interested in profit, would trade in anything, would compete and try to undercut the competition, and would lend money at interest, Jews proved formidable business competitors, and were probably more capitalist than Weber suggested.

Interpreting Calvinism Doubt has also been cast on Weber's interpretation of the attitudes of influential Calvinists to wealth and the pursuit of gain. As Weber himself recognised, many Calvinist preachers taught that wealth was a great danger, providing unending temptations, and that its acquisition was morally suspect. Moreover, it is not clear why Calvinists should come to regard economic success as the major benchmark which God might use to indicate his favour. Nor is it clear why Calvinists should have had to reinvest the profits they accumulated. Could they not have been given away to the poor (for which practice there seems some scriptural support) or used to boost employees' wages?

There is also the puzzling question of why and how Calvinism was able to attract converts – or, even more baffling, succeed as a major religious movement. As depicted by Weber, Calvinism had little to offer its followers. It did not promise them salvation and made it disconcertingly clear that membership made not the slightest difference to their prospects either in this life or the next.

Conclusion The debate about the relationship between Calvinism and capitalism still continues. It will probably never be settled. The historical documents tell us little about the way Calvinist teachings 'were received, understood and interpreted by ordinary believers', or how they were translated into behaviour (Hamilton, 2001).

key terms

Predestination The idea that people's destination after death is predetermined by God.
Salvation The saving of the soul and its admission to heaven.
Protestant ethic Moral beliefs based on Protestantism which led to self-denying, self-disciplined lives of labour which, in turn, encouraged the development of capitalism.
Rationality Action directed by reason rather than emotion or tradition.

3.7 An interpretivist view of religion

Peter Berger – religion, rationalisation and 'the problem of modernity'

Rationalisation Weber's analysis of Calvinist Protestantism forms an important part of a broader argument. Weber believed that the modern world was characterised by a process of *rationalisation*. This involved systematically working towards a clearly defined goal by precisely calculating the way to reach that goal. This can be seen in the rise of capitalism which emphasised rational calculation in business activity and rationally organised work practices in order to maximise efficiency and profit. In particular, it can be seen in the spread of bureaucracy, the characteristic institution of modern society. Bureaucratic institutions are rational – they systematically and efficiently organise people in order to attain particular goals.

Weber believed that rationalisation has its costs. Reason replaces faith, and the support which faith provides disappears. This leads to disillusionment, to *disenchantment*. The world is 'demystified', its richness, mystery and magic taken away. It now appears cold. And social relationships, particularly in bureaucratic settings, become increasingly impersonal.

These themes have been taken up since the 1960s by the Austrian-born American sociologist Peter Berger. Berger's main concern has been with what he calls 'modernity' – in particular, with questions of how changes in social structure and social interaction in modern society are experienced by individuals, and how they strive to create a meaningful reality. He takes an interpretivist approach, seeking to discover the meanings which people impose upon the world in order to make sense of it.

activity 13 the protestant ethic

Item A A pre-capitalist view

It is much sweeter to spend money than to earn it. I think that I have done more by having spent money well than by having earned it. Spending gave me a deeper satisfaction, especially the money I spent on my house in Florence.

(An example, from a medieval Florentine, of a pre-capitalist attitude towards money).

Item B The Protestant ethic

From a pamphlet published in 1653. Father Christmas is driven out of town by a Puritan.

A Puritan family meal in the early 17th century. Their dress is simple and their food is plain. The children are standing at the table to eat their food. This was considered good discipline by Puritan parents.

The Godly and hardworking man shall have prosperity, but he that follows pleasures shall have much sorrow. Don't be too concerned about being popular and sociable – it can waste a lot of valuable time.

(John Browne, a 16th century Protestant)

Even if you are called to the poorest labouring job, do not complain because it is wearisome, nor imagine that God thinks any the less of you. But cheerfully follow it, and make it your pleasure and joy that you are still in your heavenly master's services, though it be the lowest thing.

(Richard Baxter, a prominent 17th century English Puritan)

Items A and B quoted in Kitch, 1967

Religion must necessarily produce hard work and discourage the wasting of money. We must encourage all Christians to gain what they can and to save all they can – that is, in effect, to grow rich.

(John Wesley, 1703-1791, English founder of Methodism)

Quoted in Weber, 1958

questions

1 Read Item A. How does this view differ from Calvinist attitudes?

2 a) What attitudes, identified by Weber as characteristic of Calvinism, are expressed in Item B?

b) Using Weber's argument, show how these attitudes could encourage the growth of capitalism.

Berger begins by elaborating on Weber's argument that Protestantism has played a unique role in rationalising attitudes and social structures, particularly in the spread of bureaucracy. And, like Weber, he believes that the process of rationalisation, encouraged by Protestantism, has tended to 'demystify' the modern world and has led to modern people's 'disenchantment of the world'.

Plurality of life-worlds The spread of rationalisation – and associated disenchantment – Berger argues, has been accompanied by other changes in the conditions and experiences of people in modern societies. Significantly, the high levels of social and geographical mobility, combined with widespread exposure to the electronic media, have given people an unprecedented awareness of

alternative social worlds, lifestyles and belief systems. As a result, each person's life-world has become pluralised. It is no longer a single, unified and integrated world. Instead it is fragmented and diverse.

Homelessness In this situation, traditional religion is plunged into a crisis of credibility as individuals are faced with any number of competing belief systems and ways of living. In today's pluralistic and multicultural societies, each religion becomes one among many. It becomes increasingly difficult to maintain that *any* religion has a monopoly of truth. And all religions have to compete with a rapidly growing diversity of secular belief systems. This undermines traditional religious teachings, it erodes past certainties about morality and people's identity, it encourages a sense of meaninglessness. The result is *anomie* or loss of confidence in the norms, whereby people lack direction and guides to action. Using Berger's term, people are 'homeless', cut off from traditional supports and comfort and sense of self, all of which made them feel 'at home'. And religion – whose main function, Berger believes, has been as a shield against anomie – has been rendered largely impotent. It no longer has the power to give meaning to life.

key terms

Rationalisation Weber's view that in modern society, rational planning and calculation are steadily replacing tradition, emotion, mystery and magic.
Disenchantment Weber's view that rationalisation leads to disillusionment with the world.
Anomie A sense of normlessness. A loss of confidence in norms, which leads to a lack of direction.

activity 14 problems of modernity

Item A Social diversity

Christian belltowers and a Muslim mosque in Bethlehem

People at Respect Festival, 2001

Item B Homelessness

Many of the discontents of modern society stem from the pluralisation of social life-worlds. These discontents can be characterised as 'homelessness'. The pluralistic structures of modern society have made the life of more and more individuals migratory, ever-changing, mobile. Not only are an increasing number of individuals in a modern society uprooted from their original social settings, but, in addition, no subsequent setting succeeds in becoming truly 'home' either. A world in which everything is in constant motion is a world in which certainties of any kind are hard to come by. The age-old function of religion – to provide ultimate certainty – has been severely shaken.

The problem becomes most clearly apparent when one looks at that ancient religious function which Weber called 'theodicy'. This means any explanation of human events that gives meaning to the experiences of suffering and evil. Modern society has threatened the plausibility of religious theodicies, but it has not removed the experiences that call for them. Human beings continue to be stricken by sickness and death. They continue to experience social injustice and deprivation. What modernity has accomplished is to seriously weaken those definitions of reality that previously made the human condition easier to bear. This has produced an anguish all its own.

Adapted from Berger, Berger & Kellner, 1974

questions

1 a) With reference to Items A and B, explain what you understand by the 'pluralisation of social life-worlds'.

b) What sort of 'discontents' may pluralisation encourage?

2 How might the pluralisation of social life-worlds undermine religion?

3.8 Postmodernism and religion

A number of sociologists have tried to identify the main developments in human society. Some distinguish between *premodern society* and today's *modern society*. Others believe we have moved beyond modernity and are now living in *postmodern society*.

Sociologists who take this view are known as *postmodernists* and the theory they have developed is known as *postmodernism.*

Postmodern society

Sociologists have identified various characteristics of postmodern society. They include:

ICT The development and spread of information and communication technology (ICT), including television and the Internet. As a result of this development, people are increasingly exposed to images, ideas and information from around the world.

Consumerism The growth of consumerism – buying goods and services is becoming increasingly central to people's lives. What we buy says who we are. A range of branded goods from Nike trainers to Gucci sunglasses and Armani fragrance allows us to select items to fit our chosen identities.

Movement of people Mass travel and migration – people are increasingly exposed to different societies and different ways of life. Countries are becoming more and more multicultural.

Risk and uncertainty A sense of growing social and environmental risk. People's lives are increasingly insecure. Few can look forward to a job for life. Relationships are more at risk as the rise in divorce indicates. And with global warming and worldwide pollution, the environment we live in appears increasingly dangerous and uncertain.

Globalisation We live in an increasingly global society. The boundaries between nation states are breaking down with transnational organisations, such as the European Union, and transnational companies, like the Ford Motor Company, Nestlé and Coca-Cola. Interaction between nation states becomes more frequent and intense as goods, capital, people, brands, images, fashions and beliefs flow across national boundaries.

The cultural impact

Postmodernists believe that the changes outlined above have had a major impact on the culture of societies in the postmodern age. According to David Lyon (2000), this involves changes in people's attitude to *authority*, to their sense of *identity,* and to their ideas of *time* and *space.*

Authority According to Lyotard (1984), postmodern culture is characterised by a widespread loss of confidence in the grand explanations – the 'big stories' or *metanarratives* – traditionally provided by science, religion and politics. People are less likely to accept that there are absolute truths, whether religious, scientific or political. And, along with an increased pessimism that science and reason will provide solutions, comes a declining confidence in the inevitability of *progress.* Thus, sources previously regarded as authoritative, such as the scientific community, the clergy and politicians, are regarded with increasing scepticism.

To some extent, these developments are consequences of the global spread of information, which exposes growing numbers to competing interpretations of 'reality', and claims to the truth. As diverse worldviews – religious, ethnic, political, scientific – penetrate societies around the globe, knowledge in postmodern society comes to be seen as *relative.* There is no longer a single truth. It has been replaced by a multitude of truths which are relative to particular times and places.

Identity In modern society, people's identities are largely shaped by their occupation, gender, social class and nationality. In postmodern society, their identities are constructed more by personal choice. As a result, they are more fluid and flexible. However, they are also more under threat.

According to Manuel Castells (1996), this is primarily a result of the information technology revolution and globalisation. Individuals' destinies and their sense of themselves are largely at the mercy of a dynamic, globalised capitalism, which can rapidly create and destroy jobs and change communities in ways beyond political control. In this insecure, postmodern world of sudden flows of power, employment, and wealth, trying to construct an identity, either as an individual or a community, becomes of central importance (Castells, 1996).

And increasingly, according to Zygmunt Bauman (1992), individuals in postmodern societies are constructing their identities primarily through what they choose to *consume.* As David Lyon (2000) puts it, 'self-esteem and our recognition by others may be purchased over the counter'.

Time and space Postmodern society has seen a restructuring of time and space. Distance no longer provides a barrier to communication – people can talk to or email each other almost instantly across the world. This provides immediate access to cultures, practices, ideas and belief systems which were once remote and inaccessible.

Postmodernity and religion

Postmodern society has resulted in:

- A decline of previously dominant religious organisations
- A growth of fundamentalism in all world religions
- The spread of new types of religious organisations, movements and networks.

The decline of dominant religious organisations Modernity is associated with authoritative institutions which provide a metanarrative in which to believe. In modernity, the metanarratives of the world religions were transmitted via sacred texts and interpreted by highly-regarded religious authorities.

However, globalisation – in particular, the spread of people and ideas around the world – has resulted in a greatly increased exposure to rival metanarratives, including a wide range of contradictory religions and philosophies. Repeated exposure to alternative versions of the truth may undermine people's confidence in them all, and encourage a view of truth as relative. Hence, one consequence of postmodernity may be a decline in the authority of both established religious institutions and religious metanarratives. (This suggestion is discussed further on page 58.)

The rise of fundamentalism While postmodern relativism may undermine some religious institutions and diminish their support, it may at the same time encourage a counter-response. The last few decades have witnessed a rise in religious *fundamentalism* in all major world religions. For example, the worldwide membership of the Jehovah's Witnesses grew from 44,080 in 1928 to over six million in 2000. This is expected to at least double by 2020.

Fundamentalism is seen by its followers as a return to the basics or fundamentals of religion. It often involves a literal interpretation of religious texts and strict moral codes of behaviour. People tend to look to the past, to a 'golden age' of religion, and use this as a template for the present and the future.

One interpretation of the growth of fundamentalist movements such as Jehovah's Witnesses is that they offer hope, direction and certainty in a world which seems increasingly insecure, confusing and morally lost (Holden, 2002).

In poorer societies, whose traditional cultures and religions are subjected to the forces of Westernisation and globalisation, fundamentalism can also provide a defence against cultural and religious dominance. Perceiving a threat to their faith and identity, people may respond by looking backward to traditional truths. Thus, for Bauman (1992), 'fundamentalist tendencies' may 'reflect and articulate the experience of people on the receiving end of globalisation'. Similarly, Castells (1996) sees fundamentalism as a way in which people construct 'resistance identities', as globalisation undermines their traditional sense of self.

However, although fundamentalism may reject aspects of globalisation, it is not necessarily against science and technological progress. For instance, in Egypt and other Islamic societies, while conservative Islam has grown in influence in politics, law, education, and on the street, it has nevertheless embraced modern science and technology. It has stressed the 'complementary' relationship between science and Islam in its education system and in its literature (Herbert, 2001). Similarly, as Starrett (1998) notes, it has accepted many modern medical technologies (including in-vitro fertilisation, plastic surgery and birth control), as long as they are applied within certain limits. And, as Castells (1996) shows with regards to Christian, Hindu and Islamic fundamentalism, such groups are highly dependent on ICT to mobilise ideas, money and social links.

The spread of new religious movements As noted earlier, personal identity in postmodern society is increasingly constructed by individuals rather than shaped by the groups to which they belong. And identity is increasingly reflected by personal consumption – the goods and services a person chooses to buy. This emphasis on identity and consumption can be seen in people's choice of religion and the uses they make of it.

Postmodern society encourages people to select religious beliefs and practices to suit their chosen identities. Traditional religious metanarratives have lost much of their authority. As a result of travel, migration and the 'information explosion' from the new electronic media, people are exposed to a vast array of religions. Postmodern consumers are already well-prepared to select those items which appeal to them. This freedom of, and desire for, choice has led to a spread of new religious movements.

Those interested can dip in and select a 'pick and mix' assortment from the beliefs and practices on offer at the 'spiritual supermarket'. These can then be tested out to see if they 'work' for the consumer. If the experience proves rewarding, the beliefs and practices can be incorporated into the individual's identity. If not, they can be dropped.

Postmodernism – an evaluation

While accepting some of the trends identified by postmodernists, many sociologists argue that they have gone too far. Have we really entered a brand new age of postmodernity? Are all truths relative? Is fundamentalism a response to postmodern society?

The relativisation of truth Steve Bruce (2002) rejects the view that faith in science and reason is dead and all truths carry equal weight.

Although people nowadays are much more cautious about the consequences of science, for example, genetic

modification and nuclear power, Bruce denies that this amounts to a wholesale rejection of the metanarrative of science and to the relativisation of thought. Not all the ways of viewing the world have become equally plausible. For instance, most still see 'a difference in kind between astronomy and astrology, or between surgery and aura healing'. And 'most practitioners of spiritual medicine defer to conventional doctors for more serious ailments' (Bruce, 2000).

Consumption and individualism Bruce (2002) accepts that greater wealth and consumer choice have allowed people to create what they see as their own particular identities. However, he criticises postmodernists for ignoring the possibility that consumers may be manipulated by advertising to purchase items of mass consumption and to see this as an expression of their individuality.

Postmodernists present a picture of individuality based on consumption – of the individual constructing their identity based on personal choice. Bruce argues that this view underestimates the power of *group* identities. For instance, social class, ethnicity, gender and age all continue to shape our identities in important ways.

Fundamentalism Is the growth of religious fundamentalism a response to the particular changes brought about by postmodern society? This may be the case. But fundamentalism has a long history. For example, Abdullahi An-Na'im (2003) identifies many instances of Islamic fundamentalism over the past thousand years. He sees them as a response to social, political and economic crises. As such, there is nothing particularly new about today's Islamic fundamentalism.

key terms

Fundamentalism Movements within established religions which seek a return to the basic texts or beliefs – the 'fundamentals' – of religion.
Relativism The idea that there is no single or absolute truth. Truth is therefore relative.

summary

1. Substantive definitions ask what religion is. For example, religion is a belief in the supernatural.
2. Functional definitions ask what are the functions or roles of religion in society. For example, religion strengthens social solidarity.
3. Durkheim's functionalist analysis states that religion reinforces the collective consciousness and strengthens social solidarity.
4. Malinowski argues that religion reduces the disruption caused by life crises and the anxiety produced by activities whose outcome is uncontrollable and uncertain.
5. Parsons claims that religion deals with the 'problem of meaning' by providing answers to universal questions such as why do people die unjustly. Religion also sacrilises and legitimates core values which, in turn, strengthens social consensus.
6. Bellah argues that civil religion – a faith in Americanism – unites American society.
7. For Marx, religion reflects the alienation and exploitation of class-based society. It acts as a system of social control, it justifies social inequality, it produces false consciousness, and provides compensation for alienation and oppression. In doing so, religion discourages political action by the subject class to improve their situation.
8. Some neo-Marxists argue that religion can challenge ruling-class dominance – for example, liberation theology in Latin America.
9. Many feminists claim that religion is a patriarchal institution. Supernatural beings and religious professionals are overwhelmingly male. And in many religions, women play a secondary role in worship. In strongly-religious societies, women tend to have fewer options and less favourable treatment.
10. Weber argues that at certain times and places religion can be a force for social change. He claims that early forms of Protestantism, particularly Calvinism, encouraged the rise of capitalism. The Protestant ethic, with its emphasis on hard work, self-discipline and self-denial, provided the basis for the spirit of capitalism.
11. Weber's views have been widely criticised. For example, some critics argue that capitalism preceded early forms of Protestantism.
12. Peter Berger agrees with Weber's view that rationalisation has led to disenchantment. He argues that the pluralisation of people's life-worlds has produced an unprecedented awareness of different belief systems. This undermines traditional religious teachings. The result is anomie. Religion no longer has the power to give meaning to life.
13. According to postmodernists, the metanarratives of modern society have been undermined in postmodern society. As a result, knowledge and beliefs are increasingly seen as relative. This has led to a decline in traditional religion which can no longer claim a monopoly of the truth.
14. Some researchers have seen the rise of religious fundamentalism as a response to this development. They see people going 'back to basics' in an age of uncertainty.
15. People are seen to increasingly construct their own identities in postmodern society – largely on the basis of what they consume. The growth of new religious movements reflects this – people can select a mix of beliefs and practices to suit their desired identity.

activity 15 religion in postmodern society

Item A Mixing to taste

Glenn Hoddle

Glenn Hoddle, the former England football coach, is a controversial figure. He made no secret of his strong Christian beliefs. He used a faith healer for counselling his team. And he was forced to resign in 1999 as a result of his statement about karma which was seen as offensive to people with disabilities. In Hoddle's words, 'You and I have been given two hands and two legs and half-decent brains. Some people have not been born like that for a reason. The karma is working from another lifetime. I have nothing to hide about that. It is not only people with disabilities. What you sow, you have to reap.'

Statements of mixed religious belief are becoming more commonplace. Hoddle's apparent Hinduism (belief in karma) is hitched to a (Christian or Jewish) Biblical phrase about reaping what you sow. And how does this square with his consulting a New Age faith healer? The evidence shows that more and more people can both claim some fairly conventional religious positions and cheerfully add on other elements – Feng Shui, yoga, mysticism, astrology, Shiatsu, Reiki and the rest. It has been likened to cocktail mixing – mixing divine drinks to individual taste.

Adapted from Lyon, 2000

Item B What works for me

In postmodern religion, truth is relative to what people imagine will satisfy their requirements. People have what they take to be 'spiritual' *experiences* without having to hold religious *beliefs*. Instead of authoritative texts providing truth, 'truth' is seen in terms of 'what works for me'.

Adapted from Heelas, 2000

Item C Religious shopping mall

Item D Islamic fundamentalism

Today, *Sharia* law – a legal system based on Islamic teachings – has been adopted in a number of Islamic countries – for example, parts of Pakistan and Islamic areas of Nigeria. This is often seen as a recent development and as an example of fundamentalism. However, there is nothing new about this. For example, it occurred in 10th century Morocco and 11th century Moorish Spain.

Fundamentalist *jihad* movements developed in Islamic areas of West Africa in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Some of these resulted in the creation of Islamic states – for example, Ivory Coast and Guinea.

Adapted from An-na'im, 2003

questions

1 How do Items A, B and C illustrate postmodernists' claims about the nature of religion in postmodern society?

2 How can Item D be used to criticise postmodernists' views?

Unit 4 Religion and social change

keyissues

1 Is religion a conservative force?
2 Is religion a radical force?

One of the major debates in the sociology of religion concerns the relationship between religion and social change. Is religion a conservative force? Does it maintain things the way they are and discourage social change? Or is religion a *radical force*? Does it initiate social change, does it encourage new ideas and new ways of behaving? Or does it do both at certain times and places? Is religion sometimes a conservative force discouraging social change and sometimes a radical force encouraging social change?

Some of the main sociological theories of religion deal with these questions. The answers they provide will now be examined.

4.1 Social change and theories of religion

Marxism

From a traditional Marxist view, religion is a conservative force. According to Karl Marx, it justifies the dominance of the ruling class and provides consolation for the subject class. As a result, religion discourages social change.

Religion and the ruling class Religion often legitimates – defines as right – the position of the ruling class. For example, monarchs in medieval Europe ruled by divine right. How can human beings change what is ordained by God? To do so would be punishable by eternal damnation. Justifying ruling-class domination as God-given discourages attempts to change the situation.

Religion and the subject class According to Marx, religion is 'the opium of the people'. It provides consolation for the misery of oppression by offering the false promise of eternal happiness in the next life. This illusion of happiness makes life appear bearable and therefore discourages attempts by the subject class to change their situation. Again, religion acts as a conservative force which maintains things they way they are.

Alternative Marxist views Marx's friend and co-writer Friedrich Engels saw glimmers of a demand for change in some religious movements which looked forward to change in the here-and-now rather than in the afterlife. For example, he saw aspects of communism in early Christianity. However, because of religion's emphasis on the supernatural, Engels felt that these movements were doomed to failure – they would not lead to political revolution.

As noted in Unit 3, some Marxists argue that religion can contribute to radical change. For example, Antonio Gramsci and Otto Maduro claim that, at certain times and places, religion can directly support the liberation of the subject class and help them to become aware of their true situation.

Evaluation As outlined in Unit 3, there is evidence to support the standard Marxist view that religion is a conservative force – that it supports the powerful and helps to keep the masses in their place. However, there is plenty of evidence which suggests that religion can sometimes encourage social change. For example, Roman Catholicism in Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 80s supported resistance to the domination of the Soviet Union (Hunt, 2002).

Feminism

A number of feminists have seen religion as a conservative force. Where Marxists have seen religion as maintaining the power of the ruling class, feminists have seen it as maintaining patriarchy – the domination of women by men.

Christianity provides evidence to support this view.

- The Christian God – 'our father' – has traditionally been seen as male.
- Eve was created as a 'helpmate' for Adam.
- Christianity traditionally defined a wife as the property of her husband. She owed him life-long obedience.
- Until recently, women could not become clergy in Christian churches. This changed in 1992 in the Church of England. But women are still barred from becoming religious professionals in the Roman Catholic Church.

These examples support the view that religion serves to keep women in their traditional place – subordinate to men.

Evaluation There is plenty of evidence to support the view that religion reinforces patriarchy and discourages change. As such, religion is a conservative rather than a radical force. However, there is evidence to question this view. As noted in Unit 1, goddesses played a significant part in ancient Greek and Roman religion. And today, thousands of women have positions of leadership in the rapidly growing Christian Pentecostal movement.

Functionalism

In general, functionalist theories have seen religion as a force for stability rather than change. It reinforces value consensus, it strengthens social solidarity, it deals with life crises which threaten to disrupt society. As such, religion is seen as a conservative force which maintains the status quo – keeping things the way things are.

Emile Durkheim According to Durkheim, religion reinforces the collective conscience – the norms and values

of society. Religious rituals strengthen social solidarity by binding together members of society. In these respects, religion is a force for stability rather than change.

Bronislow Malinowski According to Malinowski, religion serves to reduce the anxiety and tension which result from events which threaten to disrupt social life. Such events

activity 16 religion in Black America

Item A Gospel music

Gospel singers

Throughout the USA, Black churches have resounded with the sound of gospel music. In Detroit, the Reverend C.L. Franklin, father of the famous soul singer Aretha Franklin and pastor of the Bethel Baptist church, has raised congregations to fever pitch with his preaching and gospel singing. So intense is the feeling that he arouses that nurses are regularly on hand to tend members of his flock overcome with emotion. People leave the church feeling cleansed, their burdens lifted, recharged and ready to face the problems of a new week.

At a Madison Square Garden gospel concert in New York City, Mahalia Jackson, the Queen of Gospel, sings *Just Over The Hill*, a song about going to heaven. As she sinks to her knees, singing with intensity and jubilation, women in the audience shriek and faint. Gospel music, in the words of one of its singers, 'stirs the emotions'.

A member of the Ward Sisters, a famous Black gospel group states, 'For people who work hard and make little money, gospel music offers a promise that things will be better in the life to come'. According to Thomas A. Dorsey, one of the founders of modern gospel music, 'Make it anything other than good news and it ceases to be gospel'. Many gospel songs ring with joy, excitement, anticipation and conviction about reaching the 'blessed homeland' and 'waking up in glory'. Life on earth might be hard and painful with little hope for improvement, but life after death is nothing but good news.

God not only promises eternal salvation and perfect happiness, he also provides support and direction for life on earth. Typical lines from gospel songs include, 'Take your burdens to the Lord and leave them there', 'God will carry you through', 'Since I gave to Jesus my poor broken heart, he has never left me alone', and 'What would I do if it wasn't for the Lord?'

Adapted from Heilbut, 1971 and Haralambos, 1995

Martin Luther King giving his 'I Have a Dream' speech during the March on Washington in 1963.

Item B Protest

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, some Black preachers came out of their churches and on to the streets. Led by the Reverend Martin Luther King, the Southern Christian Leadership Council, an organisation of Black churches in the southern states of the USA, directed mass protest against racial discrimination. Partly due to their campaign, the American government passed civil rights laws which declared discrimination on the basis of skin colour to be illegal.

Adapted from Franklin and Starr, 1967

questions

1 How does Item A support the traditional Marxist view of religion as a conservative force?

2 How does Item B question this view?

include life crises – birth, puberty, marriage and death. For example, a funeral ceremony checks the disruptive emotions which follow the death of a loved one. It promises life after death and brings together family and friends to support the bereaved. In doing so it reintegrates society.

Again, religion is seen to bring social stability rather than change.

Talcott Parsons Like Durkheim, Parsons sees religion as reinforcing value consensus – for example, the Christian Ten Commandments back up the norms and values of Western societies. In addition, he sees religion as giving meaning to and making sense of life. This helps people to adjust to and accept their situation which, in turn, promotes social stability. Again, the emphasis is on stability rather than change.

Evaluation Functionalists have been criticised for presenting what many see as a one-sided view of religion – for their emphasis on religion promoting social solidarity and value consensus and for neglecting instances of religion as a force for social change. This criticism is not entirely fair. For example, Talcott Parsons (1951) argued that Christianity not only reinforced, it also helped to produce, the norms and values which shaped modern societies and were essential to their economic development.

Max Weber

From a Marxist view, religion is largely shaped by economic factors. As part of the superstructure of society, religion reflects the infrastructure or economic base. Max Weber argued that in certain cases, the opposite was true – religion can help to shape entire economic systems and bring radical changes to society as a whole.

Weber argued that human action is directed by meanings. As a result, social change can result from a change in meanings, from a change in world view – the way people see the world. And these new meanings can be generated by religion.

This was the argument Weber used in his most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (see pages XX, XX-XX). He claimed that a number of Protestant religions which developed in 16th century Europe produced the ideas which were essential for the development of capitalism.

As outlined in Unit 1, these ideas included self-discipline, rational thinking, a 'calling' in life which the individual must follow in a determined and single-minded way, and a condemnation of time-wasting, laziness, luxuries and entertainment. From these ideas developed the 'spirit of capitalism' which was a major factor in the creation of the capitalist system.

Evaluation If Weber is correct, religion can sometimes be a significant force for social change. However, as noted in Unit 1, a number of researchers claim that early forms of capitalism preceded the new Protestant religions. In terms of their argument, Weber got it the wrong way round – capitalism came first and helped to produce Protestantism.

4.2 Religious fundamentalism

In recent years, there has been a rise in religious fundamentalism – in particular, Christian fundamentalism in the USA and Islamic fundamentalism in North Africa, the Middle East and the Far East.

Religious fundamentalism is seen by its followers as a return to the basics or fundamentals of religion. It usually involves a literal interpretation of religious texts and strict moral codes of behaviour. Its followers often see it as turning the clock back to true religion, to a time when religion was not watered down, tarnished and corrupted by the evils of modern society.

Some researchers see fundamentalism as a particularly conservative form of religion – it looks backward, it rejects many of the changes in modern society, it tries to return to a former time.

This is a somewhat different view of religion as a conservative force. Rather than maintaining things the way they are, fundamentalists aim to make things the way they were. In one respect they are conservative, in another respect they are not because they seek to change the existing society.

Christian fundamentalism in the USA

In the 1970s, there was a revival of Christian fundamentalism in the United States. In 1979, Jerry Falwell and a small group of preachers founded the Moral Majority – a conservative political movement which aimed to return to traditional values. Basing their views on a literal interpretation of the Bible, their goal was to restore God to the centre of American society. In his book *Listen America*, Jerry Falwell urged Americans to come 'back to God, back to the Bible, back to reality'.

The Moral Majority pointed out what they saw as the ills of American society – high divorce rates, widespread juvenile delinquency, pornography on the Internet, adultery in the White House, abortion on demand and increasing tolerance of homosexuality. This, in their view, was not God's way (Ammerman, 2003).

The election of Ronald Reagan as President of the United States has been seen by some as an indication of the Moral Majority's power. Reagan shared many of their views. However, by the 1990s, many members felt that the movement had failed. Two prominent members published *Blinded by Might* stating that, 'Today, very little that we set out to do has gotten done. In fact, the moral landscape of America has become worse' (quoted in Ammerman, 2003).

Despite this apparent failure, there is evidence that Christian fundamentalism had a significant influence on the election of George Bush in 2000 and on his policies from then on. Bush himself is a fundamentalist, born-again Christian. Shortly after his election, he created the Office of

Faith-Based Programs which encourages religious groups to take over welfare services for the homeless, unemployed, drug addicts and alcoholics. This is part of Bush's 'compassionate conservatism', a phrase borrowed from his close advisor, the fundamentalist Christian Marvin Olasky, who wrote a book entitled *Compassionate Conservatism*. Olasky's message for dealing with the poor is summed up by his statement: 'What we've found is the most useful kind of poverty-fighting is spiritual. And we forgot that in the 20th century' (quoted in Saunders, 2001).

Islamic fundamentalism

Although Islamic fundamentalist movements vary due to local history and circumstances, they have certain things in common. Islamic fundamentalists see themselves as the saviours and moral guardians of their societies. They are the chosen few who must restore true religion in an immoral and decadent society which has abandoned God's design for living. They have a duty to translate God's will into practice in line with a literal reading of the Qur'an – the Muslim bible (An-Na'im, 2003).

The Iranian revolution The following case study on the revolution in Iran in 1979 highlights some of the main features of Islamic fundamentalism.

In the 1920s and 30s, the Shah (ruler) of Iran felt that traditional Islamic culture was holding back the modernisation of his country. He introduced a Western curriculum into schools, secular (non-religious) laws into courts and invited Western companies into Iran to develop agriculture and industry. The development of the oil industry brought considerable wealth to a small elite, while leaving the mass of the population in poverty.

By the 1970s, parts of Iran, particularly the capital Tehran, were becoming increasingly Westernised with bars, cinemas, discos, night clubs, and Western dress, food, music and films. Many people resented both the wealthy

activity 17 fundamentalism in the USA

Item A Pat Robertson

One of the leaders of the Moral Majority, TV evangelist and former presidential candidate Reverend Pat Robertson outlines his vision of America after fundamentalist Christians have taken control. 'When the Christian majority takes over this country, there will be no satanic churches, no more free distribution of pornography, no more abortion on demand, and no more talk of rights for homosexuals.'

Pat Robertson at an anti-abortion demonstration in Wichita, Kansas

George Bush in the pulpit in New Orleans, claiming that the 'miracle of salvation' is the answer to many of society's problems.

Item B President Bush

According to George Bush, the greatest hope for the poor is not a reform of government welfare services but 'redemption' – in other words, religious belief. Welfare is a poor alternative to the power of religion. Like all fundamentalists, Bush takes the Bible literally as the word of God. He sees the world in religious terms. When he talks about the 'axis of evil', referring to states like Iraq under Sadham Hussein, he is identifying his enemies as literally satanic, as possessed by the devil.

Adapted from Saunders, 2001 and James, 2003

question

With some reference to Items A and B, how can Christian fundamentalism be seen both as conservative and as a movement for social change?

elite and the influence of the West.

The ayatollahs – religious leaders – blamed the poverty of the masses on the decline of Islam and on Western influence. They saw the solution as a return to a truly Islamic society based on the Qur'an and a rejection of Western capitalism and Western ways. This would cure the disease of 'westoxicifation' and restore God's design for living (Bruce, 2001).

In 1979, the people overthrew the Shah and an Islamic state was established under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. Bars were looted and burned, cinemas destroyed, casinos and nightclubs closed down, and alcohol and Western music banned. Women were encouraged to stay at home and study the Qur'an, and in public they were required to cover themselves with the *chador* – veil. Islamic law – the *sharia* – was reinstated, and schoolchildren now recited the Qur'an rather than singing the national anthem.

Religious fundamentalism – conclusion

In one respect, fundamentalist movements are conservative forces. They look backwards for their inspiration for the future, they attempt to turn the clock back to a time of true religion. But no movement can hope to completely restore the past. And there are often many new features in fundamentalist movements. Steve Bruce (2001) gives the following picture of fundamentalism in Iran. 'Although Islamic fundamentalists typically portray their task as a return to the past, the Islam they promote is not the traditional rather easy-going rural religion of a nomadic tribal people who gave a high place to the magical powers of the cults of local saints. It is a puritanical "reformed" Islam that places unusually strict requirements on individuals and replaces the magic of the saint cult with rigorous self-discipline.'

Although the aim of religious fundamentalists is a return to the past, they also aim to change existing society.

activity 18 fundamentalism in Iran

Item A Westoxification

In the words of an Iranian ayatollah:

> 'Islam was defeated by its own rulers, who ignored Divine Law, in the name of Western-style secularism. The West captured the imagination of large sections of our people. And that conquest was far more disastrous for Islam than any loss of territory. It is not for the loss of Andalusia (a reference to the Moors being driven out of Spain) that we ought to weep every evening – although that remains a bleeding wound. Far greater is the loss of sections of our youth to Western ideology, dress, music and food.'

Quoted in Taheri, 1987

Item B An Iranian woman

'Once we thought that Western society had all the answers for successful, fruitful living. If we followed the lead of the West we would have progress. Now we see that this isn't true. They are sick societies, even their material prosperity is breaking down. America is full of crime and promiscuity. Russia is worse. Who wants to be like that? We have to remember God. Look how God has blessed Saudi Arabia. That is because they have tried to follow the (Islamic) Law. And America, with all its loose society, is all problems.'

Quoted in *History of the 20th Century*, Vol. 8, 1994

Item C Anti-American demonstration

Anti-US demonstration outside the American Embassy in Tehran, 1979. The poster on the right shows a picture of the religious leader, Ayatollah Khomeini.

question

In what ways do the items illustrate Islamic fundamentalism?

Christian fundamentalism in the USA aims to change the moral landscape of America. Fundamentalism in Iran aimed to rid the country of Western influence and create an Islamic society. These are radical aims. And sometimes they can lead to radical social change – in the case of Iran, they led to a revolution.

4.3 Religion and social change – conclusion

The first section in this unit looked at theories of religion. Most theories see religion as a conservative force, as a force which maintains the status quo. Weber, however, argued that at certain times and places, religion could be a radical force, helping to change society in significant ways.

The second section looked at religious fundamentalism arguing that though conservative in their outlook, fundamentalist movements can sometimes lead to radical change in the wider society.

This section examines further evidence and ideas about the relationship of religion and social change.

Religion as a force for change

Geoffrey K. Nelson (1986) argues that there are many instances in history when social change and even revolution have been directed by religious beliefs. He gives the following examples.

- One of the leaders of the Peasants' Revolt in England in 1381 was a priest called John Ball. He claimed that God had given the land to all men equally, and that the peasants should rise up against the lords who had stolen the land from them.
- Churches played an important part in the civil rights movement in the USA during the 1960s. Protests led by the Reverend Martin Luther King influenced the government to pass civil rights laws which banned segregation on the basis of skin colour.
- From the 1960s, a number of radical individuals and groups have emerged from the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America. They argued that Christians have a duty to help liberate the poor and oppressed. They developed a set of teachings known as *liberation theology* and sometimes joined movements to overthrow oppressive regimes. For example, in 1979 Catholic revolutionaries played a part in the overthrow of the right-wing government in Nicaragua.

Nelson argues that examples such as these indicate how religion 'can spearhead resistance and revolution'. However, he also notes that in each case there are examples of religion encouraging the opposite response. During the Peasants' Revolt, many churchmen supported the lords and condemned the rebellion. In the USA, some Black religious groups discouraged civil rights protest. And in Latin America, many Roman Catholic churchmen supported the position of the ruling groups.

Nelson's point is that in certain times and places, religion can be either a conservative or a radical force.

Stability and change

Nelson's research suggests that the question should not be, 'Is religion a conservative or a radical force?' Instead, it should be, 'Under what circumstances does religion encourage or discourage change?' This is the approach taken by Meredith McGuire (1981) who asks, 'In what way and under what conditions does religion promote rather than inhibit change?' She answers this question in the following way.

Beliefs Religions with strong moral codes are more likely to be critical of the wider society. As a result, their members are more likely to demand changes in society. Religions which focus on the social conduct of their members in this world are more likely to produce change than religions which focus on spirituality or other-worldly concerns. In terms of this view, Protestantism is more likely to produce change than Buddhism with its spiritual goal of eliminating the self and earthly desires.

Culture Where religious beliefs are central to the culture of society, they are more likely to be used to justify or legitimate demands for stability or change. This can be seen in Central and South American countries with a strongly Roman Catholic tradition.

Social location If religious institutions are closely integrated with other parts of the social structure – for example, the political and economic systems – they have greater power to produce stability or change. For example, the Roman Catholic Church in Poland was closely linked to Solidarity, a trade union organisation which played an important role in the overthrow of communism.

Internal organisation Religious institutions with a strong, centralised authority will have more power to affect stability or change. For example, the Roman Catholic Church has a powerful centralised authority and a strict hierarchy of religious professionals. They tend to speak with one voice. And when they don't, they are disciplined from on high and even expelled from the church. This happened to some Latin American churchmen who supported liberation theology.

Evaluation McGuire has outlined factors which influence whether religion acts as a force for stability or change. In many cases, however, she does not indicate *why* the same religion with the same beliefs, the same relationship to culture and the same social location and internal organisation, sometimes promotes change and sometimes inhibits change. Why, for example, after years of emphasising the joys of the afterlife, did Black congregations in the USA take to the streets in protest under the leadership of Martin Luther King? Answers to this question require an examination of the social context and circumstances which led to this change of direction.

summary

1. Marx saw religion as a conservative force which justified the position of the ruling class and provided consolation for the subject class. As a result, it tended to keep the subject class in its place, so discouraging social change.
2. Some neo-Marxists argue that religion can sometimes help to make the subject class aware of their situation and support their liberation. In this respect, religion can sometimes act as a radical force.
3. Some feminists have argued that religion is a conservative force, seeing it as maintaining patriarchy – keeping women in their traditional place as subordinate to men.
4. In general, functionalists have seen religion as a force for stability rather than change. By reinforcing value consensus and strengthening social solidarity, religion tends to maintain society the way it is.
5. On the basis of his analysis of the relationship between early Protestantism and capitalism, Weber argued that religion can sometimes be a significant force for social change. In his view, early Protestantism provided the meanings and guides for action which were an important factor in the rise of capitalism.
6. Some researchers see fundamentalism as a particularly conservative form of religion – it looks backwards, it rejects many of the changes in modern society and tries to return to a former time.
7. Despite this, fundamentalism can be seen as a force for change – fundamentalists do try to change society even though their model for change is based on the past.
8. There is evidence that religion can act in some circumstances as a conservative force and in others as a radical force.
9. In view of this, some researchers argue that the question should not be, 'Is religion a conservative or a radical force?' Instead, it should be, 'Under what circumstances does religion encourage or discourage change?'
10. Meredith McGuire has attempted to answer this last question. She has outlined factors which influence whether religion acts as a force for stability or change.

Unit 5 Religious organisations and movements

keyissues

1 What are churches, sects, denominations and cults?
2 What are New Religious Movements?
3 What is the New Age movement?

Religious organisations differ in many ways. Some are organised in terms of a rigid hierarchy – for example, the Roman Catholic church with the Pope at its head and a chain of officials leading down to local priests. Others lack a clearly defined hierarchy and official positions.

Religious organisations also differ in terms of their relationship to the wider society. Some generally accept society's norms and values, others reject them.

Sociologists have used such differences to classify religious organisations into types. This unit looks at the main types they have identified. It begins with four concepts – church, sect, denomination and cult. It is important to note that these are *ideal types* – they are models of 'pure types' of religious organisations. In the messy real world, no organisation will exactly fit an ideal type – it will only tend to fit one type better than others.

5.1 Church and sect

Max Weber introduced the distinction between *church* and *sect* in the early 20th century. His friend, Ernst Troeltsch (1931) developed this idea, seeing churches and sects as very different types of organisation.

Church

Membership A church aims to be the 'spiritual home' of everybody in society. Membership is open to all and easily obtained. The church is the dominant religious organisation in a society and people qualify for membership simply by being born into that society – though there are formal rituals such as baptism which officially signify membership.

In its most developed form, a church seeks to be universal and all-inclusive – to include members of all social groups in all societies.

Organisation Churches have a complex, formal hierarchy made up of professional clergy. In the Roman Catholic church, for example, the Pope heads an organisational pyramid of cardinals, archbishops, bishops and priests.

Worship and ritual Worship in churches tends to be restrained. Rather than being spontaneous, it is often based on traditional ritual – for example, a fixed order of service, standing for hymns, and regular repetition of prayers.

Sense of legitimacy This refers to the legitimacy or 'rightness' of religious beliefs. Churches claim to have a monopoly of truth – only their teachings offer the truth, they provide the only legitimate religion.

Relationship to the wider society Churches generally accept the norms and values of the wider society. They are

often closely linked with society's major institutions – for example, church and state were closely linked in medieval Europe.

Involvement and commitment Although churches encourage members to play an active role – to regularly attend services and participate in church functions – there is no compulsion to do so. Those who show low levels of involvement and commitment are still regarded as members.

Sect

Membership Unlike churches, the attitude of sects to the world outside is highly exclusive – they erect strong boundaries between themselves and the wider society and exclude people considered 'unworthy'. Gaining membership is not a right, but has to be earned by personal merit. This might be indicated by a knowledge of doctrine, a conversion experience, or the recommendation of existing members. There is therefore a clear distinction between members and non-members. Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, Christadelphians and the Amish of the United States are examples of sects.

Organisation Sects generally lack a professional clergy and a complex hierarchy. Instead, they depend for leadership upon the special, God-given talents of members.

Worship and ritual There is little use of ritual, and worship is typically emotional, expressive and spontaneous. For example, members of Christian sects often cry out phrases such as 'Hallelujah' and 'Praise the Lord' as the spirit takes them.

Sense of legitimacy Historically, church and sect have seen the other as rivals and, often, as dangerous enemies. Significantly, both claim that they have a monopoly of the truth and that they are the only true religion.

Sects often look forward to an event of great significance – for example, the second coming of Jesus, the anticipated battle of Armageddon between God's forces and Satan's, the Day of Judgement, and 'life' in heaven or hell. Members are encouraged to think of themselves as an elite who possess special enlightenment or spiritual insight, with salvation reserved for them alone, while non-believers are rejected.

Relationship to the wider society Sects are generally critical of the wider society and expect members to stand apart from it. Contact with non-members is generally discouraged except in an attempt to convert them. Sects are also critical of the mainstream religious bodies – whom they regard as too worldly – and distance themselves from them.

Involvement and commitment of members Sects demand high standards of behaviour from their members and high levels of commitment. Much of the members' spare time is spent in sectarian activities – for example, in Bible study, trying to gain converts, or socialising with sect members. However, if members fail to meet the sect's high standards, they may be punished, and even expelled – a powerful sanction when their whole way of life has been built around the group.

activity 19 church and sect

Item A The Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian grouping. Its followers accept the authority of the Pope – the Vicar of Christ – as Christ's representative on earth. When he defines matters of faith or morals, the Pope's statements are regarded as infallible (incapable of error) and binding on all Catholics.

The Pope stands at the head of a complex hierarchy. Below him are the cardinals, who are responsible for electing and advising the Pope. Next come the 'greater' patriarchs (eg of Jerusalem), and 'minor' patriarchs (eg of Lisbon). Then come archbishops and bishops followed by priests, deacons and subdeacons.

Worship is based on traditional rituals. It is governed by detailed rules and regulations, including strict dress codes for the various religious professionals. Here are part of the instructions for the Roman Catholic Mass.

Bishops in the foreground and cardinals in red robes attend a Mass inside St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican.

The procession comes to the altar. The procession consists of the incense bearer, attendants, master of ceremonies, subdeacon, deacon, and officiating priest, all dressed in the appropriate vestments. First, the preparatory prayers are said at the foot of the altar. The altar is 'incensed'. The officiating priest reads – and the choir sing – the *Introit* and *Kyrie*. The priest, the deacon and subdeacon recite the Gloria in excelsis (Glory in the highest) which is also sung by the choir.

Adapted from *Catholic Encyclopaedia*

Item B Jehovah's Witnesses

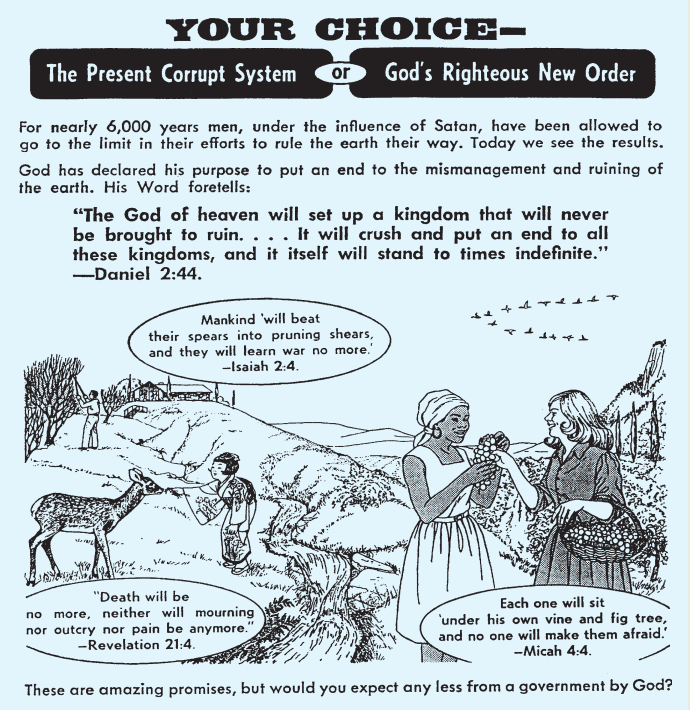
Jehovah's Witnesses believe that only they have the true faith, that only they can offer the path to salvation. In the words of their official publication, *The Watchtower*, Witnesses 'do not share in the divisive politics of this world, although they subject themselves to human governments as long as God patiently allows these to function. Instead, they patiently await the Day of Judgement and the unfolding of God's Plan for men on Earth.'

Jehovah's Witnesses separate themselves from the wider society which they regard as corrupt and immoral. They are hostile to other religions, particularly mainstream Christianity which they see as heretical – as contrary to God's teachings. Life revolves around the sect with Bible study groups, meetings, social events and door-to-door visits with the aim of gaining converts.

The Watchtower organisation, based in New York, imposes strict control on members. It is the supreme authority – its word, which appears in The Watchtower, is the only truth. Those who take contrary views are excluded from the sect and shunned by members.

Only Jehovah's Witnesses are morally pure, only they will be saved on the day of judgement when God will overturn the existing social order and transform the world.

Adapted from various issues of *The Watchtower* and www.apologeticsindex.org



question

With reference to Items A and B, why is Roman Catholicism defined as a church and Jehovah's Witnesses as a sect?

5.2 Denomination and cult

Denomination

The concept of *denomination* was introduced to sociology by the American Richard Niebuhr in 1925. Denominations are usually described as part-way between church and sect. Though widely seen as conventional, respectable and mainstream, they often have a history of challenging authority. Unlike the sect, they tend to be tolerant of others' beliefs. Examples of denominations in the UK include Methodists, Baptists and United Reformed.

Membership Unlike the church, the denomination is not 'universalistic' in that it does not seek to make members of the whole population. Although membership is open to all, there is no sect-like test of merit. Denominations tend to be disproportionately middle class.

Organisation Denominations have a professional clergy but their organisational hierarchy is much less complex than that of a church. They have no bishops, archbishops, patriarchs or popes. But the hierarchy is more developed than that of a sect, which typically has no professional clergy. Laypeople play a more direct role than in a church – as non-professional lay-preachers, for instance – but less than in a sect.

Worship and ritual Worship is relatively formal, with less ritual than a church but less spontaneity than in a sect. Though most stand to sing and sit to pray, there is no crossing oneself, incense or bells, as at a church service, nor cries of 'Hallelujah' or 'Praise the Lord' as in a sect. Most sociologists would agree that in the USA, the so-called churches are closer to denominations.

Sense of legitimacy Unlike churches and sects, denominations do not claim an exclusive monopoly of the truth. As a result, they are more tolerant of alternative beliefs and less demanding of their members. And, because they accept that there are other paths to salvation, they will more readily cooperate with other religious organisations.

Relationship to the wider society While churches tend to be closely associated with the state, denominations are explicitly separate from the state. However, unlike many sects, they do not reject the state or the wider society. Hence, in Britain, clergy of such denominations as the United Reformed and the Methodists appear at national occasions, such as Remembrance Sunday, alongside Church of England clergy who usually officiate as representatives of the national church.

Involvement and commitment Although denominations wish to increase their members, they put relatively little pressure on potential recruits to commit themselves to a particular set of beliefs, to regular attendance, or to membership. In part, this reflects a fundamental value of *individualism*. The right of individuals to interpret the

scriptures themselves, without priests as intermediaries, has been central to the 'non-conformist' Protestant traditions such as Methodism, Baptism, Presbyterianism and Unitarianism.

Cult

In everyday language, the terms *cult* and sect are often used interchangeably to refer to relatively small religious groups whose beliefs and practices deviate from those of mainstream religions and appear strange to most people. However, some sociologists make a distinction between sects and cults.

According to Roland Robertson (1970), the key difference between cults and sects is as follows. Sects believe they have a monopoly of the truth, while cults believe their teachings are just one of many paths to the truth. Cults are therefore more tolerant of the beliefs of others and of the behaviour of their members.

Roy Wallis (1974) developed this distinction between sects and cults. Where sects are exclusive, closed, tightly-knit organisations, cults are more loosely organised and open to the outside world. Where sects demand membership tests and strict codes of behaviour which apply to all their members, cults have none of these restrictions. Cults are more individualistic in that they allow individual members to decide what they will or will not accept.

While sect members usually believe in a God who is external to human beings, many cults emphasise the 'power', 'divinity' or 'real self' which is said to reside within individuals. A main aim of such cults is to help people experience their 'inner power' or 'inner divinity'.

Membership Cults are usually open to all and welcome those with a sympathetic interest. There may be no concept of membership – people may simply join in or drop out as they wish.

Organisation Cult organisation is likely to be loose. There may be a charismatic leader, but hierarchies and ideas of seniority are usually discouraged.

Sense of legitimacy Unlike sects, cults do not claim to have a monopoly of the truth. As a result, cults are relatively tolerant – sometimes even welcoming – of followers' involvement with other groups.

Relationship to the wider society Because of the wide range of cults, there is no common orientation to the wider society. Followers generally expect to live 'in the world' and cult-related activity is likely to be part-time.

Involvement and commitment Many cults do not demand high levels of commitment from their followers. Nor do they demand acceptance of their teachings. They simply ask that people be open to the experiences they offer. If people find these experiences rewarding, then they will be likely to learn more about the cult's teachings and increase their involvement.

5.3 Church, sect, denomination and cult – an evaluation

Problems of classification As noted at the start of this unit, the categories or concepts used to classify religious organisations are ideal types or 'pure' types. Their fit with real organisations will not therefore be exact. But is the fit close enough to be useful? Some researchers have their doubts. For example, Stark and Bainbridge (1987) argue that the long list of characteristics used to define each type

activity20 cults

Item A Dianetics

In early 1950, L. Ron Hubbard published an article which developed a psychological theory claiming that there were two sectors of the mind – the analytical and the reactive mind. The analytical mind was the basis of intelligent reasoning, and when its functioning was not constrained, it had much greater power than normally available. When a person was fully 'cleared' of 'engrams' – the recordings of traumatic incidents suffered by an individual – they would be completely free of any psychological problems or psychosomatic illnesses and would have a vastly increased IQ. Following a best-selling book which elaborated these ideas, thousands tried out the technique and hundreds enrolled for short courses of 'auditing' (Dianetic therapy), or training.

L. Ron Hubbard

The movement, known as Dianetics and later as Scientology, developed rapidly all over America. Local enthusiasts formed groups to pursue the study and practice of Dianetics and recruited others. However, Hubbard's work was seen as a starting point, to be developed further by others. The view that many held was that Dianetics was a science to which any individual could contribute. One editor of a Dianetics newsletter emphasised this individualistic orientation: 'There is no reason to take what I say as the "truth", as the "right way". Your way is the best for you.' And Dianetics practitioners claimed: 'There are many, many roads to a higher state of existence. No man can say "This is the route for all to follow".'

Adapted from Wallis, 1975

Item B 'Is there anybody out there?'

The Raelians were founded in 1973 after a young Frenchman, out walking in wild countryside, came upon a flying saucer from which emerged a benign, four-foot tall, humanoid alien. Over a few afternoons, the extraterrestial (ET), who could speak any human language, dictated his messages to Rael, messages which provide humanity with a revolutionary account of its origins, and offer guidance and hope for our future. In a nutshell, long ago a group of ETs had settled Earth and perfected their ability to create life in forms like their own. We Earthlings were the result. Thereafter, they withdrew, but kept a kindly eye on us and sent periodic messengers, such as Buddha, Christ and Joseph Smith of the Mormons, to inform us of our origins and – with limited success – to try to guide us. Although they created us, we mistook them for gods.

The spacecraft which brought the ETs to Earth to speak to Rael.

However, suddenly aware of the scale of our ability for destruction at Hiroshima (where the first atomic bomb was dropped), they became very alarmed and felt an urgent, and perhaps final, urge to help before we ran out of time. Unsurprisingly, however, they are not entirely confident of their likely reception by the Earthlings. Our reactions to Rael and the messages he conveys are the litmus test. Rael is the messenger for this 'Age of Revelation'. But he also comes bearing a set of meditative techniques taught him by his ET contact which can remove the root causes of most of our earthly ills. It's called 'Sensual Meditation' and proposes to 'awaken the mind by awakening the body'.

Though humanity is not perhaps inevitably doomed to self-destruct without their guidance, Rael's task is to persuade us to ponder our unexpected origins, practice the meditative techniques taught to him, and demonstrate that we are capable of wisdom and benevolence by building the aliens a home, an embassy, in which to welcome them. Then they will return.

Worldwide, the Raelians claim between 15,000 and 25,000 followers. In Britain there are about 300 names on the mailing list but only a dozen or so whom the British representative regards as really committed. Enquiries are welcome and no commitment is required.

Adapted from Yeo, 1988

question

Using Items A and B, show how a cult differs from a sect.

of religious organisation can be a recipe for confusion. When a researcher looks at an actual religious organisation in the real world, they may find that some of its characteristics fit a sect, others a cult and yet others, a denomination. Clearly this makes classification extremely difficult.

A possible solution is to limit the defining characteristics of religious organisations to a relatively few essential or key characteristics. For example, Stark and Bainbridge (1987) define sects as breakaways from established religious organisations and cults as entirely new movements.

Problems of general application Can the classification of church, sect, cult and denomination be applied universally to all religious organisations and movements? Troeltsch's classification of church and sect indicates some of the problems of general application. It was based on the history of sects within Christianity. While it may offer insights into some religious traditions – perhaps Judaism and Islam – it is doubtful whether it can be applied to others such as Hinduism and Buddhism.

In addition, Troeltsch's classification may only be applicable to a particular time period and place. Churches may well be a thing of the past – in particular, medieval Europe. Steve Bruce (1995) argues that today's so-called churches, such as the Church of England, are more like denominations.

Problems of stigma As Hadden (2003) points out, the terms sect and cult are problematic for research because of their associations in everyday thought. They are often seen as 'weird', 'freaky', and sometimes as 'threatening' and 'dangerous'. No member of an unconventional religious organisation would want to be labelled by such terms.

5.4 New Religious Movements

Sociological interest in unconventional religious movements increased dramatically throughout the West in the 1960s and 1970s. As more and more groups emerged, sociologists increasingly found the terms sect and cult inadequate to describe, categorise and analyse the new movements. For instance, although some, such as the meditative, Hindu-based Siddha Yoga movement, appeared to be cult-type religions – emphasising inner experience and the divine within – they quickly developed complex organisational structures quite untypical of cults. Gradually, in addition to the still useful concepts of sect and cult, a new concept was introduced – the *New Religious Movement* (NRM).

One influential attempt to identify types of NRM was made by Roy Wallis (1985). Wallis noted that they mainly drew upon Christian traditions (such as the Jesus People), on non-Western religions (usually Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim), or from Western psychology and psychotherapy, as in organisations such as the Ehrhard Seminars Training (Est).

His main point, however, was that NRMs also differed significantly in how they are 'orientated to the world'. He proposed that NRMs are either primarily *world-affirming*, *world-rejecting* or *world-accommodating*.

World-affirming NRMs broadly accept the world. Many do not appear conventionally religious at all and their language may be much more akin to business. What they offer their members or 'clients' are techniques to enable them to live more satisfactorily or successfully in the world. In Transcendental Meditation, for instance, each person is assured that they will relax and cope better with life if they meditate on a secret mantra (chant), or sacred word, given to them personally during initiation to the movement.

World-accommodating NRMs encourage their members to remain within the wider society, though they are dissatisfied with and critical of the secular (non-religious) nature of society. They try to help their followers cultivate their awareness of their inner power or inner divinity. However, like the denomination, they claim to be merely one of a variety of paths to truth or salvation. In Siddha Yoga, for instance, meditation and chanting are practised regularly, not primarily to help people cope with or succeed in life, but as a spiritual experience in which they come into contact with their own spiritual core or inner self. The churches and denominations are seen not as corrupt, but as failing to help people have such spiritual experiences.

World-rejecting NRMs are sect-like organisations, often founded by a charismatic leader. They are critical of or even hostile to the wider society – they keep their distance from it and often from other religious organisations. Like sects, they are seen by their members as uniquely legitimate – as the sole means of access to truth or salvation. They therefore draw clear boundaries between members and non-members, set strict conditions for entry and continuing membership, and require a high level of commitment. For instance, the Jesus People lived in group houses, sometimes on the land in agricultural communes, and abandoned in their thousands the drugs, drinking and promiscuous sex of their former lives to devote themselves to bringing others to Jesus.

activity21 New Religious Movements

Item A Scientology and Transcendental Meditation

Psychologically-based movements such as Scientology typically place little emphasis on collective ritual or worship but focus instead on the problems of individuals. They market themselves as a service which individuals can purchase and consume at their convenience. Their practices are directed more to reducing the problems of this life than to achieving salvation in the next. Such movements often draw upon ideas from the fringes of modern psychology or from Eastern thought.

Even some of the new religions which draw more directly from an existing religious tradition, such as Transcendental Meditation, also appear to be orientated to enabling people to achieve the conventional goals of this life – such as better jobs, a higher IQ, or greater success in personal relationships. These movements seem to form a type, sharing the common characteristics of accepting most of the goals and values of the wider society but providing new means to achieve them. Their organisational form is also distinct from traditional religion. Rather than organising as churches or chapels, they typically organise themselves in the form of multinational business corporations and employ the techniques of modern marketing and advertising.

John Travolta, a follower of Scientology, attending an exhibition of the works of its founder, L. Ron Hubbard.

Adapted from Wallis, 1985

Item B Neo-Pentecostalism and Charismatic Renewal

Some religious movements neither fully accept the norms and values of the surrounding society, nor entirely reject them by cutting themselves off in communities of the like-minded. Rather, they feel that the secular world and even many religious bodies have slipped away from God's design for human life. However, individuals can overcome this problem in their own lives without separating entirely from the secular world. Believers will normally continue in conventional jobs and family life, their religious practice reinvigorating and re-equipping them to face a degenerating secular world. This group includes Evangelical Christian movements such as Neo-Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Renewal. They claim that the Holy Spirit is still alive in the world and can be experienced through various divine 'gifts' – for example, through the gift of 'speaking in tongues'.

An Evangelical prayer meeting

Such groups are essentially a protest against the loss of vitality in existing religious institutions and their abandonment of a living spirituality. The new movement restores this spirituality and returns to traditional certainties in a world where religious institutions have become colder, more bureaucratic and less certain of their role and even of their fundamental beliefs.

Adapted from Wallis, 1985

Item C ISKCON and the Children of God

Some religious movements reject the world around them, seeing it as utterly corrupt. The world has to be abandoned or totally transformed. Such movements separate themselves from the wider society in communities of the faithful. Some look forward to a spiritual revolution. Members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) spend much of their lives in ritual prayers and chants, seeking spiritual truth to escape the illusion and corruption of the outside world.

Other movements look forward to a supernatural intervention. The Children of God live in a state of high expectation, awaiting the imminent return of Christ who will transform the world around them.

Adapted from Wallis, 1985

Hare Krishna festival, London

question

Each of the items provides an example of one of Wallis's types of NRM – world-affirming, world-accommodating, world-rejecting. Match each item to one of these 'orientations to the world'. Give reasons for your choices.

NRMs – an evaluation

Nothing new Critics have argued that there is nothing particularly new about so-called New Religious Movements. They've been regularly appearing over the last 200 years (Hunt, 2002). The only difference over the past 50 years has been an acceleration in their rate of growth – the data bank of NRMs at the London School of Economics estimates that there are now nearly 2600 'new religions' (Barker, 1999).

Former terms OK Many sociologists feel that the term New Religious Movement adds little or nothing to the existing classification of religious organisations. For example, Hadden (2003) doubts that it adds anything of importance to existing terms such as sect and cult.

Some NRMs are 'new' Other sociologists claim that some of the new movements are sufficiently different from existing religious organisations to justify the term NRM. They point to movements like the Unification Church,

often known as the Moonies, which draw from a variety of belief systems and are difficult to classify in terms of the existing types. The founder of the Unification Church, Sun Myung Moon, has integrated aspects of Christianity, Taoism and Confucianism along with a liberal sprinkling of new ideas which he has concocted (Hunt, 2002).

Orientations to the world Wallis's claim that NRMs have distinctive orientations to the world has been criticised. The same movement may have a different character and orientation to the world at different organisational levels or when facing different publics. Thus, a movement's elite may be living largely world-rejecting lives in a sect-like refuge, while ordinary followers may be living world-accommodating or even world-affirming lives in the community. We cannot therefore assume that each movement has only one distinctive orientation to the world.

5.5 The New Age movement

Alongside the variety of religious organisations discussed above, new movements have emerged which seem to lack even the degree of coherence and organisational structure of many cults. Although cults are often precarious and short-lived, they at least have some organisational structure and common belief system. That does not seem to be the case with the so-called 'New Age movement'.

The New Age movement has certain things in common with cults. It draws together people who are engaged in an individualistic quest for spiritual experience. However, even sociologists who describe it as a movement, acknowledge that it has few of the attributes normally associated with social or religious movements (Sutcliffe, 2003). And few of those interviewed by researchers use the term New Age movement to describe the groups or ideas in which they are interested.

Why is it so difficult to characterise the New Age movement? First, because the groupings which are commonly identified with the New Age are so diverse, it is difficult to identify common characteristics. Indeed, there is no agreement about which groups are part of New Age. So, while Hunt (2002) identifies neo-Pagans as a strand 'of major importance', Sutcliffe's detailed study of British New Agers includes very few references to pagan groups (Sutcliffe, 2003).

Second, as Sutcliffe points out, the so-called New Age movement lacks a leader, headquarters, a prescribed text, organisational boundaries, a public policy and common goals. Nor has it common doctrines or beliefs. In short, it lacks precisely the qualities one would expect of religious or other movements. Yet sociologists commonly refer to it as if it is a movement (Sutcliffe, 2003).

Rather than New Age being a movement, Sutcliffe argues, it is more a collection of individuals, most of whom gather, when they choose, in loose and egalitarian groups. These individuals and groups commonly link into wider networks of people – in the region, in other regions, in other countries – who share similar spiritual interests. And, as Sutcliffe points out, people will 'seek' along different paths at the same time – what he calls *multiple seeking*. Those interested, for instance, in 'holistic healing' may dip into any number of practices – 'astral projection, guided visualisation, iridology, reflexology, chromotherapy, rebirthing, shiatsu, pyramids and crystals (Sutcliffe, 2003). Each of these attract enthusiasts, and through them individuals are able, if they wish, to contact other groups and networks of people with complementary or related interests. And the Internet has, of course, facilitated such individualistic contacts between seekers.

Membership Interested individuals can attend and participate in any activities. There is no concept of membership. What unifies seekers – insofar as they feel they have anything in common – is the quest for spiritual experience or growth, though each will take their own individual paths.

Organisation Like the cult, the primary concern of those interested in New Age groupings is highly individualistic – often, some form of mystical or spiritual personal experience. The most important organisational form is the network, whereby individuals or couples come into contact with like-minded people in small groups and learn the groups' beliefs, norms, values and practices. People are likely to meet in private houses or rented premises and come together for special 'workshops' or more regular contact.

Worship and ritual Although individual New Agers may believe in some kind of God, the sacred is likely to be seen as within. As a result, there is unlikely to be worship as such, though there may be some ritual behaviour – such as chanting, incense burning or sitting in the lotus position – to assist the 'inner quest'.

Sense of legitimacy Whereas churches and sects believe that there is one truth, which they alone have access to, those involved in New Age believe that there are many truths which may come from a whole range of sources. People should be open to truth whatever its source. In an important sense, the source of legitimacy for New Age groupings is located within individuals. What is important is what 'works' for the individual in their spiritual quest. However, New Age seekers tend to be critical of 'religion' which they see in terms of dogma, organised belief and church control. As such, it discourages genuine spirituality (Sutcliffe, 2003).

Relationship to the wider society New Age seekers live 'in the world'. In Britain, the most significant exceptions are those who live or stay at Findhorn in Scotland, Britain's only New Age settled 'colony'. Ecological and environmental concerns are widespread throughout New Age, in line with the concept of the Earth as Gaia, a living – and perhaps dying – organism. Many are, therefore, active in 'Green' campaigns.

Involvement and commitment The commitment of New Age seekers is primarily to their own spiritual growth or

progress. Groups usually stay together only as long as they satisfy the needs of participants, for the group is essentially just a convenient source of support and encouragement. However, Heelas (1996) identifies three levels of commitment among seekers.

- 'The fully engaged' who have given up conventional lifestyles for a spiritual quest – for example, residents of Findhorn and some New Age travellers.
- 'Serious part-timers' who lead otherwise conventional lives but devote serious time and effort to spiritual concerns.
- 'Casual part-timers' who experiment with 'exotic' things as consumers.

Evaluation – the New Age movement

The New Age and religion This chapter began with a review of definitions of religion. For example, religion has been defined as:

- A belief in some kind of supernatural power
- An expression of this belief in collective worship
- A set of moral values which guide action
- A force which brings people together and unifies society.

In terms of each of these definitions, it can be argued that New Age spirituality falls short of religion. In many cases, there is no evidence of a supernatural power. For example, what have herbalism, crystal healing, meditation, Tarot cards and shiatsu massage got to do with the supernatural?

Nor is there much evidence of collective worship or common values which guide action. And apart from the Findhorn Community – around 200 people – and a visit to the annual Festival for Mind-Body-Spirit, there is little evidence that New Age beliefs and practices bring people together and unify society. In fact, the opposite seems the case – the 'movement' is individualistic rather than social, self-centred rather than group-centred. According to Steve Bruce (2002), its social impact is insignificant.

It can therefore be argued that the New Age movement fits none of the definitions of religion outlined above.

A movement? As noted earlier, critics have argued that New Age groupings are so diverse and loosely organised that they cannot be said to be a movement. In addition, those identified by sociologists as New Agers rarely see themselves as part of a movement, nor label themselves as such.

Spirituality Despite these criticisms, it would be unwise to dismiss the whole idea of New Age spirituality. Since the late 1960s, there has been a growth in self-orientated, spiritually-concerned groups which don't seem to fit the existing typologies of church, sect, denomination and cult, or even New Religious Movement. It appears that increasing numbers of people in the West are seeking their inner self, are searching for their true nature, for spirituality, vitality, wisdom, tranquillity, love and creativity, all of which are to be found and developed in their inner life (Heelas, 1996). But whether this spiritual seeking can be called religion is another question.

summary

1. In their analysis of religious organisations, sociologists have used four main ideal types – church, sect, denomination and cult.
2. Churches and sects are seen as opposite ends of the religious spectrum. Churches are open to all members of society, accept the state and the political and economic systems, are hierarchical and have a professional clergy. Limited demands are made on members and worship is ritualised and restrained. Both churches and sects are likely to claim a monopoly of the truth.
3. Sects, however, are widely perceived as unconventional and deviant. They distance themselves from – and are critical of – the wider society. They generally lack a professional clergy and place high demands on members. Worship lacks formal rituals, and emphasises spontaneity.
4. Denominations tend to be seen as conventional and respectable. Unlike churches and sects, they do not claim a monopoly of the truth. They place fewer demands on their members compared to sects. Denominations are separate from the state and tolerant of the wider society. They have a professional clergy but a less complex hierarchy than a church. Worship is less ritualised than a church but less spontaneous than a sect.
5. Cults, like sects, are often regarded as deviant by the wider society. Unlike sects however, they claim no monopoly of the truth and are therefore more tolerant of other paths. Many emphasise an 'inner divinity' or 'power within', and try to help seekers to experience and develop it. They make few demands – they simply ask people to be 'open' to their teachings.
6. With the emergence in the West of large numbers of new movements that did not fit existing classifications, the term New Religious Movement (NRM) was coined. NRMs mainly draw on Christian or other world faith traditions or Western psychotherapy. Wallis identified world-affirming, world-accommodating and world-rejecting NRMs.
7. The New Age movement is not a religious organisation as such. It is more like a loose network of more-or-less like-minded 'seekers' who dip into a variety of beliefs and practices. Insofar as followers share a common characteristic, it is a quest for spiritual experience and personal growth.
8. It can be argued that New Age spirituality falls short of religion. For example, in many cases there is no evidence of a supernatural power.

activity22 the New Age movement

Item A The Company of Avallon Society

The Company of Avallon Society (COAS) was formed in 1985 by student researchers of esoteric philosophy, occult science, and Earth Mystery phenomena. The COAS publicly revealed its existence in 1989 so as to expand and advance its aims, work and contact with others of like mind and interest.

The society takes its name from the group of spiritual entities who supplied archaeological data to Frederick Bligh Bond during his work at Glastonbury Abbey from 1907 to 1922. Glastonbury folklore and legends are of especial interest to the COAS, particularly those concerning the origins of Celtic Christianity and its links with Druidism. Study is focused mainly on the Western Mystery Traditions, and 'areas of linkage' between these and other Mystery Traditions, especially those of Ancient Egypt.

COAS overall aims include:

- Rational understanding, development, plus beneficial use of those extraordinary faculties and functions of the human psyche ('soul-powers'), that result in telepathy, telekinesis (movement of objects using the power of the mind), precognition, intuition, and the like.
- To establish and develop contact and rational communication with:
  a) those 'organising intelligences' at work in the Kingdom of Nature who are known as Devas, Nature Spirits, Angels, etc.
  b) intelligent entities and 'souls' existing in alternative, complementary and/or parallel dimensions of consciousness or reality that are empathetic and supportive to the wellbeing, evolution and needs of the human race and its environment.

Adapted from introductory circular letter to enquirers, undated

Kindred Spirit, a New Age magazine

Item B Smudging

Eleni Santoro is a New Age practitioner. She offers a 'smudging service' to New York estate agents which removes 'bad vibes' by 'balancing energies'.

The tools of her trade include objects from all over the world – silver Tibetan bells, a statue of Ganesh (the Hindu God of prudence and wisdom), an antique Chinese bell, an African necklace of yellow, red and green beads and a silver bowl containing three limes.

Having meditated for several minutes, shuffling a slim pack of 'angel cards', she picks three. Or rather, as she later explains, it is the angels who pick the cards – Light, Release, Humour – best suited to this interior. The smudging session also has a soundtrack – sounds of mountain streams or Japanese drums.

Adapted from Fowler, 1997

Item C Getting through the day

A crystal after work

Ellen was a member of a spiritual healing group. She used mini-meditations during her hectic moments at the office, applied acupressure and visualisation to counter a headache and employed breathing techniques and visualisation at each stoplight to handle the stress of a difficult commute home. At home, she used a mantra (chant), crystal and visualisation to 'centre' herself during and after an argument. Most days, she spent one hour on exercise followed by stress-reducing visualisations in the sauna. Later she had a cup of herbal tea and meditated for half an hour.

Adapted from McGuire, 2003

Item D Picking and mixing

The New Age ransacks myths, legends, rituals and symbols from different times, places and cultures – from Celtic Christianity, from Eastern religions, from ancient Norse and Germanic religions, from Australian Aborigines and Native Americans.

The 'movement' uses a wide range of practices and techniques picked up from all over the world – meditation, aromatherapy, crystals, mantras, self-hypnosis, reflexology, herbalism, spiritual healing.

Followers pick and mix from this cornucopia of beliefs and practices, concocting a DIY 'religion' which fits their individual requirements.

Adapted from Bruce, 2002 and Hunt, 2002

questions

1 With reference to the items, how would you evaluate the claim that the New Age is:
   a) a movement
   b) a religion?

2 How can the items be used to support the claim that the New Age reflects postmodern society?

Unit 6 Explaining religious movements

keyissues

1 What explanations have been given for the origins of sects, cults, denominations, New Religious Movements and the New Age movement?

2 What explanations have been given for their development?

As the key issues state, this unit is concerned with explanations. It focuses on the relationship between religious beliefs, religious organisations, social groups and social contexts. Why for example, do members of certain social groups join particular types of religious organisations? What is it about their social situation which attracts them to certain religious beliefs?

6.1 Sects

As noted in the previous unit, sects are close-knit religious groups whose members claim to have a monopoly of the truth. Life often revolves around the sect – high standards of behaviour and levels of commitment are demanded. Members tend to cut themselves off from the outside world and exclude those considered 'unworthy'. This section examines various explanations for sects – how they arise, why they appeal to particular groups, and what social situations encourage their growth.

Social marginality

According to Max Weber (1963), those on the margins of society are most likely to join sects. They are on the outside looking in – for example, the poor and members of some ethnic minority groups. Many feel they have been denied the prestige, the occupational status, income and opportunities which they deserve.

Sect membership can address this problem. In Weber's terms it can offer members a *theodicy of disprivilege* – a religious explanation for their situation and a promise of a 'sense of honour' either in this life or the next. Sect members now become the 'chosen few' rather than outsiders relegated to the margins of society.

The Black Muslims, an African-American sect which rose to prominence in the 1960s, illustrates these points. Its objective was to recruit 'the Negro in the mud' – the unemployed, the homeless and the destitute. It stated that Blacks are 'by nature divine', and that Whites are inferior and evil. It prophesied that Whites and their religion will be destroyed and that Blacks will then rule forever under Allah's guidance. Members claim that belonging to the sect gave them self-respect and hope for the future.

Relative deprivation

Deprivation refers to a lack of something – for example, a lack of prestige, employment, income or decent housing. From the point of view of the individual concerned, deprivation is *relative* – it is relative to an expectation that is not fulfilled, to a position they feel they deserve but have been unable to attain, to a comparison between themselves and other members of society which leaves them wanting. Relative deprivation refers to the deprivation or loss that people perceive or feel (Glock, 1964).

Sects offer a religious solution to relative deprivation. As one of the chosen few, sect members are no longer deprived. Following the strict code of behaviour laid down by the sect, and provided with the support of fellow members, they may gain self-respect and a sense of community. And the self-discipline demanded by many sects may improve their material situation – for example, they may find a job or get a better paid job (Hamilton, 2001).

Again, the Black Muslims provide an illustration. In most large cities, they operate small businesses – barber's shops, clothing stores and restaurants. Their *Economic Blueprint for the Blackman* advocates economic independence from White America. They are encouraged to work hard, save and abstain from luxuries. A strict moral code forbids the use of alcohol, tobacco and narcotics, sexual intercourse outside of marriage, dancing, dating and many forms of sport. In particular, the responsibilities of the man as husband, father and breadwinner are emphasised. Members take courses on self-improvement and look after the welfare of their fellow members.

The idea of relative deprivation does not just apply to those at the bottom of the class system or to those who experience racial discrimination. It can also apply, for example, to members of the White middle class – for instance, those who feel disillusioned with the materialism

of Western society and the teachings of mainstream religion can sometimes find what they're looking for in the beliefs and community of a sect (Wallis, 1984).

Social change and relative deprivation The experience of relative deprivation may become more intense as circumstances change. For example, the Black Muslims came to prominence in the 1960s. This was a period which promised change and improvement for African Americans – for example, laws were passed banning discrimination and segregation in many areas of public life. As a result, expectations rose rapidly. However, for many, particularly those in low-income, inner-city areas, those expectations were not met – things were as bad as ever. As a result, the experience of relative deprivation became more intense.

For some, the Black Muslims offered a means of translating rising expectations into reality. Statements by members indicate that the sect gave them purpose, direction, pride and hope.

The relationship between social change and the development of sects is examined in detail in the following section.

Social change and social dislocation

Sects tend to emerge during periods of rapid social change. Such circumstances can lead to *social dislocation*, to a feeling of being uprooted. This can result in *anomie* – a sense of normlessness, a feeling that traditional norms have broken down and that guidelines for action are no longer in place.

Sects with their clearly defined belief systems and strict moral codes can provide certainty in a time of uncertainty and anomie. They often contain a promise that life will improve if members follow the guidelines they provide. This can give direction and hope. And the close-knit ties of sect life can provide a community where none exists on the outside.

Circumstances that lead to anomie Research suggests that the normative breakdown and insecurity which encourages the development of sects can result from a variety of factors.

First, the experience of disasters, whether natural or man-made. As Norman Cohn's studies of medieval Europe illustrate, sects may be preceded by outbreaks of plague, devastating fires, long droughts, serious economic slumps or calamitous wars, any of which may lead to a deep sense of doom and a fervent desire for salvation (Cohn, 1957).

Sects may be a response to unsettling contact with a powerful alien culture, especially if accompanied by the experience of being occupied and colonised. For example, the colonisation of Palestine by the Romans saw the birth of a sect which later became known as Christianity. In such contact between cultures, traditional norms, values and institutions may be shaken and undermined. And the contact often demoralises those who find themselves confronted by a more powerful society.

People who feel that their way of life is threatened or has collapsed experience a sense of disorientation, frustration, deep anxiety and even rage. They will be predisposed to follow a messianic leader, such as Jesus Christ, who promises the coming of a new age.

A number of sociologists have argued that the social changes involved in the process of industrialisation and modernisation encouraged the emergence of sects. These changes can lead to social dislocation and a crisis of meaning and identity. People are less able to make sense of the world, they are increasingly unsure about who they are.

Sects can help some people to adjust to and make sense of a new situation. Bryan Wilson (1970) gives the example of Methodism which began as a sect. He sees the emergence of Methodism as a response by the new urban working class to the 'chaos and uncertainty of life in newly settled industrial areas'. Sects can provide a sense of community, clearly defined guidelines for living and a feeling of certainty.

Evaluation

The examples outlined in this section appear to support the view that sects are a response to social marginality, relative deprivation, rapid social change and social dislocation. However, there is evidence to question these explanations.

Beckford's (1975) study of Jehovah's Witnesses in Britain questions the significance of social marginality and relative deprivation. He found that most were upper working class and lower middle class. They showed no obvious signs of deprivation either financially or in terms of social status. Most had a religious upbringing and became disillusioned with mainstream religion. Sect membership offered an alternative religious direction which made sense and provided fulfilment.

Stark and Bainbridge (1985) examined the percentages of sects formed in the USA in different time periods during the first three-quarters of the 20th century. Sixteen per cent were formed in the 1950s, a period of social stability, 14% in the 1960s and only 3% from 1970 to 1977. The 1960s and early 1970s were a time of social unrest with student demonstrations, the hippie movement, Black riots and the Vietnam War. These findings cast doubt on the view that sects are most likely to emerge during periods of social change and social dislocation. However, it is important to note that Stark and Bainbridge use a fairly limited definition of a sect – a breakaway movement from an established religion. A broader definition may result in different figures and a different conclusion.

key terms

Theodicy of disprivilege A religious explanation for 'disprivilege' and a promise that things will get better in this life or the next.

Relative deprivation Deprivation which is relative to what people expect and feel they deserve.

Social dislocation A feeling of being uprooted, which can lead to a sense of anomie.

6.2 Cults and New Religious Movements

As outlined in the previous unit, cults are small religious groups which, unlike sects, believe that their teachings are just one of many paths to the truth. Compared to sects, cults are more tolerant of and open to the outside world. Many cults aim to develop the inner self and help people to experience their inner power.

Sociological explanations of cults are usually included within explanations of world-affirming New Religious Movements (NRMs), most of which can be classified as cults. They are also included within explanations of the New Age movement which contains many cult-like features. These explanations tend to focus on movements which developed in the West from the 1960s onwards.

The origins of NRMs

Rationalisation Roy Wallis (1984, 1985) draws on Max Weber's idea of *rationalisation* to explain the origins of NRMs. According to Weber, the meanings and motives which direct action in modern industrial society are rational. They are based on cold and deliberate reasoning, on precise calculations of the most effective ways of

activity23 the origins of sects

Item A The Ghost Dance

By 1890, the traditional way of life of the Native American Sioux had ended. They had been defeated by the US army, rounded up, and confined to reservations. The buffalo, their main source of food, had all but disappeared, slaughtered by professional White hunters such as Buffalo Bill.

The US government was determined to stamp out the Sioux way of life. Traditional customs such as the Sun Dance, an important religious ceremony, were banned. The reservation authorities tried to force the Sioux to become farmers – an occupation despised by Sioux warriors.

The frozen body of Chief Big Foot, leader of the ghost dancers at Wounded Knee

Farming was doomed to failure. The land was unsuitable, there was a drought and the cattle became diseased. Undernourished, the Sioux had little resistance to the measles and whooping cough which swept through the reservations in 1890. On one reservation, the death rate rose to 45 a month in a population of 5,550.

In 1890, the Sioux received news of a messiah, a Paiute called Wovoka. He had been visited by Christ and founded a new religion – the Ghost Dance. This was his message.

In the beginning, God made the earth and then sent the Christ to earth to teach the people. But White men treated him badly, leaving scars on his body, and so he went back to heaven. Now he has returned to earth as a Native American. He will renew everything as it used to be and make it better.

In the next springtime, when the grass is knee-high, the earth will be covered with new soil which will bury all the White men. The new land will be covered with sweet grass and running water and trees. Great herds of buffalo and wild horses will come back. The Native Americans who dance the Ghost Dance will be taken up in the air and suspended there while a wave of new earth is passing, and then they will be set down among the ghosts of their ancestors on the new earth. There they will follow their traditional way of life, forever free from death, disease and misery. Only Native Americans will live on this regenerated earth – the White race will disappear.

About half the Sioux nation believed in the new religion. They danced the ghost dance and wore 'ghost shirts' which they believed made them invulnerable to White men's bullets. Fearing trouble, the authorities called in the army. Troops surrounded a group of ghost dancers at Wounded Knee Creek. Fighting broke out and 150 Sioux including 60 women and children, were massacred. The Ghost Dance was over.

Adapted from Utley, 1963 and Brown, 1975

Item B The Rastafarian movement

The Rastafarian religion originated in the West Indies and was based on the ideas of Marcus Garvey, who preached that the only way for Black people to escape their poverty and oppression was to return to Africa. When Haile Selassie was crowned emperor of Ethiopia in 1930, and took the title 'Lion of Judah' (Ras Tafari), this was seen as a fulfilment of prophecy and followers claimed him as the Messiah, the incarnation of God. Rastafarians see themselves as the ancient lost tribe of Israel, enslaved and transported from Africa by Whites. They will remain forever oppressed and suffering, even in Jamaica, until they return to Africa. In Jamaica, its appeal has been greatest among the most disadvantaged sections of the Jamaican populace – the urban underclass. Some key beliefs are included in the 'Charter of the Rastafarians' below.

Rastafarian priests, Kingston, Jamaica

From the Rastafarian Charter

3 The Rastafarian Movement consists of the most advanced, determined and uncompromising fighters against discrimination, ostracism and oppression of the Black people of Jamaica.

4 The Rastafarian Movement stands for freedom in its fullest sense and for the recovery, dignity, self-respect and sovereignty of the Black people of Jamaica.

11 The Rastafarian Movement has as its chief aim the complete destruction of all vestiges of White supremacy in Jamaica, thereby putting an end to economic exploitation and the social degradation of the Black people.

Adapted from 'Charter of the Rastafarians' quoted in Williams, 1981

question

Give a sociological explanation for a) the Ghost Dance and b) Rastafarianism.

attaining goals such as making money and producing goods and services.

As a result of this process of rationalisation, mystery and magic, prophecy and the sacred have been pushed into the background. This has led, in Weber's words, to the 'disenchantment of the world', to *desacralisation* – the removal of the sacred, of religious meanings, guidelines and explanations. According to Wallis, many NRMs developed in response to this loss of the sacred.

Wallis is primarily concerned with explaining world-rejecting NRMs (many of which are similar to sects) and world-affirming NRMs (many of which are similar to cults).

World-rejecting NRMs

Wallis argues that the loss of the sacred was most acutely felt by young people in America and Europe during the 1960s and early 1970s. These were the years of political protest, counter-cultures and alternative lifestyles, when many young people sought to transform society. Their efforts largely failed. As a result, some young people believed that their lives and the wider society could not be transformed by human effort alone. They were therefore open to movements which claimed they could change the world by supernatural means, which claimed that a divine power would intervene to transform society.

Some disillusioned and disenchanted young people joined world-rejecting NRMs – sect-like organisations, often founded by a charismatic leader. Such movements were critical or even hostile to the outside world, seeing it as corrupt and lacking in spirituality. Examples of these movements are Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and the Children of God. Their members were usually middle-class young adults. For example, one survey found that 85% of Krishna Consciousness members in the USA were under 26 (Judah, 1974). And a number of studies found that many members of world-rejecting NRMs had previously been involved in hippie counter-cultural movements (Downton, 1979).

World-affirming NRMs

Many world-affirming NRMs can be classified as cults. They are concerned with self-realisation, self-improvement and the development of the inner self. As their name suggests, world-affirming NRMs generally accept the wider society.

According to Wallis, world-affirming NRMs have their origins in the values and concerns of advanced capitalist societies. These societies place a high value on status,

achievement, self-confidence, personal attractiveness, happiness and self-fulfilment. For many people, these values are difficult to translate into reality. Some find an answer in world-affirming NRMs which offer them recipes, techniques and knowledge to find what they're looking for.

Movements such as Transcendental Meditation and Scientology promise success in personal relationships and in employment, a higher IQ and a route to personal fulfilment. The Human Potential Movement and Est offer personal and spiritual growth, self-realisation and happiness.

Members of world-affirming NRMs are usually older, more affluent and even more middle class than members of world-rejecting NRMs. One study found that the average age of participants in Human Potential groups was 35 (Stone, 1976). According to Wallis, they have paid a high price for their successful careers and lifestyles – a single-minded focus on work, a high level of self-control, and a repression of their inner selves. In Wallis's words, world-affirming NRMs can provide 'a context and method of liberating spontaneity, of contacting the "real" self behind the masks and performances, of feeling and sharing intimacy and love (if only for a weekend before a return to the harsh reality of urban industrial life)' (Wallis, 1985).

Evaluation

Much of the research on NRMs has focused on movements in the West from the 1960s onwards. It has looked at NRMs which were formed or developed during these years and tended to explain them in terms of the context of Western society at the time. There is a major problem with this approach.

NRMs are not just recent developments confined to the West. Both sects and cults are examples of NRMs and both have a long history and a global spread. It is therefore inappropriate to simply explain them as a response to specific developments in Western society during the second half of the 20th century (Hunt, 2002).

key term

Desacralisation The removal of the sacred – of religious meanings, explanations and guides to action.

6.3 The New Age movement

A number of sociologists have looked for an explanation of the New Age movement in the social context of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Some have seen it as a reflection of *late modernity.* This is defined as a phase rather than a new era, the development of an existing type of society – modernity – rather than a new type of society. Others have seen it as an expression of *postmodernity*, a new era which is distinct from and follows modernity.

Who participates?

Survey data indicates that New Agers are mainly female, predominantly middle class and well-educated. There is a fairly even spread across the age groups with the highest percentage – 42% according to one survey – in the 35-49 age group (York, 1995).

According to Steve Bruce (2001), the New Age movement appeals to those who work in 'expressive professions' – teachers, social workers, nurses, counsellors, artists, writers and actors. People in these professions tend to be individualistic, and concerned with 'personal development' and 'human potential'. These concerns are reflected in many aspects of the New Age movement.

Late modernity and postmodernity

Individualism and the self *Individualism* and *social reflexity* have been identified as characteristics of late modernity. Increasingly, the individual selects their own identity and designs their own lifestyle. They are more likely to be reflexive – to reflect on the self and what they are doing (Giddens, 1991, 2001).

Similarly, a concern with self has been identified as a feature of postmodernity. In the postmodern age, the individual has greater freedom to construct their own identity.

The New Age movement reflects these concerns. According to Paul Heelas (1996), it is a 'self-religion'. According to Steve Bruce (2002), it is concerned with self-discovery, personal choice, and the development of individual potential, freedom and autonomy.

Relativism Late modernity has been described as a time of uncertainty when traditional norms and values are breaking down at an increasingly rapid rate.

Postmodernity has been characterised as an era of *relativism* – as an era in which there are no absolute truths, in which no one belief system has a monopoly of the truth. *Metanarratives* – grand explanations – such as those of science and established religions have been undermined (Lyotard, 1984).

New Age spirituality is seen to thrive in this social context. Paul Heelas (1998) argues that the disintegration of the certainties of modernity has left a vacuum of meaning within which 'self-religions' emerge as individuals struggle to make sense of the situation.

Postmodernists argue that an age of relativism means that there is no longer a single truth – instead, there are many truths. This allows people to combine ideas, symbols and beliefs from the past and present, from a variety of cultures and from many parts of the world. This is exactly what New Age spirituality does. The relativism of postmodern society opens the door for the New Age movement and the individual construction of religion.

According to Bauman (1992), postmodernity has produced a 'crisis of meaning'. For some, the New Age movement provides answers.

Choice and consumption Both late modernity and postmodernity have been seen as times which emphasise individual choice and consumption. In particular, postmodernity has been characterised as an era in which people are preoccupied with choosing and consuming symbols, images, brands and goods in order to construct their own identities and lifestyles.

The New Age movement has been seen as a reflection of this concern. New Agers pick-and-mix from a vast range of ideas and beliefs – they select, match and construct to fit their image of self and their chosen lifestyle. According to Steve Bruce (2002), the individual consumer 'will decide what to believe' and 'the crucial test is personal experience'. If it works, if it provides meaning, satisfaction and fulfilment, the individual will 'buy into' New Age spirituality. If it doesn't work, they won't.

Life-as to subjective-life

According to Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2004), there has been a 'massive turn' in Western culture from *life-as* to *subjective-life*. Life-as is life lived in terms of external roles, duties and obligations – for example, roles such as employer and employee, husband and wife, which are accompanied by a range of duties and obligations. These external roles, duties and obligations are 'higher authorities' which direct people's lives and give meaning to their existence. They are often supported by religion, by tradition and by the law.

Increasingly, people are moving from a focus on life-as to subjective-life which sees the inner feelings of each unique individual as primary. In Heelas and Woodhead's (2004) words, 'The goal is not to defer to higher authority, but to have the courage to become one's own authority. Not to follow established paths, but to forge one's own inner-directed … life'.

Assuming that Heelas and Woodhead are correct in their identification and description of recent changes in Western culture, then this 'cultural turn' helps to explain the growing attraction of New Age spirituality. With its focus on the inner-self, on subjective-life, on the unique individual, New Age spirituality can be seen as a reflection of broader cultural changes.

Evaluation

Relativism For Steve Bruce (2001), postmodernists take the argument too far. While he agrees that traditional authorities and established religions have been undermined, Bruce rejects the claim that the scientific 'metanarrative' has been abandoned. Scientific knowledge is still valued, and the idea that most people in Western societies now regard science as on a par with, for instance, the findings of palmistry or the reading of tea leaves, is nonsense.

Romanticism How new is the New Age movement? For Bruce (2001), New Age seekers' preferences for the more culturally alien and exotic religions and therapies is part of a romantic Western tradition 'as old as industrialisation itself'. There is a long tradition of 'romanticising the underdeveloped and finding true humanity and spirituality in the rural peripheries of the urbanising world'.

Tautology Explanations which see the New Age movement as shaped by late modernity and postmodernity are somewhat tautological. A tautology is a circular argument. For example, postmodern society is characterised by a concern with individualism and the self, choice and consumption and the relativity of beliefs and ideas. To argue that postmodern society shapes the New Age movement is a tautology because the New Age movement is part of postmodern society. What we need to know is what caused postmodernity *and* the New Age movement.

A similar criticism can be made of Heelas and Woodhead's explanation of New Age spirituality as a reflection of a more general cultural change. Again, what we need to know is what caused these more general changes *and* New Age spirituality.

key terms

Individualism An emphasis on the individual rather than the social group.
Reflexivity Reflecting and looking back on the self.
Life-as Life lived in terms of external roles, duties and obligations.
Subjective-life An approach to life which sees the inner feelings of each unique individual as primary.

6.4 The development of religious movements

So far, this unit has focused on the origins of religious movements. This section looks at their development.

Sects and denominations

From sect to denomination H. Richard Niebuhr (1929) argued that sects are shortlived – they must either evolve into a denomination or die. He gave the following reasons for this claim.

Members of sects tend to come from the margins of society. On joining the sect, they usually lead frugal and ascetic (strict, self-denying) lives. As a result, their social status is likely to rise and their wealth increase. Their new situation no longer fits with their rejection of the wider society – and it brings greater public acceptance. As their contact with mainstream society grows, they modify their more unconventional beliefs.

This process is accelerated by the next generation. They were not converted into the sect, they were merely born into it. As a result, they are unlikely to show the same enthusiasm and commitment as their parents. They are more likely to make compromises with, and be less critical of, the wider society.

The very success of a sect can lead to its downfall. The

more its membership grows, the greater the need for full-time officials to manage the organisation. This, coupled with the toning down of its more 'extreme' views and the rise in its members' status, leads the sect down the road to a denomination. The once radical sect now becomes a respectable denomination, sitting comfortably within mainstream society.

There is evidence that some sects follow the route outlined by Niebuhr. For example, the Quakers began as a sect in the 17th century. Within a few generations they had moderated their beliefs and entered mainstream society. So much so that several Quaker families played a major part in the development of the British banking system – Barclays Bank still bears the name of one of these families. Similarly, the Methodists began as a sect, moderated their strict beliefs and their criticisms of the wider society, and developed into a denomination.

Evaluation Death or denomination are not the only alternatives open to sects. Some survive as sects – they become *established sects* (Yinger, 1970). They often do so by isolating themselves from the outside world – for example, the Amish in Pennsylvania, isolate themselves from the rest of American society. And the Exclusive Brethren keep outside influences at bay by banning their members from watching television and using computers (Hunt, 2002).

The path to salvation According to Bryan Wilson (1970), the crucial factor which determines whether a sect develops into a denomination or remains a sect is the way it answers the question, 'What shall we do to be saved?'

The answer from some sects is to convert as many people as possible. These *conversionist sects* are likely to develop into denominations. They are typically found in the USA where they use large-scale revivalist meetings to generate conversions. They can become a denomination without compromising their primary aim – they can still save souls.

Other types of sect cannot maintain their basic position in a denominational form. The primary aim of *adventist sects*, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists and Christadelphians is to prepare themselves for the Day of Judgement. To do this, they must separate themselves from today's sinful and corrupt society and await the second coming of Christ. Only membership of the sect will guarantee them a place in the new world order. Becoming a denomination would compromise their position which demands separation from, rather than integration with, the wider society.

Wilson concludes that whether or not a sect becomes a denomination is largely determined by its prescription for salvation.

Cults and New Religious Movements

World-rejecting NRMs As noted earlier, most world-rejecting NRMs are similar to sects. Researchers who don't use the term NRM would classify many of them as sects.

Wallis (1984, 1985) sees two main routes for world-rejecting NRMs. The first is similar to the route described by Niebuhr. This involves a relaxation of the strict demands on members, a less critical view of the wider society, and a more conventional organisational structure. They move from world-rejecting to world-accommodating or world-affirming NRMs (see Activity 24, Item B).

Some world-rejecting NRMs take the opposite route, moving further inwards rather than outwards. According to Wallis, this is due to the intensity of their rejection of the wider society and the hostile reaction of the wider society to this rejection. In rare cases, this can lead to self-destruction where members of the movement commit suicide – the ultimate act of world-rejection (see Activity 24, Item A). In other cases, the movement goes underground – as in the case of the Children of God (Wallis, 1985).

World-affirming NRMs As noted earlier, world-affirming NRMs are similar to cults. Many support the norms and values of the mainstream culture and offer recipes for self-fulfilment and success in the wider society. They can be seen as serving clients or customers in a religious marketplace. From this point of view, their survival and development depend on the demand for the services they offer. To flourish, they must be sufficiently flexible to adapt their services to new demands and to compete with new brand names entering the market (Wallis, 1985).

Some do well when the economy is buoyant, but go to the wall during a recession – as did the Human Potential Movement. Others, such as Scientology and Est, vary their product to meet changing demands and attract a new clientele (Wallis, 1985).

key terms

Established sects Sects which survive over a relatively long period of time.
Conversionist sects Sects whose primary aim is to convert people.
Adventist sects Sects whose primary aim is to prepare themselves for the Day of Judgement, for the transformation of the world.

summary

1. The following explanations have been put forward for the origin of sects.
   - Social marginality – Sects tend to recruit those on the margins of society. Their new status as the 'chosen few' provided by a theodicy of disprivilege can bring self-respect and hope for the future.
   - Relative deprivation – Sects can provide a sense of community, mutual support and self-respect. The self-discipline and self-denial demanded by many sects can improve people's material situation.
   - Social dislocation – This can result in anomie (a sense of normlessness). Sects, with their clearly defined belief systems and strict moral codes, can provide certainty and direction.
2. Circumstances which can lead to anomie include:
   - Natural or man-made disasters
   - Contact with, or colonisation by, a powerful alien culture
   - The process of industrialisation and modernisation.
3. Wallis sees NRMs resulting from the processes of rationalisation and desacrilisation. He sees world-rejecting NRMs during the 1960 and 70s as a response to the failure of young people to change society by protest and alternative lifestyles. He sees world-affirming NRMs as a response to the values of capitalist society – as a means of realising them or as compensation for the price paid for living up to them.
4. Some sociologists have seen the New Age movement with its emphasis on individualism, relativism, choice and consumption as a reflection of late modernity, while others have seen it as a reflection of postmodernity.
5. According to Heelas and Woodhead, the increasing emphasis on subjective-life, as opposed to life-as, accounts for the growth of New Age spirituality.
6. Niebuhr argued that sects are short-lived – they must develop into denominations or die.
7. But some sects survive – as established sects. They often do so by isolating themselves from the outside world.
8. According to Bryan Wilson, conversionist sects are likely to develop into denominations because they can still save souls in this form. Adventist sects cannot become denominations, because only membership of the sect will guarantee them a place in the new world order.
9. Wallis sees two main routes for world-rejecting NRMs. First, they can develop into either world-accommodating or world-affirming NRMs. Or second, they can turn further inwards and increase their isolation from the wider society.
10. Wallis argues that the survival and development of world-affirming NRMs depends on the demand for the services they offer. To flourish, they must respond to new demands.

activity24 the development of NRMs

Item A The People's Temple

The People's Temple was founded in the USA by the Reverend Jim Jones. He promised to create a utopia – a perfect society in which everybody worked for the common good. Most members were recruited from the poor.

As his following grew, Jones demanded more and more discipline and dedication, along with absolute loyalty to himself. He became a messiah-like figure, claiming at various times to be God, Buddha and Lenin. He forecast the destruction of the world and claimed that only members of the Temple would survive.

Jonestown after the mass suicide

Jones and his followers grew increasingly hostile to the outside world. He vehemently criticised the 'enemies' of the People's Temple. Rumours of human rights abuses led to an investigation of the movement. Jones responded by leading around 1000 of his followers to Guyana in South America, where they hacked a settlement, known as Jonestown, out of the jungle.

Concerned relatives of the movement's members demanded an investigation which was led by Congressman Leo J. Ryan. Jones sent gunmen to ambush Ryan as he returned to his plane. The Congressman and several of his party were killed.

Next day, November 18, 1978, Jones announced that the community would soon be attacked. He ordered his followers to commit suicide as a sign of their dedication. They had rehearsed this many times. They drank a mixture of Kool-Aid (a soft drink) and cyanide. According to the few survivors, most people took their lives willingly, with mothers giving the cyanide to their children, then drinking it themselves. Over 900 people died.

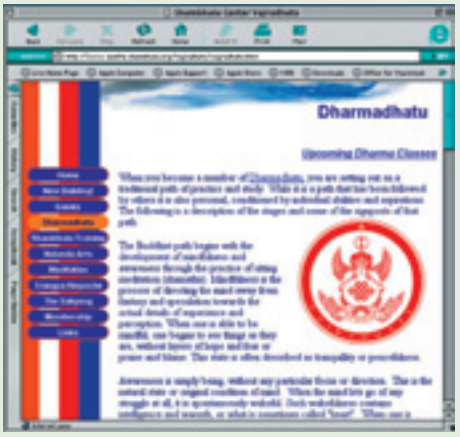
Adapted from *Chronicle of America*, 1989 and www.apologeticsindex.org

Item B 3HO and Vajradhatu

3HO

According to their website, the 'Healthy, Happy, Holy Organisation (3HO) is a worldwide association of people dedicated to the excellence of the individual. The basic philosophy of 3HO affirms that you, as a human being, are so perfectly created that by using exercise, breathing and meditation, you can balance and revitalise the physical body, nervous and glandular systems and bring balance and peace to your life.

3HO brings to the public the ancient science of Kundalini Yoga. It offers complete lifestyle guidelines on nutrition and health, interpersonal relations, child rearing and human behaviour. You may choose from a wealth of knowledge to find the exact techniques you are looking for to become healthy, happy and holy.'



Vajradhatu

Vajradhatu is based on the teachings of Buddha. According to their website, 'Buddhism is taking an increasingly prominent role in contemporary Western society as interest increases in this approach to life. A unique quality of the Buddhist teachings is that they can be expressed through existing cultural norms, making use of them rather than destroying or replacing them. This allows many Westerners to practice Buddhism today without renouncing their cultural heritage or radically changing their lifestyles. A careful sequence of group practice programmes ensures that students can develop according to their own interests and commitments.'

Sociological comment

New Religious Movements such as 3HO and Vajradhatu – whose members are mainly well-educated, middle-class, White Americans – have become increasingly world-affirming. This was a response to changing social and economic conditions. It provided a strong foundation on which the movements can grow. As Khasala (1986) states, 'What better way to become an accepted part of American society than by embracing some of the values that this country holds most dear: utilitarian individualism, capitalistic enterprise, and most definitely, financial success.'

Adapted from Hunt, 2002; Khasala, 1986; www.3HO.org; www.shambhala.org

questions

1 Discuss Item A in terms of Wallis's view of the development of world-rejecting NRMs.

2 Discuss Item B in terms of Wallis's view of the development of world-affirming NRMs.

3 The movements in Item B appear to be taking the route to denominationalism. What evidence is there for this statement?

Unit 7 Secularisation

key issues

1 What is secularisation?

2 What is the secularisation thesis?

3 What are the arguments for and against secularisation?

Has the importance of religion changed over time? In some countries, such as Britain, religion is often seen as less important than in the past. The question of the changing significance of religion in modern societies has been central to sociology. Marx, Durkheim, Weber and many other sociologists have regarded it as an issue of major importance.

This unit looks at the argument that religion is declining in modern society – a process known as *secularistion*.

7.1 Defining secularisation

The word secular means not sacred, not spiritual, not religious. So, secularisation refers to the process of becoming less religious. And the claim that religion is declining in importance is known as the *secularisation thesis.*

However, defining secularisation is not as simple as this. Sociologists cannot agree on a definition of religion. As a result, they cannot agree on how to define – and measure – secularisation.

Two views of secularisation

Woodhead and Heelas (2000) identify two versions of the secularisation thesis – the *disappearance thesis* and the *differentiation thesis*.

The disappearance thesis This thesis states that modernity is bringing about the death of religion. The significance of religion both for society *and* for individuals is steadily declining. This process will continue until religion disappears.

The differentiation thesis This thesis states that religion is declining in *social* significance. It no longer plays an important part in society – for example, it no longer influences major social institutions such as the family and the educational, legal and political systems. It has become separated or differentiated from the wider social structure. However, it is likely to retain some significance in people's private lives.

Evaluation The distinction between the disappearance thesis and the differentiation thesis is important. Early sociological theorists such as Marx and Weber believed that religion would disappear. However, more recent British sociologists, such as Bryan Wilson, Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce state that their version of the secularisation thesis does *not* suggest that religion will disappear and everyone will eventually become an atheist. Instead, it means that the social significance of religion is declining (Bruce, 2002). In Bryan Wilson's (1982) words, 'It does not even require that most individuals have relinquished all their interest in religion. It maintains no more than that religion ceases to be significant in the working of the social system.'

The Broad and Narrow Approach

Sharon Hanson (1997) makes a distinction between religion on a social and individual level. She states there are two levels to the secularisation debate, and that these levels are often confused.

- The Broad Approach asks whether religion has lost significance on the level of the social system.
- The Narrow Approach focuses on religion at the level of individual consciousness.

Making this distinction is important. As noted earlier, secularisation may be occurring on the societal level, but not on the individual level.

Secularisation and the West

Most supporters of the secularisation thesis focus on the West – they do not see it as a global process. One of its main supporters, Steve Bruce (2002), limits the secularisation thesis to Europe, North America and Australasia. He sees the secular West as an exception in the sweep of human history.

key terms

Secular Not sacred, not spiritual, not religious.
Secularisation The process of becoming less religious.
Secularisation thesis The claim that religion is declining in importance.
Disappearance thesis The claim that religion both on a societal and an individual level will eventually disappear.
Differentiation thesis The claim that religion is declining in social significance, that it no longer plays an important part in society.
The Broad Approach Focuses on the significance of religion on a societal level.
The Narrow Approach Focuses on the significance of religion on an individual level.

7.2 Evidence for secularisation

The evidence in support of the secularisation thesis can be organised in terms of Bryan Wilson's (1966) definition of secularisation as 'the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance'. So, compared to past ages:

1 What power, prestige and influence do religious institutions have?
2 What influence does religion have on people's beliefs, thinking, attitudes and consciousness?
3 How widespread are religious practices?

The power and influence of the church There can be little doubt that the power and influence of the church in Western Europe has declined over the last 1000 years. As a social institution, the Roman Catholic Church in medieval Christendom had power to rival that of kings. At its peak in the 12th and 13th centuries, the Roman Catholic Church was central to the political life of Western societies. It was the major employer, with its own courts and its own judges and lawyers, and its own physicians. In its heyday, it has been estimated that throughout Western Europe one out of every thirty adult males was in the service of the Church.

And it could shape and dominate the imagination. It provided one of the very few opportunities for literacy. And 'at a time when not one man in a thousand could read, the Church taught its story in stone, painting, glass and embroidery, in buildings which – in an age when most people lived in huts little bigger or cleaner than pigsties – towered above the landscape and blazed within with colour and wealth' (Bryant, 1953).

Today, in Western Europe, the power and prestige of religious institutions have long since shrunk. Church buildings can be seen in ruins or put to secular use. During the 20th century when the country's population almost doubled, the number of full-time clergy halved (Bruce, 2002). And, where once the churches played a major role as providers of information and guidance, this function has largely passed on to the media and to the medical profession.

Religious beliefs Supporters of the secularisation thesis claim that people's thinking and attitudes are no longer based on religious beliefs. To accept that secularisation has occurred, Wilson argues, 'All that needs to be assumed is that society was much more preoccupied with supernatural beliefs and practices, and accorded them more significance, than it does now' (quoted in Wallis & Bruce, 1989). Wilson accepts that superstitious and magical beliefs, indifference and unbelief were common in the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, he argues that those concerned were 'believers'. All shared a belief in the reality of the supernatural, even if they did draw on beliefs defined as deviant by the established church. Their beliefs were not secular in any modern sense.

The historian Peter Laslett came to similar conclusions. He studied evidence of the villagers living in Clayworth, Nottinghamshire in 1676 and concluded that they were 'literal believers, all of the time', though they might combine their Christian beliefs with others such as witchcraft (Hanson, 1997).

Surveys from the second half of the 20th century suggest a decline in religious belief. In 1947, 45% of British respondents said they believed in a 'personal God'. By 1981 this figure had dropped to 41%, by 1990 to 32% and by 2000 to 26% (Bruce, 2002).

Religious practices With regard to the mainstream churches and denominations in Western Europe, there is general agreement that religious practices have declined. The evangelical revivals of 18th and 19th century Britain (Methodism, Salvation Army, and others), led to gains in membership until perhaps the 1930s. Thereafter, most Protestant organisations declined. Church membership, church attendance, church marriage, church funerals, christenings, Sunday School and Bible reading are all down. According to Steve Bruce (1992), 'The high point for the British churches was between 1860 and 1910 when around 28% of the adult population were active members'. By 2002, only 17% claimed to be members and only about 8% attended church (Bruce, 2002). Even Roman Catholics – whose numbers grew until the early 1960s through immigration from Ireland and a high birth rate – appear to be part of this general decline in religious practice.

The decline might be greater than the figures suggest. A survey by Leslie Francis indicated that clergy in rural areas were overestimating Sunday attendances by an average of 40% (Morgan, 1997).

For most people, it appears that churches and denominations offer little more than ceremonial for the rites of passage of birth, marriage and death.

Privatised religion There is evidence of a decline in religious beliefs, particularly traditional Christian beliefs – for example, the belief in a personal God. And there is evidence of a decline in collective religious practices.

Some researchers argue that religion is becoming a 'private affair'. And this means a range of different beliefs rather than overarching, society-wide beliefs. Thomas Luckmann (1970) states, 'Once religion is defined as a "private affair", the individual may choose from the assortment of "ultimate" meanings as he sees fit'. And privatised religion does not encourage public, collective religious practice.

Grace Davie (1994) argues that there has been a separation of 'belief and belonging'. She claims that religious belief remains widespread but is less likely to be expressed in an institutional setting. People no longer feel they belong to a religious organisation.

If privatised religion is widespread, then, in terms of Hanson's Narrow Approach – religion at the level of individual consciousness – secularisation may not be occurring. However, in terms of the Broad Approach, secularisation may well be occurring. Religion appears to be losing its significance on the level of the social system. It no longer forms part of the mainstream culture. The major institutions of religion – churches and denominations – are declining in importance as their membership dwindles. This also provides support for the differentiation thesis which is an example of the Broad Approach. It states that secularisation is occurring if the *social* significance of religion is declining.

Beyond church and denomination Some religious groups outside the Christian mainstream have grown in Britain. Non-Trinitarian groups, such as the Christadelphians, Christian Scientists, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses have grown from 71,000 in 1900 to 533,000 in 2000. However, the 2000 figure is just one-sixth of the numbers lost to the main Christian Trinitarian churches over the same period (Brierley, 2000). (Trinitarian refers to a belief in the Trinity – God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Non-Trinitarian refers to a number of alternative views of God.)

As discussed in Unit 3, the last 40 years of the 20th century saw the emergence of a large number of New Religious Movements (NRMs) and the New Age movement. Eileen Barker (1983) estimated that the numbers involved in many of these NRMs in Britain were only in the hundreds. And, at any point in time during a 25 year period, the total involved in all NRMs was no more than 100,000. Socially as well as numerically, Steve Bruce (2002) regards NRMs as insignificant. Unlike earlier NRMs such as Methodism, they only affect the lives of their followers and make little or no difference to the wider society.

Bruce is equally dismissive about the New Age movement. He sees it as having minimal effect on society as a whole. And the commitment of New Age 'seekers' is slight as they flit from one spiritual novelty to the next. With the most popular aspects of New Age being relaxation techniques, meditation, yoga and massage, Bruce (2002) regards it not so much as an alternative to traditional religion as 'an extension of the doctor's surgery, the beauty parlour and the gym'.

Ethnic religions and secularisation In the UK, there has been a steady growth in the membership of ethnic minority group religions – for example, membership of the Muslim faith rose from 130,000 in 1970 to 675,000 in 2000 (Brierley, 2000). This reverses the trend shown by the

majority population. Does this indicate a resurgence of religion amongst ethnic minorities – an opposite trend to secularisation?

At least part of this increase is due to continued immigration – for example, there are growing numbers of migrants from a Muslim background. Even this, however, does not fully account for the higher levels of religious participation amongst ethnic minorities. Steve Bruce (2002) suggests the following explanations.

Religion can remain a powerful social force when it provides resources for *cultural defence*. For example, in cases of ethnic conflict, it can be a positive source of ethnic identity and solidarity. Similarly, religion can provide a vehicle for *cultural transition* when an immigrant population settles in a new, and often unwelcoming, world. Religion can offer a sense of community and a sense of self-worth and support.

In the case of ethnic minority groups, religion may provide resources for cultural defence and cultural transition. However, it appears that this is only a short-lived adaptation. As Bruce (2002) notes, the third generation of Muslims is approaching 'the English level of religious indifference'. If this is so, ethnic religious enthusiasm is simply a blip in the overall trend to secularisation.

key terms

Cultural defence The strategies used by a group to defend its culture and group identity.
Cultural transition The change in culture when people – for example, immigrants – move from one social setting to another.

Evidence for secularisation – evaluation

Problems of measurement Does the data used to support secularisation provide a valid – a true and accurate – measure of the process? Different religious organisations measure membership in different ways. Many don't record attendance figures and those that do, don't always record them all year round and for all services. As noted earlier, some exaggerate attendance levels, as do many members of their congregations when asked how often they attend services.

Similarly, when people say they believe in God in response to a questionnaire-based survey, what does this mean? Is this belief of major significance to their lives? Or, is it something they rarely think about, something they regard as unimportant?

Religious beliefs are extremely difficult to measure. For example, over 37 million people in England and Wales described themselves as Christian in the 2001 census. They were asked to respond to the question 'What is your religion?' by ticking one of a number of options (*Social Trends,* 2004). For many, this statement of religion may mean little or nothing. It may simply be seen as a follow-on from being English.

David Martin (1969) argues that church attendance in Victorian Britain, particularly for the middle classes, was as much a sign of respectability as of religious conviction.

Belief and belonging As noted earlier, Grace Davie (1994) makes the distinction between belief and belonging. Some forms of religious belief still appear widespread. For example, European Values surveys from the 1980s to 2000 show that nearly 60% of Europeans describe themselves as 'a religious person' and around 50% claim that God plays a significant part in their life (Cook, 2000).

While belief may be fairly high, belonging – membership of and attendance at religious institutions – is low and getting lower. As discussed earlier, a decline in institutional religion does not necessarily indicate secularisation. Private or personal religion may remain relatively strong. Whether secularisation is occurring depends, in part, on how the process is defined – in terms of the Broad Approach or the Narrow Approach.

Historical comparisons Going to church is often assumed to be a valid indicator of religiosity. However, it may have different meanings at different times. For example, in the past it may have been an expression of community – a normal part of community life which had little to do with religion as such. Today, with the breakup of close-knit communities, collective worship may well be an expression of religious faith rather than a normal part of social life.

A 'golden age' of religion There is a tendency for some researchers to look back to a supposedly 'golden age' of religion in the Middle Ages as a point of comparison for today. There are a number of problems with this view.

- First, the religious practices of the land-owning nobility are much better documented than those of the peasantry.
- Second, there is some evidence that the peasantry were largely indifferent or even hostile to the Catholic Church.
- Third, although some supporters of the secularisation thesis accept that there was some apathy or indifference to religion in the Middle Ages, their critics argue that they have underestimated the extent of these views (Hamilton, 2001; Hunt, 2002).

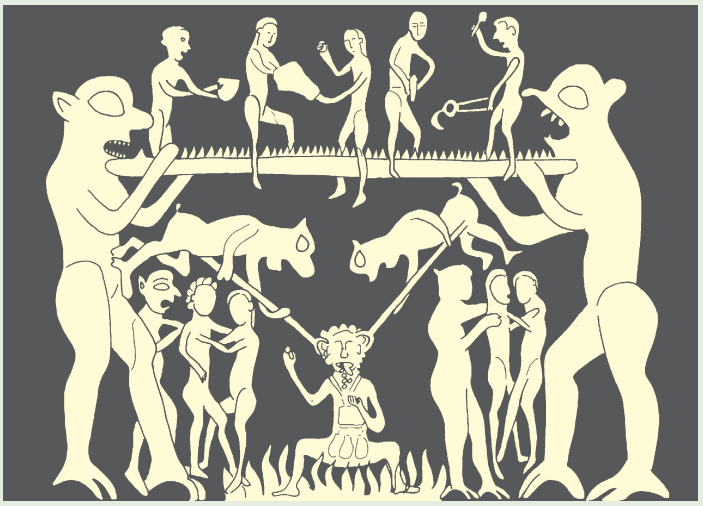
Beyond major religious institutions Secularisation theorists have tended to focus on mainstream, institutional religion – on churches and denominations. They have dismissed NRMs as numerically and socially insignificant. And their tone is often scornful when it comes to the New Age movement. Yet the significance and potential of such movements may be much greater than they suggest (Heelas & Woodhead, 2003; 2004 – see pages XX-XX).

The USA Compared to Europe, both belief and belonging in the USA are high. For example, surveys indicate that 90% of people believe in God and over 40% regularly attend a religious institution (Hunt, 2002). Does this evidence go against the secularisation thesis? This question will be discussed in Section 7.5, pages XX-XX.

Further evaluation of the evidence used by secularisation theorists is contained in later sections.

activity25 evidence for secularisation

Item A Medieval religion



Part of a medieval painting called the Great Doom. It shows some of the horrors of hell – a miser is being roasted and cheating traders are suspended over the fire on a bridge of spikes.

The God in whom medieval people believed was an intensely personal God, forever appearing in acts of nature, visions and apparitions, plagues and cures, storms, fires and miracles. And not only God, but the whole hierarchy of Heaven, angels and saints, apostles and martyrs, lay on the frontiers of the visible, tangible world, ready at any moment to reveal themselves.

So too did the Devil and the fiends, witches and ministers of evil. A flight of crows seemed a swarm of demons, the howling of the wind was the cry of some wicked lord, borne through the middle air to Hell. At a time when people knew little of the laws of nature or the world outside their village homes, they accepted such ideas with no more question than their twentieth century descendants did of the latest scientific marvels.

Beyond all this lay a conception shared by rich and poor alike, educated and ignorant. It was that divine law governed the universe, from its greatest to its minutest part. Everything that happened in the world – everything that had happened, was happening and was going to happen – was a part of God's plan, only partly intelligible to people's puny intellect. The Church existed to help explain the plan, to help people obey it and, through Christ's love and sacrifice, to obtain forgiveness for them when they broke God's law.

Adapted from Bryant, 1953

Item B From sacred to secular

Former churches in Preston, Lancashire, converted into a radio station, an antique centre and a printers.

Item C Membership of religious groups (UK, thousands)

Group	1970	1980	1990	2000
Christian: Trinitarian of whom:	9,272	7,529	6,624	5,917
Anglican (C of E)	2,987	2,180	1,728	1,654
Catholic	2,746	2,455	2,198	1,768
Free Churches	1,629	1,285	1,299	1,278
Presbyterian	1,751	1,437	1,214	989
Orthodox	159	172	185	235
Christian: Non-Trinitarian	276	349	455	533
Buddhist	10	15	30	50
Hindu	80	120	140	165
Jewish	375	321	356	383
Muslim	130	305	495	675
Sikh	100	150	250	400
Others	20	40	55	85

Adapted from Brierley, 2000

Item D Religious beliefs

Beliefs	1947	1981	1990	2000
There is a personal God	45	41	32	26
There is some sort of higher power, spirit or life force	39	37	41	21
There is something there	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	23
I don't really know what to think	16	16	15	12
I don't really think there is any sort of God, spirit or life force	n.a.	6	10	15
None of these	n.a.	n.a.	1	3

Note: n.a. = not asked.

Adapted from Bruce, 2002

Item E The social significance of New Age spirituality

Although New Agers often use words like 'radical' and 'alternative', the effect is anything but. The anxious, repressed merchant banker who learns to meditate and gets his regular shiatsu massage, does not throw up banking and become a youth worker or an eco-warrior. He just becomes a happier and more relaxed merchant banker.

But even if the merchant banker does decide to throw it all in, buy a farmhouse in Wales and start a pottery with a side-line in horoscopes, the impact on the rest of the world is minimal. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Methodists were responsible for a vast amount of social reform. They put a stop to child labour in factories and mines. They stopped young boy sweeps being forced to climb up the chimneys of Georgian houses. They restricted the length of the working day. They put an end to a system by which men were paid their wages in pubs. They ended slavery. They also founded schools, penny savings banks and public libraries.

Adapted from Bruce, 2002

Shiatsu massage

questions

1 In what ways do Items A and B support the secularisation thesis?

2 a) Briefly describe the trends shown in Items C and D.

b) What support do they provide for the secularisation thesis?

3 Using Hanson's concepts of the Broad Approach and the Narrow Approach, explain why Bruce (Item E) argues that the rise of New Age spirituality does not contradict the secularisation thesis.

5.7 Sociological theories and secularisation

This section looks at secularisation in terms of broader sociological theories of social change. Most of the sociologists examined here assume that secularisation is occurring in one form or another. Their aim is to explain the process. Others are less sure about the secularisation thesis. Some see a transformation of religious expression rather than a decline in religion as such.

Karl Marx

Marx believed that capitalism was the penultimate era of human society. The final era, communism, would follow the overthrow of capitalism.

As outlined earlier (see pages XX-XX), Marx saw religion as a reflection of class society – it justified the position of the ruling class and provided compensation for the oppression of the subject class. Social classes and oppression would disappear in communist society. Since these are the social forces which generate religion, religion too would disappear.

Marx believed that capitalism itself contained the seeds of secularisation. It presented a materialist view of the world – its aim was to produce goods and make profits. And the social order was seen to be based on contracts rather than being ordained by God – for example, the wage contract between employer and employee.

Marx saw the death of religion as inevitable. His theory is an example of the disappearance thesis of secularisation.

Max Weber

As outlined in Unit 1, Weber saw rationalisation as the key process in the development of modern society (see pages 19-20). Reason steadily replaces faith. The world becomes demystified – its magic and mystery are taken away. The meanings which direct action are increasingly rational rather than religious.

Ironically, it was religion, in Weber's view, which spearheaded this process of rationalisation. Weber claimed that the spirit of capitalism had its origins in early forms of Protestantism, particularly Calvinism. And the spirit of capitalism was one of the main factors in the development of rational capitalism. Once on its way, modern society no longer needed religion to guide action – reason was now a sufficient guide.

Malcolm Hamilton (2001) summarises Weber's views. 'Calvinistic Protestantism was its own gravedigger. In many ways, it could not help but sow the seeds of secularisation in modern society by its own promotion of worldly activity and consequent expansion of wealth and material well-being.'

Peter Berger

Like Weber, Peter Berger (1973) sees the origins of secularisation in religion itself. He notes that it is the Christian world, and particularly the Protestant world, which has experienced the greatest degree of secularisation. And it is Protestantism, more than any other branch of Christianity, which has cut out or cut down the sacramental, the sacred and the ritual elements of Catholicism, and the mystery, miracle and magic found in many other religions. In Berger's view, one of the main factors leading to secularisation is the rationality of Protestantism (see pages XX-XX).

Berger argues that the process of secularisation has been accelerated by more recent changes in modern society. The growth of the media and increasing social and geographical mobility have exposed people to a range of different religions. Faced with this market place of religions with their competing sets of beliefs and practices, it has become increasingly difficult to accept the teachings of any one as the truth. This weakens the authority of all religions. And this accelerates the process of secularisation (see pages XX-XX).

Bryan Wilson

The British sociologist Bryan Wilson (1966, 1976), argues for the differentiation thesis – that religion is declining in social significance. In Hanson's (1997) terminology, he takes the Broad Approach. Wilson gives the following explanations for secularisation.

Social differentiation As modern society developed, its various institutions became increasingly separate as they specialised in particular functions. This process is known as *social differentiation*. Religious institutions were once directly involved in politics, social control, social welfare, health and education. Now there are specialist institutions for each of these areas. As a result, religion is relegated to the margins of society where it 'ceases to be significant in the working of the social system' (Wilson, 1982).

Rational thinking and science Like Weber and Berger, Wilson argues that rational thinking has largely replaced religious views of the world. Like Weber, he sees early Protestantism contributing to rational thought. However, he places more emphasis on the development of science and the scientific method, which he sees as displacing religious explanations. In Wilson's (1966) words, 'Science not only explained many facets of life and the material environment in a way more satisfactory, but it also provided confirmation of its explanation in practical results'.

The decline of community Traditionally, religion has drawn its strength from close-knit communities. Communal values were expressed and reinforced in religious rituals. Events of significance to the community – from the harvest to births, marriages and deaths – were celebrated in the local church.

Industrialisation and urbanisation have led to the break-up of this type of community life. As a result, religion has lost much of its reason for being.

Emile Durkheim

The remaining views examined in this section are less sure about the secularisation thesis. Rather then seeing religion

declining or disappearing, they are more likely to see a transformation of traditional religion into a new form of religion.

Looking back over the 19th century and the early years of the 20th century, Durkheim saw the rapid social changes brought about by industrialisation and urbanisation as a threat to religion. These changes led to the break-up of community and to anomie – a disruption of the norms which govern behaviour. The result was a weakening of social solidarity and collective consciousness. Since the close-knit community with its shared norms and values was the lifeblood of religion, religion itself was threatened.

Durkheim feared that religion would be relegated to a corner of life – a private matter, no longer capable of overarching society and unifying its members. However, he did not see the decline of religion as an irreversible trend, believing that all societies must have sacred symbols and communal ritual if they are to survive. So, in Durkheim's view, religion will not die, though it is likely to change its form. A possible example of this transformation of religion is the civil religion identified by Robert Bellah in the USA (see pages XX-XX). If Bellah is correct, civil religion performs Durkheim's essential functions of religion – reinforcing collective consciousness and strengthening social solidarity.

Postmodernist views

According to Lyotard (1984), postmodern society is characterised by a loss of confidence in metanarratives – the big stories or grand explanations provided by science, religion and politics. Their authority and certainty have been undermined, their claim to the truth has been questioned. As a result, traditional institutional religion with its claim to universal truth has been undermined (see page XX).

According to Zygmunt Bauman (1992), this produces a 'crisis of meaning'. Traditional religious metanarratives, such as Christianity, cannot deal with this crisis, which explains their decline. However, new religions or new expressions of religiosity can restore meaning. But these new expressions are very different from the old religions. They are tailored by individuals to fit their particular identities, rather than being imposed by institutions which claim an exclusive truth which everybody should believe. This can be seen in the decline of religious monopolies, such as Christianity, and the rise of the New Age movement.

key term

Social differentiation The process by which social institutions become increasingly specialised and separate.

7.4 The spiritual revolution thesis

In an important study known as the Kendal Project, a team of researchers led by Paul Heelas set out to test the *spiritual revolution thesis*. This thesis states that a spiritual revolution is underway, or may have already taken place (Heelas & Woodhead, 2003; 2004).

The researchers identified two possible trends. First, a decline in traditional Christianity with its emphasis on a God-on-high, who tells people how to live their lives. This is the argument put forward by secularisation theorists. Alongside this decline in the sacred is an alternative growth in the sacred in the form of New Age spirituality. Here the emphasis is on the spirituality of the inner self rather than conforming to some externally imposed morality. This is the argument put forward by *sacralisation theorists.*

Methodology The researchers chose Kendal as the setting in which to test the spiritual revolution thesis. Kendal is a town of some 28,000 people in the Lake District in northwest England. It was small enough to investigate systematically, but large enough to have a range of traditional religious activity and New Age spiritualities.

The focus of the research was a comparison between the 'congregational domain' and the 'holistic milieu'. The congregational domain was represented by 25 Christian churches and chapels in Kendal. A head-count was taken of those who attended on Sunday, 26 November, 2000. This avoided the problem of self-reporting where people tend to exaggerate their attendance rate.

The holistic milieu refers to those who practise activities which they see as involving the whole person – as combining the mind, body and spirit. The inclusion of 'spirit' is critical. If an activity such as yoga or tai chi is not seen as spiritual, then that person is not included in the holistic milieu. A questionnaire was used to count those involved in New Age spiritualities and in-depth interviewing explored the attractions of New Age.

The findings The head-count for attendance at churches and chapels was 2207, 7.9% of the population of Kendal – exactly the same as the percentage for Britain as a whole. Attendance figures for Kendal from the 1950s onwards show a significant decline. By comparison, the holistic milieu shows strong growth. There were 95 practitioners (providers) of spiritual activities in 2000. In the 1970s, there were only three such practitioners in the *Yellow Pages*, by 1999 this had grown to almost 40. Those taking part in 2000 numbered 600, 1.6% of the population of Kendal. However, only 55% considered these activities to be of spiritual significance, 0.9% of the population of Kendal.

Conclusion In Heelas's (2004) words, 'the spiritual revolution clearly has not taken place in Kendal'. At first sight, the 0.9% involved in holistic spiritual practices seems a long way from the 7.9% involved in the congregational domain. However, the trends suggest a different picture. If present trends continue, then the

revolution will take place in twenty or thirty years, when numbers involved in the holistic milieu will overtake those in the congregational domain – see Activity 21, Item A.

Evaluation The Kendal Project is an important piece of research. First, it provides a measurement of New Age spirituality. Second, it looks at trends over time.

How do its findings fit into the secularisation debate? The trends identified in Kendal suggest that New Age spirituality cannot be dismissed as easily as some secularisation theorists argue. However, the numbers involved are still fairly small.

Can New Age spirituality be directly compared to religion? Although many people believe that holistic practices have a spiritual aspect, this is very different from believing in and praying to a supernatural being.

7.5 Religion in the USA

Is America an exception to secularisation in the West? This question has often been asked because of the apparently high levels of attendance at religious institutions in the USA and the high proportion of Americans who say they believe in God.

key terms

Spiritual revolution thesis States that a spiritual revolution is underway, or may already have taken place.
Sacralisation Becoming sacred. A term used by those who see a growth of spirituality or religion.

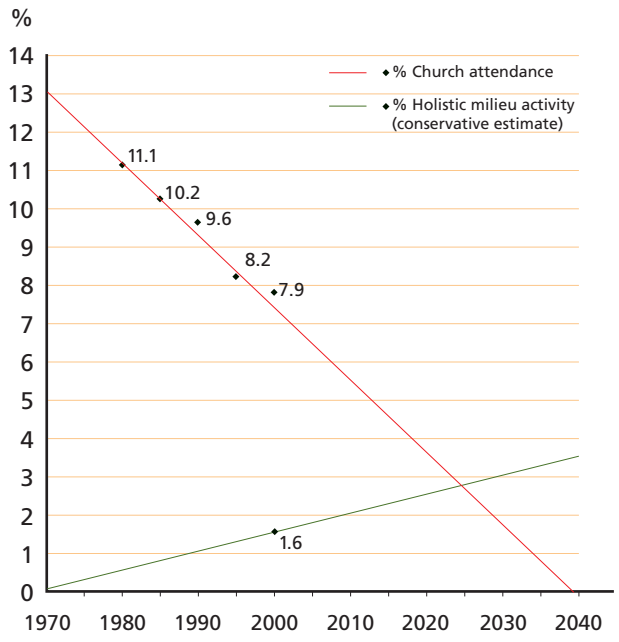
Statistical evidence

Various surveys over the past 50 years indicate that between 90 and 95% of Americans claim to believe in God. And, over the same period of time, around 40% of Protestants and 50% of Catholics say they attended church in the past week.

These figures are based on self-reports – that is, people reporting their religious beliefs and practices to interviewers or on self-completion questionnaires. There is evidence that they overstate their commitment to religion in order to present themselves in the best possible light. For

activity26 the spiritual revolution thesis

Item A The timing of the revolution



Adapted from Heelas & Woodhead, 2003; 2004

Item B The scale of the revolution

Findings from the Kendal Project show that 80% of those involved in holistic milieu activities are women, and 83% are over 40. Over half have attended university or college and many work in people-centred, caring jobs, such as nursing, where personal wellbeing is a major concern. Given the relatively small number of people with these characteristics, there is not much scope for expansion in the future. This means, of course, that the rate of growth of the holistic milieu is likely to slow down.

Adapted from Heelas & Woodhead, 2004

questions

1 Briefly summarise the trends shown in Item A.

2 New Age spirituality is very unlikely to become a majority concern. Discuss with reference to Items A and B.

example, Hadaway and Marler (1999) conducted a head-count of people who attended church. They found actual attendance was about half the level of self-reported attendance – 'Instead of 40% of Protestants attending church, we found 20%. Instead of 50% of Catholics attending church, we found 28%'. However, even these levels are considerably higher than those in Britain.

The secularisation of religious institutions

When it comes to secularisation, America should be in the lead. As Bryan Wilson (1966) observed, it is 'a country in which instrumental values, rational procedures and technical methods have gone furthest, and the country in which the sense of the sacred, the sense of the sanctity of life, and deep religiosity are most conspicuously absent' (Wilson, 1966). So how come there is high church attendance and widespread religious beliefs in a markedly secular society?

To Will Herberg (1960), the answer is simple. The religious content of churches, denominations and synagogues has been watered down. Religious institutions have compromised their beliefs and practices to fit in with the wider society. They have undergone a process of internal secularisation.

Herberg argues that the high level of attendance at religious institutions is directed by secular rather than religious concerns. He claims that to be an American – to demonstrate an American identity – requires a public commitment to religious beliefs within a religious organisation. Which religious organisation doesn't really matter. Either Protestant, Catholic or Jewish faiths are regarded as acceptable evidence of an American identity. Over time, these three religious traditions have become more and more alike in their teachings and in their function of supporting the nation. The central themes of American religion increasingly reflect the American Way of Life – the core values of American society such as freedom, democracy and achievement.

Herberg explains America's religious enthusiasm in terms of the unique experience of a nation which had to weld together a mix of people from across the world. In doing this, American religion has itself become secular. To a large

summary

1. There are two main versions of the secularisation thesis – the disappearance thesis and the differentiation thesis.
2. Sharon Hanson makes a distinction between secularisation on the level of the social system (the Broad Approach) and on the level of the individual (the Narrow Approach).
3. Secularisation theorists claim that the power and influence of religious institutions, religious beliefs and religious practices have all declined.
4. They accept that religion may continue on an individual level – as privatised religion. However, they take the Broad Approach, arguing that religion is losing its significance on the level of the social system.
5. The evidence for secularisation has been questioned in the following ways.
   - Are the measurements of religious beliefs and practices valid – true and accurate?
   - If privatised religion remains widespread, is it reasonable to claim that secularisation is occurring?
   - Is the comparison of a 'golden age' of religion in the past with a secular present justified?
   - Does the rise of the New Age movement and high levels of religious belief and church attendance in the USA provide evidence against the secularisation thesis?
6. Sociological theories offer the following views of secularisation.
   - Karl Marx believed that religion will disappear with the overthrow of the capitalist system.
   - Max Weber argued that rationalisation is steadily eroding religion on both an individual and societal level.
   - Peter Berger claimed that the authority of all religions is weakened as they compete for clients in the religious market place. How can their competing and contradictory beliefs all be seen as true?
   - Bryan Wilson gave the following reasons for the decline of religion on a societal level – social differentiation, rational thinking and science, and the decline of community.
   - Emile Durkheim argued that the rapid social changes brought about by industrialisation and urbanisation and the resulting anomie led to a decline in religion. He did not see this as an irreversible trend – societies must have sacred symbols and communal rituals if they are to survive.
   - Some postmodernists argue that the loss of confidence in metanarratives has led to a decline in traditional religion. This produces a 'crisis of meaning'. However, they see new types of religion offering to restore meaning.
7. The Kendal Project indicated that the New Age spiritual revolution had not taken place. However, it suggested that if present trends continue, then the revolution will take place in 20 to 30 years.
8. Evidence on religious belief and attendance at religious institutions in the USA has been used to question the secularisation thesis. Even allowing for problems of measurement, attendance levels are high compared to Europe.
9. Will Herberg argues that religious institutions in the USA have retained support by becoming more secular.
10. In view of the different definitions of religion and secularisation and the problems of measurement, it is difficult to reach firm conclusions about the secularisation thesis.

extent 'religion' has gone out of religion. Despite its apparent vigour, American religion has been secularised.

Evaluation Herberg's views have received some support. For example, Peter Berger (1970) argues that American religious institutions have maintained relatively high attendance levels by downplaying the supernatural and 'modifying their product in accordance with consumer demands' – that is, the demands of a secular society.

Whether American religion is becoming more secular depends on the researcher's view of religion. To Herberg, 'authentic religion' involves a strong belief in a supernatural power, a strong commitment to religious teachings and a refusal to compromise those teachings to fit in with the wider society. Other researchers might take a different view of religion and, as a result, reach different conclusions.

Herberg has been criticised for ignoring Christian fundamentalism in the USA. With their commitment to a literal interpretation of the Bible and to strict moral codes based on the 'word of God', the beliefs of Christian fundamentalists in many ways reflect Herberg's 'authentic religion'.

Conclusion

It is difficult to reach firm conclusions about the secularisation thesis. The term is used by different researchers in different ways. For some, it means the decline of religion on a societal level. For others, it means the decline of religion on an individual level.

Sociologists are unable to agree on a definition of religion. As a result, they will have different views of the secularisation process and how to measure it. In addition, they have their own views on 'authentic' religion. Is religion in the USA only a watered-down version of the real thing as Herberg and Berger claim? And what about New Age spirituality? Is it as real and significant as religious beliefs and practices? Or is it, as Steve Bruce (2002) claims, little more than 'an extension of the doctor's surgery, the beauty parlour and the gym'?

Even when sociologists agree on definitions of religion and secularisation, problems remain – in particular, the problem of measurement. How do you measure religious beliefs and practices? What do these measurements mean? Does a belief in God and regular church attendance reflect strong religious convictions? As this unit has indicated, we can't be sure.

In view of the different definitions of religion and secularisation and the problems of measurement, it is difficult to prove or disprove the secularisation thesis.

Unit 8 Secularisation

key issues

1. Is there a global resurgence of religion?
2. If so, what are the reasons for this?

This unit returns to some of the issues raised earlier in the chapter and looks at them in a global context. Is secularisation occurring worldwide? Or is it confined to Europe as the title of Grace Davie's (2002) book, *Europe: The Exceptional Case*, suggests?

There is evidence of a recent rise in religious behaviour in many parts of the world. Is this a defensive reaction to the rapid social change brought about by modernisation and globalisation? Or is it a proactive movement to deal with this situation?

8.1 The resurgence of religion

Some sociologists who saw secularisation occurring in Europe believed it was only a matter of time before the rest of the world followed suit. This has not happened, nor is there any evidence that it is likely to happen. In fact, available evidence suggests just the opposite - that over the past 30 or 40 years there has been a resurgence of religion in the world outside Europe.

Islam

A number of researchers claim that Islam is the fastest growing of the world's major religions (Sutton & Vertigans, 2005). Although it is difficult to measure, this view is supported by estimates from the United Nations and the Vatican. Islam is now the world's second largest religion after Christianity. If present trends continue, it will become the world's largest religion by mid-21st century (www.religioustolerance.org 2008).

There are other indicators of the rapid growth if Islam. According to the Saudi Arabian Press Agency, there has been a significant rise in the number of Muslims undertaking the hajj - the annual pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. The number in 1950 was less than 100,000, by 2008 it was over 2.5 million (www.about.com 2008).

Pentecostalism

In terms of numbers, Pentecostalism is a success story - it is the fastest growing Christian religion. In Asia, its followers accounted for 0.5% of the population in 1970 rising to 4.2% in 2005; in Africa, 4.8% of the population in 1970 rising to 16.6% in 2005; in Central and South America, 4.4% of the population in 1970 rising to 28.1% in 2005 (World Christian Database, 2006). Often this growth has been very rapid. For example, in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil

between 1990 and 1992 a new Pentecostal church was registered every weekday (Davie, 2007).

Religious conservatism

The main growth has been in the more conservative branches of religions. Phrases like Islamic fundamentalism and the Christian Right have been used to describe this development. The upsurge of conservatism can also be seen in the revival of the Russian Orthodox Church and in religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism.

Western researchers sometimes use the term fundamentalism to describe conservative religious groups. Such groups tend to look to the past, to traditional faiths and to 'essential truths'. Recently, there has been a reaction against the term. For example, Peter Berger (1999) argues that fundamentalism implies 'superstitious', 'over-emotional', 'reactionary' and 'backward'. However, as the next section argues, so-called conservative religious movements don't only look backwards.

8.2 Theories of religious resurgence

Modernisation and globalisation

Religious resurgence, particularly in the developing world, has been seen as a response to modernisation and globalisation. Explanations are fairly general because they attempt to cover different religious groups - for example, Islam and Pentecostalism. And also because they attempt to cover differences within religious groups - for example, Muslims are divided by different types of Islam (such as Shiite and Sunni), nationality (such as Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia), language and ethnicity.

Modernisation and globalisation have resulted in rapid social change. There has been large-scale migration within and between countries as 'economic migrants' seek to improve their living standards. This has resulted in social disruption, disorientation and threats to identity. Many migrants move from relatively stable, traditional rural communities to towns and cities. There they are often faced with high levels of unemployment and widespread poverty. The hope of a better life is sometimes dashed. The certainties of their old way of life are replaced by the uncertainties of their new environment. They are increasingly part of a global economy which shapes their lives, but over which they have little or no control (Davie, 2007; Furseth & Repsted, 2006; Sutton & Vertigans, 2005).

The resurgence of religion is seen as a response to the situation described above. It is seen primarily as a response of the poor. However, to some extent, members of the Western educated middle classes are becoming increasingly involved in the religious revival.

There are two main theories which attempt to explain religious resurgence. The first sees religion as a defensive reaction to modernisation and globalisation. The second sees religion as a proactive response, as a means of improving people's lives. Some researchers combine these theories.

Defensive reaction

A number of sociologists have seen the resurgence of conservative religious movements as a defensive reaction to modernisation and globalisation. Such movements provide a retreat into a religious haven. They provide certainty in an uncertain world by selectively retrieving traditional religious truths.

As globalisation undermines people's traditional sense of self, religion helps to build 'resistance identities', based in part on traditional doctrines (Castells, 1996). Globalisation often involves Westernisation - the spread of Western norms and values. Conservative religions can provide 'cultural defence' for local societies. This can be seen in Iran since the 1979 revolution when the religious leaders saw a return to traditional Islam as a cure for the 'disease' of 'westoxifaction' (Taheri, 1987). Activity 00 on page 00 provides evidence to support this view.

Proactive response

The resurgence of conservative religion has been seen as a practical response to the problems resulting from modernisation and globalisation. The rapid growth of Pentecostalism in Central and South America illustrates this view. Pentecostal churches impose a strict regime - services several times a week, Bible studies and committee meetings - plus a strict morality - no drinking, smoking or extramarital relations. There is an emphasis on self-improvement - a message sometime known as 'prosperity theology' and 'health and welfare gospel'. The churches offer business classes and teach congregations how to save. People are encouraged to better themselves, start their own businesses and pull themselves out of poverty.

Machismo - male virility and bravado - is widespread in Central and South America, particularly in the poorer urban areas. Machismo is expressed in drinking, gambling, womanising and partying. The strict morality of Pentecostalism works against this. The roles of husband and father become central, money spent on wine, women and song increasingly goes into the family, resulting in a better diet and education for the children (Brusco, 1995).

Developing societies are often former colonies. For many, the promise of independence has not led to prosperity. Neither colonial rule nor independence have encouraged a positive identity. Attempts at modernisation have been based on Western models and globalisation has been largely directed by Western corporations.

People in developing countries tend to feel marginalised as second-class class citizens in an increasingly global society. For many, Westernisation does not appear to be the answer.

Religion offers an alternative. It can help to build a secure and positive identity. For example, the resurgence of Islam can provide a positive, non-Western identity which draws on traditional culture (Martin, 2002). It can create an Islamic identity which crosses national boundaries and can mobilise Muslims to take political action in a global context (An-Na'im, 1999).

summary

1. While secularisation might be occurring in Europe, a religious resurgence appears to be occurring in the rest of the world.
2. Islam is growing rapidly. If present trends continue, it will be the world's largest religion by the mid-21st century.
3. Pentecostalism is the fastest growing Christian religion. It has grown dramatically in many developing countries.
4. The main growth has been in the more conservative branches of religions.
5. Religious resurgence has been seen as a response to the rapid social change and disruption resulting from modernisation and globalisation.
6. There are two main theories of religious resurgence: 1) as a defensive reaction and 2) as a proactive response.
7. As a defensive reaction, religious resurgence may provide:
   - A retreat into a religious haven
   - Certainty based on essential truths
   - Resistance identities
   - Cultural defence.
8. As a proactive response, religious resurgence may provide:
   - A strict morality
   - A guide to self-improvement
   - A recipe for upward mobility
   - Support for the family
   - A positive non-Western identity.

activity28 the resurgence of religion

Item A Islamic revival in Egypt

Estimates of how many new mosques have been built in Egypt over the past few decades vary a lot, from tens to hundreds of thousands, depending on whom you ask.

Islam is increasingly entering daily life. Even the usual Egyptian 'hello' and 'goodbye' (ahlan, ma'a al-salama) appear to be giving way to 'There is No God but Allah', a phrase used only in religious contexts before.

By the 1960s the veil was a thing of the past in Egypt. Now more and more professional and well educated women - doctors, broadcasters, engineers, lawyers - say they have donned the veil voluntarily.

However, this is not the severe black veil of their grandmothers. Wherever you go, most of the women you are most likely to see in public places are wearing a colourful headscarf with a Western-style dress that covers the whole body.

Source: Abdelhadi, 2003

Students at Cairo University, Egypt

Item B Pentecostalism in Guatemala

In churches like Showers of Grace, Pentecostals are told they can escape from poverty with the help of God and by their own efforts.

'Our purpose is to bring people with few resources to different levels,' says Nestor Mendez, a pastor of Showers of Grace, whose desk is cluttered with books such as First Time Manager and Let Your Dreams Soar. 'I believe we can change not only their lives but the country.'

Edmundo Guillen, the head pastor of Showers of Grace, explains their mission: 'Our greatest dream is that they all become entrepreneurs'.

Source: Llana, 2007

Pentecostal worshippers in South America

questions

1. What effect might the Islamic revival in Egypt have on people's identities?
2. How can Item B be seen as a positive and practical response?