

## Exam focus

### Top tips for answering questions

- ✓ This unit is examined by a written paper lasting 1 hour 30 minutes and you will need to divide up your time carefully.
- ✓ The paper is marked out of 60 and you have to answer two questions in total. The first is worth a combined total of 27 marks, the second is worth 33 marks.
- ✓ If you allow between 5 and 10 minutes for reading and planning your answers this means you should spend about 30 minutes on Question 1 and 45 minutes on Question 2. This should leave you 5 minutes to read over and make late additions to your answers.
- ✓ Question 1 will be divided into two parts, the first worth a total of 9 marks, the second worth 18 marks.
- ✓ The first part of Question 1 (part a) will ask you to 'Identify and briefly explain' – it is important to do both of these.
- ✓ You do not need to say one perspective is right and the others wrong. It is usually better to be able to discuss strengths and weaknesses of any theory you introduce.
- ✓ A question on secularisation would expect a balanced answer which explored the case for and against. Remember not to just limit your answer to Christian religions.

### Beliefs in society questions

- ✓ Questions may not just be about religion; the specification also refers to science and New Age beliefs.
- ✓ It is also likely that questions will focus on how beliefs vary over time, and also between different societies.
- ✓ Remember that different sociological perspectives view belief systems differently. Be prepared to discuss these different positions, e.g. functionalist, Marxist, postmodernist, etc.

## Exam focus

### Specimen question: Beliefs in society

1 Read Item A below and then answer parts a) and b).

#### Item A

Many writers have claimed that society has become more secular. One of the key arguments is that science-based knowledge has replaced religious beliefs as the basis for how we think and act. In addition, a number of statistical indicators have been used in order to demonstrate that religion is in decline.

However, not all writers agree with these ideas. There are many who are critical of the so-called secularisation thesis. They tend to argue that religion may have changed from how it was in the past, but this does not mean that it is any less significant.

a) Identify and briefly explain three features of 'science-based knowledge'.

(9 marks)

b) Use material from Item A and elsewhere to assess the view that society has become more secular.

(18 marks)

2 'Religion performs vital functions for both individuals and wider society.'

How far do sociologists agree with this statement?

(33 marks)

An important concept which will need to be defined.

As this is described as a key argument you will need to discuss it in at least one of your answers.

It would be worth thinking about how many of these you will be able to discuss.

Another concept which you will need to show you understand.

Think about how you will present your answer to this. Numbering the points will help you and the examiner.

Go to the item and identify what you can use from it.

Command word meaning to come to some kind of informed view having presented more than one side of the debate.

You might want to make a list of what these functions could be.

It should be clear that some will agree, others won't. You will need to explore both.

Make sure you talk about both individuals and society as a whole.

## Exam focus

### Exemplar response: Candidate A

1a) Science is usually associated with things like physics and chemistry and is usually carried out in a laboratory, often by men in white coats. Scientific knowledge often comes in the form of laws. A good example would be Newton's laws of motion. It is also claimed that science produces knowledge which is objective. This means it is true regardless of who believes it. It does not depend on any form of personal opinion or belief. Finally science produces knowledge which can be tested. This is because all the facts are clearly laid out and can be seen by anyone.

There are quite a number of identifications here: laboratory based, takes the form of laws, is objective and is testable. However, not all are explained. The first two are not explained but objectivity is well explained so scores full 3 marks. Testability has a partial explanation so gets 2. To gain the full 3 it would need to say why it might be retested, e.g. to prove/disprove. We can award 1 mark for either of the first two identifications.

(6 out of 9 marks)

1b) Secularisation means society is less religious. Some sociologists think this a fact but others are not convinced. Maybe it's just religion is changing and people are finding different ways to be religious.

This is a competent if basic introduction. The definition is somewhat limited but the candidate quotes the item and gives a suggestion of how religion might be changing. A more detailed definition and a clearer indication of what the essay will discuss would improve this introduction.

Figures for the number of people attending church show there has been a big decline over the years. In Victorian times almost everyone went to church as it was expected of you. But the 20th century saw a big decline. Nowadays more people go to football matches on a Sunday than attend church. Also shopping is a major attraction and people can also spend their time doing things with the whole family such as going to Alton Towers.

Some good discussion here of trends in church attendance and also some ideas of alternative demands on people's time. There is a link to the item ('statistical indicators') but only one is explored. Perhaps other indicators such as baptisms or church weddings could be discussed. Also the claim about football attracting more people has no supporting evidence. The item mentions the challenge to religion of science so this could also have been used as a focus.

The people who disagree with secularisation argue that people are religious in different ways today. Surveys show a lot of people still believe in God. It might be that they are too busy to go to church but they are still religious. They can watch programmes on TV like Songs of Praise so they are still being religious. Many old people are not fit enough to attend church every week but they are still very religious.

There is some evaluation by setting out a different interpretation of 'facts' here. However, this is at a fairly basic level. A way to improve it would be to question how far statistics in this area have validity. The candidate might question which religions are included in the statistics and how they are produced. It would also be good to raise the issue of how religious people really were in the past.

One sociologist who supports secularisation is Wilson. He says religion has lost its influence and instead of leading people it is now forced to follow them. Martin disagrees with Wilson. He says religion can take many forms and that the majority of people still feel the need for something spiritual so religion will never go away.

Whilst it is a good idea to present some theorists who have written about the topic the knowledge of what they say is quite basic. Wilson's point is a good one but the candidate needs to explain it, for example by discussing how churches have often followed public opinion on matters such as divorce, contraception, etc. Also this is a very abrupt ending with no real conclusion. It reads as if the candidate has just run out of time or ideas or both.

(AO1 mark: 3 out of 6, AO2 mark: 6 out of 12)

Total: 9 out of 18 marks

2 Durkheim claimed religion existed because it performed vital functions. He studied the religion of totemism in Australia and found that every clan had its own symbol or totem that it worshipped. When they were worshipping this symbol what they were really worshipping was their clan. Durkheim concluded that this was true of all religions. What they were worshipping was not really God as such but their own society. In this way people make their own gods.

There is some useful and relevant material in here but the candidate has just launched straight into an account of the work of Durkheim. A better way to start their answer would be to interpret the question and to give a sense of what they think it is about and what they intend to explore in their answer. After this the discussion of Durkheim could be placed within a context.

Why is this necessary? Durkheim said it was vital for all members of society to have a set of common values and to think in the same way. He called this a collective conscience. Without this there would be tensions and conflicts within society and it could end up tearing itself apart. Religion was there to provide people with this common set of values. A good example would be the Ten Commandments. These are moral guidelines which everyone has to follow and they help to avoid conflict.

There is some good analysis of Durkheim's views here. A key concept is introduced and explained and it is clear how religion is doing important things. The paragraph could be improved by some mention of how stability and order benefit not only society as a whole but each individual member, as this would provide a link back to the question.

This is the problem with Durkheim's theory of religion. He assumes everyone in society has the same religion. This might have been true in the past but today most societies have got a lot of religions and these are in competition with each other which can sometimes cause conflict in society. So it is wrong to say that religion helps society to stick together. In some cases it does the opposite and is the reason for it being divided.

A good attempt at evaluating as a reasonable line of criticism is suggested. Because the discussion of Durkheim's views has been quite limited so the attempt to evaluate them is also fairly basic. Other issues could be raised such as how far his analysis of totemism was correct, is it wise to suggest all societies share the same features of religion, and indeed does Durkheim's work hold any real relevance to (post) industrial society?

Parsons was another functionalist who studied religion. Like Durkheim he thought that it was a good thing because it helped to bring people together and to give them a common set of values. This was vital if society was to run smoothly. Another thing which Parsons thought religion did was to help people in times of crisis. When things happen that are out of our control religion is there to help us through it. It can explain why things happen that we don't understand such as big disasters or the death of a loved one.

The candidate correctly identifies another functionalist theorist and shows some knowledge of his work. This is important because some of the discussion here is moving from how religion functions for society to look at functions for the individual. This distinction was made in the question and it would improve the answer if the candidate made explicit reference to it at this point.

So both Durkheim and Parsons think that religion performs vital functions which help the individual and wider society. However their view of religion has been criticised. For one thing it is too positive and doesn't look at the bad side of religion. One bad aspect is all the wars that religion has produced like in Northern Ireland where religion divided people and caused conflict.

It is a good idea to enter a critical tone here and the candidate is able to provide a reasonable criticism of functionalism with an appropriate illustration. It is a pity that this is the extent of the evaluation as the critique could be expanded with some more points against the position.

This is where Marx comes in as he is a conflict theorist. He believes religion is only there to help the capitalist ruling class. They are the people who run society because they own the means of production. They want to keep everyone else, like the working class, in their place. One of the ways they do this is by religion. Religion teaches people to accept their position in society. The Bible told people that God meant them to be poor and the Hindu caste system tells people God put them in their caste or class and they should not try to change this. So we see religion justifies the status quo.

There is a good contrast here with the candidate suggesting religion may not benefit all groups in society. There are two useful examples provided to illustrate the point. An important concept (status quo) is introduced. It would be even better if the candidate was able to discuss the concept of ideology in relation to how Marxists say religion often operates.

So we can see that Marxists have a different view of religion to that of the functionalists. They see the negative side of religion rather than the positive one. Also they don't think religion benefits all members of society but instead it really only works to help a small group and works against the rest.

This is a short but useful paragraph which briefly draws out the differences between two perspectives. It is also directly related back to the question.

However the Marxist position has also been criticised. Some people point out that Communism did not bring an end to religion even when there was no ruling class. Also there have been a number of great religious leaders who have stood up for ordinary people. Examples would include Martin Luther King and Bishop Desmond Tutu. These people show that religion is not always just for the ruling class.

Whilst it is a good idea to also evaluate the Marxist position the two examples provided really don't tell us very much. There needs to be some form of explanation of how these figures provide an illustration of religion benefiting ordinary people. Also, there is the problem that the answer has become a functionalist versus Marxist answer which is a narrow interpretation of the question.

So in conclusion functionalists argue religion does perform vital functions for individuals and for society. Marxists do not agree with this and say it benefits the few. Whichever one is right it seems religion still exists over 100 years after both Durkheim and Marx were writing about it.

There is an attempt to conclude although it is really brief and superficial. As noted earlier the interpretation of the question has been very narrow. Other viewpoints could be explored, for example how might feminists or postmodernists approach the question? Also, more could be made of the distinction in the title between working for society and working for individuals. Finally, the candidate might ask if theories on the role of religion are still relevant in what appears to be a more secular age.

(AO1 mark: 8 out of 15, AO2 (a) mark: 5 out of 9, AO2 (b) mark: 5 out of 9)

Total: 18 out of 33 marks

Overall, Candidate A has scored 33 out of 60 which should translate into a grade C.

## Exemplar response: Candidate B

1a) Firstly scientific knowledge produces law-like statements. These are things which hold true over time and place. For example water always boils at 100 degrees.

Secondly the knowledge is in a form which is testable. Popper called this the 'principle of falsification'. Others can test the knowledge in an attempt to disprove it. If they fail it remains valid.

Thirdly it is objective.

This answer starts with a full 3 marks as 'law-like statements' is explained. The second point, testability, is also fully explained so again 3 marks. A pity that 'objective' is left with no attempt at explanation. This scores 1.

(7 out of 9 marks)

1b) Secular means non-religious. Bryan Wilson has defined secularisation as the process by which religious thinking, practices and institutions lose social significance. However not everyone agrees with this. It has been claimed that secularisation is not a proper theory as it cannot be properly tested.

This is a very strong introduction. There are good definitions of key terms and the criticism of the theory provides a very good basis on which to build an answer.

If we look at the three things Wilson includes in his definition, most attention has been on religious practice. This is the debate about how far people are less religious today. Certainly figures for church attendance seem to suggest a steady decline, but these figures must be treated with great caution. For example they don't include all religions; often they only refer to the Church of England. Critics point to the rise of other Christian faiths and to the popularity of non Christian religions such as Islam.

This paragraph contains some good analysis and evaluation. It is critical in tone and raises some good points. It is quite brief and a good way to build on it would be to discuss other issues surrounding the statistics, for example some figures might be for total membership whilst others relate to attendance perhaps on one specific day like Christmas. Another good point about this paragraph is the recognition of religious diversity in Britain.

Also for religion to have declined we need to be certain that it was popular in the past. Statistics about church attendance in the past tell us how many people went to church but nothing about why they went. It has been suggested that people often attended for non religious reasons such as social respectability or because their employer made them. So we cannot be sure there ever was a Golden Age of faith.

This is an interesting point which is subjecting statistics to critical analysis. By questioning the statistical basis of the secularisation thesis the candidate is able to score good marks. They do mention a key idea, the Golden Age of faith, and a little more explanation and discussion of this would make this section even better.

If we turn to religious thinking Wilson claims that fewer people believe in God today. However once again his critics are not convinced by this. Opinion polls often show high levels of belief and it is not clear just how easy it is to measure the amount of religious belief in society.

This last point is very good and could really be developed a lot more. There could be some discussion about how exactly one might 'operationalise' the concept of religious belief and how best it might be studied. Perhaps some discussion about methodological issues could be introduced to argue that it is difficult to really know how religious a society is.

Item A suggests science has replaced religion because it can now explain things that religion used to. Not everyone agrees with this and some point to America where more people believe in creationism than in evolution. This suggests that science has not taken over from religion in all cases.

It is good that there is specific use of the item. The discussion is relevant but quite brief. There is the opportunity here to bring in more theory, for example one could discuss Weber's ideas about rational thought or Bruce's discussion of how science has undermined religious thought. The alternative view could be approached from a postmodernist position which questions how far people still trust science.

So we can see that opinions are divided on whether or not society has become more secular. Supporters of the claim say there is plenty of evidence of a decline in religion. However others prefer to say that the evidence does not prove the case. They argue religion will always exist because it fulfils a basic human need.

Good conclusions, as this one does, always return to the question set at the start. The candidate suggests sociologists cannot agree on this which is a valid conclusion. The final point about fulfilling basic human needs is somewhat out of place as no reference was made to it in the main body of the answer.

(AO1 mark: 4 out of 6, AO2 mark: 8 out of 12)

Total: 12 out of 18 marks

2 Sociologists are divided on what the role of religion in society actually is. Some see it performing vital functions for both individuals and for society but others disagree and suggest that religion only benefits some members of society at the expense of others. Finally there are some who claim that religion is no longer important in today's society and has few functions left.

This is a solid introduction. Instead of jumping into a theory or study the candidate has briefly set out three possible positions which suggests they have a clear plan of where their answer is going to go.

Early sociologists such as Durkheim believed that religion performed important functions for society as a whole. He used the biological analogy where every part of society was like a human organ and had functions to make sure the whole thing ran smoothly. He identified the main function of religion as being to promote social solidarity. In order to run smoothly society needed individual members to have a common set of values. He called this consensus. Religion provided this consensus and ensured people were united by a moral code. Of course others disagree with Durkheim that consensus exists in society and he was blamed for ignoring the negative aspects of religion by only looking for positive things.

There is a lot of good knowledge demonstrated here including a number of key concepts which are used to good effect in directly linking them to the question. The evaluative point at the end is too brief to score highly. It requires greater development, for example by discussing some possible negative features.

Some time later Parsons built on Durkheim's work by not only looking at what religion did for society as a whole but also by considering what important functions it had for individuals. He said religion was there to support people at times when they needed it most such as times of great uncertainty. Religious faith could provide comfort and support to people. Also when tragic events happened religion was able to give an explanation for what seemed unexplainable. So Parsons argues that religion satisfies our need for meaning and certainty and this is what it does for individuals.

This paragraph is well directed towards the question by shifting the emphasis to the individual. Of course, the candidate could make the link back by stating how Parsons saw that things which benefit society also benefit the individual and vice versa.

This view of religion has been supported by Stark and Bainbridge. They say humans are always trying to achieve goals. However often these goals are difficult or impossible to reach. This could leave people feeling unhappy or even worthless. Here religion can act as a 'compensator'. In other words it can make up for things we don't have. In this way religion is clearly providing an important function for individuals as it helps them to feel better about themselves.

This is useful because it goes beyond the standard functionalist position to look at how other theorists see the role of religion as important. The final sentence makes a clear link back to the focus of the question. There is no real evaluation of this view or that of Parsons. Some attempt to submit them to critical scrutiny would improve the answer.

Not all sociologists take such a positive view of the role of religion. Marx saw it as a tool used by the ruling class to dominate society. He said religion was part of the ideological status apparatus because it was one of the things that was able to control the way people think and see the world. He called religion the opium of the masses because it dulled the pain people felt but didn't cure their position. It did this by promising them a better life after death so they could put up with this life.

This view of religion has been criticised for being too negative. It suggests that religion always takes the side of the ruling class but this isn't so. Liberation theology in Latin America saw Catholic priests supporting the peasants who wanted a fair share of the land and the church helped to end apartheid in South Africa.

These paragraphs present a good contrast to the previous and there is also a brief evaluation. By just introducing a brief link back to the question the candidate could improve this, for example by suggesting that Marxists see religion as benefiting some but not all members of society.

Feminists have a similar view to Marxists. They agree that religion doesn't benefit everyone but favours some groups. They think it treats women badly. Simone de Beauvoir has said religion is dominated by men and they use it to oppress women. Religion helps to justify the claim that men are superior to women.

This brief discussion of feminism helps to give the answer greater breadth. It links this view back to Marxism but there is very little detail on how exactly religion is said to oppress women. An exploration of this would improve this section of the answer.

Not everyone would agree with this view. People like Wilson say religion has lost most of its significant functions and it no longer plays a central part in the lives of individuals and of wider society. Scientific knowledge has replaced religious beliefs and people turn to the media for information and the entertainment industry for their leisure. So religion no longer has functions to perform. Others disagree and claim we often see religious revivals where people turn back to it in times of crisis. A good example of this would be after the events of 9/11.

Whilst the link between these paragraphs is not entirely clear there is a very good line of argument here. The question does not specifically ask for use of the item but the candidate has taken an idea from it and applied it well to the debate. Perhaps the point about 9/11 could be linked back to the earlier discussion of Parsons.

So in conclusion we can see there are different views on the role of religion in society. Some agree with the statement in the question whilst others think only some people benefit from religion. If we accept religion is less important today then we could say it does not play an important role for either individuals or society.

Whilst this is quite a basic conclusion it does have the merit of directly answering the question. It does also summarise what has been discussed in the answer. These are two vital features all conclusions should have.

(AO1 mark: 11 out of 15, AO2(a) mark: 6 out of 9, AO2 (b) mark: 5 out of 9)

Total: 22 out of 33 marks

Overall, Candidate B has scored 41 out of 60 which would probably be on the borderline of a grade A/B.