

Cambridge AS & A Level · Sociology 9699 · Notes

Religion and post-modernity A2

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Last checked 6 October 2026

Read first: [Religion and society](#), [The secularisation debate](#)

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What you need to know

By the end of this topic you should be able to explain and evaluate:

1. **Privatised religion.** What it means for faith to become a personal, home-based affair instead of a public one, and the arguments on both sides about whether this has increased.
2. **Spiritual shopping.** Religion as consumer choice: where the idea comes from, and what it adds (and what it misses) when we try to judge how religious people are now.
3. **Resacralisation.** Whether a renewed sense of the sacred is one of the features of post-modern society.
4. **New religious movements (NRMs) and New Age ideas.** What their spread tells us about what religion means to people today, and how much weight it still carries.
5. **The growth of fundamentalism.** The five explanations the syllabus names, **cultural defence**, **cultural transition**, **disengagement**, **marginality** and **religious revival**, with the evidence for and against each.

Building on earlier notes. Definitions of religion, the church–sect–cult types and Wallis's world-rejecting, world-accommodating and world-affirming NRMs are in *Religion and society*; the full for-and-against case on secularisation is in *The secularisation debate*. This note does not go over them again. It looks at the same religious landscape from a post-modern angle, where the interesting question is how choice, consumption and identity are reshaping religion.

Understand it

A different lens: shape, not size

Most of the classic sociology of religion asks a question of **quantity**: is there more religion than before, or less? Behind that question sits a modernist assumption that history has a direction, so religion can be plotted on a single rising or falling line.

Jean-François Lyotard (*The Postmodern Condition*, 1979) argued that late twentieth-century people had grown sceptical of **metanarratives**. A metanarrative is a story big enough to give the whole of history a plot: salvation for Christians, revolution for Marxists, ever-advancing knowledge for believers in science. On

Lyotard's account all of these plots weaken at once. If no single story is trusted, there is also no single line on which to plot "more" or "less" religion. The useful question becomes **what form** religion now takes and **where** it is found.

Four features of post-modern religion recur in this topic. Use them as a checklist when you read any example:

- **Choice.** Belief is adopted, tried out and sometimes dropped, rather than inherited at birth.
- **Fragmentation.** Authority is spread across many small sources (teachers, websites, therapists, movements) rather than held by one church.
- **Consumption and media.** **David Lyon** (*Jesus in Disneyland*, 2000) took his title from an evangelical rally staged at the Disneyland theme park. His point: religion now reaches people through the same channels as films, holidays and shopping, so it may look less like a church and more like a product.
- **Identity work.** **Zygmunt Bauman** (*Liquid Modernity*, 2000) argued that the fixed structures of earlier modern life, such as a job for life or a settled neighbourhood, have melted. People keep remaking who they are, and faith becomes one of the materials they use.

Is it really "post"-modern? **Steve Bruce** says no: these trends are ordinary modern **individualism** taken further, and they end where individualism always ends for religion, in decline. **Anthony Giddens** and **Ulrich Beck** call the present "late" or "reflexive" modernity rather than a new era. This disagreement is itself a good evaluation point: if nothing fundamental has broken, the "new forms" of religion may be stops on the road to secularisation rather than a lasting new pattern.

Privatised religion

Privatisation happens when religion stops being something society organises together (through law, state ceremonies, schools and public morality) and becomes something each person settles for themselves, mostly at home or in their own conscience. Keep two questions apart: whether religion has gone private, and whether people believe less. A privatised faith can still be held strongly.

Evidence that privatised religion has grown.

- **Thomas Luckmann** (*The Invisible Religion*, 1967) made a point about method as much as about what people believe: if you only count bodies in pews, you will miss faith that has moved indoors. He argued that as churches emptied, people built personal systems of meaning that attendance figures could not record.
- **Robert Bellah** and his co-authors (*Habits of the Heart*, 1985) interviewed a nurse they called Sheila Larson. She described her faith as "Sheilaism", guided by her own inner voice and attached to no congregation. The researchers saw her as an extreme but telling case of American religion turning into a set of one-person faiths.
- **Daily life.** Services are streamed to the sofa; prayer and meditation apps are used alone on a phone; funerals are designed around what the dead person liked rather than a set liturgy; "spiritual but not religious" has become an everyday self-description.
- **Belief without the institution.** Grace Davie's **believing without belonging** (in *The secularisation debate*) can be read as privatisation: the belief stays, the attachment to an organisation goes.

Evidence against.

- **Deprivatisation.** José Casanova (*Public Religions in the Modern World*, 1994) observed that from the late 1970s many faiths pushed back into public argument. Examples: the Moral Majority mobilising American evangelical voters from 1979; liberation theology priests confronting military governments in Latin America; Hindu nationalism shaping Indian elections.
- **Who teaches the children?** Bruce asks how a faith with no congregation passes itself on. Children learn a religion by watching adults practise it together; a purely private faith gives them little to watch, so privatisation may be what decline looks like from the inside.
- **Not every faith can go private.** Protestant Christianity has always placed the individual conscience at the centre, so it privatises easily. Islam, Sikhism and Orthodox Judaism carry rules about food, dress, prayer times and community that are lived in public view.
- **Hard to measure.** Faith kept at home leaves no attendance register, so the case for growth rests on interviews and survey answers rather than counts of behaviour.

Spiritual shopping

Spiritual shopping treats people as consumers in a market of beliefs and practices. Instead of signing up to one tradition's full package, they sample, keep what suits them and leave the rest.

An example. A 26-year-old office worker was baptised as a child but has not been to church since school. She does a weekly yoga class, keeps a gratitude journal, follows a tarot account online, went on a weekend Buddhist retreat last year and lights a candle for her grandmother each Christmas Eve at the parish church. A survey asking "Which place of worship do you attend?" would record her as non-religious.

Key ideas.

- **Danièle Hervieu-Léger** (*Religion as a Chain of Memory*, 2000) argued that religion used to be passed down like a family inheritance, through parents, parishes and schools. In much of Europe that chain has snapped, a loss she calls **cultural amnesia**. People who no longer inherit a faith have to put one together. She sketches two typical figures:
 - the **pilgrim**, who moves from practice to practice on an open-ended personal search;
 - the **convert**, who looks for a firm home, often a demanding group with clear rules and a strong sense of who belongs.
- **Wade Clark Roof** (*Spiritual Marketplace*, 1999) interviewed members of the American baby-boom generation and found many calling themselves **seekers**, moving between traditions over their lifetimes.
- **Churches as sellers.** Café churches, the Alpha introductory course, modern worship music and online services are attempts to win spiritual shoppers. **John Drane** (*The McDonalldization of the Church*, 2000) argued that churches which became predictable and rule-bound drove away people who wanted experience and meaning.

What the concept adds to understanding religiosity today.

- It explains why surveys of membership and attendance may **undercount** religiosity: shoppers rarely appear in either.

- It explains how church decline can sit alongside lasting interest in spirituality, the paranormal and the meaning of life.
- It describes the **form** much religion now takes: short-term, experience-led and centred on the self.

Its limits.

- **Low commitment.** Bruce argues that a belief you can drop when it stops suiting you shapes very little of your life.
- **Most leavers do not shop.** People who stop going to church mostly do not take up anything else; the Kendal figures below show how small the alternative is.
- **It costs money.** Retreats, courses and therapies need spare cash and time, so shopping describes the comfortable middle class better than the poor.
- **Much religion is still ascribed.** In many societies, families and minority communities, religion comes with birth, marriage prospects and sometimes the law. Shopping is mainly a picture of the Western, white middle class.
- **A Marxist reading.** Turning spirituality into products serves capitalism: it sells crystals and workshops and leaves inequality untouched.

Resacralisation: is the sacred coming back?

Resacralisation is the return of the sacred to everyday social life. Its opposite, **desacralisation**, is what Weber called **disenchantment**. The post-modern question is whether the decline of trust in science and grand stories is **re-enchanting** the world.

Arguments that it is.

- **Christopher Partridge** (*The Re-Enchantment of the West*, 2004) coined **occulture**: a large, loose pool of ideas about angels, spirits, magic, healing energies and other worlds that circulates through films, games, music and the internet. People dip into it to build their own beliefs.
- **The subjective turn.** **Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead** (*The Spiritual Revolution*, 2005) separated **"life-as" religion**, where you live as a dutiful follower of an outside authority, from **"subjective-life" spirituality**, where your own inner experience is the guide. In their study of Kendal, a market town in north-west England, the first was shrinking and the second growing.
- **Outside Europe**, the spread of Pentecostal churches, the Islamic resurgence and fundamentalist movements put the sacred back into public life (evidence in *The secularisation debate*).
- **If science loses its authority**, as Lyotard suggests, it can no longer rule the supernatural out, which leaves space for faith.

Arguments that it is not.

- **The numbers.** In Kendal, **7.9%** of the population were at Sunday worship in an average week, but only **1.6%** took part in the holistic milieu (the small groups offering practices such as tai chi, reiki and aromatherapy). For every person in the holistic milieu, almost five were in church, and the churchgoers were the shrinking group.

- **Watching is not worshipping.** Enjoying a ghost film or reading a horoscope for fun is not the same as holding something in awe; much occulture is consumed with a wink.
- **Wellness, not worship.** People mostly take up meditation or reiki to sleep better, cope with work or recover from illness. Bruce counts these as worldly aims, so the practices say more about health culture than about the sacred.
- **Authority keeps draining away.** In Western societies most believers decide questions of sex, marriage and dying for themselves, whatever their clergy say.
- **A rise needs a fall first.** Where religion was always strong, a high level today is persistence, not return.

New religious movements and New Age ideas

What makes New Age ideas distinctive. Paul Heelas (*The New Age Movement*, 1996) picked out two linked features:

- **Self-spirituality:** the sacred lives **inside** each person, and the goal is to find your "real self".
- **Detraditionalisation:** your own experience outranks scriptures, priests and tradition.

Typical practices are reiki, crystal healing, astrology, tarot, some yoga and meditation, and holistic therapies. There is rarely formal membership: people are **audiences** (reading, watching) or **clients** (paying for a session), in Stark and Bainbridge's terms.

Four cases to think with. Each shows a different way a movement's growth can be read.

1. **A city mindfulness course** (world-affirming, New Age in style). Thousands sign up; it asks nothing of law, government or public morality, and participants go home with techniques for calm. Its significance lies almost entirely in the individual's wellbeing.
2. **Soka Gakkai and Komeito.** In Japan the lay Buddhist movement **Soka Gakkai** founded the **Komeito** party in **1964**; Komeito was a coalition partner in national government for most of **1999–2025**. Here a new movement carries clear political weight.
3. **Pentecostalism from Azusa Street.** In **1906** a small, mixed-race revival meeting in a rundown Los Angeles building was mocked by the local press. Pentecostal and charismatic churches that trace their roots to it now form one of the largest branches of world Christianity. Size at the start is a poor guide to size a century later.
4. **The holistic milieu in Kendal.** Real, growing and mostly made up of women, but a small fraction of the town next to its congregations.

What the cases add up to: three positions.

- **Secularisation theorists.** **Bryan Wilson** measured a religious society by whether one recognised body could speak for its morals. When guidance is spread across sects, cults, therapists and media, no religious voice carries for society as a whole, and the spread of NRMs is an outcome of that break-up. Bruce adds that New Age activity is private, undemanding and aimed at worldly goals, so it cannot rebuild religious authority. On this view case 1 and case 4 are typical, and case 2 is an exception.

- **Functionalists and market theorists.** Functionalists start from what religion does: if every society needs shared rituals and answers to suffering, a gap left by shrinking churches will not stay empty for long. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge treat religion like any other market: when the old brand disappoints, customers try a new one rather than leaving the market. Case 3 is their strongest evidence, since the mainstream churches of 2100 may be among today's small movements, and case 2 shows that their public influence can be real.
- **Post-modernists.** Hervieu-Léger, Lyon and Heelas and Woodhead argue that both camps measure the wrong thing. They judge significance by religion's grip on **society**, while the new movements matter for **identity, wellbeing and meaning** in individual lives. On this view significance has moved house rather than disappeared. Bruce turns this round: if the best evidence for these movements is how individuals feel, the post-modernists have conceded the point about **society**.

Fundamentalism: what it is and why it has grown

A checklist for the term. A movement is usually called fundamentalist when it shows most of these features:

- **inerrancy:** its holy book contains no errors and its plain meaning is binding;
- **restoration:** it wants to bring back what it sees as the pure, original form of the faith;
- **boundary:** it treats outsiders, and softer believers of its own faith, as people in error to be kept at a distance;
- **public ambition:** it wants government, courts, schools and family life run by its rules;
- **selective modernity:** it rejects modern values but uses modern tools (broadcasting, the internet, campaign organisation) with great skill.

The word was born in the USA, where conservative Protestants rallied around a set of booklets called *The Fundamentals* (1910–1915). It is now applied to the US Christian right, the movement behind the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, the Taliban, Hindu nationalist groups in India and Jewish settler groups such as **Gush Emunim** (founded 1974). Many of these groups reject the label, and critics say Western writers apply it more readily to non-Western movements.

The syllabus names five explanations. For each: **the claim**, **the evidence**, and **the problem**.

1. Cultural defence.

- *The claim.* Steve Bruce argues that when a community feels its way of life is being dismantled by forces it did not choose, it rallies round its religion as the badge of who it is. Bruce sees two settings. In much of the developing world the pressure was **imported**: Western-trained elites, oil money and foreign consumer goods brought change that ordinary believers had not asked for. In the USA the pressure was **home-grown**: liberal Americans, the courts and the media changed schooling, sexual morality and women's roles.
- *The evidence.* Iran's Shah launched the **White Revolution** (from 1963): land reform, secular schooling, votes for women and Western dress. The clergy-led revolution of 1979 tore it down. In the USA, Supreme Court rulings against organised prayer in state schools (1962) and for legal abortion (1973) were followed by the founding of the **Moral Majority** in 1979.

- *Globalisation versions.* **Bauman** argues that global, "liquid" life piles choices and uncertainty on everyone, and fundamentalism appeals because it lifts that weight: the rules are given, not chosen. **Giddens** points out that in a global society every tradition has to give reasons for itself to outsiders; fundamentalism declines to argue and simply asserts.
- *Not irrational.* Seen from inside, the reaction makes sense: if your faith says God's law comes first, a culture that ranks personal freedom and consumption higher really is an attack, and pushing back is a reasoned choice. Calling such believers backward misses the logic of their position.
- *The problem.* It does not explain why only some members of a threatened society join, or why the reaction comes when it does (see the timeline test below).

2. Cultural transition.

- *The claim.* Bruce also uses this term for people moving between social worlds, from village to megacity or from one country to another. A strict form of religion gives them an anchor and a ready-made community while everything else is unfamiliar. Some become **more** religious after the move than they were before it: being suddenly outnumbered by people of another faith can sharpen an identity that was taken for granted at home.
- *The evidence.* Rural newcomers to fast-growing cities such as Cairo, Karachi or Lagos joining strict mosques and churches; some European-born children of migrants wearing more visible religious dress, or keeping stricter rules, than their own parents do.
- *The problem.* Most migrants do not become fundamentalists, and many become less religious over time. It explains individual journeys better than national movements.

3. Disengagement.

- *The claim.* The term works in two directions. **Mainstream religion disengages:** in David Martin's usage, a disengaged church has gone quiet on politics and public morality, so believers who still want firm moral rules go looking for groups that will state them. **Believers disengage from the mainstream:** Gabriel Almond, Scott Appleby and Emmanuel Sivan (*Strong Religion*, 2003) described fundamentalist **enclaves** that wall off a pure inside from a polluted outside, with their own schools, media and marriage rules.
- *The evidence.* Religious home-schooling networks; closed communities with their own courts and welfare.
- *The problem.* Many fundamentalist movements do the reverse of withdrawing: they fight elections, lobby and broadcast.

4. Marginality.

- *The claim.* **Max Weber** saw that sects recruit at the edges of society. His term **theodicy of disprivilege** names a faith that gives people at the bottom a reason for their hardship and a hope of vindication. Applied here: the urban poor, the jobless young, minorities facing discrimination and regions the state neglects find dignity and practical help in fundamentalist movements. Someone shut out of jobs and status in a liberal market society may find, in a movement that condemns that society, both an explanation for the failure and a community that values them.
- *The evidence.* The **Muslim Brotherhood**, founded in Egypt in **1928**, grew partly as a service provider: in poor neighbourhoods its volunteers ran the clinic, the school and the charity that government had not supplied. When a movement's strongholds are the poorest districts, the case for economics over culture

grows.

- *The problem.* Leaders and many recruits are educated and comfortable, which points to the next idea.

5. Religious revival.

- *The claim.* **Gilles Kepel** (*The Revenge of God*, **1991**) argued that from the mid-1970s Christianity, Judaism and Islam all produced movements aiming to re-Christianise, re-Judaise or re-Islamise their societies, after decades when secular modernisation looked unstoppable. Fundamentalism is then the sharpest edge of a broad religious **resurgence**, not a special reaction to one threat.
- *Why now?* Two extra pushes. **New media:** Khomeini's sermons were smuggled into Iran on cassette tapes in the 1970s; televangelism, satellite channels and social media now carry preachers across borders, so groups that always existed can reach and recruit far more people. **Doubt about science and rationality:** if experts and reason are distrusted, a literal reading of scripture looks less foolish to more people.
- *The problem.* It describes a trend more than it explains it, and part of the "growth" may be greater visibility.

A post-modern twist. Fundamentalism is usually called a return to tradition, yet many recruits did not grow up strict at all. They picked strictness as adults because it settled problems that only arise once nothing is given:

Who am I? What is my life for? How should I spend my days? In Hervieu-Léger's terms they are **converts**, choosing strictness from the range of options on offer. Seen this way, fundamentalism is itself a product of modernity: the option in the spiritual market that sells certainty.

Four checks for any single explanation.

1. **Timeline.** Does the cause arrive just before the growth? Secular state schools, the teaching of evolution and Hollywood films were part of American life by the 1920s (the Scopes trial over teaching evolution was in **1925**), yet a mass Christian-right political movement appeared only after 1979. Fifty-four years separate those two dates, so whatever changed in the late 1970s matters more than a background that was already in place.
2. **Map.** Does it fit movements in several faiths and regions, or only one? Is fundamentalism growing in every country, or only some?
3. **Membership.** Does it explain why some people join while their neighbours in the same position do not?
4. **Measurement.** Is the term defined clearly, and is there evidence that support has grown, not just that coverage of it has?

Key facts and formulas

Sociology has no formula sheet, so every row below is one to remember.

Key term	Status
Post-modern lens: metanarratives distrusted (Lyotard); choice, fragmentation, consumption and media (Lyon), identity work in liquid modernity (Bauman); late or reflexive modernity as the rival label	Learn it

Key term	Status
Privatised religion: invisible religion (Luckmann); Sheilaism (Bellah); deprivatisation (Casanova)	Learn it
Spiritual shopping: cultural amnesia, the pilgrim and the convert (Hervieu-Léger); seekers (Roof); McDonaldisation of the church (Drane)	Learn it
Resacralisation and desacralisation; occulture (Partridge); "life-as" religion and "subjective-life" spirituality (Heelas and Woodhead); Kendal: 7.9% in church, 1.6% in the holistic milieu	Learn it
New Age: self-spirituality and detraditionalisation (Heelas); audience and client cults (Stark and Bainbridge)	Learn it
NRM growth read three ways: loss of a single moral authority (Wilson, Bruce); lasting need and switching suppliers (functionalists, Stark and Bainbridge); significance moved to the self (post-modernists)	Learn it
Fundamentalism checklist: inerrancy, restoration, boundary, public ambition, selective modernity	Learn it
Five explanations of fundamentalism: cultural defence and cultural transition (Bruce); disengagement (Martin; enclaves, Almond, Appleby and Sivan); marginality and theodicy of disprivilege (Weber); religious revival (Kempel)	Learn it
Globalisation and fundamentalism: relief from choice (Bauman); tradition that asserts instead of arguing (Giddens)	Learn it
Paper 4 marking: each essay is out of 35, made up of AO1 9, AO2 11 and AO3 15 ($9 + 11 + 15 = 35$); answer two essays from different sections	Learn it

How to do it

We have tagged 6 questions for this topic (2021, 2022, 2024 and 2026). One was set in two papers of the same session, so there are 5 different questions. All are 35-mark "Evaluate this view" essays from Paper 4, and none mixes types, so the counts add up to 6.

Question type	Questions
Evaluate an explanation for the growth of religious fundamentalism	3
Evaluate what the growth of NRMs and New Age ideas shows about religion	2
Evaluate whether a religious revival is happening	1

Timing: Paper 4 gives you 1 hour 45 minutes for two essays, which is about 50 minutes per essay with 5 of them spent planning. Privatised religion, spiritual shopping and resacralisation have not yet had a question of their own here, so the worked examples practise them.

1. Evaluate an explanation for the growth of religious fundamentalism (3 questions)

Asked as: the growth of religious fundamentalism is a reaction to globalisation (1); the growth of religious fundamentalism is a reaction to the spread of western culture (1); religious fundamentalism is best explained as a response to secularisation (1).

All three quotations put forward one member of the **cultural defence** family; only the named threat changes. According to the examiners, essays that turn into a general secularisation essay, or never say what fundamentalism is, stay in the lower levels.

1. **Pin down the term.** Use the checklist (inerrancy, restoration, boundary, public ambition, selective modernity) and name movements from two or more faiths. Say that the quotation is a version of cultural defence and that "best explained" or "a reaction to" invites a comparison of explanations.
2. **Trace the named cause in three links**, so the mechanism is visible:
 - **contact:** what the cause brings to believers' doorsteps: secular schooling and law, consumerism, Western media and dress, individual rights, free speech, women's equality, foreign political power; Iran shows the sequence: rapid Westernising reform in the 1960s and 1970s, then an Islamic revolution;
 - **threat:** why traditional believers experience this as an attack on their authority and identity;
 - **response:** Bruce's cultural defence in its two settings (imported change in Iran, with the White Revolution and 1979; home-grown change in the USA, with the court rulings and the Moral Majority); Bauman's relief from choice; Giddens on asserting instead of arguing; the point that resistance is a rational choice from the believers' viewpoint.
3. **Line up the rivals**, one paragraph each, closing every paragraph with a sentence that says what it does to the quotation:
 - **cultural transition:** migrants and city newcomers becoming stricter after a move; this explains which individuals join better than a society-wide threat does;
 - **disengagement:** churches and the state stepping back from moral guidance; enclaves;
 - **marginality:** Weber's theodicy of disprivilege; the Muslim Brotherhood's clinics and schools; awareness of inequality and discrimination;
 - **religious revival:** Kepel's parallel resurgence across faiths;
 - **new media and reach:** cassettes, satellite channels and social media let long-standing groups recruit more widely, so growth may be a change in communication rather than a new reaction;
 - **doubt about science:** falling trust in reason and experts makes literal scripture easier to accept;
 - **a post-modern choice:** adults who pick strictness to settle who they are and how to live, which makes the movement a product of modern life.
4. **Run the four checks** on the named cause. The timeline check does the most damage: set 1925 beside 1979 and ask what happened in between that the named cause leaves out. Add the measurement check (vague definitions, visibility mistaken for growth) and the map check (growth in some countries, not all).
5. **Conclude** with a division of labour, for example: the named cause explains **what** fundamentalists are against and why their faith takes a defensive shape; marginality and transition explain **who** joins; media, politics and particular events explain **when**. It is part of the answer, not the whole of it.

Variants.

- **"Globalisation"**: globalisation supplies both the threat **and** the means (global media, cheap travel, diaspora networks). Start with non-Western cases, then ask why fundamentalism also grows in the USA, the society that did most to spread globalisation.
- **"Spread of western culture"**: Christian fundamentalism grows **inside** Western culture. Bruce's home-grown setting can handle this, but it is a different mechanism from the one the quotation names.
- **"Response to secularisation"**: Bruce treats fundamentalism as **evidence** that secularisation is real, because people only rally to defend what is under threat; so fundamentalism can support the secularisation thesis rather than refute it. Link to *The secularisation debate* without retelling it.

2. Evaluate what the growth of NRMs and New Age ideas shows about religion (2 questions)

Asked as: growth in support for new religious movements and New Age ideas shows that religion has lost its social significance (2, the same question in two papers).

The question is about **society**, so in the introduction set out the yardsticks of social significance you will test against: shared moral authority, political power, public institutions, and the lives of individuals. Every paragraph should name a movement or study.

1. **Introduction**. Explain what NRMs and New Age ideas are (self-spirituality, detraditionalisation) and what social significance means. Say that the verdict depends on how secularisation is defined: as the weakening of established religious authority, or as people becoming less religious.

2. **Yardstick 1, moral authority** (supports the view):

- Wilson: in a secularised society no religious voice binds everyone, and the more sects and cults there are, the plainer it is that none of them speaks for the whole;
- a scatter of small groups that disagree with one another cannot do the job a national church once did, and nothing suggests that job could be reassembled.

3. **Yardstick 2, political power and public life** (mixed):

- most New Age activity makes no public claims at all; audience and client cults have no members to mobilise;
- against this, Soka Gakkai founded Komeito, a governing coalition partner for most of 1999–2025, so the influence of new movements should not be underestimated.

4. **Yardstick 3, individual lives** (challenges the view):

- if more people are joining movements and paying for spiritual courses, the claim that individuals are losing interest in religion looks weak; add the growth of revivalist churches and of worship at home;
- post-modernists (Hervieu-Léger, Heelas and Woodhead, Lyon): significance has moved to identity and wellbeing rather than disappeared;
- Bruce's reply: what draws people is self-improvement and a sense of purpose for themselves; none of it is a campaign for religious leaders to run society again.

5. **Yardstick 4, the long run** (challenges the view):

- functionalists: some sacred, binding element survives in every society, so the churches' losses should be followed by gains somewhere else, and NRM growth is what that looks like;

- the road from Azusa Street to world Pentecostalism took a century; judging today's movements after a few decades is like judging that one in 1920.

6. **Weigh it against the wider evidence:** put the movements' gains next to Western losses on other measures (fewer religious weddings and more couples who never marry, smaller church rolls, a bigger 'no religion' census share); the losses are far larger. Note that loose movements are hard to count, and that New Age ideas are mostly Western and middle class.
7. **Conclusion**, for example: for Western societies the spread of these movements fits the view on moral authority and public life, but it shows religious interest changing form rather than vanishing, and some new movements carry real public power.

3. Evaluate whether a religious revival is happening (1 question)

Asked as: all societies are experiencing a revival in religious belief (1).

Sort the evidence into three boxes, **rising**, **steady** and **falling**, and test the word "all" box by box.

1. **Introduction.** A revival is a rise: more belief or practice than before, across a society. Say that religiosity resists measurement, and that "all" means one clear counter-case damages the claim.
2. **Box 1, rising:**
 - the **evangelical movement in the USA** winning followers through televangelism, megachurches and streamed services; Pentecostal growth in Africa, Latin America and Asia;
 - **NRMs and New Age ideas** as part of a broader turn to spirituality, including **privatised worship** and religious use of **social media**;
 - **fundamentalism** gaining support in several faiths (Kepel);
 - **religion in public life**: evangelical voters and religious language in US politics; England's free-school programme since 2010 opening new schools with a religious character; Casanova's deprivatisation;
 - **believing without belonging**: if belief survives while membership falls, falling figures may hide a revival of private faith;
 - **occulture** and the subjective turn (Partridge; Heelas and Woodhead) as evidence of re-enchantment.
3. **Box 2, steady:** a revival needs a slump before it. In the Philippines and Indonesia religious attachment never collapsed, so present-day figures there record staying power, not a comeback.
4. **Box 3, falling:**
 - **membership and ceremonies**: European attendance, membership and religious weddings and funerals keep falling, and other belief systems compete for loyalty;
 - **the non-religious keep growing**: in Britain each new census and survey finds more people with no religion, so the direction there is still downward;
 - **desacralisation**: most churchgoers make up their own minds on contraception, divorce or same-sex marriage, whatever their leaders teach;
 - **less time, more doubt**: even committed believers fit worship around work and leisure and voice more doubts;
 - **the spirituality boom is self-centred** (Bruce): people want a calmer, more fulfilled life for themselves, and nobody in a yoga class is asking for clergy to set society's rules.

5. Question the evidence:

- **outward observance:** in close-knit communities that notice who turns up, attendance may record conformity; private conviction cannot be read off a headcount;
- **measurement:** there is no agreed yardstick for religiosity, and past figures to compare with are thin;
- **over-generalising:** revival in some regions cannot be stretched to all societies.

6. **Conclusion**, for example: some societies show real growth (especially in the global South), some were never in decline, and others are still secularising; so "all" fails, and much of the Western "revival" is a change in the form of religion rather than its amount.

Worked examples

Neither essay below has been set yet; both cover parts of the syllabus the past questions have skipped. Paper 4 essays are marked by levels for each assessment objective, not point by point, so each example ends with what the top levels would need. Each bullet would be a full paragraph in the exam.

Example 1

'Religion today is mainly a private matter.' Evaluate this view. [35]

Introduction. Define privatised religion: faith withdrawn from law, politics and public institutions into family life and personal conscience. "Mainly" asks for a judgement of balance, which may differ between societies and between faiths.

Supporting the view (AO1/AO2).

- **Faith moved indoors:** Luckmann's invisible religion, which attendance counts cannot see.
- **One-person religion:** Bellah's "Sheilaism".
- **Private assembly:** spiritual shopping and believing without belonging; each person builds and keeps a personal mix.
- **Practice without a building:** streamed services, prayer apps, personalised funerals.
- **Public roles gone:** in most Western societies schools, welfare and law no longer run on religious direction.

Challenging the view (AO3).

- **Deprivatisation** (Casanova): the Moral Majority, liberation theology, Hindu nationalism in Indian politics.
- **Faiths lived in public:** food, dress and prayer rules make Islam, Sikhism and Orthodox Judaism hard to privatise.
- **Fundamentalism** has public ambition by definition: it wants scripture to govern the courts and the state.
- **Private may mean fading:** Bruce's question of how a faith with no congregation reaches the next generation.
- **Weak evidence:** private faith leaves no register, so the claim relies on small interview studies and self-reports.

Conclusion. In much of Western Europe religion is now largely a personal matter, but across the world it has pushed back into public life; "mainly private" is a regional description, and even there it may be a stage of decline.

What the marker looks for. Accurate use of Luckmann, Bellah, Davie, Casanova and Bruce (AO1 7–9); every point tied to the **private against public** contrast (AO2 10–11); and evaluation that compares faiths and regions and questions the evidence before judging (AO3 12–15).

Example 2

'The concept of spiritual shopping is the best way to understand religiosity today.' Evaluate this view. [35]

Introduction. Define spiritual shopping and religiosity. "Best way" means comparing it with rival accounts: secularisation, believing without belonging and religious revival.

Supporting the view (AO1/AO2).

- **It fits the pattern:** churches emptying while interest in spirituality and the paranormal stays high.
- **Hervieu-Léger:** cultural amnesia; the pilgrim explains loose seeking and the convert explains strict joining, so one framework covers both.
- **Roof's seekers, Lyon's consumer religion and Drane's churches redesigned as sellers.**
- **It exposes weak measures:** shoppers are missing from membership and attendance data.

Challenging the view (AO3).

- **Secularisation fits better** (Bruce): shopping is low-commitment and rarely handed on; most leavers simply stop.
- **Scale:** Kendal's 1.6% in the holistic milieu against 7.9% in church.
- **Limited choice:** for most of the world's believers, and many minority communities in the West, religion is ascribed; shopping describes the comfortable Western middle class.
- **Intense faith is growing elsewhere:** Pentecostal and fundamentalist growth demands total commitment, not sampling.
- **Commodification:** Marxists see spiritual products serving the market rather than expressing religiosity.

Conclusion. Spiritual shopping describes how many Western people relate to the sacred, but it is too narrow to be the best account of religiosity worldwide, where inherited and demanding faith remains common.

What the marker looks for. Accurate knowledge of the concept and named studies (AO1 7–9); consistently applied to **understanding religiosity** rather than religion in general (AO2 10–11); and evaluation that weighs the concept against rival accounts and other societies before judging (AO3 12–15).

Common mistakes

- **Sliding into the secularisation essay.** Examiners keep finding fundamentalism and revival answers that turn into a general account of secularisation. Close each paragraph with a sentence that links it back to fundamentalism, revival or NRMs specifically.
- **Never saying what fundamentalism is.** An argument about its causes has nothing to stand on if the reader cannot tell what is being explained. Define it at the start and name movements in more than one faith.
- **Stating the link without the mechanism.** "Fundamentalism grew because of globalisation" is an assertion. Show the chain: what arrived, why it felt threatening, how the movement responded.
- **Common sense instead of sociology.** Weaker NRM answers offer general remarks about belief today. Use the concepts and studies: self-spirituality, Wilson, Bruce, Stark and Bainbridge, Heelas and Woodhead, Hervieu-Léger.
- **Groups instead of societies.** In a revival essay, comparing religiosity between groups inside one country misses the question, which is about whole societies.
- **A list of rivals.** Setting out five explanations one after another is not evaluation; say which fits better, for which cases and why.
- **Treating the West as the world.** Most of the post-modern evidence comes from Western, Christian-heritage societies; say so, and contrast other regions and faiths.

How to get the marks

- **"Evaluate this view" (35 marks):** a single essay, marked by levels for each assessment objective.
- **AO1 knowledge and understanding (9):** the top level (7–9) rewards a wide spread of detailed material, using sociological concepts, theories and studies. Use the names (Lyotard, Bauman, Lyon, Luckmann, Bellah, Hervieu-Léger, Heelas and Woodhead, Partridge, Wilson, Bruce, Kepel) and the concepts (privatisation, spiritual shopping, resacralisation, self-spirituality, cultural defence, cultural transition, marginality).
- **AO2 interpretation and application (11):** the top level (10–11) rewards material applied to the question throughout. If it names one cause of fundamentalism, keep weighing that cause; if it says "social significance", keep asking what difference religion makes to society.
- **AO3 analysis and evaluation (15):** the top level (12–15) rewards evaluation you state openly, support in detail and keep going to the end, setting rival views and evidence against each other. If the other side is only described and left to speak for itself, the essay sits in Level 2 (4–7); evaluation that is direct but patchy reaches 8–11.
- **Evaluation questions for this topic:** has religion changed in **form** or in **amount**? Is post-modernity a real break or late modernity? Who joins, where, and why now? Western or global? How are growth and significance measured?
- **Finish with a verdict** on the quotation's exact words: to what extent, for which people, in which places, and under which definition.
- **Two essays from different sections,** so the paper totals $2 \times 35 = 70$.

Quick check

1. Define privatised religion. Give one study that supports the idea that it has grown, and one argument against.
2. Explain Hervieu-Léger's pilgrim and convert, and say which one helps explain fundamentalism.
3. In Kendal, 7.9% of the population were at Sunday worship in an average week and 1.6% took part in the holistic milieu. (a) How many times larger was church attendance, to one decimal place? (b) Assuming nobody was in both, what percentage of all the people active in either was in the holistic milieu, to one decimal place? (c) What does this suggest about resacralisation?
4. Name the explanation of fundamentalism each case fits best: (a) a woman who moves from a rural district to a capital city and joins a strict congregation; (b) a community that responds to a government ban on religious dress by adopting a literal reading of scripture; (c) a movement that wins support by running free schools in districts the state ignores.
5. An essay scores 8 for AO1 and 9 for AO2. What AO3 mark would bring it to 31 out of 35, and which AO3 level is that?

Answers

1. Privatised religion is faith withdrawn from public institutions into private life and personal choice. Support: Luckmann's invisible religion, or Bellah's "Sheilaism". Against: Casanova's deprivatisation (faiths re-entering politics), or Bruce's point that a faith with no congregation is hard to hand on, so privatisation may be decline.
2. The **pilgrim** moves from practice to practice on an open-ended personal search; the **convert** looks for a firm home in a demanding group with clear rules. The convert helps explain fundamentalism: strictness is chosen as an identity from the options on offer.
3. (a) $7.9 \div 1.6 = 4.9375$, so church attendance was about **4.9** times as large. (b) $7.9 + 1.6 = 9.5$ and $1.6 \div 9.5 = 0.1684$, so about **16.8%**. (c) The new spirituality was a small minority even among people active in religion or spirituality, which weakens claims of resacralisation in Britain.
4. (a) **Cultural transition**; (b) **cultural defence**; (c) **marginality**.
5. $31 - (8 + 9) = 14$, which is in the top AO3 level (12–15).

Past questions to try

- **9699/41/O/N/22 Q6**: essay on whether NRM and New Age growth shows religion has lost its social significance (also set in another paper that session).
- **9699/42/M/J/23 Q6**: essay on whether resacralisation is occurring in many societies.
- **9699/43/O/N/24 Q6**: essay on whether the growth of NRMs is evidence that secularisation has occurred.