

Cambridge AS & A Level · Sociology 9699 · Notes

Religion and social order A2

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Read first: [Religion and society](#), [Social control, conformity and resistance](#)

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What you need to know

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

1. **Functionalist accounts of religion and social order.** How religion is said to keep society stable and its members bound together: by turning shared values into sacred duties, by carrying people through moments that could disrupt the group, by explaining suffering, and by giving a whole nation common symbols.
2. **Marxist accounts of religion, oppression and capitalism.** How religion is said to dull the pain of exploitation, make inequality look right, and help the ruling class keep control without force; and how later Marxists accept that religion can also feed resistance.
3. **The strengths and limitations of both perspectives.** What each explains well, where the evidence goes against it, and the weaknesses they share (both are structural theories that see religion mainly as a conservative force).

How the exam uses this topic. All 16 tagged questions are 35-mark essays asking whether religion is social control, ruling-class ideology, a prop for the existing order, or a source of conflict. To evaluate them you also need short versions of ideas the syllabus places in other religion topics: feminist views (*Gender, feminism and religion*), Weber and liberation theology (*Religion as a source of social change*), secularisation and postmodern religion. This note gives each only as far as the essays need it. Definitions of religion, measuring belief and religiosity by class, gender, ethnicity and age are in *Religion and society* (listed under "Read first"); this note does not repeat them.

Understand it

The problem of order

Every society faces the same puzzle: why do millions of people with different interests mostly obey the rules, accept their place and live side by side without constant fighting? Sociology gives two broad answers.

- **Consensus:** people share values, so order comes from **agreement**. This is the **functionalist** answer.

- **Conflict**: one group has power over others, so order is **imposed**, by force or, more cheaply, by persuading the less powerful that things are as they should be. This is the **Marxist** answer (and, with men as the powerful group, the **feminist** one).

Religion matters to both answers because it can do something no law can: it can make a rule feel **sacred**, so breaking it feels wrong even when nobody is watching.

Terms to get right.

Term	Meaning
Social order	the pattern and predictability of social life; people can rely on others to act as expected
Social solidarity	people feeling bound together as one group (a cause of order, but not the same thing)
Social control	the ways a society gets people to conform: formal (laws, police, courts) and informal (approval, shame, conscience); religion mostly works informally
Status quo	the existing arrangement of power and wealth
Conservative force	something that keeps the status quo, or keeps traditional values; both functionalists and Marxists see religion this way
Radical force	something that challenges the status quo and pushes for change

Keep these apart in essays. A quotation about **social control** asks how behaviour is regulated and who gains; one about **social order** asks whether society stays stable; one about **conflict** asks whether religion divides people.

Structure and agency. Functionalism and Marxism are both **structural** theories: religion shapes people from above, and believers are fairly passive. **Interactionist** writers start from believers' own meanings instead.

Peter Berger (*The Sacred Canopy*, 1967) argued that every society builds a meaningful order (a **nomos**) and that religion stretches a "canopy" over it, presenting human-made arrangements as part of the order of the universe. This explains why religious order feels natural from the inside; it also reminds you that people **interpret** religion and can reinterpret it, which structural theories tend to miss.

Functionalist accounts: order by agreement

Functionalists ask what religion contributes to the stability of society as a whole. The answer can be broken into four jobs. (The detail of Durkheim's totemism study is in *Religion and society*; here the focus is on how each job produces **order**.)

1. Making shared values sacred.

- **Émile Durkheim** (*The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 1912) argued that when people worship together they are, without knowing it, worshipping their own society. Shared rituals renew the **collective conscience**, the values every member holds, and give the group a feeling of being one moral community.
- The link to order: a value that is sacred is not up for negotiation. "Do not steal" backed by God is stronger than "do not steal" backed only by the police. Religion builds the **internal** control (conscience, guilt, fear of sin) that makes most external control unnecessary.

- **Talcott Parsons** added that religion supplies a society's **core values**, from which its norms and laws come: rules against murder, theft and adultery in many legal codes have religious roots.

2. Steadying the group through disruption.

- **Bronisław Malinowski** (*Magic, Science and Religion*, **1925**) argued that people turn to religion when events threaten to overwhelm them emotionally (a **psychological** function), above all at **life crises** such as birth, coming of age, marriage and death. A death could leave a family and community grieving, divided and unsure what to do next; the funeral rite gives everyone a script, brings the group together and lets life restart.
- Ritual also calms anxiety in situations people cannot control, so fear does not spill into disorder.

3. Explaining suffering.

- Parsons and Berger both stress that people need answers to **problems of meaning**: why the innocent suffer, why the wicked prosper, why people die young. A religious explanation of suffering is a **theodicy**.
- If suffering seemed pointless, people might despair or turn against the social order. A theodicy lets people carry on and stay committed. (Marxists accept this point but read it the other way round; see below.)

4. Uniting a whole nation.

- **Robert Bellah** (**1967**) described American **civil religion**: faith in the nation itself, with sacred objects (the flag), scriptures (the Constitution), rituals (the pledge, national holidays) and a God who blesses the country. It unites people of many faiths and none.
- **An example of religion bringing a nation together across faiths**: after the **2019** attack on two mosques in Christchurch, **New Zealand** held national remembrance events; a week later the Muslim call to prayer was broadcast nationally and thousands of non-Muslims gathered with the city's Muslims. Shared ritual turned a moment that could have divided the country into one that drew it together.

For essays, the functionalist claim in one line: the order is **agreed** rather than imposed, and it is a shared good with **no losers**.

Strengths of the functionalist view.

- It explains why religion is found in almost every known society: if it meets real needs, it would be expected to last.
- Its claims about ritual can be **observed**: congregations at national tragedies, coronations and memorial days show collective feeling being renewed.
- It recognises that religion matters to individuals in hard times, not only to the powerful.
- It has historical cases on its side. In **1891** Pope Leo XIII's letter *Rerum Novarum* told Catholic workers to reject socialism and told employers they owed workers a fair wage. Catholic trade unions and, after the Second World War, Christian Democratic parties in Germany and Italy grew out of it, and both preferred the bargaining table to the strike and the barricade. Functionalists can read this as religion taking the heat out of class conflict.

Testing the functionalist account of order. Put it through three tests.

- **The evidence test: is order strongest where religion is strongest?** Not reliably. Northern Ireland had some of the highest churchgoing in the United Kingdom during the Troubles, yet it was the most violent part of it. Meanwhile **Phil Zuckerman** (*Society without God*, 2008) studied **Denmark** and **Sweden**, where few people attend church or believe in God, and found them among the most peaceful, law-abiding and trusting societies in the world. If order can thrive without religion and fail alongside it, religion cannot be its main source. Durkheim's own evidence came from a handful of small clans, a weak base for claims about nations.
- **The power test: whose order is it?** An orderly society can still be an unjust one. Functionalists treat the values religion makes sacred as everyone's values; conflict theorists answer that those values may be the ruling class's (Marxists) or men's (feminists), so the "order" is a settlement that suits the powerful.
- **The logic test: is the argument circular?** It starts from a stable society, notes that religion is present, and concludes that religion must be keeping it stable, without showing that order would collapse if religion were removed. Explaining something by the job it is assumed to do is called **teleology**. Law, schools and the welfare state can also produce conformity, which is exactly what secular societies rely on.

Marxist accounts: order by persuasion

Marxists ask whose interests the existing order serves. For **Karl Marx**, capitalism rests on the exploitation of the working class (the **proletariat**) by the owners of capital (the **bourgeoisie**). Exploitation should produce anger, and anger could produce revolution; so a stable capitalist society needs something that stops discontent turning into revolt. Religion, part of the **superstructure** of ideas resting on the economic base, is one of those things. Marx traced the demand for it to **alienation**: people with no control over their working lives look for meaning and hope elsewhere.

How religion is said to keep the exploited in line.

Mechanism	What it does	Why it protects the order	Example
Compensation	promises the patient poor a reward after death	patience looks wiser than revolt	Marx's "the opium of the people " (1844): it relieves the pain but leaves the cause untouched
Legitimation	presents the hierarchy as God's design	challenging the order becomes a sin, not just a risk	the medieval teaching of three orders (those who pray, those who fight, those who work), each fixed by God; preachers in the American South quoting scripture in defence of slavery ; the Dutch Reformed Church giving theological backing to apartheid in South Africa, so that white minority rule looked God-given
Selective teaching	stresses the parts of a faith that counsel obedience	the oppressed hear only the messages that suit their rulers	the Slave Bible printed in London in 1807 for enslaved people in the British West Indies cut out most of the Exodus story of escape from slavery but kept passages telling servants to obey their masters

Mechanism	What it does	Why it protects the order	Example
Ideological apparatus	spreads ruling-class ideas through an institution people trust	people police themselves, so force is rarely needed	Louis Althusser (1970) ; Methodism in early factory towns (E. P. Thompson)
Alliance and money	binds the organisation to the state and to its funders	an organisation with property and investments gains from a calm economy	established churches; large donations and endowments; colonial missions; US evangelical politics

The combined result is **false consciousness**: workers come to see their poverty as natural, deserved or a test of faith, rather than as the product of an economic system that could be changed.

More on the institutional side.

- **Althusser** distinguished **repressive state apparatuses** (police, army, courts), which control by force, from **ideological state apparatuses** (ISAs), which control by ideas. Historically the church was the leading ISA, alongside the family, education and the media. Control through ideas is cheaper and steadier than force.
- **Money and alliances.** Follow the money. Many large religious organisations hold land, buildings and shares, and big private gifts pay for many of their schools, hospitals and new places of worship. An organisation in that position does well when profits are high and the economy is calm, and its leaders have little reason to preach sermons that would alarm their largest givers. **Established churches** sit inside the state (in England, the monarch is Supreme Governor of the Church of England and 26 bishops sit in the House of Lords). In the USA, white evangelical churches and lobby groups have for decades been among the Republican Party's most loyal backers.
- **History.** Missionaries often travelled with **colonial** rule, teaching colonised peoples obedience to new masters. In early industrial Britain, the historian **E. P. Thompson** (*The Making of the English Working Class*, 1963) argued that **Methodism** taught factory workers discipline, self-denial and obedience, the habits the new factory owners needed.
- **Theocracies** make the link openest: where clergy hold state power (as in **Iran** since the revolution of 1979), or religious police enforce dress and behaviour (as in **Saudi Arabia** for many years), religion is formal social control.

When does religion stop serving the ruling class? Later Marxists keep the link between religion and class but ask under what conditions religion turns against the powerful.

- **When the faith carries a memory of protest.** **Friedrich Engels (1894)** pointed to religion's **dual character**: Christianity started among slaves and the poor, so its texts contain material for revolt as well as for patience.

- **When the oppressed have leaders of their own.** **Antonio Gramsci** saw ruling-class power as **hegemony**, consent won through culture, including religion; but popular religion can also feed **counter-hegemony**. **Dwight Billings (1990)** tested this in the American South in the early twentieth century: Appalachian coal miners, whose lay preachers were also union men, used hymns and prayer to strengthen their strikes, while Piedmont textile workers, whose churches were funded and staffed by the mill owners, heard religion used against unions. Same faith, opposite effects on order, depending on who controlled the local church.
- **When clergy are independent and the poor have nowhere else to turn.** **Otto Maduro (1982)** argued that religion has **relative autonomy** from the economy; where governments shut down every other channel of protest, the church may become the channel.

These views are a bridge between the "for" and "against" sides of an essay: religion can be social control, but whether it is depends on who runs it.

Strengths of the Marxist view.

- It asks the question functionalism avoids: who gains from order.
- There is plenty of evidence of religion lending authority to rulers, empires and unequal systems (the three orders, slavery, the Slave Bible, apartheid, colonial missions).
- It helps explain why the poorest groups are often the most religious, since they have most need of compensation.

Limitations of the Marxist view, grouped by the question each one asks:

- **Is it too narrow?** It is **economically deterministic**: it treats religion as a by-product of class, when religion also carries gender, ethnic and national identities and personal meanings that have their own effects on order.
- **Does religion always serve the powerful?** No. Religion has fuelled resistance: **liberation theology** in Latin America; Black churches in the US civil rights movement; nonconformist chapels in the British labour movement (see *Evaluation tools*, below).
- **Were the masses really persuaded?** **Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan Turner** (*The Dominant Ideology Thesis*, 1980) argued that in feudal Europe religion mainly held the **ruling class** together (through rules on marriage and inheritance that kept property in the family), while peasants knew little doctrine and were kept in line mainly by economic necessity. If so, religion's role in controlling the masses has been exaggerated.
- **Does it disappear when oppression ends?** Religion did not fade as predicted in communist states. The Catholic Church in **Poland** survived and helped bring communism down, and the Orthodox Church in Russia revived after the Soviet Union ended in **1991**.
- **Who is oppressed?** Feminists argue that religion serves **men** of every class, which Marxism cannot see.
- **Is it still needed?** Althusser himself argued that in modern capitalism the school had replaced the church as the leading ideological apparatus. Add television, advertising and social media, and a ruling class has little need of pulpits.

Comparing the two perspectives

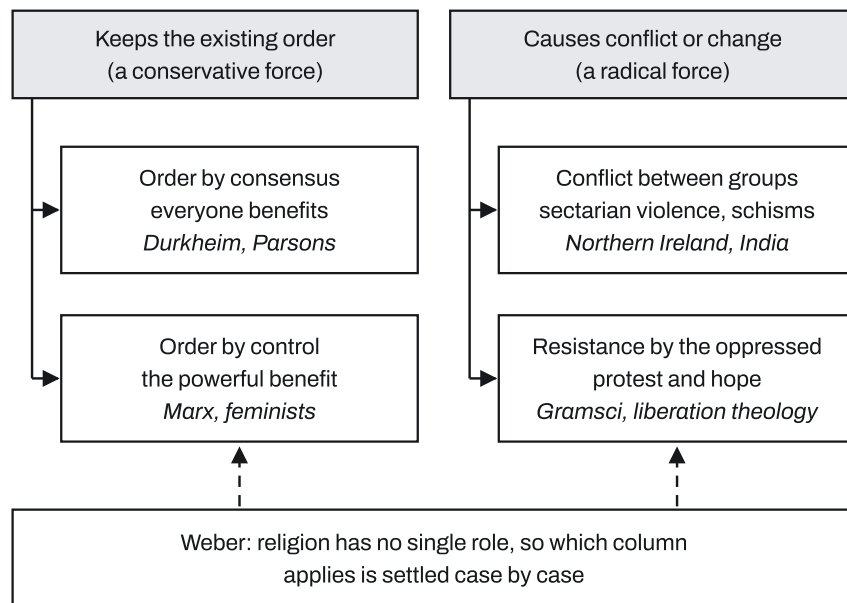
Question	Functionalist	Marxist
Does religion produce order?	yes	yes
How?	real agreement on shared values	ideology and false consciousness
Who benefits?	everyone	the ruling class
Are believers' needs real?	yes: meaning, comfort, belonging	the comfort is real, but the needs come from exploitation
Religion's future	lasts, perhaps in new forms (civil religion)	disappears in a classless society
Main blind spot	power and conflict	belief, agency and religion as protest

What they share, and so where both can be attacked at once.

- **Both are structural:** believers appear as passive receivers of ideas. Berger's interpretive approach, and **postmodernists**, for whom people now assemble a personal faith from many sources ("pick and mix" spirituality), both give believers far more say over what religion means and does.
- **Both treat religion as a conservative force**, so neither predicts religion **overturning** an order or tearing a society apart (see below).
- **Both speak of "religion" in the singular.** The Billings study above shows one faith steadying the order in one industry and challenging it in another; Weber made this a general rule (see *Evaluation tools*).
- **Both assume religion still has the reach to shape behaviour; secularisation** puts that in doubt.

Religion and conflict

Functionalists and Marxists disagree about almost everything except one claim: religion makes society more stable. The record of religious wars, riots and splits is the most direct test of that shared claim.



Four kinds of religious conflict.

1. **Between faiths (sectarian conflict).** In **Northern Ireland**, the Troubles (late 1960s until the Good Friday Agreement of **1998**) set mostly Protestant unionists against mostly Catholic nationalists; more than 3,500 people died. In **India**, the **1947** Partition was accompanied by mass violence between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, and Hindu–Muslim riots have recurred since. In both places the dividing line was drawn by religious **identity**, not by how devout people were: many who fought rarely worshipped. That suggests religion can divide a society even where belief itself is weak.
2. **Within faiths (schisms).** The Protestant Reformation split Western Christianity and led to more than a century of religious wars in Europe; the Sunni–Shia division in Islam still shapes rivalries in the Middle East.
3. **Between religion and the state or secular society.** Religious groups have fought governments over abortion, divorce, same-sex marriage and what schools teach. In the USA, the long campaign by religious conservatives against legal abortion is a clear example. At the extreme, the Iranian revolution of 1979 overthrew a secular monarchy.
4. **Between religion and the powerful.** In Central and South America in the 1970s and 1980s, clergy who followed liberation theology were jailed, exiled or killed by generals who saw them as subversives.

A Durkheimian twist. The same rituals that bind a group together also mark who is **outside** it. So religion can strengthen solidarity **within** a group while sharpening hostility **between** groups. Conflict and solidarity can be two sides of one process.

Order and conflict are linked over time. Follow the sequence through Latin America: for centuries the Catholic Church blessed a hierarchy of landowners and generals (order); many of the poor came to see official religion as their masters' religion; liberation theology then offered them a reading of the same faith that took their side; the result was open conflict between clergy and governments. Here conflict is the delayed result of order, so the two roles are stages of one process rather than opposites.

The case against seeing religion as a source of conflict.

- **Is the conflict really about religion?** In Northern Ireland, religious labels marked two **national** and **ethnic** communities with different views on which state they belonged to; Steve Bruce's idea of **cultural defence** describes religion carrying group identity. Land, power and nationalism may be the real causes, with religion the badge.
- **Religion as peacemaker.** Clergy are often the go-betweens in conflicts their own followers are fighting: the Catholic **Community of Sant'Egidio** brokered the **1992** peace accord that ended Mozambique's civil war; in Northern Ireland, church leaders helped open the talks that led to peace. Some believers, such as many **Quakers**, refuse military service as **conscientious objectors**.
- **Order is the normal case.** Many societies live with several faiths peacefully most of the time; peaceful relations rarely make the news.
- **Loosely organised spirituality rarely fights.** **New Age** spirituality has no hierarchy, no single doctrine and no territory to defend, and its focus on personal wellbeing gives followers little to fight over.
- **The Marxist reply.** On Marx's own account the opium works: the exploited are sedated, not mobilised. In class terms, then, religion lowers the temperature of a society, even if the calm is bought at the workers' expense.

Evaluation tools from other topics

These ideas belong to other parts of the syllabus, but the essays on this topic keep rewarding them. Learn one or two examples for each.

Feminist views. Religion as **patriarchal ideology**: sacred texts written and interpreted by men; male-only clergy in many faiths (Catholic priests, most imams and Orthodox rabbis); rules on women's dress, sexuality and place in worship; the idea of the husband as head of the household. For a feminist, the people who gain from religious control are **men**, whatever their class. Against this: the Church of England ordained its first women priests in **1994** and its first woman bishop in **2015**, so religious rules on gender can change; and some women find in religion respect, community or protection.

Weber: religion can dissolve an order as well as hold one up. **Max Weber** (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, **1905**) argued that Calvinist believers, anxious to know whether God had chosen them, threw themselves into disciplined work and reinvested their profits instead of spending them. The effect was to break up the traditional, slow-moving economy of medieval Europe and build a new capitalist order in its place. For this topic the lesson is that a religion's effect on order is not fixed: the same kind of belief can unsettle one order and then, once established, support the next. Weber therefore refused to give religion one social role, and that refusal is the most useful single evaluation point against both functionalism and Marxism.

Religion siding with the oppressed.

- **Liberation theology**: after the Latin American bishops met at **Medellín** in **1968**, thousands of priests, nuns and lay workers set up base communities where poor people read the Bible together and asked why they were poor; many went on to denounce the military regimes that then ruled much of the continent, and Archbishop Óscar Romero of El Salvador was murdered for it in 1980.
- **The US civil rights movement**: Black churches organised it, and its best-known leader, **Martin Luther King**, was a Baptist minister; the Montgomery bus boycott of **1955** was planned in churches.

- **Nonconformity and the labour movement:** in nineteenth-century Britain, Methodist and other nonconformist chapels trained working men to speak, organise and run meetings, and many early trade union and Labour leaders came from them. (Notice that Methodism appears on both sides: Thompson saw it as discipline, others as a school for protest.)
- **Solidarity in Poland:** in the 1980s the Catholic Church sheltered the Solidarity trade union against the communist state.

Secularisation. Count where people now pick up their values: in secular societies most young people spend far more hours with screens and teachers than in any place of worship. If religion reaches so few people so rarely, it can hardly be the main source of either order or control, which weakens **both** theories at once. (The full debate is in *The secularisation debate*.)

Postmodernism. Picture a woman who goes to yoga on Monday, lights a candle in a cathedral at Christmas and reads about Buddhism online: she has assembled her own faith (spiritual shopping). Nobody issued it to her and nobody on her street shares the same mix, so it can neither discipline a class nor bind a nation.

Differences between religious organisations. Ernst Troeltsch's distinction helps here. A **church** claims to serve the whole society and usually makes its peace with whoever rules it; a **sect** draws in people who feel shut out and defines itself against the wider world. Before agreeing that "religion" props up the powerful, ask which kind of organisation the evidence comes from.

Key facts and formulas

There is no formula list in Sociology. "Learn it" means you must remember it.

Key term	Status
Social order, social solidarity, social control (formal and informal), status quo, conservative force, radical force	Learn it
Consensus and conflict theories; structural and interactionist theories	Learn it
Collective conscience; core values (Parsons); life crises (Malinowski); problems of meaning; theodicy; civil religion (Bellah)	Learn it
Nomos and sacred canopy (Berger)	Learn it
Opium of the people (Marx); compensation in the afterlife; legitimation; false consciousness; alienation; base and superstructure	Learn it
Repressive and ideological state apparatuses (Althusser); hegemony and counter-hegemony (Gramsci); relative autonomy (Maduro); dual character of religion (Engels)	Learn it
Dominant ideology thesis critique (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner)	Learn it

Key term	Status
Sectarian conflict; schism; cultural defence; conscientious objector; church and sect (Troeltsch)	Learn it
Patriarchal ideology (feminism); Protestant ethic (Weber); liberation theology; secularisation; spiritual shopping	Learn it
Paper 4: two essays from different sections, each 35 marks: AO1 9, AO2 11, AO3 15, so $9 + 11 + 15 = 35$	Learn it

How to do it

We have tagged 16 questions for this topic (2021–2025). Two were set in two papers of the same session, so there are 14 different questions. Every one is a 35-mark "Evaluate this view" essay from Paper 4, and none mixes types.

Question type	Questions
Evaluate the view that religion is social control or ruling-class ideology	11
Evaluate the view that religion is a source of conflict	3
Evaluate the view that religion maintains the existing social order	2

Paper 4 lasts 1 hour 45 minutes for two essays, so allow about 50 minutes for each, including 5 minutes to plan.

Before planning any of these essays, underline the key word in the quotation and ask three questions of it: **who** gains (everyone, the ruling class, men, a dominant ethnic group)? **how** (agreement, ideas, organisation, force)? and **always, or only sometimes** (which religion, society and period)? Your paragraphs are the answers to those three questions.

1. Evaluate the view that religion is social control or ruling-class ideology (11 questions)

Asked as: religion is a means by which, or helps, the ruling class maintain social control (4, two questions each set in two papers); religion is an instrument or agent of social control, or its role is to maintain social control (3); religion is an instrument of ideological control (1); religion is a form of ruling class ideology (1); religion serves the interests of the rich and powerful (1); religion encourages people to accept oppression (1).

Low marks in the reports come from essays that tour the theories of religion one by one, or slide into whether religion still has influence, and never return to **control**. Every paragraph must say who is controlled, by whom and how.

- 1. Introduction.** Define social control (formal and informal) and ideology; say that the view comes mainly from Marxism (with feminism as a variant); flag the wording. "The ruling class" or "the rich and powerful" points straight at Marxism; plain "social control" lets you bring in the functionalist view that control benefits

everyone; "accept oppression" puts false consciousness and the opium thesis at the centre.

2. Build the case, mechanism by mechanism.

- **Through belief:** the opium thesis and compensation in the afterlife (Marx); theodicies that explain poverty away; legitimisation (the three orders, slavery sermons) and selective teaching (the Slave Bible) producing false consciousness.
- **Through institutions:** Althusser's ideological state apparatuses, control without force; established churches inside the state; property, investments and large donations that tie an organisation's fortunes to the economy; evangelical backing for the US Republican Party; theocracies such as Iran and religious police.
- **Through history:** colonial missionaries; Methodism and factory discipline (Thompson); scripture used to defend slavery; the Dutch Reformed Church and apartheid (religion backing one **ethnic** group's rule).
- **For a different dominant group:** feminists (male clergy, sacred texts, dress codes; men as the group in control).

3. Test it.

- **Within Marxism itself:** Engels's dual character, Gramsci's counter-hegemony, Maduro's relative autonomy: religion can serve the powerful, but not only them.
- **Religion against the powerful:** liberation theology; Black churches and the civil rights movement; nonconformist chapels and the labour movement; the Church and Solidarity in Poland; groups on the edge of the mainstream, which recruit people who feel let down by society and have sometimes attacked the social order rather than blessed it (the early Quakers' campaigns against slavery; New Age critics of consumer culture).
- **Religion dividing rather than controlling:** sectarian conflict (Northern Ireland, India) shows religion producing disorder, which an instrument of control should not do.
- **Control that serves everyone, or no control at all:** functionalists (Durkheim's collective conscience; Malinowski's help through life crises): order benefits all, not one class; Berger and postmodernists: believers are active, building and rereading their own faith (spiritual shopping).
- **Was it ever that effective?** Abercrombie, Hill and Turner; religion persisting under communism.
- **Does it still matter?** Althusser's own point that the school took over from the church; in secular societies screens and classrooms reach far more people than sermons.
- **Which religion?** Established churches against sects and minority faiths (Troeltsch's church and sect); the ordination of women in some churches; Weber's Calvinists, who unsettled one economic order before supporting the next.

4. **Conclusion**, for example: religion **has** often helped dominant groups (a class, men, an ethnic majority) keep control, especially established churches tied to the state; but it is not only an instrument of control, since the same faiths have fed resistance, and in secular societies other institutions now do this job.

"Encourages people to accept oppression". Put the opium thesis, compensation and false consciousness first. Then test it with cases where believers used their faith to throw off oppression (liberation theology, the civil rights movement), and ask which organisations, church or sect, the quotation fits.

"Ruling class ideology" or "ideological control". Show that Marxists **disagree among themselves** (Marx, Althusser, Gramsci, Maduro); the mark schemes credit this. Use the dominant ideology thesis critique as a strong evaluation point.

2. Evaluate the view that religion is a source of conflict (3 questions)

Asked as: rather than uniting people in society, religion is a source of conflict (1); religion is a source of conflict in society (1); rather than promoting social order, religion is a source of conflict (1).

Here the view **attacks** functionalism (and Marxism), so the theories that see religion as producing order become your evaluation.

1. **Introduction.** Define social order and social solidarity; point out that the quotation targets the one claim functionalists and Marxists share (religion stabilises society), whatever their reasons for it.
2. **The case for conflict**, using the four kinds:
 - **between faiths:** Northern Ireland, India, and how long such conflicts last;
 - **within faiths:** schisms such as the Reformation and the Sunni–Shia divide;
 - **with the state and secular society:** abortion and other moral issues; the Iranian revolution;
 - **with the powerful:** liberation theology; Weber's Calvinists, whose new work ethic broke up the traditional economy;
 - **conflict under the surface:** for Marxists and feminists the calm is itself the problem. A congregation that looks united contains owners and workers, husbands and wives, whose interests are opposed and which shared worship never settles; unity of that kind is a truce on unequal terms, not agreement.
3. **The case against.**
 - **Religion as a source of order** (functionalism): collective conscience, civil religion, the Christchurch example of religion uniting across faiths; *Rerum Novarum* and Christian Democracy (bargaining in place of strikes).
 - **Marxism as an argument against the view:** if religion is the reason exploited workers have not turned on their employers, its main effect on class conflict is to keep it from ever becoming open, the reverse of what the quotation claims.
 - **Peacemaking:** Sant'Egidio and Mozambique, church leaders in the Northern Ireland peace process, conscientious objectors.
 - **Religion as the badge, not the cause:** national and ethnic conflicts with religious labels (cultural defence).
 - **The dialectic:** order and conflict as stages of one process.
 - **It depends:** Weber's Calvinists show one faith both breaking an order and then supporting the next; New Age spirituality, with no hierarchy or territory, gives followers little to fight over.
4. **Conclusion**, for example: religion is a source of conflict **between** groups and sometimes **with** the state, but it is usually tied to other causes, and within groups it more often unites; the two roles are linked, not opposite.

When the quotation says "**rather than uniting people**", spend real time on Durkheim's solidarity and the twist that in-group unity can feed out-group conflict. When it says "**rather than promoting social order**", put the Marxist view that religion keeps order through control on the "against" side alongside functionalism.

3. Evaluate the view that religion maintains the existing social order (2 questions)

Asked as: religion serves to maintain the existing social order (1); the function of religion is to maintain social order (1).

The key idea is religion as a **conservative force**, in two senses: it upholds the existing structure of **power**, and it defends **traditional values**. Functionalists credit consensus and say everyone gains; Marxists credit ideology and say the ruling class gains; yet both end with religion on the side of the status quo. The other side is religion as a **force for change**.

1. **Introduction.** Define social order, status quo and conservative force; set the functionalist and Marxist versions side by side (consensus or ideology; all or the ruling class) so that the essay can test both at once.

2. The case that religion maintains the order:

- **functionalist:** collective conscience and core values; teaching that believers should obey rulers, honour their parents and do the duties of their station; rites that carry people through life crises; civil religion;
- **Marxist:** the opium thesis, false consciousness, legitimisation; Althusser's ISAs;
- **organisational:** churches whose property and donors depend on a stable economy; established churches tied to the state;
- **historical:** preachers who defended slavery from scripture until abolition; churches resisting reforms on divorce, contraception and women's rights;
- **feminist:** religion keeping a patriarchal order in place.

3. The case that religion also changes the order:

- **Weber:** Calvinism and the rise of capitalism;
- **revolutions and movements:** the Iranian revolution; liberation theology; the civil rights movement; nonconformity and the labour movement;
- **religion reforming itself:** churches rewrite their own rules (Anglican women priests from 1994, bishops from 2015), so religion adapts to a changing society rather than freezing tradition in place;
- **neo-Marxists:** counter-hegemony and relative autonomy;
- **postmodernists:** as belief becomes individual and self-assembled, religion follows social change instead of anchoring the old order;
- **secularisation:** where few people attend or follow church teaching, religion has little leverage in either direction, as a brake or as an engine.

4. **Conclusion**, for example: most of the time, especially in its established forms, religion helps maintain the existing order; but under certain conditions (a charismatic leader, clergy close to the poor, a regime that blocks other outlets for grievance) it becomes a powerful force for change.

When the quotation says "**the function of**", you can also question the functionalist language itself: religion may have several roles, and teleology is a weakness.

Worked examples

Each is a new 35-mark essay on this topic. The marks are given the way the levels mark scheme works: by assessment objective and level, not by points. In the exam, write each bullet as a full paragraph.

Example 1

'Religion benefits every member of society.' Evaluate this view. [35]

Introduction. "Benefits every member" is the functionalist claim that the order religion creates is shared by all. Conflict theories ask whether the benefits are spread evenly.

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **Belonging for all:** Durkheim's shared rituals renew the collective conscience; everyone gains from living in a society where rules are trusted.
- **Help in hard times:** Malinowski's life crises; the bereaved, the sick and the frightened all gain comfort.
- **Meaning:** Parsons's problems of meaning and theodicies help anyone who suffers.
- **National unity:** Bellah's civil religion; the Christchurch remembrance drew in people of every faith.

Against the view (AO3).

- **The benefits are uneven (Marxism):** the comfort is real, but by keeping workers passive it benefits owners far more; compensation in the afterlife costs the rich nothing.
- **Some members bear costs (feminism):** male clergy and rules on women's dress and roles mean women gain less and give up more.
- **Excluded groups:** slavery sermons and apartheid show religion working against whole groups.
- **Religion's benefits can be turned to protest:** liberation theology shows the poor using religion for their own interests, against the rich.
- **Not every member is religious:** in secular societies many people gain nothing from religion directly; postmodern choice means benefits go to those who opt in.

Conclusion. Religion offers real benefits (meaning, comfort, belonging) to many people, but it has often benefited dominant groups most; "every member" overstates the case.

How it would be marked. Accurate knowledge of functionalist concepts and named writers, contrasted with Marxist and feminist views (AO1 7–9), applied throughout to **who** benefits (AO2 10–11), and sustained evaluation weighing real comfort against unequal gains, leading to a judgement (AO3 12–15).

Example 2

'Neo-Marxist views explain the role of religion better than the views of Marx.' Evaluate this view. [35]

Introduction. Outline Marx's view (opium, false consciousness, alienation) and say that neo-Marxists keep the class link but allow religion to work for the oppressed too.

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **They fit the evidence of protest:** Engels's dual character, Gramsci's counter-hegemony and Maduro's relative autonomy explain liberation theology, the civil rights movement and Solidarity in Poland, which Marx's view cannot.
- **They give believers agency:** clergy and congregations choose how to use their faith, which matches Berger's point that people interpret religion.
- **They explain variation:** Billings's study of Southern miners and mill workers shows the same faith backing owners in one community and strikers in another, depending on who controlled the church.

Against the view (AO3).

- **Marx explains the normal case:** most of the time established churches have supported rulers (the three orders, colonial missions, apartheid); protest movements are rare.
- **Neo-Marxism may give away too much:** if religion can serve any group, the theory loses its sharp claim and becomes hard to test.
- **Shared weaknesses:** both are still class-based, so they miss patriarchy (feminism) and the declining role of religion (secularisation), and both find it hard to explain religion persisting under communism.
- **Alternative explanations:** functionalists explain religion's comfort and unity without any class interests; the dominant ideology thesis critique questions whether religion ever controlled the masses as either version claims.

Conclusion. Neo-Marxist views fit the full range of evidence better, but Marx's view still describes the usual relationship between established religion and power; the best answer uses both.

How it would be marked. Accurate, detailed knowledge of several Marxist strands with examples (AO1 7–9), applied consistently to **comparing** the two versions rather than describing each (AO2 10–11), and sustained evaluation that uses evidence of both control and protest to reach a judgement (AO3 12–15).

Example 3

'Religion now plays only a minor part in maintaining social order.' Evaluate this view. [35]

Introduction. Set out the two classic claims that religion maintains order (functionalist agreement; Marxist ideology); "now" asks whether this is still true, so secularisation and postmodernism are central.

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **Rival sources of values:** schools, law and above all the media now do the work Althusser assigned to ISAs, and they reach almost everyone.

- **Less reach:** falling attendance and the rise of "no religion" in many Western societies mean fewer people hear religious teaching.
- **Choice not obligation:** postmodern spiritual shopping makes religion a personal option, not a shared moral code that holds society together.
- **Religion as disruptor:** where religion is strong today, it often divides (sectarian conflict, culture wars over abortion) rather than holding society together.

Against the view (AO3).

- **It depends where you look:** in theocracies such as Iran religion is formal control; in much of Africa, Asia and Latin America religion remains central to everyday order.
- **Civil religion and ritual:** national memorials and the Christchurch remembrance show religion still drawing a society together at moments of crisis.
- **Hidden influence:** many laws and values came from religion and still carry its authority, even for non-believers.
- **Conservative religious politics:** evangelical influence in US politics shows religion still defending a particular order.
- **Measurement:** decline in attendance may not mean decline in belief, so religion's informal control may be underestimated.

Conclusion. In secular Western societies religion now plays a smaller part than other institutions, but globally, and at moments of crisis everywhere, it remains an important source of order.

How it would be marked. Accurate knowledge of both classic theories plus secularisation and postmodern views (AO1 7–9), applied to the **present day** and to order specifically (AO2 10–11), and sustained evaluation that compares societies and periods before reaching a judgement (AO3 12–15).

Common mistakes

- **Describing theories without the question.** The examiners report this every year: an account of functionalism, then Marxism, then feminism, never linked to "control", "conflict" or "order". End each paragraph by saying what it shows about the quotation.
- **Drifting into secularisation.** Whether religion still has influence is only one evaluation point. Answers that turn into a secularisation essay lose marks for relevance.
- **Listing examples without development.** "Northern Ireland, India, Iran" is not analysis. Take one example and explain **how** it supports or challenges the view.
- **Treating "religion" as one thing.** A church tied to the state, a sect of the poor and a liberation-theology parish can push in opposite directions; the best essays say which kind of organisation each piece of evidence comes from.
- **Forgetting that functionalists also talk about control.** Religion as social control is not only a Marxist idea; the difference is **who benefits**. Making this point is easy analysis.
- **Only one side of the conflict debate.** In conflict essays, higher-scoring answers also show religion **resolving** conflict and promoting order.

- **Evaluation by juxtaposition.** Writing "however, functionalists disagree" and then describing functionalism is weak. Say **why** one view fits the evidence better.
- **Assertion instead of sociology.** Personal opinions about whether religion is good or bad earn nothing; back every point with a concept, writer or study.

How to get the marks

- **"Evaluate this view" (35 marks)** is marked by levels for each of three assessment objectives, not by counting points.
- **AO1 knowledge and understanding (9):** for the top level (7–9), show wide and accurate knowledge: several theories, named writers, concepts (false consciousness, legitimisation, ideological state apparatus, collective conscience, theodicy, counter-hegemony) and real examples.
- **AO2 interpretation and application (11):** for the top level (10–11), every piece of material must be **used to answer the quotation**. If it says "ruling class", stay with class; if it says "uniting people", stay with solidarity.
- **AO3 analysis and evaluation (15):** this carries the most marks. The top level (12–15) needs evaluation that is **explicit, detailed and kept up throughout**, not saved for the end. Evaluation that is only implied by describing another theory stays low (4–7); explicit points that are not sustained reach 8–11.
- **Evaluate from several directions:** rival theories; counter-examples; differences between religions, societies and periods; secularisation; and the strengths and weaknesses of the theory in the quotation itself.
- **Use the variety of Marxism:** examiners reward knowing that Marxists disagree among themselves.
- **Reach a judgement** that answers the exact words: how far, for whom, in which societies, and when.
- **Answer two questions from different sections;** the paper is out of $2 \times 35 = 70$.

Quick check

1. Give one similarity and one difference between functionalist and Marxist views of religion and social order.
2. Explain what Althusser meant by an ideological state apparatus, and how religion fits the idea.
3. How did Abercrombie, Hill and Turner challenge the Marxist view of religion?
4. Give two reasons why sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland may not show that religion causes conflict.
5. Why is Methodism useful evidence on both sides of the social control debate?

Answers

1. Similarity: each treats religion as a **conservative force**, working for stability rather than change.
Difference: for functionalists the stability rests on values people genuinely share and serves all; for Marxists it rests on false consciousness and serves the bourgeoisie.
2. An institution that keeps the ruling class in power through **ideas** rather than force, getting people to accept the system so they control themselves. The church was historically the main one: it taught obedience and presented the order as God's will. (Education and the media are others, and may now matter more.)
3. Their **dominant ideology thesis** critique argued that in feudal Europe religion mainly bound the **ruling class** together (through rules on marriage and inheritance), while peasants knew little doctrine and conformed out of economic necessity, so religion's role in controlling the masses has been exaggerated.
4. Religious labels marked two **national** and **ethnic** communities divided over which state they belonged to, so religion may have been the badge rather than the cause (cultural defence); and church leaders also worked for peace, helping open the talks that led to the 1998 agreement.
5. E. P. Thompson argued it taught factory workers discipline and obedience, serving the new factory owners (social control); yet nonconformist chapels also trained working men to organise and lead, feeding trade unions and the labour movement (resistance).

Past questions to try

- [9699/42/O/N/24 Q5](#): essay on religion as an agent of social control.
- [9699/42/M/J/22 Q5](#): essay on whether religion encourages people to accept oppression.
- [9699/42/M/J/23 Q5](#): essay on whether religion is a source of conflict in society.
- [9699/41/M/J/23 Q5](#): essay on whether the function of religion is to maintain social order.