

Cambridge AS & A Level · Sociology 9699 · Notes

Religion and society A2

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What you need to know

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

1. **Ways of defining religion.** The three main kinds of definition (by what religion **is**, by what it **does**, and by what its own members **call** religion), with the strengths and weaknesses of each, and why the choice changes the answer to almost every other religion question.
2. **Difficulties in measuring religious belief.** What sociologists count (attendance, membership, ceremonies, survey answers, census answers), why each count can mislead, and why comparing today with the past is especially hard.
3. **Social groups and religiosity.** How and why religiosity (how religious a person or group is) varies by **social class, gender, ethnicity** and **age**.
4. **Religion and other belief systems.** How religion compares with **science, ideology** and **magic**, and with newer forms of belief such as New Age spirituality and humanism.

How the exam uses this topic. Every question tagged here has been an essay. They use the four ideas above as tools inside three wider debates: whether religion holds society together (functionalist and Marxist accounts, syllabus topic 11.2), whether religion has lost its importance (secularisation), and what new religious movements tell us. To answer them you need those debates too, so this note recaps each one as far as the essays need it.

Understand it

Why definitions matter

Sociologists cannot study religion until they agree what counts as religion, and they do not agree. The disagreement is not just about words: the definition you choose decides whether religion looks like it is fading or thriving.

1. Substantive (exclusive) definitions: what religion is. These define religion by its **content**: belief in God, gods, spirits or some other supernatural power. **Max Weber** treated religion as belief in a superior or supernatural power that is above nature and cannot be explained scientifically. An early anthropologist, **Edward Tylor (1871)**, put it most simply: "belief in spiritual beings".

- *Strengths*: draws a clear line, so it is easy to apply in research; it matches what most people in the West mean by religion.
- *Weaknesses*: it is **exclusive**, so it leaves out belief systems without a god in the Western sense (some forms of Buddhism, Confucianism); critics say it is **Western-centric**, built from Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

2. Functional (inclusive) definitions: what religion does. These define religion by its **effects** on individuals or society. **Émile Durkheim** (*The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, **1912**) defined it as a unified set of beliefs and practices about **sacred** things that unite believers into a single moral community. **Milton Yinger** defined it by the questions it answers: beliefs and practices through which people face the ultimate problems of life, such as death, suffering and injustice.

- *Strengths*: **inclusive**, so it covers religions without gods; it fits the sociologist's interest in what religion does for society.
- *Weaknesses*: too broad. Football fandom, nationalism, communism and even shopping can unite people around "sacred" symbols. If everything that binds people counts as religion, religion can never decline, so the definition decides the secularisation debate in advance.

3. Social constructionist (interpretive) definitions: what members call religion. These refuse to fix one definition. Instead they study how people and institutions **decide** what counts as religion. **Alan Aldridge** (**2000**) pointed out that **Scientology** is recognised as a religion in some countries and treated as a business or a dangerous cult in others: the label is fought over, and winning it brings tax breaks and respect.

- *Strengths*: takes believers' own meanings seriously (an interpretivist approach) and shows that power is involved in labelling.
- *Weaknesses*: there is no common yardstick, so it is hard to compare societies or measure change.

What this means for essays. Whenever a quotation says religion has declined, or is still powerful, ask: declined **as defined how**? Under an exclusive definition, falling church attendance looks like decline. Under an inclusive definition, people who now meditate, follow astrology or gather for national ceremonies are still "religious". Saying this early in an essay is one of the clearest ways to show the examiner analysis.

Why religious belief is hard to measure

Sociologists measure **religiosity**, the extent to which people are religious. **Charles Glock and Rodney Stark** (**1968**) showed that it has several **dimensions**, and a person can score high on one and low on another:

Dimension	What it means	A typical measure
Belief	holding the religion's teachings to be true	survey: "Do you believe in God?"
Practice	taking part in worship, prayer, rituals	attendance counts; how often people pray
Experience	feeling in contact with the sacred	survey: "Have you had a religious experience?"
Knowledge	knowing the scriptures and teachings	tests or interviews
Consequences	letting religion shape everyday conduct	behaviour, moral choices

So the first difficulty is **operationalising**: turning "religious" into something countable. Most data measure **practice** because it is easiest to count, yet practice is not belief.

What gets counted, and how it misleads.

- **Attendance counts.** Head counts at services, such as the English Church Census run by **Peter Brierley**. But people attend for non-religious reasons (habit, family pressure, music, a place at a church school), and many believers never attend.
- **Membership rolls.** Each organisation counts differently. The Catholic Church counts everyone baptised; many Protestant churches count only active adults. Small sects may exaggerate their size; others keep no lists.
- **Rites of passage.** Religious weddings, baptisms and funerals. A church wedding may be chosen for the building and the photographs, not the vows.
- **Surveys of belief.** Questionnaires such as the World Values Survey ask people what they believe. But answers depend on wording ("Do you believe in God?" against "Do you believe in some sort of spirit or life force?"), and people give **socially desirable** answers. **Kirk Hadaway, Penny Marler and Mark Chaves (1993)** compared what Americans told pollsters about church attendance with counts of people actually in church: the counts came to **about half** the claimed rate.
- **Census self-identification.** In **England and Wales**, the share of people describing themselves as Christian fell from **59.3%** in **2011** to **46.2%** in **2021**, while the share saying "no religion" rose from **25.2%** to **37.2%**. Yet ticking "Christian" may mean "I was baptised" or "I am British", not "I pray". The census question is also **voluntary**.

Comparing with the past is even harder.

- Before the twentieth century there were almost no surveys of belief. Britain's only official count of worshippers, the **1851 Census of Religious Worship**, counted attendance on one Sunday and nothing about belief.
- When attendance was high, it may have reflected **social pressure**, the law or the fear of losing a job or a home, not faith. **David Martin** called the idea of a deeply religious past a myth of a **golden age**; **Rodney Stark** argued that medieval European peasants rarely went to church and knew little doctrine.
- So a fall in attendance might show that people have stopped **pretending**, not that they have stopped **believing**.

Different religions, different measures. Christian measures centre on Sunday attendance. In Islam, regular mosque attendance is expected of men far more than women; in Hinduism, much worship happens at home shrines. Attendance figures therefore under-count religions whose practice is private or domestic, and data gathered in one culture may not fit another.

What interpretivists add. Religious meaning is personal and hard to put into a tick box. In-depth interviews and ethnography (for example, **Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead's Kendal Project**, below) give more **valid** pictures of what people believe, but on small samples that may not be **representative**.

Why this matters for essays. Every claim that people are "less religious" or "still religious" rests on these measures. The examiners keep rewarding answers that question the evidence: "religiosity is hard to measure, so we cannot be sure how much has changed" is an evaluation point for almost any religion essay.

Social groups and religiosity

The patterns below are for Britain and other Western societies, where most of the research was done. Always add that the patterns differ between religions and countries.

Gender

The pattern. By most measures, women are **more religious** than men in Christianity: they attend more, pray more, and are more likely to say they believe. They also make up the large majority of people in alternative spirituality: in the Kendal Project (**2005**), about **80%** of those active in the "holistic milieu" (yoga, reiki, meditation groups) were women.

Explanations.

- **Socialisation.** Girls are more often raised to be caring, obedient and nurturing, values close to those of many churches.
- **Life roles.** **Grace Davie** suggested women's closeness to **birth and death**, through childbirth and caring for the sick and old, brings them closer to "ultimate questions". Women who did not work full time also had more time for church and more need for its social networks.
- **Risk.** **Alan Miller and John Hoffmann (1995)** suggested that not being religious is a **risk** (if God exists, you lose), and men are socialised to take more risks.
- **Deprivation.** Glock and Stark linked religion to **deprivation**: women are more likely to experience **organismic deprivation** (ill health), **ethical deprivation** (feeling that the world is morally wrong) and **social deprivation** (low status), and religion offers comfort for each.
- **New Age appeal.** Steve Bruce and Heelas and Woodhead argue that New Age spirituality celebrates feelings, healing and the body, which fit the roles women are expected to take.

Limits. The pattern reverses in public worship in Islam and Orthodox Judaism, where duties fall mainly on men. Feminists note that women's greater involvement sits alongside **male control** of most religious hierarchies, a debate covered in *Gender, feminism and religion*.

Ethnicity

The pattern. In Britain, minority ethnic groups (Muslims of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage, Hindus, Sikhs, and Black Christians of African and Caribbean heritage) are on average **more religious** than the white British majority.

Explanations.

- **Countries of origin.** Many migrants came from societies where religion is woven into daily life, and brought that with them.

- **Cultural defence.** **Steve Bruce** argued that when a group feels threatened, religion becomes a way to defend its identity and community. Migrants facing racism and an unfamiliar culture gather around the mosque, temple or church. Bruce also applied the idea to whole nations: Catholicism in communist **Poland** and religion in **Northern Ireland** carried national or community identity.
- **Cultural transition.** **Will Herberg (1955)** found that immigrants to the USA used religion to ease the move into a new society: congregations gave them community and support until they were settled. **Ken Pryce** (*Endless Pressure*, 1979) found that **Pentecostal** churches gave African Caribbeans in Bristol mutual support, hope and a way of coping with hardship and racism.
- **Identity for the second generation.** **Tariq Modood** found that many young British Muslims put their **religious** identity before their ethnic or national one, so religion can strengthen across generations rather than fade.

Limits. Religiosity varies a lot **within** groups (by age, gender, class); some second and third generations become less religious; and treating whole ethnic groups as more religious can turn into a stereotype.

Age

The pattern. In Western Christianity, the **older** people are, the more likely they are to attend and to believe. Many congregations are mostly elderly.

Three explanations, which sociologists separate carefully:

- **Ageing effect:** people become more religious as they grow older, perhaps because they face illness and death (Heelas and Woodhead suggest older people turn to spirituality as they approach death).
- **Generational (cohort) effect:** each generation was raised in a more or less religious time and keeps that outlook. **David Voas and Alasdair Crockett (2005)** found that each British generation was less religious than its parents: two churchgoing parents passed their religion on only **about half** the time, and one churchgoing parent only **about a quarter** of the time. If this is right, decline is built in.
- **Period effect:** events that affect everyone at once (a war, a scandal, a pandemic) shift everyone's religiosity.

Young people are not simply less religious: they are more drawn to some **new religious movements**, to **Pentecostal** and evangelical churches with lively worship, and to individual, "pick and mix" spirituality. Among British Muslims, young people are often **more** observant than their parents.

Social class

The pattern depends on the kind of religion.

- **Established churches** (in Britain, the Church of England) have long drawn more of their regular attenders from the **middle class**. In nineteenth-century cities, many working-class people stayed away.
- **Sects and Pentecostal churches** draw heavily on the **poor and marginalised**. **Weber** called this a **theodicy of disprivilege**: a religious explanation of why the poor suffer, with the promise of reward in the next life. Stark and Bainbridge argued that religion offers **compensators** (promises of future reward) to people who lack rewards now.

- **World-affirming** new movements and New Age courses draw more on the **middle class**, who can afford them and look for personal growth.

A global version. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (*Sacred and Secular*, 2004) argued that religiosity is highest where **existential security** is lowest: people facing poverty, disease and danger turn to religion more. That explains why poorer societies, and poorer groups within rich ones, tend to be more religious. The USA is an exception they explain by its weak welfare state and high inequality.

Which matters most? Class, gender, ethnicity and age **interact**: an elderly working-class white man and a young middle-class Muslim woman cannot be predicted from one factor. Most sociologists see ethnicity and age as the strongest predictors in Britain today, but the answer depends on which measure of religiosity you use.

Religion and other belief systems

A **belief system** is a set of ideas that explains the world and guides action. Religion is one; science, political ideologies and magic are others.

Religion and science.

- **Karl Popper** argued that science is an **open** belief system: its claims are put up to be tested and can be **falsified**, so knowledge grows. **Robert Merton (1942)** described the norms that keep science open, such as sharing results and **organised scepticism** (every claim is checked by others).
- **Robin Horton** contrasted this with **closed** belief systems, which protect themselves from challenge: a failure is explained away rather than allowed to disprove the belief.
- But science can be closed too. **E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1937)** showed that the **Azande** of Central Africa explained away failed witchcraft predictions; **Michael Polanyi** argued that scientists defend their own beliefs in similar ways, and **Thomas Kuhn (1962)** showed that scientists work within **paradigms** they resist abandoning.
- **Weber** saw the spread of scientific, calculated thinking (**rationalisation**) as producing **disenchantment**: the world stops being seen as full of magic and spirit. This is a key cause in the secularisation thesis.
- Many people combine the two: some religious groups and new movements present their beliefs as compatible with science.

Religion and ideology. An **ideology** is a set of ideas that serves the interests of a group. **Karl Marx** saw religion as an ideology serving the ruling class (below). **Karl Mannheim** contrasted **ideological** thought (defending the existing order) with **utopian** thought (imagining a different society); religion can be either. Political ideologies such as nationalism and communism can work like religions, with sacred texts, saints, rituals and promises of a perfect future. **Robert Bellah (1967)** called the American system of sacred symbols (the flag, the pledge, "In God We Trust") a **civil religion**.

Religion and magic. Bronisław Malinowski found that **Trobriand Islanders** used magic and ritual before fishing in the dangerous open ocean, but not in the calm lagoon, where their skill was enough. Magic is used for **practical** ends where uncertainty is high; Durkheim argued that magic, unlike religion, has no "church": it serves individuals and creates no moral community.

Newer belief systems. **Humanism** and **atheism** (moral and meaningful lives without religion), **New Age** spirituality (self-spirituality: the sacred is found within), and some argue **consumerism** (identity and meaning through what we buy). **Postmodernists** such as **Jean-François Lyotard** argue that people have lost faith in all **metanarratives**, big stories claiming to explain everything, whether religious, scientific or political.

Why it matters for essays. The growth of competing belief systems is evidence **for** secularisation (religion loses its monopoly) but also a reminder that people still look for meaning (evidence **against** a complete decline).

Types of religious organisation

Several essays turn on "religious organisations", and one question asked how **cults** differ from other types. The classic types:

Type	Size and membership	Relationship with society	Example
Church	large; people are born into it	accepts and supports society; claims a monopoly of truth; often linked to the state	Church of England; the Catholic Church in medieval Europe
Denomination	medium; voluntary membership	accepts society and other denominations; no claim to sole truth	Methodists, Baptists
Sect	small; strict, chosen membership	rejects society; claims sole truth; often a charismatic leader	Jehovah's Witnesses (early), Amish
Cult	loose; members are customers or followers, not strict members	tolerant of other beliefs; often focuses on the individual; seen as deviant	Transcendental Meditation; many New Age groups

- **Ernst Troeltsch (1912)** first contrasted churches and sects; **H. Richard Niebuhr (1929)** added the denomination and argued that sects either die out or **become** denominations as members' children grow up within them.
- **Roy Wallis (1976)** sorted the types on two questions: does society see the group as **respectable** or **deviant**, and does the group claim to be the **only** path to truth or **one of many**? Church: respectable and only path. Denomination: respectable and one of many. Sect: deviant and only path. Cult: deviant and one of many. So a cult is the type that is both outside the mainstream **and** open-minded about others' beliefs.
- **Stark and Bainbridge** distinguished **audience cults** (no membership, just readers or viewers), **client cults** (paying for a service such as therapy) and **cult movements** (asking for more commitment).
- "Cult" is also used in everyday speech as an insult, which is why sociologists usually prefer the term **new religious movement (NRM)**.

Religion and social order: the two classic theories

This recap covers what the essays have needed so far.

Functionalist accounts

Functionalists ask what religion **does** to keep society stable.

- **Durkheim** studied **totemism** among the **Arunta**, Aboriginal Australian clans. Each clan worshipped a sacred totem (an animal or plant), and Durkheim argued that in doing so the clan was really worshipping **itself**: the totem was the symbol of the group. All religions divide the world into the **sacred** (set apart, treated with awe) and the **profane** (ordinary). Shared rituals produce **collective effervescence**, a powerful sense of belonging, and reinforce the **collective conscience**: the shared values and beliefs that make social life possible. Religion thus produces **social solidarity** and **value consensus**. In simple societies with **mechanical solidarity** (people alike), one religion unites everyone; Durkheim expected that in complex societies with **organic solidarity**, shared values would take other forms.
- **A. R. Radcliffe-Brown**, studying the **Andaman Islanders**, saw rituals as **integrating** forces: they reaffirm the values the group depends on, at moments when those values are at stake.
- **Malinowski** stressed **individual** needs: religion helps people through **life crises** (birth, puberty, marriage, death) that could otherwise disrupt society, and through situations of danger and uncertainty.
- **Talcott Parsons** argued that religion provides the **core values** from which a society's norms come (the Protestant values behind American individualism), and answers **problems of meaning**, such as why good people suffer, so people can keep going.
- **Bellah's civil religion** extends this to modern, many-faith societies: a nation can be held together by a shared faith in itself, with its own sacred symbols and ceremonies.

Criticisms.

- **Conflict, not unity.** Religion has inspired wars, persecution and **sectarianism** (the Reformation's wars in Europe; the Troubles in Northern Ireland; the Israeli–Palestinian conflict). In societies with **many faiths**, religion can divide rather than unite.
- **Splits inside religions. Schisms**, such as the divide between Sunni and Shia Islam or between Catholic and Protestant Christianity, show that religion can break groups apart.
- **Teleology.** Functionalists explain religion by its effects (it exists **because** it creates solidarity), which reverses cause and effect.
- **Conservatism.** By stressing order and consensus, functionalism ignores who benefits and overlooks religion's role in **change**.
- **Weak evidence.** Durkheim never visited the Arunta; he relied on others' reports about a few small societies.
- **Secularisation.** If religion has lost influence, it can no longer be the main source of solidarity.

Marxist accounts

Marxists ask whose **interests** religion serves.

- **Marx** called religion "the **opium of the people**" and "the sigh of the oppressed creature" (**1844**). It dulls the pain of exploitation by promising rewards in heaven, so the working class does not challenge capitalism. It produces **false consciousness**, a distorted view that hides the real cause of suffering.

- **Legitimation.** Religion makes inequality look natural or God-given: the **divine right of kings** in medieval Europe; the **Hindu caste** system linking a person's position to past lives; the Victorian hymn verse that placed "the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate" as God's order.
- **Lenin** called religion "spiritual gin", a drug handed out by the ruling class.
- **Alienation.** Marx saw religion as a product of **alienated** people who cannot control their own lives, and expected it to vanish in a classless society.

Neo-Marxists soften this.

- **Antonio Gramsci:** religion is part of ruling-class **hegemony**, but it can also feed **counter-hegemony**, giving the oppressed ideas to resist with.
- **Otto Maduro (1982):** religion has **relative autonomy**, a degree of independence from the economy, so clergy can side with the poor.
- **Friedrich Engels** noted that early Christianity began as a movement of slaves and the poor; **Ernst Bloch** called religion a **principle of hope**, a picture of a better world that can inspire change.

Criticisms.

- **Economic determinism:** Marxism reduces religion to a by-product of class, ignoring belief, gender, ethnicity and nationalism.
- **Religion against the powerful. Liberation theology** (from the **1960s**) saw Catholic priests in Latin America side with the poor against military dictatorships; **Archbishop Óscar Romero** of El Salvador was shot dead at the altar in **1980** after speaking out. Black churches led the American **civil rights movement** in the 1950s and 1960s.
- **Feminists** argue that religion serves **men** (patriarchy), not just one class.
- **Secularisation:** in many societies the ruling class hardly needs religion to keep control.

Weber and religion as a force for change

Weber (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, **1905**) argued that **Calvinist** beliefs (predestination, hard work and thrift as signs of being saved) helped **cause** modern capitalism. So religion can **change** society, not just hold it still. Other examples: the **Iranian revolution** of **1979**, led by religious leaders; the Catholic Church's support for the **Solidarity** movement against communism in Poland in the **1980s**. The full debate belongs to *Religion as a source of social change*, but Weber is the key evaluation point against both functionalism and Marxism: religion's role **varies** with time and place.

The secularisation debate in brief

Secularisation is, in **Bryan Wilson's** (**1966**) definition, the process by which religious thinking, practice and institutions **lose social significance**. It has three levels, and it helps to keep them apart:

1. **Society:** religion loses its hold on the state, law, education, health and welfare (**structural differentiation**: Parsons noted that specialist institutions take over religion's old functions; **disengagement**: churches withdraw from public life).
2. **Organisations:** churches lose members, money and authority.

3. **Individuals:** people pray, believe and attend less.

The case for it (Wilson, **Steve Bruce**, *God is Dead*, **2002**): falling attendance and membership; fewer religious weddings and baptisms; more people saying they have no religion; **rationalisation** and **disenchantment** (Weber); **religious pluralism** (when there are many faiths, none can claim to be the one truth, as **Peter Berger** argued in *The Sacred Canopy*, **1967**); and the rise of **consumerism**, science and individualism.

The case against it.

- **Believing without belonging.** **Grace Davie (1994)** argued that many Britons still believe but no longer attend; religion has become **privatised**, not abandoned. She also described **vicarious religion**: a small active minority practises on behalf of a larger number who approve of it and turn to it at weddings, funerals and national tragedies.
- **Spiritual revolution?** The Kendal Project found **7.9%** of the town's people in church on a typical Sunday and **1.6%** active in the holistic milieu. Heelas and Woodhead argued that spirituality is growing as church religion shrinks, though at that rate it would take decades to replace it, as Bruce pointed out.
- **The religious market.** **Stark and Bainbridge** argued that religious need is constant and that **competition** between many religions, as in the USA, keeps religion lively; decline in one church is offset by growth in another.
- **Public religion.** **José Casanova** (*Public Religions in the Modern World*, **1994**) argued that religions have come back into public life: the US Christian right, the Catholic Church in Poland, Islamic movements.
- **Global revival and resacralisation.** Pentecostal and evangelical Christianity is growing fast in Latin America, Africa and Asia; **fundamentalism** has grown; **theocracies** such as **Iran** are run on religious law. Berger himself changed his mind, calling the world "as furiously religious as it ever was" (**1999**). Some call this **desecularisation** or **resacralisation**.
- **Measurement and definition.** As above: the past may not have been very religious, and inclusive definitions make decline hard to show.

Desacralisation is a related idea: the sacred, mysterious side of life fades as the world is explained rationally (Weber's disenchantment). **Resacralisation** is the claim that the sacred is coming back in new forms. **Post-secular** society describes one where religious and secular voices coexist in public debate.

Variation between countries. Religion keeps more public influence in **Italy**, **Spain**, **Poland** and **Ireland** than in **Britain**, **France** or **Scandinavia**; the **USA** combines a secular state with high attendance; religion shapes law and daily life in **Iran**, **Pakistan** and **Saudi Arabia**.

New religious movements (NRMs)

Roy Wallis (*The Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life*, **1984**) sorted NRMs by how they relate to the world:

Type	Attitude to the world	Example
World-rejecting	sees the outside world as corrupt; members often live apart; strict	the Unification Church ("Moonies"); the Peoples Temple
World-accommodating	mostly accepts the world; focuses on renewing spiritual life inside existing religion	neo-Pentecostal and charismatic groups; Subud
World-affirming	accepts the world and offers techniques for success, health and fulfilment	Transcendental Meditation; Scientology

What their growth might show.

- **Against secularisation:** people still seek the sacred; spiritual demand moves to new suppliers (the religious market); some NRMs have grown fast.
- **For secularisation:** **Wilson** saw NRMs as a **symptom** of secularisation: they are small, fragmented and **privatised**, offer "consumer items" rather than a shared moral order, and could never replace an established church's authority. **Eileen Barker** (*The Making of a Moonie*, 1984) found the Moonies far smaller than their image: most people who attended their workshops never joined, and most who joined left within two years. **Bruce** argued that world-affirming movements are really secular goals (success, wellbeing) in spiritual clothing.
- **Postmodern reading:** **Danièle Hervieu-Léger** described people as **spiritual shoppers** ("pilgrims") who build a personal faith from many sources; **David Lyon** (*Jesus in Disneyland*, 2000) saw religion **relocated** into the sphere of consumption and the media, not lost. This supports the idea that religion has **changed form** rather than declined.

Key facts and formulas

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

Key term	Status
Substantive (exclusive), functional (inclusive) and social constructionist definitions of religion	Learn it
Religiosity; Glock and Stark's five dimensions: belief, practice, experience, knowledge, consequences	Learn it
Measurement problems: operationalising, attendance is not belief, different membership rules, social desirability, no reliable past data, golden-age myth	Learn it
Cultural defence (Bruce); cultural transition (Herberg); theodicy of disprivilege (Weber); compensators (Stark and Bainbridge); existential security (Norris and Inglehart)	Learn it
Ageing, generational and period effects	Learn it
Open and closed belief systems; falsification; paradigms; rationalisation and disenchantment; ideology and utopia; civil religion; metanarratives	Learn it

Key term	Status
Church, denomination, sect, cult; Wallis's respectable/deviant and only path/one of many	Learn it
Sacred and profane; collective conscience; collective effervescence; social solidarity; value consensus	Learn it
Opium of the people; false consciousness; legitimization; hegemony; relative autonomy; liberation theology	Learn it
Secularisation; structural differentiation; disengagement; pluralism; believing without belonging; vicarious religion; resacralisation; desacralisation	Learn it
World-rejecting, world-accommodating, world-affirming NRMs; 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 14 questions for this topic (2021–2025). Two were set in two papers of the same session, so there are 12 different questions. All but one are 35-mark "Evaluate this view" essays from Paper 4; the other is the June 2021 Paper 34 in the older format, whose two parts are of different types, so the counts add up to 15.

Question type	Questions
Evaluate the view that religion creates social solidarity or prevents conflict	5
Evaluate the view that religion has lost its influence or social significance	4
Evaluate what the growth of new religious movements shows about secularisation	4
Evaluate the Marxist view that religion serves the ruling class	1
Explain how types of religious organisation differ	1

Paper 4 lasts 1 hour 45 minutes for two essays, so allow about 50 minutes for each, including 5 minutes to plan. No question here has yet been set only on definitions, measurement or social groups, so the worked examples cover those.

For every essay: write down what agreeing with the quotation would mean before you plan, then sort each point into "supports" or "challenges". Plan around **lines of argument**, not a list of sociologists, and make every paragraph end by saying what it shows about the quotation.

1. Evaluate the view that religion creates social solidarity or prevents conflict (5 questions)

Asked as: religion functions to bind people together in society (1); the main role of religion is to create social solidarity (1); religion promotes social solidarity (1); the role of religion is to prevent conflict in society (1); functionalists provide the most convincing explanations of the role of religion (1).

The examiners report that weaker answers drift into **social order** or **social control** in general. Keep coming back to the key word: **solidarity** (people feeling bound together) or **preventing conflict**.

1. **Introduction.** Define social solidarity and value consensus; say this is the functionalist view; note that Marxists agree religion keeps society stable but say the unity is false.
2. **Build the functionalist case, from the smallest society to the largest:**
 - **the clan:** Durkheim's Arunta, the totem as the group's symbol of itself, sacred and profane, collective effervescence;
 - **the individual at risk:** Malinowski's life crises and Trobriand fishing magic, Radcliffe-Brown's Andaman rituals: religion stops anxiety and grief from tearing the group apart;
 - **the nation:** Parsons's core values and problems of meaning; Bellah's civil religion; national days of mourning and remembrance; churches filling up in wartime;
 - **communities under pressure:** cultural defence (Bruce) and cultural transition (Herberg, Pryce): religion binds minority groups and whole nations together;
 - **religion as peacemaker:** most faiths teach compassion and forgiveness; clergy brokering peace, such as Archbishop **Desmond Tutu** chairing South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission after apartheid ended, or cross-community church groups in Northern Ireland.
3. **Test it, from the inside out:**
 - **flaws in the theory itself:** teleology; conservatism; Durkheim's evidence from a few small societies; Malinowski shows religion meets **individual** needs, so even functionalists disagree about its main role;
 - **unity that is not real:** Marxists (opium, false consciousness: harmony on the surface, exploitation underneath); feminists (unity built on women's subordination);
 - **religion dividing people:** religious wars, sectarianism, long-running conflicts that last generations; schisms within faiths; sects and cults that set themselves against the mainstream; fundamentalist violence;
 - **religion driving change instead:** Weber's Protestant ethic; liberation theology; the Iranian revolution; Methodism's links with early British trade unions and the labour movement;
 - **a different world now:** in multi-faith, secular societies, one religion cannot unite everyone; postmodernists see religion serving individual identity (spiritual shopping), not society.
4. **Conclusion**, for example: religion can bind **a group** strongly, but in diverse societies the same bonds can set groups against each other; solidarity is one role among several, and it depends on how many faiths a society has and how secular it is.

When the quotation names functionalism as "most convincing", it is a theory comparison: after setting out functionalism, judge it **against** Marxism, feminism, Weber and postmodernism one at a time, saying where each does better or worse. Weber is useful here because he refuses to generalise: religion can unite, divide or

change society depending on the case.

When it says "prevent conflict", put conflict examples at the centre, and remember that a religion can **reduce** conflict within a group while **causing** it between groups.

2. Evaluate the view that religion has lost its influence or social significance (4 questions)

Asked as: religious organisations have lost their social significance (2, the same question in two papers); religious organisations have little influence in society today (1); in the June 2021 Paper 34, the extent to which desecrification has occurred has been exaggerated (1, a 16-mark part (b)).

1. **Introduction.** Define secularisation (Wilson) and "social significance"; separate the three levels (society, organisations, individuals); say that the answer depends on how religion is defined and measured.

2. **The case that influence has gone, level by level:**

- **society:** structural differentiation (the state runs schools, hospitals and welfare); civil weddings and secular funerals; laws on divorce, abortion and same-sex marriage passed against church opposition; religion's shrinking place in national ceremonies;
- **organisations:** falling attendance and membership (the census figures; Brierley's counts); lower income, closing buildings and fewer clergy; pluralism means no single church can speak for society (Berger); people ignore church teaching on sex and family life;
- **individuals:** rationalisation and disenchantment (Weber); science offering explanations; consumerism and other belief systems competing for time and meaning; Voas and Crockett's generational decline.

3. **The case that influence remains:**

- **it depends where you look:** theocracies (Iran); strong public religion in Italy, Spain, Poland and Ireland; global growth of Pentecostalism; minority ethnic communities (cultural defence);
- **public religion is back:** Casanova; the Christian right and evangelical lobbying in US politics (including the campaign that led to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in **2022**); faith schools; religious groups campaigning on war, poverty and refugees;
- **religion has changed form, not disappeared:** believing without belonging and vicarious religion (Davie); privatised worship; online services, live-streamed prayer and televangelism; NRMs and New Age spirituality; Lyon's relocation of religion;
- **churches adapting:** food banks, community projects, youth work, political campaigning: new ways of making themselves relevant;
- **the evidence is shaky:** the past may not have been more religious (golden-age myth); measures of practice miss belief (Hadaway); exclusive definitions build decline in.

4. **Conclusion** on the exact words, for example: organisations have lost much of their **institutional** power in most Western societies, but not everywhere, and religion keeps significance in private life, among minorities and in public campaigns.

The older desecrification question asked the same debate from the other side, and in three bands (0–6, 7–11, 12–16). The top band needed an **explicit** assessment, for example by questioning what "desecrification" means, using **resacralisation** and **post-secular** society, and asking whether the past was ever as sacred as

the claim assumes.

3. Evaluate what the growth of new religious movements shows about secularisation (4 questions)

Asked as: growing support for new religious movements disproves the secularisation thesis (1); the growth of new religious movements is evidence that secularisation has occurred (2, the same question in two papers); the growth of new religious movements shows that religion remains a powerful influence in society (1).

The key move is to say **which definition of secularisation** you are testing. If secularisation means established churches losing authority, NRMs are evidence **for** it (the old monopoly has broken up). If it means people becoming less religious, NRMs are evidence **against** it (people are still seeking the sacred).

1. **Introduction.** Define NRMs (Wallis's three types) and secularisation; flag the two meanings above.

2. **Reading NRMs as a sign that religion is still strong:**

- **demand for the sacred persists:** people leave old churches for new suppliers (Stark and Bainbridge's market); some movements have recruited many members;
- **part of a wider revival:** New Age spirituality, the holistic milieu, privatised and online worship, fundamentalism; Heelas and Woodhead's spiritual revolution;
- **compare like with like:** if Martin is right that past churchgoing was partly enforced, then a Victorian pew count overstates past faith; joining a small, often mocked movement today takes effort, so it may be a stronger sign of belief than old attendance ever was;
- **science is not always the enemy:** Scientology describes its methods as a "technology", and Transcendental Meditation promotes research on its effects, so some movements use the language of science rather than retreating from it, which weakens the claim that rationalisation must end religion;
- **Durkheim predicted it:** he wrote that the old gods were dying and new ones not yet born; if religion meets lasting needs, new forms of the sacred will appear as the churches shrink.

3. **Reading NRMs as a sign of secularisation:**

- **too small and fragile:** Barker's Moonies; most movements are tiny next to the churches they are said to replace;
- **fragmentation itself is secularisation:** Wilson and Berger: many competing faiths mean no shared sacred canopy, so religion becomes a private choice with little social significance;
- **individual, not social:** world-affirming movements serve personal goals (success, wellbeing), so they do not rebuild religion's hold on public life (Bruce); many support a secular state;
- **the bigger picture still points to decline:** the census rise in "no religion" from 25.2% to 37.2% in ten years dwarfs any NRM's membership; civil weddings now outnumber religious ones in Britain; the churches' role in law and education keeps shrinking;
- **but movements differ:** some world-rejecting groups do try to reshape society, so not all NRMs are purely private.

4. **Conclusion**, for example: NRMs show that religious **belief** has changed form rather than died, but they do not restore religion's **social** significance; so they support secularisation at the level of society and challenge it at the level of individuals.

Turn the plan round to match the quotation: for "disproves" or "remains a powerful influence", the revival reading supports the view; for "evidence that secularisation has occurred", the decline reading does.

4. Evaluate the Marxist view that religion serves the ruling class (1 question)

Asked as: religious organisations serve the interests of the ruling class (1).

1. **Introduction.** Explain ideology, false consciousness and legitimisation; note the quotation is about **organisations**, so think about money, power and links to the state, not just beliefs.

2. **How religion might serve the ruling class:**

- **in its teaching:** the opium thesis; rewards in heaven for patience on earth; the divine right of kings; the caste system; hymns and sermons blessing the social order;
- **in its organisation:** established churches tied to the state and monarchy; bishops and leaders drawn from the elite; organisations whose wealth (property, investments) depends on capitalism doing well; reliance on gifts from rich patrons;
- **in the family:** Marxist feminists link teachings that make the husband head of the household to capitalism's needs. A wife's unpaid housework raises and looks after the next generation of workers at no cost to employers; women can be drawn into paid work in a boom and sent home in a slump (a **reserve army of labour**); and a husband who alone supports a family has too much to lose to go on strike.

3. **Challenges:**

- **from inside Marxism:** Gramsci (counter-hegemony), Maduro (relative autonomy), Engels and Bloch (protest and hope);
- **religion siding with the poor:** liberation theology and Romero; Black churches in the civil rights movement; Methodist and other nonconformist roots of the labour movement; churches criticising poverty and inequality today;
- **other interests:** feminists (religion serves **men** of every class); functionalists (it serves **everyone** by creating solidarity); postmodernists (it serves individual identity);
- **it depends on the organisation:** an established church allied with the state is more likely to support the powerful than a sect of the poor or an NRM;
- **weaknesses in the theory:** economic determinism; and secularisation means the ruling class may no longer need religion at all.

4. **Conclusion**, for example: some established organisations have served ruling-class interests, especially when tied to the state, but religion also serves men, communities and individuals, and at times it has challenged the powerful.

5. Explain how types of religious organisation differ (1 question)

Asked as: in the June 2021 Paper 34, how cults differ from other types of religious organisation (1, a 9-mark part (a)).

The mark scheme bands were 0–4 and 5–9. A definition of a cult with one or two simple contrasts stayed in the lower band; the top of the upper band needed **several developed** differences using sociological concepts and examples.

1. **Define** a cult (loose, individual-centred, tolerant of other faiths, seen as deviant).
2. **Contrast it with each of the other types**, one difference per paragraph, each with a concept and an example:
 - **with a church**: size, how people join (birth against choice), relationship to the state, claim to sole truth;
 - **with a denomination**: both are tolerant of other faiths, but a denomination is respectable and organised, a cult deviant and loose (Wallis's grid);
 - **with a sect**: both are seen as deviant, but a sect demands strict commitment and claims sole truth, while a cult asks little and accepts other paths;
 - **with NRMs**: "cult" is a loaded word; many groups called cults are better described as world-affirming NRMs.
3. Use **Troeltsch, Niebuhr, Wallis, and Stark and Bainbridge** (audience, client, cult movement).

Worked examples

Each is a new 35-mark essay on part of the syllabus that has not yet had its own question. 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

'Women are more religious than men.' Evaluate this view. [35]

Introduction. Define religiosity and its dimensions (Glock and Stark), and say that the answer depends on which dimension and which religion is measured.

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **The figures**: in Western Christianity women attend more, pray more and believe more; about 80% of the Kendal holistic milieu were women.
- **Why it might be true**: socialisation into caring roles; closeness to birth and death (Davie); risk aversion (Miller and Hoffmann); organismic, ethical and social deprivation (Glock and Stark).
- **New forms of spirituality**: the New Age emphasis on healing and feelings appeals to women more (Heelas and Woodhead, Bruce), so even as churches decline the gap remains.

Against the view (AO3).

- **It depends on the religion**: in Islam and Orthodox Judaism men carry the duty of public worship, so attendance figures reverse.
- **It depends on the measure**: practice is easy to count, but private belief and experience are not; women may simply be more willing to **say** they are religious (social desirability).

- **Power is not piety:** men dominate leadership in most religions, so on the dimension of religious authority men are more involved (a feminist point).
- **The gap may be closing:** as more women work full time, their attendance has fallen too; some research finds the gender gap is smaller among younger people.
- **Other divisions may matter more:** age and ethnicity predict religiosity more strongly than gender.

Conclusion. In Western Christianity and alternative spirituality the view is broadly supported, but it is not true of all religions or all dimensions, and the gap may reflect social roles that are changing.

How it would be marked. Accurate use of the dimensions of religiosity, the explanations and named research (AO1 7–9), every point applied to **comparing** women and men (AO2 10–11), and sustained evaluation of the measures and of differences between religions, leading to a judgement (AO3 12–15).

Example 2

'It is impossible to measure religious belief accurately.' Evaluate this view. [35]

Introduction. Define religiosity and its five dimensions; say "accurately" means **valid** (measuring belief, not just behaviour) and **reliable** (consistent between studies and over time).

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **Operationalising:** belief is private and many-sided, so any measure captures only part of it.
- **Attendance is not belief:** people attend for social reasons and believe without attending (Davie).
- **People misreport:** Hadaway, Marler and Chaves found counted attendance was about half the claimed rate.
- **Inconsistent counting:** churches use different membership rules; census answers may express identity, not faith.
- **The past is unknowable:** no surveys before the twentieth century; the 1851 count measured attendance only; Martin's golden-age myth.
- **Cultural bias:** Christian-style measures under-count home-based worship (Hinduism) and women's private practice in Islam.

Against the view (AO3).

- **Several measures together:** when attendance, surveys, census answers and rites of passage all point the same way (as in Britain since 2011), the trend is hard to dismiss.
- **Better methods exist:** Glock and Stark's multidimensional surveys; large repeated surveys such as the World Values Survey make comparison between countries possible.
- **Qualitative research:** in-depth studies such as the Kendal Project combine counts with interviews to get at meaning.
- **"Impossible" is too strong:** we can measure religious **practice** well; it is **belief** and **comparison with the past** that are hard.

Conclusion. Accurate measurement of belief itself is very difficult, especially across cultures and centuries, but combining methods gives a reasonable picture of trends, so the view overstates the problem.

How it would be marked. Accurate knowledge of the measures, their problems and named studies, using the concepts of validity and reliability (AO1 7–9), applied throughout to **belief** rather than to religion in general (AO2 10–11), and sustained evaluation that separates practice from belief and present from past (AO3 12–15).

Example 3

'Inclusive definitions of religion are more useful to sociologists than exclusive definitions.' Evaluate this view. [35]

Introduction. Define inclusive (functional) and exclusive (substantive) definitions with an example of each (Durkheim, Yinger; Weber, Tylor); "useful" means helping sociologists to study and compare religion.

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **Wider reach:** inclusive definitions cover non-theistic religions such as some forms of Buddhism, avoiding Western bias.
- **They capture change:** New Age spirituality, civil religion (Bellah) and spiritual shopping can be studied as religion, so sociologists notice religion changing form rather than wrongly concluding it has vanished.
- **They fit sociology's questions:** sociologists study what religion does for individuals and society (Durkheim, Malinowski, Parsons).

Against the view (AO3).

- **Too broad to be useful:** football, nationalism and consumerism become "religions"; a definition that includes everything explains nothing.
- **They prejudice the secularisation debate:** if anything that binds people counts, religion cannot decline by definition, so the theory cannot be tested.
- **Exclusive definitions are clearer:** easier to apply in surveys and closer to what believers themselves mean.
- **A third option:** the social constructionist approach (Aldridge on Scientology) studies how the label is given and contested, which may be more useful than either fixed definition.
- **Usefulness depends on the purpose:** measuring decline needs an exclusive definition; studying meaning and identity may need an inclusive one.

Conclusion. Neither is more useful in every case; the choice should follow the research question, and good research states its definition openly because the conclusions depend on it.

How it would be marked. Accurate knowledge of all three types of definition with named sociologists (AO1 7–9), consistently applied to **usefulness for research** (AO2 10–11), and a sustained comparison that links definitions to the secularisation debate before reaching a judgement (AO3 12–15).

Common mistakes

- **Opinion instead of sociology.** The examiners keep reporting answers built on personal views about religion. Every paragraph needs a named sociologist, study or concept.
- **Describing theories without the question.** Outlining functionalism and Marxism in general, then stopping, is the most common reason for low marks. Each theory must be used to answer the exact quotation.
- **Mixing up solidarity and social order.** Solidarity is people feeling bound together; order can be imposed through control. Keep the essay on the word in the question.
- **Evaluation by juxtaposition only.** Writing "however, Marxists disagree" and then describing Marxism is weak evaluation. Say **why** the other view is better or worse, with evidence.
- **Treating secularisation as one thing.** Separate society, organisations and individuals; a claim can be true at one level and false at another.
- **Taking statistics at face value.** Attendance and census figures need a sentence on what they do and do not measure.
- **Over-generalising.** Answers that talk only about Britain or only about Christianity miss easy marks: contrast religions, countries and social groups.
- **Using "cult" loosely.** In sociology it has a precise meaning; do not use it as an insult for any small or strange group.

How to get the marks

- **"Evaluate this view" (35 marks):** one long essay, marked by levels for each assessment objective.
- **AO1 knowledge and understanding (9):** the top level (7–9) needs a wide range of detailed points with concepts, theory and research. Use the terms: religiosity, sacred and profane, collective conscience, false consciousness, legitimisation, secularisation, believing without belonging, cultural defence.
- **AO2 interpretation and application (11):** the top level (10–11) needs material that is accurate and **consistently applied to the question**. If the quotation is about "religious organisations", talk about organisations; if it says "prevent conflict", keep testing conflict.
- **AO3 analysis and evaluation (15):** the top level (12–15) needs evaluation that is **explicit, detailed and sustained**, with contrasting views and evidence. A description of the other side that is only implicitly linked to the quotation stays in the 4–7 band; explicit evaluation that is not kept up reaches 8–11.
- **Use this topic's tools to evaluate:** the definition chosen, the measure used, the social group and the country or religion studied. These four questions turn any religion essay from description into analysis.
- **Reach a judgement** that answers the exact words: how far, for whom, where, and on which definition.
- **Answer two questions from different sections;** the paper is out of $2 \times 35 = 70$.

Quick check

1. Give one strength and one weakness of a functional (inclusive) definition of religion.

2. In England and Wales, 59.3% of people described themselves as Christian in 2011 and 46.2% in 2021. By how many percentage points did the share fall, and by what percentage of its 2011 level, to one decimal place? Give one reason the figures may not measure belief.
3. Explain the difference between an ageing effect and a generational effect, using Voas and Crockett.
4. Using Wallis's two questions, explain how a cult differs from a sect.
5. Why might the growth of NRMs support the secularisation thesis according to Wilson?

Answers

1. Strength: it includes religions without gods (such as some forms of Buddhism), avoiding Western bias.
Weakness: it is so broad that nationalism or football could count, and religion could never be shown to decline.
2. $59.3 - 46.2 = 13.1$ percentage points. $13.1 \div 59.3 = 0.221$, so a fall of **22.1%** of the 2011 level. The census records **identity**: ticking "Christian" may mean baptised or culturally British, not believing; the question is also voluntary.
3. An ageing effect means people become more religious as they grow older (for example as they face death). A generational effect means each generation keeps the religiosity of the time it grew up in. Voas and Crockett found each generation less religious than its parents (two churchgoing parents passing on their religion only about half the time), which supports a generational effect.
4. Both are seen by society as **deviant**. A sect claims to be the **only** path to truth and demands strict commitment; a cult accepts that it is **one of many** paths and asks little of its followers.
5. Wilson saw NRMs as small, fragmented and privatised: many competing groups mean no single faith holds society's shared values, so religion loses social significance even if individuals remain spiritual.

Past questions to try

- 9699/43/M/J/24 Q6: essay on whether religion promotes social solidarity.
- 9699/42/O/N/23 Q6: essay on whether religious organisations have little influence in society today.
- 9699/43/O/N/24 Q6: essay on whether the growth of NRMs is evidence that secularisation has occurred.
- 9699/34/M/J/21 Q8: how cults differ from other religious organisations, then whether desacrilisation has been exaggerated.