

The AQA specification:

- Different theories of religion

The exam requires that you are able to:

- ▶ Describe the functionalist theory of religion.
- ▶ Evaluate the functionalist theory of religion.

Introduction

To functionalists, religion is an important part of society as it helps **integrate** people together by sharing common beliefs, morals, and opinions. This creates a **value consensus** in society (people sharing the same values).

By sharing the same values this unites people together and creates **social solidarity/cohesion** in society. It is important for individuals to co-exist in society in a harmonious way, otherwise without integration society can be prone to breaking down and falling into disorder and conflict. As such, religion helps maintain the same values and social norms held collectively by all in society, which is important for maintaining **social control** and order in society.

So the contribution of religion in society and to the individual is both **positive** and beneficial.

Durkheim and Religion

Durkheim's famous publication '*Elementary Forms of Religious Life*' (1912), analyses the role and function of religion based on secondary sources collected by anthropologists on the small primitive Aboriginal Arunta tribe in Australia (Durkheim had never visited the small tribe). Durkheim focused on researching a primitive tribe because he believed by studying this basic form of religion which has not been manipulated by man, he hoped to gain insights and apply his findings to more sophisticated religious systems (e.g. Christianity).

- **Totem.** Durkheim points out that members of the tribe would often worship a totem (e.g. an object such as a plant or animal carving) seen as **sacred symbol** by the group. The existence of an *external object* like the totem is an important one as this allows rituals and ceremonies such as collective worshipping to take place. This helps **integrate the group** together and reinforce the tribe to their **shared identity**. This ultimately provides a sense of belonging to their community.
- **Sacred and the profane.** Durkheim found that the *totem*, places and other rituals were viewed by the tribe as being sacred (reverences or having a special meaning) and anything that was not connected to the totem was seen as *profane* – that is not sacred, such as everyday activity that does not have any religious significance or meaning. The distinction between the sacred and profane is an important one because the sacred allows its members to come together and celebrate collectively. This creates a **collective conscience**; the sharing of the same beliefs, morals, values, and opinions. This is important because if individuals are left to their own for along amount of time, without sacred objects being at the centre of the group, the beliefs and convictions of the group will weaken, whereas sacred objects help reinforce the collective conscience.
- **Worshipping of society.** Durkheim argues that the tribe as a 'group' exists because of the totem. The collective worship around the totem is really the worshipping of the tribe itself. The worshipping towards the sacred objects is not really towards the object itself as such but must mean something more significant. He claims that its members are really (unconsciously) *worshipping their own social group's identity*.

Malinowski: Psychological Function

- **In times of uncertainty/risk.** Malinowski's (1954) theory on the role of religion was based on a study of a small-scale tribal society in the Trobriand Islands. In studying the Trobriand Islanders, Malinowski found that fishing in

the lagoon was not preceded by rituals (no risk) but fishing in the open sea, amid conditions of uncertainty and risk, was always preceded by rituals. This led him to believe religion helps provide security and *explanations* in times of uncertainty and crisis (unpredictable or uncontrollable events) e.g. death, illness, unemployment etc. Religious explanations help produce confidence and a feeling of control in times of crisis and fear.

- **Anomie.** Parsons (1965) argues religion helps deal with 'life crisis' which would otherwise lead to *anomie* (break down of norms of behaviour) that can threaten stability and order in society. Religion gives meaning to ultimate questions (e.g. life after death) and to the meaningless and inexplicable suffering and evil (e.g. cancer in babies). Belief in concepts such as immortality, heaven, funeral ceremonies, helps in the stability of a healthy society, as it provides meaning to such events.

Parsons: Reinforcing Core Values

- **Parsons** (1965) argues one function of religion is to reinforce the core values of society and that religion helps make them sacred (e.g. not stealing, or committing adultery or murder) which helps reaffirm society's social values. This helps promote social stability and order in society. For example, the Ten Commandments in the Bible reinforces the social values. The commandment 'thou shalt not commit adultery' demands that families stay together, thus reinforcing social cohesion. 'Thou shalt not steal' refers to the respect for private property, a religiously respected societal value.

Bellah: Civil Religion

- **Civil religion.** Robert Bellah (1970) on the analysis of American society argues the religious beliefs will eventually die as society becomes more secular and more diversified. However, he argues that certain social activities perform the same functions of uniting people together just like religion has done, which he calls *civil religion*. These are non-religious events, in which people are united by a faith in their shared nationalism which is expressed through ritual, ceremonies and beliefs (e.g. royal weddings, memorial days, flag waving, and national team sport) which help integrate its members in society in a similar way to that of religion. This unity of society can be achieved by civil religion.

✓✗ Evaluation

✓ Conflict theories

Marxists and feminists accept the functionalist view that religion can promote social stability. *However*, they offer a differing perspective in that they do not see it as beneficial for society as a whole. Marxists see religion as benefiting the ruling class whereas feminists see religion benefiting a patriarchal society, reinforcing the status quo of men. This suggests the functionalist view of religion is partially correct according to feminists and Marxists but would disagree on the outcome.

✓ The Rise of new religions and fundamentalism

There is empirical evidence to support the functionalist view of religion. The growth of new religious movements across the globe proves religion is a universal necessity, and thus in a sense, perhaps functional as people need religion. Also, the rise of extreme fundamentalism could be seen as a reaction to the weakening of society's norms and values in a postmodern world and may be a response to the threat of anomie in today's society.

✗ Postmodernists

Postmodernists argue that functionalists view religion as less significant in modern multi-cultural societies, where a diverse range of religious beliefs and practices mean religion can no longer play the role of uniting and integrating people as did in a traditional society with one monotheistic faith. This would suggest the functionalist view is no longer valid in a modern diverse society.

X The Rise in New Age Movements

The growth of New Age Movements suggests people have become disillusioned by institutional faiths, as they may no longer provide an adequate explanation and security, as suggested by Malinowski and Parsons. People now seek other forms to help with a life crisis, such as an emphasis on spirituality, self-healing and personality improvement therapies. This would suggest the functionalist view that mainstream religion provides meaning and emotional support in a modern society may to some extent no longer be valid.

X Religion can bring conflict

Religion can be a source of conflict and tension within a society. For example, the conflict in Northern Ireland between the Protestants and Catholics, or in Iraq between Shia and Sunni Muslims. In the UK, rising tensions in Muslim communities can often lead to conflict and culture clashes e.g. the Bradford riots. Or between societies such as the Arab-Israeli conflict in Palestine and the Iran-Iraq war in the 80s. This shows the function of religion does not always unit and integrate its members but can at times be dysfunctional for society.

X Methodological flaws in Durkheim's research

Durkheim only studied a few Aboriginal tribes which meant that a) his sample was small making it non-representative and therefore hard to generalise his findings to society as a whole; b) there is also the issue of applying his study of a primitive tribe to a large diverse modern society; c) finally, his research findings are based on secondary sources, not on first-hand evidence, therefore giving rise to errors, bias and misinterpretation. Such methodological issues question the validity of his research findings, and therefore his theories as it is based on such research evidence.

X Methodological flaws in Malinowski research

Malinowski's study was carried out in the 1950's on a small scale non-literate Trobriand Islanders sample, so the research findings are non-representative and not applicable to modern complex industrialised societies. Again such methodological issues question whether we can generalise the research findings beyond the tribe the research was based on.

X Religion can be psychologically damaging

The functionalist view ignores the potential psychological damage religion can have on people. The concept of damnation, sin, and hell can often leave people, especially young children, feeling anxious and terrified. Religious laws that are broken can often evoke feelings of fear, guilt, and low self-esteem in people and in some cases lead to people committing suicide.



Exam Questions

1. Outline and explain **two** functions religion plays in society. [10 marks]
2. Outline and explain **two** limitations of the functionalist view of religion [10 marks]
3. Applying material from **Item...** and your knowledge, evaluate the claim that religion brings about harmony and consensus. [20 marks]
4. Applying material from **Item...** and your knowledge, evaluate the claim that religion is more likely to be a source of conflict than of cohesions. [20 marks]

The AQA specification:

- Different theories of religion

The exam requires that you are able to:

- ▶ Describe the Marxist theories of religion.
- ▶ Evaluate the Marxist theories of religion.

Introduction

Marxists see capitalist society as made up of two classes: the ruling class (bourgeoisie) and the working class (proletariat). The ruling class own the means of production (companies, factories, shops) which generates a wealthy income. The working class being the labour force, are exploited by the ruling class keeping wages as low as possible to maximise the profit of the ruling class. This creates a conflict between the two classes. Marxists believed that the working class will eventually be aware of their exploitation and rise up to overthrow the ruling class and replace capitalism with a classless society where everyone is equal and exploitation is removed (utopian society). However, religion prevents this from occurring and helps to continue reinforcing a class-divided society.

Marxism and Religion

Marxists disagree with functionalists that religion benefits the whole of society. Marxists see the role of religion as an important one that benefits the ruling class. **Religious ideology** can be an effective method of **social control** over the working-class; the ruling class controlling and maintaining power over the working class without using physical force. The result is that the working class are less likely to challenge their status quo and revolt against the ruling class, and thus religion can be seen as benefiting the interests of the ruling class. Religion serves the interest of the ruling class by:

- **Distorting reality.** Religion blinds the working class to understanding the real reason for their poor situation; being exploited by the ruling class. Explanation of that inequality has been justified by religious ideas (e.g. sin, God's providence, God works in mysterious way, the afterlife). Religious ideas distort how working class people view reality; by distorting their view, this creates a **false class-consciousness** amongst the working class as it helps them accept their position as the norm.
- **Religion legitimatises class inequality.** Religion justifies inequality between the classes as being fair and natural because it has been ordained by God as expressed in the religious hymn "*All things bright and beautiful*": "*The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, God made them, high or lowly, and ordered their estate*". Religion also reduces the chance of revolt through the concept of 'hell'. Those who do evil will be damned in hell; such a concept creates the fear of hell amongst the working class and minimises any challenges made to existing social order as this would be a direct challenge to God.
- **The opiate of the masses.** Karl Max saw religion as the 'opium for the people'. By this he meant that religion 'drugs' the working class by providing a comforting diversion from seeing and attacking the real cause of their poverty (i.e. the injustice of the capitalist system) by promising eternal happiness in the afterlife. This helps working class people accept their poverty on earth because the potential rewards in the afterlife are huge. Marx saw happiness after death as an illusion. Such an illusion helps maintain and sustain the social inequality between the classes.

Supporting empirical evidence

Empirical evidence to support the Marxist view of religion:

- **Class inequality.** The Hindu caste system in India encourages social class divisions. This hierarchical religious system determines before birth which social position people will be born in society ('Brahmins' being the highest and 'untouchables' the lowest position). The caste system will determine the job to which one can aspire to in life, and as a result, will determine the socioeconomic status in society.
- **Religious faith is strongest amongst the poor.** The growth of religious belief is often found to be strongest among the poor, the oppressed and the working class, especially amongst women who are the least powerful in society. This may explain the growth of Islam and the veiling of Muslim women in some poorer regions in the Middle East (Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine and Iran).

✓X Evaluation

✓ Feminism

Aspects of the Marxist theory of religion is supported by feminists. They would agree with the Marxist view that religion can act as a form of social control against the working class. However, they would go further and argue religions are oppressive especially towards women because religion is used to justify a patriarchal society.

✓ Functionalism

Marxist and functionalists would agree religion acts as a form of social control but they differ in who benefits from this. To the functionalist, religion regulates and maintains social order which is good for the stability of society as a whole. To the Marxist, religion prevents the working class from realising their true position in society – one of exploitation and oppression.

✓ Religious faith is strongest amongst the poor

The growth of religious belief is often found to be strongest among the poor, the oppressed and the working class, especially amongst women, who are the least powerful in society. This may explain the rise in the veiling of Muslim women in some poorer regions in the Middle East such as in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine and Iran for example. This seems to show Marxist theory may have validity as it is supported by empirical evidence.

X Religion helps the poor

Neo-Marxists claim religion does not always act in a controlling manner against the working class. They believe religious organisations have often taken the side of the oppressed working class against the injustices of capitalism. For example, Father Camilo Torres in the 1960s is a real-life example of a Colombian Catholic priest who practised **liberation theology** by becoming a guerrilla fighter against the corrupt government, to liberate the marginalised and ill-treated working class from poverty and exploitation of capitalism. In this way, religion was used to influence the type of economic society to a fairer and just system.

X Secularisation issue

The process of secularisation has meant religious beliefs and religious worship have declined in some western societies. This means religious ideology acting as a form of controlling factor may no longer be applicable if people do not believe in religion any more. This suggests the Marxist theory of religion may not be as valid in modern societies in the West.

X Methodological issues

Some Marxist concepts are difficult to research to see if they are true. For example, with the idea of a 'false consciousness', what type of research would be carried out to test this concept? How will the variable 'false consciousness' be operationalised and measured? (the process of converting the variables in a way that can be tested and measured in practical terms). What would the researcher be looking for? This makes some concepts impossible to prove or disprove, which makes the Marxist theory of religion unscientific.

X Postmodernist

Marxists have been criticised by postmodernists. They argue the recent fragmentation of beliefs (reflected in the growth of many NRMs and NAMs) has weakened the influence religion has over people. Individuals can reason for themselves and can pick and choose the aspects of religion which they find appealing. This suggests it is hard to see how people are manipulated by religion as suggested by Marxists.



Exam Questions

1. Outline and explain **two** limitations of the Marxist view of religion. [10 marks]
2. Applying material from **Item...** and your knowledge, evaluate the claim that religion performs an ideological function in the interest of powerful groups. [20 marks]