6 BELIEFS IN SOCIETY

**6.1 IDEOLOGY, SCIENCE AND RELIGION**

P.430-432 GETTING YOU THINKING

**Suggested answers**

**1.** No set answers.

**2.** No set answers.

**3.** No set answers.

**4.** No set answers.

P.439-440 Focus on skills: EVOLUTION AND RELIGION – SEPARATE OR COMPLEMENTARY?

**Suggested answers**

**1.** Some Muslims object to the teaching of evolution to primary school children because they see evolution as contrary to the traditions of Islam and teaching it as part of a western anti-Islamic agenda.

**2.** The ‘warfare model’ of science and faith sees the two as in conflict because they offer alternative views of the nature of reality that are incompatible with each other.

**3.** Some Christian critics object to the teaching of evolutionary theory because they believe that God created the world and all the creatures living in it rather than the idea that creatures, including humans, have evolved through a process of natural selection.

**4.** The warfare model of science and faith argue that the two can never be reconciled as they offer mutually exclusive views of reality. One attempted solution to this impasse is to argue that science and religion are not incompatible, but incommensurate i.e. they exist in two completely separate domains of thought and people can choose to believe in both, either or neither. The problem with this view occurs when the claims of one belief system directly challenge those of the other, as is the case with evolutionary theory and creationism. The theory of ‘intelligent design’ put forward in the 1990s was, supposedly, a ‘scientific’ alternative to evolution, but scientists have rejected it as untestable and as little more than a recasting of creationism in pseudo-scientific guise.

The author of the passage argues that there is a way of reconciling the two by seeing them as existing in a relationship of ‘tension and synergy’ which ‘opens the way to an enriched vision of reality which is both existentially and rationally satisfying’. He does not spell out how this relationship is supposed to work in practice, however, so it remains unclear whether the two world views can actually be reconciled.

p.444 Check your understanding

**Suggested answers**

**1.** ‘Theism’ refers to a belief in a god or gods. The term derives from the Greek *theos* meaning ‘god’.

**2.** The ‘Enlightenment’ is the name given to the period in the history of western thought and culture, stretching roughly from 1650 to 1800, which was characterized by dramatic revolutions in science, philosophy, society and politics. These developments were seen as ending the stranglehold of the medieval world-view in which religion dominated and ushering in modernity, where reason and science supposedly replaced religious dogma.

**3.** ‘Totemism’ refers to a form of religion where tribes or clans adopt a totem as their divine protector and provider. A totem is some aspect of nature, such as an animal or plant, which may be believed to contain spirits, souls, demons or magic. Followers of these religions draw images of the totem onto stones or carve their images in wood to create a totem pole. The totem stone or pole symbolises the divine and consequently becomes the centre of worship and veneration.

**4.** A ‘paradigm’ is a set of taken-for-granted ideas that guide scientific research at a particular point in time. Paradigms are resistant to change because scientists tend to interpret evidence in a way that is consistent with the paradigm. However, Kuhn argues that eventually ‘anomalies’ will accumulate that can’t be explained within the existing paradigm and this will result in a scientific revolution.

**5.** Postmodernists are philosophical relativists. That is to say, they reject the possibility of objective knowledge of the world. All knowledge for them is relative to time and place: what people believe to be true at one time or in one place may not hold good at another time or place. Consequently, they are as sceptical about the claims of science as they are about those of religion, seeing them both as ‘grand narratives’ (i.e. stories) rather than as true.

Another reason why postmodernists are sceptical of science is because they interpret Thomas Kuhn's (1962) ideas about scientific paradigms to mean that scientific theories are social constructs, which therefore lack the objectivity claimed for them.

**6.** Chapter 6.1 argues that religion and science share some similarities as ‘belief systems’. For example, they are both anthropocentric approaches in that they both see human beings as at the centre of the universe. Also, they are both dominated by dogma or accepted ways of doing things (Kuhn calls these paradigms) that result in alternative ways of thinking or practice being dismissed as heretical or wrong. Finally, they both contain figures, usually men, who are revered and whose teachings or views are regarded as sacred and rarely questioned. The writings of these scientific figureheads are sometimes regarded in a similar way to those of saints and prophets, having a quasi ‘holy’ status in the scientific community

**7.** All definitions of religion incorporate the idea that religions are systems of belief, but beyond this there is disagreement. Inclusive or functional definitions of religion define a set of beliefs as religious if such beliefs have a positive social and psychological use or function for individuals and societies. From this perspective, any belief system can be defined as religious if it functions to inspire individuals and to unite communities in terms of faith, devotion and commitment. Exclusive or substantive definitions of religion, by contrast, attempt to explain what religion is by referring to characteristics unique to religious belief systems, such as belief in a god or gods. They highlight actions and practices that assume the existence of superhuman, supernatural, mystical or magical beings and powers.

**8.** For Popper the distinguishing feature of scientific knowledge is not that it has been proved true, but that it is *open* to being shown to be *untrue* – the so-called ‘falsification criterion’. If a knowledge claim is not open to falsification, that doesn’t make it necessarily untrue, but it does make it unscientific. All scientific knowledge is *provisional*, that is to say it’s probably true because no one has so far shown it to be untrue, but nothing can be proved true beyond all possible doubt.

In practice, however, scientists become attached to their theories and may reject evidence that challenges them or may ignore challenges that come from people they see as lacking the necessary qualifications or status.

1. Dixon (2008) has suggested a number of differences between science and religion as belief systems:

* Science is an ‘open belief system’ because the data collected by scientists are always open to rational scrutiny, criticism and testing by others. In contrast, religion is generally considered to be a ‘closed belief system’ because religious knowledge is sacred and cannot be challenged. It cannot grow or change because it is regarded as the absolute truth.
* Scientists gather scientific knowledge by observing the natural world and formulating logical hypotheses or conjectures, which are ideas or informed guesses usually based on existing scientific knowledge. In contrast, religion is concerned with the metaphysical or spiritual world, which is presumed to exist by religious people but which cannot be observed in a scientific sense.
* Scientists collect their data in standardised and rational ways through systematic observation and experimentation. These methods are considered reliable because they can be used by other scientists to re-test and validate findings. In contrast, the existence of God and other religious phenomena cannot be proven, because they cannot be subjected to normal scientific procedures. Religions therefore make claims about knowledge that cannot be empirically overturned.

Indeed, some scientists would reject the notion that science is a ‘belief system’ at all, seeing it as a body of factual knowledge and not a collection of beliefs. However, as the answer to Q6 makes clear, some would argue that science and religion have more in common than such scientists claim.

**10.** (Note: the question should read: ‘Assess the *validity* of the idea…’, not ‘Assess the usefulness of the idea…’.)

Historically, when scientific knowledge has been used to justify the power of a few, as for example in theories of scientific racism, it turns out that these belief systems are pseudo-sciences rather than genuinely scientific.

Marxists argue that whilst science may not be used to *justify* the power of a few, under capitalism it does tend to *benefit* some more than others because the exploitation of scientific breakthroughs may be controlled by profit-making companies e.g. drug companies. Also, the funding of scientific research by private companies is likely to be directed towards research that will enhance profits.

However, much scientific research is funded by governments or charities, and scientists themselves are as likely to be influenced by acquiring status among their scientific peers as by any possible monetary rewards. Scientific knowledge is gathered for all kinds of reasons and who benefits from it depends on how that knowledge is used, not on why it’s gathered.

**6.2 THEORIES OF THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF RELIGION**

P.459-460 Focus on skills: PENTECOSTALISM – PROTESTANT ETHIC OR CARGO CULT?

**1.** Five characteristics of Pentecostalism are: a strong belief in Biblical authority; the efficacy of prayer; the duty to engage in missionary activity; conservative morality and glossolalia.

**2.** Approximately 11.5%.

**3.** Calvinism was an ascetic, puritanical form of Protestantism that preached the virtue of hard work, self-denial and a sober lifestyle. Martin believes that Pentecostalism displays similar attributes.

**4.** Meyer and Freston are critical of the idea that Pentecostalism encourages modernisation as they see it as a type of ‘cargo-cult’ i.e. adherents believe that, so long as they are devout, they will be blessed with prosperity without any effort on their part.

**5.** The key expression of the view that religious ideas can autonomously generate ‘profound social and economic change’ was Max Weber’s thesis expounded in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* Weber argued that Calvinism, with its doctrine of predestination, led believers to strive for worldly success so that they could reassure themselves that they were among the ‘elect’ (those predestined for salvation in terms of life after death) since success ‘must’ symbolise God’s preferment of them.

Redding (1990) argues along similar lines in relation to the role of Confucianism in terms of the success of the Asian Tiger economies such as Singapore. Similarly, Aldridge (2013) links the economic success of the USA state of Utah and its capital, Salt Lake City, with Mormonism. Finally, Martin (1990) and Attanasi and Yong (2012) see Pentecostalism as driving Brazil’s economic growth.

Criticism of this thesis has come principally from Marxists who see beliefs as a product of material interests and not vice versa. Thus, for example, Kautsky (1953) took issue with Weber’s idea that Calvinism pre-dated capitalism. Kautsky argued that capitalism pre-dated Calvinism and that Calvinist ideas were adopted by early capitalists as an ideology to justify their pursuit of profit and the inequalities associated with capitalist exploitation of workers.

Marxists such as Frank (1967) have suggested that slavery, colonialism and piracy were more important than Calvinist beliefs in accelerating the development of capitalism. This was because these activities meant that countries such as the UK had already accumulated the capital required for fast and effective industrialisation. Moreover, having an empire and colonies allowed Britain to obtain raw materials extremely cheaply compared with other countries. This gave the British economy an advantage over the rest of Europe.

P.466 Check your understanding

**1.** For Weber, the ‘spirit of capitalism’ involved the adoption of a set of attitudes and rational working practices known as the Protestant work ethic. These attitudes regarded industry, hard work, good time management, diligence, thrift and asceticism as sacred, godly virtues. Meanwhile, idleness, time-wasting, spending money on luxuries and pleasurable activities such as drinking, gambling, dancing and sex were condemned as wicked and sinful – mainly because they distracted people from economic activity.

**2.** Robert Bellah defined a civil religion as a belief system that induces a mass response, with similar levels of passion, dedication and commitment to those found in mainstream religions. For example, Nazism and communism are viewed as civil religions because their belief systems substituted belief in God, for beliefs in nationalism and Marxism respectively.

**3.** When Marx described religion as the ‘opium of the people’ he meant that religion served a similar purpose to that of a narcotic: it distracted people from the reality of their material conditions and allowed them to feel contented with their situation when Marx believed they needed to challenge their conditions of life if they were ever to be truly happy.

**4.** By the ‘privatisation’ of religion, Postmodernists mean that religion in postmodern societies is less a collective expression of belief and more a matter of individual choice and commitment. (Note: ‘privatisation’ in this sense is not to be confused with the process of transferring nationalised industries and services to the private – or commercial - sector of the economy.)

**5.** Bellah argues that the USA is dominated by a civil religion he calls ‘Americanism’, which unites the American people, regardless of class, race or creed. Three features of American civil religion are: a commitment to a conception of ‘God’ that embraces Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim versions; a commitment to American nationalism and the embrace of American values such as the American Dream – the principle of making the most of opportunity and belief in the free market – which are regarded as ‘sacred’ and virtuous values that deserve veneration.

**6.** For Marxists, religion is inevitably a conservative influence, helping to legitimate the status quo. However, for neo-Marxists, in some unique cases, religions can develop into political movements that seek and achieve real social change in the here and now.

For example, the Reverend Martin Luther King and the Southern Baptist Church were at the forefront of the civil rights movement in the USA in the 1960s. King’s non-violent demonstrations played an important role in dismantling segregation and acquiring political, social and economic rights for Black people in the USA. Similarly, the Catholic Church in Poland and the Protestant Church in East Germany played an important peaceful role in the collapse of communism in those countries in the early 1990s.

**7.** Casanova (1994) claims that the irrational nature of religious belief has caused much more war, persecution and human suffering than any other belief system. For example, conflicts within the Muslim world between Sunni Muslims represented by Saudi Arabia and Shia Muslims represented by Iran have fuelled a proxy war in Yemen. Saudi Arabia and Iran support different factions in the Syrian civil war. It is estimated that 100,000 Sunni Muslims have been killed by Shia militias in Iraq since 2003 and 150,000 Shia civilians have been killed by Sunni insurgents, through car bombs and assassination.

Critics argue that conflicts apparently based on religion are really about other issues. For example, in Northern Ireland, the conflict could be interpreted as political rather than religious, as one faction wanted to remain part of the UK whilst the other wished to be part of a United Ireland. Moreover, it needs to be stated that some of the biggest conflicts that have occurred in the past century, and which have involved millions of deaths, have had nothing to do with religion. The First and Second World Wars, the Holocaust, the Korean and Vietnam wars, the Falklands War and the 1994 Rwandan genocide were not inspired by religious differences.

**8.** For functionalists, one of the major functions of religion is to infuse particular values with religious symbolism and spiritual significance. These values become ‘moral codes’ – beliefs that society agrees to revere and set above all other principles. For example, many of the laws in Western societies reflect the Ten Commandments which Christians believe were communicated by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, including prohibitions against murder, theft and ‘false witness’ (i.e. lying). Breaking such moral codes is therefore not just an example of civil disobedience, but of defying God’s injunctions. The function of all moral codes is essentially the same. They provide codes of behaviour that people and societies can use to regulate both personal and social life.

**9.** The view that religion acts as an essentially conservative force in society is associated with both functionalist and Marxist perspectives. For functionalists, religion helps to promote social integration and respect for society’s moral codes, thereby helping to maintain social order. For Marxists, religion serves to defuse political opposition to the inequities of class society by teaching that the organisation of society is divinely ordained and that those who suffer in this life but nevertheless behave piously will be rewarded in the next life.

The opposing view, that religious ideas can promote social change, is most strongly associated with Max Weber who saw Calvinism in particular as promoting an ethic of hard work and self-denial – the Protestant work ethic - that helped to promote capitalist development in Western Europe.

Both views receive extensive empirical support, although they also have their critics, so it is difficult to assess their validity. It is also a complicated issue because the term ‘conservative’ is open to different interpretations. For example, fundamentalist ideas attack society as it is currently organised, but they do so in order to try to re-establish an (imagined?) past that believers see as closer to the religious teachings of their religion’s founder. They therefore want to change society as it is, but only in order to ‘conserve’ what they see as the true spirit of their religion. Does this make fundamentalists conservative or radical (or, indeed, reactionary)?

It is also complicated because religious doctrines are open to different interpretations as guides to action. For example, some radical Catholic priests and bishops in South America interpreted Catholic teachings as requiring them to side with armed struggles against dictatorships in the form of ‘liberation theology’, yet the RC establishment condemned them. Similarly, some Protestant sects interpret God’s teaching as requiring withdrawal from the world (e.g. the Exclusive Brethren) rather than challenging the wider society, whilst others such as Quakers interpret God’s teaching as requiring them to engage with the wider society and try to improve it.

Ultimately, one has to accept that this is a highly complicated issue and that there are no simple answers.

**10.** (Note: the question should read: ‘Assess the *validity* of the idea…’, not ‘Assess the usefulness of the idea…’.)

Most world religions, as feminists such as de Beauvoir and Daly have argued, have been patriarchal, largely because the societies they originated in were themselves patriarchal. For example, Daly argues that Christianity is inherently patriarchal, with men made in ‘the image and glory of God’ and women made ‘for the glory of man’. Daly also argues that religions not only benefit men at the expense of women, but are actually misogynistic (i.e. women-hating. For example, she observes that women are not allowed to be priests in the Catholic Church because it blames them for ‘original sin’ and associates them with sexual temptation. Moreover, she claims that women are excluded from the priesthood because their presence is thought to make celibacy more difficult for priests.

Clearly, religious belief systems are not ‘merely’ patriarchal ideologies because they are a lot else besides, but they certainly have been patriarchal historically. Three qualifications need to be made to this assertion, however.

One qualification involves thinking about what is meant by gender equality and, in particular, whether distinct roles for men and women are compatible with gender equality. Kurtz (2016) claims that in some Islamic societies today women tend to have a ‘separate but equal’ status. This generally means that women exercise power and command great respect from men in their role as mothers and homemakers, but are excluded from or denied equality in public spheres, such as at work or in public places. Similarly, Davidman (1991) studied two Jewish communities in the USA and found that women occupied an exalted status in these communities, despite the patriarchal organisation of the religion. Jewish men were taught to be closely involved in home and family life, and to be deeply respectful of their wives and mothers.

A second qualification is to recognise that some religions have sought to reform their patriarchal features by opening up positions of religious authority to women in recent years. Thus, the Church of England now has women vicars and indeed a female bishop today.

Finally, it must be noted that not all religious organisations are patriarchal. For example, some Protestant denominations and sects, including Quakerism, Methodism, Unitarianism, Christian Science and the Salvation Army, are gender blind, meaning that men and women are generally treated as equals.

**6.3 religious organisations**

P.478-9 Focus on skills: spirited away – why the end is nigh for religion

**1.** A social milieu is a social setting or environment. So by a ‘holistic milieu’, Heelas and Woodhead mean a social setting in which ‘holistic’ or New Age ideas are (relatively) widely shared

**2.** During the 1990s, when Kendal’s population grew by 11.4 per cent, participation in the ‘new spirituality’ grew by 300 per cent to reach 600 people. The article does not provide any figures for the growth or decline in membership of conventional religious organisations in Kendal over the same period, but it does say that the holistic milieu now (i.e. 2004) outnumbers every single major denomination apart from Anglican, with 531 Roman Catholics, 285 Methodists and 160 Jehovah’s Witnesses. The article therefore provides some support for the idea that the spiritual is replacing the religious - in Kendal at least.

**3.** New Age Religions include an esoteric mix of beliefs and practices, based on environmentalism, alternative medicine, Eastern and Western philosophy, psychology and psychoanalysis, and criticisms of science.

The general aim shared by NAMs seems to be the achievement of self-discovery, personal growth, self-perfection, the harnessing of inner potential and spiritual awareness. NAMs are seen as ‘me-religions’ or ‘self-religions’ because they often claim to be the only means by which people can find spiritual satisfaction or life-affirming skills. It is this characteristic which has led some to claim that they are ‘the end product of a prosperous me-me-me society that has encouraged navel-gazing and pampering of the self’.

Clearly, such a claim is implicitly critical of what could be seen as a degree of self-absorption. Against this, Woodhead is quoted in the article as arguing that “(t)rying to become yourself but better through your relationships with others is a very noble activity.” Indeed, many traditional religions encourage their members to become ‘better’ people, so the real issue is to what end New Age members wish to put such self-improvement: self- glorification or being less selfish and more in tune with others and the natural environment.

**4.** The term ‘new religious movements’ (NRMs) is usually reserved to refer to religions that have emerged since the middle of the last century.

Writing in the early years of the last century, Richard Niebuhr (1929) argued that sects would inevitably be short-lived. Those that relied on a charismatic leader would struggle to survive that leader’s death. Since membership was voluntary, they could not rely on members’ children joining as adults and those that preached an ascetic creed would, as a result of their likely economic success, no longer wish to belong to a marginalised group. The sect would therefore either disappear or become more like a denomination.

The same logic applied to NRMs would suggest that they too would be likely to be short-lived. However, because many thousands of NRMs have emerged since the 1950s it is very difficult to keep track of them all and sociologists lack the data that would allow them to establish their longevity. Certainly, some world-rejecting NRMs have ended in spectacular ways, such as the mass suicide of the members of the People’s Temple in 1978 and the destruction of the Branch Davidian community in Waco, Texas, in a fire following an FBI raid in 1993 (although a handful of people have established a new Branch Davidian community in Waco calling themselves Branch, The Lord Our Righteousness). But, many world affirming and world accommodating NRMs – such as TM, Scientology, the Unification Church, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), known colloquially as the Hare Krishna movement or Hare Krishnas – are still going strong.

The claim that NRMs ‘have little influence in contemporary society’ is less contentious in that the relatively small numbers involved in any particular group inevitably limit the impact that they have on the wider society.

P.480 Check your understanding

(Please note: an error occurred in the numbering of the questions. There is no No.3.)

**1.** NRMs are religious organisations and movements that have evolved from the early 1950s, mainly in the West, and which claim to offer some sort of spiritual or possibly philosophical guidance that significantly differs from the guidance offered by traditional mainstream religions.

**2.** Postmodernists argue that the transition from a modern to an allegedly postmodern society has brought in its wake a ‘crisis of meaning’ for some individuals. This means that they are concerned about the lack of satisfaction and fulfilment in their lives and confused about their role in postmodern society.

**4.** A ‘theodicy of misfortune’ is a religious explanation for people’s suffering and a proposed solution.

**5.** Churches tend to have inclusive memberships. This means that members are born into the Church and are recruited as children, long before they can understand its teachings. Sect membership tends to be exclusive. This means that members have generally been converted to the belief system or have been inspired to join by the preaching of the charismatic leader.

**6.** Churches tend to have a larger membership than denominations (e.g. the Church of England compared with Methodism), to be closely identified with the state (e.g. the Roman Catholic church in the Republic of Ireland compared to the Church of Ireland) and claim a monopoly on religious truth ( e.g. RC in Italy compared to the Baptist Evangelical Christian Union of Italy).

**7.** Postmodernists argue that people no longer believe in religious metanarratives, or big truths, provided by mainstream religions, which claim other points of view are worthless. In postmodern society, people are more individualistic and consequently believe in the relativity of knowledge: all points of view have relevance and validity. Consequently people are happy to seek personal rationales for their unhappiness or lack of spiritual satisfaction through the process of ‘spiritual shopping’ in a global religious and spiritual marketplace.

**8.** According to Wallis, The 1960s and 1970s were associated with the development of counter-cultural ideas among young, middle-class, university-educated people which were critical of the individualism, consumerism, militarism and materialism that they associated with their parents’ generation. Some of these young people were drawn to political activism (e.g. demonstrating against the Vietnam War or racial discrimination), others were drawn to NRMs. Many of these young people were probably attracted by the communal living offered by NRMs in which property, work and even relationships were shared among members.

**9.** One influential explanation for people joining NRMs, associated particularly with Glock (1964), is that it is a response to relative deprivation. Relative deprivation refers to the idea that some people may be attracted to religion because they feel economically or socially deprived in some way, compared with others. Involvement with a religion may provide some form of compensation.

Glock identified five possible types of relative deprivation:

* Economic deprivation: NRMs may appeal to people experiencing economic deprivation or poverty. They offer a supernatural explanation for these people’s social and economic suffering and promise a way to improve the individual’s place in the social world.
* Social or status deprivation: NRMs may attract skilled manual workers and members of the lower-middle classes who are experiencing ‘social’ or ‘status’ deprivation at work. This type of worker may feel socially deprived because they lack job satisfaction or are denied creative power at work. Glock and Stark (1969) suggest that evangelism may be an alternative and compensatory means of obtaining status.
* Organismic deprivation: ‘Organismic deprivation’ refers to physical, mental and addiction problems. People affected by this type of deprivation may turn to NRMs in the hope of being healed. NRMs may claim to have faith-healing powers or provide social support to help people develop self-discipline and reject deviant forms of behaviour such as drug addiction or alcohol abuse.
* Ethical deprivation: The theology and ethos of NRMs may attract some people because they experience ethical deprivation, meaning that they feel the world is wicked and in moral decline. They may choose to retreat into world accommodating denominations such as Pentecostalism, or even into world rejecting NRMs because they provide moral certainty in societies undergoing secularisation.
* Psychic deprivation: Some people may reject the socially dominant values of individualism, materialism and consumerism and wish to explore spiritual alternatives. They may wish to discover their spiritual selves, or ‘find themselves’, because they may experience the world as too materialistic, lonely and impersonal. This rationale for involvement with NRMs, especially cults or new age movements, is most often associated with the middle classes.

However, a major limitation of such an explanation is that it fails to identify why some respond to relative deprivation by turning to religion while others seek alternative solutions: relative deprivation has also been used, for example, to explain delinquency.

**10.** The term ‘total institutions’ was coined by Erving Goffman to describe organisations such as prisons, long-stay mental hospitals and boarding schools where a number of similarly situated people, cut off from the wider community, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life and in which the organisation seeks to control virtually all aspects of their lives. The view that most sects are ‘destructive total institutions’ is claiming that sects are not only total institutions but that they have a negative impact on their members.

This view is widely promulgated by the mass media which tends to associate sects and cults with ‘brainwashing’, the break-up of families and various kinds of physical and sexual abuse.

‘Brainwashing’ is a loaded term in that it implies that people who join sects are psychologically manipulated to such a degree that they lose the ability to make rational decisions. Eileen Barker (1984) undertook a study of the ‘Moonies’ (Unification Church) through participant observation which evaluated this accusation and concluded that it was a misrepresentation of the process which leads to membership, citing the high drop-out rate of potential recruits as evidence of the inappropriateness of the concept of brainwashing.

Not all sects require members to abandon their families and live communally. The use of the ‘total institution’ label to describe those that do not require communal living is inappropriate. Those that do tend to be world-rejecting movements, in Wallis’s terms, such as the Exclusive Brethren, ISKON, the People’s Temple and the Children of God. Such sects could be seen as ‘destructive’ of families, but at the same time they may offer an alternative to the family. Indeed, Barker suggests NRMs such as the Unification Church acted as a ‘surrogate family’ for their converts. In addition, some world-rejecting sects far from breaking up families are based on communities made up of families, such as the Exclusive Brethren and the Amish.

In the tabloid media in particular, ‘sex sells’, so when world-rejecting sects or cults are discovered which engage in permissive or deviant sexual activities they are likely to be widely publicised. Even more so if other forms of deviance are also involved. Such was the case with a cult that came to be known as the Manson Family established by a petty criminal called Charles Manson in California in the 1960s. In 1971 he was found guilty of conspiracy to commit the murders of seven people: actress Sharon Tate and four other people at Tate's home and, the next day, a married couple, Leno and Rosemary La Bianca. Two points need to be made, however. One is that most world-rejecting sects and cults do not engage in the physical or sexual abuse of members. The other, as Beckford (2010) observes, is that the stereotypical negative characteristics applied to sects by the media such as financial exploitation, sexual abuse, racism and cruelty towards children are not exactly unknown in mainstream religions.

It follows that the claim that ‘most sects are destructive total institutions’ is therefore invalid.

**11.** There are a number of reasons why sociologists face difficulties in measuring involvement in NRMs:

* Many, particularly the smaller ones, do not keep records of members
* People may have different levels of involvement. Decisions about the level of involvement needed before counting someone are inevitably somewhat arbitrary
* NRMs that do keep records may not be prepared to make the data publicly available,
* There are no official listings of NRMs
* People may continue to practice techniques such as meditation associated with an NRM, individually and in private, long after ending their contact with an organisation.

**6.4 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGIOSITY AND SOCIAL CLASS, ETHNICITY, GENDER AND AGE**

p.492-3 Focus on SKILLS: WOMEN AND ORTHODOX JUDAISM

**1.** (Note: the question should refer to roles for women prescribed by Orthodox Judaism, not by Christian religions.)

Orthodox Judaism prescribes that women should be wives and mothers first and foremost, that they should dress modestly and when a woman is menstruating and for seven days afterward she should not engage in sex with her husband.

**2.** In Orthodox Judaism, men and women are seen as having equal status but distinct roles. Feminists believe that gender equality requires men and women to have the opportunity to perform the same roles e.g. for men and women to work both inside and outside the home.

**3.** Davidman (1991) suggests that some women are converting to Orthodox Judaism because they value domesticity and the roles of housewife and mother, all of which are prescribed for Orthodox Jewish women.

**4.** Feminists are likely to criticise the attitudes of Orthodox Jews towards family and gender roles because they think women should be free to choose to work outside the home; they are likely to question the idea that roles can be ‘separate but equal’ and they see the traditional nuclear family with its segregated roles as patriarchal.

P.497 Focus on skills: YOUNG PEOPLE AND ISLAM

**1.** In the context of young British Muslims, radicalisation is likely to involve support for extremist Islamist groups. As the *Report from the Prime Minister’s Task Force on Tackling Radicalisation and Extremism* (2013) puts it: “Islamist extremists deem Western intervention in Muslim-majority countries as a ‘war on Islam’, creating a narrative of ‘them’ and ‘us’. They seek to impose a global Islamic state governed by their interpretation of Shari’ah as state law, rejecting liberal values such as democracy, the rule of law and equality. Their ideology also includes the uncompromising belief that people cannot be Muslim and British, and insists that those who do not agree with them are not true Muslims”.

**2.** ‘Islamophobia’ refers to an irrational hatred of Muslims which is likely to take the form of harassment, violence or intimidation directed against people identified as Muslims.

**3.** Academically gifted young Muslims might feel a sense of blocked social mobility if they feel that they are being discriminated against by HE institutions or employers because of their Muslim identity.

**4.** There are numerous possible reasons why some young (British) Muslims are attracted to radical or fundamentalist forms of Islam:

* Choudhury (2007) suggests it is the result of a lack of religious literacy and education. The most vulnerable are those who have been prompted by recent world events to explore their faith for the first time, yet are not in a position to evaluate objectively whether a radical group represents an accurate understanding of Islam.
* Akhtar (2005) believes that British military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as foreign policy towards Palestine, alienated young Muslims from British society. She argues that radical Islamic groups are able to exploit the idea that there is a simple dichotomy between oppressors and oppressed – the West versus Islam. This places the blame for all of the problems faced by Muslims under the same banner.
* Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins (2004) argue that those who are academically inclined are the most susceptible to radicalisation. Extremist groups have targeted young university students who suffer from a sense of blocked social mobility.

**5.** Firstly, there is no reason why people who identify with Islam cannot also identify with a British identity. The two are not, as Islamist groups argue, incompatible. Secondly, a British Muslim identity does not preclude being critical of features of British society. Finally, peaceful coexistence does not require that people hold identical beliefs. This is the idea behind ‘multi-culturalism’.

P.498 Check your understanding

**1.** The term ‘disengagement’ with regard to age and religiosity could refer **either** to young people’s increasing disengagement from organised religion **or** to the fact that as older people disengage from involvement with the wider society, continued involvement with religious organisations may provide some compensation.

**2.** Bruce (2002) argues that religion functions as a source of cultural defence for ethnic minority groups. This means that it helps support and preserve identity, culture and language in an uncertain and hostile, perhaps even racist, environment. Religion may defend communities by providing emotional, social and economic supports to its members, by providing young people with opportunities to learn more about their culture and religion, and by speaking out against intolerance, discrimination and inequality.

**3.** Sherkat (2002) argues that men are more willing to take risks than women, and are less religious, because they are more willing to gamble that God and the afterlife do not exist.

**4.** The postmodernist Hervieu-Léger suggests that modern societies have experienced a collective loss of religious memory, which she calls **cultural amnesia**. She notes that for centuries, children were taught religion in the extended family, at school and at Sunday school in the local parish church. Religion was handed down from generation to generation. However, in postmodern societies, parents often let children decide on their own religious beliefs. Hervieu-Léger also notes the decline of Sunday schools and observes that religion no longer has the status it once commanded in the education system. As a result, young people today have little religious knowledge and are less likely to inherit a fixed religious identity.

**5.** One suggested reason is the ageing effect. This is the view that people turn to religion as they become older. As people approach death, they ‘naturally’ become more concerned about spiritual matters such as the afterlife and the need to repent past misdeeds. As a result, they are more likely to go to church and to pray.

Another is the generational effect. This is the view that each new generation is less religious than the one before, as society becomes more secular. Gill (1998) notes that most children, with the exception of Asian children, are no longer receiving a religious socialisation. Those brought up without religious beliefs are less likely to become churchgoers later in life.

**6.** Ahern and Davie (1987) argue that working-class people are generally distrustful of institutions such as the Anglican Church, which they see as hierarchical and too closely tied to the ruling establishment. Ahern’s survey of inner city residents in London demonstrated that they viewed the relationship between the working class and Churches as one of ‘them versus us’. Inner city residents saw the Anglican Church and its ministers as incomprehensible, patronising, gloomy and boring. They also claimed that ministers were culturally embarrassed by the presence of working-class people in church. Ahern and Davie also argue that working-class people are attracted to religious non-conformity because they perceive mainstream religion as too formal, middle-class and authoritarian. Working-class people may resent and reject instructions from their social and religious ‘betters’ on how they should behave.

**7.** Three explanations for women’s greater involvement in religion are:

* **The influence of women’s biological role**: Grace Davie argues that women feel closer to God because they are involved in the creation of life through pregnancy and giving birth. Callister and Khalaf (2009) found that mothers claimed ‘contact with God’ intensified during childbirth. Trzebiatowska and Bruce note that being pregnant and giving birth give women opportunities for religious reflection, in addition to those available to men.
* **The influence of women’s social role**: Miller and Hoffman (1995) argue that women take a greater role in religious worship, because they are less likely than men to be breadwinners and more likely to be housewives, work part time and bring up children. Miller and Hoffman argue that this gives women not only more time for church-related activities, but also a greater need for religion as a source of personal identity and commitment.
* **Risk theory**: Sherkat (2002) argues that men are more willing to take risks than women, and are less religious, because they are more willing to gamble that God and the afterlife do not exist. Miller and Hoffman’s (1995) research shows that both men and women who are risk averse have high levels of religious belief and practice.

**8.** The very poor may use religion to compensate for feelings of economic deprivation by turning to religious organisations that offer a supernatural explanation for their situation and the prospect of a release from it, either in the here and now or in an afterlife – what Weber called ‘theodicies of misfortune’.

Very little if any research has been conducted on religiosity amongst the very rich (although research comparing religiosity among rich and poor *nations* has found a strong positive correlation between higher levels of wealth and lower levels of religiosity), so suggestions about how the very rich ‘use’ religion have to be speculative. One controversial view, suggested by Solt, Habel and Grant (2011), which they call the ‘relative power theory’, holds that as societies become more economically unequal, richer people become more religious so they can disseminate religion to those who aren’t so fortunate as a way of mitigating the risks of political responses. Another possible use of religion by the very rich could be to use public observance as a mark of respectability.

**9.** Postmodernists believe that women are more attracted by new age religions because these are highly individualised as well as privatised. Middle-class women based in the ‘private’ arena of the home can easily access fashionable and flexible new age beliefs and practices such as hypnotherapy and yoga via television, DVDs and the internet. Moreover, many new age practices promote the idea of personal ‘improvement’, in which, Bruce argues, women are more interested, than men. New Age religions focus on subjective experience – ‘feelings’ - and women are generally believed to be more comfortable with exploring their feelings than men. Many new age religions emphasise the ‘natural’, such as herbal and homeopathic remedies, aromatherapy and massage. These may appeal more to females because femininity is traditionally interpreted as closer to nature than masculinity. Finally, Trzebiatowska and Bruce argue that the main reason for women’s involvement in new age religions is ‘familiarity and extension’, that is to say the concerns of New Age religions are in line with those that women have traditionally been concerned with and New Age religious practices can be seen as extensions of practices women have traditionally been involved in.

All these explanations are plausible, but there is a lack of empirical evidence available to verify them.

**10.** The chapter covers a number of theories that suggest why ethnic minority groups in the UK are generally more religious than the white majority:

* **Cultural transition**: religion can be a means of coping with the stresses of migration. It can help to ease the transition of new immigrants into a new society or culture, by providing a familiar community in an alien society. Bruce argues that religious institutions have provided a community focal point for Irish, African–Caribbean, Muslim, Hindu and Black African immigrants. It is also relevant that many of the first generation have migrated from societies with higher levels of religiosity than the UK.
* **Cultural defence:** Bruce (2002) argues that religion functions as a source of cultural defence for ethnic minority groups. This means that it helps support and preserve identity, culture and language in an uncertain and hostile, perhaps even racist, environment.
* **Economic and social deprivation:** given that ethnic minority groups are likely to experience higher levels of economic deprivation, at least initially, religion can offer compensation through theodicies of misfortune. It can also offer a solution to status deprivation by assuring believers that they are among the elect – those chosen by God for eternal salvation. Pryce’s (1979) study of the African-Caribbean community in Bristol suggests that this helps to explain the appeal of Pentecostalism to the first generation and of Rastafarianism to the second.

All of these explanations are both logically coherent and well supported by empirical research. To the extent that different ethnic minority groups share similar experiences, they are also plausible.

**6.5 SECULARISATION, GLOBALISATION AND FUNDAMENTALISM**

P.514 FOCUS ON Skills: ARISE, SECULAR BRETHREN, GOD’S FANATICS ARE BACK

**Suggested answers**

**1.** Three reasons Wooldridge identifies for secularisation in Europe are the political separation of church and state from the 17th century, the influence of atheistic scholars such as Marx, Weber and Freud and the desacralisation of churches.

**2.** By 2050 the People’s Republic of China will be the world’s largest Christian country and the largest Muslim country.

**3.** Wooldridge argues that it is misguided to seek to ‘explain-away’ the global revival of fundamentalist religions as a ‘distorted expression of something deeper or just a passing madness’, insisting that ‘reality’ is in the eye of the believer. However, to argue that there may be underlying structural causes of the turn towards fundamentalism is a perfectly reasonable sociological position. Structural sociologists argue that social behaviour is shaped by factors that social actors themselves may be unaware of.

He also argues that one should avoid stereotyping all the members of particular religions as fundamentalists since the latter represent a ‘tiny minority’ within these religions. This is an important and valid point, one ignored, for example, by Islamophobes.

**4.** Wooldridge believes that modernisation has stimulated fundamentalist religion because it offers people ‘a storm shelter in a hostile world’. This view is endorsed by many sociologists.

Giddens (1999), for example, sees fundamentalism as a response to the globalisation of Western culture and lifestyles. Fundamentalism may appeal to some people, particularly those concerned by religious pluralism and the growing popularity of secular thinking, because it promises certainty, submission to a higher spiritual authority and a retreat from modernity.

A similar analysis is provided by Bauman (1992) although he sees fundamentalism as a response to life in a *postmodern* world. This brings with it a greater variety of choices and relativist ideas, as well as uncertainties and greater risks. This might be a more adequate explanation of the emergence of fundamentalism in economically advanced societies such as the USA,

Norris and Inglehart (2011) point not to modernity, but to the threats to existential security that people in developing societies may face - such as famine, poverty, disease and environmental disasters - on a daily basis. They may be more anxious than people living in Western societies about their future or that of their children. This may lead them to turn to fundamentalist religions that provide comfort, compensation, certainty and emotional security in the context of their experience of everyday hardship.

A final possibility is that fundamentalism is not so much a response to modernisation as a response by those *left behind by modernisation.* In societies where the fruits of modernisation are unequally distributed and enormous inequalities in wealth and income are apparent, but democratic means of tackling these inequalities are absent, people may turn to fundamentalist religions because they at least offer the prospect of a religious solution to their felt and actual deprivation.

p.515 CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

**Suggested answers**

**1.** ‘Secularisation’ refers to an alleged social process involving a decline in the social significance of religion.

**2.** ‘Believing without belonging’ refers to the idea that people no longer feel the need to make their religious beliefs public by attending church with others.

**3.** The ‘ecumenical movement’ generally refers to a movement that promotes unity among Christian churches and denominations by finding common theological ground. In practical terms, it may mean that different denominations come together because of declining congregations and the rising costs of keeping churches open when attendance is lower.

**4.** Davie (2015) has attempted to reinforce the idea of ‘believing without belonging’ by developing the concept of ‘vicarious religion’. She suggests that religion is not practised overtly or regularly by the majority in Europe, but that most people engage with religion ‘vicariously’ through others. In other words, a minority of people are religious on behalf of a ‘silent majority’.

**5.** ‘Desacrilisation’ refers to the process of rendering something less sacred. For example, explaining how the universe was created, how the human race developed and the reasons for phenomena such as earthquakes and the weather, not through reference to supernatural forces but to science.

**6.** ‘Disengagement’ refers to an alleged process in which religious organisations reduce their involvement with, or engagement in, the wider society. Bruce (2002), for example, claims that the Church was once very influential in politics, local communities and family life, but this is no longer the case today in the UK.

**7.** Three ways in which statistics can be used to support the secularisation thesis (in the UK) are:

* Evidence of a decline in church attendance. Using statistics gathered by Brierley, McAndrew (2011) observes that *total* church attendance in England fell dramatically between 1980 and 2005.
* Evidence of an increase in the number of people who claim ‘no religion’, which has risen from 3.2 per cent in 1963 to 48.1 per cent in 2010.
* Evidence of a decline in those believing in the existence of God. Perfect (2011) observes that belief in God as measured by BSA surveys has generally declined since 1991. The category ‘believe and always have’ decreased from 45.8 per cent in 1991 to 36.7 per cent in 2009. In contrast, the categories ‘not believe, did before’ and ‘not believe, never have’ increased from 23.7 per cent in 1991 to 35.1 per cent in 2008.

**8.** Some sociologists see religious pluralism (i.e. the growth in the sheer number of different churches, sects, cults and denominations) as evidence of secularisation on the basis that religion can no longer unify society as a whole and the coexistence of numerous different religions reduces the plausibility of any one.

Neither of these arguments is particularly strong. The idea that for a society to count as religious it must be unified by a single faith is a value-judgement rather than a statement of fact. And, even if the second point is true, if people nevertheless join these religious groupings they are demonstrating religious behaviour.

**9.** Postmodernists suggest that religion is in a state of change rather than decline. They argue that there is a demand for spirituality motivated by increasing *individuation* that cannot be catered for by any one religion.

Lyon (2000) argues that the centrality of global computer and information technologies and consumerism in postmodern life means that the nature of religious worship has changed. Specifically, Lyon argues that religion is undergoing a process of Disneyfication. He observes that in the postmodern age, Disneyfication – a process of mass marketing that uses a range of global media including films, television, music, websites, social networking sites and theme parks – has become an increasingly widespread way in which cultural institutions sell their products. Lyon suggests that there is now a ‘religious marketplace’ competing for spiritual shoppers and that religion has become a commodity.

The growth of televangelism certainly supports Lyon’s thesis, but there is no attempt to assess whether the demand for ‘spiritual products’ is growing or declining. Supporters of the secularisation thesis would not deny the growth of consumerism and commodification, but might argue that consumption is increasingly *replacing* religion, in terms of providing people with meaning in their lives, rather than facilitating its continuation. Shopping malls increasingly resemble cathedrals (cf. the Trafford Centre near Manchester), but the god that people go to worship is a distinctly material one, not spiritual!

**10.** The UK is in no way unique in terms of its religiosity, but two features mark it out from many other countries. One is its quasi-separation of church and state which contrasts with countries like France and Russia where the two are sharply divided and those like the Republic of Ireland and Italy where the Catholic Church continues to exercise significant political influence. Another is the protection it provides to its citizens in terms of freedom of worship, including laws against religious hate speech, whereas in many countries of the world religious minorities are persecuted with relative impunity.

**11.** ‘Existential insecurity’ is the concept used by Norris and Inglehart (2011) to explain why rates of religiosity are higher in poorer countries compared with richer countries. People who live in low-income countries are more susceptible to death from malnutrition, disease or natural disasters. They are on the margins of survival and lack defences against threats such as war, crime, poverty and so on. Religion is attractive to people living in these situations because it provides a sense of reassurance that one’s fate is in the hands of a “benevolent higher power even when it is uncertain that one’s family will have enough to eat”. Although people in rich societies also face external threats, these do not tend to be life-threatening, because rich societies often have welfare systems that provide their citizens with assistance. They therefore experience ‘existential security’.

This is a plausible explanation, but it has a number of weaknesses. One is that the concepts of ‘existential security’ and ‘existential insecurity’ are difficult to operationalise and therefore difficult to test empirically. Another is that there are other, equally plausible, possible explanations. For example, the level of education tends to be lower in poorer countries and it could be that religiosity declines the higher the level of education citizens receive. A final problem is that it provides no explanation for the continuation, albeit at lower levels, of religiosity in richer countries.

**12.** The view that the UK is now a post-Christian society, is not – of course – the same as claiming that it is a secular society. The influence of Christianity could have waned whilst the influence of other religious beliefs could have continued or even increased. Indeed, the numbers of people who identify as Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs has grown in the UK over recent decades.

This is acknowledged by Woodhead (2008) who describes the modern UK as a ‘post-Christian’ society in which most people are happy to identify with some core Christian values such as love, kindness, fairness and compassion, but reject others such as dogmatism and anti-liberalism. She notes that the UK “is no longer a Christian country in the way that it was in the 19th century, or even in the 1950s. It is much more plural in cultural and religious terms than ever before, and its conscience is now shaped by a whole range of sources – both secular and religious”.

A similar point of view is expressed by Davie (2015) who talks about what she calls ‘vicarious religion’. She suggests that Christianity is not practised overtly or regularly by the majority in Europe, but that most people engage with religion ‘vicariously’ through others. In other words, a minority of people are religious on behalf of a silent majority. She argues that “Churches and church leaders perform (religious) ritual on behalf of others; church leaders and churchgoers believe on behalf of others; church leaders and churchgoers embody moral codes on behalf of others”. According to Davie, religion therefore involves rituals performed by an active minority on behalf of a much larger number of others. At least implicitly, this majority not only understands, but also clearly approves of what the minority is doing.

The evidence outlined in answer to Q7 above also supports Woodhead’s claim since it points to a decline both in church attendance and belief in God. A study based on the British Social Attitudes survey by Stephen Bullivant (the *Guardian*, 24-05-2016) found that in 2014 the proportion who identified themselves as having no religion in England and Wales was 48.5%. This is similar to the findings of a Scottish Social Attitudes survey in 2016 which found 52% of Scots saying they were not religious. However, in Northern Ireland only 7% of the population according to the 2011 census said that they belonged to a non-Christian religion or had no religion.

The chapter mentions that in December 2015, the Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, announced that schools must teach that the UK is a Christian country. The evidence outlined above however suggests that, outside Northern Ireland, this is - at the very least - a questionable claim and that the label ‘post-Christian’ would be a more accurate one.