

6 BELIEFS IN SOCIETY

Example answers

1 Outline and explain **two** ways in which science differs from religion.

[10 marks]

STUDENT RESPONSE

Firstly, science is based on a system of falsification, rather than religion which accepts its philosophies as objective truths. Karl Popper outlined that the scientific method involves trying to test if a theory is false, before trying to support it with evidence. This means a process of rigorous testing under suitable conditions. If this is universally accepted by the scientific community at large, then a theory can become accepted and used. In contrast, religions are belief systems and not based on this method, but rely on scriptures and institutions such as churches to support their claims to truths. This is significantly different from a rigorous process of critically challenging theories.

Secondly, religion often accepts a creation myth. This relies on an omnipotent god who took a conscious decision to create the universe. In contrast, science has established the triggers for the universe theoretically. The big bang is cited as a cause, a giant black hole which led to the expansion of the universe. Whilst science aims to measure and examine this phenomenon, religion aims to offer a whole worldview of the causes behind it.

TEACHER COMMENTS

The first part of this answer is excellent. Although Popper's view of science is only one approach to scientific methodology, it is certainly one of the most influential. The student identifies a very clear difference in terms of a key issue (the basis on which truth claims are established or rejected) and explains the difference very well. The second part of the answer is a little specific as it is based around particular beliefs rather than more general characteristics of religion. However, this is such a key belief that it is acceptable as an example. The second part could have been developed more for a ten-mark question with ten marks for each part. It would have been worth expanding on the final sentence and explaining more about the different significance of beliefs about the origins of the universe for the two types of belief system (for example how religion links this to ultimate meanings whereas science does not). Alternative examples could have been chosen that might have been easier to develop (for example about training, institutional arrangements or rationality versus emotional attachments).

2 Read **Item A** below and answer the question that follows.

ITEM A

Religious affiliation in the USA

According to Tom Shakespeare, one in three Americans now define themselves as spiritual but not religious. Putnam and Campbell have highlighted the number of 'Nones' in the USA. These are people who belong to no religion but still believe in God. Grace Davie has used the terms 'believing without belonging' and 'vicarious religion' to explain why affiliation with particular churches and religions is in decline.

Applying material from **Item A** and your knowledge, analyse **two** reasons why 'affiliation with particular churches and religions is in decline'.

[10 marks]

STUDENT RESPONSE

Firstly, the onset of scientific rationality and positivism may explain the decline in belief and attendance in traditional religions. Marx argued that scientific rationality opened up new ideas, challenging the hegemonic philosophies of church. Instead of believing in an all-powerful god, people began to accept science as the answer to problems. This has opened up scepticism towards religion as a credible ideology.

Secondly, as the item points out, people may be drawn into new spiritualist movements whilst not supporting traditional religions. Postmodern theorists argue that this is due to the breakdown of modern society and its belief systems. These movements, such as the Church of Scientology, offer a new social movement to participate in which may be seen by many as more relevant to their lives.

TEACHER COMMENTS

The first answer identifies an appropriate reason, but the explanation is quite weak. Marx is identified as the thinker who suggests that rationalism challenges religious beliefs, but the student is very vague about Marx's ideas. Indeed, Comte and particularly Weber would have been better choices of sociologist to cite. Weber's ideas on rationalisation, the development of bureaucracy and changes in sources of authority could have been discussed and/or there could have been more discussion of the historical development of rational ideas. It would have been useful to draw on the ideas of sociologists such as Steve Bruce who support the theory of secularisation and have specifically discussed rationalisation. The answer also discusses religion in general rather than affiliation with specific religions.

The second part of the answer is stronger because it draws on Item A, and addresses the question directly. There are some good points here and a useful example but there is room for more development of the explanation. For example, there could have been a discussion of the ideas of Heelas and Woodward on the 'holistic milieu' which can involve individuals trying out different New Age ideas rather than being affiliated with a particular institution or set of beliefs.

3 Read **Item B** below and answer the question that follows.

ITEM B

Religion and social change

Functionalists believe that religion performs a number of positive but conservative functions for society that help preserve consensus and community, and therefore social order. Marx also believed that religion was a conservative force because he saw it as an ideology aimed at preserving class inequality. However, the neo-Marxists Gramsci and Maduro both agreed that religion was sometimes capable of bringing about revolutionary change and improving the lives of the poor. Weber saw most religions as conservative ideologies but claimed that Protestantism brought about massive economic change in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Applying material from **Item B** and your knowledge, evaluate the relationship between religion and social change.

[20 marks]

STUDENT RESPONSE

Religion is often the tool of elites in society, and is used to maintain their position. Therefore, it is a conservative force that prevents radical social change. This is the case across the majority of history. However, it can be a radical tool for social change in some scenarios.

Functionalists such as Durkheim offer an organic conception of society. All aspects and institutions of society are vital, and must work in unison to provide harmony. Religion provides the ideological tool of teaching norms and values. These are passed on through sermons. Once everyone has learnt and accepted these values, they become universal. This leads to harmony and removes divisions. Consequently, functionalists see religion as beneficial in subduing social change.

As stated in the item, Marxists also argue that religion subdues social change, but differ from functionalists in suggesting it has a negative effect. Religion was described by Marx as the "opiate of the masses" subduing their consciousness. The primary function of this was to maintain the power of elites. It retained the rigid class hierarchies, as the proletariat and peasantry had 'false class consciousness'. This means they accepted their position in society as natural. This was seen as an institution to be destroyed. For example, during the Spanish Second Republic, working-class people broke the stranglehold of the Catholic Church on society by destroying churches and even killing priests. This anti-clericalism was an expression of animosity for an institution seen as subjugating people for hundreds of years. Overall, religion is seen as a tool of class domination.

In addition to this, many feminists point out the socially constricting and oppressive role religion has in relation to gender. Many Christian values emphasise the importance of marriage. Catholics mostly agree that abortion should be illegal, removing the right of choice for women. The family is seen as a patriarchal institution as well, as the male is dominant, retaining his name. Furthermore, many Islamic fundamentalists uphold the practice of female genital mutilation. Nawal el Saadawi wrote about this issue as a victim herself. She critiqued the act and outlined that it was a minority of Muslims which carried out the practice. Overall, religion is traditionally a tool of patriarchal domination, preventing the social change of women's liberation.

As pointed out in the item, religion can also offer opportunities for social change. For example, the radical cleric Oscar Romero helped build a campaign against social injustice and corruption in El Salvador. He built a grassroots social movement against the ruling elite. He was assassinated for his actions. Whilst this is a singular example, it is a crucial example of how religion can become a catalyst for radical social change.

Overall, religion predominantly prevents social change. It aims to retain a strong conservative ideology. This has led religion to supporting class and gender domination for hundreds of years. However, there are some exceptions where it can be the cause to rally behind for social change.

TEACHER COMMENTS

The introduction is rather short and stark. The claims put forward are reasonable but some more analysis of the key terms and of the question would have improved it. Religion could have been defined and the possible relationships between religion and social change analysed to set up the structure of the essay.

A competent if quite basic description of the functionalist position is given, which is linked to the question at the end of the second paragraph. It is lacking conceptual detail though, and could have discussed specific theorists such as Parsons and Durkheim.

The paragraph on Marxism is stronger, with a very useful historical example included. It is linked to the question well and has more conceptual sophistication. The analysis is sound, but there is no real evaluation in the first three paragraphs of answer.

The paragraph on feminism is good, with reasonable detail included. Good use is made of the ideas of el Saadawi. The link to the question could have been made more directly and some mention could have been made of different types of feminist. The former would have improved the application and the latter would have provided more evidence of knowledge and understanding.

The paragraph about Romero utilises a good example and allows the student to introduce some evaluation. It provides convincing evidence that religion can cause social change as well as discouraging it.

The conclusion is very sound, if rather brief. It is based on the arguments that went before and follows logically from the discussion. It is straightforward but lacks complexity or detailed development.

Overall, this is a solid answer to the twenty-mark question. It is well written. The knowledge and understanding is very sound, the application is consistently good (though it could be more explicit in the paragraph on feminism) and the evaluation that is included is well supported.

However, this answer is on the short side and it lacks development. The answer would have benefitted from more detail on the theories, more use of (preferably contemporary) examples and considerably more analysis and evaluation. For example, there could have been discussion of the circumstances that make religion more likely to be conservative as opposed to radical, or *vice versa*. The student also missed a trick by not mentioning that social changes can shape religion as well as the other way round. More thorough revision might have been the key to improving this response because the student writes well and develops a fluent argument.