Chapter 7

Religion

Introduction – definitions of religion

1 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' The God of Christianity is a supreme being, his word is the ultimate truth, his power is omnipotent. His followers worship him and praise him and live by his commandments.

2 The Dugum Dani live in the Highlands of New Guinea. They have no god, but their world is inhabited by a host of supernatural beings known as mogat. The mogat are the ghosts of the dead. They cause illness and death and control the wind and the rain. The Dugum Dani are not pious – they do not pray. Their rituals are not to honour or worship the mogat but to placate and appease them.

3 The Teton Sioux lived on the northern prairies of the USA. The worlds of nature, on which they were dependent, were controlled by the Wakan powers. The powers were stronger and more mysterious than those of people. They caused the seasons to change, the rains to fall, the plants to grow and the animals to multiply. In this way they cared for the Sioux. The Sioux did not worship the Wakan powers but invoked their aid: they appealed to the powers for assistance or protection.

Religious beliefs of one sort or another are present in every known society but their variety seems to be endless. Any definition of religion must encompass this variety. However, it is difficult to produce a definition broad enough to encompass this variety without incorporating phenomena that are not normally thought of as religions. Two main approaches have been adopted in tackling this issue: those that rely upon functional and those that use substantive definitions.

1 One way of defining religion is to see it in terms of the functions it performs for society or individuals. An example of this approach is provided by Yinger who defined religion as 'a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life' (quoted in Hamilton, 1995). However, Hamilton notes two main problems with such a definition. First, it allows the inclusion of a wide variety of belief systems in the category 'religion'. For example, by this definition communism could be regarded as a religion even though it explicitly rejects religious beliefs. Second, it is based upon assumptions about the roles and purposes of religion. However, these roles and purposes might vary between societies and it should be the job of sociology to uncover them by empirical investigation, not to assume what they are from the outset. Third, phrases such as 'the ultimate problems of human life' are open to varied interpretations. Hamilton points out that for some people the ultimate problems of life might be 'simply how to enjoy it as much as possible, how to avoid pain and ensure pleasure' (Hamilton, 1995). It is clear that many other aspects of social life, apart from religion, address such issues – for example, medicine and leisure.

2 Other approaches are based upon substantive definitions, that is they are concerned with the content of religion rather than its function or purpose. Substantive definitions can take a number of forms.

Durkheim (1961) defined religion in terms of a distinction between the sacred and the profane. Sacred objects produce a sense of awe, veneration and respect, whereas profane objects do not. However, as critics have pointed out, in some cases explicitly religious objects are not treated with respect.

A common approach to a substantive definition of religion is to define it in terms of supernatural beliefs. Thus Roland Robertson states that religion 'refers to the existence of supernatural beings that have a governing effect on life' (Robertson, 1970). A supernatural element is combined with institutional aspects of religion in Melford Spiro's definition of religion as 'an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings' (Spiro, 1965). However, as Hamilton points out, such definitions run into problems because certain belief systems which are commonly regarded as religions, such as Buddhism, do not contain a belief in supernatural beings.

All definitions emphasize certain aspects of religion and exclude others. Functional definitions tend to be too inclusive – it is too easy to qualify as a religion; while substantive ones tend to be too exclusive – it is too difficult to qualify as a religion. We will look at a variety of definitions throughout the chapter and it should be borne in mind that the definitions tend to reflect the theoretical assumptions and the specific arguments being advanced by individual sociologists. This is particularly evident in the debate on secularization (the question of whether religion has declined). Varying definitions allow the advocates and critics of the theory to include evidence that supports their case and exclude evidence that contradicts it.

The problems of definition should not, however, be exaggerated. The disputes tend to occur over phenomena that can be considered to be on the fringes of religion (such as New Age movements) and there is general agreement that such belief systems as Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Buddhism and Judaism are religions.

Religion – a functionalist perspective

The functionalist perspective examines religion in terms of society's needs. Functionalist analysis is primarily concerned with the contribution religion makes to meeting these needs. From this perspective, society requires a certain degree of social solidarity, value consensus, and harmony and integration between its parts. The function of religion is the contribution it makes to meeting such functional prerequisites – for example, its contribution to social solidarity.

Emile Durkheim

The sacred and the profane

In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, first published in 1912, Emile Durkheim presented what is probably the most influential interpretation of religion from a functionalist perspective (Durkheim, 1961). Durkheim argued that all societies divide the world into two categories: the sacred and the profane (the non-sacred). Religion is based upon this division. It is 'a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden'.

It is important to realize that:

> *By sacred things one must not understand simply those personal things which are called gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word anything can be sacred.*
>
> Durkheim, 1961

There is nothing about the particular qualities of a pebble or a tree that makes them sacred. Therefore sacred things must be symbols, they must represent something. To understand the role of religion in society, the relationship between sacred symbols and what they represent must be established.

Totemism

Durkheim used the religion of various groups of Australian aboriginals to develop his argument. He saw their religion, which he called totemism, as the simplest and most basic form of religion.

Aboriginal society is divided into several clans. A clan is like a large extended family with its members sharing certain duties and obligations. For example, clans have a rule of exogamy – that is, members are not allowed to marry within the clan. Clan members have a duty to aid and assist each other: they join together to mourn the death of one of their number and to revenge a member who has been wronged by someone from another clan.

Each clan has a totem, usually an animal or a plant. This totem is then represented by drawings made on wood or stone. These drawings are called churingas. Usually churingas are at least as sacred as the species which they represent and sometimes more so. The totem is a symbol. It is the emblem of the clan, 'It is its flag; it is the sign by which each clan distinguishes itself from all others.' However, the totem is more than the churinga which represents it – it is the most sacred object in aborigine ritual. The totem is 'The outward and visible form of the totemic principle or god.'

Durkheim argued that if the totem 'Is at once the symbol of god and of the society, is that not because the god and the society are only one?' Thus he suggested that in worshipping god, people are in fact worshipping society. Society is the real object of religious veneration.

How does humanity come to worship society? Sacred things are 'considered superior in dignity and power to profane things and particularly to man'. In relation to the sacred, humans are inferior and dependent. This relationship between humanity and sacred things is exactly the relationship between humanity and society. Society is more important and

powerful than the individual. Durkheim argued that 'Primitive man comes to view society as something sacred because he is utterly dependent on it.'

But why does humanity not simply worship society itself? Why does it invent a sacred symbol like a totem? Because, Durkheim argued, it is easier for a person to 'visualize and direct his feelings of awe toward a symbol than towards so complex a thing as a clan'.

Religion and the 'collective conscience'

Durkheim believed that social life is impossible without the shared values and moral beliefs that form the collective conscience. In their absence, there would be no social order, social control, social solidarity or cooperation. In short, there would be no society. Religion reinforces the collective conscience. The worship of society strengthens the values and moral beliefs that form the basis of social life. By defining them as sacred, religion provides them with greater power to direct human action.

This attitude of respect towards the sacred is the same attitude applied to social duties and obligations. In worshipping society, people are, in effect, recognizing the importance of the social group and their dependence upon it. In this way religion strengthens the unity of the group: it promotes social solidarity.

Durkheim emphasized the importance of collective worship. The social group comes together in religious rituals full of drama and reverence. Together, its members express their faith in common values and beliefs. In this highly charged atmosphere of collective worship, the integration of society is strengthened. Members of society express, communicate and understand the moral bonds which unite them.

According to Durkheim, the belief in gods or spirits, which usually provide the focus for religious ceremonies, originated from belief in the ancestral spirits of dead relatives. The worship of gods is really the worship of ancestors' souls. Since Durkheim also believed that souls represent the presence of social values, the collective conscience is present in individuals. It is through individual souls that the collective conscience is realized. Since religious worship involves the worship of souls, Durkheim again concludes that religious worship is really the worship of the social group or society.

Criticisms of Durkheim

Durkheim's ideas are still influential today, although they have been criticized:

1 Critics have argued that Durkheim studied only a small number of Aboriginal groups which were somewhat untypical of other Aboriginal tribes. Is may therefore be misleading to generalize about Aboriginal beliefs from this sample, never mind generalizing about religion as a whole.

2 Most sociologists believe that Durkheim has overstated his case. While agreeing that religion is important for promoting social solidarity and reinforcing social values, they would not support his view that religion is the worship of society. Durkheim's views on religion are more relevant to small, non-literate societies, where there is a close integration of culture and social institutions, where work, leisure, education and family life tend to merge, and where members share a common belief and value system. His views are less relevant to modern societies, which have many subcultures, social and ethnic groups, specialized organizations, and a range of religious beliefs, practices and institutions. As Malcolm Hamilton puts it, 'The emergence of religious pluralism and diversity within a society is, of course, something that Durkheim's theory has great difficulty dealing with' (Hamilton, 1995).

3 Durkheim may also overstate the degree to which the collective conscience permeates and shapes the behaviour of individuals. Indeed, sometimes religious beliefs can be at odds with and override societal values. Malcolm Hamilton makes this point strongly:

> *The fact that our moral sense might make us go against the majority, the society, or authority, shows that we are not quite so dependent upon or creatures of society as Durkheim claims. Society, powerful as it is, does not have the primacy that Durkheim believes it has. Ironically, it often seems to be the case that religious beliefs can have a much greater influence upon and hold over the individual than society does since it is often out of religious convictions that individuals will fly in the face of society or attempt to withdraw from it, as in the case of many sectarian movements.*
>
> Hamilton, 1995, p. 105

Bronislaw Malinowski

Like Durkheim, Malinowski uses data from small-scale non-literate societies to develop his thesis on religion (Malinowski, 1954). Many of his examples are drawn from his fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands off the coast of New Guinea. Like Durkheim, Malinowski sees religion as reinforcing social norms and values and promoting social solidarity. Unlike Durkheim, however, he does not see religion as reflecting society as a whole, nor does he see religious ritual as the worship of society itself. Malinowski identifies specific areas of social life with which religion is concerned, and to which it is addressed. These are situations of emotional stress that threaten social solidarity.

Religion and life crises

Anxiety and tension tend to disrupt social life. Situations that produce these emotions include crises of life such as birth, puberty, marriage and death. Malinowski notes that in all societies these life crises are surrounded with religious ritual. He sees death as the most disruptive of these events and argues that:

> *The existence of strong personal attachments and the fact of death, which of all human events is the most upsetting and disorganizing to man's calculations, are perhaps the main sources of religious beliefs.*
>
> Malinowski, 1954

Religion deals with the problem of death in the following manner. A funeral ceremony expresses the belief in immortality, which denies the fact of death, and so comforts the bereaved. Other mourners support the bereaved by their presence at the ceremony. This comfort and support check the emotions which death produces, and control the stress and anxiety that might disrupt society. Death is socially destructive since it removes a member from society. At a funeral ceremony the social group unites to support the bereaved. This expression of social solidarity reintegrates society.

Religion, prediction and control

A second category of events – undertakings that cannot be fully controlled or predicted by practical means – also produces tension and anxiety. From his observations in the Trobriand Islands, Malinowski noted that such events were surrounded by ritual.

Fishing is an important subsistence practice in the Trobriands. Malinowski observed that in the calm waters of the lagoon 'fishing is done in an easy and absolutely reliable manner by the method of poisoning, yielding abundant results without danger and uncertainty'. However, beyond the barrier reef in the open sea there is danger and uncertainty: a storm may result in loss of life and the catch is dependent on the presence of a shoal of fish, which cannot be predicted. In the lagoon, 'where man can rely completely on his knowledge and skill', there are no rituals associated with fishing, whereas fishing in the open sea is preceded by rituals to ensure a good catch and protect the fishermen. Although Malinowski refers to these rituals as magic, others argue that it is reasonable to regard them as religious practices.

Again we see ritual used for specific situations that produce anxiety. Rituals reduce anxiety by providing confidence and a feeling of control. As with funeral ceremonies, fishing rituals are social events. The group unites to deal with situations of stress, and so the unity of the group is strengthened.

Therefore we can summarize by saying that Malinowski's distinctive contribution to the sociology of religion is his argument that religion promotes social solidarity by dealing with situations of emotional stress that threaten the stability of society.

Criticisms of Malinowski

Malinowski has been criticized for exaggerating the importance of religious rituals in helping people to cope with situations of stress and uncertainty. Tambiah (1990, discussed in Hamilton, 1995) points out, for example, that magic and elaborate rituals are associated with the cultivation of taro and yams on the Trobriand Islands. This is related to the fact that taro and yams are important because men must use them to make payments to their sisters' husbands. Men who fail to do so show that they are unable to fulfil significant social obligations. These rituals are therefore simply related to the maintenance of prestige in that society and have little to do with cementing solidarity or dealing with uncertainty and danger. A particular function or effect that religion sometimes has, has been mistaken for a feature of religion in general.

Talcott Parsons

Religion and value consensus

Talcott Parsons (1937, 1964, 1965a) argued that human action is directed and controlled by norms provided by the social system. The cultural system provides more general guidelines for action in the form of beliefs, values and systems of meaning. The norms which direct action are not merely isolated standards for behaviour; they are integrated and patterned by the values and beliefs provided by the cultural system. For example, many norms in Western society are expressions of the value of materialism. Religion is part of the cultural system. As such, religious beliefs provide guidelines for human action and standards against which people's conduct can be evaluated.

In a Christian society the Ten Commandments operate in this way. They demonstrate how many of the norms of the social system can be integrated by religious beliefs. For example, the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' integrates such diverse norms as the ways to drive a car, to settle an argument and to deal with the suffering of the aged. The norms that direct these areas of behaviour prohibit manslaughter, murder and euthanasia but they are all based on the same religious commandment.

In this way, religion provides general guidelines for conduct which are expressed in a variety of norms. By establishing general principles and moral

beliefs, religion helps to provide the consensus which Parsons believes is necessary for order and stability in society.

Religion and social order

Parsons, like Malinowski, sees religion as being addressed to particular problems that occur in all societies. He argues that in everyday life, people 'go about their business without particular strain'. If life were always like this, 'religion would certainly not have the significance that it does'. However, life does not always follow this smooth pattern. The problems that disrupt it fall into two categories:

1 The first 'consists in the fact that individuals are "hit" by events which they cannot foresee and prepare for, or control, or both'. One such event is death, particularly premature death. Like Malinowski, and for similar reasons, Parsons sees religion as a mechanism for adjustment to such events and as a means of restoring the normal pattern of life.
2 The second problem area is that of 'uncertainty'. This refers to endeavours in which a great deal of effort and skill have been invested, but where unknown or uncontrollable factors can threaten a successful outcome. One example is humanity's inability to predict or control the effect of weather upon agriculture. Again, following Malinowski, Parsons argues that religion provides a means of adjusting and coming to terms with such situations through rituals which act as 'a tonic to self-confidence'.

In this way, religion maintains social stability by relieving the tension and frustration that could disrupt social order.

Religion and meaning

As a part of the cultural system, religious beliefs give meaning to life; they answer, in Parsons's rather sexist words, 'man's questions about himself and the world he lives in'. This function of religion is particularly important in relation to the frustrations we discussed in the last section, which threaten to shatter beliefs about the meaning of life and so make human existence meaningless. Why should a premature death occur? It is not something people expect to happen or feel ought to happen. Social life is full of contradictions that threaten the meanings people place on life. Parsons argues that one of the major functions of religion is to 'make sense' of all experiences, no matter how meaningless or contradictory they appear.

A good example of this is the question of suffering: 'Why must men endure deprivation and pain and so unequally and haphazardly, if indeed at all?' Religion provides a range of answers: suffering is imposed by God to test a person's faith; it is a punishment for sins; and suffering with fortitude will bring its reward in Heaven. Suffering thus becomes meaningful.

Similarly, the problem of evil is common to all societies. It is particularly disconcerting when people profit through evil actions. Religion solves this contradiction by stating that evil will receive its just deserts in the afterlife.

Parsons (1965a) therefore sees a major function of religion as the provision of meaning to events that people do not expect, or feel ought not, to happen – events that are frustrating and contradictory. Religion 'makes sense' of these events in terms of an integrated and consistent pattern of meaning. This allows intellectual and emotional adjustment. On a more general level, this adjustment promotes order and stability in society.

Criticisms of the functionalist approach

The functionalist perspective emphasizes the positive contributions of religion to society and tends to ignore its dysfunctional aspects. With its preoccupation with harmony, integration and solidarity, functionalism neglects the many instances where religion can be seen as a divisive and disruptive force. It bypasses the frequent examples of internal divisions within a community over questions of religious dogma and worship – divisions that can lead to open conflict. It gives little consideration to hostility between different religious groups within the same society, such as Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland or Hindus and Muslims in India. In such cases religion can be seen as a direct threat to social order. As Charles Glock and Rodney Stark state in their criticism of functionalist views on religion:

> *We find it difficult to reconcile the general theory with considerable evidence of religious conflict. On every side it would seem that religion threatens social integration as readily as it contributes to it. The history of Christianity, with its many schisms, manifests the great power of religion not merely to bind but to divide.*
>
> Glock and Stark, 1965

The Marxist perspective on religion, which we are going to consider next, provides an interesting contrast to functionalist views.

Religion – a Marxist perspective

In Marx's vision of the ideal society, exploitation and alienation are things of the past. The means of production are communally owned, which results in the disappearance of social classes. Members of society are fulfilled as human beings: they control their own destinies and work together for the common good. Religion does not exist in this communist utopia because the social conditions that produce it have disappeared.

To Marx, religion is an illusion which eases the pain produced by exploitation and oppression. It is a series of myths that justify and legitimate the subordination of the subject class and the domination and privilege of the ruling class. It is a distortion of reality which provides many of the deceptions that form the basis of ruling-class ideology and false class consciousness.

Religion as 'the opium of the people'

In Marx's words, 'Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people' (Marx, in Bottomore and Rubel, 1963). Religion acts as an opiate to dull the pain produced by oppression. It is both 'an expression of real suffering and a protest against suffering', but it does little to solve the problem because it helps to make life more bearable and therefore dilutes demands for change. As such, religion merely stupefies its adherents rather than bringing them true happiness and fulfilment.

Similarly, Lenin argued 'Religion is a kind of spiritual gin in which the slaves of capital drown their human shape and their claims to any decent life' (cited in Lane, 1970).

From a Marxist perspective, religion can dull the pain of oppression in the following ways:

1 It promises a paradise of eternal bliss in life after death. Engels argued that the appeal of Christianity to oppressed classes lies in its promise of 'salvation from bondage and misery' in the afterlife. The Christian vision of heaven can make life on earth more bearable by giving people something to look forward to.

2 Some religions make a virtue of the suffering produced by oppression. In particular, those who bear the deprivations of poverty with dignity and humility will be rewarded for their virtue. This view is contained in the well-known biblical quotation, 'It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.' Religion thus makes poverty more tolerable by offering a reward for suffering and promising compensation for injustice in the afterlife.

3 Religion can offer the hope of supernatural intervention to solve the problems on earth. Members of religious groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses live in anticipation of the day when the supernatural powers will descend from on high and create heaven on earth. Anticipation of this future can make the present more acceptable.

4 Religion often justifies the social order and a person's position within it. God can be seen as creating and ordaining the social structure, as in the following verse from the Victorian hymn 'All things bright and beautiful':

> The rich man in his castle,
> The poor man at his gate,
> God made them high and lowly,
> And ordered their estate.

In this way, social arrangements appear inevitable. This can help those at the bottom of the stratification system to accept and come to terms with their situation. In the same way, poverty and misfortune in general have often been seen as divinely ordained as a punishment for sin. Again, the situation is defined as immutable and unchangeable. This can make life more bearable by encouraging people to accept their situation philosophically.

Religion and social control

From a Marxist viewpoint, religion does not simply cushion the effects of oppression, it is also an instrument of that oppression. It acts as a mechanism of social control, maintaining the existing system of exploitation and reinforcing class relationships. Put simply, it keeps people in their place. By making unsatisfactory lives bearable, religion tends to discourage people from attempting to change their situation. By offering an illusion of hope in a hopeless situation, it prevents thoughts of overthrowing the system. By providing explanations and justifications for social situations, religion distorts reality. It helps to produce a false class consciousness that blinds members of the subject class to their true situation and their real interests. In this way it diverts people's attention from the real source of their oppression and so helps to maintain ruling-class power.

Religion is not, however, solely the province of oppressed groups. From a Marxist perspective, ruling classes adopt religious beliefs to justify their position both to themselves and to others. The lines 'God made them high and lowly/And ordered their estate' show clearly how religion can be used to justify

social inequality, not simply to the poor, but also to the rich. Religion is often directly supported by the ruling classes to further their interests. In the words of Marx and Engels, 'the parson has ever gone hand in hand with the landlord'. In feudal England the lord of the manor's power was frequently legitimated by pronouncements from the pulpit. In return for this support, landlords would often richly endow the established church.

Evidence to support Marxism

There is considerable evidence to support the Marxist view of the role of religion in society.

The caste system of traditional India was justified by Hindu religious beliefs. In medieval Europe, kings and queens ruled by divine right. The Egyptian Pharaohs went one step further by combining both god and king in the same person. Slave-owners in the southern states of America often approved of the conversion of slaves to Christianity, believing it to be a controlling and gentling influence. It has been argued that in the early days of the Industrial Revolution in England, employers used religion as a means of controlling the masses and encouraging them to remain sober and to work hard.

A more recent example which can be used to support Marxism has been discussed by Steve Bruce (1988). He has pointed out that, in the USA, conservative Protestants – the 'New Christian Right' – consistently support right-wing political candidates in the Republican Party, and attack more liberal candidates in the Democratic Party. In 1980 they 'targeted' 27 liberal candidates for attack; 23 of them lost. The New Christian Right supported Ronald Reagan in his successful campaign for the presidency in 1984. In the 1988 presidential campaign, however, Reagan was unsuccessfully challenged for the Republican nomination for president by a member of the New Christian Right, Pat Robertson. Robertson is one of a number of television evangelists who have tried to gain new converts to their brand of Christianity and who spread their political and moral messages through preaching on television.

According to Bruce, the New Christian Right have supported 'a more aggressive anti-communist foreign policy, more military spending, less central government interference, less welfare spending, and fewer restraints on free enterprise'. Although Bruce emphasizes that they have had a limited influence on American politics, it is clear that they have tended to defend the interests of the rich and powerful at the expense of other groups in the population.

The limitations of Marxism

Conflicting evidence suggests that religion does not always legitimate power; it is not simply a justification of alienation or a justification of privilege, and it can sometimes provide an impetus for change. Although this is not reflected in Marx's own writing, nor in much of Engels's earlier work, it is reflected in Engels's later work and in the perspectives on religion advanced by more recent neo-Marxists. We will examine these views after the next section, which considers the relationship between religion and communism.

Furthermore, the fact that religion sometimes acts as an ideological force in the way suggested by Marx, does not explain the existence of religion. As Malcolm Hamilton points out:

> *To say, however, that religion can be turned into an instrument of manipulation is no more to explain it than saying that because art or drama can be utilised for ideological purposes this explains art or drama.*
>
> Hamilton, 1995, p. 84

In contrast, approaches such as those used by Stark and Bainbridge (1985) do try to find an explanation for the almost universal presence of religion in society in basic human needs. Their views will be examined shortly (see pp. 445–6).

Religion and communism

Marx stated that 'Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves round man as long as he does not revolve round himself' (Marx and Engels, 1957). In a truly socialist society individuals revolve around themselves, and religion – along with all other illusions and distortions of reality – disappears.

Whatever the merits of this prophecy, it certainly does not reflect the situation in the socialist Israeli kibbutzim. Many kibbutzim are fervently religious and their members appear to experience no contradiction between religion and socialism.

In the USSR under communism the strength of religion was harder to gauge. After the revolution of 1917 the communist state placed limits on religious activity and at times persecuted religious people. Soviet law restricted religious worship to designated churches and other places of prayer. Religious instruction of children was banned. Geoffrey Hosking estimated that there were more than 50,000 Russian Orthodox churches before the 1917 revolution, but by 1939 only about 4,000 remained (Hosking, 1988). Writing in 1970, David Lane claimed that there were about 20,000 Russian Orthodox churches in 1960, but nearly half of these had been closed by 1965 due to the policies of Khrushchev.

On the surface such figures suggest that religion had declined, but this may have been due to the activities of the ruling elite rather than to a loss of faith by the population. Lane claimed that religion

probably had little hold over the population, but it had, nevertheless, shown a certain resilience to communism. This resilience was reflected in one estimate which placed the number of baptized Orthodox Christians in the period 1947–57 at 90 million, which is roughly the same as in 1914. In 1988, Geoffrey Hoskins argued that 'The Soviet Union is already a much more "religious" country than Britain or most of Western Europe.'

When President Gorbachov instituted a policy of *glasnost*, or openness, restrictions on religion were relaxed. In 1989 and 1990, unrest in a number of Soviet republics suggested the continued strength of religious belief. The Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania was one source of demands for independence. In 1990, conflict between Soviet Muslims in Azerbaijan and Soviet Christians in Armenia led to troops being deployed to restore order.

When the USSR began to divide and Communist Party rule was abandoned, religious convictions became even more evident. In 1991, David Martin described how church bells were used to summon millions of people to link arms around the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. In other former communist countries there were 'enormous gatherings in Poland to celebrate the feast of the Assumption and the passionate pilgrimages of the Serbs to monastic shrines at Kosova' (Martin, 1991b).

Opinion poll figures suggest that religion remained important to large proportions of the population during the communist eras in the USSR and Eastern Europe, and that religion has become stronger since the demise of communism. Quoting data from the International Social Survey Program, Andrew Greeley notes that, in 1991, 47 per cent of the Russian population claimed to believe in God (Greeley, 1994). The strength of the religious revival is revealed by the fact that 22 per cent of the population were former non-believers who had converted to a belief in God. Similarly, Mikl[ó]s Tomka found that, in 1978, 44.3 per cent of the population of Hungary claimed to be religious, and that this had risen to 76.8 per cent by August 1993 (Tomka, 1995).

One society which has retained communism throughout the 1990s is Fidel Castro's Cuba. However, even such a staunch communist as Castro was forced to acknowledge the continuing appeal of religion when he invited Pope John Paul to Cuba in January 1998. The Pope addressed large and enthusiastic crowds, suggesting that Roman Catholicism remained strong despite some 40 years in which the communist state had discouraged religious participation and belief.

These examples suggest that there is more to religion than a set of beliefs and practices which develop in societies based on the private ownership of the means of production. (See Chapter 15 for an analysis of religion within the general framework of Marxist theory.)

Engels and neo-Marxists – religion as a radical force

Engels – Christianity and social change

Roger O'Toole, commenting on the Marxist sociology of religion, argues that 'Beginning with the work of Engels, Marxists have undoubtedly recognized the active role that may be played by religion in effecting revolutionary social change' (O'Toole, 1984). Thus, in *On the History of Early Christianity*, Engels compared some of the early Christian sects that opposed Roman rule to communist and socialist political movements (Marx and Engels, 1957). He said, 'Christianity got hold of the masses exactly as modern socialism does, under the shape of a variety of sects.' While Christianity originated as a way of coping with exploitation among oppressed groups, it could become a source of resistance to the oppressors and thus a force for change.

Otto Maduro – the relative autonomy of religion

Maduro is a contemporary neo-Marxist. While accepting many aspects of Marx's analysis of religion, he places greater emphasis on the idea that religion has some independence, or 'relative autonomy', from the economic system of the bourgeoisie (Maduro, 1982). He denies that religion is always a conservative force and, indeed, claims that it can be revolutionary. He says, 'Religion is not necessarily a functional, reproductive or conservative factor in society; it often is one of the main (and sometimes the only) available channel to bring about a social revolution.'

Maduro claims that, up until recently, Catholicism in Latin America tended to support the bourgeoisie and right-wing military dictatorships which have represented its interests. The Catholic Church has tended to deny the existence of social conflicts between oppressive and oppressed classes. It has recognized some injustices, such as poverty and illiteracy, but has suggested that the solution lies with those who already have power. The Catholic Church has also supported members of the clergy who have assisted private enterprise and government projects; it has celebrated military victories but failed to support unions, strikes, and opposition political parties.

On the other hand, more recently, Catholic priests have increasingly demonstrated their autonomy from the bourgeoisie by criticizing them and acting against their interests. Maduro believes that members of the

clergy can develop revolutionary potential where oppressed members of the population have no outlet for their grievances. They pressurize priests to take up their cause, and theological disagreements within a church can provide interpretations of a religion that are critical of the rich and powerful.

All of these conditions have been met in Latin America and have led to the development of liberation theology (for further details of liberation theology see p. 451).

Bryan S. Turner – a materialist theory of religion

Bryan Turner (1983) follows Marx in arguing that religion rises from a material base: that is, he agrees that religion relates to the physical and economic aspects of social life. Unlike Marx, however, Turner does not believe that religion has a universal role in society, nor does he believe that religion is always an important part of ruling-class ideological control. He questions the belief that religion has always been a powerful force persuading subject classes to accept the status quo.

Religion and feudalism

Marxists have tended to assume that, in the feudal period, religion (in particular, Roman Catholicism in Europe) was a belief system that played a fundamental part in integrating society. Turner rejects the view that religion was as important for serfs and peasants as it was for feudal lords. On the basis of historical evidence he claims that the peasantry were largely indifferent to religion: their main concern was simply survival.

By comparison, religion played an important part in the lives of the ruling class, the feudal lords. In feudalism, wealth consisted of, and power derived from, the ownership of land by private individuals. For the ruling class to maintain its dominance it had to pass on property to an heir. Usually a system of primogeniture was used: the eldest son of a landowner inherited all his father's land. This prevented the splitting-up of estates, which would have reduced the concentration of power in the hands of particular individuals. It was therefore vital to the workings of feudalism and the maintenance of a dominant class that there was a legitimate male heir for each landowner. Premarital promiscuity and adultery both jeopardized the production of such an heir. Marriage and the legitimacy of children were propped up and defended by the church. Thus, in Turner's words, 'religion has the function of controlling the sexuality of the body in order to secure regular transmission of property via the family'. Without religion it would have been difficult to ensure there were recognized legitimate heirs who could retain concentrated landholdings in their family's possession.

A secondary function of religion under feudalism also stemmed from primogeniture. There was a surplus of younger sons who did not inherit land. In military feudalism, sons might meet an early death, so it was necessary to have a number of heirs in case one or more were killed. But those who did not receive an inheritance had to have some means of support. Monasteries provided one solution to the problem of the surplus males.

Religion and capitalism

Turner believes that, in modern capitalism, religion has lost the one vital function that it had for the ruling class. Today, he claims, individual and family property is much less important for the maintenance of ruling-class power. Property has become depersonalized – most wealth is concentrated in the hands of organizations (such as banks, pension funds and multinational corporations) rather than in the hands of individuals. In these circumstances, religion is no more than an optional extra for modern capitalist societies. Since the transmission of property via the family is no longer vital to the system, society can tolerate, and the church can accept, divorce and illegitimacy.

Turner's views on religion are similar to the more general views on the dominant ideology thesis advanced by Abercrombie, Hill and Turner (1980). They believe that modern capitalist societies do not possess a widely-accepted ruling-class ideology, and that such an ideology is not necessary for the continuance of capitalist domination: the ruling class use coercion and naked economic power to maintain their position. Abercrombie *et al.* therefore question Marx's beliefs about the importance of religion in producing false class consciousness in capitalist societies. (For more details on the dominant ideology thesis see Chapter 9.)

Having discussed Marxist and materialist views on religion, we will now turn to a consideration of the relationship between gender and religion. Some feminist theories of religion have similarities with Marxist theories.

Gender, feminism and religion

Introduction

Feminist theories of religion follow Marxist theories in arguing that religion can be an instrument of domination and oppression. However, unlike Marxism, they tend to see religion as a product of patriarchy (see pp. 150–6 for a discussion of patriarchy) rather than as a product of capitalism. They see religion as serving the interests of men rather than those of a capitalist class. Indeed, such a view of religion is not confined to female and feminist sociologists. For example, Anthony Giddens argues that:

> *The Christian religion is a resolutely male affair in its symbolism as well as its hierarchy. While Mary, the mother of Jesus, may sometimes be treated as if she had divine qualities, God is the father, a male figure, and Jesus took the human shape of a man. Woman is portrayed as created from a rib taken from a man.*
>
> Giddens, 1997, p. 449

The secondary and often subordinate role of women in Christian doctrine is also typical of most other religions. Karen Armstrong argues that 'None of the major religions has been particularly good to women. They have usually become male affairs and women have been relegated to a marginal position' (Armstrong, 1993). Although women may have made significant advances in many areas of life, their gains in most religions have been very limited.

Women continue to be excluded from key roles in many religions (although the Church of England finally allowed the ordination of women priests in 1992). This is despite the fact that women often participate more in organized religion (when they are allowed to) than men. Steve Bruce points out that, according to the 1991 *British Social Attitudes Survey*, 65 per cent of regular church attenders in Britain and Northern Ireland were women, compared to 35 per cent who were men.

Feminist writers are therefore interested in how women came to be subservient within most religions and how religion has been used to cement patriarchal power. More recently, some sociologists have examined how women have begun to try to reduce the imbalance between males and females within religion.

Gender inequality in religion

The origins of gender inequality

A number of writers have noted that, historically, women have not always been subordinate within most religions. Karen Armstrong, for example, argues that in early history 'women were considered central to the spiritual quest' (Armstrong, 1993). In the Middle East, Asia and Europe, archaeologists have uncovered numerous symbols of the Great Mother Goddess. She was pictured as a naked pregnant woman and seems to represent the mysteries of fertility and life. As Armstrong puts it:

> *The Earth produced plants and nourished them in rather the same way as a woman gave birth to a child and fed it from her own body. The magical power of the earth seemed vitally interconnected with the mysterious creativity of the female sex.*
>
> Armstrong, 1993, p. 8

There were very few early effigies of gods as men. As societies developed religious beliefs in which there were held to be many different gods and goddesses, the Mother Goddess still played a crucial role. Armstrong says she was:

> *absorbed into the pantheons of deities and remained a powerful figure. She was called Inanna in Sumner, in ancient Mesopotamia, Ishtar in Babylon, Anat or Asherah in Canaan, Isis in Egypt and Aphrodite in Greece. In all these cultures people told remarkably similar stories about her to express her role in their spiritual lives. She was still revered as the source of fertility.*
>
> Armstrong, 1993, p. 9

Not surprisingly, since they had goddesses, these societies also had female priests.

However, the position of women in religion began to decline as a result of invasions. Armstrong says:

> *In Mesopotamia, Egypt and India, Semitic and Aryan invaders from the north brought with them a male-orientated mythology which replaced the Goddess with more powerful masculine deities. These invasions had begun as early as the fourth millennium but became more and more devastating.*
>
> Armstrong, 1993, p. 21

Armstrong argues that an Amorite myth dating from about 1750 BC marked the start of the eventual decline of the goddess. In it the goddess Tiamat, the goddess of the sea, is replaced by the male god of Babylon, Marduk. Male gods such as the Hebrew Yahweh became increasingly important and they introduced a 'more martial and aggressive spirituality'.

The final death knell of goddesses came with the acceptance of monotheism – belief in a single god rather than many. This originated with Yahweh, the

god of Abraham. Furthermore, this 'God of Israel would later become the God of the Christians and the Muslims, who all regard themselves as the spiritual offspring of Abraham, the father of all believers'.

Jean Holm – inequality in major religions

Jean Holm has reviewed some of the ways in which women are subordinate or exploited in contemporary religions and devalued by different religious beliefs (Holm, 1994). She argues that, while the classical teachings of many religions have stressed equality between men and women, in practice women have usually been far from equal. She says, 'Women do, of course, have a part to play in many religions, but it is almost always subordinate to the role of men, and it is likely to be in the private rather than the public sphere.' She gives a number of examples.

In Japanese folk religions women are responsible for organizing public rituals, but only men can take part in the public performances. In Chinese popular religion women are associated with Yin and men with Yang. However, Yang spirits are more important and powerful. In Buddhism, both men and women can have a religious role as monks and nuns respectively. However, all monks are seen as senior to all nuns. Orthodox Judaism only allows males to take a full part in ceremonies. In Islam, in some regions, women are not allowed to enter mosques for worship, and men have made all the legal rulings. Christianity has also been male-dominated. Holm says:

> *Many of the most influential ideas were worked out by (celibate) men in the first five centuries of the church's history, and the significant developments of the medieval Church and the Reformation were also shaped by men.*
>
> Holm, 1994, p.xiii

In Hinduism only men can become Brahmanic priests. Sikhism is perhaps the most egalitarian of the major religions since all offices are equally open to men and women. However, even in Sikhism, only a small minority of women have significant positions within the religion.

Women's second-class status is often related to female sexuality. Holm comments that 'Menstruation and childbirth are almost universally regarded as polluting. In many traditions women are forbidden to enter sacred places or touch sacred objects during the menstrual period.' For example, Hindu women are prohibited from approaching family shrines when pregnant or menstruating. Muslim women are not allowed to touch the Koran, go into a mosque or pray during menstruation.

Despite documenting these inequalities, Holm is not entirely pessimistic. As we will see later, she does detect evidence of changes in which the inequality between men and women in religion is being slowly reduced (see below, p. 443).

Feminist perspectives on religion

Simone de Beauvoir – religion and *The Second Sex*

Jean Holm describes some of the inequalities between males and females within different religions. However, she goes into little detail about why such inequalities exist. The French feminist Simone de Beauvoir provides such an explanation in her pioneering feminist book *The Second Sex* (1953, first published 1949). To Beauvoir, religion acts for women in very similar ways to those in which Marx suggested religion could act for oppressed classes. De Beauvoir says, 'There must be a religion for women as there must be one for the common people, and for exactly the same reasons.' Religion can be used by the oppressors (men) to control the oppressed group (women) and it also serves as a way of compensating women for their second-class status.

De Beauvoir notes that men have generally exercised control over religious beliefs. She says, 'Man enjoys the great advantage of having a God endorse the code he writes.' That code uses divine authority to support male dominance. As de Beauvoir says, 'For the Jews, Mohammedans, and Christians, among others, man is master by divine right; the fear of God will therefore repress any impulse towards revolt in the downtrodden female.'

However, in modern societies, 'religion seems much less an instrument of constraint than an instrument of deception'. Women are deceived by religion into thinking of themselves as equal to men despite their evident inequality. In some ways women are portrayed by religion as being closer to God than men, even if they are unlikely to hold positions of power within religions. As mothers, women have a key religious role: 'a mother not only engenders the flesh, she produces a soul for God.' Women are taught to be relatively passive, but in some ways this makes them appear more godly than the men whose 'agitation for this and that is more than absurd, it is blameworthy: why remodel this world which God himself created.'

Like Marx's proletariat, religion gives women the false belief that they will be compensated for their sufferings on earth by equality in heaven. In these ways the subjugation of women through religion helps to maintain a status quo in which women are unequal. Women are also vital to religion because it is they who do much of the work for religious organizations and introduce children to religious beliefs. Thus, de Beauvoir concludes:

Religion sanctions woman's self-love; it gives her the guide, father, lover, divine guardian she longs for nostalgically; it feeds her day-dreams; it fills her empty hours. But, above all, it confirms the social order, it justifies her resignation, by giving hope of a better future in a sexless heaven. This is why women today are still a powerful trump in the hand of the Church; it is why the Church is notably hostile to all measures likely to help in women's emancipation. There must be religion for women; and there must be women, 'true women' to perpetuate religion.

de Beauvoir, 1953, p. 591

Nawal El Saadawi – *The Hidden Face of Eve*

Patriarchy, Islam and the limited role of religion

Simone de Beauvoir writes from the perspective of a Western, Christian woman. Nawal El Saadawi is an Egyptian feminist writer and a leading advocate of women's rights in the Arab world. She was sacked from her post as Egypt's Director of Public Health by the then ruler Sadat, and has been imprisoned for her political activities. In *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980), she discusses female oppression in the Arab world and elsewhere and considers the importance of religion in creating and perpetuating oppression.

El Saadawi recounts some of her personal experience of oppression. For example, she describes in chilling terms her terror as a young girl when her parents forced her, without warning or explanation, to undergo 'female circumcision', where part of her clitoris was amputated. She argues that Arab girls are often victims of sexual aggression by men (often their fathers, brothers or other relations). She also discusses prostitution, slavery and abortion and argues that all of these areas provide evidence of patriarchal dominance of Arab men over Arab women.

She notes that oppressive practices such as female circumcision have often been attributed to the influence of Islam. However, El Saadawi denies that the oppression of women is directly caused by religion in general, or Islam in particular. Female circumcision has been practised in a considerable number of countries, not all of them Islamic. Authentic religious beliefs tend to be opposed to any such practices because, 'if religion comes from God, how can it order man to cut off an organ created by Him as long as that organ is not diseased or deformed?' Authentic religion aims at 'truth, equality, justice, love and a healthy wholesome life for all people, whether men or women'.

Furthermore, other religions are often more oppressive than Islam. She says, 'If we study Christianity it is easy to see that this religion is much more rigid and orthodox where women are concerned than Islam.' To El Saadawi, the oppression of women is caused by 'the patriarchal system which came into being when society had reached a certain stage of development'. Nevertheless, she does see religion as playing a role in women's oppression. Men do distort religion to serve their own interests, to help justify or legitimate the oppression of women.

The origins of oppressive religion

El Saadawi argues that religion started to become patriarchal through the misinterpretation of religious beliefs by men. She cites the Greek mythological story of Isis and Osiris. The male Osiris is overpowered by the evil Touphoun. His body is cut into small pieces and dispersed in the sea, and his sexual organ is eaten by fish. Despite this, Isis (who is female) is able to reassemble Osiris's body. To El Saadawi, this story clearly implies female superiority, but it has been interpreted quite differently by men. They have emphasized the superiority of Osiris because he was created from the head of the god Zeus, who was greater than Osiris, according to Homer and other writers, because he was more knowledgeable. In reality, El Saadawi says, all the male gods were created by, or given the ability to move by, the greatest deity of them all, the goddess Isis.

Similar distortions have entered the story of Adam and Eve, which is accepted by both Christians and Muslims as part of the story of creation. Eve is usually portrayed by males as a temptress who created sin in the world, but was created from Adam's spare rib. However:

if we read the original story as described in the Old Testament, it is easy for us to see clearly that Eve was gifted with knowledge, intelligence and superior mental capacities, whereas Adam was only one of her instruments, utilized by her to increase her knowledge and give shape to her creativity.

El Saadawi, 1980, pp. 105–6

Like other writers, El Saadawi argues that forms of religion that were oppressive to women developed as monotheistic religions (believing in a single god) became predominant. Such religions 'drew inspiration and guidance from the values of the patriarchal and class societies prevalent at the time' (El Saadawi, 1980). For example, the Jewish religion drew upon the patriarchal power of Abraham to produce a situation in which 'A Hebrew household was embodied in the patriarchal family, under the uncontested and undivided authority of the father.'

Islamic society also developed in a patriarchal way through the dominance of a male minority who

owned herds of horses, camels and sheep. As a consequence, 'Authority in Islam belonged to the man as head of the family, to the supreme ruler, or the Khalifa (political ruler), or Imran (religious leader).' Although the Koran stipulated that both men and women could be stoned to death for adultery, this fate was very unlikely to befall men. This was because men were permitted several wives (but women were not permitted several husbands) and because men could divorce their wives instantaneously. There was therefore little need for men to commit adultery. Even today in countries such as Egypt women are still subject to extremely restrictive marriage laws.

El Saadawi describes Christ as a revolutionary leader who opposed oppression. Early Christianity had stricter moral codes than other religions, and codes which treated the sexes fairly equally. Nevertheless, at a later stage:

> *the religious hierarchies that grew and fattened on the teachings of Christ allowed the system of concubinage to creep in once more. Despite the limitations placed by Christianity on man's sexual freedom, woman was maintained in her inferior underprivileged status as compared with him. The patriarchal system still reigned supreme and grew even more ferocious with the gradual shift to a feudal system.*
>
> El Saadawi, 1980, p. 119

In the fourteenth century, for example, the Catholic Church declared that women who treated illnesses, without special training, could be executed as witches.

Conclusion

El Saadawi concludes that female oppression is not essentially due to religion but due to the patriarchal system that has long been dominant. Religion, though, has played its part. She says:

> *The great religions of the world uphold similar principles in so far as the submission of women to men is concerned. They also agree in the attribution of masculine characteristics to their God. Islam and Christianity have both constituted important stages in the evolution of humanity. Nevertheless, where the cause of women was concerned, they added a new load to their already heavy chains.*
>
> El Saadawi, 1980, p. 211

The only way for women to improve their lot is to struggle for their own liberation. Arab women have been doing this for longer than their Western counterparts. As early as fourteen centuries ago Arab women successfully campaigned against the universal use of the male gender when referring to people in general in the Koran. El Saadawi believes that any recent gains in the position of Arab women have been due to a combination of social, economic and political changes and their own struggles. She argues that women have benefited from socialist revolutions wherever they have taken place. Revolutions will further the cause of women even more if the positive aspects of the Koran can be emphasized and the patriarchal misinterpretations abandoned. Thus El Saadawi is not hostile to religion itself, but only to the domination of religion by patriarchal ideology.

Women and resistance to religious oppression

Signs of hope

Apart from El Saadawi, the theorists examined above have tended to portray women as the passive victims of religious oppression, and religions themselves as being universally oppressive. Increasingly, however, sociologists have come to acknowledge that women can no longer be seen as being so passive. Jean Holm (1994), acting as editor of a book dealing with women and different religious traditions, sees 'signs of hope' in the religious situation of women. Rita Gross (1994) detects that there are signs that a 'post-patriarchal' Buddhism might be developing in Western countries.

Leila Badawi (1994) notes aspects of Islam that are positive for women. Unlike Christian women, Islamic women keep their own family name when they get married. Muslims also have considerable choice over which interpretation of Islam, or school of law, they give their allegiance to. Some schools of law have much more positive attitudes to women than others.

Alexandra Wright notes that Reform Judaism has allowed women to become rabbis since 1972 (Wright, 1994). Holm notes that even in 1994 there were already three female Anglican bishops. Some Christian religions, particularly Quakerism, have never been oppressive to women. Kanwaljit Kaur-Singh points out that 'Sikh Gurus pleaded the cause of the emancipation of Indian womanhood and did their best to ameliorate the sordid condition of women' (Kaur-Singh, 1994).

Thus it should not be assumed that all religions are, and always have been, equally oppressive to women. Furthermore, even apparently oppressive practices may be open to varied interpretations. One example is the veiling of Islamic women.

Helen Watson – the meaning of veiling

Perspectives on veiling

Helen Watson argues that 'For non-Muslim writers, the veil is variously depicted as a tangible symbol of women's oppression, a constraining and restricting form of dress, and a form of social control, religiously sanctioning women's invisibility and subordinate socio-political status' (Watson, 1994). However, this is not the viewpoint of many Muslim women and writers. To them, hijab, or religious modesty, actually has advantages for women, which can reduce, or allow them to cope with, male oppression.

The veil has the potential both to constrain and to liberate. Watson accepts that Islamic interpretations of the Koran's advocacy of modesty have been interpreted differently for men and women. Primary emphasis has been placed upon the need for women to be modest because their seductiveness might lead men astray. Furthermore, some Islamic feminists argue that the Koran makes no clear statement of the need for women to wear a veil in the presence of men who are not relatives. Rather, the practice is based upon a misinterpretation of the Koran by those who wanted to maintain patriarchal relationships that predated Islam. To some the practice is 'at odds with the reforming and egalitarian inspiration and ethos of Islam'.

Nevertheless, by examining three personal responses to veiling by different women, Watson maintains that wearing veils can be used in a positive way by Islamic women in a globalized world. As Western culture tries to influence Islamic countries, and more Muslims live in the Western world, the veil can take on new meanings for women.

The experience of veiling

The first example studied by Watson was Nadia, a second-generation British-Asian woman studying medicine at university. Nadia chose herself to start wearing a veil when she was 16. She was proud of her religion and wanted others to know that she was Muslim. She felt that 'It is liberating to have the freedom of movement to be able to communicate with people without being on show. It's what you say that's important, not what you look like.' She found that, far from making her invisible, wearing a veil made her stand out, yet it also helped her to avoid 'lecherous stares or worse' from men.

The second woman, Maryam, was a middle-aged, lower-class Algerian living in France, who had migrated there ten years earlier with her husband. When she was growing up in Algiers her relatives wore Western-style clothes. Maryam thought that times had changed and it was now appropriate for her to wear a veil. She thought, 'It is difficult enough to live in a big foreign city without having the extra burden of being molested in the street because you are a woman.' Her husband was happy with her decision because it made him worry about her less when she was going to work. Maryam was also keen to wear a veil because she wanted to follow the example of women in Iran. She described the 1979 Islamic revolution there as 'the people's struggle to throw out their corrupt ruler, rid the country of the ill effects of Western influences and make a better society'. She continued, 'These things all had the result of making me more aware of the importance of Islam and my conduct and duty as a mother and a wife for the future of the next generation.'

The third woman interviewed by Watson, Fatima, was a vegetable seller in Cairo. She was in her late seventies. She took a less positive view of the trend towards wearing veils amongst Egyptian women. She thought it was 'just a trend'. When Fatima was a young woman, women still took the idea of modesty seriously without feeling the need to dress so traditionally. Fatima did not think that 'this new veiling is a religious duty. A woman's modest conduct is more important than what she wears.' She was in favour of an increased emphasis on morality amongst Islamic women, though, and was happy for people to turn against some of the less desirable Western values. However, she thought that the issue of whether to wear a veil should always be a matter of choice rather than of law.

Conclusion and evaluation

Watson concludes that veiling is often a reaction against an increasingly pervasive Western culture. Some Muslim men too have begun to reject Western-style clothes – for example, by refusing to wear ties. All this can be seen as '"a sign of the times" which entails the assertion of independence, separate identity and a rejection of western cultural imperialism'. Rather than seeing the veil as a sign of male oppression, it has become 'a reaction against the secular feminism of the West, and as part of the search for an indigenous Islamic form of protest against male power and dominance in public society'.

Watson's work serves as a caution to sociologists who interpret in simplistic terms the practices of religions which are not their own. It shows that the meaning of religion needs to be carefully interpreted. In studies of religion, account needs to be taken of the meaning of religion to its believers; it is not just based upon reading holy texts and observing religious practices. Watson's work suggests that practices that may appear oppressive can take on a variety of meanings. Nevertheless, her conclusions

should be treated with some caution. Her observations are based upon studying only three women. She appears to have made no attempt to find Muslim women who felt they were forced into wearing the veil against their will by men or patriarchal society.

Attempts by women to subvert patriarchy by changing the meaning of traditional practices may not always succeed in liberating women from domination through religion. There is always a danger that they might have the opposite effect.

Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge – religion and compensators

Unlike functionalist sociologists such as Durkheim, the American sociologists Stark and Bainbridge see religion as meeting the needs of individuals rather than those of society as a whole (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985). Unlike Marx, they see religion as meeting universal human needs rather than those that stem from class inequality and exploitation. Unlike feminists, they do not see religion as primarily serving the interests of men rather than women. Furthermore, they reject the view, shared by the classic sociologists of religion, that the development of industrial capitalist societies would, one way or another, ultimately undermine religion (see p. 486). Stark and Bainbridge claim that religion helps to meet universal human needs. As such, changes in society cannot diminish its appeal.

Human desires

They start with the basic premise that 'Humans seek what they perceive to be rewards and try to avoid what they perceive to be costs.' In short, people do what they believe will be good for them. This provides quite a straightforward basis for human decision making but individuals may still face problems:

1 Many of the things that people desire, for example wealth and status, are scarce and cannot be attained by everyone.
2 Some things that people strongly desire may not be available at all. One such desire, and one that is crucial for their theory, is a desire for life after death. Even without convincing evidence that eternal life is possible, people continue to want it, and it is here that the roots of religion lie.

Compensators

Stark and Bainbridge recognize that religion might not actually provide people with eternal life, but what it does offer is a 'compensator'. A compensator is 'the belief that a reward will be obtained in the distant future or in some other context which cannot be verified'. They are a type of IOU – if individuals act in a particular way they will eventually be rewarded. In the absence of immediate rewards people are liable to turn to compensators.

Some political activists would like society to be transformed. If there is little evidence that the transformation is likely, they may develop the belief in a future revolution as a compensator. Similarly, a compensator is exchanged for a reward when a parent persuades a child that working hard now will eventually lead to fame and riches. Some compensators are quite specific – for example, the promise of a cured wart; others are more general. The promise of eternal life is an example of a general compensator.

Compensators and the supernatural

Sometimes individuals want rewards that are so great and so remote from everyday experience that the possibility of gaining them can only be contemplated alongside a belief in the supernatural. Stark and Bainbridge say:

> *Since time immemorial humans have desired to know the meaning of existence. Why are we here? What is the purpose of life? Where will it all end? Moreover, people have not just wanted answers to these questions; they have desired particular kinds of answers – that life has meaning. But for life to have a great design, for there to be intention behind history, one must posit the existence of a designer or intender of such power, duration, and scale as to be outside the natural world of our senses.*
>
> Stark and Bainbridge, 1985

Only belief in a god allows us to have answers to our most fundamental questions. According to this viewpoint, religion consists of organizations which offer 'general compensators based on supernatural assumptions'.

Religious pluralism and secularization

Since religion answers universal questions, and it offers compensators that meet universal human needs, religion can neither disappear nor seriously decline. If churches compromise their beliefs in the supernatural they become less appealing as a source of compensators. Thus 'for religious organizations to move markedly in the direction of non-supernaturalism is to pursue the path to ruin'. If this happens,

people turn to different religious organizations, and particularly to new sects and cults that have a greater emphasis on the supernatural. (We will discuss sects and cults later, see pp. 460–2.)

According to Stark and Bainbridge, American society has become characterized by religious pluralism as people have sought new sources of compensators. They quote J. George Melton's 1978 *Encyclopedia of American Religions* which listed no fewer than 1,200 different religious groups. Stark and Bainbridge deny that there are many people who lack beliefs and they do not believe that secularization has taken place or will take place in the future. (In general terms secularization means the decline of religion. For a detailed definition of secularization see pp. 469–70.) They claim that 'the majority of people who say they have no religious affiliation express considerable belief in the mystical and supernatural'. In other words, they have not lost their need for supernatural compensators. Furthermore, Stark and Bainbridge quote survey evidence which suggests that 60 per cent of those whose parents had no religious affiliation claim a religious affiliation for themselves. Where agnosticism or atheism existed, they were not passed on to succeeding generations.

Stark and Bainbridge – an evaluation

Stark and Bainbridge have provided an original and comprehensive attempt to develop a sociological perspective on religion. Their work has provided a number of insights into religious organizations and religious change. However, it has not been without critics.

Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce argue that the available evidence contradicts their theory (Wallis and Bruce, 1986). New religious movements have not gained sufficient recruits to replace those lost from more established religions. (The evidence for and against the theory of secularization is examined in detail on pp. 470–93.)

Wallis and Bruce also criticize Stark and Bainbridge for ignoring social and cultural influences on the questions that individuals ask and the rewards they seek. It is by no means inevitable that people seek the kinds of reward for which religion offers compensators. Society, culture and socialization might create the need for religion rather than universal human desires. Wallis and Bruce say:

> *since most people are born into a social world in which religious beliefs already exist, belief in another world with supernatural characteristics opens up the possibility of wanting things there as well as rather than instead of here.*
>
> Wallis and Bruce, 1986

By reducing their explanation of religion to supposedly universal needs, Stark and Bainbridge neglect the social factors that help to create and sustain religion. For example, they neglect the possibility that religion might be related to sustaining the power and dominance of men. This possibility was examined in the previous section on gender.

Religion and social change

There are a number of possible relationships between religion and social change. Religion may be a factor that impedes social change, or it may help to produce it. Another possibility is that religion itself has no influence on changes in society, but that there is nevertheless a causal relationship between the two. From this point of view, it is social change in society as a whole that leads to changes in religion.

Religion as a conservative force

Functionalists and Marxists have generally dismissed the possibility that religion can cause changes in society. They believe that religion acts as a conservative force and that it is changes in society that shape religion, not vice versa.

Religion can be seen as a 'conservative force' in two senses, depending on the meaning attached to the word 'conservative'. The phrase conservative force is usually used to refer to religion as preventing change and maintaining the status quo. Functionalists have claimed that it acts in this way because it promotes integration and social solidarity. As we discovered in previous sections, from a functionalist perspective, religion provides shared beliefs, norms and values, and helps individuals to cope with stresses that might disrupt social life. In these ways it facilitates the continued existence of society in its present form. Marx had similar views, although he saw religion as maintaining the status quo in the interests of the ruling class rather than those of society as a whole.

'Conservative' may, however, be used in another way: it can refer to traditional beliefs and customs. Usually if religion helps to maintain the status quo it will also maintain traditional customs and beliefs. For

example, the stance of successive popes against the use of contraception has restricted the growth of artificial methods of birth control in Roman Catholic countries. But in some circumstances religion can support social change while at the same time promoting traditional values. This often occurs when there is a revival in fundamentalist religious beliefs.

Conservatism, fundamentalism and social change

Recent years have seen the rise of fundamentalist religious beliefs in different parts of the world. Donald Taylor (1987) defines fundamentalism as involving the following:

1 A group of people perceive a challenge to an ultimate authority, usually a god, in which they believe.
2 These people decide that the challenge cannot be tolerated.
3 They reaffirm their belief in the authority that is being challenged.
4 They oppose those who have challenged the established beliefs, and often they use political means to further their cause.

According to this view, fundamentalism involves the reassertion of traditional moral and religious values against changes that have taken place and those who support the changes. If fundamentalists are successful, they succeed in defending traditional values, but at the same time they change society by reversing innovations that have taken place.

However, it should be borne in mind that religions are usually open to many different interpretations. Those claiming to be returning to the original teachings of a religion may well disagree with one another. Thus Fred Halliday, commenting on Islamic fundamentalism, says that 'no such essential Islam exists: as one Iranian thinker puts it, Islam is a sea in which it is possible to catch almost any fish one wants' (Halliday, 1994). In other words, each particular fundamentalist interpretation of a religion is only one amongst many.

In a book of articles edited by Lionel Caplan (1987), fundamentalism was identified among a wide variety of religious groups throughout the world. These included Sikh fundamentalists in the Punjab, Hindu fundamentalism amongst Sri Lankans in Britain, and Islamic fundamentalism in Turkey. Steve Bruce has analysed fundamentalism amongst Protestant groups in Northern Ireland, Scotland and the USA (Bruce 1985, 1986, 1988).

However, perhaps the most dramatic example of fundamentalism causing social change through the imposition of a return to traditional values has been in Iran. Under the last Shah, Iranian society underwent a process of change. One aspect of this change was the liberalization of traditional Islamic attitudes to women. In 1979 the Iranian revolution, which was partly inspired by Islamic fundamentalism, took place and these changes were reversed. In this case, it can be argued, religious beliefs contributed to producing revolutionary change. Religion did not therefore act as a conservative force in one sense of the word. Nevertheless, in terms of supporting traditional values, it did act as a conservative force. The two meanings of the word conservative should therefore be distinguished.

Changes in society and religion

Most sociologists agree that changes in society lead to changes in religion:

1 Talcott Parsons (1937, 1964, 1965a), for example, believed that, as society developed, religion lost some of its functions (for further details, see pp. 434–5).
2 Marx believed that a change in the infrastructure of society would lead to changes in the superstructure, including religion. Thus Marx anticipated that, when a classless society was established, religion would disappear (Marx and Engels, 1957).
3 Bryan Turner (1983) claims that religion lost its function of facilitating the smooth transfer of property from generation to generation when feudalism gave way to capitalism.
4 As later sections of this chapter will show, supporters of the secularization theory think that industrialization has led to profound changes that have progressively reduced the importance of religion in society (see pp. 469–93).
5 A number of sociologists have claimed that changes involved in the advent of postmodernism and globalization have produced changes in religion (see pp. 493–500).

So far, then, it appears to be generally agreed that, first, religion helps to maintain the status quo, and that, second, changes in religion result from changes in the wider society. Some sociologists, however, have argued that religion can cause social change.

Max Weber – *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

Both functionalists and Marxists emphasize the role of religion in promoting social integration and impeding social change. In contrast, Weber (1958, first published in English 1930) argued that in some circumstances religion can lead to social change: although shared religious beliefs might integrate a social group, those same beliefs may have repercussions which in the long term can produce changes in society.

Marx is generally regarded as a materialist. He believed that the material world (and particularly people's involvement with nature as they worked to secure their own survival) shaped their beliefs. Thus, to Marx, the economic system largely determined the beliefs that were held by individuals. In Marxist terms, the mode of production determined the type of religion that would be dominant in any society.

Unlike Marx, Weber rejected the view that religion is always shaped by economic factors. He did not deny that, at certain times and in certain places, religion may be largely shaped by economic forces, but he denied that this is always the case. Under certain conditions the reverse can occur, that is, religious beliefs can be a major influence on economic behaviour.

Weber's social action theory argues that human action is directed by meanings and motives. (See Chapter 15 for a discussion of Weber's general theory.) From this perspective, action can only be understood by appreciating the world view – the image or picture of the world held by members of society. From their world view, individuals obtain meanings, purposes and motives that direct their actions. Religion is often an important component of a world view. In certain places and times, religious meaning and purposes can direct action in a wide range of contexts. In particular, religious beliefs can direct economic action.

Capitalism and ascetic Protestantism

In his most famous book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958), Weber examines the relationship between the rise of certain forms of Protestantism and the development of Western industrial capitalism. In the first part of his argument Weber tries to demonstrate that a particular form of Protestantism, ascetic Calvinist Protestantism, preceded the development of capitalism. He also tries to show that capitalism developed initially in areas where this religion was influential. Other areas of the world possessed many of the necessary prerequisites yet they were not amongst the first areas to develop capitalism. For example, India and China had technological knowledge, labour to be hired, and individuals engaged in making money. What they lacked, according to Weber, was a religion that encouraged and facilitated the development of capitalism. The first capitalist nations emerged among the countries of Western Europe and North America that had Calvinist religious groups. Furthermore, most of the earliest capitalist entrepreneurs in these areas came from the ranks of Calvinists.

Having established a relationship – a correlation between Calvinism and capitalism – by comparing religion and economic development in different parts of the world, Weber goes on to explain how and why this type of religion was linked to capitalism.

Calvinist Protestantism originated in the beliefs of John Calvin in the seventeenth century. Calvin thought that there was a distinct group of the elect – those chosen to go to heaven – and that they had been chosen by God even before they were born. Those who were not among the elect could never gain a place in heaven however well they behaved on earth.

Other versions of Christianity derived from the beliefs of Martin Luther. Luther believed that individual Christians could affect their chances of reaching heaven by the way that they behaved on earth. It was very important for Christians to develop faith in God, and to act out God's will on earth. In order to do this they had to be dedicated to their calling in life. Whatever position in society God had given them, they must conscientiously carry out the appropriate duties.

At first sight, Lutheranism seems the doctrine more likely to produce capitalism. However, it encouraged people to produce or earn no more than was necessary for their material needs. It attached more importance to piety and faith than to the accumulation of great wealth.

The doctrine of predestination advocated by Calvin seems less likely to produce capitalism. If certain individuals were destined for heaven regardless of their earthly behaviour – and the rest were equally unable to overcome their damnation – there would be little point in hard work on earth.

Weber points out, though, that Calvinists had a psychological problem: they did not know whether they were amongst the elect. They suffered from a kind of inner loneliness or uncertainty about their status, and their behaviour was not an attempt to earn a place in heaven, but rather to convince themselves that they had been chosen to go there. They reasoned that only the chosen people of God would be able to live a good life on earth. If their behaviour was exemplary they could feel confident that they would go to heaven after death.

Therefore, the interpretation that the Calvinists put on the doctrine of predestination contributed to them becoming the first capitalists.

The Protestant ethic

The Protestant ethic which Weber describes (and which enabled Calvinists to convince themselves that they were amongst the elect) developed first in seventeenth-century Western Europe. The ethic was ascetic, encouraging abstinence from life's pleasures, an austere lifestyle and rigorous self-discipline. It produced individuals who worked hard in their careers or callings, in a single-minded manner. Making money was a concrete indication of success

in one's calling, and success in one's calling meant that the individual had not lost grace in God's sight.

John Wesley, a leader of the great Methodist revival that preceded the expansion of English industry at the close of the eighteenth century, wrote:

> *For religion must necessarily produce industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. We must exhort all Christians to gain what they can and to save all they can; that is, in effect to grow rich.*
>
> Quoted in Weber, 1958, p. 175

These riches could not be spent on luxuries, fine clothes, lavish houses and frivolous entertainment, but in the glory of God. In effect, this meant being even more successful in terms of one's calling, which in practice meant reinvesting profits in the business.

The Protestants attacked time-wasting, laziness, idle gossip and more sleep than was necessary – six to eight hours a day at the most. They frowned on sexual pleasures; sexual intercourse should remain within marriage and then only for the procreation of children (a vegetable diet and cold baths were sometimes recommended to remove temptation). Sport and recreation were accepted only for improving fitness and health, and condemned if pursued for entertainment. The impulsive fun and enjoyment of the pub, dance hall, theatre and gaming house were prohibited to ascetic Protestants. In fact anything that might divert or distract people from their calling was condemned. Living life in terms of these guidelines was an indication that the individual had not lost grace and favour in the sight of God.

The spirit of capitalism

Weber claimed that the origins of the spirit of capitalism were to be found in the ethic of ascetic Protestantism. Throughout history there had been no shortage of those who sought money and profit: pirates, prostitutes and money lenders in every corner of the world had always pursued wealth. However, according to Weber, both the manner and purpose of their pursuit of money were at odds with the spirit of capitalism.

Traditionally, money seekers engaged in speculative projects: they gambled in order to gain rewards. If successful they tended to spend money frivolously on personal consumption. Furthermore, they were not dedicated to making money for its own sake. Weber argued that labourers who had earned enough for their family to live comfortably, and merchants who had secured the luxuries they desired, would feel no need to push themselves harder to make more money. Instead, they sought free time for leisure.

The ascetic Protestant had a quite different attitude to wealth, and Weber believed that this attitude was characteristic of capitalism. He argued that the essence of capitalism is 'the pursuit of profit and forever renewed profit'.

Capitalist enterprises are organized on rational bureaucratic lines. Business transactions are conducted in a systematic and rational manner with costs and projected profits being carefully assessed. (We examine Weber's views on rational action in detail in Chapter 15, and in this chapter, pp. 450–1.)

Underlying the practice of capitalism is the spirit of capitalism – a set of ideas, ethics and values. Weber illustrates the spirit of capitalism with quotes from two books by Benjamin Franklin, *Necessary Hints to Those that Would be Rich* (1736) and *Advice to a Young Tradesman* (1748). Franklin writes 'Remember that time is money.' Time-wasting, idleness and diversion lose money. 'Remember that credit is money.' A reputation for 'prudence and honesty' will bring credit, as will paying debts on time. Business people should behave with 'industry and frugality', and 'punctuality and justice' in all their dealings.

Weber argued that this spirit of capitalism is not simply a way of making money, but a way of life which has ethics, duties and obligations. He claimed that ascetic Protestantism was a vital influence in the creation and development of the spirit and practice of capitalism: a methodical and single-minded pursuit of a calling encourages rational capitalism. Weber wrote that 'restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling must have been the most powerful conceivable lever for the expansion of the spirit of capitalism'. Making money became both a religious and a business ethic. The Protestant 'interpretation of profit-making justified the activities of the businessman'.

Weber claimed that two major features of capitalist industry – the standardization of production and the specialized division of labour – were encouraged by Protestantism. The Protestant 'uniformity of life immensely aids the capitalist in the standardization of production'. The emphasis on the 'importance of a fixed calling provided an ethical justification for this modern specialized division of labour'.

Finally, Weber noted the importance of the creation of wealth and the restrictions on spending it, which encouraged saving and reinvestment:

> *When the limitation of consumption is combined with this release of acquisitive activity, the inevitable result is obvious: accumulation of capital through an ascetic compulsion to save. The restraints that were imposed on the consumption of wealth naturally served to increase it, by making possible the productive investment of capital.*
>
> Weber, 1958

The ascetic Protestant way of life led to the accumulation of capital, investment and reinvestment. It produced the early businesses that expanded to create capitalist society.

Materialism and Weber's theory

Weber, then, believed that he had discovered and demonstrated that religious beliefs could cause economic change. He claimed that he had found a weakness in Marx's materialism which implied that the economic system always shaped ideas.

However, it should be stressed that Weber did not discount the importance of the economy and material factors. He said, 'It is, of course, not my aim to substitute for a one-sided materialistic an equally one-sided spiritualistic causal interpretation of culture and of history.' Capitalism was made possible not just by Calvinist Protestantism, but also by the technology and economic system of the countries in which it developed. Material factors were as important as ideas in its development; neither could be ignored in any explanation.

Religion, modernity and rationality

As well as proposing an explanation for the origins of capitalism, Weber also had a good deal to say about the likely consequences of the changes produced by the development of Protestantism. His theories have had a tremendous influence on general ideas about changes in Western societies, and in particular on the concepts of modernity and secularization. Modernity refers to both a historical period and a type of society which is often seen as developing along with industrialization, science and capitalism (see p. 8). Secularization refers to the decline of religion (see below, pp. 469–70). Robert Holton and Bryan Turner (1989), for example, argue that the central themes of all of Weber's sociology were 'the problems of modernization and modernity, and that we should regard rationalization as the process which produced modernism'.

As we have seen above, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* Weber argued that ascetic Protestantism helped to produce modern capitalism. With that went an emphasis on rational calculation since pursuing the maximum possible profit required an appraisal of the profits that would be produced by following different lines of action. The capitalist would then follow whatever path would produce the greatest profit. Weber distinguished between formal rationality and substantive rationality (Weber, 1964). Formal rationality involved calculating the best means to achieve a given end, and the calculations had to be in a numerical form. Substantive rationality involved action designed to meet some ultimate goal, such as justice, equality or human happiness. Capitalist behaviour put primary emphasis upon the formal rationality of accounting in the pursuit of profit maximization. Substantive rationality, including the morality provided by religious beliefs, tended to fade into the background in capitalist societies.

To Weber, rationality would not be confined to capitalist enterprise in the modern world. As Holton and Turner point out, it would also involve 'a rational legal system, the separation of the home and the work-place, rational financial management, and the emergence of a rational system of administration'. Weber's ideas on bureaucracy are a good example of his belief that modern societies would be increasingly characterized by rationality (see Chapter 15). However, to Weber, and to many later sociologists, rationality can be at odds with the faith that is required by religion.

Religions do not expect their followers to try to test their beliefs scientifically, nor do they expect religious beliefs to be based upon weighing up the costs and benefits of joining a religious group. Followers should simply believe in the truth of their religion. In the rationalized modern world, though, Weber thought that it would be increasingly difficult for followers of religion to maintain their faith. Discussing Protestant sects in the USA, Weber said, 'closer scrutiny revealed the steady progress of the characteristic process of "secularization" to which all phenomena that originated in religious conceptions succumb' (Weber in Gerth and Mills (eds), 1948). In short, ascetic Protestantism would contribute to the development of capitalism, which required a rational approach to social life, which would in turn undermine religion. Protestant religions therefore contained the seeds of their own destruction. As Malcolm Hamilton puts it:

> *Once on its way, the modern economic system was able to support itself without the need of the religious ethic of ascetic Protestantism which in many ways could not help but sow the seeds of secularization in modern society by its own promotion of worldly activity and consequent expansion of wealth and material well-being. Calvinistic Protestantism was its own gravedigger.*
>
> Hamilton, 1995, p. 152

Weber – an evaluation

The ideas of Weber and other sociologists on modernity, rationality and secularization will be discussed later in the chapter. The following discussion therefore concentrates on his specific ideas relating to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

Since its publication Weber's book has received both criticism and support from researchers:

1 Sombart (1907), an early critic, argued that Weber was mistaken about the beliefs held by Calvinists. According to Sombart, Calvinism was against greed and the pursuit of money for its own sake.

   Weber himself countered this argument. He pointed out that it was not the beliefs of Calvinists that were important in themselves. The doctrine of predestination was not intended to produce the rational pursuit of profit, but nevertheless that was one of its unintentional consequences and the evidence was in the way that ascetic Protestants actually behaved.

2 A second criticism points to parts of the world where Calvinism was strong, but capitalism did not develop until much later. For example, Switzerland, Scotland, Hungary and parts of the Netherlands all contained large Calvinist populations but were not among the first capitalist countries.

   Gordon Marshall (1982) dismisses this criticism. He argues that the critics demonstrate a lack of understanding of Weber's theory. Weber did not claim that Calvinism was the only factor necessary for the development of capitalism. His theory cannot therefore be disproved simply by finding Calvinist countries that failed to become capitalist comparatively early. In his own study of Scotland, Marshall found that the Scottish had a capitalist mentality but were held back by a lack of skilled labour and capital for investment, and by government policies that did not stimulate the development of industry.

3 A potentially more damaging criticism of Weber's theory originates from Marxist critics such as Kautsky (1953). Kautsky argues that early capitalism preceded and largely determined Protestantism. He sees Calvinism as developing in cities where commerce and early forms of industrialization were already established. In his view Protestantism became the ideology capitalists used to legitimate their position.

   This is a chicken and egg question – which came first: Calvinism or capitalism? The answer depends upon how capitalism is defined. To Weber, pre-capitalist money-making ventures were not organized rationally to ensure continued profit.

   Marshall (1982) disputes this. He suggests that the medieval merchant classes behaved quite rationally considering the conditions of the time. It was not their psychological attitude that encouraged them to make what Weber saw as risky investments, but the situation they faced. In England the risks involved in trading were balanced by investments in land. Buying landed estates was not an example of conspicuous consumption, but of the prudent spreading of investments. In the Netherlands too, the business classes spread their risks but more money went into merchant trading because of the price of land. Even so, defenders of Weber insist that a distinctive rational capitalist entrepreneur did not emerge until after Calvinism.

4 A fourth criticism of Weber does not deny that Calvinism was an important factor which helped lead to capitalism, but questions the view that it was the religious beliefs of Calvinists that led to them becoming business people. According to this view, non-conformist Calvinists devoted themselves to business because they were excluded from holding public office and joining certain professions by law. Like the Jews in Eastern and central Europe, they tried to become economically successful in order to overcome their political persecution.

   In reply to this criticism, supporters of the Protestant ethic thesis argue that only Calvinist minorities developed the distinctive patterns of capitalist behaviour which involved rational planning for slow but sure capital growth; only they could develop capitalist businesses before capitalism was established.

Despite the considerable effort devoted to discussing Weber's theory by historians and sociologists alike, no agreement has been reached about its accuracy. Nevertheless, whatever the merits of this particular study, Weber does successfully highlight the theoretical point that ideas – in this case religious ideas – can conceivably lead to economic change.

Religion and social change – conclusion

Many sociologists do now accept that religion can be a force for change. Despite the examples that can be used to support the functionalist and Marxist view that religion promotes stability, other examples contradict their claims.

G.K. Nelson (1986) points to a number of cases where religion has undermined stability or promoted change:

1 In Northern Ireland, Roman Catholicism has long been associated with Irish Republicanism.

2 In the USA in the 1960s the Reverend Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Council played a leading role in establishing civil rights and securing legislation intended to reduce racial discrimination.

3 Also in the 1960s, a number of radical and revolutionary groups emerged within the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America. They preached liberation theology, arguing that it was the duty of church members to fight against unjust and oppressive right-wing dictatorships. Thus, in 1979, Catholic revolutionaries supported the Sandinistas when they seized control in Nicaragua.

4 In Iran, Islamic fundamentalism played a part in the 1979 revolution, led by the Ayatollah Khomeini.

5 Poland provides another example of religion stimulating change. The Roman Catholic Church

opposed the communist state in Poland, and it supported the attempts of the free trade union Solidarity to achieve changes in Polish society. In 1989 the communist monopoly on power was broken when Solidarity was allowed to contest and win many seats in the Polish parliament.

6 In South Africa, Archbishop Tutu was a prominent opponent of apartheid.

Examples such as these lead Nelson to conclude that 'far from encouraging people to accept their place, religion can spearhead resistance and revolution'. In many cases when religion has been a force for change in society, the society that results may be strongly influenced by that religion.

Engels (Marx and Engels, 1957), unlike Marx, did realize that in some circumstances religion could be a force for change. He argued that groups which turned to religion as a way of coping with oppression could develop into political movements which sought change on earth rather than salvation in heaven. Some contemporary neo-Marxists have followed Engels and developed this view (see pp. 438–9 for further details).

Religion and revolutionary movements

Leland W. Robinson (1987) argues that in some circumstances revolutionary movements deliberately try to use religion in their attempts to change society. He claims that three things are necessary if this is to happen:

1 The classes with the potential to become revolutionary need to have a predominantly religious world view. In the Third World this is often the case, particularly in Latin America, the Near East and South Asia. Europe is less religious and revolutionary movements have not usually tried to use religion. There are, however, exceptions, such as the role of the Roman Catholic Church in undermining the communist state in Poland.

2 The main religion needs to have a theology that can be interpreted in such a way that it can be used against those in power. Buddhism tends to stress the separation of religion and society into different spheres. Christianity and Hinduism have more revolutionary potential. For example, Gandhi used the Hindu concept of Sarvodaya (the welfare of all) to attack British colonial rule and to inspire rural peasants and the urban poor to turn against the British.

3 It is also necessary for the clergy and the revolutionary classes to have close contacts. Robinson argues that in countries such as Paraguay the clergy usually come from and remain in close contact with local communities. Here they have opposed the repressive regime of Stroessner. In Cuba the Catholic Church was so remote from ordinary people that it did not support Castro's communist revolution of 1956–9. A 1957 survey of 4,000 agricultural workers in Cuba found that only 7.8 per cent said that they had had any dealings with the Catholic clergy.

Where the above three factors are present, revolutionaries are able to make use of religion. This becomes even more likely in situations where the revolutionary classes all share the same religion, where this is different to the religion of those in power, and where there are no alternative organizations available through which to express dissent. In many countries in South America, such as Guatemala, Chile and El Salvador, where the police and military have been used to crush other organizations such as trade unions, religion is the only remaining outlet for dissent.

Conservative or radical religion?

Merideth B. McGuire (1981) also examines the factors which influence the type of role that religion plays in society, commenting 'The question is no longer "Does religion promote social change?" but rather, "In what way and under what conditions does it promote rather than inhibit change?"' Unlike Leland, McGuire does not concentrate exclusively on the revolutionary potential of religion. She identifies four main factors that determine the potential of religion to change society:

1 The first factor is the beliefs of the particular religion. Religions that emphasize adherence to strong moral codes are more likely to produce members who are critical of society and who seek to change it. If a religion stresses concern with this world, it is more likely to result in actions by its members which produce change than a religion which confines itself to a concern with sacred and spiritual matters. Thus Protestantism can have more impact on social change than Buddhism.

2 The second factor is the culture of the society in which a religion exists. In societies where religious beliefs are central to the culture (such as in Latin America), anyone wishing to produce change tends to use a religious legitimation for their actions. In Britain, however, religion plays a less central role in societal culture, so it tends to play a less important role in justifying changes in society.

3 What McGuire describes as the social location of religion is the third important factor. This concerns the part that religion plays in the social structure. Again, the greater the importance of religion, the greater its potential to play a part in producing change. Where an established church or other religious organization plays a major role in political and economic life, there is considerable scope for religion having an impact on processes of change.

4 The final factor is the internal organization of religious institutions. According to McGuire, religions with a strong, centralized source of authority have more chance of affecting events. On the other hand, the central authority might try to restrain the actions of parts of the organization. For example, in 1978 at the Puebla Conference in Mexico, the Pope clashed with Latin American Roman Catholic bishops who were advocating liberation theology.

McGuire provides only a sketchy outline of the factors determining whether religion acts as a conservative force maintaining the status quo or as a force for change. Nevertheless she does provide a starting point for analysing the relationship between religion and social change.

In the next section we will examine different types of religious organization and the wide variety of ideologies that have been supported by different organizations. We will also discover that conservative and radical ideologies tend to be associated with different types of religious organization.

Religious organizations

Individuals may have their own religious beliefs without belonging to any particular organization: they may form their own personal and unique relationship with a god or some source of spiritual power. However, many members of society express their religious beliefs through organizations, and the organizations tend to shape those beliefs. Social factors influence the types of organization that are created, who joins them and how they develop. At the same time, religious organizations may themselves influence society.

Before we examine these issues, it is necessary for us to distinguish between the different types of religious organization. There have been a number of attempts to categorize them, but no system fits perfectly the infinite variety of such organizations that have existed throughout the world. Nevertheless, it is possible broadly to distinguish some main types of religious organization.

The church

Ernst Troeltsch in 1931 was one of the first writers to try to distinguish different types of religious organization. Troeltsch used the term church to refer to a large religious organization. Individuals do not have to demonstrate their faith to become members of a church – indeed, often they are born into it. In some churches the practice of baptism ensures that all the children of members are automatically recruited before they are old enough to understand the faith.

In principle a church might try to be universal – to embrace all members of society – but in practice there might be substantial minorities who do not belong. Because of its size, members of a church are drawn from all classes in society, but the upper classes are particularly likely to join. This is because, in Troeltsch's words, a church usually 'stabilizes and determines the political order' (Troeltsch, 1981).

Churches are sometimes closely related to the state. For example, the Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages had important political, educational and social functions. Even in contemporary Britain the Queen is both head of the Church of England and head of state. Churches are likely to be ideologically conservative and support the status quo: an opinion poll in 1988 found that 63 per cent of active lay members of the Church of England supported the Conservative Party, which received only 43 per cent of the total votes in the 1987 election (quoted in Davie, 1989).

This type of organization accepts and affirms life in this world: members can play a full part in social life and are not expected to withdraw from society. In many circumstances a church will jealously guard its monopoly on religious truth, and will not tolerate challenges to its religious authority. For example, the Roman Catholic Church at one time used the Inquisition to stamp out heresy. Churches are formal organizations with a hierarchy of professional, paid officials.

Steve Bruce argues that the concept of a church is primarily useful in describing pre-modern Christian societies. He says, 'The notion of the church derives its force from the growth of Christianity and the historic forms of Catholic, Orthodox, and Coptic churches. These bodies sought to be co-extensive with their societies' (Bruce, 1996). However, in 1517 Martin Luther, a German priest, began to question some of the teachings and practices of the medieval church. This led to the Reformation in which competing religious views developed, including the Protestant Church of England established by Henry VIII. A plurality of sects with competing doctrines also developed. To Bruce, the development of religious pluralism in societies undermines the maintenance of the church type of religious organization. He says, 'when a population becomes divided

between a number of organizations, that fragmentation undermines the conditions for the church form' (Bruce, 1995). This is because it becomes more difficult for the state to lend exclusive support to one religion, and because a single set of religious beliefs is no longer taken for granted and reinforced by all groups in society. Thus, for Bruce, churches, in the sense meant by Troeltsch, are essentially historical phenomena which cannot continue to exist in modern societies. Indeed, Bruce sees the Church of England as a denomination rather than a church.

A number of examples can illustrate Bruce's point. A variety of organizations, which call themselves churches or which could be seen as churches, do not conform to the characteristics outlined by Troeltsch:

1 The percentage of the population who are members of a church can vary widely. For example, according to the *UK Christian Handbook*, in Britain in 1995 just 1,785,273 people were members of Anglican churches. Some 82 per cent of these were in the Church of England.
2 Many churches today do not claim a monopoly of the religious truth – other religions are tolerated. In Britain there is a growing diversity of religious groupings that are tolerated by the Church of England.
3 Furthermore, the ecumenical movement, which seeks unity between varying Christian religious groups, demonstrates the extent to which churches are now willing to compromise their beliefs.
4 Churches are not always ideologically conservative and they do not always support the dominant groups in a society: the General Synod of the Church of England clashed with the British Conservative government in the 1980s and 1990s over issues such as poverty and conditions in Britain's inner cities. Davie claims that there is a growing gap within the Church of England between lay members, who tend to be conservative, and senior officials such as bishops, who tend to be more radical (Davie, 1989).
5 In some circumstances the churches are not connected to the state, and may even act as a focus of opposition to it. Before the overthrow of communism in Poland the Roman Catholic Church opposed the communist government, and in many parts of Latin America liberation theology has also led to conflict between the Catholic Church and the state.

Roland Robertson argues that throughout the world there has been an increase in church–state tensions (Robertson, 1987). Far from identifying closely with the state, churches are increasingly distancing themselves from it. Robertson notes tensions between the state and Shiite fundamentalists in the Middle East, Coptic Christians in Egypt, Maronite Christians in Lebanon, Sikhs in India and Islamic fundamentalists in Pakistan, Indonesia and the Philippines. He points out that many churches are transnational organizations, their activities are not confined to a single country. He argues that, in the modern 'world system', nation-states interact with each other by pursuing non-religious, secular national interests. In international trade and diplomacy there is little room for the consideration of theological issues. Consequently national governments tend to come into conflict with the moral concerns of domestic churches and transnational religious organizations.

There are some ways in which contemporary churches retain some of their traditional characteristics, at least in some societies. Churches in industrial societies tend to be larger and more conservative than other religious groups. Some industrialized societies have retained fairly strong churches that continue to conform to most of the characteristics outlined by Troeltsch. Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce claim, of the Roman Catholic Church, 'In those places where it is dominant, e.g. Spain, Portugal and the Republic of Ireland, it acts as a universal church, claiming authority over the society as a whole' (Wallis and Bruce, 1986). In the Republic of Ireland the bishops continue to receive state support for the moral teachings of Catholicism, and as recently as 1983 they were able to denounce a well-established Pentecostal Protestant religious group as a dangerous cult which should not be tolerated.

In other countries, though, the Catholic Church is not in a position to act in such ways and has to coexist peacefully with a plurality of other religions, making no special claims on the state. Similarly, in Iran there is close identification between Islam and the state, but in countries such as Turkey the Muslim religion has much less influence on the state and politics.

Denominations

Troeltsch's original categorization of religious organizations included only churches and sects. It did not include 'denominations'. As Troeltsch based his work on an analysis of religion in sixteenth-century Europe, his classification was not capable of describing the variety of religions in the USA, or for that matter in modern Britain. According to Stark and Bainbridge (1985), the term denomination is usually used to refer to an organization that shares several but not all of the supposed features of a church. It is often seen as a kind of watered-down church which has some similarities to a sect (we will discuss sects in the next section).

In a study of religion in the USA, H.R. Niebuhr (1929) was the first sociologist to differentiate clearly

the denomination from the church. A denomination has been seen as having the following features:

1 Unlike a church, a denomination does not have a universal appeal in society. For example, in Britain in 1995 Methodists could claim 401,087 members, and there were 195,200 Baptists.
2 Like churches, denominations draw members from all strata in society, but, unlike churches, they are not usually so closely identified with the upper classes. Often a considerable number of denominations exist within a particular society. In the USA there is no established church, but a large range of denominations.
3 Unlike a church, a denomination does not identify with the state and approves the separation of church and state.
4 Denominations do not claim a monopoly of the religious truth. They are prepared to tolerate and cooperate with other religious organizations.
5 Denominations are usually conservative: members generally accept the norms and values of society, although they may have marginally different values from those of the wider society. Some denominations place minor restrictions on their members. For instance, Methodists are discouraged from drinking and gambling, but drinking in moderation is tolerated, and drinkers are not excluded from the denomination.
6 In other respects, denominations have the same characteristics as churches: new members are freely admitted and they have a hierarchy of paid officials.

Steve Bruce (1995) sees the lack of a claim to a monopoly of the religious truth as the defining feature of denominations. Furthermore, he sees them as increasingly important. He says:

> *The last two hundred years has seen gradual evolution of churches and sects into denominations. The church form has been made untenable by the gradual increase in cultural pluralism and by the unwillingness of the state to continue to force reluctant people into the state church.*
>
> Bruce, 1995, p. 9

The blurring of boundaries between religious organizations as they change has made the concept of the denomination no less problematic than the concept of the church. It covers a wide range of organizations from Jehovah's Witnesses to Methodists, from Pentecostalists to Baptists. Some organizations are classified as sects by some sociologists but as denominations by others.

Stark and Bainbridge (1985) are highly critical of the concept of a denomination. They argue that the addition of denominations to the distinction between church and sect only 'renders fluid and uncertain an intellectual scheme that was supposed to be a solid basis for analysis'. Indeed, they claim that the division of religious organizations into discrete types obscures rather than clarifies the differences between them (see pp. 460–2 for further details of their argument).

Sects

According to Troeltsch, sects have characteristics that are almost diametrically opposed to those of churches:

1 They are both smaller and more strongly integrated than other religious organizations.
2 Rather than drawing members from all sections of society and being closely connected to the state, Troeltsch claimed that sects are 'connected with the lower classes, or at least with those elements in Society which are opposed to the State and Society'.
3 Far from being conservative and accepting the norms and values of society, sects are 'in opposition to the world'. They reject the values of the world that surrounds them, and their detachment may be 'expressed in the refusal to use the law, to swear in a court of justice, to own property, to exercise dominion over others, or to take part in war'.
4 Sect members may be expected to withdraw from life outside the sect, but at the same time they may wish ultimately to see changes take place in the wider society.
5 Members of a sect are expected to be deeply committed to its beliefs. They may be excluded from the sect if they fail to demonstrate such a commitment.
6 Young children cannot usually enter the sect by being baptized if they are not old enough to understand the significance of the ceremony. They must join voluntarily as adults, and willingly adopt the lifestyle and beliefs of the sect. In particular they must sacrifice 'worldly pleasures' in order to devote themselves to their religious life. In this sense, sects exercise a stronger control over individuals' lives than, for example, the modern Church of England. Sects share this characteristic with religions such as Islam in countries where religious beliefs still have a strong hold over social life.
7 Like churches such as the Roman Catholic Church in Europe in the Middle Ages, sects tend to believe that they possess a monopoly of the religious truth.
8 Unlike churches, though, they are not organized through a hierarchy of paid officials. If central authority exists within a sect, it usually rests with a single charismatic leader, whose personality and perceived special qualities persuade the followers to adhere to his or her teachings.

Sects were originally groups which broke away from the dominant religion in a society because of a

disagreement over the interpretation of the religion. Steve Bruce describes the process of sect formation in the following way:

> *From time to time the church would face dissent or revolt. People would protest against ecclesiastical pomp and wealth or would seek to live out a more radical form of the faith. Those who could not be contained within the church – for example, as a religious order – broke away to form 'sects'. As they often challenged the state as much as the church, they were met with repression. For this, if for no other reason, sects were normally small.*
>
> Bruce, 1995, p. 3

To Bruce, the original sects were a product of the 'upheavals of the reformation' (Bruce 1996) but, as noted above, some of them developed to become denominations which were tolerated as religious diversity became more accepted. However, Bruce also acknowledges that sects can prosper in modern societies where people have more opportunity to form their own subcultures. Even with the greater toleration of contemporary societies, though, some sects may come into serious conflict with the wider society and its values.

One example was the People's Temple, an American sect of the 1970s. When this sect came to an end it had just 900 members. It was founded in California by the Reverend Jim Jones and, although it recruited a considerable number of relatively affluent whites, it had a particular appeal to black ghetto dwellers of northern California.

The sect had a radical ideology: it claimed to be based upon a Marxist philosophy and it strongly opposed prejudice and discrimination. Many members withdrew from participation in the outside world in the early stages of the sect's development, giving over their homes and property to Reverend Jones. Some continued to work outside, but eventually the sect became completely isolated as its members moved to set up a commune at 'Jonestown' in the rainforests of Guyana.

The degree of integration within the group was tragically illustrated when in 1978 the entire membership died after taking cyanide. Some committed suicide on the orders of their leader; others were murdered by being tricked into taking the poison.

In common with many other sects, members were expected to demonstrate their faith – in this case by such acts as signing confessions to crimes they had not committed, suffering public humiliations if Jones believed they had done something wrong, and drinking unidentified liquids of an unpleasant colour. Jones exercised strict control over his followers. His charismatic leadership was strengthened by fraudulent attempts to demonstrate his religious powers. 'Miracle healings' would take place where followers would pretend to have been instantly cured of cancer by spitting out pieces of chicken liver they had concealed in their mouth. Careful scrutiny of members' dustbins allowed Jones to claim divine fortune-telling powers.

In the 1990s there were a number of religious movements in which there were deaths of some of the followers in violent circumstances. Perhaps the best-known example of this was the Branch Davidians. Founded by their charismatic leader, David Koresh, they established a commune at Waco in Texas. Koresh demanded absolute loyalty from members. In February 1993 the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms attempted to search their premises only to be met by gunfire. Four AFT agents were killed and 16 were wounded. After a lengthy siege the FBI attempted to arrest those inside using armoured vehicles. A fire started, resulting in the deaths of more than 80 Branch Davidians including 22 children. A subsequent investigation found that sect members had started the fire themselves, although survivors insist that this was not the case.

Although the People's Temple and the Branch Davidians are extreme examples of sects, many other religious organizations display similar characteristics. But there are also numerous exceptions. It is possible to find sects of vastly different sizes, with a wide variety of ideologies, contrasting attitudes to the outside world, varying degrees of control over their membership, and with or without a professional clergy and a charismatic leader.

Bryan Wilson (1982) accepts that Troeltsch's description of sects may have been accurate in relation to European countries, until quite recently. However, it does not account for or adequately describe the proliferation of sectarian groups in Europe and the USA in recent decades. Some of the new religious movements, which come close to Troeltsch's description of sects, will be examined shortly.

Cults

According to Steve Bruce (1995), Troeltsch mentioned 'mysticism' as another tradition within Christianity in addition to the church and sect. Bruce describes it in this way, 'Unlike the other forms, this was a highly individualistic expression, varying with personal experiences and interpretations.' To Bruce, this corresponds to the idea of a cult, which he sees as a 'loosely knit group organised around some common themes and interests but lacking any sharply defined and exclusive belief system.' A cult tends to be more individualistic than other organized forms of religion because it lacks a fixed doctrine. Cults tolerate other beliefs and indeed their own beliefs are often so

vague that they have no conception of heresy. Cults often have customers rather than members and these customers may have relatively little involvement with any organization once they have learnt the rudiments of the beliefs around which the cult is based.

This rather general description corresponds fairly closely to one type of new religious movement identified by Wallis (1984) – the World-Affirming Movement (see pp. 459–60). It is rather different from the definition of cult advanced by Stark and Bainbridge (1985) (see pp. 460–2). Many aspects of the New Age movement are based around cults (see below, pp. 466–9). The different ways in which the word cult is used will be explored in greater depth in the next sections.

New religious movements, sects and cults

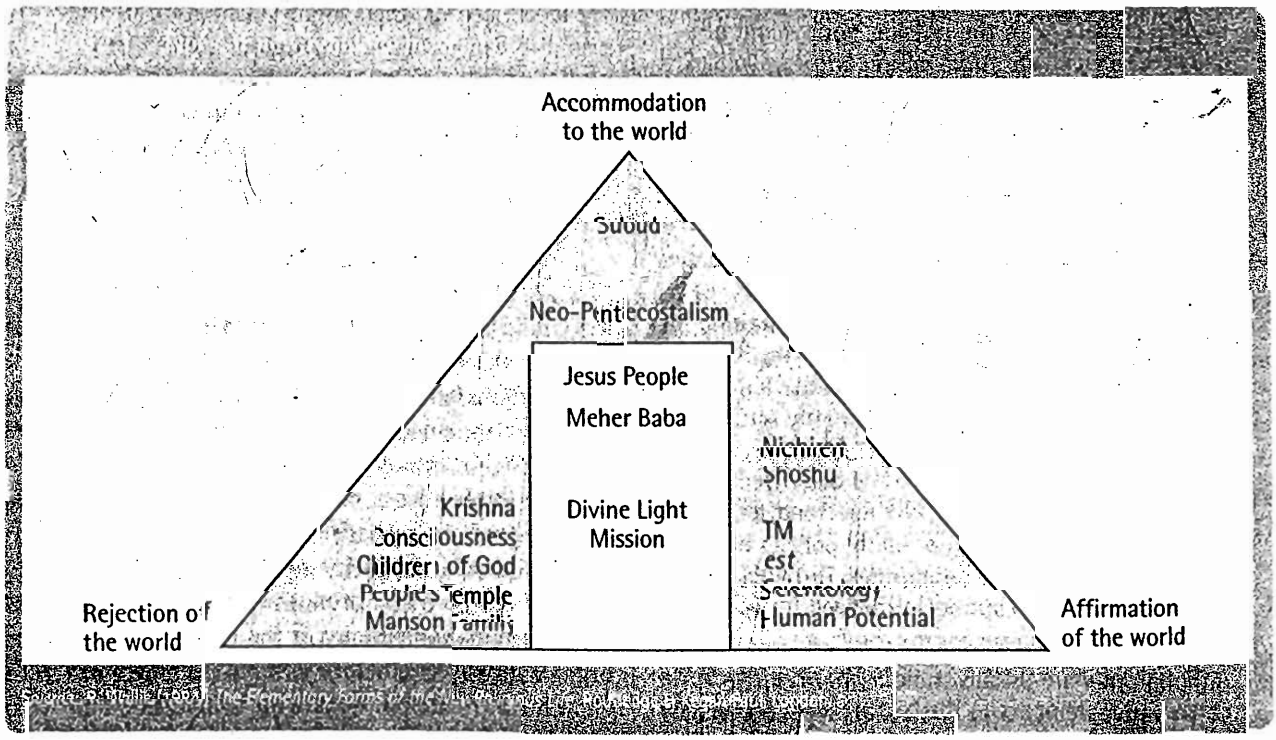
There have been numerous attempts to refine the basic distinctions between church, denomination, sect and cult in the light of the wide variety of small religious, spiritual or mystical groups that have sprung up since the 1960s. Eileen Barker (1985) suggests that they could be classified according to the religious tradition from which they originate. For example, Hari Krishna and the disciples of Bhagwan Rajneesh take their inspiration from the Hindu religion, Zen groups from Buddhism, and the Children of God from Christianity. The Unification Church (better known as the Moonies) combines elements from Taoism, Confucianism, Spiritualism and Buddhism, although it is based primarily around the Bible. Other groups have an occult, pagan or witchcraft source. Some groups have little connection with previous religions but are part of what Barker calls the Human Potential Movement, which attempts to liberate human potential through some technique – Primal Therapy, for example, uses screaming.

However, Barker also points out that some groups 'are so idiosyncratic that they would appear to defy any classification'. She cites a Japanese group who regarded Thomas Edison (the American inventor) as a minor god, and the Kennedy Worshippers who numbered around 2,000 and saw the assassinated president of the USA, John F. Kennedy, as a god.

Barker suggests that another way of classifying new religious movements is according to the degree of commitment shown by their members. The People's Temple (see p. 456) is at one extreme, while some other movements, such as Transcendental Meditation (see p. 459), require little more of their members than to attend a short course. Eileen Barker puts forward these classification schemes as no more than tentative suggestions. Other sociologists, such as Roy Wallis, have developed much more detailed systems of classification.

Roy Wallis – *The Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life*

The development of a range of new religions and the revival of some old ones, in the 1970s, led Roy Wallis to categorize these new religious movements (Wallis, 1984). His views are illustrated in Figure 7.1. He divides new religious movements into three main groups. Like Troeltsch, the principal criterion he uses to categorize religious organizations is their relation-



ship to the outside world. He therefore distinguishes between them according to whether the movement and its members reject, accommodate or affirm the world. He represents his typology with a triangle, and notes the existence of some groups (those in the central box) which do not fit neatly into any single category.

World-rejecting new religious movements

The world-rejecting new religious movements have most of the characteristics of a sect described by Troeltsch:

1 They are usually a clearly religious organization with a definite conception of God. For example, the Unification Church, better known as the 'Moonies' – after their leader Reverend Sun Myung Moon – pray in a conventional way to a 'Heavenly Father'.
2 In other respects, though, such groups are far from conventional. Their ideology is invariably highly critical of the outside world, and the movement expects or actively seeks change.
3 Some groups are millenarian: they expect God's intervention to change the world. The Nation of Islam in the USA are a case in point. They prophesy that in the year 2000 Allah will destroy the whites and their religion.
4 In order to achieve salvation, members are expected to have a sharp break from their conventional life when they join the movement. Organizations of this type act as total institutions, controlling every aspect of their members' lives. (For more details on total institutions see pp. 475–6.) As a result, they often develop a reputation for 'brainwashing' their members, since families and friends find it hard to understand the change that has taken place in a member.
5 Limited contact with the outside world might be allowed, to facilitate fund-raising. Moonies in San Francisco help to support the group by selling flowers, and members of other movements distribute literature or sell records for the same purpose. Sometimes they simply beg for money, claiming to be collecting for charity.
6 The leadership of the groups may be quite prepared to have contacts with the outside world in an attempt to try to change society without waiting for divine intervention. Jim Jones, leader of the ill-fated People's Temple, had close contacts with Californian politicians. Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam, became heavily involved in US politics. In particular, Farrakhan supported the black Democratic Party presidential candidate, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, in his attempts to promote policies designed to benefit disadvantaged minorities. Farrakhan himself, though, was strongly criticized for making apparently anti-Semitic comments.
7 Although they are usually radical, there can be conservative elements in the beliefs and actions of such organizations. The Unification Church is strongly anti-communist, and has supported South Korean military dictatorships. Many of the movements are morally puritanical, forbidding sex outside marriage, for example. The 'Moonies' are particularly strict about restricting sex to monogamous marriage.
8 World-rejecting new religious movements vary enormously in size: the 'Moonies' have an international following while other groups are small and locally based.
9 Most of them tend to be based around some form of communal lifestyle, and as such develop unconventional ways of living. The commune of the ill-fated Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas is a case in point.

Thus, despite the variations within these groups, none of them are content with the world as it is.

Wallis sees most world-rejecting new religious movements as sects. He defines sects as groups that claim to be uniquely legitimate and which advocate religious doctrines that are widely regarded as deviant. They have 'an authoritative locus for the attribution of heresy' and are hostile to the state and non-members.

World-accommodating new religious movements

The world-accommodating new religious movements are usually offshoots of an existing major church or denomination. For example, neo-Pentecostalist groups are variants of Protestant or Roman Catholic religions, while Subud is a world-accommodating Muslim group.

Typically these groups neither accept nor reject the world as it is, they simply live within it. They are primarily concerned with religious rather than worldly questions. As Wallis puts it:

> *The world-accommodating new religion draws a distinction between the spiritual and the worldly in a way quite uncharacteristic of the other two types. Religion is not constructed as a primarily social matter; rather it provides solace or stimulation to personal interior life.*
>
> Wallis, 1984, p. 35

The religious beliefs of followers might help them to cope with their non-religious social roles, but the aim of the religion is not to create a new society nor to improve the believers' chances of success in their lives. Instead, world-accommodating sects seek to restore the spiritual purity to a religion, which it believes has been lost in more conventional churches and denominations. Many of the members of these organizations were, before joining, members of churches or denominations with which they had

become disillusioned. Pentecostalists hold that the belief in the Holy Spirit has been lost in other Christian religions. The Holy Spirit speaks through Pentecostalists, giving them the gift of 'speaking in tongues'.

It is the spiritual and religious aspects of world-accommodating groups that differentiate them from other religious organizations, but they can still be seen as denominations. According to Wallis, denominations have a 'respectable' set of religious beliefs and are tolerant of the existence of other religions. Most of the members of world-accommodating groups live conventional and conforming lives outside their religious activities.

This is demonstrated by Ken Pryce's study of West Indians in the St Paul's district of Bristol. He found that Pentecostalists lived respectable lives. They usually had, or wished to have, normal jobs. Unlike some members of the local community, they did not earn their living from prostitution or by selling drugs, and they did not belong to radical political movements.

World-affirming new religious movements

The world-affirming new religious movements are very different from all other religious groups, and may indeed lack some of the features normally thought to be central to a religion. Wallis says that such a group 'may have no "church", no collective ritual of worship, it may lack any developed theology or ethics' (Wallis, 1984). However, these groups do claim to be able to provide access to spiritual or supernatural powers, and in that sense can be regarded as religions.

Rather than rejecting existing society or existing religions, world-affirming groups accept the world as it is and they are not particularly critical of other religions. What they offer the follower is the potential to be successful in terms of the dominant values of society by unlocking spiritual powers present in the individual. Salvation is seen as a personal achievement and as a solution to personal problems such as unhappiness, suffering or disability. Individuals usually overcome such problems by adopting some technique that heightens their awareness or abilities.

World-affirming movements are not exclusive groups: they seek as wide a membership as possible. Rather than trying to convert people as such, they try to sell them a service commercially. Followers carry on their normal lives except when undergoing training; often courses are held at weekends or at other convenient times so as not to cause disruption. There is little social control over the members, or customers, and they are not normally excluded from the group if they fail to act in accordance with its beliefs.

An example of a world-affirming new religious movement is provided by Transcendental Meditation or TM. TM is based upon the Hindu religion, but during at least some periods of its development the religious elements have been played down. First introduced to the West in the late 1950s, it achieved prominence in 1968 when the Beatles met its leading proponent, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

TM involves a meditational technique whereby a follower is given a personal mantra on which to concentrate for 20 minutes in the morning and evening. It is claimed that this technique can provide 'unbounded awareness' which can have beneficial effects for individuals and for society. Some followers of TM claim that in areas where as little as 1 per cent of the population have been initiated, crime, accidents and sickness are all reduced. Initiation is a simple matter and can take place in just a couple of hours with further follow-up sessions lasting just a few hours more. An advanced course in the powers of TM, the Siddi programme, claims to provide occult powers such as the ability to levitate. In the USA, the course costs several thousand dollars.

As with some other new religious movements, there have been attempts to make deliberate use of TM's teachings to solve social problems. Teachers have been dispatched to areas of civil unrest in the hope of converting local leaders who, it was hoped, would in turn use their new powers to overcome the area's problems. In the 1992 and 1997 British general elections, hundreds of followers of TM stood for parliament as representatives of the Natural Law Party, offering the voters harmonious rule in line with the natural laws of the universe as discovered by the Maharishi.

Within some world-affirming groups there is an inner-core of followers who attach great significance to the teachings of the movement and start to live more as members of a world-rejecting movement. TM, for instance, has developed an exclusive inner-group of members trained in advanced techniques who have characteristics a little closer to those of world-rejecting sects.

In addition, other world-affirming groups may think that their beliefs have a potential beyond helping individuals achieve success. They may believe that their training, if sufficiently widespread, could contribute to solving problems such as racial conflict, or even world hunger. Such political aims are not, however, the main concern of world-affirming new religious movements – they are merely a possible by-product of their teachings.

According to Steve Bruce, who has developed Wallis's views, there are two main types of world-affirming new religious movement. There are 'those which add a spiritual dimension to what had been a

western secular psychotherapy and those which tailor an initially oriental product for Western sensibilities' (Bruce, 1995). TM is a good example of the latter type. Bruce uses Insight as an example of the former type. Insight involves taking training courses which allow individuals to discover a 'centre' within themselves that contains the answer to all our questions and the solution to our problems. It enables individuals to free themselves from guilt and anxiety, to think positively about themselves and to live fulfilling lives.

To Wallis, most world-affirming new religious movements are cults. Cults are like sects in that they have religious beliefs that are widely regarded as deviant, but, unlike sects, cults tolerate the existence of other religions. Cults are 'loosely structured, tolerant, and non-exclusive'. They have a rapid turnover in membership and are relatively undemanding on their followers.

The 'middle ground'

Wallis realizes that no religious group will conform exactly to the categories he outlines. He says 'all actual new religious movements are likely to combine elements of each type to some extent' (Wallis, 1984). Indeed, he points to a number of groups that occupy an intermediate position, such as the Healthy Happy Holy Organization (3HO), and the Divine Light Mission. Comparing them to the three main groups, he says 'They combine in various degrees all three types, and more particularly elements of the conventional society and the counter-culture.'

3HO, for example, is similar to world-accommodating new religious movements in that it is an offshoot of an established religion, in this case Sikhism. As in world-affirming movements, it employs techniques that it is claimed will bring personal benefits such as happiness and good health. In common with TM, 3HO hopes that its teachings will have spin-offs for the outside world: in fact, nothing less than world unity. 3HO is not exclusive. Classes are provided for those who are not full members so that they can receive benefits from the teachings. Even fully committed members are expected to have conventional marriages and to hold down conventional jobs.

On the other hand, 3HO does have some characteristics in common with world-rejecting movements. The organization has a clear concept of God. Members dress unconventionally in white clothing and turbans. They live in communes or ashrams, but the ashrams do not involve total sharing: individuals pay for their own room and board. Some restrictions are placed on behaviour: members of 3HO are vegetarians and abstain from alcohol, tobacco and mind-altering drugs.

Occupying as it does the middle ground, 3HO allows its followers to combine elements of an alternative lifestyle with conventional marriage and employment.

Roy Wallis – an evaluation

James A. Beckford (1985) commends Wallis's scheme for recognizing that new religious movements do not always fit neatly into one category or another, and for outlining the differences in the types of individuals recruited by different types of movement (we outline Wallis's views on recruitment on pp. 462–3). However, Beckford also offers some criticisms of Wallis:

1 He argues that Wallis's categories are difficult to apply. It is not made clear whether the teachings of the movement or the beliefs and outlooks of the individual members distinguish the different orientations to the world.
2 Beckford feels that Wallis pays insufficient attention to the diversity of views that often exists within a sect or cult.
3 Beckford also questions the worth of defining some groups as 'world-rejecting'. In his view, no group can afford to reject the world altogether since they rely upon contacts with the wider economic system for their very survival.

Nevertheless Beckford does not deny that a typology, or list of types, of new religious movements is useful. In contrast, Stark and Bainbridge, whose views we examine next, reject the idea of using a typology to distinguish new religions.

Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge – un-ideal types

The problems of typologies

According to Stark and Bainbridge (1985), none of the typologies of new religious movements, sects, churches and denominations developed by other sociologists is a sound basis for categorization. All of them consist of lists of characteristics that each type is likely to have. However, these characteristics are not found in every religious organization placed in each category. Not all churches try to convert all members of society and not all sects are exclusive.

Such characteristics used to distinguish organizations are correlates – sets of characteristics that tend to be found together in the same organizations. They are not however attributes – characteristics that an organization must have if it is to be defined as a church, denomination, sect or cult. Defining types of organization in terms of correlates tends to lead to

confusion since most organizations are in some ways exceptions to the rule.

Stark and Bainbridge therefore argue that typologies of religious organization should be abandoned altogether. Instead, they adopt the ideas of Benton Johnson, an earlier sociologist of religion. Johnson argued that religious organizations could be compared in terms of a single attribute and could be placed at any point on a continuum in terms of this attribute. Johnson said:

> *A church is a religious group that accepts the social environment in which it exists. A sect is a religious organisation that rejects the social environment in which it exists.*
>
> Quoted in Stark and Bainbridge, 1985, p. 23

Thus they claim that religious groups can be compared in terms of the degree of conflict that exists between them and the wider society. The use of such a definition allows clear comparisons. For example, the Catholic Church in the USA is nearer to the sect end of the continuum than the Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland. It also allows changes over time to be clearly described: organizations might change and become more, or less, in tension with the social environment.

Sects and cults

Stark and Bainbridge then go on to argue that there are different kinds (they are careful to avoid using the word types) of religious movement in a high degree of tension with their social environment:

1 Sects are groups that are formed as an offshoot of an existing religion as a result of division or schism within that religion.
2 Cults, on the other hand, are new religions, or at least they are new in a particular society. Some result from cultural importation, where a religion from other societies is introduced into a society in which it had not previously been practised. Thus, Eastern religions introduced into the USA are examples of imported cults. Some cults, though, are entirely new. These result from cultural innovation; they are unconnected to existing religions.

Stark and Bainbridge go on to suggest that cults exhibit different degrees of organization and can be divided into three types:

1 Audience cults are the least organized and involve little face-to-face interaction. Contacts are often maintained through the mass media and the occasional conference. Many of the members of the audience for such cults may not know each other. Astrology is an example of an audience cult, as is the belief in UFOs.
2 Client cults are more organized and usually offer services to their followers. In the past they tended to offer 'medical miracles, forecasts of the future, or contact with the dead', though more recently they have 'specialised in personal adjustment'. Scientology, for example, offers its clients the opportunity to clear 'engrams' (repressed memories of painful experiences) from the brain, while the Reich Foundation offers the promise of the 'monumental orgasm'.
3 Cult movements involve followers much more. They try to satisfy all the religious needs of their members and, unlike client and audience cults, membership of other faiths is not permitted. They do, however, vary considerably in their power. Some require little more than occasional attendance at meetings and acceptance of the cult's beliefs, but others shape the whole of a person's life. The Reverend Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church is an example of a cult movement. Many client cults become cult movements for their most dedicated followers – for example, practitioners of TM who take the Siddi programme (see p. 459 for a short description of TM).

A well-publicized example that would probably fit Stark and Bainbridge's definition of a cult movement was the Heaven's Gate cult. They were a doomsday cult with an interest in computer technology and science fiction. They started in the mid-1970s and required members to refrain from sex, drugs and alcohol. The leader, Marshall Applewhite, who liked to be addressed as 'Do' or 'The Representative' even had himself castrated so that he did not become distracted by physical pleasures. The group believed that the earth was about to be recycled to become a garden for some future generation. The leader told his followers that they needed to leave their earthly bodies so as to get closer to heaven. When the comet Hale-Bopp passed close to earth in 1997, the cult members committed suicide, believing that their spirits would ascend to a spacecraft which was following close behind the comet.

Cults and compensators

Stark and Bainbridge argue that different types of cult offer different types of rewards and compensators for their followers. In line with their general theory of religion (discussed on pp. 445–6), they believe that religious organizations exist to meet the needs of individuals.

Audience cults offer very weak compensators which may provide 'no more than a mild vicarious thrill or social entertainment'. Watching Uri Geller allegedly bend a spoon through psychic power does not promise the audience any great improvement in their lives.

Client cults, on the other hand, offer more valuable specific compensators. Stark and Bainbridge

say 'If astrologers really could improve our life chances by telling us the right day to make investments, get married, or stay away from the office, those would indeed be valuable rewards.'

However, these cults do not offer general compensators such as an explanation of the meaning of life or the promise of life after death. General compensators are provided by cult movements.

Conclusion

Stark and Bainbridge offer a different, and they would claim superior, method of distinguishing religious organizations to that of Wallis. They make some useful distinctions between different types of cult; however, in doing so, they contradict themselves. They develop their own typology and fail to notice that some groups will not conform to all the characteristics they attribute to audience cults, client cults or cult movements

Reasons for the growth of sects, cults and new religious movements

Religious sects and cults are not a new phenomenon: they have existed for centuries. Steve Bruce traces the emergence of the first sects to the Reformation of the church in the sixteenth century and the upheavals that accompanied it (Bruce, 1995). Despite this, most existing sects and cults originated in the twentieth century, and the 1960s in particular saw the appearance of many new organizations. Table 7.1 shows the date of origin of the 417 native-born sects and 501 cults uncovered in the early 1980s in the USA by Stark and Bainbridge.

Although it is widely believed that these types of religious movement are more common in the USA than in Europe, Stark and Bainbridge uncovered

Historical period	Sects (405)*	Cults (484)*
1899 and before	19	7
1900–1929	22	8
1930–1949	23	10
1950–1959	16	14
1960–1969	14	38
1970–1977	3	23
	100	100

*No date of founding known for 12 sects and for 17 cults.

Source: R. Stark and W.S. Bainbridge (1985) *The Future of Religion*, University of California Press, Berkeley, p. 184.

evidence that there were proportionately more in some European countries. For example, they claimed that in the late 1970s in the USA there were 2.3 cult movements per million inhabitants, compared to 3.2 per million in England and Wales. In England and Wales they found no fewer than 153 different cult movements.

The growth of sects and cults can be explained either in terms of why particular individuals choose to join, or in terms of wider social changes. In reality these reasons are closely linked, since social changes affect the number of people available as potential recruits.

Marginality

Max Weber provided one of the earliest explanations for the growth of sects (Weber, 1963). He argued that they were likely to arise within groups that were marginal in society: members of groups outside the mainstream of social life often feel that they are not receiving the prestige and/or the economic rewards they deserve. One solution to this problem is a sect based on what Weber called 'a theodicy of disprivilege' (a theodicy is a religious explanation and justification). Such sects contain an explanation for the disprivilege of their members and promise them a 'sense of honour' either in the afterlife or in a future 'new world' on earth.

Bryan Wilson (1970) has pointed out that a variety of situations could lead to the marginalization of groups in society, which in turn could provide fertile ground for the development of sects. These situations include defeat in war, natural disaster or economic collapse. Radical and undesirable changes such as these are not the only circumstances that can encourage sect development.

In part, the growth of sects in the USA in the 1960s was accomplished through the recruitment of marginal and disadvantaged groups. The Black Muslims, for example, aimed to recruit 'the negro in the mud', and the sect seemed to offer hope for some of the most desperate blacks.

However, for the most part, in the 1960s and 1970s the membership of the world-rejecting new religious movements was drawn from amongst the ranks of young, white, middle-class Americans and Europeans. Wallis (1984) does not believe that this contradicts the theory that marginal members of society join world-rejecting sects. He argues that many of the recruits had already become marginal to society. Despite their middle-class backgrounds, they were usually 'hippies, drop-outs, surfers, LSD and marijuana users'. Their marginality may have been further increased by arrests for drug use or activities involved with radical politics. They were attracted to the communal lifestyle which the sect offered.

Relative deprivation

However, this does not explain why quite affluent middle-class youth should become marginal members of society in the first place. The concept of 'relative deprivation' can be used to explain their actions. Relative deprivation refers to subjectively perceived deprivation: that which people actually feel. In objective terms the poor are more deprived than the middle class, but in subjective terms certain members of the middle class may feel more deprived than the poor. They do not lack material wealth, but feel spiritually deprived in a world they see as too materialistic, lonely and impersonal. According to Wallis (1984), they therefore seek salvation in the sense of community offered by the sect.

Stark and Bainbridge (1985) also employ the concept of relative deprivation in explaining the origin of sects. They define sects as organizations which break away from an established church, and they believe that it is the relatively deprived who are likely to break away. Splits take place when churches begin to compromise their beliefs. When the more successful members of a religion try to reduce the amount of tension between that religion and the outside world, the less successful resent it and break away.

Social change

A number of sociologists, such as Bryan Wilson (1970), argue that sects arise during periods of rapid social change when traditional norms are disrupted, social relationships come to lack consistent and coherent meaning, and the traditional universe of meaning is undermined.

Wilson uses the example of the early Methodist movement, which had the characteristics of a sect. He sees the rise of Methodism as the response of the urban working class to the 'chaos and uncertainty of life in the newly settled industrial areas'. He claims that they had to evolve 'new patterns of religious belief to accommodate themselves to their new situation'. In a situation of change and uncertainty, the sect offers the support of a close-knit community organization, well-defined and strongly sanctioned norms and values, and a promise of salvation. It provides a new and stable universe of meaning which is legitimated by its religious beliefs.

More generally, Steve Bruce (1995, 1996) attributes the development of a range of religious institutions including sects and cults to a general process of modernization and secularization. He believes that the weakness of more conventional institutionalized religions has encouraged some people to consider less traditional alternatives. In the Middle Ages the church form of organization was dominant. With the Reformation, splits within the church led to the creation of the new sects.

As modern societies developed and faith in traditional sources of authority (such as churches) declined, religious pluralism and diversity were increasingly tolerated. The denomination became the characteristic form of religion – a watered-down version of the intolerant beliefs of churches and sects which believed that only they knew the truth. More recently, in what Bruce believes is a more secular world in which people are less likely to hold strong commitments, cults have become more popular. These require fewer sacrifices and less commitment than churches and sects and are therefore more tolerable to a modern clientele. However, a small number of people are willing to join the stricter sects. Bruce's views on specific types of new religious movement will be examined below.

The growth of new religious movements

Wallis (1984) has pointed to a number of social changes which he believes accounted for the growth of new religious movements in the 1960s. Some of these had important effects on youth in particular:

1 The growth of higher education and the gradual lengthening of time spent in education created an extended period of transition between childhood and adulthood. Youth culture developed because there was an increasing number of young people who had considerable freedom but little in the way of family or work responsibilities.
2 At the same time there was a belief that developing technology would herald the end of poverty and economic scarcity.
3 Radical political movements were also growing in the 1960s, providing an alternative to dominant social norms and values.

Wallis claims that in these circumstances world-rejecting new religious movements were attractive because of the potential they seemed to offer for 'A more idealistic, spiritual and caring way of life, in the context of more personal and loving social relationships.' It has also been suggested that the growth of such movements was related to secularization. In general terms secularization means a decline in the importance of religion in society. (For details of the relationship between sects and secularization see pp. 485–6.)

Steve Bruce (1995) sees world-rejecting movements as having a particular appeal to the young. Many had become disillusioned by the failure of the counter-culture in the 1960s to radically change the world. The hippie culture and the commune movement had disintegrated largely because of drugs and exploitation of the movement. The disillusioned young people sought another path to salvation through religion rather than peace and love.

Wallis (1984) provides only a very sketchy explanation of recruitment to world-accommodating religious movements. He claims that those with a substantial stake in society, but who nevertheless have reasons for being dissatisfied with existing religions, tend to join them.

World-affirming new religions, as we saw earlier, are very different from the other types. They do not involve a radical break with a conventional lifestyle, they do not strongly restrict the behaviour of members, and they offer material and practical advantages to their followers. For all of these reasons they might be expected to appeal to different groups in society, and to develop in different circumstances.

World-affirming new religious movements usually develop after world-rejecting ones, and more of them have survived longer. Research suggests that members of groups such as Erhard's Seminar Training have members with above-average incomes and education who are somewhat older than members of world-rejecting groups. To Wallis, what they offer is a 'means of coping with a sense of inadequacy among social groups which are, by the more obvious indicators, among the world's more successful and highly rewarded individuals'. It is primarily the emphasis placed upon individual success in terms of status, income and social mobility that stimulates these 'religions' to develop.

Actually achieving success may in another sense motivate individuals to join these groups. Individuals may feel that in the successful performance of their social roles (such as their jobs) they lose sight of their real selves. A world-affirming religious movement might allow the rediscovery of this real 'self'.

Bryan Wilson (1976) has argued that these religions offer immediate gratification for those who take part. Wallis suggests that those who are socialized into being dedicated to their work, and who have internalized the Protestant work ethic, find it hard to enjoy their leisure activities while feeling free from guilt. In an increasingly leisure- and consumer-orientated society, Wallis believes that world-affirming organizations offer a path to guilt-free spontaneously-enjoyed leisure.

Steve Bruce (1995, 1996) believes that world-affirming new religious movements are predominantly a response to the rationalization of the modern world. Because of rationalization, 'Modern life is so fragmented that many people find it increasingly difficult to draw on their public roles for a satisfying and fulfilling sense of identity' (Bruce, 1995). Jobs, for example, are simply a means to an end, to earn a living, and offer little sense of satisfaction or fulfilment. People no longer have a sense of calling to their work and may not identify strongly with their workmates. People have, however, been encouraged to value achievement, yet many lack the opportunities to be as successful as they would like. World-affirming movements can offer a solution. They provide a technique which claims to be able to bring people both success and a spiritual element to their lives.

The explanations provided above offer some general reasons why world-affirming movements should be popular in advanced industrial societies, but do not explain why particular individuals should join, nor why they are popular at particular periods of time. More specific theories have been devised to account for what Wallis calls movements of the middle ground.

Several sociologists studying these movements have claimed that they help to reintegrate people into society, while allowing them to retain some elements of an alternative lifestyle. These movements appeal to those members of the counter-culture or world-rejecting religious movements who have become disillusioned, or feel they need to earn a living in a conventional way. They offer a stepping-stone back towards respectability. Thus Mauss and Peterson describe the members of one such group, the Jesus Freaks, as 'penitent young prodigals' (quoted in Wallis, 1984, p. 75).

These middle-ground groups were particularly successful from the mid-1970s onwards, when economic recession and the decline in the numbers of people willing to adopt alternative lifestyles provided a large pool from which recruitment might take place.

The development of sects

Sects as short-lived organizations

In 1929, H.R. Niebuhr made a number of observations about the way in which religious sects changed over time. He argued that sects could not survive as sects beyond a single generation. Either they would change their characteristics, compromise and become denominations, or they would disappear altogether. He advanced the following arguments to support this view:

1. Sect membership was based upon voluntary adult commitment: members chose to dedicate themselves to the organization and its religion. Once the first generation started to have children, though, the latter would be admitted as new members when they were too young to understand the teachings of the religion. These new members would not be able to sustain the fervour of the first generation. Consequently the sect might become a denomination.
2. Sects that relied upon a charismatic leader would tend to disappear if the leader died. Alternatively, the nature of the leadership would change: no

longer would the charisma of an individual hold the sect together. This would allow the bureaucratic structure of a denomination with its hierarchy of paid officials to emerge.

3 Niebuhr argued that the ideology of many sects contained the seeds of their own destruction. Sects with an ascetic creed would encourage their members to work hard and save their money. As a result the membership would be upwardly socially mobile, and would no longer wish to belong to a religious group which catered for marginal members of society. Once again the sect would have to change or die: either becoming a denomination or losing its membership.

According to Niebuhr, then, there was no possibility of a sect surviving for long periods of time without losing its extreme teachings and rejection of society. One example that illustrates this well is that of the Methodists before they became a denomination: as the Methodist membership rose in status in the nineteenth century, the strict disciplines of the sect and its rejection of society were dropped, and it gradually came to be recognized as a denomination. A number of sects have also disappeared because of the mass suicide (or murder) of their members. The examples of the People's Temple and the Branch Davidians have been discussed above (see p. 456).

The life cycle of sects

However, Bryan Wilson (1966) rejects Niebuhr's view that sects are inevitably short-lived. He points out that some sects do survive for a long time without becoming denominations. To Wilson, the crucial factor is the way the sect answers the question 'What shall we do to be saved?' Sects can be classified in terms of how they answer this question. Only one type, the conversionist sect, is likely to develop into a denomination. Examples include the evangelical sects, typical of the USA, which aim to convert as many people as possible by means of revivalist preaching. Becoming a denomination does not necessarily compromise its position. It can still save souls.

The other types of sect cannot maintain their basic position in a denominational form. Adventist sects, such as the Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, provide an example of the reason why. Adventist sects await the Second Coming of Christ, who will judge humanity and establish a new world order. Only sect membership will guarantee a place in the new order. The rich and powerful and those who follow conventional religions will be excluded from Christ's kingdom on earth. Adventists sects are founded on the principle of separation from the world in the expectation of the Second Coming. To become a denomination they would have to change this basic premiss. Separation from the world and denominationalism are not compatible.

Thus Wilson concludes that a sect's prescription for salvation is a major factor in determining whether or not it becomes a denomination.

Internal ideology and the wider society

Roy Wallis (1984) takes a more complex view of the paths followed by sects: he feels the chances of sects surviving, changing or disappearing are affected both by the internal ideology of the sect and by external social circumstances.

Since Wallis distinguishes a variety of different types of sect, he argues that they are likely to follow different paths. According to him, the development of sects may involve them changing from one type of sect to another, rather than becoming denominations. Wallis does not believe that there is any single or inevitable path that any type of sect will follow, and he suggests that the changes that do take place may be specific to a particular historical period.

World-rejecting sects do often change their stance as time passes. Like Niebuhr, Wallis sees the possibility that such groups may soften their opposition to society and become more world-accommodating. This seems to have been particularly common in the 1970s when economic recession discouraged some members from dropping-out and rejecting society altogether. The Children of God, for example, weakened their opposition to other religions and no longer thought of non-members as servants of Satan.

Wallis accepts that charismatic leaders have difficulty in retaining personal control over a religious movement indefinitely, and that this may also result in changes. If the organization grows, a process which Weber described as the routinization of charisma can take place. A more bureaucratic organization develops so that some of the leader's personal authority becomes vested in his (or untypically her) officials or representatives. Nevertheless the changes may stop well short of denominationalization.

Wallis also recognizes that sects can disappear. World-rejecting sects may actually be destroyed by the charismatic leader, as in the case of Jim Jones's People's Temple. Social changes may lead to the members becoming less marginal in society, so threatening the base on which the sect was founded. However, as new groups in society become marginal, new sects will arise.

According to Wallis, then, world-rejecting sects do tend to be unstable, but new ones emerge, and those that do survive may become more world-accommodating while continuing to exist as sects.

World-affirming movements are less likely than world-rejecting ones to be based on a charismatic

leader or to have members who are marginal or deprived. They also require less sacrifice and commitment from members, and for this reason are not so likely to disappear. Instead, since their services are often sold as a commodity, they are vulnerable to a loss of support from their consumers. To the extent that they sell themselves in the market-place, they are subject to the same problems as a retailer. If the public no longer needs, or gains benefits from, their services, they will lose customers. To Wallis, though, world-affirming movements are more likely to change to attract a new clientele than to cease to exist.

Transcendental Meditation (TM), for example, initially emphasized its spiritual elements, and in the second half of the 1960s it succeeded by identifying closely with the counter-culture. In the 1970s the counter-culture declined and TM tried to broaden its appeal by emphasizing the practical benefits – the worldly success – that the meditation claimed to offer.

Wallis points out that consumers might tire of a product that fails to deliver its promises. One response is to try to gain an inner-core of committed followers. TM did just this through the Siddi programme and perhaps in this way helped to guarantee a permanent following.

Wallis believes that world-affirming movements are flexible and they can change relatively easily as they seek to survive and prosper. In some circumstances they can also become more religious and spiritual (like world-rejecting movements) for at least an inner-core of followers.

The position of the movements of the middle ground is by its very nature more precarious. Since they are in an intermediate position they are likely to shift between being world-rejecting and world-affirming, depending upon circumstances and the needs and wishes of the membership. This can lead to splits within the movements or the establishment of rival organizations. One British movement of this type, the Process, was founded in 1963 and split into two separate groups in 1973. If these splits do not take place it is likely that such movements fluctuate between the two extremes, continuing in one form or another, but not establishing a clear and permanent ideology and identity.

Wallis says little about how world-accommodating movements develop, but these seem the most stable of the new religious movements. Indeed, some are not particularly new: Pentecostalism has survived little-changed since the early years of the twentieth century. As Wallis points out, this type of 'new' religious movement has most in common with denominations.

Thus, although Wallis does not agree with Niebuhr that sects inevitably disappear or become denominations, his work does suggest that there may be tendencies in these directions. Those religious movements that are most similar to denominations are the likeliest to remain stable. World-rejecting movements, which have most in common with the type of sects Niebuhr described, are the least likely to survive for long periods in their original form.

The New Age

Examples of the New Age

The New Age is a term that has been applied to a range of ideas which started to become prominent in the 1980s. Although some of these beliefs were organized as new religious movements (particularly as world-affirming new religious movements) and as cults of various types (particularly client cults and audience cults), in many cases they were not closely attached to particular organizations (Heelas, 1996, Bruce 1995). Rather, New Age ideas were spread through aspects of the culture of particular societies in films, shops, seminars, meetings, music, television programmes, public lectures and so on.

Examples of New Age beliefs include interest in clairvoyance, contacting aliens, belief in 'spirit guides' and 'spirit masters', various types of meditation and psychotherapy, beliefs in paganism, magic, tarot cards, ouija, astrology and witchcraft, an interest in self-healing and natural or traditional remedies for ill health (for example, yoga, aromatherapy, reflexology), spiritually inclined ecology such as a belief in Gaia (the Greek goddess who has been used to represent the sacred and interconnected nature of all life), and so on. Manifestations of the New Age can be found in places such as the annual Mind, Body and Spirit Convention, which has been held in London since 1977; in publications on topics such as Feng Shui, mysticism and Shamanism; in the music of groups such as Kula Shaker; in shops that sell tapes of sounds from nature which can be used for relaxation or meditation; in communes such as the Findhorn community in Scotland (which grew vegetables with the help of plant spirits rather than fertilizers); and in more conventionally organized groups such as the Scientologists and some Buddhist groups.

The themes of the New Age

What have such a diverse range of activities and beliefs got in common? Paul Heelas (1996) believes that the central feature of the New Age is a belief in self-spirituality. People with such beliefs have turned away from traditional religious organizations in the search for the spiritual and instead have begun to look inside themselves. The New Age 'explains why life – as conventionally experienced – is not what it should be; it provides an account of what it is to find

perfection; and it provides the means for obtaining salvation'. However, that salvation does not come from being accepted by an external god, it comes from discovering and perfecting yourself. Often this means going beyond your conscious self to discover hidden spiritual depths. Heelas says:

> *Perfection can be found only by moving beyond the socialized self – widely known as the 'ego' but also as the 'lower self', 'intellect' or the 'mind' – thereby encountering a new realm of being. It is what we are by nature.*
>
> Heelas, 1996, p.19

In this process we find our spiritual core. New Agers tell people that 'You are Gods and Goddesses in exile' who only need to cast off the cloaks that hide this to uncover their true potential. There are many different ways to (in the word of a Doors song) 'break on through to the other side'. These include 'psychotherapies, physical labour, dance, shamanic practices, magic, or for that matter, fire-walking, sex, tennis, taking drugs or using virtual-reality equipment'.

According to Heelas, the New Age values personal experience above 'truths' provided by scientists or conventional religious leaders. In this respect detraditionalization is a key feature of the New Age: it rejects the authority that comes from traditional sources and sees individuals and their sense of who they are as the only genuine source of truth or understanding. A good example of this attitude was a notice above the door of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's Ashram (commune) at Puna, which said 'Leave your minds and shoes here.'

The New Age stresses that you can become responsible for your own actions, you do not need to be governed by preconceived ideas. It also emphasizes freedom to discover your own truth and discover your own way to the truth. Although many aspects of the New Age draw on traditional mystical and religious teachings, these are seen as ways of getting in touch with your own spirituality rather than as doctrines that must be rigidly followed. They allow the discovery of truth as an abstract concept, as an inner and spiritual phenomenon, rather than revealing a particular and specific version of the truth. According to Heelas, the movement believes that 'the same wisdom can be found at the heart of all religious traditions'.

Variations within the New Age

Although Heelas detects many common themes in the New Age, as outlined above, he also discerns some variations in New Age beliefs. Following Roy Wallis's typology of new religious movements (see pp. 457–60), Heelas distinguishes between aspects of the New Age which tend towards the world-affirming and those which are more world-rejecting. The former type stress how the New Age can help you experience the best of the outer world. For example, New Age teachings might help you to be successful in business. Harper Collins (the publishers of this book) in the 1990s ran company-wide courses following the New Age 'Values and Vision' training of Tishi. Transcendental Meditation now has its own University of Management in Holland. There are numerous other examples and all claim to be able to help companies to become more profitable and individuals more successful.

World-rejecting aspects of New Age stress how to experience the best of the inner world, how to achieve inner spirituality and turn away from any concern with worldly success.

Most New Age beliefs, though, offer the best of both worlds, claiming that you can become both successful and spiritually fulfilled. Not surprisingly, then, the radicalism of different New Age beliefs differs considerably. While some almost celebrate capitalism, others are strongly opposed to aspects of it. This is particularly true of ecologically inclined parts of the movement. Nevertheless, Steve Bruce believes that even these types are less radical than some of the new religious movements of earlier decades. Bruce says of environmentalism:

> *it is critical of aspects of the modern world, especially those such as pollution that can be seen as side-effects of greed and over-consumption, and in that sense the New Age is 'alternative', but there is little of the blanket condemnation of the present world found in out-and-out world-rejecting new religions.*
>
> Bruce, 1995, p. 109

Heelas also detects differences between those aspects of the New Age which stress that you make your own truth through experience and those which believe that there is some external cosmic order which can be discovered, or that you need the help of 'gurus, masters, facilitators or trainers'.

The appeal of the New Age

Both Steve Bruce and Paul Heelas agree that the New Age can best be explained as a development of modernity. In other words they agree that the key characteristics of the New Age are derived from, or at least closely related to, what they see as the most recent stages of the development of Western societies (see Chapter 15 for a discussion of modernity).

Steve Bruce claims that the New Age appeals most to affluent members of society, particularly the 'university-educated middle classes working in the "expressive professions": social workers, counsellors, actors, writers, artists, and others whose education

and work causes them to have an articulate interest in human potential'. They may have experienced personal development themselves and therefore find it plausible to believe that there is the potential for further development for themselves or others. These are also the sorts of people who have been most exposed to a belief in individualism, which is characteristic of modern societies. Modern societies are relatively egalitarian and democratic so the views and beliefs of individuals are given more credence than was once the case, whereas the views of experts and traditional authorities are regarded with more scepticism. Bruce says:

> *This is the importance of the New Age. It illustrates the zenith of individualism. Individualism used to mean the right to act as one wished provided it did not harm others and the right to hold views radically at odds with the consensus. It has now shifted up in abstraction from a behavioural and ethical principle to an epistemological claim [a claim about how you know what is true and what is not]. It is now asserted as the right to decide what is and what is not true.*
>
> Bruce, 1995, p. 122

The New Age is a symptom of the extreme relativism of knowledge; that is, what you believe comes to depend simply on your subjective point of view and is not based upon general acceptance of definite claims by scientists and experts. It is also, in Bruce's eyes, a symptom of the decline of traditional religion. If people have little faith in the claims of scientists, they have even less in those of traditional religious leaders.

Paul Heelas (1996) reaches broadly similar conclusions. He sees the main appeal of the New Age as stemming from aspects of mainstream culture. However, it provides a more critical, radicalized and more religious, sacrilized version of mainstream culture. On the surface it appears to reject mainstream culture but in fact it is based on an extreme emphasis on the individualism that is typical of modernity. This individualism leads to people becoming 'disembedded, desituated or detraditionalized selves'. People have no roots in the locality where they were born or brought up. They no longer have unquestioning faith in political, moral or religious codes, or in the leaders who espouse them. People are thrown back on their own resources to make sense of the world and to create their own identity.

The individualism of modernity takes two forms:

1 Utilitarian individualism encourages people to seek to maximize their own happiness and material success. This is linked both to the desire for consumer goods and to those aspects of the New Age which aim to provide people with techniques to make them more successful in business or in their careers.
2 Expressive individualism emphasizes the importance of being yourself, discovering your authentic or true self. This links to those aspects of the New Age which are more inner-directed.

Heelas examines four more specific ways in which modernity might link to the appeal of the New Age:

1 Modernity gives people a 'multiplicity-of-roles'. For example, they have work roles, family roles, roles as consumers, as members of various organizations, as friends and so on. In the modern world there may be little overlap between these roles; people are unlikely to live close to, and socialize primarily with, their workmates, or to live in the same community all their lives, or to work with members of their family. Because of this, people may end up with a fragmented identity – they have no central, core concept of who they are. The New Age offers ways of finding an identity.
2 Consumer culture encourages people to try to become the perfect person by, for example, wearing the right clothes, using the best make-up, having the healthiest diet, etc. This creates a 'climate of discontent' as people fail to achieve the perfection portrayed by the advertisers. This encourages people to try new ways of gaining perfection, including those offered by the New Age.
3 Following Bryan Wilson (see p. 463), Heelas suggests that periods of rapid social change, in which traditional norms and values are disrupted, might lead people to seek certainty and security in religious or spiritual beliefs.
4 The decline of conventional religion, particularly Christianity, leaves people without strong spiritual alternatives to the New Age when they are seeking solutions to the problems created by modernity.

Heelas sees the last of these explanations as the least important. However, he believes that all may have some role to play in explaining the appeal of the New Age. All are linked to modernity, but people experience modernity in very different ways. Some people experience modernity as (in a phrase used by Weber) an 'iron cage'. They feel trapped by the power of bureaucracies, the routines of work and the demands of success in capitalist societies. Yet, for all its demands, modernity does not offer most people a satisfying sense of identity – of who they are and why they exist. The New Age offers a solution.

Others experience modernity as a 'crumbling cage' where they have too much freedom, too few guidelines about how to behave. Again, the New Age offers possible solutions for people prepared to look within themselves for the answers.

Of course there are other ways of dealing with the dilemmas of modernity. As Heelas acknowledges, some people – for example, Christian fundamentalists in the USA – turn to traditional religion. Others

might throw themselves into their work or become entranced by consumer culture. Nevertheless, the popularity of the New Age is only made possible by the nature of modernity. Heelas concludes:

> *Basically, the appeal of the New Age has to do with the culturally stimulated interest in the self, its values, capacities and problems. Whereas traditionalized religiosity, with its hierarchical organization, is well-suited for the community, detraditionalized spirituality is well-suited for the individual. The New Age is 'of' the self in that it facilitates celebration of what it is to be and to become; and 'for' the self in that by differing from much of the mainstream, it is positioned to handle identity problems generated by conventional forms of life.*
>
> Heelas, 1996, pp. 173–4

The New Age – conclusion

On the surface the New Age seems to contradict the views of sociologists such as Weber that the modern world would become increasingly rational. There seems to be little rationality in the claim by the New Ager Shirley Maclaine that she is responsible for the birth of her parents (quoted in Heelas, 1996), or that spirit guides, astrology or messages from 'an energy personality essence no longer focused in physical reality' (quoted in Bruce, 1995) can help us to live our lives better. But if Bruce and Heelas are correct, then the rationality of modernity also brought with it an individualism in which apparently non-rational beliefs could flourish.

Some writers disagree with Bruce and Heelas, seeing the existence of such beliefs as evidence that we have moved beyond modernity into an era of postmodernity (see pp. 495–500 on postmodernity and religion). There is no agreement either on whether the New Age is evidence of the resurgence of spiritual belief or a manifestation of secularization (see pp. 499–500). But Bruce and Heelas seem to be on strong ground in arguing that the New Age is related to a decline in traditional beliefs and that it is closely linked with other social and cultural developments in modern societies.

Secularization

Support for the secularization thesis

Although sociologists have disputed whether religion encourages or inhibits social change, most agree that changes in society will lead to changes in religion. Furthermore, many have claimed that social change would lead to the weakening or even disappearance of religion.

In the nineteenth century it was widely believed that industrialization and the growth of scientific knowledge would lead to secularization, which very broadly can be defined as the process of religious decline. August Comte (1986), the French functionalist sociologist, believed that human history passed through three stages. Each stage was characterized by a different set of intellectual beliefs:

1. In the first, theological stage, religious and superstitious beliefs would be dominant.
2. These would be weakened as society passed into the second, metaphysical stage, during which philosophy would become more important.
3. Religious belief would disappear altogether in the final, positive stage, in which science alone would dominate human thinking and direct human behaviour.

Durkheim did not agree that religion was doomed to total obsolescence. He once commented that there was 'something eternal in religion' (Durkheim, 1961). Nevertheless, he did anticipate that religion would be of declining social significance. In an industrial society in which there was a highly specialized division of labour, religion would lose some of its importance as a force for integrating society. Social solidarity would increasingly be provided by the education system rather than the sort of religious rituals associated with the more simple societies.

Weber too anticipated a progressive reduction in the importance of religion. He thought that in general people would act less in terms of emotions and in line with tradition, and more in terms of the rational pursuit of goals. Rationalization would gradually erode religious influence (Weber, 1958, 1963, Gerth and Mills, 1954) (for further details see Chapter 15).

Marx did not believe that industrial capitalism as such would herald the decline of religion, but he did believe that it would set in motion a chain of events that would eventually lead to its disappearance (Marx, 1950). Religion, according to Marx, was needed to legitimate inequality in class societies, but capitalism would eventually be replaced by classless communism, and religion would cease to have any social purpose.

Many contemporary sociologists have followed in the footsteps of the founders of the subject. They have argued that science and rationality, the decline of traditional values, and the increasingly specialized division of labour, would tend to undermine religion in particular and faith and non-rational beliefs in

general. These views are largely based upon an analysis of the nature of modernity.

Modern societies are seen to be incompatible with the retention of a central role for religion. That is not to say that supporters of the secularization thesis necessarily believe that religion will disappear completely. Instead they argue that in some sense religion will decline in significance. For example, Bryan Wilson – for over thirty years a leading advocate of secularization – defines secularization as 'the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance' (Wilson, 1966).

Problems with the secularization thesis

Despite widespread support for the theory of secularization, a number of doubts have been raised:

1 Some sociologists have questioned the belief that religion was as important in the past as has been widely assumed. If pre-industrial societies were not truly religious, then religion may have declined little, if at all.

2 The role of religion in different modern societies varies considerably. It is possible that secularization is a feature of the development of some modern societies, but not of others. For example, religion appears to be much more influential in the USA than it is in the UK. There are also disagreements about how far you might expect the process of secularization to have spread. For example, would you expect Asian, African, and Latin American countries to have experienced secularization, or would you expect it to be limited to North America and Western Europe? The crucial question here is which countries are perceived to be 'modern'.

3 The concepts of religiosity and secularization are not given the same meanings by different sociologists. Problems arise in evaluating the theory of secularization because of the absence of a generally agreed definition. Glock and Stark argue that 'Perhaps the most important attribute of those who perceive secularization to be going on is their commitment to a particular view of what religion means' (Glock and Stark, 1969). Thus one researcher might see the essential characteristic of religion as worship in a religious institution. As a result she or he may see a decline in church attendance as evidence of secularization. Another might emphasize religious belief, which is seen as having nothing necessarily to do with attending a religious institution. A third might see the issue in terms of the role religion plays in shaping public life, for example politics and education; while a fourth might see it in terms of the extent to which religious teaching has influenced the moral values of a society.

4 Even if modernity does lead to secularization, you cannot necessarily conclude that contemporary societies will become increasingly secular. Some advocates of the theory of postmodernism argue that, in moving beyond modernity, societies will also move beyond the secular. Faith and religion will be rediscovered in a world in which the achievements of science and rationality have less appeal than they once had (see Chapter 15 for a discussion of modernity and postmodernity).

The question of secularization will now be discussed in terms of some of the varying definitions of the concept that have been used, before returning to a more general discussion of the issues raised by this concept.

Institutional religion – participation

Statistical evidence

Some researchers have seen religious institutions and the activity associated with them as the key element in religious behaviour. From this viewpoint they have measured the importance of religion in society in terms of factors such as church attendance, church membership and participation in ceremonies such as marriages which are performed in church.

In these respects, a good deal of the statistical evidence does seem to point towards secularization. However, the evidence needs to be examined carefully: some of it does not appear to support the secularization thesis; the evidence varies between countries; and the reliability and validity of many of the statistics are open to question. (For an explanation of the terms validity and reliability see Chapter 14.)

We will now examine the statistics relating to different types of participation in institutional religion.

Church attendance in Britain

Some of the strongest evidence for the secularization thesis as applied to Britain seems to come from church attendance statistics. Figure 7.2 shows long-term trends in church attendance in England and Wales and Scotland according to a variety of surveys and studies, some of which are discussed below.

The earliest available survey statistics on church attendance originate from the 1851 'Census of Religion'. This found just under 40 per cent of the adult population attending church. In England and Wales the figures dropped to 35 per cent by the turn of the century and 20 per cent in 1950.

In 1979 and 1989 two new Church Censuses were carried out. In both of these, clergy were asked to make comparisons with five years earlier and estimate changes in the size of their congregations. The 1979 census was based on average attendance during the month of November. The 1989 census was based upon an attempt to collect information from

every Christian church in England on Sunday 15 October of that year. A church was defined as 'a body of people meeting on a Sunday in the same premises primarily for the purposes of public worship at regular intervals'. 'Church' was used in a very wide sense – the study included figures on Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Orthodox religions, Christian denominations and the House Church movement (in which small groups get together to pray in each others' homes or in other buildings that are not normally used for religious purposes). Altogether 390,000 'churches' were discovered, 70 per cent of which returned the questionnaires on which the statistics were based (Brierley, 1991). Using these surveys and estimates provided by individual religious organizations, estimates have been produced in the *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 1998/99* (Brierley, ed., 1997) for adult church attendance between 1980 and 1995 in England. The results are given in Table 7.2 and include estimates for the year 2000 based on previous trends.

The overall attendance figures are repeated along with membership figures in graph form in Figure 7.3. These figures show a continuing drop in church

Figure 7.2 Adult church attendance in Britain, 1851–1989

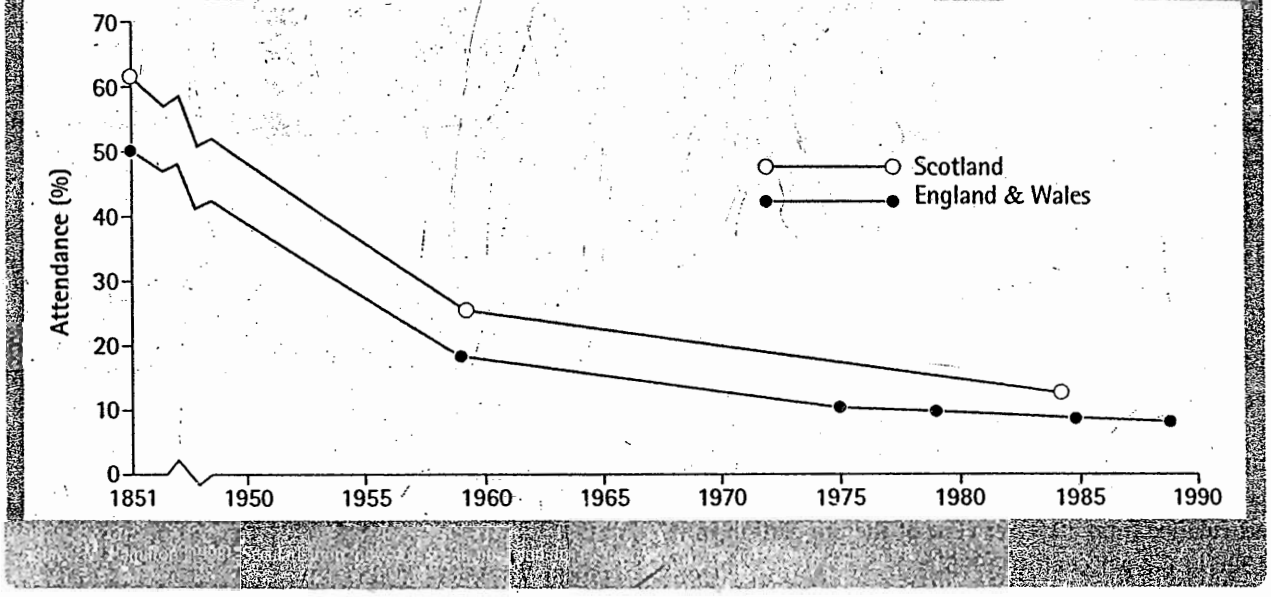
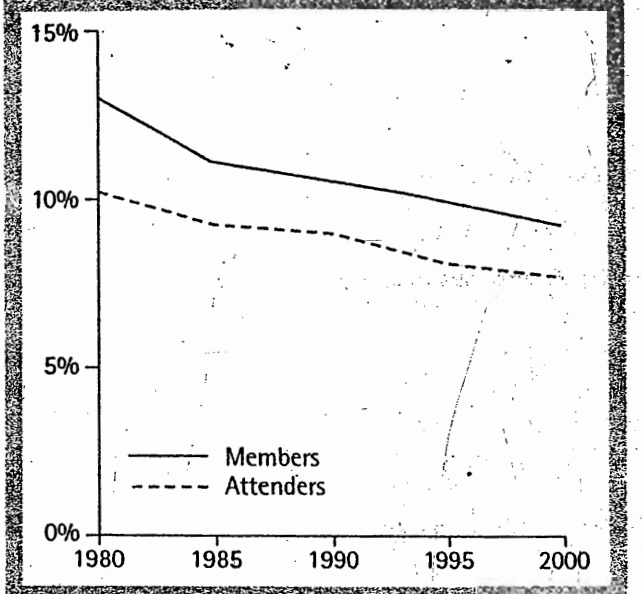


Table 7.2 Adult church attendance in England, 1980–2000

England	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000
Anglican	968,000	920,900	917,600	854,000	831,800
Baptist	201,300	196,200	197,700	195,200	192,000
Catholic	1,601,400	1,424,200	1,346,400	1,100,800	972,700
Independent	164,200	176,500	179,700	184,900	190,000
Methodist	437,900	420,800	395,200	350,500	321,800
New churches	50,300	81,000	114,200	156,100	198,000
Orthodox	7,200	8,400	9,600	10,800	12,000
Pentecostal	147,200	152,400	164,700	171,900	179,000
United Reformed	139,000	121,400	104,100	97,900	91,500
Other churches	97,700	81,400	83,000	75,700	73,000
TOTAL	3,814,200	3,583,200	3,512,200	3,197,800	3,061,800
% of adult population	*10.2%*	*9.3%*	*9.0%*	*8.1%*	*7.7%*

Source: P. Brierley (ed.) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook, Religious Trends 1998/99* (London Christian Research), p. 4.1

Figure 7.3 Church membership and attendance in England, 1980–2000



Source: P. Brierley (ed.) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 1998/99*. Christian Research, p. 2.12.

attendance overall, particularly among Anglican, Baptist, Catholic and United Reformed churches. This appears to indicate a sustained process of secularization. Table 7.3 shows total adult attendance in Great Britain from 1980 to 2000. Again, the figure for 2000 is based on projections. This shows a drop in attendance from 10.9 per cent of the population in 1980 to 8.7 per cent in 1995.

Attendance at special Christian ceremonies such as baptisms and marriages has also declined. In 1900, 65 per cent of children born alive in England were baptized. By 1970 it was down to 47 per cent and in 1993 had fallen as low as 27 per cent (Bruce, 1996). There has also been a noticeable drop in the number of marriages conducted in church. According to Bruce, nearly 70 per cent of English couples were married in the Church of England at the start of the twentieth century. By 1990 it had fallen to 53 per cent. According to the *UK Christian Handbook*, 47 per cent of marriages in England and Wales in 1995 took place in a religious building.

Table 7.3 Total adult church attendance in Great Britain, 1980–2000

Great Britain	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000
TOTAL (millions)	4.77	4.51	4.38	3.98	3.79
	10.9%	10.1%	9.6%	8.7%	8.2%

Source: P. Brierley (ed.) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 1998/99*. Christian Research, p. 2.12.

Church membership in Britain

Tables 7.4 to 7.8 show the number of church members, the number of separate congregations or churches, and the number of ministers in the UK and its constituent countries from 1980 to 1990. Figures 7.4 to 7.7 show some of these statistics in graph form. Both the tables and graphs include projections to the year 2000. The data reveals substantial falls in the membership of Anglican, Roman Catholic and Presbyterian churches, although membership of Orthodox churches has risen. Overall membership of these churches fell by nearly 1.2 million between 1980 and 1995, or by around 19 per cent.

According to the *UK Christian Handbook*, by 1995 only 10.8 per cent of the UK adult population were members of Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox or Presbyterian churches. In England the figure was just 7.5 per cent, compared to 8.8 per cent in Wales, 25.3 per cent in Scotland and 72.9 per cent in Northern Ireland.

Table 7.4 Total institutional churches

Membership	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
1980	3,749,987	289,038	1,358,679	879,747	6,277,451
1985	3,309,455	262,056	1,259,759	891,801	5,725,071
1990	3,101,081	239,515	1,175,601	892,624	5,408,821
1995	2,934,360	206,593	1,053,542	894,342	5,088,837
2000[1]	2,632,510	184,521	960,885	897,340	4,675,256
Churches					
	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
1980	21,885	3,241	3,021	1,504	29,651
1985	21,638	3,118	2,923	1,482	29,161
1990	21,478	2,996	2,863	1,537	28,874
1995	21,392	2,840	2,757	1,517	28,426
2000[1]	21,212	2,729	2,650	1,533	28,124
Ministers					
	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
1980	19,246	1,406	3,108	1,523	25,283
1985	18,637	1,290	2,847	1,501	24,275
1990	18,378	1,197	2,748	1,452	23,775
1995	17,015	1,150	2,573	1,434	22,172
2000[1]	16,183	1,103	2,370	1,457	21,113

[1] Estimate.

Source: P. Brierley (ed.) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 1998/99*. Christian Research, pr 2.8.

The above figures do not include Free churches such as Baptist, Methodist and Pentecostal churches. Here the pattern of changes in membership is more variable. There have been rises in membership of new churches and Pentecostal churches but falls in the membership of Baptist, Independent, Methodist and other 'other' Free churches. The figures are given in Tables 7.9–7.15. Overall, Free Church membership declined slightly between 1980 and 1995, falling by around 3,400 or by just under 0.3 per cent.

Membership of some non-Christian churches and other religious organizations has been increasing. Table 7.16 shows members and congregations of non-Trinitarian religions. This shows a significant increase in membership from over 350,000 in 1980 to over 520,000 in 1995 – an increase of around 47 per cent. Much of this increase is accounted for by the rises in the numbers of Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and Scientologists. (Scientologists are sometimes classified as a cult.) Some other groups, including Theosophists, Unitarian churches and Spiritualists, have declined.

Table 7.17 provides statistics on major religions other than Christianity in the UK. This shows substantial increases in membership of some non-Christian religions. The number of Muslims has increased by 274,000, Sikhs by 200,000, Hindus by 35,000 and Buddhists by 28,000. There have been declines in some groups – for example, Jews – but overall membership of these religions has increased by some 545,000, or over 70 per cent. While much of this increase may be explained by births to parents following these religions, and by immigration, some has been due to conversions. For example, some people from a Christian background have converted to Buddhism.

New religious movements, which take the form of sects or cults, involve much smaller numbers than the major non-Christian religions. The *UK Christian Handbook* lists 18 such movements and has estimated

Table 7.5 Anglican membership, churches and ministers

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
Membership					
1980	1,817,290	131,553	67,655	162,960	**2,179,458**
1985	1,553,446	116,976	62,756	162,765	**1,895,943**
1990	1,398,863	108,365	58,619	162,130	**1,727,977**
1995	1,472,627	95,985	55,136	161,525	**1,785,273**
2000[2]	1,286,310	87,150	49,800	160,830	**1,584,090**
Churches					
1980	16,927	1,698	312	462	**19,399**
1985	16,629	1,639	317	440	**19,025**
1990	16,440	1,595	313	476	**18,824**
1995	16,362	1,540	320	452	**18,674**
2000[2]	16,227	1,503	316	459	**18,505**
Ministers					
1980	11,101	802	237	332	**12,472**
1985	10,796	752	244	366	**12,158**
1990	11,130	700	240	304	**12,374**
1995	10,577	710	244	250	**11,781**
2000[2]	10,191	691	242	283	**11,407**

[1] These figures are more than just the Church of England although in 1995 the Church of England membership was 97 per cent of the total.
[2] Estimate

Source: P. Brierley (ed.) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 1998/99*. Christian Research, p. 2.8.

Table 7.6 Roman Catholic mass attendance, churches and priests

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
Mass attendance					
1980	1,601,365	56,956	296,329	502,403	**2,457,053**
1985	1,424,235	58,169	285,031	513,905	**2,281,340**
1990	1,346,416	54,819	283,899	515,710	**2,200,844**
1995	1,100,845	47,387	249,180	518,005	**1,915,417**
2000[1]	972,705	46,356	243,260	521,510	**1,783,831**
Churches					
1980	3,016	209	476	459	**4,160**
1985	3,109	217	478	464	**4,268**
1990	3,174	213	485	467	**4,339**
1995	3,147	205	464	470	**4,286**
2000[1]	3,140	206	464	472	**4,282**
Priests					
1980	6,788	340	1,175	707	**9,010**
1985	6,427	332	1,111	647	**8,517**
1990	6,083	311	1,050	643	**8,087**
1995	5,490	279	936	720	**7,425**
2000[1]	5,133	265	876	700	**6,974**

[1] Estimate

Source: P. Brierley (ed.) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 1998/99*. Christian Research, p. 2.8.

Table 7.7 Orthodox membership, congregations and priests

Membership

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
1980	187,227	9,409	6,366	163	203,165
1985	203,280	8,686	11,585	190	223,741
1990	240,281	8,512	16,950	225	265,968
1995	258,466	6,093	23,732	269	288,560
2000[1]	285,450	5,615	29,055	300	320,420

Congregations

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
1980	160	4	5	2	171
1985	185	5	8	2	200
1990	203	6	10	2	221
1995	243	7	15	3	268
2000[1]	268	7	18	3	296

Priests

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
1980	162	4	2	0	168
1985	180	3	4	0	187
1990	182	3	7	0	192
1995	201	2	11	0	214
2000[1]	217	2	13	0	232

Source: P. Brierley (ed.) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 1998/99*, Christian Research, p. 2.8

Table 7.8 Presbyterian membership, churches and ministers

Membership

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
1980	144,105	91,120	988,329	214,221	1,437,775
1985	128,494	78,225	900,387	214,941	1,322,047
1990	115,521	67,819	816,133	214,559	1,214,032
1995	102,422	57,128	725,494	214,543	1,099,587
2000[1]	88,045	45,400	638,770	214,700	986,915

Churches

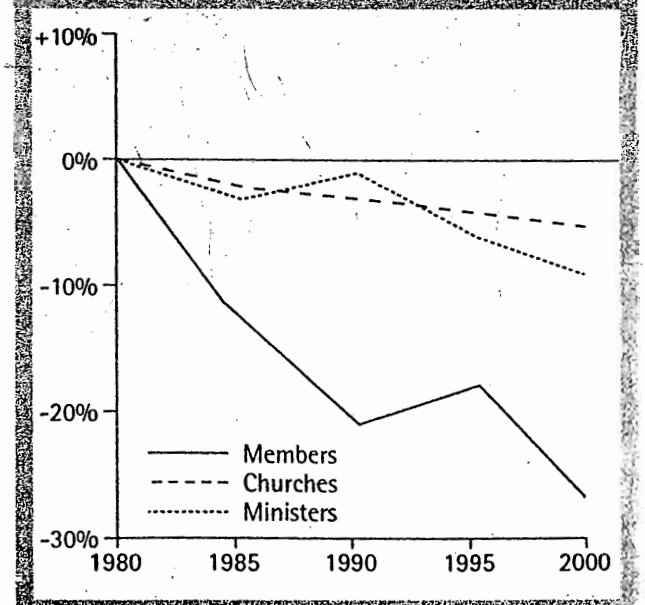
	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
1980	1,782	1,330	2,228	581	5,921
1985	1,715	1,257	2,120	576	5,668
1990	1,661	1,182	2,055	592	5,490
1995	1,640	1,088	1,958	592	5,278
2000[1]	1,577	1,013	1,852	599	5,041

Ministers

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
1980	1,195	260	1,694	484	3,633
1985	1,234	203	1,488	488	3,413
1990	983	183	1,451	505	3,122
1995	747	159	1,382	464	2,752
2000[1]	642	145	1,239	474	2,500

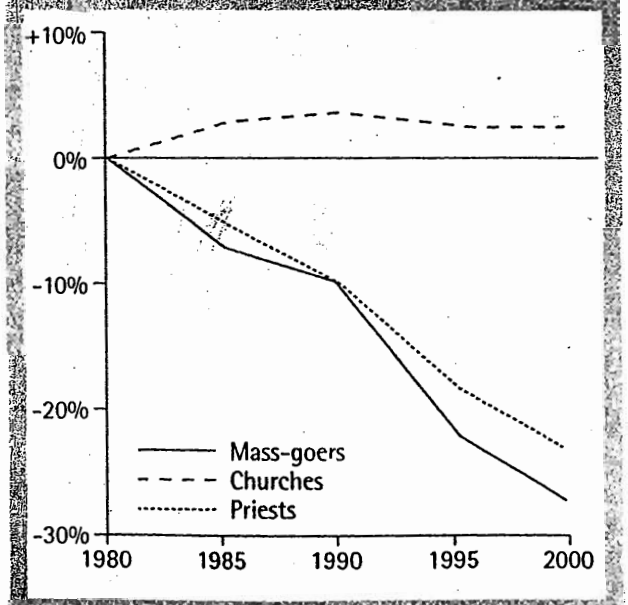
Source: P. Brierley (ed.) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 1998/99*, Christian Research, p. 2.8

Figure 7.6 Percentage changes since 1980 in the Anglican Church



Source: P. Brierley (ed.) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 1998/1999*, Christian Research, p. 2.9

Figure 7.7 Percentage changes since 1980 in the Roman Catholic Church



Source: P. Brierley (ed.) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 1998/1999*, Christian Research, p. 2.9

Figure 7.6 Percentage changes since 1980 in the Orthodox Church

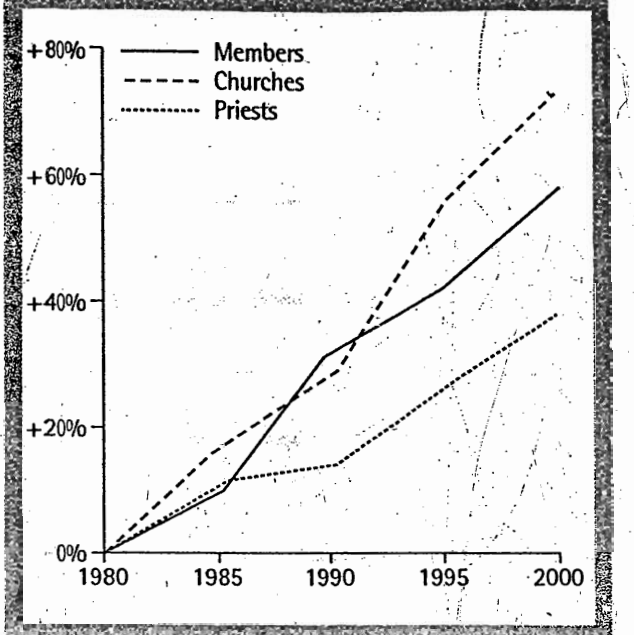
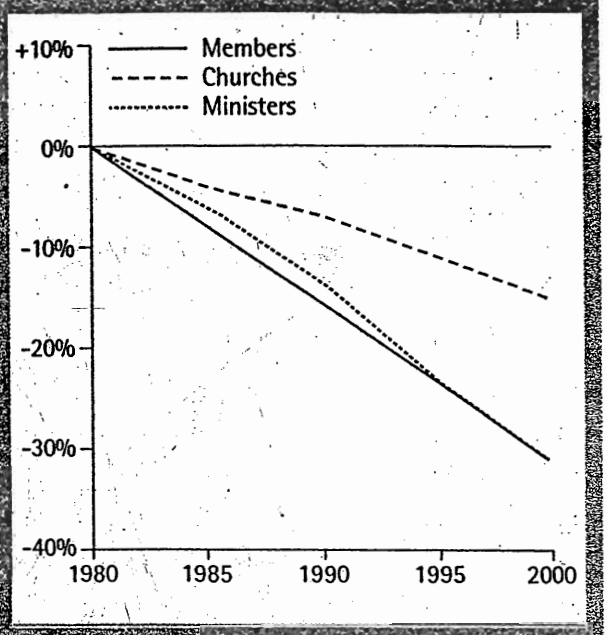


Figure 7.7 Percentage changes since 1980 in the Presbyterian Church



Source: P. Brierley (ed.) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 1998/99*, Christian Research, p. 2.9

Table 7.9 Church membership

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
Membership					
1980	972,893	166,394	78,892	57,716	**1,275,895**
1985	973,781	148,450	77,015	57,147	**1,256,393**
1990	1,007,302	136,895	79,667	59,755	**1,283,619**
1995	1,015,466	124,698	71,550	60,767	**1,272,481**
2000[1]	1,022,817	112,332	71,128	61,662	**1,267,939**
Churches					
1980	15,912	2,569	1,087	697	**20,365**
1985	15,994	2,436	1,111	698	**20,339**
1990	16,479	2,304	1,128	704	**20,715**
1995	16,487	2,206	1,109	724	**20,626**
2000[1]	16,497	2,073	1,119	735	**20,524**

[1] Estimate

Source: P. Brierley (ed.) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 1998/99*, Christian Research, p. 2.10

Table 7.10 Baptist membership and churches

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
Membership					
1980	162,892	51,814	17,564	7,545	**239,815**
1985	172,573	43,963	18,214	8,349	**243,099**
1990	166,353	37,820	18,103	8,645	**230,921**
1995	162,975	34,194	18,083	8,155	**223,407**
2000[1]	164,295	29,847	17,955	8,220	**220,317**
Churches					
1980	2,221	827	181	88	**3,317**
1985	2,279	785	191	93	**3,348**
1990	2,547	743	195	103	**3,588**
1995	2,413	715	208	112	**3,448**
2000[1]	2,413	678	215	121	**3,427**

[1] Estimate

Source: P. Brierley (ed.) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 1998/99*, Christian Research, p. 2.10

Table 7.11 Independent[1] membership and churches

Membership

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
1980	109,619	74,644	38,395	14,223	**236,881**
1985	113,205	66,785	35,457	14,122	**229,569**
1990	114,453	61,112	36,280	13,680	**225,525**
1995	112,468	53,599	27,572	12,605	**206,244**
2000[2]	114,113	46,808	26,846	12,595	**200,362**

Churches

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
1980	2,596	908	528	263	**4,295**
1985	2,538	859	521	259	**4,177**
1990	2,483	817	519	266	**4,085**
1995	2,402	780	470	258	**3,910**
2000[2]	2,346	736	466	261	**3,809**

[illegible]

Source: P Brierley (ed) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook Religious Trends 1998/99* Christian Research, p 7.10

Table 7.12 Methodist membership and churches

Membership

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
1980	463,086	25,963	8,240	23,268	**520,557**
1985	422,969	23,026	7,200	21,095	**474,290**
1990	404,381	20,627	7,133	19,591	**451,732**
1995	358,610	18,293	6,312	17,872	**401,087**
2000[1]	329,355	15,650	5,750	16,065	**366,820**

Churches

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
1980	7,639	553	79	210	**8,481**
1985	7,173	501	78	203	**7,955**
1990	6,855	451	77	179	**7,562**
1995	6,422	418	76	176	**7,092**
2000[1]	6,033	367	75	161	**6,636**

[illegible]

Source: P Brierley (ed) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook Religious Trends 1998/99* Christian Research, p 7.10

Table 7.13 New churches membership and congregations

Membership

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
1980	9,337	300	400	100	**10,137**
1985	32,351	1,000	1,500	500	**35,351**
1990	71,039	1,740	2,775	1,900	**77,454**
1995	100,766	2,400	3,460	2,975	**109,601**
2000[1]	124,100	3,100	4,200	3,800	**135,200**

Churches

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
1980	219	4	4	1	**228**
1985	649	15	15	5	**684**
1990	1,120	27	28	16	**1,191**
1995	1,479	36	40	25	**1,580**
2000[1]	1,803	44	46	35	**1,928**

[illegible]

Source: P Brierley (ed) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook Religious Trends 1998/99* Christian Research, p 7.10

Table 7.14 Pentecostal membership and churches

Membership

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
1980	105,888	8,154	4,310	8,716	**127,068**
1985	113,893	8,881	4,557	9,338	**136,669**
1990	133,669	10,902	5,717	12,211	**162,499**
1995	163,045	11,651	6,681	15,154	**196,531**
2000[2]	174,861	12,660	7,140	16,815	**211,476**

Churches

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
1980	1,568	172	93	71	**1,904**
1985	1,684	171	98	71	**2,024**
1990	1,801	171	98	77	**2,147**
1995	2,036	163	112	88	**2,399**
2000[2]	2,154	156	117	93	**2,520**

[illegible] of mainline Afro-Caribbean and Oneness Apostolic churches

Source: P Brierley (ed) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook Religious Trends 1998/99* Christian Research, p 7.10

Table 7.15 Other churches[1] membership and churches

Membership

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
1980	122,071	5,519	9,983	3,864	141,437
1985	118,790	4,795	10,087	3,743	137,415
1990	117,407	4,694	9,659	3,728	135,488
1995	117,602	4,561	9,442	4,006	135,611
2000[2]	116,093	4,267	9,237	4,167	133,764

Churches

	England	Wales	Scotland	N Ireland	Total UK
1980	1,669	105	202	64	2,040
1985	1,671	105	208	67	2,051
1990	1,673	95	211	63	2,042
1995	1,735	94	203	65	2,097
2000[2]	1,748	92	200	64	2,104

[illegible]

Source: P. Brierley (ed.) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 1998/99* Christian Research, p. 2.19

Table 7.16 Non-Trinitarian church membership, UK, 1980–95

	1980	1990	1995
Christadelphians	22,000	20,000	19,500*
Christian Community	1,060	800*	600
Church of Christ, Scientist	15,000*	11,000	9,500
Church of God International	5	35	75
The Family	200	200	200*
Global Church of God	–	–	50
Jehovah's Witnesses	85,321	116,612	131,000
Liberal Catholic Church	1,830	1,550	1,400
London Church of Christ	–	1,000	1,500
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons)	114,458	159,789	171,000
New Church	2,161	1,712	1,450
Philadelphia Church of God	–	–	50
Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints	2,000*	1,824	1,446
Church of Scientology	30,000	75,000	121,800
Spiritualists	52,404	45,000	40,000*
Theosophists	5,122	4,700	4,500
Unification Church (Moonies)	597	385	390*
Unitarian and Free Christian Churches	11,000	8,500	6,700
The Way	300	600*	750
Other non-Trinitarian	10,000	10,000	10,000
Total	**353,558**	**458,657**	**521,867**

* Estimate

Source: Compiled from P. Brierley (ed.) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 1998/99* Christian Research, pp. 10.2–10.5.

Table 7.17 Major religions other than Christianity, UK, 1980–95

	1980	1990	1995
Ahmadiyya Movement	7,250	7,700	7,900
Bahái's	3,000	5,000*	6,000
Buddhists	17,000	31,500	45,000
Hindus	120,000	140,000	155,000
International Society for Krishna Consciousness	300	425	600
Jains	6,000*	10,000	10,000
Jews	110,915	101,239	93,684
Muslims	306,000	495,000	580,000
Satanists	100	280	420
School of Meditation	4,820	7,000*	9,000
Sikhs	150,000	250,000	350,000
Zoroastrians	1,350*	2,000	2,500
Other religions	9,000	15,000	20,000
Total	**735,735**	**1,066,149**	**1,281,014**

* Estimate

Source: Compiled from P. Brierley (ed.) (1998) *UK Christian Handbook: Religious Trends 1998/99* Christian Research, pp. 10.12–10.15.

the membership of these organizations along with that of other new religious movements. As Table 7.18 shows, membership of such movements rose by nearly 5,000 between 1980 and 1995, an increase of approximately 130 per cent.

All of the above figures should be viewed with some caution. Many of the figures are estimates, and, as we will see below, interpreting religious statistics is difficult and controversial.

Nevertheless they do give some indication of membership trends. Overall there does seem to have been a decline in membership of religious organizations in the UK. Institutional, Christian religions have declined most, while many non-Christian and smaller religions have gained members. Using statistics from *Religious Trends 1998/99* (Brierley, 1998), and taking institutional churches, Free churches, non-Trinitarian churches, major religions other than Christianity, and new religious movements together, membership fell from 8,646,464 to 8,172, 993 between 1980 and 1995 in the UK. This was a fall of 473,471 or approximately

Table 7.18 Membership of new religious movements, UK, 1980–95

	1980	1990	1995
The Aetherius Society	100	100	120
Brahma Kumanis	700	900	1,000
Chrisemma	–	–	20
Creme	250	375	450
Da Free John	35	50	55
Eckankar	250	350	400
Elan Vital	1,250	1,800	2,100
Fellowship of Isis	150	250	300
The Barry Long Foundation	–	400	400
Life Training	–	200	300
Mahikari	–	220	250
Outlook Seminar Training	–	75	90
Pagan Federation	500	900	1,100
The Raelin Movement	100	100	100
Sahaja Yoga	220	280	330
Shinnyeon UK	10	30	50
Solara	–	140	160
3HO	60	60	60
Others	250	1,000	1,500
Total	**3,825**	**7,285**	**8,785**

Source: [illegible] Religion

5.5 per cent. This seems to offer some support for the theory of secularization but, as we shall see, critics of the theory see such figures as far from conclusive.

Religious participation in the USA

A very different impression is given by statistics on religious participation in the USA. There, rates of religious participation are much higher than those in Britain and on the surface do not provide support for theories of secularization. Writing in 1993, C. Kirk Hadaway, Penny Marler, P.L. Church and Mark Chaves noted that rates of self-reported church attendance in the USA were around 40 per cent. By this measure, Protestants had about the same attendance rates in the early 1990s as they had in the 1940s. Rates of attendance for Catholics in the USA did decline in the 1960s and early 1970s, but had not fallen any further. For example, in 1991 a poll conducted by Princeton Religious Research Centre found that 42 per cent of Americans claimed to have attended a church or synagogue in the previous week; 45 per cent of Protestants and 51 per cent of Catholics claimed to have done so.

Interpreting the evidence on participation and membership

Most of the long-term evidence on membership and attendance in Britain seems to support the secularization theory. Although recent years have seen a growth in smaller religious organizations, compared to the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century there is little doubt that fewer people attend a place of worship or belong to a religious organization. In the USA, though, the evidence seems to support the views of those who question the secularization thesis. However, the evidence from both countries is far from conclusive and needs to be used with care. As Grace Davie says, 'Religious statistics are notoriously hard to handle' (Davie, 1989).

Both the reliability and the validity of the statistics are open to question. Nineteenth-century church attendance figures for Britain pose special problems because the methods of data collection used do not meet today's standards of reliability. More recent British figures may be hard to trust as well. Some commentators argue that attendance and membership figures may be distorted by the ulterior motives of those who produce them. Some churches – for example, the Roman Catholic Church – may underestimate the numbers in their congregation in order to reduce the capitation fees they have to pay to central church authorities. Others, particularly Anglican churches, may overestimate the figures to produce impressive totals, particularly where there may be a risk of a church with a small congregation being closed down.

Membership figures can be calculated in different ways, and various churches, denominations and other religious groups use different criteria:

1. Members of the Roman Catholic Church in Britain and the Church of England are normally taken to be those who have been both baptized and confirmed. The numbers may therefore include people who, although officially members, have taken no part in church life since their confirmation.
2. The Church of Wales, on the other hand, bases its figures on those attending Easter Communion.
3. Figures giving the numbers who are held to be members of the Jewish religion simply document the number of Jewish heads of household, regardless of how often or whether they attend a synagogue.

Because of these variations, statistics on church membership are highly unreliable, and the trends indicated by the figures may be misleading.

In the USA the attendance statistics are based on survey evidence. Hadaway, Marler and Chaves (1993) have questioned the reliability of the evidence. They conducted a detailed study of church attendance in a

part of Ohio. In most of the churches they were able to get attendance counts from the clergy, in others they estimated attendance by counting cars in church car parks. They compared these results with findings from their own telephone poll. Their conclusion was that, overall, actual church attendance was about half that claimed in polls. Twice as many people claimed to attend church or a synagogue as actually did so. People exaggerated their church attendance, probably because church attendance was seen as socially desirable behaviour, and people were unwilling to admit their lack of attendance.

The decline in church attendance in Britain can be interpreted in a number of ways:

1 David Martin claims that the relatively high attendances in Victorian Britain may have been influenced by non-religious factors. He believes that in the nineteenth century church-going was a sign of middle-class respectability to a greater extent than it is today. Many Victorians may have attended church to be seen, rather than to express deep religious convictions (Martin, 1969).
2 Some sociologists argue that a decline in institutional religion cannot be taken as indicating a decline in religious belief and commitment. Religion today may be expressed in different ways. Religion may have become increasingly privatized; people develop their own beliefs and relationship with God and see religious institutions as being less important.
3 It is also possible that many individuals who hold religious beliefs, and whose behaviour is also partly directed by such beliefs, are not formally registered as church members.

Table 7.19 Belief in God in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 1991

	Position	Britain (%)	Northern Ireland (%)
'I don't believe in God'	1	10	1
'I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out'	2	14	4
'I don't believe in a personal God but I do believe in a higher power of some kind'	3	13	4
'I find myself believing in God some of the time but not at other times'	4	13	7
'While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God'	5	26	20
'I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it'	6	23	57
'I don't know' and 'No answer'	7	2	7

Source: British Social Attitudes Survey (1992).

Statistics on participation in religious institutions provide only one type of indicator of the religious commitment of individuals and may be only tenuously linked to the strength of religious beliefs. Those, like Bryan Wilson (1966), who see such figures as a measure of secularization are influenced by the traditional view that a religious person is one who goes to church. As Peter Glasner argues, 'These studies have in common the identification of religion with "church-orientated" religion' (Glasner, 1977).

We will now examine some evidence relating to religious belief and activity outside the context of religious organizations.

Belief, church-going and atheism

Opinion poll evidence is perhaps the simplest type of data relating to religious beliefs. However, there are a variety of questions that can and have been asked about religious beliefs, and the questions asked determine the impression given by the data.

Opinion poll data generally finds that many more people retain religious beliefs than are members of religious organizations or regular attenders at places of worship. In 1991 the *British Social Attitudes Survey* found that 62 per cent of people believed in 'God' at least some of the time, while a further 13 per cent believed in a 'higher power of some kind', and 14 per cent were uncertain about whether God existed. Only 10 per cent in Britain and a mere 1 per cent in Northern Ireland denied the existence of God outright.

As with all opinion poll data, there are question marks over the strength of the relationship between what people say and what they do. As Malcolm Hamilton says, saying you believe in God:

> *does not mean that it has any consequences for behaviour, is held with any conviction, or has any real meaning. What the surveys show is not that people are religious but that they have a propensity to say yes to this sort of survey question.*
>
> Hamilton, 1998, p. 29

Furthermore, opinion poll data can also be used to support the secularization theory. Steve Bruce points out that the *British Social Attitudes Survey* found in 1991 that 12 per cent of people in Britain said that they had given up believing in God, whereas only 6 per cent said they had started believing in God, having previously been non-believers (Bruce, 1995). Furthermore, by looking at the results of a number of surveys conducted between 1957 and 1991, Bruce was able to show a decline in the belief in sin, the soul, hell, heaven, life after death and the devil (see Table 7.20).

Less strong support for secularization is provided by Peter Brierley (1991), who has used data from the 1989 English Church Census and elsewhere to estimate the percentages of the population who are Christian and non-Christian. He has also divided Christians up into church-goers, nominal Christians (church members who do not attend regularly), and notional Christians (those who say they are Christian but who are neither church members nor attenders). Non-Christians are divided into the secular and those who hold non-Christian religious beliefs. Figure 7.8 shows Brierley's estimates with the figures for 1980 shown in brackets.

As Brierley says, 'The diagram shows that change in the British religious scene is relatively slow – a percentage point or two over a decade.' There is some evidence that the population is moving away from participation in institutional Christian religion but retaining religious beliefs. There is also evidence of an increase in atheism and agnosticism, but the change is slight. (We will examine the data relating to religion in the USA later, see pp. 487–8.)

Religious belief and participation may be the most obvious areas in which to look for evidence in favour of or against secularization. However, some theorists deny that these are crucial to the secularization thesis. For example, José Casanova (1994) argues that these aspects of religion are essentially irrelevant to secularization. For him, it is the role of religion that is important, in particular the process of differentiation (see p. 482). We will now examine aspects of theories of secularization which focus more on the role of religion in society.

Table 7.20 Belief in sin, the soul, heaven, life after death, the devil and hell, in Britain, 1957–91

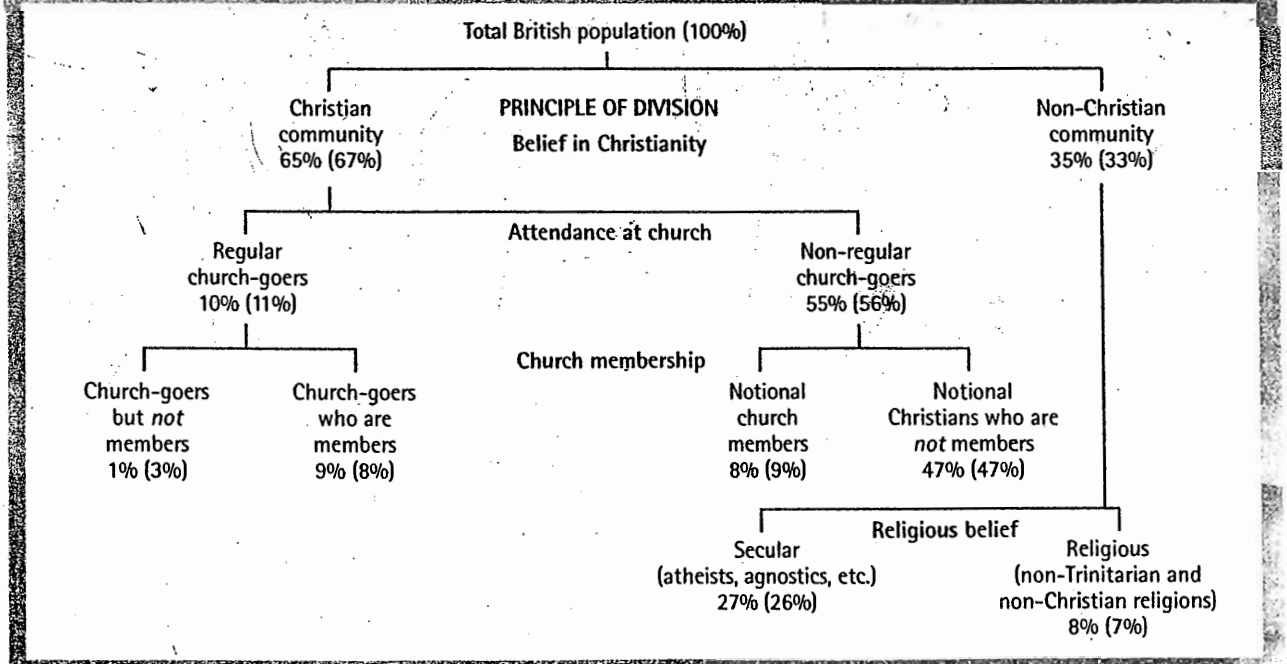
	1957	1981	1987	1991
Sin	–	69	51	–
Soul	–	59	50	–
Heaven	–	57	48	46
Life after death	54	45	43	27
Devil	34	30	31	24
Hell	–	27	29	24

Institutional religion – disengagement, differentiation and societalization

Disengagement

Some researchers, as we have just noted, have seen the truly religious society in terms of full churches. They have therefore seen empty churches as evidence of secularization. Others have seen the truly religious society as one in which the church as an institution is directly involved in every important area of social life. In terms of this emphasis, a disengagement or

Figure 7.8 Religious structure of population in Great Britain, 1990 (figures in brackets given 1980 percentages)



Source: P. Brierley (1991) *Christian England*, MARC Europe, London, p. 203.

withdrawing of the church from the wider society is seen as secularization. David Martin sees this view as concerned with decline in the power, wealth, influence and prestige of the church (Martin, 1969). Compared to its role in medieval Europe, the church in contemporary Western society has undergone a process of disengagement. In the Middle Ages, there was a union of church and state. Today, apart from the right of bishops to sit in the British House of Lords, the church is hardly represented in government.

Steve Bruce argues that the state churches have lost their power as they have become more distant from the British state (Bruce, 1995). This distancing has given them the freedom to be more critical of governments. For example, during the period of Conservative government from 1979 to 1997, the Church of England criticized nuclear weapons policy, and lack of help for the poor in the inner cities. However, the government took little or no notice of the views expressed by church leaders.

Nevertheless, the power of the church in the Middle Ages need not necessarily be seen as a golden age of religion. As David Martin suggests, 'the height of ecclesiastical power can be seen either as the triumph of the religious or its more blasphemous secularization'. Thus, today, the church's specialization in specifically religious matters may indicate a purer form of religion, untainted by involvement with secular concerns such as politics. Martin also suggests that there has been a shift in the focus of religion away from 'the institutions of the state and the economy' towards 'the needs and sentiments of people' (Martin, 1969).

The concept of disengagement is, however, questioned by José Casanova. Casanova is actually a supporter of the theory of secularization, but only in the sense that he believes differentiation has taken place (see below, p. 482). He does not believe that religion has withdrawn from public and political life. Indeed, in his book *Public Religions in the Modern World*, he claims that 'Religion in the 1980s "went public" in a dual sense. It entered the "public sphere" and gained, thereby, publicity' (Casanova, 1994).

Increasing attention was paid to religion by politicians, social scientists and the general public, and religious leaders were increasingly willing to enter public and political debate. Casanova says that 'During the entire decade of the 1980s it was hard to find any serious political conflict anywhere in the world that did not show behind it the not-so-hidden hand of religion.' Examples included the conflict between Jews and Muslim Arabs in the Middle East, between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland and between Muslims, Serbs and Croats in Bosnia. Religion played an important part in the revolts that led to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the former USSR. The 'Moral Majority' of fundamentalist Christians became influential in the USA. The Salman Rushdie affair (when the Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini declared Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* blasphemous to Islam and issued a fatwa, or religious death sentence) highlighted a clash between religious and secular values in Britain.

Furthermore, Casanova says:

> *religious activists and churches were becoming deeply involved in struggles for liberation, justice, and democracy throughout the world. Liberation theologies were spreading beyond Latin America, acquiring new forms and names, Asian and African, Protestant and Jewish, black and feminist.*
>
> Casanova, 1994, p. 3

Casanova therefore believes that there has been a deprivatization of religion. Before the 1980s, religion was becoming confined to the private sphere. It was becoming a matter of personal conscience, and religious organizations were withdrawing from trying to influence public policies. From the 1980s, this was reversed, with religions again trying to exert an influence on public life.

Casanova does not believe that this undermines all aspects of the theory of secularization. Nevertheless, he does dismiss that element of the theory which sees secularization as involving the confinement of religious influence to the private sphere. Public religions have returned to playing an important role in politics. The privatization of religion is a 'historical option', which has been followed in some societies at some times, but it is not an inevitable or irreversible aspect of modernity. Since the 1980s the privatization of religion has become an increasingly unpopular option.

Structural and social differentiation

An alternative to the view that disengagement equals secularization is provided by Talcott Parsons (1951, 1960, 1965a). Parsons agrees that the church as an institution has lost many of its former functions. He argues that the evolution of society involves a process of structural differentiation: various parts of the social system become more specialized and so perform fewer functions. (This idea forms part of Parsons's theory of social evolution, outlined in Chapter 15.)

However, the differentiation of the units of the social system does not necessarily lessen their importance. As we saw in a previous section, Parsons argues that religious beliefs still give meaning and significance to life. Churches are still the fount of religious ethics and values.

As religious institutions become increasingly specialized, Parsons maintains that their ethics and values become increasingly generalized. In American society, for instance, they have become the basis for more general social values.

Steve Bruce (1995) discusses essentially the same process as Parsons, although in Bruce's case he terms it social differentiation. Unlike Parsons, he sees it as a feature of secularization that stems from the rationalization of the modern world. In the fourteenth century the medieval church tried to assert control over activities like money lending, defining them as sinful. Social differentiation means that the church now has much less opportunity to involve itself in non-religious spheres. Indeed, to Bruce, social life becomes dominated by the logic of capitalist production with its emphasis on calculability, efficiency and profit. Religious faith and morality become less and less significant in the culture and institutions of modern societies. He says:

> *Modernization sees the freeing of economic activity from religiously sanctioned controls and the development of the world of work as an autonomous sphere driven only by its own values. Gradually other aspects of life go the same way. Education, social welfare, health care, and social control have mostly passed out of church control, and where churches still run such activities they do so in ways that differ little from secular provision.*
>
> Bruce, 1995, p. 128

Unlike Parsons, Bruce sees differentiation as affecting individuals as well as institutions. Modern societies have become increasingly egalitarian. People no longer have fixed roles which are ascribed at birth. There are no longer rigid hierarchies in which everybody knows their place. There is much greater occupational and geographical mobility. People frequently mix with strangers without knowing their status. As a result, it is increasingly difficult for people to see themselves as subject to the power of an omnipotent God. Bruce says, 'The idea of a single moral universe in which all manner and conditions of people have a place in some single grand design became less and less plausible.' Institutional religion therefore exercises a less significant hold over individuals.

José Casanova (1994) sees differentiation as a key feature of modernity and as the core of any theory of secularization. Differentiation initially involved the separation of religion from the state and from economic activity. This came about as a result of four factors:

1 The Protestant Reformation which, in those societies it affected, led to religion making less strong claims for control over the state and civil society.
2 The establishment of modern nation-states which claimed sovereignty over a given territory and which were unwilling to concede part of their sovereignty to external religious centres of power (such as the Papacy).
3 The growth of modern capitalism – the church found it impossible to establish control over the economic sphere.
4 The scientific revolution which undermined church claims to a monopoly of knowledge.

Indeed the strength of churches suffered most in societies where the church held out against developments in science (such as Newton's contribution to physics). Religion lost credibility where it stuck to biblical orthodoxies which became increasingly untenable in the light of new knowledge.

In caesaropapist societies (where an absolute ruler also claimed exclusive religious legitimacy) there was a rapid decline in the popularity of religion once the absolute ruler finally lost authority.

In societies with an established church which has tried to retain its authority over society (such as Spain, where the Catholic Church tried to retain its predominance for much of the period of rule by the fascist leader General Franco (1939–75)), the decline of church-based religion has been quite marked. In other societies where a plurality of religions has been tolerated and the church–state link has been broken early, religion has remained more popular.

Once differentiation between the sacred and the secular had taken place this opened the way for differentiation of other parts of society from one another. Casanova therefore argues that 'The differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms remains a general modern structural trend. Indeed this differentiation serves precisely as one of the primary distinguishing characteristics of modern structures' (Casanova, 1994). However, Casanova does not believe that the differentiation of religion from other spheres (which is his definition of secularization) necessarily implies that religion will decline in other ways.

Societalization

Bruce (1995) uses the term societalization (a term first used by Bryan Wilson) to refer to a process in which social life becomes fragmented and ceases to be locally based. Like social differentiation, he sees this as a consequence of a general process of modernization. Modern societies do not have close-knit communities. People's lives are increasingly dominated by large impersonal bureaucracies, and in suburbs people rarely know and mix with their immediate neighbours. People interact with one

another at the level of society as a whole rather than within local communities.

According to Bruce, the decline of community undermines religion in three ways. First, without a strong sense of community, churches can no longer serve as the focal point for communities. For example, large proportions of the community will not turn out for a local wedding or funeral at the parish church because most people will not know the betrothed or the deceased.

Second, people's greater involvement with the broader society in which they live leads them to look far more widely for services. They are less likely to turn to the local priest or vicar for practical or emotional support.

Third, the cultural diversity of the society in which people live leads them to hold beliefs with less certainty. Bruce says 'Beliefs are strongest when they are unexamined and naïvely accepted as the way things are.' In a society where we no longer get constant reinforcement of a particular religious view:

> *Religious belief is now obviously a matter of choice. We may still choose to believe, but we cannot easily hide from ourselves the knowledge that we choose God rather than God choosing us. God may still be respected and loved but that he no longer need be feared means that one major source of motivation for getting religion right has been removed.*
>
> Bruce, 1995, p. 131

According to Bruce, then, fundamental changes in social life in modern societies lead to institutional religion losing its social base, many of its social roles and its main source of legitimation. However, Bruce may exaggerate the extent of change and the consequences for religion. For example, there has been a long-standing debate about whether, and to what extent, there has been a decline of community, with many commentators questioning the view that there has been a straightforward movement from strong to weak communities (see, for example, Slattery, 1985). Bruce asserts the decline of community without examining the evidence in detail. Similarly, some writers have questioned the dominance of religious world views in the past (see below, p. 490). However, Bruce is certainly correct to point out that there has been a growth of religious diversity in many modern societies. The significance of this will now be considered.

Institutional religion – religious pluralism

Some researchers imply that the truly religious society has one faith and one church. This picture is influenced by the situation in some small-scale, non-literate societies, such as the Australian aboriginals, where the community is a religious community. Members share a common faith and at certain times of the year the entire community gathers to express this faith in religious rituals.

In terms of Durkheim's view of religion, the community is the church (Durkheim, 1961). Medieval European societies provided a similar picture: there the established church ministered to the whole society.

A number of sociologists essentially follow this line of thinking. Steve Bruce (1992) argues that religious pluralism results from a variety of sources, all of which have 'undermined the communal base to religious orthodoxy'. England expanded to incorporate Scotland and Ireland, which had different religious traditions, while migration has led to a plurality of religious groups in both North America and Europe. Industrialization reduced the contact between social classes and helped to create new, predominantly working-class versions of Christianity such as Methodism.

Modernization and industrialization bring with them the social fragmentation of society into a plurality of cultural and religious groups. As we have seen above, Bruce believes that the consequence is that the state can no longer support a single religion without causing conflict. The plurality of religions reminds individuals that their beliefs are a personal preference, a matter of choice, and no longer part and parcel of their membership of society.

Wade Roof and William McKinney (1987) have reached broadly similar conclusions about the development of religion in the USA. They quote figures, shown in Table 7.21, which show Protestantism declining and an increase in the percentage of the population with no religious preference or who believe in religions other than Protestantism, Catholicism or Judaism. Roof and McKinney quote a 1976 Gallup survey which showed that 4 per cent of the American population said they had been involved in TM, 3 per cent in yoga, 2 per

Table 7.21 Trends in religious preference in the USA, 1952–85

	1985	1952	Percentage change
Protestant	57	67	– 15
Catholic	28	25	+ 12
Jewish	2	4	– 50
Other	4	1	+ 300
None	9	2	+ 350

Source: Princeton Religion Research Center (February 1986) *Emerging Trends*, vol. 8, no. 2, quoted in W.C. Roof and W. McKinney (1987) *American Mainline Religion*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, p. 18.

cent in mysticism, and 1 per cent claimed involvement in Eastern religions. They argue that religious pluralism has meant that religion 'has lost force as an integrative influence'. Like Bruce, they believe that religious pluralism has created a 'new voluntarism', where religious beliefs become a matter of choice for the individual. They also refer to a 1978 Gallup poll in the USA in which 81 per cent of those questioned agreed with the statement, 'An individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues.'

On the other hand, it could be argued that a truly religious society is simply one in which religious beliefs and institutions thrive. It is not necessary for everyone to share the same religious beliefs for religion to be important. Northern Ireland is a case in point. There the divisions between Catholics and Protestants are associated with higher rates of church membership and attendance than in other parts of the UK. In some modern societies (such as the USA) it could be that having such religious pluralism exercises a strong influence on society in general, encouraging a toleration of diversity in which a plurality of beliefs can thrive. However pluralism is perceived in modern societies it largely stems from two sources: from the existence of different ethnic groups with their own religious traditions, and from the growth of new sects and cults. These will now be examined.

Ethnicity and religious diversity

Steve Bruce (1996) acknowledges that certain ethnic groups often retain strong religious beliefs. However, he does not see this as an argument against the secularization thesis. This is because Bruce believes that religion remains strong because of its social importance rather than because the members of the group have deep religious convictions as individuals.

Bruce claims that religion tends to serve one of two main purposes for ethnic groups: cultural defence or cultural transition:

1 Religions take on the role of cultural defence where:

> *there are two (or more) communities in conflict and they are of different religions (for example, Protestants and Catholics in Ulster, or Serbs (Orthodox), Croats (Roman Catholic) and Bosnian Muslims in what used to be Yugoslavia), then the religious identity of each can call forth a new loyalty as religious identity becomes a way of asserting ethnic pride.*
>
> Bruce, 1996, p. 96

From Bruce's point of view, it is their ethnic identity that is important rather than religiosity. In Northern Ireland he cites the example of Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party. It represents Northern Ireland Protestants who strongly support the union of Northern Ireland within the UK. (They opposed the peace proposals in 1998–9.) Most of the activists in this party are members of the evangelical Protestant Free Presbyterian Church. Only a tiny percentage of the Northern Irish population, about 1 per cent, are Free Presbyterians, but Ian Paisley's party gets much more support than that. This is because, according to Bruce, ethnic Protestants identify themselves with the party's opposition to a united Ireland, not because they are attracted to the religious convictions of the party's activists.

2 Cultural transition:

> *involves religion acquiring an enhanced importance because of the assistance it can give in helping people cope with the shift from one world to another. It might be that the people in question have migrated; it might be that they remain in the same place while that place changes under their feet.*
>
> Bruce, 1996, p. 96

Religion is used as a resource for dealing with situations where people have to change their identity to some extent. For example, Asian and Afro-Caribbean migrants to Britain and their descendants can use mosques, temples and churches as centres for their communities, and their religion as a way of coping with the ambiguities of being Asian or black and British.

However, Bruce believes that religion loses this role where a group becomes increasingly integrated into the host community. For example, Irish Catholics who migrated to England and Scotland were originally subject to considerable hostility and discrimination from the host population. Catholicism was very important to this group for several generations. However, as Irish Catholics have increasingly married outside their own ethnic group and have enjoyed increasing success, prosperity and acceptance by other members of the population, the importance of their religion as a focus for community identity has declined considerably.

Bruce concludes that 'Cultural defence and cultural transition may keep religion relevant but they will not create a religious society out of a secular one.'

However, this interpretation is not shared by everybody. The historian Callum G. Brown (1992) questions Bruce's claim that it can be seen as evidence of secularization when religion has a role in cultural defence or cultural transformation for particular ethnic groups. He sees 'ethnic defence' as a key function of religion in the modern world. Brown denies that there was ever a 'golden age' in which religion provided a single, unifying world view for all members of a society. There has always been some

diversity in religious outlooks and there have always been some who were sceptical or hostile towards religion. The role of religion has changed, but that is not the same thing as decline. Brown says that 'Religion adapts to different social and economic contexts. It is not static, unchanging and unyielding to different situations. Such changes that churches undergo do not necessarily mean secularisation.' In particular, he argues that contemporary religion might draw its strength from individual communities (including ethnic communities) rather than from society as a whole. A religiously plural society can also be a non-secular society and both the USA and Britain are examples.

Certainly, there is plenty of evidence that religion can and often does remain strong amongst ethnic groups even though it has to adapt to a changed situation if migration or social changes have taken place. George Chryssides (1994) argues that in Britain the religions of immigrant groups and their descendants have had three main paths open to them. The first option is apostasy, where a particular set of religious beliefs is abandoned in a hostile environment. The second is accommodation, where religious practices are adapted to take account of the changed situation. The third option is renewed vigour, where the religion is reasserted more strongly as a response to the actual or perceived hostility to it. Examples of all three responses can be found.

Chryssides cites the case of Morris Cerello – a Sikh who converted to Christianity – as an example of apostasy. An example of accommodation might be a Sikh who removed his turban because he believed it would improve his chances at a job interview. Those who insist on strong religious orthodoxy from their children could be practising their religion with renewed vigour.

Chryssides acknowledges that ethnic minority religions have faced difficulties in Britain. They have had to establish places of prayer and deal with situations where religious observation might be difficult. However, the general pattern has been characterized by accommodation and renewed vigour rather than apostasy. Buildings have been bought and converted into mosques and temples and religious beliefs and practices have been retained or adapted rather than abandoned. For example, many Islamic women have found ways to dress modestly while incorporating Western elements into their clothing. Religious marriage ceremonies have been adapted to meet the requirements for a legal marriage under British law.

The vigour of ethnic minority religions in Britain is demonstrated by the existence of some first-generation converts to them. Chryssides notes that Buddhism has been particularly successful in attracting new followers who have been brought up within the Christian tradition.

Some writers argue that there has been a revival of religion, which directly contradicts the claims of the advocates of the secularization thesis. For example, Gilles Kepel, in a book called *The Revenge of God* (1994), argues that there has been a resurgence of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the modern world. According to Kepel, this has affected these religions whether they are the religion of a minority or a majority in a particular society. Thus, for example, British Muslims have retained or strengthened their faith, not as a way of coping with a cultural transition, but because they have been influenced by a worldwide Islamic revival.

Furthermore, Kepel sees all the religious revivals as reactions against modernity. He says, 'they complain about the fragmentation of society, its "anomy", the absence of an overarching ideal worthy of their allegiance ... [They] consider that in the final analysis the modernism produced by reason without God has not succeeded in creating values.' If Kepel is correct, far from reducing religion to a source of identity for some ethnic groups, modernity encourages people to rediscover religion as a way of coping with the social changes produced by modernity.

Sects, cults and secularization

The continuing proliferation of sects has been interpreted by some researchers in much the same way as the spread of denominations and religious pluralism in general. It has been seen as a further fragmentation of institutional religion and therefore as evidence of the weakening hold of religion over society.

Accurate measurements of the numbers of sects and the size of their memberships are not available, but estimates have been made. Although Roy Wallis (1984) believed that there was a decline in new religious movements in the late 1970s and early 1980s, more recent figures suggest that they have been growing. Amongst established sects, Jehovah's Witnesses' membership rose from 62,000 in 1970 to 116,000 in 1990 and 131,000 in 1995. Furthermore, estimates made by *Religious Trends 1998/99* (Brierley, 1998) suggest that membership of what they define as new religious movements more than doubled between 1980 and 1995 (see Table 7.18, p. 478). There are certainly more sects today than there were before the Second World War.

Stark and Bainbridge (1985) have shown that the 1960s had the highest rate of cult formation in the USA. Some 23 per cent of the cults they uncovered were formed between 1970 and 1977, 38 per cent in the 1960s, 14 per cent in the 1950s, and the remaining 25 per cent before 1950.

Despite contradictions in the evidence, the apparent vitality of sects seems to provide evidence against the secularization theory. World-rejecting sects are perhaps the most religious type of organization, since they demand greater commitment to the religion than other organizations. If they are stronger than in the past, it suggests that religion retains a considerable appeal for the populations of advanced industrial societies. Andrew Greeley (1972) believes that the growth of new religious movements represents a process of resacrilization: interest in, and belief in, the sacred is being revived. Societies such as Britain and the USA are, if anything, becoming less secular.

Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge (1985) also deny that secularization has taken place. They believe that some established churches may have lost part of their emphasis on the supernatural, but secularization never advances far because new religious groups with more emphasis on the supernatural constantly emerge. Stark and Bainbridge put forward statistical evidence to support this claim. According to their figures on religious activity in different states of the USA, cults thrive where conventional religions are weak. For example, in California relatively few people are church-goers but many believe in supernatural phenomena. (For further details of Stark and Bainbridge's theory of religion see pp. 445–6 and pp. 460–2.)

Nevertheless other sociologists see the growth of sects as evidence of secularization. Peter Berger (1970) argues that belief in the supernatural can only survive in a sectarian form in a secular society. In order to maintain a strong religious belief and commitment, individuals must cut themselves off from the secularizing influences of the wider society, and seek out the support of others of like mind. The sect, with its close-knit community organization, provides a context in which this is possible. From this viewpoint, the sect is the last refuge of the supernatural in a secular society. Sects are therefore evidence of secularization.

Bryan Wilson (1982) takes a similar view, maintaining that sects are 'a feature of societies experiencing secularization, and they may be seen as a response to a situation in which religious values have lost social pre-eminence'. In other words, sects are the last outpost of religion in societies where religious beliefs and values have little consequence.

Bryan Wilson is particularly scathing in his dismissal of the religious movements of the young in the West, such as Krishna Consciousness which emerged during the 1960s in the USA. He regards them as 'almost irrelevant' to society as a whole, claiming that 'They add nothing to any prospective reintegration of society, and contribute nothing towards the culture by which a society might live.'

By comparison, Methodism, in its early days as a sect, provided standards and values for the new urban working class, which helped to integrate its members within the wider society. In addition, its beliefs 'steadily diffused through a much wider body of the population'.

In contrast, Wilson feels that the new religious movements show no such promise. Their members live in their own enclosed, encapsulated little worlds. There they emphasize 'hedonism, the validity of present pleasure, the abandonment of restraint and the ethic of "do your own thing"'. Wilson is scornful of their 'exotic novelty' which he believes offers little more than self-indulgence, titillation and short-lived thrills. He believes that movements which seek the truth in Asian religions and emphasize the exploration of the inner self – such as Krishna Consciousness – can give little to Western society. They simply 'offer another way of life for the self-selected few rather than an alternative culture for mankind'. Rather than contributing to a new moral reintegration of society, they just provide a religious setting for 'dropouts'. They do not halt the continuing process of secularization and are 'likely to be no more than transient and volatile gestures of defiance' in the face of a secular society.

Similar conclusions are reached by Roy Wallis (1984) and Steve Bruce (1995, 1996). According to Wallis, 'new religious movements involve only a very small proportion of the population ... and even then often for only very brief periods during the transition to adulthood'. For those who join world-affirming movements the motives for joining are largely secular anyway: they wish to get on in the world rather than pursue other-worldly concerns. Wallis claims that for most of the population new religious movements are 'a matter of profound indifference'.

Steve Bruce argues that new religious movements only recruit very small numbers compared to the massive decline in mainstream Christian religions. World-rejecting new religions have affected the smallest numbers of people, while world-accommodating ones have influenced a greater number of people. Yet it is these religious movements that have the least impact on people's lives. To Bruce, 'people who chant in Soka Gakki or meditate in TM or attend est seminars or Insight weekends' carry on their lives very much as normal and there 'are no consequences for the operation of the social system' (Bruce, 1996).

Secularization and the New Age

Steve Bruce has also commented on the significance, or in his view the lack of significance, of the New Age. Like new religious movements, he sees the New Age as posing little or no threat to the validity of the theory of secularization. Although it affects more people than

sects, 'it cannot aspire to promote radical and specific change because it does not have the cohesion and discipline of the sect' (Bruce, 1996). In fact, he believes that the New Age is simply an extreme form of the individualism that is characteristic of modern societies. As such it has a role as 'symptom and as a cause in the erosion of faith in orthodoxies and the authority of professional knowledge'.

However, Bruce does accept that toned-down aspects of New Age beliefs may become accepted as parts of the 'cultural mainstream'. For example, New Age has had some impact on people's concern for the environment and willingness to give credence to alternative medicines.

It could be argued that Bruce underestimates the significance of the effects he identifies. If substantial numbers of people are willing to question scientific orthodoxy and place some trust in beliefs which require a degree of faith, this in itself could be taken as evidence against the secularization theory. Paul Heelas (1996) certainly regards the New Age as rather more significant than does Bruce. He quotes a 1993 Gallup opinion poll which found that in Britain 26 per cent of people believed in reincarnation, 40 per cent in some sort of spirit, 17 per cent in flying saucers and 21 per cent in horoscopes; while a 1989 Gallup poll found that no less than 72 per cent had 'an awareness of a sacred presence in nature'.

Using a broad definition of the New Age, then, there appears to be at least a minimal level of belief in some of its claims amongst a high proportion of the population. Some New Age magazines are quite successful (*Body, Mind and Spirit* sells about 60,000 per month in Britain), and in the USA there were some 4,000 New Age bookshops by 1989. Heelas argues that aspects of New Age beliefs are deeply embedded in contemporary Western culture. They are a 'radicalized' version of 'humanistic expressivism'. The New Age might not be much like a traditional religion, but to Heelas it provides a strong argument against the view that modern societies have become secular and rational. It is just that individuals have turned within themselves in the search for spirituality rather than looking to the external authority of church religions.

Institutional religion – the secularization of religious institutions in the USA

Will Herberg – denominations and internal secularization

According to Will Herberg (1960), the main evidence for secularization in the USA is not to be found in a decline in participation in religion, but in a decline in the religiosity of churches and denominations themselves. The major denominations have increasingly emphasized this world as opposed to the other world; they have moved away from traditional doctrine and concern with the supernatural; they have compromised their religious beliefs to fit in with the wider society. Because of this, they have become more like the secular society in which they are set.

Herberg claims that the major denominations in America have undergone a process of secularization. They increasingly reflect the American 'way of life' rather than the word of God. For the typical churchgoer, religion is 'something that reassures him about the essential rightness of everything American, his nature, his culture and himself'. But, from Herberg's viewpoint, this has little to do with the real meaning of religion.

Herberg's views on religion in the USA have been challenged on a number of grounds. Roof and McKinney accept that Herberg's analysis had much merit when it was written in the 1950s but they argue that 'it failed to ring true in the America of the 1980s' (Roof and McKinney, 1987). In particular, not all religious groupings seem to have turned their back on what Herberg would see as authentic religion. Like other commentators, Roof and McKinney note the growth of conservative Protestant religions (sometimes called the New Christian Right) which seem to combine a serious commitment to religious teachings, a strong element of theological doctrine and a refusal to compromise religious beliefs. As such, they seem to directly contradict Herberg's claims about secularization within religious institutions.

Institutional religion – the New Christian Right

Roof and McKinney categorize the following religious groups in America as conservative Christians: Southern Baptists, Churches of Christ, Evangelicals/Fundamentalists, Nazarenes, Pentecostalists/Holiness, Assemblies of God, Churches of God and Adventists. Using survey data they estimated that conservative Protestants made up 15.8 per cent of the American population in 1984. Their evidence suggests that these groups have been growing since the 1920s. In 1967 the Southern Baptist Convention overtook Methodists as the largest Protestant denomination. Roof and McKinney quote a 1976 Gallup poll which found that 34 per cent of the population said they had been 'born again'.

Roof and McKinney's data also shows that conservative Protestants are more likely than any other religious group in the USA to attend church and

believe in God. They have rejected any move towards liberal values and instead have strongly supported traditional morality. Conservative Protestants have been strong opponents of abortion, extra-marital or pre-marital sex, homosexuality and the relaxation of divorce laws. They have supported literal interpretations of the Bible, campaigning against the teaching of evolutionary biology on the grounds that it contradicted the biblical account of God's creation of the earth.

A number of sociologists have noted the many ways in which conservative Protestants have succeeded in publicizing and promoting their views in the USA. According to James Davison Hunter (1987), by the early 1980s they had set up 450 colleges and 18,000 schools, established 275 periodicals, 70 evangelical publishing houses and 3,300 Christian bookshops. They had also started 65 television stations and intervened in numerous political campaigns.

Hunter does not claim that the growth of conservative Protestantism disproves the secularization thesis, but he does believe that it challenges it. He says:

> *Secularization may yet prove to be the ultimate design for contemporary society, but that is unlikely. Minimally, one can say that it is not a straight-line occurrence, as is often assumed; cycles of secularity and religious upsurge are evident.*
>
> Hunter, 1987

The limited impact of conservative Protestantism

A different view is taken by Steve Bruce (1988, 1996) who argues that the New Christian Right has had very little impact. Very few of its members who have stood for national office have won their elections. No more than five senators have supported the New Christian Right and they have failed to get any new Federal legislation passed. Opinion polls have showed no shift towards their views on moral issues. In Bruce's view they have achieved no more than to 'remind cosmopolitan Americans that fundamentalists were not extinct and still had some rights' (Bruce, 1996).

Furthermore, Bruce believes that the strength of religious beliefs among evangelical Christians in the USA has gradually been watered down. He quotes a study by James Hunter which found that 77 per cent of young evangelical Americans thought that playing cards was morally wrong in 1951; by 1982 none thought so. Similarly, over the same period and amongst the same group, moral objections to social dancing declined from 91 per cent to 0 per cent, to drinking alcohol from 98 per cent to 17 per cent, and to smoking marijuana from 98 per cent to 17 per cent (quoted in Bruce, 1996).

If Bruce is to be believed, the New Christian Right may have slowed down the process of secularization within its own religious institutions, but it has failed to do any more than that. Indeed he believes that the only reason the New Christian Right gets so much attention is that its members are unusual for holding strong religious convictions in a largely secular world.

Internal secularization in Britain

Less attention has been devoted to the possibility that British churches and denominations have undergone secularization. However, Steve Bruce (1988) does believe that British mainstream churches have abandoned, or at least watered down, a number of their religious convictions. These include beliefs in the virgin birth, Christ's bodily resurrection (the former Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, called it a 'conjuring trick with a bag of bones'), heaven and hell, and the expectation that Christ would return to earth. Bruce also points out that most British Christian churches have ceased to claim a monopoly of the religious truth.

In the previous sections we have examined approaches to secularization largely in terms of institutional religion. Our focus now changes to a more general view of the role of religion in Western society and is concerned with the influence of religious beliefs and values on social norms and values, social action and consciousness. As in previous sections, assessments of the importance of religion depend largely on the observer's interpretation of what constitutes a 'religious society' and religiously motivated action.

Religion and society – desacrilization

A number of sociologists have argued that the sacred has little or no place in contemporary Western society, that society has undergone a process of desacrilization. This means that supernatural forces are no longer seen as controlling the world, action is no longer directed by religious belief, and human consciousness has become secularized.

Disenchantment

Weber's interpretation of modern society provides one of the earliest statements of the desacrilization thesis. He claimed that modern society is 'characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the "disenchantment of the world"' (Weber, in Gerth and Mills (eds), 1948). The world is no longer charged with mystery and magic; the supernatural has

been banished from society. The meanings and motives that direct action are now rational.

Weber's concept of rational action and his view that modern society is undergoing a process of rationalization are examined in detail in Chapter 15. Briefly, rational action involves a deliberate and precise calculation of the importance of alternative goals and the effectiveness of the various means of attaining chosen goals.

For example, if an individual's goal is to make money, he or she will coldly and carefully calculate the necessary initial investment and the costs involved in producing and marketing a commodity in the most economical way possible. His or her measurements will be objective: they will be based on factors that can be quantified and accurately measured. He or she will reject the means to reach that goal which cannot be proven to be effective.

Rational action rejects the guidelines provided by emotion, by tradition or by religion. It is based on the cold, deliberate reason of the intellect, which demands that the rationale for action can only be based on the proven results.

Science and reason

A number of sociologists have accepted Weber's interpretation of the basis for action in industrial society. In *Religion in a Secular Society* (1966), Bryan Wilson stated that 'Religious *thinking* is perhaps the area which evidences most conspicuous change. Men act less and less in response to religious motivation: they assess the world in empirical and rational terms.'

Wilson argued that the following factors encouraged the development of rational thinking and a rational world view:

1 Ascetic Protestantism, which 'created an ethic which was pragmatic, rational, controlled and anti-emotional'.
2 The rational organization of society, which results in people's 'sustained involvement in rational organizations – firms, public service, educational institutions, government, the state – which impose rational behaviour upon them'.
3 A greater knowledge of the social and physical world, which results from the development of the physical, biological and social sciences. Wilson maintained that this knowledge was based on reason rather than faith. He claimed that:

> *Science not only explained many facets of life and the material environment in a way more satisfactory [than religion], but it also provided confirmation of its explanation in practical results.*
>
> Wilson, 1966

4 The development of rational ideologies and organizations to solve social problems. Ideologies such as communism and organizations such as trade unions offer practical solutions to problems. By comparison, religious solutions, such as the promise of justice and reward in the afterlife, do not produce practical and observable results.

Wilson argues that a rational world view is the enemy of religion. It is based on the testing of arguments and beliefs by rational procedures, on assessing truth by means of factors that can be quantified and objectively measured. Religion is based on faith and as such is non-rational. Its claim to truth cannot be tested by rational procedures.

Peter Berger (1970) develops some of Weber's and Wilson's ideas within the framework of the sociology of knowledge. He maintains that people in Western society increasingly 'look upon the world and their own lives without the benefit of religious interpretations'. As a result there is a secularization of consciousness. Berger argues that the 'decisive variable for secularization' is 'the process of rationalization that is the prerequisite for any industrial society of the modern type'. A rational world view rejects faith which is the basis of religion. It removes the 'mystery, magic and authority' of religion.

Steve Bruce (1988) stresses the specific role of scientific beliefs themselves in undermining religion. He argues that technological advances reduce the number of things that need to be explained in religious terms. It has given individuals a greater sense of control over the natural world and less need to resort to supernatural explanations or remedies. He says:

> *We may still go to church to celebrate the successful conclusion of the harvest but we use chemical fertilisers and weed-killers rather than prayer to ensure a good crop. When all the conventional medical solutions have been exhausted, we may pray for the health of a loved one but only a very few small sects reject conventional medicine and trust instead to the Lord.*
>
> Bruce, 1988

However, he also discusses the importance of rationalization in general. He says:

> *a world of rationality is less conducive to religion than a traditional society. Everything is seen as potentially improvable. Everything can be made more efficient. We find it very easy to talk about means and procedures but very difficult to discuss transcendental means.*
>
> Bruce, 1996, p. 48

Bruce acknowledges that such events as the death of a loved one or an injustice suffered may lead people to turn to God. There are some things even in the modern world that science and rationality cannot deal with. However, when people do turn to God, they do so as individuals. Furthermore, they tend to do so as a last resort after the rational, scientific alternatives have all been fully exhausted. Thus:

> *When we have tried every cure for cancer, we pray. When we have revised for our examinations, we pray. We do not pray instead of studying, and even committed believers suppose that a research programme is more likely than a mass prayer meeting to produce a cure for AIDs.*
>
> Bruce, 1996

Although the argument that scientific rationalism has triumphed over religion and superstition appears strong, not everybody finds it convincing. For example, the development of New Age beliefs seems to suggest that the non-rational has a place in contemporary societies (see pp. 466–9 and 499–500). Furthermore, there is plenty of evidence which appears to point to a religious revival on a global scale (see p. 492).

Also, the theory of postmodernism suggests that societies have begun to move beyond the scientific rationality of modernity, partly because they have started to mistrust science. People are increasingly aware of the failures of science (including the failure to find a cure for AIDs) and, more importantly, the negative side-effects that can be produced by science and technology. Examples might include global warming, air pollution, increasing cancer rates, the depletion of the ozone layer, and so on. In these circumstances people may turn to religion, of one sort or another, as an alternative to science, which some see as creating as many problems as it solves. The relationship between religion and postmodern society will be examined shortly (see pp. 495–500).

In this section we have considered the desacrilization thesis, that is the view that religion and the sacred have largely been removed from the meanings that guide action and interpret the world, and from the consciousness of humanity. This view is difficult to evaluate since it is largely based on the impressions of particular researchers rather than 'hard' data. In addition, it compares industrial society with often unspecified pre-industrial societies in which, presumably, religion provided a guide to action and a basis for meaning. We will deal with the problems involved in this approach in the next section.

Religion in pre-industrial societies

As we saw in the previous sections, the term 'secularization' has been used in many different ways. Whichever way it has been used, though, the supporters of the theory of secularization have tended to take it for granted that pre-industrial societies were highly religious. Some researchers have challenged this view.

Larry Shiner (1971) notes that those who argue that the social significance of religion has declined have 'the problem of determining when and where we are to find the supposedly "religious" age from which decline has commenced'.

The anthropologist Mary Douglas (1973) argues that the use of supposedly 'religious', small-scale non-literate societies as a basis for comparison with modern 'secular' societies is unjustified. She states that:

> *The contrast of secular with religious has nothing whatever to do with the contrast of modern with traditional or primitive ... The truth is that all varieties of scepticism, materialism and spiritual fervour are to be found in the range of tribal societies.*
>
> Douglas, 1973

It is simply an illusion concocted by Westerners that 'all primitives are pious, credulous and subject to the teaching of priests or magicians'.

In the same way, the search for the golden age of religion in the European past may provide an equally shaky standard for comparison. From his study of religion in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, K.V. Thomas states:

> *We do not know enough about the religious beliefs and practices of our remote ancestors to be certain of the extent to which religious faith and practice have actually declined.*
>
> Quoted in Glasner, 1977, p. 71

Secularization – international comparisons

David Martin – *A General Theory of Secularization*

Most sociologists studying secularization have concentrated on making observations about, and researching into, particular modern industrial societies. They have, nevertheless, often assumed that secularization is a universal and perhaps inevitable process. Bryan Wilson (1966) claims, for example, 'Secularization, then, is a long term process occurring in human society.' However, even Wilson, a leading advocate of theories of secularization, admits that 'The actual patterns in which it is manifested are culturally and historically specific to each context.' The nature and extent of the changes in the role of religion in society may vary so much in different

parts of the world that it is misleading to see secularization as a single process.

By concentrating on Britain and the USA, sociologists have had a rather narrow view of social change and religion. For instance, they have not accounted for the revival over recent years of Islamic fundamentalism in Iran and other countries. David Martin has taken a wider view than most sociologists by looking at the changing role of religion in a range of societies (Martin, 1978). Martin's research shows very different patterns of religious practice in various advanced industrial countries. In some cases it shows marked differences within single societies. Martin argues that the role and strength of religion in modern societies are determined by a number of factors:

1 The first important factors are the degree of religious pluralism and the dominant religion. Societies where the Roman Catholic Church claims a monopoly of the religious truth are usually very different to those where Protestantism and Catholicism both have a major foothold, or where there is a greater variety of denominations and churches.
2 The political system of a society and the relationship between church and state both have a significant impact on the importance of religion within that society.
3 The third major factor is the extent to which religion helps to provide a sense of national, regional or ethnic identity.

We will now study a number of examples which illustrate Martin's general theory of secularization.

Variations in religious participation

The level of participation in religion varies widely in Protestant societies. In the USA, 40 per cent or more of the adult population attend church each Sunday; in England the figure is just over 10 per cent; while in Sweden it falls as low as 5 per cent. Martin explains these variations in the following way:

1 In the USA there is a high degree of religious pluralism and no official connection between church and state. There is also a plurality of immigrant groups of different ethnic origin. Religious participation is therefore not confined to higher-status groups who can support a religion closely identified with the state. A plurality of religions flourish as ethnic minorities try to maintain their separate identities. While participation in religion is very high, religion does not play a vital role in the functioning of society. Social solidarity is cemented more by patriotism and by a belief in the American way of life than by shared religious beliefs.
2 In Britain there is an association between the Church of England and the state. However, there is also considerable religious pluralism. Protestant-dissenting denominations draw membership and support from lower social classes who may not be attracted to the established church. Attendance is quite low because of the association of church and state, but not as low as in Sweden where the church is virtually a department of state. In some parts of Britain, such as Wales and Scotland, attendances are higher than the average because of an association between religion and nationalism.
3 Sweden has the lowest attendance figures because of the dominance of a single church and its association with the state. As a result of this close association, and the lack of alternative religious organizations, church attendance is largely confined to higher social classes.

In all of these societies, then, religion retains some influence. Where a church retains important functions, religious participation tends to be low, but participation is much higher in societies where religion appears to have lost many of its functions.

In Roman Catholic countries such as France, Spain, Italy and Portugal, the church still has an important role in society. It influences government policy in areas such as education and laws relating to marriage, divorce, contraception and abortion. Attendances at church are high and, according to Martin, Catholic societies are generally less secular than Protestant ones. There is little religious pluralism and what divisions there are tend to be within the Roman Catholic Church rather than between different religious organizations.

However, such societies frequently have deep social divisions: often there is a strong, and predominantly lower-class, atheist opposition to Catholicism. These divisions are reflected in such conflicts as the Spanish Civil War and the 1968 student protests in Paris, while France and Italy also have sizeable communist parties.

Other countries like the Netherlands, West Germany and Switzerland are split between a Protestant majority and a large Catholic minority, in a ratio of approximately 60:40. In these countries the Roman Catholic minority tends to be among the less affluent, so the ruling elite and Catholicism are not closely connected. Participation in religion is high because it provides a sense of identity for the two main subcultures. Religion plays an important role in such areas of social life as education, where separate Protestant and Catholic schools may be retained.

Religion in the Third World

Martin has also drawn attention to the contrasting fates of religions in different Third World countries (Martin, 1991a, 1991b). In some Latin American countries the Roman Catholic Church remains a key institution in society, and Protestantism has made few converts. In countries such as Mexico and Argentina,

Protestants make up only about 2 per cent of the population. In Brazil, on the other hand, about 20 per cent of the population have become Protestant, and by 1985 there were more Protestant than Catholic ministers. Most ministers represent strongly religious versions of Protestantism such as Pentecostalism and Seventh Day Adventism. Martin argues that Pentecostalism attracts the small shopkeepers and craft workers who have moved to the cities and whose means of earning a living fit in well with a religion that emphasizes self-discipline and thrift.

In Islamic societies religious change also varies from country to country. In Tunisia and Egypt the state has become more secular: Islamic beliefs do not have a great influence on political decisions. In Iran the Islamic revolution of 1979 took the country in the opposite direction with religious leaders gaining most of the political power. In other countries there is a continuing conflict between the religious and the secular. In the Sudan, for example, there are strong advocates of religious pluralism and tolerance, but there are others who wish to see an Islamic state established. In Turkey attitudes towards religion are ambivalent. Some see religion as a cause of 'backwardness'. Others see it as the vital foundation on which the moral values of the society rest.

Prospects for religion

Far from predicting the demise of religion, Martin argues that it is likely to increase in importance. If anything, the future is likely to see the forces of secularization in retreat. Impetus towards secularization originated in north-western Europe, and here the factors which undermined religion have disappeared:

1 First, religion is no longer so closely associated with rich and powerful elites in society. It has therefore become more acceptable to people from lower classes.
2 Second, rationalism has lost some of its appeal. There is increasing interest in the mystical, the supernatural and the religious.

Outside Europe many countries retain strong religious influences on society. From Martin's viewpoint, 'There is no inevitable tilt to history down which every society is sociologically fated to fall.' Secularization is not an automatic and universal process.

Contemporary religious revivals

Martin's views are reflected in some more recent contributions to the debate over secularization which have argued that there is little evidence of a general trend towards secularization in the world as a whole. Gilles Kepel claims that any trend towards secularization was reversed in around 1975 (Kepel, 1994). Furthermore, the various religious revivals were very ambitious – they were aimed at 'recovering a sacred foundation for the organization of society – by changing society if necessary'. He uses the examples of Christians in the USA and Europe, Jews in Israel, and Muslims throughout the world to support his case.

Since 1978, when Pope John-Paul II became Pope, Catholicism has been less willing to concede ground to the secular forces. In Italy, young people have been attracted to the Catholic group, Communion and Liberation, which demands strong personal commitment from Catholics. In France, Catholic 'charismatic renewal' groups have tried to initiate a re-Christianization of society. In former communist countries such as Czechoslovakia and Poland the Roman Catholic Church has enjoyed great popularity.

In the USA the evangelical 'New Christian Right' have succeeded in attracting increasing numbers of Americans to their campaigns to reassert Christian values (see above, pp. 487–8, for a discussion of their significance).

In Israel, groups such as the Lubavitch have campaigned against the watering-down of traditional Jewish beliefs. Political parties based upon the Jewish religion have come to exercise an important influence on Israeli politics by holding the balance of power in parliament between the major political parties. In doing so they have forced the Jewish state to take religious beliefs seriously.

Islamization movements have had success in many parts of the world. For example, the Islamic Salvation Front won elections in Algeria in 1992. Amongst the Palestinians, radical Islamic groups such as Hamas have been prominent in opposing Israeli occupation of the West Bank. Kepel also points to the Salman Rushdie affair. The campaign by British Muslims against Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* indicates how Islamic values continue to be important even in Western Europe.

To Kepel, all of the above are examples of attempts to counter secularism. They are a reaction to the apparent failure of attempts to base the policies of nation-states upon secular principles. He says, 'They regard the vainglorious emancipation of reason from faith as the prime cause of the ills of the twentieth century, the beginnings of a process leading straight to Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism.' As such, they are very much a reaction against modernity. However, Kepel does not regard them as being equally successful. He says, 'It is far more difficult to expel secularism from Western society than from today's Jewish or Muslim world.'

Nevertheless, Kepel's work suggests that it might be appropriate to see the modern world as characterized by a continuing conflict between the secular and the sacred, rather than being characterized by the inevitable triumph of the former over the latter.

Secularization – conclusion

As the views of sociologists such as Martin and Kepel illustrate, the secularization thesis has not been definitively proved or disproved. This is partly because sociologists from Weber to Wilson and from Comte to Casanova have used the term 'secularization' in many different ways. This has led to considerable confusion since writers discussing the process of secularization are often arguing about different things.

Martin (1969) states that the concept of secularization includes 'a large number of discrete, separate elements loosely put together in an intellectual hold-all'. He maintains that there is no necessary connection between the various processes lumped together under the same heading. Because the range of meaning attached to the term 'secularization' has become so wide, Martin advocates its removal from the sociological vocabulary. Instead, he supports a careful and detailed study of the ways in which the role of religion in society has changed at different times and in different places.

Glock and Stark (1969) argue that researchers have been unable to measure the significance of religion because they have not given adequate attention to defining religion and religiosity. Until they have clearly thought out and stated exactly what they mean by these terms, the secularization thesis cannot be adequately tested.

There is some evidence that contemporary theorists of secularization do pay more attention to differentiating between different issues that have been considered under the heading 'secularization'. For example, Steve Bruce (1995, 1996), a strong advocate of the theory of secularization, accepts that religion can remain an important part of individual beliefs, but he believes that religion has lost its social and political significance.

José Casanova distinguishes between three aspects of secularization:

1 Secularization as differentiation. In these terms secularization takes place when non-religious spheres of life (such as the state and the economy) become separate from and independent of religion.
2 Secularization as a decline of religious beliefs and practices. In this case secularization takes place when fewer individuals take part in religious activities or hold religious beliefs.
3 Secularization as privatization. With this type of secularization, religion stops playing any part in public life and does not even try to influence how politicians make decisions or individuals in society in general choose to live their lives.

Casanova believes that recent history shows that religious beliefs and practices are certainly not dying out, and that 'public religions' have increasingly re-entered the public sphere. Thus, to him, it is only in the first sense that secularization has taken place. Religion no longer has a central position in the structure of modern societies, but neither does it fade away.

Most theorists who either support or attack the theory of secularization are now willing to admit that the theory cannot be unproblematically applied to all groups in all modern societies. It can therefore be argued that the national, regional, ethnic and social class differences in the role of religion discussed by Martin and others make it necessary to relate theories to specific countries and social groups.

Religion and globalization

While the debate around secularization shows the need to examine the differences between religions in different societies, the theory of globalization suggests that religion in different societies needs to be understood in the context of changes in the world as a whole. There are a number of different theories of globalization (see Chapter 9), but all suggest that the boundaries between societies are becoming less important, that social life within individual societies is increasingly influenced by events elsewhere in the world, and that some social changes are evident throughout the world rather than being confined to particular places. A number of writers have attempted to understand how such changes have influenced religion.

Peter Beyer – globalization, religion, particularism and universalism

Peter Beyer sees globalization as involving a situation in which 'peoples, cultures, societies, and civilizations previously more or less isolated from one another are now in regular and almost unavoidable contact' (Beyer, 1994). This has two contrasting effects. On the one hand, there is an increased danger of clashes between different cultures – now found within the same society – which might misunderstand or be hostile to one another. On the other hand, the increased contact between cultures and religion might reduce the differences between them and therefore reduce the likelihood of conflict.

Global society is characterized by a clash between particularism and universalism. Particularism involves an emphasis on the distinctive characteristics of particular groups. These differences might be national, regional, cultural or religious. Universalism involves an emphasis on similarities between people or societies or values, which result from their common humanity. In this situation religions can take one of three directions:

1 Religion might take a relatively marginal role in global society. Unable to provide an overarching set of values and beliefs that can be shared by all members of society, it might retreat into a limited and privatized role. According to Beyer, globalization leads to the world being dominated by specialized sub-systems. He says, 'Thus, for instance, the world capitalist economy operates in terms of money, the global political system in terms of bureaucratically organized power, the scientific system in terms of verifiable truth.' All of the systems are instrumental in aiming for increased efficiency and the rational achievement of ends.

   There is no obvious role for religion as a sub-system of global society. While religious ritual used to be seen as essential for the success of harvests, for good health or military success, this is no longer the case. Without a global role, religion tends to be left merely to deal with personal questions such as the meaning of life. When religion follows this path, it loses its public role and 'Privatized religion continues to develop in a myriad of pluralistic directions across the full range of religious possibilities.' Individuals choose the sect, cult, denomination or major world religion they wish to follow.

   However, religion is not inevitably confined to the private sphere.

2 The main sub-systems of modernity and globalization create some problems. The global economy, global science and the global political system offer little in the way of an identity for individuals and social groups. Identities tend to be relativized: people lack a single overriding sense of who they are. They may have a number of separate roles (such as a job and family roles) but no single source of identity. Furthermore, in a pluralistic world, in which different cultures and religions live close together and have increasing contact with one another, it becomes difficult to assert that one culture is better than others.

   Religion can adopt an important role in dealing with these problems. Individuals and social groups can use religion to give them a central source of identity. They can use it to reassert their superiority over other social groups. They can use religious affiliations to mobilize groups to seek power and influence in a globalized society in which they feel marginalized or threatened. Very often religions which assert particularistic differences are closely associated with nationalism. Thus, according to Beyer, Israel, Iran, India and Japan are all examples of countries where conservative or fundamentalist religions have been associated with nationalism.

3 The third option is for religion to attempt a more universalistic approach. Beyer calls this the liberal option. In this case religion attempts to be more ecumenical – it tries to bring together different faiths and beliefs. Instead of emphasizing difference, it emphasizes common values or beliefs which are, or it believes should be, shared globally. Examples of such beliefs might be a belief in universal human rights or in some conception of social justice. Beyer sees liberation theology as a good example of this type of development. Although based upon Catholicism, its interests are as much political as religious, with its concern for the poverty of disadvantaged groups in Latin America. Indeed, many of the problems of the poor can be attributed to the operation of the global capitalist system. Another example of the universalistic approach is religious environmentalism where different religious groups can be united in trying to save what may be seen as a divinely created earth.

Beyer concludes that globalization will not lead to the demise of religion. However, it does limit its influence. It is no longer integral to powerful sub-systems such as the global economy, the political system and science. While it remains important to systems of communication, it can only really try to influence events in the world rather than directly shaping them. For example, Beyer says that:

> *with peace and justice issues, many religious people and organizations will become deeply involved in the problems; but the proffered solutions are going to be political, educational, scientific, economic, and medical – assuming, of course, that the global system does not collapse along with its biological environment.*
>
> Beyer, 1994, p. 222

Samuel P. Huntington – *The Clash of Civilizations*

Samuel Huntington sees religion as developing a rather greater role in the modern world than Beyer. Although he does not use the term 'globalization' he discusses the same processes as those identified by globalization theorists. For example, he says, 'the world is becoming a smaller place. The interactions between peoples of different civilizations are increasing; these increasing interactions intensify civilization consciousness' (Huntington, 1993). Like some other theorists of globalization, he believes that the increasing contacts between different groups can sometimes have the effect of intensifying the