

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

Sociology Optional Religion and Society

Paper 1 · Unit 8

The three founders on religion, the practice and organisational typologies examiners keep asking you to distinguish, and the secularisation debate with the critics who dismantled it.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

(a) Sociological theories of religion. (b) Types of religious practices: animism, monism, pluralism, sects, cults. (c) Religion in modern society: religion and science, secularization, religious revivalism, fundamentalism.

Defining Religion — Why the Definition Decides the Answer

Sociology of religion does not ask whether God exists. It asks what religion does, how it is organised, and how it changes. The first fight in the field is definitional, and the definition you adopt silently decides what counts as religion at all. Open an answer here and you have already shown the examiner you know the terrain.

- Substantive definitions say what religion is, by content. E.B. Tylor's minimum definition in *Primitive Culture* (1871) is belief in spiritual beings. Clean and testable, but it excludes Theravada Buddhism, which has no creator god, and most of Confucianism.
- Functional definitions say what religion does. Durkheim's is the canonical one: a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, which unite adherents into a single moral community he called a Church. Wide enough to survive the Buddhism problem.
- The trade-off is exact and worth stating: substantive definitions are precise but ethnocentric, functional definitions are inclusive but so wide they admit nationalism, Marxism and football. Robert Bellah's civil religion (the flag, the constitution, the founding myths) is the celebrated case of that inclusiveness being productive rather than absurd.
- Weber refused to define religion at the start of *Sociology of Religion*, holding that a definition can only come at the end of the enquiry, if at all. This is a deliberate methodological stance flowing from *Verstehen*, not an oversight.
- Marx offered no definition either, because for him religion is not a thing with an essence but a symptom of something else, so the question to ask is what produces it.
- A fourth approach, often forgotten: the polythetic or family-resemblance definition, where religion is identified by a cluster of traits (ritual, the supernatural, a moral code, a community, sacred texts) with no single trait being necessary.

KEY TERMS

Substantive definition — Defines religion by what it contains, typically belief in the supernatural or in spiritual beings.

Functional definition — Defines religion by what it does for the individual or the group, typically integration or meaning-provision.

Civil religion — Bellah's term for the quasi-sacred national creed, symbols and rituals that bind a modern polity.

Emile Durkheim — Sacred, Profane, and Society Worshipping Itself

Durkheim's argument in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) is that religion is society misrecognised. Believers are not deluded about the existence of a force greater than themselves; they are only wrong about its address. This is the single most examined position in the unit.

- Method: study the simplest society to isolate religion's essential elements. He chose the Arunta (Aranda) of central Australia, working from Spencer and Gillen's ethnography rather than his own fieldwork.

- The defining act of religion is a classification of the whole world into two absolutely heterogeneous domains: the sacred (set apart, forbidden, approached with awe) and the profane (mundane, utilitarian, everyday). Nothing is sacred by its own properties; sacredness is conferred by the group.
- The totem is the clan's emblem and its most sacred object. Since the emblem stands for the clan, worshipping the totem is worshipping the clan. Durkheim's conclusion: the god of the clan can be nothing else than the clan itself, divinised.
- Collective effervescence is the mechanism. In the assembled corroboree, the group generates an emotional intensity no individual can produce alone. Members feel a real external force acting on them, and misrecognise a social force as a supernatural one. Ritual exists to recharge it periodically.
- So religion is true, but not in the way believers think. Its cognitive claims are false; its social reference is correct. Society is the real object of worship.
- Elementary Forms is also a sociology of knowledge: Durkheim derives the fundamental categories of thought (time, space, class, causality) from the rhythms and divisions of social organisation. Time from the calendar of rites, class from the division into clans.
- Types of rite: negative rites (taboo, asceticism) that separate sacred from profane; positive rites (sacrifice, imitative, commemorative, representative) that bind; piacular rites (mourning) that reconstitute the group after loss. Note that mourning for Durkheim is not spontaneous grief but a duty imposed by the group.
- Criticisms to name: Evans-Pritchard held the Arunta were neither the simplest nor typical, and the data were thin and second-hand. Alexander Goldenweiser showed totemism is neither universal nor a single institution. The argument is circular, since society explains the sacred while the sacred is itself defined by reference to society. And Malinowski replied that the sacred/profane boundary is not absolute and that religion serves individuals, not only groups.

KEY TERMS

Sacred — That which is set apart and forbidden, treated with awe, and defined as such by the collectivity rather than by any intrinsic property.

Collective effervescence — The heightened emotional energy generated when a group assembles, which participants attribute to a supernatural source.

Piacular rite — Mourning ritual whose function is to reconstitute the group after the loss of a member.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- Give an assessment of Durkheimian notion of 'sacred' and 'profane' in sociology of religion. [2017]
- State the reasons for the various religious beliefs and practices in pre-modern societies. [2020]

Max Weber — Meaning, Theodicy, and the Protestant Ethic

Weber reverses Durkheim's question. He does not ask what religion does for society; he asks what religious ideas mean to the actor and what conduct those meanings make rational. From that starting point he builds the argument that a religious idea helped produce modern capitalism, which is the standing rebuttal to Marx.

- The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904-05): Calvinist predestination produced unbearable salvation anxiety, since God's decree was fixed and unknowable. Pastoral practice supplied a resolution: methodical worldly success could be read as a sign of election.
- The result was inner-worldly asceticism, work as a calling, systematic self-discipline, and reinvestment rather than consumption. Money accumulates because spending it is sinful and idleness is worse. That

disposition, once detached from its theology, is the spirit of capitalism.

- The causal claim is precise and limited, and misstating it is the classic error. Weber claims an elective affinity, not a cause, and calls the spirit of capitalism an unintended consequence of religious motives. Once capitalism was established it no longer needed the ethic, leaving what Weber called a *stahlhartes Gehäuse*, rendered by Parsons as the iron cage.
- Ideas are neither epiphenomena nor prime movers. Weber's image: ideas are the switchmen who set the tracks along which action is pushed by the dynamic of interest. That single line is the whole Weber-Marx difference.
- Comparative programme: The Religion of India, The Religion of China, Ancient Judaism. He asks why capitalism did not originate elsewhere despite trade, credit, cities and rational administration. His answer in India's case is the karma-samsara complex plus the ritual barriers of caste, which sanctified occupational fixity.
- Theodicy is the intellectual problem of explaining suffering and undeserved good fortune. Weber ranked karma and samsara as the most logically consistent theodicy ever devised, precisely because it explains every inequality without residue. Its social effect is legitimisation of the given order rather than pressure to change it.
- Religious virtuosi types: the prophet, who is charismatic and preaches a break, either ethical (Muhammad, the Hebrew prophets, commanding in God's name) or exemplary (the Buddha, showing a path by his own life); the priest, whose authority is office and routine; and the magician, who coerces spirits for a fee.
- Charisma is inherently unstable and undergoes routinisation into traditional or legal-rational forms. This is the general mechanism behind the sect-to-church transition.
- Disenchantment (*Entzauberung*): rationalisation drives magic out of the world. Weber's point is not that science refutes religion but that the world ceases to be mysterious, and religion retreats into the private and the irrational.
- Criticisms: R.H. Tawney (*Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*) argued capitalism preceded and shaped Protestantism rather than the reverse. Kautsky read Protestantism as the ideology of an already rising bourgeoisie. Sombart pointed to Jewish and Catholic merchant capital. Trevor-Roper noted many Calvinist entrepreneurs were migrants, so migration and minority status may explain what doctrine was credited with.

KEY TERMS

Theodicy — A religious explanation of why suffering, evil and undeserved fortune exist in a world ordered by the divine.

Elective affinity — Weber's term for a mutual attraction and reinforcement between an idea and a material interest, short of causation.

Inner-worldly asceticism — Self-denial practised inside ordinary economic life rather than by withdrawal from it, as against other-worldly asceticism.

Disenchantment — The rationalised expulsion of magic and mystery from the world, leaving no incalculable forces in principle.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- How is Durkheim's theory of religion different from Max Weber's theory? [2016]
- How do theories of Marx, Weber and Durkheim differ in understanding religion? [2025]

Karl Marx — Religion as Ideology

Marx wrote comparatively little on religion and most of it early. What survives is a diagnosis rather than a sociology: religion is a real expression of real suffering, and a false consolation for it. The examiner rewards you for reading the famous line whole rather than as a slogan.

- The core text is the Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1843-44). Marx inherits Feuerbach's projection thesis from The Essence of Christianity, that humans create God in their own image and then kneel to it, and adds the material question Feuerbach never asked: what conditions make that projection necessary?
- The quotation is almost always truncated. Religion is first the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, the soul of soulless conditions, and only then the opium of the people. It is protest against real distress before it is anaesthesia.
- Opium here is an analgesic, not a conspiracy of dealers. Religion dulls the pain of alienation without touching its cause, and so postpones revolt. That is why Marx calls the demand to give up religion the demand to give up a condition that requires illusions.
- Structurally, religion sits in the superstructure, conditioned by the economic base. It is ideology in the strict sense, producing false consciousness, and it legitimates the property relations of each mode of production: divine right for feudalism, the Protestant work ethic and other-worldly reward for capitalism.
- Because religion is a symptom, Marx expects it to wither with its material conditions rather than needing to be abolished by decree.
- Engels qualified the model in ways Marxists rely on. In The Peasant War in Germany he showed religion serving as the idiom of revolt, in early Christianity and in Thomas Muntzer's peasant rising, which concedes religion a mobilising, change-producing role.
- Criticisms: it cannot explain religion in classless hunter-gatherer societies where there is no ruling class to serve. Weber showed religion producing economic change rather than merely reflecting it. Liberation theology in Latin America and the black church in the American civil rights movement are religion as engine of emancipation. Gramsci's more supple account places religion inside hegemony and common sense, where it is contested rather than simply imposed.
- The fair verdict for an answer: Marx is strongest on religion's legitimating function and weakest on its origins and its autonomy.

KEY TERMS

False consciousness — A subordinate class's misperception of its own interests, produced by ideology that presents ruling-class interests as universal.

Projection thesis — Feuerbach's argument, adopted and materialised by Marx, that God is the alienated projection of human qualities.

After Durkheim — Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard

The anthropologists accepted that religion is functional and then fought over whose function it was and where the fieldwork actually pointed. This section is where you get the concrete ethnographic examples that lift an answer above textbook recitation.

- Bronislaw Malinowski, among the Trobriand Islanders, relocated the function from society at large to the individual under stress. Religion and magic cluster where outcomes are uncertain and anxiety is high.
- His canonical evidence: Trobrianders perform elaborate magic before dangerous open-sea fishing beyond the reef, and none at all for safe lagoon fishing. The variable is risk, not ignorance.
- Life crises are the second site. Birth, puberty, marriage and above all death disrupt the group. Funeral rites give the mourner a script, counter the disruptive impulse to flee the corpse, and reassert solidarity at the moment it is most threatened.
- Malinowski also insisted that magic, religion and science coexist as separate domains in the same society. Trobrianders garden with genuine horticultural knowledge and add magic only where knowledge cannot reach. This finding destroys Frazer's evolutionary ladder of magic to religion to science.
- A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (The Andaman Islanders) inverted Malinowski. Rites do not merely relieve anxiety, they create it: without the taboo there would be nothing to fear. Ritual manufactures the anxiety and the ritual value that bind the individual to society. Both cannot be right, and saying so is worth marks.
- Radcliffe-Brown's own line is structural-functionalist and closer to Durkheim: religion expresses and sustains the individual's sense of dependence on the society that formed him.
- E.E. Evans-Pritchard (Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande, 1937) showed Azande witchcraft to be a coherent system for explaining the particularity of misfortune, why this granary fell on this man on this day. It answers a question empirical knowledge does not pose. Belief is rational within its own idiom.
- In Theories of Primitive Religion (1965) Evans-Pritchard attacked Tylor, Durkheim and Freud together for armchair theorising and for the shared vice of explaining believers' beliefs away instead of understanding them.
- Talcott Parsons carried Weber's problems of meaning into functionalism: religion supplies the ultimate values that anchor the normative order and manages the problems (death, suffering, unearned injustice) that the ordinary social system cannot absorb.
- The functionalist blind spot, shared by all of them, is conflict. A theory that explains religion by integration is embarrassed by schism, communal violence and holy war.

KEY TERMS

Ritual value — Radcliffe-Brown's term for the social importance a rite confers on an object or occasion, thereby creating the dependence it appears to serve.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- What functions does religion perform in a pluralistic society? [2023]

Types of Religious Practice — Animism, Naturism, Totemism, Monism, Pluralism

This is the definitional sub-unit UPSC returns to almost every cycle, usually as a compare-and-contrast. Learn each term with its author, its ethnographic base, and the one line that separates it from its nearest neighbour.

- Animism (E.B. Tylor, Primitive Culture, 1871): belief in spiritual beings, in souls detachable from bodies, animating persons, animals, plants and objects. Tylor derived it from reflection on dreams, trance, shadows and death, from which early humans inferred a separable soul and then generalised the inference to all of nature. His sequence: animism to polytheism to monotheism.

- **Naturism (Max Muller):** religion born of awe at overwhelming natural forces, sun, dawn, storm, fire, personified into gods. Working from Vedic hymns, he explained the process as a disease of language, where names for natural phenomena hardened into proper names of deities. One-line distinction: animism peoples the world with spirits, naturism deifies nature itself.
- **Animatism (R.R. Marett):** belief in an impersonal, undifferentiated supernatural power, the Melanesian mana documented by Codrington, which is not a spirit and has no personality. Marett called it pre-animistic, that is, earlier and simpler than Tylor's souls.
- **Totemism (Durkheim, following W. Robertson Smith's Religion of the Semites):** a ritual relation between a social group and a natural species or object that serves as its emblem, carrying taboos on killing or eating and usually clan exogamy. Shared with animism: both are non-theistic and pre-literate. Different: totemism is essentially social and classificatory, animism essentially psychological and individual.
- Durkheim rejected Tylor and Muller on one shared ground, that both make religion a systematic error inferred from dreams or from misread weather. A social fact this durable, he argued, cannot rest on a delusion. His totemism supplies a real referent: the group.
- Levi-Strauss (Totemism, 1962) dissolved the category altogether. Totems are chosen not because they are good to eat but because they are good to think: they are a code for classifying social differences, so totemism is a mode of thought, not a stage of religion.
- **Monism:** the doctrine that reality is ultimately one. Advaita Vedanta of Shankara holds that Brahman alone is real and Atman is Brahman, difference being appearance (maya). Distinguish carefully in three lines: monotheism is one God distinct from creation; pantheism identifies God with the world; monism says only one reality exists at all.
- Related terms worth having: polytheism (many gods); henotheism (Muller's term for devotion to one god at a time while accepting others, characteristic of the Vedic hymns); dualism (two opposed cosmic principles, as in Zoroastrianism).
- Religious pluralism carries two senses that answers routinely conflate. Descriptively it is the coexistence of several faiths in one society. Normatively it is the claim that several traditions are equally valid paths.
- The sociological disagreement over pluralism is sharp and quotable. Peter Berger (The Sacred Canopy) argued pluralism destroys plausibility structures: once your neighbour's god is visibly plausible, your own becomes a choice rather than a fact, and certainty collapses. Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge's religious economy model argued the exact opposite: pluralism means competition, competition means energetic supply, which is why the deregulated United States is devout and the monopolistic European establishments are empty.
- Pluralism is not the same as secularism or multiculturalism. Pluralism describes a social fact; secularism is a state's normative stance towards religion; multiculturalism is a policy for recognising group difference.

The four contested accounts of elementary religion

Type	Thinker	Object of belief	Source claimed
Animism	E.B. Tylor	Personal souls and spirits	Dreams, trance, death
Naturism	Max Muller	Personified natural forces	Awe at nature, disease of language
Animatism	R.R. Marett	Impersonal power (mana)	Sense of the uncanny, pre-animistic
Totemism	Durkheim (after Robertson Smith)	Clan emblem, hence the clan	Collective effervescence in assembly

KEY TERMS

Mana — Impersonal supernatural potency, not attached to any spirit or person; the core of Marett's animatism.

Plausibility structure — Berger's term for the social base of conversation and practice that keeps a worldview credible; pluralism weakens it.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- Critically compare the views of E.B. Tylor and Max Muller on Religion. [2021]
- Highlight the differences and similarities between totemism and animism. [2023]
- Discuss the concept of animism and differentiate it from naturism. [2024]
- "Religious pluralism is the order of present-day societies." Explain with suitable examples. [2016]

Church, Sect, Denomination, Cult — the Organisational Typology

This typology is the most reliably examined item in the whole unit and the one most often answered badly, because candidates define sects and cults by size or strangeness. They are defined by their relation to the surrounding society and to the parent tradition. Write that sentence and then unpack it.

- Weber drew the founding distinction. The church is a compulsory association: you are born into it, it claims to administer grace to a whole territory, and it accommodates the world. The sect is a voluntary association: you join by demonstrating religious qualification, and it can expel you.
- Ernst Troeltsch (The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches) formalised it into church, sect and a third form, mysticism, meaning individual inward religiosity with no organisation at all. The third type is frequently forgotten and worth naming.
- H. Richard Niebuhr (The Social Sources of Denominationalism, 1929) supplied the dynamic. A sect cannot remain a sect for more than a generation: its children are born into it rather than converted, its ascetic members prosper, its rejection of the world softens. It becomes a denomination, that is, a former sect that has made peace with the world and with rival denominations.
- Howard Becker added the cult: loose, individualistic, no formal membership or discipline, typically built around a charismatic figure, and either invented or imported rather than schismatic.
- Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge sharpened the sect/cult line by origin, which is the cleanest distinction available. Sects are schisms from an existing body in the same society, so they break away and claim to restore the pure tradition. Cults are new or imported faiths, so they start fresh and owe the local tradition nothing.
- Roy Wallis (The Elementary Forms of the New Religious Life, 1984) classified new religious movements by their orientation to the world: world-rejecting (demand total commitment, live communally, condemn the outside), world-accommodating (revitalise personal faith without challenging society, as in charismatic renewal), and world-affirming (offer techniques for success within the existing world, sold as a service to clients rather than preached to converts).
- Eileen Barker (The Making of a Moonie, 1984) argued cult has become an unusable term of abuse and defended new religious movement as the analytic label. Her fieldwork also demolished the brainwashing thesis: most people who attended never joined, and most who joined left within two years, which no theory of mind control can accommodate.
- Why sects and cults proliferate now: Bryan Wilson linked sects to relative deprivation and to rapid social change that leaves people without a plausible place; Stark and Bainbridge to compensators supplied where

established religion has weakened; Wallis to the collapse of the counter-culture; Berger and Giddens to a deregulated market for meaning where identity has become a matter of choice. Add urban anonymity, migration, and the low cost of scaling a movement through digital media.

- New religious movements are not new: the label describes movements since roughly the mid-twentieth century, but sect formation is as old as organised religion, which is Niebuhr's whole point.
- Practical caution for answers: use empirical examples, but avoid making value judgments about living movements. The sociological question is why the form appears, not whether the doctrine is true.

Church, denomination, sect, cult compared

Feature	Church	Denomination	Sect	Cult
Membership	Ascribed, born into	Voluntary but inherited	Voluntary, by qualification	Loose, client or audience
Relation to world	Accommodates, allied to state	At peace with world and rivals	Rejects or protests	Indifferent or world-affirming
Claim to truth	Universal and exclusive	One valid path among several	Exclusive, the pure remnant	Additive, often eclectic
Origin	Established tradition	Sect that matured (Niebuhr)	Schism from a parent body	New or imported faith
Leadership	Bureaucratic priesthood	Trained clergy	Charismatic lay leaders	Charismatic founder
Durability	Centuries	Long	Transforms or dies in a generation	Usually short-lived

KEY TERMS

Denomination — Niebuhr's type: a sect that has accommodated to the world and conceded the legitimacy of other religious bodies.

Compensator — Stark and Bainbridge's term for a promise of a reward that cannot be verified now, which religion supplies where scarce rewards are unavailable.

World-affirming NRM — Wallis's type that sells techniques for succeeding in the existing world, dealing in clients rather than converts.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- Distinguish between sects and cults with illustrations. [2015]
- What are sects? Discuss the role in multi-religious societies with empirical examples. [2018]
- What is cult? Explain the growth of cults in the contemporary world. [2021]
- What are new religious movements? Elaborate emphasizing their forms and orientations. [2023]
- How do you understand the phenomena of the mushrooming of sects and cults in contemporary society? Discuss the factors responsible. [2024]

Religion in Modern Society — Science, Disenchantment and Secularisation

The classical expectation was that modernity would finish religion off, whether through science, rationalisation or the withering of its material base. That expectation has not been vindicated, and the most interesting

sociology here is the demolition work done by the thesis's own former champions.

- The evolutionary reading makes science the successor of religion. Comte's law of three stages runs theological, metaphysical, positive. Frazer's runs magic, religion, science. Both are unilinear, both assume the human mind climbs one ladder, and both are rejected today.
- Malinowski's Trobriand evidence is the standard rebuttal: genuine empirical technique, magic and religion coexist in the same society, each with its own domain. They divide the labour rather than replacing one another.
- Weber's disenchantment is the subtler claim, and the one to lead with. Science does not disprove religion; it removes mystery, and in doing so it exposes its own limit, because science cannot answer the question it cannot pose, which is how we should live. Religion loses jurisdiction over explanation but not over meaning.
- Robert Merton (*Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England*, 1938) argued in Weber's own style that Puritan values, empiricism, utility, and the duty to glorify God by studying His works, legitimated the new experimental science. Religion can be a cause of science, not only its victim.
- The conflict thesis (Draper and White, nineteenth century) is now treated by historians of science as polemic rather than history. Stephen Jay Gould's alternative, non-overlapping magisteria, assigns science the empirical realm and religion the moral realm.
- Where they do collide, they collide over jurisdiction: creationism against evolution in school curricula, refusal of transfusion or vaccination, reproductive technology, the dating of scripture. Note the reverse traffic too, where religion adopts scientific idiom (Scientology's auditing, faith healing marketed as therapy) and science acquires faith-like features (Kuhn's paradigms are held on trust between revolutions).
- Secularisation, Bryan Wilson's working definition (*Religion in Secular Society*, 1966): the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance. The operative phrase is social significance, not disappearance. Get this right and half the standard confusion goes away.
- The dimensions question is best answered with Karel Dobbelaere's three levels: societal (laicisation and differentiation, as law, medicine, welfare and education leave religious control), organisational (religious bodies themselves rationalise, liberalise and professionalise), and individual (declining belief, attendance and salience). Larry Shiner (1967) had already found six distinct meanings in circulation, which is why disputants argue past each other.
- Steve Bruce (*God is Dead*, 2002) states the mechanism cleanly: individualism and diversity destroy the shared cosmos; rationality erodes the supernatural; societalisation removes the local community religion served. Bruce holds the thesis for Europe and treats the United States as the anomaly requiring special explanation.
- Peter Berger built the strongest version (*The Sacred Canopy*, 1967) and then publicly recanted it (*The Desecularization of the World*, 1999), writing that the world today is as furiously religious as ever, with two exceptions, Europe and an international academic intelligentsia. Quoting the author against himself is a high-value move in an answer.
- Grace Davie's Britain shows believing without belonging, with practice falling faster than belief, plus vicarious religion, where a minority performs religion on behalf of a majority that quietly approves. David Voas and Alasdair Crockett replied that the data show neither believing nor belonging, since both decline together.
- Thomas Luckmann (*The Invisible Religion*, 1967) argued religion has not declined but privatised into individual meaning systems outside churches. Daniele Hervieu-Leger reframes religion as a chain of memory that modernity breaks, so what fails is transmission, not belief.

- Jose Casanova (Public Religions in the Modern World, 1994) disaggregated the thesis into three separable claims, differentiation, decline of belief, and privatisation, and concluded only differentiation survives. His evidence is deprivatisation: Solidarity in Poland, liberation theology in Latin America, the American Christian right, the Iranian revolution.
- Rodney Stark (Secularization, R.I.P., 1999) attacks the premise rather than the trend, arguing there was never a religious golden age to decline from, since medieval popular attendance and knowledge were poor.
- The India-facing nuance that examiners reward: secularism as a constitutional principle (equal respect, no state religion, the state engaging religions rather than walling itself off) is a different object from secularisation as a social process. Conflating them is the commonest error on this topic. T.N. Madan and Ashis Nandy argue Western secularism is an impossible transplant where religion is not compartmentalised; Rajeev Bhargava defends an Indian variant he calls principled distance.

KEY TERMS

Secularisation — Wilson's definition: the process by which religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance.

Differentiation — The institutional separation of law, education, medicine and welfare from religious control; the one claim of the secularisation thesis Casanova concedes.

Deprivatisation — Casanova's term for religion re-entering the public sphere to contest political and moral questions.

Believing without belonging — Davie's description of populations that retain belief while abandoning institutional participation.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- Is religion antithetical to science? Comment. [2013]
- Define Secularisation. What are its major dimensions in the modern world? [2015]
- Problematised the concept of secularism in the present context. [2017]
- Write a note on global trends of secularization. [2022]
- Do modernization and secularization necessarily go together? [2024]

Religious Revivalism and Fundamentalism

The secularisation thesis predicted quiet decline and got noisy resurgence instead. Revivalism and fundamentalism are the two names given to that resurgence, they are not synonyms, and the best answers show that fundamentalism is a product of modernity rather than a survival from before it.

- Revivalism is the reawakening of religious fervour and observance within a tradition. It is typically emotional, often mass-scale, usually led by preachers rather than theologians, and it is not necessarily political.
- Fundamentalism is narrower: a reactive movement asserting the inerrant authority of a foundational text or law against modern encroachment, with a programme for public life.
- The word has a datable origin, which is worth stating. It comes from the American Protestant pamphlet series The Fundamentals (1910-15), asserting biblical inerrancy against liberal theology and Darwinism. Extending the term to Islam, Hinduism, Judaism or Sikhism is analytically useful and historically loose, which is why Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby proposed treating it as a family resemblance rather than a definition.

- The Marty and Appleby Fundamentalism Project catalogued recurring traits: reactivity to marginalisation; selectivity (a few doctrines are fought over and the rest quietly ignored); moral dualism, a world of pure and impure; absolutism and inerrancy; millennialism; an elect membership; sharp behavioural boundaries; and charismatic, authoritarian, usually male leadership.
- Anthony Giddens (Runaway World) gives the sharpest formula available: fundamentalism is tradition defended in the traditional way, that is, by reference to ritual truth, in a globalised world that forces every practice to justify itself against alternatives. Its opposite is therefore not modernity but cosmopolitanism. It is a child of globalisation, not a relic.
- S.N. Eisenstadt read fundamentalism as a modern Jacobin phenomenon: totalising, mobilising, utopian, using thoroughly modern organisation, bureaucracy and technology to construct a purified future rather than to restore an actual past.
- Manuel Castells (The Power of Identity) places it as resistance identity, trenches dug by those excluded from the network society. Olivier Roy adds deculturation: fundamentalism thrives among the deterritorialised and the diasporic, cut off from a lived local culture and needing a portable, purified faith.
- Why now: globalisation dislocates; states fail to deliver development or dignity; migration puts every tradition in question by putting it beside others; cheap media let a movement scale without a hierarchy; and identity becomes the available currency of politics where class mobilisation has thinned.
- Consequences for a secular nation-state: majoritarian claims on public policy, contest over personal law, control of school curricula and history, pressure on minorities and on freedom of expression, and violence at the extreme. Casanova's counter-argument must be conceded: public religion is not per se a threat, since deprivatised religion has also defended democracy, labour and human rights.
- Revivalism is not communalism. Revivalism is intra-religious intensification. Communalism is the political mobilisation of religious identity against another community on a claim of incompatible secular interests. Revivalism can feed communalism, but the Indian record cuts both ways: the Arya Samaj's shuddhi campaigns hardened boundaries, while the Ramakrishna Mission channelled revival into service and education.
- Fundamentalism is not conservatism. The conservative wants to keep what exists and is comfortable with ambiguity. The fundamentalist wants to purify and cannot tolerate it, which is why fundamentalists fight their co-religionists first.

KEY TERMS

Revivalism — Renewal of religious fervour and observance within an existing tradition, usually emotional and popular rather than doctrinal.

Fundamentalism — A reactive modern movement asserting the inerrant authority of a foundational text or law against modern encroachment.

Resistance identity — Castells's term for identity built defensively by actors excluded from dominant networks.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- How is religious revivalism different from communalism? Elaborate with examples from Indian context. [2014]
- Is religion playing an important role in increasing fundamentalism? Give reasons. [2016]
- Discuss the challenges thrown by religious revivalism to a secular nation-state. [2018]
- Give your comments on the growth of religious revivalism in the present-day context. [2021]

Last-mile revision

- Durkheim: religion is society misrecognised. Sacred/profane is the defining classification; the totem is the clan's emblem, so worship of the totem is worship of the clan.
- Weber: ideas are switchmen, not engines. Predestination produced anxiety, anxiety produced inner-worldly asceticism, asceticism produced accumulation. Elective affinity, unintended consequence, iron cage.
- Marx: religion is the sigh of the oppressed before it is the opium. Superstructure, false consciousness, legitimisation; Engels concedes it can be the idiom of revolt.
- Malinowski: magic where risk is (deep-sea, not lagoon). Radcliffe-Brown: ritual creates the anxiety it relieves. They contradict each other; say so.
- Animism = spirits (Tylor). Naturism = deified nature (Muller). Animatism = impersonal mana (Maret). Totemism = emblem of the clan (Durkheim). Levi-Strauss: totems are good to think, not good to eat.
- Monism (only one reality, Advaita) is not monotheism (one God distinct from the world) and not pantheism (God is the world).
- Sect = schism, joined by qualification, rejects the world. Cult = new or imported, loose, charismatic. Denomination = a sect that made peace (Niebuhr). Church = ascribed, universal, allied to the world.
- Wallis's NRMs: world-rejecting, world-accommodating, world-affirming. Barker: cult is an insult, not a category, and brainwashing is a myth.
- Secularisation is loss of social significance (Wilson), best disaggregated at Dobbelaere's three levels: societal, organisational, individual.
- Casanova's verdict: of the three claims (differentiation, decline, privatisation), only differentiation holds. Berger recanted his own thesis in 1999.
- Giddens: fundamentalism is tradition defended in the traditional way, and its opposite is cosmopolitanism, not modernity. Eisenstadt: it is Jacobin and modern.
- Secularism (a constitutional stance) is not secularisation (a social process). Revivalism (intra-religious intensification) is not communalism (political mobilisation against another community).

Common errors to avoid

- Writing that Durkheim studied 'primitive tribes in Australia' without naming the Arunta, Spencer and Gillen's ethnography, or the methodological reason for choosing the simplest case. The choice is the argument.
- Stating that Weber said Protestantism caused capitalism. He said elective affinity and unintended consequence, and he expressly denied a monocausal claim. Overstating it hands the examiner your weakest flank.
- Quoting 'opium of the people' with nothing before it. The full passage makes religion a protest against real suffering; the truncated version makes Marx sound merely contemptuous and loses the analytic point.
- Treating Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown as one functionalist position. They flatly disagree on whether ritual relieves or creates anxiety, and that disagreement is examinable content.
- Defining sects and cults by size, secrecy or weirdness. They are defined by relation to the parent tradition (schism versus new) and to the surrounding society (rejecting versus affirming).
- Confusing monism with monotheism, or pluralism with secularism. These are three separate distinctions and losing them costs the whole sub-question.
- Treating secularisation as an established fact rather than a contested thesis. Any answer that does not name Berger's recantation, Davie, Casanova or Stark is answering a 1970s paper.
- Confusing secularism with secularisation in the Indian portion of an answer, and then arguing that India is not secularising because the state funds religious institutions. Different object entirely.
- Presenting fundamentalism as a return to the past. Every major theorist (Giddens, Eisenstadt, Castells, Roy) reads it as a modern construction using modern means, and says so explicitly.
- Using contemporary Indian movements or living groups as illustrations with a value judgment attached. Describe the sociological mechanism, name the type, and stay analytic.
- Attributing 'sacred and profane' to Weber, 'theodicy' to Durkheim, or 'disenchantment' to Marx. Attribution slips in this unit are the single most expensive mistake available.