

## **Introduction to religion and secularisation.**

Religion as defined by sociologists has three key elements: it is a form of culture; it involves beliefs that take the form of ritualized practice; it provides a sense of purpose. Sociologists are not concerned with whether religious beliefs are true or false, but with how they are organized and what they do within a society.

Marx saw religion as a false belief system in which societies attributed to a divine power characteristics that in fact are part of human beings and societies. Religion frequently acts to support the position of the powerful within society, whilst providing some comfort to the powerless.

Durkheim studied religions in some detail, especially in small-scale societies. Religion provides an ordering system in society built around the division between the sacred and the profane. That which is sacred actually stands for the core values of the society itself. Collective rituals help to ensure social solidarity.

Weber particularly studied the relationship between religion and social change. Whilst Eastern religions promote values that do not sit easily with capitalism, Protestant and particularly Calvinist beliefs and values fit well with the drive and investment patterns that enable its development.

Smaller cultures often have beliefs based around totemism and animism.

The three most influential monotheistic religions all developed in the Middle East and each has influenced the others: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Hinduism is the third most followed religion in the world. It is polytheistic and hugely internally diverse with many different forms and practices. Most Hindus believe in an endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth and the religion establishes a caste system based upon birth into a position in a social and ritual hierarchy.

The ethical religions of the East have no gods, but emphasize ethical ideals that relate to a belief in the natural unity of the universe.

Sociologists of religion have described religious organizations in terms of Western categories. They distinguish between churches, sects, denominations and cults.

Religious movements are a subtype of social movements frequently headed in their initial phase, at least, by a charismatic leader.

‘New religious movements’ is a broad term for a collection of groups and cults concerned with spirituality that have emerged in the West since the 1960s counter-culture. They fall into three broad types: world-affirming, world-rejecting and world-accommodating.

Christian churches have historically been dominated by men. The Anglican Church admitted women as priests from the early 1990s but there remains strong resistance to this in some quarters, reignited by recent debates about women becoming bishops. The place of homosexual clergy has also caused enormous controversy. The Roman

Catholic Church only admits men as priests. Priests take a vow of celibacy which makes sexual orientation a non-issue in official debates.

Secularization describes the process whereby religion loses its influence over the various spheres of social life. Evaluating the extent of secularization is a complex sociological problem which has caused much debate. Church membership and attendance figures paint some of the picture but say nothing about levels of belief (assessed by attitude surveys) or the social influence of churches (as providers of schools, representatives on various public bodies or as 'moral experts' in public and media debates). The debate is further complicated by the increasingly multi-ethnic nature of societies where very different religious groups will be represented.

Over 70 per cent of the British population describe themselves as Christian, but less than 8 per cent of the population attend church every week. Catholics, Anglicans and established non-conformist denominations have been in decline, whilst other Christian groups such as the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses have increased their membership.

There has been an increase in attendance at religious ceremonies by members of non-Christian religions, especially among ethnic minority populations. Class, age and gender all affect patterns of religious participation.

The United States is an overwhelmingly Christian nation with a wide diversity of churches, denominations and sects. Catholicism is on the increase, due in part to immigration from Central and South America; mainstream and liberal Protestant groups are in decline, whilst conservative Protestant groups, including evangelicals, are on the increase. These shifts have political consequences in areas such as legislation on abortion and homosexuality.

There is no clear outcome in the secularization debate. In Western societies, mainstream and established churches may be in decline, but evangelical groups, new religious movements and the world religions followed by immigrants to these societies are all growing. There is a wide belief in God and the afterlife among those who do not belong to or worship in any organized religious group. In non-Western societies, religion is enthusiastically embraced.

Fundamentalism involves a strict adherence to a literal reading of the basic texts of a religion. Fundamentalism is associated with many religions and has seen an increase in recent decades as the forces of modernization have increasingly destabilized traditional elements in the social world.