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Top Marks Answers

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CHAPTER 1 BELIEFS IN SOCIETY

1 Theories of religion

Key Issues

- ▶ What are the key features of different sociological theories of religion?
- ▶ How do functionalist, Marxist and feminist theories differ?
- ▶ What criticisms can be made of each of these theories?

Functionalist theories of religion

- ▶ Functionalists see society as like an organism, with basic needs that it must meet to survive. Each institution performs certain functions to maintain the social system by meeting a need.
- ▶ Society's most basic need is for social order and solidarity. For functionalists, what makes order possible is value consensus – a set of shared norms and values for people to follow.
- ▶ Durkheim (1915) argues that religious institutions play a central part in creating and maintaining value consensus, order and solidarity.

The sacred and the profane

For Durkheim, the key feature of all religions is a fundamental distinction between the sacred and the profane.

- ▶ **The sacred** are things set apart and forbidden, inspiring feelings of awe, fear and wonder, with taboos and prohibitions.
- ▶ **The profane** are ordinary things that have no special significance.

Rituals A religion is more than a set of beliefs: it has sacred rituals or practices and these rituals are *collective* – performed by social groups.

- ▶ Durkheim argues that sacred things create powerful feelings in believers because they are *symbols* representing something of great power, and this thing can only be society.
- ▶ When people worship sacred symbols, they are worshipping society itself. For Durkheim, sacred symbols perform the essential function of uniting believers into a single moral community.
- ▶ Durkheim believed the essence of all religion could be found by studying its simplest form, in the simplest type of society. Thus he used studies of the Arunta, an Aboriginal Australian tribe with a clan system.
- ▶ Among the Arunta, bands of kin come together to perform ritual worship of a sacred totem. The totem is the clan's emblem, such as an animal or plant that symbolises the clan's identity. The totemic rituals venerating it reinforce the group's solidarity and sense of belonging.
- ▶ For Durkheim, when clan members worship their totem, they are in reality worshipping society – the totem inspires awe in the clan's members precisely because it represents the power of the group.

Analysis

Explain the functionalist argument that value consensus is necessary for society to hold together – without it, individual selfishness would cause social disintegration.

Application

Give examples of sacred things (e.g. a religious symbol like the Christian cross) and profane things (e.g. a streetlight).

Evaluation

Durkheim did not carry out any research on the Arunta himself; all his information came from secondary sources. Furthermore, religion in the simplest society may not be the same as religion in other societies.

Practice question and student answer

Read Item A and answer the question that follows.

Item A

Some sociologists see religion as the glue that holds society together. For example, functionalists argue that shared rituals and beliefs bind individuals together. This enables them to cooperate to meet society's needs.

By contrast, others argue that religion is more likely to be a source of conflict than of unity, especially in complex societies. We are also seeing increasing religious conflict between different societies today.

Question

Applying material from **Item A** and your knowledge, evaluate the view that, despite its claim to be the glue that holds society together, religion is more likely to be the cause of division and conflict. (20 marks)

Student answer by Ella

Functionalists claim that religion performs a vital role in society. Religion holds society together by offering a set of norms and values that people can live their lives by. Other sociologists, however, argue that religion is more often a source of division.

Functionalists have made a strong case for religion acting in a positive manner. Durkheim saw religion as providing the 'social cement' necessary if society is to survive. It creates stability, identity and a 'collective conscience'. When individuals share in the same religious rituals, ceremonies and beliefs, it creates unity in the social group. This also offers individuals an identity tied into that of the social group. The group shares the same set of common values that Durkheim saw as moral bonds through which individuals understand what is appropriate behaviour.

Other functionalists agree. Parsons puts religious values at the heart of the 'central value system'. To Parsons, religion has a major role to play in socialisation. Religion also helps people deal with psychological pressures. For example, Malinowski observed the Trobriand islanders. He noted that they have more rituals when fishing outside the lagoon. Ocean fishing is much more dangerous, so it is always accompanied by 'canoe magic' which gives people a feeling they have some control over events.

However, some sociologists suggest that functionalists have underestimated the negative aspects of religion. It may be that functionalist views of the role of religion are more correct about small-scale, traditional society than large-scale industrial societies.

Some argue that religion is now a major area of conflict. Huntington argues that there is a 'clash of civilisations'. He thinks Western civilisation, which is mainly Christian, is under threat from Islam. He claims this is the major conflict that will dominate the world over the coming years.

Marxists see religion as an ideological force that justifies and disguises division. Religion has sometimes justified even the most extreme forms of social division. Slavery in the USA was explained by a fundamentalist reference to early parts of the Old Testament, as was apartheid in South Africa. Hinduism legitimates the caste system of India. This ideological control is vital for the survival of the ruling class, as it is needed to blind people to the reality of their situation.

This introduction isn't much more than a re-statement of the question. It would be better to challenge the question – e.g. could religion be both 'social glue' in some cases and a cause of division in others?

A good summary of Durkheim's views. Ella maintains a focus on the issue of how religion may act as a force holding society together.

Ella touches on Parsons but needs to say more and link it to the question. Her account of canoe magic is accurate, but she needs to link it to whether religion acts as a social 'glue'.

A useful evaluative point that implies that the claim in the question may be true in some contexts, but not necessarily all.

Good to use a more recent theory to supplement the 'classical' theories such as Durkheim's.

This is quite a good paragraph, although it lacks a full explanation of the Marxist theory and relies instead on examples to make the point. It could use a wider range of Marxist concepts.

A potentially relevant example of religious conflict.

There are many examples of religion causing conflict. For example, sectarian violence in Northern Ireland shows that religion can be the basis of a lot of violence and division in society.

A fairly weak ending that really only re-states the question.

In conclusion, religion seems to operate in a variety of ways. In some cases it acts as a kind of social glue keeping society together. However, it is clear from the examples given that religion is capable of being the basis for division.

13/20

How to turn this into a top-mark answer

This is a reasonably good answer. Most of the content is relevant to the question, the examples given are appropriate and there are a few instances of explicit evaluation. The sociological content is also generally sound. However, there are several things Ella could do to boost her marks.

Feminist theories

One way to boost the 'division' side is to bring some feminist theory and evidence into the answer. You could discuss the role of patriarchal ideology as a source of division and a means of legitimating women's subordination. Use examples from different religions to illustrate this. You can also evaluate by reference to cases where religion does not appear to be patriarchal.

More concepts

Especially in the account of Marxism, Ella's answer would benefit from more concepts, such as class conflict, false class consciousness, alienation and exploitation. Whenever you are dealing with a major theory or perspective in an essay, you should identify and explain its key concepts and then apply them to the issues raised by the question.

The introduction and conclusion

Both the beginning and the end of the essay are weak. The issue of religion bringing about unity, division or both is not really opened up in the essay. It would be very useful to ask whether the claim is more true of multi-faith societies. Similarly, it could be argued that religion can function in both ways simultaneously – binding members of society together but also being the basis of conflict with other societies.

CHAPTER 2 CRIME AND DEVIANCE

1 Functionalist, strain and subcultural theories

Key Issues

- ▶ What functions might crime perform for society?
- ▶ How do blocked opportunities result in deviance?
- ▶ Why are there different types of delinquent subculture?
- ▶ What are the strengths and weaknesses of functionalist, strain and subcultural theories?

Analysis

You can demonstrate the skill of Analysis by showing how basic functionalist concepts such as these relate to the functionalist explanation of crime as inevitable and functional.

Application

You can apply Durkheim's ideas about anomic suicide to illustrate the concept of anomie. Describe how rapid change in modern society can result in suicide as norms become unclear.

Application

You can apply Stan Cohen's ideas about how the media create and condemn 'folk devils' (see Topic 7) to illustrate this view of crime and deviance.

Durkheim's functionalist theory of crime

Functionalists see society as a stable system based on value consensus – shared norms, values, beliefs and goals. This produces social solidarity, binding individuals together into a harmonious unit. To achieve this, society has two key mechanisms:

- ▶ **Socialisation** instils the shared culture into its members to ensure that they internalise the same norms and values, and that they feel it right to act in the ways that society requires.
- ▶ **Social control** mechanisms include rewards (positive sanctions) for conformity, and punishments (negative sanctions) for deviance.

Crime is inevitable and universal

While crime disrupts social stability, functionalists see it as inevitable and universal. Durkheim sees crime as a normal part of all healthy societies:

- ▶ In every society, some individuals are inadequately socialised and prone to deviate.
- ▶ In modern societies, there is a highly specialised division of labour and a diversity of subcultures. Individuals and groups become increasingly different from one another, and the shared rules of behaviour become less clear. Durkheim calls this *anomie* (normlessness).

The functions of crime

For Durkheim, crime fulfils two important positive functions:

1 Boundary maintenance

- ▶ Crime produces a reaction from society, uniting its members against the wrongdoer and reinforcing their commitment to the value consensus.
- ▶ This is the function of punishment: to reaffirm shared rules and reinforce solidarity. E.g. courtroom rituals publicly stigmatise offenders, reminding everyone of the boundary between right and wrong.

9 Control, punishment and victims

Key Issues

- ▶ What are the main crime prevention, surveillance and control strategies and how effective are they?
- ▶ What are the main perspectives on punishment? What are the main trends in sentencing?
- ▶ Who is likely to be a victim and what can sociologists tell us about victimisation?

Crime prevention and control

There are several approaches to crime prevention. These raise the issue of social control – the capacity of societies to regulate behaviour.

1 Situational crime prevention (SCP)

- ▶ SCP strategies are a pre-emptive approach that relies on reducing opportunities for crime. They target specific crimes by managing or altering the environment and aim at increasing the risks of committing crime and reducing the rewards.
- ▶ ‘Target hardening’ measures include locking doors, security guards, re-shaping the environment to ‘design crime out’ of an area.
- ▶ Underlying SCP is rational choice theory: the idea that criminals act rationally, weighing up the risks and rewards of a crime opportunity. (See Topic 4.)
- ▶ SCP measures may simply displace crime, moving it to different places, times, victims, types of crime etc.
- ▶ This approach may explain opportunistic petty street crime but not white-collar, corporate and state crime. The assumption that criminals make rational calculations may not be true of violent and drug-related crimes.

2 Environmental crime prevention

Wilson and Kelling argue that ‘broken windows’ (signs of disorder, e.g. graffiti, begging, littering, vandalism) that are not dealt with send out a signal that no one cares, prompting a spiral of decline.

- ▶ An absence of both formal social control (police) and informal control (community) means members of the community feel intimidated and powerless.
- ▶ The solution is to crack down on any disorder through an *environmental improvement strategy* (e.g. abandoned cars promptly towed away) and a *zero tolerance policing strategy*. This will halt neighbourhood decline and prevent serious crime taking root.

3 Social and community crime prevention

Rather than emphasising policing, these strategies emphasise dealing with the social conditions that predispose some individuals to future crime.

- ▶ Because poverty is a cause of crime, general social policies may have a crime prevention role; e.g. full employment policies are likely to reduce crime as a ‘side effect’.
- ▶ The Perry pre-school project in Michigan gave an experimental group of disadvantaged 3-4 year olds a two-year intellectual enrichment programme. The longitudinal study following their progress into adulthood showed far fewer arrests for violent crime, property crime and drugs compared with peers not in the project.

Analysis

Explain how some of these reduce crime; e.g. CCTV increases the effort a burglar needs to make.

Evaluation

However, sometimes this approach does more than simply displacing crime or deviance; e.g. changing from coal gas to less toxic natural gas reduced total suicides – not just those from gassing.

Evaluation

Supporters claim that such policies in New York in the 1990s produced a significant fall in crime. However, critics claim that this was more to do with increasing police numbers and falling unemployment.

Analysis

These are longer-term strategies, attempting to tackle the root causes of offending, rather than the short-term removal of opportunities for crime.

CHAPTER 3 THEORY AND METHODS

1 Quantitative research methods

Key Issues

- ▶ What are the features of the main quantitative methods: experiments, questionnaires, structured interviews and official statistics?
- ▶ What are their practical, ethical and theoretical strengths and limitations?
- ▶ How useful are they in relation to the key methodological concerns of reliability, representativeness and validity?
- ▶ How useful are they in relation to issues of methodological and theoretical perspective, science, values and objectivity?

Positivism and quantitative methods

- ▶ Positivists argue that society is an objective social reality 'out there' that shapes our behaviour.
- ▶ Social forces create patterns in people's behaviour (e.g. the pattern of working-class educational underachievement). Positivists seek to discover laws of cause and effect that explain these patterns.
- ▶ They believe that sociological research should follow the model of the natural sciences to produce objective knowledge about society.
- ▶ They therefore use research methods that produce quantitative data (information in numerical or statistical form), such as experiments, questionnaires, structured interviews and official statistics.
- ▶ They argue that the structured nature of these methods means that the data produced is reliable and representative.

Experiments

There are three types of experiment to consider: laboratory experiments, field experiments and the comparative method or 'thought experiment'.

Laboratory experiments

The laboratory is an artificial environment where the researcher controls variables to discover their effect, with the aim of discovering a causal law.

Application

When writing about quantitative research methods, link them to these key ideas of positivism.

Practice Questions for A level

This section contains A level practice questions for Beliefs in Society, Crime and Deviance, and Theory and Methods. You can attempt them yourself and compare your answers with the Top Marks Answers and Examiner's Comments in the final section of this book.

You can also find A level practice questions for Education, Methods in Context, Families and Households, and Research Methods in the companion Napier Press book, *Succeed at A level Sociology Book One including AS level*.

Practice Questions for Beliefs in Society

Item A

Recent decades have seen the growth of New Age movements. Some sociologists see this as part of a trend away from secularisation. For example, the Kendal study found 1.6% of the population took part in New Age activities each week. In contrast to traditional religious organisations, New Age movements are loosely organised. The New Age has been described as 'self-religion' because it sees spirituality as a journey of discovery through which each individual finds his or her 'inner self'.

However, other sociologists believe that the growth of New Age movements is in fact evidence of secularisation.

Item B

There are important differences between social groups in terms of their religious involvement and belief. For example, women, the old and ethnic minorities are more likely to hold religious beliefs, be members of religious organisations and attend religious services.

Sociologists have offered a variety of explanations for these patterns. For example, it has been argued that women are more religious due to their caring role.

- Q1** Outline and explain **two** functions that religion could be said to carry out. (10 marks)
- Q2** Applying material from **Item A**, analyse **two** reasons why the growth of New Age movements may be evidence of secularisation. (10 marks)
- Q3** Applying material from **Item B** and your knowledge, evaluate sociological explanations for gender, ethnic and age differences in religious belief, membership and practice. (20 marks)

Top Marks Answers

This section contains full mark answers to all the A level practice questions in the previous section (in the same order as they appeared there), along with Examiner's Comments on them to show you how they got their marks.

Answers to Beliefs in Society Questions

Q1

One of the functions that religion could be said to carry out is that of social integration. From a functionalist perspective, it is essential that all individuals feel themselves to be part of society, since this enables them to cooperate to meet the needs of the social system. As Durkheim argues, religion makes people feel the power of something greater than themselves, which they may perceive as God but Durkheim argues is actually society. Likewise, religion lays down a moral code which is the basis for society's shared norms and values. For example, the Ten Commandments set out rules for all to follow. Without a shared code, social life would be impossible and society would fragment and disintegrate as each individual pursued their own self-interest.

A second function that religion may be said to carry out is that of legitimating inequality. For example, Marxists argue that religious ideas justify the inequalities that capitalism creates by saying that they are God's will and offering spiritual comfort to the poor with promises of rewards in heaven. This provides consolation for the alienation and exploitation they suffer, or as Lenin describes it, 'spiritual gin' to drown their sorrows in. Similarly, Weber's concept of a theodicy of disprivilege or religious justification for suffering explains why the poor are more attracted to sects, which promise spiritual rewards in the afterlife to compensate for inequality on earth. As well as class inequality, religious doctrines can justify gender inequality by stating that women are subordinate to men. Religion has also been used to justify slavery by claiming that God made different races unequal.

10/10

Examiner's Comments

Two relevant functions are identified and then clearly explained, using a range of suitable concepts and studies.

Q2

Secularisation refers to the decline in religious belief, practice (fewer attending places of worship), and power or influence of religious institutions (e.g. over education, politics, culture etc). One reason why the growth of New Age movements may in fact be evidence of secularisation is because in reality it is very limited. As Item A says, only 1.6% of the population are involved in New Age practices in a given week. So while traditional religion is declining, it still has more supporters than the New Age (in Kendal it was almost five times more). Bruce argues that it is also unlikely to grow, because a belief system needs to socialise the next generation if it is to survive and grow, yet in Kendal under a third of New Agers' children actually shared their parents' beliefs.

A second reason why the growth of the New Age might be evidence of secularisation is the nature of the beliefs. As the term 'self-religion' (Item A) suggests, the New Age is very individualistic. Its basic belief is that whatever is true for you, is true, and you are free to believe what you like. No-one else (such as traditional churches) can tell you what is true. As a result, the New Age has no set of beliefs and practices that all must share (unlike the Catholic Church, for example) or that members must go out and convert people to (unlike many traditional sects). This means it has no cohesion and its various movements tend to be short-lived, almost fads. Beliefs are rarely held with great conviction, and although many people dabble in yoga, crystals etc, few take them seriously.

10/10