

Dear Candidate, as per theme-based approach, please try to link the topics of Paper I with those of Paper II. This will not only facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the given topic but also enhance your analytical and articulation skills.

Paper I. Topic 8. Religion and Society

Paper II. C. (iv). (d) Secularization

Paper II. C. (v). (e) Ethnicity and Identity Movements

*Refer **Handout** from **IGNOU** for the topic Ethnicity and Identity Movements

Sociological Theories of Religion
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Handout: Ch-11 Religion

Book: *Sociology – Themes and Perspectives* by Haralambos and Heald (Orange Colour Book)

Religion and science

*Science without religion is lame,
religion without science is blind.*

- **Albert Einstein**

According to Emile Durkheim, the essence of religion is a division of the world into the sacred and profane. The sacred is non- utilitarian and non-empirical in nature. Science, on the other hand, refers to a systematic body of certified and changing knowledge which is based upon observable and verifiable facts and the methods used to acquire this knowledge. Science is thus utilitarian and based on empirical observation (fact), while religion transcends empiricism and is based on faith.

British anthropologist, **James G. Frazer** in his major work *The Golden Bough* traced the gradual evolution of human thought, progressing from magic, through religion, to science. According to Frazer, the highest stage of cultural evolution is characterised by replacement of religious beliefs by scientific knowledge.

Religion and science, as alternate cognitive systems, offer explanations about the nature of reality and its aspects, both known and unknown. Religion and science generally pursue knowledge of the universe using different methodologies. Science acknowledges reason, empiricism and evidence, while religion includes revelation, faith and sacredness. In certain aspects, these explanations appear to be contradictory while in others they are complementary to each other.

The contradiction is rooted in the fact that the boundary between the known and unknown is the shifting one, given the rapid advancements in science and technology. What was unknown yesterday is known today. In the modern world, science has replaced many of the religious interpretations of the nature of the universe with tested – or potentially testable – rational theories. For example, the literal account of creation of universe in the Bible is challenged and supplanted by the finding of geology and the theory of evolution. **Copernicus** demolished the hypothesis of the geocentric (Earth-centred) universe and in its place he advanced the **heliocentric (Sun-centred) theory of universe**.

Further, the contradiction also underlies the orientation that guides these two cognitive systems. While religion is particularistic and collectivist, science tends to be universalistic and individualistic in nature. For example, religions such as Catholicism, Islam and Hinduism are largely collectivist in nature and repress heretical ideas.

However, religion has not always been hostile to science. As **Merton** argues that the ‘golden age’ of science, the 17th century in England, was brought about partly by the influence of the protestant ideas. **Weber** too, in his work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* argues that an inner worldly-ascetic religious ideology leads to the rationalisation of social life and hence encourages individualism and secularisation in society, which in turn facilitates growth of science. Similarly, **Durkheim** and **Parsons** too argued that modern industrial societies, characterised by high degree of division of labour, and marked by rapid advancements in science and technology, would increasingly have secular institutions as the basis of their integration.

Answering to the debate on religion and science in modern societies, sociologist **Robin Williams** argued that ‘**neither mass religiosity nor complete secularisation appear to be permanent historical possibilities**’. There is good reason to believe that religion will never be at the center of modern societies, as it had been in almost every past society. **The rise of scientific secularism has not destroyed religion as some feared. Instead, people’s need for reassurance and meaning has endured, and interest in religion now appears to be at a high level. While religious forms may change, religion survives.** There are human needs which only religion can fulfil. Despite phenomenal achievements of science, religion may become more important to people in modern society, in lending emotional support, giving a deeper meaning to their values, and helping them to express ultimate concern and commitment.

To conclude it may be argued that despite the differences in orientations and methodologies, religion and science can play complementary function in modern societies. While on one hand, science, through its empirical research can help modify and correct various religious assumptions about the nature of physical and social reality, religion, on the other hand, can act as a moral guideline to scientific research. Science and scientific inventions can best serve the mankind when subjected to the moral force called religion.

Secularization

Secularism is a modern value and is understood as the anti-thesis of communalism. Secularism as an ideology emerged from the dialectic of modern science and religious reformation in modern Europe.

However, in contemporary debates, the concept of secularism is subjected to two different interpretations. These two interpretations are that of secularism as the **separation of state and religion**, and secularism as **equality of all religions**.

The first interpretation holds that –

- a) the state shall not concern itself with religious beliefs, practices and institutions;
- b) that the state shall not be associated with a particular religion;
- c) that the state shall permit freedom of conscience, belief and religion for all its citizens; and
- d) that the state shall not discriminate between citizens on the basis of their religious beliefs.

This understanding of secularism comes to us from the history of Western Europe, during the course of which the domain of state policy and that of religion was separated. In particular, it has come to us from the U.S.A., in the formulation of President Thomas Jefferson that a ‘wall of separation’ exists between the state and religion. Jefferson in effect referred to the First Amendment to the constitution of the U.S.A. The Establishment Clause in the First Amendment prohibits the establishment of a national religion by the Congress, and prohibits preference for one religion over another. The clause also meant that government should not prefer one religion to another, or religion to irreligion. The second part of the clause, known as the ‘Free Exercise Clause’, states that the Congress cannot prohibit the free exercise of religion. The freedom to believe is part of the general grant of freedom to expression, assembly, and association.

The second interpretation of secularism was generated in and through the Indian historical experience; that the state shall treat all religious groups equally.

Secularization, according to **Peter Berger**, is the “process by which sectors of society are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols”. The process indicates the decline in the religious permeation of other social institutions. It also refers to the process through which religion’s influence on other institutions diminishes. It emphasizes that religion should be delimited to the private sphere of individual and family life. At the same time, other social institutions, such as economy, politics and education, maintain their set of norms independent of religions guidance.

According to **Bryan Wilson**, “secularization is a process in which religious thinking, practice and institutions lose social significance”. Secularization doesn’t necessarily imply that people have become areligious or anti-religious, or that religion has disappeared from both the public domain and the domain of personal life. What it does imply is that religion is just one, and not necessarily the most important, way in which people understand themselves and their relationships.

Secularization may be said to consist fundamentally of two related transformations in human thinking. The first is the ‘**desacralization**’ of the attitude towards persons and things. Desacralization is a process in which there is a decline in the overarching religious symbolism for the integration of society and in which an understanding of human beings and their society is no longer stated primarily in religious terms. Secondly, it is a move from supernatural to rational explanation. There is the **rationalisation of thought**; rationalisation implies a cognitive attitude relatively free from emotion, and the use of logic rather than an emotional symbolism to organize thought.

In the contemporary world, one can point to evidence both in favour of and against the idea of secularization. It is widely accepted by social scientists that the dominant trend in most western societies is towards secularization. There is fair enough evidence to suggest a steady decline in formal religious observances. Nowadays fewer people are visiting churches regularly, they are moving away from supernaturalism. **Advocates of secularization hypothesis argue that secularization has been de-institutionalizing the religion. In the modern world, the rational perspective of science becomes a major organizing belief for a secular and increasingly rationalized society.**

However, the critics of the secularization hypothesis argue that though it is a fact that old type of religiosity (attending churches regularly and the intensity of religious feelings) seem to be decreasing but its manifestation in other forms is heavily increasing. **Critics of secularization hypothesis talk about religious revivalism.** More and more religious activities (religious festivals, rites, rituals, ceremonies, rallies, etc.) are being performed with much pomp and show and with

much attendance of the followers. In the last few decades many new places of worship (church, temples, mosque, etc.) have been constructed and many new religious organizations with great paraphernalia have cropped up. Religious texts are being reinterpreted and new rituals are being added or given new shape to suit their circumstances.

An important development in religious life has been the dramatic rise of religious programming (performance of religious ceremonies, delivering religious discourses, sermons and prayers, etc.) in the electronic media. Organizing religious rallies and performing religious functions in public have increased tremendously. Religious personalities and groups have realized that the mass media represents an effective means of spreading religious values. Technological advances such as Television, Cable Television, Satellite transmission, etc., have facilitated the rise of ‘**e-religion**’. Aastha and Sanskar are the two new and important television channels which relay such religious programmes regularly at appointed times. These channels are most popular among Hindus. Besides these, there are many other television channels which relay religious programmes of different faiths. The audience of these religious programmes is increasing day by day.

Increase in this type of religious consciousness may be said to be the by-product of modern life which is full of stress and strains, pulls and pressures, great competitiveness and uncertainty. Modern religious activities and observances give some solace to the people torn by the exigencies of modern life. People visit temples or churches for getting fast blessings just like fast food. To use the phrase of **Thorstein Veblen** - ‘conspicuous consumption’ - we may call modern religiousness as ‘**conspicuous religiosity**’.

Critics further argue that religion in the late modern world should be evaluated against a backdrop of rapid change, instability and diversity. Even if traditional forms of religion are receding to a degree, religion still remains a critical force in our social world. The appeal of religion, in its traditional and novel forms, is likely to be long lasting. Religion provides many people with insights into complex questions about life and meaning that cannot be answered satisfactorily with rationalistic perspectives. It is not surprising then, that during these times of rapid change, many people look for and find answers and calm in religion. Fundamentalism is perhaps the clearest example of this phenomenon. Yet, increasingly, religious responses to change are occurring in new and unfamiliar forms such as new religious movements, cults and sects. While these groups may not ‘look-like’ forms of religion on the surface, many critics of secularization hypothesis believe that they represent transformations of religious belief in the face of social change (**religious pluralism**).

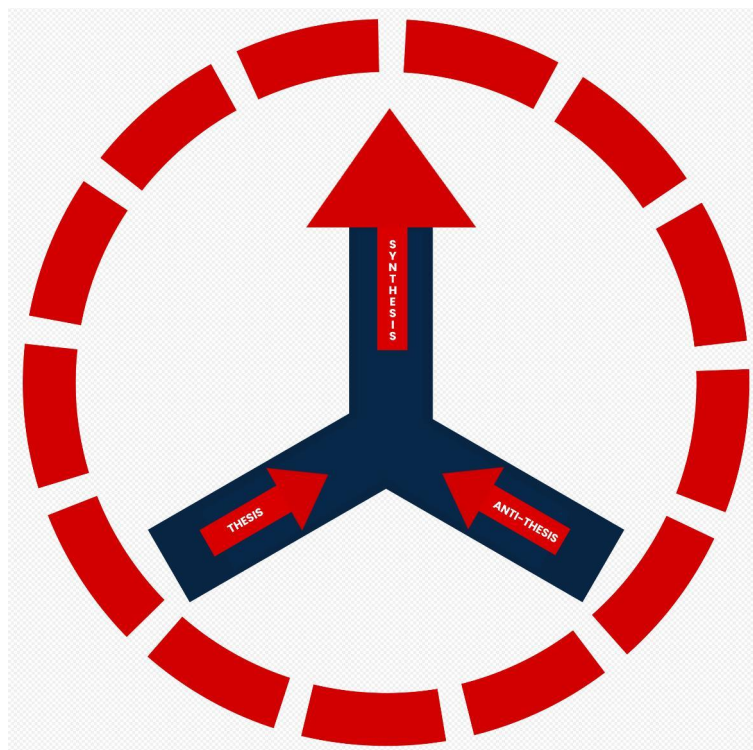
Critics also argue that secularization has not affected modern societies uniformly. There seems to be little evidence of secularization in non-western societies. In many areas of Middle East, Asia and Africa, trends of religious revivalism, fundamentalism, and communalism can be identified.

S.C. Dube argues that in the process of secularization, religion loses control over several fields of social activities such as economy, trade, education, medicine and so on. Many of the traditional functions of the religions are taken care of by secular institutions. But secularism varies from society to society. India perhaps has failed to develop diversified institutions that may take over the traditional functions of religion (remember **Durkheim**). As such, it remains communal, and religious beliefs continue to prevail.

To conclude it may be said that although the influence of religion definitely has declined, religion is certainly not on the verge of disappearing, and continues to unite as well as divide people in the modern world.

Anti-thesis of secularization:

- Religion as an ideology of protest
- Religious fundamentalism
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Religious Fundamentalism

According to **Schaefer** and **Lamm**, the term ‘fundamentalism’ refers to strict adherence to a set of principles or beliefs and is often accompanied by a literal application of historical beliefs and scriptures to today’s world.

Religious fundamentalism is one of the forms of religious revivalism. But not every religious revivalism is fundamentalist in character. Religious fundamentalism describes the approach taken by religious groups which call for the literal interpretation of basic scriptures or texts and believe that the doctrines which emerge from such reading should be applied to all aspects of social, economic and political life. Religious fundamentalists believe that only one view - their own - of the world is possible and that this view is the correct one: there is no room for ambiguity or multiple interpretations. The term ‘fundamentalist’ refers to those who oppose any kind of deviation from religious orthodoxy.

Religious fundamentalism is also defined as a movement called for a return to the basic texts or ‘fundamentals’ of revealed religion. It encourages ‘fixed identities’ where ‘slippages are suppressed’ and ‘sameness is prized’. It is commonly associated with the attempt to revive archaic modes of conduct and belief from the past. It is usually contrasted with modernism and liberalism in religion. It emphasizes the absolute truth of essential or ‘fundamental’ aspects of faith, especially those rooted in sacred texts such as the Christian Bible, the Islamic Quran or the Vedas of Hindus. These new trends in religion are sometimes termed as ‘**resurgent fundamentalism**’, meaning the revival of a conservative approach to religion.

Religious fundamentalism is a relatively new phenomenon. It is only in the last two to three decades that the term has entered common usage. **It has arisen largely in response to globalization. As the forces of modernization progressively undermine traditional institutions of social organizations – such as family, community – fundamentalism has arisen in defence of traditional belief system.** Please note that in the traditional societies, family, kinship, community, etc., served as a source of identity for the individual and the group as well as an agency for social solidarity social control.

Hints:

Modernization – the term ‘modernization’ implies the **rational transformation of social, psychological, economic and political aspects of society**

– the process of modernization can either be an **indigenous process** – as in the case of western European societies – Renaissance – Scientific Revolution – Enlightenment – hence, modernization was a gradual process – allowed the various subsystems of society to develop, adapt and gradually evolve – without any drastic changes or major upheavals – alternative secular institutions evolved to take over the functions of social solidarity and social control that were performed earlier by the traditional institutions such as religion, family, kinship, etc.

– or, by **diffusion of ideas** or **acculturation** – as in the case of most of the third world societies – when the liberal ideas of equality, liberty, democracy, secularism, social justice, etc., of the west were introduced in the traditional societies which were deeply rooted in particularistic values and dominated by traditional institutions of religion, caste, race, ethnicity, family, kinship, etc. – it lead to **contra-acculturative response** in the form of religious fundamentalism – a reaction to foreign ideas which challenged the core values of the traditional culture and threatened the traditional basis of social solidarity and social control as well as leading to the **identity crisis** of the individuals or the social group – for example, India – which is marked by strong religious sentiments and particularistic values – manifested in the form of religious fundamentalism, communalism, caste-conflict, vote-bank politics, etc.

– relate it to the concepts of **alienation** (Marx), **anomie** (Durkheim), **structural strain** (Parsons and Merton), **formal and substantive rationality** (Weber).

According to **Anthony Giddens**, religious fundamentalism can be understood in two ways:

1. **revival of ‘fundamentals’** – a conservative attempt in response to the moral crisis in society – degeneration of lifestyle.

For example, the growth of Christian fundamentalist religious organizations in the UK and Europe, but particularly marked in the United States, is one of the most notable features of the past few decades. Fundamentalists believe that ‘the Bible, quite bluntly, is a workable guidebook for politics, government, business, families, and all of the affairs of mankind. The Bible is taken as infallible by fundamentalists – its contents are expressions of the Divine Truth. Fundamentalist Christians believed in the divinity of Christ and the possibility of the salvation of one’s soul through the acceptance of Christ as personal saviour. Fundamentalist Christians are committed to spreading their message and converting those who have not yet adopted the same beliefs.

Christian fundamentalism is a reaction against liberal theology and supporters of secular humanism – those who favour the emancipation of reason, desires and instincts in opposition to faith and obedience to God’s command.

According to **Anthony Giddens**, Christian fundamentalism emerged in response to ‘moral crisis’ wrought by modernization – the decline of traditional family, the threat to individual morality and the weakening of relationship between man and God.

For example, in the United States, Reverend Jerry Falwell’s group **Moral Majority** (1970s) – later, in the United States, some fundamentalist groups became increasingly involved in what has been termed as the ‘**New Right Movement**’ – some other fundamentalist groups in USA – **Southern Baptist Convention, Assemblies of God**, etc.

2. as a **contra–acculturative response** – to rapid and uneven modernization in the societies of the third world.

Dear Candidate, **acculturation** refers to the modification of the culture of a group or an individual through contact with one or more other cultures and the acquiring or exchanging of culture traits. In other words, it refers to the process whereby an individual or a group acquires the cultural characteristics of another through direct contact and interaction. From an individual point of view this is a process of social learning. From a social point of view acculturation implies the

diffusion of particular values, techniques and institutions and their modification under different conditions. It may give rise to culture conflict and to adaptation leading to a modification of group identity. Some scholars defined acculturation as ‘those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into first hand contact, with subsequent change in the original cultural patterns of both groups.

Religious fundamentalism is more a characteristic feature of the traditional societies of the third world which are undergoing through a process of modernization, as a result of westernization and globalization. Religious fundamentalism can be better understood as a contra- acculturative response to the rapid and uneven modernization in the third world societies. This process can best be understood with the help of the concept of **cultural lag** given by **William F. Ogburn**.

The concept of cultural lag was introduced by Ogburn who applied it especially to modern industrial societies in which the **material culture** through rapid advances in technology and science has developed at much faster pace than the **non –material culture** (ideas, value, etc.) which regulates the man’s adjustment to the material culture. The concept of ‘cultural lag’ suggests that there is a gap between the technical development of society and its moral and legal institutions. The failure of latter to keep pace with the former in certain societies is cited as the basic factor to explain social conflict and social problems.

According to Anthony Giddens, for example, Islamic fundamentalism plainly cannot be understood wholly in religious terms; it represents in part a reaction against the impact of the west and is a movement of national or cultural assertion. For example, the Islamic revolution in Iran (1979) was fuelled initially by internal opposition to the Shah of Iran who had accepted and tried to promote forms of modernization modeled on the west – for example, land reforms, extending the voting rights to women, secular education, etc. The most prominent leader of the Islamic revolution in Iran was Ayatollah Khomeini who provided a radical reinterpretation of Shiite ideas. Following the revolution, Khomeini established a government organised according to traditional Islamic law. Religion, as specified in the holy Quran, became the direct basis of all political and economic life. Under Islamic law – *sharia* – as it was revived, men and women are kept rigorously segregated, women are obliged to cover their bodies and heads in public, practicing homosexuals are sent to the firing squads and adulterers were stoned to death. The strict code is accompanied by a very nationalistic outlook, which sets itself especially against Western influences. The aim of the Islamic republic in Iran was to Islamize the state – to organize government and society so that Islamic teachings would become dominant in all spheres.

Fundamentalism is sociologically important not only because of its unique place among religions, but because it easily extends itself into political realm. There is an increasing entanglement of religion in politics around the globe. Despite its theological character, it is usually linked to projects of social reform and the acquisition of political power. In Middle East (Iran), Iraq, Afghanistan and more recently Egypt, Syria, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, many countries of Europe and even that the most modernized the United States of America and to some extent India, religious fundamentalism has affected the political process and has given rise to conservative political movements and blind faith in nationalism.

Religious fundamentalists oppose secularization of society on one or the other basis. They sometimes even question about the removal of certain chapters from educational books. In recent years, there has been increasing effort by fundamentalists to censor books used in school curricula. In Islam, fundamentalists issue *fatwa* against those who go against the principle of Islam. For example, Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran issued one such *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie, the writer of *The Satanic Verses* in 1989. There have been several deaths apparently related to the *fatwa* at many places. In Britain and in some European countries, male Sikhs had come into conflict for wearing turban in public. Recently in France girls were banned to wear *burqua* in the school premises.

Fundamentalism is associated with a militant and sometimes violent attitude to enforcing 'moral purity' as defined by the fundamentalists. Frequently, fundamentalists seek to use the state to establish and enforce what they see as morality as we had seen in Taliban and Al-Qaeda (fundamentalist organizations) which controlled Afghanistan a few years back. Recently, some fundamentalist organizations banned yoga exercises in Far East countries like Indonesia. In Pakistan, a girl of sixteen years, Malala, was attacked by the fundamentalist organizations for attending school. Fundamentalist organizations compel people to act according to the respective religious doctrines rather than the state laws.

It is very interesting and striking that fundamentalists are using latest modern communication technology such as T.V., Radio, Internet, etc., to disseminate their ideas. While religious leaders directly attack many core values of the secular world, they are nevertheless willing to use its artifacts in their spiritual campaigns.

Sociologist **James Hunter** (1983) argues that fundamentalists see 'technology as either neutral and thus not challenging to their faith, or positive – as a gift of god to further his work on earth – and thus, an enhancement to faith.'

Sects and Cults

Early theorists such as Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch and Richard Niebuhr describe religious organizations as falling along a continuum, based on the degree to which they are well established and conventional. Churches lie at one end (they are conventional and well established), cults lie at the other (they are neither) and sects fall somewhere in the middle.

Ernst Troeltch in 1931 was one of the first writers to try to distinguish different types of religious organizations. Troeltsch's original categorization of religious organizations included only churches and sects.

Features of Church:

- Church is a large, well-established religious body, like the Roman Catholic or the Church of England.
- Most often, membership is acquired by birth.
- Churches normally have a formal, bureaucratic structure, with a hierarchy of religious officials.
- Churches are likely to be ideologically conservative and support the status quo.
- 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 the state.

Features of Sects:

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

- Sects are smaller and more strongly integrated than other religious organizations.
- Unlike church, sects are not closely connected to the state.
- Membership of the sect is largely drawn from the deprived sections of the society, or at least with those elements in society which are opposed to the state and society.
- Far from being conservative, sect rejects the dominant values of the society.
- 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.

- 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. Thus, do not entertain alternative ideologies and hence are intolerant of dissent.
- Unlike church which is governed by paid officials, sects quite often are founded and governed by a charismatic leader.
- For example, Calvinist and Methodists, in their early years of formation.

Please note that other authors have further developed the church/sect typology as originally set out by Weber and Troeltsch. One of these is **Howard Becker**, who added two further types: the **denomination** and the **cult**.

A **denomination** is a sect which has ‘cooled down’ and become an institutionalised body rather than an active protest group. Sects which survive any period of time inevitably become denominations. Thus Calvinism and Methodism were sects during their early formation, when they generated great fervour among their members; but over the years they have become more ‘respectable’. Denominations are recognized as more or less legitimate by churches and exist alongside them, quite often cooperating harmoniously with them.

The Life Cycle of Sects

H. R. Niebuhr made a number of observations about the way in which religious sects changed over time. Niebuhr 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. Niebuhr advanced the following arguments to support this view.

Firstly, when a sect is initially formed, its membership is based on voluntary commitment. Hence the initial members are highly committed to the values of the sects. However, later generations would not be able to sustain the fervour of the first generation and may become moderate and accommodative over time.

Secondly, 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.

Thirdly, Niebuhr argued that the ideology of many sects contained the seeds of their own destructions. 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 become 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 denomination.

However, Bryan Wilson rejects Niebuhr's view that sects are inevitably short-lived. Wilson points out that some sects do survive for a long time without becoming denominations. Wilson concludes that a sect's prescription for salvation is a major factor in determining whether or not it becomes a denomination. In other words, sects which do not compromise their ideology tend to last longer, for example, Adventist sects.

Adventist sects await the Second Coming of Christ, who will judge humanity and establish a new world order. Only sect membership will generate a place in the new order. Adventist sects exclude those who follow conventional religion. Adventist 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 premise. Separation from the world and denominationalism are not compatible.

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provided that you
Study Sociology Systematically

Cults

According to **Steve Bruce**, Troeltch 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 ‘**cult**’. According to Bruce, a cult may be defined 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. Like sects, cults quite often form around an inspirational leader. Instances of cults in the West today would include groups of believers in spiritualism, astrology or transcendental meditation.

It should be obvious that what is a cult in one country may well be an established religious practice in another. When Indian gurus (religious teachers) bring their beliefs into the United Kingdom (UK), what might be considered an established religion in India is regarded as a cult in the UK.

Rodney Stark and **William Sims Bainbridge** argue that sects are groups that are formed as an offshoot of an existing religion as a result of division or schism within that religion. 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 practiced. 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 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
- for example: Scientology – offers its clients the opportunity to clear ‘engrams’ (repressed memories of painful experiences) from the brain
- for example: 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

Reasons for the Growth of Sects and Cults:

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. Despite this, most existing sects and cults originated in the twentieth century and the 1960s in particular saw the appearance of many new organizations.

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 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 or 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.

Relative Deprivation

Relative deprivation refers to subjectively perceived deprivation: that which people actually feel. Stark and Bainbridge 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.

Social Change

A member of sociologists, such as Bryan Wilson, 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.

Steve Bruce attributes the development of a range of religious institutions including sects and cults to a general process of modernization and secularization. As modern societies developed and faith in traditional sources of authority (such as churches) declined, religious pluralism and diversity were increasingly tolerated.

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----- **Dialectics IAS (Sociology)** -----

Dear Candidate, please also refer the following articles/chapters for a comprehensive coverage of the topic on **Religion and Society** for both Paper I as well as Paper II.

Handout: Ch – 19 Religion and Society

(Book: *Sociology of Indian Society* by C.N. Shankar Rao)

Handout: Religion: Concepts and Characteristics

(Book: *Indian Society and Culture* by Vinita Pandey)

Handout: Religions of India (T.N. Madan)

(Book: *Oxford Handbook of Indian Sociology* by Veena Das)

Handout: Religious Diversity and Nation State (Surinder S. Jodhka)

(Book: *Culture and Economic Transformation* by Surjit Singh and Surinder S. Jodhka)

Handout: Sects and Indian Religions (Lawrence A. Babb)

(Book: *Oxford Handbook of Indian Sociology* by Veena Das)

UPSC: Previous Years' Questions

Paper I 8. Religion and society

Paper II B. (vi) Religion and society

C. (vii). (e) Ethnic conflicts, communalism, religious revivalism

Q. What is the nature of relationship between science and religion in modern society? Analyze with suitable examples. (2025/10)

Q. How do religious communities contribute to the cultural diversity of India? (2024/20)

Q. How do you understand the phenomena of the mushrooming of sects and cults in contemporary society? Discuss the factors responsible for the trend. (2024/20)

Q. How does a multicultural society accommodate diversities of all kinds—ethnic, linguistic, and religious? Discuss its major challenges. (2024/20)

Q. Do modernization and secularization necessarily go together? Give your views. (2024/20)

Q. How do you account for the increasing significance of religion in public and personal spheres in the context of secularization thesis in India? (2023/20)

Q. What are new religious movements? Elaborate emphasizing their forms and orientations. (2023/20)

Q. What functions does religion perform in a pluralistic society? (2023/10)

Q. Define ethnicity. Discuss the factors responsible for the growth of ethnic movements in India. (2022/20)

Q. Discuss the problems of religious minorities in India and suggest measures to solve them. (2022/10)

Q. Rising 'ethnocentrism' is leading to conflict in our society. Assess this statement with appropriate reasons. (2021/20)

Q. Discuss the role of social media in communal polarization. Suggest ways to combat it. (2021/20)

Q. Write a note on 'cultural pluralism' in multi-religious society like India. (2020/10)

Q. "Secularism was an outcome of 20th century humanistic radicalism." Comment. (2020/10)

Q. Explain the growing salience of ethnicity in the contemporary world with illustrations. (2021/10)

Q. Critically compare the views of E.B. Tylor and Max Muller on religion. (2021/10)

Q. What is cult? Explain the growth of cults in the contemporary world. (2021/10)

Q. Give your comments on the growth of religious revivalism in the present day context. (2021/10)

----- **Dialectics IAS (Sociology)** -----

- Q. State the reasons for the various religious beliefs and practices in pre-modern societies. (2020/20)
- Q. Are all world religions patriarchal? Substantiate your answer with examples. (2019/20)
- Q. Do you think that the Indian saints have brought about social reform and awareness in Indian society? Explain. (2019/10)
- Q. What is ethno-nationalism? Examine the critical factors responsible for tribal discontent in India. (2019/20)
- Q. How do you understand the 'minority' question? Examine the violence and discrimination against the religious minorities in India. (2019/20)
- Q. What are sects? Discuss their role in multi-religious societies with empirical examples. (2018/20)
- Q. In what way did Durkheim perceive religion as functional to society? (2018/10)
- Q. Discuss the challenges thrown by religious revivalism to a secular nation-state? (2018/10)
- Q. Assess the impact of ban on 'Triple Talak' on marriage and divorce among the Muslim community in India. (2018/10)
- Q. Write a critical narrative on the concerns of religious minorities in India. (2018/20)
- Q. Discuss the growth of religious sects in India. (2018/10)
- Q. With increase in education and economic development is Indian society becoming more secular? (2018/10)
- Q. Give an assessment of Durkheimian notion of 'sacred' and 'profane' in sociology of religion. (2017/10)
- Q. What is Cultural Revivalism? Give some examples from performing arts, language dissemination and arts and crafts in recent times? (2017/20)
- Q. Problematised the concept of secularism in the present context. (2017/10)
- Q. Elaborate on various types of religious practices prevalent in Indian society. (2017/10)
- Q. What are the distinct features of Islam as practiced in India, and how have they changed over time? (2017/10)
- Q. The main objective of socio-religious movement during the colonial rule in India were reforming and synthesizing Hinduism. Write any two such important movements. (2017/20)
- Q. To what extent does nation building depend on strengthening of pluralities in Indian society? (2017/20)

----- Dialectics IAS (Sociology) -----

- Q. Is religion playing an important role in increasing fundamentalism? Give reasons for your answer. (2016/10)
- Q. "Religious pluralism is the order of present-day societies." Explain by giving suitable examples. (2016/20)
- Q. Elucidate the concepts of 'majoritarianism' and 'minoritarianism' in accentuating communal tensions in India? (2016/20)
- Q. Distinguish between sects and cults with illustrations. (2015/10)
- Q. What are the major concerns of ethnic identity and religious identity in India? (2015/20)
- Q. What are the basic tenets of Hindu religion? Is Hinduism based on monotheism or polytheism? (2015/20)
- Q. How is religious revivalism different from communalism? Elaborate with suitable examples from the Indian context. (2014/20)
- Q. Gandhi's efforts on communal harmony (2014/10)
- Q. Discuss the problems of religious minorities in India. (2014/20)
- Q. Is religion antithetical to science? Comment. (2013/10)
- Q. "Science has empirical means to logical ends and religion has non-empirical means to logical ends." Comment. (2013/10)
- Q. Analyse the role of communalism in undermining democracy in India. (2013/15)
- Q. Examine the impact of secularization on various religious communities in India. (2012/30)
- Q. Discuss the factors leading to growing religious revivalism in the contemporary world. (2012/20)
- Q. Write short note on Cultural Pluralism from a sociological perspective. (2011/12)
- Q. Define sect, cult and religion. In what way do Weber's views on religion differ from those of Durkheim? (2011/20)
- Q. How are the issues of ethnicity and nationalism related? Discuss in the context of the emergence of ethnonationalism in India. (2011/30)
- Q. Write short note with a sociological perspective on The Parsi community and its contribution to Indian society. (2010/20)
- Q. Examine the social dimensions of religious revivalism and fundamentalism in the context of globalization. (2010/30)
- Q. Write short note on Positive Religion. (2010/15)
- Q. "Science has empirical means to logical ends and religion has non-empirical means to logical ends." Comment. (2010/15)
- Q. "Science without religion is lame. Religion without science is blind." Comment on this statement critically in the light of emerging sociological contexts in Europe, USA and India. (2009/60)
- Q. Write short note on Secularization of societies in the modern world. (2009/20)

----- **Dialectics IAS (Sociology)** -----

- Q. Can religion form a sufficient basis of forming cultural identity in India?
(2009/20)
- Q. In what important ways can religion be a force both for social stability and social change?
Discuss.
(2008/60)
- Q. Write short note: Religious revivalism
(2008/20)
- Q. Discuss the major problems of religious fundamentalism in contemporary India. Give suggestions to tackle these problems.
(2007/60)
- Q. Write short note: Problems of religious minorities
(2007/20)
- Q. Describe the indicators of secularism. In your opinion, is it being practiced in letter and spirit in present day Indian society?
(2006/60)
- Q. Write short note: Religious fundamentalism
(2005/20)
- Q. Examine the functional as well as dysfunctional aspects of religion in a pluralistic society taking India and the United States of America as illustrative models.
(2004/60)
- Q. Examine the functional as well as dysfunctional aspects of religion in a pluralistic society taking India and the United States of America as illustrative models.
(2004/60)
- Q. Write short note: Role of religion in civil society
(2004/20)
- Q. Describe the socio-economic factors responsible for communal tensions in India. What suggestions will you give to control them?
(2003/60)
- Q. Is Secularism a weak Ideology? Critically analyse the reasons for anti-secular trends in India.
(2002/60)
- Q. Write short note: Problems of Hindu minority in Kashmir
(2002/20)
- Q. Write short note: Inequality among Brahmins
(2002/20)
- Q. Explain the concept of secular state and discuss the problems of India as a secular state.
(2001/60)
- Q. Write short note: Religion and Science
(2001/20)
- Q. Critically examine functional and dysfunctional aspects of religion.
(2000/60)
- Q. Write short note: Religious fundamentalism
(2000/20)
- Q. Define religious minority. Discuss the problems of religious minority in India.
(1999/60)
- Q. Write short note: Secularism
(1999/20)
- Q. Elaborate on the social of religion. Discuss the relationship between religion and science.
(1999/60)
- Q. Write short note: Religious pluralism
(1998/20)
- Q. Discuss the constitutional safeguards for religious minority groups and account for increasing religious fundamentalism in India.
(1998/20)

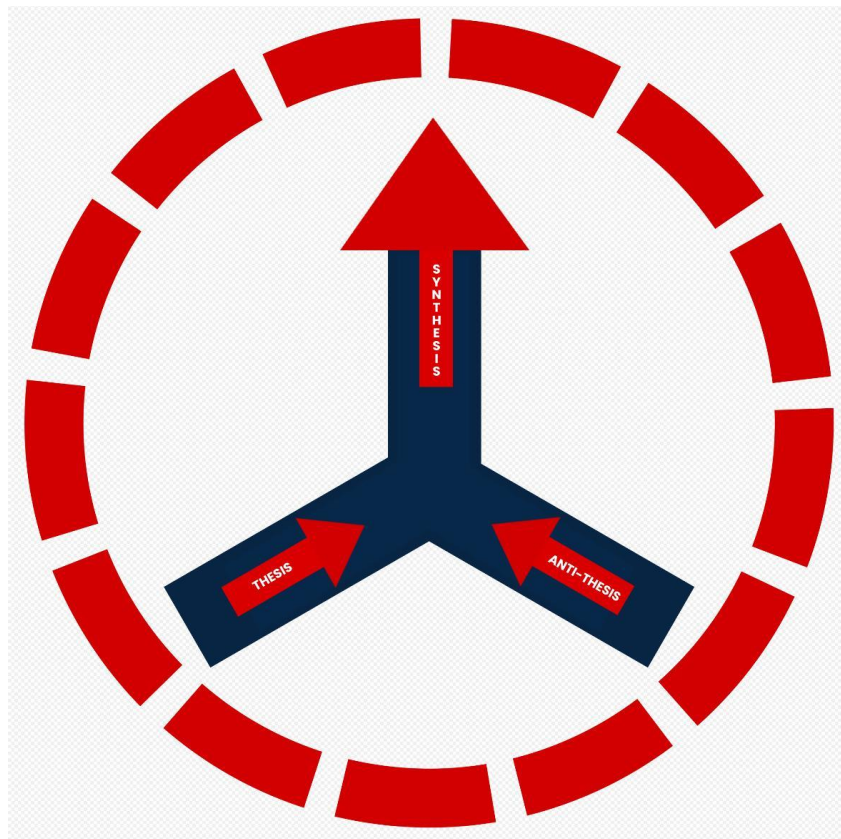
----- **Dialectics IAS (Sociology)** -----

- Q. Write short note: Communal tensions in India (1997/20)
- Q. Write short note: Fundamentals of religion (1997/20)
- Q. Write short note: Pattern of secularism in India (1996/20)
- Q. Write short note: Minority status and religious conversions (1994/20)
- Q. Explain issues emerging from inter-religion interaction in India today. Evaluate them in the context of secularism in India. (1993/60)
- Q. Write short note: Primitive Communism (1993/20)
- Q. Write short note: Minority groups and communalism (1993/20)
- Q. What is happening to religion in the face of challenges of science in modern societies? Elaborate your answer with the help of sociological literature. (1992/60)
- Q. Write short note: Plural society and secularism (1991/20)
- Q. "Religion is said to have emancipated human beings on the one hand but it also alienates them in the other". Bring out the paradoxical functions religion plays in a modern secular society. (1990/60)
- Q. Write short note: Religion and national integration in India (1990/20)
- Q. Critically evaluate the role of religion and ethnicity in Indian politics since the First General Elections in 1952. (1990/60)
- Q. Write short note: Secularism as a scientific concept (1989/20)
- Q. Write short note: Linguistic Conflicts (1988/20)
- Q. Discuss the role of religion in the world today. Has the super growth of science any de-mystifying effect on religion? (1986/60)
- Q. Write short note: Communal tensions: their economic and social background (1986/20)
- Q. Discuss the factors responsible for the growing feeling of alienation among the religious minorities in India. How can they be made to overcome this feeling? (1986/70)
- Q. Write short note: Religious and ethnic conflict in India (1985/20)
- Q. Write short note: Religion and Society (1985/20)
- Q. Write short note: Religious factor in economic development (1984/20)
- Q. Write short note: Religious and scientific world views (1983/20)

Online Module I: 15 August 2026

Test Series Batches (Online): June, October and January

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