

Religion



In what ways does religion act to uphold the status quo and how does it help to bring about social change?

This question derives from a fundamental concern of sociology to analyse social order and social change. The role of religion also concerned Comte, Marx, Durkheim and Weber, so it is probably a good idea to begin your answer with some of their ideas. This is not only a question about the history of sociological theory though. These debates are still very topical and you ought to be able to connect them to contemporary examples and debates.

It is always a good idea to define your key concept, so the essay could start with the sociological definition of religion offered on page 677, noting what it includes and omits. From here the main ideas of the classical theorists can be introduced. The section 'Religion in classical sociological theory', starting on page 679, looks at the work of Marx, Durkheim and Weber. Marx and Durkheim are both associated with analyses that see religion as an essentially conservative force, whilst Weber is more clearly associated with the idea that in certain circumstances, such as the development of capitalism in Western Europe, religious beliefs and practices can contribute to fundamental social changes. Weber's ideas on the role of Calvinism are outlined in Chapter 1.

Having looked at the theories of religion, the essay can put some flesh on the bones of the argument by bringing in and examining some examples of real-world religions. The chapter provides a number of examples and you will need to select a few of these. For example, it is possible to look at the position of women within religious organizations (pp. 693-4). It has been argued that the treatment of women in many religious groups is fundamentally conservative, failing to keep pace with social change in the wider society. On the other hand, some new religious movements, particularly those described as world-affirming movements, have a strong desire to transform the world or the individual within the world. In this way they can be seen as at least trying to change societies (pp. 691-2).

Religious fundamentalism is perhaps one of the more difficult examples you might discuss (pp. 710-6). Initially it appears that any religious group basing its behaviour and beliefs on a strict interpretation of an ancient text could hardly be seen as focused on social change. However, the teachings of fundamentalist groups have promoted some dramatic social revolutions in recent years, not least in the form of the Iranian Revolution of 1978-9. How should we evaluate such revolutions? Are they upholders of an older status quo or radical forces for social change? The section on Islam emphasizes that this is not a simple return to an older form of society but a particularly modern response to the conditions of the contemporary world. It is possible to argue that fundamentalism is *both* a conservative and a radical force. Whichever way you make your case, be sure to support it with examples and to be explicit about your definition of terms such as conservatism and radicalism.



Although the question is deceptively simple, your answer, if it has done the job correctly, will have covered a lot of ground stretching from the theoretical contributions of the founders of sociology through to religion in the contemporary period. Hence, it is important in your conclusion to take us back to the original question and draw these threads together by assessing the question of whether religion is primarily a conservative force or can it also have radical effects depending on historical circumstances?