4.1 Religious Organisations: Churches, Denominations, Sects and Cults

AQA 7192 · about 45 minutes · Write-in edition

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. Use sociological vocabulary. For extended answers write in full sentences. At least two extended answers require full sentence responses.

1 Explain two reasons, using Weber's idea of the theodicy of disprivilege and other relevant concepts, why sects might appeal to the relatively deprived in modern British communities.

(Total for Question 1 is 4 marks)

2 State one methodological problem a sociologist might face when comparing membership claims made by an established national church and by small local sects.

(Total for Question 2 is 2 marks)

3 State one criticism of using the church-sect typology as a rigid classification when analysing contemporary religious organisations in Britain.

(Total for Question 3 is 2 marks)

4 Explain one reason why new forms of religious organisation, such as loosely organised therapeutic spiritual groups, might not be classified easily as either a sect or a cult in Troeltsch's scheme.

(Total for Question 4 is 2 marks)

5 Discuss how far sociologists would agree that the decline of traditional established churches in modern Britain is mainly caused by social and cultural secularisation processes rather than by organisational weaknesses. In your answer, consider competing explanations and reach a supported judgement.

(Total for Question 5 is 12 marks)

6 Define the term 'church' as used in sociological typologies of religious organisations, naming the key features of size, relation to society and structure.

(Total for Question 6 is 2 marks)

7 Define the term 'denomination' as Niebuhr added it to the church-sect typology, and explain how it differs in relation to social tolerance and claims to authority.

(Total for Question 7 is 2 marks)

8 Define the term 'cult' as it appears in classifications of religious organisations, including typical organisational features and member commitment.

(Total for Question 8 is 2 marks)

9 State one clear difference Troeltsch used to contrast a church and a sect in studies of religious organisations.

(Total for Question 9 is 2 marks)

10 Item A: A national established church reports a steady fall in formal weekly attendance over 25 years, but local small sects report stable or slightly rising membership. Using Item A and your sociological knowledge of Troeltsch, Niebuhr and Stark and Bainbridge, identify two reasons why the established church might decline while sects grow.

(Total for Question 10 is 4 marks)

11 Explain one way Stark and Bainbridge's classification of religious groups by degree of tension with wider society helps to understand the difference in appeal between an established church and a sect in a UK local community.

(Total for Question 11 is 3 marks)

Mark scheme · 4.1 Religious Organisations: Churches, Denominations, Sects and Cults

Question 1

identifies Weber's theodicy of disprivilege as an explanation that suffering or disadvantage can be given religious meaning	**B1**
explains how this attracts the relatively deprived, e.g. sects promise spiritual or future compensation for present suffering	**B1**
identifies a second reason, e.g. sects provide social support and a strong sense of belonging	**B1**
explains the second reason, e.g. material or emotional support within a sect can be attractive to those lacking resources in wider society	**B1**

Answer: Weber's theodicy of disprivilege suggests sects give disadvantaged people a religious explanation for suffering and promise of future reward, attracting the relatively deprived; additionally, sects provide social and emotional support and a strong sense of belonging that appeals to those lacking resources in wider society.

Question 2

identifies a methodological problem, e.g. differing definitions of membership and record keeping between large churches and small sects	**B1**
brief development, e.g. small sects may not keep formal attendance records, making comparisons unreliable	**B1**

Answer: One problem is differing definitions and record keeping of membership: large churches often keep formal attendance records while small sects may not, making comparisons of membership unreliable.

Question 3

identifies a recognised criticism, e.g. the typology is too rigid and many organisations do not fit neatly into a single category	**B1**
brief development, e.g. groups may hybridise features of churches, denominations and sects in practice	**B1**

Answer: A criticism is that the typology is too rigid: many contemporary organisations hybridise features of churches, denominations and sects, so they do not fit neatly into one category.

Question 4

identifies a reason, e.g. these groups mix low commitment of cults with some moral expectations of sects	**B1**
development, e.g. their organisational fluidity and focus on personal experience challenge strict size and authority criteria	**B1**

Answer: Because such groups mix features like low commitment and personal focus with moral expectations, their organisational fluidity and emphasis on personal experience challenge Troeltsch's strict size and authority criteria, making classification difficult.

Question 5

Level 1 Assertive or descriptive points about secularisation or organisation, with limited development and little use of sociological evidence or concepts.	**1-3**
Level 2 Some developed points showing understanding of secularisation or organisational explanations, with at least one sociological concept applied and some attempt to compare views.	**4-6**
Level 3 Clear and developed argument considering both secularisation processes and organisational weaknesses, using appropriate sociological concepts and evidence, with a reasoned comparison of viewpoints.	**7-9**
Level 4 Balanced, well-developed evaluation weighing secularisation explanations against organisational explanations, drawing on key sociological perspectives and evidence, acknowledging limitations, and arriving at a supported judgement.	**10-12**

Indicative content:

- Secularisation explanations: decline in belief, religious pluralism, loss of collective rituals, decline of social authority of religion, modernisation and rationalisation reducing influence of traditional churches.
- Organisational explanations: failure to modernise worship or communication, bureaucratic inertia, poor local outreach, leadership scandals, inability to meet contemporary spiritual or social needs.
- Alternative or complementary explanations: growth of individualised spirituality and New Age movements, competition from denominations and sects, demographic changes and immigration altering religious landscapes.
- Perspectives: functionalist view that institutions adapt but may decline if functions are replaced by others; Marxist or conflict perspectives might stress decline due to loss of ideological relevance or class shifts; interactionist perspectives emphasise conversion and identity factors favouring sects; Weberian ideas on rationalisation and disenchantment.
- Evidence and evaluation: use of attendance statistics, membership records, case examples of church renewal or decline, critiques of secularisation thesis noting continuing private belief or cultural religion, and the role of organisational change in some churches reversing decline.
- Conclusion: a supported judgement might argue that secularisation provides broad structural explanation for decline, but organisational weaknesses determine the extent and speed of decline in particular churches, so both explanations are important and complementary.

Question 6

identifies a church as a large, established religious organisation, often formally structured and widely accepted in society (oe) **B1**

development, e.g. notes links to the state or broad social acceptance and integration with wider society **B1**

Answer: A church is a large, established religious organisation, often formally structured and widely accepted in society, sometimes having links to the state and integrated with wider society.

Question 7

identifies a denomination as an intermediate type between church and sect in terms of social distance and tolerance **B1**

development, e.g. notes that denominations do not claim state authority like churches, nor demand the strict exclusivity of sects **B1**

Answer: A denomination is an intermediate religious type between church and sect, not claiming state authority like a church and not demanding the strict exclusivity of a sect, often tolerating other beliefs while keeping distinct identity.

Question 8

identifies a cult as a small, often loose grouping centred on new ideas or a leader, with low to variable commitment (oe) **B1**

development, e.g. notes cults may be tolerant of outside beliefs and often focus on personal experience, therapy or self-improvement **B1**

Answer: A cult is a small, often loosely organised group centred on new ideas or a charismatic leader, often with lower or variable commitment and an emphasis on personal experience or self-improvement.

Question 9

identifies a difference, e.g. churches are large and inclusive, sects are small and exclusive **B1**

brief development, e.g. notes that sects separate from mainstream society while churches are socially integrated **B1**

Answer: Churches are typically large and inclusive and integrated into society, while sects are small, exclusive groups that separate from mainstream society.

Question 10

identifies a reason, e.g. loss of social authority and state links reduces the church's social role **B1**

explains how this leads to decline, e.g. people no longer see the established church as central to community life so attendance falls **B1**

identifies a second reason, e.g. sects attract those seeking intense commitment and clear identity, appealing to disaffected groups **B1**

explains how this causes sect growth, e.g. sects offer support and meaning that draws members away from less demanding established church services **B1**

Answer: Possible answers: the established church declines when it loses social authority and state links, so people no longer see it as central and attendance falls; sects grow because they offer intense commitment and clear identity, attracting disaffected individuals seeking support and meaning.

Question 11

identifies Stark and Bainbridge classify groups by how much tension they have with wider society **B1**

explains how churches have low tension, being accommodating and integrated **B1**

explains how sects have high tension, offering commitment and distinctiveness that can attract those alienated from mainstream values **B1**

Answer: Stark and Bainbridge classify religious groups by tension with society: churches have low tension and are accommodating, which may suit mainstream members; sects have high tension and distinct demands, attracting those alienated from mainstream values who seek a committed community.