4.3 Functionalist Definitions of Religion and Civil Religion

AQA 7192 · about 55 minutes · Write-in edition

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. For questions worth more than 1 mark, write in full sentences. Show sociological knowledge and, where asked, apply it to the item material. Time guidance: 55 minutes for the whole pack.

1 Item A: Extract about an American national ceremony

Item A: During a state memorial service for disaster victims, the US President refers to a shared national faith, asks citizens to pray for the victims, and the ceremony includes a moment of national silence and a reading from the Constitution. Sociologists studying civil religion point to such public rituals as examples of a shared sacred language used to unite diverse citizens.

Using Item A and your knowledge of Bellah's civil religion, explain two reasons why such public rituals might strengthen national solidarity. Each reason should be developed.

(Total for Question 1 is 6 marks)

2 Explain one way Malinowski's psychological-functionalist account complements Parsons' functional account of religion's role in maintaining social order.

(Total for Question 2 is 2 marks)

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3 Explain one limitation of using Durkheim's analysis of small-scale totemic societies as evidence for functionalist claims about religion in complex modern states.

(Total for Question 3 is 2 marks)

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4 Give two brief examples of how governments might use civil religious language or rituals to legitimise political authority, drawing on Bellah and applying generally rather than to one specific country.

(Total for Question 4 is 2 marks)

5 Item B: Short passage on functionalist claims about religion and social cohesion

Item B: Functionalist sociologists claim religion creates social cohesion by providing a shared set of beliefs and rituals, reinforcing moral rules and value consensus. Critics argue that this ignores divisions and the ways religion can support unequal power structures.

Applying material from Item B and your sociological knowledge, evaluate the functionalist view that religion is a force for social cohesion. In your answer you should refer to Item B, use relevant sociological theory, and reach a supported judgement.

(Total for Question 5 is 12 marks)

6 Define what sociologists mean by a 'functional definition' of religion when explaining religion's role in society.

(Total for Question 6 is 2 marks)

7 Identify and explain one way Durkheim used the example of totemism among Australian Aboriginal clans to support his argument that religion expresses the collective conscience.

(Total for Question 7 is 4 marks)

8 Identify and explain two ways Talcott Parsons argued religion contributes to social stability in modern societies.

(Total for Question 8 is 4 marks)

9 Explain Malinowski's argument about the psychological function of religion at life crises such as death.

(Total for Question 9 is 2 marks)

10 Explain one Marxist or feminist criticism of functionalist accounts of religion. Develop how religion may sustain inequality and why this challenges the functionalist emphasis on social cohesion.

(Total for Question 10 is 4 marks)

11 Identify which sociologist is most associated with the phrase 'collective conscience' and Durkheim's study of religion among small clans.

- ☐ A) Emile Durkheim
- ☐ B) Talcott Parsons
- ☐ C) Bronislaw Malinowski
- ☐ D) Robert Bellah

(Total for Question 11 is 1 mark)

Mark scheme · 4.3 Functionalist Definitions of Religion and Civil Religion

Question 1

identifies a reason, e.g. rituals sacralise national values by giving them a sacred framing	**B1**
development, e.g. referring to prayer and Constitutional reading turns secular symbols into sacred ones, creating shared moral language	**B1**
identifies a second reason, e.g. public ceremonies provide collective emotional experience that bonds citizens	**B1**
development, e.g. moment of silence and shared mourning produces empathy and a sense of belonging across diverse groups	**B1**
additional development linking to Item A, e.g. presidential leadership in the ritual gives moral authority and models unity	**B1**
further development, e.g. using the Constitution in the ceremony links national identity to a sacred text, reinforcing shared commitment	**B1**

Answer: Reason 1: The ceremony sacralises national values, for example turning the Constitution and public prayer into sacred symbols, which creates a shared moral language and sense of what the nation stands for. Reason 2: The collective ritual produces shared emotion and grief, for example the moment of silence and communal prayer, which bonds citizens through empathy and a feeling of belonging; the President's role also lends moral authority and models unity.

Question 2

identifies that both see religion performing useful functions for society or individuals	**B1**
development, e.g. Malinowski's focus on individual anxiety relief complements Parsons' focus on social stability by showing how individual wellbeing supports social order	**B1**

Answer: Both views see religion as performing useful functions; Malinowski's focus on relieving individual anxiety at life crises complements Parsons' emphasis on social stability because individuals who are psychologically supported are more able to play their social roles, helping maintain order.

Question 3

identifies one limitation, e.g. small-scale clan societies differ structurally from modern plural states	**B1**
development, e.g. shared totemic rituals in a clan may not map onto diverse, multi-faith societies where religion is one of many cohesion mechanisms	**B1**

Answer: A limitation is that clan-based totemism occurs in small, homogeneous societies that differ from complex modern states; therefore, rituals that create cohesion in a small clan may not operate the same way in diverse, multi-faith societies where other institutions also create cohesion.

Question 4

gives one correct example, e.g. using national prayers or invoking God in official speeches	**B1**
gives a second correct example, e.g. state ceremonies that sacralise founding documents or national heroes	**B1**

Answer: Examples include governments invoking God in official speeches or national prayers, and state ceremonies that sacralise founding documents or heroes to create a sense of shared moral purpose.

Question 5

Level 1 Basic statements about functionalist claims with little or no use of Item B, limited sociological knowledge and no developed evaluation. **1-3**

Level 2 Some accurate knowledge of functionalist ideas and use of Item B to support points, limited analysis of how religion creates cohesion, and limited evaluation using an alternative view or brief criticism. **4-6**

Level 3 Good knowledge and application: clear explanation of functionalist claims using Item B, analysis of mechanisms through which religion promotes cohesion, and developed evaluation including plausible criticisms such as religion reinforcing inequality or differing effects in plural societies. **7-9**

Level 4 Excellent, sustained analysis and evaluation: well-developed use of Item B and wider knowledge, balanced discussion of functionalist strengths and weaknesses, consideration of empirical evidence and limitations, and a clear, justified conclusion about the extent to which religion promotes cohesion. **10-12**

Indicative content:

- AO1 material: Functionalist claims that religion creates shared norms and values, Durkheim's sacred/profane and totemism as evidence for collective conscience, Parsons on value consensus and tension management, Malinowski on psychological support at crises, Bellah's civil religion producing national moral solidarity.
- Application: Use Item B to illustrate the functionalist claim that religion supplies shared beliefs and rituals producing social cohesion; show how Item B summarises the core functionalist mechanism.
- Analysis: Explain mechanisms in some depth, for example how rituals reinforce solidarity, how shared moral codes regulate behaviour, and how religion can provide comfort that helps stabilise social roles.
- Evaluation points: Consider criticisms that functionalism overstates consensus; point out that religion can also divide (confessional conflict, sectarianism), or be used to justify power structures; note Durkheim's evidence from small-scale societies may not generalise to complex modern, plural societies; consider feminist and Marxist critiques (summarised briefly) that religion may legitimise patriarchy or ruling-class interests, and empirical examples where religion both unites and divides.
- Evidence and examples: Refer to totemic rituals, civil religion ceremonies, examples of religion underpinning national identity, and counter-examples such as religious conflict, sectarian violence, or religion used to justify inequality.
- Judgement: Balance functionalist strengths in explaining some cohesive effects against persuasive criticisms and context-dependent limits, and conclude on the extent to which religion acts as a force for cohesion overall.

Question 6

identifies that a functional definition explains religion by the social or psychological functions it performs for individuals or society **B1**

development, e.g. examples such as creating value consensus, social cohesion or providing emotional support **B1**

Answer: A functional definition explains religion by the social or psychological functions it performs for people and for society, for example creating value consensus, reducing tension, or offering emotional support.

Question 7

identifies that Durkheim used totemic worship as a symbol of the clan itself **B1**

development, e.g. the totem represents the group, so worshipping the totem is effectively worshipping the society **B1**

further point, e.g. communal rituals around the totem reinforce shared beliefs and moral rules **B1**

development, e.g. this shared morality is the collective conscience that binds members to one another **B1**

Answer: Durkheim used totemic worship as a symbol of the clan, arguing the totem stands for the group so worshipping it is effectively worshipping society; communal rituals around the totem reinforce shared beliefs and moral rules, forming the collective conscience.

Question 8

identifies Parsons' view that religion promotes value consensus **B1**

development, e.g. religion legitimates central values and norms which guide behaviour and reduce conflict **B1**

identifies Parsons' view that religion helps with tension management **B1**

development, e.g. religion provides rituals and beliefs that help individuals cope with disruptions and maintain social order **B1**

Answer: Parsons argued religion promotes value consensus by legitimating central values and norms which guide behaviour and reduce conflict, and it helps with tension management by providing rituals and beliefs that support individuals in times of stress, keeping social order.

Question 9

identifies that Malinowski argued religion eases anxiety at life crises such as death **B1**

development, e.g. religious beliefs and mourning rituals offer comfort to the bereaved, helping them cope with loss **B1**

Answer: Malinowski argued that religion eases anxiety at life crises such as death. Religious beliefs and mourning rituals offer comfort to the bereaved, helping them cope with loss.

Question 10

identifies a recognised criticism, e.g. that functionalism overstates social consensus	**B1**
development, e.g. functionalism ignores how religion can serve ruling-class interests or patriarchy	**B1**
further development, e.g. legitimating inequality encourages disadvantaged groups to accept their position, reducing challenges to unequal power	**B1**
development, e.g. cohesion may therefore reflect acceptance of an unequal social order rather than shared interests benefiting all members	**B1**

Answer: A Marxist criticism is that functionalism overstates social consensus. Religion can serve ruling-class interests by legitimating class inequality. This can encourage disadvantaged groups to accept their position, protecting unequal power. Apparent cohesion may therefore reflect acceptance of an unequal social order rather than shared interests benefiting everyone.

Question 11

A (Emile Durkheim)	**B1**

Answer: A