



GSOC.AL17 Functionalist Definitions of Religion and Civil Religion

AQA 7192 · Calculators not allowed · about 90 minutes

Total Marks

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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: 90 minutes for the whole pack.

1 Which one of the following best describes a substantive, exclusivist definition of religion as used in sociology of religion?

- ☐ A) Religion is whatever a society treats as sacred and separate from the profane
- ☐ B) Religion is any social institution that helps produce social solidarity
- ☐ C) Religion is whatever people in a particular community happen to label as a belief system
- ☐ D) Religion is simply a reflection of economic forces in a society

(Total for Question 1 is 1 mark)

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

(Total for Question 2 is 2 marks)

3 Define Durkheim's distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane' as used in sociological definitions of religion.

(Total for Question 3 is 2 marks)

4 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 4 is 4 marks)

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

(Total for Question 5 is 4 marks)

6 Explain Malinowski's argument about the psychological function of religion at 'life crisis' points, such as death or dangerous sea voyages.

(Total for Question 6 is 2 marks)

7 Identify and explain two features of Bellah's concept of 'civil religion' in the United States.

(Total for Question 7 is 4 marks)

8 State one general Marxist or feminist criticism of functionalist accounts of religion, kept brief and used as a limitation rather than a full alternative explanation.

(Total for Question 8 is 4 marks)

9 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 9 is 1 mark)

10 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.

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(Total for Question 10 is 6 marks)

11 Outline two ways a functionalist definition of religion differs from an inclusivist or social-constructionist definition.

(Total for Question 11 is 2 marks)

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

(Total for Question 12 is 2 marks)

13 State one empirical piece of evidence a sociologist might use to support the claim that religion promotes value consensus in society.

(Total for Question 13 is 2 marks)

- 14** Explain two limitations of using Durkheim's analysis of small-scale totemic societies as evidence for functionalist claims about religion in complex modern states.

(Total for Question 14 is 2 marks)

- 15** 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 15 is 2 marks)

- 16** 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.

Question: 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.

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(Total for Question 16 is 12 marks)

Mark scheme · GSOC.AL17 Functionalist Definitions of Religion and Civil Religion

Question 1

- **B1** A (substantive definition: religion as beliefs and practices relating to the sacred, distinct from the profane)
- **Answer: A**

Question 2

- **B1** 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
- **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 3

- **B1** identifies sacred as things set apart and treated with reverence, profane as ordinary everyday things
- **B1** development, e.g. sacred symbols and rituals unite a group and carry collective meaning
- **Answer: The sacred are things set apart and treated with special respect or reverence, while the profane are ordinary, everyday things; sacred symbols and rituals unite a group and carry collective meaning.**

Question 4

- **B1** 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
- **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 5

- **B1** 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
- **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 6

- **B1** identifies that Malinowski argued religion eases anxiety at moments of uncertainty or danger
- **B1** development, e.g. rituals and beliefs provide comfort and a sense of control when rational explanations are lacking
- **Answer: Malinowski argued religion performs a psychological function by easing anxiety during life crises, for example through rituals and beliefs that offer comfort and a sense of control at times of death or danger.**

Question 7

- **B1** identifies that civil religion is a set of beliefs, symbols and rituals that unite a nation
- **B1** development, e.g. examples include national ceremonies, references to God in public discourse, and shared sacred texts like the founding documents
- **B1** identifies that civil religion sacralises the nation and its values
- **B1** development, e.g. political leaders invoke civil religious language to create moral solidarity and legitimacy for the state
- **Answer: Bellah's civil religion consists of national beliefs, symbols and rituals that unite the nation, such as ceremonies and political references to God and sacred founding documents, and it sacralises the nation and its values, with leaders using civil religious language to build moral solidarity and legitimacy.**

Question 8

- **B1** 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 point, e.g. religion can be a source of social control protecting inequality, not just cohesion
- **B1** development, e.g. this criticism is noted briefly here and reserved for fuller development in companion packs
- **Answer: A common criticism is that functionalism overstates social consensus and ignores how religion can serve ruling-class interests or patriarchy; religion can therefore act to protect inequality, not only to create cohesion, a point noted here as a limitation rather than developed fully.**

Question 9

- **B1** A (Emile Durkheim)
- **Answer: A**

Question 10

- **B1** 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
- **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 11

- **B1** identifies first difference, e.g. functionalist defines religion by what it does, inclusivist by what people call religion
- **B1** development, e.g. functionalist focuses on roles like cohesion or psychological relief, inclusivist focuses on range of beliefs labelled religious in context
- **Answer: Functionalist definitions identify religion by the functions it performs, such as social cohesion or psychological support, whereas inclusivist or social-constructionist definitions focus on the varied forms people label 'religion' in different societies, not only beliefs about the sacred.**

Question 12

- **B1** 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
- **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**

Question 13

- **B1** identifies one appropriate example, e.g. surveys showing shared moral attitudes among members of a religious community
- **B1** development, e.g. or historical examples where religious teachings shaped laws or social norms, such as prohibitions linked to religious moral codes
- **Answer: One example is survey evidence showing that members of a religious community share similar moral attitudes; historically, religious teachings have influenced laws and social norms, illustrating religion's role in promoting value consensus.**

Question 14

- **B1** identifies first 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
- **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 15

- **B1** 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
- **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 16

- **Level 1** (1-3): Basic statements about functionalist claims with little or no use of Item B, limited sociological knowledge and no developed evaluation.
- **Level 2** (4-6): 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.
- **Level 3** (7-9): 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.
- **Level 4** (10-12): 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.
- **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.