



## Religion in Contemporary Society

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

This informative video resource discusses what religion means in today's society and looks at some of the new religious movements that have evolved.

Duration of resource: 19 Minutes  
Year of Production: 2014  
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We discuss if contemporary society is moving away from the traditional and historical view of religion or if religion and spirituality is merely changing and taking on new forms.

This video resource is produced to prompt discussion and debate amongst students.





# Religion in Contemporary Society

## Short Program 2 – Secularisation?

Activity 1 – Answer the following questions:

1. The video clip says that, like everything else, religious practices have changed as societies have modernised. What two significant changes that have taken place over the last 150 years were identified in the film?

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2. Can you give a general definition of secularisation?

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3. What three dimensions of secularisation did Professor Woodhead identify in the film?

- I. 

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- II. 

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- III. 

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4. How has the idea of secularisation been challenged in recent years:

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5. The film talked about people beginning to 'shop around' for spirituality. What does this mean?

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# Religion in Contemporary Society

## Short Program 2 – Secularisation?

### Activity 2 – Questionnaire - Measuring' religiosity

In order to make general statements about religion and religiosity, researchers have to find ways of measuring it. This activity is designed to illustrate this process, provide a basis for a class discussion (e.g. distinction between 'religion' and 'spirituality') and show whether the class doing the activity is more 'religious' or 'secular'.

Ask students to design a questionnaire aimed at showing levels of religious belief and practice in the class. Alternatively, you can either help students design it or give them a 'ready-made' questionnaire. To help here are some questions taken from a religiosity survey:

Religion: Would you describe yourself as 'religious'?

- (a) Yes
- (b) Not sure
- (c) No

Religious practice: State which of the following statements best describes you:

- (a) I am a member of a religious community and I practice my religion regularly
- (b) I am a member of a religious community but I do not practice my religion regularly
- (c) I am not a member of any religious community

Belief: Do you believe in a God, gods, or a higher spiritual being?

- (a) Yes
- (b) Not sure
- (c) No

Prayer: Do you pray?

- (a) Every day
- (b) At least once a week
- (c) Occasionally e.g. at ceremonies
- (d) If you're in a jam
- (e) Never

Identity: Is your religion a key source of your identity i.e. how you see yourself and how others see you?

- (a) Yes my religion is a major source of who I am
- (b) I have a religion but it is not a major source of how I see myself
- (c) I do not have a religious belief

How did you acquire your religious beliefs, or lack of them?

- (a) I followed the religion of my parents
- (b) I developed my religious beliefs independently i.e. through conversion
- (c) I was religious but lost my faith
- (d) I have never had any religious convictions

Spirituality: Which of the following statements do you think best describes you?

- (a) I am religious and that is a source of spirituality for me.
- (b) I am not religious but I am spiritual. (If possible could you elaborate and say how you spiritual?)
- (c) I am neither religious nor spiritual

# Religion in Contemporary Society

## Short program 3 – New religious movements

Activity 1 – Answer the following questions:

1. The film begins by saying that studying the major world religions, such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, doesn't tell us the full story about religious beliefs and practices around the world. Why?

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2. The film mentions two influential new religious movements, The Unification Church (Moonies) and Scientology. Can you identify a key difference between them?

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3. What does INFORM stand for and what does it do?

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4. How many new religions has INFORM identified in Britain and how many are currently active?

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## Religion in Contemporary Society

5. What four characteristics are common to many NRMs:

I. \_\_\_\_\_

II. \_\_\_\_\_

III. \_\_\_\_\_

IV. \_\_\_\_\_

6. How do the Moonies reflect these characteristics?

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7. Professor Barker undertook a seven year study of the Moonies. How did she refute claims that they 'brainwashed' young recruits?

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8. There has been a massive growth in the number of new religious movements in the past few decades. How might this be explained?

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# Religion in Contemporary Society

## Short program 3 – New religious movements

### Activity 2 – Researching NRMs

Divide students into small groups and ask each to group to do a little research on a new religious movement of their choice. Students can either find their 'own' religions on the Internet or through the Inform site, or they can be given a list to choose from.

Each group should provide a brief outline narrative of 'their' new religious movement looking at, for example, its:

- Origins
- Aims and beliefs
- Leadership
- Membership
- Practices

These findings should then be presented to the class as a whole as a basis for class discussion.



# Religion in Contemporary Society

## Short program 1 – What is religion?

### Activity 1 - Answers

1. Write a short summary of the following:

#### **Substantive approaches focus on:**

- I. **What religion is and the various ways it is specifically different from other forms of collective behaviour.**
- II. **The content of religion - beliefs and behaviours that don't occur together in any other social setting. These include:**
  - belief in a higher being or power
  - a distinction between the sacred and the profane
  - rituals and ceremonies designed

#### **Functional approaches focus on:**

- I. **What religion does for the both the individual and society. This includes providing a sense of:**
  - identity
  - meaning
  - security
  - fear
- II. **The idea religion functions to provide:**
  - values
  - a sense of identity
  - a way of looking at the world and the individual's place in that world
  - social integration, that is bringing people together through shared beliefs and practices.

2. Why are substantive approaches called 'exclusive' and functional approaches called 'inclusive'?

**Substantive approaches are exclusive in the sense they clearly distinguish between behaviours that are and are not 'religious'. In other words, they specify the things behaviour must have, such as a distinction between the sacred and the profane, in order to be considered a religion.**

**Functional approaches are inclusive in that they consider a much wider range of behaviours as 'religious'; any behaviour that functions to provide people with a sense of identity, gives them a particular worldview or encourages them to behave in communal ways can be considered 'religious'.**

3. Which approach did you find more convincing and why? List both the strengths and limitations.  
Each definition has strengths and limitations to consider:

#### **Strengths of substantive definitions include:**

- I. **This approach reflects what people conventionally mean by 'religion', in the sense it involves beliefs and behaviour that are both special and different.**
- II. **If we can reliably define what we mean by religion, it's possible to measure different levels of religious behaviour. To test, for example, whether society is becoming more or less religious.**

#### **Limitations of substantive definitions include:**

- I. **The claim such definitions simply reflect the beliefs and behaviours of major world religions, such as Christianity or Islam. Distinctions between the sacred and the profane, for example, may simply serve, in an increasingly competitive global religious marketplace, to define and control 'the religious brand'.**
- II. **Some beliefs and behaviours, while arguably religious in nature, do not meet the strict requirements of substantive definitions. Scientology, for example, involves ideas about spirituality, such as the ability to realise our 'inner divinity', but has no concept of an external god or supernatural power makes no distinction between the sacred and the profane.**

#### **Strengths of functional definitions include:**

- I. **We can easily account for the wide diversity of religious and spiritual beliefs, behaviours and organisations that exist in any society.**
- II. **No one form of religion, such as Christianity or Islam, can have a monopoly on how religion is defined.**

# Religion in Contemporary Society

Limitations of functional definitions include:

- I. It casts the religious net too widely. A case can be made for almost any form of behaviour being 'religious' and this makes it difficult to assess whether societies are becoming less or more religious.

## Short program 1 – What is religion?

Activity 2 - Group discussion: 'Death of a Princess' – Suggested responses will include:

Although widespread expressions of grief and mourning are relatively rare in our society, the death of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997 provoked a vast outpouring of public grief for a number of days.

*Write a brief (200 - 300 words) analysis of how this public display of national mourning could be explained by functional approaches to religion.*

Students might want to relate some functions of religion mentioned in the film to the idea of death and mourning, in terms of some or all of the following:

- Social integration: how people are brought together through shared beliefs and practices.
- Shared values - about the meaning of life and death.
- A sense of identity demonstrated through shared rituals and ceremonies.
- A way of looking at the world and the individual's place in that world.
- Social control - in terms of how societies manage public outpourings of grief.

## Short Program 2 – Secularisation?

Activity 1 – Answers

1. The video clip says that, like everything else, religious practices have changed as societies have modernised. What two significant changes that have taken place over the last 150 years were identified in the film?
  - I. The percentage of the British population regularly attending church has declined. In the middle of the 19th Century it was around 60%, but by the early 20th Century it had dropped to less than 10%
  - II. The number of people in Britain describing themselves as 'religious' declined from 80% in 1963 to 50% in 2012
2. Can you give a general definition of secularisation?  
The decline of religion, measured in terms of indicators such as attendance at religious ceremonies or personal beliefs.
3. What three dimensions of secularisation did Professor Woodhead identify in the film?
  - I. Decline in the number of believers.
  - II. Decline in power and influence of religious institutions, such as Churches.
  - III. Decline in the general public and political influence of religion.
4. How has the idea of secularisation been challenged in recent years:
  - I. Attendance in the past may have been overestimated as people were often forced or expected to attend church, whereas now it is more a matter of personal choice.
  - II. Religion is not declining but changing. While organised (congregational) religions have seen a decline in attendance and fewer people believe in concepts like God, non-congregational forms of spirituality have increased in number.
5. The film talked about people beginning to 'shop around' for spirituality. What does this mean?  
As contemporary societies have become more individualist and consumerist, people are more-inclined to look around for forms of spirituality that suit their particular lifestyle. The many different 'brands' of religion now available mean that people can 'pick-and-choose' from a wide range of different types of religion as well as 'mix-and-match' diverse ideas taken from different religions.

# Religion in Contemporary Society

## Short Program 2 – Secularisation?

Activity 2 – Measuring' religiosity

Answers will vary

## Short program 3 – New religious movements

Activity 1 – Answers:

1. The film begins by saying that studying the major world religions, such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, doesn't tell us the full story about religious beliefs and practices around the world. Why? **Because there are many thousands of relatively small new religious movements in existence with a wide diversity of beliefs and practices, some of which may be similar to traditional world religions and some of which are very different. The number of new religious movements has grown dramatically in the past few decades, and many scholars of religion are now suggesting they should be taken very seriously because they point to new ways in which people are acquiring their religious beliefs and practices.**
2. The film mentions two influential new religious movements, The Unification Church (Moonies) and Scientology. Can you identify a key difference between them? **While the Unification Church offers a new interpretation of an established religion (Christianity), Scientology develops a completely different religious belief system based on the idea individuals are spiritual beings who can be taught to release their hidden spiritual powers.**
3. What does INFORM stand for and what does it do? **The Information Network Focus on Religious Movements is an organisation that gathers information on new religions. It is a very useful source of information for students – check out [www.inform.ac](http://www.inform.ac)**
4. How many new religions has INFORM identified in Britain and how many are currently active? **Inform has data on over 4,000 new religious movements, around 1,000 of which are active in the UK. But as Professor Barker acknowledges, there are far more worldwide, some of which remain unknown.**
5. What four characteristics are common to many NRMs:
  - I. **A charismatic leader 'of this world'**
  - II. **A relatively young membership.**
  - III. **A higher level of commitment to their religious beliefs.**
  - IV. **Often seen as dangerous**
6. How do the Moonies reflect these characteristics?
  - I. **They had a charismatic leader, Sun Myung Moon.**
  - II. **They attracted a relatively young, idealistic, middle class, membership.**
  - III. **Members showed a very high level of commitment to the organisation, for example by leaving home, working long hours for the religion and entering into marriages arranged by the Reverend Moon.**
  - IV. **The Unification**
7. Professor Barker undertook a seven year study of the Moonies. How did she refute claims that they 'brainwashed' young recruits?
  - I. **90% of potential members declined to join the Church.**
  - II. **Of those who did join, the majority left of their own free will within 2 years.**

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8. There has been a massive growth in the number of new religious movements in the past few decades. How might this be explained?

**There are a number of interrelated reasons for this. For example:**

- I. There has been a decline in participation in organised religion in contemporary societies and to some extent new religions can be seen as 'filling a gap'.
- II. The increasing individualism and consumerism of contemporary societies is also reflected in religion with more people wanting to 'shop around' to find a religion that works for them.
- III. Globalization: the mass movement of populations and transmission of ideas throughout the world in the 20th Century meant that an increasing number of people are exposed to new ideas, some of which are religious ideas.
- IV. Widening use of the inter-net in the 21st Century has meant that new religious ideas are available at the touch of a button.

### Short program 3 – New religious movements

#### Activity 2 – Researching NRMs – Answers

Divide students into small groups and ask each to group to do a little research on a new religious movement of their choice. Students can either find their 'own' religions on the Internet or through the Inform site, or they can be given a list to choose from.

Each group should provide a brief outline narrative of 'their' new religious movement looking at, for example, its:

- Origins
- Aims and beliefs
- Leadership
- Membership
- Practices

These findings should then be presented to the class as a whole as a basis for class discussion.

**Discussion could include, for example, similarities and differences between the movements themselves, and between them and established religions such as Christianity and Islam, the potential benefits of the religion and whether or not it might represent a threat or danger to society or to its followers.**

**Students can also discuss whether or not these new religions really are 'religions' and if so, why/why not? This can then link back to the question, what do we mean by religion?**

If appropriate, a lighter touch could also be introduced into the discussion. For example by asking students if they would consider joining the movement they had been looking at and, if so, why/why not, and if they had to join one of them, which one would it be and why? Students could also be asked if any of them have participated in a new religious movement, or if they know anyone who has.

**Finally, it's important that discussion is brought back to the key point of how we explain the rapid rise of new religious movements. What does it tell us about social change? What does it tell us religion? And should the established 'world religions' be worried?**