**A-level Religious Education**

**(Philosophy, Ethics and Christianity)**

[](https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fses.edu%2Fnew-religious-movements%2F&psig=AOvVaw0tJL1GtC66UNVMTlgFFHgY&ust=1589371321156000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CAIQjRxqFwoTCPC8pe2jrukCFQAAAAAdAAAAABAD)

**Bridging Course - Week 4**

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****St Mary’s Catholic School

A-level Religious Education Bridging Course

**Review of Week 1**

In Week 1 you looked at Religious Experience, the types and various arguments for these experiences resulting from God. We considered the counter arguments that they could be the result of illusions or humans simply being mistaken. A strong argument provided against Religious Experiences is from Persinger and the God-helmet which suggests that the brain can be stimulated into creating Religious Experiences for a person.

**Review of Week 2**

Last week we remained with Philosophy but moved onto the Design Argument. You looked at Paley’s Analogy of the Watch in more depth and more focus was given to the scholars who have provided challenges to such an argument. The key questions considered were – Does the Universe show evidence of a designer? What kind of designer could this be? Could the Universe simply have been chance? Can we be certain that a designer exists or is it just probable? How has science tried to answer this question of design and has it proved religion wrong?

**Review of Week 3**

We moved to the Christianity Paper to explore one of the units of work which looks at the scientific challenges made against religion. We looked at the challenges from science that took place over the centuries and what impact these had on religion. We looked at a debate which took place between Francis Collins and Richard Dawkins and the arguments that they both put forward relating to the relationship between Science and Religion.

**Focus of Week 4**

We will continue with the Christianity Paper and looking at the challenges to religion. This week we are going to look at New Religious Movements, what they are, some examples and why they have become so popular with people. We shall first be looking at Secularisation and what impact this has had on religion. Again, we shal be looking at some scholars and their views.

The following work requires a lot of reading, and some of the ideas might be challenging to understand on first reading. Remember to take regular breaks, go back to any of the tasks after some time away, and try your best. Your Religious Education Teacher will go over the following with you in lessons, early in Year 12.

1. **You are now going to begin preparatory work relevant for Paper 3 of the A-level. Paper 3 is an exam that focuses on various elements within Christianity. You have already studied some of the topics at GCSE which will give you a good foundation on which to build your knowledge.**

**We are going to begin by looking at Secularism and its rise to popularity.**

1. Draw a table and label on column “Society with religion” and label the other column, “Society without religion”. Fill the table in with 5 point on each side in answer to that statement.
2. Read the following article and complete the questions at the end.

**Secularisation in Europe**

Over the last 60 years, religion in Europe has seen a strong decline. On average throughout the 27 EU countries, only half of its people believe in God and 25.4% directly say that they have no religion. There is much variation from country to country. Only 16% of the populace of Estonia believe in God and the Scandinavian countries are highly atheist. But 95% believe in Malta.

Despite the low rate of belief in God, many Europeans still claim to belong to theistic religions. 49.5% of the population of Europe say they are Catholic Christian, 15.7% say they're Muslim, 12.7% say they're Protestant Christian, 8.6% say they're Orthodox Christian and 0.4% say they are Jewish. These numbers mean that at least 30% of Europeans are putting down a religion despite not believing in the very basic first principal of the religion they put down. In some places, this percent is higher. In France only 52% of Catholic believe in God and "only 18 percent define God according to the teachings of the Catholic Church". This is all because most people in Europe confuse religion and cultural heritage, and for many the actual beliefs of a religion don't really matter.

**The Defiers of Secularisation**

The world is not secularising evenly. Academics can be found asking "is the situation best captured by secularization theory, or by the notion of resurgence of spirituality? By the decline in traditional religiosity, or by the upsurge of fundamentalism?" Some of the exceptions to secularisation (even in the developed world) are pronounced enough to count as evidence against Secularisation Theory. Sociologist of religion Rodney Stark condemns secularisation theory "to the graveyard of failed theories.” Others (erroneously) believe it is only a European phenomenon21. We will respond to these arguments below, for example Steve Bruce points out Japan as an example of a non-Christian, non-European country that has also secularized extensively.

The USA still has a very high religiosity rate, as high as third-world countries, and is, with the possible exception of parts of Scandinavia the most advanced country in the world. So this is a serious exception that needs explaining. Most explanations have concentrated on the high level of immigration, something which tends to harden people's religions. See: Political Power Struggles and Identity Reinforcement: Why are People Religious?

The developing world is highly religious; there are countries and cultures that can hardly imagine what life without religion is like. Critics imagine that these countries will not lose their religious beliefs as they develop higher rates of education and technological development.

Sections of society within secular countries remain highly religious. The middle-ground believers are now swayed into a religiosity by the same inertia that used to lead them into religion. Now these are largely gone, what is left behind are the hardcore believers, who are both more vocal, more educated and more activist about their beliefs. These fanatical groups show no signs of dissipation. A report in The Economist (2007) reads: "It is the tougher versions of religion that are doing best - the sort that claim Adam and Eve met 6,003 years ago. Some of the new converts are from the ranks of the underprivileged (Pentecostalism has spread rapidly in the fevelas of Brazil), but many are not. American evangelicals tend to be well-educated and well-off".

The growth of New Religious Movements in secularized countries makes some doubt the depth of secularisation23. However, the numbers involved in NRMs are small in comparison to the numbers lost by world religions in the developed world, and their middling increase in numbers is simply part of the decentralisation process of religions. It is just that the NRMs are often newsworthy, hence, have a higher profile.

Some Muslim countries are modernizing without secularizing. In contrast, some of these states are seeing dwindling minority religions and increasing power of Islamic institutions. Yet, the type of science accepted is often engineering and branches of science that lack teleological and theological implications. Evolution is, for example, still comprehensively rejected in all gulf states. So, we are not seeing a true adoption of modernism in these countries, just an uptake of pragmatism.

**Questions to answer**

1. What does Rodney Stark condemn Secularisation to? Why do you think that is?
2. How have people explained secularisation?
3. Why will technological advances not dissuade people from believing in God?
4. Who are the ones believed to be left believing in God? What does this mean for the religion that is presented to others?
5. Who are seemingly the ones joining religious groups? Why do you think this is?

**2. Let us now look at some arguments for and against Secularisation.**

1. Look at the statements below and divide them into two groups. One group of statements will agree with secularisation and the other set of statements will disagree that secularisation is taking place.

Statistical trends - Decline in church attendance, therefore there is no longer a place for religion.

Change in place of worship: just because footfall has declined does not confirm people aren't praying etc elsewhere like at home.

Postmodernism and Pluralism: multi faith countries cause no one truth to exist, questioning one religion against another. Therefore, there is no real place for a religion that claims ultimate truth. (LYOTARD)

Pluralism: more diversity, can chose a change of religions. If secularisation is happening, we lose our moral fabric

Rationalism: scientific explanations have replaced and clashed with religious explanations.

People do believe in God or a deity, the religious climate has changed. New Age Religions and spiritual explorations. Religion is simply just different and therefore is certainly existent.

Disengagement theory: Sects and diverse and more spiritual religious groups have become more interesting than organised religion and in is replacing these religions.

Just because religion has lost its authority in law does not mean it has lost its spiritual influence and place in the world.

1. Let us now look at two scholars who are strong atheists and provide challenges to religion.



In the last thirty years people with strong atheist beliefs have become celebrities. Atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens appear on radio and TV debates throughout the year promoting their anti-religious beliefs. 

Christopher Eric Hitchens (13 April 1949 – 15 December 2011) was an American author, columnist, essayist, orator, religious and literary critic, social critic, and journalist. Hitchens was the author, co-author, editor or co-editor of over 30 books, including five collections of essays, on politics, literature and religion. A staple of public discourse, his confrontational style of debate made him both a lauded intellectual and a controversial public figure.

Hitchens advocated the separation of church and state. As a self-described antitheist, he regarded the concept of a god or supreme being as a totalitarian belief that impedes individual freedom. He argued that free expression and scientific discovery should replace religion as a means of informing ethics and defining codes of conduct for human civilization.

Watch this clip of Christopher Hitchens speaking at a conference. Make a note of his arguments against God / religion.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQox1hQrABQ>

**Tasks to complete**

* What arguments does Hitchens make?
* How valid do you think these arguments are?
* Is he fair in his arguments or do you think he is missing a bigger picture?
* Do some research on Hitchens. For example, what some of the names of his books?
* What can you find out Peter Hitchens (Christopher’s brother) and what is Peter’s view of God?

1. In 2006 Richard Dawkins wrote a book titled the God Delusion. In was an attack on religious belief. A series of arguments that aimed to prove that God and in particular Christian beliefs are not real.

Watch this clip and make notes on some of the arguments it provides against religion.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VjnECJVwReo>

**3. We are now going to read a summary of Richard Dawkins book The God Delusion. Highlight key points as you read the summary.**

**Summary of The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins**

**1) The God Hypothesis**

“There exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.”

A theist believes in such a God who is intimately involved in human affairs: answering prayers, forgiving or punishing sins, intervening in the world by performing miracles. This God is a pernicious delusion.

The existence of God is a scientific hypothesis: The religious claim of an interventionist God who answers prayers leads to a very different world from one without such a God. If God communicated with humans, that fact would not lie outside science. Even if we believe in a non-interventionist God, to claim an ultimate design of the universe implies a very different universe.

**2) No Design – No God**

Evidence for design: The natural world looks as though it is designed. However, evolution through natural selection (Darwinism) gives us evidence to reject creation by design as well as creation by chance. Religious people have argued that the natural world is so complex, it could not have evolved (for example, the human eye). But natural selection is a cumulative process so that what seems highly improbable can be broken up into steps which are not prohibitively improbable. Evolution is the only process, as far as we know, capable of generating complexity from simplicity. We cannot be satisfied to say that this is a mystery as it would mark an end to scientific investigation; ignorance drives scientists on.

We live on a planet that is friendly to our kind of life. There are two reasons for this: 1) Life has evolved to flourish in the conditions provided by the planet; 2) There are billions of planets in the universe and our planet is one of the few which is evolutionary friendly.

We live in a friendly universe. The laws and constants of physics are friendly enough to allow life to arise; a very small difference would make life impossible. • A theist says that God tuned the constants such that the production of life was possible – but this leaves the existence of God unexplained. A God capable of calculating the values of the constants is very improbable. • Some physicists think that the constants have to be the particular values they are for any universe. • Other physicists suggest that there are many co-existing universes, each one with a different set of constants and laws; we are in one of the universes which happened to be propitious to our eventual evolution.

A God capable of designing a universe (and who is claimed to be able to send and receive intelligible signals to millions of people simultaneously) would have to be complex and would be statistically improbable. To suggest that a great unknown is responsible for the universe existing rather than not is a total abdication of the responsibility to find an explanation. The God Hypothesis is untenable. God almost certainly does not exist.

**3) Why are there religions?**

As religious rituals have a cost in both time and resources, an evolutionist has to ask the question, What is the benefit? For evolutionists, ‘benefit’ normally means, What is the enhancement to the survival of the individual’s genes?

There is little evidence that religious belief protects people from stress-related diseases. It may be a placebo that prolongs life by reducing stress but this does not explain the extent of the phenomenon.

Neuroscientists suggest there is a ‘god centre’ in the brain, but Darwinians then want to know what natural selection favoured this.

I suggest that religion is a by-product of the way we bring up our children. There is a selective advantage for children to believe without question what grown-ups tell them in order for them to avoid what is dangerous. This, though, makes them vulnerable to misinformation (mind viruses) such as religion.

How did religion start? One psychologist suggests that children have a natural tendency to: • make a fundamental distinction between mind and matter. This compares with the view of most scientists who regard mind as a manifestation of matter. • assign a purpose to everything (for example, clouds are ‘for raining’).

Both tendencies predispose us to religion. Genes are the physical entities which are responsible for biological reproduction. In a similar way, memes may be responsible for transmitting culture in human society. Just as there are copying errors (mutations) in genes, religion may be seen as a mutation of these memes. Once religion has a hold, its attribute of being against reason helps its own survival.

**4) Do we need religion in order to be good?**

Genes are ‘selfish’ in the sense that, through the filter of natural selection, those that survive do so at the expense of rivals. But this does not necessarily make the organism (humans) selfish.

There are four good Darwinian reasons for individuals to be altruistic: • Genetic kinship: care for those who share similar genetic make-up. • Reciprocation: giving of favours in anticipation of a payback. • Acquiring a good reputation for generosity and kindness. • Conspicuous generosity demonstrates superiority.

These ‘rules’ of altruism may be carried out even when there is no genetic advantage (example of a reed warbler feeding a young cuckoo).

We don’t need God or religion to have good morals. One study shows that there is no statistical difference between atheists and religious believers in making moral judgements. Moral principles based only upon religion may be called absolutist but, for example, “Is it always wrong to kill an embryo?”

Religious people don’t derive their morals from scripture, or if they do, they choose the nice bits and reject the nasty. There are many Old Testament passages which we would now describe as immoral. In the New Testament we read that Jesus didn’t derive his ethics from the scriptures of his day.

The central doctrine of Christianity is that Jesus was tortured and executed in payment for the hereditary sin of Adam, including possible future sins. This is vicious, sado-masochistic and repellent. If God wanted to forgive our sins, why not just forgive them?

Religion makes the world’s troubles worse, even when they can be described as political. Religion exacerbates the world’s problems through: • Labelling of children in terms of their religion before they know what they believe. • Segregated schools. • Taboos against marrying outside the religious culture.

We have all changed our attitude to what is right and wrong over time, whether or not we are religious. These changes have not come from religion. Individual atheists may do evil things but they don’t do evil things in the name of religion.

**5) What is wrong with religion?**

As a scientist, I am hostile to fundamentalist religion because it actively perverts the scientific enterprise as it teaches us not to change our mind. Religious people who are not fundamentalists make the world safe for fundamentalists by teaching children that an unquestioning faith is a virtue.

Only religious faith is a strong enough force to motivate utter madness of the terrorist acts we have seen over the last few years. Our current war against terrorism is a war against religious idealists who have an unquestioning faith.

The treasured heritage of our sacred religious books can be retained even when we give up our belief in God. Any gap that religion leaves in the areas of explanation, exhortation, consolation and inspiration can be filled in other ways. Explanation and inspiration can come from science.

**Tasks to complete**

1. Make summaries of each section of The Gold Delusion
2. Identify some evidence which would support Dawkins’ view in each case and also some arguments which would challenge his view.
3. Which of Dawkins’ arguments do you think is the strongest? Do you think he has a case to make against religion? Do you think Dawkins is being biased at all in his thinking / approach? Give three reasons to support your view.

4. **Now that we have looked at the attitudes of some scholars towards religion and the rise of Secularism, let us know turn our attention towards the rise of New Religious Movements (NRM’s). We will look at what these groups involve, some characteristic of them and why they have become so popular.**

i) Have a look at the image below. What do you know about these images or the groups themselves?



ii) Read the following information which outlines what a New Religious Movement is.

New religious movement (NRM), the generally accepted term for what is sometimes called, often with pejorative connotations, a “cult.” The term new religious movement has been applied to all new faiths that have arisen worldwide over the past several centuries.

NRMs are characterized by a number of shared traits. These religions are, by definition, “new”; they offer innovative religious responses to the conditions of the modern world, despite the fact that most NRMs represent themselves as rooted in ancient traditions. NRMs are also usually regarded as “countercultural”; that is, they are perceived (by others and by themselves) to be alternatives to the mainstream religions of Western society, especially Christianity in its normative forms. These movements are often highly eclectic, pluralistic, and syncretistic; they freely combine doctrines and practices from diverse sources within their belief systems. The new movement is usually founded by a charismatic and sometimes highly authoritarian leader who is thought to have extraordinary powers or insights. Many NRMs are tightly organized. In light of their often self-proclaimed “alternative” or “outsider” status, these groups often make great demands on the loyalty and commitment of their followers and sometimes establish themselves as substitutes for the family and other conventional social groupings. NRMs have arisen to address specific needs that many people cannot satisfy through more traditional religious organizations or through modern secularism. They are also products of and responses to modernity, pluralism, and the scientific worldview.

**Complete the following tasks**

* Create a description of what a New Religious Movement is
* What are the characteristics of a New Religious Movement?
* Why do you think New Religious Movements occur?

iii) New Religious Movements are divided into three categories. The categories are provided for you below.

**1. World Rejecting Movements**

Highly critical of the outside world so tend to withdraw and adopt a communal lifestyle.

They vary in size but most are small, local groups which often have charismatic leaders. However, some are international in size such as the Unification Church (The Moonies). They are politically radical.

They cut off former ties – friends, relatives, possessions, and members have to hand over all assets and are forced to live an ascetic lifestyle.

**2. World accommodating movements**

Members of such groups (e.g. “born again Christian” groups) usually live “normal” lives. These are often offshoots of existing churches. They resemble denominations and are far more politically conservative than world rejecting NRMs. They are a breakaway from a church which they feel has lost its religious purity.

**3. World Affirming Religions**

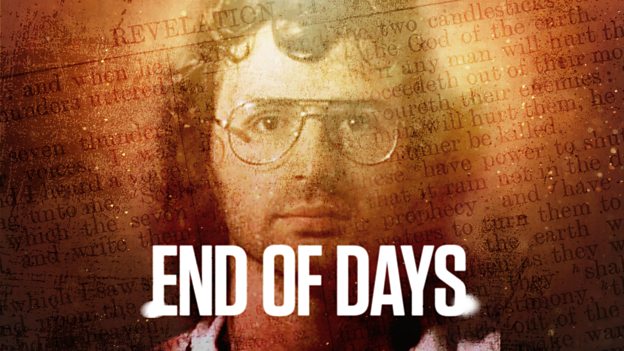
Scientology is an example. The world is one of opportunity (acceptance of society’s norms). We can be more successful and become ‘better’ people. Many involve expensive training programmes. Members live in the ‘normal world.’

**Essay style question to complete**

Explore the various types of New Religious Movements (8)

(This question is just asking you to share your knowledge and understanding of what the types of NRM’s are)

1. BBC Sounds has a series of podcasts which explores the events that took place in Waco, Texas in 1993. David Koresh was a leader of a group of people and he had amazing knowledge of the scriptures. He believed that God was revealing information to him that would allow him to decode the “seven seals” as mentioned in Book of Revelation. Have a listen to the first podcast. As you do think about which New Religious Movement this group would fit into. (There are 8 episodes in total which you could also listen to)

[](https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bbc.co.uk%2Fprogrammes%2Fp06qc33m&psig=AOvVaw14cP3YAUd7pWYutkPNnvow&ust=1589374639526000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CAIQjRxqFwoTCPCUmYmwrukCFQAAAAAdAAAAABAD)

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p06qcxz9>

**5. Bringing all of your work together complete these exam style questions using the guidance you have been given. It is these answers that will be marked and detailed feedback given.**

**Assess the belief that traditional religion cannot compete with New Religious Movements (12)**

*Guidance for answering this style of question:*

* *This question is asking you to show your knowledge of the New Religious Movements but also to assess whether they have more interest than “traditional” religion.*
* *You could work your way through characteristics of a New Religious Movement and what they offer in comparison to traditional religion. Why is a New Religious Movement seen to be more appealing?*
* *You will need 4 - 5 paragraphs.*