**“On balance, societies benefit from religious belief and practice.”**

This topic asks us to analyze the effects of religion throughout various societies and weigh the positives and negatives to come to a *general* conclusion. A key feature of this topic will be providing a mechanism with which to weigh both material and immaterial effects of an ideology or practice.

For the affirmative, the benefits one can focus on are numerous. Many authors write about the strong correlation between charitable giving and religious practice, regardless of the particular denomination. This goes together with many others who write about the ability for religious practice to be linked to poverty reduction in the form of charitable giving, the ability to help people navigate day-to-day struggles, and providing harm reduction in areas like addiction or personal counseling.

Affirmatives may also focus on the benefits of religious practice such as stronger test scores and the benefits on the family structure as well. Many authors write about the connection between regular religious practice and higher academic achievement and stronger familial ties. These outcomes may create more grounded and successful individuals, which are a necessary component of societies throughout history. Additionally, some bolder affirmatives could provide a broader definition of benefits and discuss cultural and historical contributions such as artwork and philosophy that have resulted from religion as continuous benefits to society.

For the negative, arguments about the potential exclusionary aspects of religion will be a large focus. While the affirmative may focus on charitable giving, the negative can point out the large barriers that religious labels can put between different groups and the isolating effect it has. For example, while some may give charitably, that giving may be conditional upon engagement with that religious community, which isolates others. Many authors note that the lines that determine this exclusion tend to follow societal norms for discrimination and end up affecting already-marginalized groups. For example, some note that charitable giving sounds good on face, but if funds are being used to continue exclusionary practices or harm marginalized people, the potential gain to society is considerably lessened.

Negatives may argue that some religious groups oppose different forms of scientific research that would greatly benefit society because it may conflict with their religious teachings. Impediments to medical science, for example, may be something that costs countless future lives. Even if religious texts or ideals do not necessarily lead to discrimination or anti-scientific sentiment, the glorification of religious leaders can create institutions that may be ripe for abuse.