

## How has religion become an agent in peace-building in conflict areas of the world?

Wednesday, 14th May 2014

Duration: 26:19

A level	
AQA	RSS08, RSS10, RST3C, RST3F, RST3H, RST4B
Edexcel	6RS01, 6RS02, 6RS03, 6RS04
OCR	G572, G575, G578, G579, G582, G585, G588, G589
WJEC	RS1/2 CS, RS1/2 ETH, RS1/2 CHR, RS2/2 CS, RS2/2 ETH, RS2/2 CHR, RS3 CS, RS3 ETH, RS3 CHR, RS4 HE

This is a Faith Interview featuring John Brewer, Keith Kahn-Harris, Jonathan Powell, Ian Reader, Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead.

This programme is suitable for use with A level students studying Christianity, Christian thought, Islam, Judaism, religious ethics and religion and society.

In order to get the most out of the programme it would be worth first showing students the two minute preview and then brainstorming them on questions such as:

- To what extent can religion help in peace-building?
- What might be the disadvantages of religion being involved in peace-building?
- Would you agree that 'Violent conflicts in the modern world which appear to be rooted in religious divisions are in reality "power and resources dressed up as religion"'?
- How far would you agree that women have a particular and special role in peace-building?

All of these issues are addressed in the discussion and the Question and Answer section.

Violent conflicts in the modern world which appear to be rooted in religious divisions are in reality "power and resources dressed up as religion", according to Jonathan Powell at the final Westminster Faith Debate of the season. He argued that religious organisations can play a part in bringing about peaceful resolutions – but other members of the panel were doubtful. The lively discussion showed that the role of religion in conflict situations is highly ambivalent.

This debate provided academic insight into what is a very contemporary controversy. In January 2014 former Prime Minister Tony Blair warned that religious extremism will be the biggest source of conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; and in our first Faith Debate of the year we explored the interactions of religion, politics and armed conflict in the Arab Spring. But are there ways in which religious organisations can be agents for ending violence? Or do religions mainly act as catalysts for conflict and stumbling blocks for peace?

On the panel tackling these questions were John Brewer, Professor of Post Conflict Studies at Queen's University Belfast; Keith Kahn-Harris, a specialist on dialogue within the Jewish community and on attitudes to Israel; Jonathan Powell, former Chief of Staff for Tony Blair and the chief British government negotiator on Northern Ireland during his time in office; and Ian Reader, Professor of Religious Studies at Lancaster University, with research interests in the connections between religion and violence. The debate was chaired by Charles Clarke, former Home Secretary, and Linda Woodhead, Professor of Sociology of Religion at the University of Lancaster.

Underlying much of the debate was the crucial question – what exactly is meant by 'peace'?

According to Brewer, an important factor that can exacerbate conflicts is that different players may

have different ideas about what 'peace' is. He argued that in the Northern Ireland peace process, Catholics were often pushing for a broad "positive peace", or "social transformation" – the securing of "justice, fairness, equality of opportunity". Protestants, however, were focusing primarily on simply ending the violence – "negative peace", or "conflict transformation". Kahn-Harris cited the example of Israel and Egypt to demonstrate another interpretation – "cold peace" – a situation where the different sides do their best to avoid and ignore each other rather than actively seek to resolve their differences. For Powell, these more pessimistic notions of peace were exemplified in the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland – simply signing a peace agreement does not necessarily mean the end of social conflict.

For Brewer and Powell, it is precisely because 'peace' means more than the cessation of violence that religious organisations can play important roles in 'peace-building'. Brewer divided this term into two processes: "state-building", or the "political peace process", which involves the reintroduction of government structures and the re-establishment of institutions of justice and politics; and "nation-building", or the "social peace process", where former enemies learn to live together after conflict. Most important in his view are the contributions of faith-based institutions to nation-building – they can lead communities in dealing with issues of forgiveness, memory, truth and justice. Powell suggested that religious institutions do not tend to have very useful roles in brokering the end of violence itself, though religious individuals have played important parts. Religious institutions can, however, be important for creating a context for dialogue between different sides. As Brewer noted, in Northern Ireland churches provided sacred spaces where political enemies could be brought together to engage in, and implement, the processes of 'state-building'.

But the role of religions in conflict areas is not simply benevolent. Powell insisted that religion's influence on the causes of conflict is often exaggerated – "Northern Ireland was not about religion" but about access to power, traditions and identity. Reader and Kahn-Harris, however, felt that religion often plays a much greater role in causing conflict than reducing it. Reader challenged Brewer by arguing that it is precisely when religion becomes involved in "nation-building" that problems arise. "Religious nationalism" is driving the attacks by Buddhists on Muslims in South East Asia. When the land itself forms part of a sacred landscape, which cannot be negotiated in religious terms, peaceful solutions can only be found in the 'political sphere'.

Kahn-Harris was also critical of the capacity for religious organisations to reduce conflict. He suggested that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had originally been between two movements that were essentially secular – the Zionist movement and the leftist liberation movement of the Palestinians. In the last few decades, however, the conflict has taken on increasingly religious elements. Religions can function by giving the "nitty gritty stuff" of daily life "transcendent implications" – which in Kahn-Harris' view can make disputes over such temporal issues as land and power much more difficult to resolve. He also noted that peoples in diasporas, including Jews and Palestinians, can give conflicts universal significance, drawing in the support of other states like the USA and hindering resolution. Peace-making is best achieved when conflicts are relatively isolated and localised. Similarly, interfaith dialogue achieves most on the local, grassroots level – there is a danger that global, elitist interfaith dialogue can simply work as an "alibi", enabling religious leaders to "feel good about themselves" without making practical progress.

A number of other structural factors were noted by the panel and audience members that might inhibit efforts for peace-building. International justice bodies can, ironically, impact detrimentally on the ending of conflict. Both Powell and Reader noted that the threat of facing justice and imprisonment makes it less likely that key figures involved in conflict atrocities will accept peace

processes. On another note, Brewer stressed that the relations between particular states, civil societies and religions can affect in various ways the capacity for religious organisations to aid in peace-building. In the Northern Ireland case, he suggested that the established churches aimed at “negative peace”, the ending of violence, but were constrained by their allegiance to state players from pushing further. The “minority” churches and “maverick” individuals led the way towards broader “positive peace”. The variability of the structural relations between states, societies and religions means that it is important to approach conflict situations case-by-case – the peace-building model from one place may not be appropriate in a different context.

A final point raised by an audience member concerned the connections of gender, religious organisations and peace-making. The UN Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, affirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and post-conflict reconstruction. It was suggested to the panel that some of their pessimistic views on religion’s capacity to resolve conflict overlooked the importance of religiously-orientated, grassroots women’s movements in peace processes. Whilst the panel agreed with this point, Kahn-Harris cautioned against stereotyping women as ‘the peace-makers’ – both men and women can contribute to conflict, and both should engage in peace-building processes.

Ultimately, it seems that if religious organisations are to have practical successes in resolving conflicts, these are best achieved on the local, grassroots level. The panel generally agreed that religious groups are unlikely to broker the end of violence by themselves; but they can provide spaces for the establishment of dialogue, and in some cases they can aid the healing of social wounds after formal peace agreements are signed. In other cases, however, the influence of religion is clearly more likely to exacerbate conflict situations. As Clarke summed up, we need to disentangle religion’s precise role in the origins of individual cases. Sweeping statements about the functioning of religion only exacerbate the ignorance and distrust which lie behind much of the world’s conflicts today.

As always, after watching the discussion, it is worth returning to the students’ views and finding out if and how their personal opinions have been influenced or changed by what they have heard.

For 6th formers it might well be possible to watch the discussion straight through, however, for some students it might be advisable to watch one segment at a time. After discussion, it might be worth getting students to listen to some of the podcasts provided on the website.