

## How should moderates deal with hardliners?

Wednesday, 26th March 2014

Duration: 24:44

A level	
AQA	RSS08, RSS10, RST3C, RST3F, RST3H, RST4B
Edexcel	6RS01, 6RS02, 6RS03, 6RS04
OCR	G572, G575, G582, G585
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 Sir Tony Baldry, Masooda Bano, Peter Herriot, Maajid Nawaz, Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead.

This programme is suitable for use with A level students studying Christianity, Christian thought, Islam 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 does religion cause conflict?
- Why do some religious people turn to extremism?
- Should extremists be allowed to practice their beliefs and influence others?
- What is the best way in which moderates can deal with hardliners?

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

### **How can religious moderates deal better with uncompromising hardliners and the conflicts they cause?**

Creating difference and conflict is the religious fundamentalist's "raison d'être", according to Peter Herriot at the fourth Westminster Faith Debate of the year. The panel of politicians and academics broadly agreed that religious moderates need to do more to tackle this challenge, but there was some disagreement about how this can be done in the (at times heated) discussion.

The debate was certainly timely. On Saturday 29th March the first same-sex marriages were legalised in the UK – an issue which polarised opinions within the Church of England, with those Anglicans who oppose the move becoming increasingly vocal in public discourse. As we saw in our first Faith Debate of the year, conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa following the Arab Spring are often portrayed along religious sectarian lines. Former Home Secretary Charles Clarke opened the discussion by emphasising that the media's focus on the "dramatic" positions of minority religious groups has led to a public "misunderstanding" of religion. How can religious moderates contest these misleading images, and deal with the conflicts caused by hard-line positions?

Debating these questions were Sir Tony Baldry, MP for Banbury and the Second Church Estates Commissioner; Masooda Bano, University Research Lecturer in Development Studies at the University of Oxford; Peter Herriot, former Professor of Psychology at City University and the author of several books on fundamentalism; and Maajid Nawaz, a former member of a global Islamist group and now Liberal Democrat candidate for Hampstead and Kilburn, and co-founder and chairman of Quilliam, a global think tank focusing on such issues as religious freedom and extremism. Charles

Clarke and Linda Woodhead, Professor of Sociology of Religion at the University of Lancaster, chaired the debate.

Bano began by addressing an issue that recurred throughout the discussion – the importance of conceptual clarity. She challenged the language of the debate title, arguing that it is unhelpful to assume that religious ‘hardliners’ have a propensity to cause conflict and violence. Nawaz agreed with this, distinguishing between ‘religious conservatism’ and ‘fundamentalism’. Focusing on Islam, he defined fundamentalism as the adherence to a strict, single interpretation of religion, combined with an attempt to stereotype and “dehumanise” people of other views. ‘Islamism’ for him is the attempt to impose a particular interpretation on others, through either political or violent means. Religious moderates must be clear in the meanings of their terms to avoid surrendering to fundamentalists the terms of engagement. As an example, Nawaz argued that the Law Society’s recent recommendations concerning ‘Sharia succession rules’ were not only “patronising” but would play into the hands of fundamentalists by offering only one interpretation of Sharia. As he put it, “there is no one Muslim community, there is no ‘the Sharia’.”

Distinguishing between religious conservatism and fundamentalism enabled Bano and Nawaz to argue that armed conflict comes not from the nature of religion itself, but from the use of religion by extremists. Bano also emphasised the importance of the political and economic contexts out of which violent fundamentalists emerge. In the case of violent Muslim ‘jihadists’, a sense of “injustice” at political marginalisation, and a build-up of personal grievances, including the loss of family members, are crucial for motivating individual violence; but this can only be sustained in the long-term through the political support of states like Saudi Arabia and Iran. She noted, nonetheless, that religions could encourage “sacrificial” violence by offering believers “rewards”, in this world and the next.

Looking at the situation from a theoretical standpoint, Herriot explained the emergence of fundamentalist positions in terms of collective identity formation. He argued that every social system is a continuum ranging from “integration” to “differentiation”; at the latter end, fundamentalists emphasise above all their “difference” from both their co-religionists and people outside their tradition. Stressing difference is key: it enables them to treat outsiders as stereotypes, setting up an “us and them” conflict situation; it encourages the internalisation of a collective identity; and it paints the world as a “cosmic conflict”, in which the chosen few on the right side have to oppose everyone else. Later, Herriot suggested that in today’s society it is very “countercultural” to have, as fundamentalists do, a social rather than an individual identity as the centre of one’s being – and that part of our anxiety about fundamentalism may come from this.

Having set out their ideas about how religious conflicts can arise, the panellists offered suggestions about how, in Woodhead’s phrase, the “disorganised majority” should respond. Baldry stressed his belief in the “power of rational argument and discussion”, suggesting that the debate within the Church of England on women bishops had required methodologies akin to Middle Eastern peace talks. Considering Christian divisions, he questioned whether individuals are attracted to specific churches by their “particular practices and ambience”, and then adopt that church’s theology, or whether the attraction of the theology comes first. Asking this question could help identify those standpoints which different groups might be willing to compromise on, and other positions which are rooted in theological convictions that are unlikely to move. Nawaz suggested that what is needed is a much broader “cultural shift” to rebrand moderate positions. Reasoned arguments are not enough – religious moderates need to recapture media attention through deployment of dynamic liberal leaders, popular music, art, and other cultural symbols.

Herriot suggested that debate between moderates and fundamentalists is ultimately futile – it is “not much use inviting them round for tea and a nice chat”. If fundamentalists’ very identities are built on a sense of difference and a stereotyping of others, then it is unlikely they will be persuaded to see beyond those stereotypes. He stressed that religious moderates should avoid allowing fundamentalists to paint them into a role of a persecuting “enemy”. If religious extremists adopt the position of “victim”, they can claim political concessions from governments. Further, he suggested conceiving of fundamentalists less as enemies, and more as necessary “opportunity costs”. The “disorganised majority” should spend less time countering the opinions of fundamentalists, which might only give the latter more media coverage, and focus instead on attracting media attention to religiously moderate responses to social problems.

A final theme recurring in the discussion was authority within religions. While both Nawaz and Bano emphasised that the lack of central authority in Islam means that extreme interpretations can compete for legitimacy with moderate ones, Bano argued that Islam is not as “open to interpretation” as Nawaz suggested – in many places the ulama (legal scholars) and established tradition retain control over possible interpretations. In the UK, however, Clarke noted that the 2013 YouGov polls conducted by Woodhead and the Westminster Faith Debates show a clear discrepancy, across different religions, between the views of religious leaders and the rank and file. Because the media and politicians often focus on the views of religious leaderships, they easily misunderstand and misrepresent religious majorities and reinforce their silence.

In the midst of debate on many issues, there was agreement amongst the panel on the need to give a large voice to religious majorities, without silencing minorities. The balance needs to be more proportionate to their numbers. Woodhead pointed out that according to the Westminster Faith Debates YouGov polls, only 3.6% of the UK population fall into the ‘fundamentalism’ category – yet such individuals are given much more air space, and a huge role in dictating church policies. Religious moderates themselves need to step up to the challenge of dispelling current misconceptions about religion – and religious opinion – as a whole. This is a global task, and it is urgent.

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. You might consider the impact of extremist views propagated by the media and the very small percentage of religious adherents who hold these according to the YouGov poll.

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.