

Religion and violence in the Arab spring

Wednesday, 12th February 2014

Duration: 24:32

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

This is a Faith Interview featuring Bassma Kodmani, Charles Clarke, Jack Straw, Linda Woodhead, Shuruq Naguib and Toby Matthiesen.

This programme is suitable for use with A level students studying Islam, religion and authority, religion and society and issues of war and peace.

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:

- What is the relationship between religion and politics?
- Should religion and politics be kept separate?
- What can religion contribute to politics and vice versa?
- Is religion a danger to democracy and politics?

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

“Everyone is quoting God,” said Shuruq Naguib, speaking about the Arab Spring in the first Westminster Faith Debate of 2014.

The issue for debate was the causes of violent upheaval occurring across the Middle East and North Africa since 2010. The media often present “sectarian” religious division, particularly between Sunni and Shi’a, as the culprit. However, are the conflicts actually being driven by religious animosities? Most importantly, what can be done to achieve peace?

Taking part in the debate were Bassma Kodmani, director of the Arab Reform Initiative and former head of foreign relations of the Syrian National Council, Toby Matthiesen, Research Fellow in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at Cambridge University, Shuruq Naguib, Lecturer in Islamic Studies at Lancaster University, and Jack Straw, former Labour Foreign Secretary and MP for Blackburn. The debate was chaired by Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead.

Matthiesen began by downplaying the importance of religious belief in the Middle Eastern conflicts. While the media portrays an apocalyptic clash between religious rivals, observers should not be fooled by such “essentialising”. Three events were key to the current unrest: the Iranian Revolution of 1979 which “changed the way the Shi’a saw themselves”, the Iraq War which began in 2003 and redrew the balance of power in the region, and the events of the Arab Spring itself. Insofar as religion was involved, Matthiesen mainly saw it as a political tool used by states and elites.

The manipulation of religious divisions by political regimes was a theme running through the debate. In Dr Kodmani’s view, corrupt rulers have been using religious establishments as a soft security device for decades.

For Naguib, however, a crisis of religious authority, particularly within Sunni Islam, is also a critical factor. She rooted this in postcolonial state-building. Newly independent states with nationalist agendas co-opted religious authorities to bolster support. The result is a crisis of legitimacy for traditional religious authorities. In Naguib's view, organisations like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt are reacting as much against religious elites as against social injustice and political corruption.

This crisis of authority also involves conflict between different generations. Some young people, disillusioned by lack of employment and political voice, turn away from moderate religious figures to those who incite violence. Social media can play an important role here in spreading extreme views.

Woodhead drew parallels with a wider crisis of religious authority affecting all religions. Traditional leaders are questioned or ignored by new generations of believers who have increased access to religious knowledge, particularly through the internet.

The question "who speaks for Islam?" is linked to another: "who profits?" According to Matthiesen and Kodmani, religious conflicts have been stoked by corrupt regimes to undermine united opposition against them. In Syria, Kodmani suggested, the persistent threat of the 'other' provides justification for the use of violence against society. On a wider scale, sectarian violence offers major regional players the opportunity to assert their influence, with conservative forces from the Gulf monarchies and Iran casting themselves as the defenders of Sunnis and Shi'a respectively. Jack Straw also believed it was necessary to look behind these religious labels to the political rivalries they support.

What should be done? The panel offered two suggestions. For Matthiesen and Kodmani, a stable and lasting solution can only be found through the establishment of democratic societies on the basis of citizenship. For Kodmani, "Secularism provided it is well understood, is the most important principle we need to hold." She offered the example of Tunisia, which following its Revolution has avoided extensive violence. Whilst one audience member suggested this was to do with economic pragmatism – "there is no such thing as Sharia-compliant tourism" – Kodmani stressed that Tunisia's achievement was built on existing institutions of civil society lacking in many other countries – including trade unions and women's groups. She believed that lasting solutions could only be based on equal citizenship, not ethnic or religious belonging.

Naguib and Straw agreed – but for them, the answer must be religious and well as political. Neither doubted that Islam and democracy are compatible. Naguib thought the issue of "Who speaks for Islam" must be resolved, and enduring solutions must have religious legitimacy. Straw suggested that stable religion-state relations have to be worked out in ways appropriate to each country. He reminded us that only a few decades ago religious "sectarians" from Ireland attempted to blow up the Prime Minister's residence just across the road from where we were sitting. The history of religious conflict in Europe reminds us that stable solutions can take a very long time to evolve.

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. In particular it would be useful to consider media and political responses to Islam and Islamophobia.

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.