What have we learned about radicalisation?

Wednesday, 7th March 2012

Duration 1:42:01

A level	
AQA	Religious Studies: AS Unit A, A2 Unit 3F
Edexcel	Religious Studies: Units 1-4
OCR	
WJEC	Religious Studies: RS 1/2 CS Religious Studies: RS 3 CS

This is a Faith debate featuring Charles Clarke, Linda Woodhead, Ed Husain, Marat Shterin, Mark Sedgwick, Matthew Francis and Mehdi Hasan. It focuses on the issues surrounding radicalisation, with particular reference to Islam.

Students could be given the same issues as used in this debate and asked their opinion on them prior to watching the discussion, revisiting them later to see if any of the views expressed had caused them to change their minds. For extension work students should look at the different meanings of radicalisation, extremism and terrorism. They might also consider the life of e.g. Adolf Hitler, as a case study, because of the 'positive' impact of Mengele's work on genetics.

This programme is suitable for use with A level students studying philosophy, ethics, religion and society and Islam. However, the debate is quite long and it would probably be sufficient for one lesson to listen to the opening presentations. The Question & Answer section could be a useful second lesson or make worthwhile extension work.

Questions for debate

What is 'radicalisation' or 'extremism'? Is it unique to Islam? Is it always religious? Is it a new and unique phenomenon, or just a new label for certain forms of terrorist violence? And what can research tell us about its causes and how to prevent it?

Conclusions from the debate

As currently used 'radicalisation' often includes too much and too little. Too little, because it focuses attention only on Islamic or religious forms of terrorism, and too much because radical ideas and 'Islamism' do not usually lead to violence and are too widespread for security initiatives to counter (attempts may be counter-productive).

As for what causes recent incidences of extremist violence, there is a growing consensus that there are multiple causes including: a sense of grievance and isolation, belief that violence can remedy a perceived problem, and contact with networks and images that glorify the use of violence.

Research Findings

'Radicalisation' is a new word, but the process whereby groups and individuals with religious or secular commitments turn violent is not new, and past and present research, e.g. that on New Religious Movements and various forms of terrorism, should not be ignored.

What needs to be explained (and countered) is not the embrace of radical ideas, which is widespread and always has been, e.g. communism, but why some groups and individuals embrace violence, which is rare.

It is impossible and often counter-productive for states and their security forces to counter radical ideas. This does not mean that extremist beliefs do not need to be contested, but there are more effective ways to do this, e.g., good education, including in religion and theology, and active initiatives in civil society.

Violence is always over-determined – there are multiple causes, many paths, and no single 'conveyor belt' to violence. There are situational, strategic, social and individual causes. This means that the move to violence can be explained in retrospect, but not accurately predicted in advance (two people with exactly the same circumstances may act violently in one case and not in another).

One dynamic observed in some of the research is the existence of an 'us-and them' (minority/majority) mentality combined with a sense of grievance. If the 'minority' then starts to attract criticism and repression by agents of 'the majority' this can lead to a vicious cycle of escalation.

The importance of (individual) belief as a driver of action tends to be overestimated. Involvement in social networks is arguably more important. Also important and underestimated is access to images, aesthetics, cultures and practices of violence which are not exclusively Islamicist but can be harnessed to Islamist ideas – as well as to anti-Muslim ideas.

There is no evidence to support the reality of 'brainwashing', nor of de-programming or de-radicalisation where these are equated with quick processes which bypass normal modes of socialisation, cognition and volition.

Practical Suggestions

'Radicalisation' includes too much. The holding of radical, intolerant attitudes, is widespread in all societies. It is the move to violence which needs to be understood and countered.

Counter-radicalisation policies have spread the net too wide. This is both ineffective and can be counter-productive when it engenders an us / them mentality and sense of grievance in a 'target' community.

Counter-radicalisation should follow established counter-terrorism pathways, which rely on gathering good intelligence and looking in a focused way for indications of interest in violence, involvement in networks advocating such violence, and other indicators of a move to violent action.

It is not the business of the state to prescribe or proscribe particular theologies, any more than particular political ideologies – so long as they operate within the law. It is, however, legitimate to educate and argue against false beliefs.

The model of human behaviour which holds that beliefs are the 'drivers' of action is misleading; practices, emotions and relationships are just as important as beliefs

After watching the discussion, students should revisit their views to find out if and how their personal opinions have been influenced or changed by what they have heard.

After discussion, if there is time, it would then be worth watching the 22 minute summary to clarify and crystallize the thoughts and views expressed.

The presentations by Marat Shterin, Mark Sedgwick and Matthew Francis are available as pdfs on the website.