

Security, religion and radicalisation

Religious ideology has been connected to recent years' rise in deadly terrorist attacks, and in the UK the Islamist group Al Qa'ida and associated networks are ranked as the most significant terrorist threat. Effective policy measures will need to include a better understanding of the role of religion in a security context.

Terrorism linked to radical Islamism is seen as a major and ongoing threat to UK security. However, the domestic security debate on perceived 'religious extremism' reveals a lack of religious literacy and a vocabulary focusing on phrases that are understood differently by different groups.

Misunderstandings can arise from confusion about what is meant by 'security', 'extremism' or even 'religion'. The common ground of shared values is often lost in the discourse, with politicians and media expressing exaggerated viewpoints.

The *Religion, Security and Global Uncertainties* report examines the link between religion and security, including terrorism and so-called 'religious violence', drawing on insights from history and contemporary Northern Ireland, as well as analysis of the Islamic world.

The research shows that the building of mutual trust and understanding provides the best foundation for security in relation to religion. It concludes that more interaction, reflection and dialogue between stakeholders such as policymakers, media and communities is needed to achieve more accurate and nuanced representations of conflicts and violence.

Key findings

- Religion plays an ambivalent role when it comes to security: in certain situations it can be a threat, in other situations it promotes security.
- There is no simple link between 'dangerous' religious ideas and violent action, but rather a complex combination of social triggers and individual characteristics.
- Religious leaders are potentially effective agents for overcoming community tensions.
- Politicians are often reluctant to work with religious leaders, and when they do their choice of partners tends to be influenced by their own agendas rather than an objective understanding of conditions in the community.
- Self-appointed community and media 'experts' can misrepresent the community, and should regularly be reassessed by authorities and media to ensure a balanced representation.
- It is important to have an inclusive approach and consult with a broad diversity of representatives within communities - including the youth, the marginalised and the most alienated. These groups are considered to be the most likely to become radicalised.
- There is a need for improved religious literacy among journalists to counter stereotyped media representations, particularly in national coverage.

Policy relevance and implications

- Simplified 'cause and effect' policies to counter violent extremism can easily backfire, as they don't reflect the complex combination of factors that trigger violence.
- Policy measures to remove community tensions and promote tolerance need to be particularly considered. Ill-judged or mistimed attempts have previously proved counterproductive and provoked confrontations they were intended to prevent.
- Given the potential for religious leaders to defuse community tensions, policymakers need to overcome reluctance in engaging with them due to a tradition of religious-secular divide. However, such engagement needs to be informed by an enhanced understanding of the religious context.
- Experience shows that 'bottom-up' measures starting at a community level can be more effective than a 'top-down' policy led by central government. Consultation with involved communities can identify problems with failed strategies to ensure they succeed.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The *Religion, Security and Global Uncertainties* report examines the relationship between religion and security, including terrorism and so-called 'religious violence'. It summarises research findings from the Religion and Global Uncertainties 1914-2014 project, carried out under the RCUK Global Uncertainties Leadership Fellowship with the ESRC as part-funder.

Web: www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/religion-martyrdom-global-uncertainties/reports

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Professor John Wolffe, The Open University
Email: john.wolffe@open.ac.uk

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Web: www.esrc.ac.uk ESRC communications team: comms@esrc.ac.uk

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