For much of the twentieth century, the world was divided between East and West, communist and capitalist, left and right. The international divide was replicated within most Western countries, with left-wing parties advocating some form of socialism, and right-wing parties upholding various forms of conservatism and liberal capitalism. While this meant the global stage was dominated by Cold War – and frequent more heated conflicts – and domestic politics were characterised by fierce ideological divisions and class tensions, both sides claimed to represent the best hope for democracy, freedom and material progress.

To these ends, Marxists saw communism, whether in its Soviet form or some form still to come, as the future of capitalism, the more or less inevitable destiny of human society. When the Soviet Union collapsed, ending the Cold War and disorienting the left internationally, the American thinker Francis Fukuyama famously claimed that it was now liberal capitalism, not communism, that had been shown to be the final destiny of humanity: it was ‘The End of History’. Ideology was a thing of the past.

It was another American thinker, Samuel Huntington, who soon gave voice to a strikingly different vision. Huntington argued that the Cold War had given way to a ‘Clash of Civilisations’: rather than politics in the traditional sense, it was culture that would now divide the world and become the main source of conflict. And perhaps the most important divide would be between the West and the Islamic world. Huntington’s thesis was very controversial, and is far from universally accepted, but many Arabic countries did indeed have significant anti-Western movements. During the Cold War these had often been influenced by Communism, and were generally anti-colonial and secular in nature; now they were increasingly taking on a religious character. Contemporary radical Islam can thus be seen as a response to the demise of traditional ideology, offering a new outlet for dissatisfaction with the prevailing world order.

In the domestic sphere, too, post-ideological ‘secular liberal’ values have not been embraced by everyone. It is not only radical Muslims who seek an alternative vision: ongoing debates about what it means to be British reveal a deep concern with cultural identity, while controversies over the role of religion in public life show that some Christians and others too feel they must struggle to hold onto their religious values. Even the rise of environmentalism demonstrates unease with materialism and a questioning of what we mean by progress. All this means ideology and belief remain important aspects of contemporary life. While it is Islamist terrorism and other extremist violence that attract most attention, there are deeper questions about what we believe and how we want to live that are worthy of consideration as we think about the future.
SOCIAL SCIENCE FOR SCHOOLS

Ideologies and Beliefs: Head2Head Debate

Motion: Extremist religious and political groups should be banned from university campuses

For motion: Professor Anthony Glees, director, Buckingham University’s Centre for Security and Intelligence Studies. Professor Glees has over 30 years of experience in the academic world covering issues relating to terrorism and counter terrorism, intelligence, and security. He is also a regular commentator in the UK and European media on these issues. Professor Glees is a member of the Terrorism and Security Working Group within the European Ideas Network, and has delivered numerous lectures and seminars across Europe and the US.

Against motion: Dennis Hayes, Professor of Education at the University of Derby. Professor Hayes has been a columnist for FE Focus in the Times Educational Supplement and writes regularly for the national press on educational issues and is a member of the Editorial Board of the Times Higher Education magazine. He is the Hon. Secretary of the Standing Committee for the Education and Training of Teachers (SCETT) and is well-known throughout higher education as the founder of the campaign group Academics For Academic Freedom (AFAF).

Round One: For motion
Like Professor Hayes, I’m an academic. I’ve long had a professional interest in extremist political groups and ideologies of all kinds because I think liberal democracies need to be safeguarded from extremists. Indeed, history teaches us that liberal democracies have frequently been destroyed by extremists. That university authorities should be permitting today’s extremists to visit campuses to sow violence is outrageous, irresponsible, and morally and politically unacceptable.

Before outlining my reasons for saying extremist religious and political groups should be banned from working and organising on our campuses if they break the law or academic standards (that is, on both security and pedagogical grounds), I’ll define a few terms.

First, extremism: our government, and our security community, distinguish between ‘extremism’ and ‘violent extremism’ – the former being acceptable, the latter illegal. As far as our nation is concerned, I’m OK with these definitions and their consequences - we don’t intervene against ‘extremism’, but we do get involved where it breeds violence.

However, as I will explain, I don’t think that extremism of any kind should have a place in our national educational life.

As for ‘radicalisation’, the government uses two different definitions. The first describes what happens after someone has been recruited by a terrorist organisation and acquires weapons and explosives training. The second addresses the process which leads to recruitment. In the case of the former, MI5 has a duty to intervene, on or off campus. In the case of the second, MI5 won’t intervene (although I think they should) and it becomes a police or university matter.
Round One: For motion continued

It follows that he believes that those who incite violence, or support changes to our governance which would inevitably provoke violence, should - where they can claim to be ‘academics’ - be given free run of our campuses. ‘No right to curb’ he says!

In my view this is an appalling and totally irresponsible attitude to take, particularly if an Islamist or any other extremist student group (ALF, BNP and so on) were to insist that if ‘academics’ have this ‘right’, then they should too.

There are so many reasons for this; many go to the heart of what our democracy is about and how it can be sustained. The taxpayer agrees to fund higher education on the basis of the principles laid down by Lord Dearing in his 1997 Report: ‘to play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised and inclusive society’. Extremists are not democratic, not civilised and believe in exclusion, not inclusion. They don’t belong on campuses.

For another, universities owe a duty of care to their students. Students do not turn to terror at the flick of a switch but because they have been confronted with unbalanced and extreme views of politics which lead them to believe that violence against others is fine. The very point of higher education is to teach students that balance matters and conflicts should be resolved peacefully. If a view isn’t balanced, it’s propaganda and has no place in a seat of learning. If it promotes violence, it should be a police matter. Academics who are propagandists should find other jobs, in politics for example.

Professor Hayes is asking that academics be given something that no one else in our society has, or should have, namely the right to be above the law. We don’t have absolute free speech, nor should we, if we want Britain to remain a peaceful and inclusive society, blind to gender, ethnic background and religion. Going through democracy in order to destroy it is an old strategy used by Communists, Nazis and Islamists in other countries, and with success. What is happening in Iran and what happened in Afghanistan illustrate the point precisely. Millions have died as a result. Unless we draw a line in the sand, it could happen here, too.

Round One: Against motion

A ‘campus’ is more than a geographical place. It is an intellectual place – a university.

A university is first and foremost a place where speech is met by speech. ‘Speech’ here means propositional speech that attempts to say something. We are not talking about emotional outbursts, or abuse, or any of the variants of the hoary old example of shouting ‘Fire!’ in a crowded theatre that are used in the discussion of ‘extremism’ to encourage proscriptions and bans. Broadly, these examples are all actions, rather like pressing the Fire Alarm in a crowded theatre. These examples may have once been philosophically interesting in delineating the boundaries of propositional speech, when speaking freely in the university was the norm. When, as now, it is increasingly difficult to speak your mind in a university, their role is not philosophical but political. They no longer determine boundaries, but by analogy ask us to accept a picture of lecturers and students as either vulnerable and collapsing in fear when the alarm goes off or acting like savage beasts in order to survive.
Round One: Against motion continued

A university is second, and importantly, a place where speech is heard in public. Speech has consequences. It is not the soliloquy of the hermit or the ranting of a bigot on a platform….it is subject to questioning, clarification, elaboration, criticism, contradiction, caricature, denunciation, and ridicule by those who hear what is said. In recognising that speech has consequences a speaker accepts that they are talking to other human beings who will judge what is said and make up their own minds on what they hear. Any restrictions on what they can hear implies that they are not up to engaging in speech, in other words, that they are diminished and not full human beings.

Behind much of the debate about extremism on campus is this picture of a diminished human being. Basically, it is the idea that students are children. But if children, and students in particular, are vulnerable to anything it is propositional talk and reasoned argument.

Bill Rammell, when he was the Higher Education Minister, made this clear in his Fabian lecture on 27 November 2007. He argued that academic freedom is one of the most powerful means to challenge and refute violent extremism. Rammell’s somewhat instrumental approach to academic freedom had some positive elements; for example, he argued against proscription of individuals or groups with extremist or offensive views demanding that their views should face open, critical debate.

When I put a similar but more consistent view of academic freedom and free speech ‘with no buts,’ that came straight out of John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty to a Times Higher Education journalist, she said I was so ‘militant.’ She may well have said ‘extreme.’ When did it become a ‘militant’ view to defend what could be seen as a solid liberal British or even Victorian value?

One reason is that there is a strange alliance of the revolutionary left, the conservative right, the National Union of Students, the University and College Union, university administrators and cowardly academics whose first thought is to ban rather than debate with people who hold unacceptable views. They are happy to ‘turn them in’ to the authorities or seek to sack ‘extremists.’ In this they betray the idea of a university where the response to extreme views is to talk. The banners, boycotters or authoritarian censors are the real extremists. Anthony will of course claim that I am ‘in denial’ about the threat extremist groups pose.

The term ‘extremist groups’ does not refer to armed bodies of men but groups with ‘extreme ideas’ made up of individual students. The duty of all academics and students, backed by the administration, should be to ensure their views can be openly debated. A list of their extreme views, however shocking, would not alter the fact that on campus the response to them should be debate not proscription. My ‘militant’ view of the university is now held only by a few because the witch hunting of ‘extremists’ by the left, the right, college authorities and the state sends a strong message and has created a silent academic majority. It is probably easier now to find a member of al Qaeda on campus than a defender of academic freedom and freedom of speech.
Round Two: For motion
Professor Hayes and I agree that a ‘campus is more than a geographical space’, that it is a space where rational debate should take place. We also agree that higher education has become over-bureaucratic and perhaps he agrees with me that most academics spend too much time on ‘research’, and too little time getting to know their students and teaching them properly.

But at this point, our views diverge. He expects society to fund universities but says academics owe no duty to our political system. He says what is at stake is the principle of academic freedom and that stamping out radicalisation undermines that freedom.

My argument is that unless we remain a democracy, academic freedom will lose any meaning. Radicalisation, especially when it leads to violent extremism, undermines that freedom and, where it ends with people being killed, freedom more generally. He says academic freedom must exist without any ‘buts’. I say academic freedom, as it is defined in the 1986 Act, is freedom within the law, not outside it, and certainly not above it.

Academics are no different from any other kind of professional and have the same responsibilities. The hard truth is that at present campuses tolerate discriminatory practices by some groups. They continue to be sites where Al Qaeda and its associates can recruit members. The government is right to acknowledge this and to try to act against it. The numbers involved are not huge but their impact can be severe. Joining Al Qaeda is not like joining any normal political party or pressure group in our democracy because Al Qaeda is committed to the destruction of our democracy. It is ridiculous to equate this with the ‘militant’ or ‘extreme’ views that Professor Hayes says he holds. Genuine academic freedom works to sustain the security of our democracy. Phoney academic freedom will destroy it.

Round Two: Against motion
Unlike Anthony, and many others prone to panic, I am not scared or frightened of giving any group the right to speak evil. I even support his right to argue for the suppression of the right to speak evil on campus because: ‘Extremists are not democratic, not civilised and believe in exclusion, not inclusion.’ I think calling them ‘savages’ might be the real meaning Anthony intends but New Labour speak is more acceptable. It is precisely this view of students and ordinary people as ‘savages’ that underlies the scare-mongering. Politicians and their academic epigones in the ‘community cohesion’ industries are scaring themselves in an almost medieval way about the masses. They are not ‘civilised’ so they can be easily led to violent acts. Mill, we may recall, exempted ‘savages’ from his argument for free speech.

Students need ‘balanced’ views not ‘propaganda,’ he argues, but academic ‘balance’ is something that is gained through debate; it is not a pre-requisite of debate. That would require selection and censorship of the sort that academics at The University of Nottingham were asked to apply to their international politics programme reading lists. The message was: you have to self-censor to make sure that nothing in the recommended literature encouraged terrorism. A tall order given the topic!
Round Two: Against motion continued

I also think unbalanced academic writing is unacceptable, but it’s everywhere – even in Anthony’s final paragraph that could well have come out of any New Labour politician’s mouth. But the academic response is to argue with what is said and write articles, book reviews and so on, not to call for bans. When we hear the claim that we don’t have ‘absolute free speech’ a modern Ockham’s Razor needs wielding. The word ‘absolute’ negates what follows, so it should just read ‘we don’t have freedom of speech.’

I defend the academic’s right to say to the state and the law, ‘here we say what runs’. The academy is the societal embodiment of the commitment to reason which is why I like the ‘ivory tower’ as a metaphor for it. The ivory tower stands above society as a beacon of (the) enlightenment.

The academy is a place for grown-ups and not a sort of ‘Big School’ for socialising big and difficult children. Socialisation is not an academic’s job, although acquisition of some values may be a contingent result of learning to think critically through open debate. Telling young people what to think as if they were children, rather than teaching them to think, is much more likely to encourage them to rebel and my sympathies would be with them.

I think Anthony’s position amounts to the hope that by banning some views and groups on campus we will be doing our bit to counter extremism like good boy scouts. This seems empirically false. Banning groups is likely to encourage support and win liberal sympathy for them while leaving unquestioned their ridiculous causes, such as establishing a world Caliphate. The historical analogies I find odd; I don’t think Nazi Storm Troopers were a debating club!

Against his feeble hope of stopping something developing that he fears, I can set a single certainty. Anthony’s call for balance and bans undermines academic freedom and the academy.

Round Three: For motion

I’m not sure how much history Professor Hayes knows but his readiness to tolerate on campus racists like the BNP and those who would abolish democracy suggests he needs to brush up a bit on his understanding of 20th century politics. Hitler did not just rely on storm troopers to win power but on winning votes, including (as Speer reminds us) at universities.

He gets other facts wrong as well.

The former Nottingham student, Rizwaan Sabir, wasn’t arrested for downloading and reading an Al Qaeda ‘training manual’ but for asking a non-student to copy it. Academic freedom? Or its abuse? Fearing for democracy in these difficult times isn’t panicking. I am not a New Labour voter, nor do I consider students ‘savages’, or ‘children’.

No, students are just that and, unlike other adults, they come to university to learn and be taught. This places on their teachers a core responsibility to support balance, fairness, respect for all our laws –
Round Three: For motion continued

including, and especially, on equality. Those who break them or want them broken should not be allowed on campus.

Debate means a genuine balance of views, with opposing views fairly put. Where there is no balance or fairness but only orthodoxy, academic enquiry no longer exists (e.g. climate change at UEA, the call to kill Jews at a recent Oxford Union debate on Palestine). It’s as simple as that.

Round Three: Against motion

Anthony accuses me of getting facts wrong, wrongly as it happens. The case I mentioned was not the downloading incident but a serious consequential when academics were asked to censor reading lists. Just reading the press will show the many contemporary threats to academic freedom (see the Times Higher Education magazine 12 February 2010). Not taking an interest in what’s going on outside their research area is one reason why many academics can casually call for bans. Thus they casually throw away the freedom that is the basis of their job. Their job is unique. The academic job is to produce critical thinkers and not to be political propagandists for any government. That’s why in many places in the world it is universities that stand up for academic freedom against intolerable laws. Anthony’s argument would be that in Britain our restrictions are tolerable. It’s time he woke up to the increasing number of legal, and quasi-legal formal and informal restrictions on free speech since 1988 when the Hillhead Amendment to the 1988 Education Reform Act gave universities academic freedom ‘within the law.’

What always surprises me in these debates is the ahistorical approach of the banners and censors. Historians are the worst even when pointing out the ‘facts.’ What makes history is change and therefore difference. This ahistorical approach is true of the traditional right (the western right and the Islamic ‘radicals’) who see, for example the rise of ‘radical’ Islam as a revival or continuation of the Crusades. The left, with less excuse for an ahistorical approach, have a shorted ahistoricity and see ‘radical’ Islam as a continuation of ‘anti-imperialist’ struggles against national and ethnic oppression. That is why they are silent about issues such as the inequitable and often brutal approach to women and homosexuals of many ‘radical’ and ‘traditional’ Islamic groups. They feel guilt about being ‘Western’. Thinking is needed as well as facts Anthony!

I want to argue that both these approaches are wrong-headed. There is no ‘politics’ now and the old ways of looking at events and the old responses are irrelevant. The new ‘radicalism,’ that Anthony fears is duvet radicalism. The radicalism of individuals watching TV in their bedrooms and getting upset, or meeting with friends in small ‘radical’ gatherings to reinforce their fears. I do not downplay the terrible consequences of this introverted activity but it is not politics.

Such groups do not even think of trying to win people over to their arguments and have no idea of what solidarity action once meant. So they blow themselves and others up. You cannot target it or ban it unless you raid every bedroom. What you can do is drag these young people out of bed and into open public debate. Set their alarm clocks Anthony, don’t set the alarms off on campus!
Religious Conflict

Opinion piece by Dr Jamie Wood, Leverhulme Early Career Postdoctoral Fellow in Religions and Theology, University of Manchester. Dr Wood’s postdoctoral project explores the role of religious elites in the cultivation of conflict between and within religious groups in the later Roman Empire and the early middle ages. Prior to this position he worked as an educational developer at the University of Sheffield and has published in both pedagogic and historical journals. He is currently preparing a monograph on the historical writings of Isidore of Seville, a seventh-century Spanish bishop.

Religion can play an important role in justifying the choices made by individuals and by groups, and this is nowhere more true than in the case of religious conflict. Indeed, individuals and groups often maintain that their beliefs require them to engage in conflict of some kind.

But if religious beliefs and values motivate some people toward conflict, they motivate others to act as peace-makers. Recent research has demonstrated that even in societies riven by conflicts that claim to be justified by religious difference, such as Northern Ireland, many religious organisations in fact dedicate tireless efforts to promoting inter-faith dialogue, and to developing strategies of mutual assistance and conflict resolution.

In order to understand the role played by religion in social conflicts, we need to understand better what religion is, and also how social conflicts tend to work.

Understanding religion

Scholars no longer think that ‘belief’ is a fundamental element of all religions. Some religious traditions require people to believe something, while others require them to do something—whether performing rituals or following particular ethical principles in their daily life. Traditionally, this led to a division into the categories of religious ‘practice’ and ‘belief’.

For a group or philosophy to be protected as a religion under current human rights legislation in the United Kingdom, it must be able to demonstrate a combination of (a) belief and/or conviction, (b) practice and/or ethics, and (c) a sense of belonging or community. Belief and practice are separated in this definition, and the element of belonging is interesting because it recognises the role of social relationships in religion.

Across history, societies have varied in how they understood religion. In the ancient world, religion involved people doing things just as much, if not more, than it involved them believing things. Religious performance was through participation in communal ritual acts and not necessarily through the affirmation of belief.

Participation in communal rituals was essential to membership of local and broader communities and to maintaining the relationship of the community with the god(s). Refusal to participate in those communal rituals—for example the refusal of the early Christians to sacrifice to the gods of Rome—was understood as a rejection of the community and a threat to the relationship between the community and its god(s). It also threatened to absolve the accountability of the individual to the community, which meant that individuals could not be trusted to support the social order—this is why the Christians who refused to sacrifice to the gods were seen as a danger to the Roman state. Belief and practice are not necessarily separate, they are connected and both have as much to do with social issues as they do with what is in the minds of individuals.
Religious Conflict

Why do some groups encourage conflict?

Surprisingly, conflict often plays an important role in the formation of groups. The formation of communities often involves emphasising points of difference to other groups. Setting up of an ‘other’ against which communal identity is defined can be important for group formation and cohesion. This can result in socially destructive biases and prejudices, but within limits this way of establishing the boundaries of a group’s identity may be natural and even necessary. Back in the 1960s Fredrik Barth, a Norwegian anthropologist, suggested that ethnic identity was not a continuous feature of human society but that it was the result of social interaction between groups. For Barth, boundaries tended to be emphasized at precisely those places where groups interacted and where group leaders could see that members might move back and forth from one community to another. In other words, boundaries were just as much the result of cultural contact as they were of ethnic animosity (Barth, 1969).

Historically, we can see a similar process at work in the relationship between ancient Judaism and early Christianity. The early Christians built up an image of pagans and Jews as ‘un-Christian’ in part because there was quite a bit of contact between the three traditions. John Gager has argued that although hardliners worked hard to generate and enforce a distinction, Christian and pagan interaction with the Jewish tradition was not solely negative and that many Christians and pagans engaged creatively with Judaism (Gager, 1985). Similarly, ideas about heresy developed at least in part out of uncertainty about what it meant to be an orthodox Christian. When we read the texts of earlier periods it seems obvious that Christians were always arguing amongst themselves about who was a heretic and who held correct, orthodox belief. But it might not have been that simple. These conflicts may have flared up precisely because contact was occurring and movement between groups was seen as a real possibility by those patrolling community boundaries.

We suggest, therefore, that conflict over religious belief, practice, and belonging should also be seen as socially constructed, a response to specific circumstances in which group leaders feel that the loyalty of their members may be in doubt. That these issues erupt into conflict may sometimes say as much about tensions within each group as about the issues that divide them from one another.

References