

## Ideologies and Beliefs: Opinion 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.

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**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.

# SOCIAL SCIENCE FOR SCHOOLS

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#### *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**

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