



## **Religion in history: conflict, conversion and co-existence**

*Christianity in context*

### **John Wolffe**

I am John Wolffe. Welcome to Religion and History: Conflict, Conversion and Coexistence. We will be exploring a long span of religious history through a focus on particular periods and case studies. I shall briefly be discussing the approach adopted which runs through all the diverse contexts that we shall be looking at.

Religious identities and traditions are deeply rooted in particular events and readings of history. For example, there is the Jewish sense of God's past dealings with his chosen people. The Christian conviction of a pivotal significance of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and the Muslim submission to the teachings and example of Mohammed. We are not seeking either to challenge or to confirm such readings of history, as it were, through the eyes of faith, although we shall certainly be acknowledging their powerful influence in shaping the beliefs of many of the people we are studying.

Our intention rather is to stand back from religiously committed interpretations of history and to seek to understand and to interpret the role of religion in the past in as neutral and objective manner as possible. But of course, in relation to religion as in other aspects of history, you will encounter different perspectives and assumptions. Indeed, if we all achieved perfect detachment, consistency and objectivity, our writing would probably be very boring. There are seldom clear cut right answers to complex historical questions and you should be ready to make your own mind up about the material presented to you.

I discussed the academic study of the history of religion with Professor David Chichester of the University of Cape Town.

### **David Chichester**

I was intrigued by as a historian of religions, I was interested in this task of writing about Christianity from the prospective of a historian of religions using categories that could be used in principal to study any religion and yet focusing in some depth and detail on Christianity as both a global religion with the international even universal scope, but always as an intimately local religion, and so what I wanted to do was get into place, to get into very specific locations of Christianity and see what we could discover.

### **John Wolffe**

Yes, and it is quite an exciting approach, but sometimes when we get into our particular locations surely what we see is not so much the dominance of Christianity as very wide patterns of religious co-existence, I mean whether for example it is the greater Roman Empire, or many present day Western societies.

### **David Chichester**

Yes, so this was in a way to open up the study of Christianity so that it was not exclusively owned and operated by particular Christian interests and so to open up a history of Christianity that was inter-religious that those who identify themselves as Christians have always been in relation to so called 'others', so on the one hand I wanted to bring into the story the prospective on Christians from Muslim prospective, Jewish prospective, Hindu prospective, Buddhist prospective. It's an important part of the story.

But then we also tend to assume that religions are focal points of conflict and that people cannot co-exist with different religious identities. So I worked very hard to find places as you say in the later Roman Empire, Mamre, for example where in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century there was a

sacred site for Pagans, Jews, Christians, in a way a kind of co-existence in that space, or in 17<sup>th</sup> Century India where Christians, Muslims and Hindus could share a particular space. Now I have to admit those instances of peaceful co-existence were harder to find than I had hoped, but there is that commitment throughout the book to inter-religious, inter-relational history of Christianity.

**John Wolffe**

What would you say were the dominant themes in the history of Christianity? Was there perhaps anything that surprised you during the course of writing the book as opposed to the assumptions you started out with when you embarked on it?

**David Chichester**

I knew where I wanted to begin with these ancient origins and making them more complex and rich, so there was more material to think about the beginnings. Then I knew where I wanted to end with these problems of globalization in a world of trans-national relations, consumerism and so on. So I wrote the first section first, I wrote the third section second – now connecting them – that was the challenge and I suppose over twenty years living in Southern Africa I developed this Southern African perspective on religion where Europe was a problem. The notion that Christianity was a European invention, that it was a European commodity, that it was this European thing that came to Africa. So part of it was the challenge of reversing that. I suppose what I was most surprised by was in the middle section, the beginning between my ancient origins to my global transformations of Christianity, I came to love dwelling in this detail of those middle chapters, getting from pieces of fragmentation of forms of Christianity developing in Europe to the very notion of a Europe.

**John Wolffe**

On America, as I understand it, you see a central theme in American religious history, which informs your chapter as the sense of Americans searching for Zion, the Puritans crossing the Atlantic in search of Zion then the Mormons in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century finding their way into the west, again, searching for Zion. That's one narrative of American Christianity, and quite a powerful one, but I wonder what other ways you might see of looking at it?

**David Chichester**

I was raising the question of centre. The conventional narrative about American religion is pluralism, diversity within a constitutional framework that prohibits the establishment of any single religion, and the same time guarantees the free exercise of all religions, so this would be another way of telling the story of pluralism, diversity, a million flowers blooming. But at the same time there is this centralising impulse, and so in that chapter I just wanted to set up that dynamic of a centralising impulse that's sometimes called 'civil religion' or 'religious nationalism', so it's invested in the nation or in the state during this collective identity as Americans and yet it has this centralising force.

**John Wolffe**

Yes, there are so many intriguing paradoxes and tensions in American religious history, aren't there? To relate it specifically to our themes in this course and that the tension between coexistence and conflict. Where do you stand on this kind of dynamic? I mean, would you emphasise coexistence or conflict, or do you see them as different sides of the same coin, perhaps?

**David Chichester**

Well, this goes to the heart of the problem in which religion, as I understand it is, well, you know, it might refer to the 'more than human' but it's at least of human things and something human beings do. And one feature of religion is to relate to *transcendence*, what rises above and goes beyond ordinary human life so you have this highest aspiration of the human spirit but the other side of that coin is always dehumanisation, that some entities are treated as less than human. Now, they might be animals, they might be vegetables, they might be minerals but they might be folks like us with opposable thumbs, bipedal locomotion and slightly increased frontal lobe of the brain, that under various signs of religious difference, which we did note, like this less than human.

So this notion of religion being in touch with the super human, the more than human, the transcendent, is the other side of the same coin of this impetus to classify some persons as less than human and outside of the realm of morally protected entities. So, this is always a problematic dynamic in religion. Likewise, religion is about the sacred, the sacred terms and conditions that, as Durkheim said, weave people together into a moral community, but the very terms that include also exclude and so it's again, as you say, the same side of the coin or the other side of the coin.

So I think it's sort of a general sweeping observation about the dynamics of religion. It's part of what I was trying to track in the book, was that inherent ambiguity is good news and bad news, and so this also applies to America, I mean, it's religious life is diverse and plural and within a constitutional framework that prevents establishment and guarantees exercise. Now, a critical historian could look at the formation of the constitutional arrangement and see it as a compromise in which no single Christian grouping was able to establish dominance, and so to guarantee the existence of any one, it had to guarantee the existence of all but then you're always going to say, where is the limit? Where is the boundary? How far does that toleration extend? And at many points in the book I tried to look for that, you know, where are the boundaries which are flash points of conflict?

### **John Wolffe**

How do you account for the ongoing success, at least relatively speaking, of Christianity in America? Because it strikes me there are two periods when Christianity in America sort of confounds what might be their predictions. In the period post-independence of the late 18th Century when enlightenment influence is strong for people like Jefferson, who would certainly seem to be leading the new nation away from at least traditional Christianity. Then we have a period of in fact great evangelical revival and building of evangelical churches, and in much more recent years, a period when Europe seemingly has become much more secular when indicators of Christian profession and practice have remained much higher in the United States. I wonder what your observations and explanations for that phenomenon might be?

### **David Chichester**

Well, I have no explanation, but I mean as you point to a history of revitalisation, in conventional history of Christianity in America, these are great awakenings and so there is this history of revitalisation, re-energising, and then often coming from the periphery, I mean, I would like again to look at the centre and the periphery where, you know, there's rather unconventional, maybe wild and wacky things, unusual forms of religious creativity that have remarkably succeeded in re-energising Christian commitment and affiliation in America. I've no explanation for it but it is just an astounding phenomenon that American varieties of Christianity have been able to renew themselves or transform themselves in these different historical periods. It is amazing. I also stand back in awe of it, just wondering just how does that happen?

### **John Wolffe**

Shall we move, as in fact you did in your own career, from America to Africa, and can I begin by asking you why do you think the initial European missionary effort towards Africa was relatively unsuccessful?

### **David Chichester**

Well, I read, you know, missionary correspondences from southern Africa, what's now called , it's one of the most missionised regions of the world, complaining about their lack of success in gaining converts, and one missionary complained and said, 'Oh, we can't convert anybody there. They're too wealthy. They're too prosperous. They are too happy.' By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century in Southern Africa you had missionary correspondents saying, the only way we're going to gain converts is to break their political independence, to destroy their economic subsistence, to incorporate people as wage labour, so it was a whole, you know, it was this concerted effort to destroy local forms of life.

You found Christian missions, you know, you think in the earlier historiography of the Christian mission being transplanted from Europe, where locally in Southern Africa, Africans experienced Christianity as a religion that defined itself in opposition to indigenous religion.

So what Christianity was, it was not ancestors, it was not sacrifice, it was not rain-making, it was not witch detection and so on, so it defined itself in opposition to local religious practices and then if you had to give some positive content to it, it was certain styles of European clothing, it was square houses rather than round houses, it was the plough, it was the wagon, it was firearms, you know. We don't usually think of these as religious symbols but within the Christian mission these were highly charged Christian symbols and the very terms and conditions of conversion. So, you know, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, throughout much of Africa, Christianity was experienced as an opposition not just in religious terms, as if religion could be separated from the rest of life but in opposition of a whole range of social practices, of gender relations, of economic activity and political independence.

**John Wolffe**

So, why then the turnabout that comes from the very late 19<sup>th</sup> Century onwards and particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century? Why are such large numbers of Africans becoming Christians at this later period?

**David Chichester**

No, it's extraordinary. You go from, say around 1900, and what's now South Africa you're looking at in the African indigenous population, maybe 10% Christian. Fifty years later, 50% Christian, a remarkable religious transformation. Now, this coincided with the rise of independent churches, indigenous churches, African initiated churches. Getting back to one of the themes of the book is that Christianity is not just meaningful because people interpret its religious resources in different ways, it's also powerful because people appropriate, they claim, they own these things.

So you had a remarkable rise of independent, indigenous, African initiated churches throughout Africa which mobilised the people, and it's often been argued in which folks didn't convert to Christianity but Christianity was converted to African religious interests of building up the home as a sacred place, of building a community as a sacred network of inclusion. But now people are also converted to the so-called 'mission churches' of various European denominations and, as recent research has shown, this was also an African initiative, that no small group of European, foreign, alien missionaries could possibly have managed this process. That it was really the initiative of African leadership that took roles in creating Christian communities. So, I think it's these two things: the rise of independent churches and then the rise of African Christian leadership within the European mission churches. Now, this was concubinate with the destruction of political independence, of economic subsistence, of social forms of life, so it was in the context of tremendous material destruction.

**John Wolffe**

So, to that extent, the political expansion of European powers in the late 19th Century Africa does provide some of the preconditions?

**David Chichester**

Oh yes. No, I would think definitely. And part of what's interested me is I wrote a book on comparative religion in southern Africa where I was intrigued by all these Christian missionaries who would come in and say, 'Africans have no religion', and they weren't just saying that they were not familiar with Christianity, they said they had no religion whatsoever and at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century every Christian missionary said, 'these folks have no religion'. By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century, as the Christian mission was backed up by military force and by the economic penetration of wage labour and so on, when a community's political independence was broken, when its economic stability was disrupted, well, then suddenly these missionaries started recognising these folks had a religion. It was a strange historical phenomenon. Of course, that religion had to be destroyed and entirely replaced by Christianity. Now, what I try to suggest in the book is that destruction and replacement did not happen. What happened was forms of African indigenous religious life were mobilised to claim Christianity as African.

**John Wolffe**

So, would you really say its Christianity that is converted to Africa almost more than Africans being converted to Christianity?

**David Chichester**

That's what I would like to say.

**John Wolffe**

Can we move on to India, where you've been formulating a little bit of the same kind of argument, as I understand it, of the interchange between Hinduism as the traditionally dominate religion in the subcontinent with Christians? And very interesting is retracing the Christian presence back into earlier history. I think sort of reminding us that it wasn't just an arrival with 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century missionaries. I think though specialists on Hinduism might have some trouble with the way that you portray figures like the Ram Mohan Roy and Vivekananda as sort of somehow claiming Christ as a part of Hinduism. Would it be fair to say that in fact they'd, while respecting Jesus as a moral teacher, in the case of Vivekananda, as an example of sort of supreme renunciation, still would have fallen quite a long way short of the theological claims that Christians themselves traditionally make for Jesus Christ?

**David Chichester**

Absolutely, and in that chapter, as in other chapters, it says I'm not a theologian. I don't want to privilege any particular Christian theological claim on Christ and what I love about that chapter, if you read it backwards, if you start at the end, you will find an anecdote that I think is the only thing in the book that I don't provide a reference for, and it's about research that was done in the local community in which people who identified themselves as Hindu were asked, who is your deity, your chosen deity or Ishtar Devita, the focus of your religious devotion? And out of this community, 15% identified Jesus Christ as their focus of religious devotion but 0% said they were Christians.

But it impressed me if then you go backwards through there you will read Gandhi, for example, he takes Christ on. He takes in Christ but not Christianity, and I think you find a similar thing when I'm writing about the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Hindu reformers, if you want to use that word, what I was really interested in was writing about Hinduism as a whole different structure, so you find with, again, reading backwards, Vivekananda, Jnana yoga way of knowledge, of insight. Well, Christ features in there, as you say, as an enlightened being although he does not take on Christian theological propositions about Jesus. Working back through the middle sections saying you find Bhakti yoga, the devotional yoga in which Christ appears without Christian theological suppositions, and then Ram Mohan Roy, Karma yoga, this emphasis on works and moral dimensions, Christ as a moral teacher, so taking Christ on but not Christianity.

So I think you're absolutely right. My claim in this chapter is certainly not that these Hindu reformers were Christian theologians or were adopting Christian theological propositions or premises or assumptions, and yet as part of this work of appropriating and owning and claiming, you find a similar situation as in Africa in which Hindu reformers converted Christ to Hinduism rather than converting to Christianity. But it is a problem, you know, you're writing a history of Christianity. Who is a Christian? You know, it really is a difficult problem, you know, who is in and who is out? Clearly the St Thomas Christians or the Thomas Christians would identify themselves, as Christians whereas the figures we've just been talking about would not.

**John Wolffe**

Thank you. What about Protestant Hinduism, which some might find a sort of, again, a slightly problematic category because it brings a concept from one tradition, Christianity, Protestantism, and applies it to another, Hinduism? I find it a stimulating concept nevertheless but, as you were saying, purifying tradition, recovering and interpreting its primary sacred text which is very much sort of analogy with what the Christian Protestant reformers were doing in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Europe but nevertheless aren't there ways that we could also see Vivekananda and others as advocates of a Catholic Hinduism in terms of trying to universalise the tradition and bring it into a more worldwide than local dimension?

**David Chichester**

Yes, a more inclusive universalising, but this notion of Protestant Hinduism or Protestant Buddhism, I believe we have Max Weber to thank and to blame for this because we are

looking at, you know, however it takes different religious form, it is this Weberian notion of modernisation and rationalisation in which the Protestant ethic of self discipline in productive labour that's adapted to these different modern conditions combined with a self denial, you know, this whole dynamic of the Protestant ethic, well, is this what's going on in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Hindu reformers? Oh maybe Ram Mohan Roy a bit but maybe not some of the others. You know, it becomes really a point of finer historical debate and contestation.

I remember some years ago, we were talking earlier about American Christianity, there was the institute for Christian economics that had worked up this scheme that, you know, only the Protestant ethic is the formula for economic success and somebody would say to them, you know, at that time Japanese were doing pretty well, what about Japan? They're not Protestant Christians. 'Ah they'd say, they act like Protestant Christians!' you know, so that, whereas, you know, all of Africa's messed up because they are pagans this institute would say, and they would say, well, no actually quite a lot of them are Protestant Christians. 'Oh, well, they act like pagans!' You know, it's a humorous example of the... of the historical problem that we're looking at in all forms of modern religion. It's just such a curious thing that just at the time when this very notion of religion is arising as a separate, differentiated, specialised, social institution, you know it seems like it's going out of style just when we get the words. Very, very strange.

### **John Wolffe**

And I think one of the intriguing things that is going on in 19<sup>th</sup> Century India is how the Hindu reformers are trying to find their way towards more modern forms of religion and culture which are not simply the appropriation of Western Christianity and so called 'Western' civilisation.

### **David Chichester**

Well, it's that modern dilemma where religion becomes increasingly privatised so it's transportable through ethical life, through devotion, through meditation practices you can do anywhere and everywhere just at a time when it's in this uncomfortable relationship with nationalism, you know, which is carving out a territory. Maybe it's a symbiosis of increasingly privatised religion and then a religious character given to the nation that's also been worked out here.

### **John Wolffe**

In the final part of our conversation, David Chichester and I discussed some of the general issues raised by perceived links between religion and violence, and also the question of authenticity in religious traditions.

There's a dynamic also isn't there where it is seldom the leaders of religion who are directly responsible for the violence but they may well be part of the preconditions to give rise to it? You know, one might cite the holocaust as an example, where it is the Nazis who are responsible for the death camps but there is a whole much wider story to be told about traditions of Christian anti-Semitism in 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> Century Germany.

### **David Chichester**

Oh, absolutely. I mean, this is what I also try to develop in that chapter in the book on the holocaust that there were, at the very least, nurturing and supporting conditions that were part of a long history of Christian anti-Judaism and after the holocaust it was certainly a focus of reflection and self critique among Christian theologians, so this is not a new thing that I'm introducing. But I think you're absolutely right that we cannot just look at the statements of religious leaders. We cannot just look at the canonical text. We can't just look at the ethical pronouncements but this deeper structural history preparing the groundwork, creating a climate, enabling, I mean these were all part of the dynamics of violence.

### **John Wolffe**

Another example of this close to home for us in Britain would be that of Northern Ireland, where church leaders on both sides have seldom specifically advocated violence but the whole tradition, particularly of anti-Catholicism in Northern Ireland, has produced at least some good preconditions, I think, for Protestant paramilitary violence.

### **David Chichester**

Yes, and in all these situations you wonder what breaks the cycle of violence. What breaks the cycle of revenge and retribution and so on and so forth? Often an extraordinary, almost religious breakthrough whenever that happens. We're just now and South Africa celebrating 10 years of freedom and democracy. Yesterday we just celebrated 10 years ago the inauguration of our first democratically elected president, Nelson Mandela. That's extraordinary. You've heard the religious language that's being used to describe what was an intensively difficult, confliction and negotiated settlement, well, it's called a miracle, you know, this was a miracle that somehow the cycle of revenge and retribution was broken.

### **John Wolffe**

Can I also, in conclusion, raise the question for sort of authenticity of the Christian tradition which I understand you've also been writing issues about authenticity in religion recently and this has come up in relation to quite a bit of the discussion of the role of Islam in the modern world. The quest of some Islamists and others to redefine what they see as an authentic Islam that the tendency of debates around the possible implication and violence then suggesting, well, it isn't the *real* Muslims that are doing this.

Where do you stand on these kinds of debates in relation to Christianity because some of the transformations you write about in the book might be seen by some as compromising the historic authenticity of the Christian tradition? Some of the possible unacceptable face of Christianity we've been talking about in terms of violence might be seen by some as not real Christianity, which is about pacifism and other things, according to them. Do you think it's possible as a scholar and as an historian of religion, rather than as somebody holding to a particular theological faith position of what Christianity is, to uncover an authentic Christianity in all that discussion?

### **David Chichester**

You point to an important strategy for claiming authenticity, and that is to distinguish between the ideal and the real, so it's an important strategy that many people use. There's an ideal, perfect Christianity, which we must distinguish from its distortions in the real world. I'm sorry to reminisce about 10 years ago in South Africa but a little bit before that, when the African national congress was unbanned, the South African communist party was unbanned, one of the leaders of the South African communist party came on television and he was going to debate with one of our Protestant Christian religious leaders and the Protestant Christian religious leader, for some reason, decided to apologise for the crusades, and the South African communist party leader, he apologised for Stalin, so there were apologies all around and then the Christian guy says, 'well, you know, Christianity is really good, it's just never been tried' and the communist guy says, 'you know, communism is really good, it's just never been tried', so they both agreed on using that same strategy of identifying their authenticity.

The distinction between the ideal and the real. Now, I'm not interested in passing judgement on that, I'm just interested in identifying that there's one strategy that people use to establish authenticity. But there are many other kinds of strategies for establishing authenticity, claims on the ownership of authentic text, claims on, as I developed in the middle part of the book, who gets to speak and who doesn't get to speak? Well, you know, for some of these, poverty was the warrant to be able to speak. To have no ownership of possessions during the Catholic middle ages was a sign of authenticity. So without trying to resolve the question of authenticity, which I do not know how to resolve, I nevertheless think it's the most important question. You know, as an historian I can examine different characteristic strategies for claiming authenticity, for producing authenticity, for living authentically and for dying for that authenticity and then, of course, as you elude, killing to protect that authenticity.

In my recent research I've tried to push this absolutely to the limit by studying frauds and charlatans and fakes and, you know, even these invented religions on the Internet like the Church of the Profits, P, R, O, F, I, T, S. The only authentic and honest religion in the world, they say, because they're only in it for the money. Well, you know, it pushes out, you know, what do we use to establish authenticity? There are historical claims on authentic origin. There are structural claims on the basic ingredients that go into authenticity. There is sincerity as a claim on authenticity. How do you measure sincerity? So, there are a range of different

strategies for producing authenticity, and what interests me, as a historian is just to try to track those in various specific situations and to see how they play out.

**John Wolffe**

Well, thank you very much indeed.

**David Chichester**

John, thanks very much.