Religion and Violence

John Wolffe

Video transcript

(0:04) JOHN WOLFFE: I've always been fascinated by the ways in which religion, culture and politics are intertwined. Depending on your point of view, you can claim religion explains everything or nothing. This is particularly difficult when we start to explore connections between religion, conflict and violence. Those with an anti-religious mindset often see the use of religious labels in conflict situations as confirmation of their belief that religion is a malign force. On the other hand, religious people themselves will tend to play down the role of religion, dissociate themselves from those who claim a religious justification for acts of violence, and claim that true religion promotes peace building.

(0:58) If we are to be serious about religious literacy, we need to appreciate that the truth usually lies somewhere between these two extremes, although where the balance lies will of course vary in different conflict situations. Much of my own academic research has been concerned with conflict between two major Christian traditions, Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Recently I have been looking at ways in which this historic divide, going back to the 16th century, continued to shape the conflict in Northern Ireland in the later 20th century. [GUNSHOTS]

(1:37) It would be far too simplistic to say that religion caused the conflict, as other factors, including the rival political agendas for the future of Northern Ireland, pronounced cultural differences, and inequality and deprivation, especially among Catholics, were clearly important. On the other hand, these issues were themselves intertwined with the historic religious divisions of Ireland. And during The Troubles, some, notably Ian Paisley, explicitly stated religious motives for political confrontation, even though they did not openly condone violence.

(2:15) Similar points can be made about other conflict situations in which religion is implicated. For example, there are indications that so-called Islamist terrorists and jihadists are rather like loyalist and Republican paramilitaries in Northern Ireland, in that they were often previously on the fringe of organised religion rather than core regular worshippers. Religious motivation has nevertheless been significant, but they have also been driven by political concerns, especially resistance to perceived Western neocolonialism in the Islamic world, and by a sense that their cultural identity needs to be defended.

(2:57) On the other side of this particular coin, there is a strand in Christianity that attacks Islam as false religion. But more common emphases in Islamophobia are hostility to the cultural practises of many Muslims, such as the hijab and to their supposed political aspirations to take over the world.

(3:27) There is no easy way to disentangle the role of religion in these kind of situations. But a responsible, religiously literate approach requires one to recognise complexity, even when one does not fully understand it, and to resist jumping to easy conclusions.