

# Religion, Security and Global Uncertainties

## Executive Summary and Recommendations

John Wolffe and Gavin Moorhead

Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, The Open University  
Report from a Global Uncertainties Leadership Fellowship

*The Religion and Global Uncertainties 1914-2014* project is funded under a Research Council UK Global Uncertainties Leadership Fellowship. This report offers a synopsis of the research findings from Phase 1 of this project, which examined the relationship between religion and security, including terrorism and so-called 'religious violence'. This phase had two key objectives:

- To provide guidance on identifying circumstances in which religion (either on its own or in combination with other factors) is likely to give rise to security challenges.
- To provide a constructive interrogation of some underexplored assumptions relating to religion and security.

We conducted a series of interviews with leading academics which then informed discussion at 'roundtables' of academics and representative research 'users' in Belfast and London. The working paper and roundtable outcomes then fed into the discussion points of a symposium on religion and security, which brought together a diverse group of leading academics and 'critical friends' from the media and different faith communities. These activities took place between October 2013 and January 2014.

### **Our main conclusions and recommendations are:**

- 1. Religious literacy and a wider vocabulary are needed by all.** We must consider and explain what we mean by terms such as religion and security before we develop policy, research or media reports based on them. We must not assume that we all have the same or even compatible understandings.
- 2. Religion plays an ambivalent role when it comes to threatening or promoting security.** That is, in certain situations it can be a threat, in other situations it promotes security. As a consequence, it is crucial that practitioners (policymakers, academics and journalists) get a deep understanding of a particular context before they evaluate or seek to predict the role of religion in security issues.
- 3. There is no simple 'cause and effect' perspective whereby 'dangerous' ideas lead people to violent action.** In fact research indicates that there is an infinitely complex combination of contingencies that can bring conflict and spark violence, including many different social triggers, flashpoints, contexts and characteristics of the protagonists involved. Accordingly, seeking simple and short-term solutions can be counterproductive and lead to greater problems in the future.

- 4. It is particularly important to encourage an ethic of inclusivity to help forestall violent responses.** Seek to consult with a broad diversity of representatives within communities, including the youth, the marginalised and the most alienated. After all, these groups are considered to be the most likely to become 'radicalised'.
- 5. Practical initiatives can be developed based on previous examples of good practice.** For example, the successful 'bottom up' approach developed by ECONI (Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland - now the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland) is seen to have encouraged and brought positive change from within the Evangelical Christian tradition. Similarly, through consultation with communities involved, we can identify problems with failed strategies to ensure success in the future.
- 6. We can also identify specific badges and flashpoints within certain communities that have tended to re-ignite conflict or cause a shift from tension to violence.** However, history also suggests that ill-judged or mistimed attempts to remove flashpoints, can prove counterproductive and provoke the very confrontations they were intended to prevent.
- 7. Religious leaders are potentially effective agents for overcoming community tensions** and for promoting or countering challenges to domestic and international security, especially in reaching alienated and marginalised groups. However policy-makers, politicians and activists within civil society and the public sector seem reluctant to engage with these agents, particularly in the West where we tend to want to keep a divide between state and religion. This needs to be remedied.
- 8. Academics and policy-makers need to develop long term strategic partnerships, informed by proper knowledge of their respective capabilities and requirements.**
- 9. The religious literacy of journalists should be promoted and improved** through training, access to better religion sources, and the establishment of an Institute for Religious Literacy and the Media.
- 10. Self-appointed 'experts' can mislead.** Identified contacts at regular intervals should be regularly reassessed to ensure a dynamic, ever-changing and diverse group of representatives involved in decision-making.

---

**John Wolffe and Gavin Moorhead**  
Department of Religious Studies, The Open University  
john.wolffe@open.ac.uk  
gavin.moorhead@open.ac.uk  
Faculty of Arts, The Open University,  
Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA



**The Open  
University**



Partnership for  
Conflict, Crime &  
Security Research