

GATEWAY DOCUMENT 4.1

Religious extremism

WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

Extremist views and behaviour exist in most aspects of human life, although it should be remembered that the judgement that a person, or point of view, is extreme is always made in relation to a perceived norm that is being contested and which might well change over time. This Gateway concentrates on manifestations of extremism in religious contexts.

Various forms of religious extremism are regularly featured in the media and have a direct or indirect impact on the lives of young people. Currently Islamist extremism and its relation to terrorism is the most obvious. But some religiously motivated anti-abortion campaigners, for example, have also resorted to violence (see also Gateways 4.2 *Terrorist organizations that claim religious authority*, 4.3a *Israel-Palestine*, 4.3b *Northern Ireland*, 4.3c *Partition and its aftermath* 4.4 *Race hatred, especially when given religious justification*, 4.5 *Jihad*, 4.6 *Homophobia*, 4.9 *Women, gender equality and religion*).

However, there is a distinction between those who hold extreme views (e.g. Christians who are fundamentalist in their view of the scriptures, dogma, good and evil, and of there being a single 'right way', but hold these as private beliefs which do not impinge on the freedom and well being of others) and people who hold extreme views and wish to impose them on others by violent means (e.g. members of Al Qaeda).

Between these two poles – the holding of private beliefs that do not impinge on the freedom and well-being of others, on one hand, and the advocacy or commission of violence, on the other – there are organisations and individuals with views which give rise to disagreement as to whether their free expression should be allowed in a democratic society. Democracy cherishes free expression¹ for at least two very good reasons:

1. Freedom is held to be something that should be protected in a democracy because it is valued and wanted by the individuals who make up that society. A general rule of democratic societies is that individual liberty should only be constrained when not to do so would be to compromise the freedom of others. The right to freedom of thought,

¹ 'Freedom of expression' is preferred to 'freedom of speech' as it makes clearer that what is to be protected are rights to seek and receive information and ideas, and also to disseminate them, not only privately but through publication.

conscience and religion, and the right of free expression are held to be fundamental human rights and are set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights. The 1998 Human Rights Act made European Convention rights legally enforceable within the UK.

2. Freedom of expression is held to be not only good for individuals but also good for society, in that free expression allows knowledge and ideas to circulate and this informs public debate and discussion. When matters of public interest are to be decided everyone who is potentially affected can contribute to the debate, alongside others who through specialist knowledge, skills or experience, will also contribute to good decisions being made.

Against the background of guaranteed freedoms of conscience and expression questions are, however, sometimes raised about whether some religious or political groups that are not blatantly violent should be outlawed.

It is sometimes suggested that some groups, whilst claiming to operate within the law, either in fact do not, or else recruit members to more extreme organisations that do engage in illegal acts. This is the accusation that used to be directed towards Sinn Féin and sometimes towards a variety of revolutionary socialist organisations. Today it is more often directed at right-wing organisations like the British National Party and the English Defence League, and religious organisations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir.

Here a central initial question must be to ask whether the accusation of links with violent extremist organisations is justified. Hizb ut-Tahrir certainly insists that it is committed to non-violence, and the principle of 'innocent until proven guilty' should surely extend from individuals to groups. That individuals sometimes move on from respected political or religious organisations to less acceptable ones should not be an argument for banning the more respected organisation – did anyone ever suggest that either the Conservative Party or the Labour Party should be wound up because Sir Oswald Mosley belonged to both before founding the British Union of Fascists?

Even in cases where there is a known link between a legal and an illegal organisation, the argument for allowing the continued existence of the former can often be made. One very good reason for insisting that political violence is unjustified in a democracy is that it is possible to achieve desired ends peacefully through democratic means. This argument is clearly undermined by proscribing groups that wish to campaign peacefully for a cause being pursued by others violently. Further, and more pragmatically, organisations with known connections to illegal groups can be a conduit for negotiation with mainstream society and its government. Also pragmatically, security forces might sometimes prefer dubious organisations to operate in the open, where they can be more easily tracked (or infiltrated), than to have them driven underground.

KEY QUESTIONS

How can this help teachers and students to increase their understanding of contentious issues?

It is important that students are enabled to think about what constitutes religious extremism. How is it distinct from unusual religious beliefs, held by small numbers of people? Not all, indeed not much, extremism involves the use or threat of violence and coercion. *Extremism* is not necessarily the same as *violent extremism*.

Some of these questions can be adapted by the teacher to help students explore the issues and their own views:

- What forms of extremism can you think of?
- At what point do extremist views become unacceptable?
- Should freedom of religion and belief or freedom of speech be unlimited?

Why is this a contentious topic?

As explained above, 'extremism' is a subjective term. It depends on your perspective. People rarely describe *themselves* as extremists, whether religious or otherwise; the term is usually applied to others, generally to a minority, fringe groups separate from the 'mainstream'. In religious terms it can refer to a sect or breakaway group.

The view of what makes a group 'extremist' may change over time. Certainly this is true of religious groups. Few people today would describe Catholics, Baptists or Quakers as extremists. But once, in England, they were seen as heretics or fanatics. So from one angle the term 'extremist' just means 'very different from the average right now'.

However, we need to go further than this. In the *REsilience* context, religious extremism means a belief and attitude that has all or most of the following features:

- **It is based on generally unquestioning and literal adherence to a body of basic doctrines.** Extremism sees the world from one perspective. It interprets life, politics, relationships, and problems through this single prism. Manifestations may include some forms of Christian fundamentalism, racist politics or violent jihad against the 'Zionist Crusader alliance'.
- **It claims a monopoly on truth, often on the basis of divine authority.** Religious extremism is based on a particular exclusive interpretation of religious beliefs. There is no room for an alternative theology. Violent anti-abortion campaigners or extremist jihadists do not share the same theology but they share this same theological approach.
- **It sees a cosmic battle between good and evil.** There are few shades of grey, little room for debate. Those who disagree or question are regarded as not being 'true believers'. Again, although we may be aware of Islamist and Christian extremism today, the word has been applied to other religious groups.

- **It rejects compromise and discussion.** Conventional political strategies have little place, though extremists may be experts at using public opinion or political tactics. This has been true in most long running terrorist conflicts.
- **It sees the cause as more important than individual human lives.** Although violent extremists may claim to be acting in the best interests of people, they are willing to sacrifice human life, their own or that of others, for the sake of their cause. They may advocate and use coercion or violence, or the threat of it, in order to pursue their aims.

Nevertheless, religious extremism is hard to define precisely. Many of the above characteristics apply to some extent to large numbers of mainstream followers of religious traditions who would be shocked to be described as extremists. Extremist views may be seen as immoderate, uncompromising and fanatical by those outside a particular group but normal and acceptable by those within it, so it is hard to come to an objective and universally accepted definition.

Why is RE relevant to this topic?

Discussion of what might be meant by ‘extremism’ may open helpful discussion about religious faith and observance. For example, in a Pentecostalist or charismatic Christian context the phenomenon of ‘speaking in tongues’ when moved by the Holy Spirit may be perceived as a normal aspect of worship by those taking part but as extreme and unusual by some other Christian groups.

This topic relates to the question of what it means to be an adherent of a religion in the 21st century, particularly in a country with great diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews. For some religious believers, the will of God is clearly given within an authoritative tradition, by scripture or a divinely ordained human leader. For others interpretation on the basis of study and rational thought is required to make ancient teachings relevant to the modern world.

Another area for exploration is to consider when religious belief is constructive and when and why it can become distorted or destructive, but it is important to realise that this again is always going to be a subjective judgement – for example, a young woman seen by her parents as the victim of an evil cult may, in her own mind, be at peace with herself for the first time in her life.

What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

An open approach is essential for RE and for students’ own spiritual, moral and intellectual development. However, open discussion also carries risks. There may be pupils in the class who hold views which, if expressed, might expose them to disparaging comment, or even violence, by other pupils. Teachers must be alert to this possibility and not encourage students to put themselves at risk.

It is a challenge to all in a class, pupils and teachers alike, to listen to the full range of religious and non-religious beliefs without making immediate value judgements.

How can teachers address such challenges?

Discussion and other classroom activities will need to be sensitive to the personal feelings of individuals. We cannot know in detail the background of everyone in the class but it is important for the teacher to demonstrate respect for all and to encourage dialogue and enquiry amongst students.

NEXT STEPS

Signposts for further reading

Eatwell, R and Goodwin, M, eds. (2010) *The new extremism in 21st century Britain*, Routledge.

Abou el Fadl, K (2005) *The great theft: wresting Islam from the extremists*, Harper.

Signposts for further resources

<http://religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/media/file/codeofconduct.pdf> *Everyone Matters in the Classroom: A Practice Code for Teachers of RE*. This voluntary code sets out principles of showing respect for persons, valuing reason giving, practising reciprocity, accepting contestability, openness, promoting fair and accurate representation and balance and modelling life-long learning. The Code is relevant to a number of *REsilience* Gateways.

Signposts for further action

Review with citizenship/PSHE/history teaching colleagues the distinctions they need to help students learn about in order to understand the difference between the holding of extreme beliefs and the taking of violent action based on them, and also to ensure exploration of alternative ways of expressing strongly held beliefs appropriate to living in a democracy.

See Gateway 2.4 for ground rules on discussion.