

## GATEWAY DOCUMENT 4.10

# Islamism

### WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

In everyday English usage the religion of Buddhists is Buddhism, the religion of Hindus is Hinduism, the religion of Jews is Judaism, and so on. Common sense might suggest that Islamism is the religion of Muslims and therefore simply another expression for Islam, and it has sometimes been used in that way in the past. However, in recent times, the word 'Islamism' has come to be given new and more negative connotations. Islamism has been described as an ideology but it is not a single united view shared by all who might be described as Islamists (it is, in any case, not a word that people generally use of themselves). Nevertheless, some of the following attributes are widely shared amongst Islamists.

- Firstly, they hold in common the belief that a good society can only be achieved if Islam is the foundation of the state.
- Most agree that the Shari'a provides a system capable of regulating all aspects of human life in accordance with God's law.
- In general Islamists have little interest, for example, in trying to extract concessions from democratic western governments to make their states more 'Muslim friendly' places – Islamists tend to seek root and branch change leading to the establishment of an Islamic state.
- This is even more the case in Muslim majority states. Islamists condemn some of these because their governments base law and administration on secular principles rather than explicitly Islamic ones, or because they accept a plurality of Islamic interpretations and paths rather than insisting on a single state sanctioned one, or because they are simply corrupt and venal.
- Some so-called Islamists are also nationalists; they want an Islamic government for their particular country and show relatively little interest in other parts of the Islamic world; by contrast, others believe old style nationalism is a force which detracts from what they see as Islamic universals.

- An important goal for some Islamist groups is that of re-instating a Caliphate, by which they mean a unified polity bringing together the whole Islamic world under the leadership of a single ruler, the Caliph.<sup>1</sup>
- Some Islamists believe the best way to build an Islamic state is through grassroots activity such as preaching, building mosques and creating charitable networks, thus persuading people of the superiority of a society governed by Islamic principles of behaviour (as the Hamas party did in Gaza, for instance – and in their case it was successful in that they were voted into power in 2006).
- Others seek to take over a government and impose the change from above.

Islamists are sometimes seen as puritanical and literalist in their understanding of Islamic law but they are not anti-modern and their views on some issues are widely shared. For instance, the conflict between some western values (e.g. regarding alcohol and sexual relationships) and Islamic ones is something felt by many Muslims who otherwise live comfortably in the west; they cannot approve of the aspects of life and behaviour in western countries that are at odds with almost any interpretation of central tenets of Islam.

Other beliefs that may be shared by both Islamists and more liberal Muslims relate to western foreign policy. Many Muslims are profoundly disturbed by the failure of the western nations to help to bring about a just solution to the Israel-Palestine situation and, more recently, by the invasion of the 'Muslim lands' of Iraq and Afghanistan. There is also a widely held belief that western powers, and Britain and the USA in particular, have continued to prop up corrupt and undemocratic regimes in the Islamic world in pursuit of their own national economic and strategic self-interest. Terrorist activity in the UK and other western countries can then be seen as an effort to persuade these governments that their continuing involvement in the economies and politics of Muslim majority nations is no longer consistent with their self interest. This helps to explain why some Islamists – those who believe the end justifies the means in bringing about a truly Islamic state and whose main and immediate concern is for the traditionally Muslim countries – consider it necessary to promote terrorist activity in western nations.

Islamism is often referred to as 'political Islam'. If an individual Muslim is inspired by faith in the way s/he approaches politics, this does not necessarily mean the person is an Islamist. Rather, Islamism is the desire to introduce an interpretation of Islam into politics at a collective level, affecting the lives of others by doing so. Islamism has historically sometimes led to coercion and violence on the part of its advocates in an effort to achieve their political

<sup>1</sup> This was the system instituted after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD; his successor was Caliph Abu Bakr who was acknowledged as head of the Islamic community. The method of choosing the Caliph was disputed and led to the division into Sunni and Shi'a Islam in these early years; the Islamic world underwent many wars and cleavages over succeeding centuries but the Caliphate continued until 1924 when it was abolished by Kemal Ataturk following the overthrow of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War.

goals. In particular, incidents of Islamist terrorism around the world have caused Islamism to be a contentious issue.

Teaching about the possible implications of Islamism as a political ideology may open up these contentious issues. It provides an opportunity for pupils to explore the interplay and relationship between religious beliefs and everyday politics, and how one's faith on a personal level relates to society on a communal level.

## KEY QUESTIONS

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

Pupils can gain a better understanding of the inter- and intra-religious tensions observable in the world today by learning about the history, aims and methods of some Islamist groups and examples of the impact of these in practice.

Teachers and students may wish to research the range of answers different groups would give to questions such as the following.

- What should be the relationship between any religion and political governance? Who should decide?
- Who has the authority to decide what is and what is not permissible in Islam, when interpreting traditional Islamic teaching? How are decisions reached about what is and is not acceptable, particularly regarding situations or issues that have not occurred in the past?
- How do different societies handle the political consequences if different sources of religious authority disagree on a certain matter?
- If 'Islam is a comprehensive way of life, and not simply a religion', then should Muslims be able to be governed collectively according to the perceived teachings of Islam?
- Why have some Muslims been attracted to Islamism in recent decades?
- When Muslims are a majority in any given country, should they be able to elect a government that will introduce laws of their choosing, even if they pass laws that are contrary to international human rights declarations?
- What could be the consequences for previously-law-abiding citizens who contravene newly-introduced 'Islamic' laws?

- What place, in practical terms, would non-Muslims have in a state that introduced 'Islamic' laws and an 'Islamic' orientation to its government?<sup>2</sup>

### Why is this a contentious topic?

All religions encourage their adherents to behave in a certain way, and follow certain codes and lifestyles. The role that religion plays in the lives of individuals varies from person to person. Some families and communities are generally more religiously observant than others, and religiosity is expressed in different ways.

When Islamists want to impose on members of society at large a single interpretation of religious law as the only acceptable way to behave, what impact does this have on others who disagree?

Should living life according to the teachings of one's religion be a matter for the individual to follow, or should this be something that the state should enforce on its subjects? Many devout Muslims are opposed to Islamism, since they believe that their religious beliefs are a private matter, and not the business of the state.

What should happen to non-Muslims if a Muslim-majority state were to become a state ruled by a particular definition of Islamic law and governance? Adherents of other faiths or religious traditions are often anxious at the prospect of aspects of Islamic teachings (as interpreted) being introduced as public law.

### Why is RE relevant to this topic?

In learning about the various views of Islamism, students will come to understand the impact on other people's lives that governing society at large according to an interpretation of religion can have. In particular they can reflect on how people from different religious backgrounds are able to interact in the public sphere, and the relationship between religious commitment and the rule of law. Examining the issue of Islamism opens up a discussion of how adherents of one religion can and should relate to those of another, and how religious majorities and minorities should relate to each other within the political sphere.

RE can counter unfair stereotyping of Muslims by making sure that when Islam is studied, adequate attention is given (a) to the range of interpretations of doctrines such as *jihad* and (b) to Muslim diversity in terms of ethnic and cultural background, and sectarian difference

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<sup>2</sup> In the great Islamic empires of the past there was a well-established system in place to deal with this question, whereby people from minority groups such as Buddhists, Christians, Jews, Hindus and Zoroastrians, as 'People of the Book', were able to apply their own religious laws and had a measure of self government within their communities.

(and it must be understood that the terms Sunni and Shi'a both incorporate a huge diversity of interpretation and practice<sup>3</sup>).

Among non-Muslims, media coverage of Islamist-inspired political and social violence has provoked considerable anxiety about Muslims, and Islam generally. An understanding of some of the differences between Islam and Islamism, and of diversity within Islam more generally, can help to unpack any misconceptions.

## What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

In any classroom, the role that religion plays in the lives of students is likely to vary from one student to another. Muslim and non-Muslim students alike may talk about Islam and Muslims as if they are static and monolithic ('Muslims think x', 'Muslims don't do y'), overlooking a more diverse reality. Teachers should be aware that some religiously-orientated students have no problem with the prospect of more religiously-homogenous societies being governed politically according to the perceived tenets of the majority faith, whilst other religiously-orientated students take a much more pluralistic view. Teachers should avoid a scenario in which Muslim students are placed on the defensive, and 'othered' in a way that pressures them into having to account for any instances of political violence undertaken in the name of Islam. In any religious tradition there is a difference between ideals and reality. Teachers should also be aware of far-right narratives that present Islam as a religion of violence, conflating Islamism with Islam. unfounded beliefs that an international ideological conflict is in progress between 'Islam and the West'.

## How can teachers address such challenges?

- It is important to acknowledge and explore religious diversity. Islam, as a religion, represents different things to its different followers. Opinions will differ over the role it should play in society (particularly in Muslim-majority societies). It may be difficult for all students to understand the nuances of this. Inviting local and well-informed Muslims from different religious backgrounds to take part in the class's work may be one way of highlighting this (see also 'The Best of British Islam' in *Signposts to further resources*

<sup>3</sup> Traditionally Sunni Muslims have been adherents of one of four madh'habs or schools of law. The Scholar-Jurists of the earliest generations developed a sophisticated methodology for the derivation of the Islamic Law from its sources – Qur'an, Hadith, Qiyas (Analogical Reasoning) and Ijma (Scholarly Consensus). Some other Sunni Muslims describe themselves as *Salafi*. Salafism has its roots in the 19th<sup>th</sup> century and rejects the mainstream Sunni schools of Law claiming to return to the pristine teachings of 7th century Islam. There are divisions and sub-divisions of Shi'a Islam where even within the major grouping, Ithna-Asheri (followers of twelve Imams), adherents look to different religious leaders (Grand Ayatollahs) for rulings on disputed questions.

below. Former Islamists, also, can offer perspectives into why they initially found Islamism appealing and why they became disaffected with the ideology.

- It is worth highlighting the inter- and intra-religious diversity that exists, particularly in Muslim-majority societies. 'Muslim country' is a misnomer.
- The questions above provide a good focus for discussion and investigation.
- Students can be encouraged to consider the differences between a private belief on one hand and a private belief one might also think should be imposed in law on others, and the basis for deciding on this.
- In the relatively safe environment of a classroom, teachers can challenge and question attitudes in such a way that students feel respected and accepted, not misunderstood or rejected. Where possible, it is always worth working with parents and the local community on curriculum issues. Developing a working partnership may be particularly worthwhile.

## NEXT STEPS

### Signposts for further reading

Burgat, F. (1999) *Face to Face with Political Islam*, IB Tauris

Saeed, A., "Trends in Contemporary Islam", *The Muslim World*, (97:3, 2007),

### Signposts for further resources

*The Best of British Islam* (2010) Gazelle Media. Set of 6 DVDs illustrating Islamic diversity and the lives of many Muslims in contemporary Britain from

[info@religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk](mailto:info@religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk)

### Signposts for further action

- Counter Islamophobia by taking steps to establish/improve the school's relationship with local Muslims and their communities, including parents, as well as religious professionals.
- Consider ways of involving parents from the full range of Islamic backgrounds to highlight the diversity of the faith. Islam is a faith as diverse in its manifestations of religious commitment as any other.
- The Schools Linking Network, working with Three Faiths Forum, provides CPD for teachers on tackling controversial or contentious issues, using the 4 questions: **Who am I? Who are we? Where do we live?** and **How do we all live together?** and once teachers have attended this they have free access to online resources. This year, the SLN can offer the CPD free to RE teachers – they need to call SLN 01274 385470 and say that they are RE teachers using the *REsilience* Gateways in order to secure a place on the next CPD sessions in spring 2011

## APPENDIX

### Islamism and History

Although many Islamists present their views and agenda as 'Islamic' rather than 'Islamist', it is important to note that Islamism is a political ideology that emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has only ever been supported by a small minority of Muslims.

The origins of Islamism are in the Arabic speaking world, but its ideology has spread around the world. The (Egyptian) Muslim Brotherhood is considered to be the first Islamist organisation, founded in 1928 by the school teacher Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949). Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, often arose as a reaction to both the challenges of modernity and the experience of colonialism, opposing both the political activities of colonial powers and the cultural influences that were seen as foreign imports spreading to the detriment of society. Over the later decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Islamist movements emerged as some of the most vigorous opponents of both US foreign policy and of western cultural influences in Muslim-majority societies. In this respect, part of Islamism's popularity can be understood in the form of resistance it offers to a perceived western cultural and political hegemony.

The spread of support for Islamism and Islamist groups in recent decades is part of a wider trend of the re-emergence of religiosity amongst the world's major faiths. However, it is important to note that religious observance and Islamism are not the same. Religiosity concerns how Muslims express their faith, whereas Islamism concerns the desire to impose an interpretation of the faith on society as a whole. Many Muslims who are extremely devout and religiously observant are not Islamists. This is an important point for teachers who may mistake enhanced religious fervour in a student (quite a common phenomenon amongst adolescents of a variety of traditions) for politicization, whilst overlooking the temptations and dangers Islamism presents to some other Muslim young people who show little evidence of interest in religion.

Support for Islamist groups tends to be stronger in urban than in rural environments and to be generated through a number of factors. For poorer members of society, the provision that Islamist groups are able to offer (in the form of healthcare, housing, education, and even food) is often attractive, especially when contrasted to perceived or actual government inaction. For others, it is the modesty of members of Islamist groups in contrast to the corruption and ostentation of political elites that offers a moral appeal. They are often appreciated as fulfilling Islamic injunctions to be charitable, modest and to enjoin the good and condemn the bad. Particularly among youths, a frustration with the lack of opportunities in society leads many to support Islamist groups, since it is they who contest the ruling governments most energetically. Of the reasons mentioned, it is worth emphasising that few features are inherently or exclusively 'Islamist'; rather, these features often happen to be the case with Islamist groups, but they could just as easily be the case with other political

groups and ideologies.

Within Muslim-minority populations, particularly those of overseas origin living in Western Europe or the US, a feeling of alienation from the wider society in which they live may lead to a crisis of identity in which Islamism can offer a solution for disaffected individuals. This is particularly the case with younger, second and third generation Muslims. In their case, they may lack the contact with and experience of their country of origin that their parents have, and often find it difficult to relate to the older generation of traditional religious leaders who grew up overseas. At the same time, many second and third generation Muslims also feel a sense of not fully belonging to the society they were born in, and may have experienced racism. Here, youthful disaffection and alienation are often exacerbated by political issues about which they have strong feelings, and Islamism can offer an appealing framework through which they can interpret their experiences. Islamism can promise an idealistic solution to very real daily problems.

Islamism also covers a wide range of political opinions. Within the Islamist spectrum, opinions vary hugely over certain issues (see below), and the term 'Islamist' can often group together individuals from very different walks of life, and different doctrinal branches of Islam, who have very diverse attitudes. What unites such figures is the desire to impose an interpretation of Islamic teachings (although which interpretation that is often varies) over society as state law. Many such figures would see themselves as having nothing in common with other Islamists, whose views on certain matters they disagree with.

### **Islamism and Elections**

Many Islamists have embraced the electoral process as a path to power. At times, where they have been allowed to participate in free elections, Islamist parties have scored significant successes (e.g. the FIS successes in municipal and first round parliamentary elections in Algeria in 1990 and 1991 and more recently, the Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank in 2006). In some parts of the world, were there to be increased electoral opportunity, then it is the Islamist organisations that would most likely increase their representation. The extent of this is impossible to predict; however, it is also worth noting that where free elections have taken place Islamist parties have not always fared as well as they thought they would or had been expected to, particularly in South and Southeast Asia.

A distinction may be made between elections and democracy, and many see Islamism as an un-democratic ideology. According to such thinking, any programme of implementing a single interpretation of religious beliefs as public law in a given place sits uneasily with democratic values such as freedom of religious expression.

Other Islamists reject electoral democracy as 'un-Islamic'. For them, democracy represents the sovereignty of humankind, whereas the only legitimate and true form of authority they would acknowledge is one that recognises the sovereignty of God. The political term 'sovereignty' does not appear in the Qur'an. Even within a single Islamist organisation, views can differ: the Muslim Brotherhood's Hasan al-Banna stood for election several times, whereas the radical Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) emphasised the sovereignty of God. From



this perspective it is easy to understand how elected politicians seeking to introduce a more 'Islamic' legal system see themselves as having little in common with those who reject the entire system.

### **Islamism and Authoritarianism**

In many parts of the world, the ruling regimes see Islamist organisations as a threat to their hold on power. As a result, they often restrict the electoral representation of Islamists, and even deny legal recognition to Islamist groups. In reaction to this, Islamist groups often emerge as the most vocal contesters for power, often agitating for elections under authoritarian regimes. This contestation boosts their popularity: as movements of opposition and in Muslim-majority countries many consider them to represent the only viable alternative to the incumbent regimes. Islamist groups have a lot to gain from unhindered participation in an electoral system, but many voters fear that voting for such groups or parties might simply replace an authoritarian state founded on secular principles with an authoritarian state based on religious ones.

On the other hand, it is important to note that Islamism is not solely an ideology of opposition. A number of regimes are Islamist, and many Islamist movements have benefitted from relationships with ruling regimes. In Egypt, for example, although the Muslim Brotherhood welcomed the removal of the monarchy in 1952, it had enjoyed close relations with the king at times, and in the aftermath of the Revolution it also had close relations with the Free Officers movement that replaced him.

### **Islamism and Religious Conservatism**

Islamism is often associated with puritanical interpretations of Islam. Islamist dissenting organisations and Islamist regimes have both advocated particularly puritanical interpretations of Islam in the past. The so-called Wahhabi regime in Saudi Arabia<sup>4</sup>, and the Twelver Shi'i regime in Iran, for example, have both introduced particularly conservative interpretations of Islam into state lawmaking. A strict segregation of genders, compulsory headscarves for women, outlawing of alcohol, and implementation of corporal punishment and the death penalty, have all been enforced by both these regimes.

However, it is important to note two things. Firstly, not all those who have puritanical interpretations of Islam are Islamists. Indeed, some of those who are deeply opposed to Islamism as an ideology hold puritanical religious beliefs. They may consider their religious beliefs to be a private matter, which they may encourage others to share but not seek to implement through the mechanisms of the state. Islamism concerns politics, so such

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<sup>4</sup> The term Wahhabism is not a term owned by those to whom it is attributed. According to the website <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/gulf/wahhabi.htm> "The movement is ... known by its adherents as *ad dawa lil tawhid (the call to unity)*, and those who follow the call are known as *ahl at tawhid (the people of unity) or muwahhidun (unitarians)*."

individuals cannot be considered to be 'Islamists'.

Secondly, not all Islamists share a particularly conservative/ puritanical interpretation of Islam. Indeed, far from being 'extreme', their interpretation of Islam may well be shared by the majority in a given society. It is possible to be an Islamist and at the same time to not be religiously conservative but to have progressive views regarding a number of religious issues and to wish these progressive religious views to be implemented through the political mechanisms and imposed on society at large. This does not mean however, that Islamism is a liberal ideology. Ultimately, Islamism concerns imposing one interpretation of Islam on everyone, whether through violent or non-violent means.

### **Islamism and Violence**

Islamism is an ideology which has become particularly associated with violence. A number of Islamist organisations prosecute acts of violence and are also the targets of violence. In particular, in the recent past a number of Islamists have even advocated and undertaken violence that deliberately targets non-combatants, contrary to most traditional Islamic teachings about the limits on acts of war. Clearly, there is a relationship between Islamism and terrorism; however, not all Islamists are terrorists, or even endorse terrorism and other kinds of violence. Theoretically, it is possible to be an Islamist and a pacifist; however, the majority of Islamists do sympathise with the use of political violence.