

## Features

Sectarian divisions and the Arab Spring  
Divide and rule  
20 February 2014 by Linda Woodhead

**Conflict between different religious groups cannot be held solely responsible for the upheavals in the Middle East. Participants in the first Westminster Faith Debate of 2014 teased out key factors behind the headlines**

“Everyone is quoting God,” said Shuruq Naguib, speaking about the Arab Spring in the latest of the Westminster Faith Debates, held on 12 February.

The issue for debate was the causes of violent upheaval occurring across the Middle East and North Africa since 2010. The media often present “sectarian” religious division, particularly between Sunni and Shia, as the culprit. But are the conflicts really driven by religious animosities? And what can be done to achieve peace?

Taking part in the debate were Dr Bassma Kodmani, director of the Arab Reform Initiative and former head of foreign relations of the Syrian National Council; Dr Toby Matthiesen, research fellow in Islamic and Middle Eastern studies at Cambridge University; the above-mentioned Dr Shuruq Naguib, lecturer in Islamic studies at Lancaster University; and Jack Straw, former Labour Foreign Secretary and MP for Blackburn. The debate was chaired by Charles Clarke and myself.

Matthiesen began by downplaying the importance of religious belief in the Middle Eastern conflicts. While the media portray an apocalyptic clash between religious rivals, observers should not be fooled by such “essentialising”. Three events were key to the current unrest: the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which “changed the way the Shia saw themselves”; the Iraq War which began in 2003 and altered the balance of power in the region; and the events of the Arab Spring itself. Insofar as religion was involved, Matthiesen mainly saw it as a political tool used by states and elites.

The manipulation of religious divisions by political regimes was a theme running through the debate. In Kodmani’s view, corrupt rulers have been using religious establishments as a soft security device for decades.

For Naguib, however, a crisis of religious authority, particularly within Sunni Islam, is also a critical factor. She saw this as rooted in postcolonial state-building. Newly independent states with nationalist agendas co-opted religious authorities to bolster support. The result was a crisis of legitimacy for traditional religious authorities. In Naguib’s view, organisations like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt are reacting as much against religious elites as against social injustice and political corruption.

This crisis of authority also involves conflict between different generations. Some young people, disillusioned by lack of employment and political voice, turn away from moderate religious figures to those who incite violence. Social media can play an important role here in spreading extreme views.

I drew parallels with a wider crisis of religious authority affecting all religions. Traditional leaders are questioned or ignored by new generations of believers who have increased access to religious knowledge, particularly through the internet.

The question “who speaks for Islam?” is linked to another: “who profits?” According to Matthiesen and Kodmani, religious conflicts have been stoked by corrupt regimes to undermine united opposition against them. In Syria, Kodmani suggested, the persistent threat of the “other” provides justification for the use of violence against society. On a wider scale, sectarian violence offers major regional players the opportunity to assert their influence, with conservative forces from the Gulf monarchies and Iran casting themselves as the defenders of Sunnis and Shia respectively. Jack Straw also believed we need to look behind these religious labels to the political rivalries they support.

What should be done? The panel offered two suggestions. For Matthiesen and Kodmani, a stable and lasting solution can only be found through the establishment of democratic societies on the basis of citizenship. For Kodmani, “Secularism, provided it is well understood, is the most important principle we need to hold.” She offered the example of Tunisia, which following its revolution has avoided extensive violence. While one audience member suggested this was to do with economic pragmatism – “there is no such thing as sharia-compliant tourism” – Kodmani stressed that Tunisia’s achievement was built on existing institutions of civil society lacking in many other countries; including trade unions and women’s groups. She believed that lasting solutions could only be based on equal citizenship, not ethnic or religious belonging.

Naguib and Straw agreed – but for them, the answer must be religious as well as political. Neither doubted that Islam and democracy are compatible. Naguib thought the issue of “Who speaks for Islam” must be resolved, and enduring solutions must have religious legitimacy. Straw suggested that stable religion-state relations have to be worked out in ways appropriate to each country. He reminded us that only a few decades ago religious “sectarians” from Ireland attempted to blow up the Prime Minister’s residence just across the road from where we were sitting. The history of religious conflict in Europe reminds us that stable solutions can take a very long time to evolve.

\* Professor Linda Woodhead is professor of Sociology of Religion at Lancaster University. The Westminster Faith Debates were founded and are organised by Professor Woodhead and Charles Clarke. They take place in central London and are open to the public free of charge.