

## Religion in History. Conflict, Conversion and Co-existence

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**Author:**

John Wolffe

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Peter Webster

The work under review here owes its genesis to the Open University course of the same title, for which it is the core text. As such, it consists of ten interlinked essays, specially commissioned, on the broad theme of the dynamics of difference within and between world religious traditions. There are contributions on topics ranging from the development of Christianity in the world of late antiquity through until the contemporary clash with militant Islamist terrorism and the assault on New York and Washington on September 11th 2001. With such a range of coverage, it is clearly impossible for any one reviewer to comment on the detail of each contribution. This review will therefore be confined to two main areas: firstly, the coherence and usefulness of the work as a textbook, and secondly, the degree to which the intellectual approach adopted may prove thought provoking and instructive for research into the history of religion more generally.

That this collection occupies a historiographical space of its own is very clear indeed. The literature is already rich on specific areas of religious conflict, syncretism and tolerance, from the extensive volume of work on the Crusades, the Reformations and on Christian mission in the imperial age. The opportunity to take a more explicitly comparative approach is much rarer, and provided this reviewer, with research interests in the British sixteenth, seventeenth and twentieth centuries, with much food for thought. As the editor notes in his introduction (p. 8), works by Gilles Kepel and Karen Armstrong on the roots of our contemporary religious conflicts have focussed much more narrowly on the twentieth century.<sup>(1)</sup> Such a space for long-range comparative thought is too often closed off by the assumption that religion is always and everywhere a slave to political power, and also that religious belief, on the rarer occasions where it is sincerely held, is fundamentally intolerant and must necessarily lead to tension, persecution and violence, in direct proportion to the political and social power it holds. More sophisticated analyses, such as the Huntingtonian 'clash of civilisations' have also tended to assume the univocal and unchanging nature of

religious systems, and to equate, in Huntington's case, the political, social and religious complex that is 'the West' with Christianity.<sup>(2)</sup> The opportunity this collection affords to juxtapose the case studies provided, and to focus on the particularity and mutability of religious thought, is thus a welcome and timely one.

The three modes of interaction given in the title are concisely summarised in the introduction, and provide a powerful organising device for the collection as a whole. Conflict in this context denotes international military action between confessional states, and civil violence within them, but also conflict in spoken and written form, and all the varying degrees of social and communal antagonism in between. Conversion encompasses both voluntary and personal conversion from a native tradition into a newly discovered one, and the forced conversion of whole nations to a new faith, architecturally, legally as well as personally. Co-existence is conceived more broadly than simply as legal toleration, including in addition all degrees of tolerance between neighbouring communities, divergent groups within communities, and between conquerors and conquered.

The first four pieces, being those on medieval and early modern periods, draw out these themes. Janet Huskinson explores the ways in which pagans and Christians interacted under the changing conditions of the Christianising and then the collapse of the western Roman empire. Here patterns of martyrdom, voluntary conversion and co-existence are to be found under varying political conditions and in different places. Jo Pearson's essay on the Crusades of the eleventh and twelfth centuries provides much interesting material on Muslim understandings of their 'strange and unexpected enemy'. The two pieces that deal with early modern Britain, by Anne Laurence and John Wolffe, describe well the complexities of the relationships between Roman Catholics, Dissenters and the Church of England, and between them collectively and the imperatives of a growing state and nation. Wolffe's account of anti-Catholicism, which deals also with continental Europe and north America, is the most analytically sophisticated piece on offer here, and would serve very well as an introduction to the topic in any publishing context.

The contribution of Gwilym Beckerlegge, on the Hindu Renaissance of the nineteenth century, provides a valuable counterpoint to many of the other pieces here. Its value lies in its demonstration of the syncretistic adaptation possible within Hindu thought, and its absorption and domestication of Christian ideas. Beckerlegge provides a salutary example of the degree to which apparently subservient traditions could in fact re-deploy elements of the supposedly dominant Christian tradition in a manner far from passive. Here the notion of conversion, implying a decisive rejection of one in favour of the other, loses its meaning.

It is at this point that a reservation about the approach of the volume as a whole may be ventured. While there are inevitably many other case studies that might equally well have found a home in a volume as wide-ranging as this, it is perhaps the case that the disposition of material here embodies two equally legitimate but distinct approaches to such an enquiry, with the attendant opportunities and drawbacks of both. One approach would have been to concentrate on one of the religious traditions, perhaps Christianity, and to explore its external relationships with other faiths, and its own internal divisions. Under such a scheme, there would be more room for material on crusading ideology, relatively neglected in Jo Pearson's piece, and on *Christian* thought concerning Indian mission in the nineteenth century, also less prominent in the essay by Beckerlegge. Other topics that might have come into play would be the Latin-Orthodox division, or the place of non-Christian minorities in a secular Europe of the twentieth century. Such an approach would be open to criticisms of Eurocentrism, but would perhaps gain in overall coherence.

A second option might have been to adopt a more explicitly comparative approach to the ways in which the world faiths related to other faiths both within and without, and dealt with internal change and dissent. The volume as it stands includes only one essay concerning the interaction between two non-Christian faiths, and both Buddhism and Confucianism are not addressed at all. It is perhaps invidious to criticise such an ambitious and fundamentally valuable undertaking as this on these grounds. However, the collection as it stands attempts to take both approaches, which suggests to this reviewer the need for a considerably larger volume.

The latter five chapters deal predominantly with the twentieth century. Gerald Parsons provides a suggestive

and wide-ranging assessment of the current state of the debate over the secularisation of British society in the 1960s, by way of an extended review article on the work prompted by Callum Brown's *The Death of Christian Britain*.<sup>(3)</sup> As well as providing a clear and concise review of this very lively debate, the definition of 'religions' is creatively stretched to include the meeting of Christianity with the non-institutional threat of secularism, both as an articulated world-view, and also when manifest in a 'practical Christianity', an commonplace ethical code emptied of most or all of its supernatural content. For the teacher, this breadth of definition opens up particularly fruitful possibilities for comparative thinking on such areas as (amongst others) the encounter between Christianity and paganism during the *birth* of Christian Europe; the renegotiation of the medieval accommodation between Christian and animist metaphysics during the Reformations, or the conflict between religion and philosophically atheist ideologies in China or Soviet Russia.

Susan Mumm's chapter on the ordination of women amongst Christian denominations is a clear and concise treatment of its topic, providing a useful case study on the means by which doctrinal disagreement has been ignored, stymied or accommodated, particularly within the Church of England. However, its use of gender as the organising category of analysis leaves it relatively isolated from the other chapters, and tutors would need to work hard to integrate it into analyses of the interaction either between religious traditions, or of denominations within them. Its chief value in this collection perhaps lies when used in conjunction with Parsons's study, on the adaptation of Christianity to external social and intellectual change.

The final three chapters are each sure-footed treatments of highly complex and ideologically charged moments in the tortured history of the twentieth century. Hannah Holtschneider examines the relationship between Protestants, Catholics, Jews and national and political identities in Germany and Poland from 1918 until after the Holocaust, providing a sophisticated analysis of the pre-conditions for Nazi rule without succumbing to a straightforward equation of Nazi ideology with Christianity or enumerating the sins of omission of the churches. Even for those organisations of Jews rejecting their Jewishness in the 1930s, conversion was insufficient to satisfy Nazi requirements.

The contributions of David Herbert on Israel and Palestine, and Herbert and Wolffe on modern Islamism, make explicit one of the surely crucial issues in the whole volume, which is less explicit in earlier chapters: the degree to which the varying patterns of conflict, conversion and co-existence are determined by the closeness of the mapping of religious and national identity. Herbert demonstrates that it was only relatively late in the twentieth century that secular nationalism on both sides in Israel/Palestine gave way to religiously defined political parties, and the pressure increased for political and social reform along religious lines. Similarly the last chapter sees the roots of the ideology that provoked the events of September 11th in a radical re-definition of the appropriate relation between Islam and the political order within which it is situated. This chapter serves as a useful corrective to the search for an essential, univocal and timeless Islamic core, inevitably disposed towards *jihad*. It situates the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in a much wider context of reactions to modernisation, the de-centring of religious interpretation and the globalisation of communication. These two chapters together raise the question of whether religious conflict is more likely in conditions of unstable national identity when coupled with a perceived need for that identity to be religiously uniform. The alternative mode of resolution of conflict through enforced social stratification, as seen under Ottoman rule, when juxtaposed with the increased equation of political and religious loyalty as the process of state formation proceeded in early modern Europe, suggests some connection.

Overall, this study will be highly valuable for courses touching on questions of religious identity and conflict over a very long period. It does not, neither could it, make claims of comprehensiveness. However, many crucial issues are raised and the studies as a whole provide a basis for teaching of a creative and contemporarily relevant nature. Although they might test the range and depth of many if not most university libraries, the suggestions for further reading are full, accessible and up to date. In short, this is a highly ambitious enterprise executed with an admirable degree of success.

## Notes

1. K. Armstrong, *The Battle for God. Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (2000); G. Kepel, *The Revenge of God. The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Islam in the Modern World* (Cambridge, 1994). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York, 1996). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. C. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain. Understanding Secularisation 1800–2000* (2001). [Back to \(3\)](#)

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