

## Religion, Diversity and University Responses

### Project Summary

One of the most pressing contemporary problems not just for the academic community but also – and more disturbingly – for the political order of the world is how to understand and respond to the current toxic combination of religion and politics. It is a fundamental concern on the one hand for the issue of diversity. How should the liberal ideal of a tolerant and mixed society comprehend claims to exclusive and totalizing visions of truth, which set themselves against such liberal ideals? We may recognize that there is now, nationally and globally, a new and complex map, which has more than one monotheism, and polytheism, competing alongside secular standpoints. The challenge, in brief, may be expressed like this: how can we take account of theological difference without going to war for belief? Quite simply, diversity in modern society cannot be adequately broached without an engagement with religion. It is, on the other hand, an equally if differently problematic arena of conflict for universities and other institutions of education. Current attempts at legislation in Britain and elsewhere (e.g. Britain's 2015 "Prevent" strategy) demonstrate little but bafflement, and consequently a profoundly incoherent response to the vexing issues of how teaching and other university practices should engage with the raft of interests unhelpfully sloganized as fundamentalism. The modern secular university – itself the result of a long and contested development – in part because of its very history, has left religion in a systematically awkward and often vexed space on campus, for all participants: teachers, students, administrators. This project aims to approach these problems from a new direction and with new methods of engagement. It will place the dialogic dynamics of religious interaction at the heart of a series of interlinked workshops, summer schools and seminars, to explore how the university can explore the issue of religious diversity in the most sophisticated, historically grounded and productive manner.

We use the heading "the dialogic dynamics of religious interaction" to mark out a specific approach. We intend to look at how religious groups – their social forms, their practices, their theologies, their cultural expressions – take shape and develop in an interactive response and counter-response to each other, and to the societies around them. It is in dialogic interaction and its violent denial that the crisis of diversity is articulated.

We need first of all to be clear that this approach is quite different from comparative religion, which sets out to contrast different discrete religious identities, theologies or practices. Comparative religion, especially from within anthropologically-informed scholarship, has been crucial in displacing the theological assumptions of nineteenth-century supersessionist thinking – the sort of thinking which enabled Mayhew's history of the working poor in London to include a 200 page analysis of marriage practices across the world and find them all failing in comparison to Anglican propriety. Comparative religion compares, and as such can describe diversity – but it is less interested in the interactive dynamics between religions, the zones of contact,

where the politics of contemporary social life are acted out. Second, it must be emphasized that this is not an interfaith project. Our aim is not to bring confessional groups together – consenting adults, already – to share insights from their religions, however interesting and productive recent developments in scriptural reasoning, say, have been. Ours is rather an analytical project with bases in historiography, anthropology, art history and political science.

Why is the emphasis on the dialogic dynamics of religious process so important? To put it in its most general form, with concomitant risk of oversimplification, the religious communities of the so-called Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, have a flair for constructing self-serving narratives of their own purity of development or origin. (Even the most sophisticated accounts – which of course do exist – set themselves as renegades or revisionists explicitly and polemically against such narratives, and are framed by them: one thinks of Daniel Boyarin on the Talmud in exile or Shaba Ahmed on the plurality of Islams.) Internalist accounts of religious dissent, transformation and triumph, tend to be as teleological as love stories, and the multiform stories of interaction between different religions serve all too often to erect fences of self-definition in their representation of the rejected other. Such narratives require retrospective acts of historical cleansing, and have direct consequences for how lives committed to such stories are structured, and how such groups respond to others. These self-representations are efficacious and consequential, and undoubtedly integral not just to contemporary violence of the most extreme kind, but also to the divisiveness and discrimination of mundane social life in multicultural communities. Our aim – set consciously and polemically against such self-representations and their consequences – is to understand and recognize how the long history and continuing practices of dialogic interaction are not liminal, border skirmishes, but inherent processes at the very heart of the formation and continuation of religious groups.

If we needed an icon for how difficult and necessary such work is, we could consider the current state of play in the historiography of early Islam outside a circumscribed Western academic environment (although other examples from other religious groups could, of course, also be cited). The often violently expressed response to secular books by scholars such as Patricia Crone, Fred Donner and Tom Holland, reveals a field at odds with expected contemporary historical methods such as source criticism and the questioning of ideologically inflected narratives. To suggest, specifically, that early Islam developed not just by the violent rejection of the Jews of Medina – excluded for their opposition to the Prophet Mohammed – but also by a theological dialogue with local religious groups including Jewish ones, has prompted extremely negative responses from Islamic academies, committed to the purity and integrity of revelation, and, consequently, unwilling to show much regard to others' historiographical evidence-based knowledge. Our questions are aimed at the Western academy, however: How should such a drama be analysed or taught? Is it possible to engage in a way that is more productive than simply reasserting the values of the secular university over and against its rejected other? How is our engagement with diversity in such circumstances to be performed?

### **Programme of activity**

We aim to start this work in a four-year programme. Each year will have a specific theme, divided into four sub-elements to be picked up in the relevant workshops and seminars. The academic co-ordinator will be required to contribute to at least one of these areas in his or her research.

**Year One:** the historical base. It is for us crucial to acknowledge that contemporary circumstances have a series of historical contexts, backgrounds and causes without which any analysis will be lacking, not least because so much of the current religious ideology turns on claims about the past. Of course, a comprehensive historical guide would be impossible, and we have chosen to focus on a single area through which to develop methodology and explore the central issues for understanding modernity through the past. For this purpose, we will study the interaction of Jews and Christians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is a set of circumstances, it need hardly be emphasized, with a long impact on the transformation of Europe, with consequences that are still being felt.

In a century where religious commitments were more bitterly contested than at any time since the Reformation, there was no tension in the nineteenth century more politically transformed or more fantasized or more portentous for future political violence, than the opposition of Christian and Jew. Christianity since its inception, of course, had worked constantly to separate itself from the Jewish soil in which it had grown; Judaism in Europe since the Crusades had been forced to articulate its community against the boundaries Christianity constructed for its own self-definition, and used such boundaries in turn for its own negotiations of public and private self-representation. Yet in the nineteenth century a perfect storm of events – including emancipation, the growth of political anti-Semitism along with Christian and Jewish Zionism, the so-called Jewish enlightenment – conspired to make the interaction of Judaism and Christianity charged with a new and newly significant force. Of course, many elements of this history have been very well studied. We have four central areas which have barely been treated but which are germane to our project.

- *The intermediaries* Who were the figures through which dialogic interaction between Jews and Christians took place? We will look in our first seminar at converts, Hebraists, missionaries, socialites and adventurers. Jewish converts were often surprisingly high profile figures – from Disraeli in politics to Christian Ginsberg in biblical studies – whose works spoke directly to their position (Disraeli's *Tancred* is an exercise in imagining the dialogue of Britain and Semite). Hebraists such as Charles Taylor and Solomon Schechter together changed the shape of scholarship. The interface between the British and American Ambassadors in Jerusalem with the Jewish, Christian (and Muslim) communities was sufficiently dramatic to end up both in court and in a Nobel-prize winning novel. In Berlin, Jewish salonières such as Henrietta Herz, Dorothea Schlegel and Rahel Varnahagen were receiving, corresponding and discussing with radical Christian theologians like Schleiermacher. How did the social process of interaction occur?

- *Biblical scholarship* It is remarkable that Judaism and Christianity are two world religions that share the same sacred scripture, for all that they read it very differently. It is equally remarkable that despite the history of difference there is no new edition of the Bible produced from the Renaissance through the 19<sup>th</sup> century that is not the work of collaboration between Christian and Jewish scholars. How did Christian and Jewish scholars collaborate or debate? Here, we can explore specifically the interaction of German and British scholarship on the text of the bible, especially under the influence of the new critical methods: Ewald, Wellhausen, van Harnack argued passionately with Geiger and other Jewish luminaries of the new engagement with public scholarship. How did the peoples of the book interact over the book?
- *Historiography* The nineteenth century itself was obsessed with our question of how the past explains the present – the great age of historical self-consciousness, as the Victorian era has often been described. Rewriting the history of the Jews and of Palestine was a necessary and heated task because of the genealogical, political and theological implications of such a history for the authorization of the present. In Britain, Henry Hart Millman, and Arthur Penrhyn Stanley are iconic of liberal Anglican attempts to produce an authoritative image of religious antiquity – as Ewald did in Germany and Ernest Renan in France. Against such models, Abraham Geiger and Heinrich Grätz offered a Jewish perspective. How was the history of the Jews fought over by Jews and Christians?
- *Artistic representations* It is a baffling moment when Holman Hunt said he could not find any models with Jewish faces in London, and set off to Palestine to complete his ethnographically accurate picture of the youthful Jesus in the Temple. It was not that there were no Jews in London, of course – rather he needed to find a face that matched his idealization/stereotype – an idea connected to notions of racial purity, the purity of Judaism in Palestine, the allowed beauty of a certain type of Jewishness and so forth. He couldn't find one in Jerusalem, either. A theological physiognomics. The nineteenth century was the first to produce travel books in their thousands, to illustrate bibles, including with photographs, to circulate on a very wide scale journals and newspapers with illustrations. What is more, biblical art was a hugely popular genre in the hugely popular exhibitions in all urban centres – as were staged reconstructions of bazaars and other “Eastern scenes”. How did this new visual technology change, inform, structure the interaction between religious groups? Our final seminar will explore the visual literacy of religious interaction in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This combination of the analysis of social process, intellectual activity, public narrative and public imagery will together produce an interconnected multidisciplinary image of the dialogic dynamics of interaction, that will lay a base for the following years' work.

**Year 2:** disciplinary practice. One of the grounding problems is the distribution of the study of religion across disciplines and the inconcinnity of approaches between disciplines. Departments of theology or divinity do not look at religion in the same

way as departments of anthropology, sociology or history. For this year, we will focus each seminar on a central discipline in each case in relation to the others and in relation to its history of development. We intend that this multiple, multi-disciplinary shifting focus will move us towards an engaged interdisciplinary perspective. The four central disciplines will be: theology, historiography, anthropology, political science.

- *Theology* Here, by way of contact with the first year's work, we will start with Schleiermacher, guest of the Jewish salons of Berlin, who wrote passionately against Judaism in a way which has proved an embarrassment to his liberal image and thus largely undiscussed in the modern academy. We will move up through Wellhausen and von Harnack towards post-Holocaust recalibrations of both the Catholic and the Protestant church's position on Judaism, and its current anxieties over Middle Eastern politics. This will act as a preparatory study to an exploration of current theological positions on multiculturalism, liberalism, and diversity in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The disciplinary history of theology traces the discomfort around religion in a secular university.
- *Historiography* How are the histories of religion written and what is at stake in such work? Again, linking with the first year, we can start with Martin Hengel, another Protestant minister, whose celebrated history of early Palestine is the standard starting point now for modern histories, and who famously declared that all Judaism was Hellenized – a statement of hybridization significantly penned in 1967 (and translated into English before 1973), that is, between two defining wars involving modern Israel and its Arab neighbours. In what ways do modern histories explain, comment on or embody religious agendas? Jewish, Christian and Muslim cases will be discussed, in relation to each other, and it is here where the historiography of early Islam will be explored.
- *Anthropology* Anthropology's development is in fascinating dialogue with the religious upbringing of its earliest scholars (as recent work by Tim Larsen, for example, has brilliantly exposed), with the history of ancient religion both biblical and classical, and, as we noticed above, has provided the most powerful counterblast to nineteenth-century theology, relocating the *logos* from *theos* to *anthrōpos*. Anthropology puts the human centre-stage, displaces divine explanation and story-telling to the status of epiphenomenon of social process, and (perhaps most significantly in this respect) insists on the need to appreciate the radical alterity of the subject as a humbling challenge to the scholar's own inherited metaphysics. Anthropology has moved decisively away from looking for mediation with the divine realm, and towards the study of ritual as embodied social praxis and (under the influence of structuralism) myth as a system of human linguistic communication and world-building. Anthropology might seem to be the archetypal science of diversity. How, then, should it, can it engage with contemporary politicized religion? Here we will draw on the strength of Cambridge's current teams working on Christianity in Africa, one of the most interesting arenas for the discussion of the dynamics of religious interaction, where dialogue is repeatedly transformed by violent hostility.

- *Political Science* The separation of church and state is a given of American politics, and a huge anxiety in the Middle east and elsewhere – and the source of great debates about Erastianism and Disestablishmentarianism in the nineteenth century. The relationship between constitutional politics, religion and the pragmatics of policy is integral to this project. The final seminar of the second year's series will consider the history of such debates leading into a discussion of the contemporary possibilities, theories and blockages in this area. This strand of the project will draw both on the current team at CRASSH working on Middle eastern politics, and on the strengths of the university's department of Politics.

**Year 3:** representations. The first two years of the project have focused on the history and on the university-based intellectual activities that inform our understanding of religious diversity. Years three and four will look at a more public discourse, beginning with visual, literary and dramatic representations. It should be self-evident that the engagement between religions is performed as much as commented on by the cultural products of different communities. Again, we will focus on four paradigmatic areas.

- *The literature of loss* One of the more notable literary phenomenon of the last thirty years has been the literature of loss – by which we mean the novels, poetry and popular histories that attempt to describe – and inevitably to idealize, fantasize, denigrate – communities which have disappeared or been fundamentally altered by modern political upheaval. The most obvious examples are the multiple projections of Palestinian writers of a pre-Israel land; but there have also been novels and poetry about the destroyed Jewish communities of Cairo and Baghdad; the multicultural communities of Greece – Mark Mazower's brilliant history of Salonica could easily be included here; and the destruction of rural Christian villages in Africa. Our question here is: how is the long history of writing the past, designed to motivate the present, re-appropriated in this literature and what are the effects on political and social interaction of such idealized images of an ur-community?
- *The documentary filming of cultural interaction* The same set of questions that motivate our seminar on literature motivate this second seminar. But here we have to add two key elements: the changing impact of the medium of the visual, on the one hand; and the role of documentary analysis, on the other. The medium of the visual brings a special claim on the real (as our discussion in the first year on photography will adumbrate), and hence has played a special role in the politics of self-representation in and against the other. So too, on the other hand, has the claim to truth embodied in the form of the documentary. Here we will make specific use of the new Arab Media unit in the department of Political Science at Cambridge. How do documentaries inform and regulate the practices and comprehension of religious diversity?
- *The news* The constant beaming of images into hand held devices makes the new digital forms crucial for how interaction with cultural others is mediated. The discussion of the distorted representation of minority groups in the media is a

familiar complaint. Here we wish to explore more specifically how cultural interaction is represented, and, above all, what difference the new forms of digital communication are producing.

- *The movies and the imagination* The film business is international, and, paradoxically because of this, the engagement with religion from Hollywood and Bollywood is desperately thin (in comparison with violence, sex or politics). To take one example: in *Creation*, a widely circulated film about the life and work of Charles Darwin, there were many examples of the sort of license one would expect from a popular account of a historical scene. But particularly poignant was not so much the necessity to represent Charles and his wife as anti- and pro-religion respectively (a typical oversimplifying naivety), but rather the assumption that Mrs Darwin was simply a Christian, and not the Unitarian she was, as if there were only one sort of Christian. In the imagination of the film makers, and in their self-fulfilling projection of an audience's allowance, it would seem to be too complex to assume that religious commitments might be of different types and that Christianity might be multiple. How, then, is religious conflict, religious interaction, religious commitment represented in the movies, and with what impact on public discourse?

**Year 4:** Secularism. This final year is the most challenging, but, to our minds, essential. Secularism has an intricate history, for sure. The complexity and instability of the concept of the secular has, of course, been exposed many times by modern historians, to the extent that it is impossible now to subscribe to any simplistic, myths of progress (which we have learned to call 'Whiggish'): there was no triumphant journey from religious befuddlement to scientific modernity. Secularism as a term is a nineteenth-century invention, for all that it has roots in the enlightenment, constantly in dialogue with organized religion as an idea, and with public, political process. The growth of the university as a secular institution is a fundamental part of the history of the modern university, connected with the history of objectivity as an idea (as Daston and Galison have traced), and with the sciences of man as a challenge to theological supremacy. Secularism and religion are mutually implicative terms. Religion, we contend, cannot be understood therefore without a careful appraisal of its dialogic relation with secularism. Here we have two overarching questions. One: have modern disciplines fully escaped their theological past? Two: how can secularism engage productively with religious argument?

Here seminars 1 and 2 will be focused on the first question, and will explore through the different relevant disciplines the degree to which the theological has been expunged from modern disciplinary formation. A single example will suffice to epitomize the issue. One of the most sophisticated modern historians of ancient Greek religion, Robert Parker, Professor at Oxford, and widely read in anthropological literature, includes two chapters in his most recent *magnum opus*, entitled "Why believe without revelation?", and "Religion without a church". The default assumptions of a long Christian tradition are startlingly evident here in the postulation of revelation as a ground for belief, and of the institutional normality of a church. Theology frames and defines *how* the questions are asked in the very

gesture of trying to go beyond theological assumptions. How successfully and integrally modern disciplines in the humanities and social sciences have disentangled themselves from a theological inheritance remains to be discovered.

Seminars 3 and 4 will look at the second question: can the secular university deal adequately with the religious drives of modern commitment? Seminar 3 will canvass models of approach; seminar 4 will discuss policy and enactment. These seminars must be described with the least detail here as they will depend most heavily on the results of the previous three years' work.

Each year has thus a focused topic and each will be structured around four elements which it will be the duty of the academic co-ordinator to organize and participate in:

First, four high-level international meetings, with invited participants from around the world, pre-circulated papers, and extensive time for genuine exchange of ideas – a model we have spent much time refining at CRASSH. These will be events with between 24 and 30 participants. In the descriptions of the strands of each year, we have indicated what each of these four seminars will be on. The aim is for an incremental process of shared research, with a core group attending each meeting and visitors combining for particular topics.

Second, a summer workshop/school for both early career and mid-career academics on the subject of the year. These will involve the opportunity for early career scholars to develop their work in critical discussion with each other and more senior figures. We also add a novel element of intermedia workgroups, where scholars introduce to the group types of material that are less familiar, to explore how different media contribute to the central questions of the seminar. These seminars will be open and we will have bursaries to enable graduate students and post-docs to attend.

Third, we will by way of preparation for the international workshops run a regular seminar series in Cambridge, for local participants with a healthy admixture of invited guests. The regular contact and slow development and testing of ideas is crucial for any interdisciplinary project to work.

Fourth, we will circulate the ideas of the groups by publication. Each workshop has the potential for a special edition of a journal. Each year's strand will produce a collected volume. We have included some finances for a fifth meeting for those publishing in these volumes further to workshop their ideas in a subsequent year. A final public event will help launch the book series as a series – with the intention it should continue as a publishing venture. CUP has already indicated its interest in it.