

## Religion, respect and revolution

Understanding the role and nature of religion, culturally, socially and historically, in the Middle East is vital if the West is to play any meaningful part in helping to stabilise the region, with interfaith dialogue demonstrating a deep respect for Islam, argues the former Prime Minister.



*Anti-government protesters hold a placard that reads “People want the rule of Islam” during a demonstration after Friday prayers in Amman, Jordan.*

*Photo: Reuters*

Politics is often the art of understanding the interplay and complexity of a great number of factors, some of which are not always obvious at first glance. However, I regularly find that a closer inspection of the obvious can show us a way forward and help shape our approach to a given problem.

Take the Northern Ireland peace process. It was obvious that religion was important to the people, but why? The answer is that for so many people religion is not just about how we live or how we die, but about many other things: history, identity and belonging. It is about culture, tradition, meaning and the philosophy of life. Getting to grips with that fact was vital in making progress towards a solution. It is not just the case in Northern Ireland; seriously understanding the religious dimension of the public

sphere is vital in many situations.

This is clearly the case at the moment, as unfolding events in the Middle East show, as well as recent talks between Pakistani and Indian officials to resume peace negotiations following the Mumbai attacks, the formation of a new state in Sudan, and religious killings in Indonesia, although that nation is making great strides in religious tolerance. Then there are debates over blasphemy laws and their consequences for religious minorities (as we have seen recently in Pakistan) and dialogue about multiculturalism in Germany and the United Kingdom.

Throughout the world, a new type of debate is taking shape. While it can centre on immigration or protectionism, it is above all about issues to do with culture and integration issues that are altogether more vigorous and potentially more explosive. In the Middle East, it is about whether the West fundamentally does or does not respect the religion of Islam; and the Israel-Palestine dispute is caught up with it.

In Europe, the debate is about whether our attempt to integrate cultures has succeeded or failed; and, insofar as there is a perception of failure, it is about whether our “generosity” in allowing inward migration and encouraging multiculturalism has been abused. Here it is often felt that the “host” nations are being unfairly taken advantage of by those who want Western benefits but not Western values. The economic challenge is intensifying the cultural one.

In meeting this challenge, democracy and even economic change are not enough.

There is a social challenge too. Do we want societies that are open to those who have different faiths and cultures to our own traditions; or do we want, in the face of insecurity and economic crisis, to close the door, to look after what some would call “our own” first and foremost? And if we want open societies, what are the conditions for such openness to prevail?

The one lesson we learn unequivocally from Europe’s past is that when we close the door, we lose. And if that were true in times gone by, how much more true it is today in the era of rapid globalisation where technology, in the form of mass and social media, is shrinking the world. It is particularly true of the Middle East.

There are three elements in play. One is regimes, often allies of the West, who believe they need to keep a firm grip on their people, for otherwise uncontrollable and extreme forces with a closed view of the world will be let loose. The second are those forces themselves. The third is a group of citizens whom I would call the modernisers. They have an open attitude, politically, economically and socially. We should clearly be encouraging a steady evolution of that modernising tendency and many of the rulers of that region who wish to see such an evolution.

However, they are operating within a region in which religion occupies a vital, if not determining, space in society. This cannot be overlooked for a second. Ask how important religion is in the lives of people in Europe, and the answer is around 30-35 per cent. But in the Middle East it is 90-95 per cent.

The crux of the matter is that if you don’t understand religion in the Middle East, you don’t understand the Middle East. So as these recent developments are transforming the Middle East region, the way that religion affects that transformation is profoundly significant. If democracy brings with it an open attitude not just to the economy but to society and religion, it will be hugely beneficial. If it

doesn't, by contrast, it will further the sense of anxiety and alienation between East and West.

For me, the missing bit of Middle East policy is interfaith dialogue. If the concern is that Muslims feel Islam is disrespected by the West, then the answer is to engage in a dialogue that proves it isn't. This begins in school, it should be analysed and debated at university and should be grounded in political, social and cultural exchange.

Just as in Northern Ireland, the reason that religion is important in the Middle East is that it is about so much more than religion. If the Middle East produces political change, without social change that is based on an open mind towards others, then it will have been a revolution half-formed and unfinished and the economic change, so vital to advancing the position of the people, will likewise fall short. Such change cannot come about without Islam – and indeed all of us – embracing the twenty-first century. It is therefore our job at this moment to reach out; to open not close our own minds; to push forward for justice and for peace; to partner the modernisers and give them hope; and it is their job to lead, to reach back, to show that respect and equality between people of all faiths and none is a purpose shared.

This change can be managed over time and with care; but come it must. That is why, even with all the uncertainty and even instability of the present time, we should be demonstrating renewed commitment to security for the state of Israel and the dignity of statehood for the Palestinians. Now is the time to prove that if peace between the Israelis and Palestinians is at an impasse, there is an overwhelming will to remove the blockage and press forward. Our ambitions must be bold, however hard they are to achieve.

Wherever you look today, religion matters, nowhere more so than in the Middle East. Faith motivates. Understanding faith, its adherents, its trends, its structures, can be as important as understanding a nation's GDP, its business, its resources. Religious awareness is as important as gender or race awareness. For politicians, business people, or just ordinary interested citizens, to know about a country or a region's faith perspective is an essential part of comprehending it.

There are literally hundreds of websites –well financed and well subscribed to – that promote the closed or even extreme view of the world and faith. My Faith Foundation attempts to promote the open view, based on a vision of respect and understanding between people of different religions. We have a schools project now in more than 15 countries with thousands of students, and a university programme with eight world-class universities and many more joining.

This is just a start. An alliance of people of faith to support the Muslim majority against the threats that they and we now face is imperative. Today's developments in the Middle East are inherently destabilising but in the longer term full of great promise. Even some Muslim modernisers share the temptation to assert that the West is disrespectful of Islam.

One task of interfaith dialogue is to demonstrate beyond doubt that it is not.

*?The Rt Hon Tony Blair was Prime Minister from 1997 to 2007 and is now Quartet Representative to the Middle East. He is patron and founder of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation.*

