

Study of persecuted 16th century Protestants reveals lessons for 21st century terrorism

New History & Policy Paper released – 1 October 2010

Persecution of terrorists risks creating influential martyrs that could act as a magnet for support – according to innovative research into public opinion of the burnings of Protestants in 16th century England.

The study by economist Paul Ormerod and historian Andrew Roach, whose History & Policy report [Understanding Terrorism and Radicalisation: a Network Approach](#) is released today, applies modern mathematical models to 16th century English history to reveal important lessons for tackling contemporary terrorism.

Using social network theory, which has increased understanding of many contemporary phenomena, from how companies (mal)function, to the spread of HIV and AIDS, the researchers modelled the effects on public opinion of burning Protestants at the stake during the reign of 'Bloody Mary'.

At the time, persecuted Protestants recognised the power of their martyrdom and documented it in their writings. 'Our results suggest that the persecuted Reformed Protestants were right and that the burnings offered an unprecedented opportunity to influence opinion,' say Professor Ormerod and Dr Roach.

'Those who were persecuted by the Marian government shrewdly chose martyrdom as an opinion-changing strategy as well as for its own spiritual benefits. Modern understanding of network theory shows that they were right to do so.'

The results of their experiment offer important lessons for tackling 21st century extremists. 'Martyrdom is potentially much more powerful if it is undergone by prominent adherents of the ideology. At present militant Islamic terrorists tend to be drawn much more from the rank and file. It would be more effective for their cause if Osama bin Laden and some of his top associates, the hubs within their network, were to become suicide bombers themselves or to be martyred publically by the authorities. As long as this does not happen, the opinion forming potential of martyrdom will be self-limiting.'

Notes to Editors

1. Professor Ormerod and Dr Roach's History & Policy paper, [Understanding Terrorism and Radicalisation: a Network Approach](#), is published today at www.historyandpolicy.org Their research was enabled by a knowledge transfer fellowship from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which seeks to cast light on contemporary issues using historical examples and developments in the theory of social networks.
2. Professor Paul Ormerod is a Fellow of the British Academy, and in 2007/2008 was a Distinguished Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Study, University of Durham. He is a director of Volterra Consulting. His books include *The Death of Economics* (1994), *Butterfly Economics* (1998) and *Why Most Things Fail* (2005).
3. Dr Andrew Roach is a Senior Lecturer in History at Glasgow University. He is the author of *The Devil's World: Heresy and Society 1100-1300* (2005). He collaborated with Bridget Rosewell, chief economist to the GLA on *Building Bridges: Some lessons from the Middle Ages on the long-term economic impact of bridges over the Thames* (GLAECONOMICS Working Paper 32, 2008).
4. [History & Policy](#) works for better public policy through an understanding of history. 6 October 2010 marks its arrival at King's College London, alongside the Centre for Contemporary British History & King's, Institute for Contemporary History. History & Policy's current work is supported by [Arcadia](#) and [The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation](#)
5. H&P has a network of 250 historians willing to engage with policy makers and media. To keep up to date with the latest H&P news, you can [sign up](#) for our monthly newsletter online or [follow us on Twitter](#)
6. To request an interview with Professor Ormerod or Dr Roach, please contact:

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