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## WHEN RELIGION BECOMES EVIL.

By Charles Kimball. (Harper Collins, San Francisco), \$21.95. Reviewed by Stephen J. Duffy.

Some time ago, Hans Küng sagely observed that "there can be no world peace without religious peace." We might add a qualifier: religious peace is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for world peace. Nonetheless, flash points of violence across the globe in the last decade confirm Küng's observation. There have been bloody encounters between Christians and Muslims, Muslims and Hindus, Protestants and Catholics, Tamil Hindus and Buddhists, Sikhs and Hindus. And the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is by no stretch purely political. Unfortunately, the myriad faces of violence in the media have desensitized us, rendered us numb even to violence in the name of religion. So commonplace is the relationship between religion and violence and so inured are we to it that it is now hardly a disturbing scandal that arouses shame. That many of history's dark chapters reveal a pitch-dark underside to religious traditions and movements that motivates and sanctions violence and

atrocities has, until recently, been little attended to by many religious leaders and theologians. Indeed, they have often enough self-deceptively cloaked the carnage of religion in a haze of sacralized ideologies and social structures of violence. Too many wars have been fought and too many humans slaughtered under the banners of religion. The "warrior" is morally exalted, war is a "holy cause," and "God" a blood soaked word.

This indictment of religion for the scandal of its corruption by violence seems universally applicable. It cannot be laid at the doorstep of cults and sects alone, while the major religions stand innocent. Certainly there is the religiously sanctioned violence of figures like Ashara Shoko and the Aum Shinrikyo movement, Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple in the jungle of Guyana, David Koresh and the Branch Davidians and Marshall Applewhite and the Heavens Gate movement. But the annals of history testify to the atrocities of the mainline

religions as well. Consider, too, at yet another level, the religious sanctioning of slavery and apartheid, of violence and discrimination against women, and of the episcopal cover up of the sexual abuse of minors by clergy in the American Catholic Church. Violence in the name of religion is done not only to outsiders, but also to community insiders and to the community itself. If religion has often enough been victim, it is no stranger to the role of victimizer.

What is needed in the religious traditions is critical self-analysis rather than finger pointing. But because doubt and questions about one's basic beliefs and assumptions may prove too threatening, the paucity of self-analysis by the religious traditions of their part in spawning and sustaining violence is not surprising, though it is lamentable. However, a recent spate of books and articles has come to examine the unsettling alliance between religion and violence. Charles Kimball, professor of religion at Wake Forest University, offers his own timely analysis of this long, tragic history of bloodshed laced with religious rhetoric and imagery. Ours is a world of religious diversity combined with global interdependence. It is also a world of political and economic instability, shifting cultural values and expanding secularization, ethnic conflict, nuclear proliferation, grinding poverty and ecological devastation. Combine these ingredients with narrow, exclusivist religious world-views, political self-interest and the human proclivity to aggression and you have an incendiary mix. It is crucial, therefore, that we recognize the centrality of religion and its interaction with an aborning new world marked by both globalism and tribalism.

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ber almost half the planet's population. Both, along with Judaism, incline by their very nature to engage with political structures more readily than do the other major religions, and both have a strong missionary impulse. Although Christianity and Islam are Kimball's focal points, he ranges widely, nonetheless, through all the major traditions to evanescent sects and cults of little or no historic import. But the central aim of Kimball's analysis is to examine five interpenetrating warning signs that signal the human corruption of religion, from which no tradition is exempt. Jesus taught nonviolence, yet violence runs through the history of Christianity's encounters with Judaism, Islam and the religions of China and India. Indeed, the Old and New Testaments and later Christian tradition present conflicting perspectives on violence. Buddhism has preached *ahimsa*, but Buddhists have not been wholly immune to the perpetration of violence.

According to Kimball, five alarm bells should alert us to religiously sanctioned evil. The five are absolute, totalistic truth claims, blind obedience to charismatic leaders, belief that one's community is ushering in the ideal age, ends that justify any and all means, and declarations of holy war. Kimball's elaboration of these fire signals is nicely anecdotal rather than abstractly analytical as he weaves together illustrative narrations of events past and present drawn from historical sources, media

accounts and his own extensive experiences throughout the Middle East. One may wonder whether, and if so, to what extent, Kimball agrees with Bernard Lewis' approach or Samuel Huntington's very debatable "clash of civilizations" thesis.

Kimball is correct in locating the root of the problem in the efforts of religious communities to find their fit in society, in the everyday world of politics, economics, education and social life. Theocracy is out of the question in a pluralistic world increasingly wired for cyberspace. Moreover, the historical record hardly recommends it. I might add, however, that many in the West cannot begin to comprehend this problem. Living as we do in secularized societies where religion is largely privatized, it is difficult for us to understand anyone who sees religion as a way of life permeating every nook and cranny of existence, public and social as well as private. And yet, that by nature and inherently is what authentic religion must attempt, granting the problems of accommodation it faces in a pluralistic society.

Kimball is also correct in finding in the texts and foundational figures of the major traditions another side, which provides the resources enabling a turn from distortion to authenticity. The rationalization of violence in a sacred cause is not a necessary feature of most traditions, though their ethics of respon-

sibility, decency and concern for the other too often recede when religious lifestyles and ideals that are alloyed with political agendas are challenged. If there are the warrior God, the military messiah, the samurai, and warrior monks, there are also the Ebed Jahweh, the crucified Christ, and the Bodhisattva; if there are summons to holy war and crusades, there are also the love commands and the ideal of *ahimsa*. If exclusivism is strong, inclusivism is stronger still. But critical examination and reform of one's own community is difficult to initiate, even more difficult to pursue and implement, and impossible to ever bring to completion.

Kimball's final chapter points up the need for a new paradigm, a new way of understanding and living out one's particularity in a religiously diverse world, a paradigm that enables interfaith engagement at all levels, religious, social and intellectual. In quest of this new paradigm, he turns to the shopworn exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism typology. Of late, theologians have shown that there is sand at the foundations of this typology. Kimball's own brief presentation of it lacks nuance and precision. In the end, it is less than clear exactly how he wants us to think about religious diversity while maintaining our own faith commitments and not facilely melting down the diverse religions to a bland one-size-fits all homogeneity. More is required than an open and respectful attitude. What Kimball needs here is a much better thought out theology of the religions that will ground interreligious interaction and dialogue at every level and beget an openness to the truth and grace at work in the heart of other traditions and their devotees.

While Kimball's claim that more blood has been spilled and evil done in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in history is asserted without any warrants to support it, the data he presents do confirm the awful fact that religion as a human phenomenon is not immune to the tragic ambiguity that dogs all things human. Religion continues to inspire the noblest of our

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aspirations and the highest values of human experience, yet it can turn demonic and betray our humanity when our capacity for self-transcendence yields to tribalism and scapegoating violence. Religious myth and ritual will then be invoked to energize and rationalize destructive community choices and

actions. Genetic selfishness and aggression coupled with inborn anxiety surely lie behind the evils of religious people. Divided selves and divided communities live in symbiosis. But religious ideologies masked in religious symbolism stoke the fires within and without, enflaming hatred of the outgroup and dividing the

world into armies of God and dark satanic empires and axes of evil and sending each camp into sacralized wars against the enemy its ideology creates. Religion has been, and sadly still remains, as tragically ambivalent as any of the highest human achievements. We do well to ponder all this in our flag-waving Republic poised on the brink of yet another war. **S**

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*(Editor's Note: The above review was submitted prior to the war with Iraq.)*

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# Wrangling Religions: An Interview with Charles Kimball

Jodi Mathews  
10-11-07

Religion "is arguably the most powerful and pervasive force in human society," according to Charles Kimball, author of the new book *When Religion Becomes Evil*.

Kimball, chair of the department of religion at Wake Forest University and a recognized authority on the Middle East, recently told *EthicsDaily.com* about some of the ideas in his latest work.

**You said religions tilt toward evil when they succumb to any of five dynamics. What are the "five dynamics"?**

I believe we can discern five major warning signs, predictable indicators that dangerous corruption of the heart of the religion is likely. These include: absolute truth claims, blind obedience, efforts to establish the "ideal" time, when ends justify any means, and declaring holy war.

In the book, I illustrate patterns of behavior in all major religious tradition under these five signs. The antidote for the corrupting patterns of behavior, I believe, can be found within the religious traditions that have stood the test of time.

Truth claims, for example, are central for religions. But when people pronounce absolute truth claims when they believe they know what God wants for them and everyone else, you've got a recipe for disaster. We need a more humble and toned "human" view of both, one that recognizes we are all in a process of growth, change, learning and unlearning. The book contains numerous examples across traditions and through the centuries.

**How do you define "religion," in general and its potential for evil?**

In the first chapter, "Is Religion the Problem?" I focus on the difficulty of defining religion adequately. At a basic level, religion is that arena of human awareness and action that addresses matters of ultimate concern. Religions, of course, are multifaceted. It includes cognitive, experiential, moral/ethical, ritual and other dimensions. It is individual and communal.

All religious systems and traditions are not equally valid or valuable. The Branch Davidian movement headed by David Koresh or the Aum Shinrikyo movement (whose members released deadly sarin gas in the Tokyo subway system in 1995) are clear examples of religious movements gone dreadfully bad. My primary focus is on the major religious traditions that have stood the test of time (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism).

As I explore the contemporary and historical dynamics within these traditions, the propensity for corrupting the heart of these traditions is lodged primarily with people. Some systems may be more prone to violent and destructive behavior (e.g., Christianity and Islam have horrific dimensions of their respective histories) whereas the Buddhist tradition is rarely connected with violent behavior. But the primary concern is with people, adherents in all traditions who can easily fall into patterns that pervert and distort the central teachings and promises of peace, love and justice.

**What "good" can be found in exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism?**

There are various theological approaches to understanding one's religious truth in a world of great diversity and pluralism. My argument in the final portion of the book suggests that these various approaches need not preclude one from seeking understanding and cooperating with people in other religious traditions.

The "exclusivist" positions (and there are many variations within this dominant framework for understanding) need not be harsh. I illustrate this clearly with an example of a traditional Southern Baptist preacher in Tulsa, Okla., a man who was a wonderful mentor and friend.

His and my theological positions were quite different. But he warmly encouraged my study and pursuit of questions about particularity and pluralism. He preached many sermons and kept singing the final invitation hymn for 20 minutes on most Sundays. But he also recognized that he was not God and that the Bible was full of hints and clues that God's love extended to all creation.

**How can religion be evil and yet possess the only real hope for a peaceful world?**

My contention with respect to these major religious traditions is that they have served millions of people well for many, many centuries. People within these traditions have the teachings and resources to help fashion a more healthy and hopeful future for all of us who share our increasingly fragile and interdependent planet.

At the heart of the major traditions, for instance, you find a version of Jesus' teaching that the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart and soul and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. The corollary, the "golden rule," is also found in some form in each religious tradition.

We need people in all traditions to rediscover and live out these simple, yet life-changing truths. Think of Gandhi. Think of Martin Luther King Jr. Think of yourself and how consciously you seek to live out your faith in light of these fundamental truths.

Jodi Mathews is BCE's communications director.

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