

Will We Ever Stop Killing Each Other in the Name of Religion?

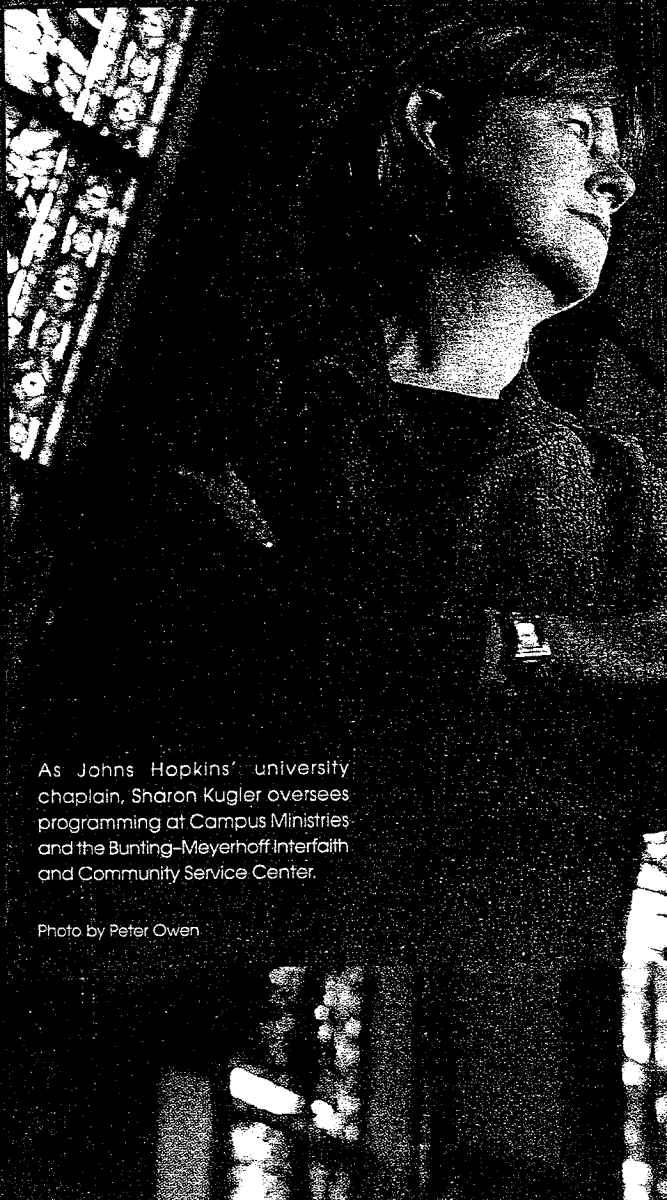
"I have an abiding hope that we will and reason to believe that it is possible. Here is why:

"As members of one human family, the best and worst of us are often revealed through our 'religious' urges. At our worst, we feed a corrupt belief that we alone have the corner on truth. We cling to the conviction that no other community of believers can enlighten 'our way.' 'Difference' becomes threatening, leading to a compulsion to defend 'our way' with a severity that defies reason and gives way to fanaticism. Sadly, such behavior fractures creation. It can breed alienation, senseless violence, and destruction.

"At our best, we nurture a genuine spirit of love and compassion. Each major religion has some form of the 'Golden Rule' at the core of its self-understanding. Seeking truth and promoting justice by embracing all of creation is the only road to true human flourishing. It is not an easy road. It involves a daring commitment to take each other as seriously as we take ourselves. Only in doing so can we transcend our differences and affirm our best urges and inclinations.

"Through our students, I have been blessed to witness this daring commitment in action. During their interreligious encounters, they explore together the tenets and practices of their individual faiths. At times they struggle with some of the most vexing questions of the ages, and they are often astounded by what they share. With respect and appreciation, they engage each other and take each other seriously. They embody what is possible when a deliberate embrace of difference is met with a steadfast sense of humility about the process itself and the awesome potential of the encounter.

"Our students fill me with an abiding sense of hope. Their souls are deep in dreams of a world transformed, where religious quests open channels of peace and understanding. Through their holy engagement with each other in dialogue and in service to those in need, they affirm that there is reason to believe in possibility. Their daring acts illuminate what our God of many names asks of us—to love in the name of religion."



As Johns Hopkins' university chaplain, Sharon Kugler oversees programming at Campus Ministries and the Bunting-Meyerhoff Interfaith and Community Service Center.

Photo by Peter Owen

Intolerance Swaddled in Faith

Wash. Post

On Sept. 12, 1960, John F. Kennedy, in a tight presidential race with Richard Nixon, addressed the Greater Houston Ministerial Association. In an attempt to reassure those Americans who thought a Catholic president would take orders from the Vatican or somehow impose Catholic doctrine on a majority Protestant nation, Kennedy not only said he believed that "the separation of church and state is absolute" but added something else as well: "I believe in a president whose religious views are his own private affair." For this, Sen. Rick Santorum has rhetorically excommunicated him.

Kennedy's position did "much harm in America," Santorum told the National Catholic Reporter last year. "All of us have heard people say, 'I privately am against abortion, homosexual marriage, stem cell research, cloning. But who am I to decide that it's not right for someone else?' It sounds good. But it is the corruption of freedom of conscience."

In contrast, Santorum named George W. Bush—a Methodist—as a president with the right approach. He dubbed him "the first Catholic president of the United States." Goodbye, JFK.

As it happens, Santorum was interviewed in Rome, where he was attending a celebration marking the 100th anniversary of Opus Dei, the archconservative Catholic movement. Among other things, the movement believes in the "coherence" between faith and politics. While the National Catholic Reporter said that Santorum is not an Opus Dei member, his words suggest he is in agreement with its tenets.

None of this would matter particularly if Santorum had not recently unloaded his views on homosexuality to the Associated Press. They are by now famous, but just to review, he predicted that if consensual sex between persons of the same sex were legalized—it is illegal in Texas and some other states—it would lead to the legalization of bigamy, polygamy, adultery and even incest. He then went on to make a distinction between homosexuality, which can be tolerated, and homosexual acts, which cannot. For these views, I essentially called Santorum a "moron."

Predictably, a frenzied Internet lynch mob responded in smokin' e-mails that it was I, not Santorum, who was a moron. Less predictably, and more interestingly, others said that Santorum was merely echoing the position of the Vatican on such matters and therefore his views ought to be re-

spected.

Here we get back to Kennedy. He gave that speech in Houston because most Americans did not share his faith—some of them to the point of ludicrous bigotry. Others, though, merely had some qualms. Therefore, he was assuring them all that he would not try to translate his faith into public policy. His Roman Catholicism would remain "his own private affair."

Santorum rejects that approach—and, importantly, so do others of his bent, whatever their religion. In doing so, they sometimes advance beliefs about which there is no consensus. It is one thing to refer to the Judeo-Christian heritage to justify a ban on polygamy, which is often just another term for the exploitation of women, or on incest, where children are often victimized. But it is quite another thing to give the police the power to invade your home and arrest you for a consensual sex act with another adult—which is what happened in Texas—or read you your Miranda rights for committing adultery. Many Americans would be appalled by that.

Worse, in advancing religious arguments for public policy, Santorum and others foreclose both debate and compromise—the basic ingredients of democracy. If you think, simply as a matter of faith, that homosexual sex ought to be a crime, then I cannot reason with you. We might as well argue over the parting of the Red Sea, the virgin birth or whether Muhammad really ascended to heaven on a winged horse. As history has shown, when these issues get into the public square, absolutes are declared and swords are drawn.

You hear a lot of talk nowadays about how godless this nation has become—downright immoral, if you ask some. The prescription supposedly is to give religion some muscle, bring it back into the schools and into public life in general. George Bush, from everything he says, favors that approach—and the White House, beholden to religious conservatives, waxed Orwellian about Santorum, pronouncing him "an inclusive man."

Rick Santorum serves as a warning. His zealotry, his intolerance swaddled in the tenderness of faith, is polarizing and downright frightening. He does not—he cannot—speak for those of us who do not share his faith, although we all must respect his right to practice it. John Kennedy had the right approach in these matters. He didn't run as a Catholic but as a Democrat. On account of that, he won as both.