

One New Book for the Preacher

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WHEN RELIGION BECOMES EVIL by Charles Kimball. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2002. 237 pages.

Considered an expert in Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations, Charles Kimball embodies a deep interest in these three faiths. An ordained Baptist minister, Kimball is the grandson of a Jew who immigrated to America from the Polish-Russian border in the 1880s, and a Presbyterian. His doctorate from Harvard University is in comparative religion with a specialization in Islam. Having served as director of interfaith programs for the Fellowship of Reconciliation and as director for the Middle East office of the National Council of Churches, Kimball currently chairs the religion department at Wake Forest University. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Kimball pulled together material from three decades of lectures, sermons, panel discussions, personal experience, and research to write *When Religion Becomes Evil*, which was published exactly a year after the attacks.

With a keen understanding of the particularity of religion and deep concern for our world of pluralistic faith claims, Kimball begins with the conviction that with some variation, common belief in the two greatest commandments—love for God and love for others—is universal among the major religions. Corruption begins when either of these commandments is broken in the name of religion. Given the raging religious conflicts in the world today, Kimball argues that we need to understand and accept religious pluralism, and that we also need to make value judgments about what is acceptable religious practice and what is not.

Religion is arguably the most powerful force on earth. Throughout history religious ideas and commitments have inspired individuals and communities of faith to transcend narrow self-interest in pursuit of higher values and truths. The record of history shows that noble acts of love, self-sacrifice, and service to others are frequently rooted in deeply held religious worldviews. At the same time, history clearly shows that religion has often been linked directly to the worst examples of human behavior. It is somewhat trite, but nevertheless sadly true, to say that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in history.

With this introduction, Kimball draws upon examples from history, current events, and his own experience to define authentic religious practice and to offer five specific categories of corruption. The warning sign that a religion is being corrupted begins with “absolute truth claims,” which can lead to arrogant and violent extremism. The second signal is “blind obedience,” which limits individual freedom, warns against uncritical acceptance of charismatic leaders, and often advocates violence. “Establishing the ‘ideal’ time” is the third corruption, which happens when a particular faith’s worldview becomes convinced it knows what God wants for all people, and therefore seeks control of government and the law of a land. The fourth signal of corruption is “the end justifies any means,” which we see evidenced in suicide bombers and murder of doctors by those protesting abortion. Finally, in a chapter on “declaring Holy War” Kimball explores three Christian approaches to war: pacifism, just war theory, and the Crusades, as well as the Islamic understanding of peace and war and the meanings of Jihad. While he asserts that there are legitimate causes for the use of military force, he asserts that when war is justified by a religion as “holy” then that religion becomes evil.

After outlining these categories of corruption, Kimball’s closing chapter explores how religion can remain true to its worthy practices, exhibit an inclusive faith rooted in tradition, and embrace religious pluralism. Among the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths no one is singled out as being more prone to or guilty of corruption than any other. Across religious traditions he gives examples of these five warning signs and points to their own resources for authentic faithfulness. No religion is free from the possibility of corruption, but each faith has the capacity and means to overcome it. “We need to recover what is best and healthy in all religious traditions. As flawed as they can be,” Kimball has said in an interview, “religious traditions and institutions are absolutely necessary in an increasingly interdependent world community.”

When Religion Becomes Evil is straightforward, easy to read, and seeks to help people better understand religious pluralism, recognize the signs of religious corruption, and work toward a more peaceful world. While addressing huge concerns of religious violence, it also considers how individuals comprehend faith and exercise religious practice. The categories of religious evil Kimball outlines help us think broadly about global religious issues and also offer insight into how we engage in inner denominational culture wars. Filled with examples of historical events and contemporary issues, quotes from theologians, historians, and religious texts, as well as personal anecdotes, this book contains a wealth of material for preaching. It would also provide thought-provoking discussion as a text for an adult church school class.