



When Religion Becomes Evil

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Top Religion Book of 2002--*Publishers Weekly*

The Five Warning Signs of Corruption in Religion

Absolute Truth Claims Blind Obedience Establishing the "Ideal" Time The End Justifies Any Means
Declaring Holy War

When Religion Becomes Evil Details

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From Reader Review When Religion Becomes Evil for online ebook

Joshua Duffy says

There was some good stuff in this book, and I love where Kimball is trying to go regarding the subject of multi-faith peace, but I think it was written a little softly. Kimball, an ordained Baptist minister, seemed to go out of his way for the sake of accommodation. Something I don't think is needed even when writing about such a sensitive subject.

kashiichan says

Despite the dramatic book title, this is a rather even-handed treatment of religion. Both the good and the bad are covered; the Crusades, September 11, the evolution of 'jihad', going to war for peace, and many other issues are examined. The author's points are made via interesting anecdotes, references to and quotations of multiple holy texts and references to more scientific sources. Definitely worth reading.

Yuvi S Sandhu says

It changed my current perception of religion. For that I am grateful.

Kevin Swanson says

I was skeptical of reading this book. I figured it would just be another one of those religious nonfiction texts that my mom is always reading. I wasn't pleasantly surprised to find that this is not the case. Kimball is a very fair and objective narrator with a wealth of knowledge of world religions. The book does an excellent job highlighting what Kimball sees as the root cause of evil deeds committed in the name of religion. He also keeps the book from becoming too drenched in religious terminology that might alienate someone without a strong background in the field. Overall I thought this was a good read.

Bethany says

This was a fresh breath of air when it comes to critical thinking concerning religion.

Rarely do I read a critical analysis on the effect of religion on society that respects each religion that is put under the microscope (including the author's own) while not pulling any punches on the disasters of "absolute truth" claims, cultish authoritative figures and the oppressive mix of politics and religion.

The only criticism I have is that the author promoted religious pluralism, which I personally agree with, but is blasphemous in most religions. I would like to know more about peaceful co-existence among religious groups without altering anyone's belief system. (Is that even possible?)

Pam Anderson says

Wonderful observations by a minister, trained in the Southern Baptist tradition, about the dangers in absolute theology in religion. Having served in the religious studies of many universities he is intimately knowledgeable & specializes in Islamic studies. He examines the role of religion in the world and when it defects from its original purpose. While he claims that religion is basically necessary and positive, he ascribes several warning signs for when religions can become dangerous.

Carolyn says

I really like the book and would recommend anyone to read it. The author is very fair in dealing with all religions and I don't think his take was skewed unfairly to any one side. It really helped me think about issues such as war, religion, and how to reconcile with those of other religions. I really agree with how he presents his arguments and it helped me to reconcile some questions of faith. Great book!

Angie Lisle says

I love the message of this book - acceptance, tolerance, and intelligence are the solutions to preventing evil being done for the sake of religion. And I love that this message is being taught by a Christian minister who is encouraging people to THINK about what they believe and why.

That being said, this is geared for the general public; those with backgrounds in religion/history are probably already aware of these issues.

kingsheart says

This book turned out to be even more interesting than I'd expected. I don't remember putting it on The List, so I don't know what I did or didn't know about it then, but when it came to the top of The List, all I really had to go on was its title. And frankly, I feel that it's poorly titled. To me, When Religion Becomes Evil implies that it's going to get into what happens when religions go bad, i.e. the consequences. And not to put too fine a point on it, but I don't need to read a book about that; I can just read the news. But this book was not that. It was instead an exploration of the warning signs that a religion is going off the rails, and, in theory, what we can do about it.

That second part is not exactly revelatory. Like any book on problems with religions or religious figures, the solution pretty much comes down to everyone not behaving like selfish assholes. And humanity overall — especially those who gain themselves a degree of power — has not historically been so good at refraining from behaving like selfish assholes.

But the exploration of those warning signs I found really interesting. Honestly, I'm not a religious scholar or a practitioner of any religion, so I don't really feel super qualified to comment extensively on very much of this, but maybe I'll just share some quotes I found particularly intriguing, or in some cases, blindingly obvious, and yet...

"We simply must find better ways to share the planet with people whose worldviews and ultimate commitments differ from ours." (8) Hear hear.

"Whatever religious people may say about their love of God or the mandates of their religion, when their behavior toward others is violent and destructive, when it causes suffering among their neighbors, you can be sure the religion has been corrupted and reform is desperately needed." (39)

"Christians who say they take the Bible literally are either ignorant or self-deluded. No one takes the Bible literally. Serpent-handling Pentecostal Christians in Appalachia may come closer than anyone else. They put their life on the line each week when they try to follow literally the words of Jesus as recorded in Mark 16. Christian leaders who berate those who don't take the Bible literally find other ways to interpret the last chapter of Mark." (57) This made me snort.

"The misuse and abuse of sacred texts comes in many forms. This must not, however, obscure the compelling fact that sacred texts have been a constant source of strength, inspiration, and guidance for people in many cultures for more than three millennia." (61)

On absolute truth and faith: "When my daughter tells me I'm the best daddy in the world, and there can be no other father like me, she is speaking the truth, for this comes out of her experience. She is honest about it; she knows no other person in the role of her father. [...] in the next house there is another little girl who also thinks her daddy is the best father in the world. And she too is right. In fact at the level of the way the two children relate to their two fathers, no one can compare the truth content of the statements of the two girls. For here we are not dealing with the absolute truths, but with the language of faith and love." (70, quoting Wesley Ariarajah) I loved this. I think it's a beautiful way of conceiving of the differences in faith traditions and beliefs.

"At some level, any state in which rights and status are tied to a particular religious tradition will relegate some of its citizens to second- and third-class citizens." (111)

"Beware of people and groups whose political blueprint is based on a mandate from heaven that depends on human beings to implement." (125)

"The history of the twentieth century suggests that durable peace and stability in the Middle East [or anywhere else] is not likely to be secured through war." (168) Understatement of the year.

"Jihad literally means "striving" or "struggling in the way of God." All Muslims are enjoined to engage in jihad. The term holy war, which is widely used in Western media and among some Muslims, includes one of the ways this obligatory duty has been and is being promulgated. But this is not the primary focus for a term rich in meaning throughout Islamic history." (173) I had to stop reading and let that one sink in for a bit. We seriously need to listen more and make fewer assumptions when it comes to unfamiliar cultures.

"But imagine for a moment how different the world would and could be if millions of people who identify themselves with a religious tradition constantly consulted their spiritual compass, found their bearings, and took the next step on their journey with the golden rule as their guiding principle." (193) Not to mention all those who don't identify with any such tradition. Like I said earlier, it kind of all comes down to if we could just all behave ourselves, we'd be alright.

"I've always been puzzled and saddened by people who make clear that they couldn't be very happy in heaven unless hell was full to overflowing with people who disagree with their particular theology." (208)

Right?

So yeah. Ultimately, a really interesting read whose bibliography provided me with a few new entries for The List and that I would say is worth a read.

Maureen says

Charles Kimball is an ordained Baptist preacher with a kaleidoscopic world view. He has the experience, through his work with the World Council of Churches, to speak authoritatively on this subject. He addresses home-grown errant religious groups, as well as international ones. This book is an easy read on a fascinating topic. Besides having a really great title, it is sure to generate discussion among those who read it.

Jacklyn Trexler says

I have to say, I'm a pretty skeptical person, especially when it comes to religion, so when I began reading Kimball's book and was informed of his extensive background and close ties to his Baptist Christian faith, I became apprehensive. However, as I continued reading, it became clear to me how Kimball's history and experience with religion helped him reach the conclusions he comes to in *When Religion Becomes Evil* and his experience allows him to speak with authority of all the topics he brings up.

Kimball explains that religions all have the capabilities of becoming evil, and there are warning signs that can be identified in advance of these evil acts. These warning signs include absolute truth claims, blind obedience, establishing the "ideal" time for the practitioners, the end justifying any means, and declaring holy war. Kimball also stresses the fact that all religions support the same ultimate concept, peace, but sometimes this gets clouded by other goals that take over the religion's purpose, thus triggering evil.

This book does not target any specific religion, but applies to all faiths as a general concept while using a variety of examples. It's a book for any curious reader who's willing to have an open mind about these general religious patterns. I appreciated how Kimball did not make the topic of religion a personal topic, letting his own views or criticisms of other religions creep in, but kept the discussion at a scholarly place. At the same time, however, some of my favorite moments were his personal encounters with religious leaders or scholars, and his memories of learning about religion in college and how he uses this to teach religious studies. The mix of distanced observation and personal experiences provide for an entertaining, yet informational and analytical reading experience.

Personally, I found this book to be a wonderful use of my time. Anyone who finds themselves even marginally interested in religious studies or sociology should definitely look into it, for Kimball provides a unique perspective into this complex and highly volatile issue.

Damon Glassmoyer says

Helpful summary describing how "religion" is or becomes divisive. Written in the aftermath of 9/11, but still timely in the age of Trump. Useful endnotes, but no index.

Beth says

Clear simple explanations of what entails fanaticism. Being able to discuss this kind of thing, I feel is important to combating terrorism. Oddly I think these are things you should discuss with children between eight and ten years of age, as they grow into being teenagers they are too susceptible to lunatics. Having the knowledge that separates belief from fanaticism before they get to that age I feel is crucial to reducing fanaticism and terrorism.

Cameron says

I remember this author coming to my college to give a lecture not long after 9/11. It is not only an intelligent but earnest discourse but he is a professor and also an ordained Baptist minister and has traveled widely; so, he is speaking from education as well as experience. In this book he writes about the three desert/Abrahamic/monotheistic religions as being essentially of the same tradition and the potential for interfaith dialogue. He outlines their history and also talks about how the fundamentalism and terrorism that may occur in each one and also other religions such as Hinduism, though that does not negate or mitigate the necessity of scrutinizing and critiquing any one particular faith. In fact, this viewpoint offers hope for reform and progress in a modern context.

My only point of contention is that these types of issues occur more frequently with religions that are organized (tax-exempt) and seek political power; the 3 Abrahamic faiths do not stand for all 'religion' in terms of becoming corrupt, and while dogma is distinctly an authoritative doctrine held by a religious OR political group as 'absolute truth,' religion does not always equal dogma. And here is the error: the desire for interfaith dialogue at the same time excludes dialogue with people who do not subscribe to the Abrahamic faith.

With this and a more spiritual viewpoint in mind, I suggest reading Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth*.

Mikey B. says

A very forthright account of the dangers of religion to the human condition. There are many fine examples by this person of faith (he is a Baptist minister) that illustrate how religion can corrode its members and the society around them. The points are so good that if you are a person of no faith you likely will remain that way.

The author is convinced (as most of us are) that since 9/11 we must pay closer attention to what is happening in our religious communities. Unlike the author I am not convinced that religion can extricate humanity from the many problems it has within itself. I feel religion creates boundaries between people. To paraphrase from a book of Thomas Friedman ('Longitudes and Attitudes') - 'I want to be tolerant, but do you'. I do not get a feeling of toleration when I am standing beside a Mennonite with a Jesus logo or a Muslim woman wearing a hijab. – I get a strong feeling of 'religious advertising'.

The author is certainly not one for boundaries or walls – he wants an exchange of thoughts and ideas between all religions which is certainly a noble concept, but perhaps idealistic?

Some concepts of religions create boundaries. All religions have a Heaven (Nirvana) and the opposing dichotomy of Hell. This becomes a selective process as to which individuals will enjoy one or the other environment. It is divisive.

Also in the last 200-300 years society has had many scientific and social advances despite the resistance of religious institutions. Science and technology have enabled us to explore and travel the earth. Modern democratic countries have allowed and now encourage women to have a much more prominent role in society. But in organized religion, women have been denied any leadership role (except in a few Protestant sects). If religion wants to be considered just and fair it must overcome this grievous shortcoming.

The author continually refers to ‘sacred texts’ – some of which have been used to justify abominable acts – like suicide and murder. Why are these texts considered sacred if they advocate abominations; or conversely; why is a text advocating an evil act considered sacred?

I am glad that Mr. Kimball is for the secularization of government – he states repeatedly that theocratic government is a dangerous concept. In the U.S. there has been increasing infringement of religious groups in government. In the last two Presidential election campaigns candidates were repeatedly questioned on their religious beliefs (whether they believed the Bible). I vividly remember Hilary Clinton telling a CNN audience what she prayed for.

If only all religious folk could be like Charles Kimball (or Jimmy Carter for that matter) religion would be far more tolerable. Mr. Kimball is most enlightened and searches for the good in all things – he is a pluralist.
