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NONFICTION

When religious fervor takes a malignant turn

By Douglas Groothuis

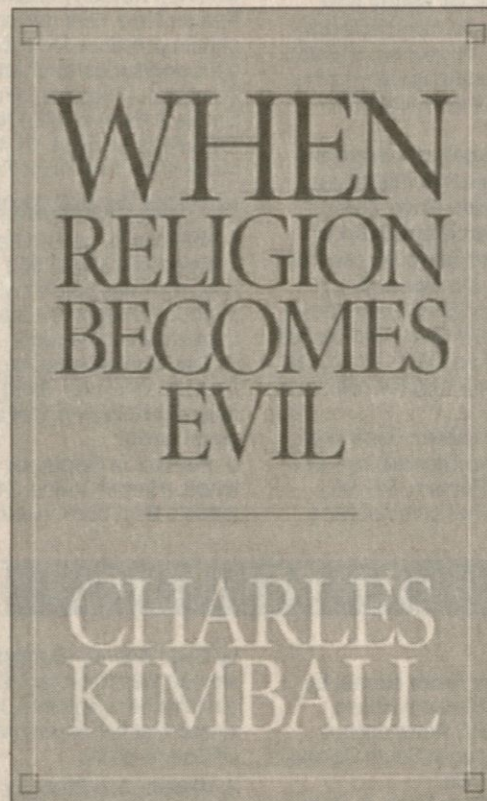
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We should never discuss religion and politics among friends, goes an old saying. This notion has always been suspect (aren't these rather important subjects that make for bracing conversation?), but after last year's terrorist attacks, the idea seems laughable. Now that America has been attacked by violent extremist Muslims, the topics are unavoidable. How should we understand connections between religious and political and military goals? Can we tell when religions become "evil"? Religion professor Charles Kimball attempts to shed light on these questions in his wide-ranging book.

Kimball believes the well-established religions should be respected, despite evils committed in their names, because they all "converge in teaching both an orientation toward God or the transcendent and compassionate, constructive relationships with others in this world." This does not imply, however, that "all roads lead up the same mountain." Religions may defect from their "authentic sources" and thus even become evil in several ways.

For example, religions may make absolute truth claims, require blind obedience, attempt to set up a utopian theocracy, teach that the end justifies the means or declare holy war. Kimball addresses these matters in the context of various religions, ancient and modern, and provides insights into the dynamics of doomsday groups such as the Branch Davidians and the Japanese Aum Shinrikyo, which required total commitment to irrational beliefs that led to destructive behaviors. He also attempts to explore the religious motivations of Osama bin Laden and his followers, but spends less time on this than expected.

Kimball observes that truth claims are foundational for religion. But, he claims that believers err when they hold their religious beliefs in a "rigid" or "absolute" manner. So, when some Christians criticize the Islamic view of God (Allah) as deficient, they reveal their ignorance



and bigotry. Kimball asserts that, "there is simply no ambiguity here. Jews, Christians, and Muslims are talking about the same deity." This is because the Koran claims that Allah inspired the Hebrew prophets and Jesus. Moreover, the Arabic word "Allah" means "God."

Is this true? While Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all monotheistic, they differ considerably in their conceptions of God. Islam denies the Trinity and the Incarnation, both of which are well-established Christian doctrines. But God cannot be both a Trinity (Christian) and not a Trinity (Islam). This is logic, not religious intolerance. Moreover, these religions' different

WHEN RELIGION BECOMES EVIL

By Charles Kimball

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concepts of God explain why Muslims and Christians try to convert each other. If mutual understanding is key to tolerance, then disagreements between religions should not be dismissed by deleting "absolute" truth claims from their "authentic sources." It is certainly possible to tolerate someone who holds religious views quite contrary to one's own.

Kimball wants to soften biblical claims about the uniqueness and centrality of Jesus by saying that they should be taken as pious exaggerations. However, such affirmations are plentiful in the New Testament and have historically been seen as objective descriptions, not embellishments. Kimball seems to be calling for a revision of Christianity's "authentic sources," not a return to them. Likewise, most Muslims would reject this kind of revision of the Koran. Muslims claim that Muhammad was the last and greatest of the prophets, not just one among many. Being "rigid" on this doctrine is necessary to Islam.

In addition, Kimball never really faces the possibility that a religion's "authentic sources" themselves may contain moral errors that encourage evils. He also tends to overemphasize the abuses of Christians — such as the Crusades — while underemphasizing similar abuses by Muslims, such as dhimmitude: an institution that places heavy restrictions on non-Muslims in Islamic nations.

Kimball's ambitious book highlights the need to make reasoned and well-informed judgments on religions and their ethical implications. However, we still await a book that adequately handles this controversial topic.

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