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Review Article

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When Religion Becomes Evil

five warning signs

Charles Kimball

New York: Harper Collins, 2003, pbk, 256 pp., \$13.95, ISBN 0060556102

Terror in the Name of God

why religious militants kill

Jessica Stern

New York: HarperCollins, 2003, pbk, 400 pp., \$15.95, ISBN 006050532X

Violence in God's Name

the role of religion in an age of conflict

Oliver McTernan

New York: Orbis Books, 2003, pbk., 176 pp., \$20, ISBN 1570755000

In the Name of Identity

violence and the need to belong

Amin Maalouf

New York: Penguin Books, 2003, pbk, 176 pp., \$14, ISBN 0142002577

Axis of Peace

Christian Faith in Times of Violence and War

Wesley Ariarajah

Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004, pbk, 137 pp., \$15, ISBN 2825413941

Interreligious Insight looks back over the past few years to consider five powerful books, each offering

a unique perspective on the role of religion in the cultivation and conquest of violence, war, and terror.

Violence, terror, and war defaced the 20th century. Their awful discoloration of our era was heightened by the exacerbating role of religious (and ethnic) identity. The conjuring of evil in our time has all too often been intensified by the admixture of “good”. That frames the questions at issue. What are the sources of violence, terror, and war? How does “good” intensify “evil”? Five books published over the past three years address these concerns and questions. This article offers a very brief glimpse of each.

When and how did religion become the most terrifying face of our age? When, in the modern period, did violence and religion become intertwined in the minds of so many thoughtful people?

And how, in the enlightened 20th century was God’s name taken so often in vain? Of course the concepts of religion and violence have hardly been estranged in human history. But by the early 20th century, the hope (at least in religious circles) was that religion would at last become a steadily-flowing wellspring of peace and justice.

Well, it just didn’t work out that way. Try this question in your group, your family, congregation, circle of friends, or workplace: “What are the principle sources of violence in today’s world?” I’m just guessing here, but I’ll wager that “religion” places #2 or #3 in the tally. What would Jesus say? Or Moses, Muhammad, or Buddha? Well, of course, they knew. They knew the power of religion to unite and to bring harmony; but just as surely they knew religion’s potential to divide. And each must have understood (as so many scriptures attest) the power of religion to conjure up violence.

Perhaps a better question would be, “What would Gandhi or King say?” Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King – or many of the tens of thousands of peace and justice workers giving their all and often their lives in the struggle – would attest to the power of religion to unite and to uplift. They would also testify to the power of pseudo-religion to incite, to inflame, and to enrage. Let’s move on.

When religion becomes evil, says Charles Kimball (*When Religion Becomes Evil*), it begins to exhibit warning signs. He identifies five.

1. Absolute truth claims made with rigidity and certainty.
2. Blind obedience to charismatic leaders.
3. Pursuing an ideal time. (“...groups that are certain when God’s future should happen – or is going to happen...”)
4. The end justifies any means.
5. Holy war.

I’d add another to his list:

6. Anti-intellectual and anti-scientific pronouncements.

Kimball, an expert on religion and Mid-East policy, stakes out the cultic center of reference. The “truths” of the group attract followers, searchers desperate for solid “meaning claims”. The hunger for easily digestible truth, fed by cultic certainties, drives the modern religious far right.

He notes, however, that just as the source of religious destructive behavior and violence is to be found in the several he explores, the antidote is to be found in religion as well.

Conversely, when religion remains true to its authentic sources, it is actively dismantling these corruptions.

Kimball's concluding chapter introduces the concept of the spiritual compass, with God or the transcendent as "true North" and faith, hope, and love as the other cardinal points.

Jessica Stern (*Terror in the Name of God*) spent many precarious months with terrorists of several schools. Her extraordinary analysis distills from those encounters five grievances that drive religious terrorism, while offering a socio-cultural frame for Kimball's warning signs. Each grievance is examined in a chapter that focuses on a particular religious Jewish, Christian, or Muslim group engaged in acts of terror.

1. Alienation: the feeling that one (or one's community) is cut off from the larger social order by changing cultural values, injustice, declining morals, etc. (e.g., Christian anti-abortion movements)
2. Humiliation: real and perceived personal and national humiliation of one people at the hands of another leads to desperation and uncontrollable rage (e.g., Hamas and the Muslim suicide bombers in Israel / Palestine)
3. Demographics: dramatic population shifts (often government mandated) that upset regional religious, tribal, cultural balances (e.g., Christian-Muslim violence in Indonesia)
4. History: the understanding and/or manipulation of ancient history as a powerful weapon in extremists' hands, including their efforts to expand national boundaries and to seek redemption (e.g., Jewish extremists like the Temple Mount Faithful)
5. Territory: long-standing political disputes over territory as *raison d'être* for holy war (e.g., Muslim-Hindu violence in Kashmir)

Stern's timely perspective on the psychological dimensions of militant religion provides the foundation for the book's second half, an examination of the structures of terrorist organizations. Finally, Stern examines the particular vulnerability of Islamic states to terrorism, emphasizing rampant globalization, American support for Israel, the deepening of poverty, and the turbulence of the movement toward popular democracy.

She concludes with a thought-provoking but unfortunately brief set of recommendations for the architects of modern western policy. The central question posed by this section: how can we address the crisis of religious violence without exacerbating hatred of the West?

Oliver McTernan (*Violence in God's Name*) offers a different perspective on the issues addressed by Kimball and Stern. A former Jesuit priest, broadcaster, and peace activist, he challenges two tendencies that weaken modern journalistic and scholarly analyses. The first is to deny the role of religion in terrorist violence, emphasizing instead factors such as perceived economic and social injustice, struggles over land, political power, etc. The second tendency exaggerates the role of religion, ignoring other contributing factors and cultural dynamics. Religion, McTernan says

...does matter and... needs to be seen as an actor in its own right. The preciseness of role that religion plays will vary from conflict to conflict.

McTernan's chapter on "Religion and the Legitimization of Violence" is particularly powerful, demonstrating that "without exception" each of the world's great faith

communities – when faced with a significant threat to its existence or with a dramatic opening to expansion – has sanctioned the use of violence in its own interest.

In each faith tradition one can find sufficient ambiguity in its founding texts and stories to justify killing for the glory of God. Each tradition has also its heroes who saw themselves as acting on divine authority as they plotted the destruction of those whom they perceived to be enemies of God. Today's religious extremists can find their rationale for inflicting terror in the name of their God in the ambivalence towards violence that is found in each faith tradition.

The book's closing passages may, however, be the most evocative of all. He quotes the Hindu sage, Swami Vivekenanda at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions.

The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve its own individuality and grow according to its own law of growth.

McTernan concludes:

If those words had been acted upon the twentieth century may have been less confrontational and bloody.

Amin Maalouf (In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong) argues that, in our own age, many find the world-shrinking forces of globalization unbearably threatening to one's personal, family, religious, cultural, and national identity. His insight into the phenomenon of multiple identities ("the genes of the soul") in a changing world, sets this evocative work apart.

Amin Maalouf offers a simple and moving reflection on life in a shrinking world:

To tell the truth, if we assert our differences so fiercely, it is precisely because we are less and less different from one another.

Like Stern, Maalouf examines the role of humiliation and alienation, particularly in the face of rampant globalization. He focuses on the tendency of the identity-challenged to define themselves over and against other groups: to judge myself not so much in terms of my own virtues, but in terms of the vices of the "other".

Maalouf's most powerful insight, however, comes near the end of the book, as he reflects on the argument he has advanced:

I do not deny that my recommendations for preserving cultural diversity call for a certain amount of effort. But if we were to let ourselves off this task and just let things take their course; if the world civilization taking shape before our eyes were to go on seeming essentially American, Anglophone or even occidental; then I think everybody would lose by it. The United States, because they would alienate a large part of the rest of the world, which already chafes at the present imbalance of power; the members of non-Western cultures, because they would gradually lose all that makes up their raison d'être and find themselves in a rebellion doomed to failure; and, perhaps above all, Europe, which would lose on both counts, because while becoming the primary target of all who felt

Finally the tension is relieved, if only a bit, by Wesley Ariarajah. Ariarajah is a Methodist minister formerly with the World Council of Churches. His Axis of Peace is intended for Christians, but its message is compellingly interreligious and intercultural.

Ariarajah recognizes the intimate relationship between religious and personal identity and understands the tensions experienced by Christians and all other people of faith as religious identity is challenged.

Those tempted to see religion as some kind of spiritual compartment of life that can be isolated from the rest of what it means to be human miss the foundations on which most religious traditions are built.... But in reality when religious beliefs do play a significant role in a society, they inform the way the culture of the community expresses itself.... For our purposes what is important is to note the role that the close link between religion, culture and identity has in much of the violence we see today.

His address to the problem is global but his resolution is crafted for the people who share his faith. Still, other faiths can and will draw on Ariarajah's evocative prose. Reflecting on the response to President Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech, Bob Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, argued that

"the only Axis of Evil we need to confront is this: endemic poverty, devastation of the environment, and weapons of mass destruction."

Ariarajah adds another dimension. He writes:

It occurred to me that perhaps we should go even further in providing yet another alternative, perhaps a positive one. Hence, the Axis of Peace: Justice, Reconciliation, and Non-Violence.

Here he echoes theologian Walter Wink's description of a cultural evolutionary shift from "the myth of redemptive violence" to what he terms "the myth of restorative justice".

Axis of Peace offers a practical, hopeful set of alternatives for an age upon which the destructive storms of religious violence have descended.

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