

# Poisoned piety

by [Stephen Healey](#) in the [October 9, 2002](#) issue

*When Religion Becomes Evil*. By Charles Kimball. HarperSanFrancisco, 240 pp., \$21.95.

The horrors of 9/11 and the past summer's revelations of priestly child abuse and the Catholic hierarchy's apathy, secrecy and arrogance in the face of it have led many to wonder whether religion is more curse than blessing. The deeper, horrifying reservoir of concern about religion's influence includes the cult suicides of Jonestown, the subway attack by Aum Shinrikyo in Japan, the seemingly endless bloodfest in the Middle East, the atavistic outbreak of genocide in the Balkans, and other terrors.

Charles Kimball argues that religious malignancy can be diagnosed and cured. A Baptist minister and a Harvard-trained scholar of comparative religions now teaching at Wake Forest University, Kimball tackles the source of these ills, keeping the intolerance experienced by his Jewish grandfather firmly in mind. He poses the question that has been on all of our minds: Is religion to blame? His answer, aimed mainly at nonscholars, is both no and yes.

The "no" is based on the realization that it's both shallow and too easy to blame religion entirely for the evil done in its name or by its practitioners. Last century's champions of secularism believed that religion had a single, flawed essence (Karl Marx's characterization of religion as an "opiate," for example) which could be expunged along with religion's deleterious consequences. Few believe this now, but Kimball tacitly warns against reverting to such a view, a view which might seem the most adequate of inadequate explanations. The "yes" comes from the honest recognition that the same texts and practices that have inspired some to extraordinary acts of love and compassion have provoked others to senseless violence.

Kimball hopes to articulate a middle ground that promotes the critical and ethical consideration of religions as sources of both consolation and menace. His central point is that we can recognize the signs of malignancy. These signs are evident

when religions make absolutist claims, inspire blind obedience, idealize their pasts, justify heinous means for the sake of inspired ends, and the like. Kimball argues that commitment to one's own religious tradition can be reconciled with respect for that of others, and that one can grow as a result of being exposed to the religious views and practices of others. However, he tends to resist the syncretic blending of religious ideas and practices. He recognizes that others will also desire to preserve their own traditions, and believes that we can develop inclusive traditions that do not fall prey to the seductions of toxic religion.

Kimball's major foci are Christianity and Islam, the first his own faith, the second his primary scholarly subject. This focus is warranted, he says, because members of these religions constitute half the world's population. The strong missionary emphases of both traditions means that the potential for absolutism, exclusivist truth claims and blind-eyed ambition lurks not far beneath the surface. With the right circumstantial catalysts, Christianity and Islam can become promoters of evil. In his analysis, Kimball makes clear to a broad range of readers the implications of analyses produced for more academic audiences by the likes of Mark Juergensmeyer, Gilles Kepel, Stanley Tambiah and Samuel Huntington. Kimball's sources can be found in the footnotes.

In spite of a few errors of detail (Huntington did not write *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* with Robert Kaplan, for example), I strongly recommend this book to leaders of religious and civic groups and to teachers of introductory courses in religious ethics.

Yet two serious questions come to mind about Kimball's point of view. First, how extensively does his response to Christianity and Islam apply outside of his specialized world, the world of a Harvard-trained Baptist? I question the nature of Kimball's theological synthesis. It seems that he proposes to limit the dangers of absolutist Christianity as mediated by the Baptists by appealing to an Enlightenment idea of tolerance as mediated by Wilfred Cantwell Smith.

Kimball proposes an ethically inclined faith that encourages believers to be politically involved without being seduced by the possibility of religiously sanctioned power. Indeed, some of Kimball's most strident criticisms are levied against what he considers overly politicized notions of religion (as in the Christian Right, for example). His career has focused on the intersection of religion and politics, with special attention to the Christian-Muslim cross-traffic. But because many Christians

and Muslims view the interaction of religion and politics differently than he, Kimball's religious liberalism and credo of nonabsolutist political involvement may seem a faith foreign to their own. These days, political and religious liberalism are tantamount to heresy for many Muslims. Kimball grounds tolerance theologically, but I wonder whether such theological tolerance is not vulnerable to the same criticism as political liberalism for many believers. I hope it is not.

A second question is whether Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism could have been tapped more extensively to suggest possible answers to the concerns Kimball raises. Kimball opens this discussion but does not develop its implications. Perhaps the more communitarian ethos of Judaism could be used to quiet the universalist pretensions of Christians and Muslims—though, as Kimball is painfully aware, Ariel Sharon's community does not include Yasir Arafat. Hindu and Buddhist notions of ignorance might suggest stronger ways of limiting the world-dominating propensity of Western religions. Seeding Christianity's idea of world transformation and Islam's creation of Ummah with Chuang Tzu's playfulness might render them less pathogenic.

Only living communities of people who possess the courage to engage in self-criticism can prevent holy medicine from becoming poison. History testifies to how scarce such communities are. Kimball adds considerably to the Christian community's self-critical conversation about religious evil: *insh'Allah*, his book will start a soul-searching dialogue.