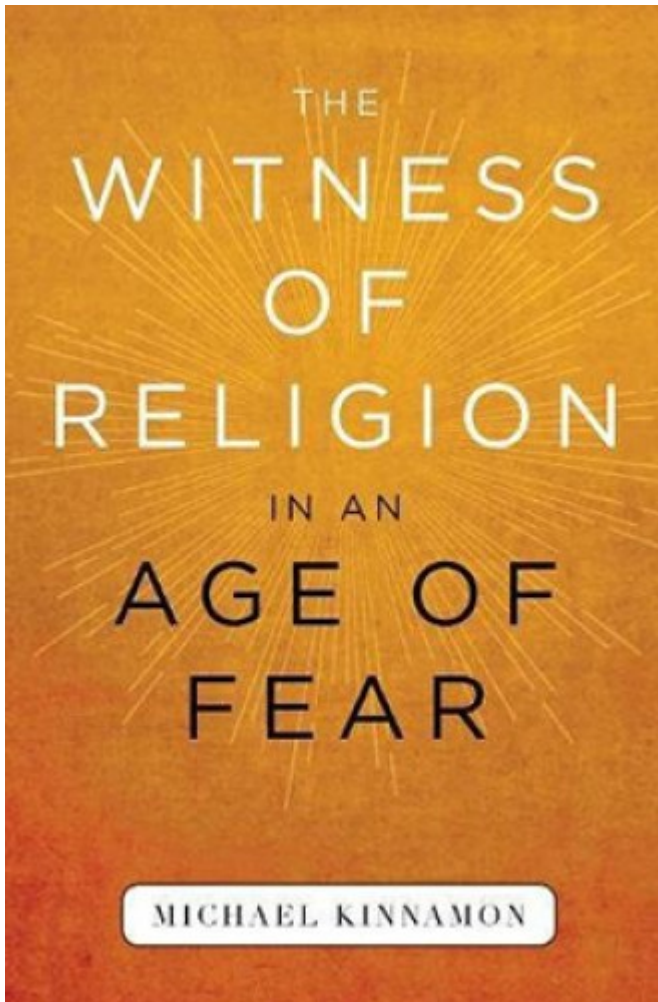


Facing fear with Christ

Our collective panic is hurting us. Can faith help?

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [June 7, 2017](#) issue

In Review



The Witness of Religion in an Age of Fear

By Michael Kinnamon
Westminster John Knox

Here's a small book that deftly deals with large truth. Ecumenist and seminary dean Michael Kinnamon has succeeded in writing a concise, readable book that shows that fear, "when it becomes excessive or misdirected, is itself dangerous." The stated purpose of the book: "to move all of us to action."

Kinnamon says that Americans live in an age of fear. Through millions of years of adaptation, humans are beneficially hardwired to survive with the help of neurological mechanisms of fear. However, in the present age, fears have gotten out of hand. Otherwise normal, essential fearfulness has ballooned out of proportion. It's the nature of fear to take over our limbic systems, to force us into quick, defensive response. As fear takes over the human brain, it impairs our capacity to assess the magnitude of the threat, weigh alternatives, and make good decisions. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Normal fear protects us; abnormal fear paralyzes us."

In the present moment our fearfulness is whipped up by fearmongers like Donald Trump and the NRA's Wayne LaPierre for their political and financial gain. Many of our overwhelming fears (like death by terrorists) make little sense when compared with the actual threats that we face (from smoking and auto accidents). People my age are most fearful of being victims of crime, though we are the least likely to be harmed by a criminal. Americans are more fearful than people in nations where the chances of violent death or a short life are higher than here.

Kinnamon deftly notes and dismisses excessive, misplaced fears. He marshals some great citations to show how our irrational fear does damage to our society as we hunker down behind alarm systems, expend huge resources for bogus security, and cower in gated communities. His depiction of the tragedy of Israeli fear and its sad results is especially poignant.

What's to be done about our excessive, thoughtless, paralyzing fears and the collective panic attack that grips America? Kinnamon advocates "the witness of religion" as an antidote to the damage we are doing to ourselves in this age of fear. "Religions, at their best, have not only a word of comfort for those who are afraid, but a word of challenge for those who manipulate fear to their own advantage or who succumb to such manipulation."

After offering valid warnings on the dangers of excessive fear, Kinnamon shifts toward arguing for religion as an essential, though often overlooked, foe of fear. I found this last third of the book disappointing. Kinnamon fails to demonstrate that

religion is fear's worthy adversary. Asserting that all major religions "warn about the dangers of excessive fear," he calls up texts from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Hinduism that "teach ways of overcoming fear." But he offers a largely decontextualized cherry-picking of these sacred texts. Though it's interesting to know that many of the world's religions disapprove of fear, it's also reasonable to suppose that various faiths criticize fearfulness for a variety of vastly different reasons.

Kinnamon has a tantalizing discussion of fear among Jews and Christians, and he quotes Aquinas to good effect. But I wish he had said more about Jesus' curious call not to fear him but rather to cultivate fear of worldly lures and temptation. (When a person reacted to one of my recent sermons with, "Your fear of the Trump administration is mean-spirited and unjustified. You have nothing to fear from our new president," I suspect Jesus would have approved the terror with which I reacted to the comment.)

I can't speak for any faiths other than Christianity, but I think that faith faces fear with more than moral exhortation and sweeping dismissals of excessive, misplaced fear. Christians are bold to believe that we face fear with Christ. The one who commanded repeatedly, "Fear not!" was not only a wise teacher, he was the Son of God. Christ helps us accomplish what he commands. If my fear response is deep within me, an all-too-human, natural inclination that jerks me around despite my best efforts to curb it, then moralistic exhortations to suppress my fears are ineffective.

Kinnamon's essentially nonchristological response to fear fits nontheistic Buddhism better than those faiths that believe in a God who is greater even than our fears. Through the ages, countless Christians suffered persecution and took risks—not because they believed that fear hindered full human flourishing, but because they had their eyes fixed on a reality other than that established through human fearfulness.

Kinnamon uses the Israel-Palestine conflict as a case study for his assertions that fear can be tempered by religion, but he does so brashly. The fears that many Israelis and Palestinians have for one another may paralyze their consciences and lead to bad consequences, but I would be hard-pressed to tell either party that their fear is unreasonable and can be healed through a moralistic version of religion. Kinnamon approvingly quotes Martin Luther King's dictum, "People fail to get along

because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other." True. But quoted in the context of a conflict so great as that between Israel and Palestine, it borders on sentimentality. My religion suggests to me that if these two peoples are to move beyond such deep fear and suffering, the move must be miraculously (that is, divinely) initiated.

The book concludes with ten guidelines for churches that want to address the issue of excessive fear. This section will be most helpful to clergy and congregations, and it's where the book might achieve Kinnamon's goal of moving us to action. The tenth rule is for "people of religious faith" to "lift up the real basis for hope." If we are to find such hope, we'll need to move past vague notions of faith and grasp onto the God who, through Christ, is an active ally in defeating our fears and righting our wrongs.