



Fundamentalism & militancy: In world torn by religious history, stereotypes, is peace possible?

By Greg Warner

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WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP) -- Is it possible in today's world for religions to live at peace? It is if they are true to their natures, according to world-religions expert Charles Kimball.

"Peace is a central feature of all of the world religions that have stood the test of time," said Kimball, author of the seminal book *When Religion Becomes Evil*. To warrant long-term devotion, he said, a religion "has to provide hope, guidance, serenity and a way to be at home in the world."

But in a country at war with militant Islamic terrorists, interfaith understanding is at a premium today.

"Some people think that Muslims wake up and think, 'What am I willing to destroy today?' But that's not how most Muslims think," said Kimball, professor of comparative religion at Wake Forest University and an expert on Islam. "They're not plotting anything. They're trying to feed their family...."

But, as in other faiths, peaceful intent can be distorted. "In Islam there is always a responsibility to defend yourself when attacked," continued Kimball, who recently was hired by Oklahoma University to direct its religious-studies program. "In the hands of a[n Osama] bin Laden and others, this is an open license to do anything."

And, he added, Muslims aren't alone in that tendency.

"The two religious traditions that have the most to be ashamed of are Christians and Muslims," Kimball said, noting both are also both monotheistic and "missionary," and the largest and most global religions.

"By numbers of persons killed," said Bruce Knauft, an anthropologist and director of Emory University's Institute for Comparative and International Studies. "Christianity has very likely been the greatest perpetrator of violent religious extremism during the past 1,000 years, including the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Thirty Years' War, and the wars of the French Reformation. Like current violent religious extremism, these deaths were linked with political disputes and rivalries."

"If you ask which [religious] empire provided a more hospitable environment for [other] religion[s], it was the Muslims," said Kurt Anders Richardson, a Baptist who teaches comparative religion at McMaster Divinity College, an evangelical seminary in Hamilton, Ontario. "Sure, Jews and Christians became second-class citizens, but you never had the Inquisition or [Nazi] pogroms of eradication."

Christianity's violent past is not lost on Muslim audiences. Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, an American ally, called the 20th century's world wars Christian-on-Christian violence, noting both German and Allied armies were full of chaplains who prayed for victory.

Similarly dangerous, several scholars said, is the belief that politicians with the right beliefs are more capable of moral leadership. "What got us into this war [in Iraq]," said Richardson, "was a belief that sanctified leadership is not only possible but realized and deserving of extraordinary trust."

The overwhelming percentage of the world's extremist violence is Muslim-on-Muslim, Richardson said. While many Muslims are struggling to cope with the encroaching demands of the modern world, he said, "most Muslims believe it is possible to be faithful and modern."

"The vast majority of educated and politically responsible Muslims in the world want stable governments, peaceful co-existence among religions, and control of all forms of religious extremism," Richardson said. "That's not bad."

Some Westerners fear “a global Islam,” Richardson said, but the only Muslims who envision such an empire are in the least developed countries. “They imagine people on horseback and camelback getting this done. What are we really afraid of here?”

The threat of an “expansionist Islamic nation” is unrealistic, and a “transnational militant Islamism will not provide a standing army anywhere,” he said. “There’s nothing even workable.”

Shlomo Fischer, who has spent his career teaching democratic principles to Israelis, said viewing other faiths as enemies has “terrible consequences.” He advised seeking common ground with potential adversaries. “When I go to conferences, I almost always sit with my Muslim colleagues,” a Jewish scholar at Israel’s Tel Aviv University. “We have a lot in common. We don’t eat meat and don’t drink wine.

“I don’t think of myself in a worldwide war with Islam. And I don’t think it would be right for Christians to view themselves as in a worldwide war with Islam.”

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