

## READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

# *When Religion Becomes Evil*

by

Charles Kimball

*Note:* Some of the questions refer to “your faith tradition.” If you do not consider yourself a member of a faith tradition, reflect on the tradition you grew up with or the tradition you know the most about.

### INTRODUCTION

1. Charles Kimball writes that more evil has been perpetrated “in the name of religion” (p. 1) than any other institutional force. Why does religion lend itself to evil uses?
2. Did the attacks of September 11, 2001, and their aftermath change your ideas about Islam? About religion in

general? If so, how? How did the media's presentation of differing theories affect your opinion?

3. Kimball comments that although people tend to perceive their own religion in terms of its ideals, they often think about other faiths in terms of teachings they may not fully understand and the flawed behavior of adherents. Does his statement ring true for you? Upon what experiences and sources have you based your opinions about other religious traditions?
4. Kimball argues that it is possible to practice one faith with integrity and still believe that one's own experience of God does not exhaust all the possibilities. Do you agree? Why or why not? In a world of religiously diverse faith practitioners, what are the consequences for people of all religions believing (or not believing) that statement?
5. As Kimball understood, our personal beliefs and experiences render us subjective. How do your religious beliefs or lack thereof contribute to your overall identity? How do these beliefs and your religious experiences affect what you think about other faiths?
6. What are the differences among a dialogue in which "we" talk to "you," one in which "we" talk with "you," and one in which "we" talk among ourselves about "us"? Which perspective have you adopted in your conversations with people of other faiths?

## CHAPTER 1 IS RELIGION THE PROBLEM?

1. What first comes to your mind when you think of defining “religion”? What does this reveal about your beliefs or experience?
2. How do you think someone who practiced another faith might present your faith? How might it differ from the way you would describe it? What elements might not be immediately obvious to someone who learned about your faith in a classroom or from observing practitioners rather than as an adherent?
3. How do you interpret Kimball’s statement that “understanding religion requires reflecting on how adherents of the religion understand and interpret its elements, for religion does not exist in a vacuum; it exists in the hearts, minds, and behavior of human beings” (p. 21)? What are the implications of this statement for the comparative study of religions? What common characteristics are shared by most religious traditions?
4. Kimball gives two reasons why religion may be the problem: exclusive truth claims and the belief that science has rendered religion anachronistic and irrelevant. Which is more compelling to you? Why? If you disagree, what arguments would you offer?
5. What reasons does Kimball give for why religion may not be the problem? Do you agree with his reasons? Why or why not?

## CHAPTER 2 ABSOLUTE TRUTH CLAIMS

1. When is a religious truth claim an absolute truth claim? What truth claims in your religious tradition tend toward rigidity?
2. Kimball writes, “The most basic truth claims in religion include many presuppositions and require considerable interpretation; and sincere people can and often do appropriate truth claims in substantially different ways.” What does this statement mean to you?
3. What do you think attracts people to absolute truth claims or other exclusionary points of view? How can an absolute truth claim lead to evil?
4. How would you answer Kimball’s question: “What do we mean when we say ‘God’” (p. 55)? How can a narrow perspective on God be dangerous?
5. Why are sacred texts “the most easily abused component of religion” (p. 62)? How do you view your tradition’s sacred texts?
6. What place is there, if any, for missionary practices in a religiously plural world? What does Kimball mean by “mission is a matter of bearing witness” (p. 74)? Do you think, as Kimball seems to suggest, that meeting other humans’ needs is the most powerful and scripturally sound form of mission? Why or why not?
7. Wesley Ariarajah writes that the statements of faith found in the Gospel of John, which so many Chris-

tians use to bolster their exclusivist claims about God, “derive their meaning in the context of faith and have no meaning outside the community of faith” (pp. 78–79). Can a truth be foundational to you because of your experiences but not true for all people? Why or why not?

### CHAPTER 3 BLIND OBEDIENCE

1. Why do you think membership in a cult or sect under a leader like Jim Jones is initially so seductive?
2. What are the warning signs that a charismatic religious leader is becoming a dangerous leader who demands blind obedience?
3. How have you seen exemplified religious groups’ tendency to withdraw from the world?
4. How can leaders resist the temptations inherent in powerful positions?
5. Kimball makes it clear that we need to think for ourselves because we are ultimately responsible as individuals for our behavior. When have you had to rely on your own judgment over and above that of a respected religious leader or mentor?

## CHAPTER 4 ESTABLISHING THE “IDEAL” TIME

1. What might the “ideal time” look like in your faith tradition?
2. How does Kimball’s discussion of Muslim states, Israel, and the Christian Right in America add to or change your ideas about the principle of separation of church and state?
3. Kimball points out that in biblical times prophets such as Nathan and Jeremiah spoke truth to power, exhorting religious leaders to follow policies of justice, compassion, and humility. Who are some modern-day prophets?
4. Although Kimball warns against people and groups that believe they are God’s agents, people of faith clearly are called by God to act in the world. What are the responsibilities of people of faith in regard to their government and the world around them? What do you feel called to do in your community? In the political realm?

## CHAPTER 5 THE END JUSTIFIES ANY MEANS

1. What does the concept of sacred space signify to you? Why does this concept often lead to end-justifies-the-means violence?

2. How have you seen “us versus them” group identity reinforced within your own tradition or in religious groups you have observed?
3. How can wishing to maintain group identity or the status quo lead to the dehumanization of people within the group, such as women, widows, or people of color?
4. What kinds of evil can result from the desire to protect a religious institution?
5. With statements such as “The Sabbath is meant for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath” (p. 162). Jesus showed his followers that traditions and rules like honoring the Sabbath were means of facilitating religious life rather than ends. When have you or your religious tradition mistaken an institution or rule for the end rather than the means? What is a sure sign that we should question our perceived end or goal?
6. Kimball mentions wearing a WWJD bracelet. What can you do to preserve the connection between the end and the means, or what you do and what you believe, in your daily life?

## CHAPTER 6 DECLARING HOLY WAR

1. What are the four criteria and four corollaries for a just war? What, if anything, would you change about the criteria?

2. What is the difference between a “just war” and a “holy war”?
3. Does your religious tradition support the pacifist, just-war, Crusades, or another theory about war? How has your religious community responded to events such as 9/11 and the war in Iraq?
4. Why do you think the pacifist traditions within Christianity and Islam have often been overshadowed by pro-war factions?
5. How does the larger definition of jihad differ from how non-Muslims and Westerners usually understand it?
6. How can we help promote nonviolent alternatives to holy war as citizens of our particular countries? As members of religious communities?

## CHAPTER 7

### AN INCLUSIVE FAITH ROOTED IN A TRADITION

1. What hope is offered by our religious traditions as we seek to correct religion that has become corrupt?
2. Kimball uses the metaphor of a spiritual compass, a set of guiding principles and directions. What are the benefits and limits of the concept of the spiritual compass? What are the guiding principles of your belief system?
3. How might you respond to someone who says that loyalty to religious traditions fuels a negative tribalism?

What are the benefits of religious traditions to their adherents and to society as a whole?

4. Would you categorize yourself as an exclusivist, inclusivist, or pluralist? How have you come to that understanding?
5. Throughout the book, Kimball focuses on the “twofold mandate to love God and to love our neighbor” (p. 227). Do you agree that this mandate is at the heart of your religious tradition? What might the world look like if all religious people strove to uphold this mandate?