

## FUNDAMENTALIST CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

**A Second Sunday Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper**  
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro (VA)  
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My sermon today is part of my monthly series on religious diversity. In my opening talk in September, I identified three possible responses to the reality that America is the most religiously diverse nation in the world: **exclusivism, assimilation, and pluralism**. Today I want to talk about the form of religious exclusivism that expresses itself as religious fundamentalism, which purports to return to the basic beliefs of a religious tradition in defiance of the tendencies to evolve into the realities of contemporary life. Religious fundamentalism deliberately stands in direct opposition to religious pluralism. I believe that religious fundamentalism in all of its forms presents one of the greatest obstacles to world peace, because it promotes conflict between people of differing religious faiths.

In his book *When Religion Becomes Evil*, Charles Kimball discusses **five warning signs** that indicate when followers of a religion have transformed it into an instrument of hatred and violence. Kimball is a professor of comparative religion at Wake Forest University and has spent most of his career studying the role of religion in the Middle East. He says, “Whatever religious people may say about their love of God or the mandates of their religion, when their behavior toward others is violent and destructive, when it causes suffering among their neighbors, you can be sure the religion has been corrupted and reform is desperately needed. When religion becomes evil, these corruptions are always present. Conversely, when religion remains true to its authentic sources, it is actively dismantling these corruptions, a process that is urgently needed now. Unlike generations that have gone before us, the consequences today of corrupted religion are both dire and global.” [p. 47] Kimball offers these **five warning signs** that indicate when a religion has crossed the line from fundamentalism to fanaticism.

### **Warning Sign #1: Absolute Truth Claims**

In 1993 a man named Michael Griffith shot and killed Dr. David Gunn outside an abortion clinic in Pensacola, Florida. In the weeks following the murder Rev. Paul Hill gained national attention as a defender of this action and a spokesman for the group that called itself the

“Army of God.” A year later Reverend Hill himself came to the same clinic and murdered Dr. John Britton and his security escort James Barrett (a Unitarian Universalist). “The absolute truth claims uniting members of [the Army of God] are unambiguous: abortion is legalized murder; abortion is an abomination to God; true Christians must engage in direct action to stop what they see as a slaughter of innocents.” [Kimball, p. 53] As Charles Kimball concludes, “It is sadly ironic that soldiers in the Army of God intentionally break the [Bible’s] commandment not to murder in order to stop people who they consider guilty of murder.” [p. 54]

Similar extremist groups who kill in the name of God can be found in other religions as well, most notably Islam. What these groups have in common is a highly selective and self-serving use of quotations from their sacred text, whether it is the Bible or the Qur’an (called **prooftexting**), combined with a vigorous rejection of the truth to be found in other sacred texts. The mirror-imaging between Christian and Muslim fundamentalists is sometimes stunning. Kimball writes, “If you are not persuaded that religious truth claims based on prooftexts as interpreted by authority figures can have harmful consequences, think about the history of anti-Semitism or the justification of slavery or discrimination against women or attitudes and behavior toward homosexual persons.” [p. 66]

### **Warning Sign # 2: Blind Obedience**

The Reverend Jim Jones was a charismatic leader who founded a progressive, interracial congregation called the Peoples Temple. His vision of a religious community required his followers to give up their personal possessions and sever ties with their own families. Even as his followers increased in number, he became more obsessed with power and more paranoid about his critics. When he led his followers to establish a rural commune named Jonestown in the jungle of Guyana (in South America), they were completely cut off from the outside world. He renounced his Christian roots and proclaimed divine status for himself. When a Congressional fact-finding team visited the commune in 1978, Jones’s paranoia could no longer contain his paranoid anger. Congressman Leo Ryan and his delegation were gunned down as they prepared to depart, and the final tragic chain of events was set in motion. More than 900 members of his community—nearly one third of them children—drank Kool-Aid laced with cyanide in what would be the largest mass suicide in American history.

How could such a thing have happened? It's worth noting that most of the world's great religions began as **cults**. A charismatic leader (Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad) attracts a small but growing group of followers who are drawn to his radical new ideas. As the size of his following increases, the leader is faced with a kind of internal crisis. Should he take on more power and authority for himself, as the Prophet Muhammad did, or should he encourage his followers to seek their own path to religious truth, as the Buddha did? In either case, the natural tendency of many followers is to worship the founder, as Christians have done, or to enshrine his message, as Muslims have done with the Qur'an. It is not just adoration of the founder that can make a cult dangerous, but rather the combination of leader worship with two other ingredients: withdrawal from mainstream society and belief that an apocalypse is fast approaching. I find it amusing that some fundamentalist Christians consider Unitarian Universalism to be a "cult." If only they knew how **little** influence a UU minister exerts over his or her congregation!

### **Warning Sign # 3: Establishing the "Ideal" Time and Society**

It is no accident that the world's two largest religions, Christianity and Islam, are also the most missionary in their approach. I mentioned earlier how much these two traditions mirror one another, especially in the attitudes and actions of their most fundamentalist followers **and** in their mutual antagonism toward one another. Fundamentalist Muslims are committed to establishing nations governed by the principles of Islamic law (*Shariah*). Very few Americans understand that for many Muslims, the prototype for the ideal society was the Prophet Muhammad's benevolent ten-year rule in Medina, when there was no distinction between religious and political authority. However, the goal of an ideal Islamic state has been very elusive. The widespread violations of human rights—particularly women's rights—perpetrated by the Taliban in Afghanistan and to a lesser extent by the current government in Iran have alarmed citizens throughout the world. Charles Kimball concludes, "Although theocracy is not a tenable model for the nation-state today, some type of formal religious connection to the structures of state may be necessary for the foreseeable future in some countries." [p. 134]

Paralleling the efforts to establish a government driven by a religious agenda in Islamic nations is the movement to establish the United States as a “Christian nation”—a position known as reconstructionism. The self-appointed leader of this movement is the Rev. Pat Robertson, who has said, “For reconstructionists there is no neutral ground, no sphere of activity outside God’s rule. One is either following God in all aspects of life or not following God at all. One is either engaging in godly politics or is participating in the anti-God structures that now threaten the home, the school, and the church. . . .” Reconstructionist seek “to remove the political and institutional barriers to God’s law in order to impose the rule of God’s law.” [Kimball, pp. 128-29] Doesn’t this sound a lot like the goal of the Islamic fundamentalists?

#### **Warning Sign # 4: The End Justifies Any Means**

Muslims, Jews, and Christians share a common ancestor: Abraham. His burial site in Hebron is considered sacred by all three of these traditions. In 1994 Baruch Goldstein, an American doctor living in a nearby Jewish settlement on the West Bank, entered the Muslim mosque on this site disguised as an Israel soldier and then opened fire with an automatic weapon, killing 29 Muslims and wounding many others before he was shot and killed. Instead of being condemned as a mass murderer, he was regarded as a hero by some extremist Jewish settlers and activists. “The marble plaque on his grave reads, ‘To the holy Baruch Goldstein, who gave his life for the Jewish people, the Torah, and the nation of Israel.’” [Kimball, p. 141] There is no mention of all the innocent lives he **took**.

To me, treating mass murderers and suicide bombers as heroes is the most repulsive example of how religious fundamentalism can be a force for evil. The idea of religious martyrdom is deeply rooted in all three of the religions of the Middle East: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. To suffer and die for one’s religious beliefs is seen as the ultimate sacrifice and as a guarantee of immediate reward in the afterlife. But how can mass murder be justified? The key is to regard the victims of religious violence as **infidels**—as less than human perpetrators of a rival faith—worthy not just of death but of desecration. Most Westerners have no idea about how significant the Christian Crusades in 1099 C.E. remain for contemporary Muslims. When they finally reached Jerusalem, the crusaders first killed the Jews who had gathered in the Great Synagogue and then stormed the Muslims’ sacred Temple Mount mosque, where they

slaughtered thousands of Muslims who had paid a huge ransom for their safety. One of the witnesses to the carnage wrote, “Indeed, it was a just and splendid judgment of God, that this place should be filled with the blood of unbelievers, when it had suffered so long from their blasphemies.” [quoted by Kimball, pp.175-76]

### **Warning Sign # 5: Declaring Holy War**

In exhorting his followers to engage in holy war, Osama bin Laden often refers to the atrocities committed by Western civilization against Muslims and the imperative to avenge these insults by violence. The term *jihad* is widely misunderstood by many Americans. It refers above all to the “constant struggle to be virtuous and moral, to do good works on the behalf of others and for the betterment of society.” By focusing only on the meaning of *jihad* as warfare against the enemies of Islam, both Islamic fundamentalists and their Christian counterparts overlook the call to peaceful coexistence that is hard-wired into their own traditions.

Ultimately, religious fundamentalism undermines the deepest values of the tradition it claims to revive: the values of **compassion for others** and the **pursuit of justice**. When we are faced with the powerful forces of religious divisiveness, what should we do? Above all, we should counteract any attempts to distort other faith traditions whenever we encounter this—whether in the news media or in our conversations with people in our community. Let me conclude with the words of William Schulz, past president of the Unitarian Universalist Association:

This is the mission of our faith: To teach the fragile art of hospitality;  
 To revere both the critical mind and the generous heart;  
 To prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness;  
 And to witness to all that we must hold the whole world in our hands.