

## INTERFAITH INSIGHT

# The characteristics of religion at the extreme



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In many religious traditions there has been a history of martyrs, persons who willingly or unwillingly give up their lives for their faith. With our American freedom of religion, we easily forget the extent to which those in other countries or other historic times were faced with the choice between their lives and their faith. We even find it hard, if not impossible, to understand how and why someone would willingly and even joyfully make the death choice rather than give in to the demand for renouncing one's faith.

Scott Appleby recounts the second-century bishop of Antioch, Ignatius, who, while being taken to his death sentence in Rome, pleaded with his fellow Christians not to interfere with his fate. In describing his sentence of being fed to the lions, he says: "What a thrill I shall have from the wild beasts that are ready for me! I hope they will make short work of me. ... Forgive me — I know what is good for me. Now is the moment. I am beginning to be a disciple."

Appleby notes that "when pagan Rome gave way to the 'Holy Roman Empire' of medieval Christendom, the tables were turned. Christian crusaders and inquisitors were on the giving end of lethal violence." Current examples are the suicide bombers and terrorists who are not only willing to accept death, but more than ready to perpetrate death as well.

What is there about religion that can

lead to the most humanizing and peaceful impulses in our history, but at the same time generates evil and violence against others? Why for some is a strongly held belief grounds for destroying others who have different beliefs, or just different versions or interpretations of the same tradition?

Appleby, who will be our speaker next week at the annual Interfaith Consortium Conference, uses the term "strong religion" to describe that tendency to fundamentalisms and even violence. While every religion is a plurality of beliefs and practices, some versions become so aggressive in their understandings that they seek to convert, control or destroy the enemy by whatever means.

He describes five characteristics of religion that come together in an intense and connected way leading to these religious fundamentalist movements. These are found at the extremes of most religions and tend toward politicized, aggressive, and sometimes violent forms. A major study that involved dozens of scholars over many years resulted in the five-volume publication of the "Fundamentalisms Project," which was co-edited by Appleby and his mentor, Martin E. Marty. They identified seven religious traditions in five continents that contained examples of such movements within the huge plurality of religious expressions in each of these traditions. It is important to note that these expressions represented a very small component of the tradition and were not characteristic of the mainstream of the religion.

The first characteristic is reactivity. Fun-

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damentalists are reacting to the impact of modernism and secularism and their influence in society. They are also reacting against aspects of their religion that have drifted away from what they think are the correct beliefs, and hence contribute to the disintegration of society.

The second characteristic is selectivity. Certain aspects of the tradition are selected as being the most important and through which every action is judged.

Third is the assertion of absolutism. It is not just God who is absolute, but also a particular interpretation is absolute and cannot be modified. This leads to the fourth characteristic, dualism, where the world is composed of just those who agree with the agenda and those opposed — who must be defeated at all costs.

Finally, such groups are apocalyptic, looking to a future where the great struggle will

be resolved in their favor, ushering in a new order.

Within the pluralism of any religious tradition, there are multiple teachings and expressions of the divine. Most of these fundamentalist movements are a tiny minority who choose to separate from their orthodox or traditional communities. They see themselves as the "true believers" who must fight against nonbelievers and the majority, who are seen as being compromised in their faith.

But Appleby also affirms there are strong impulses pushing against these extremist trends. "Within each of these great traditions ... one can trace a moral trajectory challenging adherents to greater acts of compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation, and delegitimizing as 'demonic' the competing voices of revenge and retaliation."

Let us participate fully in the moral trajectory toward "compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation." Our religious freedom and our souls are at stake.

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## Interfaith Consortium Conference

- › "Can Religions Collaborate for the Common Good?"
- › Noon-8:30 p.m., Wednesday, Nov. 8.
- › Donnelly Center at Aquinas College, Grand Rapids
- › Details and free registration at [interfaithunderstanding.org](http://interfaithunderstanding.org)