

## BOOK REVIEW

**Bad Faith: The Danger of Religious Extremism**

[Neil J. Kressel, 2007, Amherst, NY:  
Prometheus Books, 264 pp., \$32 (Hardcover)]

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Finally someone has it right—that someone is Neil Kressel. Kressel is not entirely unknown in the field of hate studies. The William Paterson University professor authored *Mass Hate* (Plenum, 1996), which, along with Ervin Staub's *Roots of Evil* (University of Massachusetts, 1989), began the social psychological conceptualization of why we hate.

Kressel now offers answers to the question of why we hate in the context of religion—a phenomenon most people in a post-9/11 world are well aware exists. But instead of blaming the obvious problems in Islam, Kressel makes the case that extremist thinking, rather than religion per se, is the culprit.

Against a current backdrop which includes several atheists getting a lot of press (Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*; Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*; Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*), Kressel provides a fairly compelling argument for not giving up on religion. By the same token, he has little sympathy for those on the Religious Right who teeter toward extremist thinking on a good day. He listens to and respects those in the middle. For Kressel, the moderates are those who are able to negotiate the Left's atheism and intellectual bravado and the Right's fundamentalism. The moderates steer the vehicle just fine and avoid both extremes.

A similar argument was advanced by genocide scholar Israel Charny (*Fascism and Democracy in the Human Mind*, University of Nebraska Press, 2006). A clinical psychologist, Charny indicted fascistic thinking as being the root of all evil—especially crimes that are committed in the name of the Father. While Kressel does not rely on Charny, the social psychologist and the clinical psychologist reach the same understanding regarding the pathology of extremist thought.

Strange as it sounds, warnings regarding the seduction of fascistic thinking have been around since the end of World War II, beginning with the 1949 work *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, Frankel-Brunswick, & Levinson). Yet somehow, when fascistic thinking hid behind religion, it got a pass. “We remain deeply divided and confused about the nature of religious extremism, how it differs from more traditional forms of piety,

where it originates, and how we might best control its adverse effects,” notes Kressel (p. 18). Who can argue? The difficulty lies in identifying the psychological mechanisms that produce violence and harm to others.

In an attempt to do this, Kressel walks the reader through three sections. Part One, entitled “The Unexpected Battle of the 21st Century,” consists of three chapters which mostly define and expand Kressel’s examples of extremists in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, and explain why Islam’s lack of reform makes it vulnerable to extremists. Part Two, “The Causes of Militant Faith,” contains the much needed examination of susceptibility to Dangerous Books (Chapter 4) and Sick Societies (Chapter 5). Kressel shines here, but he would have had an easier task if he had focused on the suppression of personal identity in the service of social identity, and on politics, and on the politicized religion that occurs in the life of the mind.

Part Three (“Fighting Extremism Sensibly”) is always the shortest section in any book of this nature. Here Kressel expresses the hope that religious leaders can call for peace. He explains, “What is needed is not the abandonment of religion, but rather a social, psychological, theological and political system of checks and balances, a way to shout ‘whoa!’ when faith starts galloping down the wrong path” (p. 29).

Some statements are debatable. “Society need not respect dysfunctional and destructive beliefs, but it must tolerate them,” Kressel concludes (p. 265). Tolerate the 450 antisemitic statements in the New Testament or 30 antisemitic statements in the Koran and wonder as to the origins of antisemitic beliefs? Tolerate the hate speech from an English imam and wonder why 7/7/05 later occurs in London’s subways? Tolerate the intolerant? –Why?

Kressel stops short of seeing religion as an opiate and the key to dangerous beliefs. He stops short of lamenting that people are not mentally healthier. He knows that religious leaders have the power to contain the masses and that only they can persuade their flocks to be less violent and healthier. But while one group is singing Kum Ba Yah, the underdeveloped one is convinced of conspiracy, planning to wipe whole nations off the earth, and rationalizing their actions via beliefs about the afterlife and rewards they will receive in Heaven.

This is an important and well researched book—a thinking person’s guide to a religious life devoid of violence. But religion has some serious explaining to do. By definition, religion asks people to defer logic and accept ideas based on faith. Police it well, as Kressel wishes, and you have less in the way of politics—but politics nonetheless. Invariably it is religion’s politics which fuses fact with fiction, blends church with state politics, and waits for the certainty of fundamentalism to strengthen and embolden

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those beliefs. What Kressel really wants is mentally healthier religions and believers—and that is something worth praying for in these most dangerous of times.

