

## **Positives and Negatives of Religion in Contemporary America**

**By Walter S. Zapotoczny**

Religion is one of the oldest institutions that govern the social as well as personal behavior of man. It provides guidelines, laws and principles relating to man's interaction with his fellow man and his God. In most religious teachings, those who fail to follow the rules, laws, guidelines and principles must pay penance or penalty. Some believe that disaster will fall on the whole society, not just the individual, if religious rules are not followed. It is these beliefs, carried to the extreme, that have resulted in confrontation. Throughout history, governments have mobilized their military in the name of religion. Extremist organizations have organized themselves as military units and carried out violence. There is strong evidence that military action in the name of religion will continue. Religious violence is not a new phenomenon. James A. Haught describes much of the violence that has occurred through the centuries in his book *Holy Horrors: An Illustrated History of Religious Murder and Madness*. While religion can offer Americans a moral and intellectual compass, the negative aspects of religious fundamentalism can stifle individual freedoms and relegate those who do practice the accepted religions to the margins of society.

In *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* the authors write that Americans are primarily biblical and republican. The day, the week, the season, and the year are punctuated by an alteration of the sacred and the profane. American society is permeated with God and religious ceremonies and religious teachings and religion is intertwined in our laws. In posing the following question the authors perhaps define the very reason why so many people are often moved to extremist religious beliefs. If we as a society owe the very meaning of our lives to biblical and republican traditions of which we seldom consciously think, is there not a danger that erosion of these traditions may eventually deprive us of that meaning altogether? Perhaps it is the fear of losing ones traditions that causes some to turn to fundamentalism and intolerance for other's religions or for someone who does not believe as they do. It is this fundamentalism that is the most negative and dangerous aspect of religion in contemporary America.

Fundamentalists have surfaced in every religion. They want to drag God and religion to the political center stage. Some fear that freedom and liberty will wipe out religion. This fear has caused them to lash out violently against non-secular governments. When other social, political and national variables mix with religion, violence often follows. Intense beliefs produce intense hostility. When people believe so strongly that they must convert others to their way of thinking, abuse follows. Fundamentalism is on the rise within many religions in America and presents an increasing challenge to the security of nations and those who do not accept the fundamentalist's principles. Many nations feel threatened by violence and the acts of extremist organizations. As long as there are intense religious beliefs, military action undertaken in the name of religion will continue.

For many in contemporary America religion provides them with meaning in their life. The erosion of meaning and coherence in their lives is not something Americans desire. Some will turn to violence and even military action when they feel threatened. When a nation feels

threatened, using many American's attitudes towards Arabs as an example, the very nature of what they profess is laid open for what it really is a very personal belief that is negative towards those who do not believe as they do. Overall, this, in my judgment, outweighs the positive aspects of religion in America.

#### **References**

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