

# When spiritual beliefs become a shield or a sword

BY CHRIS HIGHLAND

Many of the cultural clashes we see, often stirred by bible battles, can be understood as protectionism.

One side protecting its beliefs and viewpoints, its chosen way of life, against anyone not in agreement with those beliefs about “correct” living. People take up “the sword of the Spirit” (see Ephesians) to “slay the demons,” that is, those others—The Other. The demonization of the “other side” is as old as human society, and underlies much of the history of religion. The danger is obvious. To demonize is to de-humanize and turn differences of opinion into spiritual battles where anything goes. After all, “God is on our side” because “We are on God’s side” can only lead to one result: violence; violent skirmishes to conquer minds or main streets for spiritual domination. Is there something ironic or contradictory in that?

What generates this “holy hatred”? I’ve long identified

fear-based faith as a major culprit. Though many fears are understandable, particularly when societal standards or cultural norms are rapidly changing, the worst ones are irrational, even anti-rational (for obvious reasons, I’m not going to give too many specifics here. I encourage readers to practice CRT: Critical Reflective Thinking). Fear-fomented faith can lead directly to aggressive agitation, an insistence on “my way” at all costs. Aggression stirred up by belligerent self-righteousness destroys any possibilities or opportunities for civil conversation, actual discussion, open and free dialogue. Stopping the ears and shouting at and over others becomes the old-time preaching approach where nothing is open to discussion, question or compromise. It’s not about listening but “overcoming” the enemy.

This is primarily about using faith as a shield, a protection of one’s own beliefs. We can criticize the protectiveness

as evidence of fearfulness, yet it’s not hard to see why some people seek to preserve “the old ways.” Not all the older beliefs are destructive. Yet, when they become a danger to vulnerable people in those communities, or to those on the outside in broader society, the shield itself can transform into a weapon.

When religious faith seizes a solid shield and takes up the sword—figuratively or literally—the Holy War is on. History shows us the graphic outcome of this divinely inspired warfare. Sectarian violence in the name of one god or another rips communities and nations apart, all for the purpose of establishing one religion’s doctrines and laws. The goal is Spiritual Supremacy, as defined and defended by the victor—fighting in defense of personal preference and privilege. “We demand our morals, our beliefs, our views, are enforced over everyone else.” The cry is essentially: “We are exceptional, so treat us exceptionally!” One current example

is the attempt to dismantle public education by forcing teachers and librarians to adhere to strict moral principles while public monies flow to sectarian groups (see the Oklahoma religious charter school case). When extremist religious beliefs become law, swords are sharpened and shields burnished. When these folks win one battle to insert their beliefs into the public square, they are emboldened to continue the fight school by school, legislature by legislature, court by court. “Take our country back!” they cry.

The reasonable response to this combative form of faith is just that: a response based on reason. Threats to our historic secular public educational system call for basic education about the founding of the nation, the purpose of public schools, and what “religious liberty” truly means. Attacks on foundational principles of equality, fairness and a level playing field for all, have to be met with firm reminders that

the Constitution protects freedom of conscience and opinion without preference or prejudice. If some take up spiritual (or material) weapons, they must be held accountable for harm brought in the name of their chosen deity.

In those youthful days as a Charismatic Christian, I believed I was joining the Army of God against the powers of evil represented by unbelievers and even the established churches. We were afraid to let down our guard, to drop our swords or shields for even a minute, since the Evil One was lurking nearby to devour us, to destroy our faith. We saw ourselves as Soldiers of the Spirit, God’s pure defenders, ready for the assaults waged against Christ and His Crusaders. We were fearfully faithful. And we were defeated by our own self-righteousness and destructive view of the world.

What the Warriors of Faith miss, in their frenzy for fighting the Foe, is the goodness, the beauty, the wonder of the



world. A world that challenges them to be self-reflective rather than self-righteous, that urges them to face others with kindness, to lower their shields and swords, not to surrender their beliefs, but to “wage peace” instead.

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