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INTERFAITH LECTURE



Kimball

## Kimball to focus on Christianity inside Iran

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Charles Kimball is an ordained Baptist minister with a Jewish heritage and a doctorate in Comparative Religion with a specialization in Islamic studies. So it makes sense that his career does not revolve around one particular religion.

His grandfather was Jewish, his grandmother was Christian and Kimball was raised as a Christian keenly aware of his Jewish side, he said.

"How do you make sense of that?" Kimball said. "From an early age, that piqued a strong interest in learning more about the other religious traditions, even if I pursued my own."

Kimball was one of seven Americans invited to Iran during the Iran Hostage Crisis from 1979 to 1981. This experience was the jumping point into a career of Middle East relations and the study of religion and politics in Iran.

About three years later, Kimball became the director of the Middle East Office at the National Council of Churches, a position he left in 1990 to become a professor.

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## **KIMBALL** FROM PAGE 1

At 2 p.m. today in the Hall of Philosophy, Kimball will use his experiences with Christianity, Judaism and Islam to discuss the challenges Christians face in Iran in his lecture "Christians in Iran — Before and After the 1979 Revolution."

Kimball's main point will be that the revolution ended an authoritarian regime and brought about positive, democratic changes in the country but also resulted in religious persecution of minorities, he said.

"That will (introduce) the area of religion and politics and the challenges when the state defines itself in part by religious identity,"

Kimball said.

As a result, many Christian minorities find it difficult to live in a country of religious zealotry. Despite the controversy of the topic, Kimball said he sees education and communication as key to progress.

"The world in which we now live is interconnected and interdependent in unprecedented ways ... particularly when religion can be ... a deadly force," Kimball said. "Many (Christians) are just trying to keep their heads down and not get in the way of zealotry. You have to be a little less straightforward because you don't want to put people at risk, but there are still ways to talk about this."

After a life of traveling and living in the Middle East, Kimball re-entered the academic

world in 1990 to provide a more settled life for his young children. From 1996 to 2008, he served as the chair of the Department of Religion and the Divinity School at Wake Forest University. He now is the presidential professor and director of Religious Studies at the University of Oklahoma.

Although life in the Middle East sounds worlds apart from life as a college professor, Kimball said he sees them both as part of one whole.

"I really perceive what I do as kind of a teaching ministry. ... My goal has always been to educate people and raise the level of thoughtful discussion and constructive engagement with issues that concern all of us," he said. "And religion figures prominently into that mix, whether you're personally religious or not. The kinds of

things we see, like Islamophobia, represent a very real danger on many levels, whether a person is religious or not."

This will be Kimball's sixth lecture at Chautauqua, a place where he feels comfortable because of its similar nature to his career.

"What I've always seen myself doing is trying to help people understand the importance of engaging issues thoughtfully ... and a lot of it does begin with education," Kimball said. "That is one of the reasons I think Chautauqua is such a remarkable place. It's just a feast of opportunities ... and I think that's helping. In that sense, (in) the things I've done over the years, there's a theme that runs through it."