Religious expressions are heading in various directions at the same time, and political conflicts involving religions are assuming great importance on the world scene. Religious perspectives and influence are being sought in the effort to solve pressing global challenges. Therefore, as we conclude this survey of religions as living, changing, interacting movements, an overview of religion is necessary to gain a sense of how religion is affecting human life now and what impact it may have in the future.

Globalization

Human factors in the global landscape are not what they once were. In contrast to earlier centuries, in which regions were relatively isolated from each other, two major world wars and other violent conflicts, technological advances, and population shifts have brought us into closer contact. Our world has been “shrinking” through increasing urbanization (over half of all people now live in cities) and globalization. Primarily through markets and businesses, regional and national economies have become part of an interconnected global network. Cultural and social connectivity is also increasing, through technological innovations such as the Internet and air travel, political alliances such as the European Union, and the entertainment industry.

Global integration has thus far been largely seen as a one-way process, with Western ways dominating and other cultures and societies tending to be submerged. The 2008 financial meltdown in American banks threatened economies and jobs around the globe. Over eighty percent of all websites are in English, particularly American English. Television programming tends to follow the models created in the United States of quick-bite newscasts and popular series such as Who Wants to be a Millionaire? And an estimated eighty-three percent of the film offerings in Latin America and fifty percent in Japan consist of Hollywood movies.

Globalization of culture is not only one-way, however. For example, Hindu beliefs have been influencing North American culture since the time of John
Adams, who after leaving the presidency in 1801 told Thomas Jefferson that he had been reading “everything I could collect” about “Hindoo religion,” and the nineteenth-century early Transcendentalist philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was deeply influenced by Vedanta. Popular culture—from the Beatles’ encounter with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi to Indian-born American Deepak Chopra’s talk-show appearances, seminars, and best-selling books—has also brought Hindu spiritual terms such as “karma” and “guru” into everyday vocabulary in the West, and yoga and meditation have become common aspects of Western lifestyle.

Intermixing or overlaying of cultures is also occurring because of immigration. The United States was built on the basis of immigration from various countries and has historically been known as a “melting pot.” Emigration in search of economic gain is still happening around the world, creating myriads of diaspora communities as well as individuals of mixed roots. Political violence and natural disasters also continue to send people far from their homelands in search of refuge. Oppressed in Tibet, Tibetan Buddhists have established a new homeland in India, and lamas are giving dharma teachings in many countries. Abject poverty, starvation, political collapse, and civil war in Muslim-majority Somalia have forced great numbers of Somalians to seek asylum in neighboring Christian-majority Kenya, which is hard-pressed to accommodate them in what is now the world’s largest refugee camp.

Parallel to such globalizing trends is what economists and sociologists are now referring to as “glocalization.” This is the now-familiar pattern by which both universal global and particular local tendencies have interacted to create adaptations such as Christian hip-hop music in Africa, or Buddhist meditation for stress relief in Germany.

**Secularism**

Until the Iranian revolution in 1979, which brought Islam to the fore as a potent social force, there was a common assumption by Western intellectuals that “Europe’s past is the world’s future.” That is, just as many Europeans had lost interest in religion since the Enlightenment, the whole world would eventually secularize. This assumption that religion would become irrelevant in people’s lives was shared by capitalism, communism, and liberalism.

Charles Taylor, Professor of Philosophy at McGill University, describes three forms of Western secularism. One refers to “public spaces”:

> These have been allegedly emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality. Or taken from another side, as we function within various spheres of activity—economic, political, cultural, educational, professional, recreation—the norms and principles we follow, the deliberations we engage in, generally don’t refer us to God or to any religious beliefs; the considerations we act on are internal to the “rationality” of each sphere—maximum gain within the economy, the greatest benefit to the greatest number in the political area, and so on. This is in striking contrast to earlier periods, when Christian faith laid down authoritative prescriptions, often through the mouths of the clergy, which could not be easily ignored in any of these domains.

Professor Taylor also describes another form of secularism—its individual dimensions (which he again sees mostly with reference to Western Christianity):
In this second meaning, secularity consists in the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to church. In this sense, the countries of western Europe have mainly become secular—even those who retain the vestigial public reference to God in public space.

Yet a third meaning of secularism is the social condition in which religious faith is only one of various possibilities. In Taylor’s words:

Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives. And this will also likely mean that at least in certain milieus, it may be hard to sustain one’s faith. There will be people who feel bound to give it up, even though they mourn its loss. This has been a recognizable experience in our societies, at least since the mid-nineteenth century. There will be many others to whom faith never even seems an eligible possibility.3

As religion has become an option which some have rejected, there has been a spate of books by Western authors overtly critical of religion, such as The End of Faith by Sam Harris (2005), The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins (2006), When Religion Becomes Evil by Charles Kimball (2006), and God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything by Christopher Hitchens (2008). Even half a century ago, such literature would have been unthinkable.

Yet a fourth meaning of secularism applies to countries such as the United States, India, and Turkey, where the modern constitutional separation of religion and state may be referred to as “secularism,” even though individuals may have strong belief structures. The United States has the largest percentage of church-going people in the industrialized countries of the world, yet its constitution insists on a wall of separation between the state and religion. In a secular democracy, the government is supposed to respect the rights of individuals to their own religious beliefs, thus protecting minority religions from oppression.

This chart shows current followers of the world’s religions. Percentages of the world’s population following each religion or none, and approximate numbers of followers are based on statistics in the Encyclopaedia Britannica 2006 Book of the Year, London, EB, 2006, p. 282.

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In all four senses, secularism is now under siege or waning. Many religions are undergoing a resurgence, either in their home regions or elsewhere, and political secularism is being threatened by politicized religious pressure groups.

**Religious pluralism**

Within these social, political, and cultural contexts, the global picture of religion is changing. A major feature of contemporary religious geography is that no single religion dominates the world. Although authorities from many faiths have historically asserted that theirs is the best and only way, in actuality new religions and new versions of older religions continue to spring up and then divide, subdivide, and provoke reform movements. Christianity claims the most members of any global religion, but Christianity is not a monolithic faith. Thousands of forms of Christianity are now being professed.

With migration, missionary activities, and refugee movements, religions have shifted from their country of origin. It is no longer so easy to show a world map in which each country is assigned to a particular religion. In Russia there are not only Russian Orthodox Christians but also Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, shamanists, and members of new religions. At the same time, there are now sizable Russian Orthodox congregations in the United States. Buddhism arose in India but now is most pervasive in East Asia and popular in Europe and North America. Islam arose in what is now Saudi Arabia, but there are more Muslims in Indonesia than in any other country. There are large Muslim populations in Central Asia, and growing Muslim populations in the United States, with over fifty mosques in the city of Chicago alone.

Professor Diana Eck, director of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, describes what she terms the new “geo-religious reality”:

> Our religious traditions are not boxes of goods passed intact from generation to generation, but rather rivers of faith—alive, dynamic, ever-changing, diverging, converging, drying up here, and watering new lands there.

> We are all neighbors somewhere, minorities somewhere, majorities somewhere. This is our new geo-religious reality. There are mosques in the Bible Belt in Houston, just as there are Christian churches in Muslim Pakistan. There are Cambodian Buddhists in Boston, Hindus in Moscow, Sikhs in London.⁴

**Hardening of religious boundaries**

As religions proliferate and interpenetrate geographically, one common response has been the attempt to deny the validity of other religions. In many countries there is tension between the religion that has been most closely linked with national history and identity and other religions that are practiced or have been introduced into the country. With the collapse of communism, Protestant congregations rushed to offer Bibles and religious tracts to citizens of formerly atheistic communist countries, with the idea that they were introducing Christianity there. But Orthodox Christianity, established more than a thousand years ago in Russia, had continued to exist there, even though the church structures were limited and controlled by the state. People from the
more established religions seek to find a balance between freedom of religion for all and the threat they perceive from religious minorities to their traditional values, customs, and sense of national identity.

One issue that arises as religious boundaries come to the fore is that of legal jurisdiction. Can Muslim minorities in a pluralistic nation-state be governed by their own traditional Shari’ah laws, or must they accept the common law of the country? And vice versa: Must other religious minorities in a Muslim-ruled country be subject to the laws of Shari’ah? In some northern states of Nigeria, for instance, Muslims and Christians clashed over attempts to implement full Shari’ah jurisdiction, which could mean applying punishments such as stoning to death in cases of adultery, flogging for those convicted of sexual intercourse outside of marriage, and amputation of the hand of a person convicted of theft.

Another issue arises concerning which religions will receive state funding. Registration requirements are another means used to help control or at least track the introduction of religions into countries where they did not originate. Another is outright banning of new or minority religions. In 1997, the Russian parliament passed a law prohibiting religions that had not officially existed in Russia longer than fifteen years from distributing religious materials or newspapers or running schools. The law protects the traditional status of the Russian Orthodox Church and Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism with some concessions to Protestant and Roman Catholic Christianity.

Religious symbols have become the focus for the French government’s attempts to keep religion within bounds. In 2004, a controversial law was passed forbidding the wearing of religious symbols including Muslim veils, Sikh turbans, Jewish yarmulkes, and large Christian crosses in French public schools and colleges. The government has also tried to restrict the activities of new religious movements, as well as charismatic and evangelical Christian groups, even though its constitution states “France shall respect all beliefs.” Similar legislation has also been passed in other European countries, particularly with reference to the wearing of burqas.

In some previously communist countries, old animosities between people of different ethnic groups resurfaced with great violence once totalitarian regimes toppled. These intense ethnic and political struggles often pitted people of different faiths against each other, as in former Yugoslavia. Where there had been a seemingly peaceful society, horrifying atrocities arose among largely Orthodox Christian Serbs, Roman Catholic Croats, and Muslims.

Boundaries between religions have also hardened in recent times because of the clash between fundamentalism and modernism. Along with the salient features of modernity—complex technologies, globalization, urbanization, bureaucratization, and rationality—have come the values collectively known as “modernism.” They include individualism, a preference for change rather than continuity, quantity rather than quality, efficiency rather than traditional skills and aesthetics, and pragmatism and profiteering rather than

Religions are now practiced far from the countries where they originated. This Tibetan Buddhist nun is practicing on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne in the United Kingdom.
eternal truths and values. Modernism is perceived by some fundamentalists as threatening the very existence of traditional religious values; contemporary secular culture seems crude, sacrilegious, and socially dangerous.

Some fundamentalists have tried to withdraw socially from the secular culture even while surrounded by it. Others have actively tried to change the culture, using political power to shape social laws or lobbying for banning of textbooks that they feel do not include their religious point of view. As described by the Project on Religion and Human Rights:

Fundamentalists’ basic goal is to fight back—culturally, ideologically, and socially—against the assumptions and patterns of life that are taken for granted in contemporary secular society and culture, refusing to celebrate them or to embrace them fully. They keep their distance and refuse to endorse the legitimacy of any culture that opposes what they perceive as fundamental truths. Secular culture, in their eyes, is base, barbarous, crude, and essentially profane. It produces a society that respects no sacred order and ignores the possibility of redemption.5

Fundamentalism sometimes turns to political means to accomplish its objectives. At the same time, political leaders have found the religious loyalty and absolutism of some fundamentalists an expedient way to mobilize political loyalties. Thus, Hindu extremists in India have been encouraged to demolish Muslim mosques built on the foundation of older Hindu temples and to rebuild Hindu temples in their place. The United States, which had prided itself on being a melting pot for all cultures, with full freedom of religion and no right of government to promote any specific religion, has witnessed attempts by Christian fundamentalists—the “Religious Right”—to control education and politics, and a simultaneous rise in violence against ethnic and religious minorities. Buddhism, long associated with nonviolence, became involved in the violent suppression of the Hindu minority in Sri Lanka. Violence among different branches of the same religion also rages—Roman Catholic churches in Northern Ireland have been burned by Protestants, and Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims have taken up arms against each other. The Internet reveals the sentiments and activities of a troubling number of hate groups promoting intolerance, bigotry, hatred, and violence against specific others in the name of religion.

Religion after 11 September

The stunning attacks by terrorists on United States targets in 2001 brought instant polarization along religious and ethnic lines. Hundreds of hate crimes were committed in the United States against Muslims and foreign immigrants who were mistaken for Muslims. As some Americans responded in fear and rage, these groups were suddenly seen as “outsiders.” With the subsequent bombing of Afghanistan and Iraq, the perpetrators of terrorism such as Osama bin Laden incited Muslims to see the world in terms of Muslims versus the infidels, and to join together to drive the United States out of its strategic positions in Muslim lands. Both sides claimed that God was on their side and their cause a holy one.

While the Christian Identity movement promoted ideas of Christian supremacy in the United States, leaders of Al Qaeda selectively cited passages from the Holy Qur’an to give the appearance of spiritual legitimacy to their militant teachings. After 11 September, Osama bin Laden proclaimed:
These events have divided the world into two camps, the camp of the faithful and the camp of infidels. … Every Muslim must rise to defend his religion. … God is the greatest and glory be to Islam.6

Once groups have taken such oppositional standpoints, violence seems inevitable. In search of sensational news that sells, the media often fan local issues into widespread conflicts. Dr. Rosalind Hackett, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Tennessee, describes the media coverage of inter-religious tensions in Nigeria:

There is plenty of evidence of how local conflicts get transformed into national issues by virtue of media coverage, especially if that coverage is particularly biased and provocative, which it often can be. It is important to note that the coverage may be determined by media ownership—i.e. Muslim or Christian. These incidents of ethnic and religious violence also get reported more internationally because Nigeria is seen by many as a barometer of what is going on in the rest of Africa, and because it represents an interesting case of a country which has moved from being renowned for its religious tolerance up to about 30 years ago to one known the world over for its interreligious tensions and conflict.7

In some areas, inter-religious animosities have been stirred up to the point that people are even ready to sacrifice their lives as suicide bombers, kill innocent people in terrorist attacks, conduct assassinations, or drop bombs on populated areas, for the sake of what they consider to be a holy cause. Study of suicide bombers in organizations such as Al Qaeda and Hamas in Palestine shows that the suicide attackers tend to be well educated and to come from relatively well-off families. Theirs is not the easily exploited despair of poverty and ignorance; it is the conviction of ideology. Pilots dropping bombs and soldiers treating prisoners brutally may similarly be motivated by the conviction that they are doing the right thing and attacking evil by “countering terrorism.” And some who kill innocent people may not be motivated by any kind of principles. Instead, they may be emotionally angry and callous, or simply hired killers working for money without any scruples. As public support for such violence is waning, wages offered for suicide attackers are reportedly declining.

Given the plurality of religions in the world and the extremism that some of their adherents are espousing, is a global “clash of civilizations” inevitable in the future? Some observers are now saying that the real problem is not conflict among religions but rather a “clash of ignorance.”8 Rigid exclusivist positions do not represent the heart of religious teachings. Whether state-sponsored or incited by militant extremists, violence finds no support in any religion. Thus there has been a strong outcry against fundamentalist violence by the mainstream religions from which militants have drawn their faith. Muslims are trying to point out that jihad must not be confused with terrorism, for jihad (spiritual struggle, particularly against one’s own inner flaws) is the holy duty of every Muslim, whereas terrorist killing of innocent people is forbidden by the Holy Qur’an. Likewise, many Christian organizations have come out strongly against violence of any sort, including state terrorism. Roman Catholic theologian Vimal Tirimanna explains:

Ordinary human experience shows that terrorism can never be a moral good, because of the horrendous evils it causes to human lives and to property. Let us not forget here that terrorism also damages the very existence of the
terrorist himself/herself as a human being with others; it is demeaning of his/her own basic human dignity. Terrorism is an evil also because it is always a deliberately planned act to hurt, to damage, to injure other human lives, and also to devastate God’s creation. Moreover it is intimidation which seeks to eliminate the basic human freedom of the would-be victims and which tends to impose the will of the terrorists forcefully on those who are at the receiving end. Terrorism, no matter whatever form it takes, no matter who are its perpetrators, and no matter what “noble” goals it seeks to promote, can never be justified by a conscientious person.9

Religion in politics

The future of religion is sure to include its engagement with politics. In many countries, religious groups have become associated with political parties or political interest groups—such as the linkage of Hindu religious fundamentalists with exclusivist nationalist political movements in India, and the linkage between neo-conservative politicians in the United States and evangelical Christian beliefs. Such politicians then frequently legitimate their agendas by giving them a religious color or by claiming they are defending religion. When religious groups are mobilized for political purposes, people oriented toward power rather than toward spirituality thus tend to be propelled into leadership roles, while still justifying their actions in religious terms. The political agenda can even become a global one, as in the case of Al Qaeda. Bruce Lincoln, Professor of the History of Religion, observes:

The Al Qaeda network … understands and constructs itself as simultaneously the militant vanguard and the most faithful fragment of an international religious community. The goal it articulates is the restoration of Islam in a maximalist form and its consequent triumph over its internal and foreign enemies. Those enemies include, first, the Western powers, who are not only non-Muslims, but non-, even anti-religious (“infidels”); second, postcolonial state elites, whose Islamic commitments have been egregiously compromised (“hypocrites”); third, that part of the Enlightenment project committed to religious minimalism and ascendancy of the secular state.10

After 11 September, U.S. President George Bush proclaimed a global politico-religious agenda: to attack any nation suspected of harboring terrorists and thus presumably bring peace, with God’s blessings resting securely upon America:

In the face of today’s new threat, the only way to pursue peace is to pursue those who threaten it. We did not ask for this mission, but we will fulfill it. The name of today’s military operation is Enduring Freedom. We defend not only our precious freedoms, but also the freedom of people everywhere to live and raise their children free from fear. … The battle is now joined in many fronts. We will not waver; we will not tire; we will not falter; and we will not fail. Peace and freedom will prevail. May God continue to bless America.11

Some international observers feel that this triumphalist policy has increased rather than decreased terrorism and violent deaths, and many religious leaders have questioned its ethics, as well as its political usefulness. This confrontational approach was reversed early in Barack Obama’s presidency. In an historic speech to the “Muslim world” given in Cairo University in June
2009 (see Box, p. 505), President Obama spoke sympathetically about resolving political tensions between Islam and the West, as well as political tensions in areas such as West Asia between people of different religious traditions.

While separation of religion and state is one of the defining principles of modern democracy and also of some totalitarian states, certain religious beliefs and symbols are so deeply ingrained in people’s minds as part of their culture that they may still influence policies and worldviews. In Israel, for instance, even totally secular Jews beset by violence on their borders and terrorism within may subconsciously harbor the ancient Jewish dream of a world at peace—and thus rule out any consideration of ending the Zionist political experiment. As Charles Liebman, Professor in Religion and Politics at Bar-Ilan University, writes:

> Surely the dream of the Jewish prophets, the notion of “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the lion shall lie down with the kid, and nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they know war anymore” is for many, whether they call themselves religious or secular, an important vision of the future and, therefore, a source of how we behave in the present.12

Christian Bishop David Niringere of Uganda proposes that “tribalism” is still a problem, and not only in Africa. He notes that politics is a matter of access to public space and public resources, and typically involves the exclusion of others by groups in power:

> Tribal-based spirituality does not make a distinction between religious and political ends. Tribal religion is about belonging: All belong, none are non-believers. A few professionals carry it on. Tribal religion enables structuring of power for exclusion, escalating conflict.13

For religious cultures such as Islam and Sikhism, the combination of religion and polity is perceived as a positive goal—the possibility of the mundane world reordered according to spiritual ideals. Even Buddhism has become...
Excerpts from Obama’s Historic Cairo Speech

We meet at a time of great tension between the United States and Muslims around the world, tension rooted in historical forces that go beyond any current policy debate. … Tension has been fed by colonialism that denied rights and opportunities to many Muslims and a Cold War in which Muslim majority countries were too often treated as proxies without regard to their own aspirations. Moreover, the sweeping change brought by modernity and globalization led many Muslims to view the West as hostile to the traditions of Islam.

Violent extremists have exploited these tensions in a small but potent minority of Muslims. The attacks of September 11, 2001, and the continued efforts of these extremists to engage in violence against civilians has led some in my country to view Islam as inevitably hostile not only to American and western countries but also to human rights.

All this has bred more fear and more mistrust. … And this cycle of suspicion and discord must end. I’ve come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap and share common principles, principles of justice and progress, tolerance and the dignity of all human beings. …

Just as Muslims do not fit a crude stereotype, America is not the crude stereotype of a self-interested empire. The United States has been one of the greatest sources of progress that the world has ever known. We were born out of revolution against an empire.

We were founded upon the ideal that all are created equal. …We are shaped by every culture. Drawn from every end of the Earth, and dedicated to a simple concept, E pluribus unum: Out of many, one. …

When violent extremists operate in one stretch of mountains, people are endangered across an ocean. When innocents in Bosnia and Darfur are slaughtered, that is a stain on our collective conscience.

That is what it means to share this world in the twenty-first century. That is the responsibility we have to one another as human beings. This is a difficult responsibility to embrace, for human history has often been a record of nations and tribes, and, yes, religions subjugating one another in pursuit of their own interests.

Yet in this new age, such attitudes are self-defeating. Given our interdependence, any world order that elevates one nation or group of people over another will inevitably fall. …

The same story can be told by people from South Africa to South Asia, to Eastern Europe to Indonesia. It’s a story with a simple truth: Violence is a dead end. It is a sign neither of courage nor power to shoot rockets at sleeping children or to blow up old women on a bus. That’s not how moral authority is claimed, that’s how it is surrendered. …

All of us have a responsibility to work for the day when the mothers of Israelis and Palestinians can see their children grow up without fear, when the holy land of three great faiths is the place of peace that God intended it to be, when Jerusalem is a secure and lasting home for Jews and Christians and Muslims and a place for all of the children of Abraham to mingle peacefully together as in the story of Isra, when Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed—peace be upon them—joined in prayer. …

Freedom of religion is central to the ability of peoples to live together. We must always examine the ways in which people protect it. …

It’s easier to start wars than to end them. It’s easier to blame others than to look inward. It’s easier to see what is different about someone than to find the things we share. But we should choose the right path, not just the easy path. There is one rule that lies at the heart of every religion, that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

This truth transcends nations and peoples, a belief that isn’t new, that isn’t black or white or brown, that isn’t Christian or Muslim or Jew. It’s a belief that pulsed in the cradle of civilization and that still beats in the hearts of billions around the world. …

We have the power to make the world we seek, but only if we have the courage to make a new beginning, keeping in mind what has been written. The Holy Qur’an tells us, “Mankind, we have created you male and female. And we have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another.”

The Talmud tells us, “The whole of the Torah is for the purpose of promoting peace.”

The Holy Bible tells us, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”

The people of the world can live together in peace. We know that is God’s vision. Now that must be our work here on Earth.”
engaged in politics, and to some Buddhists’ thinking, a proactive approach to political change is desirable.

**Interfaith movement**

What can religions do to end political deadlock and hatreds between followers of various religions? There is already an existing countercurrent growing in the world, as globalization is increasing friendly person-to-person cross-cultural contacts. In addition, there are many formal efforts at interfaith dialogue, in which people of varying religions meet, explore their differences, and appreciate and find enrichment in each other’s ways to the divine. This approach has been historically difficult, for many religions have made exclusive claims to being the best or only way. Professor Ewert Cousins, editor of an extensive series of books on the spiritual aspects of major religions, comments: “I think all the religions are overwhelmed by the particular revelation they have been given and are thus blinded to other traditions’ riches.”

Religions are quite different in their external practices and culturally influenced behaviors. There are doctrinal differences on basic issues, such as the cause of and remedy for evil and suffering in the world, or the question of whether the divine is singular, plural, or nontheistic. And some religions make apparent claims to superiority which are difficult to reconcile with other religions’ claims. The Qur’an, for instance, while acknowledging the validity of earlier prophets as messengers of God, refers to the Prophet Muhammad as the “Seal of the Prophets” (Sura 33:40). This description has been interpreted to mean that prophecy was completed with the Prophet Muhammad. If he is believed to be the last prophet, no spiritual figures after he passed away in c.632 CE—including the Sikh Gurus and Baha’u’llah of the Baha’is—could be considered prophets, though they might be seen as teachers. Similarly, Christians read in John 14:6 that Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me.” But some Christian scholars now feel that it is inappropriate to take this line out of its context (in which Jesus’s disciples were asking how to find their way to him after they died) and to interpret it to mean that the ways of Hindus, Buddhists, and other faiths are invalid. Relationships with other faiths was not the question being answered.

Many people of broad vision have noted that many of the same principles reappear in all traditions. All religions teach the importance of setting one’s own selfish interests aside, loving others, harkening to the divine, and exercising control over the mind. What is called the “Golden Rule,” expressed by Confucius as “Do not do unto others what you do not want others to do unto you,” and by the Prophet Muhammad as “None of you truly have faith if you do not desire for your brother that which you desire for yourself,” is found in every religion.

The absolute authority of scriptures is being questioned by contemporary scholars who are interpreting them in their historical and cultural context and thus casting some doubt upon their exclusive claims to truth. Some liberal scholars are also proposing that there is an underlying experiential unity among religions. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, for instance, concluded that the revelations of all religions have come from the same divine source. Christian theologian John Hick suggests that religions are culturally different responses to one and the same reality. The Muslim scholar Frithjof Schuon feels that
there is a common mystical base underlying all religions, but that only the enlightened will experience and understand it, whereas others will see the superficial differences.

If the religions are true it is because each time it is God who has spoken, and if they are different it is because God has spoken in different “languages” in conformity with the diversity of the receptacles. Finally, if they are absolute and exclusive, it is because in each of them God has said “I.”

Frithjof Schuon

Responses to other faiths

With these contrasting views, there are several different ways in which people of different religions may relate to each other. Diana Eck observes that there are three responses to contact between religions. One is exclusivism: “Ours is the only true way.” Eck and others have noted that deep personal commitment to one’s faith is a foundation of religious life and also the first essential step in interfaith dialogue.

Eck sees the second response to interfaith contact as inclusivism. This may take the form of trying to create a single world religion, such as Baha’i. Or it may appear as the belief that our religion is spacious enough to encompass all the others, that it supersedes all previous religions, as Islam said it was the culmination of all monotheistic traditions. In this approach, the inclusivists do not see other ways as a threat. Some Sikhs, for instance, understand their religion as actively promoting interfaith appreciation and thus propose that their holy scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, could serve as a roadmap to harmony among people of all religions, without denying the right of each religion to exist as a respected tradition.

The third way Eck discerns is pluralism: to hold one’s own faith and at the same time ask people of other faiths about their path, about how they want to be understood. Uniformity and agreement are not the goals—the goal is to collaborate, to combine our differing strengths for the common good. From this point of view, for effective pluralistic dialogue, people must have an openness to the possibility of discovering sacred truth in other religions. Raimundo Panikkar (1918–2010), a Catholic-Hindu-Buddhist doctor of science, philosophy, and theology, wrote of “concordant discord”:

We realize that, by my pushing in one direction and your pushing in the opposite, world order is maintained and given the impulse of its proper dynamism. … Consensus ultimately means to walk in the same direction, not to have just one rational view. … To reach agreement suggests to be agreeable, to be pleasant, to find pleasure in being together. Concord is to put our hearts together.

Professor Arvind Sharma of McGill University, who grew up in India as a Hindu, goes beyond Eck’s categories to describe a fourth possibility, which he calls universalism. From his personal experience, he states that by studying different religions people may learn about the diversity within their own religion and then the diversity of the world’s religions, and yet still somehow develop an inner connection with all religions:
In the end one might emerge with the tacit knowledge of being the legatee of not just one’s tradition, however tolerant, or the various religious traditions of humanity, however diverse, but of the entire religious heritage of humanity, in the singular. The experience could be compared to that of geographical discovery, when what one thought was one’s separate country turns out to be part of a continent, and then what one thought were different continents turn out to be part of a single globe.\textsuperscript{18}

This feeling of universalism is sometimes referred to as “religious tolerance,” in the sense of respect and even appreciation for all religions. However, the same term can also have negative connotations, as explained by Wendy Brown, Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley:

Despite its pacific demeanor, tolerance is an internally unharmonious term, blending together goodness, capaciousness, and conciliation with discomfort, judgment, and aversion. Like patience, tolerance is necessitated by something one would prefer did not exist. … In this activity of management, tolerance does not offer resolution or transcendence, but only a strategy for coping. … As compensation, tolerance anoints the bearer with virtue, with standing for a principled act of permitting one’s principles to be affronted; it provides a gracious way of allowing one’s tastes to be violated.\textsuperscript{19}

Brown proposes that the kind of “religious tolerance” she is referring to becomes possible when religion is already relegated to the background in a society as having no claim on public life, or else as a solution to insolvable conflicts among dueling absolutist approaches to religious belief. It may also stem from the superior and condescending attitude of a religion in power toward religious minorities whom it is in a position to regulate. It typically does not spring from conviction that religions have equal truth claims, or even that religions are dealing with truths.

\textit{Spirituality is not merely tolerance. … It is the absolute recognition of the other’s faith in God as one’s own.}

\textit{Sri Chinmoy}

\textbf{Interfaith initiatives}

People of all faiths have been intentionally discovering each other for some time now. A major global assembly was held in Chicago in 1893: The Parliament of the World’s Religions. The figure who most captured world attention was Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. He brought appreciation of Eastern religions to the West, and made these concluding remarks:

\textit{If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity, and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart.}\textsuperscript{20}
After that initiative, ecumenical conferences involved pairs of related religions that were trying to agree to disagree, such as Judaism and Christianity. Now a large number of interfaith organizations and meetings draw people from all religions in a spirit of mutual appreciation. In 1986, Pope John Paul II invited 160 representatives of all religions to Assisi in honor of the humble St. Francis, to pray together for world peace.

Two years later, the Assisi idea was extended to include governmental leaders, scientists, artists, business leaders, and media specialists as well as spiritual leaders. Some 200 of them from around the globe met in Oxford, England, in 1988 at the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders on Human Survival. They held their plenary sessions beneath an enormous image of the earth as seen from space. It was spiritual camaraderie rather than shared fear that brought the participants together. Dr. Wangari Maathai (1940–2011), leader of the Green Belt movement in Kenya, observed:

> All religions meditate on the Source. And yet, strangely, religion is one of our greatest divides. If the Source be the same, as indeed it must be, all of us and all religions meditate on the same Source.

In 1990, another great assembly of spiritual leaders of all faiths, with scientists and parliamentarians, took place in what, until a few years before, would have been the most unlikely place in the world for such a gathering—Moscow, capital of the previously officially atheistic Soviet Union. The final speaker was Mikhail Gorbachev, who called for a merging of scientific and spiritual values in the effort to save the planet.

Throughout 1993, special interfaith meetings were held around the world to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Parliament of the World’s Religions. The largest 1993 centenary celebration was again held in Chicago. It included an attempt to define and then use as a global standard for behavior the central ethical principles common to all religions. “The Declaration Toward a Global Ethic” included the Golden Rule:

> Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
There is a principle which is found and has persisted in many religious and ethical traditions of humankind for thousands of years: What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others. Or in positive terms: What you wish done to yourself, do to others! This should be the irrevocable, unconditional norm for all areas of life, for families and communities, for races, nations, and religions.22

The global gathering model has been replicated in various locations, drawing participants from around the world to deliberate how religions can collectively help to solve the world’s problems. Many people have had the vision that the United Nations could be home to representatives or leaders from all faiths, jointly advising the organization on international policy from a religious perspective. This was the thrust of the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders held at the United Nations in 2000. Another series of interfaith meetings is ongoing in Astana, capital of Kazakhstan, where people of many faiths are participating in the World Forum of Spiritual Culture, with the idea that Kazakhstan, where multiculturalism is intentionally celebrated, can be a global model of interfaith cooperation for the common good.

Questions arise in such efforts, in addition to the necessity for substantial funding. Which religions should be represented? As we have seen, most major religions have many offshoots and branches that do not fully recognize each other’s authority. And which, if any, of the myriad new religious movements should be included? If indigenous religions are to be included, could one representative speak for all the varied traditions? Would such an organization reflect the bureaucratic patriarchal structures of existing religions, or would it include women, the poor, and enlightened people rather than managers? If the members of the body were not elected by their respective organizations, but were rather simply interested individuals, what authority would they have?

The Internet conveys the efforts of many organizations to provide accurate information about a variety of religions to help overcome igno-

*Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians enjoy a children’s interfaith education class together in Gobind Sadan, New Delhi.*
tance and intolerance. The Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, for instance, sponsor www.religioustolerance.org, a rich offering of articles and resources on a long list of religions plus essays on interfaith themes.

Some nongovernmental organizations are also attempting to develop curricula for teaching children about the world's religions in classrooms. Materials for values education have also been prepared for universal use by such august institutions as the Oxford University Press. Its Indian series “Living in Harmony: A Course on Peace and Value Education” uses stories and activities drawn from all religions to inculcate virtues such as honesty, non-violence, religious tolerance, and respect for the environment. The editors explain:

The destiny of a nation depends on the character of its people. Character is not merely the awareness of some values, but also the commitment to uphold them in practice. To our sages and seers, education was incomplete without nobility of character.

There are also schools that intentionally impart interfaith perspectives. Among these, followers of moderate Turkish Islamic theologian Fethullah Gülen (b. 1941) have developed many schools in Central Asia and elsewhere, engaging students from various traditions in modern education and service directed toward the common good.

Local and national inter-religious groups and projects are quite active in Britain, with its increasingly multicultural population. The Leicester Council of Faiths’ efforts include developing a multifaith Welcome Centre, ensuring that there is balanced representation of all faiths at civic events, providing multifaith counseling and a multifaith chaplaincy service in some healthcare institutions, informing the various faiths about political matters that affect them, and working with the National Health Service on care that is sensitive to people’s specific faiths.

In some places, interfaith efforts are being applied directly to difficult real-life situations, such as the conflicts between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. In Israel, the Interfaith Encounter Association brings Muslims, Christians, and Jews together for intimate sharing of cultural and spiritual experiences from each other's traditions. In Jaffa, amidst tensions between adults of different religions, the Cologne Day Care Peace Center school develops harmonious interfaith relationships among its nursery and kindergarten students, who are chosen from an intentional mixture of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian families, and taught by both Israeli and Arab teachers. There are even groups bringing together the families and friends of those from all sides who have been killed in conflicts.

In India, where inter-religious tensions have sometimes been fanned into deadly violence, the Sikh-based interfaith work of Gobind Sadan is bringing together volunteers of all religions in practical farm work on behalf of the poor, and in celebrations of the holy days of all religions. Baba Virsa Singh, the spiritual inspiration of Gobind Sadan, quoted from the words of all the prophets, explaining:
All the Prophets have come from the same Light; they all give the same basic messages. None have come to change the older revealed scriptures; they have come to remind people of the earlier Prophets’ messages which the people have forgotten. We have made separate religions as walled forts, each claiming one of the Prophets as its own. But the Light of God cannot be confined within any manmade structures. It radiates throughout all of Creation. How can we possess it?24

Although Baba Virsa Singh passed on in 2007, his teachings and his practical approach to interfaith harmony are being carried on by his followers. One new initiative is interfaith education for children. Poor children from the community and surrounding area gather weekly to learn about the teachings of all religions and to act out stories from the lives of all prophets. Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim children happily play the roles of figures from traditions other than their own and regard them all as messengers from the same divine source.

Where people have seen their relatives tortured and killed by fanatics of another faith, reconciliation is very difficult but necessary if the cycle of violence and counterviolent reactions is to be halted. The International Center for Conciliation is training facilitators for conciliation workshops in various hot spots in order to turn “pained memory and hate into empathy.”25 Andreas D’Souza and Diane D’Souza, who are working to heal hatreds among Muslim victims of violence in India, point out that we tend mentally to divide society into opposing camps:

In our world today, particularly in Western countries, we are tending to demonize the other. It is “us,” the sane and balanced, against “them,” the demented, violent, and inhuman. We must resist this attempt to polarize “the good” and “the bad,” for it leads to complacency at best, and to the rationalization of violence, death, and destruction at worst.26

However, embedded within religions themselves is the basis for harmony, for all teach messages of love and self-control rather than murderous passions.

Religion and social issues

Within every religion, there are contemporary attempts to bring religious perspectives to bear on the critical issues facing humanity. Today we are facing new issues that were not directly addressed by older teachings, such as the ethics of genetic engineering. Some are old issues which persist into the present, such as the ethics of abortion and sexual activity outside of marriage. And some issues have reached critical proportions in our times, such as terrorism, HIV/AIDS, global recession, the gap between rich and poor, climate change, and the deterioration of the natural environment. Many religious groups are re-examining their scriptures for teachings that would support...
careful environmental stewardship, in the face of dire warnings about global warming and other looming disasters. Buddhists are spearheading efforts to ban landmines. Hindus and Muslims are trying to stop the spread of immoral, violent, and cynical mass media communications, to help protect the minds of the young. Racism and violence are challenging people of all faiths to deepen their spiritual understanding and to ponder appropriate responses to these scourges. Poverty, injustice, and human rights abuses in societies are being addressed by many religious groups. The Catholic liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez (b. 1928) asserted:

In the last analysis, poverty means an unjust and early death. Now everything is subordinated to market economies, without taking into consideration the social consequences for the weakest. People say, for example, that in business there are no friends. Solidarity is out of fashion. We need to build a culture of love, through respect of the human being, of the whole of creation. We must practice a justice inspired by love. Justice is the basis of true peace. We must, sisters and brothers, avoid being sorry for or comforting the poor. We must wish to be friends of the poor in the world.27

In contrast to this ethic, in today’s world there is an increasing gap between rich and poor, and poor people are homeless and dying from malnutrition and starvation in the same countries where many wealthy people are benefiting from their cheap labor and politicians are benefiting from their votes. India, home to the world’s largest tribal populations, is also the world’s largest democracy, a richly agricultural country with plentiful grain surpluses that are exported or left to rot because of inadequate storage facilities. Urban areas are becoming very smart throughout the country, and many large homes and high-rise apartments are being built with teak and marble decor. However, despite promises of politicians to the tribal peoples languishing out of sight in rural areas, over eighty percent of them remain below the poverty line, sick, malnourished, ill-educated, lacking basic services, and hungry. Although the central government has legislated many programs designed to alleviate poverty, aid has not reached the people who need it, because of mismanagement, corruption, and a lack of direct participation by tribal people in implementation of poverty alleviation programs. Uneducated and facing extreme poverty, they are easy prey to unscrupulous moneylenders who charge such high interest that poor farmers fall more deeply into debt each year, especially when crops fail. As a result, thousands have committed suicide because they see no other way out. Some faith-based NGOs are trying to help people on a local scale, but there is as yet no concerted, sincere, large-scale effort by religiously conscientious people to change this bleak picture of structural injustice, even though India is home to many of the world’s religions. The same widening gap between rich and poor in India is evident in other countries as well. Until individualism gives way to genuine concern for the community, this pattern may persist and worsen in the years to come.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic, which some feel is already the greatest social crisis in the world, may continue to grow in the future. More than 330 million of the world’s people are carrying HIV/AIDS, and 1.5 million people have died so far from this scourge in sub-Saharan Africa alone. It has been a particularly difficult subject for religions to come to grips with, since it involves intimate behaviors that they do not usually discuss. However, the response of religions is now growing, with dialogues, debates, and actions being undertaken from local to international levels by religious institutions. In Uganda, one of
When Jimmy Carter left the White House after being the President of the United States from 1977 to 1981, he did not retire from public service. He went on to become involved in Habitat for Humanity, which helps to build houses for the poor, and to found the Carter Center, which works on many fronts to help governments solve conflict through peace talks rather than violence. The Carter Center also promotes development, health, and human rights in many countries. Jimmy Carter explains the philosophy that underlies all these efforts:

> Bringing deaths and injuries, massive destruction of property, and the interruption of normal law and order, war is the greatest violation of basic human rights that one people can inflict upon another. Starvation, exposure, and disease caused by war often produce more casualties than the fighting itself. War touches not only soldiers in battle and leaders in government but ordinary citizens—men, women, and children—as well.

> Because of numerous bloody struggles [in our times, many of them in poor countries], millions of people have lost their homes, livelihoods, and opportunities for medical care and education. Children in particular suffer—many do not know when to expect their next meal, whether they will ever attend school again, or where their parents might be.

The former president is a highly respected and effective statesman whose personal intervention and reconciliation efforts during his presidency brought the Camp David peace accords between the leaders of Egypt and Israel. He has not always been successful in accomplishing his high ideals. But Jimmy Carter is a deeply religious person, a committed Christian who brings a strong grounding in faith to the inevitable trials and setbacks in life. He asserts:

> Faith is the gift of God, and it is more precious than gold; to face life, we should put on the shield of faith, the breastplate of faith and love. … Without a central core of beliefs or standards by which to live, we may never experience the challenge and excitement of seeking a greater life. We will have ceased to grow, like Jesus, “strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God upon him” (Luke 2:4).  

the worst-hit countries in Africa, the disease was identified in 1982. People thought that those who contracted the disease must be victims of witchcraft, revenge from angry ancestors, or the wrath of God. Once the connections of the disease with sexual promiscuity, homosexual contact, and drug use were made, the issue was shrouded in stigma and denial. But by 1992, the government recognized that its future development could be seriously imperiled by the disease, so it organized the Uganda AIDS Commission. Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim leaders have been active members and chairs of the commission, and have helped it to be candid about the problem and also sensitive to the people’s religious beliefs and practices. They developed a basic program called “ABC”: abstinence, being faithful, and condoms. Since limiting the number of sexual partners is considered the most important way of stopping spread of the epidemic, Ugandans have encouraged “zero grazing” for monogamous, mostly Christian couples, and “paddock grazing” for polyga-
RELIGION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

In the midst of difficulties, Jimmy Carter is comforted by a personal sense of the presence of God. He reflects:

In addition to the intellectual realization of a supreme being, we have a purely subjective need to meet a personal yearning. We have an innate desire to relate to the all-knowing, the all-powerful, and the ever-present—to some entity that transcends ourselves. I am grateful and happy when I feel the presence of God within me, as a tangible influence on my thoughts and on the ultimate standards of my life. It is reassuring to me to know that God will always be with me and cares for me. I think of the words of Isaiah: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you; For I am the Lord your God. … You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you” (Isaiah 42:2–4).30

Jimmy Carter is now one of the leaders engaged in a deep struggle to restore fundamental American values in government. He explains:

In recent years, I have become increasingly concerned by a host of radical government policies that now threaten many basic principles espoused by all previous administrations, Democratic and Republican. These include the rudimentary American commitment to peace, economic and social justice, civil liberties, our environment and human rights. Also endangered are our historic commitments to providing citizens with truthful information, treating dissenting voices and beliefs with respect, state and local autonomy, and fiscal responsibility.

At the same time, our political leaders have declared independence from the restraints of international organization and have disavowed long-standing global agreements—including agreements on nuclear arms, control of biological weapons and the international system of justice. Instead of our tradition of espousing peace as a national priority unless our security is directly threatened, we have proclaimed a policy of “preemptive war,” an unabridged right to attack other nations unilaterally to change an unsavory regime or for other purposes.

... I am extremely concerned by a fundamentalist shift in many houses of worship and in government, as church and state have become increasingly intertwined in ways previously thought unimaginable. As the world’s only superpower, America should be seen as the unswerving champion of peace, freedom and human rights. ... We should be in the forefront of providing human assistance to people in need. It is time for the deep and disturbing political divisions within our country to be substantially healed, with Americans united in a common commitment to revive and nourish the historical political and moral values that we have espoused during the last 230 years.31

mous relationships among Muslims. But even this simple program, which has apparently shown considerable success, runs into many subtle barriers related to people’s religious cultures, such as traditional acceptance of wife-sharing, spontaneous sexuality during celebrations, and allowance for men to “inherit” their relatives’ widows.

Reproductive restrictions are proposed by many religious groups, for the sake of safeguarding the family and the preciousness of human life. Homosexual preferences are controversial when the actors are in roles of spiritual leadership. The issue of homosexuality in the clergy is a deeply divisive issue within the Anglican Church. Sexual intercourse outside of marriage is discouraged by many religions. Even within marriage, contraception may be subject to religious guidelines. The Roman Catholic Church tries to prohibit contraception by any means other than abstinence during the most fertile days of the woman’s monthly cycle, and also forbids abortion and sterilization. In 1965, in a historic
document called *Gaudium et Spes* (Joy and Hope), the Second Vatican Council recommended that individual freedom should be consciously subsumed to concern for the common good and commitment to God: “Married people … must be ruled by conscience—and conscience ought to be in accord with the law of God in the teaching authority of the Church, which is the authentic interpreter of divine law.” Such recommendations do not have the force of law except in theocracies. Many couples make their own sexual choices, including the moral decision not to have large families, to help curb population growth and to use their time and resources to rear a few children as best they can.

Legalized abortion has been a hot issue for decades, with strident conflicts continuing between “pro-life” and “pro-choice” factions, both of whom cite ethical principles to support their causes. In vitro fertilization has also been controversial since its inception. It is seen by infertile couples as a last hope in their efforts to bear children, but some people have religious objections to the procedure. A Sunni Muslim fatwa issued in Egypt in 1980 is still considered valid in many Muslim circles: IVF is permitted if the husband’s sperm is used and if the partners are currently married to each other. Because many fertilized eggs die during IVF attempts without becoming viable embryos, the spiritual question arises of whether and when the embryo should be considered a human being, with human rights.

The newest reproductive-choice issues involve cloning research. Several hundreds of cloned animals of various species already exist. Of various types of cloning procedures, reproductive cloning has the potential for creating a cloned human being. The potential for severe genetic defects is only one of the ethical issues involved, and many countries have banned the reproductive cloning of humans. Another type of cloning, therapeutic cloning, is being researched with the hope of being able to create organs, such as hearts or kidneys, for transplant using a patient’s own genetic material, thus thwarting the danger of organ rejection. Some of the ethical issues involved here include the morality of raising genetically modified animals for this purpose, such as pigs, who are genetically similar to humans, from whom organs could then be “harvested” for transplant. People of many religions doubt that humans are wise and restrained enough to use cloning technology carefully. “Bioethics” is becoming a subject of serious consideration by conferences around the world, bringing together religious leaders, scientists, and legal experts to try to shape appropriate policies for use of new technologies.

Concern over other social problems has for some people been eclipsed by concern over terrorism. The terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001 and in other countries have brought a sea change in ways of thinking. The future may hold a more serious inquiry into the motives and concerns of people who are willing to risk their lives and kill others, as well as the intentions of those who are interpreting scriptures as supporting such actions.

**Religion and materialism**

All religions teach that one should not hurt others, should not lie, should not steal, should not usurp others’ rights, should not be greedy, but rather should be unselfish, considerate, and helpful to others, and humble before the Unseen. These universal spiritual principles were swamped by the expansion of capitalism in the twentieth century, as the profit motive triumphed as the most important value in economies around the world.
William J. Byron, who teaches courses in corporate responsibility at Loyola College, observes that integrity has fallen by the wayside in the “new corporate culture.” Instead, “secrecy, easy money, and the violation of trust define a framework for the test of character in the world of business.” Spiritual principles were notoriously absent in the sub-prime lending by American banks that led to a severe global recession starting in 2008. Economist Thomas Friedman described the situation as “a near-total breakdown of responsibility at every link in our financial chain.”

Christian theologian Sallie McFague points to dire ecological as well as social consequences of unrestrained greed:

We are addicted to our consumer lifestyle, and we are in denial that is bad for us and for our planet. But of even greater importance, it is unjust: many of the world’s people have been impoverished by this model. ... According to the United Nations Human Development Report (1998), 20 percent of people in high-income countries account for 86 percent of private consumption while the poorest 20 percent of the world’s population consume only 1.3 percent of the pie. In Africa, the average household consumes 20 percent less than it did 25 years ago. Furthermore, two-thirds of the world’s population lives on less than two dollars per day.

Some religious observers are re-examining the values of traditional economic systems in light of this situation. Dr. Zhou Qin of the Department of Chinese Studies at the National University of Singapore writes:

In the light of the teachings of Confucian tradition, neoliberalism and the global economy contribute to the moral disorientation and shallowness of our time. Today, it would be absolutely reasonable for one to claim all of one’s rights as an individual without any concerns for the rights of others.

From a Buddhist perspective, Professor David Loy of Bunkyo University, Japan, points out that the problem is attachment and uncontrolled desires, rather than wealth per se:

An intense drive to acquire material riches is one of the main causes of our dukkha [suffering]. It involves much anxiety but very little real satisfaction. ... “Wealth destroys the foolish, though not those who search for the goal” (Dhammapada 355). In short, what is blameworthy is to earn wealth improperly, to become attached to it and not to spend it for the well-being of everyone, to squander it foolishly or use it to cause suffering to others.

In the midst of global recession Pope Benedict XVI called upon governments, corporations, political leaders, and individuals to look at their economic responsibilities from a spiritual perspective of love and truth. He proclaimed, “Only with love illumined by reason and by faith is it possible to achieve goals of development endowed with humane and humanizing values.”

Some individuals and corporations have now stepped back to consider how to reconcile spiritual motives with earning a living. Books on voluntary simplicity have proliferated on the bestseller lists. Typically, they encourage the relatively wealthy to cut back on their breakneck work pace for the sake of their own spiritual peace, and to cut back on unnecessary individual expenditures for the sake of sharing with others. Liberal capitalism is being reinterpreted not as a means of allowing industrious people to climb out of poverty, but as a potentially amoral system.
A new social consciousness that reflects religious values is beginning to enter some workplaces. Professor Syed Anwar Kabir, a faithful Muslim on the faculty of the Management Development Institute in New Delhi, India, teaches his managerial students to do mind-stilling meditation daily in order to listen to their own conscience and make ethical choices from a base of inner tranquility. He observes:

Businessmen themselves say that the uninhibited, reckless way in which you accumulate wealth will not give you a good name. For a company to survive in a highly competitive world in the long term means creating an image in the mind of the public, creating good will, creating its own impact and niche in the market. … If you treat human beings not as means but also as ends, naturally it is reflected in your products and services and creates an impact in the world of consumers so that they also come to respect the company’s principles and strategies.39

However, in the twenty-first century, power-mongering, self-interest, and corruption are at the forefront of economic and political activities; honesty, altruism, service, harmony, justice, and the public good are not the primary motivating forces in most government actions.

Religion and the future of humanity

The new century has begun with flagrant materialistic greed, crime, amorality, ethnic hatreds, violence, and family crises, together with ignorant demonizing, power-mongering, and moneymaking in religions themselves.

Although there is a global increase in religiosity, this trend includes both polarizing and harmonizing tendencies. New alliances are being forged across old religious lines, but often in the direction of dividing the world into liberal and conservative factions. Many watched the events of the “Arab Spring” in 2011 with hope that people’s power to remove oppressive governments would lead to new social models of freedom and harmony. Some worry that the resulting political vacuum may give rise to even more restrictive and oppressive regimes, but it is too early to make such judgments. During this process, a Muslim prince from Yemen who is committed to a more humane future cautioned against seeing the world in black and white terms:

The story of the past is not that of two sides: the good and the bad. Rather it is a story of many sides and many layers, who are good and bad at the same time. There are no angels in this story, nor devils. There are no absolute victims, nor absolute aggressors. The past is ambivalent and complicated, and no one has absolute moral supremacy. Rather, each side has a moral right sometimes, in some situations, with some people, but never always and with everyone. All sides are now suffering, and all have to be sympathetic to the plight of the other. Concessions have to be made based on humanitarian terms, rather than purely legal and political ones. Ultimately, I wish people will decide on building their future not on any moralizing of the past, but rather on moralizing the future. And as a step towards that, I want people to break the monolithic view they have of each other, and to complicate historical process rather than simplify it.40

If we are to amicably co-habit the world, we need far more nuanced and educated understandings of each other. The thoughtful study of religions is thus critical to our shared future. So is deep spiritual awareness and practice.
of what the prophets of all religions have tried to teach us. The words of the late French sage Teilhard de Chardin are often quoted:

Some day, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides, and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And then, for the second time in the history of the world, man will have discovered fire.

Key terms

exclusivism  The idea that one’s own religion is the only valid way.
inclusivism  The idea that all religions can be accommodated within one religion.
interfaith dialogue  Appreciative communication between people of different religions.
modernism  Values that developed in the twentieth century including individualism, preference for change rather than continuity, quantity rather than quality, efficiency, pragmatism, and profiteering, all seen by some as threatening the existence of traditional religious values.
pluralism  An appreciation of the diversity of religions.
universalism  Belief in the inner oneness of all religions.

Review questions

1. Define globalization. What factors are influencing the globalization of culture, and how do these factors affect religion?
2. What are the four meanings of secularism described in this chapter, and how does each affect contemporary religiosity?
3. Describe the major themes of the interfaith movement.
4. What are some of the factors that have led to a hardening of religious boundaries?
5. Describe how religious leaders have responded to the issue of materialism in the contemporary world.
Discussion questions

1. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of religions’ involvement in politics and social issues such as sexuality and reproduction.
2. Compare examples of exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and universalism. What do you consider the advantages and disadvantages of each position?
3. One of the chapter’s final statements is that “the thoughtful study of religions is ... critical to our shared future.” How has your study of religion affected your views?
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- The Battle for God
- Ground Rules for Interfaith Dialogue
- Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief
- God Will Break All the Barriers
- Sacred Whispers in the World