

Religious Movements for a New Century

Along with the revitalization of ancient traditions in the form of traditionalism and various religious revivals and reformulations of religious traditions, a number of new religious forms have emerged as a response to modernism. These forms include civil religions and syncretic religious movements and new forms of religiosity that draw upon elective affinities between the interests of particular groups of people and the interaction among various religious traditions and secular forces. Religiosity in the new century is a dynamic mixture of the old and the new, of ancient rites and beliefs as well as a plethora of recent religious movements, and the impact of social movements, such as the women's and environmental movements, on religious beliefs and institutions (see, e.g., Robbins & Anthony, 1990). As the pace of globalization picks up, the crosscurrents of the global cultures—and reactions against broad social changes—make spiritual life interesting and diverse.

Civil Religion and Nationalism

One of the most significant forms of quasi-religion in the 20th grew out of the social organization of the nation-state, which often replaces traditional religious institutions as a focus of identity and basis of the cultural ethos. This significant element of political culture, especially in modern nation-states, is usually called civil religion, a concept developed by Jean-Jacques

Rousseau (1762/1901) and Alexis de Tocqueville (1862/1945) that is congruent with Emile Durkheim's understanding of the role of religion in collective life. The growth of civil religion has been widespread primarily for two reasons: (1) to provide cultural unity among a set of pluralistic belief systems created by population migration or artificially constructed states (usually established by colonial powers) and (2) as a functional substitute for a religious tradition that was deliberately attacked because of its alliance with the old order (especially in the socialist states).

American society provides a particularly instructive model of civil religion because of the parallels between the multicultural U.S. society and the emerging pluralistic world system. Many of the struggles faced first by Western Europe and then the United States, as they moved into the heterogeneity of the modern world, are now encountered in other countries, even when the paths and contents of cultural transformation have been substantially different.

Civil Religion: The American Case

No matter where we live, we have a promise that can make all the difference—a promise from Jesus to soothe our sorrows, heal our hearts, and drive away our fears. He promised there will never be a dark night that does not end . . . And by dying for us, Jesus showed how far our love should be ready to go: all the way.

—President Ronald Reagan, February 1984

Civil religion in the United States, though still highly Christian in its tone and basic beliefs, is a general religious orientation that emphasizes belief in a generic God and a specific role for the United States of America in world history. Robert Bellah (1970) is the sociologist who has applied the notion of civil religion most thoroughly to the U.S. context:

Behind the civil religion at every point lie biblical archetypes: Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, and Sacrificial Death and Rebirth. But it is also genuinely American and genuinely new. It has its own prophets and its own martyrs, its own sacred events and sacred places, its own solemn rituals and symbols. (p. 186)

Gehrig (1981) concluded that civil religion in the United States is “the religious symbol system which relates the citizen's role and the American society's place in space, time, and history to the conditions of ultimate existence and meaning” (p. 108); it is differentiated structurally from the political

and religious communities of the United States and carries out “specialized religious functions performed by neither church nor state.”

Generic religious images and rituals are frequently evoked to underscore the sacredness of U.S. tradition and culture, practices that reflect the ambivalent and tenuous framing of religion in American political culture: “In God We Trust” is inscribed on the currency, but the referent is deliberately ambiguous. Every presidential inaugural address, except George Washington’s second, includes references to God. In the 1950s, the phrase “one nation under God” was added to the pledge of allegiance, which is still recited in most public schools around the country. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan broke traditional rules about the relationship between politics and religion with his specific references to Jesus. This explicitly Christian presidential rhetoric returned with the presidency of George W. Bush in 2001.

Civic rituals in the United States have a strong religious flavor. The major holidays in the American liturgical calendar unite religion and political culture, if not church and state:

- Thanksgiving is at the core of the practice, with its explicit link between the “status legend” (as Weber might call it) of the country’s founding and the deity of American civil religion.
- The period around “Christmas,” now sometimes generically referred to as “the holidays,” embraces Christmas and New Year’s, and in recent years has adopted Chanukah and the African American invention of Kwanza.
- Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday, a recent addition for the purpose of inclusivity, celebrates a Christian pastor’s contribution to national political life.
- Memorial Day links the nation’s wars with the deity.
- The Fourth of July is explicitly a secular holiday, but God’s name is often invoked in official ceremonies.

Hammond (1980) summarized the ideology behind the peculiar alliance between the state and religion in the United States as follows: “(1) There is a God (2) whose will can be known through democratic procedures; therefore (3) democratic America has been God’s primary agent in history, and (4) for Americans the nation has been their chief source of identity” (pp. 41–42). This ideology is multifaceted: On the one hand, it has been a useful cultural tool for uniting people from diverse backgrounds into a single body politic; aspects of the civil theology facilitated a critique of slavery in the 19th century and legitimated the civil rights movement in the 20th (see Bellah, 1975). On the other hand, civil religion in the United States has cultivated hegemonic ambitions and a sense of religious superiority that has legitimated some of America’s worst episodes of adventurism, from the earlier doctrine of “Manifest Destiny,” which was used to justify the genocide of the people

living in the New World before the Europeans arrived, to more recent efforts to police the world with the American military.

Debates about Bellah's characterization of American civil religion all reflect the problem of collective religious ideas in a pluralistic society so characteristic of both U.S. culture and the global village. Richard K. Fenn (1972, 1974, 1976) developed a series of critiques, the core of which resurfaced on a broader scale with R. Stephen Warner's (1993) important proposal for a new paradigm for the study of religion in American society, in which the metaphor of the marketplace replaces that of the sacred canopy. Fenn contended that because cultural integration is impossible in modern societies, civil religion is a useless concept. It is probably more accurate to say that cultural integration is a necessary but extremely difficult process in diverse societies and that the idea of a broad civil religion that lacks any sectarian character but still aids the construction of a collective identity is one important response to the dilemmas of multiculturalism.

Civil Religion in the Global Village

Political elites attempting to achieve national consensus will, of course, find some form of civil religion, or its functional equivalent, desirable to give legitimacy and (at least the appearance of) higher purpose to the political order. The more diverse the citizenry, the more difficult it is to suspend a sacred canopy across the state. Independent India, for example, has had great difficulty developing a secular state that embraces Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Jains, because questions of religion and politics are always intertwined. Efforts to use Mahatma Gandhi, the universally acknowledged "father of the country," as a figurehead have sometimes backfired because Gandhi, despite his own universalistic approach to religious belief, alienated large portions of the Muslim and Sikh communities by employing Hindu rhetoric and symbols in his public presentations (although he also included symbols from many faiths, including Muslim, Sikh, and Christian, as well as Hindu).

Like Western Europe following the French Revolution, 20th-century communist countries attempted to replace traditional religious forms with new versions that were not always successful. Civic rituals in the Soviet Union looked remarkably like Russian Orthodox ones, with some new content. The public processions of the Communist Party and military looked much like ancient religious processions, and the celebrated saints of Christianity were replaced with Saints Marx and Lenin. Father Frost, a bearded man in a red suit, left gifts for the children under the New Year's tree, a decorated evergreen. Meanwhile, opposition movements throughout the Soviet bloc were supported in significant ways by both the ideologies

and the institutions of the Christian church. Religious organizations provided a space for organizing alternative institutions and resistance movements, training workshops in nonviolence, and a general legitimacy within the larger population.

In China, efforts to replace Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism with Maoism were only partially successful. Because diverse religious beliefs had lived together in relatively peaceful coexistence in Chinese culture over the centuries, many people simply added Mao to the pantheon, or at least worshiped him in public and their traditional Gods at home. Buddhist religious officials, with a long history of negotiating with Chinese political elites, discussed affinities between Buddhism and Marxism.

The Republic of China (Taiwan) presents an interesting case, because the nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek was a Christian, as were many of his followers (converted and educated by missionaries). When the government fled to Taiwan from the mainland in 1949, it tried to suppress “superstitious” Chinese folk religions but allowed free worship of Confucianism and Buddhism, which place relatively little emphasis on transcendental theology and have traditionally promoted public order in Chinese culture. Because K’ung-Fu-tzu (Confucius) is regarded more as a philosopher and founder of Chinese social and political thought than as a God, the conflicts do not seem so sharp. Confucian temples are maintained by the state and are the site of major celebrations every year at K’ung-Fu-tzu’s birthday, when he is honored—not so much as a God but as the “Great Teacher”—by government officials and the general public.

Efforts to create civil religions within and among national societies are now complicated by intercultural conflicts almost everywhere, even in places where new states have been carved out more or less on the basis of ethnic identities—such as Pakistan and Israel—because of persisting internal diversity and, more important, because no nation lives in isolation and the dilemmas of multiculturalism cannot be avoided.

The Sunni–Shia Divide in Islam

As the Muslim community grew and became a combined political and spiritual force after the death of Muhammad, first Uthman (Muhammad’s son-in-law) and then Ali (Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law) became caliphs, the leaders of the community. Internal divisions erupted into deep and long-lasting conflicts and finally civil war, laying a foundation for a fierce internal conflict that persisted into the 21st century. The group of Muslims who supported Ali came to be known as the **Shia** (“followers”), or Shiites, and created an institution called the *imamah* (from *imam*, meaning

“leader”) in which each leader appointed his successor to be the imam, whom the Shias believe is divinely inspired and can provide both religious and secular leadership. When Ali was assassinated in 661 CE, his eldest son Hasan succeeded him, followed by a younger son Husayn.

The other major branch of Islam, the **Sunni Muslims**, became the majority Muslim group, deriving their name from an emphasis on the *sunnah*, the custom or practice of the Prophet. The Sunnis developed an elaborate set of means for interpreting the Shari’a that relied upon the use of consensus and analogy by the scholars who specialized in the study of Islamic law. Not surprisingly, some broad differences of opinion in how to interpret the Shari’a led to the creation of four schools of law in Sunni Islam, each named after the scholar most responsible for its creation: Shafi’i, Maliki, Hanbali, and Hanafi. Each school has its own distinctive characteristics but recognizes the others’ right to their differing views (e.g., on whether the Qur’an was created by God or is eternal), thus allowing for a considerable level of tolerance and autonomy while recognizing a common membership in the universal Islamic community, the *ummah*.

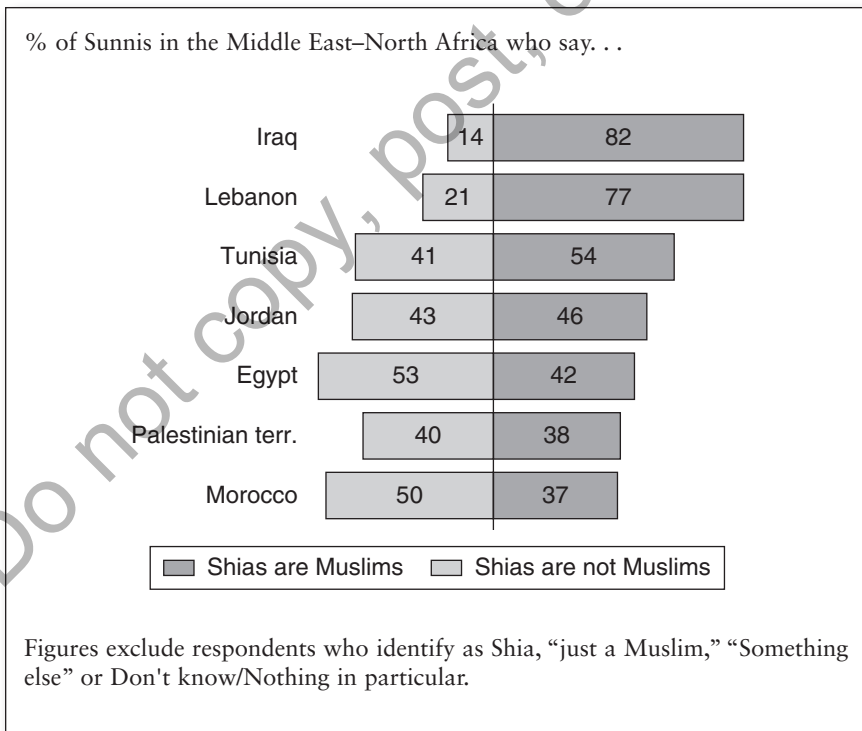
Because of their dramatic leadership succession struggle, the Sunni and the Shia became bitter enemies, much like the Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland but with wider geographical consequences. With the division between them coinciding with many political and economic divisions, this has led to many violent struggles. The Sunnis constitute the overwhelming majority of Muslims worldwide, perhaps 87% to 90%, but the Shiites dominate the key Middle Eastern countries of Iran and Iraq, constituting nearly 65% of the population (Esposito & Mogabed, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2009). This ancient internal religious struggle persists centuries later and shapes many of the dynamics of world politics, in part because religious identity is so important to so many.

The most recent configuration of the struggle between Sunnism and Shiism emerged after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s disproportionately Sunni Baath Party, when the relationship between the two groups in Iraqi politics was reversed. The numerical majority of the Iraqis were Shiite, but the elites had been Sunni since the Middle Ages, through the Ottoman Empire and then British rule. After independence from Britain, the Sunnis created a one-party state, then repressed religious Shiites, who sought revenge and allied themselves with the United States in the post-Saddam Iraq and supported a program of “de-Baathification,” firing tens of thousands of Sunnis from government jobs and teaching positions and closing down state-owned industries (Cole, 2014). As Maréchal and Zemni (2013, p. 1) put it, “a series of upheavals within the Shiite sphere of influence had altered the relationship between Shiism and Sunnism over the course of several decades.” In particular,

the Iranian Revolution of 1979 changed the politics of Iranian Shiism and subsequently impacted on Shiite communities throughout the region; the 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq initiated a new phase of tension in the relations between the two trends and Shiites were suddenly gaining political power that had traditionally been held by the Sunnis. (p. 1)

In the wake of the toppling of Saddam Hussein, massive unemployment in the Sunni cities, parliamentary elections in which the Sunnis were almost excluded, and a widespread fear among the Sunni Iraqis about their future provoked a violent insurgency. A Shiite shrine in Samarra was blown up in February 2006, and by that summer, 3,000 people were being killed a month. The Sunni militias were disarmed and many of them fled to Syria, Jordan, or Mosul; when U.S. military officers in the field had tried to reach out to disaffected Sunnis in 2005, they were apparently rebuffed by Washington, and

Table 7.1 Sunnis in Iraq, Lebanon More Accepting of Shias



Source: Pew Research Center, *The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity*, August 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-executive-summary>.

Sunni discontent continued to escalate. Ironically, despite the outbreak of violence between Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq and the focus on it in the media, a study by the Pew Research Center between October 2011 and November 2012 revealed citizens of that country to be among the least concerned about conflicts between the two groups, and Iraqi citizens were most likely to consider Shias to be legitimately Muslims (see Table 7.1).

In 2011, inspired by the Arab uprisings starting in Tunisia and Egypt, but with a violent twist, some combatants from the Iraqi struggle morphed “Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia” first into the Islamic State of Iraq and then the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, sometimes referred to as ISIS (also called the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant, or ISIL). The al-Maliki government brutally repressed youthful Sunni demonstrations in the Iraqi cities, and Iraqi Sunnis felt increasingly subject not only to discrimination, but harassment and humiliation. Mobilized and inspired by their fighting in Syria, ISIS expanded back to the Iraqi cities of Falluja, Ramadi, and Mosul and elsewhere. Juan Cole (2014) claims that “Sunni Iraqis had been in the 20th century cosmopolitan and often modernists,” but in desperation have turned

to rural fundamentalists who want a medieval caliphate only because of the vast reversal in their fortunes resulting from the Bush invasion and occupation, and the unfair policies of the Shiite government, which has turned them from an elite into an underclass.

Feeling sorely aggrieved and existing in a culture of violence, ISIL became a brutal force to reckon with in the entire region as well as a surrogate for conflicts between the two major rival powers in the region, the Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia and the Shia-led Iran. The Obama administration later promoted a more inclusive Iraqi government to mitigate the conflict in that country, but the genie had already been let out of the bottle, so to speak; a significant number of Iraqi Sunnis, with financial and political support from outside the country, were on a trajectory of escalating violence and were convinced (like their opponents) that the conflict would be settled only through the use of force.

Although the violent conflict raging at the time of this writing is complex and multifaceted and its future impossible to predict, it is also clearly religious in many ways. In many conflicts, religion simply provides the narrative used by the parties to justify their actions (especially violence) and to demonize their opponents. In others, religious fervor becomes an independent factor in addition to others, and so it seems in this case.

In a Brookings Doha Center Paper, on the one hand, F. Gregory Gause III (2014, p. 1) contends that “the best framework for understanding the

regional politics of the Middle East is as a cold war in which Iran and Saudi Arabia play the leading roles.” Rather than a religious conflict, Gause argues, “Riyadh and Tehran are playing a balance of power game. They are using sectarianism in that game, but both have crossed the sectarian fault line in seeking regional allies” (p. 1). Vali Reza Nasr, dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, on the other hand, argued in 2007 that the future of conflicts in the Middle East should be understood as related to a passionate conflict provoked not only by the long-term struggle between the branches of Islam, but also the Shia awakening after the fall of Sadaam Hussein’s regime in Iraq. “The Shia–Sunni conflict,” he contends,

is at once a struggle for the soul of Islam—a great war of competing theologies and conceptions of sacred history—and a manifestation of the kind of tribal wars of ethnicities and identities, so seemingly archaic at times, yet so surprisingly vital, with which humanity has become wearily familiar. Faith and identity converge in this conflict. . . . It is not just a hoary religious dispute, a fossilized set piece from the early years of Islam’s unfolding, but a contemporary clash of identities. Theological and historical disagreement fuel it, but so do today’s concerns with power, subjugation, freedom, and equality, not to mention regional conflicts and foreign intrigues. It is, paradoxically, a very old, very modern conflict. (Nasr 2007, p. 20)

The motivations of many of the combatants in these Middle Eastern conflagrations are probably genuinely spiritual as well as being driven by political and economic concerns, geopolitics, and identity issues. Even the experts can disagree on this issue, however, and I do not pretend to have the definitive answer. I am convinced, however, from my study of multiple conflicts that have a religious face, that simple explanations of conflicts embroiling religion with politics that rely on a single explanatory factor are almost always inadequate and usually just wrong. We will take up this issue of religion and conflict in more detail in Chapter 8.

Religious Syncretism and Alternative Religious Movements

In the new context of multiculturalism, we witness the revival of a venerable phenomenon in the history of the world’s religions: religious syncretism—that is, the combination of elements from more than one religious tradition to weave a new sacred canopy that competes in the cultural marketplace. We should expect this to happen in our increasingly interconnected global village.

It is nothing new—all the world's religions were created over the centuries through processes of intercultural conflict, amalgamation, and creative synthesis—but the scale and scope of the interactions among them are unprecedented. The current religious scene presents a dynamic interplay between traditional practices on the one hand and widespread transplanting of traditions and experiments with syncretism on the other.

Vast movements of migration and the creation of modern means of communication and transportation have increased the tempo of syncretism in the early 21st century. New versions of old traditions are emerging as alternatives to mainstream culture in contexts where the tradition has been dominant, as well as in new settings where a religious movement is transplanted. The potential for conflict between established and alternative religious communities is thereby greatly increased, posing a significant social problem for the global village.

The Sociology of Alternative Religious Movements

Conflict between current religious movements on the one hand and religious and social establishments on the other is not a new theme, nor is it a marginal one. It is a riff on the age-old story about the relationship between religious expression and the social order, between heresy and orthodoxy. Most religious movements—including those that now constitute the mainstream—begin as small, intense rebel groups at odds with the religious and political establishments of their own origins. Early Christians, for example, were in constant conflict with authorities: Jesus was executed by Rome after complaints by the local religious establishment, and many of his disciples were put to death. New religious movements (NRMs) tend to attract primarily people who perceive themselves as marginal or opposed to the dominant society and its value system (Glock & Bellah, 1976). Consequently, some form of tension between these movements and the larger society they inhabit is inevitable.

This section briefly examines some alternative religious movements and traditions. By alternative movements, I mean those religious groups outside the mainstream, sometimes called “cults,” although sociologists sometimes refer to them as NRMs to avoid the negative connotations of the popular term. I will adopt the term *NRM* in this discussion, though reluctantly, because it is something of a misnomer; to quote Ecclesiastes, “There is nothing new under the sun.” Some NRMs are actually imported versions of ancient religious perspectives from the other side of the global village; others are new interpretations of ancient indigenous religions. In this sense, North American religious life offers a microcosm of the broader processes taking place on the planet; and the experiments have had mixed results.

New Religions in the United States

The history of religious life in the United States is a story of ongoing struggles among various religious communities to coexist within the same political and geographic area. What is so interesting sociologically about this case is that it reflects many aspects of the process that the entire global village continues to experience; it is also the subject of a good deal of sociological inquiry. Because of the diversity of religious groups in the New World from the very beginning of American colonial history, a variety of faith communities—some of them with highly incompatible worldviews—have been required to forge a working relationship with each other.

Religious diversity has been normative in U.S. history from the beginning, but the cultural ferment of the 1960s and the waves of new immigrants from various parts of the world in recent decades precipitated an explosion of NRMs in the United States. The degree of multiculturalism has never been so high in American culture, especially with the introduction of large numbers of Asian immigrants in the late 20th century as a consequence of the relaxation of immigration laws barring them. Although the American religious landscape has always been diverse, this large influx of people from the Far East made a dramatic difference in the number of non-Christian believers living in the United States.

Three related sociological observations I would make about the alternative religious movements of contemporary American life are as follows:

1. Not all religious movements are alike, and they cannot accurately be classed together under the single label “cults” to distinguish them from “legitimate religions.”
2. The appearance of large numbers of NRMs around the world in recent decades reflects ongoing globalization processes: The “anticult” movement is often a protest against those changes, sometimes from an ethnocentric point of view.
3. Those characteristics of NRMs that people most detest are as much a consequence of social hostility toward them as of properties inherent in the movements themselves.

Let us examine each of these observations more closely.

Not All “Cults” Are Alike

Alternative religious movements are remarkably diverse in their beliefs and rituals, organization, membership, relationship to the broader society,

and virtually any other dimension, with one exception: Most are forged in deliberate contrast to existing mainstream religious groups in the culture or as a subgroup within these groups.

The original meaning of the term *cult* comes from the Latin *cultus*, “care” or “adoration.” It also refers to formal religious veneration, worship, or a system of religious beliefs, or its rituals. More recently, the term has taken on a third meaning—as Webster’s puts it, “a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious” (“Cult,” n.d.). In its latest sense, the idea of a cult, at least in American popular culture, has absorbed a range of negative images that include brainwashing, fanaticism, mind control, and so on (see Table 7.2).

Table 7.2 Major Religious Movements in the United States

	Movement Name	Roots	Major Figure	Doctrines, Practices
Mormon	Latter-Day Saints	Christian	Joseph Smith	Alternative Christian
Communal/ Countercultural	The Farm			Counterculture
Asian	Buddhism	Buddhist	Buddha, Dalai Lama	Meditation school, parables
	Yoga	Hindu/ Buddhist	Maharishi Mahesh Yoga	Meditation, health
	Transcendental Meditation	Hindu/ Buddhist	A. C. Bhaktivedanta	Meditation, improve clarity
	Krishna Consciousness	Hindu	Maharaj Ji	<i>Bhagavad Gita</i>
	Divine Light Mission	Hindu	Sun Myung Moon	New incarnation of God
	Unification Church	Syncretic		New incarnation of God
Feminist	Wicca (Witchcraft)	Syncretic		Feminism, Goddess worship
Neo-Christian	Christian World Liberation Front	Christian		Radical counterculture
	Children of God	Christian		Counterculture Christian

	Movement Name	Roots	Major Figure	Doctrines, Practices
	Campus Crusade	Christian		Evangelical Christian
	Jews for Jesus	Judeo-Christian		Converted Christian
New Thought	Christian Scientist	Christian	Mary Baker Eddy	Healing through positive attitudes
Psychic/New Age/Personal Growth	Scientology	Syncretic	L. Ron Hubbard	Auditing past lives
	EST	Asian/Syncretic	Werner Erhard	Sensitivity training
	Synanon		Charles Dederich	Substance abuse therapy
Neopagan	Satanism	Pagan	Anton Szandor LaVey	Magic, hedonism
Political	Christian Right	Christian	Jerry Falwell	School prayer, morality
	Sojourners	Christian	Jim Wallis	Evangelical liberation
	Nation of Islam	Muslim	Elijah Muhammed	Counter-white supremacy

Sources: Adapted from Bromley & Shupe (1981); Glock & Bellah (1976); Wuthnow (1976).

Asian and Countercultural Movements

The most significant NRMs in the United States were imported from Asia and derive especially from Buddhist and Hindu traditions. Like other NRMs, the Asian movements were transported through two different routes: (1) immigrants from the region who brought their own native religious beliefs and practices with them; and (2) indigenous countercultural movements that emerged, especially in the 1960s. These two distinct groups of practitioners were sometimes in conflict with one another: Whereas the immigrants were often busy assimilating into their new environment, counterculture participants were attempting to jettison the American cultural

milieu they had rejected. Thus, immigrant groups trying to adapt to a new cultural milieu were sometimes embarrassed by practitioners of their religion who were criticizing American culture.

Buddhist groups in the United States, especially the Zen and Pure Land schools, often have Japanese origins, although Tibetan Buddhism has gained a widespread following in American popular culture in recent years, largely because of the popularity of the Dalai Lama and supporters of the Free Tibet movement. Zen Buddhism was a particular favorite of the 1960s counterculture movements because of its spontaneity and its thoroughgoing challenge of Western utilitarian rationality and materialism (see also Hesse, 1971). The Beat generation of the 1950s set the stage for its introduction, with such writers as Jack Kerouac (with his novels such as *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*) and Gary Snyder making the precepts of Buddhism familiar to a large American audience. The counterculture of the next decade provided fertile soil for both Buddhism and Hinduism, demonstrating

a clear affinity between the pure self-determinist notion of the hippie movement and the law of karma as stated in Buddhism. Despite a present shaped by past actions, freedom of action in each new moment persists, enabling the practitioner to claim complete responsibility for, and control over, the future, religiously and otherwise. Further, the practitioner is enjoined not to look outside of himself to any agency of control such as God. (Prebish, 1978, p. 162)

The association between Asian religions and the American counterculture had mixed consequences for the Buddhist tradition: On the one hand, Asian traditions flourished as an outlet for disgruntled Americans, especially young people, and they received a great deal of attention. On the other hand, versions of Hinduism and Buddhism in the U.S. scene came in a variety of popular forms, often substantially modified from their Asian roots, and focused on a critique of American culture rather than on developing a true religious vision (see G. Johnson, 1976, p. 48). Yoga classes were given on television, and techniques of Yoga were sold as a form of self-therapy as well as consciousness expansion and relaxation.

Many South Asians who were gurus in the yogic tradition—such as Yogi Bhanan of the Happy Holy Organization; Swami Satchidananda, who performed at Woodstock; Swami Vishnudevananda of the International Sivananda Yoga and Vedanta Society; and the Maharishi Mahesh Yoga, with whom the rock group the Beatles associated—came to America with their message. The “British invasion” of American popular culture (especially the Rolling Stones and the Beatles) brought with it Asian culture.

George Harrison went to India to study the sitar with Ravi Shankar and came back singing “Hare Krishna” on the American airwaves.

Other 1960s cultural movements had a profound impact on mainstream American religion as well, notably the feminist movement.

Goddess Worship

Whereas Asian religions have been used as a framework for much countercultural resistance in American culture, a number of feminist movements have turned to so-called pagan religions and witchcraft as a way of embodying their discontent with the patriarchal structure and content of the dominant religions.

What Mary Jo Neitz (1987) called the Goddess movement encompassed a variety of countercultural groups that, although they have “no unifying organization, written scriptures, or dogma, no defining ritual practice” (p. 355), belong to two intersecting currents: neopaganism and feminism. The neopagan movement revived witchcraft in the countercultural ferment of the 1960s, drawing upon pre-Christian Celtic folk religions from ancient Europe. The term *witch* is used deliberately, in spite of (or because of) its negative connotations, because participants in the Goddess movement are protesting the sexism of Christian culture.

Witches organize in covens, small grassroots women’s circles that focus on bonding and empowering one another as women (although some neopagan circles include men as well). When witches gather, they draw syncretically upon ancient rituals of religions from what Eisler (1988) called the “partnership” societies of ancient Europe as well as new rituals, including one reported by Neitz (1987) in which women sit in a circle and give their names and the names of their matrilineal ancestors as far back as they can go. The participants quickly realize that the patrilineal naming practices have caused them to lose even the names of their foremothers. Goddess movement participants have experimented with the use of dance and music to tap the energy of the religious spirit.

Goddess worship is an interesting phenomenon that many North Americans find threatening because it represents a deliberate rebellion against the Christian cultural mainstream. Long a subject of denigration by Western patriarchal culture, witchcraft calls up images of devil worship and black magic in the minds of many. For feminist witches, however, the Goddess is “a symbol for the empowerment of women” (Neitz, 1990, p. 353) and provides a vehicle for creating an alternative social space within the patriarchal culture. Some witches have emphasized the more generally accepted positive characteristics of the Goddess image, however, interpreting her as “an archetypal figure based in the

early human experience of nurturance from a mother” (Neitz, 1990, p. 356). In that sense, the witches share much in the tenor of their religious movement with other Goddess movements around the world, including Chinese and Indian folk religions and, in a less obvious way, with the cult of the Virgin Mary that has permeated a broad spectrum of the Christian church. Another interesting twist on the goddess movement is the emergence of a Male Goddess Movement comprising pagan men who venerate goddesses and see the “female antitype as a form of liberation from dogmas of masculinity” such as aggression and competitiveness (Green, 2012, p. 305).

Because of its deliberately rebellious spirit and negative image in the mainstream culture, Goddess movement participants have often faced considerable opposition. In a series of events in Jonesboro, Arkansas, Terry and Amanda Riley, for example, were forced to close their shop, the Magick Moon, which sold books on witchcraft, incense, wands, and cauldrons. Area merchants banded together to prevent the two from finding another location. When asked by a *Newsweek* reporter about protecting their religious freedom, one local resident replied that he naturally supported religious freedom but said the Rileys did not have a religion (Shapiro, 1993).

According to Carol Christ (1987), a feminist theologian involved in the movement, the contemporary Goddess movement in North America “is the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of female power as a beneficent and independent power” (p. 121). It is a religious subset of the feminist movement that has diffused worldwide in recent decades in a myriad of forms.

Neo-Christian and Charismatic Movements

Some rebels against contemporary American culture turn not to ancient pagan rituals or Eastern religions but to aspects of the diverse Christian tradition not normally emphasized by the religious mainstream. In the 1960s, a number of such movements, such as the Christian World Liberation Front, an outgrowth of the “Jesus Movement,” or “Jesus Freaks,” as they were sometimes called, emerged as part of the youth counterculture. Their leftist political orientation appealed to campus radicals in Berkeley, California, but these movements were opposed to Marxism and were somewhat introverted, so did not attempt aggressively to recruit new members.

Members of a related movement called themselves the “Submarine Church,” after the Beatles song and movie *The Yellow Submarine*, because they considered themselves a Christian community that went underwater, not underground; they emphasized the idea of a radical faith community that challenged the establishment and championed the poor much like the

early church. When the United Methodist Church held its quadrennial conference in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1972, the Submarine Church was there as well. At the major local church downtown on the day the conference convened, as a number of international dignitaries were gathered for worship, members of the Submarine Church unfurled a banner from the balcony with a bright yellow submarine and a cross on it. One of the members stood up from the floor just as the worship service began to make a “testimony” of concern about the poor people living in the neighborhood of the church. As he was arrested and escorted from the sanctuary, a number of people in the congregation stood up to voice their protest against the arrest; they, too, were taken off to jail. (Two Methodist bishops later visited the police station and negotiated their release, and all charges were eventually dropped by the church.)

Other new Christian groups had a more conservative message but also represented a counterculture movement within the church. One of these was Campus Crusade, a popular evangelical movement that appealed to a different audience than the other groups mentioned thus far but differed from mainline Christian campus ministries in its recruiting methods and more sectarian organizations.¹ A fast-growing and vital alternative Christian group is the charismatic movement, which swept the United States and many other parts of the world. This movement protests the formality and “dryness” of contemporary establishment Christianity and emphasizes so-called “gifts of the Spirit” (see Neitz, 1987). Although originating in Protestant churches, the charismatic movement became very popular in the American Catholic church following the Second Vatican Council. In 1966, faculty members at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, began meeting regularly to pray for these “gifts,” which included “speaking in tongues,” or glossolalia, vocalizations that are linguistically unintelligible despite recognizable phonetic features (Lane, 1976) and seem to express intense religious experiences. The Catholic Pentecostal movement, or Catholic Charismatic Renewal as it was later called, spread quickly; at its first annual convention in 1967, 90 people came; five years later, 10,000 attended, and the following year, more than 20,000.

The charismatic movement has touched a deep chord in contemporary popular culture, “a concern that the world is falling apart,” as Mary Jo Neitz (1987) put it in her ethnographic study of a Catholic charismatic group: “Yet the problems on which their actions focus are overwhelmingly personal, with concern for protecting oneself and one’s family” (p. 232). The intense community of the movement and the idea of a powerful personal relationship with Jesus have provided an important source of support for thousands of people living tenuously in the postmodern world.

Who Participates?

Glock and Bellah's (1976) classic study of NRMs in the San Francisco area gives an informative portrait of participants and groups in the major center of cultural ferment at a significant time, the early 1970s. Robert Wuthnow's (1976) contribution to that study identifies three broad categories of movements: (1) countercultural movements that provide an alternative to mainstream American culture (e.g., Zen Buddhism, Yoga, Transcendental Meditation, Hare Krishna), (2) personal growth movements that combine religious practices with psychology and an emphasis on personal development (Erhard Seminars Training, Synanon), and (3) neo-Christian movements that are sectarian in nature and draw upon the Christian tradition to create an alternative, usually sectarian, Christian community (such as Campus Crusade, Jews for Jesus, Children of God, and the Christian World Liberation Front).

The countercultural movements tend to overselect young people with slightly higher than average educational levels. Not surprisingly, they are likely to reinforce values and lifestyles that contrast sharply with convention. Participants in all groups (but especially the countercultural) are more likely to be single and employed part time or looking for work and more geographically unsettled than the general population. Counterculture movements appear to be stronger than their small numbers would indicate because they attract better-educated people and consequently have greater influence. The movements in general may continue to find a more responsive chord among the young, the educated, and those interested in more general forms of cultural and societal transformation.

"Networks of Faith"

Sociologists usually emphasize what Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge (1980) called **networks of faith** in explaining why people join religious groups, whether more conventional, mainstream groups, or the unconventional groups under discussion here. Two slightly different emphases emerge in the literature: (1) on the appeal of the ideology of various groups and the needs of those who join them and (2) on the importance of interpersonal relations. The latter position contends that membership spreads through social networks and that people adjust their religious beliefs to conform to those of people who are important to them.² Stark and Bainbridge (1980, p. 1392) provided evidence from studies of three groups (a doomsday group, an Ananda commune, and the Mormon church) for the importance of social networks in recruitment to both types of NRMs. They concluded that a

sense of deprivation (e.g., social isolation, people with a grievance of some sort) and ideological compatibility “limit the pool of persons available for recruitment” (p. 1392), but since many people are deprived and ideologically predisposed to “cult” membership but do not join, a number of situational variables must be explored to explain why some join and others do not.

The number of new religious groups in the United States jumped dramatically between 1950 and 1970—the period in which the United States became fully integrated into the world economy; large numbers of immigrants came to the country; tourist travel flourished; and television brought the far corners of the globe into the nation’s homes. Many Americans became disenchanted with their own cultural milieu and religious traditions. The same impulse that led to the hippie movement, the New Left, and the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s influenced many to search for alternative religious communities in which to pursue their spiritual quests.

The institutional and technological infrastructure facilitating the spread of NRMs, including cable television and video technologies, developed dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s. ISKCON, for example, developed its own network of print and video newsmagazines, and ISKCON TV began producing instructional videos with lectures from Swami Bhaktivedanta and reports on ISKCON activities around the globe. Distant religious practices no longer appeared so foreign, and as young people rebelled against their own culture and their parents’ values and religious traditions, large numbers of Western youth sought spiritual and social support in these alternative communities. In some instances, religious traditions from other parts of the world provided a significant alternative to the conventional (mostly Christian) traditions of their families.

Finally, Stark and Bainbridge (1980, p. 1393) concluded that potential recruits who are likely to join a movement must receive *direct rewards* from their participation. Although the affection of the movement network is often an important factor—especially for people who suffer from isolation and low self-esteem—successful groups also include other rewards. The Hare Krishnas and Moonies often provide food, clothing, and shelter as well as a meaningful occupation with potential for advancement within the organization. The Mormons have a 13-step recruiting plan that showers potential new members with tangible rewards.

Contemporary empirical research on reasons for joining NRMs does not advance us theoretically much beyond Max Weber’s concept of elective affinities between ideas and interests, although it does spell out the nature of the relationship in more detail. People tend to join an NRM primarily for social reasons, adopting first the ethos of a group and gradually accepting its worldview as well. Most people, of course, choose the religious tradition of

their families and other immediately relevant social groups. In the global village, however, switching may become more common. The role of elective affinities in the conversion process can be seen quite clearly within some social groups, which, as they undergo dramatic transformation, construct an ethos and worldview they feel a stronger affinity for than those traditionally available to them in their social situation.

In the late 20th century, the number of NRMs in the United States skyrocketed, in part because of the unprecedented new immigration of ethnic groups from parts of the world where Christianity did not predominate (such as Asia) but also because of the cultural upheaval of the 1960s, in which—as we have just seen—many, especially young people, turned to alternative forms of religious expression as part of the counterculture movement. In the first decade of the 20th century, only 11 new religious groups had formed in the United States. In the 1960s, 105 new communities were founded; in the 1970s, it was 177 (see Hinnells, 1984). The only time the trend was reversed during the century was during World War II, which fostered a climate that discouraged cultural experimentation. When the global economy emerged in the postwar world, social networks expanded and cultural patterns were widely disrupted and reformed. The most obvious reason for the birth of NRMs anywhere in the world is that people live increasingly in a global context. People living in a heterogeneous culture generally have more freedom of choice and more religious options in the religious marketplace.

Cult and Anticult

Many Americans find alternative religious communities repulsive and threatening, and the negative label *cult* is popularly used to refer to all of them. Some of the reasons for this criticism are quite valid: Many horrible things are done in the name of these NRMs, just as much evil has been committed in the name of every one of the more established religious communities. People also object to NRMs because they are different, intense, authoritarian, and often cause family members and friends to break with kin and friendship networks, much to the dismay of those left behind. Finally, a great deal of misinformation is spread about alternative religious groups by those who are critical of them.

Ironically, the anticult movement that emerged in the wake of the proliferation of religious movements in the 1960s has often exacerbated the very characteristics that trouble many people about the NRMs in the first place. Under attack by the outside, participants in alternative religious communities become more alienated from the external world and consequently more amenable to authoritarian structures and leadership.

Brainwashing and Deprogramming

As NRMs attracted widespread attention in the 1970s, the anticult movement became increasingly aggressive in its opposition. A major source of the movement was the hostility and fear from family members of converts who felt abandoned, sometimes under stressful conditions. A network of anticult movement organizations mounted a campaign against the NRMs and clashed with the elites of these groups, creating what Bromley and Shupe (1981) called a “social scare.” This means the following:

(1) a sociocultural climate characterized by heightened tension as a result of (2) intense conflict between two (or more) social groups in which (3) the more powerful group mobilizes control claims by (4) denigrating the moral status of the less powerful groups through (5) construction of a subversion mythology. (Bromley, 1988, p. 186)

The key element in the “subversion mythology” constructed about NRMs was the idea of brainwashing—that individual recruits had been robbed of their free will through mind control techniques.³ The anticult movement focused on Reverend Moon’s Unification Church because of its visibility, aggressive recruitment of young adults, direct challenge of the authority of traditional churches, and provision of a single target on which to concentrate its efforts most effectively (Bromley, 1988, pp. 188–189).

The most remarkable part of the campaign was the creation of what anticult activist Ted Patrick (1976) called the **deprogramming** process, intended to help “victims” snap out of the hypnotic trance into which cult members were supposedly put by the brainwashing process. In the process, NRM members were kidnapped, taken to a secluded location (such as a hotel room), and subjected to various techniques, including the following:

[eliciting] guilt for rejecting family members and educational plans, expressing love and concern about the dubious future the individual had charted, refuting the group’s doctrines, revealing esoteric beliefs and practices that were not known to the individual, challenging the motives and sincerity of the group’s leaders, providing testimonials by former members that they had been brainwashed but failed to recognize their own psychological captivity, and threatening that the individual would be released only on the condition that membership in the group was renounced. (Patrick, 1976, p. 194)

Although deprogramming incidents involved varying degrees of coerciveness, these anticult tactics raise many questions about the reality of religious

freedom in the United States. Bromley (1988) contended, “The practice of forcibly separating individuals from religious groups for the purpose of inducing them to renounce their membership is unprecedented in American religious history” (p. 203). The extreme measures of deprogramming were given justification by the mythology of brainwashing and supported by much of the general public. The news media in the United States further legitimated deprogramming and other attacks on the movements by disseminating “atrocious tales” about NRMs (Bromley, Shupe, & Ventimiglia, 1979). By evoking outrage at the alleged acts of religious groups, newspaper accounts facilitated the “social construction of evil” about these religious movements.

In their study of 190 newspaper articles about former members of the Unification Church between 1974 and 1977, Bromley and colleagues (1979) found that all but two contained at least one atrocity story and were primarily hostile toward the church. The most frequently reported atrocities were as follows:

1. Psychological violations of personal freedom and autonomy
2. Economic violations: reports that the church forced members to sell their private property and give it to the church
3. Severing of the parent–child bond—the most sensational of the reports, growing out of the hostility of families who were rejected by members joining NRMs
4. Political and legal atrocities stemming from the fact that the church was founded and run by a foreigner

Although there was an element of truth in many of these stories, the point is that these problems are present in many other organizations and the kind of coverage provided was entirely negative.

That people should be *forced* out of the Unification Church to regain their freedom was an irony lost on many. The movement in and out of most NRMs is relatively high and the average stay within the communities is rather short. Eileen Barker (1988) found “that the majority of members joining the Unification Church seem to leave voluntarily within two years of joining” (p. 167). Long-term affiliation and involvement seems even more tenuous; only 3% of 1,000 people attending a workshop in 1979 were full-time members by the end of 1985. People left the movement for a variety of reasons, and many of the deprogramming efforts were successful,⁴ but the cost of extricating them was extremely high to those involved and to the society as a blow to religious freedom.

What to Do About “Cults”

Alternative movements, or NRMs, do present a threat to the established sociocultural order in the United States not only because of what the movements themselves do but also because of the anticult movement’s campaign against them. Families are disrupted, and people are cut off from former social networks, sometimes causing pain and anguish; those developments are often symptoms of deeper problems in the relationships and in the broader culture, rather than something caused by the NRM itself. The record of the response to these threats has been mixed. Alternative religious movements have not been accorded the kind of protection guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution. They have been harassed not only by the anticult movement but even by agencies of the state (see Bromley & Shupe, 1981; Wallis, 1976). Unfortunately, such responses are more consistent with historic practices than is a thorough protection of religious freedom.

The tragedy at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, in 1993 is an extreme but not entirely unrepresentative case. Federal agents came to arrest the leader of a Christian sect, David Koresh, whose community had stockpiled a vast arsenal of weapons and were awaiting the Battle of Armageddon, which, according to Christian scriptures, would signal the end of the world. Several government agents were killed in the raid; after a long standoff between the FBI and Koresh’s followers, remaining members of the religious community perished as their building went up in flames. Confronted by a heavily armed group of “religious fanatics,” the federal government responded with violence. The standoff in Waco involved two groups of people who were well armed and willing to fight to the death for higher principles. Although the religious movement involved may have been unjustified in its stockpiling of guns and David Koresh may have misled members of the group by using his charismatic authority to exploit their fears, the question remains as to whether the most appropriate way to respond was in kind—that is, with the same violence and pressure tactics that Koresh was condemned for using. Criticism of the government’s response to the Branch Davidian situation was widespread, and an investigation was initiated by the U.S. attorney general’s office. Even though such investigations are often an attempt to justify and cover up the actions taken rather than to expose mistakes made, the norm requiring a clear explanation for such actions was affirmed.

Science fiction writers have often evoked the theme of what we would do if confronted by an “alien force,” by a life-form from another planet with different customs, beliefs, and rituals. Perhaps we can see the answer to that question in how dissident groups are treated in any given society.

Kai Erikson's *Wayward Puritans* (1966; Erikson, 1965) concluded that the kind of deviance most likely to be defined and sanctioned in any given society will reflect the important values of that society. The outliers and outlaws provide something of a mirror image of the dominant norms and values, but both criminals and police operate by the same rules and share many of the same values.

Without attempting to prescribe public policy recommendations regarding alternative religious movements, it does seem important for societies to consider the following questions:

1. How should the freedom of all religious movements be protected? This is not an easy, absolute task, and certainly society will draw boundaries around acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Most modern constitutions make religious freedom an official tenet of each nation's political culture (although, as we have seen, the norm is not always adhered to, for example, in the United States). Consequently, actions taken by the state against any religious group should be done within the boundaries of strict due process and not because of prejudice or theological disagreements. Religious movement members should be accorded the same legal rights as rapists, murderers, and the Ku Klux Klan.
2. How can religious movements be evaluated on the basis of their "fruits"—that is, in terms of the personal and social consequences of their religious beliefs? Disagreements should take place within the confines of the moral debates about what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior, as far as the law is concerned, and questions of theology should be debated theologically. In a heterogeneous society, some people will obviously find some groups more attractive and others more repulsive; is it possible for people to debate those differences freely, rather than trying to suppress those with whom they disagree?

From a sociological point of view, these questions are ultimately the kinds of questions that must be asked about the way in which religious movements will be treated in the global village as we attempt to fashion a global ethos that permits the peaceful coexistence of diverse social groups.

New Forms of Religiosity

One variant of the secularization thesis suggests that the new cultural forms of the modern world are, in fact, a sort of invisible religiosity. Thomas Luckmann (1967) argued that the central cultural themes of "individual 'autonomy,' self-expression, self-realization, the mobility ethos, sexuality and familism," as well as a number of other less important topics,

constitute something of an “invisible religion,” because they have some claim to a “sacred” status in modern culture, but are not explicitly organized religious traditions (p. 113).

Durkheim’s study of aboriginal Australian religion in his formative book, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915/1965), was part of his lifelong search for functional equivalents of the mobilizing power of religion to revitalize the social order and provide a basis for social solidarity. His sociological predecessor Auguste Comte capped his career by elaborating a secular “religion of humanity,” basically Catholicism without the supernatural, and Durkheim appeared to be taking somewhat the same path, although with a more sophisticated method. He concluded that the phenomena being worshiped in religious ritual were actually social forces themselves and that ritual could be harnessed for the common good if science were used to provide a moral basis for the collective life.

Durkheim was not alone in his quest for functional surrogates for religion; many other moderns who were “spiritually musical” (that is, were spiritually inclined and talented) but disillusioned with traditional religious forms have sought to replace them with a new worldview and its corresponding ethos. Others have replaced some of the social and psychological functions in a less deliberate manner, through other social activities such as voluntarism, dance, music, sports, or nationalism. Even on a relatively mundane level, collective life is now often expressed through secular rituals that take on a quasi-religious character, especially for those most dedicated.

The line between religious and secular rituals is very thin, as both lie along the same continuum of social forms that run from the most sacred to the most profane. In modern and postmodern societies, secular rituals from political campaigns and television ads to rock concerts and Olympic Games fulfill many of the functions identified by Durkheim as religious, promoting social solidarity and facilitating the process of collective identity construction.

Cultic practices often emerge around charismatic cultural icons like popular rock singers or political figures. Many of the groups surrounding particular rock groups, such as the Grateful Dead, take on many characteristics of a religious movement. In its most extreme forms, fans become devotees and exhibit behavior that borders on worship. During the height of their popularity, perhaps the most famous group of the latter 20th century, the Beatles, were thought to have such miraculous powers that people were brought to their dressing rooms for healing. The singers themselves tried to downplay these practices, and John Lennon even wrote a song protesting such attitudes and providing a long list of things he did not believe in, including God and the Beatles, concluding that he believed only in himself.

Women's Movements

"I'd like to be a priest when I grow up," she said.

"You can't," I said, "you're female."

"So what?" she said, in the tone she defies her grandmother but not her mother in.

"Girls can't be priests," I said. "Our Lord said so."

"Where?" she insisted.

I told her He didn't say it in so many words, but He chose no women to be apostles, and priests are successors to the apostles. That means they would have to be like the apostles.

"But the apostles were Jewish, and you're not Jewish," she said.

"What's that got to do with it?" I asked her.

"So, you're not like them, and you're a priest." She glowed with successful argument.

I thought of all the foolish, mediocre men who were permitted ordination because of the accident of their sex. And I thought of this child, obviously superior to all others of her age in beauty, grace, and wisdom. I told her to pray that the Church would change its mind by the time she grew up.

"You pray, too," she said.

I said I would, but it must be a secret between us. And so each morning, at my mass, I pray for the ordination of women.

—Mary Gordon, *The Company of Women* (1980)

Nowhere do interreligious encounters occur more intimately than in the separate voices of men and women as they encounter the sacred not in different parts of the globe but within their own homes. One of the most profound of modern movements—that affects all levels of society as well as all societies—is the demand for equality by women (see Sharma & Young, 1999; Shih, 2010). This movement, in its various forms, challenges the very roots of the major world religions, each of which has its own liberating traditions but all of which have consistently legitimated patriarchal culture and male domination. The related social problem, of course, lies in the ways in

which female identity is shaped from a very early age, so that religious legitimations of inferior status affect the lifelong socialization process and the ways in which women (or any other group of people) will be treated and, consequently, think of themselves.

Every major living religious tradition has a patriarchal tendency, and the Western religions, especially Christianity, have been soundly criticized for their sexism. As with critiques of that tradition during the French Revolution, the basis of the complaint is the use of religious institutions and ideas to impose inequality. Some of the early women's leaders in the United States found aspects of Christianity downright immoral. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, for example, felt this way:

[She] was shocked by the frank misogyny of the original [Bible]. Genesis, for example, read to her like "gross records of primitive races," and the stories of Lot's daughters (who got their father drunk and then seduced him) and of Tamar (who dressed as a whore to seduce her father-in-law) she found unworthy of comment. As for contemporary Christianity, she wrote: "So long as ministers stand up and tell us that Christ is the head of the church, so is man the head of the woman, how are we to break the chains which have held women down through the ages?" (Ehrenreich, 1981, p. 38)

A different strategy of some contemporary critics, like Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether, has been to forge a feminist theology that reshapes the traditions in a less sexist manner. Ruether (1981, p. 388) developed a feminist critique of religious studies that begins with the historic exclusion of women from religious leadership roles in the Judeo-Christian tradition. She noted that women were prohibited from studying the scriptures in Judaism, as in the rabbinic dictum "cursed be the man who teaches his daughter Torah." Christianity has had similar practices, noted in the New Testament statement, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over men. She is to keep silence" (1 Timothy 2:12). Moreover, Ruether (1999) claimed this:

Christianity from its New Testament beginnings exhibited a deep tension between egalitarian and patriarchal views of women. Feminist scholars of the New Testament and early church are increasingly showing that the polemics against women's leadership found in New Testament and patristic writers can only be explained by recognizing an alternative understanding of the gospel as the "good news" of the dissolution of gender hierarchy in the new humanity in Christ that arises from the baptismal font. (p. 214)

Women were usually permitted only an inferior role in shaping the major traditions, and a number of derisive characterizations of women have been made by the core figures of Western thought: Thomas Aquinas, for example, defined a woman as a “misbegotten male.” In the medieval scholastic tradition, efforts to ordain a woman for the priesthood were considered simply impossible—the ordination “would not ‘take,’ any more than if one were to ordain a monkey or an ox” (Ruether, 1981, p. 390). Ruether (1981) argued the following:

The male bias of Jewish and Christian theology not only affects the teaching about women’s person, nature and role, but also generates a symbolic universe based on the patriarchal hierarchy of male over female. The subordination of woman to man is replicated in the symbolic universe in the imagery of divine-human relations. . . . Thus everywhere the Christian and Jew are surrounded by religious symbols that ratify male domination and female subordination as the normative way of understanding the world and God. This ratification of male domination runs through every period of the tradition, from Old to New Testament, Talmud, Church Fathers and canon Law, Reformation, Enlightenment and modern theology. It is not a marginal, but an integral part of what has been received as mainstream, normative traditions. (pp. 390–391)

Ruether’s response to this situation is not to reject the entire tradition but to reshape it, first by documenting the male bias and tracing its sociological roots (see Daly, 1968/1975; Ruether, 1974). The second step is to discover “an alternative history and tradition that supports the inclusion and personhood of women” (Ruether, 1981, p. 391), either within the Jewish and Christian traditions or elsewhere. A number of well-documented studies show, Ruether contended, that the exclusion of women from leadership roles is not the whole story. Women were probably not so excluded in first-century Judaism, and the rabbinic dicta against teaching women Torah is only one side of an argument, albeit the side that won (Ruether, 1981, p. 392).

Similarly, the passage in I Timothy just cited is a second-generation reaction, Ruether claimed, against the widespread participation of women in leadership positions in the early church. It is unlikely that anyone would bother to oppose female involvement if it were not happening. Ruether argued that the participation of women in early Christianity was a natural part of its theology, in which “baptism overcomes the sinful divisions among people and makes us one in the Christ: Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free” (Galatians 3:28; Ruether, 1981, p. 393).

Some support for feminist perspectives on the early church have come from unexpected quarters, as in Robin Scroggs’s (1972) contention:

We must make a radical reversal in our interpretation of Paul's stance toward women. Far from being repressive and chauvinistic, Paul is the one clear and strong voice in the New Testament speaking for the freedom and equality of women in the eschatological communities he has helped create. (p. 309)

Some authorities in the early church, Scroggs (1972) contended, "found this freedom too radical and quickly rewrote Paul to make his writings conform to the practices of the establishment church" (p. 309). The charge is a serious one, based on textual criticism concluding that portions of the text were altered. This should be taken in light of different norms for the status of texts in the ancient world, where individual authorship rights were not rigidly defined as they are in modern cultures. Paul lucidly sets forth the equal rights and responsibilities of men and women, grounds this freedom in the liberated humanity of the new creation, and assumes that women will live in this freedom.

Women and the Priesthood

Debates about the role of women in religious institutions often focus on their eligibility for the priesthood. Some branches of Protestant Christianity, especially in the mainline denominations, include women in leadership roles so that there are even some female bishops. In the bastion of male clergy, the Roman Catholic Church has proponents of the ordination of women (see the website <http://www.womenpriests.org/index.asp>, which claims that 9 out of 10 scholars favor ordination and provides over 1,000 documents relevant to the issue). In several areas of Protestantism and in the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox churches, however, resistance to female leadership in the church is still very strong and unlikely to change soon, despite shortages of priests.

In the meantime, barriers are falling elsewhere, albeit in isolated instances. In Pune, India, in 1984, for example, a group of Hindu women began chanting hymns and conducting rites previously reserved for male Brahman priests. Shankar Hari Thatte, a 76-year-old Brahman, brought them together for that purpose, contending the following:

The men priests were cheating people, their lives had degenerated, they were unable to honor the holy books and I felt I should organize the women because there is no specific ban on them performing these rites in the religious texts. (Hazarika, 1984, p. 4)

Although some priests and scholars voiced objections, no one attempted to stop them. Ganesh Shastri Shinde, an 86-year-old priest, contended that

what they were doing was “against religious traditions,” but added, “We will not interfere with their ways. We will let them go on their path and we will continue on ours” (Hazarika, 1984, p. 4).

A year later, Amy Eilberg was ordained as a Conservative Jewish rabbi after graduating from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York (Goldman, 1985). Following a vote of the Rabbinical Assembly allowing the ordination, Eilberg was admitted into the ancient priesthood as the first Conservative woman member (Reform Judaism had been ordaining women for the previous decade). Although Rabbi Eilberg fulfilled a life-long dream and broke another barrier, it remains to be seen how long it will take before women rabbis are accepted as equals. Conservative female rabbis are becoming more common, however, and in December 2005, the *Toronto Star* ran a feature story on “dual-rabbinic spouses” featuring Canada’s first married Conservative rabbis, Jennifer and Sean Gorman (Csillag, 2005).

Nonpatriarchal Traditions

Some people have used historical and anthropological studies to explore alternative religious traditions that are not patriarchal, including both ancient Mother Goddess traditions and popular contemporary feminist spirituality groups. In a provocative analysis of archaeological research, Marija Gimbutas (1982) contended that because “the task of sustaining life was the dominating motif in the mythical imagery of Old Europe,” that is, in the period before about 4500 BCE, “the goddess who was responsible for the transformation from death to life became the central figure in the pantheon of gods” (p. 236). Male and female divinities were presented side by side, however: “Neither is subordinate to the other; by complementing one another, their power is doubled” (Gimbutas, 1982, p. 237).

Rianne Eisler’s (1988) *The Chalice and the Blade* analyzed these findings by positing a partnership society, in which men and women were equal partners, that was overrun by male-dominated warrior societies at the end of the Neolithic Age, during the third to fifth millennia BCE. For about 20,000 years, Eisler argued, most European and Near Eastern societies were based on simple, supportive technologies, matrilineal descent, and common ownership of the means of production. They had a cooperative social organization and a gynocentric culture, with the deity represented in female form. Their Kurgan conquerors imposed a dominator model of social organization with male deities, “a social system in which male dominance, male violence, and a generally hierarchic and authoritarian social structure was the norm” (Eisler, 1988, p. 45).

Although the jury is still out on the exact nature of the evidence and its implications, a number of discoveries are quite remarkable. First, representations of weapons appear only after the Kurgan invasions, with “the earliest known images of Indo-European warrior gods” (Eisler, 1988, p. 49; cf. Gimbutas, 1982, 1989). The weapons apparently represent the power and function of the Gods, with the Goddess gradually appearing as the wife or consort of the male deities. Moreover, the nature of burial sites begins to shift at about the same time, from more egalitarian graves to hierarchical “chieftain graves,” with marked differences in size and “funerary gifts”—that is, the contents found in the tomb along with the deceased. For the first time in European graves, an exceptionally tall or large-boned male skeleton will be accompanied by the “skeletons of sacrificed women—the wives, concubines, or slaves of the men who died” (Eisler, 1988, p. 50).

If the obvious interpretations of these findings are true—and it seems plausible—the implications are profound. They are both horrifying and hopeful. On the one hand, a radical cultural revolution occurred in human prehistory thousands of years ago, a revolution in which we are still participating, that values hierarchical, male-dominated culture at the expense of partnership models, and warrior Gods over peaceful, nurturing deities. On the other hand, these archaeological discoveries—like some of the existing alternative religions in the 20th century—also suggest that human social organization can be different from the way it now is and that our worldviews might once again be transformed before our own warrior Gods overtake us.

Female Deities and Quasi-Deities

A number of contemporary religious traditions contain a strong female presence. One of the most prevalent figures worldwide is the Virgin Mary, a particularly potent symbol for women and the poor around the world, although she remains a somewhat suspect figure for most Protestant churches. Pope John Paul II, apparently recognizing her importance, and echoing the long-standing popular interest, actually promoted interest in Mary from the Vatican. The Beatles’ popular song “Let It Be” captures the spirit of the religious adoration of Mary, claiming that she comes in times of trouble.

Chinese religious symbols include three major female deity cults: Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the “Eternal Mother” (see Sengren, 1983). Although they do not represent a simple transfer of men’s and women’s social roles, these deities contrast sharply with the male bureaucratic deities in Chinese folk religion. The female deities provide some alternatives to the hierarchical models of the

male deities and reflect the mediation role that mothers often play in Chinese family life. Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the Eternal Mother all intercede in times of danger and are approachable in ways that the bureaucratic deities are not, just as Mary seems closer to humans in need (especially women) than the Christian God, as either a father or a son (see Warner, 1976).

Sengren (1983) suggested that whereas one can approach “ancestors or territorial cult deities only as a representative of a patriline or household, one can approach female deities as an individual” (p. 20). Male deities act as officials, responding to justice and bribes and promises of payment, but female deities are moved more by a worshiper’s devotion and dependence. Thus, the female deities provide an alternative model of authority within the religious sphere that reflects differences in authority elsewhere. They facilitate the empowerment of women in religious life in a way that is difficult for the male deities, because they respond to the models with which women are socialized in Chinese society.

In practical matters of worship, the female deities in China may act more as opiate than activists despite their “proven” powers, thus covering over any symptoms of discontent among women that might emerge as a result of inequality within religious institutions. Men tend to run the important temples, even those with female deities, who are often more prominent as domestic Gods. Moreover, the attributes the Goddesses possess reflect those of women in the traditional patriarchal society, even if in a subtly subversive way. In the sectarian cults of the Eternal Mother, a subversion of the hierarchical structure of celestial bureaucracies reflects the coalitions between children and mothers against their fathers in extended Chinese families (Sengren, 1983; Wolf, 1968, 1972).

Religious deities or quasi-deities such as Mary, Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the Eternal Mother thus reinforce the hierarchical, male-dominated social order under normal circumstances but also contain the seeds of rebellion—sometimes as a subtle form of covert sabotage but also potentially as a direct confrontation. Most important, as Neitz (1990) noted, “the symbols of the goddess movement in themselves represent cultural change. For many the rituals are new forms of play. For others the rituals express their deepest hopes for social transformation as well” (p. 370).

The introduction of Goddess worship into the contemporary religious life of advanced industrial cultures is not limited to those who have rejected mainstream religious forms altogether and opted for alternative systems, or even to the more subtle inclusion that surrounds the adoration of Mary in Catholicism. Controversy recently erupted in the mainline Protestant denominations of the United States over the use of a ritual devoted to Sophia, an ancient feminine image of God in Christianity. At an ecumenical

gathering of women in Minnesota, elements of the ritual were included in a worship service, provoking a series of attacks on the Women's Division of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries, which had financed the participation of several United Methodist representatives at the conference.

One of the most vital of women's movements is the effort of women in Islam to overcome the patriarchy of cultures in which Islam has taken root and flourished. Although Muslim scholarship has traditionally been a male bastion, increasing numbers of women in various parts of the world are beginning to take up the Qur'an and the Hadith literature in an effort to reinterpret the tradition on the basis of careful scholarly examination.

Riffat Hassan (1999), for example, explored the basic questions surrounding the role and status of women in the Qur'an and the tradition, concluding the following:

The Qur'an, which is the primary source on which Islam is founded, consistently affirms women's equality with men and their fundamental right to actualize the human potential that they possess equally with men. Seen through a nonpatriarchal lens, the Qur'an shows no sign of discrimination against women. If anything, it exhibits particular solicitude for women, much as it does for other disadvantaged persons. (p. 275)

Hassan (1999) contended, by means of a careful examination of key passages in the scripture and tradition, that the Qur'an's position on key issues surrounding women's rights has been superseded and often contradicted by patriarchal interpretations. She claimed that the passages in the Qur'an about creation do not show that men were created before women, showing instead that the language in the cosmogonies refers to both genders. Similarly, the idea that Eve (Hawah) is somehow responsible for the "fall" of humanity is not possible in the Qur'an because it contains no concept of such a fall. Finally, the purpose of women in the Qur'an is not to be servants of men but to be their partners and protectors, as men are to be theirs.

All of the major living religions of the world are in many ways patriarchal and male dominated. They explain the world in masculine terms and tend to reinforce male-dominated social structures. Underneath the surface of these religions, the feminine face of God persists, kept alive sometimes quietly and sometimes loudly. Gimbutas (1989) wrote, "Now we find the Goddess reemerging from the forests and mountains, bringing us hope for the future, returning us to our most ancient human roots" (p. 321). As women become increasingly prominent in public life in the global village, they may change the face of religious beliefs as profoundly as the interaction among the major world traditions now dominating the religious landscape. We might find,

however, that many women might avoid organized religion because of its sexism, but are themselves personally religious. Susan Crawford Sullivan found in her study of poor urban women that they “exercise agency by drawing on their religious repertoire in confronting their numerous challenges” (2012, pp. 204–205). Moreover, she says, “What really struck me in the interviews was how personally religious many respondents seemed to be, yet they did not attend church” (p. 3).

Religious Environmental Movements

Many of the religious traditions—like the Goddess worship of Old Europe—that emphasize a harmonic relationship with the natural environment have been destroyed by industrialization, along with the destruction of the environment that has accompanied so much of modern economic development. The more utilitarian attitude toward nature emphasized in the dominant cosmopolitan religions of the 20th century has been challenged on a number of fronts in recent years. For some practitioners of ancient religious traditions like those of some Native Americans and other indigenous groups around the world, the idea of harmony with the environment and a critique of modern ecological destruction have forced the basis of a protest theology that has a clear affinity with the interests of these groups, which are often exploited by the “advance of civilization.”

The environmental movement, like the pro-democracy and women’s movements, was born largely out of a religious sensibility but contains an ambivalence toward religious traditions because of the legitimation for environmental devastation those traditions have provided. A new sensitivity to ecological issues has emerged in many religious traditions in recent years, however, in part because of the emphasis on placing ethical values and broader universal causes above short-term profit motives that often fuel environmental destruction.

Attention to environmental issues has fanned the flames of multicultural conflict and protest theologies. Of particular interest are questions surrounding the role of Christianity in creating and solving environmental problems. Especially since the 1990s, a number of Christians have attempted to mobilize attention to the environment as a faith issue, including Ian Bradley (1992) in his *God Is Green: Ecology for Christians* and James Nash’s (1992) *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility*. Others claim that the environmental crisis is symptomatic of deep-seated problems in the Judeo-Christian tradition that must be dramatically changed (see Ruether, 1992). A third group attempts to replace or supplement Christianity

with other religious perspectives, whereas a final argument contends that environmentalism is an anti-Christian movement undermining the authority of the church (see Wilkinson, 1992).

At the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992, leaders from many religious traditions gathered to focus their attention on the environment along with official governmental representatives and people from various nongovernmental groups around the world. Loren Wilkinson (1992) reported the following in *Christianity Today*:

The Christian presence at the forum was swamped by a plethora of feminist, universalist, and monist groups, who argued that a new religious paradigm must replace the old one, which was shaped by patriarchy, capitalism, theism, and Christianity. Many blamed the “old paradigm” for the environment’s destruction. (p. 48)

The charge against Christianity is considered inaccurate by the Jesuit Drew Christiansen (1992), who contended “that there is something disingenuous in maligning those who, only a generation ago, were considered insufficiently modern as perpetrators of modernity’s capital crime” (p. 449). The root of the problem, he claimed, is not any religious tradition but “social systems built on material accumulation” (Christiansen, 1992, p. 451). Christian theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether argued, however, that such groups as the “deep ecology” and feminist movements are correct in identifying Western culture, sanctified by Christianity, as the major cause of destructive conflict. Ruether (1992) claimed that “ecofeminism brings together . . . two explanations of ecology and feminism in their full, or deep forms, and explores how male domination of women and domination of nature are interconnected, both in cultural ideology and in social structures” (p. 2). Her approach, though not opposed to looking for insights from non-Christian traditions, is to “sift through the legacy of the Christian and Western cultural heritage to find usable ideas that might nourish a healed relation to each other and to the earth” (Ruether, 1992, p. 2).

A follow-up conference in Rio twenty years later—“Rio plus 20”—continued the emphasis on the environment, but shifted the problem of poverty elimination to the top of the list of issues for the world community. “Poverty eradication is the greatest global challenge facing the world today and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development. The Rio+20 outcome reiterated the commitment to freeing humanity from poverty and hunger as a matter of urgency” (United Nations, 2014). Indeed, the very top goal of the conference’s outcome document was to “end poverty in all its forms everywhere” (United Nations, 2014).

The green liberals of the 1990s have been joined by the green evangelicals in the new century, with some evangelicals combating global warming (Goodstein, 2005). Just as issues of racial injustice became a matter of concern for people across other theological and institutional divides in the church from the 1960s, a broad coalition of Christians are now joining forces—despite varying theological foundations—to promote a new focus on environmentalism as a Christian duty of stewardship for God’s creation. According to a report in *Science*, Reverend Richard Cizik, chief lobbyist for the National Association of Evangelicals, “says a 2002 gathering in Oxford, U.K., was ‘a conversion . . . not unlike my conversion to Christ’” (Kintisch, 2006, p. 1082).

Many in this group have become politically active, as Blaine Harden (2005) reported:

Frustration with the Bush administration’s environmental policies is bubbling up from mainstream churches and synagogues, as reflected in a statement signed recently by more than 1,000 clergy and congregational leaders in about 35 states. Called “God’s Mandate: Care for Creation,” the statement says that “there was no mandate, no majority, or no ‘values’ message in this past election for the President or the Congress to rollback and oppose programs that care for God’s creation.” (p. A16)

Contemporary environmental movements often turn to indigenous religious traditions for inspiration (Harvey, 2003; cf. the discussion of Chief Seattle in Chapter 4). Although one should not idealize indigenous cultures, many of them had ritualized protections for the environment and managed to live in peace with it (R. S. Gottlieb, 2006; Tucker, 2003). Grim (2009) concludes that

minority, or indigenous, peoples bring a unique voice to cross-cultural perspectives on East Asian religious traditions. These insights arise from indigenous interactions with sacred sites as well as the ways in which indigenous peoples incorporate strong sensory perspectives through singing, dancing, and ritual practice.

The issue of climate change has become a major rallying point across the religious spectrum, from the “Green Evangelicals” of the United States (see R. S. Gottlieb, 2006) to the “eco-jihadists” of Indonesia (Amri, 2013). Veldman, Szasz, and Haluza-Delay (2012, p. 3) note that

a growing chorus of voices has suggested that the world’s religions may, individually and collectively, become critical actors as the climate crisis unfolds.

Religions affect societies at every level, from the individual to the transnational, as worldviews and as institutions, as conservators of traditions and as resources for change.

A series of 10 conferences on the world's religions and ecology at Harvard from 1996 to 1998 that brought together 800 environmentalists and scholars of religion from around the world led to considerable scholarship, publications, conversation, and debate around that topic, precipitating the development of a new field of study including the participation of elite universities. The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale was created to sustain that momentum; it offers a joint master's degree in religion and ecology in the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies (F&ES) and Yale Divinity School (YDS). The Forum also created a website for people interested in the field at <http://fore.research.yale.edu/>, with information about ecology from the perspective of the Baha'i faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism, indigenous traditions, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, and Shintoism. Oxford University Press published *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (Gottlieb, 2006), comprising chapters on various religious perspectives on ecology as well as a section on religious environmental activism.

Bhutan's Gross National Happiness: Linking Justice and Environmentalism

Sometimes a statistically insignificant religious group can have a profound impact on the world's spiritual and political movements, the most profound example being the ancient Hebrews who laid the foundations for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. More recent examples of small religious subtraditions having a broad impact are Tibetan Buddhism, whose spiritual leader the Dalai Lama has widespread respect, and the tiny Buddhist nation of Bhutan, which initiated an effort to transform the world's economic paradigm from its emphasis on increasing production and an ever-higher GDP, on the one hand, to an emphasis on GNH—Gross National Happiness—on the other.

A hybrid movement has emerged, struggling to replace the current failed economic paradigm based on GDP growth and the concentration of wealth with a new one based on the happiness and well-being of all life in the world. This movement, initiated by Bhutan and a High Level Meeting at the United Nations in April 2012, combines a grassroots mobilization of people power to envision and implement a new economic paradigm with a high-level mobilization of United Nations–related institutions in which people advocate an

economic transformation. The foundation of the movement was not the political infrastructure of Bhutan and the United Nations that provided a global platform for its discussion, but an ancient Buddhist tradition that affirmed the basic unity of all people and, indeed, the natural world.

As the gap between rich and poor escalates and the means of destruction improve exponentially, the potential for conflict and war increase dramatically. The current economic system has failed both humanity and the natural environment, in terms of maldistribution of resources that result in widespread deprivation, lack of opportunity, and massive malnutrition, as well as global climate change that threatens to destroy the ecosphere. An interfaith group of religious leaders at the High-Level UN meeting issued a statement advocating a “new economic paradigm . . . based upon compassion, altruism, balance, and peace, dedicated to the well-being, happiness, dignity, and sacredness of all forms of life” (Religious Leaders, 2012). Moreover, they observed that

because external economic realities mirror internal psychological and spiritual realities, participants in the new paradigm pledge themselves to ethical conduct, reflecting and holding themselves to the highest level of integrity and virtue, increasing their sharing and dedication to others, and resilience in the face of challenges.

Because economics is based upon relationships, in the new paradigm, relationships are characterized by active service, justice, and cherishing the dignity of other’s lives.

The bishops of the United Methodist Church, in a 2009 statement, came to a similar conclusion, linking environmental with justice issues but adding the problem of violence, concluding that humanity faced three interrelated threats:

- Pandemic poverty and disease,
- Environmental degradation and climate change, and
- A world awash with weapons and violence. (United Methodist Church, Council of Bishops, 2009)

This broader-picture thinking, along with ethical systems and institutional infrastructures, is what makes the spiritual traditions significant players in the international community’s efforts to address economic, political, social, and environmental issues.

Constructing and Reconstructing Religious Life

As we have observed in this chapter, religious life has not died in the modern world, as many scholars expected. Instead, religious beliefs and practices have been reformulated in a variety of ways. The ancient traditions of the mainstream have been revitalized, for example, as traditionalist protest movements on the one hand and as liberation theology on the other. Other forms of religiosity, notably civil religion and nationalism, though they are decried by the traditionalists as examples of the disappearance of the “true religion,” nonetheless function much as religious traditions do. Religious syncretism at the margins of society and a new ecumenical spirit among the mainstream religious groups also constitute a crucible in which a new generation of religious traditions may now be forming. The emergence of alternative religious movements, especially in the United States, reflects a religious ferment that stimulates creative theologizing in a way reminiscent of the formative periods of the existing mainstream religions.

In addition to the emergence of some deliberately syncretistic religious traditions, such as the Baha’i faith, a new spirit of dialogue seemed to be widespread as the 20th century came to a close. In 1893, at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the first Parliament of the World’s Religions brought representatives from a wide variety of religious traditions together to explore their similarities and differences. A century later, the second Parliament of the World’s Religions convened—again in Chicago—to discuss the possibility of constructing a human ethical consensus out of the world’s religious traditions, as well as an institutional basis, a sort of religious United Nations, to encourage ongoing dialogue among religious leaders from a wide variety of traditions.

Religious diversity will no doubt remain the hallmark of the global village well into the next millennium—perhaps as long as human life persists—and the major issue is probably not how to eliminate religious conflict among different traditions and perspectives but how to facilitate constructive and creative, rather than destructive, conflict. That issue will be explored in the final chapter.