

CHAPTER 13

RELIGION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

KEY TOPICS

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In the twenty-first century, the global landscape is a patchwork of faiths. Religious expressions are heading in various directions at the same time, and political conflicts involving religions are assuming great importance on the world scene. Therefore, as we conclude this survey of religions as living, changing movements, an overview of religion is necessary to gain a sense of how religion is affecting human life now and what impact it may have in the future.

Religious pluralism

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

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

Jews 0.2%
15,073,000

Sikhs 0.4%
25,377,700

No religionists 1.8%
115,781,200

Atheists 2.3%
151,612,000

No religionists 4.0%
256,332,000

Buddhists
378,808

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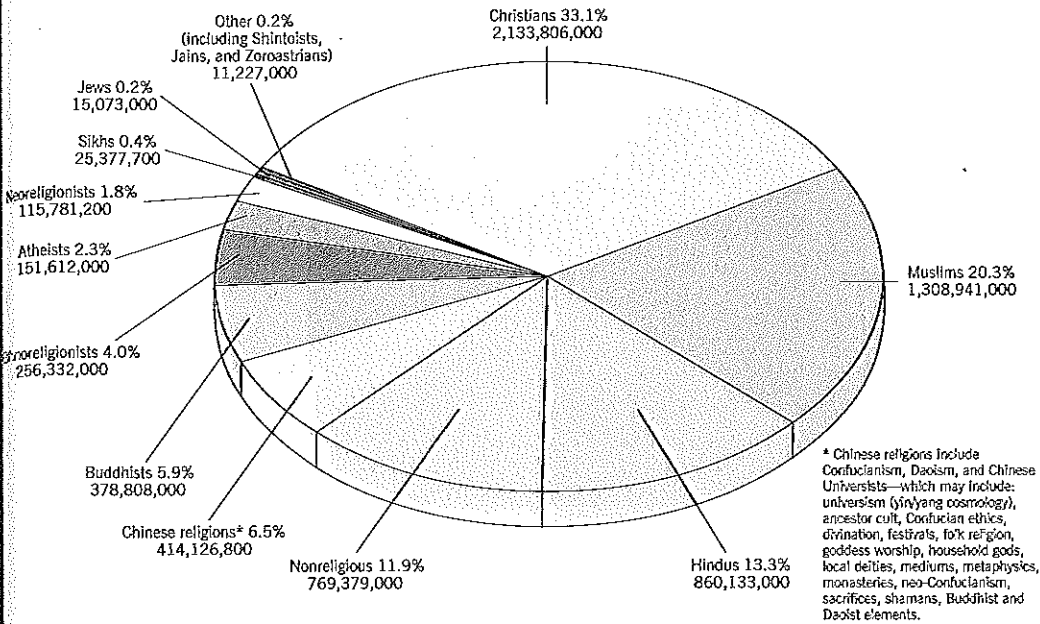
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The Next
Christendom, p. 351
PHILIP JENKINS



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

large Muslim populations in Central Asia, and growing Muslim populations in the United States, with over fifty mosques in the city of Chicago alone.

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

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

We are all neighbors somewhere, minorities somewhere, majorities somewhere. This is our new geo-religious reality. There are mosques in the Bible Belt in Houston, just as there are Christian churches in Muslim Pakistan. There are Cambodian Buddhists in Boston, Hindus in Moscow, Sikhs in London.¹

Hardening of religious boundaries

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

Religions are now practiced far from the countries where they originated. This Tibetan Buddhist nun is practicing on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne in the United Kingdom.



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

Religious symbols have become the focus for the French government's attempts to keep religion within bounds. In 2004, a controversial law was passed forbidding wearing of religious symbols including Muslim veils, Jewish yarmulkes, and large Christian crosses in French public schools and colleges. The government has also tried to restrict the activities of new religious movements, as well as charismatic and evangelical Christian groups, even though its constitution states "France shall respect all beliefs."

In some previously communist countries, old animosities between people of different ethnic groups resurfaced with great violence once totalitarian regimes toppled. These intense ethnic and political struggles often pit people of different faiths against each other, as in former Yugoslavia. Where there had been a seemingly peaceful society, horrifying atrocities arose among largely Orthodox Christian Serbs, Roman Catholic Croats, and Muslims. Boundaries between religions also hardened in recent times because of the clash between fundamentalism and modernism. Along with the salient features of modernity—complex technologies, globalization, urbanization, bureaucratization, and rationality—have come the values known as "modernism." They include individualism, a preference for change rather than continuity, quantity rather than quality, efficiency rather than traditional skills and aesthetics, and pragmatism and profiteering rather than eternal truths and values. Modernism is perceived by some fundamentalists as threatening the very existence of traditional religious values; contemporary secular culture seems crude, sacrilegious, and socially dangerous.

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Jerry Falwell (1933–2007), who founded the “Moral Majority” in the 1970s in the United States, described what he saw as signs that America is “losing its soul”:

During the past 35 years or so, we have expelled prayer from our schools and legalized abortion on demand. Our divorce rate has soared to 50%. There are one million teen pregnancies each year. We have a drug epidemic. We are considering legalizing same-sex marriages and trying hard to normalize the gay and lesbian lifestyle. School violence has burst upon the scene. Our culture is collapsing. Hollywood, television, video games, internet pornography and other influences are destroying our children and our values. America is in serious jeopardy of self-destruction.²

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

Fundamentalists’ basic goal is to fight back—culturally, ideologically, and socially—against the assumptions and patterns of life that are taken for granted in contemporary secular society and culture, refusing to celebrate them or to embrace them fully. They keep their distance and refuse to endorse the legitimacy of any culture that opposes what they perceive as fundamental truths. Secular culture, in their eyes, is base, barbarous, crude, and essentially profane. It produces a society that respects no sacred order and ignores the possibility of redemption.³

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

Terrorism and counter-terrorism

The stunning attacks by terrorists on United States targets in 2001 brought instant polarization along religious and ethnic lines. Hundreds of hate crimes



The Battle for God,
p. 359
KAREN ARMSTRONG

were committed in the United States against Muslims and foreign immigrants who were mistaken for Muslims and were suddenly seen as "outsiders" as some Americans responded in fear and rage. With the subsequent bombing of Afghanistan and Iraq, the perpetrators of terrorism such as Osama bin Laden incited Muslims to see the world in terms of Muslims versus the infidels, and to join together to drive the United States out of its strategic positions in Muslim lands. Both sides claimed that God was on their side and their cause a holy one.

While the Christian Identity movement promoted ideas of Christian supremacy in the United States, leaders of Al Qaeda selectively cited passages from the Holy Qur'an to give the appearance of spiritual legitimacy to their militant teachings. As indicated in Chapter 1, after September 11, Osama bin Laden proclaimed:

These events have divided the world into two camps, the camp of the faithful and the camp of infidels. . . . Every Muslim must rise to defend his religion. . . . God is the greatest and glory be to Islam.⁴

Once groups have taken such oppositional standpoints, violence seems inevitable. Feelings have been inflamed to the point that people are even ready to sacrifice their lives as suicide bombers, kill innocent people in terrorist attacks, conduct assassinations, or drop bombs on populated areas, for the sake of what they consider to be a holy cause. Study of suicide bombers in organizations such as Al Qaeda and Hamas in Palestine shows that the suicide attackers tend to be well educated and to come from relatively well-off families. Theirs is not the easily exploited despair of poverty and ignorance; it is the conviction of ideology. Pilots dropping bombs on Iraq and soldiers treating prisoners brutally may similarly be motivated by the conviction that they are doing the right thing and attacking evil by "countering terrorism."

Given the plurality of religions in the world and the extremism that some of their adherents are espousing, is a global "clash of civilizations" inevitable in the future? As noted in Chapter 1, some observers are now saying that the real problem is not conflict among religions but rather a "clash of ignorance."⁵ Rigid exclusivist positions do not represent the heart of religious teachings. Whether state-sponsored or incited by militant extremists, violence finds no support in any religion. Thus there has been a strong outcry against fundamentalist violence by the mainstream religions from which militants have drawn their faith. Muslims are trying to point out that jihad must not be confused with terrorism, for jihad (spiritual struggle, particularly against one's own inner flaws) is the holy duty of every Muslim, whereas terrorist killing of innocent people is forbidden by the Holy Qur'an. Likewise, many Christian organizations have come out strongly against violence of any sort, including state terrorism. Roman Catholic theologian Vimal Tirimanna explains:

Terrorism is an evil that needs to be eradicated if we sincerely wish to make this world a place suitable for all human beings. Besides, ordinary human experience shows that terrorism can never be a moral good, because of the horrendous evils it causes to human lives and to property. Let us not forget here that terrorism also damages the very existence of the terrorist himself/herself as a human being with others; it is demeaning of his/her own basic human dignity. Terrorism is an evil

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also because it is always a deliberately planned act to hurt, to damage, to injure other human lives, and also to devastate God's creation. Moreover it is intimidation which seeks to eliminate the basic human freedom of the would-be victims and which tends to impose the will of the terrorists forcefully on those who are at the receiving end. Terrorism, no matter whatever form it takes, no matter who are its perpetrators, and no matter what "noble" goals it seeks to promote, can never be justified by a conscientious person.⁶

Religion and politics

The future of religion is sure to include serious consideration of its link with politics. In many countries, religious groups have become associated with political parties or political interest groups—such as the linkage of Hindu religious fundamentalists with exclusivist nationalist political movements in India, and the linkage between neo-conservative politicians in the United States and evangelical Christian beliefs. Such politicians then frequently legitimate their agendas by giving them a religious color or by claiming they are defending religion. When religious groups are mobilized for political purposes, people oriented toward

Religious fervor is a potent force that has often been tied to political movements.



power rather than toward spirituality thus tend to be propelled into leadership roles, while still justifying their actions in religious terms. The political agenda can even become a global one, as in the case of Al Qaeda. Bruce Lincoln, Professor of the History of Religion, observes:

The Al Qaeda network ... understands and constructs itself as simultaneously the militant vanguard and the most faithful fragment of an international religious community. The goal it articulates is the restoration of Islam in a maximalist form and its consequent triumph over its internal and foreign enemies. Those enemies include, first, the Western powers, who are not only non-Muslims, but non-, even anti-religious ("infidels"); second, postcolonial state elites, whose Islamic commitments have been egregiously compromised ("hypocrites"); third, that part of the Enlightenment project committed to religious minimalism and ascendancy of the secular state.⁷

As the Bush administration responded to September 11 by attacking Afghanistan—and later, Iraq—President Bush also proclaimed a global politico-religious agenda: to attack any nation suspected of harboring terrorists and thus presumably bring peace, with God's blessings resting securely upon America:

In the face of today's new threat, the only way to pursue peace is to pursue those who threaten it. We did not ask for this mission, but we will fulfill it. The name of today's military operation is Enduring Freedom. We defend not only our precious freedoms, but also the freedom of people everywhere to live and raise their children free from fear. ... The battle is now joined in many fronts. We will not waver; we will not tire; we will not falter; and we will not fail. Peace and freedom will prevail. May God continue to bless America.⁸

Many international observers feel that this triumphalist policy has increased rather than decreased terrorism and violent deaths, and many religious leaders have questioned its ethics, as well as its political usefulness.

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

Surely the dream of the Jewish prophets, the notion of "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the lion shall lie down with the kid, and nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they know war anymore" is for many, whether they call themselves religious or secular, an important vision of the future and, therefore, a source of how we behave in the present.⁹

For other religious cultures such as Islam and Sikhism, the combination of religion and polity is perceived as a positive goal—the possibility of the mundane world reordered according to spiritual ideals. Even Buddhism has become engaged in politics, and to some Buddhists' thinking, a pro-active approach to political change is desirable.

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Interfaith movement

What can be done to end the increasing political deadlock and hatreds between followers of various religions? There is already an existing counter-current growing in the world. At the same time that boundaries between religions are hardening in many areas, there has been a rapid acceleration of **interfaith dialogue**—the willingness of people of all religions to meet, explore their differences, and appreciate and find enrichment in each other's ways to the divine. This approach has been historically difficult, for many religions have made exclusive claims to being the best or only way. Professor Ewert Cousins, editor of an extensive series of books on the spiritual aspects of major religions, comments: "I think all the religions are overwhelmed by the particular revelation they have been given and are thus blinded to other traditions' riches."¹⁰

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

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

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



Ground Rules for
Interfaith Dialogue,
p. 371
LEONARD SWIDLER



Can We Share in
Others' Spiritual
Traditions? p. 365
MARCUS BRAYBROOKE

Control of the Mind

The necessity of controlling our mind is one of the common themes that can be found in all religions.

Hinduism: Arjuna said: "The mind is restless, turbulent, obstinate and very strong, O Krishna, and to subdue it, I think, is more difficult than controlling the wind." Lord Shri Krishna said:

"It is undoubtedly very difficult to curb the restless mind, but it is possible by suitable practice and by detachment."

Bhagavad-Gita 6:34

Jainism "Fight with yourself; why fight with external foes?"

He who conquers himself through himself will obtain happiness."

Uttaradhyayana Sutra 9:34-36

Buddhism "Check your mind, be on your guard. Pull yourself out, as an elephant from mud."

The Dhammapada

Daoism "One who overcomes others has physical might;

One who overcomes the self is strong."

Dao de jing 33

Judaism "Better to govern one's temper than capture a city."

Proverbs 16:32

Christianity "Do not set yourself against the person who wrongs you.

If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the left.

Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors."

Matthew 5:39, 44

Islam "The greatest *jihad* [striving] is that against the *nafs*, the base instincts."

Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad

Sikhism "He who conquers his mind conquers the world."

Jap Ji 28

Responses to other faiths

With these contrasting views, there are several different ways in which people of different religions may relate to each other. Diana Eck, Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies of Harvard Divinity School and Chair of the World Council of Churches committee on interfaith dialogue, observes that there are three responses to contact between religions. One is **exclusivism**: "Ours is the only true way." Eck and others have noted that such a point of view has some value, for deep personal commitment to one's faith is a foundation of religious life and also the first essential step in interfaith dialogue.

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

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

We realize that, by my pushing in one direction and your pushing in the opposite, world order is maintained and given the impulse of its proper dynamism. . . . One animus does not mean one single theory, one single opinion, but one aspiration (in the literal sense of one breath) and one inspiration (as one spirit). Consensus ultimately means to walk in the same direction, not to have just one rational view. . . . To reach agreement suggests to be agreeable, to be pleasant, to find pleasure in being together. Concord is to put our hearts together.¹¹

Guidelines for Inter-religious Understanding

- 1 The world religions bear witness to the experience of the Ultimate Reality to which they give various names: Brahman, the Absolute, God, Allah, Great Spirit, the Transcendent.
- 2 The Ultimate Reality surpasses any name or concept that can be given to it.
- 3 The Ultimate Reality is the source (ground of being) of all existence.
- 4 Faith is opening, surrendering, and responding to the Ultimate Reality. This relationship precedes every belief system.
- 5 The potential for human wholeness—or in other frames of reference, liberation, self-transcendence, enlightenment, salvation, transforming union, *moksha*, nirvana, *fana*—is present in every human person.
- 6 The Ultimate Reality may be experienced not only through religious practices but also through nature, art, human relationships, and service to others.
- 7 The differences among belief systems should be presented as facts that distinguish them, not as points of superiority.
- 8 In the light of the globalization of life and culture now in process, the personal and social ethical principles proposed by the world religions in the past need to be rethought and re-expressed. For example:
 - a In view of the increasing danger of global destruction, the world religions should emphasize the corresponding moral obligation of nations and ethnic groups to make use of non-violent methods for the resolution of conflicts.
 - b The world religions should encourage civil governments to respect every religion without patronizing one in particular.
 - c The world religions should work for the practical acceptance of the dignity of the human person; a more equitable distribution of material goods and of opportunities for human development; the cause of human rights, especially the right to choose and practice one's own religion or no religion; the solidarity and harmony of the human family; the stewardship of the earth and its resources; the renewal of their respective spiritual traditions; and inter-religious understanding through dialogue.¹²

Father Thomas Keating



Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, p. 369 UNITED NATIONS

Interfaith initiatives

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

If the Parliament of Religions has shown anything to the world it is this: It has proved to the world that holiness, purity, and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart.¹³

After that initiative, ecumenical conferences involved pairs of related religions that were trying to agree to disagree, such as Judaism and Christianity. Now a large number of interfaith organizations and meetings draw people from all religions in a spirit of mutual appreciation. In 1986, Pope John Paul II invited one hundred and sixty representatives of all religions to Assisi in honor of the humble St. Francis, to pray together for world peace. "If the world is going to continue, and men and women are to survive in it, it cannot do without prayer. This is the permanent lesson of Assisi," declared the pope.¹⁴

Two years later, the Assisi idea was extended to include governmental leaders, scientists, artists, business leaders, and media specialists as well as spiritual leaders. Some two hundred of them from around the globe met in Oxford, England, in 1988 at the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders on Human Survival. They held their plenary sessions beneath an enormous banner with the image of the earth as seen from space. Statements of concern for the environment



Leaders of many religions gather in Westminster Cathedral, London, in 1996 on the tenth anniversary of the Assisi interfaith gathering.

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brought participants to the conclusion that the ecological dangers now threatening the entire human race may be the key that draws us together. But it was spiritual camaraderie rather than shared fear that brought the participants together. Dr. Wangari Maathai, leader of the Green Belt movement in Kenya, observed:

All religions meditate on the Source. And yet, strangely, religion is one of our greatest divides. If the Source be the same, as indeed it must be, all of us and all religions meditate on the same Source.¹⁵

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

Throughout 1993, special interfaith meetings were held around the world to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the Parliament of the World's Religions. The largest 1993 centenary celebration was again held in Chicago. It gathered hundreds of well-known teachers from all faiths and thousands of participants to consider the critical issues facing humanity. It included an attempt to define and then use as a global standard for behavior the central ethical principles common to all religions. The provisional conference document signed by many of the leaders, "The Declaration Toward a Global Ethic," included agreement on the Golden Rule (see page 503):

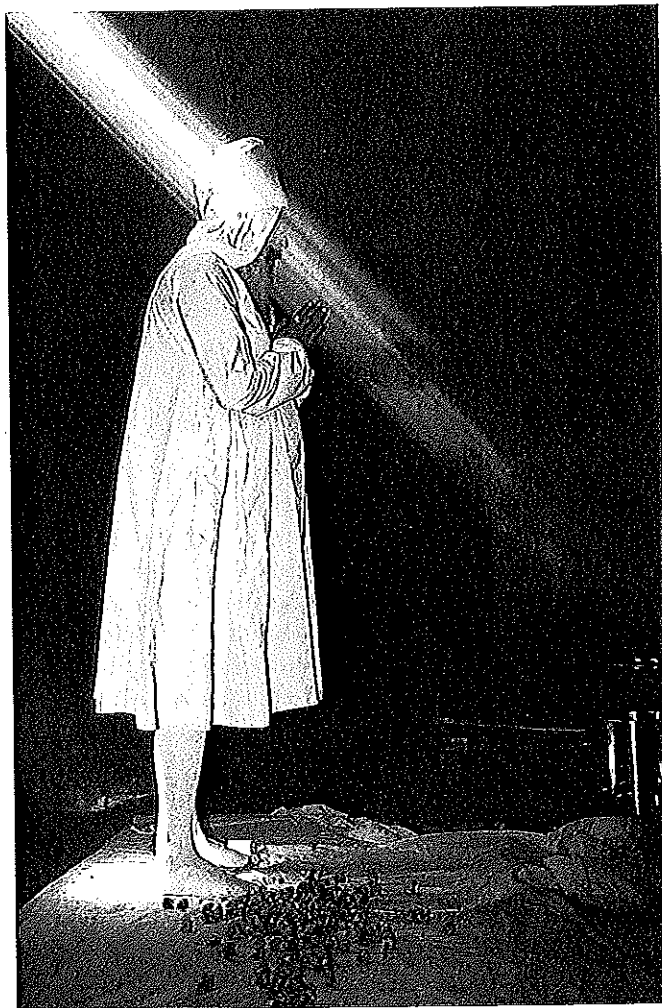
There is a principle which is found and has persisted in many religious and ethical traditions of humankind for thousands of years: What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others. Or in positive terms: What you wish done to yourself, do to others! This should be the irrevocable, unconditional norm for all areas of life, for families and communities, for races, nations, and religions.¹⁶

The global gathering model has been replicated in various locations, drawing participants from around the world to deliberate how religions can collectively help to solve the world's problems. Many people have also had the vision that the United Nations could be home to representatives or leaders from all faiths, jointly advising the organization on international policy from a religious perspective.

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

The Internet conveys the efforts of many organizations to provide accurate information about a variety of religions to help overcome ignorance and intolerance. The Ontario Consultants on Religious Practice, for instance, sponsor www.religioustolerance.org, a rich offering of articles and resources on a long

Baba Virsa Singh prays to the Light some perceive as shining through all the prophets and pervading all Creation.



list of religions plus essays on interfaith themes. Some non-governmental organizations are also attempting to develop curricula for teaching children about the world's religions in classrooms.

In addition to global projects, there are many local interfaith initiatives. A common response in the United States to the September 2001 terrorist attacks was interfaith prayer meetings, from local communities to the National Cathedral. Many leaders broadcast appeals against confusing Islam with terrorism. To help prevent hate attacks on their Muslim sisters, non-Muslim women in the United States, Britain, and Australia donned headscarves in the "Scarves for Solidarity" campaign. They explained:

To protect Muslim women who have been afraid to leave their houses because of ignorant hatred, we will dress piously. The hijab is worn outwardly to show the inner hijab of compassion, honesty, and love, which is carried in the hearts and souls of Islamic men and women alike. It is not meant to be a political symbol in any way, just a symbol of love.¹⁷

Holding Hands at the World Trade Center

On September 11, a young Muslim from Pakistan was evacuated from the World Trade Center where he worked. He saw a dark cloud coming towards him. Trying to escape, he fell. A Hasidic Jew held out his hand, saying, "Brother, there's a cloud of glass coming at us, grab my hand, let's get the hell out of here."

People of all faiths have held hands to support and comfort each other and to join

together in prayer. Can we continue to hold hands as we shape a world society in which all people share to the full the precious gift of life? . . .

As Anne Frank wrote in her diary at the age of fourteen, "How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before beginning to improve the world."

As told by Marcus Braybrooke¹⁸

Inter-religious groups and projects are quite active in Britain, with its increasingly multi-cultural population. The Leicester Council of Faiths, for instance, includes representatives from Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Judaism, Jainism, Buddhism, and the Baha'i faith. Their efforts include developing a multi-faith Welcome Centre, ensuring that there is balanced representation of all faiths at civic events, providing multi-faith counseling and a multi-faith chaplaincy service in some healthcare institutions, informing the various faiths about political matters that affect them, and working with the National Health Service on care that is sensitive to people's specific faiths.

"Spirituality is not merely tolerance. . . . It is the absolute recognition of the other's faith in God as one's own."

Sri Chinmoy

In some places, interfaith efforts are being applied directly to difficult real-life situations, such as the fighting between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. In Israel, the Interfaith Encounter Association brings Muslims, Christians, and Jews together for intimate sharing of cultural and spiritual experiences from each other's traditions. For example, twenty Christian, Muslim, and Jewish women went to the home of one of the Muslim women for a traditional Ramadan fast-breaking dinner. Her family welcomed them, gave them a tour of their garden, and helped them pick figs before sunset. The meal thoughtfully included many kosher delicacies for the Jewish guests, with the hostess explaining the meaning and customs of Ramadan. Such person-to-person contacts seem very effective in developing warm friendships among people of different faiths. There are even groups bringing together the families and friends of those from all sides who have been killed in conflicts.

In India, where communal violence between people of varying religions is daily news, the Sikh-based interfaith work of Gobind Sadan is bringing together



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volunteers of all religions in practical farm work on behalf of the poor, and in celebrations of the holy days of all religions. Baba Virsa Singh, the spiritual inspiration of Gobind Sadan, continually quotes from the words of all the prophets and says:

*All the Prophets have come from the same Light; they all give the same basic messages. None have come to change the older revealed scriptures; they have come to remind people of the earlier Prophets' messages which the people have forgotten. We have made separate religions as walled forts, each claiming one of the Prophets as its own. But the Light of God cannot be confined within any manmade structures. It radiates throughout all of Creation. How can we possess it?"*¹⁹

Where people have seen their relatives tortured and killed by fanatics of another faith, reconciliation is very difficult but necessary if the cycle of violence and counter-violent reactions is to be halted. Andreas D'Souza and Diane D'Souza, who are working to heal hatreds among Muslim victims of violence in India, point out that we tend mentally to divide society into opposing camps:

*In our world today, particularly in Western countries, we are tending to demonize the other. It is "us," the sane and balanced, against "them," the demented, violent, and inhuman. We must resist this attempt to polarize "the good" and "the bad," for it leads to complacency at best, and to the rationalization of violence, death, and destruction at worst.*²⁰

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

Religion and social issues

Within every religion, there are contemporary attempts to bring religious perspectives to bear on the critical issues facing humanity. Today we are facing new issues that were not directly addressed by older teachings, such as the ethics of genetic engineering. And some issues have reached critical proportions in our times, such as terrorism, the gap between rich and poor, and the deterioration of the natural environment. Many religious groups, including indigenous spiritual traditions, sent representatives to the huge 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, lobbying for careful environmental stewardship. At the 1994 Cairo Conference on Population and Development, Christian and Muslim delegations took strong stands on behalf of just economic development and education and health care for women rather than forced population control or abortion as means of stabilizing population. Buddhists are spearheading efforts to ban landmines. Hindus and Muslims are trying to stop the spread of immoral, violent, and cynical mass media communications, to help protect the minds of the young. Racism and violence are challenging people of all faiths to deepen their spiritual understanding and to ponder appropriate responses to these scourges. Poverty and injustice in societies are being addressed by many religious groups. The Catholic liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez asserts:

In the last analysis, poverty means an unjust and early death. Now everything is subordinated to market economies, without taking into consideration the social consequences for the weakest. People say, for example, that in business there are no friends. Solidarity is out of fashion. We need to build a culture of love, through respect of the human being, of the whole of creation. We must practice a justice inspired by love. Justice is the basis of true peace. We must, sisters and brothers, avoid being sorry for or comforting the poor. We must wish to be friends of the poor in the world.²¹

The HIV/AIDS pandemic, which some feel is already the greatest social crisis in the world, may continue to grow in the future, challenging religious groups and people to develop appropriate responses. It has been a particularly difficult subject for religions to come to grips with, since it involves intimate behaviors that they do not usually discuss. Though late in starting, the response of religions is now growing rapidly, with dialogues, debates, and actions being undertaken from local to international levels by religious institutions. In Uganda, one of the worst-hit countries in Africa, the disease was identified in 1982. Its first victims seemed to be fishermen, traders, and smugglers between Uganda and Tanzania. People thought they must be victims of witchcraft, revenge from angry ancestors, or the wrath of God. Once the connections of the disease with sexual promiscuity, homosexual contact, and drug use were made, the issue was shrouded in stigma and denial. But by 1992, the government recognized that its future development could be seriously imperiled by the disease, so it organized the Uganda AIDS Commission. Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim leaders have been active members and chairs of the commission and have helped it to be candid about the problem and also sensitive to the people's religious beliefs and practices. They developed a basic program called "ABC": abstinence, being faithful, and condoms. Since limiting the number of sexual partners is considered the most important way of stopping spread of the epidemic, Ugandans have encouraged "zero grazing" for monogamous, mostly Christian couples, and "paddock grazing" for polygamous relationships among Muslims. But even this simple program, which has apparently shown considerable success, runs into many subtle barriers related to people's religious cultures, such as traditional acceptance of wife-sharing, spontaneous sexuality during celebrations, and allowance for men to "inherit" their relatives' widows.

Poverty is another social issue that should be of great concern to religions and religious people. While every religion has some version of the "Golden Rule," there is an increasing gap between rich and poor around the world, and poor people are homeless and dying from malnutrition and starvation in the same countries where many wealthy people are benefiting from their cheap labor and politicians are benefiting from their votes. India, home to the world's largest tribal populations, is also the world's largest democracy, a richly agricultural country with plentiful grain surpluses that are exported or left to rot because of inadequate storage facilities. Urban areas are becoming very smart throughout the country, and many large homes and high-rise apartments are being built with teak and marble decor. However, despite promises of politicians to the tribal peoples languishing out of sight in rural areas, over eighty percent of them remain below the poverty line, sick, malnourished, ill-educated, lacking basic

Jimmy Carter



When Jimmy Carter left the White House after being the President of the United States from 1977 to 1981, he did not retire from public service. He went on to found the Habitat for Humanity, which helps to build houses for the poor, and the Carter Center, which works on many fronts to help governments solve conflict through peace talks rather than violence. The Carter Center also promotes development, health, and human rights in many countries. Jimmy Carter explains the philosophy that underlies all these efforts:

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

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

It is one thing to say that we each have the right not to be killed. It is another to say that we each have the right to live comfortably, with adequate food, health care, shelter, education, and opportunities for employment. It is even more powerful to say that we each have the right to worship as we choose, to say what we choose, and to be governed by leaders we choose. And perhaps the most powerful statement of all is to say that we each hold these rights equally—that no one person is more entitled to any of these rights than the next, regardless of his or her sex, race, or station in life.²²

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

Faith is the gift of God, and it is more precious than gold; to face life, we should put on the shield of faith, the breastplate of faith and love. . . . Without a central core of beliefs or standards by which to live, we may never experience the challenge and excitement of seeking a greater life. We will have ceased to grow, like Jesus, "strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God upon him" (Luke 2:4).²³

services, and hungry. Although the central government has legislated many programs designed to alleviate poverty, aid has not reached the people who need it, because of mismanagement, corruption, and a lack of direct participation by tribal people in implementation of poverty alleviation programs. Uneducated and facing extreme poverty, they are easy prey to unscrupulous moneylenders who charge such high interest that poor farmers fall more deeply into debt each year, especially when crops fail. As a result, thousands have committed suicide because they see no other way out. Some faith-based NGOs such as the Swadhyaya Movement (Chapter 3) and Gobind Sadan (Chapter 11) are trying to help people on a local scale, but there is as yet no concerted, sincere, large-scale effort by

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

In addition to the intellectual realization of a supreme being, we have a purely subjective need to meet a personal yearning. We have an innate desire to relate to the all-knowing, the all-powerful, and the ever-present—to some entity that transcends ourselves. I am grateful and happy when I feel the presence of God within me, as a tangible influence on my thoughts and on the ultimate standards of my life. It is reassuring to me to know that God will always be with me and cares for me. I think of the words of Isaiah: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you; For I am the Lord your God. . . . You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you" (Isaiah 42: 2-4).²⁴

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

In recent years, I have become increasingly concerned by a host of radical government policies that now threaten many basic principles espoused by all previous administrations, Democratic and Republican. These include the rudimentary American commitment to peace, economic and social justice, civil liberties, our environment and human

rights. Also endangered are our historic commitments to providing citizens with truthful information, treating dissenting voices and beliefs with respect, state and local autonomy, and fiscal responsibility. At the same time, our political leaders have declared independence from the restraints of international organization and have disavowed long-standing global agreements—including agreements on nuclear arms, control of biological weapons and the international system of justice. Instead of our tradition of espousing peace as a national priority unless our security is directly threatened, we have proclaimed a policy of "preemptive war," an unabridged right to attack other nations unilaterally to change an unsavory regime or for other purposes. . . .

I am extremely concerned by a fundamentalist shift in many houses of worship and in government, as church and state have become increasingly intertwined in ways previously thought unimaginable. As the world's only superpower, America should be seen as the unswerving champion of peace, freedom and human rights.... We should be in the forefront of providing human assistance to people in need. It is time for the deep and disturbing political divisions within our country to be substantially healed, with Americans united in a common commitment to revive and nourish the historical political and moral values that we have espoused during the last 230 years.²⁵

religiously conscientious people to change this bleak picture of structural injustice, even though India is home to many of the world's religions. To varying extents, the same widening gap between rich and poor in India is evident in other countries as well. Until individualism gives way to genuine concern for the community, this pattern may persist and worsen in the years to come.

Concern over other social problems has in recent years been eclipsed by concern over terrorism. The terrorists attacks in the United States in 2001 and then in other Western countries have brought a sea change in ways of thinking and have shaken people around the world into re-examining the underlying motives of their governments in the sphere of foreign policy. The future may



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hold a more serious inquiry into the motives and concerns of people who are willing to risk their lives and kill others for the sake of causes they hold dear. After the initial shocks, fear and hatred may begin to give way to deeper attempts to understand and even help each other as fellow human beings.

Religion and materialism

All religions teach that one should not hurt others, should not lie, should not steal, should not usurp others' rights, should not be greedy, but rather should be unselfish, considerate, and helpful to others, and humble before the Unseen. These universal spiritual principles were swamped by the expansion of capitalism in the twentieth century, as the profit motive triumphed as the most important value in economies around the world.

Many people live by material greed alone, with no further meaning to their lives. As Vaclav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic, wrote to his wife Olga when he was imprisoned for his courageous human rights work:

The person who has completely lost all sense of the meaning of life is merely vegetating and doesn't mind it; he lives like a parasite and doesn't mind it; he is entirely absorbed in the problem of his own metabolism and essentially nothing beyond that interests him: other people, society, the world, Being—for him they are all simply things to be either consumed or avoided or turned into a comfortable place to make his bed. Everything meaningful in life, though it may assume the most dramatic form of questioning and doubting, is distinguished by a certain transcendence of individual human existence. Only by looking outward . . . does one really become a person, a creator of the "order of the spirit," a being capable of a miracle: the re-creation of the world.²⁶

Many individuals and corporations have now stepped back to consider how to reconcile spiritual motives with earning a living. Books on voluntary simplicity have proliferated on the bestseller lists. Typically, they encourage the relatively wealthy to cut back on their breakneck work pace for the sake of their own spiritual peace, and to cut back on unnecessary individual expenditures for the sake of sharing with others. Many people are also taking a second look at the effect of economic systems. Liberal capitalism, for example, is being reinterpreted not as a means of allowing industrious people to climb out of poverty, but as a potentially amoral system. In free market capitalism, as Pope Paul VI commented: "The right to the means of production is absolute. It has no limits. It has no social obligation."²⁷

A new social consciousness that reflects religious values is beginning to enter some workplaces. Professor Syed Anwar Kabir, a faithful Muslim on the faculty of the Management Development Institute in New Delhi, India, teaches his managerial students to do mind-stilling meditation daily in order to listen to their own conscience and make ethical choices from a base of inner tranquility. He observes:

Businessmen themselves say that the uninhibited, reckless way in which you accumulate wealth will not give you a good name. For a company to survive in a highly competitive world in the long term means creating an image in the mind of the public, creating good will, creating its own impact and niche in the market. . . .



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If you treat human beings not as means but also as ends, naturally it is reflected in your products and services and creates an impact in the world of consumers so that they also come to respect the company's principles and strategies.²⁸

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

Religion and the future of humanity

The new century has dawned with flagrant materialistic greed, crime, amorality, ethnic hatreds, violence, and family crises, together with ignorant demonizing, power-mongering, and moneymaking in religions themselves. But being sick, perhaps the world is ready to be cured. There is indeed a global increase in interest in religion, particularly in new forms of traditional religions as well as new religious movements.

The negative signs of our times are interpreted by some as the darkness before the dawn, chaos from which will emerge a new and greater order. As Yasuhiro Nakasone, former Prime Minister of Japan, optimistically states: "Perhaps we are undergoing a trial—a test that will facilitate the rebirth of the human race."²⁹

Baba Virsa Singh confidently asserts that sweeping change in the hearts and actions of humanity is not difficult at all for the One who has created the entire cosmos. He reminds people of the value of practicing the eternal spiritual teachings and advises them to ignore religious leaders who do not practice what they preach and who have led people away from the truth because they themselves are not connected to it. He says that truth and love are ultimately very powerful:

Anticipate that day when God transforms the world, and the Truth, which is now hidden, comes out and starts working among the people again. That day is upon us.³⁰



Drawing inspiration from the past in order to greet the future, contemporary Russians gather in a Moscow park to celebrate the Spring Equinox according to ancient Slavic rites.

The world stage is ready for a true moral and spiritual revolution, in which people of every faith truly begin to practice in their own lives what their prophets have taught. The words of the late French sage Teilhard de Chardin are often quoted in these apocalyptic days:

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

Suggested reading

- Barney, Gerald O. and others, *Threshold 2000: Critical Issues and Spiritual Values for a Global Age*, Ada, Michigan: CoNexus Press, 2000. Projections of environmental and social crises in the twenty-first century, with multi-faith spiritual perspectives that may offer solutions.
- Beverluis, Joel V., ed., *A Sourcebook for Earth's Community of Religions*, second edition, Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1995. Essays on contemporary issues, reflections on how religious people might come together in harmony, and resources guides for religious education, first prepared for the 1993 Chicago Parliament of the World's Religions.
- Braybrooke, Marcus, *Faith and Interfaith in a Global Age*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: CoNexus Press and Oxford: Braybrooke Press, 1998. One of the world's central interfaith coordinators surveys the interfaith movement.
- Cenkner, William, *Evil and the Response of World Religion*, St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1997. Leading scholars from many religions explore the diversity of religious beliefs about a major spiritual issue: Why is there evil and suffering in the world?
- Fisher, Mary Pat and Lee W. Bailey, *An Anthology of Living Religions*, second edition. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2008. Readings from the various religions, following the outline of this book, to deepen understanding of the material herein.
- Forward, Martin, *Ultimate Visions: Reflections on the Religions we Choose*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1995. Interesting personal essays by scholars and leaders of many religions, reflecting upon why they like their religion and how it can contribute to a future of harmony among all religions.
- Kelsay, John and B. Twiss Sumner, eds., *Religion and Human Rights*, New York: The Project on Religion and Human Rights, 1994. A sensitive introduction to conflicts caused by religious "fundamentalism," with positive suggestions as to the potential of religions for insuring human rights.
- Khan, Hazrat Inayat, *The Unity of Religious Ideals*, New Lebanon, New York: Sufi Order Publications, 1927, 1979. A master of Sufi mysticism explores the underlying themes in the religious quest that are common to all religions.
- Knitter, Paul F., *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004. Exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism as perceived from Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, and Western perspectives.
- Marshall, Katherine and Lucy Keough, *Mind, Heart and Soul in the Fight Against Poverty*, Washington: The World Bank, 2004. Encouraging report from the world's largest development bank as it attempts to work with religions to alleviate poverty, unemployment, debt, and HIV/AIDS.
- Swidler, Leonard, ed., *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988. Leaders in the evolving interfaith dialogue grapple with the issues of transcending differences.
- Tobias, Michael, Jane Morrison, and Bettina Gray, eds., *A Parliament of Souls: In Search of Global Spirituality*, Ada, Michigan: CoNexus Press, 1994. Interviews with twenty-eight spiritual leaders from the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions, plus supplementary material.