1 Religious Life in the Global Village

> *"God" isn't a provable math problem, Zach. "God" is just a catchall term we give to our ignorance.*
>
> —Joyce Carol Oates, *The Gravedigger's Daughter*

Never has the study of religion been more important or an understanding of the various traditions more crucial. Terrorism and the war on terrorism, as well as waves of nonviolent civil resistance to dictatorship, are accelerating many of the changes taking place on our planet and revealing the continued role of **religion** in our daily lives and in global politics. The whirlwind of change in our economic, social, political, and personal lives that we are experiencing may change the course of human history, but at the same time we are rooted in ancient faith traditions that both resist and promote social change. Can we consider ourselves educated or understand what is going on in today's world without having a basic knowledge of our shared faith traditions?

Fortune-tellers in China now provide computer-generated astrological charts. Telecommunication satellites link isolated religious communities at separate ends of the earth; American television offers its viewers Christian preachers and Buddhist teachers. In the summer of 1993, representatives of religious communities met at a Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago to establish a process for ongoing dialogue and to initiate a debate on a declaration of a global ethic. The parliament had not met since 1893 but met again in South Africa in 1999 and in Spain in 2004. At lectures given by a Hindu teacher in Texas, a large color portrait of the Indian guru Sai Baba is framed by a vase of fresh flowers and a candle painted with an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. In the middle of Colombo, Sri Lanka, sits St. Anthony's Shrine, a pilgrimage center for hundreds of thousands each week, 90% of whom are not Christians but Buddhists and Hindus. Capital, goods, and people move about the planet with increasing frequency, changing the spiritual as well as economic and political landscapes of our world.

The pleasant coexistence of religious traditions is only one side of the story, however, as anyone who follows the news already knows. The first decade of the 21st century—designated the decade of peace and nonviolence by the United Nations—started off with a bang, literally, apparently continuing a pattern of intercommunal violence well established in the previous century. In early 1994, for example, an Israeli doctor entered a mosque in Hebron at the Cave of the Patriarchs, where Abraham is supposedly buried, and murdered more than 30 Muslims at prayer. He was beaten to death on the spot by the worshipers, and violence broke out again between Jews and Muslims throughout the region. Meanwhile, in India, Hindus and Muslims were killing one another in a flare-up of a centuries-old conflict, with current issues

including the political status of Kashmir, the destruction of a Muslim mosque by Hindu nationalists at a disputed site in Ayodhya, and the development of nuclear weapons by India and Pakistan. Catholics and Protestants were fighting one another viciously in Northern Ireland. Militants were killing and injuring thousands in the name of Islam, while the U.S. administration called on the name of God to justify its war against terrorism and invasions of Iraq. The Ku Klux Klan still marches in the United States, using religious arguments to denounce African Americans, Jews, and others. In the former Yugoslavia, Serbian Orthodox Christians engaged in a campaign of "ethnic cleansing" of Muslims that involved wholesale slaughter.

The **global village** is becoming a reality economically and socially, if not politically, as every isolated corner of the planet is being knit together into a world system. This global order, emerging for several centuries, has become a reality in the 20th century as all humans increasingly participate in a "shared fate" (Joseph, 1993; Wallerstein, 1984; cf. Durkheim, 1915/1965). Our economic and social institutions; our culture, art, and music; and many of our aspirations are now tied together around the world. The human race, however, is constructing a multicultural global village full of conflict and violence as well as promise.

Just as the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union ended in the 1990s and we made astounding progress in solving old conflicts, ethnic and religious nationalism exploded in violence around the world. Mark Juergensmeyer (1993) contended that rather than witnessing the "end of history" (see Fukuyama, 1992) and the emergence of a worldwide consensus in favor of secular liberal democracy, we may see the coming of a new Cold War, one between the secular West and numerous new religious nationalisms. "Like the old Cold War," said Juergensmeyer (1993, p. 2), "the confrontation between these new forms of culture-based politics and the secular state is global in its scope, binary in its opposition, occasionally violent, and essentially a difference of ideologies." The new millennium ushered in not an end to the bloodshed of the last century but the terror of a new violence.

Social life may be fundamentally different in the coming century, although many features of today's life will persist, just as there was much continuity between preagricultural and agricultural eras, premodern and modern times. A major task of the coming millennium will be to order our lives together and to create an **ethos**, or style of life, with a moral basis that is not nonetheless ethnocentric. The ethos must include sufficient agreement about common norms to facilitate cross-cultural interactions, international commerce, and conflict resolution while permitting considerable cultural diversity on the planet. The process of coming together, however, will not be an easy one. Religious traditions are central to that process because of their role in defining norms, values, and meaning; in providing the ethical underpinning for collective life; and in forging the cultural tools for cooperation and conflict.

Much of the best and worst of human history is in the name of its Gods, Goddesses, and religious traditions that continue to provide both an ethical

critique of, as well as a justification for, much bloodletting. The central thesis of this book is that the sociological study of religion has important insights into the central issues of how we can live together in our multicultural global village as well as helpful tools for investigating the problems created by our newly created common life with its diverse norms and values. The task here is to review those insights, assess the tools, raise questions, look at what does work, and develop some tentative conclusions about the role of religions in promoting chaos or community as humanity moves into the 21st century. Whether or not we can discover a means for sustaining a diversity of religious traditions and a wide range of ethical values and still live together remains an unanswered question.

The world's religions will be an integral part of the process, for better or for worse. Faith traditions "work" because they seek to answer fundamental questions in a comprehensive way. That strength, however, sometimes results in exclusivist claims to a monopoly on the "Truth," which, in a multicultural global village, often precipitates fatal conflicts among competing religious claims and the people who make them. The very things that hold a community together can also tear it apart.[1] The next few generations may decide, in this new global context, whether we continue to escalate the violence until the last shred of human civilization lies under the rubble or, alternatively, develop what Martin Luther King Jr. called a "beloved community" that ushers in an era of peace and justice.

Religion and the Globalization of Social Life

Our ancient ancestors sat around the fire and heard stories about their forebears —about the time when life first emerged in the universe, about lessons for living their lives. When people gather today, the flickering light usually comes from a television rather than a fire, but we still hear stories about the nature of reality as we perceive it in our own cultures. Many of Earth's previous inhabitants heard only one story about creation during their lifetime, but today most people hear more than one as the various religious traditions of the world —as well as newer scientific ones—diffuse widely through modern means of mass communication. We are surrounded by not only our own cultures but those of countless other peoples. Encountering these different perspectives on life is stimulating and enticing, but the overall process of cross-cultural contact is highly complicated because meaningful differences do exist among religions and sometimes provide the basis or excuse for confrontation. In Northern Virginia where I live, just outside of Washington, DC, a quarter of our county was born outside the United States; some of our close neighbors were born in Virginia, but others in Korea, Saudi Arabia, China, Cameroon, and India, making for interesting conversations at the school bus stop. It is also an interesting time to study religion, which permeates much of humanity's everyday experience. As Nancy Ammerman (2014, p. 189) notes, "the multilayered nature of everyday reality and the permeability of all social boundaries makes a more nuanced study of religion possible."

Historically, religious ideas have provided the major organizing principles for explaining the world and defining ethical life for elites and masses alike, and they continue to do so, but modern critiques of religion have shaken them to the root. The globalization of our "lifeworlds" (Habermas, 1987) will have as great an impact on religious life as industrialization did. Just when humanity most needs an ethical system that enables diverse peoples to coexist peacefully and justly, the traditional sources of such guidelines are being daily undermined by the challenge of modern science and the increased cross-cultural contact.

Many conflicts occurred throughout the history of Christianity, of course, but none so radical as those precipitated by the crisis of modernism in the last two centuries. Scientific arguments called into question not just specific dogmas but the very notion of dogma. As the Roman Catholic pope put it in 1907, modernism lays "the axe not to the branches and shoots, but to the very root" of the faith (Pius X, 1907). Cross-culturally, meanwhile, competing religious traditions were offering alternative religious explanations to fundamental questions about life and how it should be lived.

Even before the changes in society and culture associated with industrialization had time to become fully absorbed, however, the world changed again—just as profoundly—when the various human communities were thrust into intimate contact by late-20th-century communications and transportation technologies and the globalization of an advanced capitalist economy that relies on far-flung networks of production and consumption. Most scholars in the 19th century predicted a new era of peace and prosperity; yet the 20th century brought bloodshed on a scale never before experienced and prosperity for a privileged few, accompanied by mass starvation and misery for many more.

The communications and transportation revolutions of the 20th century took off in the post–World War II era. By the time Marshall McLuhan (1960) introduced the term *global village* into our vocabulary, a new awareness of the interconnectedness of our lives was emerging. In the 1960s and 1970s, a massive increase in international trade transformed the nature of economic processes. Capital from the industrialized countries, in search of cheap labor, shifted to so-called "less developed" nations so that much of the actual production process moved outside the United States and Western Europe and into Third World countries. By the early 1970s, the 500 major U.S. corporations were making 40% of their profits abroad.

These economic changes were intertwined with dramatic transformations in the civil society and political spheres as well. In 1900, there were about 200 nongovernmental organizations in the world—that is, noneconomic institutions organized to take care of some aspect of human life. By 1990, the number had risen to 6,000, and it had risen another 50% to 9,000 by 1993 (J. Smith, 1999), creating a web of structures ranging from religious organizations to humanitarian, activist, and other civic organizations. Cultural diffusion, driven in part by economic developments, has resulted in a global greed for consumer goods among those people who can afford to participate in the system (and

often a hope for participating among those who cannot afford to do so). In addition to nation-states, regional and international political alliances and institutions are playing an increasingly important role, right up to the United Nations, which functions as something of a quasi-state at the global level.

At the close of the 19th century, the sociologist Emile Durkheim (1893/1933) observed that the emerging world system of his day showed two separate and contradictory trends: (1) increasing unity and (2) increasing diversity. This insight proved to be an enduring one. Even as our lives become ever more intertwined, the people who exist in our everyday world are becoming increasingly diverse. Most people live not in isolated homogeneous villages but in heterogeneous cities. International trade, global social networks, and telecommunications locate us all in the same shared space. Even rural villagers are linked in an unprecedented way to the world economy as they send and receive goods around the globe.

Most people are probably ambivalent about the new world order. Many enjoy the material benefits, but they have come at a high price—including the destruction of many of the world's indigenous cultures and radical transformations of other societies as well as widespread ecological devastation. The past two centuries have seen violence and misery on an unprecedented scale, but a large portion of the world is healthier, eats better, and lives longer than the royalty of past civilizations. In the 19th century, the people with the most advanced technology, Western Europeans, subjugated most of the rest of the world. In the 20th century, they began slaughtering one another at an unprecedented rate as militarized conflict was industrialized and the technology of war created "total war," in which—for the first time in history—all humanity is involved and all are potential victims.

The academic study of religion provides one valuable approach to a serious study of the dilemmas plaguing modern culture. In the 19th century, science seemed to be replacing religion in the cultural centers of Europe; the Christian church cast its lot with the monarchy and appeared to be dying along with the old order. More than a century later, however, religion persists as a vital force in the world. Because of its persistent importance, the study of religion remains central to any adequate understanding of the nature of human life. The discussion that follows introduces the history of the scholarly (mostly sociological) analysis of religion, some of the analytical tools that can be used to explore current trends in religious life, and the series of themes that will inform this book.

Religion and the Sociological Tradition

Nineteenth-century sociologists, even as they mistakenly anticipated the imminent demise of religion, created a new approach to the study of religion that is rich with insights relevant to our lives. By identifying the very issues that define our present struggle, the intellectual quest initiated by Durkheim, Weber, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud can help us as we move into a 21st century