At the turn of the twentieth century, Pope Pius X (1907) declared modernism to be the synthesis of all heresies. It “lays the axe to the root, not the branch,” he said as he excommunicated a number of scholars and set up vigilance committees to report heretics to Rome. The Vatican severely suppressed biblical scholarship in the Catholic tradition until the Second Vatican Council half a century later.

Of course, the pope was right. Modernism is a synthesis of all heresies that goes to the root of faith traditions, challenging the very notion of dogma. As reprehensible as we might find his suppression of scholarship, he was correct about the profound shaking of the roots that modernism brought to Catholicism and to religion in general as it entered onto the human stage as part of the cultural and intellectual package accompanying the birth of modern Europe. From the pope’s position at the top of the church hierarchy, his efforts to smash modernism, beginning with those priests under his control, was a rational decision, even if we might see it differently. The church would never be the same.

The deep and radical changes associated with the globalization of social life are occurring with even more rapidity as we begin a new millennium. When social organization changes, so does religious organization; new ideas, rituals, and societies emerge through mutual, dialectical interaction. Societies have always changed, especially when they encountered others, but never have the scale and scope of cross-culture encounter been so widespread or intense. When culture groups interact, the encounter changes each of them, even if they are of unequal power. The impact of the agricultural revolution on human life unfolded over many centuries, but the industrial revolution
immediately transformed humanity in profound ways. Although considerable continuity exists between the cultures created by the modern world’s industrial, scientific, and democratic revolutions on the one hand and those of the early twenty-first century on the other, many now argue that we are living in a postmodern era that is undergoing another transformation as profound as any in human history.

In this chapter, I examine the two great cultural upheavals of the last two centuries, the twin crises for religion of modernism and multiculturalism, and the diverse responses they have provoked among the world’s cultures and religions. They constitute nothing less than what I like to call “cultural tectonics”—like the shifting of tectonic plates deep under the earth’s surface that cause earthquakes, the deep cultural shifts of our time are shaking the very cultural ground on which we stand.

From Local to Cosmopolitan

Each of the world’s major religions had its roots in a local primal religion, usually connected with a particular tribe or clan and a specific geographical location. Each tradition became more cosmopolitan as it diffused, encountering and incorporating other cultural forms along the way. Even today, most of the world’s population never moves more than 50 miles away from their birthplace; the cultural changes at the founding of the world’s religions usually involved courageous men and women stepping outside the boundaries of their comfortable lives and moving into new territory, geographically and spiritually.

These roots did not disappear as the tradition changed over time but established the form that influenced each religion’s later shape. In a similar transformation process, each of the world religions has increased in (1) its internal diversity and (2) its structural differentiation. Finally, (3) each religion has had to struggle with the two-horned dilemma of modernism: the challenges of cultural pluralism and scientific criticism. All these aspects of the local-cosmopolitan shift have had profound cultural and organizational consequences for each tradition. I will look now more closely at some of the specific transformations in religion that the phenomenon called “modernism” has brought about.

Internal Diversity and Structural Differentiation

The farther a tradition travels from its roots, the more diverse it becomes. Each major religious tradition incorporates a wide range of beliefs under a
broad, abstract sacred canopy and thus becomes diverse in terms of beliefs, rituals, and institutions. The reason for this development is no mystery. The primal faith of each religion’s origins was constructed along relatively homogeneous lines by a group of fairly like-minded people who lived close to nature in specific ecological conditions. As culture groups migrate, carrying their religious traditions with them, or as invading tribes conquer them or they defeat their neighbors, people reevaluate and reconstruct their worldview and corresponding ethos to incorporate different perspectives and adapt to new data. These groups borrow features of other traditions, then reformulate and strengthen their tradition in direct opposition to new challenges. Sometimes the culture changes dramatically as the result of a new technology or environmental condition. Among the Siksika in North America, for example, the introduction of the horse disrupted collective, egalitarian buffalo-hunting practices by allowing individuals to obtain their own buffalo independent of the group. A hierarchy developed favoring those who had horses and buffalo-centered egalitarian religious rituals deteriorated.

The major religious traditions often adapted to new settings through syncretism or co-optation: Chinese folk Gods became Buddhas and local African deities became Christian saints. Even Judaism, which remained an ethnic religion with strictly guarded boundaries, adapted to local conditions, so that a Palestinian and a Babylonian Talmud were produced early in the Common Era, and contemporary Ashkenazi Jews differ from their Hasidic brothers and sisters. After centuries of adaptation, each religious tradition has become remarkably diverse; patterns of rituals and beliefs vary widely around the globe and sometimes even between congregations in the same neighborhood.

The process of structural differentiation is a relatively recent phenomenon that involves the creation of specific institutions to fulfill different functions; it can occur both within the religion and between religious and other spheres of life. As societies become larger and more complex, the division of labor increases (see Durkheim [1893] 1933), so that specialized institutions carry out specific functions. Functions once performed by religious organizations are now carried out elsewhere (e.g., in public school systems) and religious institutions have taken on a specialized role, concentrating more on private than on public life.

The structural differentiation of the social order itself is a striking characteristic of modern societies and has been the subject of much scholarly and political debate. Early sociologists made much of the difference between premodern and modern society, the “Great Transformation” from preindustrial to industrial society in Western Europe during the nineteenth century, when countless peasants were uprooted from their family and village and flocked to the cities to work in factories. Tönnies’s ([1887] 1957)
distinction between the *Gemeinschaft*, or “community,” of preindustrial life and the *Gesellschaft*, or “society,” of modern social organization implies a loss of communal feeling and family ties. Durkheim ([1893] 1933) distinguished between mechanical and organic solidarity, expounding a more optimistic view of this transformation process than did Tönnies. Elements of that vision were revived again after World War II as modernization theorists identified parallels between cultural changes precipitated by industrialization in the West and those occurring elsewhere. Western modernization included the **secularization** of society, that is, the removal of responsibility and authority in certain spheres from religious institutions and the concomitant privatization of religion, issues I will pick up again in a moment.

Critics of early modernization theory challenged the idea that industrializing non-Western societies have to follow the same path of modernization as the West (Wallerstein 1984). Moreover, it turns out that the characterization of a vast gap between primitive and modern culture is not historically accurate (see Macfarlane 1979) and too much has been made of “pervasive and insidious contrasts” between the old social order and the new (see Bendix 1978; Shils 1981; Wallerstein 1984). Secularization has been a major issue in the sociology of religion, of course, but reflects more of a European experience than a general phenomenon; religious belief—and even participation in public religious rituals—persists in the modern world, even in the United States, despite its advanced economy and mostly secular government. As we shall see, a major reason for the secularization of Europe is the nature of the political transition and the conflict between the church, on the one hand, and democratic movements on the other.

The advent of the modern era profoundly affected religious life. All the world’s religions have had to do battle with the collective social and intellectual giant called modernism. I will now look more closely at this phenomenon.

### The Challenge of Modernism

**Modernism** is the emergence of a global, scientific-technological culture since the scientific, technological, and industrial revolutions that began with the Enlightenment in Western Europe. The perception among many European intellectuals in the nineteenth century that religion was dying was the result of two interrelated social movements: the scientific and democratic revolutions. Western science itself was parented by the Judeo-Christian tradition, which put a high premium on cognitive development.
and scholarship. The scientific movement took on a life of its own, however, and scientists soon came into direct conflict with church authorities because of their questions about particular claims made by the Vatican and other religious authorities.

This conflict began in the seventeenth century, when church authorities charged the famous scientist Galileo with heresy because he contended that the earth revolved around the sun, and not vice versa. The Jesuit inquisitors forced Galileo to recant his “heretical” ideas (quoted in White 1896–1897, Vol. 1:139). It was not just a specific doctrine that was at stake, of course, but the reputation of the Roman Catholic Church and the entire social order legitimated by Christianity. If the church could be wrong about the immovability of the earth, perhaps it made other, more significant mistakes as well. “If the peasants cease to believe that the sun revolves around the earth, they will revolt!” bemoans Father Inchofer in Bertolt Brecht’s (1966) dramatized version of the encounter. As the conflict between scientists and church authorities escalated, their positions polarized (as is usually the case in significant social conflict). It became increasingly difficult to be both a champion of scientific inquiry and a Christian; neither side would allow it.

The second challenge to the church occurred through a similar social process: As the democratic revolution emerged in the late eighteenth century (especially in France), its major opponents included not just the monarchy, but also the church because of its alliance with Europe’s political elites that dated from the fourth century. When the monarchy of France was challenged by the French Revolution, the crown and the church stood side by side to defend the ancien régime. Positions tended to solidify in nineteenth-century Europe: Either one was pro-democratic, in favor of the development of science, and anti-Christian, or one was in favor of retaining the monarch and traditional Christianity, and restricting the development of science.

Because a sacred canopy is woven out of a vast complex of interdependent parts, when one aspect of it is challenged, the validity of the entire system is called into question. Thus, when scientists began to doubt some dogmas of the Christian church, such as the process of creation and the authorship of the Bible, they cast doubt on the validity of the entire Christian tradition. A bitter conflict ensued between scientists and church authorities that persisted for centuries in Western culture. Christianity, and especially the Roman Catholic Church, bore the brunt of the modernist crisis because of its monopolistic truth claims and political alliances with the ancien régime and also because modernism came first to the West as it pioneered the industrial revolution. Science was used as a weapon in the battle to wrest control of the social order from the church, so the battle lines were drawn sharply, distorting the nature of the conflict.
The Revolt Against Religion: The Crisis Begins

The philosophical turmoil beginning in seventeenth-century Europe and culminating in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment set the stage for the “warfare between science and religion” (White 1896–1897). In addition to the new scientific empiricism that Galileo and others initiated, many Europeans exploring the world in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had observed common threads in all of the world’s religions. Lord Herbert of Cherbury claimed, in his 1624 De Veritate, that all humans had a “natural religion,” a position that came to be known as deism. Although it may not be inherently anti-Christian, deism was an early challenger of some of the church’s doctrines and encouraged tolerance of non-Christian religious perspectives.

Advocates of science also came into direct conflict with church officials over the growing development of textual criticism, that is, the scientific study of texts, including scriptures. Scholars examined such questions as the authorship, historical development, and composition of biblical writings and concluded that many of the church’s claims about these texts were untrue. Thomas Hobbes (1651) questioned the traditional belief that Moses authored the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). Baruch Spinoza ([1670] 1883) contended that theologians simply used the Bible for their own purposes, pointing out inconsistencies and historical problems in the biblical texts. Some scholars using critical methods were devout Christians, but the methods were appropriated by others who opposed the church and its hold over believers. One of these dissenters was Pierre Bayle, whose Dictionnaire Historique et Critique (Historical and Critical Dictionary; 1697–1706) was widely read and was supported by such influential intellectuals of the eighteenth century as Rousseau, Voltaire, Montesquieu, David Hume, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson.

In the political realm, advocates of the 1789 French Revolution attempted to destroy the Catholic church, not so much as a religion, but as a power in society (Tocqueville [1862] 1945). As the battle lines were drawn, people were forced to choose between the church and the monarchy on the one hand or science and the republic on the other. It was almost impossible to hold to any middle ground; people often demonstrated their loyalty to either the king or the new democratic government by choosing to send their children to the traditional church schools or to the newly established secular schools run by the state.

The Problem of Historical Contingency

By the nineteenth century, new rifts emerged between theorists of the burgeoning social sciences and orthodox Christian belief. Auguste Comte
(1853) contended that human thought developed through three historical stages: first, the theological or superstitious; second, the metaphysical; and finally, the positive or scientific. His developmental positivism was provided as a scientific basis for colonial expansionism and a general euphoria about progress and the future of humanity. The controversy that Comte’s framework generated exploded with the theories of evolution that spread throughout Europe, especially in Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* ([1859] 1952) and *The Descent of Man* ([1871] 1952). Darwin himself claimed that there was “no good reason why the views given . . . should shock the religious feelings of everyone” ([1859] 1952:239; cf. Darwin [1871] 1952:593), but many church leaders claimed that his theories contradicted the Genesis creation account. In 1865, *The American Church Review* contended that if Darwin’s hypothesis was true, “then is the Bible an unbearable fiction . . . then have Christians for nearly two thousand years been duped by a monstrous lie. . . . Darwin requires us to disbelieve the authoritative word of the Creator” (quoted in White 1896–1897).

The principle of evolution raised another issue even more profound than specific disputes over the authenticity of the Genesis cosmogony: Did religious doctrine also evolve historically? The major problem raised by the “scientific study of the Bible,” or historical criticism, is the issue of historical contingency. When religious truth is considered an infallible revelation from the deity, the idea of the historical nature of the tradition can precipitate a crisis because the conclusion of most historiographic science is that each religious tradition has its own history, and the immutable, taken-for-granted truths of the faith have in fact mutated considerably over time. One example is the disputed authorship of the Pentateuch, traditionally attributed to Moses himself. Study of the texts created problems in Jewish, Islamic, and especially Christian circles when scholars discovered that the sacred scriptures changed over time and were written by different scribes; later versions of the Hebrew scriptures were written with vowel marks whereas early versions did not have them.

Evolution and biblical criticism were used by the “anticlerical” (antichurch) movement to undermine the church’s authority, and the church (notably the Vatican) responded with a scathing attack on both science and democracy. When Pope Pius X condemned modernism in 1907 as a synthesis of heresies, however, in a way he was right. Conflicts about orthodoxy and heresy, in the Christian tradition, have historically concerned the truth or falsity of particular dogmas. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the notion of dogma itself came under attack and the word took on a negative connotation (Kurtz 1986). Not specific doctrines or religious ideas, but the idea of absolute religious truth itself was attacked by modern scholarship and by social reformers.
who saw the church as an enemy because it supported the monarchy and opposed democracy, and supported theology and opposed science.

*The Problem of Relativism*

Although some religions are more exclusivist in their formulations than others, virtually all of them either assert or imply that their own version of the world is true, thereby rendering competing worldviews inferior. Although this position may obtain some legitimacy in isolated cultures, it obviously becomes problematic in a multicultural context. This brings us to the second major problem of modernism, and a central theological issue for contemporary religions—the issue of relativism.

Religious conservatives criticize such modern perspectives as humanism and liberalism on the grounds that they erode absolutes, working to destroy the moral basis of a society. Certain ethical standards, the critics of relativism argue, are universally and unequivocally true, and therefore absolute, because they come from God, who is Absolute. This debate is particularly difficult to analyze with any intellectual reliability because first and foremost it involves a framing issue. That is, if one believes that certain truths, values, or beliefs are Absolutes, then any suggestion of relativism will be simply dismissed out of hand. If one refuses to take an absolutist stand, however, a paradox emerges, for the relativist by definition cannot know with certainty that absolutes do not exist.

Georg Simmel (1978) provides a useful perspective on the problem that helps to bridge the gulf between these two seemingly irreconcilable positions. A relativist position, he notes, does not inherently deny the possibility of the existence of an Absolute or Absolutes; it merely insists that one cannot know the Absolute absolutely, but only from a specific point of view, unless one is actually God. Simmel’s restatement of the problem suggests that any exclusivist truth claims (such as papal infallibility) might in fact be blasphemous, according to traditional definition, because only God knows the full truth about anything. Without addressing the issue of divine versus human perspective, a sociological analysis of religion can establish that absolutist or exclusivist truth claims are not entirely rare in human history. Moreover, because a wide range of human perspectives tends to represent the world in widely different ways, it is difficult to accept the premise that any single one has a complete corner on the truth.

**The Revolt Against Modernism (The Counterrevolution)**

When absolutism is threatened, people often respond with fanaticism. If one facet of a tradition seems at risk, people often believe that the entire
system is. The conflict between establishment religion in the West and broad cultural movements of modernism in the nineteenth century provides an exemplary case of the scandal modernism created in many religious traditions. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Vatican came down harshly on modernism, unintentionally fanning the flames of discontent, but eventually putting them out by driving some of the dissidents out of the church and silencing many more (Lyng and Kurtz 1985).

**Roman Catholicism Versus Modernism**

As its own authority in European society was attacked by waves of democratic and scientific revolutions, Rome launched a systematic campaign against modernism over a period of several decades. At the First Vatican Council, convened in 1870, the pope was declared infallible in matters of faith and morals for the first time in the history of the church. In 1899, Pope Leo XIII denounced “Americanism” as a heresy in an effort to criticize both modern science and certain forms of democracy as examples of the pernicious practice of adapting religious doctrine and practice to new social circumstances (Klein 1951; Leo XIII 1899).

The church’s external enemies, attacking its hold on European society and politics, used scientific criticism as a weapon to undermine the legitimacy of the sacred canopy woven from Christian doctrine. Little could be done by the waning papacy against such formidable enemies, but inner enemies—heretics—were identified and soundly condemned. When Pope Pius X (1908) issued decrees condemning modernism, he set up a system of secret vigilance committees in every diocese to identify and report suspected heretics to Rome.

The modernist scholars denounced by the Vatican faced remarkable ambivalence in their dual roles as Christians (in some cases, clergy) and as scholars, because the culture wars tried to force them to choose sides. The findings of their research contradicted the pronouncements of the Vatican, and Rome exploited their vulnerable positions to mask its own vulnerability. The process of identifying and denouncing heretics, of institutionalizing a campaign to root them out of the church, served as a purification ritual for the beleaguered church hierarchy and set the tone for other “counterrevolutions” to follow.

**The Counterrevolution Continues**

Conservative Protestant and Catholic Christians in the United States today continue to struggle with many of the same issues the Vatican confronted in the nineteenth century. The evangelical and traditionalist movements of late
twenty-first-century American culture reflect efforts by a large sector of the Christian community to resist reliance upon scientific and secular thought to establish the moral boundaries of contemporary life.

The modernist crisis has also spread to other religious traditions, especially in what some claim is a “postmodern period,” in which all tradition allegedly ceases to function (see Robertson 1991, 1992a, 1992b). It was not long after Christianity’s encounter with scientific empiricism that questions were raised about other religious doctrines. Did God dictate the entire Qur’an word by word to Muhammad? Did Krishna really serve as Arjuna’s charioteer on some historical battlefield? Have the Vedas really always existed and were not authored by humans? Does Matsu really live in the statues at the temple, or are the figures just symbolic representations of her? Or, more fundamentally, does a Goddess of Mercy Matsu really exist, or is she just a projection of some social or psychological reality?

As with secularization, the extent to which modernism becomes a problem depends on the nature of the belief system and religious institutions as well as the conflict strategies chosen, especially by religious elites. Each religious tradition faces modernism at its most vulnerable spot. For Judaism and Islam, modernism raises questions about social boundaries and creates a cultural climate in which it is difficult to sustain the rituals that reinforce them. In the Christian churches, modernism attacks the integrity of the belief structure by challenging the tradition’s claims about its scriptures and by presenting alternative perspectives that answer the same questions in different ways. Modernism may not offer as much of a challenge to the Eastern religions, which have traditionally co-opted, rather than opposed, new ideas. Nonetheless, the more mystical elements of Eastern thought are sometimes problematic in the modern scientific ethos. Both the internal spiritual claims of such disciplines as yoga and the cosmic worldviews that posit cycles of the universe lasting hundreds of thousands of years appear too fantastic and unverifiable to many modern Hindus and Buddhists, despite the effort by some to articulate their claims with scientific rhetoric.

Moreover, the instrumental rationality—that is, the utilitarian calculation of means to an end—of the technocratic ethos that now pervades the global village frequently undermines the value rational (rational from a values perspective) and nonrational (e.g., affective) bases of action promoted by Hinduism and Buddhism as well as other religious traditions. The technocratic ethos also values efficiency and practicality above all other values, including justice and personal loyalty. Religious and technocratic values do not always collide, but they often do.

It is clear that a countertrend has also emerged, often not merely a retrogressive or temporary movement but a solid reaction against the dominant
worldview that modernism represents. I will return to this issue in later chapters, but a few points must be made here. First, the rising traditionalist theologies in Islamic societies, North American Christianity, and Hindu nationalism are powerful movements that will not go away and represent a basic revolt against modernism that has persisted long after the first major battles between religion and modernity arose 200 years ago. The most hopeful prognosis is that these movements will help to mitigate some of the more damaging effects of modernism without destroying the possibility of rapprochement among the religious communities or between religious and secular forces.

Second, mainstream cultures have begun to learn the limitations of both science and tolerance. Science and technology have been humbled in recent decades, particularly by the ecological crises brought on by unbridled technological development in some sectors of the world and the destructive consequences of scientific and technological research in the development of weapons of mass destruction. Some of the old battles have died down and new areas of agreement have developed between scientific and religious spheres.

Finally, antimodernist movements are now facilitated by modern technologies of mass communication and transportation. Now, millions of like-minded people who might have felt isolated in their opposition to the intrusion of modernism into their culture can join together across geographical boundaries, support and encourage one another in their critiques of modernism, and build networks and strategies for collective action.

**Historical Outcomes of the Modernist Crisis**

Modern culture contains two simultaneous, contradictory trends: increasing unity and increasing diversity (Durkheim [1893] 1933). The emerging global culture has some common denominators and centripetal forces that draw people together as well as profound countertrends that challenge the mainstream—notably, the revival of traditional cultures in many parts of the world, in part as a protest against the flood of foreign influences.

What have been the direct outcomes of the modernist challenge to traditional religion? Some of the consequences were

1. The substitution of religious traditions with rationalism, scientism, and individualism

2. The secularization of public life and the privatization of the religious, so that people from different faiths could share a common social life
3. The revitalization of traditional forms
4. The construction of quasireligious forms that fulfill many of the social and psychological functions of traditional religions, such as civil religion and nationalism
5. The creation of new forms of religious belief and practice created through processes of syncretism

The first two of these consequences were a logical outgrowth of the Enlightenment worldview that precipitated the modernist crisis in the first place. The latter three represent attempts to reshape, rather than replace, the world’s religious traditions. I will explore the first two briefly here and the last three when I explore the crisis of multiculturalism below.

Rationalism, Scientism, and Individualism

The first Western solution to the problems raised by modern science was advanced during the Enlightenment: Replace the illusions and arbitrary authority of traditional Christianity with a rational system of norms and values based on science. Most of the Enlightenment philosophers and their heirs thus emphasized a rationalism that insisted on reason as a source of knowledge superior to religious tradition. As we have seen, the social sciences took the lead in this effort; many were optimistic that a new scientific morality could be founded on either a scientific psychology and economics—Adam Smith and the British utilitarians—or a scientific sociology—Auguste Comte and the French positivists. The German idealists exposed the “illusions” of religious thought in the West, which would be replaced with the rationality of Kant, the socialist revolutions of Marx, and the psychotherapeutic treatment of Freud. In its most extreme forms, this approach resulted in the development of scientism, a quasireligious belief in the scientific method.

The warfare between science and theology that characterized the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has subsided somewhat, because both sides have pulled back their troops, and because bridges have been built between the two sides. As Ian Barbour (1960) has observed, the relationship between science and religion is now one not of content differences but of methods. Barbour notes a number of similarities and differences between the two methods that are most instructive. Both science and religion involve (1) the interaction of experience and interpretation, (2) the role of community and analogy (neither perspective makes sense to the outsider who is not familiar with the symbolic language of the community), (3) the primacy of relationships rather than objects (relationships among people and with their deities in religion, and among elements of matter—such as probability
waves in atomic structures—in science), and (4) the use of reason to test interpretations of the way in which reality is experienced.

According to Barbour (1960), however, some differences between the two methods remain significant, including (1) science focuses on means rather than ends; (2) science aims at knowledge of reproducible relations expressible in general laws, whereas religion emphasizes configurational understanding and the significance of a unique part in relation to the whole; and (3) science promotes objective detachment as opposed to the personal involvement valued by religion. But finally, Barbour concludes, science and religion are complementary forms of investigating reality: “Either science or religion alone affords a partial view,” he claims (1960:214). “We need to use various categories and frames of reference. The man who says, ‘Love is not real because I cannot weigh it’ is confusing two frames of reference.” The same could be said of the multiple perspectives within and between scientific and religious traditions. Every scientific field, every religious tradition has its own fields and schools, its own perspectives, which point to reality as it is experienced by people from a given point in the social and natural world.

Various religious traditions have responded differently, of course, to the challenge of modern science, as have schools of thought within each tradition. The historical context and nature of ecclesiastical institutions, as well as flexibility of doctrinal orientations, also influence the extent to which traditions resist or accommodate modern science. Most religions, like Buddhism, have both those who wish to accommodate and those who resist, although the inclusiveness of the tradition favors an incorporation of scientific paradigms into the Buddhist worldview. A few Buddhists have found science inadequate; others have emphasized the similarities between the Buddha’s search for truth and the methods of modern science. Buddhist advocates of science point to a passage in which the Buddha encourages testing of his teachings through one’s own powers of reason (Kitagawa and Reynolds 1976:46). Dr. Luang Suriyabongse asserted that “the Buddha was the greatest discoverer and scientist of all time” (quoted in Kitagawa and Reynolds 1976:47). Other Buddhists were less sanguine about science. G. P. Malalasekera, the first president of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, asserted that the Buddha utilized science when appropriate but that the ultimate mysteries of his teachings went far beyond the knowledge that any purely scientific approach could offer (Kitagawa and Reynolds 1976:47).

A major feature of the Enlightenment was an individualism that maintains the independence of the human individual as the source of all values, rights, and duties. This claim was a response to the legitimation crisis of the modern West; the democratic legacy to which individualism gave birth is a hallmark of the Enlightenment. Granting the individual the freedom to make
doctrinal and ethical claims independent of religious communities or institutions solves the crisis of faith by making religion a matter of personal choice, but it also creates new social problems. People are not required to rely on suspect institutions, but the dilemma of how to maintain collective life is unsolved if each individual is responsible only to him- or herself.

Secularization and Privatization

The second major consequence of the crisis of modernism is constituted by the dual processes of secularization and privatization in which religious institutions are differentiated from other spheres of life. The process of secularization was the hallmark of political and religious reform following the French Revolution, when the church, in alliance with the monarchy, had such a monopoly on the organization of public life that those who wished to discard the ancien régime felt that they had to eliminate the church’s control as well. It is, at first glance, a logical solution to the problem because, like Jefferson’s proposed “wall of separation between church and state” (Jefferson 1802), it allows a diverse people to build a collective life despite their religious differences. When people enter the marketplace, the statehouse, or the classroom, they can leave their religion at home or in their hearts.

In Europe, the passing of the old regime resulted in the secularization of many spheres of European society, notably in politics and education. As the officially recognized religion in most of Europe, the Christian church had constructed the authorized ethos, socialized and educated the youth, and pronounced judgment on moral boundaries. During the French Revolution, advocates of democracy recognized the power of the Catholic schools in promoting monarchical ideas among young people, and so made the creation of state schools a major priority (see Durkheim 1961). The schools had also been used to promote Christianity; in the secular sphere, they would promote the principles of “liberty, equality, and fraternity” and the civic virtues required by a democratic society (Dansette 1961; Kurtz 1986:30ff.). In country after country in Europe and the New World, the official relationship between the state and the church was terminated.

As a response to modernism, secularization is closely linked to the scientific ethos, which insists that it is possible to adopt an objective viewpoint that stands above cultural biases; it lies at the heart of the Enlightenment project that would substitute religion with scientific rationality. The problem with this effort, as I have noted, is that the all-encompassing nature of religious perspectives makes it difficult, if not impossible, to “check them at the door” when entering the public arena. A religious perspective by definition
involves itself in the ethical standards that apply to all other spheres of life. For most people, historically, and in most cultures, religion is diffused throughout everyday life.

Most sociologists, and many other people living in “modern” society, have trouble understanding this because they compartmentalize religion, assigning it to a specific sphere and attending to it only on an occasional basis. Although attention to the sacred has always had a cyclical nature, commonly oriented around festivals and seasonal rites or daily and weekly times of prayer and worship, such differentiation is a fairly recent development in the world’s history. The compartmentalization of religion, however, represents one solution to the problem of a multicultural social reality. Here, each of many religious perspectives takes its place in a cultural marketplace alongside secular worldviews and ethical standards. If everyone in our interaction space shared the same basic worldview and ethos, we could go about our daily lives taking religious elements for granted. When we encounter a plurality of worldviews on a regular basis in the public sphere, however, we often accommodate that reality by assigning the explicitly religious to certain times and sectors of our lives in the process known as privatization.

This process is enforced by social norms of modern Western urban life: When people constantly talk of God or their religious convictions, they are either religious professionals, for whom it is acceptable (although they are alienated somewhat from mainstream society), or religious “fanatics,” some of whom are shunned; others are revered, but still set apart (like Mother Teresa). If we think that the copy machine will not work because it is infested with demons or the operator has bad karma, we will probably keep our opinions to ourselves. In everyday life, people in heterogeneous urban societies usually approach the sacred with some ambivalence. Those who are religious acknowledge that their faith should inform their entire life, but they are often hesitant to engage in religious talk in a multicultural setting because they get negative feedback. Religious convictions are thus considered private concerns that should be kept to oneself, like one’s sexual fantasies.

Sociologists of religion have made much of the secularization phenomenon, in large part because it was a major event in Europe and many of the prominent figures in the field were European and tended to generalize from their own experience. Many of the perspectives of the founders of modern social science persisted outside of Europe. In less secularized societies, however, the religious traditions people bring with them continue to shape the ways in which they define the world, the meaning of life, and the nature of ethical behavior in everyday life. A majority of people on the planet live in a much more sacralized environment than do the people who write and read
books on the sociology of religion. For billions of people, religious traditions are a natural part of everyday life.

Because of the highly visible disestablishment of religion in the United States, along with the establishment of state schools as well as other spheres of secularization in society, many people assumed that U.S. culture had become secularized in an analogous fashion. As Warner (1993:1049ff.) notes, the secularization paradigm for American religion proposed by Berger (1969) and Parsons (1960, 1967, 1969) was increasingly challenged by an antisecularization thesis growing primarily out of empirical research on American religion, which found it flourishing (see, e.g., Ammerman 1987; Christiano 1987; Ebaugh 1991; Neitz 1987, 1990). Indeed, the counterevidence was so strong that it appears that “the antisecularization thesis . . . has become the accepted wisdom” (Sharot 1991:271).

As Sherkat and Ellison (1999:364) observe, many of the controversies in the sociology of religion “are rooted in debates between scholars wedded to secularization theories and those who explain religious behaviors and trajectories through a different lens.”

This **antisecularization thesis** contends that U.S. culture, far from secularizing, has become more religious than ever; religious participation not only persisted throughout U.S. history, Warner (1993) points out, but also actually increased dramatically well into the twentieth century. At the time of the American Revolution in 1776, about 10 percent of the population were church members, compared with about 60 percent in the 1990s (Warner 1993:1049; cf. Caplow, Bahr, and Chadwick 1983:28–29; Finke and Stark 1986; Herzberg 1962:47–50). A major reason for the lack of secularization in American society may well be that the battles there have not been as vociferous as in Europe, where they were politicized in an ethos that preferred democracy over monarchy and where church officials promoted the retention of the monarchy and fought democratization in every sphere.

Sherkat and Ellison (1999), in examining the available data on religion in the United States, note that—contrary to the secularization theories—religion continues to play an important role in American life in terms of “(a) the distribution of beliefs and commitments, (b) trends in beliefs and attachments, and (c) predictors of religiosity” (p. 365). A mere 2.2 percent of American respondents to the General Social Survey (GSS), according to Melton (2003), say that they do not believe in God, whereas more than 80 percent say they believe that the Bible is divinely inspired. Membership and participation in religious organizations is high compared with other countries, with 61 percent of Americans claiming to belong to more than 2,000 religious organizations, about half of them being Christian denominations (see Melton 2003).
At the bottom of the secularization debate is what Murray (2004) calls the “rationalizing impulse,” which was also a central theme of Max Weber’s work on the sociology of religion. The intellectual work of the modern world was the application of reason to every sphere of life, but it had serious unintended consequences. As Murray (2004:15) puts it,

The paradox of Western civilization [is] the dialectic of the Enlightenment. The rationalizing impulse that led to the liberation of the modern subject from tyrannical faith in myth, superstition, and sovereign power, and their embodiment in the objective world, is according to Adorno and Horkheimer, also responsible for its negative by reducing it to the status of that objective, or natural world from which it was trying to liberate itself.

The very process of liberation from the tyranny of the ancien régime may lead to a new entrapment, not only the “iron cage” of the modern socio-economic order about which Weber wrote, but also a myopic intellectual inquiry that provides only certain kinds of answers and neglects other forms of inquiry that science, narrowly defined, might not understand or have the capacity to address.

Although the modernist crisis certainly affected U.S. culture profoundly and the battles have not completely subsided, the working compromise establishing some boundaries between religious and political spheres instituted at the founding of the republic, as well as the forced multiculturalism of American culture over time, have mitigated the polarization between religious and scientific perspectives and among various religious traditions.

The Modernist Crisis and the Twenty-First Century

Not only is religion alive and well in the world’s most advanced industrial society, it is thriving in many other areas of the world. Along with the creation of new religious forms, we are now witnessing some dramatic revitalizations of traditional forms of religious life. The growing interdependence of the various human cultures, along with the economic and social webs woven across thousands of former boundaries, is creating an unprecedented series of changes in the nature of human theology. On the one hand, the very notion of religious belief has been called into question by the secular nature of thought in industrial society. On the other hand, the idea of a tightly woven, nearly seamless sacred canopy has clearly become obsolete (if it ever truly existed) as people from various strands of religious thought encounter ideas from other traditions. It is virtually impossible for any believer in the world today to live in isolation.
Each religious tradition faces a similar dilemma, although it is more acute in those that are more exclusivist in their theology: how can they encounter the ideas of another faith expression, and indeed interact with people from that community on a regular basis, without losing the integrity of their own faith? The idea of religious traditions encountering one another is, of course, nothing new. The process has occurred again and again over the centuries, as we saw in our tour of the world’s religions. The scale and significance of those encounters are new. Members of every major religious tradition now, in a sense, meet one another on the street, and must decide whether to kill each other, pass by indifferently, or somehow engage one another.

One important consequence of these encounters, however, is the rediscovery of the rich diversity each tradition embraces. From within one’s own small corner of a faith community, the canopy might appear relatively uniform and seamless. When we look closely at any sacred canopy, however, we discover that it is not uniform at all but a patchwork of contradictory ideas stitched together over the centuries. The great prophets and seers of the planet emerge from the profane order of human existence at times of crisis, when the canopy is ripped apart by wars and invasions, social or economic ferment, and natural disaster. The power of the prophets and the Gods comes from being able to restore the canopy so that it can once again be taken for granted. Recognizing the affinities between their interests and the ideas of a particular religious perspective—or even an antireligious belief system—various social strata and classes struggling for a position in a new social order also attempt to seize that power.

The Western Enlightenment worldview, which in essence called for the substitution of religion with modern science, became in effect another competing sacred canopy with its own arbitrariness, contradictions, and truth claims that legitimated a new system of social exploitation. Against those secularizing worldviews and the global military-bureaucratic structures they legitimated arose a series of protest theologies, sometimes from the Left and occasionally from the Right, but almost always from the bottom up, reaffirming sacred frames for explaining and ordering the world.

Not all responses to the modernist crisis involved either efforts to substitute religion with science or simply to have religion retreat into private spheres as public life became secularized. Other efforts to cope with modern and postmodern life involved the revitalization of traditional forms, the creation of new religious movements, and the formation of quasireligious systems such as civil religion and nationalism. Let us look now at these permutations of religion in the wake of the challenge that followed on the heels of the crisis of modernism: the crisis of multiculturalism and competing religious beliefs, rituals, and institutions.
The Crisis of Multiculturalism

As modern cultures emerged in the West around the time of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, profound changes occurred in the religious sphere of life as in all other spheres. Religious impulses pushed toward an all-embracing sacred canopy that pervaded everyday life and linked it with the broadest theories of the cosmos. The pluralism of the modern world, however, has created a contradictory impulse that limits religious spheres of influence as multiple traditions conflict with one another. New forms of religious life have taken shape out of competing tendencies of the world’s religions to provide a sacred canopy for all elements of life on the one hand and resistance from alternative traditions to the monopoly of any such system on the other hand. The tension between opposing forces precipitated the privatization of religion and a differentiation of spheres of life in the modern world. Even as people’s religious traditions continue to guide their private ethics, a wall of separation has emerged between religion and politics, religion and economics, faith and education.

In a structurally differentiated society, every institution has a specialized task; the task of religious institutions is to tend to spiritual and ethical issues. Religion intrudes on all other spheres, however, because its ethics generally apply to all areas of life. A modern society compartmentalizes institutions, but we cannot compartmentalize people.2 The cultural life of the global village is a product of an interaction of religious traditions among themselves as well as between each tradition and the multitude of others within which they came into contact as the global society emerged. In itself, this is not a new phenomenon; each major cultural tradition is, after all, a product of multicultural encounters. In both form and content, moreover, our late twentieth-century multicultural crisis is similar to the modernist crisis a century ago. What is new is the scale and scope of the process.

When cultures collide, the sacred canopy of each tradition competes in a cultural marketplace and is thus open to the scrutiny of potential consumers. When new Gods arrive on the scene, we often react in much the same way as King Kadmeus did when Dionysius was said to have appeared in Thebes in ancient Greece—we pull out our swords for battle. Multiculturalism creates a crisis, but also an opportunity. We can learn from the successes and failures of the past and, with a sociological imagination, construct new religious traditions in the next centuries. It is not a question of whether we will do it, but how, and what kinds of new traditions will emerge. The construction of new social and cultural forms is never a simple process, however, and the crisis of multiculturalism, following in the wake of modernism, has precipitated culture wars around the globe.
Besides the responses to modernism already discussed—the substitution of religion with alternative ideologies and the secularization of public life—efforts to deal with these crises helped to forge a transformation of religion in the following outcomes:

1. Anti-modernist movements such as the protest theologies of Christian and Islamic traditionalism (fundamentalism)
2. Liberation theologies from Latin America and the women’s movement
3. New religious and quasireligious forms, such as individualism and consumerism, civil religion and nationalism
4. Religious syncretism, the development of religious movements that bring together elements of various religious traditions in a new (and often controversial) manner

I will examine each of these developments briefly in order to understand contemporary trends and future possibilities for religious life in the global village.

Culture Wars and Protest Theologies

Multiculturalism (the product of sustained encounters among the various religious traditions of the world) along with modernism (the critical force of modern secular thought) fuel ongoing culture wars in virtually every corner of the globe. These wars are, in part, a result of what Jürgen Habermas (1975) calls a “legitimation crisis.” Many religious movements struggle against the hegemony of modern cultural centers and the invasion of materialistic, relativistic, and hedonistic culture from these centers. These movements, based upon traditional indigenous cultures, have a variety of political agendas, often with diametrically opposed implications for reorganizing society in the global village. From the liberation theologians of Latin America and Africa to the Islamic and Christian traditionalists (“fundamentalists”) of the Middle East and North America, however, all share a common characteristic. Religious frames empower the participants in their struggles against the oppressive structures of what Weber ([1904] 1958) called the “iron cage” of the modern socioeconomic order and what Simmel ([1908] 1971) called the growth of “objective culture.” In the contemporary world, the family and religion are viewed as enclaves of “communicatively structured interaction”—that is, interaction is based on who people “are” rather than on what they are “worth,” in some market sense. When even that terrain is invaded, people resist (see Habermas 1987:393). Fields (1991) contends that
this social context helps explain the current rise of traditionalism in the United States; it can no doubt apply to other traditionalisms as well. “After years of withdrawal,” Fields argues, traditionalist groups are now resisting:

Thus, the major thrusts of the ideology of activist fundamentalism . . . involve a reduction of state intrusion into the economy and the family coupled with state promotion of religious doctrine as the basis of law. While seemingly contradictory, institutionalization of this ideology would produce a shift in the relationship between subsystems and the lifeworld, while political discourse would become more “substantive” than “formal” or “technical.” (Fields 1991:185)

This two-pronged effort to eject the modern world from private life and at the same time to transform public life so that the gap between private values and the cultural ethos is less striking lies at the core of traditionalism. This dual development appears in various conservative subforms around the world, as well as in the emergence of liberation theology among the poor, especially in Latin America.

Cultural cleavages in the global village sometimes fall along the lines of the religious traditions. In recent decades, for example, movements in the Islamic world used centuries-old themes of Muslim–non-Muslim divisions as a vehicle for expressing their discontent about the invasions of their lives by Christians from the West, Marxists from the Soviet Union, Hindus from Delhi, and the like. Protestant–Catholic cleavages in Northern Ireland reflect economic and political divisions that parallel deep religious differences. In many instances, however, new lines of conflict cut across old ones, reflecting competing impulses toward orthodoxy and progressivism, or modernism (see Hunter 1991). These conflicts involve the question of how to set standards in all social spheres—the family, law, art, education, and politics. They concern, as Hunter puts it, “allegiances to different formulations and sources of moral authority” and “how we are to order our lives together” (1991:118, 51).

These culture wars are sparked by the interaction of diverse worldviews in the global village. Widespread dissatisfaction with the way the world is ordered and the ways in which it is changing fuels the conflicts. Moreover, interpersonal, intertribal, interethnic, interclass, interregional, and international conflicts are often framed in religious terms, intensifying them and giving them a significance to participants that transcends the mundane struggle for survival, wealth, and power. These battles, framed as religious conflicts, take on larger-than-life proportions as the struggle of good against evil.

First, the cultural dimension of the crisis involves the assault on religious traditions by the interaction of various religious orientations and scientific critiques, undermining each system’s legitimation. Second, advanced capitalism is in a state of crisis, precipitated, Habermas and others argue, by the
inability of political and economic systems to meet expectations about delivering material comforts and economic stability. Finally, these broader crises result in what Habermas (1984) calls the “colonization of the lifeworld,” that is, the welfare state and the public realm in general have invaded the private sphere of lived experience, including the family, which is now subjected to the imperatives of advanced capitalism, “consumerism and possessive individualism, motives of performance and competition” that shape behavior. Everyday life is thus squeezed into a “purposive-rational action orientation [that] calls for the reaction of hedonism freed from the pressures of rationality” (1987:325). Habermas is writing primarily of the world of advanced capitalism, but elements of his analysis are applicable to other parts of the world as well. The lifeworld of the poor in the Third World, for example, has been colonized by the advanced capitalism emanating from the West in such a radical manner that many have organized with the only cultural tools they had available, that is, those from their Christian tradition.

People often perceive the culture wars of the modern world as strictly moral conflicts, but they also have a basis in social organization. Orthodoxy thrives in sociologically simple (small, homogeneous) communities and modernism in complex ones (large, heterogeneous societies). In a small, rural village, where everyone comes from the same ethnic group and class differences are minimal, it is feasible to have rigid moral boundaries and a sacred canopy that unifies the ethos of the entire society. In the global village, however, competing claims of diverse groups with radically different ethnic, historical, and class backgrounds render consensus on moral codes virtually impossible.

Sociological insights into religion center on the proposition that religious and social systems are intimately connected. Consequently, they change in a dialectical fashion, influencing and shaping one another. The dramatic transformation of the social world in the twentieth century is both shaped by and in turn produces remarkable changes in the nature of religious life on the planet.

As the world system emerges, many indigenous traditions are either incorporated into broader religious traditions or eliminated altogether, radically changing the global map of religious ecology. Colonialism and modernization destroyed so many local expressions of religious life that it appeared to some that few religious traditions would remain. Religious life has proven remarkably resilient, however, and we would be mistaken to assume that the shape of religion on the planet will be determined only by the central traditions. Moreover, many local variations of the global traditions incorporated many of the indigenous beliefs and practices.

The formation of new religious movements has become widespread, some in the form of movements that syncretize a range of older forms, just as intense intercultural conflict created the major religions themselves in earlier
times. Other movements, such as the communist and socialist systems of the twentieth century, claim to be nonreligious but take on many of the characteristics of religions. They attempt to provide a worldview and an ethos, as well as a general sacred canopy to guide both the ideology and the structure of life, from the personal to the public. In the Soviet Union, the state created a relatively rich, though often cynically practiced, ritual life apparently intended to replace traditional religious practices. When I visited the Soviet Union in 1988, I was surprised to see highly decorated evergreen trees in public places. When I asked about them, one of our hosts explained that they were New Year’s trees, and that Father Frost, a large man with a red suit and white beard, would put presents under the tree for the children. Similarly, a humanist seder in Austin, Texas, had all the elements of a traditional Jewish Passover except that there was no deity.

Throughout the modern world, with its nation-state system, various forms of nationalism offer a surrogate religion in which identity is forged not on a religious anvil, but is linked to citizenship in a nation. This development has given us the democratic political institutions so widely cherished in modern life but also nationalistic wars and new forms of ethnocentrism. A similar ambivalence pervades the individualism of contemporary Western culture. It has taken on a quasi-religious form as well, leading to both a highly ethical humanism that stresses justice, community service, and civic responsibility and, at the same time, a narcissistic hedonism in which the lofty values of individual freedom and self-actualization are translated into patterns of consumption of mass-produced goods.

Revitalizing the Traditions

The root of the contemporary culture wars is a deep-seated discontent with both traditional and modern culture, which invades virtually every corner of the global village and undermines traditional worldviews and the ethos of indigenous cultures. Instead of showing respect for elders and attending religious ceremonies, many young people from East Asia to Latin America now play brash American rock music, watch Western movies, and drive motorcycles. Instead of following the strict moral codes of their traditions, some young women of the Arabic countries are discarding the veil and demanding to work with men outside the home. These cultural movements lead to conflicts at every level of society, from the intergenerational struggles about conflicting norms and values within families to regional and international conflicts about religious, cultural, and economic issues.

Most individuals experience an ambivalence toward modern culture that pervades the global village, resulting in contradictory behaviors as people
express first one, and then another, aspect of their love-hate relationship with the new world. Young people often love their parents and their village, but are also drawn toward the lifestyles seen in Western movies. This ambivalence helps explain the penchant for many influences, from rock music to postmodernist theory, through which one can simultaneously emulate and attack the cultural center of the global village. As a representative battlefield, I will briefly examine the culture wars in the United States, in which traditionalist Christians see themselves as struggling with modernists and progressivists to preserve moral values.

**Christian Traditionalist Protests**

The culture wars occurring in the United States provide a convenient microcosm of the global conflict. American culture is organized in much the same way as culture in the global village: One broadly hewn worldview and its corresponding ethos are hegemonic, but the dominant paradigm is never fully accepted. The vast diversity of religious and ethnic perspectives brought to America by immigrants from around the world, constituting strong religious and ethnic subcultures in the country, present a strong and vocal challenge to efforts to create a hegemonic culture.

Polarized camps in the wars advocate two different styles of social authority, identified by Richard Merleman (1984) and elaborated by James Davison Hunter (1991) as “tight bounded” and “loose bounded.” In tight-bounded communities, moral obligations are viewed as rigid and given, whereas loose-bounded groups view moral commitment as voluntary, contingent, and fluid. I will refer to them as the orthodox and modernist camps. Reality in American public culture, Hunter argues, is increasingly shaped by the “knowledge workers” of the modernist camp, such as “public policy specialists . . . special interest lobbyists, public interest lawyers, independent writers and ideologues, journalists and editors, community organizers and movement activists” (1991:60). These shapers of rhetoric and definers of moral standards challenge the fundamental religious tenets of many subcultures in the nation, partly because of efforts to create the proverbial “melting pot,” and partly as a function of the common-denominator effect of capitalism.

At stake in each area of dispute in the culture wars is the question of authority: Who is responsible for the care of the family and how much shall the state and other institutions intervene? Who can define the role of women in society, and how much authority should men retain in the family? Who defines the ethical boundaries of business, public culture, education, and other issues of public policy? Finally, and most fundamentally, who can determine when life begins and when it should end?
Specific battles of the culture wars often reveal their fundamental structure, as in the debates over gender-specific language and the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). The orthodox party, represented by the Christian Right, claimed that the ERA would destroy the traditional family and motherhood. Modernists saw it as an essential step in the creation of a just society that ensures equality for all. The same issues underlie such seemingly unrelated public battles as homosexual marriage, prayer in the schools, and abortion. Some religious leaders claim that gay rights movements represent a vicious attack on traditional family values, whereas others defend it as an essential struggle for dignity. Modernists see collective prayer in public schools as an intrusion on the religious freedom of those not of the dominant religious perspective. The founder of the Campus Crusade for Christ, however, insists that the 1963 Supreme Court ruling against prayer in the public schools constitutes the primary cause of the social problems faced in the United States today. Since the decision, he argues, “premarital sexual activity has increased over 200%, pregnancies to unwed mothers are up almost 400%; gonorrhea is up over 200% . . . [and] adultery has increased from 100% to 250% [sic]” (Hunter 1991:204).

The battle between the orthodox and the modernists is not just an American phenomenon. It fans conflicts within and between religious traditions around the world that have some common characteristics whether they are between the African National Congress and pro-apartheid forces in South African churches, secular-oriented and nationalist Hindus in India, or proponents and opponents of women’s rights among the world’s Muslims. Although I am referring to all of them here as “traditionalists,” they are known in popular parlance as “fundamentalists,” which is such a loaded term that it is problematic for academic discussion. When one group and not another is referred to as “fundamentalist,” it touches a nerve in the culture wars, as shown in a letter to the editor in *The Economist* by Mohammed Azim, who observed that in writing about the Christian Right, a story in their journal “carefully avoided the ‘f’ word—the more familiar term ‘fundamentalist’—in your descriptions. At what point, if ever, do these rightist Christian factions become fundamentalists, or is that a pejorative term reserved exclusively for Muslims and, occasionally, Hindus?” (2005:1).

Despite shared national, linguistic, and geographical bonds, the combatants of the culture wars live in different worlds and talk past one another. The orthodox and modernist camps tend to “operate from different philosophical assumptions and by very different rules of logic and moral judgment” (Hunter 1991:250). A negotiated settlement is not likely in the near future, Hunter argues, because vocal advocates “at either end of the cultural axis are not inclined toward working for a genuinely pluralistic resolution” (1991:298).
The New Christian Right. One of the most visible developments in American culture in the late 1970s and 1980s was the rise of the so-called New Christian Right, which soared into prominence with the presidential administration of Ronald Reagan. It revived again with the election of George W. Bush, who relied upon the Christian Right as a major political base, addressed some of their core issues, and appointed Pentecostal John Ashcroft as his attorney general and conservative judges John Roberts and Samuel Alito as justices on the Supreme Court.

Although it had an impact on American politics at a number of points in its history (see, e.g., Sutton 2005), Christian traditionalism in the United States during the 1980s contained a number of interesting hybrids that used modern technology to promote its decidedly antimodern beliefs. Television brought the Christian Right into America’s homes and made it possible for the movement to become a major force in American culture. In 1970, according to Arbitron, 38 religious programs had a combined audience size of 9,803,000; by 1980, 66 programs had 20,538,000 viewers, significantly transforming the religious landscape of the country (Hadden and Swann 1981:55).

Television was the most important, but not the only, medium used by traditionalists in mobilizing their movement: Other means used included computerized direct mail, Lear jets, and even a computer billboard created by John Marler’s “Computers for Christ.” Marler encouraged the development of a computer network to exchange information about everything from how to attack disturbing social problems to theological debates. Marler himself claims to have “proof” that God dictated “each and every character and word in the Bible” (quoted in “Evangelist Uses Computer Exchange” 1984).

Many Christian conservatives overcame a natural antipathy to partisan politics, beginning in the late 1970s, because they were fed up with the drift of American culture. On the West Coast, where the two sides of the culture wars meet on the battlefield daily; in the South, where many still view the national culture with considerable ambivalence; and across the airwaves into every conservative corner of resistance, they began to talk with a new confidence about changing the country. And this time, they were not just talking about individual conversion; they were talking politics.5

In January 1979, a number of antigay, antipornography, and pro-family groups on the West Coast were brought together by California ministers Robert Grant and Richard Zone to found Christian Voice. Pat Robertson featured Voice on his program The 700 Club and it quickly amassed a mailing list of 150,000 laity and 37,000 clergy, including Catholics and Mormons as well as Protestants. A few months later, in July 1979, Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority, with a strong Southern contingent and a serious computer-based fund-raising effort that gathered $1,000,000 in the
first month, largely with support from the *Old Time Gospel Hour* audience. Falwell traveled to all 50 states holding “I Love America” rallies; by 1981, he claimed to have 4 million members in his organization—hardly a majority, but certainly a substantial bloc.

Another significant Christian Right organization, Roundtable, sponsored workshops (including a 1980 Dallas extravaganza with Ronald Reagan) to teach clergy how to mobilize their congregations to support conservative political candidates. These organizations and others joined with the televangelists to oppose the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty between the Soviet Union and the United States in late 1979, to protest state interference with Christian schools, to oppose abortion and endorse school prayer, and to elect a new set of political leaders. Although not very successful at recruiting people to run for Congress, the New Right did play an important role in defeating Senators Robert Packwood, Frank Church, Evan Bayh, George McGovern, and John Culver, as well as several House members from conservative districts.

The Christian Right’s greatest coup, though, was the election of Ronald Reagan as president. Not only did the conservatives mobilize people in the church to vote, but they also raised large sums of money for political action committees (PACs). Whereas liberal PACs only raised about $1.2 million in 1977–1978, conservative PACs raised about $6.4 million. In 1979–1980, the disparity was even greater: Liberal PACs raised about $2.1 million and conservative PACs, $11.3 million (Latus 1983).

Some students of the Christian Right predict that the movement mobilized resources to influence U.S. politics at the turn of the twenty-first century for the following reasons:

1. A loss of confidence in the liberal philosophy because of persistent military defeats, failed leadership, poverty, crime, drug use, and the like

2. The legitimization of a conservative cultural revolution during the Reagan era and the linkage between Christianity and free enterprise capitalism, prayer in schools, and the protest against secular humanism

3. The New Christian Right’s monopoly of religious broadcasting: By 1987 it had 1,370 religious radio stations and 221 religious television stations, far surpassing that of any other single interest group (aside from corporations)

4. Their mastery of fund-raising skills so essential to sustaining a social movement organization, in terms of grassroots fund-raising (especially through television and direct mail) and contacts with wealthy individuals

5. The New Christian Right’s appeal to the growing number of Americans over the age of 65 (3.1 million in 1900 and 29 million in the late 1980s), who are more likely to be religious than a demographically younger population
To this impressive list, Hunter (1991:299) adds another: the extensive network of parallel institutions—the schools, colleges, universities, and publishing firms of the New Christian Right. Moreover, despite a number of scandals and difficult times for televangelists, many persist in having widespread influence. A more secularized version of the Christian Right’s agenda has a widely heard supporter in the strident voice of syndicated radio and television talk show host Rush Limbaugh.

A number of countertrends call the above predictions into question, however.6

1. When Ronald Reagan left the presidency, the initial fervor of the New Christian Right evaporated quickly; Reagan’s charismatic authority held together a rather disparate movement with serious internal cleavages.

2. Those people most likely to support the movement—a disproportionate number of the working class and minorities—are traditionally drawn to the more liberal Democratic Party, so that few issues unite the movement beyond school prayer and abortion.

3. The institutional resources and power behind the modernist camp—notably the knowledge industry itself, so central to the process of constructing public opinion, and with a relatively secular ethos—are probably stronger than those supporting the orthodox camp.

4. Because of its general orientation and modes of operation, the ethos of the modern state does not support an orthodox stance.

5. The ethos of the country’s major cultural centers—Washington, D.C., New York, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco—tends to be progressive or modernist.

6. Finally, the style of contemporary policy debates assumes the autonomy of rationality, thereby excluding the appeal to traditional authority of the orthodox message. The orthodox camp tends to lose simply by accepting this ground rule for participation in debate. (see Hunter 1991:306)

The culture wars are far from over in the United States, and bickering occurs within each camp as well. One of the most difficult problems in political culture is the lack of tolerance on both Left and Right. For example, even some of the traditional conservatives were displeased with the New Christian Right’s efforts to label those who disagreed with them as immoral people. Senator Barry Goldwater, a longtime spokesperson for the conservative community, declared in 1981 that he was “frankly sick and tired of the political preachers across this country telling me as a citizen that if I want to be a moral person, I must believe in A, B, C, and D. Just who do they think they are?” (Nelson 1981).
Because of the pluralistic character of the U.S. population, pressures to have a broad, flexible collective moral code have permeated American culture from the country’s beginning. Those forces favoring less rigid common morals have always collided with others attempting to install a hegemonic culture and to enforce a particular brand of Christianity on everyone. They have never been fully successful, however, and part of the reason for the New Christian Right’s emergence in the 1970s and 1980s was their perception that they were losing the battle for the country’s hearts and minds, especially as various minority groups began to assert their own subcultures in the wake of the cultural ferment of the 1960s.

Christian traditionalist and evangelical movements in the United States provide an important anchor for identity in a sea of change and a means of expression for people dissatisfied with the direction in which the world is moving and grieving over the loss of the world as they knew it. Christian traditionalists also present a serious challenge to American multiculturalism and religious pluralism because of their strong opposition to religious tolerance and their certainty of the truth on certain moral issues against which other groups hold competing beliefs just as strongly.

Islamic Traditionalism: Antimodern and Anticolonial

Many believers in the Islamic world have picked up their own banner of orthodoxy in a manner similar to that employed by the New Christian Right in the United States. In some ways, these two groups fight the same enemy—the Western establishment, the modernists who attempt to establish cultural hegemony in the contemporary world based on secular scientific thought that undermines the ethos and worldview of the religious community. The Islamic traditionalists emerged from a very different historical context, however.

In the last century, issues of modernism and colonialism became deeply intertwined in the Islamic community. On the one hand, life in the twentieth century raised the question of how to respond to the globalization of culture, the interaction among the world’s religious traditions, and the challenges to all religious dogmas presented by science. On the other hand, the humiliation of colonial subjugation that so many Muslims endured at the hands of Westerners fed fuel to the fire of conflict. In the polarized climate of charges and countercharges, it became virtually impossible, in many parts of the Muslim world, to be faithful to Islam and also tolerant of other religious faiths and scientific inquiry—much like the Catholic church aligned itself against science and democracy in the West during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
By the end of the nineteenth century, nearly all of the Muslim world had been conquered by European colonialism: Britain controlled the Gulf area, Egypt, portions of Africa, India, and Malaysia; France took over North Africa and much of West Africa and the Middle East; the Soviet Union incorporated major Muslim areas of Central Asia after the 1917 revolution. During this colonial period, Jamal al din Afghani (1830–1897) and Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) attempted to elevate the dignity of Islamic thought and encouraged self-determination among Muslims in the Middle East. Afghani argued that Islam was not inherently opposed to modern science, but that European domination should not be tolerated; he encouraged the formation of a pan-Islamic federation of states. A number of independent Muslim nation-states were created, although at the beginning they tended to follow, rather than reject out of hand, trends initiated by the European colonials. Ataturk (Mustafa Kemal) founded Turkey, a secular state replacing the disintegrating Ottoman Empire, in 1923. Ataturk essentially disestablished Islam in Turkey, limiting the scope of the Shari’a to personal matters, and adopted many European practices in government and culture.

Iran underwent a similar process, beginning in 1921 with Reza Khan, who proclaimed himself shah (Persian for emperor) and set his country on a process of modernization, despite resistance from the religious scholars, the mullahs, who had always played a significant role in governing the country. Hasan al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the movement spread to Syria, Palestine, the Sudan, and elsewhere in the Arab world. In South Asia, scholars such as Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Sayyid Amir Ali, and Muhammad Iqbal participated in an Islamic intellectual revival at the turn of the twentieth century, including the founding of the Aligarh Muslim University in India. Muhammad Ali Jinnah pressed vigorously for the formation of a separate Muslim state when India was pushing for its independence from the British Empire, and succeeded in getting it, despite the strenuous objections of Gandhi and others.

Sayyid Abdul Ala Maududi, a Muslim intellectual and religious leader in India and Pakistan in the early 1940s, spoke for many Muslims when he decried the moral decadence and corruption of the West. “Islam and Western civilizations are poles apart in their objects as well as in their principles of social organization,” he insisted (Maududi 1979:23). Moreover, he claimed that Islam was self-sufficient and provided a viable alternative to both Western and socialist ways of life. The Muslim Brotherhood (Jama’at-i Islami), founded in 1941, was vital under Maududi’s leadership and laid the basis for an educational campaign, influencing many Muslims outside of Pakistan, including those in Europe and North America (see Cragg 1965).
Two years later, in 1949, Indonesia gained independence from the Dutch after a struggle led by Sukarno that was motivated by nationalism and Islam. Although the independent republic succumbed to military rule, Indonesia’s Muslims remain a vital part of the country, which has the largest population of Muslims in the world. North and West African Muslims also gained independence during the mid-twentieth century, producing a number of Islamic states. Considerable conflict ensued, however, between orthodox and modernist Muslims within these new nation-states, as well as with external powers. Dreams of establishing a unified Islamic Brotherhood of nations has not materialized, and the difficulties of doing so are exemplified in the eight-year bloody war between Iraq and Iran, in which each side claimed to have God on its side.

The traditional alliance between Islam and the state, an alliance also enjoyed by Western religions until very recently, has exacerbated the tensions between those wishing to make a transition to modernity and forces wanting to revive a more traditional Islamic society. The emergence of Islamic traditionalism—which some call Islamic “fundamentalism”—represents the orthodox camp’s effort to reassert itself in the wake of Western colonialism and in the face of rapid changes in many Islamic states. Those internal conflicts have been exacerbated by continued struggles with the non-Muslim world as well, especially since the founding of the state of Israel and the intrusion of the United States after the disintegration of European control over the region. Many of the orthodox thus perceive a dual enemy attacking the sanctity of their traditions: the Western outsiders, especially the United States and Israel, and the modernizing insiders, who reduce the power of religious leaders and the Shari’a, the rule of Islamic law, in regulating society’s affairs as they press for a modern, secular state.

These developments in the Muslim world have led to tremendous misunderstandings in the West along with considerable fear fueled both by misleading stereotypes in the media (see Said 1978) and popular culture, and by the visibility of life-threatening terrorist groups, sometimes operating in the name of Allah. Now, for the first time, these groups have launched significant attacks on targets within the United States, heretofore relatively unscathed by the Islamic struggle. The bombing of the World Trade Center in New York in the spring of 1993 and the attacks of September 11, 2001, as well as the subsequent arrests of suspected terrorists planning to bomb other key U.S. targets, has left many in the country suspicious and fearful. On the other hand, the United States government, sometimes in league with the other major Western powers, has inflicted much violence on Islamic populations as well, having destroyed the infrastructure of Iraq during the 1991 Persian Gulf War and overthrown the governments in Iraq and Afghanistan.
in the wake of September 11. The so-called “war on terror” has resulted in rounding up large numbers of Islamic suspects and attacking other targets in predominantly Muslim states. The publication of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in Denmark in 2006 became a symbol of perceived insults that provoked rage and protests in many places around the world.

When the battles escalate, religious traditions are often called into play to justify the political stances of the combatants. This practice is particularly obvious in the Islamic world, in which religious rhetoric is a more central part of the political culture than in other societies. Thus, the orthodox attack their enemies—both internal and external—with an intensity that only religious framing can justify.

Islamic reformers enrage the traditionalists. It is one thing to have infidel ideas imposed by foreigners. It may be even more outrageous to have such ideas championed by insiders, who are, in the long run—like all heretics—more dangerous than outsiders because they undermine the faith.

The case of King Amanullah of Afghanistan (who reigned from 1919 to 1929) is instructive. He declared Islam to be the official religion of Afghanistan in 1923, provided the country with a written constitution, and endeared himself to many with his jihad against the British. In 1927, he toured India, the Middle East, and Europe, and his wife Soraya appeared unveiled at receptions in Europe, causing a scandal when her photographs circulated in Kabul. Despite resistance, Amanullah pressed forward with his efforts to reshape his Islamic society. He championed women’s rights, outlawing polygamy among civil servants and permitting women to discard their veils. In October 1928, the queen led a hundred women in appearing unveiled at an official function in Kabul, outraging the religious establishment. The act was not simply a matter of women’s rights, according to some; it rent the entire fabric of the sacred canopy. As one cleric declared, “When reforms come in, Islam goes out” (Hiro 1989:234). Instead of retreating, the king escalated the conflict. In 1929, he required all Afghans in Kabul to wear Western dress, including European hats. When clerics pronounced this practice blasphemous, the king forbade students to enroll in the famous Deoband seminary. When the Hazrat of Shor Bazaar collected signatures of protest, he was arrested. At this point, rioting broke out in Kabul and an insurrection ousted King Amanullah from power, despite his last-minute concessions.

The significance of this scenario lies in the role of religion and religious leaders in the debate over the ethos of Afghan society and the extent to which people were willing to allow Western influence to affect the norms and values of their culture. It was not the monarchy itself, but the king’s alliance with the West and his subversion of Islamic tradition that precipitated both
the popular revolt and the organized resistance of the *ulama*. Afghan traditionalism waxed and waned throughout the rest of the century, but it was almost always used as a tool to resist both modern culture and Western intervention in that society.

As the case of Amanullah suggests, one test for ethos-related conflicts between orthodox and modernist camps in the contemporary world is the role and status of women. Some highly visible and influential Islamic women insist on their equality, and many equally visible and influential Islamic men resist their efforts ferociously. The Pakistani Muslim leader Sayyid Maududi, for example, was innovative in trying to develop Islam as an alternative to Western and socialist systems, but on the issue of women he maintained a strict orthodox position. Maududi advocated strict sexual segregation and the necessity of the veil to close the “main gate,” that is, the face: “Nothing can be more unreasonable than to close all the minor ways to indecency but to fling the main gate wide open” (Maududi 1979:197–198).

One reason for the intensity of these conflicts now is that the social organization of the family often represents for Muslims the last bastion of traditional Islam. During the colonial period, Muslims were forced by the colonial powers to secularize their legal system, taking power away from the Shari’a, the rule of Islamic law. The family was exempted from many of these developments, probably because it was so important to traditionalists and did not substantially affect the economic interests of the colonizers. By leaving the family under the aegis of the Shari’a, Islamic elites and the general population could be more easily persuaded to cooperate with the colonial government.

**Revivalism Around the World**

The Islamic world is not the only place where colonialism and modernism are challenged by efforts to revive indigenous religious practices. The prototype is Mohandas K. Gandhi’s revival of Hinduism in India as part of his campaign for independence from Britain. In his famous *Hind Swaraj* (Gandhi [1908] 1939), Gandhi denounced the corrupt influence of Western, especially British, influence on Indian culture, calling for a return to Hinduism. Gandhi successfully used the stories and rituals of several religions, but especially those of Hinduism, as a vehicle for his development of the Indian Freedom Movement.

The first major element of the Indian movement’s campaign of non-cooperation with British rule to protest the colonization of their country was initiated with a Day of Prayer and Fasting. “Do you mean a strike?” he was asked. “No, a Day of Prayer and Fasting,” Gandhi replied. The entire
country came to a standstill as people prayed and fasted. The British might try to punish people for engaging in a general strike, but how could they suppress a religious celebration? Subsequently, Gandhi used daily prayer meetings and his status as a religious holy man to press his message of Indian home rule and to mobilize the social movement that opposed British rule. Despite the fact that it was presented in an orthodox fashion, Gandhi’s interpretation of Hinduism was novel. His charismatic authority was so great as leader of the Freedom Movement, however, that no one was able to challenge him successfully on religious grounds.

Other colonial countries followed suit, especially after World War II, often emulating Gandhi’s tactics and adapting them to their own situation. A 1947 Nigerian editorial, for example, bemoaned the invasion of Christianity and advocated a revival of traditional religion as a means of resistance.

The native dweller in Nigeria had a religion before the advent of Christianity. His religion was perfect, and taught him the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God. He lived for the other man. His one sole aim was to carry sunshine and happiness into the home of his fellow man. . . . The African has a religion which, unfortunately, is fast giving place to the imported form of worship. His religion takes him closer to the Divine Presence, and enjoins him in true love for his fellow man. Hence the African has always been found a child of nature, docile and unsuspecting. This copyist attitude in all phases of his life has robbed the African of his innate godliness, and it was time our people turned to find God, to worship Him, and to serve Him in the true African way.  

In Latin America, Roman Catholicism was used from the beginning of the colonial period to legitimize the imposition of European rule over the indigenous people of that continent. Over the centuries, Catholicism became the core of Latin American popular culture, and people in power there used the faith’s symbols and the authority of the church to maintain their hold over the masses. With the emergence of indigenous Christian leaders in the twentieth century, however, Christianity began to legitimate movements of resistance against the power structure and was used to mobilize reform movements and even revolutionary activities.

**Christian Liberation Theology**

A social protest movement challenging the status quo of the modern world—the theology of liberation—represents one of the major religious movements of the twentieth century. As with Islamic and Christian traditionalism, as well as the Indian Freedom Movement, liberation theology
frames the desire for freedom from political subjugation in a traditional religious perspective. The birth of this movement among the poor of Latin America signaled a reshaping of traditional Christian symbols in a way that some argue is truer to the spirit and teachings of Jesus and the early Christian church than is the establishment church, which legitimates an oppressive social order. A traditional reliance upon God as a personal savior—or liberator—is taken for granted by people in this movement, but the classical theological questions of modernism—Does God exist? Are the scriptures infallible? Is the pope infallible? Can a Buddhist be saved without becoming a Christian?—mean little to them. They ask instead: How can we participate in God’s liberating activity in the world?

Christianity from the bottom up. Liberation theology grows, first of all, out of Latin American attempts to break out of the historical oppression of first colonialism and then hierarchical systems in which a small wealthy elite is sustained in power by the United States. As Penny Lernoux (1982:10) puts it,

From the moment Columbus set foot in the New World cross and sword had been indistinguishable. Priests and conquistadors divided the plunder in people and land—it was a toss-up which was the greedier. And long before Latin America’s military regimes installed their torture chambers the Inquisition was at work with whip and rock. By the time of the wars of independence at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Church was the largest landowner in Latin America. It was also the most conservative political force on the continent.10

Other forms of liberation theology have emerged elsewhere in the Third World, especially in Africa, and among feminists, black Christians in the United States, and German philosophical theologians criticizing the middle-class gospel of consumerism. Liberation theology constitutes a new paradigm in Christian theology (Chopp 1986), as well as a practical liberating activity in the comunidades de base (“base communities”) of Latin America.

Two events in the 1960s laid the groundwork for the emergence of the liberation theology movement: the Second Vatican Council in Rome, beginning in 1962, and the Medellín Conference (CELAM II) in 1968. Vatican II, and Pope John XXIII’s attempts to “open the windows” of the church, established a precedent in taking note (in Gaudium et Spes 1965) that Christians have a special responsibility for “those who are poor or in any way afflicted.” This emphasis on the church’s responsibility to the poor struck a chord in Latin America, where the church was deeply enmeshed in the lives of the poor. At the General Conference of the Latin American episcopacy in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968, the Roman leaders of the church
contended that “the Lord’s distinct commandment to ‘evangelize the poor’ ought to bring us to a distribution of resources and apostolic personnel that effectively gives preference to the poorest and most needy sectors” (Latin American Bishops 1979:175).

The Medellín conference gave a green light (Berryman 1976) to the development of Christian base communities in which small groups of people—often meeting without clergy, because of a shortage of priests and Rome’s relaxation of regulations after Vatican II—met throughout Latin America for prayer and Bible study, rediscovering the radical liberating message of the New Testament often lost in contemporary Christianity. This message—and the process by which it emerges from the pages of the Bible in the hands of the peasants—comes through clearly in the four volumes of The Gospel in Solentiname, transcripts of Bible studies led by the poet-priest Ernesto Cardenal in Nicaragua. In the discussion following their reading of Luke 4:16–30, in which Jesus announces that he has come “to give the good news to the poor,” Cardenal (1976–1982) explains, “The good news is for the poor, and the only ones who can understand it and comment on it are the poor people, not the great theologians. And it’s the poor who are called to announce the news, as Jesus announced it.” Similar communities emerged in other parts of the world, including Africa and Asia, although with their own local agendas and languages. In Zimbabwe before independence, people from all across the country would meet early in the morning to pray and sing and ask God for their liberation.

The preeminent figure in articulating the ideas of liberation theology was Gustavo Gutiérrez, whose Teología de la Liberación (A Theology of Liberation; 1973) served as a manifesto for the movement. Bridging the gap between the church hierarchy and the base communities that flourished in the slums, Gutiérrez’s theological reflections were amplified by such figures as Camilo Torres from Colombia (who studied sociology at Louvain, where he was a classmate of Gutiérrez’s), and Dom Hélder Camara in Brazil.

Ironically, the initial ecclesiastical actions that led to the liberation theology movement grew out of conservative efforts to defend the institutional interests of the Roman Catholic Church in the face of Marxist and other left-wing critics (Adriance 1992). Moreover, the practical measure of forming base communities in the wake of Vatican II reforms and a shortage of priests cultivated the growth of base communities among the poor, which unexpectedly resulted in a movement that gradually sought some independence from the church hierarchy. Adriance’s examination of developments in Brazil and Chile “provide illustrations of the paradox of institutionalization. They show how measures taken by some bishops to restore the church’s influence in the context of a secularized, pluralistic
society unleashed a potential for social and ecclesial change that may prove to be more radical than the bishops had ever intended” (1992:60).

The Vatican found the liberation theology movement a highly disturbing phenomenon, in part because of its independence, not only from the political establishment, but also from the ecclesiastical one. The Polish Pope John Paul II was also concerned about its links with Marxism, because in his experience Marxism was more the oppressor than the liberator. When the pope visited Nicaragua in 1983, he shook his finger at Father Cardenal, who was Minister of Culture in the new communist Sandinista government, and scolded him for his political involvement.

Liberation theology had many critics in the church because it was too politicized, too Marxist, and sometimes advocated violence. It also had many supporters at high levels and represented one of the fastest-growing sectors of the church, and so the movement was difficult to suppress. As with Islamic and Christian traditionalism, liberation theology provided a vehicle for discontented people to express their protest and try to change the world around them. A similar, and in some ways more successful, movement for change with a religious base occurred in recent nonviolent movements in Asia and Europe, where the church played a key role in organizing resistance against various dictatorships.

A theology of “nonpersons.” Although not always articulated by the poor, liberation theology is a perspective of and from the poor, or as Gutiérrez (1973) puts it, “nonpersons”—that is, the people who are ignored to the extent that they do not even exist for people in power. Erving Goffman (1959) explains the dynamics of this role in social life in the example of the servant, who is a convenient “nonperson” to have around but does not exist for social interaction and is treated as less than human. In the most extreme instances, a “nonperson” in the role of a servant sleeps in the master’s bedroom as part of the furniture in case anything is needed during the night. Most of us find ourselves in this role, to a lesser extent, when people of power and privilege simply ignore our presence.

Entire classes of people are nearly invisible to the mainstream, and especially to the elites, of most modern cultures. The invisibility phenomenon enables the rich to cope psychologically with the existence of mass poverty and starvation in their environment. In India, the millions of people living in abject poverty on the street are simply screened out of existence by the middle and upper classes, which go about their daily routines pretending that they do not exist. The number of people who live in such dire poverty that they scarcely live at all is so enormous that we ignore their existence in order to enjoy our own lives. Even the news media, which usually focus on
problematic aspects of human life, manage to ignore what is certainly one of the most significant stories about our world every day: that is, that roughly 40,000 children die each day of malnutrition and related causes, and a similar number are permanently damaged each day by the same state.

Since the 1960s, the world has witnessed what Gutiérrez (1973) calls an “eruption of the poor.” Religious thinking grows out of the social context in which the thinker lives; liberation theology constitutes a form of reflection on the nature of the sacred from the point of view of those who suffer, from those who constitute the majority of the world’s population (see Chopp 1986). Sociologically, we expect “nonpersons” to view the world differently, of course, from people in other social roles, and to have affinities with different religious expressions from those of the rich. Gandhi said that God should appear to the poor in the form of bread. Liberation theology recovers the perspective of the poor from the Judeo-Christian tradition, a rich and deep element that has been conveniently subordinated by the alliance between the church and the Western establishment.

All of these developments in faith communities over the past 200 years or so brings us to a situation in the twenty-first century in which religious life has been substantially transformed. It is to the religious landscape of the new millennium that I now turn my attention.