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CHAPTER

12

The Modern Search

FIRST ENCOUNTER

After a recent flood, you decide to join a much publicized community effort to clear a nearby stream. The flooding, caused by a buildup of branches and litter under two bridges, has left mounds of refuse—including old tires and shopping carts—along the sides of the streams. The cleanup is scheduled for this coming Saturday at nine o'clock.

Local schools and colleges are the primary sponsors. Students from McKinley, Central, Washington Intermediate, Roosevelt High, and many other schools will be there. So will students from the University, where there was much damage from the raging waters, especially in the basement of the library. You expect to see some friends and neighbors. You have read that you should bring gloves and wear heavy old shoes.

When you arrive, you see an even larger group than you had anticipated. Television cameras are there, too. You say hello to friends. One face looks oddly familiar. You realize that it is the mayor—though you hardly recognize him, since he is wearing jeans and a red plaid shirt instead of his trademark navy blue suit and black tie. There is a

brief press conference. The University president says a few words of thanks and is then followed by the head of the parks department. The gathering of people is divided into groups, given instructions, and directed to specific work sites.



As you work, you realize how pleasant it is to be outside, where you can hear the birds, the water of the stream, and the wind in the leaves of the tall trees on the stream banks. You wonder, Why is the sound of cars so unappealing but the rustling of leaves so wonderful? You recall something that you once heard in a high school class: that the world of made is not the world of born. At first its meaning was unclear, but now you understand. This leads you to think about our human relationship with the rest of nature—the responsibility we humans have to the natural world and all its elements. You remember reading about countries that are creating national parks for the preservation of unique sites, and others that are setting up animal sanctuaries for the protection of wildlife. Increasingly, you hear neighbors and even politicians talking about the need to *respect* trees, animals, and the processes of nature. Global warming is now almost universally seen as a result of human excess and disrespect for the environment. Is this widespread interest in the earth and all its parts a new kind of religious development? In the future, will we recognize our national parks as religious sites? Will local ecologies become the focus of political concern? Will we see traditional religions embrace environmentalism? Will we have religious festivals to honor nature? As you push aside a thick branch of bamboo, you notice a partially torn plastic bag underneath. A few empty beer cans fall out, as you carry the bag to a nearby trash bin.

MODERN INFLUENCES ON THE FUTURE OF RELIGION

It is obvious that religions in the modern world face both challenge and inevitable change. Numerous social and technological developments are responsible for bringing about change. Women are demanding roles in arenas traditionally dominated by males—including institutional religions. Scientific advances in such areas as reproduction, genetics, and organ transplantation pose ethical questions that people in earlier times never had to answer. Many Western cities are homes to religions, such as Hinduism and Islam, that not too long ago were considered exotic and foreign. Finally, television and travel expose human beings worldwide to new cultures and their religions.

Change is happening so quickly that we must wonder about the future of religion. What if we could return to earth a thousand years from now? Would the religions that we know now have changed a great deal? What religions would even still exist? Would there be new great religions?

We cannot know exactly how the religious landscape will look in another millennium, but we can make a guess based on the influences at work today—influences that are pulling religions in different directions. As we've seen throughout this book, religions in general tend to be conservative and often change more slowly than their surrounding societies. But, indeed, they do change. They change as a result of forces both from within themselves and from their surrounding cultures.

In this chapter we will first look at a few of the modern developments that are shaping both our future and the future of religions. We will consider the recurrent theme of change in religion. And we will look at two alternatives to organized religion. The first is the environmental movement and its almost religious view of nature. The second is what has come to be called eclectic spirituality, a union of various sources of inspiration, often expressed through art and music, which are frequently associated with spirituality.

The New World Order

A century ago, the majority of human beings lived an agricultural life on farms and in villages, and many countries were ruled by monarchs. Over a relatively short amount of time, however, most kings and queens either disappeared or became largely symbolic; democracy became a common (though not fully realized) ideal; and large numbers of people moved to cities.

The political and economic landscape has changed dramatically over the past thirty years. After decades of dividing the world symbolically into communist and capitalist halves, the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. After many of its republics declared their independence, the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991 and abandoned communism. And mainland China, although it remains a communist nation, now includes highly capitalistic Hong Kong (returned in 1997) and tolerates—even encourages—free enterprise. International companies are becoming significant entities—sometimes with more real power than nations.

At one time, people traveled abroad in order to experience different cultures and different foods. Now, a person can buy a Big Mac at a McDonald's in Italy or a doughnut and coffee at a Dunkin' Donuts in Japan. And people who live in large cities have their pick of national cuisines—Chinese, Indian, Greek, Moroccan, Vietnamese, Japanese, and Thai, to name just the most common. But it is easy to go more deeply, too, into the lives of *people* of different cultures. Supporting the people who run these businesses are entire structures that include community centers, places of worship, and even television stations that broadcast in a multitude of languages.

We cannot help but wonder how this cultural unification will affect religion. So far, most of the world's religions have remained fairly separate traditions—even those that have spread to different countries and cultures. But globalism may make it impossible for separate religions to remain separate.

Modern capitalism will also challenge religion, primarily by exposing relatively broad segments of populations to its promotion of a fairly positive



As if in protest, a cow wanders past a McDonald's restaurant, which in the United States advertises hamburgers by the "billions sold." At this restaurant in Jaipur, the menu, like that of most other Western chain restaurants in India, does not include beef.

attitude toward money—that is, its promotion of financial success as a means to attaining personal satisfaction. In the past, many religions preached the values of poverty, simplicity, and detachment—values that at one time were consistent with life as experienced by the vast majority. Now, many religions are influenced by capitalist ideals, which esteem individual and group betterment; but it is a betterment that can be measured in material terms and can be paid for with money. As Robert Ellwood, a noted scholar of religions, has commented, the "idea that poverty could be a state of blessedness in itself, a favorite of preachers as recently as a century ago, is now hopelessly discredited. . . . Even the most conservative pulpiteers nowadays exhort their poor to get ahead, but to do it by nonviolent means."¹ We know that money can be used just as selfishly in the modern world as it was in the past. But money is not always used for selfish and useless reasons—take, for example, scholarships, contributions to disaster-relief projects, endowments to the arts. The modern culture of money-based betterment will increasingly challenge religions to produce what material cultures value. It will challenge the religious idealization of poverty and will question religions carefully about how much they contribute to measurable human betterment.²

The global economic crisis that emerged in 2008 will be a further challenge to religious thought and action. Religions may be influenced by the crisis in

developing a new approach to the financial world, and religions could conceivably offer help in providing both theoretical and practical solutions.

Globalism will also challenge any incomplete visions of reality offered by traditional religions. Finally, urbanism will challenge traditional religions to confront the tribulations of large-scale city life and to take advantage of urban opportunities, such as a wide choice of educational and career opportunities.

Multiculturalism and Interfaith Dialogue

The new world order makes cross-cultural contact practically unavoidable as television, radio, film, travel, books, and the Internet all work to narrow the gulfs that once separated people, nations, and even religions. It will thus be very difficult in the future for any religion to belong to a single culture or to be unaware of the teachings and practices of other religions. With awareness often comes adaptation, a phenomenon we have already seen with current religions. Certain forms of Pure Land Buddhism outside Japan, for example, have adopted the use of hymns and the Christian tradition of Sunday school. In Western forms of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, married laypersons sometimes take leadership roles that have traditionally been performed by monks. African and Native American forms of Christianity now deliberately make use of native art, music, and dance. Roman Catholicism, which only a generation ago celebrated its rituals in Latin with uniform prayers and music, is today often as much a reflection of its specific community or church group as it is of Rome. Some Christian monasteries and other religious groups have adopted Zen meditation. Moreover, entirely new religions may frequently blend elements from several religions. We see this, for example, in religions such as the Unification Church, which began in Korea and blends Christianity and Confucianism, and in new Shinto religious offshoots, some of which blend elements of Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity.

Another response to the growing awareness of cultural multiplicity can be seen in the increasingly frequent meetings held by representatives of different religions. The fact that these interreligious meetings are now being held is really a hopeful new direction. (It was not typical in the past.) Although religions have too often battled each other or even promoted war, they all preach human harmony and offer visions of peace. They have much to gain from and share with each other. One natural focus of discussion applies to basic rules of living—all religions seem to value honesty and display a concern for the disadvantaged. Another possible discussion focus involves mystical experience, which is described similarly in quite different religions. A third focus for discussion is the changing role of women in religion. And a fourth focus will increasingly be the practical problems of the world—poverty, overpopulation, destruction of natural resources—and what religions can do jointly to help.

One of the earliest examples of modern religious dialogue was the first World Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893. Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), a disciple of Ramakrishna, brought the inclusivist Hindu

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Today it is not unusual for people of different faiths to pray together. Here, a Sikh, a Native American, and a Buddhist join for meditation and prayer in Bloomington, Indiana.



approach to the attention of the world through his insistence at that conference that all religions value holiness and love. And in 1993, Chicago hosted a second World Parliament of Religions, with simultaneous meetings of religious leaders at many places around the world. At the tenth annual Convocation for Peace, held in Rome, Yasumi Hirose, a Japanese representative of Omoto, used the language of several religions to speak of his hope. "Unless we awake to the love and compassion of the God who created the heavens and earth, and realize that all creatures are filled with Divine Spirit and live by the grace of Amida Buddha, it will be impossible to change history to bring about a new century of co-existence. By rethinking the significance of human life and returning to the sources of religion, it is my deep hope that all the world's religions can work and pray together to realize a . . . future where peaceful co-existence between the races and nations of this earth is possible."³ There is ongoing dialogue as well in less spotlighted circles, such as the Ecumenical Institute at Saint John's Abbey in Minnesota, where scholars of different faiths spend months in conversation, study, and reflection. These dialogues may well chart a new path for religion in the future.

Women's Rights Movements

Some of the most significant movements of the past hundred years have involved efforts to liberate women from oppression and inequality. Just as the nineteenth century is seen as the century in which slavery was abolished worldwide, the present century may well be seen by future generations as the century in which women worldwide achieved full equality and political freedom.



Young monks share school desks with female students, an uncommon occurrence in Buddhist cultures even today.

In many societies, women have been restricted by tradition in multiple ways. They have been kept from acquiring an education, owning land, having professional careers, traveling, marrying and divorcing as they wish, voting, and holding office. But education and women's political movements—along with scientific advances that produced contraceptives and minimized the complications of pregnancy and childbirth—have slowly changed attitudes toward women's roles and rights. As a result, women are now indispensable in the workplaces of many cultures; they are earning their own incomes and making use of their new economic power. This new independence has led women closer to equality in government, business, and the arts.

Many religions, following traditional patterns, have been slow to allow women to assume leadership roles. But there have been notable exceptions; this has been especially true of smaller, more charismatic groups, such as some of the New Religions derived from Shinto and those Christian churches (such as the Christian Science Church and the Foursquare Gospel Church) whose founders were female. Christian churches in the Lutheran and in the Episcopal and Anglican traditions now ordain women priests and bishops. And in 2006, the American Episcopal Church elected a female bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori, as its presiding bishop.

Resistance to allowing women in key roles is, however, still strong. In Christianity, the Catholic and Orthodox Churches so far have staved off pressures to ordain women or otherwise allow them full participation in decision making. In Judaism, females have been ordained in the Reform and Conservative branches. The Orthodox, however, still will not accept the notion of a female rabbi. Buddhism is seeing stirrings in its communities of nuns, who traditionally have played only a small role in the religion.

Women's gains have been broader in areas that don't affect a religion's basic power structure. Thus we find new translations of sacred literature and prayer forms that attempt to be more gender-neutral. For example, words such as *Ruler*, *Creator*, and *Parent* are used in place of the exclusively male terms *Lord* and *Father* in some translations of the Bible. Unity Church congregations address God as Father-Mother—a term used as early as 1875 by Mary Baker Eddy (see Chapter 9), the founder of Christian Science, in her explanation of the Lord's Prayer.

There is also heightened interest in religions that envision the divine as being female or that value its feminine aspect. This explains the renewed attention paid to early nature religions that worshiped a major female deity (such as Astarte) or in which women have had an important role. As discussed in Chapter 11, Wicca worships the Goddess in nature and in all women. In Judaism and Christianity, research into the contributions of women is common and even encouraged. Bible studies now talk of the great matriarchs, as well as the patriarchs, of Hebrew history. In Christianity, there is growing interest in medieval female mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen (see Chapter 9), Margery Kempe (c. 1373–1438), and Mechtild of Magdeburg (c. 1210–1285). Likewise, Hinduism is being appreciated not only for its female divinities but also for the many female gurus it has produced; Shinto and shamanistic religions are being studied for the important roles women have played; and Daoism is receiving attention for its female imagery.

Much of this new insight still remains academic and theoretical. Whether male-dominated religions will be able to stand firm against the momentum of women's movements is anyone's guess. But many observers assume that women's liberation efforts, at least in industrialized countries, will eventually succeed.

Reassessment of Human Sexuality

Scientific developments as well as the economic and ideological developments that we have already discussed in this chapter have all broadened our understanding of human sexuality to include more than procreation as its purpose. At the same time, through its development of artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization, science has expanded the possibilities for reproduction. The result of these developments is that reproduction has become a more intentional event. Medicine, clean water, and public sanitation have led to an explosion of the world population. This fact, combined with our new understanding of sexuality, has forced the rethinking of the purpose of marriage. Psychology has contributed an understanding of sexuality as being essential to the makeup of human beings. Biology has demonstrated the human connection with the animal world and revealed the great variety of animal sexual expression. Anthropology has made people aware of the variety in attitudes toward sex among different cultures and across historical periods.

As a result of these advances and findings, many people now grant that sex has key functions in human existence beyond the creation of children;

among these are intimacy, pleasure, self-expression, and even self-understanding. The acknowledgment of these functions has led many to question traditional sexual ethics and to rethink the appropriateness of sexual prohibitions in religious traditions.

The ongoing clash between traditional views of sexuality—views often codified in religions—and the modern outlook on sexuality probably will not be resolved anytime soon. What we are likely to see, however, is greater tolerance for beliefs and practices that are somewhat contradictory—as is evident in teachings about the indissolubility of marriage as compared to the actual toleration of divorce or annulment. The arena of birth control is particularly fertile ground for debate. Although forbidding the practice of birth control acknowledges the primacy of the procreative purpose of sex, it also risks pushing people and even world populations beyond the point where they can satisfy physical and educational needs.

Another area of controversy exists regarding same-gender sexual expression and relationships. Some religions hold that all homosexuality runs

Some countries, some states, and some faiths recognize and perform same-sex marriages. Nonetheless, almost all issues relating to sex continue to divide faith communities.



counter to divine or natural laws. Although some religions and denominations accept homosexuality as an orientation that occurs naturally in some people, they say that acting out that orientation in sexual behavior is wrong; still others value love, compassion, individuality, and privacy more than any traditional judgment of sexual acts and thus accept gay men and lesbians as full members. Of course, for heterosexual men and women, with full membership come the rights to a religious marriage and ordination; few religions, however, have yet to extend the same benefits to gays and lesbians. Nonetheless, as the contradictions in a partial acceptance of gay members become more obvious and even painful, religions are beginning to reconsider past practice. Same-gender commitment ceremonies are celebrated in increasing numbers of religious congregations—examples are to be found among Jewish congregations, Unitarians, Quakers, the Metropolitan Community Church, the Unity Church, Episcopalians, and Lutherans. In 2003 the Episcopal Church in the United States consecrated as bishop a man who is in a gay relationship; but this has caused conflict with other branches of the Church of England, particularly in Africa.

While debate over what constitutes legitimate sexual expression will continue, there is no denying the impact the sexual revolution has had on religion. Traditions that emphasize conservative principles will be most challenged by the changing views on sexuality.

Science and Technology

One of the engines that powers to some degree all of the movements we are analyzing has been science. Modern science made great early progress in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with the work of Copernicus (1473–1543), Galileo (1564–1642), Kepler (1571–1630), and Newton (1642–1727). At first, the developments were theoretical, without much practical application. While theoretical science continued to advance, applied science in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led to many practical benefits, including the invention of machinery that could do the work that human beings had formerly done by hand. Scientists investigated the mysteries of lightning and electricity; inventors made engines powered by steam and coal; researchers made advances in understanding and preventing diseases; engineers designed train tracks that linked large cities to each other; and the telephone and electric light became commonplace. In the next century came the airplane, radio, television, and computers. Over these same centuries, scientific theory advanced, resulting in the theory of evolution, molecular theory, the theory of relativity, and theories regarding astronomy and quantum physics. These accomplishments have transformed both our physical world and our view of the universe.

Some religions have tried to reject or even ignore the contributions of science, arguing that science displaces God, questions religious belief, and undermines morality. Scientists, however, argue that science gives us a valuable view of the universe that should be appreciated. It represents, they say, the collective work of thousands of people over many centuries. If we think



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about how long it took for human beings to draw a map of the whole earth (accomplished by Gerardus Mercator in 1538), we can admire the efforts of science to give us an even grander “map”—a general view of reality.

The current scientific view of reality can be summarized quickly. Scientific theory and research state that our universe emerged in a great explosion approximately ten to fifteen billion years ago. (What came before the explosion is not and possibly cannot be known by science.) In fact, the universe is still expanding from that explosion—although scientists debate whether the universe will contract or continue to expand indefinitely. As the universe cooled, galaxies formed; there are at least a hundred billion galaxies, each containing about a hundred billion stars. Our planet, earth, is about six billion years old, belongs to a galaxy we call the Milky Way, and travels around a sun whose energy will be exhausted in another six billion years. All physical things are made of smaller units, called molecules, which in turn consist of even smaller

The orbiting Hubble telescope has provided a myriad of reminders that the earth is but a tiny dot in the universe. This photo shows two galaxies—billions of stars and their planets—slowly colliding.

units, called atoms, electrons, neutrons, and other particles; and, ultimately, the physical world can be seen as various forms of energy. Phenomena such as lightning and earthquakes have natural causes. Carbon-based life-forms—possibly assisted by lightning, volcanic eruptions, and matter from comets—began to emerge on earth in one-celled form several billion years ago and, growing more complex, evolved in many directions on land and sea, finally producing the plants and animals we know today. The human being, which first appeared on earth several million years ago, is part of the same evolutionary process but is the most complex life-form known so far.

Although some scientific positions, such as those concerning evolution and molecular structure, are still called theories, they have enough proof underpinning them that they will almost certainly not be supplanted. The current general scientific vision of reality thus seems fairly firm; and although intriguing discoveries will certainly be made over the next centuries, the basic vision will probably not be totally overturned.

Just as science has advanced our understanding of reality, so it has replaced earlier worldviews. For example, we now see the earth not as a flat surface but as a sphere, in orbit around the sun; we understand most sickness to be caused by germs; and we know that earthquakes are generally caused by the movement of tectonic plates. Just as surely as electricity, television, and basic literacy are penetrating to the far corners of the world, so also will the scientific model of reality. Prescientific religions may continue to exist in the remotest cultures, but major religions will have to accommodate the scientific view of reality. It is the anvil on which all religions will be hammered and tested.

Science and Ethical Issues

Science and technology have broadened our knowledge and enriched our lives. In addition, they have given people new choices. Some of these choices pose ethical questions, at least in some cultures and religious traditions; and having choices can force people to examine their most basic philosophical positions.

Following are some areas that may raise ethical questions in some of the religious traditions we've considered in this text:

Fertility assistance Through fertility drugs and in vitro fertilization, medical science has made conception or a viable pregnancy possible for some women who in earlier times could not have conceived or carried a pregnancy to term. But multiple births among women who have taken fertility drugs are common; women sometimes carry as many as seven or eight babies in the same pregnancy, knowing that some of them may die. Is the survival of one or a few babies worth the potential loss of the others?

Birth control The number of contraception options for women and men is growing all the time; a pill for males will be available in the future. In some religious traditions the number of children born is

viewed as originating in divine will. Is it moral then to use any means to limit the number of one's children? Is it moral or immoral to use condoms? (Since condoms are helpful in controlling the spread of AIDS, this question has gained increased urgency.)

Ethical termination of pregnancy At what point in its development is an embryo or a fetus to be considered a human being and thus accorded basic human rights? Is there a moral difference between early abortion and late-term abortion? Is a mother's right to life greater than that of an embryo or fetus? Several techniques now exist for examining an embryo or fetus for gender and for genetic abnormalities. Should such knowledge be seen as justification for terminating a pregnancy?

Ethical termination of adult life Do individuals have the right to end their own lives? Do they have the right to end the lives of others, such as spouses, relatives, or friends? What might be reasonable circumstances for euthanasia? Is there a right to "death with dignity"? Should a doctor be permitted to speed the death of a dying patient? Should the life of a person who is comatose or brain-dead be sustained as long as mechanically possible?

Organ transplantation Human body parts that have failed can sometimes be replaced by organs from another human being. Among the organs that are commonly transplanted are hearts, kidneys, livers, and corneas. Do we have an obligation to donate our body parts for transplantation? Is it ethical for people to sell parts of their bodies before or after death?

Cloning Mice, sheep, and other animals have been replicated by cloning. Scientists are working to clone human body parts that can be used as replacements for defective body parts. Some scientists wish to clone entire human beings. What moral considerations should guide decisions about human cloning?

Genetic manipulation and stem-cell research Scientists are hopeful that research on the human genetic code will result in heightened intelligence, extended life spans, and new treatments for disease. What kinds of controls are needed in terms of the experiments that are allowed and the places where the experiments are performed? Should, for example, human embryonic tissue, a product of miscarriages and terminated pregnancies, be used in genetic and stem-cell research?

Species rights Most laws derive from an assumption that human beings have basic rights. But some thinkers assert that animals, trees, and other elements of nature have rights of their own. Some argue, for example, that all animals and sentient beings have the right to not suffer from human infliction of unnecessary pain. This argument questions the legitimacy of using animals for food, clothing, sport, or scientific experimentation. Other thinkers (especially those in the movement called Deep Ecology) assert that forests, jungles, wildernesses, and oceans also have rights—to exist and to be protected from exploitation.

The founders of the major religious traditions never had to address these issues specifically. That does not mean, however, that their followers today should not concern themselves with these issues. At the same time, some would argue that these issues should be decided not in churches and temples by religious authorities but rather in secular courts by representatives of civilian governments. Deciding who should determine what is ethical and how ethics should be expressed in law are themselves important issues for this century.

The scientific approach to reality generally has helped—at least potentially—to make the earth a more interesting and pleasant place for human beings to inhabit than it was in past centuries. Granted, applied science has done a great deal to alter the landscape for the worse. Applied science has damaged nonindustrial cultures and polluted the environment. But science has also done much to help. It has reduced infant mortality, extended human life spans, and made human life generally more secure. This has been done especially by advances in medicine and sanitation. Today, life spans in industrialized countries are double what they were two hundred years ago. People now routinely expect to live to be 80 or more. Scientists are working on life extension, and it may become common for people to live to 100, 110, or even 120 years old. (We know that this is at least possible, because Jeanne Calment, a Frenchwoman who died in 1997, lived to be 122.) And scientists will attempt to extend human life even further. When this happens, death and the afterlife will seem increasingly distant, and the earth will seem more like our permanent home. The resultant feeling of security that has grown up among people of industrialized countries may have helped them place a new value on the earth and on earthly life. It has helped foster an approach to living that is not traditionally religious but rather secular.

Secularism

The word *secular* is often used as the opposite of *sacred*. As mentioned in earlier chapters, *secularism* refers to the modern tendency to separate religion (which deals with the sacred) from everyday life (the secular). In earlier centuries, as we have seen throughout much of this book, religion and everyday life were quite commonly intertwined. Today, they remain intertwined mostly in societies in which a single religion is the state religion or the predominant religion.

The impetus to separate religion from public life found its greatest support in Europe. Primarily because of the horrific religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, influential thinkers there began to envision a type of nation in which there would be no state religion. They wanted individuals to be free to practice their religions as they chose. This model was drawn on in the creation of the new United States and was detailed in the Bill of Rights, which was appended to the Constitution. Because the model is based on a general separation of church and state, it has led to a secular type of government.⁴

Furthermore, the model of no established religion has encouraged a secular style of life. After all, if people are free to practice any religion, they are equally free to practice no religion at all. *Secularism* thus has come to refer to a way of looking at life in which human values and rules for living are taken from experience in *this world*, not from divine revelation, from a world beyond this one, or from religious authorities or religious traditions.

Secularism seems to be gaining ground, as science finds ways to extend human life and make it more secure. Consequently, for many people traditional religious worldviews have lessened in influence. Religions of the future will continue to be challenged by the secular vision, particularly when they have to work within secular political entities. To survive on a large scale, they will have to add to and give greater meaning to the modern secular world. This may not be impossible, however. After all, science seeks to describe reality, but religions seek to describe and create meaning. As the philosopher K. N. Upadhyaya has explained, "Religion is not antagonistic to science. . . . The antagonism comes only through a misunderstanding. It has to be understood that science deals with the physical. Religion, on the other hand, deals with something that is beyond the physical. But the methodology of the two is—or should be—exactly the same: observation, experimentation, and verification."⁵ We might note, too, the many contemporary scientists, such as physicists Paul Davies (b. 1946) and Fritjof Capra (b. 1939), who have shown considerable interest in religion.

Agnosticism is a concept often associated with a secular worldview. The English biologist T. H. Huxley (1825–1895), who coined the term, was of the opinion that the existence of God could be neither proven nor disproven from a scientific point of view. He argued that agnosticism—a middle ground between theism and atheism—was the most reasonable theoretical position to hold. It is a view that is commonly held today by scientifically minded people, because it accommodates the study and teaching of science without reference to God or gods. Some people have found that everyday life can be carried on, too, without reference to God or gods. Agnosticism may begin to replace traditional theistic religious belief and practice. This tendency may also generate attempts to redefine the conceptions of God; it may inspire a turn toward the nontheistic religions (such as Jainism or Theravada Buddhism); and it may promote the development of nontheistic expressions of values and beliefs.

Communism, even where it has now been abandoned as an official ideology, succeeded in creating a fairly secular milieu. In Russia and many parts of eastern Europe, new generations of people have been raised without religion. Schools in the Communist era often spoke of religion as an outdated method for providing solutions to life's problems—as outdated as horse-drawn carriages and whale-oil lamps. The same antireligious stance has also been true of China, particularly since the Communist Revolution of 1949. The resultant secularism among many mainland Chinese may have a significant influence on the world, as China, with its population of more than a billion, gains power in the international arena.

CONFLICT IN RELIGION



Religions, Sacred Texts, and Violence

Religions almost universally preach peace. But they also face questions about the use of violence. Are there situations in which violence is justified? May violence be used for self-defense—to protect one’s body, family, or property? Should violence be used to destroy a tyrant? May violence be used to bring justice to society? May violence be used in the conversion of nonbelievers? Unfortunately, religions do not speak with one voice on these matters, and even within the same religion we find contradictory advice. Adding to the difficulty, many sacred texts contain descriptions of justified warfare and killing. Sometimes such texts are meant as metaphors for the fight against evil, but they can too often be used to justify violence. We will look at a few examples.

Most religions accept that violence is justified if it is needed for the protection of oneself or one’s family—a position that many people hold as reasonable. There are exceptions, though. Jainism and early Buddhist teachings reject using violence for any purpose whatsoever. The *Dhammapada*, an early Buddhist document, says this: “All beings tremble before violence. All fear death. All love life. See yourself in others. Then whom can you hurt? What harm can you do? He who seeks happiness by hurting those who seek happiness will never find happiness. For your brother is like you. He wants to be happy. Never harm him. . . .”⁶ Nonetheless, in later Buddhism, particularly in China and Japan, Buddhist teachings about detachment and transience were sometimes employed to idealize the skillful soldier and the warrior-monk. And Buddhist sculpture shows

many figures holding symbolic swords and other weapons.

Hinduism values nonviolence highly, as we see in Gandhi’s teachings about non-harm (*ahimsa*). But we also know that the *Bhagavad Gita*, perhaps the most influential book in Hinduism, endorses fighting to overcome serious injustice. In the popular epic the *Ramayana*, Rama and his brother Lakshman engage in warfare in order to rescue Rama’s wife, Sita. And some of the Hindu deities, such as Durga and Kali, are known for their love of blood. Animal sacrifice is still used in their worship, and human sacrifice has not been unknown.

The *Daodejing* says that the person of the Dao hates weapons. “Whenever you advise a ruler in the way of [Dao], counsel him not to use force to conquer the universe,” for “thorn bushes spring up wherever the army has passed.”⁷ It says that the person of the Dao hates weapons. But then the text adds that “he uses them only when he has no choice.”⁸ This opens a very wide door for fighting, as anyone who has seen a Chinese martial arts film can attest.

We see a fairly militant approach in some religions, possibly as a result of the tribal nature of their original societies. Perhaps because biblical Judaism grew up in a land without strong natural borders, it viewed Yahweh as “Lord of hosts” (Isa. 6:3)—a commander of angelic armies that could protect his people. Psalm 135 makes clear this notion of Yahweh as a national protector: “He struck down all the first-born in Egypt, both man and beast. . . . He struck down mighty nations and slew great kings” (Ps. 135:8, 10).⁹

Some people welcome secularism—possibly with the same relief felt by many in the early confederation of the United States—because they want life to be carried on without religiously inspired hatreds. Machines, such as computers, cars, and telephones, are secular in that they do not ask the religion of the person who operates them. In secular cultures, some wish that human beings could be similarly accommodating.

Science offers explanations of reality that once came only from religion. Secular governments often promote values that were once primarily espoused by religion. And secular governments run hospitals, schools, and welfare programs, which at one time were under the exclusive control of religion. What, then, does this leave for religion? Will current religions move in the

Psalm 18 also sees him as a personal protector: “Thou settest my foot on my enemies’ necks” (Ps. 18:40). Psalm 137 is even more graphic about the treatment of the enemy: “Happy is he who will seize your children and dash them against the rock” (v. 9). Since God “sets the time for war and the time for peace” (Eccles. 3:8), warfare seems at times to be approved and even commanded by God. The Books of Joshua and Judges, for example, offer much justified warfare (Josh. 8:1–29). Yet we should also recognize that the Hebrew Bible balances this harshness with a vision of a God of compassion, concerned for the good of the lowly and poor (1 Sam. 2:8).

Christianity began with strongly nonviolent principles, evident in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). We know that Jesus refused to lead an armed revolt against the Romans. Early Christianity continued this pacifism, and Christians at first did not become soldiers. Yet change came quickly, both in society and in sacred texts. The Book of Revelation—one of the last biblical books written—portrays Jesus on a white horse, dressed in a robe that is covered with the blood of battle. Out of his mouth comes a sword; he rules with an iron rod; and he tramples on sinners like a harvester crushing grapes under his feet (Rev. 19:13–15). (This passage inspired the rhyming words of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic”: “the Lord,” who holds “a terrible swift sword,” tramples out “the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.”) After Constantine became emperor, there was no longer any prohibition on Christians becoming soldiers—perhaps because Constantine was a soldier himself. A century later, Augustine elaborated principles that justified warfare. He also approved of

using political force to compel “heretics” (nonmainstream Christians) to conform to orthodoxy. By the time of the Crusades, the cult of the Christian soldier was complete, and it had military patrons such as Saint George, Saint Barbara, and Saint Michael, who are often portrayed holding swords. (Saint George is the patron saint of England, and his red cross is in its flag.)

We find a similar mixture of responses in Islam. The name of the religion itself is related to the Arabic word for peace, and Muhammad worked tirelessly for harmony among the many tribes of Arabia. Yet Muhammad thought that violence was sometimes justified, and he led his followers into battle. As the Qur’an records, God commanded him, “Prophet, rouse the faithful to arms” (8:65).¹⁰ Muhammad spoke of a final day of divine reward and punishment, just as Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity also teach, and he described vivid punishments prepared by God for sinners: “Garments of fire have been prepared for the unbelievers. . . . They shall be lashed with rods of iron” (22:19). Yet the Qur’an equally counsels fairness and patience, such as in this passage: “If you punish, let your punishment be commensurate with the wrong that has been done you. But it shall be best for you to endure your wrongs with patience” (16:126).

What we see in the scriptures of many religions are words of peace and compassion, side by side with warnings of violence and punishment. Unfortunately, most texts offer possibilities for individual believers to choose passages that give authority to their cruelty and anger. Only scriptures (like those of the Jains) that allow no harm whatsoever can avoid being used to justify the use of violence.

direction of secularism? Will religions survive as pockets of belief and practice in a basically secular environment?¹¹ Could completely secular “religions” emerge? Or will religious instincts be expressed in increasingly nontraditional forms?

Environmental Challenges

Four centuries ago, the total human population was about 500 million. Now, the world’s population is more than 6 billion. This growing population has migrated to cities to find jobs, and cities with a million people—once extremely rare—are now sprouting like mushrooms. Megacities—such as Mexico City,

The view from the moon . . . gave new meaning to the word “religion.” The English word for religion came from the Latin word *religare*. It means to connect. Religion is about how we are all connected to each other and to every creature and to the earth. Religions is about including, about every part belonging to the whole. “Religion” is the old word and “ecology” is the new word. The view from the moon shows that religion and ecology share the same meaning of connectedness.

—James Parks Morton,
Dean Emeritus of the
Cathedral of Saint John
the Divine in New York,
speaking of the photo
of the earth taken from
the moon¹²

This NASA photo of earth has sometime been called a religious icon that makes viewers realize the beauty of the earth and the interrelatedness of all its parts. ►

São Paulo, Shanghai, Tokyo, New York, and Cairo—are becoming more common, even though most of them find it difficult to cope with their unchecked growth. Some cities have become bleak, inhospitable urban environments.

At the same time, the natural environment is being ravaged to provide resources for the increasing world population. The rain forests of Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Brazil are disappearing to provide wood and farmland, and the habitat of many animals, including all great apes in the wild, is being threatened. Nuclear energy is used to make electricity, but no one knows where to safely store the spent fuel. Pesticides are used for growing and storing many foods, despite their related health dangers.

The great religions of the past grew up in a quite different world and did not have to deal with the moral issues raised by population growth, urban life, corporate business policies, nuclear waste, and environmental pollution. Faced with these entirely new problems, old religions must try to discover within themselves the wisdom to handle these challenges. They will have to fundamentally rethink morality. Doing so will not be easy or straightforward, as we will see in a moment.

THE RECURRING CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

If our textbook pilgrimage of world religions has revealed a common denominator among religions, it is this: all religions that survive must ultimately adapt to changing circumstances, whether they acknowledge the adaptations or not. If there is a second common denominator, it is probably the fact that adaptation is seldom achieved without confusion and pain. Indeed, debate, struggle, and the formation of new divisions are necessary ways in which religions seek to remain relevant in a changing world.

A good case study of a religion’s processes of adaptation is found in the recent history of Roman Catholicism. Catholicism, because it has adherents in so many parts of the world, is always being challenged somewhere by changing circumstances. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Catholicism was challenged by new “scientific” understanding, particularly Darwinism and modern biblical criticism. Its response was initially a set of proclamations against the evils of modernism and secularism. Despite its apparent conservatism, it was also adapting to the changing world order. This was particularly true in its development of new Catholic social doctrine, spelled out in papal encyclicals, concerning social justice and workers’ rights. The two world wars increased the pace of social change and the need for religious adjustment. The movement of social and religious “tectonic plates” eventually produced a Catholic earthquake in the person of Pope John XXIII (1881–1963). This elderly, mild-mannered pope stated his desire to open the Church to the modern world, and he initiated meetings of the world’s Catholic bishops that were intended to help Catholicism remain relevant. By the end of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, Roman Catholicism had a different face, a face marked by an emphasis on human equality, a new tolerance for



the secular world, an acceptance of separation between church and state, and an openness to diversity. This was the face of an old religion taking major steps to adapt itself to the modern world.

But the case study does not end with the liberalization initiated by John XXIII. As history would have predicted, the pendulum swung back, particularly at the urging of Pope John Paul II (1920–2005), the first pope from a Communist country. Pope John Paul II insisted that only males could be priests and bishops. He also appointed bishops who reflected his own conservative beliefs; he reasserted the primacy of Rome; and he condemned the thought of some liberal Catholic theologians. Nonetheless, he also furthered his church's defense of human social rights, condemned the excesses of capitalism, and fought capital punishment. He is often credited with being a major cause of the downfall of Communism in Russia and eastern Europe. His death in 2005 ended one of the most influential papacies in history. Although Benedict XVI, the first pope chosen during this century, attempts to strike a balance between the conservative and liberal factions of his church, his general approach has been conservative. At some point in the future, however, the pendulum will undoubtedly swing in the other direction.

This case study, with its tensions and vacillations, is typical of many religions. As we saw in preceding chapters, religions must adapt and change. Often they fight the forces of change, but such conservatism can be a stage of adaptive development that eventually evolves into flexible forms of belief and practice.

The inevitability of conservative reaction to the onslaught of change is one way to understand a phenomenon that is sometimes called fundamentalism. Fundamentalist movements—occurring in many parts of the world—are often fueled by calls for a “return to the values of our founders” and to an earlier, more traditional vision.

Fundamentalist movements reflect an effort to simplify a religion. They emphasize what followers see as the basics, the essential elements, of a religion. The personal rewards of fundamentalism are multiple: a sense of bettering society, of uniting with like-minded people, and of repairing a religion to make it useful once again as a clear guide to what is right and wrong. Although fundamentalist movements are motivated by many reasons, they represent primarily a response to the threat of change.

The best-known example of fundamentalism is possibly the Islamic Revolution in Iran, initiated by the late Ayatollah Khomeini (see Chapter 10); but Islamic fundamentalist movements are also occurring in many other countries, such as Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Algeria. As mentioned in earlier chapters, we see fundamentalism active in other religions as well—in Christianity, especially in the United States and Africa; in Hinduism in India; and in Judaism, particularly in Israel. Some people see religious fundamentalism, especially if it takes control of nations' armies and weapons, as one of the greatest dangers currently facing the human race. Others believe that the attraction of fundamentalism will either be eroded



by the secular values that they see spreading throughout the world or be replaced with new religious ideals.

The image of a swinging pendulum is a recurrent metaphor in this chapter. We return to it one last time, as we imagine the pendulum swinging away from fundamentalism toward another phenomenon, which may well be at the other end of the arc: a kind of neopanthemism expressed through a semideification of nature. Just as Muslim and Christian leaders have articulated the aspirations of traditional monotheistic movements, other thinkers have articulated the “doctrines” of the “nature movement.” Among the many important writers have been Julian Huxley (1887–1975), Rachel Carson (1907–1964), David Brower (1912–2000), and E.O. Wilson (b. 1929).

Major religions are now taking note of the inescapable ethical attention that the natural world demands. Buddhism in both Asia and the West is slowly developing environmental awareness, and so is Christianity. These developments in traditional religions are an entirely new and important extension of religious morality. The potential of the environmental movement to grow—and to influence existing religions—suggests that it is a possible new scaffolding for the cathedral of humanity’s future religious expressions.

ENVIRONMENTALISM: A RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON?

The Green Movement, as we have seen, is becoming a large development. It now extends to a host of practical areas, including architecture, waste disposal, car design, clothing materials, energy sources, agriculture, and much

The speed of glacier melt reminds us that human behavior can harm natural resources far across the globe. Promoting the right relationship between humans and the environment is a growing concern of every religion.



Family members in Washington, DC, march to protest the prevalence of lead pollution in everyday environments.

else. The threat of global warming and related environmental damage have moved it to the forefront of our consciousness. So significant is the need to care for nature that the major religions have made environmentalism as an important ethical commandment.

Sensitivity to nature, however, did not begin with the Green Movement. Since nature can be viewed contemplatively, it has long been a source of religious inspiration. In Asia, we can see great sensitivity to nature in the origins of Daoism, and the beauties of nature appear as a major theme in the poetry of the China and Japan as early as the seventh century. In the West, we find awareness of the spiritual aspect of nature in the medieval thought of Saint Francis and the Cistercian monks. A profound feeling for nature reasserts itself in the Romantic movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which taught that nature was the most important manifestation of the sublime.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the movement toward nature was strikingly evident in the painting of the Impressionists, among whom Claude Monet (1840–1926) was a significant example. Monet not only painted occasional scenes of nature in the countryside, but he left Paris to create a country home with a garden featuring a large water lily pond, which he painted regularly for the last forty-three years of his life. The garden he created at Giverny is virtually a place of pilgrimage today; his paintings of nature hang in many major museums; and reproductions of his paintings of water lilies have made his work well known and loved throughout the world.

The great open spaces of North America also inspired a feeling for the spirituality of nature—as depicted in the works of European and American painters of the nineteenth century. Travelers who visited the western part of North America wrote of its extravagant beauty. One of these was Scottish-born naturalist John Muir (1838–1914). In several books, Muir demanded that beautiful regions that are important to the whole nation be protected. Because of his efforts, Yosemite was made a national park; in fact, his work helped ignite the establishment of the national park system and local nature preserves. Muir Woods, a fine grove of redwoods just north of San Francisco, is named after him.

Today, signs of this new approach to the natural world—an approach that is both practical and spiritual—are evident everywhere. Earth Day was established a few decades ago as a celebration of nature. Television is crowded with wonderfully photographed programs on animals and insects, forests and lakes, coral reefs, fish, and oceans—films that have become an art form

in their own right. Specialty stores now sell items that express the theme of nature—from semiprecious stones and interesting mineral formations to posters of dolphins and whales. A whole new type of environmentally sensitive travel is becoming popular; ecotourism takes people to places like the Amazon and the Galápagos Islands. Zoos, which used to be little more than prisons for animals, are undergoing a revolution in design; they now try to provide a familiar, comfortable, and spacious environment for their animals. Legal protections are being created for endangered species. Art and music—discussed in more detail later in this chapter—have actually pointed the way, through over a century of works that have been strongly inspired by the natural world.

This entire environmental movement is influencing our lives in important ways in the industrialized world. It is actually a network of related interests. The movement has inspired groups that work for the protection of forests and jungles and endangered species. It has worked to set up sanctuaries for whales and dolphins. It has produced ardent animal rights groups, which oppose the use of fur, the killing of animals for sport, unnecessary animal testing, and the inhumane breeding and slaughter of animals for food. As examples of its organizational expression, there are numerous groups dedicated to bettering the earth: Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, the Nature Conservancy, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.

As environmental consciousness has spread, the issue of sustainability has moved from the fringes into the mainstream. As we have seen in earlier chapters, it has been embraced by leaders of several religions. It has become part of political-party platforms across the world. What remains is the hard work of transforming sustainability from a goal into a set of actions that produce real results. If the goal is truly embraced both by politicians and by religious leaders, it may generate greater momentum than it would in the political sphere alone.

Chapter 2 suggested that the Green Movement can be seen as a sort of twenty-first-century indigenous religion. Indeed, the entire environmental movement has interesting parallels with traditional religions. For example, it has a strongly prophetic aspect because of its moral rules. Like many religions, it dictates what a person should or should not eat, wear, and do. (Some bumper stickers illustrate this: “Fur looks good on animals,” and “Think globally, act locally.”) Environmentalism also has a mystical aspect in its emphasis on the fundamental unity of human beings and the universe. In fact, it offers as its supreme experience the sense of oneness with animals and the rest of nature.

So far, this movement is deficient in the sacramental, ritualistic element that usually characterizes religions—although this aspect has great potential for development in the next centuries. Events such as Earth Day and summer solstice festivals may be a beginning of such rituals, and the religion of Wicca attempts to re-create pre-Christian nature rituals. We might see the evolution of nature-based ritual for the major seasons: Earth Day already



Ansel Adams's photo of the moon over Hernandez, New Mexico, reminds us that for those who pause to look, the sacred is easy to see.

marks spring; summer solstice rites mark summer; and autumn is marked by Thanksgiving or similar end-of-harvest ceremonial meals and rituals.

Like religion, environmentalism also has its "sacred places." Destinations of ecopilgrimage include Yosemite, the Rocky Mountains, wildlife preserves in eastern Africa and Costa Rica, Mount Everest, the whale sanctuary at Maui, Glacier Bay and Denali National Park in Alaska, and many others. (The word *sanctuary*, used in reference to animal preserves, is religiously significant.) Environmentalism is also developing its role models, many of whom, interestingly, are women: Dian Fossey (1932–1985), Jane Goodall (b. 1934), Brigitte Bardot (b. 1934), Rue McClanahan (b. 1934), and Pamela Anderson (b. 1967). (In 2006, Jane Goodall was awarded the French Legion of Honor for her work—a great honor, whose past recipients included Elie Wiesel and Helen Keller.) There is a growing body of environmentalist

“scripture”—for example, *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) and *Animal Liberation* by Peter Singer (b. 1946). And sacred iconography extends from the nature photographs of Yosemite by Ansel Adams (1902–1984) to popular paintings of whales and porpoises by Christian Lassen (b. 1956), Robert Wyland (b. 1956), and others. Equally important are environmental films, such as Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*, which helped win him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007.

ECLECTIC SPIRITUALITY

It is quite common now to hear people say that they are not particularly interested in any one religion, but that they are interested in spirituality. It is not always clear what they mean by *spirituality*, but the fact that people use this word to describe their religious stance does reveal an important contemporary phenomenon. Individuals now assemble elements of different belief systems to create their own spiritual system. Highly valued are practices that promote inner peace and a feeling of harmony between oneself and the outer world. The key belief of those who embrace eclectic spirituality is the interrelatedness of all elements in the universe. That belief is often expressed in an attitude of respect and reverence for all people and creatures. The respect and reverence are often cultivated through contemplative acts that dissolve separateness and promote ways of seeing beyond the superficial to the essential relatedness, even oneness, of all beings.

Traditional religions often engender spirituality, and eclectic spirituality is marked by borrowings from traditional religions. These borrowings range from meditative practices inspired by Buddhism to dancing inspired by Sufism. But there are other means to attain spirituality, and many find it outside traditional religion. We have all had the experience, for example, of going to a movie theater, sitting down in the darkness, and gradually being drawn into a film that does far more than merely entertain. At a certain point, we recognize that the film is evoking in us a response that is somehow fundamental to the human experience and at the same time transcendent—an experience of the “spiritual.” Often we sense that others in the audience are sharing in that experience. At the end of such films, there is silence, a silence that may prevail even in the lobby as people leave the theater. Musical concerts can also induce a similar experience.

Psychologists such as Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) and Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) have written extensively of the necessary spiritual development of the human being. Maslow became preoccupied with it, first describing what he called “peak experiences,” which are rare and transient, and then describing what he called “plateau experiences,” which are contemplative experiences in everyday life that may be frequent and long-lasting.

A heightened interest in spirituality may also have influenced the changing attitude toward the home. People increasingly think of their home as their “sanctuary.” They want to include elements in their apartment or house



Physical exercise can also be a form of exercise for the spirit.

that will promote tranquility in everyday life. (This may in part explain the popularity of home makeover programs on television!) Some homes feature intriguing elements of religious design: a small home altar, a meditation area, or a garden room for reflection. Plants and gardens are taking on a new importance, reminding us of their significance in several Asian religious traditions. Fountains are popular for both interior and exterior, and come in all sizes and shapes. They recall the uses of water in so many religions, such as Shinto, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. Sometimes larger houses even have “cathedral” ceilings. The home—as well as the church and temple—is now being conceived of as a sacred space.

Because eclectic spirituality is difficult to define, we will try now to understand it through examples. We will look particularly at three aspects frequently thought of as characterizing modern spirituality: the sense of interrelatedness, an attitude of respect and reverence, and a contemplative approach to experiencing reality.

Interrelatedness

As we saw in earlier chapters, many religions have pointed to a relatedness among all beings, expressed perhaps most strongly in Buddhist and Hindu thought but also in the mystical teachings of many other religions.

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES



Religion and Movies

From their earliest days, movies have explored religious themes and the questions of spirituality—from the silent film *Intolerance* and films based on the Bible to more recent movies such as the *Matrix* series. Less overtly religious films also have explored moral and spiritual topics. Frank Capra (1897–1991), in his film *Lost Horizon*, contrasted the utopian world of Shangri-la, hidden in the Himalayas, with the superficiality of the modern industrial world. The message of the movie is given by the “high lama,” the founder of Shangri-la, whose very last words are “Be kind.” In another film by the same director, *It’s a Wonderful Life* (which regularly appears on television at Christmastime), a man discovers the value of his life only when he is on the brink of suicide. At that moment he sees all the good he has done, and he receives the affectionate care of his neighbors.

Some films bring a kind of enlightenment through their revelation of the value of everyday life. In the film version of the play *Our Town*, by Thornton Wilder (1897–1975), a girl goes back in time to her sixteenth birthday and sees her family in a new light. *Peggy Sue Got Married*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola (b. 1939), does the same thing, when a woman is transported back

to her high school days. *Late Spring* and other films by the Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu (1903–1963) reveal the beauty of the everyday through careful attention to the details of human life. They typically show a family at a turning point in its life, such as when a daughter gets married and must move away. The Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki (b. 1941), in films of extraordinary hand-drawn animation, has turned our attention to the needs of animals and the environment. Many of his films, such as *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away*, use images from Shinto and Buddhism to illustrate his concerns. His film *My Neighbor Totoro* has sparked a movement to protect forests in Japan; it has also inspired the name for a Japanese forest preserve, called Totoro’s Forest.

Science-fiction films about space travel also show interesting parallels with mythic religious stories of visitations by angels and deities or human ascensions to heavenly realms. Sometimes these films touch on the semireligious struggle between the forces of good and evil—take, for example, the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* series. Many times (as in the film *E.T.*), they suggest that human beings need to learn lessons that can only be taught by representatives from other worlds.

Science has also shown great interest in interrelatedness, sometimes linking the worlds of religion and science. The scientific exploration of the subatomic world has helped us understand that the connections that we observe in the visible world mirror the structures in the very building blocks of the universe. This same interest in interrelatedness helps account for the popularity of such abstruse topics as chaos theory, cosmology, and the meteorological relations between ocean temperature and distant weather patterns; it also explains the popularity of such books as *The Whole Shebang* by Timothy Ferris (b. 1944) and *A Short History of Nearly Everything* by Bill Bryson (b. 1951).

Popular interest in interrelatedness is also evident in the reinterpretation of some artworks, particularly the paintings of Georgia O’Keeffe (1887–1986). O’Keeffe’s paintings of flowers and animal bones and close-to-the-earth architectural forms have always been regarded as technically excellent. Her paintings have become so popular that one was reproduced on a commemorative U.S. postage stamp. Their recent popularity, however, may hinge more on their expression of interrelatedness and interchangeableness: because many of her paintings depict objects at very close

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES



Religion and Pop Culture

Popular culture often presents religious themes. Comic strips and animated cartoon films, for example, look uncomplicated but sometimes have a depth that belies their appearance. (Pablo Picasso and other artists have highly valued comics for their economy of line—a great deal can be said with minimal drawing.) Some comic strips indict society in a prophetic way (such as *Doonesbury* or *Dilbert*); other comic strips often are explicitly religious (such as *Peanuts*, *Family Circus*, and *B.C.*). In many of Disney's animated films (*Dumbo*, *Bambi*, *Cinderella*, *Little Mermaid*, *Lion King*, *Tarzan*, *Dinosaur*, *Finding Nemo*), a host of loving animals have been created with such personality and charm that their portrayal as conscious, feeling beings on a par with human beings may have contributed to the growing animal liberation movement.

The creation of Superman and other heroic comic-book figures may be a popular form of biblical messianism. Like the messianic agent given authority by the Ancient of Days in the seventh chapter of the Book of Daniel, Superman comes to earth from another world

to bring justice and truth. Biblical influence may have inspired the semibiblical “Krypton names” of Superman and of his father: Kal-El and Jor-El. (We might recall that *El* means “God” in Hebrew and occurs in names such as *Israel*, *Samuel*, and *Michael*.) Superman and other similar heroes help reinforce the human desire for justice and compassion.

The cult of Elvis Presley (“Presleyanity”), while perhaps not what one would call “spiritual,” has multiple religious parallels: the death of Elvis at an early age, his later “apparitions” to the faithful, the supposed healing power of his photos, the common image of him dressed in white, the commemoration of his birth and death, the pilgrimage to Graceland and other sites where Elvis lived and worked, and the marketing of his gospel music. Followings centered on other musicians—Jim Morrison, John Lennon, Bob Marley, Kurt Cobain, and the Grateful Dead—show similar religious parallels. These followings suggest that the religious urge remains, though its forms of expression change.

range, the viewer may be unable at first glance to tell if the painting represents a flower, a part of human or animal anatomy, an adobe church, a hillside, or even a seashell. This ambiguity is surprising because, in fact, O’Keeffe’s work is often closer to realism than abstraction. However, even that distinction is broken down by O’Keeffe’s highlighting of the abstract within the specific. Overall, her paintings express interrelatedness on several levels; they invite the viewer to contemplate patterns and underlying similarities. Some reproductions of O’Keeffe’s paintings have become almost icons of spirituality.

Abstraction has been used repeatedly to suggest both the state of interrelatedness and the human experience of oneness. Georgia O’Keeffe’s non-representational works frequently use curves of color with this intent, as in her paintings *Music: Pink and Blue*, *Blue*, and the *Series 1*.¹³ Mark Rothko (1903–1970), one of the greatest painters of pure spiritual experience, achieved a similar effect by superimposing squares of subtle color, which seem to float luminously above their backgrounds. Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) created spontaneous but very complicated worlds of relationship in color by spattering paint on canvases that he had placed on the ground. These artists’ works can give the viewer a feeling of being either out in space, surrounded by stars and blackness, or within an atom, amid the active particles and surrounding emptiness.



Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings can help us experience everyday realities in new ways. This painting portrays music.

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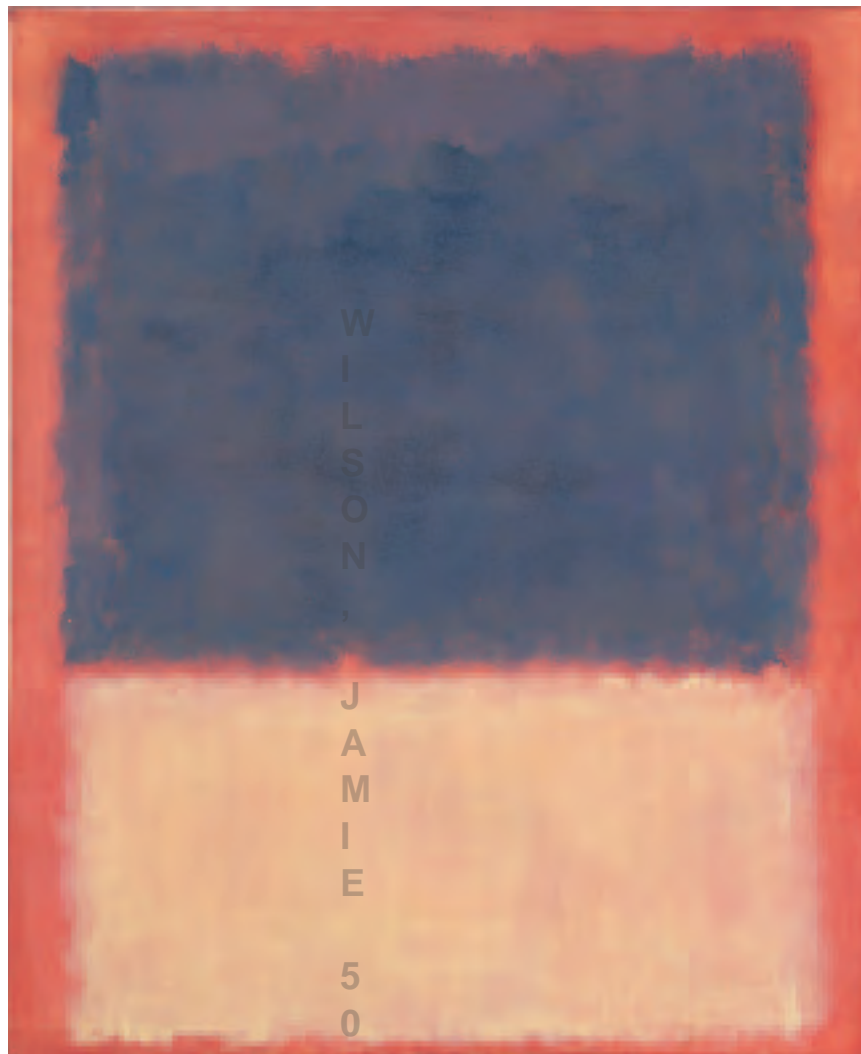
Reverence and Respect

As we've already discussed, nature is coming to be seen not as something only to use, but rather as a part of ourselves that must be nurtured for the well-being of all. Beyond this reconceptualization of nature, best expressed in environmental movements, is a turn to nature as revelation—nature as an expression of the spirit that permeates all reality, nature as a phenomenon to be revered. This attitude is perhaps best expressed in the art of photography.

In an article that compares the qualities of some creative photographers with the virtues of the Daoist sage as espoused in the Zhuangzi, writers Philippe Gross and S. I. Shapiro describe Daoistic ideals, often using both

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The large paintings of Mark Rothko have been called windows into eternity. They have the luminosity of stained glass but the mystery of the Zen circle.



I'm not responsible for my photographs. Photography is not documentary, but intuition, a poetic experience. It's drowning yourself, dissolving yourself. . . . First you must lose your self. Then it happens.

—Henri Cartier-Bresson, photographer¹⁵

the words of the Zhuangzi and of modern photographers themselves, placed side by side. The authors conclude that the vision of the Daoist sage and of many great photographers is the same: "Both . . . have the capacity for seeing with unconstricted awareness and are therefore capable of seeing the miraculous in the ordinary."¹⁴ According to Gross and Shapiro, the virtues shared by the Daoist sage and the contemplative photographer include freedom from the sense of self, receptivity, spontaneity, acceptance, and nonattachment—attributes that promote a general attitude of respect and reverence.

Contemplative photography reached a peak of sorts in the nature photography of Ansel Adams (mentioned earlier). His black-and-white photographs of Yosemite National Park, whose mountains and waterfalls recall the subject matter of traditional Chinese landscape painting, evoke a

feeling of respect for the power and the beauty of nature. Another devotee of nature, Eliot Porter (1901–1990), photographed in brilliant color to let nature speak fully of its beauty. He became well known for his photographs of trees turning yellow in autumn, of reflections in ponds, and of river canyons. These photographs often elicit the same reverence in the viewer as a Daoist sage might have experienced in contemplating a waterfall or a distant mountain.

Photography has been particularly effective in recording the most minute details of the human face and of human life, once again inviting insight, respect, and reverence. Photography of the American Civil War by Matthew Brady (c. 1823–1896) includes portraits of people in terrible circumstances. Not long after, Edward Curtis (1868–1952) sensitively documented the vanishing indigenous life of Native Americans. Dorothea Lange (1895–1965) and Walker Evans (1903–1975) produced moving studies of people during the Great Depression. More recent masters have been Edward Steichen (1879–1973) and Diane Arbus (1923–1971). Steichen's influential anthology of photographs, called *The Family of Man*, includes studies of the spiritual expressed in human faces and actions from around the world. Arbus drew our respectful attention to marginalized people in our urban societies.

The ability to evoke an attitude of respect and reverence is by no means limited to the art of photography. The details of ordinary human life can be treated with reverence in painting as well. Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) did this repeatedly in his works—from his earlier portrayal of peasants, in *The Potato Eaters*, to his later paintings of the neighborhood postman, of sunflowers arranged in a vase, and of a neighborhood cafe at night. The same attitude of respectful attention can even be found in cartoons (consider the role of Lisa in *The Simpsons*). In fact, this attitude can be expressed by any art form or technique that promotes contemplation—the method for revealing spirituality—to which we now turn.

Contemplative Practices

Although eclectic spirituality emphasizes the interrelatedness of all creation, it does not maintain that each person is automatically able to see interrelatedness. However, one can develop this ability, as well as acquire an attitude of respect and reverence, through a variety of contemplative practices.

As we saw in the earliest chapters of this book, native forms of religious practice have often made use of techniques that result in trance states, in which ordinary reality is viewed in a transformed way. In later chapters we reviewed the forms of mysticism that exist in many of the world's religions, and we touched upon the different contemplative activities—such as meditation, Sufi dancing, tea ceremony, and hatha yoga—that have to some extent supplanted the cultivation of trance states. The fact is that anyone—even the person who does not practice a traditional religion—is free to try any of the following contemplative practices.

Traditional religions provide a number of the practices that attract people who are charting their own eclectic spiritual path. Most religions make use of

songs, chants, and other forms of music—some of them elaborate. Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism use complex chant, often accompanied by bells, drums, gongs, trumpets, conch shells, and cymbals. Christianity has produced a great amount of chant and other choral music. Shinto uses chants and gagaku (the solemn instrumental music derived from ancient Chinese court music). Much religious music is intended to help listeners experience a connectedness with the sacred. Until recently, there were few opportunities to experience religious music without attending a religious service. Today, however, through recordings, people can listen to this music and use it as part of their own contemplative practice at home or even in a car, while commuting or traveling.

Along with traditional religious music, some forms of secular music are also used for contemplative purposes. Today, a common form of contemplative practice is to listen to these types of music in a meditative way. During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the Impressionist schools (particularly in France) developed not only a style of painting but also of music. What is notable about Impressionist music is that it aims not so much to satisfy classical requirements of form but to convey a sensual impression, through music, of a primarily nonmusical experience, such as the coming of dawn or the feeling of standing in a forest.

Much Western contemplative music today is a direct descendant of that earlier evocative music. One example of Impressionist music is *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* by Claude Debussy (1862–1918). In his tone poem *La Mer*, Debussy uses music to describe a sunrise and a storm on the ocean. His *Nocturnes* for orchestra include a meditation on clouds (*Nuages*), and his *Clair de Lune* (from the *Suite Bergamasque*) creates the feeling of a quiet, moonlit night. Another French composer, Maurice Ravel (1875–1937), even used a wind machine to evoke nature in the full version of his *Daphnis and Chloe*. And both Ravel and Debussy created music for piano that suggests the relaxing play of fountains. A third composer in this contemplative line was the Englishman Frederick Delius (1862–1934), whose works are generally short impressions of seasonal moods. Among the finest are *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring*, *Summer Night on the River*, and *The Walk to the Paradise Garden*. The English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958), who studied with Ravel, suggests with a solo violin the flight of a bird in *The Lark Ascending*—a delicate work that, when experienced in a quiet environment, has helped many a listener experience a connectedness with the sacred (the composition is also often used as a subject for modern ballet). His *Fantasia on Greensleeves* and *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* are equally contemplative. The moods created by these composers are today frequently echoed in what has come to be called New Age music, some of which is performed on synthesizers. Trance-inducing techno music may also be seen as a new form of spiritual music.

In addition, the spread of modern orchestral instruments in Asia and the use of the synthesizer have made it possible for Asian composers to create complicated cross-cultural works that offer new windows through which listeners can experience that which is within and beyond. The

Japanese composers Toshiro Mayuzumi (1929–1997) and Toru Takemitsu (1930–1996), for example, are often cited for their efforts to transport listeners through transcultural music.

Whether eclectic spirituality will expand into a fully developed religion is impossible to say. It is easier to predict that world growth will result in more crowded spaces, more noise, greater competition, and increased stress. Under such circumstances, the need for contemplation can only grow.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE: LUNCH

Recently I got together with close friends for lunch. We met at a local restaurant that overlooks the ocean. After we all ordered sandwiches, I remarked on the beautiful view.

“Too much infinity,” Kathy said cryptically, looking out at the miles of water.

“How can you ever have too much of that?” I asked, with a laugh. “I like infinity.”

“To me it’s like being in a huge room that echoes when you walk across it. The echoes are like my questions. I don’t want them echoed back. I want answers!”

“Don’t be so difficult,” said John. “Anyway, Mike thinks that religions provide all the answers you’ll ever need.” John, a civil engineer with a scientist’s mind, was making fun of me—as usual. He turned toward me. “Let’s face it: religions are not rational. They don’t want you to think. They just offer you doctrines to accept blindly.”

“And what kind of help is that?” Kathy asked. “Every religion’s views are different. If you ask the big questions—about God or gods, the origin of the universe, what’s right or wrong, what happens after we die—you get different answers. No, you can’t look to religions for answers.”

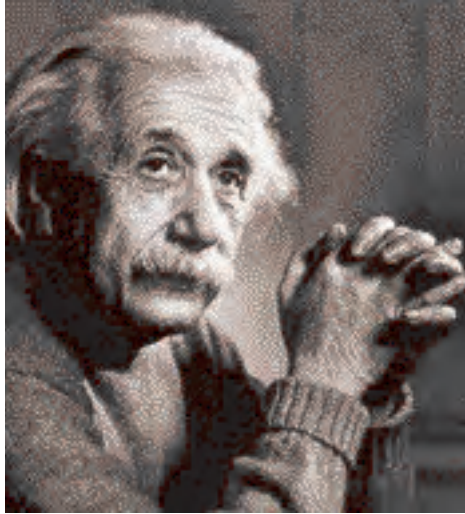
“You’re sort of right,” said Robert.

“Only sort of?” asked Kathy.

“Well, there are different ways of looking at the issue,” Robert answered. “Something that I think is great about religions is that, even if they don’t always get the answers right, at least they’re looking at the important questions. They’re reminding us that there’s more to life than this year’s fashions and the price of gas. They remind us to focus on the big issues.”

“You’re letting religions off too easily,” said John. “Their so-called answers can mislead people and cause lots of harm. Think of religions that condone beating children or oppressing women or killing minorities. Think of the support that religions gave to the Nazis during World War II. And what about religions that have supported slavery? It’s taken centuries to get people to think that keeping slaves might be wrong, and religions haven’t helped speed up that process.”

Peggy, an emergency-room nurse, countered. “Haven’t religions also made people more generous? Look at all the hospitals that were started by religions.”



Albert Einstein, a prophet in the history of science, may also offer prophetic insights about human beings and the cosmos that we briefly inhabit.

designer, don't you think?"

"Here comes lunch!" Peggy exclaimed. She was either hungry or trying to change the topic. Two servers brought the plates. The first few bites helped everyone to mellow.

But not for long. I turned to my right. "Robert, you're a professor," I said. "But you're more open to religion than John is. What do *you* think about religion and about the divine?"

All eyes turned to Robert. "I think that religions are like human beings," he finally answered. "When they're at their best, they can be pretty wonderful. But at their worst, they can be cruel and terrible. And about belief in a God, for me it's very hard to be either an atheist or a traditional believer." He paused. "Maybe the truth is somewhere in between." He looked across the table at John. "I agree that it's hard to believe in a loving, personal God. To me, that seems to be nothing more than human wish fulfillment. But it's also hard to be an atheist. Take Einstein, for example. He refused to be called either a traditional theist or an atheist." Robert stirred his iced tea. "Einstein said that he didn't believe in a personal God and he didn't believe in miracles. But Einstein used the word 'God,' and he did it deliberately. He said that the beauty, the harmony, and the mystery of the universe were what had led him into science. He said that they led him to think there was something spiritual about the universe—something way beyond our comprehension, perhaps, but obvious when you look around." Robert took a sip of tea. "I tend to agree with Einstein."

John looked up from his plate. "So, what did Einstein know about the universe?" John began to smile. We all laughed.

Thinking it was time again to change the subject, I turned to John. "How's your sandwich?"

"It's delicious," he replied. "It has to be, doesn't it? After all, I think we'd all agree that all our sandwiches were very well designed!"

"Maybe" Kathy replied. "But people don't need religions to make them gentle and generous. Lots of people are that way without any religious influence. You don't have to believe in an afterlife in order to be kind. In fact, if you think there's no afterlife, then how you treat people in this life may be all the more important to you."

"And what about the existence of God?" Do we really need that? Does it really help people or not?" John was on a roll. "I just read a couple of books—by Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins—that say that theism is irrational and harmful. Believing in a Grand Designer, they say, is big mistake. What doesn't fit eventually just dies away. If there's any design, they say, it's only a by-product of evolution." John took a sip from his glass.

Kathy nodded. "Think about malaria and cancer and droughts and tsunamis. Where's the good in things like that? If those are parts of some design, we should sue the

READING

EINSTEIN AND RELIGION

The physicist Albert Einstein was often asked about his religious views. In answer, he wrote of his sense of the mystery that manifests itself in the workings of the universe. Here is a typical response:

The most beautiful and deepest experience a man can have is the sense of the mysterious. It is the underlying principle of religion as well as all serious endeavour in art and science. He who never had this experience seems to me, if not dead, then at least blind. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is a something that our mind

cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection, this is religiousness. In this sense I am religious. To me it suffices to wonder at these secrets and to attempt humbly to grasp with my mind a mere image of the lofty structure of all that there is.¹⁶

TEST YOURSELF

- The modern culture of _____ betterment will increasingly challenge religions to produce what material cultures value.
 - nature-based
 - money-based
 - spirit-based
 - peace-based
- Entirely new religions may frequently blend elements from several religions. For example, the _____ Church, which began in Korea, blends Christianity and Confucianism.
 - Unitarian
 - Unification
 - Trinity
 - Trimurti
- One of the earliest examples of modern religious dialogue was the first _____, held in Chicago in 1893.
 - Council of World Religions
 - World Religion Convention
 - Religious Ecumenical Council
 - World Parliament of Religions
- In Christianity, there is growing interest in medieval female mystics such as _____.
 - Mary Baker Eddy
 - Catherine the Great
 - Elizabeth I
 - Hildegard of Bingen
- In 2003, the _____ Church in the United States consecrated as bishop a man who is in a gay relationship; this has caused conflict with other branches of the Church of England.
 - Episcopal
 - Baptist
 - Catholic
 - Presbyterian
- The term _____ has come to refer to a way of looking at life in which human values and rules for living are taken from experience in *this world*, not from divine revelation.
 - agnosticism
 - secularism
 - tritheism
 - monism
- _____, even where it has been abandoned as an official ideology, succeeded in creating a fairly secular milieu.
 - Communism
 - Theocracy
 - Nazism
 - Democracy

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8. _____, the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, has been called “the Green Patriarch” because of his environmentalism.
 - a. Saint Augustine
 - b. John Chrysostom
 - c. Tertullian
 - d. Bartholomew I
9. In Europe, a contemplative interest in nature can be traced back many centuries to the nature mysticism of some medieval monks and friars, beginning with Saint _____.
 - a. Augustine
 - b. Anne Jahouvey
 - c. Francis of Assisi
 - d. Anselm of Lucca
10. The key belief of those who embrace _____ is the interrelatedness of all elements in the universe—a belief that is expressed in an attitude of respect and reverence for all people and creatures.
 - a. the new world order
 - b. structuralism
 - c. eclectic spirituality
 - d. secularism
11. Based on what you have read in this chapter, what do you think twenty-first century religious leaders view as the greatest threat to religion? Using information from the media and this chapter, explain your answer.
12. Why do you think eclectic spirituality has become very popular in the contemporary world? Do you think the majority of twenty-first century Americans find eclectic spirituality more appealing than traditional religions? Explain your answer.

RESOURCES

Books

- Allison, Jay, and Dan Gediman, eds. *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*. New York: Holt, 2007. A collection of essays, from the weekly NPR segment begun in 2005, that portray the personal credos of Americans.
- Azara, Nancy. *Spirit Taking Form: Making a Spiritual Practice of Making Art*. York Beach, ME: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2002. An encouragement to inner growth through the creation of art.
- Byock, Ira. *Dying Well: Peace and Possibilities at the End of Life*. New York: Riverhead/Penguin Putnam, 1997. A book for both patients and caregivers about the spiritual possibilities of dying, written by a compassionate specialist in hospice care.
- Gamwell, Lynn. *Exploring the Invisible: Art, Science, and the Spiritual*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002. A well-illustrated discussion of how the images and worldview of science have contributed to the development of modern art.
- Gottlieb, Roger S. *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. A hopeful, ecumenically oriented book that argues that religion can be a powerful force for environmental activism.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005. A discussion of the links between feminism, ecology, and religious thought.
- Seay, Chris, and Greg Garrett. *The Gospel Reloaded: Exploring Spirituality and Faith in The Matrix*. Colorado Springs, CO: Pinon Press, 2003. A knowledgeable discussion of religious symbolism and meaning in the film *The Matrix*.
- Sutherland, Audrey. *Paddling My Own Canoe*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1978. On the surface, a lyrical description of paddling along the shore of Moloka'i; underneath, a charming classic by a legendary canoeer and kayaker that presents a spirituality akin to Zen.
- Wirzba, Norman. *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. An argument for a new religiously based environmentalism.

Film/TV

- Gifts from God: Women in Ministry*. (Films Media Group.) A CBS News special in which Jewish and Christian women who are in the ministry discuss their experiences.
- God Is Green*. (Directors Mark Dowd and Bruno Sorrentino; 3BM Television.) A documentary profiling the rise of the evangelical environmental movement.

An Inconvenient Truth. (Director Davis Guggenheim; Paramount.) An award-winning documentary that profiles Al Gore's efforts to communicate the perils of global warming to audiences around the world.

Journeys of Spirit: A Pilgrimage to New Mexico. (Films Media Group.) A CBS News special on an ecumenical gathering at the Sanctuary of Chimayó, New Mexico.

The Land and the Sacred. (Films Media Group.) A three-part series exploring the spiritual relevance of the environmental in Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America.

Music/Audio

Music has pointed the way for modern spirituality and contemplation. Here are important selections, available on CD. Especially approachable pieces are starred:

Debussy: **Prelude to the Afternoon of a faun*, **Nocturnes*, *La Mer*, *Syrinx*

Delius: **On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring*, *Summer Night on the River*, *Brigg Fair*

Fauré: *Berceuse*

Hovanness: *Mysterious Mountain*

Ravel: **Mother Goose Suite*, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, *Daphnis and Chloe* (concert version), *String Quartet in F*, *Piano Concerto in G*

Satie: **Gymnopedies nos. 1–3*

Vaughan Williams: **The Lark Ascending*, **Fantasia on Greensleeves*, **Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*, *Serenade to Music* (orchestral version), *String Quartets nos. 1 and 2*

Internet

Center for Religious Tolerance: <http://centerforreligious tolerance.org/>. The Web site of a nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote peace and harmony through interfaith activities and dialogue.

Marvel, Believe, Care: <http://www.marvelbelievecare.org/>. An online Christian environmental resource, meant to raise awareness about the importance of caring for God's creation.

Visit the Online Learning Center at www.mhhe.com/molloy5e for additional exercises and features, including "Religion beyond the Classroom" and "For Fuller Understanding."

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