

## Endorsements

A rich, fascinating intellectual odyssey, this book places religion in a wide historical and politico-economic context to reveal its dynamics and entanglements with multifarious forces that have impacted its development over the centuries. Respectful in tone, vast in scope, thrilling in detail and replete with instructive case studies, it is a journey that challenges common conceptions about human identity, spirituality and purpose.

*Alamin Mazrui*

Professor of Sociolinguistics and Cultural Studies  
Rutgers University

This astonishingly wide-ranging and generous work explores the role of religion in societies through time and across the world, and its relationship to politics and economics, art and culture. It is a book about humanity's search for truth, both in the physical and metaphysical spheres, a search often corrupted by power and greed, but with the potential for showing us how to live well together on our beautiful but threatened planet.

*Elizabeth Jones, MA*

Teacher, Quaker, Former Co-editor of *Christian Today*, UK

This is a fact-based book that genuinely expresses things as they are. Some will criticize it, others will praise it, openly or privately. In the end I believe that the world will be a better place due to the tolerance that it will inject into the society.

*Mahmood Hameer, MBChB, MMed (Pediatrics)*

This brilliant empathetic exploration of religion encompasses Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism together with folk religions, some smaller religions, Confucianism and secularism. Hirji convincingly argues that whatever the originating theology, which frequently challenged existing power structures, in practice religions are colored by the social, economic, political and cultural context and tend to serve power. And yet, the original theological message also becomes a vehicle for continued resistance to power. Besides summarizing the beliefs and structures of religions, this book pays particular attention to the role of women in religion and the relationship between religion and neo-liberalism.

*Abdul Paliwala*

Emeritus Professor of Law  
University of Warwick

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*RELIGION, POLITICS  
AND  
SOCIETY*

A PROGRESSIVE PRIMER

Karim F Hirji



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In memory of:

*Kulsumbai Hirji Sunderji*  
Beloved Grandmother

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*Faith is taking the first step even  
when you can't see the whole staircase.*  
Martin Luther King

*True religion is real living; living with all one's soul,  
with all one's goodness and righteousness.*  
Rabindranath Tagore

*Humanism is a philosophy of joyous service  
for the greater good of all humanity, of application of  
new ideas of scientific progress for the benefit of all.*

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Linus Pauling



# PREFACE



*God has no religion.  
The hands that serve are holier than the lips that pray.*  
Mohandas K Gandhi

*People can be only divided into good or bad;  
their race, religion, nationality don't matter.*  
Irena Sendler



THIS BOOK EXPLORES THE INTERPLAY between religion, politics and society. It covers the four major world religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam—as well as secularism and several minor religions. For each religion, prior to discussing its social and political function, a synopsis of its origin, main beliefs, scriptures, practices and institutions is presented. Four issues are of particular concern: How has the globally prevalent neoliberalism affected the social role of religion? What are the nature and roots of conflict between and within religions? How can interfaith harmony be realized? And how can religion serve the broad interests of humanity?

My presentation has a foundational premise: While their spiritual beliefs differ, all humans are equal in dignity and have equal rights. No human or belief system is more exalted than the rest. There are no chosen people; there is no chosen religion. We all are a part of the global human family. Our religious and cultural diversity is a cause for celebration, not conflict.

This book is the first of a two-book project. The second book, *Religion, Science and the Pandemic*, addresses the relationship between religion and science and mathematics, and look as the role of religion during the eugenics era and in the corona virus pandemic. Unlike most other books on the social function of religion, these two books are based on a progressive, humanistic perspective. Writing for the general reader, my objective has been to factually and clearly present the relevant issues in an interdisciplinary, evidence-based manner and without bias towards any faith system.

Our world is engulfed within an existential social, economic, health and environmental crisis. Resolution of this crisis requires unity among peoples across the globe. Unity does not mean homogeneity; it means realizing that we are in the same boat, acknowledging our differences, celebrating cultural

1 and religious diversity, promoting interfaith dialogue and joining our hands to  
2 confront our shared problems.

3 The coverage of religion and related issues in this book mostly ends at  
4 the time of the onset of the corona virus pandemic. The pandemic era issues  
5 are addressed in the sequel, *Religion, Science and the Pandemic*.

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9 In writing this book, I have benefitted from the assistance of many. Foremost,  
10 I thank the co-editors Zarina Patel and Rosa K Hirji whose meticulous editorial  
11 corrections and insightful comments considerably improved the quality of the  
12 work. Erudite comments and suggestions from Abdul Paliwala and Elizabeth  
13 Jones were invaluable. Others who gave useful comments and pointed out  
14 errors are Alamin Mazrui, Rafik Hirji, Farida Hirji, Emma Hirji-Johnson, Nigel  
15 Westmaas, Mahmood Hameer and Lulu Chirande. My heartfelt thanks to  
16 them all. Zahid Rajan of Zand Graphics and Firoze Manji of Daraja Press  
17 deserve credit for their support and for expeditiously producing an elegantly  
18 designed book. I also thank Joshua Folorunso for the cover and layout design.

19 This book uses US English spelling. The quotes at the beginning of each  
20 chapter do not necessarily reflect my views. I give them to show the diversity  
21 of views on the subject.

22  
23 *Karim F Hirji*  
24 *July 2022*  
25

## 26 CHAPTER 01: INTRODUCTION



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33 *Three things cannot be long hidden;*  
34 *the sun, the moon and the truth.*  
35 *Gautama Buddha*

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37 *Religion must mainly be a matter of principles only.*  
38 *It cannot be a matter of rules.*  
39 *BR Ambedkar*

40  
41 *Your pain is My pain,*  
42 *My wealth is Your wealth,*  
43 *Your salvation is My salvation.*  
44 *African Folk Religion Proverb*



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4 RELIGION IN A NASCENT FORM has been with us since the era of hunting  
5 and gathering. Religion today is belief in divinity, prayer, worship, celebrating  
6 special events and more. Religion is a holy book, a code of conduct, values,  
7 a moral guide.

8 Religion is not monolithic. Humans have embraced it diversely. One count  
9 identified over 4,000 distinct religions. Today Christianity, Islam, Hinduism  
10 and Buddhism constitute the numerically dominant religions. A plethora of  
11 minor religions exist. They form sects and denominations. And, over a billion  
12 people are irreligious. They do not believe in divine entities, do not formally  
13 follow a religion, or are neutral about such issues.

14 Religion operates, directly or implicitly, in virtually all aspects of personal,  
15 family and social life. It reverberates in politics, economics, culture, health,  
16 education; it affects social harmony and conflict, war and peace. To billions,  
17 it gives meaning to life and helps them navigate its arduous, capricious path.  
18 It unifies people; it divides people, sometimes bitterly. Hindus, Muslims,  
19 Christians, Jews, Buddhists and others often coexist without discord yet also  
20 battle each other. Conflicts within religions are common. As sharp lines over  
21 esoteric or mundane issues form, the room for reconciliation evaporates.

22 Religion and science impinge on each other. Some scientists deem them  
23 irreconcilable, some call them complimentary ways of perceiving reality, and  
24 some say they are distinct domains of human life. Theologians are also  
25 divided into similar camps. These are not purely intellectual discourses; they  
26 flow over into politics, and social and economic relations.

27

28

### 1.1 A PERSONAL PASSAGE

29

30 To set the stage, I recount my initiation into and exodus from religion. I grew  
31 up in a religious environment in Lindi, a southern town in colonial Tanzania.  
32 From the age of five or so, an hour of each evening was spent at the Ismaili  
33 *Jamaat Khana*. On special occasions, praying and singing hymns took longer.  
34 What I liked best was frolicking with my friends after the prayers.

35 Saturday morning was set aside for religious studies. I learnt to recite the  
36 *dua* (main prayer) and *ginans* (hymns). The *dua* was in Arabic, of which I  
37 understood but a few words, but the *ginans* were in Gujarati, my home  
38 language. Learning faster than my mates, I had recited the *dua* and *Eid*  
39 *Namaaz* (Eid prayer) for the *Jamaat* (congregation) by age eight.

40 In 1961, the year of Independence from colonial rule, I was in a middle  
41 school in Dar es Salaam run by the Ismaili Education Board. Most students  
42 were Ismaili, and in this African nation, of Asian origin. The set up reflected  
43 the colonial racial structure. Morning assembly was opened by a prayer. The

1 once-a-week religious studies class was taught by a distinctly uninspiring  
2 teacher.

3 My grandmother was the best teacher. I loved her. In late afternoon, she  
4 would have me sit next to her, and regale me with tales about our family  
5 history and sing alluring *ginans*. Those moments and her favorite *ginans* are  
6 etched in my mind. My religiosity intensified. A missed prayer session was  
7 unthinkable. I joined the Ismaili Youth Volunteer Corp. We cleaned the large  
8 *Jamaat Khana* grounds, served water to attendees, kept their shoes safe,  
9 arranged the trays of food offerings, decorated the premises for special  
10 occasions, and did other tasks. We enjoyed what we did. Prayers and service  
11 were combined with fun and learning the intricacies of our religion.

12 The Aga Khan III, Sir Sultan Mohamed Shah, was the Imam (spiritual  
13 leader) of the Ismailis until his death in 1957. The Imamate passed on to his  
14 grandson, Prince Karim, the Aga Khan IV. The Ismailis hold that the Aga Khan  
15 is directly descended from Hazrat Ali, the son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad.  
16 He holds a divine status. His *firman*s (edicts) not only are a guide for this and  
17 the next life, but also constitute the irrefutable truth. They reach the Ismailis  
18 across the globe. The prayer house was full the day a *firman* was read out.

19 The Ismailis were a third of the Asian community of about 100,000 in  
20 Tanzania. Barely one percent of the national population, the Asians had been  
21 key to the colonial policy of divide and rule. Granted special disposition for  
22 trade licenses, bank loans, residential areas and education, their economic  
23 status was distinctly higher than of Africans. Until I went to secondary school  
24 in 1963, I had no African friends. The attainment of Independence in 1961  
25 signaled that the colonial racist reality would no longer be tolerated.

26 The Aga Khan was an honored guest at the Independence Day events in  
27 1961. Besides partaking in the official ceremonies, he gave a speech at our  
28 school and blessed his *Jamaat*. On both occasions, he stressed the need for  
29 Ismailis to reconcile themselves with a new mode of life in an independent  
30 nation. We had to make it our homeland, acquire Tanzanian citizenship, live  
31 as loyal citizens and serve our nation.

32 Taking those words to heart, I joined nation building projects like primary  
33 school construction during weekends and spent a month of school vacation  
34 in a national service youth camp. My *Jamaat Khana* buddies also took part in  
35 such activities. I listened to and read the speeches of Julius Nyerere, our  
36 president. Shining with wisdom and dedication to racial equality and social  
37 justice, they inspired me. I queried the racist values and conduct my fellow  
38 Ismailis had imbibed in the colonial era. That the students at my secondary  
39 and high schools were largely African, and among whom I had close friends,  
40 propelled me further along that path. Yet, I remained devoted to the spiritual  
41 Ismaili values and our Imam. Religiosity and patriotism were complimentary  
42 sides of the same coin.

43 In 1968, I joined the University of Dar es Salaam to pursue the bachelor's  
44 degree in mathematics. It was an era of activism. Students at universities in  
45 Africa and the world were raising the banner of anti-colonialism, racial justice,  
46 and equality, and taking to the streets. The University of Dar es Salaam was

1 no exception. Inspired by the astute, pioneering historian Walter Rodney, a  
2 group of activist students formed a radical front to champion the notions of  
3 Pan-Africanism, total African liberation and socialism. Organizing public  
4 lectures and Sunday discussions, staging demonstrations and publishing a  
5 radical magazine, it aimed to challenge the conservative ideas dominating  
6 academic discourse and raise awareness about the critical concerns of the  
7 day. Attracted to the radical front from my first day on the campus, in my  
8 second year of studies, I became the senior editor of its magazine.

9 My intellectual horizon expanded in two directions. I imbibed the works of  
10 Pan-Africanist and revolutionary thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, Che  
11 Guevara and Karl Marx. I was drawn to Marxism as a cohesive philosophical  
12 outlook. It made me question things I had taken for granted. My studies in  
13 mathematics and science cemented an idea that had bubbled in my mind  
14 since high school: Reason and evidence were the sole dependable venues  
15 for gaining knowledge.

16 And yet, during the first year of my studies, I remained a devout Ismaili.  
17 With about seventy Ismaili students, the administration allowed us to use the  
18 room above the science lecture theater for evening prayers. I was one of the  
19 two volunteers responsible for keeping it clean, laying out the mats for the  
20 prayers and folding them afterwards. At times, I recited the evening prayer.

21 But this bifurcated life—a socialist activist by day and fervent believer by  
22 evening—could not endure. Five Ismaili students who were allied to the  
23 activist cause, including myself, began to query the practical and theoretical  
24 bases of our faith. Why was money so central to devotional activities? Why  
25 were we so exclusive a community? Why did we pay only lip service to racial  
26 equality and patriotism? Were science and faith compatible? I was alienated  
27 by the racists words that invariably arose in conversations with community  
28 members and disgusted by the hypocrisy of the local Ismaili leaders who  
29 preached one thing but practiced another.

30 Within a year, the radical Ismaili students made a clean break. For my  
31 part, apart from funerals, I have not entered a prayer house since 1969. Yet,  
32 to disavow what one has held dear for the first two formative decades of life  
33 was a gut-wrenching process. I felt I was sinking into madness. But through  
34 student activism and support from comrades, I managed to stay afloat, and  
35 landed on the firm shore of secular humanism, where I remain to this day. My  
36 ethical and intellectual gestalt today comprises of humanism, democratic  
37 socialism and firm adherence to the methods of science.

## 38 39 40 41 **1.2 DISCORD** 42

43 These are the times of information and science. Education, communication  
44 and commerce have expanded across the world. Distant peoples are in closer  
45 contact. Yet, this connectivity has yet to generate a satisfactory level of mutual  
46 understanding and tolerance. Fair, dispassionate inter-cultural exchanges

1 remain limited as unyielding opinions and vested interests block a meeting of  
2 minds.

3 Locally and internationally, the world seems as divided as ever, and along  
4 many fault lines. Discord and inequality between rich and poor nations, and  
5 within nations keep growing. Western imperialism led by the US remains the  
6 primary fomenter of the surging global arms trade and military conflict. It  
7 seeks to overthrow the governments of Cuba and Venezuela, to destabilize  
8 Russia and encircle, isolate and militarily provoke China. People continue to  
9 embrace narrow nationalism, and exclusive racial and ethnic ties. Even as  
10 the corona virus pandemic rages on and the dire effects of climate change  
11 are manifested regularly, nations pay lip service to united action, but place  
12 their interests above that of others.

13 Religion remains a major fault line. In India, Hindu mobs attack Muslims;  
14 in Bangladesh, it is the reverse; in the Central African Republic, Christian and  
15 Muslim militias commit atrocities against common folk; Islamophobia,  
16 discriminatory practices, and violence against Muslims prevail in Europe and  
17 North America; anti-Semitism is resurfacing; terror groups espousing loyalty  
18 to Islam commit atrocities against civilians and Christians in Nigeria and the  
19 Middle East; Buddhist militias in Myanmar go on violent rampages against the  
20 Muslim Rohingya population; free thinkers are killed in broad daylight in  
21 Bangladesh; Russian forces rampage in Muslim Chechnya; the Uyghurs in  
22 China face discrimination; Sunni and Shia Muslims engage in deadly conflict;  
23 and so on. India's ongoing, extended domination of Kashmir, its only Muslim  
24 majority state, and the strife with Pakistan are interpreted in religious terms  
25 by both sides. The interventions by Western powers in Iraq, Afghanistan,  
26 Somalia and Syria, and their aid for the illegal Israeli occupation of Palestine  
27 are seen by Muslims as attacks on Islam.

28 A year 2012 survey of 198 nations indicated that religion-based hostility  
29 prevailed in 66 nations, and religion related violence occurred in 40 nations.  
30 Governments in 60 nations placed some form of restrictions on the practice  
31 and display of religion. Deadly conflicts with a religious component rose in  
32 Africa (DW 2019; Reuters 2014).

33 The deeply personal, emotive nature of religious belief catalyzes conflict.  
34 The faithful believe what they believe, no matter what others say. A misplaced  
35 word or deed may flare tempers. Riots may ensue.

36 A few years back in Dar es Salaam, my home city, two primary school  
37 boys were pushing and shouting. In the process, a book one was holding fell  
38 on the ground. And it was the Quran. The incident was observed by Muslim  
39 men. *A Christian has insulted our faith; he has desecrated the Quran*—the  
40 emotive words spread like wildfire. Soon, Muslims were attacking Christians  
41 with sticks and stones. And they were responding likewise. It took the riot  
42 police an entire day to restore order in that area. Had saner minds noted at  
43 the outset that it was an inadvertent act of a child, life would have gone on as  
44 usual.

45 In February 2022, the custodian of a village mosque in Pakistan reported  
46 to fellow villagers that he saw a man burning the Quran in the prayer house.

1 As he went to report to the police, an angry crowd seized the ‘blasphemer’  
2 and pelted him with stones. The three policemen who arrived at the scene  
3 were also stoned. By the time more police arrived, the man was dead, and  
4 his body hung from a tree. But it turned out that he had been suffering from a  
5 serious mental illness for over a decade.

6 Religious minorities, opposition figures and critical academics in Pakistan  
7 have often been accused of blasphemy on spurious grounds.

8  
9 *In April 2017, an angry mob killed the university student*  
10 *Mashal Khan after he was accused of posting blasphemous*  
11 *content online. And a Christian couple were lynched then*  
12 *burned in a kiln in Punjab in 2014 after being falsely accused*  
13 *of desecrating the Quran. (AFP 2022).*  
14

15 Blasphemy is a crime in Pakistan carrying a possible death sentence. Many  
16 have been convicted under the law, but no execution has taken place. The  
17 alleged blasphemer faces street justice leading to death or severe injury.  
18 Even as mob violence is decried by governmental officials and generates  
19 outrage in the main media, it is an ongoing social malady.

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23 There is another side to the story. That religion related violence occurred in  
24 40 nations means that it did not occur in 158 nations. Cordial interaction and  
25 solidarity between different faiths are in evidence across the world. When the  
26 followers of one religion face attacks, people and leaders from other religious  
27 groups often stand in solidarity with them. Despite the risk of personal harm,  
28 they often shelter the victims from zealots.

29 A general review of history shows that discord between religions and  
30 sects changes over time and place. Thus, a detailed study of Christianity,  
31 Islam and traditional religions in Africa to the 1960s noted a few instances of  
32 purely religious strife but more instances of conflicts that while appearing to  
33 have religious causation were actually propelled by commercial and imperial  
34 factors.

35  
36 *Africa today is a field of multi-religious activity that induces*  
37 *tolerance of different ways of belief. (Parrinder 1969, page*  
38 *235).*  
39

40 Even in this age of rising tensions, it is not all a story of conflict. There is room  
41 for hope.

### 42 43 **1.3 MY FAITH** 44

45 Though I ceased participation in formal religious activities in 1969, I did not  
46 discard all I had gleaned from my immersion in Ismailism. Even as a non-

1 religious socialist, I cherish the ethical values embodied in the *ginans*—  
2 honesty, modesty, humility, selflessness, altruism, compassion, respecting  
3 people especially elders—and abhor the behaviors—acquisitiveness, lying,  
4 cheating, hypocrisy—proscribed therein. Early in my non-religious life I held  
5 a disdainful attitude towards the religious way of thinking. But soon I shed that  
6 stance and adopted a balanced, scientific view that respects individuals and  
7 their beliefs yet does not compromise on logic or evidence. And I continue to  
8 value the friendship of my Ismaili peers from the 1960s.

9 My interest in religion expanded. My reading of current affairs and history  
10 covered the role faith had played at varied historical junctures and in different  
11 places. My collection of books on religion and related issues kept growing.  
12 Some I read cover to cover; some I perused lightly. Once in a while, I read  
13 parts of the Quran, the Bible and the Bhagavad Gita. And I kept up with news  
14 reports and articles relating to religion in the media, websites and magazines.

15 My readings made one thing clear. Religion has played a supportive role  
16 and an obstructionist role in the endeavors for human decency, fairness,  
17 equality and social justice. Among the instances that stuck in my mind were  
18 the role of religion in justifying slavery and abolishing slavery; the role of the  
19 Catholic Church in the efforts to replace military dictatorship with democratic  
20 rule in South and Central America; the role of the Christian churches in  
21 backing and fighting against Apartheid rule in South Africa; the role of the  
22 church in the fight for civil rights in the USA; and the role of Islamic parties in  
23 the fight against colonial rule in the Middle East and North Africa. I was  
24 intrigued by liberation theology, a doctrine which blended Christianity with  
25 Marxism.

26 I realized that religion had contributed significantly to human culture—  
27 language, poetry, literature, music, art, architecture. I was not surprised to  
28 find prominent scientists who were atheists or agnostics but was taken in by  
29 the fact many scientific luminaries had been devout believers. The case of  
30 the two founders of modern physics, Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein, is  
31 apropos. The former wrote more books on Christianity than on science while  
32 the latter was a pantheist for whom science and exploration of nature were  
33 deeply spiritual endeavors.

34 In my worldview, science, logical thinking and empirical evidence are the  
35 foundational pillars. But I recognize that despite its indispensability to life in  
36 the modern era, science cannot provide moral, ethical codes for humanity. It  
37 can explain why things are the way they are, and how they came to be, but  
38 cannot prescribe how they ought to be. It can theorize why humans act as  
39 they do, but it cannot lay down a code of conduct, a standard for good and  
40 bad.

41  
42 *You are right in speaking of the moral foundations of science,*  
43 *but you cannot turn around and speak of the scientific*  
44 *foundations of morality.*

45 Albert Einstein  
46

1 For much of human history, religion played the dominant role in the provision  
2 of ethical codes. In the modern capitalist society, its status as the guardian of  
3 morality has diminished. Now, many other forces and institutions affect the  
4 formulation and dissemination of ethical percepts and norms, and socially  
5 acceptable and proscribed ways of behavior.

6 Ethical codes arose from the process of evolution of human societies.  
7 They reflect and govern social relations. Neither science nor religion can  
8 boast an ethically spotless record. Both have been deployed for humane and  
9 inhumane ends, for moral and immoral goals.

10  
11 *Perhaps religion provides the justification for wars,*  
12 *but science provides the weapons.*

13 James Rozoff

14  
15 Science has moral deficits while religion has factual deficits. One should not  
16 reject a scientific fact or theory on scriptural grounds. And one should not  
17 dismiss religious values and beliefs just by invoking the banner of science.

18  
19 *If our world is regulated by reductionist, narrow, sophomoric*  
20 *versions of Darwin; or reductionist, narrow, sophomoric*  
21 *versions of religious dogma; you end up being childish anti-*  
22 *scientific, and childish anti-religious, and you miss the very*  
23 *complex interaction [they share].*

24 Cornel West

25  
26 A worldview that envisions human development in a holistic way, adopts  
27 science as the foundation of knowledge and presents an elevated ethical  
28 code is required. That worldview for me is secular, socialist humanism but for  
29 others it maybe faith-based humanism.

## 30 **1.4 DIALOGUE**

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32  
33 Dialogue is essential for resolving discord. Yet, for many, religion is so  
34 emotive that any form of discussion is unthinkable. This is true even in  
35 hallowed academic fora, where the spirit of free inquiry is expected to flourish.  
36 Take the experience of Michael S Roth, a professor at Wesleyan University  
37 in the United States. He finds the students attending his class on philosophy  
38 eager to discuss the topics he covers. But with one exception: religion. For a  
39 religion related topic, the class turns awkwardly quiet. And once in a while, a  
40 student is overtly bellicose. He wonders:

41  
42 *How can such an institution claim to educate students about*  
43 *ideas, culture, and ways of life if students, professors, or both*  
44 *are uncomfortable when talking about something that's been*  
45 *central to humanity throughout recorded history? (Roth 2019).*

1  
2 Despite the difficulties involved, a respectful, fact-based dialogue between  
3 religions, their denominations, and secular traditions is absolutely essential.  
4 It has to be an honest dialogue at the official and grassroots levels. Today  
5 many national and international organizations promote interfaith harmony and  
6 understanding. Some are doing exemplary work. But clearly, more needs to  
7 be done.

## 8 9 **1.5 ISSUES AND APPROACH**

10  
11 The internecine conflicts between religions at first sight seems paradoxical.  
12 Religions embody humane values—peace, spirituality and kindness. Their  
13 tenets abhor violence and selfishness. Yet, they have turned into instruments  
14 for the perpetration of the opposite. Are the religious beliefs abused by a few  
15 errant believers, or is religion intrinsically double-faced? Or are there hidden  
16 factors and forces at the root of these conflicts? Are religion and science  
17 compatible? Such queries propelled me to embark on writing what I thought  
18 would be a small book giving a broad perspective on the relationship between  
19 religion, politics, science and society. But one thing led to another, and I  
20 ended up with a two-volume work.

21 Thousands of articles, papers and books that address these matters exist.  
22 The organizations engaged in promoting interfaith harmony have produced  
23 material of relevance as well. Yet, I felt something was missing. A book that  
24 would cover the major and minor religions and non-religious creeds and bring  
25 the critical issues under one roof was needed.

26 This book, unlike most works on religion and society, takes a progressive,  
27 socialistic perspective. It is based on the premise that a valid study of the  
28 relationship of religion to politics and society cannot be based primarily on  
29 holy texts. Religious scriptures are factually incomplete, inaccurate and  
30 ethically inconsistent. Thus, during the Atlantic slave trade, some Christian  
31 pastors quoted the Bible to justify it while other pastors used passages from  
32 the same source to oppose it.

33 A valid, consistent exposition of religion and society requires an approach  
34 based on evidence, logical reasoning and the methods of social science.  
35 Every scientific theory has an element of uncertainty. Thus, incorporating the  
36 strengths and limitations of the two strands of the scientific method,  
37 reductionism and holism, it has to guard against the biases that often afflict  
38 scientific studies. The gap between the principles of science and the actuality  
39 of research practice is disturbingly wide in many fields.

40 Using an interdisciplinary approach and secondary material from varied  
41 sources, this book aims to formulate a coherent perspective on the relation  
42 between religion, politics and society. Religions have functioned within  
43 diverse social and economic structures—**feudalism, capitalism,**  
44 **imperialism, slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism, neo-liberalism,**  
45 **socialism, communism.** A basic understanding of these terms is desirable.  
46 Elaborations appear at the relevant junctures in the book.



## 1.6 PURPOSE

I wrote this book as a concerned global citizen who feels that his ideas will help uplift the quality and tenor of discourse on religion and politics and promote harmony. Though the dialogue on religion and society has to be conducted in civil tones, it should not desist from bringing unsavory realities to the fore. A genuine consensus and peaceful coexistence cannot emerge from the avoidance of the truth.

My main aim is to give a valid picture of the beliefs, scriptures, institutions, practices, history and social functions of the four major religions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism), some minor religions and secular beliefs systems. Intended for the general reader, I hope to provide a comparative perspective on varied faiths and make people more open towards beliefs other than their own. And I expect it will stimulate the reader to ruminate on seven key questions that often arise in interfaith discussions.

**Question 1:** Are some religions more exalted than other religions?

**Question 2:** Is religion essential for morality?

**Question 3:** Can secularism and religious belief coexist?

**Question 4:** Are science and religion compatible?

**Question 5:** Do divine beings and divine realms exist?

**Question 6:** What is the future of religion in a neoliberal world?

**Question 7:** How can harmony between faith systems be promoted?

My responses to these questions are given in Chapter 11.

## 1.7 BASIC TENETS

The fundamental tenets of this book are: All religions and faiths, ancient and contemporary, small and large, together with humanistic, secular creeds that lack a divine component deserve equal respect and freedom to exist. That is, unless it is engaged in activities causing harm to humans. And every person has an inviolable right to participate or not participate in any religious system of his or her choice.

*Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.* Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Article 18.

Equality in dignity is the essential springboard for a general discussion of religion and its relationship with politics, science and society in which popular participation is essential. The broader the audience, the greater the room for

1 trust and understanding. If left to specialists, the conversation may become a  
2 befuddling exchange of little use in addressing real-life concerns. If left to the  
3 vocal believers, it may foment division, not respect or understanding.

4 Presently, humanity is at a critical juncture. Its future is being hijacked by  
5 a minority with enormous power, wealth and influence. The insecurity fueled  
6 by their policies feeds extremist agendas. We are at a precipice; now is the  
7 time to act. Silence does not augur peace, understanding, progress, or  
8 justice.

9 People of goodwill from all religious, ethnic, racial, gender and national  
10 backgrounds have an obligation to learn the histories, visions and actualities  
11 of people of other backgrounds, to arrive at a fact-based common  
12 denominator and engage in a united manner to confront the problems facing  
13 humanity and protect life on our planet.

14  
15 *The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression*  
16 *and cruelty by the bad people*  
17 *but the silence over that by the good people.*

18 Martin Luther King  
19  
20

# CHAPTER 02: LEXICON



*Don't seek God in temples.  
He is within you.*  
Leo Tolstoy

*Science deals mainly with facts;  
Religion deals mainly with values.  
The two are not rivals.*  
Martin Luther King



THIS CHAPTER EXPLAINS the meaning of commonly encountered terms in a discourse on religion. Terms specific to particular religions are explained in the relevant chapters.

**Religion:** Many definitions of 'religion' exist. After exploring them in Chapter 3, we use the following definition.

***Religion** is a system of beliefs and practices shared by a community that accepts the existence of supernatural beings and/or supernatural realms and has stories, rules of conduct (ethical norms) and rituals that are taken to be of divine origin.*

We use the terms faith system, belief system, faith, religious tradition and religious creed in an interchangeable fashion as equivalent terms for religion.

**Theism** accepts the existence of divine being(s) who rule the universe and must be worshipped. While believing in divine beings, a theist may hold that the universe has no creator; it has always existed.

**Atheism**, the opposite of theism, denies the existence of divine or supreme entities and supernatural realms. Some atheists affirm that a divine being does not exist, but some do not believe that such a being exists.

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**Agnosticism**, saddling a position between theism and atheism, posits that sufficient evidence to either accept or reject the existence of divine entities does not exist. Agnostics regard such questions not amenable to resolution through rational means. Humans should attend to the observable and try to understand it through rational, scientific methods.

Religion or theism occur in three basic forms: Monotheism, Polytheism and Pantheism.

**Monotheism** posits that a single divine power (God) created and rules the universe. He may be assisted by lesser beings like prophets and angels and may or may not directly intervene in human affairs. Christianity, Islam and Judaism are monotheistic religions.

**Polytheism** posits that several gods and goddesses jointly or in a hierarchy rule the universe. Each god or goddess has its own domain. Hinduism, Chinese folk religion, Taoism, Shintoism (Japan), many traditional African religions, and the faiths of ancient Egyptians, the Roman Empire and the ancient Greeks are polytheistic beliefs.

**Deism** holds that evidence and reason support the belief that God created the universe. But He does not interfere in human affairs or give revelations. Humans are fully responsible for what they do.

**Pantheism** says that everything in the universe is permeated by a spiritual force. God is all and all is God; there is no personal, interventionist God. A flower, a bee, a child, a stone, a tree, the Moon and the Sun—all are infused with a soul and deserve reverence. Nature is to be respected, not despoiled. Examples of pantheistic religions are Buddhism, some traditional African and Native American religions, and Confucianism. Influenced by the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, scientists like Albert Einstein and Carl Sagan held beliefs that were close to pantheism.

**Animism** is the idea that all things—animate and inanimate—possess a spirit or a spiritual essence. Animists revere natural objects such as tall trees, mountains and rivers.

**Humanism**, a form of atheism, posits that the organization and conduct of human affairs does not need recourse to divine entities. Human society has the capacity to formulate codes of ethics, morality and law and does not need supernatural intervention for the purpose. Resolution of human problems and progress can be achieved by rational, ethical and scientific means. It is a tolerant creed and accepts that right of any person to hold religious beliefs.

1 **Skepticism** is a tendency that questions, tests and debunks claims about  
2 supernatural events, paranormal phenomena and miracles. It casts doubts on  
3 the authenticity of religious stories and investigates the claims of people who  
4 supposedly can perform deeds that defy the laws of science. Skeptics are  
5 also called **freethinkers, naturalists** or **rationalists**.

6  
7 **Secularism** has two meanings. One, it is a political doctrine that espouses  
8 the separation of the church and state. In particular, laws, civic affairs and  
9 public education should not be governed by religion. Two, it is an umbrella  
10 term that covers atheism, agnosticism, humanism, skepticism and irreligiosity  
11 in general. In this book, it is used in the second sense.

12  
13 People who do not follow a religion or believe in God or gods may identify as  
14 **irreligious, non-religious, non-theist, non-believer, spiritual but not**  
15 **religious** and **nothing in particular**. Their attitudes toward religion are not  
16 uniform.

17  
18 **Syncretism** is adherence to more than one belief system. Some regard their  
19 separate beliefs concordant, and some adhere to a belief system other than  
20 their primary one as a matter of social custom. Large majorities of Christians  
21 and Muslims in Africa and South America today continue to practice the rites  
22 and rituals of their traditional religions.

23  
24 **Alternative Beliefs** is an umbrella term for diverse beliefs that fall beyond the  
25 purview mainstream religions. Examples include Scientology, Raelian  
26 Movement, Way of the Jedi, Voodoo, Occultism, homeopathy, Powwow,  
27 reincarnation, and astrology. It covers people who believe in spiritual powers  
28 of crystals, special charms and flowers, psychic trance, and extraterrestrial  
29 visitors. Branded as **cults**, some are led by charismatic figures. **New Age**  
30 **Beliefs**, a common synonym for Alternative Beliefs, has a specific  
31 connotation. It refers to the non-traditional beliefs that emanated from the  
32 1960s protest movements in the West.

33  
34 **Ideology:** Consciously or subconsciously, adult humans have a collection of  
35 ideas (worldview) that helps them make sense of their world. It generally  
36 comprises the primary values and perspectives on life and society that are  
37 held by most of the people around them. The dominant ideology in a society  
38 constitutes its ruling ideology. It includes the religious, cultural and political  
39 ideas prevailing in the society. The institutions, formal and informal, that  
40 generate, sustain and disseminate the societal ideology are called the  
41 **ideological apparatuses** of the society.

42 Religion was the main basis of personal and societal ideology in the past.  
43 While it still affects the formulation of values and consciousness, today the  
44 prime conveyors and formulators of personal and social ideology are the  
45 education system, main media and the various cultural and political entities.

1 **Materialism** is a term with two disparate meanings. On the one hand, it  
2 implies undue attachment to material goods and pleasures of life, or wasteful  
3 consumerism. On the other hand, it denotes a philosophical disposition that  
4 recognizes an objective, tangible external reality, and accords primacy—in  
5 history and social development—to material forces. The laws of nature, labor  
6 and production relations dominate mental forces (ideas, consciousness) in  
7 natural and human development.

8 The term 'materialism' is often misused by political conservatives and  
9 myopic preachers. They accuse people who espouse a progressive,  
10 collective vision of being materialistic and ignoring the spiritual dimension. In  
11 reality, the progressives value sharing, compassion, modest lifestyles, caring  
12 for the environment and equality while the conservatives directly or indirectly  
13 are subservient to market-based capitalism, a system based on greed,  
14 individualism and rampant consumerism.

15  
16 **Idealism**, in the philosophical context, refers to the doctrine that accords  
17 primacy to mental forces (ideas, will power, consciousness) over material  
18 forces. People driven purely by ideals or values are called idealists. At times,  
19 it is posited as the opposite of **realism**, an outlook that recognizes the limits  
20 imposed by existing conditions.

21  
22 **Spiritualism** as distinct from spiritism, recognizes the importance of non-  
23 material, spiritual dimension of life but may not accept the existence of divine  
24 entities.

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26 +++++  
27

28 **Fundamentalism**, a term often found in media reports and scholarly articles  
29 on religion, denotes an unquestioning, strict acceptance of a system of ideas.

30  
31 **Religious fundamentalism** denotes the unquestioning, strict acceptance of  
32 the ideas, scriptures, teachings of a religion. Deemed morally and factually  
33 infallible and absolute, they are seen as superior to those of other religions.  
34 Fundamentalists divide the world into two parts: the blessed, righteous and  
35 the misguided heathens or heretics. A fundamentalist is also called a zealot.

36  
37 Religious fundamentalism has three tendencies:

38  
39 **Quietism** is holding and practicing fundamentalist beliefs and focusing on  
40 personal spiritual upliftment but not engaging in activism or interfering in the  
41 affairs of other religions.

42  
43 **Reformism** is holding and practicing fundamentalist beliefs along with  
44 engaging in civil and social actions to defend and promote one's religion.  
45 Reformism operates within the existing legal and political structures. It aims  
46 to establish a state in which that religion is paramount in all aspects of life.

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**Extremism** or **Militant fundamentalism** is enhanced reformism that includes militant or violent actions not sanctioned by the law to defend and promote one's religion and establish a theocracy.

**Evangelism** is preaching and teaching the beliefs of a religion with the aim of gaining converts or sympathizers and spreading it. Missionaries and religious institutions evangelize through varied direct and indirect ways.

We avoid using the terms fanaticism and radicalism in a religious context.

# CHAPTER 03: A FIRST LOOK



*When I admire the wonders of  
a sunset or the beauty of the moon,  
my soul expands in the worship of the creator.*

MK Gandhi

*It is certain that an atom of goodness  
on the path of faith is never lost.*

Jalal al-Din Rumi

*Religion is an illusion  
and it derives its strength from the fact that  
it falls in with our instinctual desires.*

Sigmund Freud



WHAT IS RELIGION? Though religion has been an integral part of every human society, a commonly accepted answer to this question does not exist. Notwithstanding, we all know it. The word conjures up notions like God, Allah or Brahman; church, mosque or temple; Bible, Quran or Gita; and Christmas, Eid or Diwali. It is commonly seen as a system of beliefs, rules, symbols and practices involving supernatural forces or beings.

More than 4,000 religions have been recorded over the course of human history. From Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Shintoism, Judaism, Bahai, folk religions to many more, they exhibit an immensely diverse collection of beliefs, sacred visions and mythology; holy books and spiritual and philosophical literature; gods, goddesses, prophets, angels and evil beings; prayers, rites, rituals and special occasions; practical rules and prohibitions; sites of worship and pilgrimage; statutes and shrines; priests, gurus, imams, monks and holy personages; organized structures; and dress styles, literature and stories, art, music, song and dance. Religion is a central element of the cultural heritage of humanity and is deeply inscribed to the human psyche and way of life.

Most people formally identify with a religion, but one out of six persons disclaims a religious affiliation. Currently, the four main religions, Christianity,



1 Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, account for 76% of the global population;  
2 16% are non-religious and 8% follow other faiths. These proportions ignore  
3 syncretism, namely the tendency of people to follow more than one religion  
4 at the same time.  
5

**Table 3.1 Global Population by Religion (2020)**

Religion	Followers	Percentage
Christianity	2.4 billion	31%
Islam	1.9 billion	25%
Irreligious	1.2 billion	16%
Hinduism	1.1 billion	15%
Buddhism	0.5 billion	6%
Folk Religion	0.4 billion	5%
Other	0.1 billion	2%
Total	7.6 billion	100%

Source: Wikipedia (2021 – List of Religious Populations).

6  
7 Religion is not a static entity. New religions have emerged over time, existing  
8 ones have evolved, and numerous religions have become extinct. Some  
9 religions expand while other decline. The ubiquity and diversity of religion  
10 evoke intriguing historical, sociological and psychological questions:

- 11  
12 1. Why, how and where did religion emerge?  
13 2. What are roles of religion in personal life and society?  
14 3. What factors account for the diversity of religions?  
15 4. Is religion an indispensable part of human existence?  
16

17 This chapter sets the stage for a general analysis of religion, politics and  
18 society with a survey of five religions—Ahmadiyya, Confucianism, Sikhism,  
19 Seventh Day Adventism and Traditional African Religion. An overview of their  
20 history, beliefs, practices and societal aspects illustrates religious diversity  
21 and enables us to begin formulating a general perspective on the role of  
22 religion in personal lives, history and societal matters.  
23

### 24 **3.1 AHMADIYYA**

25  
26 *A religion which does not inculcate*  
27 *universal compassion is no religion at all.*

28 Mirza Ghulam Ahmad  
29

30 Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat (AMJ), or Ahmadiyya in short, is an Islamic sect  
31 founded in India in 1889 by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. Presently, it has between

1 10 and 20 million disciples spread out in some 200 nations and territories.  
2 Almost 4 million Ahmadis reside in Pakistan. Like the other Islamic sects, it  
3 affirms the unity of Allah and holds that Muhammad was the prophet to whom  
4 Allah revealed the Quran, the Islamic holy book. The Ahmadis abide by the  
5 key Islamic tenets and rituals like praying five times a day while facing Mecca,  
6 fasting during Ramadhan, charity and pilgrimage to Mecca. And they believe  
7 in angels who act as intermediaries between God and humans. In line with  
8 the Islamic doctrine, they ascribe a divine status to Judaic and Christian  
9 scriptures. But they hold that Jesus Christ did not die at the cross. Rather, he  
10 survived, and migrated to Kashmir, India where he died and was buried.

11 While its website projects AMJ as a socially liberal movement, in actuality  
12 Ahmadis adhere to conservative Islamic practices on issues of dress, role of  
13 women and parental authority. The status of women in AMJ hardly differs  
14 from that in most Islamic sects. Many Ahmadi women, especially in the West,  
15 are highly educated professionals. Yet, they live under a patriarchal ethos in  
16 the community, lack decision making authority or leadership roles, and have  
17 subservient roles in family affairs.

18 Despite ascribing to a literal reading of the Quran, the Ahmadis place a  
19 high value on secular education. Some have become eminent scientists,  
20 doctors and scholars. Included among them were the first Asian President of  
21 the International Court of Justice at the Hague, Sir Zafarullah Khan, and  
22 physicist Abdus Salam, the first Nobel laureate from Pakistan. The Ahmadis  
23 have occupied senior offices in political, civil, business, educational and  
24 media institutions across the world.

25 Viewing religion and science as complimentary manifestations of God,  
26 Ahmadi theologians do not dispute the Darwinian theory of evolution but say  
27 that evolution is guided by God. Ahmadi scholars have translated the Quran  
28 into over 70 languages. A Swahili translation for East Africa, for example,  
29 appeared in 1936, just two years after the first Ahmadis landed in the area.

30 Mirza Ahmed was a distinguished scholar and prolific writer, well versed  
31 in Islamic history and theology as well as in Judaic, Hindu and Christian  
32 scriptures. Convinced that he was ordained by Allah to rescue Muslims from  
33 prevalent social and spiritual decay, he set forth preaching the insights he  
34 gained from his divine visions. He debated Christian and Hindu theologians  
35 in defense of the Islamic faith. Even those who differed with him admired his  
36 integrity and spiritual devotion. His mission, he said, was to propagate true  
37 Islam, revive Islamic values like compassion, peace and forgiveness, and  
38 save humanity from sinful indulgence in worldly vices. He urged the Ahmadis  
39 to pursue a non-violent *Jihad*, spread Islam and pursue both spiritual and  
40 humanistic goals:

41  
42 *There are only two complete parts of faith. One is to love God*  
43 *and the other is to love mankind to such a degree that you*  
44 *consider the suffering and the trials and tribulations of others*  
45 *as your own and that you pray for them.*

46 Mirza Ghulam Ahmad

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While the Ahmadis see themselves as Muslims in every respect, they differ from mainstream Islam in relation to the spiritual status of their founder. Muslims generally hold that Muhammad was the last prophet. The Ahmadis, on the other hand, are divided into two branches: those who regard Mirza Ahmad as the last prophet (messiah guided by Allah) and those who see him as a divinely blessed reformer. The latter, however, are a small minority.

Since the death of the founder, the global AMJ has been led by a series of Caliphs and a Consultative Council. The Caliph, elected by majority vote in the Consultative Council, holds the office for life. With its headquarters at the Fazal Mosque in London, it is now a well-endowed, centrally organized movement that operates over 15,000 mosques, many of high architectural distinction, across the globe.

During the struggle for independence in India, the AMJ leadership stood for a separate state for Muslims and was criticized by the rest of the nationalist movement for being too close to the British. In Indonesia, on the other hand, the Ahmadis fought together with the other nationalist parties to eject the Dutch from their homeland. In African nations like Tanzania and Malawi, local Ahmadis were involved in the anti-colonial struggles. When Tanganyika united with Zanzibar in 1964, a competition to name the new nation was held. Sixteen of the over 1,500 entrants proposed 'Tanzania'; one being an Ahmadi high school student, Mohammed Iqbal Dar, whose doctor-father had moved from India to East Africa in the 1930s.

The AMJ flag contains the full moon on the left, the minaret of a mosque near the middle, and the crescent and star on the right. The images are in white, the background is black. The flag and the white minaret are common symbols used to represent the Ahmadiyya community.



The White Minaret Symbol

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The official motto of the AMJ is: '*Love for All, Hatred for None*'. Its public face is marked by two features: ongoing persecution and social engagement. The

1 Ahmadi belief that Mirza Gulam Ahmad was a prophet has been rejected by  
2 other Muslims, especially the orthodox Sunnis. Labelled as heretics, they  
3 have suffered official and social persecution in many Islamic nations since the  
4 early times. In Pakistan, their faith is banned, their civil rights are restricted,  
5 and hundreds have died at the hands of Muslim extremists. Yet, the first Chief  
6 of the Airforce, several high-ranking officers in the military and distinguished  
7 civil servants in Pakistan have been Ahmadis. In Indonesia, anti-Ahmadi  
8 violence and discrimination erupt now and then. But the lyrics and melody of  
9 the Indonesian national anthem were composed by Wage R Supratman, an  
10 Ahmadi who is regarded as a national hero. Saudi Arabia does not allow  
11 Ahmadis to join the annual Hajj. But some go incognito. They encounter  
12 hostility from fellow Muslims in the UK. An Ahmadi shopkeeper in Glasgow  
13 was murdered by a devout Sunni Muslim for allegedly insulting Prophet  
14 Muhammad. In East and West Africa, where AMJ has been established for  
15 nearly a century, they have rarely encountered violent attacks though anti-  
16 Ahmadi incidents occur occasionally. The new Citizenship Amendment Act  
17 passed in India in 2019 that grants citizenship to refugees from neighboring  
18 nations who belong to persecuted minorities has left out the Ahmadiyya.

19 The Ahmadis do not advocate retaliation but call for non-violence and  
20 tolerance. Since they vociferously condemn attacks by extremist Muslims in  
21 European cities, they earn accolades from Western politicians. Equivalent  
22 condemnation of terrorist bombings by Western militaries in Iraq, Somalia,  
23 and Afghanistan, however, is not heard from the Ahmadi dignitaries.

24 The Ahmadi community participates in many socially beneficial projects.  
25 They cover disaster relief and long-term development projects. It cooperates  
26 with other relief organizations to provide medical care, food and clothing in  
27 the aftermath of major natural or man-made disasters in many places.  
28 Humanity First, an Ahmadi NGO, utilizes volunteer, unpaid professionals to  
29 provide skills training and eye care in East and West Africa. It supports clean  
30 water projects and orphanages. In 2017, it spent about \$5 million in such  
31 projects. The AMJ operates over 30 health centers. Those in Africa charge  
32 minimal fees. It also runs 500 schools. The Ahmadiyya University, whose  
33 main objective is to produce competent missionaries, has campuses in many  
34 nations. It offers four- and seven-year degree courses which cover subjects  
35 like Arabic, Urdu, other languages, Islamic law, religious studies, Islamic  
36 scriptures, history and logic.

37 AMJ communities are generally close knit and well organized. In many  
38 places, they are racially and ethnically inclusive. The Shia Muslim groups in  
39 East Africa originating from the Indian subcontinent—Ithnasheri, Bohra and  
40 Ismaili—are racially exclusive, with very few African adherents. But having  
41 stressed local conversion, the Ahmadis, in contrast, are a mixed community  
42 of Asians and Africans, with the latter in the majority. Yet, a class-race divide  
43 persists in the Ahmadi community: many Asian Ahmadis are a part of the  
44 business elite while the African Ahmadis mostly hail from the working, not-so-  
45 well-to-do groups. The former also dominate the leadership positions.

1 The AMJ is a vibrant, growing, well organized faith that has acquired a  
2 broader legitimacy through its philanthropic activities and accommodation  
3 with Western capitalist social and political structures. As for other religions,  
4 its charitable acts are palliative remedies for the inequities generated by neo-  
5 liberalism. They are not meant to question the foundation of that system.

### 6 7 **3.2 CONFUCIANISM**

8  
9 *To practice five things under all circumstances constitutes*  
10 *perfect virtue; these five are gravity, generosity of soul,*  
11 *sincerity, earnestness, and kindness.*

12 Confucius

13  
14 Confucianism originated in China five centuries before the birth of Jesus  
15 Christ. It takes its name from Confucius, the main codifier and exponent of  
16 the doctrine. Fewer than 10 million people formally adhere to Confucianism  
17 at present. Yet tens of millions of Buddhists, Taoists, Christians and others in  
18 East Asia accept the principles of Confucianism in some way and attend  
19 Confucian ceremonies.

20 The philosophy and practicalities of Confucianism are embodied in nine  
21 major works—the *Five Classics* and the *Four Books*. Among these, *The*  
22 *Analects of Confucius (Lun Yu)* and *The Classic of Changes (I Ching)* have  
23 an esteemed position.

24 While a few large, architecturally magnificent Confucian temples exist  
25 across Asia, most Confucian rites occur in Buddhist and Taoist temples. Held  
26 on special occasions, attendance tends to be high. But these rites are more  
27 akin to cultural events that give a sense of ethnic pride and provide emotional  
28 solace to the attendees and are not prayer sessions in the usual sense of the  
29 term.



31  
32 *Shui*

33  
34 Confucianism has varied symbols reflective of its tenets. Some of them are  
35 shared with other Asian religions. *Shui*, the Chinese character for water, an  
36 element essential for sustaining life, frequently appears in Confucian art and  
37 works.

38 Is Confucianism a religion? A few scholars say it is; most say it is not. The  
39 Confucian canon is a vast collection of astute vignettes, observations and

1 teachings concerning life, family, education, work, culture, nature, politics and  
2 psychology. They are not centered on God or gods, a divine creator or mode  
3 of worship. Yet, Confucianism has a divine dimension. Like Taoism, it asserts  
4 that a heavenly realm (*Tian*) supersedes the earthly domain. Heaven is the  
5 supreme source of virtue and morality that overrides worldly authority. Human  
6 society will recede into disarray if people abandon the mandates of Heaven.

7  
8 *Heaven means to be one with God.*

9 Confucius

10  
11 Religion, as we saw for Ahmadiyya, stands on three pillars: Spiritual (beliefs),  
12 devotional (personal practice) and societal affairs (social function).  
13 Confucianism straddles the nebulous territory between a religion rooted in the  
14 worship of the divine and a guide for ethical conduct and social organization.  
15 We characterize it as a religion, albeit one that accords a heavy emphasis to  
16 the societal, secular pillar. When Confucians visit the temple, they also pray  
17 for their departed loved ones and seek aid from Heaven for problems like ill  
18 health and financial insecurity. An example of witty Confucian wisdom is:

19  
20 *He who will not economize will have to agonize.*

21 Confucius

22  
23 Confucians respect their founder as an exemplary teacher, a saintly sage, but  
24 not a godly being or a prophet. They do not have a central organization or a  
25 priestly hierarchy. In common with many religions, the moral principles of  
26 Confucianism include compassion, personal integrity, respectful and  
27 harmonious conduct, and fair and just treatment of people. It cultivates  
28 virtuosity, diligence and fidelity to family and society. Learning is highly  
29 valued. On the broader arena, it advocates a societal organization and mode  
30 of governance based on wisdom and trust and decries the use of coercion  
31 and penalties.

32 Confucianism emerged at a time when corruption and profligacy of the  
33 ruling circles had produced significant economic malaise, social unrest and  
34 warfare. At the outset, it was opposed by the nobility for rendering a dour  
35 verdict on their neglect of the welfare of their subjects and wanton material  
36 indulgence. They had lost the mandate of Heaven and thus earthly legitimacy  
37 as well.

38 Over time, Confucianism shed its revolutionary footing and became the  
39 state religion in China. The emperors employed its teachings to rationalize  
40 their rule. In terms of its social function, Confucianism has a transformative  
41 and a conservative angle. On the one hand, it takes an optimistic stand on  
42 the ability of people to improve their lives through individual and collective  
43 endeavor. On the other hand, its tenets provide support for extant social  
44 hierarchies and institutions and call upon people to conduct themselves in  
45 ways that are in conformity with their standing in society and the *status quo*.

1 Confucianism accords a lower status to women and restricts their role to  
2 domestic affairs. A married woman must respect her husband and faithfully  
3 serve the family. Women are depicted as inferior to men in intellectual and  
4 emotional terms.

### 5 6 **3.3 SIKHISM**

7  
8 *One cannot comprehend Him through reason,*  
9 *even if one reasoned for ages.*

10 Guru Nanak

11  
12 Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak in Punjab, northern India, during the  
13 15th century. It currently has between 20 and 30 million adherents. While the  
14 majority resides in India, Sikhs are spread across the world. The Golden  
15 Temple in Amritsar, Punjab, is the most exalted Sikh shrine.

16 Guru Nanak felt that Hindus and Muslims had inordinately digressed into  
17 rituals and material indulgence at the cost of spiritual devotion. Distressed at  
18 the extant tension between the faiths, he decried the neglect of compassion.  
19 According to Sikh beliefs, a revelation from God instructed him to implore  
20 people to return to God and the true faith. He travelled widely within and  
21 beyond India to preach, set up houses of worship and actualize his divine  
22 mandate. Finally, he settled in Punjab, and spent his life elucidating the  
23 precepts of a new religion, setting up its structure, formulating its rites, and  
24 establishing temples. After his death, the faith he founded was led by nine  
25 successive Gurus, each chosen by his predecessor. The ninth Guru decreed  
26 that after him Sikhs should resort to the main canon—*Guru Granth Sahib*—  
27 as the ultimate authority on religious and secular matters.

28 The key precept of Sikhism is recognition of the One Supreme Being, the  
29 perfect, ever-living, indescribable creator (*Waheguru*) who is depicted by the  
30 *Ik Onkar* character. The goal of life is to spiritually unite with the Supreme  
31 Being. And that requires adherence to the tenets of pious living embodied in  
32 the teachings of the Gurus and enshrined in *Guru Granth Sahib*. They stress  
33 curbing the ego and worldly desires (*maya*)—lust, greed, possessiveness—  
34 and pursuing an active, simple, ethical, honest, compassionate life.



36  
37 *Ik Onkar, One Supreme Being*  
38

1 The *Khanda* is the principal symbol of Sikhism. It integrates the oneness,  
2 eternal nature of the Supreme Being with expression of loyalty toward Him by  
3 following His rules for ethical conduct in worldly affairs.  
4



5  
6 *Khanda*, Symbol of Sikhism

7  
8 Sikhism places a central emphasis on human unity, equality and social  
9 justice. Guru Nanak was particularly critical of the caste system in India.

10  
11 *He who regards all men as equals is religious.*  
12 Guru Nanak

13  
14 Fidelity to the Supreme Being is expressed through meditation and prayer.  
15 Recitation of spiritual poems and hymns are integral to Sikh worship. The  
16 poetic style of *Guru Granth Sahib* lends itself well to song and sacred music  
17 that often accompany its recitation. Holding that no religion has the monopoly  
18 over truth, Sikhism enjoins its followers to respect and ponder over the holy  
19 texts of other religions. The different names for God found in various religions  
20 are said to be different names of one and the same Supreme Being.

21  
22 *Sikhism stresses the importance of doing good actions rather*  
23 *than merely carrying out rituals. Sikhs believe that the way to*  
24 *lead a good life is to: keep God in heart and mind at all times;*  
25 *live honestly and work hard; treat everyone equally; be*  
26 *generous to the less fortunate; serve others. (BBC 2009).*

27  
28 Sikhs abide by a number of practical rules. These include refraining from  
29 smoking, intoxication and cutting one's hair. Men wear turbans while women  
30 adorn turbans or scarves. Early rising and prayers before breakfast and at  
31 night are customary. The Sikh temple, *Gurdwara*, is open to everyone. Free  
32 meals are served daily and during the festivals. Sikhism does not have an  
33 ordained clergy, though there are respected men who look after the temples.  
34 Like Hinduism, it ascribes to rebirth. The dead are cremated, and their ashes  
35 are thrown into a flowing body of water.

36 Generally, the Sikhs in India coexisted amicably with Hindus and Muslims.  
37 But on occasion, they faced intense persecution. During the intolerant final



1 days of Mughal rule, two Sikh Gurus were executed for refusing to convert to  
2 Islam.

3 Ongoing persecution from many quarters prompted the last Guru to set  
4 up a wing of holy warriors, the *Khalsa*. He decreed that in addition to leading  
5 a spiritual, virtuous, simple life of service, a Sikh should prepare like a soldier  
6 to fight against injustice and defend the community. A Sikh kingdom was  
7 established in Punjab in 1799 but was violently subdued by the British. In the  
8 aftermath, the *Khalsa* acquired a new dimension. Recognizing their fighting  
9 spirit, the British recruited thousands of Sikhs into special regiments of the  
10 colonial army. Deployed in India and across the world in the two world wars,  
11 many Sikhs perished in the service of the British Empire.

12 Punjab was a key center of agitation against the colonial era political and  
13 economic impositions. Many Sikhs actively fought for independence. Some  
14 formed Sikh parties; many joined the Congress Party. Prominent Sikhs  
15 cooperated with the leaders of the freedom movement, MK Gandhi and J  
16 Nehru. Militant socialists like Bhagat Singh and his compatriots, who were  
17 executed by the British, are respected martyrs for free India. In this struggle,  
18 Sikhs, like other Indians, suffered from colonial batons and bullets.

19 The constitution of India protects freedom of religion. Today Sikhs form  
20 2% of the population of India. Since Independence, Sikhs have held major  
21 positions in government, business, academia, media, entertainment industry  
22 as well as the medical, scientific and technical fields. Markedly, they account  
23 for about a fifth of the Indian armed forces, at both the senior and junior ranks.

24 India has a gruesome history of religious strife. During the partition of  
25 India in 1947, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs engaged in inhumane orgies of  
26 violent attacks. Up to two million Indians perished. Fifteen million were made  
27 homeless. Thousands of women were raped. Much property was vandalized  
28 on all the sides.

29 From the 1970s, Punjab was the center for the implementation of the US-  
30 backed Green Revolution in India. High-yield seeds, chemical fertilizers and  
31 pesticides raised agricultural productivity and reduced the prices of staple  
32 grains. In the long run, the benefits were offset by numerous adverse effects.  
33 Vandana Shiva, a distinguished scientist and ecologist sums up:

34  
35 *The Green Revolution has been a failure. It has led to reduced*  
36 *genetic diversity, increased vulnerability to pests, soil erosion,*  
37 *water shortages, reduced soil fertility, micronutrient*  
38 *deficiencies, soil contamination, reduced availability of*  
39 *nutritious food crops for the local population, the displacement*  
40 *of vast numbers of small farmers from their land, rural*  
41 *impoverishment and increased tensions and conflicts. The*  
42 *beneficiaries have been the agrochemical industry, large*  
43 *petrochemical companies, manufacturers of agricultural*  
44 *machinery, dam builders and large landowners. (Shiva 2015).*  
45

1 The Green Revolution sharply increased indebtedness among the Punjabi  
2 peasants. Losing their land, many were impoverished. Tensions between  
3 Punjab and adjacent states in relation to water quality and supply arose. The  
4 feeling of being used and abused for the benefit of the rest of India affected  
5 the Punjabi psyche.

6 In this atmosphere, a militant but small Sikh party that had worked for an  
7 autonomous state in Punjab gained popularity. The situation turned volatile  
8 as it engaged in skirmishes with the Indian state. The climax ensued after the  
9 holiest Sikh shrine, where Sikh militants had taken refuge, was invaded by  
10 Indian troops. Sikh anger rose by degrees. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was  
11 assassinated in 1984 by her Sikh bodyguards. Spurred on by influential  
12 politicians, angry mobs then attacked Sikhs across the land in the aftermath.  
13 Thousands died. It only fed a cycle of violence. In 1985, an Air India plane  
14 flying from Canada was blown up by two Sikh militants while crossing the  
15 Atlantic Ocean. All 329 people on board were killed. A subsequent Canadian  
16 investigation revealed that the Canadian security agencies and probably the  
17 US CIA were culpable in the attack. Because of the close relationship  
18 between the USSR and India under Indira Gandhi, the US was keen to  
19 destabilize her government.

20 Sikhism was born at a time when women suffered from discrimination and  
21 ill treatment among the Hindus and Muslims in India. Guru Nanak posited that  
22 men and women were spiritually equal. He endorsed monogamy, criticized  
23 dowry payment and condemned infanticide and the practice of the wife being  
24 burned at the pyre alongside her dead husband. It was a major step towards  
25 gender equality.

26 Sikh women participate in temple activities in an almost equal measure to  
27 men, are active in community functions, and are well educated. But especially  
28 in India, Sikhism remains under the ambit of the dominant patriarchal society.  
29 Men hold the main leadership posts and prevail in decision making. Women  
30 are responsible for domestic work.

### 31 32 **3.4 SEVENTH DAY ADVENTISM**

33  
34 *The great moral powers of the soul*  
35 *are faith, hope, and love.*

36 Ellen G White

37  
38 The Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Church, an offshoot of Protestantism, was  
39 officially proclaimed in the USA in 1863 under the initiative of four eminent  
40 persons. With Ellen G White the most venerated founder, it has between 20  
41 and 25 million adherents today. More than 80% of them reside in Africa and  
42 Latin America. The SDA operates more than 8,000 churches and runs many  
43 schools, health facilities and varied social welfare projects across the world.

44 The doctrine of the SDA largely concurs with Protestant Christian tenets.  
45 It views the Bible as the word of God and accepts the Ten Commandments  
46 and the tripartite nature of the divinity. The Adventists, though, ascribe to a

1 set of 28 core beliefs that are in part at variance with mainstream Christian  
2 views. For example, they accord prophetic authority to Ellen White. Her words  
3 of wisdom provide valuable insight into the Bible. Salvation is attained purely  
4 by faith in Christ. Heaven and hell do not exist. Either resurrection or eternal  
5 demise, as commanded by God, ensues after death. And the second coming  
6 of Christ is imminent.

7 The Adventist Church adopts a literalist interpretation of the Bible. If the  
8 Bible says the world was created in six days, then it was created in precisely  
9 six days. No reinterpretation of the 'day' is accepted. It opposes abortion and  
10 only recognizes monogamous heterosexual unions. Personal activities such  
11 as buying life insurance and investing Church funds in the stock market are  
12 justified by Biblically formulated explanations.

13 A human being is a unitary entity, composed of body, mind and spirit. The  
14 human body is a temple of God that has to be cared for by living a simple life.  
15 Thus, tobacco and illegal drugs are prohibited. Alcohol, caffeinated drinks and  
16 'unclean' foods like pork are deplored. Good health needs a nourishing diet.  
17 Vegetarianism is promoted.

18 The Adventist folk observe the Sabbath from Friday sunset to Saturday  
19 sunset. Abstaining from work, business and non-religious recreation in that  
20 period, they are enjoined to engage in family activities, charity work, church  
21 youth programs, Bible study, prayer services and interaction with the natural  
22 environment.

23 The official logo of Seventh-day Adventism has four principal features. The  
24 shape of the flame represents the mission to spread Christianity world-wide;  
25 an open Bible stresses unwavering acceptance of the word of God; rising  
26 lines underline the second coming of the Christ; and the cross denotes the  
27 gospel of salvation. Reproduction of the copyrighted SDA church logo for a  
28 purpose not connected with Adventist activities is not permitted.

29 The extent and range of integration of secular and religious activities is  
30 almost unique to Adventism. Besides building churches, organizing religious  
31 programs and regular faith activities, it operates a large-scale secular wing at  
32 a global level. From the early days, the SDA has championed freedom of  
33 religion, provided education and health services, organized youth groups and  
34 engaged in humanitarian endeavors under its own umbrella body. Now it runs  
35 one of the largest international educational systems in the world with some  
36 6,000 primary schools, 2,400 secondary schools and 115 tertiary institutions.  
37 For example, it runs the University of Arusha in Tanzania. The SDA church  
38 also operates nearly 200 hospitals and over a hundred nursing homes, some  
39 of which are state of the art, major facilities. The renowned Loma Linda  
40 Medical School and Hospital in California is the premier SDA medical  
41 institution. The hospitals are for the most part self-financing and some are  
42 profitmaking institutions. The Adventist church also owns several publishing  
43 companies.

44 The integration of secular and spiritual activities extends to commerce and  
45 business. The principal luminary of Adventism was clear on this issue:  
46

1                    *Religion and business are not two separate things:*  
2    *they are one.*

3    Ellen G White

4  
5 Taking this dictum to heart, some enterprising Adventists developed a global  
6 empire specializing in the manufacture and sale of vegetarian foods and  
7 breakfast cereals:

8  
9                    *The Seventh-day Adventist Church is surely the world's only*  
10                    *church that owns and operates a worldwide chain of food*  
11                    *factories--and, moreover, factories that make natural, healthy*  
12                    *vegetarian foods.* (Shurtleff and Aoyagi 2014).

13  
14 Food and drinks producing companies owned by or affiliated with the SDA  
15 include Earth's Own Food Company, McKee Foods, Sanitarium Health and  
16 Wellbeing Company and Sahmyook Foods. These conglomerates have a  
17 global footprint, dominating the cereal market in nations like New Zealand and  
18 Australia. Worldwide, more than 7,000 companies are said to be linked with  
19 Adventism.

20                    The Kellogg's company, one of the leading producers of breakfast cereals  
21 in the world, was founded by two Adventists, Dr John Kellogg and his brother,  
22 William Kellogg. Mentored personally by Ellen White, the former utilized his  
23 medical skills to exercise a decisive influence on the evolution of preventive  
24 health practices in the United States and beyond. He was a prime proponent  
25 of making breakfast cereals an essential part of a healthy diet. His brother  
26 used his managerial acumen to make it a reality and, in the process, build up  
27 an international economic empire.

28                    Interestingly, Dr Kellogg was a staunch eugenicist who spent the last  
29 three decades of his life to the idea of wiping out the 'inferior' human stock.  
30 He co-founded the Race Betterment Foundation that organized conferences  
31 dealing with maintaining the separation of races and forcibly sterilizing the  
32 'mentally defectives'. He also assisted state health bodies to enact eugenics  
33 laws (see *Religion, Science and the Pandemic*, Chapter 3).

34                    The global cereal and food companies have a tall agenda. Primarily they  
35 aim to divert people away from traditional home-cooked food to processed  
36 industrial foods. In that relentless drive, they employ a battalion of lobbyists  
37 to influence politicians, government ministers, regulators, health experts and  
38 journalists. Directly and under the aegis of charitable foundations claiming to  
39 promote children's health and education, they conduct multi-million-dollar  
40 marketing campaigns in the media with cartoons, Disney characters, enticing  
41 music and popular toys.

42                    Their health claims are oblivious of the fact that industrial processing and  
43 packaging removes or denatures basic micro-nutrients. Fortification is a poor  
44 substitute. Analyses of their products by independent experts have found that  
45 most violate important health standards. Many have excessive amounts of  
46 sugar and salt as well as saturated fat. Yet they aggressively market their

1 products to children. Investigations by regulatory agencies in the UK, for  
2 example, have repeatedly found major flaws in their ads and banned them.

3 Yet, the food behemoths march on. Their dream of a global presence is  
4 fast coming true. Not just the supermarkets in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania but  
5 its street vendors too, sell foreign branded cereal boxes. There is less scrutiny  
6 over quality and content in Africa. The least nutritional varieties predominate.  
7 At times, date-expired or fake items are repackaged to indicate otherwise.  
8 There is no guarantee that they are fortified with vitamins and minerals as  
9 stated on the label. Yet, boxed cereal is a status symbol, a mark of  
10 modernization. Traditional dishes made from whole grains, cassava, sweet  
11 potatoes are being replaced by heavily sugared, salted and fried foods onto  
12 which the cereals form the latest entry. They are a part of the process that  
13 has made Africa, despite its huge agricultural potential, to become heavily  
14 dependent on imported food; a process that has entrenched malnutrition, and,  
15 of recent, fueled obesity and related health ailments.

16  
17 *[Processed] cereals represent a triumph of marketing,*  
18 *packaging and US economic and foreign policy. (Lawrence*  
19 *2008).*

20  
21 In theory, the Adventist philosophy promotes injection of humanitarian values  
22 in business and openness in marketing. In practice, it could not be otherwise.  
23 Interpreting risk taking in theological terms and fostering entrepreneurship  
24 has not made the Adventist associated firms function in ways other than like  
25 typical multinational corporations. The business side of Adventism is an  
26 integral part of the global capitalist system where the aims of maximal profit  
27 and accumulation outstrip any other objective. The beneficiaries of the SDA  
28 business activities mostly come from the smaller but affluent segment of the  
29 Adventists who reside in the US and Europe.

30 Adventists are asked to pay 10% of their annual incomes as tithe to the  
31 Church. But the actual level of payment among the young followers is low. In  
32 Africa, only a few affluent members can afford the tithe. Yet, in recent years  
33 the Church has been raising over two billion dollars from tithe each year. The  
34 North American branch accounts for some 40% of the amount. The centrally  
35 held funds are used for pastoral salaries, maintenance of church facilities,  
36 proselytization work and partial support for primary schooling. A substantial  
37 amount is invested in stocks and bonds. In 2019, the Adventist investment  
38 portfolio was valued at over 500 million US dollars.

39 Adventist women, especially in the West, generally play an active role in  
40 church and public activities. Since 1985, women are allowed to attend the  
41 Adventist seminary and perform some pastoral duties. However, they are not  
42 ordained as pastors, and cannot undertake the full range of pastoral duties  
43 such as presiding over baptism and marriage ceremonies. The patriarchal  
44 ethos is more entrenched in the African and Latin American SDA branches.

### 45 46 **3.5 TRADITIONAL AFRICAN RELIGIONS**

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21

*Character is religion.*  
Yoruba Proverb

Before the onset of trans-Atlantic slave trade and the imposition of colonial rule, Africa was home to numerous small, and a few large, social formations. With elaborate organizational and social structures, some had technical capacities akin to contemporary Europe (Rodney 1972). There was conflict but also peaceful intercourse, and extensive interregional trade in Africa.

African societies had a substantial cultural apparatus comprising of music, dance, ceremonies, folklore, wall paintings, ritual items, housing styles and carpets, pottery, clothing, masks, sculptures, amulets, bead necklaces and earrings. Integral to the culture was a belief system that explained the origin of life and humanity as well as the causation of natural events. It linked the living with the ancestors, posited the existence of a divine entity or entities that oversee all existence, and decreed a moral code for humans. Natural objects like the sky, mountains, rivers and large trees had a mystical status. Affirming the rhythmic character of natural phenomena, weighty events like rain, draught, floods, thunder, lightning and pestilence were ascribed to the operation of divine forces.



Hippopotamus Carving for Divining

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Art objects like sculptures had a spiritual significance in traditional African societies. For example, the wooden hippopotamus carving above was used in the divining rituals performed in the Itoon community in the 19th century.

The moral code of African folk religions derived from Ubuntu, a philosophy based on interdependence and compassion among humans.

*Ubuntu is the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community with justice and mutual caring. (Nussbaum 2003).*

1 John Mbiti, the eminent scholar of African religions, encapsulated the Ubuntu  
2 spiritual philosophy thus:

3  
4 *I am because we are,*  
5 *and since we are,*  
6 *therefore I am.*  
7 Ubuntu Principle  
8

9 In addition to affirming the centrality of compassion, communal responsibility,  
10 and mutual aid, the key pillars of most traditional African religions were  
11 affirmation of a Supreme Being, stories of creation and human origin, linkage  
12 with the ancestors and the view of life as a changing, not static entity. And  
13 these beliefs were cemented in oral traditions, cultural rites, taboos, prayers  
14 and physical objects, not sacred texts. African religions had special rituals for  
15 pregnancy, birth, attainment of adulthood, marriage, illness, medicine and  
16 funerals. They conducted blessing ceremonies for important village activities  
17 like farming, animal husbandry and production of tools, utensils, cloth and  
18 building material.

19 As for the ancient societies everywhere, the African of the yesteryear was  
20 immersed in the spiritual realm from dawn to dawn.

21  
22 *The African worldview is life-affirming; a philosophy of vitalism*  
23 *or dynamism lies behind many attitudes and actions.*  
24 (Parrinder 1969, page 233).  
25

26 That said, traditional African belief systems form a diverse terrain that covers  
27 the Akan and Yoruba religions of West Africa, Xhosa and Zulu belief systems  
28 of South Africa, Kikuyu and Maasai traditions of East Africa, and the Dinka  
29 and Hausa religions of central and northern Africa. Islam spread over Africa  
30 from the early days of its inception. Christianity laid roots in Ethiopia from the  
31 days of the Apostles and, in 330 CE, became the official religion.

32 Yet, due to Western imperial intrusions, the traditional religions are no  
33 longer the primary religions in Africa. Christian missionaries rallied against  
34 traditional culture and beliefs during the colonial era, denouncing them as  
35 idolatry and witchcraft. Their efforts were largely successful. Over 90%  
36 Africans now are either Christian or Muslim. Exclusive adherents of ancestral  
37 religions are a minority. Traditional beliefs persist across Africa, but in a  
38 syncretic form. Most Christians and many Muslims hold on to the rituals and  
39 customs of their indigenous religions and resort to them in daily discourse. To  
40 state one case:

41  
42 [The] *Songhay [of Niger], who have been Muslims for 500*  
43 *years, observe the minimal daily prayers and go to the mosque*  
44 *on Fridays, but on Sundays, they have popular drumming and*  
45 *dances where people are possessed by the river spirit called*  
46 *Zin or Jinn.* (Parrinder 1969, page 57).

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Below is an overview of two African belief systems.

**Akan Religion (West Africa):** The Akan people of Ghana, Ivory Coast and Togo adhere to the Akan religion whose central doctrine is that the world is governed by an all-knowing, all-powerful divine entity. A common name is *Nyame*. An infinite being, he provided the energy that created the universe. He is also able to control every occurrence in the universe. *Nyame* has laid down a code of conduct, of actions that are good or bad, which people have to follow.

*Nyame* does not directly communicate with humans but has angles called *abosoms* who act on his behalf. They are in touch with priests who perform prayers and ceremonies like libations and invoke the spirit of the ancestors. *Nyame*'s power varies according to the context and is depicted in songs and chants. One lyrical chant goes:

*Nyame exists  
Nyame exists  
Nyame is everywhere  
If you sin,  
He will see, He will hear, He will write  
If you sin,  
He will not bless you.*  
Akan song (Anderson 2013).

*Nyame* and his powers are represented by the *Adinkra* symbol:



*Adinkra* Symbol

27  
28  
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37

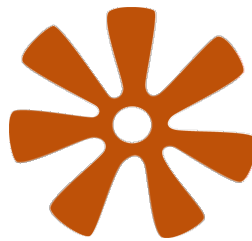
Akan beliefs crossed the Atlantic Ocean during the slave trade and fostered associated religious systems and cultural practices in Jamaica, Surinam and Haiti, among other places. These beliefs found their way into North America as well.

The Akan religion has a large array of esoteric symbols that not only depict the varied forms of the supreme deity and things like immortality, war, peace, wealth and diplomacy, but also promote values like purity, love, goodwill, mercy, consent, remembrance, adaptation and harmony. The most known



1 symbol of the Akan religion is *Anansi*, a spider-shaped wise, creative deity  
2 with a penchant for playing tricks upon unsuspecting beings.

3 Also called *Kwaku Ananse*, it is the central character of the traditional  
4 folktales of the Ghanaian people that depict the intricacies and mysteries of  
5 life. Once of a purely oral form, the large corpus of *Anansi* fables has spread  
6 beyond West Africa, spawned other tales and became a part of the cultural  
7 traditions of the West Indian, African American and other peoples. *Anansi*  
8 also came to depict a valiant, inspirational character in the struggle against  
9 slavery and oppression, and an upholder of the dignity and ancient roots of  
10 the enslaved peoples. His stories are now in many literary works, children's  
11 tales and songs, rock and spiritual music, comics, TV programs, movies and  
12 video games. But much of this extension has occurred outside of Africa and  
13 has become over commercialized.



15  
16 *Anansi* the Spider Symbol  
17

18 Numbering about 20 million, the modern *Akans* of West Africa retain their  
19 historical traditions but to a degree. Ancient taboos and norms are observed,  
20 rituals are performed, family names are retained, aspects of the matrilineal  
21 tradition persist, and family lives are organized around small groups under a  
22 council of elders. Yet, this strong tradition of cultural resistance wilted under  
23 the economic and social forces that came into play during colonial rule. Rapid  
24 urbanization and the ethic of neoliberal capitalism of the recent times further  
25 severed traditional ties and culture. Most of the *Akans* today are Christians  
26 who observe the religion of their ancestors as an adjunct creed.

27  
28 **Bantu Religions (East, Central and Southern Africa):** The Bantu people,  
29 located in hundreds of ethnic groups in the central and southern half of the  
30 continent, display basic commonalities in language, customs and religious  
31 beliefs. While roughly numbering 350 million, most ethnic groups are small.  
32 The population of only five Bantu ethnicities exceeds seven million: Shona  
33 (Zimbabwe), Zulu (South Africa), Luba (Democratic Republic of Congo),  
34 Sukuma (Tanzania) and Kikuyu (Kenya).

35 The shared aspects of Bantu religions include belief in a divine power who  
36 cares for humanity, veneration of the ancestral spirits, origin myths of earth  
37 and sky, and eternity of the universe. The divine power has many names;  
38 among the Swahili speakers, he is *Mungu*. He rules the world along with  
39 lesser spirits. Individually and as a group, Bantu peoples are implored to lead

1 virtuous lives in harmony with the spirits. The moral code of the spirits values  
2 honesty, integrity and bravery. It requires allegiance to the community,  
3 respect for parents and the elders, extending hospitality to visitors, raising  
4 children under good communal norms, and fidelity to the family. Special  
5 ceremonies to honor and appease the spirits, where animals are sacrificed  
6 and food offerings given, are held. If they are not done, an angry spirit may  
7 unleash calamities like famine, illness, pestilence, forest fire and conflict.

8 People fear shamans who can harm individuals. The practice of traditional  
9 medicine with herbs and special chants is a key element of Bantu religion.  
10 Prayers and other ceremonies are accompanied by song and dance, which  
11 at times result in trance like states.  
12



13  
14 Bantu Mythological Chameleon  
15

16 Animals have a diversity of roles in the Bantu culture. The hare embodies  
17 modes of conduct like bravery, cunning, intelligence, patience and violence.  
18 Lizards and chameleons have a special significance. A Pygmy story links the  
19 chameleon with the emergence of humanity while Zulu and Luyia stories  
20 portray it as a harbinger of death. Other stories view it as a symbol of the  
21 eternity of life. (Parrinder 1969, pages 34, 37).

22 Most subscribers to Bantu religions today are also Christian or Muslim.  
23 Their traditional beliefs and customs have been altered by the dominant  
24 religions. Urbanized life under neoliberalism has further distorted the beliefs,  
25 limited the opportunity to practice traditional rituals and undercut the Ubuntu  
26 ethic, replacing it with a self-centered outlook.  
27

28 +++++  
29

30 Traditional African religions had flourished in social formations in which the  
31 technology for agriculture and craft production was at its formative stage and  
32 hierarchical structures were neither extreme nor entrenched. Egalitarian  
33 practices and values and conscious cooperation within the community, the  
34 essence of Ubuntu, were essential for survival and advancement.

1 African religions, through their diverse forms, provided the glue for social  
2 stability and encouraged collective endeavor. Religion was communal, not  
3 personal. It served as a cushion of emotional solace and driver of resilience  
4 in times of family or general distress. Praying to gods and making offerings  
5 gave hope for a better future. It gave meaning to an often-uncertain life.

6 In traditional African societies women worked at home but also on farms.  
7 Their work was valued, and their voices were respected. Women also served  
8 as priestesses, mediums and traditional healers. But over time, they were  
9 increasingly dominated by men, and their freedoms were restricted. For  
10 example, at mealtimes, the men got the choicest portions.

11 The ambivalent but largely subordinate status of women is reflected in  
12 African myths and creation stories. Some portray them as worthy beings and  
13 some blame them for social ills. Some African proverbs depict women as the  
14 source of life, glory and good fortune, but some depict them as lazy and  
15 capricious; some see women as gentle, loving mothers; and some view them  
16 as talkative, wasteful persons who need supervision by men. A few proverbs  
17 advise men to beware of deceptive seductresses. A wide-ranging survey of  
18 African proverbs by John Mbiti shows that they generally portray men more  
19 favorably than women. One case is the Maasai proverb positing the basis of  
20 a successful life: '*a wife, a cow, a sheep, a goat, and a donkey*'. It notes the  
21 essentiality of women but ranks them with domestic animals, and not as  
22 autonomous, equal beings. (Mbiti 2020).

### 23 24 **3.6 WHAT IS RELIGION?**

25  
26 Our brief survey of five religious traditions returns us to the definitional query:  
27 What is religion? The answers vary. A succinct definition was given in 1871  
28 by Edward B Tylor in his influential work, *Religion in Primitive Culture*. He  
29 defines religion as:

30  
31 *The belief in supernatural beings.*  
32 EB Tylor (Saxton 2006, page 39).

33  
34 Other definitions are elaborate. *The Encyclopedia Britannica* declares:

35  
36 *Religion [is] human beings' relation to that which they regard*  
37 *as holy, sacred, absolute, spiritual, divine, or worthy of*  
38 *especial reverence. It is also commonly regarded as*  
39 *consisting of the way people deal with ultimate concerns about*  
40 *their lives and their fate after death. ... Worship, moral*  
41 *conduct, right belief, and participation in religious institutions*  
42 *are among the constituent elements of the religious life.*  
43 (Petruzzello 2019).

44  
45 The Wikipedia characterizes religion in slightly different terms:  
46

1           *A religion is a set of beliefs passionately held by a group of*  
2           *people that is reflected in a world view and in expected beliefs*  
3           *and actions (which are often ritualized). (Wikipedia 2019 -*  
4           *Religion).*

5  
6 It elaborates that these beliefs concern the origins of the world and humanity,  
7 and the purpose of human life, and are linked to supernatural beings, codes  
8 of moral conduct, devotional practices and rituals. The scholar YH Harari  
9 provides a shorter definition:

10  
11           *Religion can .... be defined as a system of human norms and*  
12           *values that is founded on a belief in a superhuman order.*  
13           *(Harari 2018, page 210).*

14  
15 David Dennett, a cognitive scientist and philosopher, also has a short working  
16 definition:

17  
18           *[Religion is a social system] whose participants avow belief in*  
19           *a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be*  
20           *sought. (Dennett 2006).*

21  
22 Religions stand on three foundational pillars: spiritual (beliefs), devotional  
23 (practice), and societal (social function). Even as they are manifested in highly  
24 diverse forms, every religion rests on these pillars. The first two pillars  
25 (spiritual beliefs and devotional practices) are essential features of religion,  
26 and the third (social function) has been an inseparable consequential aspect  
27 of religion. Religion is a communal entity, serving a communal purpose and  
28 not just an isolated relationship between a person and the divine. Hence, this  
29 book uses the following definition:

30  
31           ***Religion is a system of beliefs, practices and symbols shared***  
32           ***by a community that accepts of the existence of divine beings***  
33           ***and/or supernatural realms and has modes of worship, rituals,***  
34           ***stories and rules of conduct (ethical norms) that are taken to***  
35           ***be of divine origin.***

36  
37 We employ the terms faith and faith system as synonyms for religion and use  
38 terms like denomination, branch, creed, tradition, school, order and sect to  
39 refer to a particular religion or its subdivisions.

40 Religion is a complex, astonishingly diverse historical phenomenon. It is  
41 not a static entity. As their histories attest, all religions evolve. Beliefs, codes  
42 of morality and practices change; religions splinter into different branches;  
43 some become extinct; and new ones emerge—processes that persist to this  
44 day.

45 Our review of five religions leads us to identify five interrelated, essential  
46 components of religion.

1

### **Five Components of Religion**

Beliefs	Spiritual beliefs, holy texts and origin stories
Practice	Prayers, customs, rituals, ceremonies, symbols
Morality	Ethical and moral precepts and prohibitions
Organization	Leadership, organizational structure, finances
Social Role	Societal activities, relations and function

2

3

Even though religions change over time, viewing religions in this framework in the following pages will provide us a useful comparative perspective.

4

5

# CHAPTER 04: ORIGIN



*Faith is the force of life.*

Leo Tolstoy

*It was the experience of mystery  
- even if mixed with fear –  
that engendered religion.*

Albert Einstein



BELIEF IN THE SUPERNATURAL, in a mystical domain beyond this world, is the primary feature of religion. Religion is faith in a divine force deserving of worship and obedience. And it is not just a person-centered entity. It is a collective, shared endeavor.

Our survey of five religions in Chapter 3 shows that religious beliefs and practices vary widely in form and expression. We also noted the five main components of a typical religion: Beliefs, morality, practice, organization and social function. Art, sculpture, painting, music, chants, song, dance, design, dress, dietary preferences and other elements of culture are also associated with religion.

How and why did religions originate? An extensive volume of research on this issue exists. Philosophers, scholars, social scientists and theologians have weighed in with a diversity of views. This chapter reflects on the origin of religious beliefs and practices.

From the dawn of humanity to some ten thousand years ago, thousands of religious types of beliefs emerged in different parts of the world. These are generally placed into two groups, Primal Religion and Neolithic Religion. Our ideas about these ancient religions is mostly derived from archeological excavations and rock paintings. Apart from clay tablets found in a few places, there are no written records. Genetic analysis has extended our knowledge of early human history, but much is unknown. Many regions have not been archeologically explored. And scholars differ widely in the interpretation of the

1 unearthed evidence. The portrait below is my distillation of the main common  
2 features of these diverse belief systems.

#### 4 **4.1 PRIMAL RELIGION**

5  
6 Theologians say religion was revealed from a divine source. For some of the  
7 major religions, the dates and manner of revelation are given. After looking at  
8 unexplained and intriguing finds from archeological sites in the different  
9 continents, Eric Von Daniken gave another answer (Von Daniken 1971). He  
10 surmised that there is good evidence to presume that our world was visited  
11 in the past by extraterrestrial beings. The development of human society and  
12 culture, including religion owes a great deal to these beings. Though a highly  
13 popular work when it came out, his book is not in vogue anymore. The use of  
14 sparse data to form sweeping conclusions undermined its credibility. Yet, to  
15 this day, the lack of a good science education makes many people inclined to  
16 take such scenarios seriously.

17 A more credible picture of the origin of religion is based on evidence from  
18 archeological, genetic, biological and cultural studies. Fossil and genetic  
19 records indicate that modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) emerged from pre-  
20 human species some 200,000 years ago. Living in nomadic groups, they drew  
21 sustenance from the surroundings by hunting, fishing and foraging. As they  
22 learned to control fire and improved tools like axes, hammers, harpoons,  
23 bows and arrows, procurement and storage of food became more efficient.  
24 They dug pit traps and constructed public fire hearths. Language flourished;  
25 stories of life and nature surfaced. Knowledge of hunting, animal migration,  
26 harmful and edible plants, seasonal variation, tool making, and the use of  
27 animal hide for wear was passed on via experience and orally. Such changes  
28 were gradual, occurring over tens of thousands of years, and uneven from  
29 place to place.

30 The nomadic communities led a precarious existence, especially after  
31 they moved from thick forests to open land. Their tools were rudimentary,  
32 made from stone and wood. Nature was a friend and a foe; a year of  
33 abundance could be followed by one of scarcity, harsher climate or greater  
34 danger from predatory animals. Life was unpredictable. Risk of death from  
35 hunger, illness or injury was high. Nature was revered but also feared.

36 Coordinated cooperation between community members was essential for  
37 survival, especially for the protection of children. It made hunting of large  
38 animals possible and provided better defense against predators and raiders.  
39 Moving constantly, locating safe sheltering sites like caves and building  
40 temporary huts needed harmonized actions. While sexual relations were  
41 flexible, sexual impulses had to be controlled. Aspects of such traits are seen  
42 among other animals. But for the more vulnerable, conscious humans, they  
43 were critical.

44 Paleolithic communities were classless. While elders and diviners were  
45 held in high regard, no subgroup lived off the labor of others. The notion of  
46 private property did not exist; everything was shared. Work and life were

1 organized on the basis of equality and utility, not privilege. Solidarity was a  
2 fundamental feature of life in these communities.

3  
4 *The social community was, and still today is a necessity for the*  
5 *survival of man as an individual. Without it, the human spiritual*  
6 *forces would never mature. (Alan 2015).*

7  
8 While the evidence is sketchy, it appears that these earlier humans bonded  
9 through development of elements of culture. Fear of nature and desire for its  
10 bounty found expression in art, rituals and symbols. Walls of caves were  
11 painted, and small stone and clay sculptures were made. A hunt was  
12 preceded by ceremonial appeal to natural spirits and hunted animals were  
13 slaughtered in a ritualized fashion.

14 This was the context in which different components of what we call religion  
15 now evolved. Recent genetic investigations show that the general sequence  
16 of emergence evolved from animism (belief that animals, plants, rocks, wind,  
17 river, sky, sun were imbued with spirits); to belief in life after death; to  
18 shamanism (resorting to diviners who went into trance to communicate with  
19 spirits and the departed ones); and to the reverence of ancestors. Events like  
20 storms and floods were ascribed to magic. Fire symbolized a magical spirit.

21 In their totality, these beliefs formed a **primal religion**, the ideology of the  
22 Paleolithic era. By providing a psychic basis for group identity and fostering  
23 cooperation, it served a utilitarian purpose. It provided hope when nature was  
24 unforgiving and motivated hunting and gathering drives. Ideology had a  
25 material basis. The shamans were the counselors of that era—for individuals  
26 and the group. They also dispensed herbs for treatment of disease.

27 Primal religion had a mystical dimension. With larger and more complex  
28 brains, human are inquisitive animals. Myths and stories provided a basis for  
29 understanding what was going on in the world. Explaining diverse events and  
30 objects expanded vocabulary and extended the mental horizon. Rituals  
31 embodied love, joy and sadness, hope and despair as well as playfulness.  
32 They helped people cope with the death of a loved one. Belief in the unitary  
33 spirituality of nature fostered empathy, altruism and reconciliation. As such,  
34 primal religion stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing ideologies of today.

35  
36 *Most people regard hierarchy in human societies as*  
37 *inevitable, a natural part of who we are. Yet this belief*  
38 *contradicts much of the 200,000-year history of Homo*  
39 *sapiens. ... In fact, our ancestors have for the most part*  
40 *been 'fiercely egalitarian', intolerant of any form of*  
41 *inequality. While hunter-gatherers accepted that people*  
42 *had different skills, abilities and attributes, they*  
43 *aggressively rejected efforts to institutionalize them into*  
44 *any form of hierarchy. (Suzman 2017b).*

45



1 The multiplicity of forms and styles of rock paintings and figurines indicate a  
2 gradual evolution towards abstract thinking. The artist transcends from the  
3 obvious onto identifying patterns. The fascinating diversity of art in different  
4 Paleolithic societies across continents indicates the flowering of imagination  
5 and creativity. Ideology, even in these early human societies, acquired a  
6 momentum of its own.

7 To paraphrase Karl Marx, religion in the early human societies was the  
8 psychic pillar of a precarious existence, the sentiment of an egalitarian,  
9 harmonious way of life and the soul of a curious, determined people. Through  
10 the medium of religious beliefs, our ancestors laid the basis for modern ethics  
11 and morality, and the astonishing intellectual and cultural ferment that was to  
12 occur among their descendants.

## 13 14 4.2 THE HADZA

15  
16 The area surrounding Lake Eyasi in northern Tanzania is home to one of the  
17 few surviving hunter-gatherer communities in the world. Numbering about  
18 1,300 in 2012, the Hadza provides an actual window into the *Homo sapiens*  
19 way of life for 95% of the period of its existence. With a distinct genetic profile  
20 and a language unrelated to any in the adjacent areas, these people persist  
21 with the millennia old practices of their ancestors.

22  
23 **Lifestyle:** The traditional Hadza do not build permanent shelters. Living in  
24 mobile subgroups of 20 to 40, they draw sustenance from plant foods like  
25 berries, yams, cassava, baobab fruit, honey and honeycomb as well as small  
26 and large animals. Hunting is done with poisoned tipped bows and arrows.  
27 Their foods vary by season. A keen knowledge of the environment enables  
28 efficient location of food, medicinal plants and water sources. But extraction  
29 from nature is done in a sustainable manner. Of recent, their fiber rich diet  
30 has garnered accolades from global health experts. Infant mortality is high  
31 but life spans for those who make it through childhood are similar to those in  
32 surrounding areas.

33  
34 **Social Organization:** Hadza lives are organized on the basis of equality,  
35 sharing and collective decision making. Daily decisions are taken jointly. No  
36 leader has a special status. Viewing themselves as a unified family, everyone  
37 is treated with respect. Caring for children is done by related and unrelated  
38 persons. Competition, selfish conduct and accumulation are frowned upon.  
39 The few items a person owns are carried on her or his back. Meals are eaten  
40 together. When internal conflicts cannot be resolved, calm is restored by a  
41 parting of ways.

42  
43 **Matrimony:** Monogamy is the norm, but separation and remarriage also  
44 occur. Marriage is a non-ceremonial act of consent between a man and a  
45 woman. For a young girl, approval from her family is sought. Women take part  
46 in collective decision making; gender discrimination is minimal. In food

1 collection and other activities, a division of labor between men and women  
2 exists, but it is not always adhered to. Female puberty rituals are conducted.

3  
4 **Culture:** In addition to egalitarian norms and values that reflect respect for  
5 nature and emphasize collective endeavor, there are two other components  
6 to the Hadza culture: cosmological myths and folk tales, and ritualized eating  
7 and dance ceremonies.

8  
9 **Myths:** Hadza cosmology does not feature a divine power. But their myths  
10 have god-like beings linked to the sun (female, *Ishoko*) and the moon (male,  
11 *Seta*) and stars, their children. They believe that humans were created over  
12 four culturally distinct epochs during which animals, people and man-eating  
13 giants emerged. Among their numerous folk tales, some depict malevolent  
14 giants who were finally vanquished and some feature heroes who entered the  
15 netherworld after death and returned to spread customs and material objects.  
16 They maintain a worshipful attitude towards the ancestors who can return as  
17 ghosts on special nights.

18  
19 **Rituals:** The Hadza conduct special rituals that have spiritual connotations.  
20 The most important are the *epeme* dances on moonless nights and *epeme*  
21 meal ceremonies for men who attain manhood by killing a large animal. And  
22 they do not perform burial rites. Corpses are put in a hole made into the soil  
23 or left in the open.

24  
25 **Education:** As in all traditional societies, Hadza children learned the ways of  
26 the world informally, through stories and by observing and doing. But now,  
27 since school attendance is compulsory, they spend three quarters of a year  
28 in public boarding schools in surrounding areas. While this is a positive step,  
29 questions about the quality and content of education, deleterious influences  
30 and loss of traditional knowledge cannot be ignored. In addition to their own  
31 language, the Hadza speak Swahili, the national language of Tanzania.

32 Some educated Hadza hold low level jobs in the district administration  
33 and private firms. A few run small shops in border areas and a number are  
34 employed as game scouts and guides for Western tourists and scholars.

35  
36 **External Influences:** Due to misguided colonial and post-colonial policies,  
37 the Hadza have lost access to over three quarters of their land and animal  
38 populations. Conflicts due encroachment by neighboring communities have  
39 worsened their situation. Some foreign companies have acquired hunting  
40 rights in former Hadza lands. Missionaries have often attempted to convert  
41 them to Christianity but, for the most part, the Hadza have managed to resist  
42 them.

43  
44 **Current Situation:** Only about a third of the Hadza pursue their traditional  
45 lifestyle. The rest are settled in border areas, trading with outsiders or doing  
46 manual work on large farms, including guarding corn fields from monkeys and

1 other animals. They buy necessary items like clothes, shoes and tools. Some  
2 Hadza men demonstrate their hunting ability to tourists in return for cash.  
3 External contact has led to a rise in alcoholism, and infectious ailments like  
4 tuberculosis, sexually transmitted diseases and measles. Malaria is also a  
5 persistent problem.

6  
7 **External Support:** Due to their unique profile, the Hadza have garnered  
8 extensive support from human rights organizations and non-governmental  
9 agencies of the West in the past two decades. Anthropologists, social  
10 scientists and medical researchers from outside have landed in droves on  
11 Hadza land. But such attention is a double-edged sword. While in the short  
12 run it has benefitted them by enabling them to secure their basic land rights,  
13 and yielded valuable knowledge about the past and human health, it runs the  
14 risk in the long run of turning the Hadza into zoo-like entities who are  
15 mythologized and admired but whose basic right to self-determination is  
16 progressively compromised.

17 The Hadza are an integral part of a nation and continent that is under the  
18 exploitative tutelage of the global neoliberal system. External attention is  
19 predicated upon the flawed assumption that African enigmas can be solved  
20 with philanthropy. Like the Native Americans, the Hadza are at risk of turning  
21 into communities rife with alcoholism, loss of dignity and culture, malnutrition  
22 and disease.

23  
24 **Religion:** The Hadza do not build temples or shrines. They do not conduct  
25 prayer sessions. Their society does not have priests or shamans. If religion is  
26 taken to mean an institutionalized spiritual belief system, there is no Hadza  
27 religion. Yet, in a more profound sense, a veritable Hadza religion exists.  
28 Their ingrained ethical percepts embody social equality, cooperation and  
29 grass-roots democracy. These values are complemented by a vibrant sense  
30 of living in a balanced harmony with nature. These bedrocks of Hadza  
31 ideology are intertwined with rituals and a host of myths and creation stories  
32 that feature other worldly beings and ghosts of belief system. These lend a  
33 spiritual dimension to the ideology.

34 The fundamental, practically articulated secular tenets of the Hadza  
35 religion are social equality, cooperation, material contentment and a balanced  
36 existence with nature. Whether named or not, codified in a holy book or not,  
37 there is a *de facto* Hadza religion that is adhered to more faithfully in daily  
38 practice than many other religions. Furthermore, its basic ethical values and  
39 attitudes towards the environment stand in stark contrast to the norms of  
40 competition, individualism, consumerism, accumulation and disregard for the  
41 planetary ecosystem that characterize the globally dominant neoliberal  
42 ideology and socio-economic order. While the latter is propelling humanity  
43 and all living species towards a dark abyss, the former holds the keys to  
44 establishment of a sustainable, egalitarian and just mode of existence. The  
45 appalling tragedy is that instead of drawing basic lessons from these noble,  
46 resilient people, the capitalist system, at the national and international levels,

1 has set in motion powerful forces that portend the complete demise of their  
2 autonomy and traditions. To safeguard its future, humanity has to integrate  
3 the egalitarianism of the Hadza with judicious use of science and technology.  
4 It needs the best of both worlds, ancient and modern. Yet, the Hadza are  
5 being propelled into a situation that embodies the worst of both worlds.

### 6 7 **4.3 THE NEOLITHIC AGE** 8

9 As the global climate warmed some 12,000 years ago, humankind began a  
10 transition from nomadic hunting-gathering to settled living in larger groups.  
11 The discovery of agriculture and domestic rearing of animals formed the basis  
12 of this process which occurred at varied rates in different geographical  
13 regions. Some foraging societies maintained a nomadic lifestyle but lived off  
14 large herds of domesticated animals. Stable fishing communities emerged  
15 near rivers, lakes and oceans. And in places, hunting and gathering persisted  
16 for millennia. Such an admixture of modes of production was seen in many  
17 parts of Africa where agriculture was independently discovered.

18 Catalyzed by chance observations and trials about plant reproduction,  
19 humans started growing grains like millet, corn, wheat, sorghum, rice and  
20 barley, root crops like yams, potatoes and cassava as well as beans, coffee,  
21 kola nuts, oil palm, sunflower, bananas, citrus fruits and other crops. Crops  
22 grown in one area diffused over millennia to other areas. Farming needs a  
23 stable life, fertile soil and adequate rainfall or other sources of water. In the  
24 course of a sedentary existence, people learned to tame goats, sheep, pigs  
25 and poultry. Harvest was stored to provide a stable supply of basic foods. The  
26 domesticated animals yielded meat, milk, eggs, bone, wool, hide and  
27 excrement which was used as manure.

28 Better tools and improved farming techniques evolved. Making stone and  
29 clay pots and utensils for cooking and storage expanded. Some people  
30 weaved clothes and mats or made decorative ornaments. The discovery of  
31 metal smelting some 6,000 years ago raised the productivity of labor and  
32 enabled manufacture of new, sturdier tools and daily use items. Sedentary  
33 communities began to ferment beer, bake bread and cook a wider variety of  
34 dishes.

35 Not everyone could do everything. Many activities required special skills  
36 that could only be acquired through experience and apprenticeship. Hence, a  
37 skill-based division of labor emerged. Some people were artisans working  
38 with stone, wood or clay; others were builders, weavers, farmers or herders.  
39 Dwellings that gave better protection from the elements were built. Villages  
40 expanded in size and began to resemble what we now call towns.

41 Farm output and herding yields generally were at subsistence levels at  
42 the outset. But increasingly, with better tools, more productive soils and use  
43 of irrigation, some plots yielded more than what the family could consume.  
44 Initially, the surplus was distributed within the settlement by ceremonial rites  
45 and barter. Exchange of food and other items with adjacent communities  
46 occurred. The craft persons received food in return for their wares.

1 Bartering, which entails finding someone who needs what you have and  
2 has what you need, faced limitations. Gradually, it was superseded by the use  
3 of an accepted medium of exchange. The initial forms of money were  
4 seashells, fine beads and necklaces, and colorful, shiny rocks and crystals.  
5 Money spawned the emergence of a new economic group, the traders whose  
6 sole occupation was buying and selling commodities. The value of an item  
7 was monetized, and money became a device for accumulating wealth as well.

8 Development did not occur in a uniform, straight line process. Production,  
9 storage, construction and exchange improved slowly and unevenly. At times,  
10 it suffered setbacks due to natural disasters or conflict between communities.

11 While more or less egalitarian social relations persisted for centuries and  
12 more, fixed living, larger population, division of labor, surplus production,  
13 trade and money formed the bedrock upon which a qualitative change in  
14 these relations evolved. Control of production and ownership of the means of  
15 production largely accumulated into the hands of a few families. Hitherto  
16 communal lands came under the control of individuals. Some family farms  
17 and herds expanded rapidly in acreage and animal numbers and began to  
18 use slaves or serfs.

19 Gradually, a small upper stratum who lived in larger houses with multiple  
20 rooms, possessed more land and animals, began to exercise a dominant role  
21 in the community affairs. Village governance structures with hereditary chiefs  
22 emerged. The chief, perhaps with a small council, settled disputes, set the  
23 rules of conduct, and directed community activities. He and his council  
24 received gifts in the form of food, cattle and objects of decorative or practical  
25 use from the villagers. But overtime, voluntary gift giving turned into required  
26 payments of tax.

27 The emergence of centralized city states and empires with a dominant  
28 ruler or a group of rulers, a graded social hierarchy, and standing armies who  
29 extracted economic surplus through taxation and coerced labor from the  
30 working majority and neighboring societies culminated the Neolithic era. The  
31 earliest kingdoms emerged in present day Iraq around 6,500 BC. It was a  
32 global but not contemporaneous phenomenon. Among the many empires in  
33 Africa were the Sudanese, Egyptian, Ethiopian, Ghana, Songhai, Mali,  
34 Buganda and Zulu empires. Some empires were federated kingdoms.

35 The expansion of the knowledge base of human society was a crucial  
36 concomitant of this process. Languages flourished, writing was invented, new  
37 techniques of production were discovered, knowledge of the seasons and  
38 environment expanded, calendars were written down, and a natural science  
39 of a rudimentary form emerged. Of particular note are techniques of counting,  
40 measuring weights and volumes, and the elements of geometry. Allocation  
41 and evaluation of property and goods as well as taxation and trade implied  
42 that land areas had to be known; farm output to be measured; herds to be  
43 counted; and the value of artisanal objects known. Travelers, traders and  
44 conquest diffused such knowledge and practical skills from place to place.

45 Yet, the Neolithic transition brought forth several untoward elements into  
46 the human society. In most places, it saw the inception of economic and social

1 inequalities, including subjugation of women, that sharpened over time. The  
2 egalitarian hunting-gathering mode of life was progressively compromised  
3 with the emergence of an elite stratum at the top and the multitude as their  
4 vassals. Higher population density and living close to animals increased  
5 prevalence of infectious disease and emergence of ailments not seen earlier.  
6 Even as farming and herding provided more food, food variety diminished.  
7 The nomads of the earlier era had consumed a far greater variety of plants.  
8 Nutritional deficiencies ensued, as reflected in decreases of average human  
9 height. A long time was to pass before some of these health effects were  
10 reversed. It was also an era where humans began to make efficient weapons  
11 not just for hunting and fishing but also to fight against each other. Inequality  
12 and institutionalized violence gradually permeated human existence.

#### 14 4.4 NEOLITHIC IDEOLOGY

16 Changes in the technology of production and unequal economic relations  
17 were reflected in ideology and culture. Neolithic religions extended the  
18 mystical beliefs and rituals of the hunting-gathering times to more elaborate  
19 forms of cosmology and spiritual worship and developed novel institutional  
20 features.

21 A critical difference between hunting-gathering and settled communities  
22 was how they related to the environment. The former lived in balance with  
23 nature while the latter sought to change nature. The former took what nature  
24 provided but the latter extracted materials from nature and used them to  
25 produce what they needed. Animals were bred to be domesticated, new crop  
26 varieties were introduced, and large areas were cleared.

27  
28 *Where hunter-gatherers saw themselves simply as part of*  
29 *an inherently productive environment, farmers regarded*  
30 *their environment as something to manipulate, tame and*  
31 *control. (Suzman 2017b).*  
32

33 Farming and grazing endeavors depended on seasons and adequate rainfall  
34 which often occurred in cyclical patterns. Neolithic worldviews incorporated  
35 the cycles of the sun and the moon. Heavenly bodies were deified. People  
36 prayed for life needs, rain, good fortune, harmony and deliverance from  
37 calamitous storms, floods, droughts, epidemics and pestilence. The goddess  
38 of fertility, symbolized in creative figurines, was a revered deity. She was  
39 worshipped for her power to deliver ample harvests, larger herds and family  
40 well-being. Rites for rain, planting and harvesting were performed. Each  
41 season commenced with special ceremonies. Life transitions like birth,  
42 puberty, marriage and death were marked with elaborate rituals and objects,  
43 especially among the elite.

44 Belief in life after death became more pronounced. Burial became more  
45 common and food, drink, pots and tools for the departed one in afterlife were  
46 placed in the tombs. The deities and ancestors who protected the living and

1 gave them sustenance were respected through elaborate ceremonies and  
2 animals were sacrificed to placate them.

3 Merciful and harmful gods were represented using animalized figurines  
4 and other forms. Each god had his or her domain of operation. Wondrous  
5 totems denoting the magnificence of the deities were erected. Religious  
6 symbols were placed in or near homes. Exquisitely designed and painted  
7 pottery, statuettes, ornamental items and amulets with apparent spiritual  
8 significance have been found in numerous Neolithic excavation sites. A pot  
9 dated around 4,000 BCE from the Indus Civilization in India shown below is  
10 illustrative of Neolithic craftsmanship and artistry.  
11



12  
13 Pottery from Indus Valley Civilization, India.  
14

15 In the Neolithic era, a priestly stratum superseded the shamans. As the  
16 guardian of the religion, it oversaw holy ceremonies and rites. In smaller  
17 settlements, the village chief conducted such rites. But in the city states and  
18 empires that evolved later, the priests acted on behalf of the king. Large  
19 temples where people congregated for prayers and ceremonies were built.  
20 Totems and temples were made to high artistic and architectural standards  
21 that displayed a good grasp of geometry and construction technology.

22 Under the priestly stratum, spiritual beliefs and stories evolved into a large  
23 body of intricate written narrations. Customs, symbols and rituals became  
24 grandiose. Life and natural events acquired more complex interpretation.  
25 Rules and laws reflecting an elaborate, enforced ethical code delineated  
26 good, acceptable from bad conduct and homogenized the social order.

27 A novel function of religion emerged. The growing material inequality in  
28 society was reflected in the spiritual domain. Not just nature but society, with  
29 its hierarchical structure, was projected to be divinely ordained. The chief (the  
30 king or queen in the later times) was an intermediary between heaven and  
31 earth, deserving of veneration and obedience. The rules and laws they  
32 promulgated were blessed by the gods. Priests had the sanction of the  
33 representative of divinity; they had to be obeyed. Payment of tax became a

1 religious obligation. Totems and religious symbols had markings reflecting the  
2 social hierarchy. The wars waged by the ruler received religious blessing.

3 Ancient Egypt, ruled by the pharaohs, had a religion with powerful and  
4 minor gods who controlled natural phenomena. Humans were linked to the  
5 gods through the agency of the pharaoh, who had a divine status. When the  
6 pharaoh died, his son inherited his divine power along with the pharaohship.  
7 Grand temples containing the images and statues of the gods were erected.  
8 They were manned by priests who had an elevated social and spiritual status  
9 and often were wealthy and politically influential persons. Only a select few  
10 could gain entry to the temples. People attended special ceremonies to honor  
11 the gods and the pharaoh. Belief in the existence of a soul and afterlife  
12 together with an elaborate compendium of creation myths, stories about the  
13 nature and relationship of the gods, and hymns were central to their religious  
14 faith. People prayed to the gods and commonly consulted oracles to make  
15 important decisions and deal with life problems.

16 The gods maintained order in the universe. By building temples to house  
17 their images and honor and communicate with them, the pharaoh played an  
18 important role in maintaining social stability and prosperity. Thus, they too  
19 were venerated as spiritually powerful beings and when they died, their  
20 bodies were placed in elaborate tombs, the pyramids, with all they would need  
21 for their afterlife. The religion of ancient Egypt is a classic example of a  
22 religion that sanctified a highly stratified social order.

#### 23 24 4.5 LESSONS 25

26 We draw four important lessons from our exploration of the origin of religion:  
27

28 **Lesson 1:** In classless, mobile communities utilizing rudimentary technology  
29 for sustenance and protection, primal religion kept the group intact in times of  
30 uncertainty and risk. Intertwined with the practical knowledge base of the  
31 community, it also fulfilled their intellectual curiosity and urge to connect to a  
32 higher, protective power.

33  
34 **Lesson 2:** Religion in the economically and politically stratified agrarian and  
35 settled Neolithic societies had a special stratum of priests who were allied  
36 with the ruling class. The religious rites and rituals, and the implorations of  
37 the priests not only serviced people's spiritual needs but also sanctioned and  
38 reinforced the extant unequal social order. The priests helped maintain civil  
39 order. On top of undertaking revenue collection for the state, they also  
40 gathered and disseminated knowledge that enhanced production methods,  
41 thus contributed to an improved the standard of life.

42  
43 **Lesson 3:** The fundamental problems facing humanity today—a vast gap  
44 between a few at the top and the multitude below, mass poverty, large scale  
45 warfare, and environmental mismanagement—were initiated in the Neolithic  
46 era.



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**Lesson 4:** The alliance of the priests and the rulers made religion culpable in the misdeeds of the rulers. The priests became objects of popular anger as well. At times, some dissident priests went on the other side or newer faith systems challenged both the priests and the rulers. Religion acquired a retrogressive and a progressive facet, a trait it continues to have to this day.

# CHAPTER 05: HINDUISM



*My religion is based on truth and non-violence.  
Truth is my God.  
Non-violence is the means of realizing Him.*  
Mohandas K Gandhi

*Hinduism the perennial philosophy  
that is at the core of all religions.*  
Aldous Huxley

*Hinduism is synonymous with humanism.  
That is its essence and its great liberating quality.*  
HG Wells



HINDUISM IS THE OLDEST of the four major religions. With approximately 1.1 billion followers, it is the third largest religion in the world today. Unlike the other major religions, it is geographically restricted: about 95% of the Hindus reside in India. Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and United States each have 2 million or more Hindu residents. India and Nepal are the only Hindu majority nations. Smaller Hindu communities are scattered in virtually all parts of the world. There are about 20,000 Hindus in Tanzania, of whom nearly 12,000 reside in Dar es Salaam. This chapter focuses on Hinduism in India.

## 5.1 ORIGIN

Hinduism does not have a founder or a specific time of birth. It is not a unified doctrine either. Historians trace its roots to the customs and belief systems of the post-Neolithic Indus Valley civilization in India around 2,000 BCE. Over time, a loose association of disparate belief systems but with similar core values, texts and practices evolved to lay the basis for modern Hinduism. The process was connected to the rise and fall of the political empires in the region. The sacred texts of Hinduism emerged over an extended period of

1 time, but its main ideas and practices were formulated under the prosperous,  
2 stable Gupta Empire between 300 CE and 550 CE. In this era of significant  
3 progress in science, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, art and literature,  
4 pioneering texts on several subjects were written. The base-ten number  
5 system, decimal numbers and the concept of zero we take for granted today  
6 originate from that era. A system of education in which religious and worldly  
7 matters were taught developed in this period. But education was restricted to  
8 the upper echelons of society.

## 9 10 **5.2 CORE BELIEFS AND TEXTS**

11  
12 India is a vast nation of diverse ethnicities, cultures and traditions. Hindu holy  
13 texts, originally in Sanskrit, were later translated into other Indian languages.  
14 New texts also appeared in these languages. Each Indian ethnicity has its  
15 own mode of practicing Hinduism, its own favored gods and goddesses.  
16 Internal diversity is a central feature of Hinduism.

17  
18 *Hinduism is a conglomeration of a variety of beliefs and*  
19 *practices with no one, or official, set of doctrines or religious*  
20 *authorities.* (Sarma 2017).

21  
22 With that qualification in mind, it is safe to say that most Hindus regard four  
23 holy sacred texts, jointly denoted the Vedas, as the ultimate embodiment of  
24 spiritual and secular wisdom. These Sanskrit texts were likely written between  
25 1,500 BCE and 1,000 BCE.

- 26  
27
  - *Rigveda*: Book of Hymns -- for recitation by the senior priest.
  - *Yajurveda*: Book of Formulas -- for recitation by priests.
  - *Samaveda*: Book of Melodies -- for chanting by priests.
  - *Atharvaveda*: Book of Stories and Enchanting Poetry.

31  
32 The five other major Hindu holy books are: the *Upanishads*, the *Puranas*,  
33 *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavad Gita*. The Hindu theological canon  
34 represents a humongous collection of origin stories and myths, human and  
35 godly epics, syntheses of moral principles and strictures, depictions of ways  
36 of worship, philosophical ruminations, and explications of customs, rites and  
37 rituals. Much is conveyed through enchanting hymns and verse. *The Laws of*  
38 *Manu* is the primary manuscript for ancient Hindu jurisprudence. It also lays  
39 details rightful conduct and prohibitions for virtually all facet of life.

40 Hinduism is an agglomeration of four major systems of belief and diverse  
41 practices: Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism and Smartism. Each has its  
42 primary gods and goddesses. But these systems share a core set of beliefs:  
43 (i) Brahman (*Bhagavan* or *Ishwar*) is the supreme divine being who controls  
44 all existence; (ii) The four sacred texts, the Vedas, embody the irrefutable  
45 truth in matters spiritual and secular; (iii) A living being possesses a soul

1 (*atman*) which undergoes cycles of birth, death and rebirth (*samsara*); (iv) Its  
2 present status arises from its conduct in the past life (*karma*); (v) Spiritual  
3 salvation (*moksha*) or liberation from the cycle of rebirth requires following  
4 principles of ethical life (*dharma*). As declared by Swami Vivekananda, a  
5 venerated Hindu authority:

6  
7 *The three essentials of Hinduism are belief in God, in the*  
8 *Vedas as revelation, in the doctrine of Karma and*  
9 *transmigration.*

10  
11 Brahman is a manifold divinity with the *Trimurty* (Trinity)—*Brahma* (Creator),  
12 *Vishnu* (Preserver) and *Shiva* (Destroyer)—its premier incarnation. *Vishnu*  
13 has come to rescue this world in ten forms (*avatars*) when it was plagued with  
14 moral disorder and chaos. *Krishna*, a teacher who embodies love, divine  
15 wisdom and compassion, and *Rama*, a role model for true moral conduct  
16 (*dharma*) are two exalted *avatars*. Other gods and goddesses with specific  
17 powers and function enrich the Hindu pantheon. The ranking goddesses are  
18 *Lakshmi* (wealth and purity), *Durga* (fierce defender of *dharma*), *Kali*  
19 (ferocious but loving mother) and *Sarasvati* (learning and wisdom). Varied  
20 sects of Hinduism attach different importance to the gods of the *Trimurty* and  
21 other divinities and worship them in distinct ways. Strict adherence to *dharma*  
22 (abiding by norms of pious conduct and fully discharging family and social  
23 duties) is a key belief accepted by all the Hindu sects.

24 Hinduism defies a clear theological characterization. The presence of  
25 diverse gods and goddesses give it the flavor of a polytheistic faith while the  
26 assertion that all entities in the universe are interconnected and have a soul  
27 renders it a pantheistic faith. Yet, since the multitude of divinities represent  
28 the supreme divine entity, it is arguably a monotheistic faith system.

29  
30 *Hinduism is so elastic and so subtle that the most profound*  
31 *Methodist, and crudest idolater, are equally at home with it.*

32 George Bernard Shaw

33  
34 Hinduism accepts a modified form of the idea of human free will: Brahman  
35 controls all existence; what you are now is the outcome of your deeds in a  
36 past life. Nonetheless, what you will be in future depends on your conduct in  
37 this life. If you abide by your *dharma* and seek the Truth, you will attain  
38 salvation and be liberated from the eternal cycle of *samsara*. A lot depends  
39 on your choices.

40  
41 *As is a man's desire so is his will,*  
42 *and as is his will so is his deed,*  
43 *and whatever deed he does that he will reap.*

44 The Upanishads  
45

1 Division of society into four distinct *varnas*, each with a distinct spiritual and  
2 worldly standing is integral to the Vedic creed. In order, they are *Brahmins*  
3 (priests, teachers and scholars), *Kshatriyas* (warriors and administrators),  
4 *Vaishyas* (people in commerce or with special skills) and *Shudras* (farmers,  
5 craftsmen, servants, etc.). Below all are the Dalits (Untouchables, Outcasts,  
6 *Harijans*, Scheduled Caste) who are relegated to menial work like disposing  
7 carcasses, cleaning toilets and sweeping the streets. *Varna* is determined at  
8 birth. Inter-marriage is shunned. Some religious rites are reserved for the  
9 upper three *varna* persons for whom close contact with a low caste person is  
10 an act of impurity requiring ritual cleansing. Traditionally, the Dalits have not  
11 been allowed to worship in temples or use common water wells. (*Bhagavad*  
12 *Gita*, Chapter 18: Text 41-45.)

13 Abiding by the duties and expectations of your *varna* is a basic part of  
14 your *dharma*. Your caste decides your *dharma*. Social harmony follows when  
15 people abide by their *dharma*.

16 For Hindus cow is a sacred animal. Many Hindus are vegetarians, but  
17 many are not. But slaughter and consumption of cow meat is proscribed by  
18 all Hindu denominations.

### 20 5.3 ETHICS AND MORALITY

21  
22 Written by unknown authors between 400 BCE and 200 CE, the *Bhagavad*  
23 *Gita* (*Poems of the Lord*) is a collection of 700 ballads of spiritual and secular  
24 import representing an extended discourse between *Krishna* and his warrior  
25 devotee *Arjun* at the onset of a major war between two related royal families.  
26 Originally a section of *Mahabharata*, a colossal rendition of human history, it  
27 is often read as an independent text. According to a Hindu sage, *Gita* is  
28 'transcendental literature,' and the 'essence' and 'most perfect' rendition of  
29 the 'infallible' Vedic doctrine. (Swami Prabhupada 1986). The fundamental  
30 ethical issue tackled therein is: How can a person live a spiritually exalted life  
31 and at the same time fulfil his or her worldly duties to family and society? Do  
32 you have to be like a monk to attain salvation? We focus on this holy text to  
33 distill and summarize the main ethical and moral precepts of Hinduism.

34 As the violent battle is about to start, *Arjun* sees members of his family and  
35 friends on the other side. Horror stricken at the prospect of killing them and  
36 thousands of other warriors, he reconsiders his plans. Confident though he is  
37 of victory, he deems it more ethical to lay down his bow, end the strife and  
38 avoid committing a great sin. Thereupon he receives wise counsel from his  
39 charioteer who, unknown to him, is *Krishna* in human guise. He descends on  
40 this planet from time to time to rescue humanity from calamity and moral  
41 disorder.

42 The first point *Krishna* stresses is that the soul (*atman*), the true essence  
43 of a person, is indestructible. It cannot be killed. If you kill a person, you are  
44 but destroying the temporary form that houses the soul. And the soul will be  
45 reborn. Second, as a *Kshatriya*, it is *Arjun's dharma* to fight, no matter the  
46 consequences. He must be resolute and not be swayed by impure thoughts

1 and petty weaknesses. He is an esteemed valiant warrior. If he surrenders,  
2 his reward will be dishonor and reputation as a coward.

3  
4 *Do thou fight for the sake of fighting, without considering*  
5 *happiness or distress, loss or gain, victory or defeat—and by*  
6 *so doing, you shall never incur sin. (Bhagavad Gita, Chapter*  
7 *2, Text 38).*

8  
9 Besides fulfilling the duties and expectations of his *varna*, *Arjun* is taught that  
10 if he avoids excessive attachment to worldly opulence and pleasure, is gentle  
11 and modest, values simplicity and cleanliness, cultivates spiritual knowledge,  
12 performs his rites and gives offerings as prescribed, controls anger and lust,  
13 is compassionate, performs charity and penance without untoward aims, is  
14 not lazy or envious, does not cheat or insult people, does not cultivate a false  
15 ego, honors his parents, is gentle and non-violent in normal life, and  
16 surrenders to *Krishna* without inhibition, doubts or expectation, he can attain  
17 transcendental knowledge and liberation (*moksha*) without becoming a yogi  
18 or an ascetic monk. Living and working according to such injunctions of the  
19 scriptures is, he is advised, the highest form of *dharma*.

20  
21 *The renunciation of work and work in devotion are both good*  
22 *for liberation. But, of the two, work for devotional service is*  
23 *better than renunciation of work. (Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 5,*  
24 *Text 2).*

25  
26 Hinduism is a spiritually based guide to life with four key precepts: *dharma*  
27 (abiding by moral obligation), *artha* (pursuance of prosperity), *kama* (seeking  
28 pleasure) and *moksha* (attaining spiritual liberation). The bulk of the ethical  
29 values and modes of conduct it upholds are found in most other religions.  
30 Where it differs from many religions is the positing of a divinely sanctioned  
31 birth-determined hierarchy that affects how one should conduct oneself and  
32 the religious rites a person can do. But such distinctions do not carry over into  
33 the spiritual realm. For, whatever your station in life, if you faithfully abide by  
34 your *dharma*, you can attain salvation.

35  
36 *By following his qualities of work, every man can become*  
37 *perfect. (Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 18, Text 45).*

#### 38 39 **5.4 WORSHIP, SYMBOLS AND CULTURE**

40  
41 Hindus worship (*puja*) at home and at the local temple (*mandir*) of their sect.  
42 While there are no set times for *puja*, there are times when more people visit  
43 the *mandir*. The center piece of the *mandir* is a shrine of a god or goddess in  
44 the form of a statue or large photo. The faithful clasp their hands in front, bow  
45 down, recite individual or collective prayer, and place flowers and scents at

1 the feet of the deity. Oil is poured into a small fire that is kept burning and food  
2 offerings are made. The priest (*pujari*) oversees these rites.

3 Hindu prayers are flavored by soothing chants and hymns (*mantras*) that  
4 are at times accompanied by the ringing of a bell or striking of small cymbals.  
5 Many mantras begin with the word *Om*, which represents the holy trinity of  
6 *Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Shiva*. Its rendition in Hindi script is a prime symbol of  
7 the Hindu faith.

8



9

10

Om: Brahman -- The Universal Soul

11

12

The lotus flower is also an important Hindu symbol. The image of *Vishnu*  
13 standing on a lotus flower is associated with the creation of the world.

13



14

15

Lord Vishnu Narayana

16



The Akshardham Temple Complex, Delhi.

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About half a million small and large, plain or elaborately designed Hindu temples, many with magnificent towers and spires, are scattered across India and Nepal. With some more than a thousand years old, they constitute a staggering monument to the remarkable creativity and craftsmanship of the ancients. Small to expansive temples of grand design exist around the world as well.

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Pilgrimage to holy places is a key part of the Hindu tradition. Crossing points of major rivers, birth places of divinities, sites of ancient temples and cities of historical import have hundreds of thousands of visitors each year. Dipping in the Ganges is a spiritually cleansing exercise. A number of important days are observed. *Diwali*, the festival of lights, *Navratri*, the festival of harvest, and *Holi*, the joyful spring festival, are among them. In addition to reciting special prayers, the devotees sing, dance and celebrate in colorful ways.

18

19

20

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24

Jointly and individually recited devotional rhythmic chants and songs (*bhajan* and *arti*) with music played on flute, sitar, *vina*, cymbals and drum is an ancient feature of Hinduism. The scriptures are amenable to melodious recitation. Sacred music, linked to gods and goddesses, connects with the divine. *Om Jai Jagdish Hare* is a frequently recited Hindu hymn. The first stanza is:

### Om Jai Jagdish Hare

<i>Om jai jagdish hare</i>	O Lord of the Universe
<i>Swami jai jagdish hare</i>	Mighty Lord of the Universe
<i>Bhakt jano ke sankat</i>	The troubles of Your devotees
<i>Daas jano ke sankat</i>	The troubles of Your servants
<i>Kshan mein door kare</i>	In an instant Thou erases
<i>Om jai jagdish hare</i>	O Lord of the Universe

25



1 Religious music and songs unify the diverse Hindu traditions. Historically,  
2 religious music, songs, poems, chants and dance have been the principal  
3 drivers of the vast treasury of Indian culture. But in the past hundred years,  
4 cinematic and secular cultural forces have displaced religion as the fountain  
5 of culture.

6 Classical Indian dance concretely symbolizes esoteric notions and is a  
7 key part of Hindu culture. Years of training and practice are essential in order  
8 to render a performance of grace and beauty. Sublime, intricate, rhythmic  
9 gestures convey the dissonance between the divine and secular, good and  
10 evil, joy and sadness, love and loss, serenity and temptation and the play of  
11 divine entities. Classical dance traditions are conjoined with *tablas* (drums),  
12 sitar and other musical instruments. Devotional, celebratory, mundane and  
13 romantic songs and dances coexist in a seamless fashion in this culture.

14 All life is revered. The cow is a singularly sacred animal. Vegetarianism is  
15 commonly practiced, and consumption of beef and pork are considered sinful  
16 by most Hindus. Sacred texts like *Bhagavad Gita* also contain advice on the  
17 types of foods to eat and not to eat.

18 Life transitions have special rites. For a newborn, a red dot (*kumkum*) on  
19 the forehead and a drop of honey on the tongue are placed. At the naming  
20 ceremony, the child's hair is shaved off. When it reaches the age of puberty,  
21 a sacred thread is tied to a wrist. On such occasions, where a *pujari* may be  
22 present, *bhajans* or *mantras* are recited to bless the child and ward off evil  
23 spirits.

24 Hindu marriage ceremonies extend over days. From the proposal to the  
25 wedding and beyond, colorful and elaborate rituals bedecked with flowers and  
26 incense, enjoined with chants, *bhajans* and music, peppered with exchanges  
27 of gifts and henna application sessions, and marked with feasts of meals and  
28 sweets occur. The center piece is a ceremony where the priest utters holy  
29 chants and supervises the bride and groom tying their scarves together in a  
30 knot, walking around a fire seven times, placing a sacred thread or necklace  
31 on the bride, saying the wedding vows and much more. Social separation  
32 based on caste is often maintained at such events.

33 Hindus do not bury the dead. Bodies are cremated in an open fire. The  
34 accompanying rituals are simple and solemn with continuous recitation of  
35 *mantras*. The ceremony usually ends with a simple family meal and offerings  
36 for the poor.

## 37 38 **5.5 EARLY HINDUISM** 39

40 Prior to the diversification of Hinduism, the Indus Valley civilization had fallen  
41 apart. Historians disagree about the impact of external invasion and the  
42 nature of the aftermath. Empires and city states rose and fell, merged or were  
43 conquered by rivals. Stability and instability alternated. The settlements  
44 across India were shedding or had already shed the egalitarian structures of  
45 the early and middle Neolithic times and were evolving towards hierarchical

1 social formations comprising a ruler, his aristocratic cohorts, landowners and  
2 large traders, and the multitude of the ruled.

3 The upper class lived off the labor of the ruled. The latter farmed the land,  
4 raised cattle, engaged in crafts, built houses, palaces and temples, worked  
5 as servants, guards and foot soldiers and maintained the surroundings. The  
6 traders who bought, transported and sold goods within and beyond the  
7 kingdom, had an intermediary social status. Owning large tracts of fertile land,  
8 the upper class exacted the surplus from dependent and independent  
9 farmers, craftsmen and traders in the form of taxes and levies.

10 A hierarchical system cannot be sustained for long purely by the use of  
11 force. Psychological acquiescence on the part of those who labor to enable  
12 the opulence of the rulers and feed their armies is essential. Social stability  
13 demands implicit or explicit consent.

14 The *varna* (caste) system emerged within such an economic structure. It  
15 was intertwined with class structure in a way unique to the social formations  
16 in India. The top caste, the *Brahmins*, guarded, conveyed and interpreted the  
17 religious doctrine and performed the rites. Their invocations rationalized the  
18 existent social structure. The devotee had the sacred duty to accept the mode  
19 of life since it was blessed by the supreme deity. It was his/her duty (*dharma*)  
20 to accept his/her status in the social order and perform required tasks with  
21 diligence. The *Brahmins* were the repository of not only spiritual ideas but of  
22 practical learning as well.

23 The three *varnas* below the *Brahmins* were: *Kshatriyas*—administrators  
24 and military officers; *Vaishyas*—traders; and *Shudras*—farmers, craftsmen,  
25 servants. The first *varna* was more elevated than the second and the second  
26 was more elevated than the last.

27 We note three key points: First, social formations and related ideologies  
28 take centuries to evolve through a non-linear process marked by random and  
29 purposeful events and contradictory tendencies. That also was the case with  
30 the social formations in India. Second, like any ideology of a class-based  
31 society, Hinduism portrays social reality in an inverted way. Without the  
32 farmer and the tool maker, people will starve. Yet, they are accorded the  
33 lowest status in society.

34 Third, the four-fold *varna* system coexisted with an occupation-based  
35 system, the *jati* system, which divides people as traders, farmers, potters,  
36 weavers, shoemakers, etc. Numbering more than twenty-four, they are not  
37 hierarchical divisions. But it is a hereditary order that prohibits inter-marriage.

38 The caste (*varna* and *jati*) based divisions are sanctified by Hindu beliefs  
39 and practices and form a major pillar of Hinduism. But they do not constitute  
40 the primary societal division in modern India. That division is the class divide  
41 based on wealth and relation to the means of generating it. The associated  
42 class structure consists of the upper economically dominant ruling classes,  
43 the multitude of laboring classes and an intermediate class of elite religious  
44 and secular functionaries as well as the well-off, self-employed individuals.  
45 The caste divisions operate within the interstices of class divisions and add a  
46 layer of complexity to the social relations within the nation.

1  
2 *While caste is perceived as a hereditary group with a fixed*  
3 *ritual status, a social class is a category of people who have a*  
4 *similar socio-economic status in relation to other segments of*  
5 *their community or society. (Mahawar 2017).*  
6

## 7 **5.6 COLONIAL ECONOMY**

8

9 British rule in India had a profound effect on the social function of Hinduism.  
10 It had two distinct phases. From 1600 to 1858, India was governed under a  
11 royal charter granted to the British India Company. And from then to 1947,  
12 India came under direct crown control. Colonial India included present day  
13 India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and, until 1937, Myanmar.

14 As in other colonies, the primary goals were economic and geo-political.  
15 Britain sought to dominate the global commodities trade, secure cheap and  
16 reliable sources of raw materials for its burgeoning industries, find protected  
17 markets for their manufactures and constrain the rival powers—France, the  
18 Netherlands and Portugal. During the heydays of its operations, the British  
19 India Company controlled over half of the world trade, especially in products  
20 like cotton, silk, indigo dye, saltpeter, salt, tea, gold and opium. It owned a  
21 fleet of ships and had a private army of a quarter million soldiers to enforce  
22 control and protect the trading centers. The officers were British; the rank-  
23 and-file soldiers were Indian.

24 On arrival, the British encountered a vibrant, thriving economy based on  
25 agriculture, artisanal manufacture and regional commerce. The scale, variety  
26 and quality of the fabrics made in India had no rival. Different regions were  
27 famed for weaved products distinctive in material and style. Mundane as well  
28 as elegant dresses for women and men were stitched from regular cotton,  
29 muslin cloth and silk. Cotton growing, ginning, yarn production, weaving and  
30 embroidery together with trade in these items provided livelihood for millions.

31 The British India Company came to dominate this sector by using devious  
32 tactics. Export of Indian goods, including fine fabrics, filled its coffers to the  
33 brim. However, as the British cotton industry developed, its major competitor,  
34 the Indian weaver, had to be subdued. India had to be a source of raw cotton  
35 for the British factories, nothing more. The agricultural policies enforced by  
36 the company adversely affected food production and manufacture of fine  
37 cotton goods in India. Farmers were forced to cultivate cotton and opium  
38 instead of traditional grains. Several large-scale famines occurred.  
39

40 *The sought-after Indian weaver and spinner became a*  
41 *destitute farmer, hungry and scantily clad in Lancashire cloth*  
42 *made from Indian cotton he so dutifully grew. The rising cotton*  
43 *prices in the world contributed to Indian misery as famine*  
44 *ensued because of all irrigable land being devoted to growing*  
45 *cotton instead of food. The farmers' indebtedness didn't shield*  
46 *them against rising food prices in the British-manufactured*

1            *Indian famine of 1890's in the cotton districts of India – causing*  
2            *millions to die. (Kashif 2016).*

3  
4 From being the world's major exporter of weaved clothing, India became the  
5 world's largest exporter of raw cotton. Millions were left jobless as the vast  
6 but small-scale cotton goods production sector collapsed within a couple of  
7 decades.

8        Company revenue came from trade, land and toll taxes, and fees for  
9 services. The taxes were onerous. Weavers had earlier got about 30% of the  
10 value of their goods; now they got a paltry 6%. Company officials looted gold  
11 and valuables of local nobles and merchants with impunity. Bribery, extortion  
12 and disregard for contractual obligations were integral to its *modus operandi*.  
13 Its callousness, greed and disdain for Hindu and Muslim traditions generated  
14 intense opposition. Anger towards company rule climaxed in 1857 when a  
15 contingent of Indian soldiers mutinied to oppose British rule. The revolt spread  
16 and was joined by civilians. In the ensuing ferocious fights, hundreds of British  
17 officers, officials and their families were killed but the number of Indians who  
18 perished was in the hundreds of thousands. Captured mutineers were  
19 tortured and executed by distinctively barbaric methods. Though the uprising  
20 was contained within a year, the days of company rule were over. Direct  
21 British rule was imposed in the following year. It lasted ninety years.

22        Direct rule brought a uniform administrative and legal system, created a  
23 vast rail and road network, a modern system of education and dispensed with  
24 the arbitrariness of company rule. But the basic goal did not change. The  
25 Indian economy had to provide goods and profits for the British economy and  
26 society, be a secure market for British products and the Indian people had to  
27 live as loyal subjects of the British Empire.

28        The economic structure of colonial India integrated capitalism with semi-  
29 feudalism. The special political status accorded to the *raj*as and princes  
30 entrenched the traditional *zamindari* system in which tenant farmers and  
31 laborers toiled for large landowners. A class of small-scale independent  
32 farmers (peasants) and craftsmen also existed. While the princes lived in  
33 luxury, the tenants, laborers, peasants and craft workers barely made ends  
34 meet. They were burdened with onerous levies and taxes imposed by the  
35 British and the princes. The latter also collected revenue for the government.  
36 The types of crops grown were affected by the priorities set by the colonial  
37 administration. Merchants and money lenders, who exacted a substantial  
38 share of the economic surplus, formed an essential intermediary connecting  
39 the rural economy to the outside world.

40        Caste was intertwined with class. The *zamindars* were from the upper  
41 castes while the laboring class came from the low caste *shudras* and Dalits.  
42 A religious divide existed in places where the landowners were Brahmins and  
43 the toilers were largely Muslim.

44        British companies operated in jute, cotton, indigo and tea production and  
45 owned large plantations across the territory. They were also heavily invested

1 in mining. Workers in these enterprises garnered pitiful wages and had no  
2 benefits to speak of.

3 In the urban centers, workers, small traders, independent craftsmen were  
4 at the lower end of the economic spectrum while a nascent class of factory  
5 owners, merchants and bankers stood well above them. Many of the latter  
6 were agents for British trading, shipping and manufacturing firms. An  
7 educated middle class formed. The new class structure first took hold in the  
8 Bengal and Bombay areas. Later it spread through the territory. The institution  
9 of private property and commercial relations came to displace the economic  
10 arrangements cemented during the Mughal rule (Chapter 8).

11 Internal economic stratification was subordinate to external economic  
12 domination. Senior and critical positions in the administration, the railways  
13 and other sectors were monopolized by Europeans. The colonial officials and  
14 British capital were the paramount economic actors. Directing development,  
15 they ensured that the wealth generated in India was siphoned off to Britain.

16 The impact on India was disastrous: From the world's main producer and  
17 exporter of finished goods, it became an exporter of primary commodities.  
18 Between 1770 and 1947, eleven large scale and more minor famines were  
19 recorded in the nation. Some 35 million people are estimated to have died as  
20 a result. As World War II unfolded, the British prime minister Winston Churchill  
21 deliberately redirected food supplies in India that caused a famine and deaths  
22 of three million Indians, mostly in Bengal. After meticulously studying data on  
23 tax and trade over a two-hundred-year period, prominent economist Utsa  
24 Patnaik came to a damning conclusion:

25  
26 *Britain drained a total of nearly \$45 trillion from India during*  
27 *the period 1765 to 1938. (Hickel 2018).*  
28

29 This is a staggering sum. Nearly two and a half million Indians fought for the  
30 British side during World War II. Yet, in India,

31  
32 *the British left a society with 16% literacy, a life expectancy of*  
33 *27 and over 90% living below the poverty line. (Tharoor 2017).*  
34

## 35 **5.7 COLONIAL POLITICS**

36  
37 An extensive rail and road network, a common set of laws, currency, lingua  
38 franca (English) and education system generated a unified economy and  
39 polity. People organized at local, regional and national levels to promote their  
40 interests and seek redress for grievances against the colonizers and internal  
41 overlords.

42 Peasants facing exorbitant taxes, rent, interest rates, shortages and low  
43 prices for what they sold, especially cotton, and high prices for the essential  
44 goods they needed, rose up now and then—spontaneously but also under  
45 the rubric of region-wide *sabhas*. The All India Kisan Sabha was founded to  
46 represent the peasants, tenant farmers and farm workers. Workers formed

1 local unions, which later coalesced into the All India Trade Union Congress.  
2 The Indian business community founded the Federation of Indian Chambers  
3 of Commerce and Industry.

4 The numbers of educated Indians expanded but their economic prospects  
5 remained dim. Existing rules made it harder for them to get civil service jobs,  
6 especially in the senior ranks. The new middle class—teachers, civil servants,  
7 students, lawyers, health personnel, journalists—organized and wrote  
8 petitions demanding equality with their European counterparts. They joined  
9 broader nationalistic struggles and engaged with political parties and national  
10 civic organizations. Indian scholars, writers, poets, philosophers, doctors,  
11 scientists and economists articulated visions for a free, democratic India with  
12 a developed economy and global standing. The prose and poetry of  
13 Rabindranath Tagore, Muhammad Iqbal, Kavi Pradeep and many others  
14 elegantly captured people’s desire for freedom and a better existence. The  
15 intelligentsia provided the bulk of the leadership of the cultural, regional and  
16 class-based political parties. While they were instrumental in the germination  
17 of a national consciousness, their diverse political visions also exercised a  
18 divisive influence on the struggle for freedom.

19 Direct rule by the British crown refined and entrenched the divide-and-rule  
20 system of the Company days. Instituted through religion, ethnicity and tribal  
21 affiliation, it fostered separatism, fortified the princely fiefdoms and buoyed  
22 the caste system. Religious antagonisms were exacerbated as well. By  
23 granting differing political status to princes, regions, religions, and ethnicities,  
24 it pitted Indian against Indian, and strove to delay the flowering of a national  
25 consciousness and Pan-India organizations. In return for lives of luxury and  
26 distinct status, the rajas and princes espoused loyalty to the British rulers,  
27 influencing their subjects to do the same.

28 But the process could not be stifled. Unpopular taxes and levies like the  
29 salt tax, strict rules on what people could produce, and forceful suppression  
30 of groups with moderate demands catalyzed the emergence of nationalistic  
31 political organizations. At first, they sought equality and betterment within the  
32 colonial order but eventually agitated for Indian self-rule (*swaraj*).

33 The Indian National Congress (INC) was the most prominent movement.  
34 Founded in 1885, and led by MK Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru after the  
35 1920s, it was the first organization to acquire a broad base in virtually all the  
36 strata of the Indian society. From demanding fair treatment and opportunities  
37 for progress within the colonial system, its program evolved to fighting for  
38 complete independence from Britain. While the INC promoted the rights and  
39 equal status for minority, under-privileged and discriminated groups like the  
40 Dalits and women, and a socialistic form of economic system, the patronage  
41 of the wealthy classes diluted its transformative agenda.

42 Left wing parties also played a key role in the Indian freedom struggle.  
43 Communists and nationalist radicals assumed the leadership of the All India  
44 Trade Union Congress in 1928. Becoming more militant, the union organized  
45 marches and strikes across India. Their protests as those of the peasants

1 often sparked violent uprisings. The colonial police responded with ferocious  
2 brutality in either case.

### 3 4 **5.8 MOHANDAS K GANDHI**

5  
6 The course of the final four decades of the struggle for freedom in India and  
7 its outcome were inextricably linked to the life, outlook and actions of one  
8 man, Mohandas K Gandhi. He not only transformed India but also exercised  
9 a major impact on Hinduism and relations between religious groups in India.

10 Born in 1869, Gandhi spent his childhood in Gujarat, India. His father was  
11 the chief minister of a small princely state. An avid reader of Indian classics,  
12 he was deeply affected by his intensely Hindu mother for whom daily prayers,  
13 extended fasting and keeping difficult vows were a way of life. While just an  
14 innocent thirteen-year-old, he, his brother and cousin went through a joint  
15 arranged marriage ceremony. His wife was a year older than him. When he  
16 was sixteen and still attending school, the couple had their first baby.

17 Encouraged and financially supported by his brother, a lawyer, he went  
18 to the heartland of the British Empire to study law at the University College of  
19 London. A diligent, reserved eighteen-year-old, he often became tongue-tied  
20 when he had to speak in public. Shortly, he joined the London Vegetarian  
21 Society and came into contact with members of the Theosophical Society. It  
22 was upon their urging that he read, for the first time, the *Bhagavad Gita* in  
23 Sanskrit and English. The seeds of his social and political outlook were laid  
24 through immersion into Vedic literature and reflections on the philosophy of  
25 universal brotherhood espoused by the Society. The works of Leo Tolstoy,  
26 which he read several years later, also contributed to his ethical and spiritual  
27 vision.

28 After admission to the Bar at the age of twenty-two, he returned to India  
29 to practice law. His reserved countenance and obstacles placed by colonial  
30 officials did not bode well for his practice. But after securing a contract from a  
31 Muslim merchant to act as the defense lawyer for a cousin in South Africa,  
32 his fortunes changed.

33 Gandhi was expecting to spend a year in South Africa. Instead, he spent  
34 most of the next twenty-one years in a place where discrimination based on  
35 the color of skin reigned supreme. The humiliating treatment he faced from  
36 white South Africans in the street and during the course of his work and his  
37 struggles to counter the social restrictions faced by the Indians begot a new  
38 Gandhi. A politically naive family man focused on conventional legal practice  
39 morphed into a committed, charismatic leader of hundreds of millions, a man  
40 of unparalleled integrity and courage. His devotion to the philosophy of non-  
41 violence as the main tool for promoting social change turned him into a global  
42 icon for freedom from colonial rule and human equality.

43 Upon urgings from local Indians, he extended his stay and began to take  
44 up cases of broader social import. His first major case related to a proposed  
45 law to curb the voting rights of Indians. He petitioned the British Colonial  
46 Secretary to reverse the law. From a personal injury attorney, he evolved into

1 a social justice activist. His purview extended from purely legal matters to  
2 political philosophy. His role in founding the Natal Indian Congress in 1894  
3 signaled his formal entry into politics. In 1906, he led a campaign to oppose  
4 mandatory registration for Indians and Chinese in Transvaal. His call for non-  
5 violent civil disobedience reverberated in mass meetings and marches.

6 Yet, at that time Gandhi devoted his attention to the plight of the Indian  
7 community in South Africa. Apart from assisting the wounded Zulu warriors  
8 during the British assault on the Zulus, he did little to redress the plight of the  
9 African majority. His writings at times portrayed them in racist terms. But in  
10 the latter half of his stay, he began to change. He had been disgusted by the  
11 retributive treatment meted out to the Zulu people when they revolted against  
12 the British. At a public gathering in Johannesburg in 1908, he envisioned a  
13 multi-racial future:

14  
15 *If we look into the future, is it not a heritage we have to leave*  
16 *to posterity that all the different races commingle and produce*  
17 *a civilization that perhaps the world has not yet seen? MK*  
18 *Gandhi (Reddy 2019).*

19  
20 In 1912, Gandhi hailed the founding of the African National Congress as ‘*the*  
21 *awakening of Africa*’ and penned articles condemning the racist oppression  
22 of the African people, whom he designated as ‘*the sons of the soil*’. He also  
23 conferred with leading African activists, discussed the tactics of the struggle  
24 against their common foe, and provided greater international publicity for the  
25 ANC.

26 As his pro-British acts during the Boer war indicated, throughout his stay  
27 in South Africa, Gandhi regarded himself as a loyal subject of the British  
28 Empire. But the unfolding events gradually chipped away into that mentality  
29 and his disillusionment with the Empire rose incrementally.

30 By the time of his return to his homeland in 1915, he was famed as a  
31 principled nationalist and community activist. Immediately joining the Indian  
32 National Congress (INC), he made his mark. In 1917, he joined the struggles  
33 of the peasants of Bihar against local and British landlords. Forced to grow  
34 low-priced crops with poor yields, their conditions were dire. The non-violent  
35 campaign he organized secured some benefits for the rural poor. In 1918, he  
36 engaged with the peasants of Kheda affected by food shortages, flooding and  
37 high taxes. Joined by INC notables, he launched a series of broad-based non-  
38 cooperation actions. Local tax collectors were ostracized. The peasants  
39 vowed to not pay taxes. After five months of sustained struggle, the British  
40 granted some concessions. Jailed activists were set free and tax collection  
41 was deferred until the famine had ended. Uprisings by peasants and tenant  
42 farmers were a regular feature of Indian colonial life. Gandhi’s interventions  
43 into labor disputes in Indian and British owned factories also resulted in  
44 somewhat better work conditions and wages for the workers.

45 In 1920, he assumed the presidency of the INC. Previously the elitist party  
46 had focused on writing petitions. Under him, it became a base for mass



1 activism. Instead of seeking betterment within the system, it championed full  
2 independence. Civil disobedience and non-violent resistance (*satyagraha*)  
3 embodied the main strategy for securing that goal.

4 Progress was uneven. Disputes between conservatives, moderates and  
5 radicals led to splits. Yet, the popularity of the INC kept rising. Gandhi's aura,  
6 energy, activism, devotion to civil-disobedience, promotion of Hindu-Muslim  
7 cooperation and his desire for broad-based national unity attracted millions.  
8 Support from Jawaharlal Nehru, SV Patel and SC Bose and other prominent  
9 nationalists enhanced his appeal.

10 Though he subsequently ceded formal office to Nehru and others, Gandhi  
11 remained the undisputed leader of the freedom struggle in India until his death  
12 in 1947. A landmark statement declaring that complete independence was  
13 the party's prime objective was issued in 1929. But radical elements in the  
14 party were not satisfied. They perceived his stand as too gradualist and  
15 accommodating towards the colonial rulers.

### 16 + Philosophy +

17  
18  
19 Gandhi's philosophy was encapsulated in two words: *Satyagraha* (truth force)  
20 and *Ahimsa* (nonviolence towards all living beings). His rules for ethical and  
21 moral conduct encompassed: faith in God and the goodness of human  
22 beings; active non-violence; respect for and adherence to truth; non-  
23 possessive, simple living; honest conduct; respect for manual labor; avoiding  
24 indulgence; curtailing sexual desire; discipline and fearlessness; confronting  
25 injustice with non-cooperation and boycotts; equal respect for all faiths; and  
26 better treatment of lower caste people.

27 His political tactics included public speeches, articles for newspapers,  
28 appeals to the people, petitioning the British authorities in India and Britain,  
29 undertaking short and long marches, breaking unjust laws and asking his  
30 followers to do the same. When appeals or marches had no effect, he fasted,  
31 often for days, becoming weak and emaciated. And often, it worked. The  
32 British realized that a dead Gandhi would be much more dangerous than a  
33 living one. They would not be able to contain the ensuing public anger, in  
34 India and abroad. It was better to give in, make moderate concessions and  
35 backtrack later on. He undertook seventeen major fasts and innumerable  
36 minor fasts in the course of his political career. The first two were in South  
37 Africa and the rest, in India. On three occasions, the fast lasted twenty-one  
38 days.

39



## Lord Mahavir: The Torchbearer of *Ahimsa*

1  
2  
3  
4 Gandhi's vision and politics did not emerge overnight. His attitude and  
5 reactions to social and political issues were refined as he engaged in the  
6 struggles of his era. And, critically, they were tainted with minor and major  
7 contradictions. His religious outlook had both a positive and a negative effect  
8 on his leadership.  
9

10 **Nonviolence:** During the Anglo-Boer war in South Africa, Gandhi and fellow  
11 Indian volunteers organized a stretcher service to ferry the injured to  
12 hospitals. Though it operated from the British side, it catered to the needs of  
13 both warring factions and carried, to the displeasure of the racists, white and  
14 African wounded.

15 The British had employed Indian soldiers not just for internal suppression  
16 but also for battles in Asia and Africa. As World War I began, large numbers  
17 of Indian fighters on fronts stretching from Europe to Africa and Asia were  
18 needed. Enthusiastic support of Indian rajas and princes was easily gained.  
19 Under the rationale that loyalty at such a time would generate concessions  
20 later on, the nationalist parties in India chimed in to support the war effort.  
21 Non-cooperation and other moves to oppose colonial rule slowed.

22 The British Viceroy met with Gandhi to garner his support. Though Gandhi  
23 had articulated his firm commitment to non-violence with clarity by then, he  
24 now openly encouraged Indians to enlist in the British army. He justified his  
25 stand on the basis of necessary self-defense. While personally he would  
26 never fight, if the cause was just, he would not oppose others from pursuing  
27 violent means. While in England during the war, he took actions to support  
28 the British forces. Noting the involvement of more than a million Indians in a  
29 horrific conflagration that consumed tens of millions of lives, the *guru* of non-  
30 violence opined:

31  
32 *Home Rule without military power was useless, and this was*  
33 *the best opportunity to get it.* MK Gandhi (Kant 2014).  
34

35 But in the years leading up to and during World War II, Gandhi's position on  
36 non-violence became unequivocal. Appealing to all nations to avoid war, he

1 said that should a war breakout, people should use non-violent means to  
2 counter it.

3 Despite dissent from some INC leaders and the possibility of a Japanese  
4 invasion, he espoused noncooperation with any aspect of the British war  
5 effort. He focused on ending colonial rule, not on currying concessions from  
6 the colonialists. Together with major INC leaders, he launched the mass-  
7 based Quit India Movement. In response, the authorities put him and the INC  
8 leaders behind bars. They remained there for the duration of the war.

9 Gandhi's vision of and adherence to *Ahimsa* became more consistent and  
10 inviolable in the last two decades of his life. He held that no one, not even the  
11 most brutish despot, was immune to its power. Making amiable but firm  
12 appeals to Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini to desist from aggression, he  
13 urged Britons and Polish people to face the invading forces with non-violent  
14 resistance.

15  
16 *There is no bravery greater than a resolute refusal to bend the*  
17 *knee to an earthly power, no matter how great, and that*  
18 *without bitterness of spirit and in the fullness of faith that the*  
19 *spirit alone lives, nothing else does.* MK Gandhi (Paxton  
20 2017).

21  
22 Noble as it was, Gandhi's stand was imbued with political naiveté. Equating  
23 the habitual violence of the oppressor with the reactive violence of the  
24 oppressed, he at times admonished the latter in harsher terms. He urged  
25 them to have stronger moral resolve. That he did not resolutely oppose the  
26 execution of Bhagat Singh and his compatriots is a dour stain on his record.  
27 His critical words at times demoralized the activists and the masses and  
28 undercut unified militant struggles on the ground. A mutiny by Indian sailors  
29 in the British navy occurred at a crucial juncture in WW II. The British may  
30 well have made major concessions to the Independence movement. Yet,  
31 Gandhi's opposition to the mutiny enabled them to delay Independence to  
32 when they could grant it on terms more beneficial to themselves. His blanket  
33 espousal of non-violence at times solidified existent communal schisms  
34 which later had singularly violent repercussions.

35  
36 **Hindu-Muslim Unity:** Gandhi was a firm proponent of a unified India in which  
37 all religions would have an equal status. In South Africa and India, he  
38 advocated unity between Hindus and Muslims. Experience and history had  
39 taught him that division between the major religions would be of detriment to  
40 both and play into the hands of the colonialists.

41 The policy of divide and rule enabled the British to rule millions with only  
42 a few thousand of the colonizers. Hindu and Muslim had stood together in the  
43 1857 uprising against the British India Company. Cognizant of the power of  
44 unity, the British systematically fomented communal and political antipathies  
45 in the aftermath.

1        Around the time Gandhi returned from South Africa, the main figures of  
2 each of these communities, including MA Jinnah, GK Gokhale and AG Khan,  
3 and the major political organizations like the INC and the All India Azad  
4 Muslim Conference, stood for interfaith unity and a unified India.



6  
7                                  MK Gandhi and Abdul Gaffar Khan

8  
9        But religious bigots existed on both the sides. VD Savarkar, an anti-British  
10 lawyer and activist, espoused India as a nation based on the Hindu identity  
11 (*Hindutva*). Inspired by his writings, the Indian doctor KB Hedgewar founded  
12 the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) in 1925. Declaring Hinduism as  
13 the national faith, the RSS favored mandatory observance of Hindu customs.  
14 India had to reject foreign cultural and religious influences, in particular Islam  
15 and Christianity. The RSS considered the stands of Gandhi and the INC as  
16 too moderate.

17        Feeling that working within the INC would not adequately protect the civil  
18 and political rights of the Muslim community, Aga Khan III and Nawab S Khan  
19 founded the All-India Muslim League in 1906. It was also supported by  
20 prominent Muslim lawyers and leaders. Despite his close ties with the British,  
21 Aga Khan III became its first president. His advocacy of expanded higher  
22 educational opportunities for Muslims was soon embraced by the League.

23        One of the first political tasks the League undertook was to lobby for a  
24 separate voting system and guaranteed seats for Muslims in the Imperial  
25 Council and provincial councils across India. The demands were accepted in  
26 1909 but not to the level desired by the League. Separate electorate systems  
27 for Hindus and Muslims laid the foundation of what later became an  
28 unbridgeable gap between these communities.

29        Until the late 1930s, the Muslim League was an elitist organization. Quite  
30 a number of Muslims activists and leaders remained within the ranks of the  
31 Indian National Congress. Until the outbreak of World War II, the students  
32 and faculty at the Aligarh Muslim University, a bastion of Muslim scholarship,  
33 had favored a united, free India. In the provincial elections of 1937, the INC  
34 won majority votes in eight of the eleven provinces while the Muslim League  
35 failed to form a government even in states where Muslims were a substantial

1 portion of the population. The vote signified the affinity of ordinary Muslims to  
2 a united India led by Gandhi and the INC.

3 However, the inability of the luminaries of the two parties to reconcile their  
4 differences and contain outbreaks of deadly communal riots in the 1920s took  
5 its toll. An economic basis for such strife prevailed as in some places, the  
6 large landlords were upper caste Hindus, but the tenants were mostly Muslim.  
7 Uprisings from below acquired a religious flavor.

8 Muhammad Iqbal, a renowned Muslim poet, philosopher and senior figure  
9 in the Muslim League proposed a separate state for the Muslims of India. The  
10 year was 1930 and Aga Khan III supported it. The separatist tendency  
11 received a decisive boost after 1939 when the leadership of the INC was  
12 jailed for not cooperating with the British war effort. Differing with the INC, the  
13 Muslim League, now led by MA Jinnah, supported the colonial rulers. In  
14 return, it acquired the freedom to engage in mobilization drives and secure  
15 votes. And that paid off. In the elections held after the end of the War, the  
16 League secured virtually the entire Muslim vote. Separatism triumphed at the  
17 top and grassroots levels, and the prospects of peaceful Hindu Muslim  
18 coexistence dimmed precipitously. A catastrophic chapter in the nation's  
19 history was about to unfold.

20 The partition of India and formation of Pakistan in 1947 occurred in the  
21 context of a truly barbaric episode. Rivers of blood flowed as neighbor killed  
22 neighbor. Homes were looted and burned; women were raped. More than a  
23 million Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and others lost their lives. And more than  
24 fifteen million relocated—in both directions—far from their ancestral homes  
25 to distant lands.

26 To further his goal to promote Hindu-Muslim unity, Gandhi had fasted on  
27 three occasions. The first, in 1924, lasted twenty-one days. It was ended  
28 while the Quran and the *Bhagavad Gita* were being read. As the partition  
29 rampage began, he fasted twice. Yet, the murderous rage went on. And a  
30 short while later, he was downed by a bullet from a Hindu extremist who felt  
31 Gandhi had compromised too much with the Muslims. His assassin remains  
32 an RSS hero to this day.

33  
34 **Caste:** In principle, Gandhi, Nehru and much of the leadership of the INC  
35 opposed discriminatory treatment of the under-privileged sections of society,  
36 especially the Dalits. Caste differences did not exist in Gandhi's residential  
37 estate (*ashram*). His campaigns to enable the Dalits access Hindu temples  
38 and common drinking wells without hindrance earned him many followers. He  
39 fasted on four occasions, once for twenty-one days, in relation to the status  
40 of the Dalits in Indian society.

41 BR Ambedkar, a Dalit and a towering statesman in the freedom struggle,  
42 did not see eye to eye with Gandhi. Untouchability had to be fought, in his  
43 view, in tandem with the struggle for national independence and with equal  
44 import and attention. For him, what Gandhi was doing was too little.

45 Gandhi's first fast in relation to the rights of the Dalits was to oppose a  
46 proposed law that would institute a separate voting process and reserved

1 seats in provincial councils for the Dalits. It was supported by Ambedkar and  
2 other Dalit leaders, but Gandhi felt that it would undermine national unity and  
3 impede the attainment of national independence. The fast was a success.  
4 Ambedkar reluctantly caved in and the British removed the relevant clause  
5 from the law.

6 Commentators from left to right shades of political opinion cite this fast as  
7 an instance of Gandhi's lukewarm support for the Dalit people. That, in my  
8 view, was not so. The British had no special regard for the Dalits. They were  
9 simply pursuing their time honored, invidious policy of divide and rule to  
10 weaken the independence movement. Earlier, by granting special vote and  
11 seats to the Muslims, they had institutionalized the Hindu-Muslim divide in  
12 India. Now they were taking a step further and drawing Dalits within their net.

13 The right to vote ought not to derive from religion, culture, race, gender  
14 or ethnicity. You vote as a citizen, as any citizen. Martin Luther King did not  
15 fight for special seats in the US Congress for African Americans. He fought  
16 for a system in which racist barriers in all walks of life were disbanded. It was  
17 unthinkable for a politician in the UK to advocate separate voting systems for  
18 Catholics and Protestants. Yet, in India the British had no qualms about  
19 breaching a major democratic norm. In Tanzania, the British established a  
20 racialized allocation of seats in the legislative assembly. But it was rightly  
21 opposed by the main nationalist party under the leadership of Julius Nyerere.  
22 The colonial brand of democracy differed from the home brand.

23 By taking the stand he did, Gandhi not only upheld sound democratic  
24 principles but also was prescient. The move would only institutionalize the  
25 subordinate status of the Dalits and continue to relegate them to the bottom  
26 rungs of the society.

27  
28 **Capitalism:** Gandhi supported peasant, tenant farmer and worker struggles  
29 against exploitative conditions. He organized marches and boycotts and led  
30 disobedience drives against local and British landowners and capitalists. And  
31 he advocated improved social status for the lower caste people.

32 Gandhi articulated his vision for the economic system for independent  
33 India with clarity in an interview with a French journalist in 1931. In response  
34 to a series of pointed questions, he declared that the princes, landowners,  
35 industrialists and bankers in India had acquired their wealth by exploiting the  
36 masses, and without such exploitation, they could only accumulate a limited  
37 amount of wealth. They had no right to live in luxury off the sweat of others.  
38 However, he opposed a violent revolution because a real change could be  
39 attained only through non-violent means. And that, he said, was what he was  
40 working for. While he did not detail his program, he opined that the socialist  
41 system in the USSR was not sustainable as it was based on coercion. He  
42 favored a system in which the wealthy would retain their wealth but, as  
43 'trustees' and use it for the benefit of the masses. He also did not equate the  
44 British landlords with the Indian landlords.

45

1           *If I come to power, I shall certainly abolish capitalism, but I*  
2           *shall not abolish capital, and it follows that I shall not abolish*  
3           *the capitalists. I am convinced that the coordination of capital*  
4           *and labor is perfectly possible. I have seen it realized in some*  
5           *cases, and what is true in one case can become true for all. I*  
6           *do not consider capital in itself as an evil, no more than I*  
7           *consider the machine system in itself as an evil.* MK Gandhi  
8           (Petrasch 1932).  
9

10 Gandhi's accommodating opinion of the wealthy classes was reflected in the  
11 composition of the Indian National Congress. From its inception, it functioned  
12 as an umbrella organization integrating all economic and social segments of  
13 the Indian society. But while the lower, middle and upper classes all stood for  
14 a free India, their long-term goals diverged in a significant manner. The INC's  
15 economic agenda was compromised by this uneasy alliance. Due to the  
16 patronage of the wealthy, and Gandhi's association with them, it failed to  
17 place issues like excessive land rent, indebtedness of the rural poor and  
18 abolition of the *zamindari* system, abolition of the caste system, the *sine qua*  
19 *non* for improving the lives of the rural poor, at the center of its priorities.

20         The INC had radical, moderate and conservative elements among its  
21 leadership and rank and file activists. Leftist activists in the INC, many drawn  
22 from the Communist Party of India that had been founded in 1925, played a  
23 prominent role in the formation and actions of peasant and worker groups.  
24 But under Gandhi's influence, their room for maneuver within the INC was  
25 limited. Later they were expelled from the Congress, mainly due to their  
26 support for the British War effort and the right of religious and other minorities  
27 for statehood.

28         Most senior leaders of the INC had moderate socialist orientations and  
29 stood for a social democratic system in which the state would play a major  
30 role in stimulating economic development, nationalize major industries,  
31 improve the living conditions of the masses, expand education and health  
32 services for the urban and rural poor, protect the civil rights of the minorities  
33 and the discriminated communities under a multi-party democratic political  
34 system.

35         During World War II, the British obtained support from critical sections of  
36 the India society. Particularly, the Indian business groups who stood to profit  
37 from lucrative wartime contracts set aside their nationalistic aspirations.  
38 Indian elites within the colonial government and its institutions, like members  
39 of the Viceroy's Council, senior civil servants, officers in the police and the  
40 army together with the *rajahs* and *nawabs*, and two influential Hindu and  
41 Muslim political parties—the Hindu Mahasabha and the All India Muslim  
42 League—also sided with the colonizers, considerably reducing the support  
43 for the Quit India Movement.

44         After Hitler attacked the Soviet Union, the Communist Party of India allied  
45 itself with the British war effort. Its leaders were released from custody, and  
46 it lost much of its credibility. SC Bose, the radical nationalist who had been

1 the President of the INC in 1938 and 1939, went to the other extreme. Due  
2 to major differences with Gandhi over strategy, he and the radical socialist  
3 groups were expelled from the INC. His strident opposition of the British war  
4 effort led to placement under house arrest. After managing to escape, he  
5 sought the help of Germany and Japan to establish the Indian National Army  
6 to fight the British and evict them from India. A hero among radical student  
7 groups in India, he managed to set up a force of about 3,000 soldiers. But his  
8 provisional government based in Singapore could not gain a significant  
9 standing within the Indian nationalist movement. Bose died in 1946 from  
10 injuries sustained in an air crash.

11 Gandhi and Bose opposed the British war program but adopted different  
12 ways to counter it. Gandhi wrote appeals to Hitler to change his aggressive  
13 ways. Bose thought that Germany and Japan would not only aid the fight  
14 against the British but also permit the existence of a free India once the war  
15 had ended. Both harbored illusions about the nature of fascism.

16 A primary feature of the anti-colonial movements almost everywhere was  
17 that they were loose alliances of classes, ethnic and religious groups. Once  
18 political freedom was attained, each faction within the hitherto united entity  
19 strove to dominate the state, economy and society. The interests of the  
20 capitalists conflicted with those of the masses. Driven by the profit motive,  
21 the capitalist class thrives by exploiting the masses. It is never a benevolent  
22 trustee.

23 In the post-colonial setting, however, the capitalist class was constrained  
24 by several inherited realities. Having been subordinated to foreign capital, it  
25 was weak. In places, socialist or communist parties had a strong popular  
26 following. And in places, the popular nationalist party leadership had strong  
27 social democratic aspirations. Nationalized and newly formed public firms  
28 played a large role in the economy. Services like health, education and water  
29 supply were free or subsidized. It was then a standard formula for economic  
30 development.

31 The half-way social democratic policies were over time whittled away by  
32 foreign and local capital. Capital progressively asserted command over state  
33 power. Under neoliberalism, economic inequality rose precipitously. A small  
34 middle class had come into being, but the masses languished in relative and  
35 absolute misery. It is the story of modern-day Africa, Asia and Latin America.  
36 And it is the story of modern-day India as well.

37 Gandhi's vision of capitalists as trustees of the social wealth in a system  
38 based on traditional modes of rural cooperation and intermediate technology  
39 was not unique. It appeared in many guises in post-colonial nations. Aspects  
40 of this mode of thinking was the basis of the rise of social-democratic parties  
41 and the welfare state, the Euro-Communist movement of the 1970s, various  
42 brands of African socialism in Africa like Julius Nyerere's policy of *Ujamaa* in  
43 Tanzania as well as Nehru's policies in India. The leaders claimed they did  
44 not follow the capitalist or the communist path. But in the long run, the poor  
45 suffered and the capitalists, internal and external, prospered.



1 **Religion:** Gandhi was a devout Hindu, who venerated the *Bhagavad Gita*,  
2 dutifully performed Hindu rites, and saw Hinduism as a particularly exalted  
3 religion.

4  
5 *My religion is Hinduism which, for me, is the religion of*  
6 *humanity and includes the best of all religions known to me.*

7 MK Gandhi  
8

9 Gandhi conceptualized Hinduism more abstractly than Hindu sages such as  
10 Swami Vivekananda who pared it down to four essential elements: belief in  
11 the Supreme Being, the Vedas, karma and rebirth. Though venerated as a  
12 Mahatma (Great Soul) by hundreds of millions of Hindus, his Hinduism was  
13 distant from how they perceived and practiced it. When asked to define  
14 Hinduism, Gandhi distilled its essence into one key tenet:

15  
16 *Search after Truth through non-violent means.*

17 MK Gandhi  
18

19 Gandhi espoused full tolerance and respect for all faiths. Upon an inquiry if  
20 he was a Hindu, he replied:

21  
22 *Yes, I am, I am also a Muslim, a Christian, a Buddhist, and a*  
23 *Jew.*

24 MK Gandhi  
25

26 Some prominent figures in the Indian independence movement and the INC  
27 took a rather different stand on Hinduism. **Jawaharlal Nehru**, later the first  
28 Prime Minister of India was, like Gandhi, a nationalist opposed to communal  
29 violence. But he was an avowed secular humanist who despised the caste  
30 system and rejected belief in life after death. While Gandhi died with name of  
31 Lord Ram on his lips, Nehru asked for a non-religious burial in his will. A keen  
32 student of history, Nehru noted that religion had two divergent facets:

33  
34 *In the name of religion many great and fine deeds have been*  
35 *performed. In the name of religion also, thousands and millions*  
36 *have been killed, and every possible crime has been*  
37 *committed.*

38 J Nehru  
39

40 Arguing that organized religion inculcated blind obedience to authority, he  
41 called it a barrier to progress.

42  
43 *No country or people who are slaves to dogma and dogmatic*  
44 *mentality can progress, and unhappily our country and people*  
45 *have become extraordinarily dogmatic and little-minded. J*  
46 *Nehru (HUK 2022).*

1  
2 Though a strong believer in science, Nehru respected the moral principles  
3 laid down in the Hindu scriptures. With a spiritualist streak, he had high regard  
4 for Buddhism. And he was a firm believer in religious freedom.

5  
6 *If any person raises his hand to strike down another on the*  
7 *ground of religion, I shall fight him till the last breath of my life,*  
8 *both as the head of the government and from the outside.*

9 J Nehru

10  
11 **BR Ambedkar**, also a towering figure in the independence movement and  
12 the first Minister of Justice in Nehru's cabinet, differed more with Gandhi on  
13 the issues of religion and Dalits. Of Dalit heritage, he was a spiritually inclined  
14 humanist who felt that Gandhi's policies on better treatment of Dalits were  
15 too moderate. Regarding Hinduism as such a barrier against equality for  
16 Dalits, he urged the Dalit community to abandon Hinduism and adopt, like he  
17 later did, Buddhism.

18  
19 *Religion compels the Hindus to treat isolation and segregation*  
20 *of castes as a virtue.... If Hindus wish to break caste, their*  
21 *religion will come in their way.* BR Ambedkar

22  
23 While Gandhi regarded Hinduism as an embodiment of the Truth, Ambedkar  
24 felt it was too rigid an outlook:

25  
26 *In Hinduism, conscience, reason and independent thinking*  
27 *have no scope for development.*

28 BR Ambedkar

29  
30 Bhagat Singh, a Marxist militant who was executed by the British, stood for  
31 interfaith harmony and freedom of religion. He was particularly cognizant of  
32 the retrogressive social role of religions, including Hinduism:

33  
34 *[All] religions, faiths, theological philosophies, and religious*  
35 *creeds and all other such institutions in the long run become*  
36 *supporters of the tyrannical and exploiting institutions, men*  
37 *and classes.*

38 Bhagat Singh

39  
40 Nonetheless, Gandhi, Nehru, Ambedkar and Singh set their theological  
41 differences aside and persevered in unison on a common nationalist platform  
42 to oust the British from India. Unity on secular and humanistic endeavors amid  
43 religious diversity is eminent attainable. But that lesson has been lost in the  
44 religiously charged atmosphere under the BJP rule in India.

45

1 **Women's Rights:** Gandhi's role in the struggle for women's rights is  
2 discussed in a later section.

3  
4 **Legacy:** Gandhi was not a saint. He was a human being afflicted with human  
5 frailties. But he was a truly exceptional human being. His commitment to the  
6 right of peoples to determine their own destiny, non-violence, removal of  
7 discriminatory barriers and promotion of a society based on equality was,  
8 despite some shortcomings, sincere, persistent and rock solid.

9 Gandhi was a man of his words. He advocated simplicity and lived a frugal  
10 life. He was capable of extreme levels of self-sacrifice, like fasting unto death.  
11 After a fast to protest communal riots in 1921, he made a vow to fast for 24  
12 hours every Monday until the British rule in India ended. And that he did for  
13 the next twenty-six years, until his death. Albert Einstein's verdict on MK  
14 Gandhi sums up his unique stature:

15  
16 *Generations to come, it may well be,*  
17 *will scarce believe that such a man as this one*  
18 *ever in flesh and blood walked upon this Earth.*  
19 Albert Einstein on MK Gandhi

## 20 21 **5.9 HINDUISM IN MODERN INDIA**

22  
23 Presently, 80% of the Indians are Hindu; 15% are Muslim; and Buddhists,  
24 Sikhs, Christians, Jains and others form the remaining 5%. In modern India,  
25 the practice of Hinduism is affected by the economic and political conditions  
26 in the nation.

27  
28 **Economy:** By any measure, India is a key player in the world economy. The  
29 annual growth rate of the Indian GDP in recent years has exceeded 6%. Its  
30 huge industrial, agricultural, service, computer and information technology,  
31 transport, mining and entertainment sectors employ millions. Some Indian  
32 corporations, especially those in the IT sector, are leading global actors. Yet,  
33 nearly 70% of the people reside in the rural areas, who mostly derive their  
34 livelihood from small-scale farming.

35 On a per person basis, Indians in general are comparatively poor. In 2019,  
36 China's per capita income was almost \$10,000 while that of India was just  
37 about \$2,000. A wide regional variation in poverty rates exists: the poorest  
38 Indian states have one-fifth of the average income of the richest states. But  
39 the most critical divide is between a small class of billionaires and multi-  
40 millionaires, and the hundreds of millions eking out a miserable existence.

41 Economic inequality and mass poverty have afflicted India for a long time.  
42 But the neoliberal policies instituted after 1991 have dramatically magnified  
43 the gap between the rich and the poor. The major political parties and all the  
44 regional parties are wedded to neoliberalism.

45 Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)  
46 a new dimension has been added. Since 2014:

1  
2 [already] thriving billionaires added more billions to their net  
3 worth. Those who were not doing so well were given a helping  
4 hand to retain their wealth. Those who were not billionaires to  
5 begin with, were lifted to be included in the billionaire wealth  
6 bracket by the Modi government. (Srujana 2019).  
7

8 In 2012, the top 10% of the richest Indians owned 73%, and the top 1% owned  
9 49% of the nation's wealth. By 2019, these figures stood at 80% and 59%.  
10 There are 120 billionaires in India now, up from 9 in 2000. But it is not a tale  
11 of astute entrepreneurs leveraging market forces to their advantage. Crony  
12 capitalism, corruption, tax evasion and favors from the state divert the social  
13 wealth to the top bracket. Outright fraud is also a part of the process.

14 Vijay Mallya, who amassed his fortune in the liquor business, fled in 2016  
15 after charges of defaulting on dubious loans worth \$1.4 billion surfaced. Nirav  
16 Modi, a billionaire engaged diamond and jewelry business with a global reach,  
17 featured in a bank fraud case amounting to \$1.8 billion. And that is just the tip  
18 of an iceberg. There were more than 5,000 businessmen who had defaulted  
19 on loans worth nearly \$9 billion from public sector banks in 2017. Such  
20 misdeeds are rarely pursued by the authorities as many culprits have strong  
21 ties with the state and the political establishment.

22 During the first five years of BJP rule, the wealth of M Ambani rose from  
23 \$23 billion to \$55 billion, and of Modi's close associate, G Adani, went up from  
24 \$2.5 billion to \$12 billion. Timely change of regulatory rules, major state  
25 contracts, concessionary, restructured loans with long payment periods, new  
26 pricing systems, official pitches in foreign nations, over-invoicing, and undue  
27 dismissal of fraud cases have enabled their companies to expand rapidly and  
28 raise their assets.  
29

30 *If we are counting the beneficiaries of five years of BJP rule,*  
31 *one must not forget Baba Ramdev. Unlike others who have*  
32 *been billionaires before Modi came to power, the PM can*  
33 *claim credit for singlehandedly turning this baba in to a*  
34 *billionaire. (Srujana 2019).*  
35

36 Baba Ramdev is an internationally famed yoga guru whose TV shows attract  
37 millions in India and abroad. The owner of two large yoga training campuses,  
38 he has taught yoga to prominent personalities from many nations. His family  
39 company packages a range of common and esoteric consumer goods. A  
40 decade ago, he initiated a high-profile campaign against official corruption  
41 and illegal financial transactions that rattled the corridors of power. But the  
42 misdeeds of the business sector got sparse attention in the campaign.

43 In the 2014 elections, he threw his weight behind Modi and the BJP, thus  
44 influencing the votes of millions of his followers and viewers. Their victory  
45 altered the fortunes of his company. Its product line expanded, and sales  
46 skyrocketed. Marketing Ayurveda medicines and other goods claimed to be

1 reflecting Hindu values is a major selling point. Extensive acreage of public  
2 land and facilities at below market rates and free security services boosted  
3 company profits. By 2019, Ramdev was a newly minted billionaire with assets  
4 worth \$6 billion. He had also advised the Modi government on policy issues  
5 like education and health care. His efforts to project a positive image of the  
6 rule of N Modi are well appreciated.

7 As the billionaires reap ample rewards and the middle class sees its  
8 income grow, the 800 million Indians at the bottom face deprivation and  
9 insecurity. Unemployment and underemployment are high. Recent initiatives  
10 to employ the rural poor, provide basic services and improve sanitation are  
11 dented with substandard practice and symbolism. While the country is a major  
12 exporter of medicinal drugs and destination for medical tourism, most ordinary  
13 Indians lack access to basic health care. High medical costs push millions  
14 into poverty. Infant mortality rates in the poorest Indian states are higher than  
15 in sub-Saharan Africa. Child labor and child marriages continue. Rural  
16 indebtedness is a biting concern. In the recent years, it has led to about  
17 250,000 farmer suicides. About a third of the Indians are functionally illiterate.  
18 Abysmal conditions, discrimination and anger against external projects in  
19 some areas have fueled armed rebellions. Strikes involving tens of millions  
20 have demanded payment of minimum wage, and improved work conditions.

21 The Human Development Index (HDI) combines factors relating to quality  
22 of life, longevity, mode of living and education. In terms of HDI, in 2019, India  
23 ranked 129th out of 189 nations. China ranked at 85.

24  
25 **Politics:** India is reputed as the world's largest democracy. Constitutionally,  
26 it is a secular state. Though four-fifths of the population is Hindu, India does  
27 not have an official religion. The basic law of the land supports religious  
28 pluralism. And it is against the law to conduct political campaigns on religious  
29 grounds.

30 Yet, religion plays a major role in Indian politics. Of recent, the influence  
31 of religion in politics has broken historic bounds. The key player behind that  
32 process has been the BJP under the leadership of Narendra Modi. The BJP  
33 is the political wing of *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS). Founded in  
34 1925 with the aim of promoting the Hindu identity (*Hindutva*), the RSS is now  
35 a formidable organization with 50,000 chapters throughout India. Deeming  
36 the religious diversity in India a product of foreign contamination, the RSS and  
37 BJP aim to make Hinduism the official religion of India. In a nation with 780  
38 languages, they want to make Hindi the national language of India. The  
39 tentacles of the RSS extend to the major trade unions, farmer unions and  
40 charity groups in the nation. Manned by half a million dedicated activists, it  
41 runs thousands of primary and secondary schools. The millions of young  
42 minds in RSS schools form a captive audience for its ideology. N Modi is a  
43 long-time member of the RSS.

44 Yet, as everywhere, politics in India is primarily affected by the economic  
45 relations in the society. The intrusion of money in politics has had a profound  
46 impact on its democratic system and the policies of the major political parties.

1 In particular, the religious aura of the BJP stands atop a strong pro-corporate  
2 neoliberal agenda that reflects the interests of the wealthy sectors of the  
3 Indian society. And they bankroll Modi and the BJP. The total annual income  
4 of the main Indian political parties in 2018 was about \$200 million. But lack of  
5 transparency shrouds the source of four-fifth of the amount. Undoubtedly,  
6 much of it is from the corporations and the rich. The main beneficiary of  
7 corporate largess has been the BJP as some 70% of the corporate donations  
8 in the 2019 elections are estimated to have gone to it.

9 Adequate financial resources enable a party to mount a publicity blitz and  
10 sway the voters. And it enables deployment of underhand tactics like creating  
11 smaller parties to undermine the opponent's vote. The BJP and its leader  
12 were also the prime beneficiaries of free sympathetic airtime and print space  
13 in the mainstream corporate media.

14 For the corporate sector, the returns on investment are worth it. Lucrative  
15 contracts, corporate friendly regulations, appointment to key governmental  
16 posts and more ensue. Indian corporations and business moguls exercise a  
17 decisive influence on policy and public opinion via control of the main media  
18 outlets, leveraging other media through advertising as well as by funding  
19 NGOs, film and holy festivals, think tanks and university research.

20 A massive, unrelenting barrage of laudatory messages from its parent  
21 body (the RSS) and financially weighty sources have managed to convince  
22 many Indians that N Modi is the savior the nation badly needs. Traditional  
23 democracy has not worked. India needs a strongman who will do what he  
24 says. Modi is the man to tackle mismanagement, corruption and inefficiency.  
25 His welfare programs show the way to development. He will raise the profile  
26 of India in the world. And so, they voted for him in massive numbers. The  
27 Congress and the left parties lost as never before, even in their long-time  
28 strongholds. Influential regional parties also wilted under the Modi aura.

29 The rise of authoritarian rightwing rule is a global trend. But it is more than  
30 a political trend. Everywhere it brings retrogressive and divisive tendencies  
31 that portend a bleak future. Use of religion has been a principal factor in that  
32 process.

33 The agenda of the RSS is to extricate India from external cultural and  
34 religious influences (Islam and Christianity) and form a nation governed by  
35 Hinduism. The policies of the BJP government are aligned to this agenda.  
36 This issue is elaborated in a point-by-point manner below:

37  
38 **Supremacy of Hinduism:** Taking strong action on issues over which Hindus  
39 and Muslims have long standing disputes is a key plank of the RSS/BJP  
40 strategy. The Babri *Masjid* (mosque) in Ayodhya, built in 1528, is a critical  
41 flashpoint. Hindu ideologues claim that the site on which it stands was the  
42 birthplace of Lord Ram. The existence of a Muslim house of worship at the  
43 site was thus sacrilegious. From the early days of Independence, they made  
44 return of that land to Hindu control a major political issue. After years of  
45 agitation, and in alliance with the RSS, the *Vishva Hindu Parishad* (VHP), an  
46 extremist Hindu organization, instigated a frenzied mob to descend on the

1 site with axes and hammers to demolish the mosque. The attack generated  
2 riots that left about 2,000 people dead. Most were Muslims. As the BJP made  
3 the issue into an electioneering point, its popularity soared. For the first time,  
4 it became a force to reckon with in the parliament.

5 Ten years on, upon a verbal altercation between Hindu passengers and  
6 Muslims at a station platform in a city in Gujarat, a burning object was tossed  
7 into a train compartment. Fifty-eight people died from burns or suffocation.  
8 Most of the dead were RSS supporters who had gone to the *Masjid* site to  
9 rally for the construction of a temple at that site.

10 With state governmental approval, RSS members paraded dead bodies  
11 in the street of Ahmedabad, the largest city in the state. The outcome was  
12 predictable. Enraged Hindu mobs descended upon Muslims. Homes were  
13 pillaged and families were attacked. Women were raped and murdered, and  
14 pregnant women had their bellies sliced open. Schools were not spared as  
15 children were set alight. One elderly Muslim politician was stripped, marched  
16 through city streets and dismembered. And, in an ugly historic novelty, Hindu  
17 women took a direct part in the plunder of Muslim shops.

18 The systematic, persistent nature of the attacks bore the signs of advance  
19 planning and official backing. N Modi was the Chief Minister of Gujrat at the  
20 time. As he did nothing until the situation was about to get out of hand, many  
21 human rights groups have accused him of encouraging the assaults.

22  
23 *The riots dragged on for nearly three months; when they were*  
24 *over, as many as two thousand people were dead and nearly*  
25 *a hundred and fifty thousand had been driven from their*  
26 *homes. The ethnic geography of Gujarat was transformed,*  
27 *with most of its Muslims crowded into slums. One slum formed*  
28 *inside the Ahmedabad dump, a vast landscape of trash and*  
29 *sewage that towered hundreds of feet in the air. .... After the*  
30 *riots, Modi's government did almost nothing to provide for the*  
31 *tens of thousands of Muslims forced from their homes; aid was*  
32 *supplied almost entirely by volunteers. .... In the following*  
33 *months, there were indications of substantial government*  
34 *complicity. .... A few officials claimed that the decision to*  
35 *encourage the riots came from Modi himself. .... But there was*  
36 *not much political will to pursue the evidence against Modi,*  
37 *and his accusers did not stay in the public eye for long. .... For*  
38 *Modi, the riots had a remarkable effect. The US and the United*  
39 *Kingdom banned him for nearly a decade .... In Gujarat,*  
40 *though, his prestige grew. Rather than seeking reconciliation,*  
41 *Modi led a defiant Hindu-pride march across the state, which*  
42 *was met with an outpouring of support. (Filkins 2019).*

43  
44 Today Narendra Modi is the undisputed, popular leader of India. He is said to  
45 be a modernizing politician who wants to rid India of the ills of corruption and  
46 inefficiency. Much of the Indian business community stands behind him. The

1 leaders of the West vie for his attention and contracts to operate in India. The  
2 mountain of evidence of his complicity in serious violations of human rights  
3 has now been swept under the rug. Many of his detractors in India—  
4 journalists, academics, editors and officials—have faced harassment or  
5 worse, including murder. Yet, former US President Barack Obama painted  
6 him as a great reformer and dynamic leader of a nation on the march.

7 This case of the Babri *Masjid* site lingered before the Supreme Court of  
8 India for years. A unanimous verdict rendered in November 2019 directed that  
9 it be reserved for the Ram temple. The Muslims were compensated by  
10 allocation of a plot some distance away for the construction of a mosque.  
11 Modi hailed the ruling as a symbol of the maturity and peaceful nature of the  
12 Indian people.

13 Empirical evidence to support the claims about Lord Ram and where he  
14 was born is shaky at best. It is mostly a matter of belief. Independent experts  
15 questioned the legal basis of this verdict. It was seen as a sign of the extent  
16 to which that hitherto esteemed institutions of India have succumbed to the  
17 influence of the Hindu fundamentalism. But the Muslims did not riot, even as  
18 their legal appeal was denied. Had the decision gone the other way, the  
19 consequences are hard to imagine.

20  
21 **Fascist Leanings:** MS Golwalkar, the second RSS leader, had declared in  
22 1939 that India was a Hindu nation and anyone who was not a Hindu was an  
23 enemy of the nation. His rejection of a multicultural society was inspired by  
24 the Nazi doctrine:

25  
26 *Germany has also shown how well-nigh impossible it is for*  
27 *races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be*  
28 *assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in*  
29 *Hindustan to learn and profit by.* MS Golwalkar (Democracy  
30 Now 2019).

31  
32 During the struggle for freedom in India, the RSS mostly stood in the side  
33 lines. It perceived the Muslims and socialists as greater foes than the colonial  
34 rulers. It promoted the idea of India as an unblemished theocratic state in  
35 which religious affiliation is the basis of citizenship.

36 Golwalkar, who firmly supported the caste system and *The Laws of Manu*,  
37 cofounded a sister radical Hindu organization, the *Vishva Hindu Parishad*  
38 (VHP) in 1964. Ever since, the VHP has worked hand in glove with the RSS  
39 on issues like protection of cows, opposing conversion of Hindus and the  
40 Babri *Masjid* mobilization.

41 Reminiscent of the Brown Shirts, the Nazi Party's paramilitary youth  
42 brigade and the ultra-racist Ku Klux Klan of the USA, the RSS has an  
43 organization (*Bajrang Dal*) of about 50,000 militants who get martial arts  
44 training with a heavy dose of the RSS ideology. Drawn from diverse walks of  
45 life—poor and middle class, educated and uneducated, civil servants and  
46 professionals—what brings them together is devout Hinduism. With military



1 style drills, yoga and training in combat with long wooden poles, they form a  
2 fearsome, disciplined contingent who can be called upon quickly as needed.

3 The *Dal* enables the RSS to enforce the precepts of *Hindutva* and *Hindu*  
4 *Shastra* (Hindu nationhood) through intimidation, violence and retaliation  
5 against opponents of the BJP. One issue it has adopted with gusto is the cow.

6 Hinduism venerates cows as sacred beings. In the past, cows formed an  
7 integral part of the rural economy. Some Hindus consume meat, but not cow's  
8 meat. Cow slaughter is forbidden in several Indian states. But Muslims and  
9 Christians, like hundreds of millions of people in the world, eat beef and beef  
10 products.

11 The RSS and the BJP have placed the cow at the center of their agenda.  
12 Anyone endangering the life of a cow is seen as equivalent to a terrorist. As  
13 a result, Muslims and Dalits who handle carcasses find themselves at the  
14 receiving end of the stick. Often those in the legitimate business of leather  
15 processing are falsely accused of killing a cow when in fact the animal had  
16 died naturally. Beaten up by members of the *Dal*, some have died. Such  
17 murders usually go unpunished.

18  
19 +++++  
20

21 Yet, as the Hindu celebrations in Nepal indicate, Hinduism has a paradoxical  
22 relationship with animal slaughter. There are, percentage-wise, more Hindus  
23 in Nepal, a mountainous nation on the northern flank of India, than in any  
24 other nation. Until 2008, Hinduism was the official religion. Though about a  
25 fifth of the people are non-Hindu, Nepal has not suffered from major inter-faith  
26 conflicts. Yet, it is a land with a litany of retrogressive traditions and practices  
27 that include a rigid caste system, economic exploitation of ethnic minorities,  
28 local and international trafficking of young girls, denigration of women,  
29 sweatshop and child labor, and more.

30 Of interest here is the fact that Nepal is the home to a Hindu festival in  
31 which the world's largest sacrifice of animals occurs. Animals ranging from  
32 rats, birds, chicken to pigs, goats and buffaloes are slaughtered in public  
33 ceremonies held every five years. Local devotees and pilgrims from India  
34 congregate to witness butchers ceremonially kill the animals with swords and  
35 knives. Some 200,000 animals were sacrificed in 2014. And the devotees  
36 pray to the goddess *Gadhimai* for resolution of the problems they face in life.

37 Though the practice was banned in 2015, the Hindu community has not  
38 relented. Official disapproval notwithstanding, the festival was once again  
39 celebrated in December 2019.

40  
41 **Muslims:** The centerpiece of fascist ideology is to single out minorities whose  
42 'polluting' presence causes social ills. The nation must be purified; they have  
43 to go. In Nazi Germany, it was the Jews, Roma people, people with disabilities  
44 and communists. In the *Hindutva* worldview the undesirables are Muslims and  
45 Christians. Hindu zealots spread the paranoia that the great Hindu nation is  
46 under an existential threat from Islamic terrorism. The RSS activists advance

1 unfounded claims about Muslims seducing Hindu women and turning them  
2 into prostitutes. Hysteria is whipped up and violent assaults ensue. Hindu-  
3 Muslim unions are condemned, at times with tragic results.

4  
5 *When Muslims are lynched, Modi typically says nothing, and,*  
6 *since he rarely holds press conferences, he is almost never*  
7 *asked about them. But his supporters often salute the killers.*  
8 (Filkins 2019).

9  
10 In 1947, West Bengal and East Bengal (Bangladesh) experienced large-scale  
11 partition related massacres. Hundreds of thousands moved from one side of  
12 the border to the other, where they remain as undocumented refugees. Bitter  
13 memories persist as no serious attempt at reconciliation has been launched  
14 on either side. The BJP government has put this issue on the front burner by  
15 alleging that the Hindus in West Bengal face a major threat from the Muslims  
16 refugees. The 'infiltrators' and 'termites' have to be identified, corralled and  
17 deported.

18 Under the rationale of identifying illegal immigrants, a law to institute a  
19 National Register of Citizens (NRC) was passed by the parliament in 2003.  
20 Pre-tested in Assam from 2013, it identified some 1.8 million '*undesirables.*'  
21 As many more Hindus than Muslims were caught in the net, it caused an  
22 outcry. The Citizenship Amendment Act was passed in December 2019 to  
23 address this problem. It grants citizenship to Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Parsees  
24 and Christians who had fled from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan.  
25 Muslims from these nations are excluded, as are Tamils from Sri Lanka,  
26 Rohingya from Myanmar and Tibetans from China. They are left out because  
27 they allegedly do not face persecution in their place of origin. A BJP minister  
28 has categorically declared that no Hindu will face deportation under this law.

29 The new law reflects the spirit of former US President Trump's edict to  
30 ban immigration from designated Muslim nations. Local and international  
31 human rights organizations and independent academics say that it is  
32 discriminatory and a threat to the secular basis of the Indian constitution. As  
33 unease and fear spread among Muslims, protests arose in Assam, West  
34 Bengal and elsewhere in India. University students in many cities took to the  
35 streets. The police responded with tear gas, baton charges and live  
36 ammunition. Death counts rose. The chief ministers of two states, West  
37 Bengal and Kerala, opposed the law. Yet the BJP government went full steam  
38 ahead.

39 Kashmir, India's only Muslim majority state, has for decades been a bone  
40 of contention between India and Pakistan. Its people have been brutally  
41 suppressed by the Indian army and denied their right to self-determination.  
42 The BJP went a step further in August 2019 by revoking the constitutional  
43 status of the state. This was followed by the arbitrary detention of thousands  
44 of Kashmiris and activists, house arrest of prominent leaders, widespread  
45 torture, and extrajudicial killings. Schools were closed; Friday prayers at the  
46 mosques were banned. A virtually total information blackout was instituted by

1 cutting off cellphone and Internet services and restricting external journalists.  
2 Compliant mainstream media outlets were used to present a false image of  
3 the conditions in the state.

4 Understandably, the move was condemned by Muslims and human rights  
5 organizations in India and abroad. It is feared that Modi aims to transfer  
6 Kashmiri lands and property to Hindu settlers from other parts of India. There  
7 are strong parallels with the aggressive actions of Israel towards the people  
8 of Palestine.

9 Religion is not the primary factor in these conflicts. Land and resources  
10 are the primary drivers. Religion provides an ideological mask.

11  
12 **Christians:** The presence of Christianity, the third largest religion in India,  
13 dates back to the European colonial era. Christian missionaries were the  
14 benign face of colonial domination. But they influenced the passage of laws  
15 prohibiting widow immolation, female infanticide, and encouraged education  
16 for girls. With about 40 million adherents, Christians were only 2% of the total  
17 population in 2019. Catholicism and most Protestant branches are present.

18 In many areas of India, Hindus and Christians have lived amicably for  
19 decades. Explicit strife between the two groups has been rare. From 1964 to  
20 1997, about two anti-Christian generally small and localized attacks per year  
21 were recorded. As the RSS labeling of Christianity (and Islam) an 'invader  
22 religion' gained a foothold, violence against Christians rose. Reliable figures  
23 do not exist; estimates vary from between several hundred to thousands of  
24 attacks against Christians and churches on an annual basis after 2014. At  
25 times, more than one factor is at play, as when Dalit Christians are assaulted,  
26 or Christian women are gang raped. Rumors that Christian missionaries use  
27 underhand means to convert Hindus, especially in the tribal areas, often spark  
28 off such attacks.

29  
30 **Dalits:** The RSS stand on Dalits is a convoluted one. At nearly 17% of the  
31 population, the Dalits form a major voting bloc in India. They also form the  
32 base of some regional parties. Election calculus calls for a party holding or  
33 seeking power at the national level to bring them under its fold, at least during  
34 the voting season. The INC takes credit for articles in the Indian constitution  
35 that prohibit discrimination against Dalits and for programs to provide jobs  
36 and improve education and health care. But these were partial measures and  
37 the situation of Dalits remains dire. Discrimination against them persists in  
38 rural and urban areas, and economically, they remain at the bottom. The  
39 middle class disfavors the affirmative action programs for Dalits, akin to the  
40 white middle class opposition in the US of the affirmative action programs for  
41 African Americans.

42 For the BJP, there is an additional conundrum. Its theological parent, the  
43 RSS, is inextricably wedded to Hinduism, the basis of the caste system. Even  
44 though India has had two Dalit presidents, a major change in the status of  
45 Dalits is unthinkable without a fundamental revision of the tenets of Hinduism  
46 and the economic structure of the society.

1 But accumulating votes is essential. Making pro-Dalit pronouncements is  
2 one way. By pointing to events like a meeting between the Dalit champion BR  
3 Ambedkar and RSS luminaries during colonial rule, it is opportunistically  
4 claimed that the RSS has always stood for Dalit rights (More on this later).  
5 Modi has encouraged his party members to spend two nights in a Dalit home.  
6 In its first term, the BJP under Modi promoted more public service jobs, free  
7 supply of cooking gas and construction of toilets in Dalit and other minority  
8 areas. But the programs had mixed results. Many incidences of cow-based  
9 violence and attacks on their leaders made Dalits reduce their participation in  
10 RSS training camps and slackened their support for Modi.

11 Dalits are caught between a rock and a hard place. Bitter experience has  
12 made them aware of the duplicity of national politicians. And they have been  
13 let down by the leaders of regional Dalit parties, who are mostly a corrupt  
14 bunch focused on filling their own pockets and making unethical deals with  
15 the wealthy. They lend support to whichever party that rules at the national  
16 level to secure minor benefits for their constituents and shore up their own  
17 political position.

18 The projection of Modi as a different brand of politician who promises not  
19 to take or give a bribe, who decries waste and mismanagement, and who  
20 champions programs to benefit the poor affected the Dalit outlook. In the May  
21 2019 election season, Dalit support of the BJP grew for both the national  
22 parliament and state assemblies. In December 2019, the main segments of  
23 the working class in the UK placed their hopes on a man famed for bending  
24 facts, promoting divisive politics and serving the interests of the billionaires.  
25 The Dalits in India have pinned their hopes on a man whose party functions  
26 along similar lines.

27 In so doing, they are clutching at straws. Over 95% of the rural villages  
28 and most urban communities adhere to the caste system, treat Dalits in  
29 demeaning ways, and deny them the statutory minimum wage. Thousands of  
30 attacks on Dalits occur each year. Even their marriage processions are not  
31 spared. Convictions for such crimes are rare. In 130 villages in Gujarat, their  
32 situation is so precarious that they have now been placed under police  
33 protection.

34  
35 **Revisionism and Suppression:** Capitalism adroitly manages to confine the  
36 dominant narrative on history and current reality within acceptable bounds  
37 through the mass media, education system, cultural activities and other  
38 institutions. When fascistic tendencies begin to take root, the process sheds  
39 off its masks and assumes a blatant form. Accordingly, the BJP and RSS  
40 have operated on several fronts to champion the *Hindutva* mode of thinking.

41 The education system is the primary target. Pliant scholars have been  
42 tasked to write and rewrite textbooks that support the RSS vision of history.  
43 Books infused with unfounded, false assertions replace old and new books  
44 based on sound research.

45

1           *At the Chhatrasal stadium event in February [2019], [Home*  
2           *Affairs Minister] Amit Shah told the crowd that the BJP wanted*  
3           *[Baba] Ramdev to join them in reforming the Indian*  
4           *educational system. One of the party's new priorities is an*  
5           *ambitious effort to rewrite Indian school textbooks to assert*  
6           *Hindu primacy. Mahesh Sharma, India's culture minister and*  
7           *an avowed follower of the RSS, has said he hopes to rewrite*  
8           *the conventional narrative about India as a multicultural*  
9           *tapestry, and to inculcate the belief that the ancient Hindu*  
10           *scriptures are historical facts, not legends. (Worth 2018).*

11  
12       Eminent historians and scholars of religion are sidelined in the academy and  
13       governmental curriculum making bodies. And appointment of people inclined  
14       towards *Hindutva* to key academic posts is on the increase. Publishers who  
15       bring out books critical of this ideology and RSS face intense pressure from  
16       Hindu nationalists. Some have been forced to withdraw such books. The few  
17       academies like the Jawaharlal University that fervently uphold academic  
18       freedom face the threat of loss of state funds and support as well as police  
19       intrusion onto their campuses. Unwarranted attention from the tax authorities  
20       is used to silence critics of the ruling party. Stringent laws have been enacted  
21       to curtail funding from abroad for human rights organizations in order to  
22       undermine the critics of the BJP government.

23       And it goes further. Mobs inspired by the *Hindutva* doctrine invade and  
24       damage the offices of human rights activists. Some are attacked physically,  
25       and a few died as a result. They have been detained under ludicrous charges  
26       of sedition. If you complain about injustice or expose official misdeeds, it is  
27       you who ends up being investigated. The organs of the state charged with  
28       upholding the rule of law have been compromised to an unprecedented extent  
29       in the recent years.

30       Prime Minister Modi, who, in an apparent violation of existing rules, ran  
31       his own TV channel during his reelection bid has, like Donald Trump of the  
32       US, a penchant for bashing the media. And it has an impact. Fear of loss of  
33       advertising revenue from the government and pro-Modi corporations, denial  
34       of access to information sources as well as their own self-interest have  
35       brought much of the main media in line. Self-censorship is on the rise. Some  
36       prominent journalists have faced violence and death. The pronouncements  
37       by Modi glimmer with half-truths and extremist religiosity but they escape  
38       critical exposure in media channels that reach the majority of the people.

39       The case of Feroz Khan illustrates the anti-Muslim bias in education being  
40       promoted via the *Hindutva* doctrine. With fine academic credential in his vitae,  
41       in 2019 he secured appointment as an assistant professor of Sanskrit  
42       literature at the Banaras Hindu University. Yet, a rightwing student group was  
43       enraged. Declaring that a Muslim has no right to teach the classical language  
44       of Hinduism and for other spurious reasons, they raised strong objections to  
45       his appointment.

1 They ignored historical facts: The Mughal emperors had supported the  
2 development of Sanskrit and Muslim scholars had penned important works in  
3 Sanskrit. And just in 2019, a Muslim scholar, Mohammed HK Khan, was given  
4 the fourth highest civilian award of India for his contribution to Sanskrit  
5 studies.

6 The Banaras Hindu University was founded in 1916 with resources and  
7 funds from Hindu, Muslim and Sikh princes. With Pandit Madan Mohan  
8 Malviya, a multi-talented Indian nationalist, intellectual and educationist the  
9 leading light among the small elite group of founders, the foundation stone  
10 was laid by the senior Sikh guru of that time. Pandit Malviya's vision for the  
11 institution was unreservedly multi-cultural and multi-religious.

12  
13 *India is not a country of the Hindus only. It is a country of the*  
14 *Muslims, the Christians and the Parsees too. The country can*  
15 *gain strength and develop itself only when the people of the*  
16 *different communities in India live in mutual goodwill and*  
17 *harmony. Pandit MM Malviya (www.bhu.ac.in).*

18  
19 The 1915 document establishing the Banaras Hindu University reads:

20  
21 *The University shall be open to persons of either sex and of*  
22 *whatever race, creed, caste or class, and it shall not be lawful for*  
23 *the University to adopt or impose on any person any test*  
24 *whatsoever of religious belief or profession in order to entitle him*  
25 *to be admitted therein, as a teacher or student, or to hold any*  
26 *office therein, or to graduate there at, or to enjoy or exercise any*  
27 *privilege thereof, except in respect of any particular benefaction*  
28 *accepted by the University, where such a test is made a condition*  
29 *thereof by any testamentary or other instrument creating such*  
30 *benefaction. (Source: www.bhu.ac.in).*

31  
32 Further, among the multiple enacted powers of the University are:

33  
34 *[To] promote the study of religion, literature, history, science and*  
35 *art of Vedic, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Islamic, Sikh, Christian,*  
36 *Zoroastrian, and other civilizations and cultures.*

37  
38 Some university departments focus on the study of classic Hindu scriptures  
39 and Sanskrit and are involved in establishment of the general Hindu liturgical  
40 calendar. But for the most part, it is a modern, conventional higher education  
41 institution offering degrees in the arts, sciences, management, medicine, etc.  
42 and which ascribes to the spirit of academic freedom and excellence.

43 Feroz Khan is not a Muslim in the traditional sense of the term. He hails  
44 from one of several syncretic communities in India where people  
45 simultaneously practice Islam and Hinduism. And his academic credentials  
46 are not in doubt. He is eminently qualified to teach Sanskrit.

1 Yet, the vociferous campaign based on misinformation and fear took its  
2 toll. Fearing for his safety, Khan was initially forced to go into hiding. Later,  
3 despite support from fellow academics, he was propelled by the force of the  
4 circumstances to tender his resignation. It is not known if he will ever be able  
5 to resume teaching at this university. As another scholar commented:

6  
7 *A university which was constructed with a vision and*  
8 *contribution of various personalities of the time comes to a*  
9 *point where religion is evoked for the appointment of an*  
10 *assistant professor. .... If religion is the deciding factor of the*  
11 *country's education system and language becomes the battle*  
12 *ground of communal battle against identities, I believe that*  
13 *even gods can't save the people of this country. (Rajdev*  
14 *2019).*

15  
16 But the theocratic rightwing students and some senior figures at University  
17 have set aside the inclusive vision of the founder. As the website of the  
18 University now prominently proclaims, the focus has to exclusively be on the  
19 study and promotion of Hinduism and Hindu culture. In the process, one of  
20 India's leading academic and research institutions, a longtime bastion of  
21 academic excellence and free inquiry, is being sucked into the quagmire of  
22 demagogic, hate-driven philosophy.

23  
24 **Manufactured Narratives:** Under the BJP government, official statistics have  
25 been manipulated to project the view that the economy is on track. Data  
26 gathering methods and definitions are changed in order to enhance the good  
27 and downplay the untoward trends. Farmer suicide and unemployment data,  
28 for example, have been suppressed or are not published. More than 100  
29 respected economists penned a letter of complaint that alluded to data  
30 distortion. But it was ignored.

31  
32 *In the past, 1 kilometer of road was recorded as 1 kilometer*  
33 *whether it had one lane or more. Now, if there are two lanes it*  
34 *will count as 2 kilometer, three lanes as 3 kilometers, and so*  
35 *on. (Croucher 2019).*

36  
37 The RSS had stood at the fringe in the struggle against British rule. It saw the  
38 Muslims as bigger enemies than the colonizers. But now the RSS and BJP  
39 promote a new history. One tool to serve that end has been to alter the  
40 narratives about the leaders of the Indian freedom struggle. MK Gandhi, BR  
41 Ambedkar and R Tagore are proclaimed as heroes whose ideas resonate  
42 with the *Hindutva* stand. That Gandhi was assassinated by an RSS extremist  
43 and the RSS was banned for a while have been expunged from school  
44 textbooks. BJP leaders now attend ceremonies marking Gandhi's birth and  
45 use his image for programs to clean up streets and neighborhoods in the cities

1 and villages. In the process, they cover up his promotion of a unified India  
2 based on compassion, Muslim-Hindu unity, and multi-culturalism.

3  
4 *India indeed needs clean toilets, streets and neighborhoods.*  
5 *But Gandhi in Noakhali, as Manubahen described in her diary,*  
6 *cleared with his own hands, the dung and human excreta*  
7 *thrown into the streets by Muslims opposed to his visit. He cut*  
8 *through social prejudice against manual scavenging in an*  
9 *atmosphere of distrust. Gandhi's idea of cleanliness included*  
10 *the cleansing of hatred from people's hearts. (Bhattacharjee*  
11 *2019).*

12  
13 Muslim-Hindu harmony was central to the vision of India's founders like MK  
14 Gandhi, J Nehru, BR Ambedkar, V Patel, SC Bose and R Tagore. The latter  
15 five also laid the philosophical and practical foundation for making India a  
16 secular state. Now their ideas are being remodeled to suit BJP politics.

17 In a tactic to shore up Dalit support, BR Ambedkar has received glowing  
18 praise from Prime Minister Modi. The RSS proclaims that his ideas and the  
19 ideas of other Dalit champions like JG Phule resonate with the *Hindutva*  
20 doctrine. Public ceremonies to honor them are held and attended by senior  
21 BJP ministers.

22 Ambedkar was a visionary who aimed to annihilate the caste system.  
23 Every ruling party in India has just taken baby steps in that direction. And  
24 some of them have been counterproductive. Ambedkar's belief that there was  
25 no future for the Dalits within a society dominated by Hinduism was so strong  
26 that he converted to Buddhism and took millions of Dalits along with him (see  
27 Chapter 6). But such uncomfortable truths do not exist for the BJP.

## 32 33 **5.10 STATUS OF WOMEN**

34  
35 Hindu scriptures contain many powerful goddesses. Some women played a  
36 prominent role in the Indian struggle for independence. Sarojini Naidu served  
37 as president of the INC party during that time and later became a state  
38 governor. India has had a woman Prime Minister, a woman President and a  
39 woman Speaker of Parliament. And there has been no dearth of female law  
40 makers and politicians in India. In several states, the legislature is 50% or  
41 more female. In 2014, the government of Prime Minister Modi had a record  
42 six women cabinet ministers. Two of them led key ministries, Defense and  
43 External Affairs. In 2018, there were eight women billionaires in India. The  
44 first woman president of the UN General Assembly was an Indian. Many  
45 women have been at the helm of important organizations, professions and



1 companies in India. Indian women have excelled in music, literature, dance,  
2 medicine and science. Many are national and international celebrities.

3 The constitution of India prohibits gender discrimination. Laws that protect  
4 women's rights at work, home and society exist. Since the 1950s, women in  
5 India have made significant progress in all walks of life. The practice of killing  
6 female newborns has virtually been wiped out, and the number of childhood  
7 marriages has dropped. Women participate in all arenas of life in significant  
8 numbers. Higher education is one marker: In 2018-2019, women accounted  
9 for slightly more than a half of the undergraduate degree awards, and about  
10 two out of five doctoral degree awards.

11 But that is a part of the picture. Despite presence in upper echelons of  
12 society and theoretically adequate legal protections, most women and girls in  
13 India have extremely arduous lives and face major social barriers. Modern  
14 India is a highly unequal society. The inequality is reflected and magnified at  
15 the gender level. Girls from families in the top 20% income bracket average  
16 nine years of schooling while those in families of lowest 20% are lucky to get  
17 any education. Premature cessation of school attendance is an emblematic  
18 issue, as more than 23 million girls, mostly from poor families, drop out of  
19 school each year. Low finances, domestic work, caring for babies and the  
20 elderly and lack of hygiene facilities in school detach them from education.

21 Most women and girls, more so in the villages, have yet to attain a decent  
22 existence. Water is a major problem. Decades of poor planning, resource use  
23 and limited construction of piping systems have made the collection of water  
24 for household use a daily chore for many women. Requiring travel on foot  
25 over long distances with water carried in buckets and cans, it is a back-  
26 breaking, feet damaging task which puts them at a high risk for water borne  
27 diseases. Multiple trips over kilometers in hot weather are common. And that  
28 is a part of the multiple domestic responsibilities they shoulder. Malnutrition  
29 and poor access to health care services plague young girls and pregnant and  
30 breast-feeding women.

31 The social status of hundreds of millions of lower-class women is a dismal  
32 one. Gender ratio at birth is an indicator. Globally, for every thousand male  
33 births, there are about 990 female births. In India, the number is about 930  
34 females. Here, India stands among the lowest five nations. Determination of  
35 sex before birth and selective abortion is the prime motor of lowered gender  
36 ratio. Considerable state-wise variation exists. In Kerala, it is nearly one-to-  
37 one but in Gujarat it is 900 to 1,000 and in Punjab, it is 800 to 1,000. The  
38 physical and psychological trauma of the women forced to undergo abortion  
39 receives little attention. Dowry payment, cost of education, job opportunities  
40 and economic hardship stand behind the lowered ratio. And, despite laws  
41 prohibiting it, about one in seven girls are married at a young age. Some are  
42 as young as ten.

43 The unemployment rate in India is higher than it has been for decades.  
44 Ten civil service job openings attract more than ten thousand applicants. The  
45 situation for women is particularly dire. In the age group of 15 or more years,  
46 about one in four women are formally employed. In comparison, nearly 4 out

1 5 similarly aged men have a job. And when employed, on average a woman  
2 earns two thirds of what a man doing comparable work earns. As measured  
3 by the Gender Inequality Index, India ranked 122 out of 162 nations in 2018.  
4

5 **Sexual Assault:** Rape, sexual harassment and domestic violence are  
6 serious dangers affecting women across the nation. Approximately 250,000  
7 serious crimes against women—rape, murder, trafficking and sexual abuse—  
8 have been recorded in every recent year. About 35,000 of these crimes are  
9 rape cases. Some four out of ten rape victims are minors, and, in most cases,  
10 the perpetrator has ties with the family. As such cases are often not reported,  
11 statistics on rape and sexual abuse are underestimates. And when they are  
12 reported, conviction rates are low. The young victim is labeled ‘damaged  
13 goods’ and in order to reduce the associated social stigma, she is at times  
14 forced by her family to marry the rapist. Burning of women for dowry problems  
15 continues. International surveys rank India as one of the four most dangerous  
16 places for women.

17 Now and then, particularly horrendous cases of gang rape capture the  
18 headlines and generate widespread protests. Women fear venturing out on  
19 their own. Some measures to protect women, like female only train cars in  
20 the major cities, have been instituted. The central government and several  
21 states have allocated over \$150 million in programs to enhance the security  
22 for women, but significant changes are yet to be observed.  
23

24 *India is in denial of the fact that a majority of its women do not*  
25 *feel safe alone on the streets, at work, in markets, or at home,*  
26 *even though they have learned how to cope with this*  
27 *existential anxiety. (Narayan 2018).*  
28

29 **Role of Religion:** Does religion help promote equality, well-being and safety  
30 of women in India?  
31

32 The current status of women in India has roots in history, culture and religion.  
33 According to some scholars, the first sacred texts of Hinduism, the *Vedas* and  
34 *Upanishads* accord an elevated position to females. But later texts like  
35 *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavad Gita* downgrade them to a subordinate status. The  
36 revered *Laws of Manu* decree that ‘a woman must never be independent’.  
37 When young, she submits to her father; afterwards, to her husband. If her  
38 husband dies, the control passes on to her sons. A wife’s sacred duty is to  
39 bear children, rear them in the traditional way, perform household chores and  
40 uphold the family’s reputation. A faithful, obedient wife has to be treated with  
41 respect. However, mistreatment of wives by husbands and mothers-in-law is  
42 commonplace. Widows in the rural areas who remarry tend to face much  
43 hostility from the community.  
44

45 *Wife, son and slave – all these three, tradition tells us, are*  
46 *without property. Whatever they may earn becomes the*

1 *property of the man to whom they belong.* The Laws of Manu,  
2 Chapter 8, shloka 416. (Ali 2020).

3  
4 Some changes countering these traditions have transpired since the colonial  
5 times. A sizeable group of educated middle class women has emerged of  
6 recent. They are more able to chart their own future and overcome traditional  
7 barriers. Yet, the weight of the tradition and misogyny also bears down on  
8 them. Attaining gender equity remains an uphill battle.

9  
10 **Priesthood and Temple Access:** Hindu women participate in religious  
11 ceremonies in large numbers, generally outnumbering the menfolk. But what  
12 they can and cannot do is restricted by custom. Only men (Brahmin men) can  
13 become priests and lead religious worship and rituals. And some places in  
14 the temple are out of bounds for women. Cases challenging the restrictions  
15 on females in temple access and temple duties have been before the courts.  
16 In October 2018, the Indian Supreme Court issued a path-breaking ruling that  
17 extended the scope of religious freedom for women. But it was blasted by  
18 hardline Hindu priests as unwarranted state intrusion in religious affairs. And,  
19 in a defiant mood, they prepared to hold their ground.

20 The case of the Sabarimala temple in Kerala is apropos. For most of the  
21 time since 1947, Kerala was ruled by a communist party. It outranks the other  
22 states in India in terms of literacy rate, education, gender ratio and key health  
23 indicators. Girls in Kerala have better opportunities for higher education and  
24 professional employment than in most of the other states of the nation.

25 Yet, women of menstruating age were not allowed to enter the venerated  
26 Sabarimala temple. The prohibition is justified on the grounds of protecting  
27 the celibacy of the temple deity. The Supreme Court ruling arose specifically  
28 from this ban. But it incensed the priests and rank-and-file Hindus in Kerala.  
29 When a dozen women led by a female law professor attempted to enter the  
30 temple, tens of thousands took to the streets to block them. Violence ensued.  
31 One protestor died. Most Hindu women in the area did not support the ruling,  
32 saying that it violated their right to practice their religious customs.

33 The women who had tried entry faced physical attacks. Their homes were  
34 vandalized. And after receiving death threats, the professor and her family  
35 went into hiding. Petitioned by hardline Hindu groups, the Supreme Court is  
36 set to reconsider the ruling.

37 Yet, in a few parts of India, senior priests have blessed the participation  
38 of females in Hindu rituals. In Maharashtra, thousands of women have been  
39 trained in priestly work. But they conduct religious ceremonies in homes, not  
40 at the temples. At a temple of repute in Tamil Nadu, women oversee religious  
41 rites even in the most sacred areas. The state government of Tamil Nadu  
42 gave formal imprimatur to this practice in September 2021 by proclaiming that  
43 women who had completed required priesthood training could perform  
44 priestly duties in temples. The state of Tamil Nadu leads on this matter.

45 Change is afoot in Kerala as well. The ancient Tirunavaya Temple in the  
46 state has launched a two-year training program for women priests. The first

1 batch of twenty-two graduates of the program were formally inducted into  
2 priesthood in October 2021 by KV Subhash Thantri, the senior *pujari* at this  
3 temple. Another batch of graduates is in the making. However, these priests  
4 are to conduct sacred rituals in people's homes only. But as they improve  
5 their skills and garner greater public support, it is hoped that they would  
6 perform priestly duties in temples. An ancient temple in Maharashtra has two  
7 ordained female priests. But their range of duties is limited.

8 A few temples in the diasporic Hindu communities in the West have also  
9 launched systematic programs to train and ordain women for priesthood. The  
10 Hindu temple in Berne, Switzerland, has gone the furthest. But there is an  
11 age divide. Young Hindus tend to initiate and support ordination of women  
12 while the elders disapprove. The path to equality for women in Hindu liturgy  
13 is a long and arduous one.

14  
15 **Stigmatization of Menstruation:** Hindu custom deems menstrual blood as  
16 impure. Its effect transcends access to temples. In parts of India but more so  
17 in Nepal, women who are on their periods are placed in complete seclusion.  
18 Called *chhaupadi*, it obliges women to live in makeshift, isolated huts for days  
19 each month. Some are left in dung-filled barns with goats and cows, unable  
20 to use communal water sources. Women who have given birth are forced to  
21 stay away from their homes for up to ten days after delivery as well.

22 Making them susceptible to respiratory infections including pneumonia  
23 during winter, it is a serious health hazard. The tiny straw huts put them at  
24 risk from snake bites and other dangers. Yet, in rural Nepal, the ancient  
25 custom is rigidly followed. Though banned by the Nepalese Supreme Court  
26 in 2005, the practice has not abated.

27 After the much-publicized deaths of three girls during *chhaupadi*, the  
28 parliament passed laws specifying fines and jail terms for anyone who forces  
29 a woman into such huts. But no monitoring and enforcement mechanism was  
30 put in place. When a few activists teamed up with the police to destroy the  
31 huts, it backfired. More resources and effort are needed to eliminate a deeply  
32 ingrained, scripturally sanctioned tradition. Raised living standards, universal  
33 education, enhanced job opportunities and general empowerment of women  
34 are the key. But can the pseudo-democratic regimes wedded to neo-liberal  
35 programs that favor the wealthy embark on such a path?

36  
37 **Attacks on Muslim Women:** Brutal gang rape and murder represent the  
38 extreme form of dangers faced by women in India. When the assault has a  
39 religious flavor, the animosity between Muslims and Hindus is aggravated. In  
40 the outbreaks of communal violence in Gujarat in 2002 and Uttar Pradesh in  
41 2013, deadly rape was a weapon to terrorize the targeted minority groups. As  
42 there has been no accountability for these crimes, sad memories linger, and  
43 the fuel for future conflict accumulates.

44 An eight-year-old girl from a nomadic Muslim tribe in Kashmir was gang  
45 raped and killed in early 2018. Normally, such an incident would elicit across  
46 the board condemnation. But in this case, the issue was politicized. Hindu

1 extremists insinuated that the tribe had brought on the attack because it had  
2 slaughtered cows. Large Hindu crowds gathered to demand the release of  
3 the accused, one of whom was a police officer.

4 *Before this brutal case made to national and international*  
5 *news, the Bakarwal community struggled with pressure from*  
6 *members of the Hindu majority not to make noise about it. The*  
7 *family and their lawyer were repeatedly threatened not to*  
8 *speak out; some members of the community left early for the*  
9 *mountains. Her parents were forced to take her brutalised*  
10 *body to another village to bury because baton-wielding locals*  
11 *did not allow them to lay her to rest in the place where she*  
12 *used to live. (Salim 2018).*

13  
14 BJP leaders were slow to react and when they did, it was in muted tones.  
15 One female academic ventured to apportion the blame onto some ‘*jihadists*’.

16 When a 27-year-old Hindu veterinarian was abducted, and gang raped in  
17 Hyderabad, senior politicians urged ‘fast-track’ trials for the accused. The  
18 protestors outside their detention site angrily demanded instant punishment.  
19 The contrast between the two cases could not be sharper.

20

21 **Women and Social Activism:** Throughout history—precolonial and  
22 postcolonial—Indian women made a distinctive contribution in the drive for  
23 freedom, justice and enlightenment.

24

25 **Sarojini Naidu** who grew up in a family of poets, artists and scientists in the  
26 late 1880s, acquired basic and higher degrees from Indian and British  
27 universities—then a rare feat for an Indian woman. Her evocative, vibrant  
28 poems and prose on personal and social issues earned her international  
29 acclaim and the title, ‘Nightingale of India’. And she was at the forefront of the  
30 fight for freedom from colonial rule and a champion of equality for women and  
31 minorities. She supported inter-caste and inter-regional marriage when it was  
32 a major taboo. In recognition of her vision, dedication and support for  
33 Gandhi’s ideas and methods, she was elected the president of the Indian  
34 National Congress in 1925.

35



MK Gandhi and S Naidu, 1931 Salt March

1  
2  
3  
4 Sarojini Naidu was one of many. Since independence, Indian women have  
5 excelled in the arts, sciences, business, politics, entertainment, medicine,  
6 literature and social activism. Indira Gandhi, Lata Mangeshkar, Vandana  
7 Shiva and Arundhati Roy feature among the thousands who scaled the top  
8 heights of their fields. In these times of the ascendance of the RSS and BJP,  
9 women activists continue to champion peace and justice. We look at two  
10 contrasting examples.

11  
12 **ANHAD:** Act Now for Harmony and Democracy (ANHAD) is a women-led  
13 NGO co-founded by Shabnam Hashmi after the 2002 intercommunal strife in  
14 Gujarat. It operates in several states to promote religious harmony, civil  
15 rights, female empowerment and awareness of suppression of vital data like  
16 that on farmer suicides and the financial contributions to political parties.  
17 Addressing the myriad of problems faced by women, Dalits and workers in  
18 India is a central part of its agenda.

19 Besides grassroots advocacy, female literacy drives and vocational  
20 training, it holds well-attended meetings, press conferences and workshops,  
21 and issues periodic reports on important issues of the day. ANHAD has  
22 worked to expose hate crimes against minorities and the ill-treatment of the  
23 people of Kashmir. It was a principal organizer of the April 2019 march to  
24 protest the BJP policies that foment bigotry and violence. Some 30,000  
25 women took to the streets on that day.

26  
27 *ANHAD knows that it is crucial to protect and amplify the voices*  
28 *of minorities, forge alliances with different groups and facilitate*  
29 *conversations between them, highlight regional concerns, and*  
30 *bring environmental issues to the forefront. Their strategy*  
31 *includes political training at the community level — hundreds of*  
32 *training camps have been conducted over the years.*  
33 *(Matheswaran 2019).*  
34

1 In a clear stratagem to silence the critics, the BJP government passed a law  
2 in 2016 that drastically reduced access to foreign funding by Indian based  
3 NGOs. Human rights groups, including ANHAD, saw a large shortfall in their  
4 budgets, and scrambled for internal alternatives. The resounding victory of  
5 the BJP in the May 2019 election dampened the morale of progressive  
6 organizations. Far fewer marches and practical campaigns are initiated now.  
7 And when meetings are held, attendance is dismal.

8 The popularity of the *Hindutva* doctrine has momentarily stifled dissenting  
9 voices. However, when a spark is ignited, as with the passage of the new  
10 citizenship law or the farm law, fires begin to rage across the nation.

11  
12 **Durga Vahini:** The VHP, an RSS linked fundamentalist Hindu group, runs a  
13 sizeable women's branch called *Durga Vahini* (the Battalion of *Durga*). In the  
14 Hindu canon, *Durga* is a powerful goddess who fiercely combats evil. The  
15 aims of *Durga Vahini* are to uphold Hindu culture and protect safety, morality  
16 and equality among Hindus. In 2019, it boasted a membership of 35,000  
17 across India. Married and unmarried women from traditional families have  
18 joined this close-knit group of mutually supportive, confident women that  
19 operates in a disciplined, no-nonsense manner. It is a social force to reckon  
20 with.

21 *Durga Vahini* conducts two-week in-residence training camps in many  
22 cities. Between 15 to 35 years old, the participants are grounded in ideas of  
23 social service, personal safety and Hindu culture. After prayers sessions, they  
24 learn the VHP version of Indian history. The realities of Moghul rule in India  
25 are distorted and episodes from history are selected to drive home the point  
26 that Islam is the major enemy of the nation. Operating in military style, the  
27 curriculum of the camps covers physical exercise, martial arts, handling a gun  
28 and how to defend oneself against sexual predators. They are taught that  
29 protecting the Hindu nation requires both the ability to love and to fight.

30  
31 *Durga Vahini women find power while holding onto their*  
32 *traditional, submissive roles. As trainers, they teach young*  
33 *girls how to be submissive, devout role models. The women*  
34 *often serve as moral police in their communities, attempting to*  
35 *prevent interfaith relationships and monitor inappropriate*  
36 *clothing and behavior. Their first line of defense — calling*  
37 *someone's parents. (Jain 2019).*

38  
39 Protecting Hinduism and Hindu women from Muslims is high on its agenda.  
40 When communal violence breaks out, *Durga Vahini* women support the  
41 Hindu side through moral support and giving food to the *Hindutva* extremists.

42  
43 **Gandhi and Women:** In their first twenty-five years together, Mohandas  
44 Gandhi and his wife Kasturba were a typical couple. His immersion into civil  
45 rights struggles had, however, convinced him that effective and efficient  
46 service to humanity required living a chaste, simple life. In 1906, at the age

1 of 38, he took a vow of strict celibacy. Kasturba, as a devoted wife, appears  
2 to have concurred. But it was a unilateral decision. Her true feelings remain  
3 unknown.

4 Kasturba was not just a traditional Hindu wife. The man who confronted  
5 a mighty empire with confidence had to tread with care in dealing with her  
6 strong, independent personality. Kasturba was also dedicated to the struggle  
7 for freedom for India. From her days in South Africa to later life in India, she  
8 took part in the marches and civil disobedience campaigns led by Gandhi.  
9 She was arrested five times, once in South Africa and four times in India. Of  
10 her, he said:

11  
12 *If anything, she stood above me. But for her unfailing co-*  
13 *operation I might have been in the abyss. .... She helped me*  
14 *to keep wide awake and true to my vows. She stood by me in*  
15 *all my political fights and never hesitated to take the plunge.*  
16 *In the current sense of the word, she was uneducated; but to*  
17 *my mind she was a model of true education.* MK Gandhi on  
18 Kasturba Gandhi.

19  
20 Gandhi's attitude towards sexuality was restrictive and bizarre. For him, sex,  
21 a result of '*animal passion*,' was for married couples only, and only for the  
22 purpose of procreation. He believed that excessive sexual activity led to  
23 maladies like constipation and that conserving the vital semen gave a person  
24 '*unfailing power*'. And he adamantly opposed use of contraceptive devices, a  
25 stand that would be a public health hazard in the world of today.

26 That was not all. Ascribing the lack of unity and resolve in the struggle for  
27 freedom to his personal moral failings, he embarked on experiments to test  
28 and enhance his control of sexual desires. The experiments were perverse.  
29 Many women lived in his *ashram* and performed the daily duties. A few were  
30 his personal assistants. At night, he had some of them sleep in the same bed  
31 with him while he lay completely naked. He was bathed while naked by a  
32 female assistant. The subjects of his experiments included two of his  
33 seventeen-year-old nieces.

34 No record of objections to his requests exists. It appears that there was a  
35 degree of competition among the women at the *ashram* for his attention. He  
36 made no secret about it. Many prominent Indians and senior leaders of the  
37 independence struggle were dismayed. But it did not become an issue. Yet,  
38 there is no doubt that here Gandhi was abusing the immense moral authority  
39 and respect he commanded among his followers.

40 That said, Gandhi was at the same time a consistent advocate of equality  
41 for women and men in the private and public spheres. He held that women  
42 could be effective public leaders as well as devoted wives with domestic  
43 duties. His political and social campaigns in South Africa and India and his  
44 vision inspired women by the tens of thousands from all strata in society. At  
45 a time when the status of women in civic affairs, education, work and other  
46 spheres of life in the Western nations was low, his stand on these issues was



1 a more progressive one. And it had results. With his backing, Sarojini Naidu  
2 became the president of the Congress Party. And many other women went  
3 on to occupy senior positions in the freedom movement, a tradition that  
4 continued and was extended in independent India.

5 Gandhi forthrightly condemned child-marriage, prostitution, polygamy, ill  
6 treatment of widows, the dowry system and wearing of *purdah*—the bane of  
7 Indian society then and now. He deplored unequal treatment of women under  
8 law or in the home.

9  
10 *In my opinion [a woman] should labor under no legal disability*  
11 *not suffered by man. I should treat daughters and sons on a*  
12 *footing of perfect equality.* MK Gandhi (Kaur 2019).

13  
14 The women residing at his *ashram* had more freedom than women in the  
15 broader society. Visitors were surprised at the confidence and independence  
16 they exhibited. Gandhi felt that the unconditional love and ability to sacrifice  
17 for their children reflected women's superior inner moral strength.

18  
19 *Woman is more fitted than man to make explorations and take*  
20 *bolder action in Ahimsa. For the courage of self-sacrifice*  
21 *woman is any day superior to man as I believe man is to*  
22 *woman for the courage of the brute. .... If by strength is meant*  
23 *brute strength then, indeed, is woman less brute than man. If*  
24 *by strength is meant moral power, then woman is*  
25 *immeasurably man's superior. .... If non-violence is the law of*  
26 *our being, the future is with women.* MK Gandhi (Kaur 2019).

27  
28 Though unhappy about his inability to persuade Kasturba to abandon caste-  
29 based customs, Gandhi held that women had a critical role in overcoming  
30 caste and communal barriers. In the event of a violent confrontation between  
31 Hindus and Muslims, he asked women on both sides to go on hunger strikes  
32 and refuse to cook food for the men engaged in '*dirty communal squabbles*'.

33  
34 *So long as considerations of caste and community continue to*  
35 *weigh with us and rule our choice, women will be well-advised*  
36 *to remain aloof and thereby build up their prestige. Women*  
37 *workers should enroll women as voters, impart or have*  
38 *imparted to them practical education, teach them to think*  
39 *independently, release them from the chains of caste that bind*  
40 *them so as to bring about a change in them which will compel*  
41 *men to realize women's strength and capacity for sacrifice and*  
42 *give her places of honor. If they will do this, they will purify the*  
43 *present unclear atmosphere.* MK Gandhi (Thakkar 2019).

44  
45 When Gandhi inveighed against the fashionable attire adorned by Indian  
46 women, he was not just taking a cultural stand. It was a major part of his

1 *swadeshi* (economic self-reliance) strategy. He wanted women (and men) in  
2 India to put on locally designed clothing made from home spun cotton. And  
3 when he urged Indian women not to wear imported bangles, they listened. In  
4 defiance of ancient custom, married and single women across the land broke  
5 their bangles.

6 Using the principle of *ahimsa*, Gandhi combined the struggles for self-  
7 rule, inter-religious harmony, economic independence, removal of caste  
8 barriers and empowerment of women into an integrated whole. While one  
9 may question his tactics at various junctures, there is no doubt about his  
10 dedicated pursuance of this strategy. Despite the egregious nature of his  
11 personal experiments, he consistently talked about and worked for equality  
12 and empowerment of women. In terms of advocating leadership roles for  
13 women in politics and society, he had few peers.

14 Modern India is a long distance away from attaining equality and fair  
15 treatment of women. The situation of the poor women in rural communities is  
16 particularly dire. But to ascribe, in any manner, the blame for that on Gandhi  
17 is a gross perversion of fact and history.

## 18 **5.11 NEOLIBERAL RELIGIOSITY**

19  
20  
21 Hinduism, like other religions, is not a static entity. Its beliefs, interpretations,  
22 emphases and practices changed over its initial period, the colonial era and  
23 beyond. Offshoot branches appeared. Some historians divide pre-colonial  
24 Hinduism into three doctrinal phases. The first phase focused on sacrifice  
25 rituals when only priests had access to the Vedic texts. The second phase  
26 emphasized meditation and ascetic living. The last phase promoted wider  
27 temple worship, symbolism and reading of the holy texts. Some emergent  
28 ideas at first challenged existent social norms but were later coopted into the  
29 mainstream. (Arni 2009).

30 The evolution of Hinduism towards a more unified entity received a major  
31 boost in the colonial times. Facing a common adversary, Hindus of varied  
32 traditions joined hands and their ideas coalesced. The nature of Hindu beliefs  
33 and rites evolved as well. Thus, while Hindu holy books display ambivalence  
34 towards violence, Gandhi made non-violence a central, inviolable tenet of  
35 religious, personal and public life.

36 In the new millennium, India remains a nation beholden to religion. In the  
37 early 2000s, it had 1.5 million schools and 75,000 hospitals but over half a  
38 million places of worship. Tens of millions of Indians travel long distances to  
39 pray at holy shrines and temples or secure blessings from a *swami* each year.  
40 Throngs of poor folk trek miles on foot. In December 2019, about 20 pilgrims  
41 died from exhaustion and dehydration while going to the Sabrimala temple in  
42 Kerala for a major festival. Surveys consistently show high, rising levels of  
43 engagement with holy rituals among all the religious groups in India.

44 For Hinduism, a qualitative change is afoot. The penetration of neoliberal  
45 globalization and wide utilization of information technology (IT) devices have  
46 spawned a market driven, nationalistic variant of Hinduism. It is not the vast

1 numbers at the low rungs of society, but a newly expanded social group, the  
2 middle class, that is enamored by this new variant. Higher education and  
3 income, to the surprise of scholars, correlate with higher rate of attendance  
4 in religious activities.

5 The middle class includes well-educated persons in medicine, academy,  
6 social services, media, engineering, IT sector, business services, the huge  
7 entertainment industry, and the multitude of the NGOs together with senior  
8 civil servants, ranking military and police officers, regional and national  
9 politicians, prosperous traders, farmers and small-scale manufacturers. It is  
10 estimated that they (and their families) form roughly a sixth of the nation, or  
11 around 200 million people. This class is identified by ownership of TV sets,  
12 computers, smart phones, two or four wheeled vehicles and ability to access  
13 decent health care and education for their children as well as travel abroad.  
14 It is also intertwined with the diasporic Indian communities in the US, UK and  
15 elsewhere.

16 Despite a modicum of nationalistic ambivalence towards foreign culture,  
17 middle class Indians strive to speak English in the American style and follow  
18 Western norms in attire, food and entertainment jointly with Indian culture and  
19 practice. Imbued with the individualistic ethos, they espouse a strong faith in  
20 the 'free market' and oppose any brand of socialism. With a weak sense of  
21 'citizenship and social responsibility,' they display little concern for the  
22 deprivation and inequities in India (Nanda 2011, page 67).

23 Analysts had expected that cosmopolitan orientation and immersion into  
24 lives inundated with products of science and technology would make them  
25 gradually shed religiosity and embrace a secular vision. Nothing resembling  
26 this expectation has transpired.

27  
28 *India today is teeming with millions of educated, relatively well-*  
29 *to-do men and women who enthusiastically participate in*  
30 *global networks of science and technology. The Indian*  
31 *economy is betting its fortunes, at least in part, on advanced*  
32 *research in biotechnology and the drug industry, whose very*  
33 *existence is a testament to a thoroughly materialistic*  
34 *understanding of the natural world. And yet, a vast majority of*  
35 *these middle-class beneficiaries of science and technology*  
36 *continue to believe in supernatural powers supposedly*  
37 *embodied in idols, divine men and women, stars and planets,*  
38 *rivers, trees and sacred animals. By all indications, they treat*  
39 *the supernatural beings and powers with utmost earnestness*  
40 *and reverence and go to great lengths to please them in the*  
41 *hope of achieving their desires. (Nanda 2011).*

42 Not only is the bulk of the middle class fervently religious but its religiosity has  
43 grown with the growth of the globalized economy. Noting that it is not  
44 restricted to India, Meera Nanda, in a data packed, cogently analyzed book,  
45 *The God Market: How Globalization Is Making India More Hindu*, describes  
46 the key features of this process.

1  
2 **New Temples:** A large number of temples and shrines of exceptionally grand  
3 design, some of which can accommodate thousands of worshippers, have  
4 been constructed of recent. The new temples have statues of new gods who  
5 are hybrid versions of old gods.

6  
7 **New Rituals:** Newly invented rituals are performed on demand for a sizable  
8 fee. If you can afford it, you join a procession around the perimeter of the  
9 Meenakshi temple in Madurai in a gold-plated car with the statue of the temple  
10 goddess. Chanting priests and elephants bless you and your family. Other  
11 temples have emulated this innovation. For those seeking a spouse, more  
12 elaborate rites are available for a fee.

13  
14 **Scientific Spirituality:** Packaged spirituality that liberally uses the words of  
15 science and technological devices is peddled by the old and new gurus and  
16 *swamis* with a view to attract educated, middle income Indians and Western  
17 audiences. Some *swamis* own wealthy religious-commercial empires. Two  
18 internationally influential gurus, Deepak Chopra and Bikram Yoga, adroitly  
19 blend spirituality with the individualist capitalist ethic and formulate guidance  
20 for life and work. Commanding large TV and Internet audiences, their books  
21 and videos are in high demand.

22  
23 **Language:** English-speaking priests with academic training are now hired by  
24 businesses and wealthy people to conduct fire-based holy services to bless  
25 staff and families on astrologically auspicious days.

26  
27 **Public Worship:** Rites mostly done in the temple or home in the past are now  
28 being held on large open fields. Sponsored by wealthy individuals and major  
29 politicians, they attract tens of thousands. The ceremonies they conduct  
30 refine traditional ceremonies.

31  
32 Many more instances of repackaged, extended or reformulated versions of  
33 traditional rites that emphasize different aspects of the Hindu doctrine are  
34 given in Nanda's book. A priestess in Pune declares:

35  
36 *Nowadays I conduct a lot of marriages in English because*  
37 *Indians who go abroad increasingly marry foreign partners. But*  
38 *they're keen on having an Indian wedding. And Indian parents*  
39 *who live overseas often want their children to learn about their*  
40 *culture. But the children don't understand Marathi. So, I*  
41 *conduct the thread ceremony – a rite of passage for boys - in*  
42 *English. (Phalnikar 2010).*

43  
44 Holy consumerism has penetrated new domains. Computers, cell phones,  
45 printers, T-shirts, stickers and office items are embossed with the images of

1 deities *Ganesha, Shiva, Krishna, Lakshmi* and religious symbols. Ownership  
2 of religiously branded goods is a marker of your devotion to the faith.

3 For the devotee with an overloaded life, online *pujas* are available. With a  
4 subscription payment, she can participate in electronic *pujas* for wealth,  
5 health, peace, marriage or conception or celebrate special holy days via the  
6 laptop computer or smartphone. You recite your prayers while glued to the  
7 work desk.  
8



9  
10 A Laptop *Puja* (Arni 2009).  
11

12 *Diwali* (the Festival of Light) is a joy-filled occasion for decorating the house  
13 with flowers, preparing sumptuous food and sweets, lighting candles and  
14 incense, offerings to the gods and impressive fireworks. Hindus take stock of  
15 their lives and pray for resolution of personal and family problems. Wealthy  
16 merchants traditionally hold a prayer called *Chopda Puja* (accounts prayer)  
17 to *Lakshmi*, the goddess of wealth and prosperity during *Diwali*. The practice  
18 has gained a foothold among students, office workers, shopkeepers and  
19 professionals of recent. Hindu temples in the US conduct the *Chopda Puja*  
20 for thousands of worshippers during *Diwali*.  
21

22 *For the accounts puja, participants must first pray to Lord*  
23 *Ganesha, the elephant god, to clear their minds and hearts of*  
24 *any distractions that could interfere with prayers. A fistful of*  
25 *rice yellowed with turmeric powder and a bright silver coin of*  
26 *Goddess Lakshmi are placed in a stainless-steel plate. A*  
27 *priest then blesses the offering along with the devotees'*  
28 *accounting books. At some temples, people bring their*  
29 *laptops, iPods, stethoscopes, power tools or any other*  
30 *business essentials to be blessed. (Singh 2009).*  
31

32 The Hindu scriptures are not consistent on accumulation of wealth. Some  
33 parts proscribe it while other parts deem it acceptable for the merchant caste.  
34 Their economic prescriptions reflect a social structure based on feudalism

1 and the five-fold caste system. The working people are thereby not expected  
2 to raise themselves economically.

3  
4 *Even a capable Sudra must not accumulate wealth; for when*  
5 *a Sudra becomes wealthy, he harasses Brahmins. The Laws*  
6 *of Manu*, Chapter 8, shloka 129 (Ali 2020).

7  
8 Gandhi held an ambivalent attitude towards capitalists. He recognized their  
9 exploitative ways, yet he deemed them trustees of the nation. The super  
10 wealthy and middle-class of India today have cast the ambivalence aside.  
11 Individualism and accumulation are as much a part of their moral creed as is  
12 demonstrative religiosity.

13 *Hindutva* does not endorse economic inequality in explicit terms. Yet, the  
14 authoritarian neo-liberalism of the BJP government, which has spawned a  
15 vast chasm between the rich and the poor, stands on the *Hindutva* doctrine.  
16 The widening chasm is a potent potential grassroots unifying factor. It is then  
17 imperative to deflect the attention of the masses onto hot-button cultural and  
18 religious matters. Divide and rule is integral to the capitalist system. *Hindutva*  
19 politics are facilitated by the weakened state of the traditional left and social  
20 democratic parties, especially the INC. When in power, they had peddled  
21 pseudo-socialist agendas, compromised unduly with the business sector and  
22 promoted a corporate globalization agenda. Undue focus on identity politics  
23 and internal bickering had further eroded their political base. Feeling  
24 betrayed, the working masses cast their alliance onto political parties that  
25 frame their policies in ways that had a direct appeal for them. Politics at the  
26 state and national levels is now more flavored with religious, caste, ethnic,  
27 regional and nationalist rhetoric. Caste politics were a key feature of the 2019  
28 elections in India.

29  
30 *It is surprising, given the assumption that seven decades of*  
31 *independence and rapid economic growth along with*  
32 *affirmative action to help disadvantaged groups [in India]*  
33 *would have broken down caste barriers. But it is not just a*  
34 *reality in rural areas, but also in urban areas, forcing*  
35 *candidates to reveal their caste identity.* (Himanshu 2019).

36  
37 *The Laws of Manu*, the primary manuscript for ancient Hindu laws, endorses  
38 caste, occupational and gender inequalities. But during the first four decades  
39 of the Independence era, promotion of social equality was a national policy.  
40 Education for women was emphasized and affirmative action in education  
41 and employment for Dalits and disadvantaged minorities was instituted.  
42 Sensing political repercussions, the RSS, BJP and other *Hindutva*-oriented  
43 political organizations had refrained from directly invoking this text in their  
44 campaigns. But with the reinforced reign of the BJP, some BJP luminaries are  
45 openly citing *The Laws of Manu* to justify their religiously and culturally  
46 divisive rhetoric and attack affirmative action programs.

1 Nanda (2011) identifies the state-temple-corporate (STC) complex as the  
2 major force strengthening divisive, diversionary and intolerant religiosity in  
3 modern India, and especially under the BJP government. Development of a  
4 reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationship between the temples and the  
5 public sector is a basic feature of the STC complex.

6 In the early post-Independence era, revelations of priestly corruption led  
7 to the establishment of public bodies to regulate and oversee temple affairs.  
8 But of recent, external regulation over temple affairs has been relaxed. Land  
9 grants, virtually cost-free use of public buildings and other devices have  
10 diverted more public funds to the already wealthy temples and Hindu groups.

11 Hindu temples often earn sizeable incomes from donations, in kind and  
12 cash, as well as fees for the services they provide. They possess large tracts  
13 of land and social service facilities like libraries, training schools, clinics and  
14 rest houses. Thus, the land holdings of the parent organization managing the  
15 Tirupati Balaji temple in Andhra Pradesh are valued at \$1.5 billion. It owns  
16 shopping complexes and properties across India and Nepal. Like other  
17 temples it owns a large amount of gold and valuables. Some is kept on the  
18 premises and some is deposited with the banks. The BJP government has  
19 appealed to the temples for to use their savings to assist in ameliorating  
20 India's balance of payments problems. In response, the Tirupati Balaji temple  
21 has begun to invest in the booming stock market. Other temples are following  
22 the suit.

23  
24 +++++  
25

26 Over 500,000 temples in which a couple of million priests, *pujaris*, *pandits*,  
27 gurus, conduct prayers, render spiritual and worldly guidance, perform birth,  
28 coming-of-age, marriage and funeral rites exist in India alone. Add to this the  
29 perhaps 100,000 Hindu temples spread across the world, the demand for  
30 trained Hindu priests is clearly a large one.

31 Traditionally, religious training was imparted by the spiritual master (guru)  
32 to his student or apprentice (*chela*). The esteemed guru, a model mystic and  
33 a fountain of wisdom, had absolute authority over the *chela*. But much has  
34 changed. Religious education now occurs mostly in schools and academies.  
35 Their programs not only cover the Vedas, Sanskrit, priestly duties, astrology,  
36 history and priestly duties but English fluency, computer literacy and basic  
37 accounting as well. While modern technology—computers, projectors and  
38 Internet sources—is used liberally, critical thought is off the agenda.

39 A large number of such programs exist. Temples in India and abroad vie  
40 to employ their graduates. Traditional training was diverse, varying from guru  
41 to guru. The RSS and allied groups are partnering with the BJP government  
42 to standardize such training across India. A diploma-holding professionalized  
43 priesthood promoting the *Hindutva* version of homogenized Hinduism is in the  
44 offing.

45 Religious institutions are major beneficiaries of the policy of privatization  
46 of health and education. Fee charging private schools and universities have

1 sprung up by the thousands of recent. Many are operated by organizations  
2 linked to the RSS or the temples. Some are run by eminent *swamis*. The BJP  
3 allied newly minted billionaire Baba Ram Dev runs a yoga training, herbal  
4 medicine dispensing and merchandizing empire. He is also an advisor to the  
5 Modi government on educational policy.

6 The Tirupati Balaji temple group is a veritable educational powerhouse. It  
7 runs 12 colleges enrolling about 30,000 students. About 600 degree holding  
8 *pujaris* graduate from its colleges each year. It also runs scores of hospitals,  
9 health clinics and charitable service institutions.

10 Privatized education has engendered minimal regulatory oversight over  
11 educational quality and content, and official blessings for dilution of scientific  
12 rigor associated with university education. It is not unusual to find universities  
13 that offer basic and advanced degrees in astronomy and astrology, medicine  
14 and Ayurveda, yoga and physiotherapy, and natural sciences and Vedic  
15 sciences. Disciplines of contradictory foundations coexist in the same place.  
16 The RSS affiliated colleges offer up to PhD level degree programs in the  
17 Vedic Sciences in which the students get training to conduct *pujas* and Hindu  
18 rites. To attract students, some public universities are also offering such  
19 courses.

20 Major corporations stand behind such policies by funding the RSS, BJP  
21 and other Hinduist organizations and by direct support for the temples, their  
22 activities and private and religiously oriented schools and colleges. The scale  
23 of the support is masked, except when a billionaire or corporate executive  
24 appears as the guest of honor at the ceremonies held by the temples and  
25 religious colleges. Senior politicians are also present at such events.

26 Religious tourism is now a multi-billion-dollar industry in India. Take one  
27 case: In the first phase of the year 2019 41-day annual pilgrimage period, the  
28 Sabrimala temple in Kerala collected over US\$21 million, an increase of 50%  
29 over the collection over a similar period in 2018. This booming sector is a  
30 major avenue for collaboration between the temples, business firms, and the  
31 state and central governments. Tens of millions of devotees from India and  
32 abroad visit venerated shrines. The tourists in the high-income brackets have  
33 increased. That generates high incomes for the temples as well as the  
34 shopkeepers, airlines, hoteliers, tour guide agencies and corporate providers  
35 of equipment and consumer goods. And the government benefits from the  
36 associated tax revenues.

37 The three-way STC partnership in a key economic sector serves to bring  
38 the *Hindutva* doctrine more into the mainstream and legitimize the neoliberal  
39 state and corporate policies. It is a public relations boost for them. The goal  
40 of making India a pure, strong Hindu nation that holds its own status in world  
41 affairs is brought closer. Yet, the inevitable corollary is to magnify communal  
42 prejudices and create an atmosphere of hate towards all who are perceived  
43 to be in the way of attaining that goal. Under the BJP, incidents of religion  
44 related violence have been on the rise.

45  
46 +++++



1  
2 Indian companies are major investors in all parts of the world, including the  
3 US and Europe. In the communications and information technology sector,  
4 they stand head-to-head with the global giants. This reality underlies a key  
5 aspect of the state-temple-corporate complex: The projection of India as an  
6 important, powerful player in global affairs.

7 In the Nehru era, India was a leader in the block of non-aligned nations.  
8 While the other states with nuclear weapons did not rule out the first use of  
9 such weapons, India stood with China in affirming a no-first-use policy. The  
10 BJP Defense Minister R Singh signaled a reversal of that policy in August  
11 2019. India may now initiate a nuclear conflagration, a threat to Pakistan and  
12 China.

13 Prime Minister Modi is also charting a course towards a firm alliance with  
14 the US in business and military affairs. During his visit to the US in 2018, the  
15 ten-year ban placed on him after the Gujarat massacres was set aside. Now  
16 a respected global statesman, he addressed a joint session of the US  
17 congress. His stand on fighting 'Islamic terrorism' and fostering business ties  
18 elicited standing ovations from the legislators.

19 Former US President Trump sat in the front row as he addressed a 50,000  
20 strong cheering crowd of Indian Americans in Texas. Calling Trump '*my*  
21 *friend, a friend of India, a great American president,*' Modi justified his  
22 unilateral action in Kashmir as a step to combat 'terrorism'. Trump called Modi  
23 America's '*greatest, most devoted and most loyal friend*'. (Brennan 2019;  
24 Ratcliffe 2019). As the audience wildly applauded them, a first ever tri-service  
25 military exercise between the US and India was announced.

26 Modi and Trump are birds of the same feather. Their core support base is  
27 far-right nationalists and religious fundamentalists. Espousing anti-Islam  
28 policies, they fume against independent media, twist facts, display disregard  
29 for democratic norms, and come across as strong nationalists who want to  
30 make their nation great.

31 Yet, a thick line sets the two apart. The *Hindutva* doctrine wants to cleanse  
32 his nation not just from Islamic influence but also from Christian influence.  
33 Attacks against Christians and Christian churches have increased during BJP  
34 rule. This troubling fact was not lost among Christian evangelical leaders in  
35 the US. Many expressed unease at the reception accorded to Modi but did  
36 not protest. The RSS leaders in India as well had little complaint about unfair  
37 treatments of minorities (including Indians) in the US or about strong ties with  
38 a leader firmly backed by evangelical Christians who deem other religions,  
39 including Hinduism, akin to pagan worship.

40 And it is not without reason. Both Trump and Modi provide unprecedented  
41 benefits to the corporate sector and the class of ultra-rich individuals. That is  
42 their primary creed. It is thus understood that in case of a conflict between  
43 religion and business, the latter has the priority. Despite appearances to the  
44 contrary, the corporate arm is the dominant, driving arm of the state-temple-  
45 corporate complex.

## 5.12 REFLECTIONS

Hinduism, a complex system of beliefs and rituals, has an expansive sacred pantheon that ranges from the *Vedas* to the *Mahabharata* and beyond. These holy texts reveal a supreme being, Brahman, manifested in the form of three elevated deities. A conclave of paramount gods and goddesses comprises his divine cortege. The four main branches of Hinduism have a set of shared beliefs and rites but differ in the importance they attach to the deities. Unlike Christianity and Islam, no record of major conflict between the branches and subdivisions of Hinduism exists.

Hindus believe that all living beings possess a soul that is reborn after death. Liberation from the cycle of rebirth requires spiritual and practical conduct appropriate to one's station in society. The key ethical precepts of Hinduism—honesty, respectful conduct, compassion, diligence, avoidance of greed and lust—are akin to those in the other major religions in the world. Unlike Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, Hinduism has a scripturally ordained system (*varna*) that divides people into five hereditary groups (castes). Each caste has its own function in society. Only those in the upper caste may be priests. The lower castes are further subdivided by occupation. Traditionally, the Dalits, the lowest of the low, were forbidden to enter temples or use communal water sources.

Like other religions, the Hindu code of ethics bonds people, harmonizes conduct and enhances social stability. It has sanctioned a hierarchical social order and rationalized the status and privileges of the ruler and the dominant class. You are what you are because of your deeds in the past life. You attain salvation only by faithful adherence to what is decreed for your station in life. To Hindus, Hinduism is not just a mode of worshiping the divine but a way of life as well.

Hinduism has generated a humongous, impressive cultural edifice in the form of sacred texts, general literature, songs, poems and hymns, music, dance, paintings, ornaments, colorful holidays, and hundreds of magnificent temples, statues and shrines. Prohibition of eating meat has occasioned the innovation of tasty, nutritious, mouthwatering vegetarian dishes of the Hindu culture.

The absence of proselytization zeal and other historic factors confined Hinduism mostly to where it first emerged. It has been an influential force in India for millennia. The state-temple-money complex has ancient roots. But the character of the relationships among its constituents has changed over time. In the colonial times, that linkage was significantly altered. The British fomented political divisions between Hindus and Muslims with horrific consequences for the future.

Hinduism has displayed both retrogressive and emancipatory tendencies. Gandhi and the INC did not discard Hindu heritage while struggling against colonial rule. While championing harmony between religious communities, they promoted equality of men and women, and removal of discriminatory practices against Dalits and minorities. The *Hindutva* promoting RSS, on the

1 other hand, detached itself from the freedom struggle, espoused affinity to  
2 fascism and declared Muslims as the main enemies of the nation.

3 Officially, India is a secular nation, not a Hindu nation. The Constitution  
4 of the Republic of India forbids the state to favor one religion over another. It  
5 prohibits discrimination against women, Dalits and minorities. Effectively, it  
6 reverses what is written in the Hindu scriptures. Despite political and social  
7 limitations, the initial decades after Independence saw significant progress  
8 towards fair, equal treatment of religions, minorities and women. Though,  
9 tensions between Hindus and Muslims (as well as Hindus and Sikhs, Hindus  
10 and Christians) did not subside. Minor mostly localized riots occurred almost  
11 every year. A few major, deadly riots also broke out. Yet, generally there was  
12 a marked level of peaceful coexistence and intermingling between these  
13 communities. The influence of Hinduism and Hindu groups on official policy  
14 was curtailed, though more at the national level than the state level.

15 In the neo-liberal era, and more so under BJP rule, those positive trends  
16 are being reversed. Religion is intertwined with politics in previously unseen  
17 ways. With handsome backing from large corporations and the super-rich,  
18 the RSS and other *Hindutva* espousing organizations have gained a strong  
19 foothold not just in national and state politics but also in education, social  
20 services, media and the entertainment industry.

21 Instead of addressing the structural problems in the Indian economy, the  
22 expanding gap between the rich and the poor, and abject levels of poverty of  
23 the fourth fifths of the population, politics now revolves around religion and  
24 fomenting inter-religious antagonisms together with entrenching customary  
25 practices that disadvantage women and minorities. The doctrines of religious  
26 purity and separatism are being institutionalized by policy, law and official  
27 actions.

28 Virtually all strata in society are affected. The degree of religiosity of the  
29 relatively well-off middle class is a surprising fact of neo-liberal life. The rural  
30 and urban working poor, the Dalits and tribal peoples have historically been  
31 quite religious. But their interests have garnered minimal attention from the  
32 major and minor parties, including the parties on the left. Disenchanted and  
33 betrayed, they too are being swept up by the *Hindutva* socio-political storm.

34 Nonetheless, despite all that has transpired under the ascendance of the  
35 RSS and during BJP rule, progressive voices and activism in India have not  
36 been silenced. A small segment of the middle class—students, academics,  
37 writers, artists and poets, media and film personalities, political and social  
38 activists—men and women—speak out and often take to the streets despite  
39 official harassment or worse. They are active in civil society organizations  
40 that champion human rights, social and economic equality, better conditions  
41 of work and wages for the workers, elimination of the exploitative practices of  
42 landowners, improvement of the status of women and low caste peoples, and  
43 other causes. But they remain fragmented and have yet to constitute a  
44 political block of national import.

45 Recent trends indicate the presence of a broad-based undercurrent of  
46 disaffection with the BJP and *Hindutva* doctrine. Belief in the divine, however

1 intense, cannot displace the desire for food, health care, shelter, education  
2 and security. Even the most devout are not oblivious of the vast gap between  
3 the few at the top and the hundreds of millions at the bottom. The majority  
4 does not harbor a natural animus against followers of different faiths. As  
5 ongoing exposés of corrupt politicians in the ruling party reveal, the BJP  
6 boasts of clean governance has failed to deliver. Lack of jobs, inflation,  
7 reduced incomes and farm crises affect most states. Thus, the BJP and  
8 parties associated with it experienced electoral setbacks in several states  
9 during 2019.

10 The level of mobilization, tenacity and diversity of the protests against the  
11 National Register of Citizens and Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that took  
12 off at the end of 2019 caught the BJP government by surprise. It was on a  
13 scale not seen since India became independent. Young and old, men and  
14 women, lower and upper caste, students and working people—Muslim and  
15 Hindu—staged sit-ins and marches for days by the thousands across India.  
16 Male and female students at several university campuses were at the front  
17 line. Despite bans, penalties and police repression, they persisted.

18 Yet, a queer paradox prevails. While dissenting forces mobilize hundreds  
19 of thousands if not tens of millions to protest specific policies of the BJP  
20 government, when it comes to the elections and the ballot box, the BJP often  
21 prevails. Left parties with programs and track records that appeal to the  
22 masses have become a rarity.

23 The virtual relegation of Muslims, comprising 20% of the population, to  
24 second class status has drawn international criticism. For the first time, the  
25 BJP government has faced words of regret, if not condemnation, from its  
26 allies in the Western world. Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan have rejected the  
27 offer of Indian citizenship granted by the new law.

28 As the protests against the CAA were raging across India, J Nandakumar,  
29 the senior RSS leader and prominent expounder of the *Hindutva* creed issued  
30 an unqualified declaration:

31  
32 *Multi-culturalism divides the society, and not unites it. On the*  
33 *other hand, ours is a universal concept. It is a manifestation of*  
34 *unity.* J Nandakumar (News 18 2019).  
35

36 Surprisingly, he cited none other than BR Ambedkar to support his stand. But  
37 his case rested on selective and shaky evidence. And it was presumably  
38 issued to counter the multitude of anti-CAA protestors who have held large  
39 posters with Ambedkar's photo. The principal drafter of the Constitution of  
40 India and an uncompromising advocate of the rights of Dalits, women and  
41 minorities, Ambedkar was a firm multiculturalist. His position on making India  
42 a religious state was unambiguous:

43  
44 *If Hindu Raj does become a fact, it will, no doubt, be the*  
45 *greatest calamity for this country. No matter what the Hindus*  
46 *say, Hinduism is a menace to liberty, equality and fraternity.*

1            *On that account it is incompatible with democracy...* BR  
2            Ambedkar (Rehnamol 2019).

3  
4            While Gandhi was more of a traditionalist, he too had no affinity with religious  
5            bigotry and divisiveness. Though he held on to Hinduism, he had a flexible  
6            stand on Hindu traditions. Traditions that did not accord with humane values  
7            and equality of all peoples were dispensable.

8  
9            *It is good to swim in the waters of tradition, but to sink in them*  
10           *is suicide.* MK Gandhi (Thakkar 2019).

11  
12           The subordination of women to men in the home, workplace, religious affairs  
13           and public sphere in the cities and villages is a retrogressive tradition that  
14           needs continued dismantling efforts. Positive changes have transpired in the  
15           past seventy years, but much remains as well. The situation of poor women  
16           in the rural areas remains particularly dire. Religious institutions need to  
17           discard the remnants of anti-female bias and fully embrace gender equality in  
18           all aspects of religious practice, including full ordination of women priests.  
19           Another important social institution that needs annihilation, as BR Ambedkar  
20           put it, is the nefarious caste system. It and its religious basis need to be  
21           dumped into the dustbin of history.

22           Elimination of inter-religious strife, especially the strife between Hindus  
23           and Muslims, and grassroots unity that transcends religion is a prerequisite  
24           for tackling India's multitude of economic, educational, health and social  
25           problems. Thus far, those at the helm of the neo-liberal order have managed  
26           to keep the common people divided along religious lines. Attainment of the  
27           theocratic vision of MS Golwalker, the RSS luminary of yesteryear, is their  
28           ultimate goal:

29  
30           *Ever since that evil day, when Moslems first landed in*  
31           *Hindustan, right up to the present moment, the Hindu Nation*  
32           *has been gallantly fighting to take on these despoilers. The*  
33           *Race Spirit has been awakening.* MS Golwalker (Roy 2019).

34  
35           The hold of that vision among the common Hindu folk is a tradition has to be  
36           broken as well. Recent events have pointed to emergence of unifying trends  
37           among the youth. And quite a number of Hindu leaders have proclaimed that  
38           the *Hindutva* doctrine goes against the essence of Hinduism. But their voices  
39           are muted. Whether they and the progressive Indians will join hands and  
40           mobilize the masses to roll back the *Hindutva* steam roller, dethrone the BJP  
41           and institute non-neoliberal governance is an open question.

42           India is at the crossroads. Will it go towards a nation where Hinduism is  
43           the state religion, where people of other faiths are second class citizens, or  
44           will it become a secular society where all faiths are accorded equal legal  
45           status and promotion of interreligious tolerance is the governmental policy?  
46           Will the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists and Christians of India be able to

1 live harmoniously in the same neighborhoods? Will their children attend the  
2 same schools and play with each other just as children? Will India be driven  
3 towards authoritarianism or socialistic democracy? Those are the burning  
4 questions of the day.

5 Without a broad-based movement that aims to transform the economic  
6 foundations of the present system, close the gap between the rich and the  
7 poor and institute policies that will uplift the living conditions of the masses,  
8 there will be ample room for divisive, hate-mongering, diversionary religion-  
9 based politics. History and current global trends attest to that assertion.

10

# CHAPTER 06: BUDDHISM



*Everything changes,  
Nothing remains without change.*  
Gautama Buddha

*To really do nothing,  
with perfection,  
is as difficult as doing everything.*  
Buddhist Philosopher Alan Watts

*Dharma isn't a belief; it isn't dogma.  
It is total appreciation of impermanence and change.*  
Buddhist Nun Pema Chodron



BUDDHISM, THE BELIEF SYSTEM based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, has 500 million followers worldwide. At 7% of the global population, it is the fourth largest religion. Most Buddhists live in Asia. They form the majority religious group in Bhutan, Cambodia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Laos, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Some 40% of the Buddhists reside in China and Japan. Though in India, the land where it was born, less than 1% of the population is Buddhist.

## 6.1 ORIGIN

Gautama Buddha was born presumably in a Nepalese royal family some five hundred years before the Christian era. Disillusioned by a secluded life of comfort and luxury and distressed at the suffering he encountered upon venturing beyond the palace gates, he abandoned family, wealth and power in a quest to comprehend the essence of human existence and find a path to spiritual tranquility. He was 29 years old.

In the first stage of his wanderings, he successively became a pupil of two esteemed masters of meditation. Though he excelled with both, the spiritual prize he was seeking eluded him. Subsequently, he joined a group

1 of ascetics who led lives of extreme deprivation and self-inflicted pain. That  
2 produced pain and weight loss, not insight. Legend says that after meditating  
3 under a fig (*Bodhi*) tree, he was eventually enlightened. He spent the rest of  
4 his life travelling across northern India spreading the insights he had gained.  
5 Attainment of mental bliss and purity through meditation and mindfulness,  
6 and practicing lovingkindness towards all humans as well as animals formed  
7 the core of message.  
8



9  
10 Buddha Meditating Under a *Bodhi* Tree

11

12 It was a time of extensive social and economic change in northern India.  
13 Production, commerce and construction were expanding. Urban centers were  
14 growing in size and population. Crafts flourished. Yet, a sense of disquiet  
15 prevailed. While wealthy merchants and landowners exercised an influence  
16 in societal affairs, the prevailing caste system continued to accord them a low  
17 status. The lowest castes were uneasy. The existent Vedic doctrine was rigid  
18 and antithetical to social mobility.

19 The wisdom of the sagely Buddha who favored an egalitarian social order  
20 and did not attach birth right to the spiritual, social standing of a person found  
21 a receptive audience in this atmosphere. With his pronouncements denoting  
22 a viable mode of spirituality, his following increased. Devout disciples were  
23 ordained as monks. Communities of lay followers under the mentorship of a  
24 group of monks (*sangha*) took shape. By the time Buddha died at the age of  
25 80, the principal beliefs, tenets and rites of Buddhism were in place. In the  
26 centuries to follow, it evolved further, spread to distant lands and spawned  
27 multiple variations.

28 A year after his death and during the 4th century and 3rd century BCE,  
29 the First, Second and Third Councils of Buddhism were convened. These  
30 councils generated greater formalization of the doctrine. During this period,  
31 Buddhism diverged into the two main denominations: Theravada Buddhism  
32 and Mahayana Buddhism. Two smaller offshoots, Tantric Buddhism and Zen  
33 Buddhism, emerged in 5th century and 13th century, respectively. By this



1 time Buddhism had spread southward down to Sri Lanka and eastward to  
2 Korea and Japan. While recognizing the authority of Buddha, each branch  
3 has its own interpretation of his teachings as well as its own texts, customs  
4 and practices. Other minor branches were also founded.

## 6.2 CORE BELIEFS AND TEXTS

8 At its inception, Buddhism accepted, but in a modified form, some ideas and  
9 practices of Vedic Hinduism and rejected others. Buddhism dispensed with  
10 immortal souls (*atman*), the numerous Hindu gods and goddesses, and the  
11 caste (*varna*) based division of society. The Vedas and other holy Hindu  
12 books were not viewed as spiritually authoritative texts.

13 Buddhist cosmology posits that the universe has no beginning or end. It  
14 cycles in four phases—creation, operation, disintegration and emptiness—  
15 over billions of years. Composed of six realms with deities, sub-deities,  
16 humans, animals, ghosts and hell-dwelling beings, it is a flat, interconnected,  
17 whole in which each entity, life bearing or not, is in a state of perpetual flux.  
18 Nothing is static. Under Hinduism, the Supreme Soul (Brahman) underpins  
19 the grand unity of existence. In Buddhism, overall unity is an integral property  
20 of nature. But in partial concordance with the former, it asserts that *Karma*,  
21 the law of cause and effect, is the driving force of transformation. What you  
22 are is influenced by your past deeds and what you will be is affected by your  
23 deeds in this life. But the Vedic notion of a permanent, distinct self (soul,  
24 *atman*) is held to be an illusion. Buddhism accepts the notion of rebirth, but  
25 what is reborn is not the soul but an element of cosmic consciousness.

26 The other basic Buddhist precept is that human existence is stamped by  
27 *Dukkha*, a state of psychological anguish and alienation, possibly linked with  
28 physical distress. It is both caused by, and a result of, skewed visions of  
29 reality and negative emotions like hatred, greed and anger. The goal of life is  
30 to overcome *Dukkha* and attain *Nirvana*, a state of tranquil bliss and wisdom,  
31 here and now, not in an external domain. This vision is enshrined in the Four  
32 Noble Truths: (i) *Dukkha* exists; (ii) *Dukkha* emanates from desire; (iii)  
33 *Dukkha* is staved off by subjugating desire; (iv) the Noble Eightfold Path  
34 embodies the modality to block *Dukkha* and achieve *Nirvana*. Multiple lives  
35 of strict adherence to this path give freedom from the cycles of rebirth and  
36 attainment of a spiritual status akin to that of a demigod.

37



## Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Noble Path

1  
2  
3  
4 The Eightfold Noble Path (the essence of *Dharma*) has psychological, ethical,  
5 and intellectual components. They advocate the cultivation of (i) right view,  
6 (ii) right intention, (iii) right speech, (iv) right action, (v) right livelihood, (vi)  
7 right effort, (vii) right thought, and (viii) right concentration (mindfulness).  
8 Buddha proclaimed that his vision was the Middle Way, a balanced but  
9 disciplined mode of life between the two extremes of total renunciation of  
10 worldly pleasures and undue attachment to material extravagance. The Four  
11 Truths and the Noble Path are depicted in many striking, multi-colored  
12 pictorial designs. Above is one standard examples.

13 After Buddha's death, his close disciples collected his teachings, and  
14 formulated and memorized them in a uniform way for oral conveyance from  
15 generation to generation. Their collections cover a broad range of issues,  
16 events and stories abounding with rhythmic phraseology and paradoxical  
17 ruminations. Recitation of relevant portions during rituals, meditation,  
18 gatherings and instruction became customary. It took centuries of effort for  
19 the Buddhist scripture to be compiled into written texts.

20 The main Buddhist canon, the *Tripitaka* (also called the *Pali Canon*) is  
21 arranged in three parts. They feature stories and illustrations about Buddha's  
22 path to *Nirvana*, rules (*vinayas*) for the monks, guidelines for organizing  
23 monastic communities (*sangha*) and schematically ordered renditions of  
24 Buddha's teachings (*sutras*). These voluminous texts integrate extensive  
25 comments and reflections on the different aspects of the Buddhist faith.

26 The multiplicity of Buddhist traditions that emerged in the two and half  
27 millennia since the founder's death have each spawned their own bodies of  
28 venerated texts. They have varied interpretations of Buddha's teachings and  
29 contain novel ideas, beliefs, rituals and symbols. By now, Buddhism boasts  
30 a gigantic compendium of elegantly rendered doctrine, philosophy, stories,  
31 devotional material and guidance for the organization of the monastic way of  
32 life and social institutions.

33 The schism between Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism  
34 was the key stimulus of the flowering of the Buddhist canon. The latter school  
35 brought forth the Mahayana *sutras*, a large collection of *sutras* that hitherto  
36 were thought to have been revealed to just a few enlightened disciples. The  
37 *sutra* form was very popular. As Buddhism spread from country to country

1 and spawned distinct sub-traditions, a vast collection of *sutras* evolved. Each  
2 Asian nation where Buddhism has a significant standing has its own body of  
3 texts that place distinct emphases on the ancient and newer theological  
4 ideas, and its own collection of *sutras*. Some of the popular Mahayana *sutras*  
5 are the Lotus Sutra, Heart Sutra, the Diamond Sutra, and the *Vimalakirti*  
6 Sutra.

7 Both Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism proclaim fidelity to  
8 the original wisdom of Buddha. But they differ on three major grounds. The  
9 former largely retains the nontheistic flavor of Buddha's teachings, but by  
10 acceding to the existence of divinities, the latter has acquired a polytheistic  
11 character. The Mahayana texts posit multiple universes (realms), each with  
12 its own Buddha. Theravada Buddhism stresses personal salvation through  
13 meditation, but Mahayana Buddhism is more attentive to the alleviation of  
14 collective suffering. Accordingly, diligent devotion, compassion, meditation  
15 and reflection can enable a devotee to attain Buddhahood. In other words,  
16 he or she can become a *bodhisattva*, an enlightened person who can be  
17 reborn into a sacred realm after death but who, for compassionate reasons,  
18 opts to remain on earth to assist others in their spiritual quest.

19 The Buddhist creed declares that depending on your accumulated deeds  
20 (*karma*), you can land in one of the numerous diabolical realms (*Naraka*) of  
21 extreme heat or cold. You may experience excruciating pain, rupture of the  
22 skin, bleeding and much more. These realms are described in graphic forms.  
23 Your residence in a *Naraka* may last from  $10^{12}$  to  $10^{21}$  years, at the end of  
24 which you can attain *Nirvana*. Rebirth into these realms can be prevented by  
25 accepting the Four Noble Truths and following the Eightfold Noble Path.

### 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46

## 6.3 ETHICS

29 The essence of Buddhist ethics is embodied in the Noble Eightfold Path, the  
30 path to *Nirvana*. The four segments of this path that pertain to ethics are:  
31 Right Action, Right Speech, Right Living and Right Thought.

32 **Right Action** enjoins one to desist from injuring or killing living entities,  
33 theft, consuming intoxicants, extramarital sex and accumulating material  
34 goods; **Right Speech** prohibits lying, rumormongering, and insulting talk;  
35 **Right Living** promotes charity, simplicity and non-violence, and discourages  
36 harm-generating work; and **Right Thought** implores freedom from greed,  
37 anger, hatred, ill-will, hostility and delusion. And sharing and empathy are  
38 elevated precepts in the Buddhist sacred texts.

39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46

*Give, even if you only have a little.*

Gautama Buddha

*In whom there is no sympathy for living beings:  
know him as an outcast.*

Gautama Buddha

1 The other four segments of the Noble Path promote development of will  
2 power, meditational skills, mindfulness and gaining insight and wisdom via  
3 understanding *Dukkha* and the transitory nature of everything including the  
4 self. The Buddhist ethical creed stresses strong moral discipline and noble  
5 intent in all actions. It also stresses non-violence and elimination of hatred.

6 The Eightfold Noble Path is symbolized by the eight spokes of the Wheel  
7 of *Dharma* (*Dharma Chakra*). Etched on ancient statues, the *Chakra*  
8 represents the cosmic spinning of a moral order that leads towards wisdom  
9 and insight. Seen in many colorful pictorial and objectified forms, it is  
10 encountered in Hinduism and Jainism as well.



11  
12  
13 *Dharma Chakra*

14  
15 The basic ethical tenets of Buddhism resemble those found in the Hindu  
16 scriptures. Such tenets also exist in most religions. While the formulations,  
17 specifics, emphases and prohibitions diverge, their basic components reflect  
18 a great degree of overlap.

#### 19 20 **6.4 WORSHIP, SYMBOLS AND CULTURE**

21  
22 Buddhists worship in temples and monasteries, at sacred shrines, revered  
23 places and festival sites as well as in private domains. Many magnificent  
24 Buddhist temples, some over a thousand years old, stand across Asia, and  
25 of recent, in other parts of the world. The compounds of many monasteries  
26 contain remarkable structures. Some monasteries contain splendid gardens,  
27 statutes, symbolic pillars, *stupas*, and recreational spaces. A few statutes of  
28 Buddha and other Buddhist shrines in the Asian nations are made partly or  
29 entirely of gold.

30 Forms of worship vary by denomination. Other than for special days, no  
31 preset times or days of worship are observed. You worship alone or in a group  
32 while seated barefoot on the temple floor; you walk in circles around a shrine;  
33 you meditate, stand or bow down in silence. You absorb the chants and  
34 recitation of *sutras* by the monks. Soothing instrumental music may serenade  
35 the ceremony. You partake in prayers for the dead and living. You pay  
36 homage to Buddha and *bodhisattvas* and pray to local gods and spiritual  
37 protectors honored by your sect. Burning candles and incense, dispersal of

1 decorations and flowers, wearing special amulets, and twiddling rosaries are  
2 typical practices.

3  
4 **Meditation:** The healers and shamans of ancient and traditional religions  
5 were the precursors of the priests, gurus, imams and monks of modern  
6 religions. They were revered for their power to mediate between the natural  
7 and heavenly domains. Communication with the spirits and the ancestors  
8 occurred through them. Guiding the tribe in times good and bad, they also  
9 helped resolve health and family problems. Besides prescribing herbs and  
10 charms, and casting spells, they chanted, danced and entered a trance-like  
11 state. They were able to induce such a state in their consultees as well.

12 The modalities for attaining soothing altered mental states became more  
13 refined and less restrictive over time. They formed the basis for the mystical  
14 tendencies of faith systems like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islamic Sufi  
15 orders, Bahaism, Sikhism, Judaism, Christianity and Taoism. Today, these  
16 modalities are collectively known as meditation.

17 The spiritual bases, rationale and actions associated with meditation vary  
18 widely. The efforts of psychologists and scholars of religion notwithstanding,  
19 no standard definition of meditation exists. However, meditation generally  
20 implies an endeavor that (i) instills mental discipline and ability to control  
21 random thoughts, (ii) induces a state of profound calmness and relaxation,  
22 (iii) involves focusing on a single word, phrase or deed to attain sustained  
23 mental silence, and (iv) enhances spirituality and union with divine beings.  
24 Some schools combine internal meditative efforts with leading an ethical life.

25 Different religions place different emphases of these four components of  
26 meditation. Christians meditate by focusing on a Biblical idea or event to  
27 express their love of God. Sufi mystics partake in extended, intense sessions  
28 of chanting, inner reflection and concentration to express submission to the  
29 will of Allah. A Hindu meditator aims for a state of mental equipoise and  
30 closeness to Brahman. Religious meditation involves singular attention to the  
31 breath and gently calming thoughts, emotions and sensations to attain a state  
32 of psychic tranquility, emotional equipoise and spiritual bliss so profound that  
33 it evades verbal description.

34 A major pillar of Buddhist thought and practice, meditation is addressed  
35 in several sections of the *Pali Canon*. Elaborations appear in later day texts.  
36 While it stands out among the major religions in the emphasis placed on  
37 meditation, Buddhist meditation is a progeny of the Hindu tradition. Buddha,  
38 who was enlightened through meditation, posited it as an indispensable  
39 vehicle for attaining *Nirvana*. The Buddhist and Hindu forms have much in  
40 common. Both teach that persistent effort involving appropriate posture,  
41 regulation of breathing, singular focus, stilling the mind and anaesthetizing  
42 the senses engender an elevated, sublime state of consciousness.  
43 Suppression of logical thought and mundane ideas transports you to a realm  
44 beyond common perception.

45 Hindus meditate for unification with Brahman, for purification of the soul.  
46 But to the Buddhist, the self—individual soul—is an illusion. The reality is an

1 illusion, but an ever-changing one. Only an effusive, cosmic consciousness,  
2 akin to utter emptiness, exists.

3 Buddhists meditate to curtail craving, reduce suffering and attain wisdom  
4 and enlightenment, an understanding beyond words and rational discourse.  
5 Some Buddhist schools stress mental control to end desire and pain, and  
6 other schools stress gaining insight into the nature of reality. In the modern  
7 era, meditation is linked with developing mindfulness, that is, the ability to  
8 control unhealthy mental tendencies and calmly adapt to one's surroundings  
9 in a non-judgmental manner.

10 Buddhism has a large collection of chants (*mantras*) for meditative  
11 purposes. A range of positions to be adopted in a calm setting exist. Initially,  
12 they may pose a challenge, but through practice, they become conducive to  
13 mental stillness and immersion into infinitude of the universe. The time spent  
14 on meditation varies. Pre-dawn meditation is often recommended.

15 A meditation session may involve adopting a composed lotus position in  
16 a calm setting; deep and rhythmic abdominal breaths; suppressing random,  
17 diversionary, pleasurable or troubling thoughts; and repeating, in silence or  
18 with sound, a word or phrase with devotional connotations (*mantra*). The  
19 Buddhist *mantras* derive from the teachings of the Buddha and the revered  
20 texts. The *Shakyamuni Mantra* is a popular *mantra*.

21

### ***Shakyamuni Mantra***

<i>Om</i>	O universal sound
<i>Muni Muni</i>	The wise, wise sage
<i>Mahamuni</i>	The supreme sage
<i>Shakyamuni</i>	Sage of the Sakyas
<i>Svaha</i>	Hail to thee!

22

23 Meditational practice has been criticized on two grounds. One, it leads to a  
24 hallucinogenic trance akin to that of psychoactive drugs. Meditation gurus  
25 counter that while drug effects are transitory and associated with harmful side  
26 effects, meditation produces a sustained state of mental calmness and has  
27 no major adverse effects. Two, meditational practice implies withdrawal into  
28 the inner self and abandoning humanity. Buddhists assert that mental  
29 relaxation, stability, control and insight, make you abandon the individualistic  
30 notion of the self and enable you to practice loving-kindness in an automatic,  
31 unrestrained form. Self-realization does not alienate you from reality, rather it  
32 unifies you with humanity and the universe.

33

34

++++

35

36 When attending prayer and instructional sessions at the temples, devotees  
37 bring donations in the form of food, robes and other items for the monks.  
38 Cash and property donations to the monastery are also made.

1 Buddhist monks are identified by their robes. In the early days, monks  
2 used robes made out of rags and discarded cloth. But that tradition died out  
3 as Buddhism blossomed, spread to distant lands, acquired distinct national  
4 characteristics and the *sangha* accumulated vast riches. Presently, monks  
5 adorn robes of many designs that vary from nation to nation. Orange, saffron  
6 or maroon robes are the norm but robes in other colors and multi-colored  
7 robes are also found. Some robes are sleeveless; others cover the arm.  
8 Some monks wear a shirt and a skirt; some put on an additional top layer.  
9 Robes are made from cotton, silk and other material. The basic robe is a  
10 single piece of cloth draped over the body, but more elegant robes have multi-  
11 layered garments and are laced with holy symbols and inscriptions.  
12 Ceremonial robes sparkle with elegance and beauty. Robes are considered  
13 sacred items and are venerated by the laity.

## 14 **6.5 EARLY BUDDHISM**

15  
16  
17 As a result of his tolerant stand, Buddha's sermons attracted people from all  
18 strata in society. Buddhist communities with merchants, landowners, civil  
19 administrators and low caste people emerged in town after town. Some joined  
20 the *sangha* as monks, but many were lay followers.

21 It was a time of expanding production in agriculture and crafts, and growth  
22 of local and long-distance trade. The prevailing Vedic creed accorded a low  
23 status to the merchant class. To the wealthy traders, Buddhism provided an  
24 avenue for elevating their social status and the chance of attaining salvation  
25 that hitherto was the prerogative of the Brahmins.

26  
27 *Early texts say that fifty-five of the first sixty of the Buddha's*  
28 *followers were from wealthy and powerful merchant families.*  
29 (Patheos Editors 2019).

30  
31 At the outset, Buddhist monks who travelled across the land to spread the  
32 word depended on charity for survival. This practice underwent a profound  
33 change as more wealthy individuals joined the *sangha*. These prosperous  
34 converts donated land to the *sangha* and built monasteries for education and  
35 meditation. Residences were built. The *sangha* was gradually transformed  
36 from a group of itinerant monks into an organization of settled monks with  
37 elaborate rules of personal conduct and institutional administration. As time  
38 passed, many *sanghas* became owners of large tracts of land and property.  
39 The monks no longer lived the life of relative deprivation. Converted traders  
40 took monks along in their trips to distant lands. Migration and proselytization  
41 facilitated the spread of Buddhism into the Asian landscape.

42 With its stress on responsible, ethical conduct, local rulers saw Buddhism  
43 a vehicle for promoting social harmony and a means of resolving disputes.  
44 Adorning himself with the socially egalitarian tapestry of the new faith and  
45 dispensing charity, the king could project an image of a fair, benevolent ruler.

1 His status was enhanced as he engaged Buddhist monks as advisors and  
2 emissaries.

3 The conversion of King Ashoka to Buddhism around 270 BCE was the  
4 major turning point in its geographical expansion and the codification and  
5 elaboration of its doctrine. His empire spanned the Indian subcontinent. He  
6 incorporated aspects of the Buddhist *dharma* philosophy into his system of  
7 governance and built monasteries, elegant *stupas*, shrines, Buddha statues  
8 and massive pillars inscribed with the teachings of Buddha across his  
9 dominion. Local and itinerant monks obtained dwelling quarters. Gatherings  
10 of respected monks were organized to reflect on the teachings of Buddha.  
11 Ashoka was the primary driving force behind the Third Buddhist Council held  
12 sometime around 250 BCE. Composition of Buddhist texts accelerated under  
13 his patronage. He was also known for promoting tolerance between Vedic  
14 and Buddhist monks, and for donations to other religious orders.

15 The Buddhist monks he dispatched to Sri Lanka and central Asia made a  
16 lasting impact. As powerful kings converted, Buddhism acquired permanent  
17 roots. Ashoka's mode of rule, which embodied a secular, not a divinely  
18 blessed relationship between religion and the state, became the model for  
19 other rulers in Asia.

20 The Ashoka *Chakra*, with 24 spokes denoting twenty-four Buddhist laws  
21 of origination and termination, was created under his reign. Etched on pillars  
22 and shrines, it also reflects the Buddhist cycle of change and time. Today, it  
23 adorns the national flag of India.  
24



25  
26 The Ashoka *Chakra*  
27

28 The flowering of general culture was an important concomitant to the spread  
29 of Buddhism. Language and writing developed in the course of translations  
30 of existing texts and extension of the doctrine in new texts. Kings and wealthy  
31 merchants in lands with vibrant urban trading centers sponsored mammoth  
32 literary and poetic endeavors. A few large monasteries became major centers  
33 of education, enrolling thousands of monks from distant areas who desired to  
34 learn the intricacies of the doctrine. In an atmosphere of relatively open-  
35 minded discourse, distinguished scholars produced varied works of  
36 philosophical import. Attendees from distant lands used their knowledge to  
37 spread the Buddhist doctrine. Some monks became respected scholars, and



1 some were seen as possessors of special powers. Religion expanded  
2 concurrently with the blooming of artistic endeavors like painting, sculptures  
3 and statues. As in Hinduism, culture was inextricably intertwined with religion.  
4 Cultural activities and discourse that did not carry religious flavor and  
5 meaning occurred but rarely.

6 It is estimated that if just the Tibetan Buddhist canon was translated into  
7 English, it would extend over 200,000 pages. The entire collection of Buddhist  
8 holy books may extend over a million pages! The *Diamond Sutra* produced  
9 in China in the 8th century is the oldest printed book in the world. A collection  
10 of some 700 one-and-a-half meter slabs in a Buddhist stupa in Myanmar,  
11 each etched with verses from the *Tripitaka*, is considered to be the largest  
12 book in the world.

13  
14 +++++

15  
16 Along with cultural development, a key feature of Buddhism emerging from  
17 this era and continuing onwards is that it became intertwined with wealth and  
18 political power wherever it took root. That association was particularly strong  
19 in Cambodia, Japan, Laos, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Tibet. Many  
20 Buddhist orders became fabulously wealthy, constructed massive temples,  
21 elegant statutes and residential buildings, and became major actors in the  
22 economy of their areas. Thus, in 12th century Sri Lanka:

23  
24 [considerable] *economic resources were directed to the*  
25 *sangha through royal patronage which often took the form of*  
26 *land grants to individual monasteries, with the result that these*  
27 *became, collectively, the major landowner on the island during*  
28 *this period.* (Skilton 1997, page 152).

29  
30 Many a *sangha* exercised major influence in public and political affairs and  
31 served as mediators in disputes between competing royal families and  
32 traders. In places, they became translators and advisors to the king and state  
33 officials. Monastic life became more regimented with detailed rules of order  
34 and personal conduct. Large monasteries had monks who specialized in  
35 memorizing and reciting *sutras* and revered texts, and in teaching and  
36 meditation. Monks functioned as administrators, educators, accountants,  
37 property supervisors, caretakers of wandering monks and purchasers of  
38 items for the monastery. Some supervised the laborers and slaves serving  
39 the monastery and oversaw farming and other productive activities.

40  
41 *Monasteries supported themselves by different means in*  
42 *different countries. Some received support from the state. In*  
43 *Tibet and China, large monasteries often owned substantial*  
44 *lands (sometimes at a great distance from the monastery*  
45 *itself) that would be leased out to tenant farmers; monks were*  
46 *prohibited by the vinaya from tilling the soil because they might*

1 *inadvertently kill insects. The Indian monastic code contains*  
2 *detailed instruction on how funds for permanent endowments*  
3 *to the monastery may be loaned at interest, a service*  
4 *monasteries elsewhere also provided. Other monasteries*  
5 *supported themselves by providing services for the dead,*  
6 *while others, located on a sacred mountain or possessing a*  
7 *famous image would benefit from donations of pilgrims and*  
8 *tourists. (Lopez 2001, pages 153--154).*  
9

10 Inevitably, as its secular component grew, the *sangha* was corrupted by the  
11 ills of the prevalent social order. In nation after nation, it partook in political  
12 intrigue among feuding royal clans, amassed wealth and property, was  
13 involved in lawless acts, imported the local mode of social stratification into  
14 its own setting and exacerbated existent social tensions. Monasteries that  
15 charged interests rates on loans bordering on usury faced public censure.  
16 For such and other political reasons, many monastic orders underwent cycles  
17 of prosperity and stability followed by persecution and decline.

18  
19 *Popular images of Buddhism as a spiritual endeavor detached*  
20 *from mundane affairs and of Buddhist monks as sage-like*  
21 *persons who live austere lives, depend on charity, engage in*  
22 *meditation and contemplation, and do not partake in worldly*  
23 *affairs do not reflect the historic reality.*  
24

## 25 **6.6 MODERN BUDDHISM**

26  
27 This section presents, in a summarized form, the social, political and spiritual  
28 dimensions of Buddhism in Tibet, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand and India.

### 29 **+ Tibet +**

30  
31  
32 Buddhism was brought to Tibet in the 8th century by two esteemed monks  
33 from India. Working under the patronage of the king of Tibet, they set up  
34 monasteries and translated major Buddhist texts into Tibetan. Eventually,  
35 Tibetan Buddhism evolved into a religion that combined the basic tenets of  
36 Mahayana Buddhism with beliefs and practices derived from Bon, a folk  
37 Tibetan religion. Under the inspiration of venerated sages, five different  
38 Tibetan Buddhist traditions came into being, with the latest one emerging in  
39 the West after the 1950s.

40 The lama is the Tibetan equivalent of the Buddhist monk. Regarded as  
41 teachers, the lamas live in thousands of monasteries under a strict hierarchy.  
42 The authority and power of the senior lamas far outstrip that of the bulk of the  
43 regular lamas. During the two centuries prior to 1959, Tibet was ruled by a  
44 Dalai Lama who is seen as an incarnation of a *bodhisattva* of compassion.  
45 Though formally he leads the largest of the five Tibetan Buddhist traditions,  
46 the Dalai Lama exercised supreme authority in political and secular affairs in

1 the nation and is deemed the most senior figures in Tibetan Buddhism. When  
2 a Dalai Lama dies, his incarnate successor is selected through an intricate  
3 process. Tenzin Gyatso is the 14th and current Dalai Lama of Tibet. With its  
4 distinct beliefs, multiple texts, elaborate rituals, dress styles, music and  
5 organizational set up, Tibetan Buddhism is a distinct brand of Buddhism,  
6 unlike that found anywhere else.

7 Before the 1950s, Tibet had a hierarchical social formation partly akin to  
8 European feudalism. It had a history of violent conflicts arising from infighting  
9 within the ruling class over succession and division of property, or between  
10 the different sects for theocratic supremacy and control of resources. Major  
11 uprisings from below occurred but rarely. The system was relatively stable.

12 China invaded Tibet in 1959. The 14th Dalai Lama was exiled to India  
13 and the Tibetan society underwent fundamental changes. For the US, the  
14 Chinese intrusion was an opportunity to extend its policy of isolating, vilifying  
15 and destabilizing China that was initiated a decade earlier when the forces  
16 led by Mao Zedong liberated China from the twin yokes of feudalism and  
17 imperialism. Through the 1950s and beyond, CIA, the US spy agency,  
18 covertly funded the exiled Dalai Lama government and trained fighters to  
19 infiltrate Tibet and oppose Chinese rule.

20 An image of the Dalai Lama and Tibet took hold in the western mind that  
21 was far from actuality. The mainstream media portrayed him as a peaceful,  
22 genial and deeply spiritual person who had ruled his land in a fair, even-  
23 handed manner. Tibet before Chinese takeover was depicted as a Shangri-  
24 La, an oasis of tranquility, contentment and bliss. Tibetan Buddhism was  
25 portrayed as a non-dogmatic, humanistic creed which focused on attainment  
26 of spiritual tranquility. And popularity of Buddhism in the West grew. It was a  
27 veritable cacophony of politically divergent vibrations in which the anti-  
28 establishment alternative cultural groups of the 1960s unwittingly united with  
29 mainstream scholars, journalists, film and TV stars and political hotshots. A  
30 new brand of Buddhism distinct from the historic tradition began to emerge.

31 Before proceeding with our analysis of Buddhism in Tibet, it is important  
32 to clearly state that the people of Tibet have the inalienable right to determine  
33 their own destiny. Whatever the social, economic benefits it has produced,  
34 and these are many, Chinese rule in Tibet is a colonial imposition. Yet,  
35 adopting a critical stand towards the Dalai Lama and the situation in Tibet  
36 under his reign should not be conflated with an endorsement of the Chinese  
37 domination of that nation.

38 Prior to 1959, Tibet was a society of extreme inequality. The ruling class  
39 of the Dalai Lama, the ranking Lamas, major landowners and merchants lived  
40 opulent lives in a land rife with squalor, malnutrition and disease. The average  
41 lifespan was barely 30 years.

42  
43 *Drepung monastery, on the outskirts of Lhasa, was one of the*  
44 *largest landowners with 185 manors, 25,000 serfs and 16,000*  
45 *herdsmen. (Neuss 2009).*  
46

1 While scholars debate the character of the mode of the social formation in old  
2 Tibet, there is no doubt that it was a brutally enforced, theocratic system of  
3 immense privilege for a few and extreme misery for the many.  
4

5 *In old Tibet there were small numbers of farmers who*  
6 *subsisted as a kind of free peasantry, and perhaps an*  
7 *additional 10,000 people who composed the ‘middle-class’*  
8 *families of merchants, shopkeepers, and small traders.*  
9 *Thousands of others were beggars. There also were slaves,*  
10 *usually domestic servants, who owned nothing. Their offspring*  
11 *were born into slavery. The majority of the rural population*  
12 *were serfs. Treated little better than slaves, the serfs went*  
13 *without schooling or medical care, they were under a lifetime*  
14 *bond to work the lord’s land—or the monastery’s land—without*  
15 *pay, to repair the lord’s houses, transport his crops, and collect*  
16 *his firewood. They were also expected to provide carrying*  
17 *animals and transportation on demand. Their masters told*  
18 *them what crops to grow and what animals to raise. They*  
19 *could not get married without the consent of their lord or lama.*  
20 *And they might easily be separated from their families should*  
21 *their owners lease them out to work in a distant location.*  
22 (Parenti 2007).  
23

24 The Tibetan state was conservative in the extreme. Apprehensive of their  
25 potentially destabilizing effects, the rulers opposed the introduction of basic  
26 things like schools, health clinics, industries and wage labor. Life had to  
27 remain as it always had been. A major portion of the national wealth was  
28 consumed by religious activities. All echelons of society were steeped in a  
29 complex version of Buddhist beliefs, rituals and practices in which the Dalai  
30 Lama had a status akin to a divinity. Tens of thousands of monks manned  
31 hundreds of elegant temples to oversee that everything went according the  
32 scriptures and the proclamations of the Dalai Lama.

33 Tibetan Buddhism generated social stability in an effective manner. While  
34 some bonded workers ran away, and in cases of blatantly egregious behavior  
35 by the master, some—individually or in a group—damaged his property,  
36 collective, sustained forms of rebellion against the rulers were rare.  
37 Punishment for transgressions was brutal. Despite the gravity of injustices,  
38 one’s spiritual outlook suppressed questioning the social order. Rebellious  
39 thinking and action were evil, *karma* violating acts. To act out of line with the  
40 wisdom of Buddha and the Lamas was to flout one’s *dharma* and negate his  
41 or her chance of attaining *Nirvana*. It was an invitation for rebirth in a hellish  
42 realm. Life in an insecure, harsh and isolated environment with no options  
43 had conditioned people to meekly accept things as they were.  
44

45 *The poor and afflicted were taught that they had brought their*  
46 *troubles upon themselves because of their wicked ways in*

1 *previous lives. Hence, they had to accept the misery of their*  
2 *present existence as a karmic atonement and in anticipation*  
3 *that their lot would improve in their next lifetime. The rich and*  
4 *powerful treated their good fortune as a reward for, and*  
5 *tangible evidence of, virtue in past and present lives. (Parenti*  
6 *2007).*

7  
8 The Chinese occupation of Tibet did not face grassroots opposition at the  
9 outset. The system of bonded labor and back-breaking taxes was abolished;  
10 schools and health clinics were built; piped water systems were constructed;  
11 the property of the landlords was confiscated; and land and livestock were  
12 distributed among the tenants.

13 Yet, Chinese rule was marked by unpopular authoritarian acts. Many  
14 monasteries were closed. Chinese officials looked down upon Tibetans.  
15 Slightest dissent invited serious consequences. Tibetan culture, language  
16 and religion were portrayed disparagingly in the school educational material.  
17 Collectivization was introduced without consulting the rural residents. And  
18 after the egalitarian policies of the Mao era were replaced by unchecked  
19 capitalism from the 1980s, the divide between the Chinese administrators  
20 and the few well-off Tibetans, mostly from the former aristocratic families, on  
21 the one hand, and the rank and file Tibetans, on the other, deepened. The  
22 limited social security that was in place earlier began to whittle away.

23 From 1989 to the present, Tibet has been rocked by small and large  
24 expressions of opposition to Chinese rule. Monks are on the frontlines on  
25 many occasions. The authorities respond without mercy. Unarmed civilians  
26 have perished from bullet wounds. But the people are not subdued. The  
27 monks self-immolate to publicize their cause. Over a hundred and fifty monks  
28 have set themselves afire since 2010. While the Tibetan leaders in exile have  
29 vacillated, the basic demand of the internal forces is total independence from  
30 Chinese rule, not just regional autonomy.

31 During his years in exile, the Dalai Lama has reinvented himself and has  
32 begun to espouse liberal values like respect for human rights, democracy and  
33 non-violence. But prior to 1959, he was the leader of a profoundly unjust,  
34 authoritarian society.

35  
36 **+ Sri Lanka +**

37  
38 About 70% of the population of Sri Lanka is Buddhist. Hindus, Muslims and  
39 Christians respectively form 13%, 9% and 8% of the population. Religion  
40 largely overlaps with ethnicity. The Sinhalese, who form about 75% of the  
41 population, are mostly Buddhist. Some 15% of the population is Tamil (Sri  
42 Lankan and Indian). Most of them are Hindu and some are Christian. The  
43 Moors (about 9% of the total) follow Islam. Yet, even as three out of ten Sri  
44 Lankans are not Buddhist and all religions have constitutional protection,  
45 Theravada Buddhism is the now the official religion of Sri Lanka. During much

1 of history, the diverse ethnicities and faiths of Sri Lanka lived in a general  
2 state of harmony.

3 For over two thousand years, Sri Lankan Buddhism had been intimately  
4 linked with wealth and power. But during the nearly two centuries of British  
5 rule, it was a subjugated entity. Pained by the denigration of their culture,  
6 customs and institutions, Buddhist monks joined the struggle for freedom.  
7 They backed the nationalistic cause without forming religion-based political  
8 parties. However, they did not rally against the deftly executed colonial policy  
9 of divide and rule. The British used the Tamils as middlemen between them  
10 and the people and granted them minor favors. The policy worked. Attempts  
11 to form a united front against colonial rule were thwarted for the most part.  
12 Ethnic and religious tensions between the Sinhalese and Tamils were thus  
13 not diffused in the course of the freedom struggle.

14 The consequences were predictable. After independence in 1948, moves  
15 by some politicians to forge national unity on the basis of equal rights for all  
16 citizens regardless of ethnicity or religion were stalled by adamant Sinhalese  
17 politicians and extremist monks. Prime Minister SWRD Bandaranaike was  
18 killed in 1959 by a hardline Buddhist monk for allegedly being too conciliatory  
19 towards the Tamils. Politics slowly acquired a sectarian flavor. The civil rights  
20 of the Tamils dimmed and official and unofficial discrimination in education  
21 and other walks of life reared its ugly head. The use of the Tamil language in  
22 schools and workplaces was restricted. As tensions mounted, a series of  
23 ethnic riots, in which the Tamils suffered the most, broke out. As religion and  
24 ethnicity gained more import in public affairs, Buddhist monks began to play  
25 a more direct role in the political sphere. The trend was catalyzed by two  
26 monks—W Rahula and GS Thero—who had gained international reputation  
27 as distinguished Buddhist scholars. Abroad they pontificated on harmony and  
28 spirituality but at home they fanned the flames of ethnic, religious  
29 divisiveness.

30 Sri Lankan politics became more polarized along ethnic, religious lines in  
31 the 1970s. With the Tamil community being marginalized in all walks of life,  
32 a militant Tamil party launched an armed struggle for autonomy. In 1983, a  
33 horrific 25-year civil war began. Tamil fighters encountered utmost brutality  
34 from the state forces. An estimated hundred thousand people, most being  
35 Tamil civilians, were killed. Their bodies were often dumped in rivers. As  
36 villages were ravaged, thousands disappeared, tens of thousands were  
37 injured and many more were displaced. A third of the Sri Lankan Tamils  
38 became refugees in distant lands. The Sri Lankan army stands accused of  
39 committing major war crimes. Yet, no judicial intervention and accountability  
40 has occurred. Despite frequent resort to tactics that did not discriminate  
41 between fighters and civilians, the monks blessed the army's campaigns.  
42 Ignoring Buddha's teachings on compassion and non-violence, prominent  
43 Buddhist monks extolled the warrior mentality as a virtuous credo for the  
44 defense of Buddhism.

45 Apart from this civil war, independent Sri Lanka has a long record of  
46 political violence and assassinations. In the course of an armed struggle

1 launched by a communist party in the 1970s, many journalists, students,  
2 human rights activists, academics, and state officials were killed either by the  
3 government death squads or by the communist party.

4 The defeat of the Tamil fighters in 2009 did not herald an era of political  
5 tolerance. On the contrary, the Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalist parties were  
6 emboldened. According to their creed, which resembles the *Hindutva* creed  
7 of the RSS in India, the Sinhalese are the exclusive historical owners of Sri  
8 Lanka. All others are aliens who have corrupted the ancestral Sinhalese-  
9 Buddhist culture. Their venom is directed at the Hindu Tamils, Muslims and  
10 Christians.

11 The strident crusade is led by Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) under the helm of  
12 GAG Thero, an outspoken, militant, charismatic monk with a wide following.  
13 The large anti-Muslim rallies held by BBS have spawned violent riots. Scores  
14 of Muslims died. Mosques are under siege. Homes and shops were torched.  
15 In the drive to ban the sale of *halal* meat, butcheries owned by Muslims are  
16 vandalized. False rumors that Muslims have a preference in the education  
17 system are used to drum up public support. And Christian missionaries are  
18 wrongly accused of conducting deceitful drives to convert Buddhists to their  
19 religion. Attacks against Buddhist temples and shrines by Muslim fanatics in  
20 Bangladesh and Afghanistan pour fuel on the fire. The BBS has also forged  
21 an alliance with extremist, anti-Muslim Buddhist factions in Myanmar.

22  
23 *As the tectonic plates of Buddhism and Islam collide, a portion*  
24 *of Buddhists are abandoning the peaceful tenets of their*  
25 *religion. .... Buddhist nationalist ideologues are using the*  
26 *spiritual authority of extremist monks to bolster their support.*  
27 (Beech 2019).  
28

29 Divisive politics are flourishing on the foundation of a neoliberal economic  
30 policy that cements a vast economic divide. While the top 20% of the Sri  
31 Lankan population earns over 50% of the national income, the bottom 20%  
32 gets only 5%. The income divide exists across regions, and between the  
33 capital city and the rural areas. A small number of Sri Lankans command  
34 millions to billions of dollars in wealth. The very wealthy have strong political  
35 ties and backgrounds. Top politicians and state officials have been a party to  
36 major corruption scandals with local tycoons and foreign firms. A modicum of  
37 economic growth has come along with greater economic uncertainties for the  
38 majority. The fabulous Buddhist shrines and temples are now popular tourist  
39 destinations that earn valued foreign exchange.

40 The political space is increasingly constrained as leaders of the past  
41 human-rights violating military campaigns now hold the top positions in the  
42 state. Thus, in early 2020, the Sri Lankan government reneged upon its  
43 earlier promise to cooperate with the UN mission investigating human rights  
44 violations during the civil war and withdrew from the exercise. Making an  
45 appearance in the monasteries, offering alms, or hobnobbing with the monks  
46 is an honored way for the politicians to sanitize and uplift their public image.

1 Extremist religious-ethnic nationalism is no longer a fringe entity. A large and  
2 growing segment of the public has come to believe that Sinhalese Buddhism  
3 is under existential attack from internal and external adversaries and needs  
4 to be vigorously defended. The pungent anti-Islamic propaganda coming  
5 from right wing politicians in the West has found a receptive audience in Sri  
6 Lanka.

7 As more monks become involved in politics and their popularity increases  
8 at a fast pace, the state takes little action to contain religious fanaticism. The  
9 few monks who advocate peace and reconciliation are marginalized and  
10 condemned by the hardliners. Open minded journalists find it harder to do  
11 their job. Journalists, writers, academics and the few monks who criticize the  
12 divisive rhetoric and espouse pluralism find themselves under assault from  
13 fanatics. A small deviation lands a person in trouble, as a short story writer  
14 put under arrest for 'disrespecting' Buddhism found out.

15 In this toxic atmosphere, a small group of Islamic extremists carried out a  
16 series of terrorist attacks on civilian targets. A luxury hotel was blown up by  
17 Islamic suicide bombers in April 2019. About 250 people died. The cycle of  
18 violence turns faster and deadlier. As in neighboring India, authoritarian,  
19 intolerant politics based on religion and ethnicity is demolishing the remnants  
20 of the secular, democratic polity established in the early post-Independence  
21 days. In the unstable setting, only the super-rich are reaping major benefits.

22 Yet, by early 2022, Sri Lanka was in the throes of an economic crisis more  
23 severe than any since Independence. Prices of basic goods and services and  
24 rents skyrocketed, hospitals faced an acute shortage of medicines and even  
25 paper for newsprint and school examinations was scarce. Families by the tens  
26 of thousands were suddenly propelled into destitution. Economics spilled over  
27 into politics as streets were filled with protestors demanding the resignation  
28 of the hitherto popular ex-military President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Prime  
29 Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, his brother, on grounds of misrule,  
30 incompetence and corruption. The entire Cabinet tendered its resignation. In  
31 a major turnaround in a nation divided by religion and ethnicity, Sinhalese  
32 Buddhists, Hindu Tamils and Muslim Moors jointly called for accountability  
33 and good governance. People are fed up with the toxic, divisive, xenophobic  
34 nationalism of the ruling politicians and the extremist monks. It does not feed  
35 hungry stomachs. But thus far, the authorities have responded with force and  
36 batons only.

37 Many rank and file monks have come out in the streets and senior monks  
38 are urging the national leaders to show restraint and heed the demands of  
39 the people. Senior Christian clergy has joined the chorus for change as well.  
40 One can only hope that the protest movement will mature beyond demanding  
41 removal individuals to questioning the neoliberal system underlying their  
42 predicament.

43  
44 *It is not far from the truth when we state that the best way to*  
45 *strengthen the freedom gained with such sacrifices is to go for*



1 *a radical change in our national agenda.* Cardinal Malcolm  
2 Ranjith (Gomes 2022).

3  
4 Perhaps the Buddhist *sangha* of Sri Lanka will now firmly disassociate itself  
5 from the hate-filled bellicosity of the extremist monks and revert to Buddha's  
6 philosophy of universal compassion.

## 7 8 **+ Myanmar +** 9

10 About 70% of the population of Myanmar (Burma) is of Bamar ethnicity while  
11 the rest comprises several ethnicities. Some 88% percent of the people follow  
12 Buddhism. Christians are about 6% of the population and Muslims, about 4%.  
13 Though there is no state religion, there is a clear bias towards for Theravada  
14 Buddhism in official and unofficial practices and institutions. Especially in  
15 rural areas, life revolves around the monastery. Monks are held in high  
16 esteem. Children grow up immersed in Buddhist rites. Praying to the local  
17 deity to bless their village is central to their spiritual life, and celebration of  
18 Buddhist festivals are the most important occasions for the families.

19 Historic Myanmar was a land of ancient civilizations and prosperous city  
20 states, and a key crossing point for Asian trade. Buddhism was introduced by  
21 traders and monks in the fourth century. After gaining the patronage of royal  
22 families, it was adopted by a large segment of the population. Over the past  
23 2,000 years, Myanmar has experienced the rise and fall of numerous  
24 kingdoms, internal warfare, armed intrusion in adjacent lands, and external  
25 invasion. But there were extended periods of stability and progress during  
26 which thousands of Buddhist temples and pagodas were built, and Buddhist  
27 colleges and libraries were founded. Buddhist literature flourished as well. As  
28 in India and Sri Lanka, monastic control of large tracts of land and resources,  
29 usurious lending and ill treatment of the peasantry fed into social strife and  
30 instability.

31 Britain colonized Myanmar at the end of the 19th century. At first, they  
32 ruled it as a province of India. Finding the place awash in mineral resources,  
33 forestry products, oil as well as blessed with fertile soil, the colonizers single-  
34 mindedly went about instituting a social order that would enable them to reap  
35 the rewards at minimal cost. Major changes ensued. A top-down system of  
36 administration was set up. A transport system to serve the import-export  
37 economy was built. Educational and industrial development was restricted to  
38 the needs for the colony to function. High taxes on land and produce were  
39 imposed, workers got very low wages and health services were introduced at  
40 a minimal level.

41 In no time, Myanmar became the world's largest exporter of rice, with the  
42 profits mostly accruing to British trading houses. Other production activities  
43 and exports gathered pace over time. The economy grew but the people  
44 derived little benefit. As George Orwell wrote in his firsthand account:

45

1 [The] *British are robbing and pilfering Burma quite*  
2 *shamelessly. ... Although Burma has developed to a certain*  
3 *extent since the war, already the peasant there is poorer than*  
4 *he was twenty years ago.* (Orwell 1929).  
5

6 Instead of using local personnel, the British imported large numbers of  
7 traders, craftsmen, low level civil service cadres, laborers, money lenders,  
8 policemen and soldiers from India to run internal commerce, staff essential  
9 services and administration, carry out construction and other work as well as  
10 maintain law and order. It was a highly unpopular move that would have long  
11 lasting divisive consequences. While promoting Christianity, the education  
12 system downgraded local culture and Buddhism.

13 The civil service was dominated by Indians and Anglo-Burmese. In the  
14 latter stage of their rule, and after much internal discord, the British instituted  
15 a local parliamentary system. Yet, it was a democracy in name only. For key  
16 decisions and policies, the parliament and local officials had little say. As in  
17 India, the British Governor was the final authority in all matters, small or large.

18 In line with their customary policy of divide and rule, the British employed  
19 ethnically organized administrative systems to run the territory. Minority  
20 groups were administered through the Frontier Area system under which  
21 'disloyal' leaders were ejected and replaced by compliant leaders. Non-  
22 cooperative villages were burned down. After the nation gained freedom, this  
23 divisive system had grave consequences. An identity card system based on  
24 ethnicity and religion ingrained the divisions along these lines.

25 The struggle against colonial rule in Myanmar evolved through a long,  
26 convoluted history. For here, it suffices to say that Buddhist organizations and  
27 monks played a prominent role in this effort. Many monks sacrificed their lives  
28 through hunger strikes and other tactics while a few monks led an armed  
29 rebellion.

30 But democracy in independent Myanmar did not last long. For most of the  
31 recent five decades, the nation has been ruled with utmost brutality by a  
32 military junta that has put the nation's resources in the hands of foreign  
33 companies. Use of slave-like labor in various projects has been common. Any  
34 form of opposition is suppressed by massive force. The army has also been  
35 fighting long-standing insurgencies in the indigenous areas.

36 Military rule ignited a vibrant, broad-based pro-democracy movement.  
37 While the junta projected itself as a champion of Buddhism, a large number  
38 of Buddhist monks played a prominent role in the anti-military struggle. They  
39 engaged in civil disobedience practices like sit-downs and refusing to accept  
40 alms from military personnel. Invading monasteries, soldiers savagely beat  
41 monks, and placed them in custody. Many were disrobed and tortured.  
42 Though elections were held periodically, when voters favored independent  
43 parties, the military nullified the results.

44 Starting from the 1980s, and especially after a major uprising in 1988, the  
45 anti-democracy movement became unified under a *de facto* charismatic  
46 leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. Her party, the National League for Democracy

1 (NLD), gained wide support and scored major electoral victories. But that only  
2 earned her detention and house arrest. She spent about fifteen of the next  
3 twenty years as a political prisoner. In that time, her fame and popularity  
4 skyrocketed, at home and abroad. The Buddhist monks in Myanmar were a  
5 major base of support for Suu Kyi. Her steadfast, non-violent Gandhi-like  
6 campaign to abolish military rule earned her many international honors,  
7 including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991.

8 The anti-military struggle was marked by progress and setbacks. In 2015,  
9 her party won a landslide electoral victory. This time the military conceded,  
10 and she assumed a post akin to that of prime minister of the government of  
11 Myanmar. But effective power remained with the military high command.  
12 Democratic rule was a façade. Yet, the US lifted the economic sanctions it  
13 had imposed on Myanmar. Western companies rushed in to compete with  
14 Chinese companies that had provided economic support to the regime and  
15 enabled the generals to become wealthy tycoons.

16 While calm returned to the towns and cities, the army did not cease its  
17 attacks on minority ethnicities. Now its operations focused on the Rakhine  
18 State, home to the mostly Muslim Rohingyas. The potential for lucrative  
19 infrastructure and extractive investments fueled military aggression. One  
20 thing led to another. After a small Rohingya faction launched defensive armed  
21 attacks on police stations, the army began a systematic campaign of  
22 merciless violence. Since early 2017, hundreds of villages have been turned  
23 to ash. Thousands of Rohingyas have died. Over 750,000 have sought refuge  
24 in neighboring Bangladesh. Islamic buildings, mosques and homes have  
25 been destroyed. Labeling it a genocide, human rights organizations have  
26 called for war crimes investigation and prosecution. But the refugees have  
27 received little international support. Food is scarce; living conditions in the  
28 camps are squalid. Even their existence is not recognized as the usage of  
29 the term Rohingya has been prohibited by a 2014 law.

30 In the past, many Buddhists in the nation had supported the attacks on  
31 the Rohingya. It was expected that under the premiership of Suu Kyi, sanity  
32 would prevail and there would be calls on the military to cease its brutal  
33 onslaught. Yet, nothing of that sort transpired. On the contrary, the monks  
34 who just recently had espoused peace and human rights joined the military  
35 bandwagon. Media images of monks silently and serenely standing up to  
36 armed soldiers was replaced by images of monks demanding firm war-like  
37 measures against the perceived foes of their religion. Monks often led armed  
38 mobs attacking Rohingya villages. Esteemed monks depicted Muslims as  
39 uncivilized people who posed a threat to Buddhist culture and religion, and  
40 loudly called for a ban on headscarves worn by Muslim schoolgirls and the  
41 killing of animals during Islamic holidays. Accusing Muslims of being rapists,  
42 they sought to restrict inter-faith marriage. In the name of Buddhist cultural  
43 purity, they urged people not to conduct business with Muslims or allow their  
44 children to play with Muslim children. And they quoted stories and passages  
45 from Buddhist texts to justify discriminatory, violent acts against the alleged  
46 enemies of Buddhism.

1 The central role played by the Buddhist monks in the persecution of the  
2 Rohingya and minorities has surprised and shocked many observers. Suu  
3 Kyi, for her part, initially maintained a discrete silence, refusing to condemn  
4 the military and describing media reports as exaggerations. A once-upon-a-  
5 time admirer laments:

6  
7 *Not only has she snubbed and obstructed UN officials who*  
8 *have sought to investigate the treatment of the Rohingya, but*  
9 *her government has prevented aid agencies from distributing*  
10 *food, water and medicines to people displaced or isolated by*  
11 *the violence. Her office has accused aid workers of helping*  
12 *'terrorists', putting them at risk of attack, further impeding their*  
13 *attempts to help people who face starvation. (Monbiot 2017).*  
14

15 Suu Kyi condoned the military crackdown on the media and journalists.  
16 Ironically, some of them had campaigned for her freedom during the time she  
17 was under arrest. Her government abided by and strengthened the laws that  
18 discriminate against minority groups. Under the pretext that they do not  
19 belong in Myanmar, it is against the law to use the term Rohingya. Suu Kyi  
20 also refuses to use that term. Fellow Nobel Laureates, including the Dalai  
21 Lama, have urged her to oppose the attacks on the Rohingyas. Noting the  
22 gross, abusive violations of their human rights, the UN General Assembly  
23 voted in December 2019 by a 134-9 margin with 28 abstentions demanding  
24 urgent cessation of the criminal attacks on the Rohingya people and other  
25 minorities. But all that has fallen on deaf ears in Myanmar. The Rohingya  
26 simply do not exist.

27 After hearing the case launched by the government of Gambia, the UN  
28 International Court of Justice issued a major ruling against the government of  
29 Myanmar in January 2020. It effectively called on the latter to abide by the  
30 UN Convention on Genocide and provide adequate protection to all the  
31 oppressed minorities. Yet, Suu Kyi not only attended the proceedings as the  
32 representative of the government but also strongly defended the actions of  
33 her government and the military. Her avoidance of the term Rohingya spoke  
34 millions. The spectacle of an erstwhile icon of freedom and non-violence  
35 somberly rationalizing a genocidal pogrom shocked the world. A large group  
36 of her former supporters in the West have called for a revocation of her Nobel  
37 Peace Prize. (Further developments in Myanmar are covered in *Religion,*  
38 *Science and the Pandemic.*)  
39

#### 40 + Thailand + 41

42 The relationship between Buddhism and politics in adjacent Thailand, where  
43 95% of the 60 million-strong nation follows Theravada Buddhism, is similar to  
44 Myanmar. We make a short note. The history of Thailand is awash with rise  
45 and fall of regional kingdoms. Due to a tacit agreement between the France  
46 and Britain, Thailand did not come under formal colonial rule, but its economy

1 came to be dominated by the Western nations. Rule by the King was replaced  
2 by a constitutional system in 1932. The monarch remained the formal head  
3 of state. But intense rivalries between factions of the political elite, wealthy  
4 tycoons and senior army officers generated a succession of military coups.  
5 Military decrees ruled the nation. Exemplary constitutions were drafted only  
6 to be abrogated within a short time by military takeovers. Over the past eighty  
7 years, Thailand has been one of the most politically unstable nations in Asia.  
8 A fragile quasi-democratic, military dominated political order prevails at the  
9 moment. The economy is dominated by a class of local multimillionaires and  
10 foreign investors. The gap between the rich and the poor, and between urban  
11 and rural residents is wide. Political strife, street demonstrations and violent  
12 scuffles have become regular features of Thai society.

13 As a part of its long-term war of aggression in the region during the Cold  
14 War years, the US strongly backed the Thai military, and established its own  
15 military bases. When student activists and the Communist Party of Thailand  
16 opposed these moves and initiated an armed struggle, it was countered with  
17 indiscriminate massacres.

18 Like Myanmar, Thailand has several ethnic groups with long standing  
19 social and economic grievances. Decades of discrimination, assimilation  
20 drives, disenfranchisement and poverty have fueled armed insurgencies. The  
21 situation is especially tense in the southern Muslim dominated areas. In 2004,  
22 several small armed groups launched attacks on police and army outposts.  
23 The Thai military then unleashed a ferocious crackdown on these  
24 communities. Over 6,500 people, some 90% of whom were unarmed Muslim  
25 civilians, died. Buddhists residing in the areas have been displaced as well.

26 And as in Myanmar, the Buddhist monks allied themselves with the army,  
27 and advocated violent attacks on minorities perceived to pose a threat to  
28 Buddhist culture. Some monks with military training are posted in the conflict  
29 zone to guard the temples with guns under their robes. Discriminatory laws  
30 and practices against Muslims resembling those in Myanmar were instituted.  
31 Prominent monks proclaim that for every monk who is attacked, a Muslim  
32 mosque should be burnt down. In a nation deeply divided by politics, public  
33 support for such measures is unified.

34 At less than 5% of the population and concentrated in remote areas, these  
35 minorities do not, by any stretch of imagination, pose a threat to the Thai  
36 society and culture. What they desire is fair treatment, improvement of their  
37 lives and a degree of autonomy. But instead of advocating just policies for  
38 Muslims and minorities, and promoting social harmony, the monks favor  
39 suppression of their basic rights. Toxic rhetoric only fuels violent aggression,  
40 emboldens authoritarianism, and retards the transition to a democratic,  
41 peaceful order in Thailand.

## 42 43 + India + 44

45 Buddhism flourished across India in the first one thousand years of its  
46 existence. The multitude of large, striking shrines, temples and statutes that

1 dot the landscape attest to that history. Subsequently it underwent a gradual  
2 but sustained decline to the extent that it was barely visible at the beginning  
3 of the 20th century. The decline was caused by external as well as internal  
4 factors. They included loss of kingly patronage after the fall of supportive  
5 dynasties; opposition from the dominant Hindu religion, especially the  
6 Brahmins who were averse to its caste-free spirit; post-12th century Islamic  
7 incursions; and gradual assimilation into the Hindu culture. Further, as the  
8 monasteries accumulated wealth and property and turned to money lending,  
9 agriculture and commerce, strife intensified and the *sanghas* garnered public  
10 disrepute and censure. The idealistic appeal of the founder was diminished.

11 The 20th century witnessed a slow reversal of that trend. Astonishingly, it  
12 was on a single day in 1955 that Buddhism in India received its primary boost.  
13 That mammoth transformation was not initiated by a guru or a *swami*, but a  
14 secularly inclined intellectual, BR Ambedkar, a senior statesman in the  
15 struggle against colonial rule in India.

16 Born into a modest Dalit family, Ambedkar experienced extensive bigotry  
17 and abuse while growing up and in his work life. Yet, he excelled in school  
18 and secured degrees from Bombay University, Columbia University and  
19 London School of Economics while also obtaining admission to the UK Bar.  
20 It was a rare feat. But he set aside his career as a reputed jurist, economist  
21 and academic for activism in the fight for freedom in India. Combining  
22 erudition, eloquence, charisma and populism with sound reflection, he soon  
23 became one of the captains in the anti-colonial circles. His secular, social-  
24 democratic outlook allied him with Jawaharlal Nehru, later the first Prime  
25 Minister of India. He subsequently served for four years as the first Minister  
26 for Law and Justice in Nehru's cabinet. An eminent expert in constitutional  
27 law, he was the lead figure in the framing of the Constitution of the Republic  
28 of India.

29 What distinguished BR Ambedkar from the other leaders was his firmly  
30 expressed stand that the struggle for freedom from external domination had  
31 to be waged concurrently with efforts to combat internal oppression and  
32 discrimination. He stridently championed the rights of the under privileged  
33 strata in society, especially the Dalits (*Harijans*, Untouchable, Outcaste) and  
34 women. On this issue, he did not see eye to eye with MK Gandhi. In his view,  
35 the proposals advanced by Gandhi to accord equal status to the Dalits, like  
36 allowing them unhindered access to temples, were too moderate since they  
37 remained within the ambit of the rigid, religiously enshrined caste system.  
38 Nothing short of the complete annihilation of the caste system was in order.  
39 The social and economic status of the Dalits in India was, in his view, akin to  
40 that of the African Americans in the US.

41 Ambedkar was a prolific writer. His subjects ranged from economics, law,  
42 social affairs, political philosophy to religion. Naturally, his views evolved over  
43 time. There is now a sizeable body of debate on the nature of his stand on  
44 various issues: Was he a socialist or a liberal democrat? Did he espouse a  
45 secular philosophy or one with a spiritual essence? Upon developing a  
46 powerful critique of capitalism and the caste system, Ambedkar came to favor

1 an egalitarian social system for India. In his framework, the state would own  
2 the main means of production and finance; the exploitative *Zamindar* system  
3 would be abolished, and land redistributed. Farming would be done along  
4 collective lines. The underprivileged sections of the society like the Dalits  
5 would get special dispensation in education and employment at the outset. A  
6 central plan would guide the economy. Private enterprise would function but  
7 within the confines set by the state sector and policy.

8 At the same time, he favored a parliamentary political system based on  
9 liberal democratic ideals. The state would not have an official religion and  
10 religious freedom would be protected. Privileges acquired by birth, rank,  
11 religion or race would be abolished. But he clearly distanced himself from  
12 Marxism. Many progressive leaders of the anti-colonial parties in Africa and  
13 Asia held similar views. '*One man, one value*'—that was the essence of his  
14 political creed.

15 The caste system, religious violence and personal experiences of anti-  
16 Dalit humiliation had alienated Ambedkar from Hinduism from an early age.  
17 Yet, he felt that spirituality was an essential component of human life. Purely  
18 secular socialism may provide equality but would lack liberty and fraternity.  
19 He thus embarked on a decades-long scholarly, reflective venture into  
20 diverse religions and philosophies.

21  
22 *Ambedkar tested every big and small, old and new religion*  
23 *available to Indians, trawled through the texts and tenets of*  
24 *Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians and indeed*  
25 *made himself an entire career as a scholar of comparative*  
26 *religions alongside his enormously busy public life as a mass*  
27 *leader, a politician and a scholar. (Shah 2019).*

28  
29 His quest, during which he met Buddhists from many nations and attended  
30 Buddhist conferences, landed him firmly within the embrace of Buddhism. He  
31 saw that the principles contained in the original teachings of the Buddha were  
32 based on compassion and social egalitarianism. He viewed Buddhism a path  
33 for emancipation not just for an individual but for the community as well. But  
34 perceiving that Buddhist traditions had been co-opted to provide justification  
35 for greed, power and violence, he did not accept the views, rites, customs  
36 and organizational ways of any existing Buddhist school.

37  
38 *If a modern man who knows science must have a religion, the*  
39 *only religion he can have is the Religion of the Buddha.*

40 BR Ambedkar

41  
42 He framed a new vision of Buddhism consistent with his secular egalitarian  
43 outlook. Calling it *Navayana* Buddhism (or neo-Buddhism), he felt that it was  
44 in line with the original philosophy of the Buddha. He founded the Buddhist  
45 Society of India in 1955, and in the following year, he formally converted to  
46 Buddhism.

1 His advocacy of and conversion to Buddhism exercised a profound and  
2 lasting impact in the Dalit community, which deemed him as its principal  
3 champion. Officiated by a Buddhist monk, it took place in a large public  
4 gathering in Nagpur, India in October 1956. On the same occasion, nearly  
5 half a million of the gathered supporters took traditional Buddhist vows. Two  
6 days later, he oversaw the conversion of 300,000 more Indians to Buddhism.  
7 Just in a few months, the Buddhist community in India had a million new  
8 members, a pace of religious conversion rarely seen in history. But that  
9 momentum suffered a setback in a short while as BR Ambedkar passed away  
10 from complications of diabetes in 1957. His plan to establish the Republican  
11 Party of India to champion socialist principles and the rights of the minorities  
12 and women was, however, realized a few months after his death.

13 Conversion to Buddhism in India, especially among the Dalit people, has  
14 continued steadily since then but a slower pace. In the recent years, due to  
15 the upsurge of fundamentalist Hindu organizations and political parties,  
16 notably the BJP, and the rise in the violent attacks and discriminatory acts  
17 against the Dalits and rape of Dalit women, it has intensified. Yet, the Dalits  
18 are in a difficult situation: Upon conversion, a Dalit sheds his or her inferior  
19 social status, but stands to lose the preferential services, job and educational  
20 opportunities accorded to marginalized peoples. Buddhism in rural India,  
21 furthermore, has a flavor that is distinct compared with that in the urban areas.  
22 In the latter areas, Buddhist there are activist groups who abide by the secular  
23 vision of Ambedkar and champion the rights of the poor and the  
24 disadvantaged. But in the rural areas, where the majority of Indian Buddhists  
25 live, a syncretic outlook predominates. Here, the Buddha is revered as one  
26 of the Hindu gods, and Ambedkar is their *bodhisattva*.

27 Dalits, forming about a fifth of the population of India, constitute a critical  
28 voting bloc. Several Dalit based political parties exist. But apart from formal  
29 programs, they have shed Ambedkar's egalitarian, humanistic vision. Mired  
30 in political jockeying, thuggery and crony capitalism like the major political  
31 parties, their charismatic, corrupt leaders have amassed extensive wealth,  
32 and are keener to retain their ideological stranglehold on their followers than  
33 anything else. Currying favor with those in power is a basic practice. And they  
34 comfortably function in the same ambit of the neoliberal system as the BJP  
35 and the Congress Party.

36 The leadership of the BJP, for its part, has tried to curry favors with the  
37 Dalit parties by paying homage to Ambedkar and visiting Buddhist shrines in  
38 India and elsewhere. They project the view that while Islam and Christianity  
39 are foreign entities, Buddhism is a branch of Hinduism, and is acceptable  
40 within the *Hindutva* framework. The level of political hypocrisy is unrivalled.

41 Of recent, Ambedkar has been rediscovered in his homeland. Called one  
42 of the founding fathers of India, his statues and pictures adorn official and  
43 unofficial sites. Colleges and streets are named after him, his birthday is  
44 celebrated more widely, his writings and life are depicted in the main media  
45 and many scholars have devoted extensive effort to analyze them. But in



1 practical politics and policy making, his vision of an egalitarian, socialistic,  
2 caste-free India is all but forgotten.

3 Yet, there were limitations to the steps Ambedkar took at the end of his  
4 life. Upon realizing that there was little chance for Dalits and other minorities  
5 to attain equality and better their lives so long as Hinduism remained a strong  
6 force in society and politics, he sought a solution in another religious creed.  
7 Instead of working for an overall transformation, he sought a separate path  
8 of liberation for the Dalits. He effectively refrained from tackling capitalism,  
9 the root of social inequality. In that respect, his vision was as misguided as  
10 that of Gandhi.

11 Inequalities based on caste, race, religion and identity-based factors form  
12 the interstices of a social, economic system characterized by the existence  
13 of a small enormously wealthy class and a multitude of deprived, powerless  
14 majority at the bottom. Conflicts based on cultural factors divert attention from  
15 the principal contradiction in society and serve capitalist interests.

## 20 **6.6 MEDITATION & MINDFULNESS**

21  
22 *Meditation is a totally nonviolent, nonaggressive occupation.*

23 Pema Chodron  
24

25 From the 1800s to the 1950s, Chinese laborers, US soldiers who had fought  
26 in Asia, visitors, monks and scholars carried Buddhism into North America.  
27 Buddhist masters from Japan and Sri Lanka lectured and spread the religion.  
28 Buddhist texts were translated into English.

29 A further influx of charismatic Buddhist teachers in the 1950s and 1960s  
30 boosted the popularity of Buddhism in the West. Buddhist and Zen centers  
31 sprang up in major cities. In an era of cultural ferment, the social atmosphere  
32 was ripe. A large segment of the youth had become disenchanted by racism,  
33 patriarchy, consumerism and militarism—particularly the brutal US war on  
34 Vietnam. They were also disillusioned with traditional politics, the education  
35 system and Christianity.

36 Students, feminists, workers, African Americans, Native Americans and  
37 Latinos fought for their rights and social justice. A minority adopted the ideas  
38 of revolution and socialism. Martin Luther King, Malcom X, Muhammad Ali,  
39 Che Guevara, Cezar Chavez, Noam Chomsky, etc., symbolized the anti-  
40 establishment spirit. As poets, writers, singers, film directors, and social and  
41 natural scientists generated creative endeavors in the arts and all disciplines,  
42 the counterculture movement blossomed.

43 Some cultural rebels resorted to hallucinogenic drugs to resolve their  
44 spiritual angst. But a good many cast their gaze towards esoteric eastern  
45 traditions. Under the enticing spell of luminaries like Ram Das, DT Suzuki,  
46 Timothy Leary, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Alan Watts, they reached

1 out to yogis, *swamis*, monks, Sufi mystics and Taoist masters. Movie stars,  
2 musicians and celebrities embraced yoga and meditation. The International  
3 Hare Krishna Society, the Shambala International and eastern spirituality  
4 creeds established branches in many Western cities. It was a veritable  
5 ideological avalanche.

6  
7 *In Be Here Now, Ram Das's first book for the masses, which*  
8 *has sold over 2 million copies since publication in 1971, he*  
9 *offered seekers an engaging, unconventional, slightly zany*  
10 *roadmap for finding a spiritual path and a more enduring*  
11 *connection to higher consciousness than a tab of acid could*  
12 *bring. (Oliver 2019).*

13  
14 A decade on, such spiritual practices filtered into the mainstream. By the  
15 1990s, Zen Buddhism, meditation and yoga were in vogue across the US and  
16 Europe. Deepak Chopra was a ubiquitous presence on TV and radio. Almost  
17 every major Western city now boasts a Buddhist center, yoga and meditation  
18 classes, and Hare Krishna chanters who roam the main streets. Thousands  
19 of books, websites, apps and blogs on Buddhist philosophy and practice  
20 exist. Buddhist spirituality is now projected as an essential tool for personal,  
21 professional, educational, corporate and political wellbeing.

22 The Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh are the most prominent dignitaries  
23 of Buddhism in the Western mind. The former is a recipient of the Nobel  
24 Peace Prize while the latter was nominated for that prize by Dr Martin Luther  
25 King. Given high honors in many nations, the Dalai Lama comes across as a  
26 friendly, wise, humble, charming, and deeply spiritual person who stands for  
27 universal peace and justice. Civil society, governmental and business leaders  
28 seek his attention. The main media treat him with respect akin to veneration.  
29 Opinion polls conducted in the US and Europe have ranked him among the  
30 five most popular leaders in the world. His bestselling book, *The Art of*  
31 *Happiness* (Lama 2009), is touted as a profound text in psychology.

32 Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist Zen master from Vietnam who passed on in  
33 January 2022, wrote over a hundred books on Buddhism and its importance  
34 to personal well-being, education, politics, business and the environment. He  
35 promoted his message of peace, ethics and spirituality with elegant poetry  
36 and calligraphy. Seen as a devout person and activist, he was a much sought-  
37 after international speaker and garnered scores of honors and accolades. His  
38 two works *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*  
39 *and The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation*  
40 (Hanh 1992, 1999) played a major role in stimulating the mindfulness  
41 movement that has swept across the Western world. In 2012, some 4% of  
42 the adults in the US reported having meditated in the past 12 months. By  
43 2017, it had risen to 14%. The corresponding percentages for children were  
44 1% and 5%.

45 The popularity of meditation and mystical spirituality has occurred in the  
46 context of a faster pace of daily life and weakening of family and communal

1 bonds. Modern capitalism has accelerated technological change, induced  
2 instability in the economy and insecurity in the job market and weakened the  
3 social security net. It instills anxiety and feelings of loss of control. Despite  
4 having a lot, people are dissatisfied. The sense of a fulfilling, moral existence  
5 eludes them.

6 The appeal of Buddhism is enhanced by the perception that it is not like  
7 a traditional religion with a rigid allegiance to a holy text. It is also not a cult.  
8 Instead, it is seen as a flexible secular, humane philosophy based on peace  
9 and connecting with nature and the inner self, a potent potion for countering  
10 *Dukkha* and cravings. The quintessential notion signifying Buddhism in the  
11 West is mindfulness, the sense of being in the present, focused and attentive  
12 yet non-judgmental. Meditation anchors life and gives it meaning.

13 Classes on relaxation, meditation, yoga and mindfulness are popular and  
14 are being utilized in health care, psychotherapy, counselling, education and  
15 social services. Several techniques, ancient and modern, are available:  
16 Mindfulness, Transcendental Meditation, *Jing Zuo*, *Qi Gong*, Zen, Kundalini  
17 Yoga, Breath Awareness Meditation, Loving-Kindness Meditation,  
18 Progressive Relaxation, Stress Reducing Mindfulness and Mindfulness-  
19 Based Cognitive Therapy. They are applied in varied settings—indoor or  
20 outdoor, online or in person, group or individual format, and supervised or  
21 autonomous. Some programs combine physical activity and dietary advice;  
22 some are adjunct to medicinal drugs and psychiatric counseling.

23 Hundreds of evaluations of the efficacy of meditation and mindfulness  
24 training and practice have appeared in the scientific literature. Nearly 1,400  
25 scientific papers on its neurological and clinical effects have been published.  
26 Systematic reviews of these studies concluded that despite concerns of about  
27 their scientific quality, meditation and mindfulness is a useful, effective and  
28 low-risk adjunct to conventional therapies for the treatment of a wide variety  
29 of psychological and chronic physical ailments and for improving emotional  
30 well-being among patients and healthy persons. In particular, it does not risk  
31 the debilitating adverse effects associated with many medicinal drugs, puts  
32 people more in charge of their own welfare and enhances self-esteem. The  
33 benefits of meditation and mindfulness do not carry religious baggage.  
34 Whatever his or her religion, a person can derive benefits from meditation  
35 and mindfulness-based therapies.

36  
37 +++++  
38

39 But there is another side to the story. In the neo-liberal era, meditation and  
40 mindfulness has been commodified, corporatized, militarized and spiritually  
41 disembodied. It now is a multi-billion-dollar enterprise that employs slick  
42 promotion campaigns in the main media and its own turf. Buddhist centers  
43 compete for trainees, contracts, sales and prestige for a large share of a  
44 lucrative market. About a million Americans adopt mediational practices  
45 associated with Buddhism and Hinduism every year. One can enroll in local  
46 classes, special retreats, or 'authentic' courses conducted by traditional

1 monks in Asian countries. A dazzling paraphernalia relating to eastern  
2 religions in the form of necklaces, bracelets, rosaries, rings, prayer flags,  
3 mats, cushions, gowns, meditation attire, mandalas, decorative tapestry,  
4 painting sets, Buddha statues and figurines, lotus flower images, crafted  
5 bowls, incense burners and sticks is available. There are thousands of books  
6 on these subjects.

7 Humans seek happiness and freedom from suffering. Buddhism in its  
8 ancient form teaches that the way to attain those goals is to conquer desire.  
9 Happiness does not arise from wealth or possessions. Consumerism, on the  
10 other hand, implies that the more you have the happier you will be. It is the  
11 very opposite creed.

12 But meditation and mindfulness, its modernized progeny, proclaims that  
13 one can do both. It seamlessly marries Buddhism to consumerist norms. Like  
14 pricey lattes at Starbucks cafes, meditation is a trendy act. The tool to subdue  
15 consumerism has been subdued by consumerism. Meditation and  
16 mindfulness is now an integral segment of the trillion-dollar global wellness  
17 industry.

18  
19 *The 'Western Buddhist' meditative stance is arguably the most*  
20 *efficient way for us to fully participate in capitalist dynamics*  
21 *while retaining the appearance of mental sanity. Zizek (2001).*  
22

23 Some conservative Christian groups in the US have opposed the practices  
24 derived from eastern religions. In the state of Alabama, they had sufficient  
25 clout to make the Board of Education pass a rule in 1993 banning yoga,  
26 meditation and hypnosis in public schools. A move by some legislators to  
27 partially lift the ban succeeded in May 2021. But some restrictions remain.

28 Major US corporations hold mindfulness training sessions for rank-and-  
29 file employees and executives. Articles in scholarly business journals credit it  
30 for boosting attention and efficiency, elevating employee moods, lowering the  
31 harmful effects of information overload and reducing absenteeism.

32  
33 *[In] today's hyper-paced work environment, mindfulness*  
34 *practitioners know the importance of recharging in order to*  
35 *regain productivity. And mindfulness research is convincing*  
36 *many managers that investing in reflection, openness, and*  
37 *thoughtfulness will have a positive impact on employees and*  
38 *on the bottom line. (Schaufenbuel 2015).*  
39

40 The corporate sector is adapting the works of famed Buddhist authorities for  
41 its own requirements. Google, the corporate behemoth that is mindfully and  
42 systematically casting a large shadow on the personal affairs of billions, has  
43 offered a catalogue of mindfulness training schemes to its staff since 2007.  
44 The aims are to enhance emotional aptitude, resilience, focus and geniality.  
45 General Mills, the global processed foods giant, offers similar courses to its  
46 workers. Intel, the technology conglomerate, has conducted meditation and

1 mindfulness sessions from which employees report an increase in creativity,  
2 clarity, more engagement with company goals, happiness and friendliness  
3 towards colleagues. Target, a multi-purpose retailer with huge sales outlets  
4 across the US, offers meditation and mindfulness instruction to its workers.  
5 Aetna, a global insurance giant, facilitated research on mindfulness and  
6 stress reduction programs and now offers them in an online or in-person  
7 format to its clients. Healthy clients mean less insurance payouts and higher  
8 profits. Some companies hold meditation and mindfulness retreats for the  
9 workers and their families.

10 Educational institutions use meditation and mindfulness to raise student  
11 attentiveness and scores. Hospitals, public and private, conduct meditation  
12 and mindfulness sessions for nurses and doctors. Enhancing mindfulness for  
13 nurses is now an integral part of the UK National Health Service. But a critical  
14 academic with practical experience observes:

15  
16 *Having previously worked for an NHS trust, I have genuine*  
17 *concerns about these new trends of corporate-based*  
18 *mindfulness training. I do not doubt that nurses are faced with*  
19 *increasing pressures and are suffering terribly from stress. But*  
20 *we must recognize that this is largely due to their working*  
21 *conditions. Nurses are generally overworked, over-managed,*  
22 *underpaid, understaffed and under-appreciated!* Cohen  
23 (2017).  
24

25 Modern corporation practices generate work tension, stress, burnout and  
26 absenteeism. Meditation and mindfulness is a key psychological device to  
27 control their mood, conduct and output. Governments implement austerity  
28 measures that induce stress, burnout and low efficiency among teachers,  
29 nurses, doctors and social workers. And then they contract meditation and  
30 mindfulness dispensing firms to make them content with the high demands  
31 and accelerated schedules they face. Meditation and mindfulness functions  
32 as a shock absorber to save the capitalist system from its excesses.

33 The market driven economy has generated an epidemic of social isolation  
34 and loneliness. Just before the onset of the corona pandemic, about 40% of  
35 adult Americans felt lonely. In the 1980s, only 20% had felt that way. A third  
36 of people over the age of 65 live alone, and the proportion increases with  
37 age. Overall, one in six Americans has no residential partner. People with  
38 poor health status, low income or without a college degree are more  
39 vulnerable to social isolation, loneliness and absence of close contacts. Being  
40 isolated and lonely increases the risks for a wide range of physical and mental  
41 ailments and early death. As others celebrate major holidays, their sense of  
42 isolation intensifies. Studies indicate the prevalence of a similar situation in  
43 the UK and other European nations.

44 Even among those who are not isolated socially and revel in social media  
45 connections, the market economy induces detachment from society. People  
46 become competitors, not compatriots with a common cause. In their hearts,

1 they are consumers, not citizens who can unite to control their own destiny.  
2 Cynicism, political apathy and low voting levels prevail as people regard the  
3 existing state of affairs as unchangeable.

4 Karl Marx described the dominant psychosocial mindset under the rule of  
5 capital as '*alienation*'. By extolling individualism and competitiveness as  
6 virtues, capitalism fragments social bonds. As norms of the market take hold  
7 of all arenas of life, dehumanization gathers pace. States privatize and  
8 liberalize. Public services are slashed to the bare minimum. For example, in  
9 the UK, more than 100 public libraries, 500-day care centers for children, and  
10 many centers for domestic abuse victims, people with dementia, and children  
11 with learning disabilities have been boarded up.

12 Social alienation generates pathologies and anomalies. Meditation and  
13 mindfulness programs are devised to assist the afflicted. Compared to the  
14 gap created by neoliberal cutbacks, they are a drop in the bucket. The  
15 message is: Life will improve if you control your thoughts and emotions and  
16 have a positive attitude. Meditation and mindfulness will connect you with the  
17 universe, give you peace and freedom.

18  
19 *This is our culture of self-help, where we must meditate*  
20 *ourselves out of loneliness by being more mindful or pick*  
21 *ourselves up by going for a run and a yoga class. It is not a*  
22 *culture where we think about our responsibility for each other*  
23 *and for the systems of social and health care that were built to*  
24 *protect people at their most vulnerable – systems that are now*  
25 *being pulled apart. .... Loneliness is not only something that*  
26 *happens to an individual, it is something structural that*  
27 *permeates a society, as it is permeating ours right now.*  
28 (Sarner 2018).

29  
30 By wedding individualism with consumerism, meditation and mindfulness  
31 makes one forget that:

32  
33 *Individual wellbeing is inseparable from collective and*  
34 *ecological wellbeing.* (Purser 2019a).

35  
36 Compassion towards sentient beings is a key tenet of Buddha's teachings.  
37 He accorded the same spiritual worth to animals and humans; a fly was  
38 perhaps a human being in a past life. A monk may not kill an insect, even  
39 inadvertently. Meat consumption is discouraged; vegetarianism is promoted.  
40 Some texts forbid a monk to kill even to save his own life. Compassion has  
41 to be extended towards the enemy as well. The classic Buddhist view on  
42 violence is captured in a scriptural verse:

43  
44 *Everybody fears being struck by a rod.*  
45 *Everybody fears death.*  
46 *Therefore, knowing this, feeling for others as for yourself,*

1 *Do not kill others or cause others to kill.*  
2

3 Classic Buddhism contains little moral basis for violence. It impairs spiritual  
4 balance, instills hatred and begets more violence. It brings physical suffering  
5 and poisons the psyche of the community. As a destroyer of inner calm, it is  
6 a barrier for spiritual progress. Compassion, on other hand, propels people  
7 towards *Nirvana*. This is the image popularized by Buddhist circles in the  
8 West.

9  
10 *The vast majority of introductory books on Buddhism and*  
11 *Buddhist philosophy do not mention Buddhist violence.*  
12 *Instead, they associate Buddhism with pacifism and non-*  
13 *violence. (Jerryson 2017).*  
14

15 The reality, both in terms of doctrine and actual conduct, is complex. In the  
16 first instance, Buddha himself advised a powerful king that under certain  
17 circumstances war was justified. As Buddhism was adopted by kings and  
18 made the state religion, it came to rationalize military campaigns. Buddhist  
19 sacred texts contain stories of monks counselling powerful ruler on matters  
20 diplomacy and war, and describe cases where force was appropriate. A war  
21 must have a just cause. Specifically, protection of the religion, *sangha* and  
22 state were valid, just grounds for war. But war driven by envy, avarice, ill will,  
23 hate or revenge is not justified. Attacks on disarmed soldiers and civilians are  
24 prohibited.

25 It was a slippery slope. Gradually all deeds of the monarch were depicted  
26 as just and beyond reproach. Aggressive war was rationalized in spiritual  
27 terms, and deaths of tens of thousands dismissed, as the affected were non-  
28 believers. Execution of prisoners, torture and capital punishment received  
29 religious sanction. Religion cloaked the deeds and misdeeds of the ruler.

30 Eventually, Buddhist monks were personally drawn into violent action.  
31 China has a long history of monks taking up arms for the emperor and to  
32 further the cause of the *sangha*. The Japanese Samurai warrior underwent a  
33 training like that of a monk, meditated to fine tune his skill and focus, and  
34 resorted to Buddhist beliefs to sanctify his profession. In the process of  
35 adapting to real world conditions, Buddhism turned into its opposite. Intent,  
36 not the act, became the gauge. If the intent is pure, one may kill people who  
37 persecute Buddhists.

38 The Buddhist monks of Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand who have  
39 supported and participated in violent rampages against Muslims and others  
40 in the recent times claim that these groups pose a threat to the survival of  
41 Buddhism. A notion that is patently absurd in practical terms now drives the  
42 hardline Buddhist parties and, increasingly, state policy. Protective violence  
43 transmutes into aggressive violence and is masked as self-defense; identity  
44 politics supersedes the noble notion of universal compassion. For example,  
45 monks in Thailand were implored not to get involved in politics, yet their

1 leaders issued politically framed messages such as declaring that it was not  
2 sinful to kill communists.

3 From the late 19th century up to, and during, the Second World War, Zen  
4 Buddhism in Japan became integrated into the ideology of the state. As  
5 Japan extended its colonial rule in Asia and fought a war against Russia, a  
6 new brand of Buddhism linked religious and nationalist ideas. Japanese  
7 Buddhism attained a special, elevated status. It held that the other Buddhist  
8 schools had decayed spiritually. Apart from a lone dissenting voice, all the  
9 venerated Zen masters acceded to the atrocities of the imperial forces in  
10 Korea and China. The emperor was accorded a divine supreme status,  
11 fascist conduct was praised, and war was portrayed as integral to Zen  
12 practice. Japanese fighter planes were emblazoned with Buddhist images.  
13 And many monks served as military chaplains.

14 Distinguished Buddhist teachers like DT Suzuki and HD Sogaku, who  
15 popularized Zen Buddhism in the West either jumped on the patriotic  
16 bandwagon or adopted an ambivalent stand towards the horrific acts of mass  
17 murder, rape and destruction committed by the Japanese forces in Asia. The  
18 Zen Buddhist orders in Japan have yet to fully acknowledge and offer  
19 apologies for their complicity in wartime barbarism.

20 The association of Buddhism with imperial militarism did not end with the  
21 War. In the Cold War era, Buddhism became firmly enjoined with the US  
22 foreign policy in Asia. In many Asian countries, communist parties had either  
23 led or played a central role in the fight against the Japanese fascist forces  
24 during the war. One major goal for the US and UK in the aftermath, which  
25 became more urgent after the victory of Mao's forces in China in 1949 and  
26 the defeat of the French in Vietnam in 1954, was to vanquish the progressive  
27 movements and roll back their gains.

28 Post-war US policy in Asia became more defined after the visit of Vice  
29 President Richard Nixon to Southeast Asia in 1954. Firm, direct military  
30 intervention would continue. Relentless, merciless bombing of North Korean  
31 towns and villages killed nearly 3 million people, mostly civilians, and caused  
32 extensive injuries and destruction of civilian facilities. In South Korea, US  
33 forces regularly opened fire on unarmed civilians and decimated thousands  
34 of lives. In Vietnam and adjacent nations, US military aggression escalated  
35 and eventually took over five million lives, again mostly of innocent civilians.  
36 Toxic chemical weapons and millions of cluster bombs dropped over a vast  
37 area produced horrific health problems and environmental damage. They kill  
38 and maim children and farmers and produce birth defects to this day.

39 US policy makers realized that violence by itself would not suffice. Covert  
40 and overt diplomatic and political support for right-wing forces in the Asian  
41 nations was essential. US agencies worked with them to replace neutral,  
42 democratically elected governments with US friendly authoritarian, military  
43 regimes. They backed the military coup in Indonesia which led to a massacre  
44 of over 750,000 '*communists*,' including teachers, trade union leaders,  
45 students, workers and farmers, and their families. Cooperating with the coup



1 leaders, the US embassy in Jakarta provided them names of individuals to  
2 be targeted.

3 The third important plank of the US strategy was on the psychological and  
4 cultural front. It aimed to create public perception that the US was a freedom  
5 loving, altruistic nation which gave humanitarian assistance and supported  
6 indigenous cultures against '*godless communism*'. In Asia, it meant, among  
7 other things, support for Buddhism. Under the auspices of the Foundation for  
8 Religious Action, a semi-official, secretive group, US dollars poured into  
9 conservative Buddhist organizations. US agencies like the CIA and the US  
10 Information Agency funded studies to devise clandestine programs to win  
11 over Buddhist monks and the public to their side. American Christian groups  
12 operating in Asia provided willing support to and vital information for these  
13 programs.

14 The Asia Foundation, secretly financed by the CIA, launched a multi-  
15 pronged drive involving research, education, rural development and support  
16 for monasteries so as to create a social base of Buddhist monks and laity to  
17 counter communist influence. Presented as private initiatives to promote  
18 religious freedom, these endeavors sought to nullify the influence of brave  
19 monks in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar who were standing up to  
20 the crimes of US supported regimes. The Asia Foundation was particularly  
21 active in Thailand where hundreds of monks were trained to present a  
22 reformed face of Buddhism, work in development efforts and propagate anti-  
23 communist messages in the countryside. It was effective in preventing the  
24 Thai Buddhist leaders from aligning with progressive monks in neighboring  
25 nations and instead supporting the US war on Vietnam. Similar drives were  
26 launched in Myanmar and elsewhere. In Myanmar, the CIA secretly funded  
27 what at that time was the world's largest Buddhist publishing house.

28 In Tibet, the US provided diplomatic support and funds to the Tibetan  
29 government in exile led by the Dalai Lama after the Chinese takeover of the  
30 nation. The CIA armed and trained Buddhist exiles and assisted them to  
31 infiltrate Tibet to carry out sabotage and attacks. With the complicity of the  
32 main Western media, a rosy image of Tibet prior to the Chinese invasion that  
33 was totally at variance with reality was created. That Tibet was a feudalistic  
34 society with grotesque exploitation of the rural folk including children; that it  
35 had no social services for the poverty stricken masses; that the ruling class,  
36 senior monks and military brass enjoyed opulent lives; that it had been a  
37 scene of frequent, bloody infighting between the various Buddhist orders for  
38 control of power; that it had a section of monks who were also soldiers; in  
39 other words, that it had been a social system bereft of the Buddhist tenet of  
40 universal compassion was erased. The Dalai Lama, who had overseen this  
41 oppressive system, was reborn as a kind, loving, gentle, tolerant, wise, peace  
42 loving, spiritual personage for whom freedom of his people was the main  
43 priority. And that image was a major factor in clouding the historic and  
44 contemporary reality of the association between Buddhism and violence.

45 Under US support, progressive Buddhist and secular voices in the region  
46 endured brutal crackdowns while narrow-minded, intolerant voices became

1 more entrenched. After the neoliberalism generated economic insecurity and  
2 instability (like the Asian economic crisis of 1997), the forces of hate and  
3 intolerance gained larger ground, made major political gains and, in places,  
4 attained a standing in the state institutions. That trend has been accompanied  
5 by widespread serious violation of the human rights of minority populations  
6 in these nations. An aggressive, retrograde version of Buddhism has infused  
7 the public mentality in key Asian nations. And it is making its presence felt  
8 elsewhere as well. The US raises tepid human rights concerns, bans a few  
9 individuals but eschew its historic responsibility in laying the foundation for  
10 this state of affairs.

11 The ultimate irony has transpired with the incorporation of Buddhism into  
12 the US military operations. Meditation and mindfulness are now tools used  
13 by the military to combat stress and enhance field performance. US marines  
14 stationed in Japan visit Buddhist temples to learn meditation. Mindfulness  
15 techniques are used to treat the post-traumatic syndrome. Further, there are  
16 nearly 5,000 soldiers in the US armed forces who identify themselves as  
17 Buddhist. They are counseled by Buddhist military chaplains whose insignia  
18 is the *Dharma* Wheel. A similar situation prevails in the UK armed forces.

19  
20 *The bodhisattva has compassion for all beings, but did the*  
21 *Buddha teach meditation so that the designers of cruise*  
22 *missiles, the dealers of genetically modified corn, or the*  
23 *marketers of Pokemon could relax and feel good about*  
24 *themselves? Does a meditation club at the Pentagon*  
25 *represent the pacification of the military-industrial complex or*  
26 *the concentration of the warrior mind? (Patt 2011).*  
27

28 The incorporation of Buddhism into the rapacious neoliberal system, the rise  
29 of fanatic Buddhist orders in Asia and its incorporation into the world's largest  
30 purveyor of systematic violence have rendered the humanistic teachings of  
31 Buddha into shreds. Buddhists who are opposed to these diversions are few.  
32 Unless they speak up loudly, and act firmly but peacefully to reverse these  
33 trends, the future for Buddhism as a noble religion is bleak.

34 Being critical of the commercialization, corporate abuse and militarization  
35 of Buddhism does not imply a rejection of meditation and mindfulness. Of  
36 value in tackling varied psychological and physical ailments, it can also assist  
37 social justice activists to maintain emotional poise, strengthen resolve and  
38 embrace a long-term perspective.

## 39 40 **6.7 WOMEN AND BUDDHISM**

41  
42 There are two distinct pictures about the status of women in Buddhism.  
43 Mainstream books and websites read that despite practical shortfalls, in  
44 principle it gives equal status and rights to women and favors education for  
45 them. These sources highlight supportive passages from Buddhist scriptures

1 and mention nuns from various nations who became eminent scholars and  
2 teachers and rose to saintly ranks.

3 Feminists, on the other hand, declare that women have had a low status  
4 in Buddhist communities and were derided for their allegedly promiscuous  
5 proclivities. They focus on history, not scriptures.

6  
7 *Buddhist women, including nuns, have faced harsh*  
8 *discrimination by Buddhist institutions in Asia for centuries.*  
9 (O'Brien 2019).

10  
11 Buddhism emerged in a society that was permeated with prejudice against  
12 women. Women were denigrated and mistreated in family and public life. The  
13 sacred texts of Hinduism placed the woman at par with the *sudras*, the lowest  
14 caste. She had no autonomy. Her sole duty was to fulfill the needs of parents,  
15 husband and community. Widowhood was a nightmare; some women were  
16 burnt to death along with the corpses of their husbands. A newborn daughter  
17 was a cause for dismay.

18 At its inception, Buddhism attracted many female lay followers, some of  
19 whom studied and abided by the teachings of Buddha. Nonetheless, while he  
20 rejected the existing caste system, Buddha had reservations about giving  
21 equal status to women. He accepted that through diligent *dharma* they could  
22 be enlightened just like men. Yet, because they were morally tainted, they did  
23 not merit the same spiritual standing as men. He did not allow them into the  
24 *sangha* because their presence would compromise adherence to his  
25 teachings. Female charms epitomized desire and formed an impediment to  
26 the attainment of *Nirvana*.

27 Reportedly, he changed his stand after a dialogue with a senior monk  
28 who was also his cousin. The transformation was sparked by the actions of  
29 his elderly activist stepmother. Buddha repeatedly rebuffed her entreaties to  
30 ordain women. Yet, she did not relent. To press their demand, she and five  
31 hundred female compatriots shaved their heads and embarked on an  
32 arduous march exceeding a hundred miles to the monastery where he held  
33 his sermons.

34  
35 *This was the first women's rights march in recorded history.*  
36 (Rinpoche 2018).

37  
38 The discussion with his cousin in which Buddha changed his mind was  
39 prompted by this march. After seeing that ordained nuns managed the affairs  
40 of the *sangha* as well as the male monks and could attain high levels of  
41 learning, he gave them more responsibilities in the *sangha*. But the *sangha*  
42 nuns occupied inferior positions, faced stringent restrictions and had limited  
43 powers. A nun had to study twice longer than a monk in order to be ordained.  
44 Nuns had to live in close proximity to a male *sangha*. Monks could criticize  
45 nuns, but nuns were not allowed to criticize a monk. And monks were

1 implored to resist the charms of lustful, vain females. Else, they would be  
2 entrapped in the cycle of rebirth.

3 The factual basis of the story about his conversion notwithstanding, in the  
4 subsequent centuries, Buddhist orders run by nuns flowered across India and  
5 beyond. The female *sangha* became famed for discipline, orderliness, stress  
6 on learning and service to the needy. Despite the limitations imposed on  
7 them, the very existence of a religious order run by females was a bold,  
8 radical step in the context of the misogynic environment of the era. Some  
9 nuns became venerated teachers, learned scholars and authors of important  
10 texts. The records note lay Buddhist women from wealthy families serving as  
11 patrons of the *sangha* and facilitating the spread of the faith.

12 Nonetheless and eventually, the female *sangha* succumbed under the  
13 weight of obdurate patriarchy. In place after place, the ordination of women  
14 was curtailed through deprivation of basic resources and archaic rules. It  
15 managed to survive, but mostly at a limited level, in China, Korea, Vietnam,  
16 Nepal and Taiwan. Some Buddhist schools in India explicitly banned the  
17 ordination of nuns. Later day Buddhist texts were more chauvinist, declaring  
18 that women are born with bad *karma*. While women were encouraged to  
19 embrace Buddhism as it would make them docile, submissive and loyal, they  
20 were denied autonomy and leadership roles.

21 In most Buddhist communities and nations, women remain subordinate  
22 to men in social and religious activities. But in some places, their status has  
23 risen to a remarkable degree. And in a few places, they have outpaced men.  
24 We look at specific nations to illuminate the character of inequality between  
25 the sexes under Buddhism.

### 26 27 + Tibet + 28

29 In the archaic semi-feudal Tibetan society that placed little value on the lives  
30 of ordinary people, poor rural women fared the worst. On top of poverty,  
31 ignorance and disease, they endured discrimination from their masters and  
32 husbands. Sexual abuse of women by monks and lamas was common. Their  
33 children were forcibly removed from their homes for service in the temples.  
34 But some upper class women obtained Buddhist training and became lamas.  
35 Women in Tibet, lay or nun, rarely held position of authority prior to 1959.

36 The establishment of a large Tibetan exile community in India and the  
37 West after the Chinese takeover led to significant changes in the status of  
38 women among the exiles. The decadent edicts and customs of the old order  
39 could not be sustained under the watchful eyes of the media that were  
40 extolling Buddhist Tibet as an ideal, dream-like society. Consequently, with  
41 Western funds and support from feminists in the West, exiled women  
42 obtained basic and higher education, and worked as competent  
43 professionals. The Dalai Lama set aside the patriarchal customs of his  
44 predecessors and began to champion education for women. In 2005, he  
45 acceded to the possibility of full ordination for women.

1 In a 2015 BBC interview, he was asked why there was no gender equality  
2 in Tibetan Buddhism and if a woman could become the next Dalai Lama. In  
3 reply to the first question, he stated that women and men had the same rights  
4 in Tibetan Buddhism, and that in his abode of exile in India, they had equal  
5 educational opportunities. He ignored historical reality. His own words had  
6 implied that female education was initiated to placate his supporters in the  
7 West. Under his theocratic rule in Tibet, he and other senior lamas had  
8 rejected modern education, both for men and women.

9 In the interview, he accepted that the next Dalai Lama could be a woman,  
10 but qualified his standby saying that to be effective, the female Dalai Lama  
11 should be '*very attractive*'. Feminists branded it as a retrograde proposition  
12 that objectified women and contradicted the efforts to promote equality for  
13 women.

14 In Chinese ruled Tibet, education and health services expanded greatly.  
15 Over 95% of eligible girls obtain primary education. Many secured advanced  
16 training in a range of professions. Women are represented in good numbers  
17 in the political hierarchy as well. Yet, there are only a few women in the upper  
18 echelons of the Buddhist religious hierarchy inside Tibet. Tibetan people  
19 desire independence from Chinese rule and the right to practice their religion  
20 without restriction. But neither male nor female Tibetans seek a return to the  
21 oppressive, misogynist lama-ruled way of life.

## 22 23 + Japan + 24

25 Religious practice in Japan blends Buddhism with Shintoism, the ancient  
26 Japanese religion. Both are infused with the patriarchic norms of the broader  
27 society. By custom, women were groomed to be submissive and loyal to the  
28 family, parents, in-laws and elders and were expected to be courteous,  
29 charming, elegant and demur.

30 Japanese Buddhism portrays the female body as unchaste, spiritually  
31 debased. Yet, monks frequently broke the vows of celibacy, married in secret  
32 and fathered children. The nuns cooked, served food, stitched robes, and  
33 maintained temple facilities. Performing religious functions or meditating was  
34 not a priority for nuns. And assigning them positions of authority was out of  
35 the question.

36 Yet, there were extended periods during which women rose in public and  
37 religious life. A few women became distinguished Zen masters. But after  
38 Japan rose as a regional imperial power from the 1800s, women increasingly  
39 saw their status undermined. Until the 1950s, their rights were restricted by  
40 law. Some rights were legally recognized, but it had little impact on practice.  
41 Rules limiting their access to temples, shrines and holy sites were abolished  
42 in 1872. But it took long before they were implemented. Women could not  
43 join the parades carrying religious shrines until 2001. Unlike Taiwan, China  
44 and Korea, Japan has a weak tradition of female *sanghas*, or women led  
45 Buddhist orders.

1 Japanese women have made major gains in education and employment  
2 since the 1950s. Though, on average, they still earn less than men and hold  
3 few managerial positions. Many have part-time or low-level service jobs. They  
4 also shoulder the onus for cooking, child-care and family affairs. The march  
5 towards gender equality is a long one. And on the religious front, they have a  
6 longer path to traverse.

7  
8 **+ Sri Lanka +**  
9

10 Like other nations in the region, patriarchy dominates Sri Lankan society. But  
11 it has a fine history of female participation in Buddhist life. For several  
12 centuries after Buddhism was established, *sanghas* populated by women  
13 operated across the island. Nuns were ordained; some rose to high ranks.  
14 But as social and economic inequalities enlarged and more stringent forms  
15 of patriarchy materialized, the status of women in Buddhist practice suffered  
16 as well. About 1000 years ago, ordination of nuns was curtailed and women  
17 only *sanghas* became extinct. Until recently, nuns only had domestic types of  
18 responsibilities in the monasteries.

19 The year 1960 saw the first election of a woman prime minister in the  
20 world. It occurred in Sri Lanka and the woman was Sirimavo Bandaranaike,  
21 a Buddhist. She served three terms over a long political career. But this elite-  
22 level event did not have a major impact on the equality between the sexes on  
23 the ground. And the Buddhist hierarchy remained as conservative as in the  
24 past.

25 Of recent, a vocal group of Buddhist women in Sri Lanka has been fighting  
26 to regain the ancient right to be fully ordained nuns. The first modern-day  
27 ordination of Buddhist nuns occurred in 1996. Three years later, more than  
28 one hundred and fifty nuns were ordained. Yet, unlike the male run temples,  
29 those run by women do not receive government grants. Women aspiring to  
30 get monastic education face an uphill battle. And due to opposition from  
31 powerful monks, female ordination has an uncertain future. Overall, Sri Lanka  
32 remains a strongly male-dominated society.

33  
34 **+ Thailand +**  
35

36 Thailand is a male-dominated society in which Buddhism is a core aspect of  
37 life. But women have progressed in education and the professions in recent  
38 decades. Though they won the right to vote in 1932, their representation in  
39 the upper echelons of power has been marginal. Democratic politics have  
40 been distinctly rocky in this military dominated system with a constitutional  
41 monarchy.

42 Fabulous natural sites, beaches, temples, shrines and cultural practices  
43 have made Thailand a favored destination for global visitors. Tourism now  
44 accounts for nearly a fifth of the Thai GDP. But it is an industry with a moral  
45 taint. Despite prevailing religiosity, the nation is a key center for international  
46 sex-tourism and sexual trafficking of women and children. Though forbidden

1 by law, prostitution thrives in brothels, massage parlors, hotels and street  
2 solicitation.

3 Thailand was a principal vacation spot for US soldiers fighting in Vietnam  
4 in the 1960s. Sex trade then expanded from a small-scale activity into an  
5 international industry. The soldiers left behind a legacy of rampant sexually  
6 transmitted diseases and antibiotic resistance that later spread across Asia.  
7 Their temporary partnerships bred many children, a large number of whom  
8 were abandoned.

9 Presently an estimated 200,000 sex workers operate in Thailand. Basic  
10 necessity leads poor families to surrender their children to crime gangs. The  
11 high-end establishments specifically cater to foreign visitors. Top politicians,  
12 higher echelons of the military and big business are complicit in this lucrative  
13 sector. Under the table payments to the police are common.

14 The Buddhist hierarchy, which is integrally aligned with the state, has not  
15 rallied against sex trade and tourism. Monks are not allowed to have direct  
16 contact with women. Thai Buddhist teachings deem women as lustful beings  
17 prone to sinful activity due to their *karma*. Prostitution is a sin but is explained  
18 away as a matter of fate.

19 There is also a perfidious side here. Pra Chai, a distinguished Thai monk  
20 was the leader of a child trafficking network that enticed teenage boys from  
21 broken families and street kids for sexual acts. A small amount of cash and  
22 petty gifts sufficed to buy their silence. Police investigators had a hard time  
23 obtaining evidence against him due to his high social standing. He was finally  
24 convicted in 2015 and given a long prison sentence. Prior to this case, five  
25 other monks had been found guilty of sex crime. It is likely that some other  
26 predatory monks continue such practices.

27 Ordination of nuns is illegal since 1928. A few Thai women circumvented  
28 the law by securing ordination abroad and returning to practice as nuns. The  
29 first time this occurred was in 2001. While these nuns are not prosecuted,  
30 they face social opprobrium and even death threats as they go around, just  
31 as male monks do, begging for alms and food with a bowl in hand. Unlike  
32 monks, they are not eligible for state educational, health care and transport  
33 assistance.

34 With external support, some Thai feminists are struggling to improve the  
35 position of women in the social, political and religious arenas. They were  
36 instrumental in founding the International Association of Buddhist Women.  
37 Bangkok also hosted the first international Buddhist women's conference. But  
38 it is more of an elitist than a grassroots movement. Progress is slow. A nation  
39 with more than 250,000 monks still has less than 300 nuns.

#### 40 41 + Myanmar + 42

43 In this patriarchic society infused with cultural and religion-based prejudice  
44 against women, no Buddhist nun has secured ordination for centuries. But  
45 women have become active in political affairs. Many took part in the pro-  
46 democracy struggles led by Aung San Suu Kyi. But now their activism has

1 assumed a different agenda as many participate in the institutions run by the  
2 ultra-nationalist groups which aim to preserve and protect the culture and  
3 values of Buddhism against alleged onslaught by foreign influences like  
4 Islam. These groups operate on two fronts. On the political front, Buddhist  
5 leaders issue incendiary pronouncements fomenting hatred against the  
6 perceived enemies of Buddhism. They canvass for laws that discriminate  
7 against minorities and Muslims. They and their followers take a frontline part  
8 in burning down villages and killing and expelling the Rohingyas.

9 On the social front, the militant Buddhist groups undertake charitable work  
10 like feeding the poor, providing education for young people from low income  
11 strata, and assisting people affected by natural disasters. However, such  
12 assistance is not extended to the non-Burmese ethnic groups, whatever their  
13 plight.

14 Thousands of Buddhist women participate in both types of activities. They  
15 collect donations and organize and distribute essential supplies to the needy.  
16 Some volunteer to teach marginalized youth, some provide pro-bono legal  
17 assistance, and some give talks on Buddhist doctrines. They also organize  
18 and undertake drives to gather signatures for anti-Muslim petitions and other  
19 planks of the extremist Buddhist agenda.

20 The role of the Buddhist monks and nuns in the extremist programs has  
21 taken people of goodwill everywhere by surprise. Women members of these  
22 hardline groups fervently back the genocidal pogroms against the Rohingya  
23 people. The burning and destruction of villages, rape, torture and killings have  
24 internally displaced tens of thousands. Many live in encampments. And over  
25 700,000 have fled to Bangladesh and Thailand.

26 The Rohingyas live in absolute squalor and misery in the internal refugee  
27 camps. But they received no assistance from the former government led by  
28 the Nobel laureate Suu Kyi or the current military government. A few NGOs  
29 from abroad try to provide basic necessities and services like health care and  
30 education, especially for the children.

31 Yet, nationalist Buddhist women have led protest campaigns and placed  
32 physical barriers to block aid supplies from reaching the displaced people.  
33 They claim that the 'refugees' are being favored at the expense of the local  
34 people.

35  
36 *Women 'will actively stop heavily pregnant Rohingya women*  
37 *from getting to the nearest hospital,' a seasoned*  
38 *representative of an international aid organization working in*  
39 *the area told us, speaking anonymously due to fear of*  
40 *reprisals from the government. 'I've worked in many*  
41 *complicated places around the world, but I had never*  
42 *experienced this'. (Augilar 2018).*

43  
44 Detested in their own nation, the Rohingyas are unwanted anywhere else.  
45 Despite declarations about crimes against humanity by the UN and human  
46 rights groups, their future remains bleak.



1  
2 *At present, it seems that hostility towards the Rohingya*  
3 *population is one of few things binding together Aung San Suu*  
4 *Kyi's NDL party, the army that once opposed her, and the*  
5 *majority of people in Myanmar. Whichever direction the*  
6 *movement takes next, it seems likely that women will remain*  
7 *at its forefront. (Augilar 2018).*  
8

9 In hierarchical societies with distinct and disjoined marginalized groups, the  
10 ruling circles play off one against the other by granting minor favors here and  
11 there and using one to oppress the others. Buddhist men and women in  
12 Myanmar have succumbed to the same tactic. Instead of uniting to fight  
13 against militarism and for the establishment of a just, democratic society, as  
14 they did earlier, they have thrown in their lot with the military and fascistic  
15 forces to brutalize the most brutalized among them.

16 After the military takeover of power in February 2021, and detention of  
17 Suu Kyi, the situation took another turn. Many Buddhist monks and nuns once  
18 again turned against the military but their stand against Muslims and the  
19 Rohingya is unchanged.  
20

#### 21 **+ China, Taiwan and South Korea +** 22

23 Despite the prevalence of patriarchy, the nations of China, Taiwan and South  
24 Korea have a more permissive attitude towards the ordination of Buddhist  
25 nuns. With a good economic standing, ordained nuns there preach, instruct  
26 and conduct services alongside the monks. Many female orders in these  
27 nations practice 'socially engaged' Buddhism by supporting schools, low cost  
28 health facilities and centers for the care of orphans and disabled people.

29 In pre-revolutionary China, women had little choice but to live under the  
30 control of men. Foot binding, dowry payment, arranged marriage, polygamy  
31 and dominant in-laws produced lives of rank drudgery for most women. Laws  
32 enforced since 1949 have ended most degrading practices. The majority of  
33 adult Chinese women now have at least a secondary school level education.  
34 Some 70% are in the work force. In 1959, Indian and Chinese women were  
35 not far apart in terms of social and economic status. Today, Chinese women  
36 have outpaced their Indian counterparts by many miles.

37 Some 74% of the Chinese people follow Chinese folk religion, 16% follow  
38 Buddhism, 7% follow Taoism, 2.5% follow Christianity, and 0.5% follow Islam.  
39 Among the Buddhists, women have made good progress since 1949. In  
40 monasteries, monks and nuns undergo similar ordination rituals, adorn  
41 similar robes and are given similar names and titles. Nuns oversee religious  
42 rites, participate in monastic decision making and attain mastership rank at  
43 the same level as the monks. Negative aspersions on their virtuosity are not  
44 common. Yet, given the Buddhist vision of the role and spiritual status of  
45 women, a glass-ceiling at the senior levels exists.

1 Some 35% of the population of Taiwan is Buddhist, 33% is Taoist, 19%  
2 is irreligious, 4% is Christian, and 9% follows traditional religion. Of the Asian  
3 nations, gender equality in general and within Buddhism has made the  
4 greatest strides in Taiwan. The process accelerated by leaps and bounds  
5 after 1952 when nuns were fully ordained for the first time. Of the nearly  
6 30,000 ordained Buddhist priests now, three-quarters are women. Buddhist  
7 women run the largest charitable civic organization. Nuns are at the forefront  
8 of educational, media and publication organizations and endeavors. Many  
9 have college level and advanced degrees in religious, professional and  
10 scientific fields. Taiwanese nuns are well respected by the community. They  
11 focus both on overall social welfare and gender equality. Yet, some leading  
12 conservative monks want to turn back the tide. Despite the remarkable  
13 success story of the Taiwanese nuns, patriarchic Buddhism has not been  
14 subdued.

15 South Korea is another Asian nation where women have made major  
16 strides in the social, economic and religious arenas since the 1950s. A  
17 surprising 56% of the population is irreligious, 27% is Christian, 16% is  
18 Buddhist, and 1% follows other religions. Buddhist women in the nation have  
19 made major strides towards gender equality. Many monastic orders run by  
20 nuns have been revived of recent. As in Taiwan, nuns run monasteries,  
21 oversee religious affairs and are among the most respected groups in society.  
22 Their educational gains are reflected in the fact that nuns with doctoral  
23 degrees in Buddhist studies outnumber similarly qualified monks.

### 24 25 + Nepal + 26

27 Nepal, the birth land of Buddha, had a monarchic system of rule until about a  
28 decade ago. With some 80% of the population Hindu, 10% Buddhist, 4%  
29 Muslim and 6% other, Hinduism was the official religion. Hinduism and  
30 Buddhism in Nepal exist in a syncretic form together with indigenous beliefs  
31 and customs. In a culture infused with religion, the landscape is dotted by  
32 temples and shrines. The town where Buddha was born draws pilgrims from  
33 all over the world. Inter-religious strife has been rare in this multi-cultural  
34 nation.

35 Nepal has a vibrant secular side. For decades, the fight for social justice  
36 and democracy was led by a coalition of communist parties. Subsequently,  
37 the violent campaigns of the past were replaced by massive street protests.  
38 The monarchy was deposed, and a constitutional democracy instituted. Now  
39 there is no official religion. Popular for their welfare programs like elderly and  
40 widow support and unemployment benefits, the coalition won elections and  
41 ruled for a while. But their policies did not deviate far from neoliberal recipes,  
42 and the conditions of the masses hardly changed. Economic uncertainty and  
43 vast inequality have made the political landscape quite fragile.

44 The magnificent cultural façades of Nepal mask an appalling reality. It is  
45 a place with a large gap between the few haves and the mass of have nots.  
46 The latter have no voice in local and national decision making. The caste

1 system is entrenched; the Dalits and minority people are discriminated in all  
2 walks of life; and women and children, especially in poor families, risk a range  
3 of life damaging abuses.

4 Nepal is strongly misogynistic with extremely harmful anti-women norms.  
5 Menstruating women and women who have given birth are secluded under  
6 highly risky conditions. Religious obstinacy and dysfunctional policing have  
7 prevented implementation of laws banning the practice. Women and girls in  
8 growing numbers face abuse, violence, rape, kidnapping and even murder,  
9 in the home and outside. Complaints to the police do little to stem the tide.

10 Poor children live precarious lives, hungry, malnourished and ill. Illiteracy  
11 is common. Families scrap a living from a patch of land and few livestock.  
12 Jobs are scarce. Most are arduous and pay sweatshop wages. All avenues  
13 of making a living entail grinding poverty. Girls are worse off than boys. The  
14 benefits of the flourishing tourist industry do not trickle down. It is a fertile  
15 ground for making Nepal a center for international trafficking of children—  
16 mostly girls but boys as well. Seductive promises by recruiters from criminal  
17 gangs induce hard up families to hand over their children for a paltry sum and  
18 promise of good jobs in local towns, India or the Middle East. Some children  
19 are kidnapped.

20 Each year between 5,000 and 10,000 girls and young women from Nepal  
21 are smuggled into India. Most face sexual exploitation in massage parlors,  
22 bars, brothels, spas and dance venues. A number of girls land in the Arab  
23 nations as low-paid, overworked domestic workers. Some of those sent to  
24 India are forced into organ harvesting surgery. Internal trafficking for sexual  
25 exploitation and cheap, risky work is rampant. Thousands contract diseases  
26 like Hepatitis B and HIV/AIDS. Victims of child trafficking mostly come from  
27 the Dalit and marginalized communities. Other than Nepal, majority Buddhist  
28 nations like Cambodia and Thailand are major sources for trafficked children.  
29 Of recent, Japan has emerged as a rising point of origin, transshipment and  
30 destination for sexually exploited girls.

31 Poverty and ingrained patriarchic beliefs and practices are major barriers  
32 towards preventing abuse of women and children In Nepal. The leaders of  
33 Hindu, Buddhist and traditional religions have yet to denounce the injustices  
34 and take strong measures to address them.

35 The role of women in Nepalese Buddhism is a diverse one. Most nuns  
36 get minimal training and effectively are the under-paid labor force of the  
37 monasteries. They attend to domestic duties—cooking, laundry, cleaning,  
38 buying supplies, and doing whatever the monks assign them. They abide by  
39 monastic rules but lack religious responsibility.

40 A few nuns are fully ordained. A few liberal monasteries provide education  
41 in Buddhist scriptures to nuns and allow them to lead prayer sessions. They  
42 also benefit from secular education. Some nuns are trained in business  
43 matters and operate the guest houses, shops and restaurants owned by the  
44 monastery.

45 A handful of nunneries that follow Tibetan Buddhist traditions exist in the  
46 remote mountainous areas of Nepal. Most were set up or revitalized recently.

1 In contrast to pre-1959 Tibet, they provide a complete monastic training of a  
2 Tibetan brand to women students. One nunnery offers a seven-day retreat,  
3 two have a three-year study program and one has a comprehensive nine-  
4 year program. Enrollment in these residential, full time programs ranges from  
5 7 to 150. A couple of these institutions have a primary school within their  
6 compounds. One nunnery attracts trainees from abroad. The funds for such  
7 nunneries come mainly from Buddhist foundations and supporters in the US  
8 and Europe. Some Nepalese nunneries trace their lineage across centuries.

9 A few Nepalese woman run monasteries go beyond their normal calling  
10 to engage in social work. A couple assist former and potential victims of child  
11 trafficking. At-risk girls are sheltered and trained in Nepali language, hygiene  
12 and Buddhist doctrine and practice, and later enrolled in public schools. The  
13 activist nuns also do environmental sanitation tasks like picking litter.

14 A few nunneries address the issue of anti-female violence and rape.  
15 Besides mounting educational campaigns, they conduct Kung Fu style self-  
16 defense training for nuns and other women. Each year, over a hundred nuns,  
17 some from India, undertake this training. Some of the well-trained nuns go  
18 into rural areas to raise awareness about child trafficking and teach martial  
19 arts to young women. They have garnered international recognition and  
20 awards for their exemplary work.

21 Activist nuns from progressive monasteries joined the demanding search,  
22 rescue, supply and rebuilding efforts after a deadly 7.8 scale earthquake  
23 struck Nepal in 2015. Trekking on foot with heavy loads, they penetrated the  
24 hilly terrain to bring badly needed supplies to remote villages.

25 Despite the fine work done by dedicated, socially engaged nuns, their  
26 effort suffers from basic limitations. Consider the case of Dhamma Moli, a  
27 large nunnery led by two eminent Buddhist nuns. With parental consent, it  
28 houses young girls from poor families and teaches them language skills,  
29 Buddhist doctrine, personal hygiene and secular subjects to enable them to  
30 live independent lives. Some are just six years old. A key aim is to prevent  
31 the girls from becoming victims of human traffickers. The leaders recognize  
32 that poverty and cultural denigration of women form the base of the problem  
33 of child trafficking and proclaim that such practices are incompatible with  
34 Buddhism. In a wide-ranging interview with an American Journalist, Sister  
35 Dhamma Vijaya, one of the two leaders, had the following response to a key  
36 question:

37  
38 Question: *Do you know of other Buddhist organizations*  
39 *working to fight human trafficking?*

40  
41 Reply: *We believe that there are many Buddhist organizations*  
42 *fighting human trafficking, but we do not know of them*  
43 *specifically.* (Compano 2013).

44  
45 The reply typifies NGO work in the Global South. While the issues they deal  
46 with are serious, the focus is on those issues that resonate with funders in

1 the Western nations. Often scores of NGOs attend to any particular issue—  
2 human rights, press freedom, women rights, child health, education, human  
3 trafficking, etc. Some secure funds from private and governmental agencies  
4 in the US, some from Norway, some from the European Union, and so on.  
5 Each NGO works independently; coordinated efforts are rare. While most  
6 NGOs are secular groups, a number are linked to a religious institution. The  
7 latter have a faith-based agenda, namely, to gain converts. Assistance to  
8 people facing life difficulties often increases conversion rates, but at times  
9 draws criticism from other religious groups and communities.

10 NGO reports are biased; success stories are spotlighted; other tales are  
11 swept under the rug. Despite outstanding results achieved by some NGOs,  
12 overall, they can only make a minor, often short-term, dent on a problem that  
13 is structural and national in scope. Dependency on external funds affects the  
14 activist nunneries and influences their priorities and mode of operation. Like  
15 the Kung Fu-trained nuns, they win international prizes but are hardly known  
16 among the common people at home. In any case, instances of progressive  
17 monastic work are exceptions; they do not reflect the overall situation in the  
18 Buddhist monasteries of Nepal. The dance and music programs staged by  
19 nuns for US audiences would, for example, hardly meet the approval of the  
20 traditionalist monks.

21 The basic issue is that NGO efforts, including those of the Buddhist nuns  
22 in Nepal, do not question and mobilize against the system that produces  
23 mass misery, patriarchy and inequality. They work within the system. And  
24 effectively, they act as a shock absorber of the system. Foreign funds foment  
25 nepotism, opportunism, and corruption. With shallow roots among the local  
26 people, the NGOs often serve to neutralize movements that fight for  
27 fundamental change.

28 Nepal is famed for its mountain ranges that include the highest peak in  
29 the world. Scaling their heights is risky, to say the least. On Mount Everest  
30 alone, nearly 4,500 have summited successfully to date, and about 350 died  
31 trying. The World Peace Prayer is an annual event that combines promotion  
32 of global peace and wellbeing with a commemoration of the heroic spirit of  
33 the mountaineers. Sponsored by the World Buddhist Religious Association,  
34 the Bhadracharya Monlam Foundation in Lumbini (birthplace of Buddha) and  
35 the Nepalese Mountaineering Association, the three-day program is held in a  
36 prime tourist location. A wide variety of inexpensive and pricey souvenirs to  
37 mark the occasion and the usual array of merchandise for tourists and visitors  
38 are on sale as well.

39 The third World Peace Prayer was observed in March 2020. The final  
40 program was preceded month-long prayers at many Buddhist monasteries.  
41 Handing over the peace torch by a leading Buddhist monk in Lumbini marks  
42 a high point of the event. Designed to promote tourism in Nepal, it attracts  
43 25,000 people from all walks of life. Hundreds of Buddhist monks, lamas and  
44 nuns are present. But the outbreak of the corona virus disease limited the  
45 number of international visitors in 2020. On the last day, all attendees are

1 blessed by venerated Buddhist priests. Senior state and provincial officials,  
2 including leaders of the communist party also attend the final sessions.

3 The World Peace Prayer denotes an NGO-based curious admixture of  
4 religion, tourism, spirit of adventure, commerce and politics the likes of which  
5 occur elsewhere in these neoliberal times. The aim is to promote peace, yet  
6 no educational sessions on the actuality of militarism in the world are held. It  
7 promotes human welfare without addressing the basic causes of poverty and  
8 misery.

9  
10 **+ Ani C Drolma +**

11  
12 A household name in Nepal, Ani C Drolma passionately promotes education  
13 for girls and denounces domestic violence. The Nuns Welfare Foundation  
14 she set up runs a school giving cost free residential training for some eighty  
15 girls from poor families. The saffron-clad students learn science, computer  
16 basics, mathematics, Nepali and Buddhist doctrine. She also funds a  
17 specialist hospital where hundreds of people with kidney diseases receive  
18 free dialysis every month.

19 In recognition of her endeavors to improve the lives of girls, combat the  
20 scourge of domestic violence and stage events to assist victims of natural  
21 calamities, she was appointed the UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador to Nepal.  
22 Besides the year 2017 Freedom Award from the US based Atlantic Council,  
23 she has garnered honors at Harvard University, Stanford University and other  
24 educational institutions.

25 Remarkably, Ani Drolma, who grew up under difficult circumstances, is  
26 an ordained Buddhist nun. Known as the singing nun, not just in Nepal but  
27 well beyond, she has sixteen and counting best-selling albums to her credit.  
28 She is arguably the top Buddhist music performer in the world today. Fusing  
29 a multiplicity of global styles with Nepalese and Buddhist meditational styles,  
30 her music represents a genre of its own.

31 Her dignified poise, soothing, exquisite elocution and sublime intensity  
32 complement the skill of her musical accompanists to provide an experience  
33 to behold. She intersperses her Nepali singing with moving life stories and  
34 gentle explanations of the history and meaning of the traditional and modern  
35 Buddhist *mantras* and hymns she evokes. She passionately speaks about  
36 her sisters in Nepal, about gender discrimination, about freedom from anger  
37 and hate, about love and compassion. Her English is flawless, and her smile  
38 is endearing. She promotes music as a means to develop spiritual capacity.  
39 Always draped in the robes and scarf of a nun, her concerts in the US, UK,  
40 Brazil, Germany, China, India, Japan, Taiwan and Romania are filled to  
41 capacity.

42 Yet, she enjoys a posh lifestyle that is as far as it can be from that of her  
43 Nepali sisters. Wealthy beyond their dreams, her classy automobile and  
44 house are the talk of the town. For her, no inconsistency between words and  
45 deeds exists. She disagrees that a nun should live a cloistered, reserved life.  
46 Poverty is not a thing to celebrate. Buddhists may prosper in the world but

1 should use their wealth to help the needy. What she does for the Nepali girls  
2 and kidney patients justifies her musical career and earnings. Popular and  
3 respected among the people, many venerate her as a saintly *bodhisattva* and  
4 consider her a national treasure.

5 Her messages of salvation through spirituality and charity resonate well  
6 within the context the global neoliberal system. Her 2017 Freedom Award  
7 was from an organization that is directed by luminaries of the US political,  
8 business and military elite and whose main goal is to promote US leadership  
9 (read US imperialism) in the world. Like the mindfulness movement, Ani  
10 Drolma exemplifies Westernization of Buddhism and its redirection towards  
11 serving the needs of the capitalist system.

12 People mired in poverty and desperation need the emotional solace her  
13 music brings. But it also has to motivate them to stand up for their rights and  
14 be active in transformative work. Unfortunately, that does not seem to be the  
15 case.

### 16 + The Mosuo +

17  
18 Tucked away in a remote mountainous enclave in south-west China, the  
19 Mosuo follow a traditional form of Tibetan Buddhism. Unlike Tibet, they have  
20 no monks, lamas or temples and no landlords or high rulers. Buddhism is  
21 practiced via a shared belief in the Buddha and communal rites and customs.  
22 Veneration of sacred mountains and female deities is intertwined with the  
23 Buddhist doctrine.

24  
25 The Mosuo live in a matrilineal-cum-matriarchal society where women  
26 head households and control family affairs. General communal affairs are  
27 also under their control. Marriage is an informal union between a woman and  
28 a man. A woman is free to choose her partner. The union may last long or be  
29 dissolved in a while through consent by both parties. But the children stay  
30 with the mother who controls the family property.

31  
32 *Women own and inherit property, sow crops in this agrarian*  
33 *society, and run the households – cooking, cleaning and child-*  
34 *rearing. The men provide strength, ploughing, building,*  
35 *repairing homes, slaughtering animals and helping with big*  
36 *familial decisions, although the final say is always with*  
37 *Grandmother.* (Booth 2017).  
38

39 This social system, which survived through centuries including under the  
40 turbulent transformative onslaught of the 1960s Cultural Revolution, is now  
41 undergoing a slow but definitive change in this era of neoliberal globalization.  
42 Like the Hadza of Tanzania (Chapter 4), the Mosuo people have received  
43 much publicity in China and the West. Their land abounds with spectacular  
44 sights, colorful traditions and friendly people. More and more tourists come  
45 each year and tourism has replaced agriculture as the principal economic  
46 activity.

1 Predictably, social inequality is on the rise and patriarchy is creeping in.  
2 Business establishments like hotels and taxis are generally run by men who  
3 decide key business issues. They represent the community in dealings with  
4 the outsiders. As the traditional sexual freedom is abused, prostitution,  
5 sexually transmitted diseases and crime are on the rise. Like the Hadza of  
6 Tanzania, the Mosuo are exotic objects for the tourists, to be photographed  
7 for a fee. But as their traditions are glorified by scholars and journalists in the  
8 Western outlets, their community turns into a symbolic shell of its glorious  
9 past. Sadly, it stands no chance against the hydra of capitalism that  
10 transforms or devours all cultures that come along its path.

### 11 12 **+ Navayana Buddhism +**

13  
14 The Indian statesman BR Ambedkar was a principled champion of women's  
15 rights. Responsible for inserting clauses in the constitution of the Republic of  
16 India that protected the rights of women, as the first Minister for Law and  
17 Justice, he was also the prime mover of the bill that provided specific benefits  
18 like paid maternity leave to women. When Prime Minister Nehru did not  
19 accord it due priority, he resigned from the government. Two quotes from his  
20 speeches on the issue are significant:

21  
22 *I measure the progress of a community by the degree of*  
23 *progress women have achieved.*

24  
25 *I strongly believe in the movements that are run by women. If*  
26 *they are truly taken into confidence, they may change the*  
27 *present picture of society which is very miserable now. In the*  
28 *past, they have played a significant role in improving the*  
29 *conditions of weaker sections and classes. BR Ambedkar (FII*  
30 *Team 2016).*

31  
32 The *Navayana* Buddhist order he founded in 1956 gave Dalit men and  
33 women an honorable avenue to detach themselves from their low social  
34 status and chart their own path. But his death a year later robbed the nascent  
35 movement of a bold, learned leader of national stature. Instead, the Dalit  
36 parties that emerged later, while claiming to follow his philosophy, are run by  
37 charismatic, but unprincipled, well-to-do and corrupt personalities for whom  
38 politics is device for lobbying for favors from the main parties and holding on  
39 to their positions. A few women occupy the top positions in these parties. But  
40 they have done little to advance the status and conditions of Dalit women in  
41 general. The *Navayana* Buddhist order functions, especially in the rural areas  
42 where most of the adherents live, as a syncretic adjunct to Hinduism and has  
43 adapted to its misogynic tendencies.

### 44 45 **+ United States and Europe +**

46



1 Western Buddhism has a more progressive record on gender equality in  
2 comparison to the Asiatic Buddhist sects. It has largely dispensed with the  
3 sexist tenets of the venerated Buddhist texts and the discriminatory practices  
4 of the Asiatic monastic orders. Women hold senior positions in the Buddhist  
5 centers of the US. They are as well credited with policies that promote social  
6 justice, welfare of poor families and environmental awareness. The US has  
7 more Zen masters than Japan.

8 Buddhist women in the West consider institutional sexism to be a vestige  
9 of Asian culture that can be excised surgically from authentic Buddhism. A  
10 few Western monastic orders are co-ed, with men and women abiding by the  
11 same rules. The list of distinguished, western women Buddhist masters and  
12 teachers is long. Pema Chodron is a leading voice. After training by Buddhist  
13 monks, in 1981 she became the first American woman to be a fully ordained  
14 nun. Her books and speeches on noble living, meditation, peace, spirituality  
15 and nonviolence have a worldwide audience. A sampling of her views is  
16 indicative of her philosophy:

17  
18 *Life is like that. We don't know anything.*

19 +++++

20 *Let your curiosity be greater than your fear.*

21 +++++

22 *Compassion becomes real*  
23 *when we recognize our shared humanity.*

24 +++++

25 *The ego seeks to divide and separate.*

26 *Spirit seeks to unify and heal.*

27 Pema Chodron  
28

29 Chodron led the Shambhala Buddhist order and was honored with the Global  
30 Bhikkhuni Award. Her foundation now supports Buddhist communities and  
31 nunneries across the world. Unlike traditional Buddhist nuns, she is married  
32 and has three grandchildren.

33 There is as well a dark side to Western Buddhism. The lamas and monks  
34 in a host of Tibetan Buddhist centers in Australia, France, California and the  
35 UK have faced charges of rape and sexual abuse. Several have been  
36 convicted, jailed and compensation was paid to the female and male victims.

37 Sexual misconduct accusations have plagued the leaders of the Triratna  
38 Community Trust, the most influential Tibetan Buddhist School in the West.  
39 Spread across 26 countries, its properties have an estimated value in excess  
40 of 100 million UK pounds. It maintains some thirty centers in the UK alone.  
41 Its income mostly comes from retreats, meditation courses, sales of Buddhist  
42 books and material, and contributions from members and external sources.  
43 The centers run bookshops and cafeterias. Members work on a voluntary  
44 basis or for minimal pay. As a registered charity, it is eligible for tax breaks.  
45 The Trust has influential linkages with the political establishment. Its senior  
46 leaders were involved in the production of a key policy document on the use

1 of mindfulness for stress reduction among state employees and treatment of  
2 mental ailments in the UK.

3 Notwithstanding its spiritual repute, undercurrents of sexual misdeeds  
4 permeated the Trust centers. In what was dubbed a 'bombshell' report, some  
5 one in ten members, male and female, had either been subjected to or had  
6 observed inappropriate sexual practices. Many of the charges were levelled  
7 at the now deceased founder of the Trust.

8 Nuns of a similar disposition to Pema Chodron exist in the West. But in  
9 general, there are more men than women in the leadership. Buddhism in the  
10 West is big business and has yet to extricate itself from the sexist tendencies  
11 in the society. Genuine gender equality is still a distant goal even in Western  
12 Buddhism.

### 13 + Overall +

14  
15  
16 Buddha initiated, albeit reluctantly, measures that lifted women to a degree  
17 from the misogynic Hindu culture. Allowing nuns to be ordained, he accepted  
18 that women could attain enlightenment. But he did not categorically proclaim  
19 spiritual equality of men and women. The Buddhist scriptures after his death  
20 by and large portray women as sinful beings. A few centuries on, ordination  
21 of nuns managed to survive only in a few places.

22 The status of women in Buddhism today spans the gamut from total  
23 subordination to near equality. Thailand typifies the former while the US and  
24 Taiwan represent the latter. Conservative voices generally control the Asian  
25 landscape. Buddhist schools give minor credence to the enlightenment of  
26 women, let alone the issue of females being admitted into the *sangha*. That  
27 reality is obscured by popular images of Buddhism in the West. Scholars of  
28 Buddhism neglect the issue as well. By declaring that the sagely Buddha  
29 stood for equal rights for all, the embarrassing historical and modern-day  
30 realities of the superior status of monks in comparison to nuns are masked.  
31 The pronouncements of Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama to promote  
32 gender equality are taken at their face value. The advocates of equality are  
33 often silenced.

34  
35 *The complete silence on the subject of misogyny so firmly*  
36 *entrenched in the Buddhist scriptures, and traced to the*  
37 *Buddha, is quite remarkable. (Pattanaika 2016)*  
38

39 A leading Buddhist scholar concurs. After noting the ambivalent but mostly  
40 unfavorable depictions of women in the teachings of Gautama Buddha, he  
41 declares that '*Buddhists texts are replete with negative portrayals of women*'  
42 and further draws a key conclusion:

43  
44 *[Regardless] of the textual sources that may be available, the*  
45 *presence of Buddhism in any given society has not materially*  
46 *improved the status of women, though nunneries have often*

1           *provided a welcome refuge for women.* (Lopez 2001, pages  
2           161,163).

3  
4 Buddhist women are struggling to change the misogynist culture. In places,  
5 they have made large gains. The important question is will the striving for  
6 gender equality be associated with the hate mongering trends in Buddhism,  
7 as in Myanmar or will it express itself within socially engaged Buddhism, as  
8 in Taiwan, and even go towards questioning the structure of the system that  
9 promotes all the types of inequalities? Attaining equality so as to participate  
10 in the oppression of other people or join violent institutions like the military is  
11 a morally depraved goal unworthy of those who profess allegiance to the  
12 noble path laid down by Gautama Buddha.

### 13 14   **6.8 BUDDHISM: A RELIGION?**

15  
16 Since its inception, Buddhism as perceived and practiced by the majority of  
17 the followers has included the idea of a supernatural realm and supernatural  
18 beings. That along with its varied communal customs and rites and the body  
19 of venerated texts make it a religion as defined in Chapter 3. Westernized  
20 Buddhism and *Navayana* Buddhism, where the philosophical and secular  
21 components predominate, are two partial exceptions to this rule.

22           Buddhism is the most idealized religious belief system in Western nations.  
23 Numerous books and websites portray it as a secular philosophy of prime  
24 relevance to the multitude of personal, social and environmental problems  
25 faced by humanity. Some authors project that the principles of Buddhism can  
26 be applied to construct a humane form of capitalism. These versions of the  
27 Buddhist doctrine deemphasize what is in the basic texts and ignore the  
28 historical and current realities of the practice and social function of Buddhism  
29 in the world.

30           The contradictory, inconsistent and at times, incoherent segments of the  
31 doctrine and the gap between doctrine and actuality, are effaced. It is said  
32 that Buddhism has dispensed with the Vedic ideas of soul and rebirth, and  
33 Christian visions of heaven and hell. But Buddhist scriptures talk about being  
34 reborn into a divine realm or a hellish realm. It depends on your deeds in this  
35 and the past life. They contain graphic descriptions of eight excruciatingly hot  
36 hells, eight incredibly cold hells and other unpleasant hells. When asked: 'If  
37 there is no soul, what is being reborn?' the typical Buddhist response is:  
38 consciousness, or cosmic consciousness. Yet, what does that really mean?  
39 Is it not an entity beyond the natural realm? If it is an entity consignable to a  
40 divine or a hellish afterlife, can it experience pleasure and pain in the manner  
41 humans do?

42           To see Buddhism as a purely secular ethical philosophy is to overlook the  
43 fantastic creation myths, magical events and the plethora of gods and  
44 demigods that feature in its texts. Most Buddhists accept them. One finds  
45 statements to the effect that in the early cycles of the universe, humans were  
46 able to fly and had a life span of 80,000 years which, over successive cycles,

1 will decrease to ten years. Like the reincarnations of *Vishnu* accepted by  
2 Hindus, the Buddha periodically lands among humans to guide them towards  
3 the true path. The next Buddha is expected to appear 5 billion years from  
4 now. Some stories say that Gautama Buddha started walking immediately  
5 after birth and wherever he stepped, a lotus flower bloomed. The Buddhist  
6 canon is steeped with hundreds of such tales that are held valid by devotees.  
7 Like any religion, actual Buddhism is intertwined with supernatural events,  
8 objects, stories and beings. And like the other major religions, it is divided  
9 into denominations that differ according to the holy books they venerate, their  
10 interpretations, and their religious and cultural practices.

## 11 12 **6.9 REFLECTIONS**

13  
14 The massive Buddhist canon, its numerous stunning monasteries, shrines,  
15 sculptures and artwork; the diversity of entrancing monastic rituals; the  
16 captivating, calming hymns, *sutras* and chants; the colorful attires of monks  
17 and nuns; the resonating musical instruments lending serenity to chanting  
18 and meditation, and the festivities associated with Buddhism represent a  
19 remarkable, valuable component of human culture. Buddhism has enriched  
20 life wherever it has taken root and provided comfort, solace and meaning to  
21 hundreds of millions.

22 The rationale for spiritual living, the code of ethics and guidelines for  
23 conduct embodied in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Noble Path  
24 present an elevated, admirable portrait of a civilized, just and harmonious  
25 mode of living and for organization of society. Meditational practice and the  
26 tenets of compassion and loving kindness are psychological modalities of  
27 import to daily living. Helping to attain focus and mental balance, they are  
28 useful therapies for a wide range of mental ailments and stress reduction as  
29 well as devices for promotion of harmony among human beings.

30 Buddhism emerged within a social formation based on a rigid social  
31 hierarchy and strict patriarchy. The dominant religious doctrine with gods and  
32 goddesses who oversaw human affairs declared that the fate of the soul  
33 depended on living in conformity with the ordained functions of your birth  
34 caste. Gautama Buddha challenged the hierarchical caste system and the  
35 religion that sanctioned it. As it opened up chances for a freer, improved life,  
36 disaffected social strata and women were attracted to Buddhism.

37 But it did not take long for the religion of the underprivileged to undergo a  
38 metamorphosis and become linked to wealth and power. As it expanded  
39 across Asia and spawned a vast variety of subdivisions and sacred texts,  
40 such a linkage became crucial for its survival and development. Adoption by  
41 the rulers bifurcated its social function. While it provided comfort, emotional  
42 support and meaning to the adherents it as well helped buttress the existent  
43 hierarchical structure and endow a spiritual standing to the ruler. Yet, there  
44 also were adherents who invoked Buddhist ethical values to oppose unjust  
45 and oppressive rulers.

1 This chapter has provided a snippet of the complex history of Buddhism.  
2 It has several examples from the past and present that illustrate these starkly  
3 contradictory tendencies. The most striking case is that of Buddhist monks in  
4 Myanmar who valiantly but peacefully defied the military dictatorship in the  
5 pro-democracy struggle but later joined hands with the same military in the  
6 onslaught on the Rohingya people. Some Buddhist communities have made  
7 significant progress on the issue of gender equality. But for the most part,  
8 Buddhism remains intertwined with a misogynist culture.

9 The growth of Buddhist practices in the Western world, especially the US,  
10 occurred in a way that reflects these dualistic tendencies. Embraced by the  
11 counterculture movement of the 1960s, Buddhism became a vehicle for  
12 expressing an alternative lifestyle that, among other things, rejected the US  
13 military aggression in Vietnam and adjoining nations. Yet agencies of the US  
14 and their front organizations gave financial and political support to orthodox  
15 Buddhist orders to combat the anti-imperialist and communist groups in Asia.  
16 This support was a key factor in the evolution of modern-day hate spewing  
17 nationalist Buddhist monks and parties in the region. The monks of the past  
18 who made it acceptable to kill communists have been replaced by nationalist  
19 monks who foment violence against Muslims and other minorities.

20 The popularity of Buddhism in the US and Europe has contradictory  
21 features. On the one hand, meditation and mindfulness practices assist  
22 people in combatting stress, attaining mental equipoise, and give health care  
23 professionals a relatively safe way for treating an array of psychological  
24 ailments. Yet major corporations use them to reduce workplace disharmony,  
25 increase efficiency and protect the bottom line. Governments utilize them to  
26 alleviate the overwork and angst caused by cutbacks of essential services  
27 and the military deploys them to boost combat efficiency. Like other religions,  
28 Buddhism is increasingly serving as a prop for the neo-liberal system across  
29 the world. It is a vehicle for groups that marginally tackle the symptoms, not  
30 the basic causes, of social problems. And it has become an ideological plank  
31 for extremist political tendencies that portray 'the other' as the cause of  
32 national and global problems. While many Buddhist orders partake in charity  
33 work, Buddhist movements and activists that challenge the system as such  
34 are a rarity. The Buddhist counterpart to the vibrant liberation theology of  
35 Latin America (see Chapter 7) has yet to make its presence felt.

36 On the one hand, Buddhism gave rise to the superb, sublime, entrancing  
37 musical performances and meditational chants of the Nepali Buddhist nun  
38 Ani C Drolma. (see the links in Drolma 2020). On the other, we see the  
39 erstwhile global icon of non-violent, pro-democracy struggles, Aung San Suu  
40 Kyi, a devout Buddhist supported by thousands of Buddhist monks, take the  
41 podium to defend a genocidal pogrom. David Patt captures this duality well:

42  
43 *Is modern capitalism, with its retinue of social injustice,*  
44 *militarism, and environmental destruction, ultimately*  
45 *incompatible with the Buddhist way of being in the world? And*  
46 *if it is, what is a good Buddhist to do about it? (Patt 2001).*

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The most eminent scientist of the 20th century had high expectations of Buddhism:

*The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion.  
The religion, which is based on experience,  
which refuses to be dogmatic.  
If there's any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs  
it will be Buddhism....*

Albert Einstein

Was Albert Einstein aware of the actualities of Buddhism in Tibet? Did he know about the support given by Zen masters to the rampages of fascist Japan in Asia? What would he have said of the participation of Buddhist monks in the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya people?

Hundreds of millions of unquestionably decent Buddhists go about their ordinary, often challenging, lives today. Like other humans in the same social crucible, they feel joy as well as pain. They need to pose and address these questions. Resorting to the ruminations of Pema Chodron is not enough. The answers they will give and how they will act are crucial not just for retaining the reputation of Buddhism as a religion of compassion and spiritual growth but also for the progress of humanity.

# CHAPTER 07: CHRISTIANITY



*The fruit of faith is love,  
and the fruit of love is service.*  
Mother Teresa

*Let us care for one another  
and let us be loving custodians of creation.*  
Pope Francis

*When the missionaries came to Africa  
they had the Bible and we had the land.  
They said, 'Let us pray'. We closed our eyes.  
When we opened them, we had the Bible  
and they had the land.*  
Bishop Desmond Tutu

*If Jesus were alive today, He would be a guerrillero.*  
Camilo Torres Restrepo



CHRISTIANITY IS THE RELIGION based on the teachings and deeds of Jesus Christ, also known as Jesus of Nazareth. About one of every three persons in the world is a Christian. With nearly 2.4 billion followers in 2015 scattered in every corner of the globe, it is the dominant religion in the world, and outranks all religions in terms of material and financial resources and political influence. The Bible, its holy book, has been translated into more than 2,000 languages. Freely available in print and electronic forms, it is also the book with the largest number of copies ever printed.

Christianity has three main denominations—Roman Catholic (50%), Eastern Orthodox (20%) and Protestant (30%). The Protestants are divided by varied traditions—Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, etc. Doctrinal divisions—Charismatic Christianity, Pentecostalism, Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism—also prevail. About 40% of the Christians live in North and

1 South America, 25% in Europe, 25% in Africa, and 10% in Asia and the Pacific  
2 region. Nearly one of eight, some 250 million, Christians lives in the US. It is  
3 the nation with the highest number of Christians in the world.  
4

## 5 **7.1 ORIGIN**

6

7 Two thousand years ago, Palestine, a province of the Roman Empire, was a  
8 highly differentiated society with Roman administrators, large landowners,  
9 wealthy merchants and high priests at the top and farmers, herders, artisans,  
10 fishermen, servants, manual laborers and slaves at the bottom. A middle  
11 stratum of innkeepers, small traders, tax collectors and others also existed. A  
12 few landlords owned enormous tracts of land. There was a large Jewish  
13 presence in the area.

14 Roman rule was oppressive and exploitative. High taxation intensified  
15 poverty; famines and epidemics occurred frequently. Consequently, mass  
16 uprisings against the Romans and the upper echelons were common. Each  
17 time, the imperial legions reacted with brutality and crucified captured rebels.

18 It was in these circumstances that Jesus Christ was born in a carpenter's  
19 family. The bleak times had many itinerant sermonizing orators. Instead of  
20 taking up his father's trade, Jesus became one of them. And he stood out. His  
21 magnetic rendition had a unique emotional appeal. He talked against social  
22 injustice and the misconduct of the Jewish priests. Within a short time, his  
23 message caught on far and wide. By the time he was just in his twenties, he  
24 became:  
25

26 *[a charismatic] healer and teacher who initiated an egalitarian*  
27 *social movement [that was] critical of religious elite and*  
28 *favorable to those who [were] poor, humble and socially*  
29 *despised.* (Woodhead 2014, pages 8 and 13).  
30

31 Touring the land with twelve devoted disciples (apostles), he spread the word  
32 that the Kingdom of God was imminent. Many people, especially those at the  
33 bottom rungs of society, were attracted to it. But to Jewish priests and the  
34 Romans it was an incitement to rebellion. Three years on, he was placed in  
35 custody, tortured and killed by crucifixion.

36 Far from relenting, his close followers ventured into other parts of the  
37 Roman Empire reiterating his teachings and proclaiming that Jesus was the  
38 Son of God who had been resurrected after death. Within decades, Christian  
39 communities existed in the Middle East and the Mediterranean lands. As its  
40 doctrines were elaborated and adorned with chronicles by the apostles like  
41 Peter and Paul, a mature form of Christianity evolved. In an era when people  
42 were drenched in esoteric beliefs, the Christian tales of miracles and divine  
43 events like resurrection found a fertile audience.  
44

45 *That was a time when even in Rome and Greece and still more*  
46 *in Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt, an absolutely uncritical mixture*



1 *of the crassest superstitions of the most varying peoples was*  
2 *indiscriminately accepted and complemented by pious*  
3 *deception and downright charlatanism; a time in which*  
4 *miracles, ecstasies, visions, apparitions, divining, gold-*  
5 *making, cabbala and other secret magic played a primary role.*  
6 *It was in that atmosphere, and, moreover, among a class of*  
7 *people who were more inclined than any other to listen to*  
8 *these supernatural fantasies, that Christianity arose. (Engels*  
9 *1894).*

10  
11 At inception, Christianity functioned as an adjunct of Judaism. Gradually,  
12 while retaining a key segment of the Judaic canon, it shed the customs and  
13 traditions of the parent faith and bloomed into a vibrant, autonomous belief  
14 system with its own sacred text, liturgy, rituals and institutions. Within a  
15 hundred years of the crucifixion, the principal elements of the Christian canon  
16 were in place.

17 The image of a fish, symbolizing Jesus Christ the Savior and Son of God  
18 was used by some Christian communities in the early days.



20  
21 Fish – Christian Symbol  
22

23 The first Christians faced a mixture of tolerance and intolerance from the  
24 authorities. As a sect of Judaism, they could practice their faith and preach.  
25 Christian evangelists traveled across the Empire to spread the Gospel. The  
26 kind of stories they told, and the unique social services provided by Christian  
27 communities swelled the ranks of the converts. But as its departure from  
28 Judaism became pronounced, Christianity began to face legal sanction.

29 A central feature of the prevailing polytheistic Roman religion was the  
30 numerous public festivals and feasts honoring its multiple gods. Other belief  
31 systems were tolerated so long as they did not openly display disloyalty to the  
32 state. Festival participation and burning incense for the Emperor were  
33 required for all living under Roman rule. With their strong belief in one god,  
34 Christians often refused to do either. God, for them, was above the state.  
35 Such defiance combined with the fact that Christianity had many followers  
36 from the lower classes and slaves, and its predictions of calamities caused  
37 by sinful behavior raised the ire of the authorities and non-Christians.

38  
39 *Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it*  
40 *first appeared as the religion of slaves and emancipated*  
41 *slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples*  
42 *subjugated or dispersed by Rome. (Engels 1894).*

1  
2 In consequence, they faced sporadic persecution in some provinces of the  
3 Roman Empire, not just from the state but from other people as well. By 250  
4 CE Christians faced empire-wide bans. During the four prohibitions that were  
5 enacted, prominent Christian missionaries and lay persons were executed,  
6 Christians were disbarred from public service, their churches were reduced  
7 to rubble, and their books were burnt. An estimated 1,000 Christians were put  
8 to death by the Romans during the first three centuries.

9 A fundamental change occurred in the initial years of the 4th century after  
10 Emperor Constantine I became a convert and legalized Christianity. Feeling  
11 that it would stabilize his empire, he urged Christian theologians to cease their  
12 doctrinal disputations and provide clear articulations of Christian beliefs.

13  
14 *In 325, Constantine convened the First Ecumenical Council at*  
15 *Nicaea in Asia Minor, the first council to include bishops from*  
16 *both the eastern and western regions of the empire. The*  
17 *Council issued a creed that affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity.*  
18 *The Nicene Creed, which summarizes the core of Christian*  
19 *belief, is seen as authoritative by all main branches of*  
20 *Christianity. (Patheos 2019).*

21  
22 In 381 CE, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.  
23 Once an ideology of the underprivileged, it transmuted into a doctrine that  
24 could rationalize despotic rule. Eusebius of Caesarea, an influential and  
25 prolific Christian theologian and historian of that era, elevated the spiritual  
26 status of the Roman Emperor:

27  
28 *And surely monarchy far transcends constitution and every*  
29 *form of government; for that democratic equality, which is its*  
30 *opposite, may rather be described as anarchy and disorder.*  
31 *Eusebius of Caesarea (Woodhead 2014, page 43).*

32  
33 Christianity asserted its designation as the official doctrine of the Empire in  
34 an uncompromising manner.

35  
36 *When Christianity came to power in the empire of Constantine,*  
37 *it proceeded to almost viciously repress all non-Christians and*  
38 *all Christians who did not line up with official Orthodox*  
39 *ideology, policy, and practice. (Wikipedia (2021 - Religious*  
40 *Fanaticism)).*

41  
42 By the end of the fourth century, Christianity had landed in Europe, North  
43 Africa and the regions adjacent to India. The Roman Empire disintegrated  
44 shortly. The western portion descended into disarray, but stability reigned in  
45 the regions surrounding Turkey. As it spread across Russia, the Church

1 experienced a slow, inexorable partition into two major denominations, the  
2 Catholic Church and the Russian-based Orthodox Church.

## 3 4 **7.2 CORE BELIEFS AND TEXTS**

5  
6 Christianity is a monotheistic religion whose primary tenets are: (i) There is  
7 no god but God; (ii) God is a perfect, ever present, most powerful and all-  
8 knowing being; (iii) God created the universe and human beings out of  
9 nothing; (iv) God exists as the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit; (v) God  
10 sent his son Jesus to the world to save humanity from sin and damnation; (vi)  
11 Jesus was resurrected and ascended into Heaven; and (vii) Jesus will return  
12 to earth on the Day of Judgment. These tenets are synthesized in the  
13 Apostle's Creed which is accepted by almost all the branches of Christianity  
14 and recited frequently in church services.

### 15 16 **The Apostle's Creed**

17 *I believe in God, the Father almighty; creator of heaven and*  
18 *earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who*  
19 *was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of Virgin Mary, suffered*  
20 *under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; he*  
21 *descended into hell. On the third day, he rose again,*  
22 *descended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the*  
23 *Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead. I*  
24 *believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, the*  
25 *communion of saints, forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of*  
26 *the body and the life everlasting. Amen. (Woodhead 2014,*  
27 *page 22).*

28  
29 Christians believe that Jesus Christ was sent by God to convey His wisdom  
30 to people and save humanity. Stories about his life and work form a basic  
31 part of Christian belief. After virgin birth, Jesus apparently displayed amazing  
32 learning at an early age. He walked on water, healed people who had serious  
33 diseases, fed thousands from little food and performed miracles. Conveyed  
34 in the Bible, these stories combine enticing morality tales with paradoxes and  
35 edicts. But there is considerable dissent and variation among the various over  
36 the veracity and interpretation of these stories.

37 The story of Adam and Eve is a primary feature of Christian belief: First  
38 God created the universe out of nothing. Then He placed the first human,  
39 Adam, together with plants and animals in the Garden of Eden. Eve, his  
40 companion, was created later from his rib. It took God six days to finish his  
41 work. On the seventh day, He rested. To respect God, Humans should also  
42 desist from worldly work on the seventh day of each week and spend it in  
43 prayers.

44 Provided everything they needed, Adam and Eve were told by God not to  
45 eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. But because they violated His rule, they  
46 condemned themselves and their descendants to lives of pain, suffering and

1 death. This Original Sin taints humans with a proclivity to commit sinful and  
2 evil deeds.

3 While suffering and sin characterize human living, Christians hold that in  
4 His unlimited compassion and love, God has given humans a path out of that  
5 blight. Humans have the ability to choose between living according to God's  
6 will or pursuing their own desires and indulging in sin. The cardinal principle  
7 of a Christian life is to love God unconditionally and follow His laws. It is the  
8 sole avenue for redemption and salvation. Else, you will land in eternal Hell.  
9 Christians believe in the Devil who diverts people away from God. Resisting  
10 the sinful temptations of the Devil is a basic Christian duty. Christians should  
11 lead lives of faith and morality.

12 If you commit sin but confess, repent and ask for forgiveness, God, in His  
13 divine grace will forgive you. By sacrificing His son, Jesus Christ, He showed  
14 that His love for humans has no bounds. Jesus paid the price for our sins.  
15 (The Christian notions of suffering and redemption resemble the Buddhist  
16 ideas of suffering (*dukkha*) and *Nirvana*.)

17 Christians differ in the interpretation of the Biblical tales. Some consider  
18 them the literal truth, some regard them as a source of inspiration, and some  
19 hold they are symbolic stories. The main Christian holy book, the Bible, has  
20 two parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament. The first part came  
21 from the existing Jewish canon. Originated by various authors in the seven  
22 decades after the death of the apostles of Jesus, the New Testament took  
23 centuries to be compiled. It consists of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke  
24 and John plus a section on apostolic history, the letters of Apostle Paul and  
25 others, and the Book of Revelation. All Christians do not attach the same  
26 importance to the Old Testament and differ in the interpretation of the New  
27 Testament. Several versions of the Bible circulated for centuries. The King  
28 James Bible, an official English language version, was published in 1611.  
29 Different Christian traditions venerate other texts of spiritual import. Three  
30 among them are: *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, *The Rules of Saint*  
31 *Benedict* and John Calvin's *Institute of the Christian Religion*.

32 The Bible, like the holy texts of all the major religions, displays a lack of  
33 consistency in descriptions of important events and elucidation of the tenets  
34 of morality. Details about the life of Christ vary between sections. Selective  
35 citation of verses and parables of the Bibles can justify views and deeds that  
36 contradict each other. If a Christian has been assaulted, how should he or  
37 she react? Consider two passages from the holy book:

38  
39 *...thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand*  
40 *for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound,*  
41 *stripe for stripe.* The Bible, Exodus 21:23-25

42  
43 *...ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on the right*  
44 *cheek, turn to him the other also.* The Bible, Matthew 5:39

45

1 At one point, the Bible was employed to permit slavery, and at another, to  
2 oppose it. As William Shakespeare opined in *The Merchants of Venice*: '*The*  
3 *devil can cite Scripture for his purpose*'.

4 Such ambiguities and contradictions have spawned extensive doctrinal  
5 dissensions from the early days. Theologians have churned out volumes to  
6 interpret and reinterpret the passages of the Bible. A dictionary is needed to  
7 disambiguate a pile of arcane phrases and disentangle coessential from  
8 consubstantial, homousian from homoiousian, for example, to navigate  
9 through this literature. Medieval Christian scholasticism, epitomized in the  
10 works of Thomas Aquinas, marked a high point of that endeavor. Much has  
11 been said about the futility of the issues dissected in minute detail by the  
12 scholastics. But it was not in vain. The arcane disputations influenced the  
13 development of a rigorous, logical mode of reasoning that fertilized the growth  
14 of science and mathematics in the later centuries. At the same time, they  
15 represented an ideological endeavor to rationalize, in Christian terms, the  
16 existent feudal order and the dominance of monarchs and the Pope.

17 A sizeable group of Christian theologians today cling to the outmoded  
18 tradition. But their mental peregrinations and squabbles generate more heat  
19 than light and are inconsequential for the beliefs and lives of the laity. Plainly,  
20 they are a pseudo-scholarly diversion from the real concerns and fissures of  
21 modern Christendom.

### 22 23 **7.3 ETHICS AND MORALITY** 24

25 The principal moral and ethical precepts of Christianity, which are meant to  
26 govern the outlook, lifestyle and conduct of the faithful, derive from a two-fold  
27 primary commandment: (i) A deep, unconditional and unrestricted love for  
28 God, and (ii) To love your neighbor as you love yourself. This forms the  
29 foundation for the specific edicts about good and bad deeds laid down in  
30 various parts of the Bible and their elaborations in other Christian holy texts.

#### 31 **The Ten Commandments**

- 01 Do not have gods other than God.
- 02 Do not make idols.
- 03 Do not take the name of the Lord in vain.
- 04 Keep the Sabbath day holy.
- 05 Honor your father and your mother.
- 06 Do not kill.
- 07 Do not commit adultery.
- 08 Do not steal.
- 09 Do not bear false witness against your neighbor.
- 10 Do not covet.

1 The Ten Commandments, inherited from the Jewish canon, encapsulate the  
2 Christian ethic. The Bible contains two versions of the Commandments,  
3 whose formulation also evolved over time. A common rendition is shown  
4 above.

5 The Seven Heavenly Virtues and Seven Cardinal (Deadly) Sins provide  
6 another formulation of the Christian moral code. The former are (a) justice  
7 and fairness, (b) self-control and moderation, (c) wisdom and discretion in  
8 practical matters, (d) strength, diligence and endurance in life, (e) faith in God,  
9 (f) hope for a divinely decreed future and (g) expression of love and charity.  
10 The Cardinal Sins are vices commonly listed as (a) sloth (apathy and  
11 laziness), (b) wrath (undue anger and hostility), (c) gluttony (over-indulgent  
12 way of life), (d) envy (jealousy) (e) lust (for sex, wealth and power), (f) greed  
13 (unlimited desire for material goods); and (g) pride (feeling of superiority and  
14 self-importance).

15 Christian ethical precepts encompass the full range of human emotions,  
16 drives and behaviors. Jesus taught that abiding by them is the only way to  
17 attain salvation.

18  
19 *I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father*  
20 *except through me. Bible, John 14:6.*

21  
22 Invariably, this proclamation generates two questions: Are the belief systems  
23 and ethical codes of other faiths as exalted as Christian beliefs and codes?  
24 Will God save non-Christians too? Christian sources that explicitly say yes to  
25 both these queries are rare. One stand ambiguously holds that God may save  
26 whomever He wishes yet no salvation outside the Church is possible. The  
27 other stand unequivocally declares that the Christian ethic and belief system  
28 are superior to any other.

29  
30 *Muslims believe that moral norms are arbitrary, a product of*  
31 *God's decree, and therefore can change as God chooses.*  
32 *Marxists and Secular Humanists rely almost exclusively on*  
33 *their economic or naturalistic philosophy to determine ethics.*  
34 *Postmodernists argue for a morality based on shared*  
35 *'community' values and Cosmic Humanists assume that*  
36 *everyone acts morally by following inner truth determined on*  
37 *an individual basis. Christians, on the other hand, believe that*  
38 *moral norms come from God's nature or essence. Rather than*  
39 *believing in some passing fancy bound to society's ever-*  
40 *changing whims, as Christians we are committed to a specific*  
41 *moral order revealed to us through both general and special*  
42 *revelation. ... Christian ethics and the Christian ethical system*  
43 *are both like and unlike any other system ever postulated.*  
44 *Every ethical system contains some grain of the truth found in*  
45 *the Christian code, but no other system can claim to be the*

1 *whole truth, handed down as an absolute from God to*  
2 *humanity.* (AAGM 2020).

3  
4 An objective examination of other major religions—Hinduism, Buddhism and  
5 Islam—and minor religions like Sikhism, Judaism and Shintoism, does not  
6 support such views. Like the Bible, the holy books of virtually all religions  
7 contain contradictions and inconsistencies that make it difficult to precisely  
8 pin down their ethical codes. Having said that, it also is true that a great  
9 overlap between the ethical codes of all religions prevails, and, under an  
10 objective standard, none appears superior to another. Where the religions  
11 differ is in relation to specific cultural issues like consuming meat and pork,  
12 dress code, divorce, adultery, alcohol intake, and homosexuality. But even  
13 Christian denominations differ on such matters.

#### 14 **7.4 WORSHIP, SYMBOLS AND CULTURE**

15  
16  
17 The primary Christian ritual consists of church service and Bible study on  
18 Sundays (observance of the Sabbath). A typical Sunday church session has  
19 recitation of verses from the Bible, a sermon from the priest, solicitation of  
20 donations, communal interactions and perhaps, a shared meal. The service  
21 may be interspersed by singing of hymns and devotional music by a choir or  
22 a band. Consumption of a token amount of bread and wine (communion),  
23 symbolizing Christ’s Last Supper, is integral to Christian worship. Christians  
24 pray at other times and at home as well.

25 The Cross, expressing the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, is the principal  
26 Christian symbol. Different denominations have different versions. The most  
27 basic form is the Latin Cross.



28  
29  
30 Christian Cross

31 Christian denominations operate under structures that span the gamut from  
32 a centralized hierarchical system to grass-roots democracy. The global  
33 Catholic Church has a single leader, the Pope (Bishop of Rome) who is based  
34 in Vatican City. He also heads the city state of Vatican. In a top-down system  
35 of governance, he is the superior bishop among the more than 5,000 bishops  
36 spread out in all the continents. A local bishop oversees the clergy and  
37 churches within his region. The Church of England, a part of the global  
38 Anglican Communion, is formally headed by the British monarch and has two  
39 Archbishops as the senior executives of the church. A consultative structure

1 in which senior lay members participate with the ministers in the decision-  
2 making process exists at the local level. Some branches of Christianity like  
3 the Baptists have no central authority and function under a localized,  
4 democratic system. There is a wide range of modes of organization with a  
5 bewildering set of titles, authority and responsibilities for the church officials  
6 within many denominations and branches.

7 At the parish level, church activities are in the hands of fulltime clergy—  
8 priests, pastors, ministers, deacons. Conducting communal prayers and  
9 education sessions, they also perform key rites like marriage, baptism and  
10 funerals. They maintain church property and administer church affairs. At  
11 times, they follow the directives of their superiors and, at times, decisions are  
12 taken in consultation with the congregation. Many live on church grounds.

13 An extensive variety of Christian clerical costumes exists. In the Catholic,  
14 Orthodox and Anglican traditions, the clergy adorn elegant cassocks or robes  
15 with caps and distinctive neck collars, neck bands and waist bands as set by  
16 denominational rules. Some robes are simple, single layered; some are multi-  
17 colored, multilayered. Senior clergy have embroidered robes made with fine  
18 cloth and intricate designs. In many Protestant traditions, the clergy wear  
19 simple gowns and a neck collar, but otherwise dress like the congregants.  
20 Some priests just wear what people generally wear.

21 The church grounds and buildings are venues for Bible study sessions,  
22 meetings for communal and church affairs, organizing evangelical and social  
23 service types of actions, and play and educational activities for children.

24 Baptism, the formal entry of a young or new person into the Church, is a  
25 basic rite. A priest sprinkles water on the initiate or dips his or her head into  
26 water while reciting a prayer. The essence of a Christian marriage involves  
27 the couple taking the vows of marriage as guided by a priest and recitation of  
28 prayers to bless the newly wed. In the Catholic tradition, a Christian who  
29 thinks that he or she has sinned can approach a priest in confidence, confess  
30 the sinful deed, repent and ask for forgiveness from God.

31 As in Buddhism, some Christian denominations run monasteries and  
32 nunneries in which the devotees live an austere, secluded life. Wearing plain  
33 robes and spending their days in prayer, meditation and study, they may also  
34 provide social and educational services to the needy.

35 In all societies where it has taken root, Christianity has had a major, if not  
36 decisive, impact on culture and customs. Elegant, often expansive churches  
37 and religious buildings spread across the landscape strikingly testify to a  
38 tradition that values beauty on a grandiose scale. Church construction in the  
39 early days improved building tools, techniques and craftsmanship and  
40 induced the use of novel material for walls, roof, doors, and windows. The  
41 major churches, cathedrals and shrines of Christianity stand among the  
42 architectural wonders of the world. Their external and internal layout, grand  
43 wall murals and decorations, glazed windows, majestic doors, ornate  
44 furniture, gorgeous tapestry, symmetric lay out of the pews and altar, and the  
45 spiritually ennobling ambiance are breathtaking.





Notre Dame de Paris



*The Last Judgment* by Michelangelo

1  
2  
3

4  
5  
6

7 Two among the thousands of such products of human ingenuity are the  
8 centuries old Notre-Dame cathedral of Paris and the grand, intriguing wall  
9 mural, *The Last Judgment*, painted by Michelangelo in the Vatican City's  
10 Sistine Chapel.

11 Christianity played a lead role in the refinement of the visual arts including  
12 painting, sculpture and embroidery in Western nations. Famed painters—  
13 Leonardo da Vinci, *Michelangelo Buonarroti*, *Raphael*, *Rembrandt van Rijn*,  
14 *El Greco*, Jean-François Millet, Bartolome Esteban Murillo and *Salvador*  
15 *Dali*—whose exquisite works now fetch millions of dollars, benefitted from  
16 church sponsorship. Many of their heralded paintings derive from religious  
17 imagery or inspiration.

18 The grand repertoire of Western classical music owes an incalculable  
19 debt to Christianity. Hymns, sacred songs, psalms, carols sung by the choir

1 or congregation, at times accompanied by tunes from a piano, pipe organ or  
2 other instruments are integral to Christian worship and festivities. Works of  
3 the master composers—Johann Sebastian Bach, Johannes Brahms, Ludwig  
4 van Beethoven, George Handel, Amadeus Mozart, Antonio Vivaldi—derived  
5 from ecclesiastical inspiration and support. Christmas carols and music are  
6 now a world-wide tradition adopted by non-Christians as well.

7 Spirituals that merged African folk music with religious hymns rose in the  
8 time of slavery. Soulfully expressing the anguish and expectations of African  
9 Americans, they have bloomed into a distinct, vibrant repertoire of hymns and  
10 gospel music that reverberates in their present day church services.

11 Christianity was a key factor in the maturation of language and flowering  
12 of literature, poetry and technical writing in Europe. Galvanizing novel writing  
13 styles, it improved writing material quality and book production techniques like  
14 the printing press. Picture books with elegant designs first appeared under a  
15 Christian purview. The King James version of the Bible is regarded as one of  
16 the greatest works of English literature. Towering works of fiction, philosophy,  
17 theology, history, and general subjects emerged from Christian influence and  
18 patronage. Education institutions in Europe were an extension of monastery-  
19 based learning. Universities, many of which exist to this day, were founded  
20 with support from the Church and Christian rulers.

21 Many nations, Christian majority or not, now observe holidays of Christian  
22 origin. The Easter Holidays (March or April) and Christmas (December) are  
23 the main ones. The former celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the  
24 latter celebrates his birth. The Easter egg hunt is a cross-cultural affair. In the  
25 modern era, hyper-commercialization has undercut the spiritual import of  
26 these holidays.

27 Televangelism, the promotion and practice of religion for an audience of  
28 millions via radio and television, is a distinct Christian innovation. The US  
29 leads the nations where televangelism prevails.

## 30 **7.5 CHRISTIANITY UNDER FEUDALISM**

31  
32 We jump a millennium ahead from the collapse of the Roman Empire to  
33 Europe in the 13th century. By the turn of the millennium, the slave mode of  
34 production had been replaced by feudalism in most of Europe. The feudal  
35 system had a strict hierarchy with the monarch at the top followed by the  
36 nobility, clergy, traders, independent craftsmen and serfs in that order. The  
37 serfs, comprising over three quarters of the population, tilled the land owned  
38 by the landlord. Bonded to the land, the serf could not exit the place without  
39 the master's consent and payment of fees. He had a few acres of land on the  
40 master's manor for growing food for his family. But a half or more of his work  
41 time was spent on the master's farm, for which he did not get payment. A part  
42 of the produce from his own land was for the landlord and another part for the  
43 local church. He paid levies and fines for special occasions and acts. His wife  
44 and children were obliged to cook, bake, brew wine, weave cloth, clean, care  
45 for the livestock and do other work for the master.  
46

1 The manors were owned by the aristocrats, the monarch or the church. A  
2 wealthy aristocrat possessed many manors. The Church owned about a third  
3 of the land in almost every country in Europe. And the enormously wealthy  
4 Papacy in Rome wielded considerable political influence in all the nations. By  
5 this time, Christianity had largely lost its vestiges of being a movement of the  
6 underprivileged. Notwithstanding the existence of monastic orders where  
7 priests lived simple lives of service and prayer, Christianity was, doctrinally  
8 and practically, embroiled in a profoundly unjust social system.

9 Christianity gave the laws and rules of the system a holy imprimatur. As  
10 almost the only learned group in society, the Christian clergy had a decisive  
11 say in matters of custom, law, philosophy and even science. All writing and  
12 pronouncements had to conform to its doctrine. A minor deviation risked  
13 major punishment. Questioning the idea that the earth was flat, for example,  
14 was heresy. Heretics faced the wrath of the Inquisitors. And by teaching the  
15 poor to view poverty as a blessing, it consecrated the feudal order.

16 The Church provided administrative and general support to the aristocrats  
17 and kings. Mired in decadent lifestyles, the priests competed with the nobles  
18 for a bigger share of taxes and levies and sought additional payments for  
19 basic religious services.

20 Yet, trends that would eventually undermine the feudal system were in  
21 motion within its interstices. Production of agricultural and other goods was  
22 increasing. Innovations like mechanical clocks, gears, efficient methods of  
23 forging iron tools and cut stone, carts of improved mobility and larger ships  
24 fed into the expansion of the economy. Trade, local and interregional, grew.  
25 Urban areas whose governance deviated from the manorial system grew in  
26 size and population. As their wealth grew, traders, bankers and crafts guilds  
27 desired abolition of the restrictions on credit, production, and exchange set  
28 by the feudal order. A new ethic of accumulation was emerging.

29 Laborers and serfs ran away in greater numbers from rural areas to towns  
30 in the hope of a better life. Wars and outbreaks of epidemics reduced the  
31 labor supply. Many manors could not function well and were abandoned.  
32 Imposition of the poll tax raised the public anger. The serfs responded by  
33 forming collective organizations to confront the landlords. Armed uprisings  
34 occurred. The bonded labor system withered away gradually, paving the way  
35 to a system based on free wage labor.

36 And opposition to orthodox doctrines grew within the Catholic Church.  
37 John Wycliffe, an English clergyman, was a key dissident. Disillusioned by  
38 Rome's dogmatic stand on benefits and tax allocation, he and his followers  
39 petitioned the parliament and wrote documents that castigated the clergy for  
40 betraying the true teachings of Christ and neglecting charity. They decried  
41 rites that reeked of idolatry, scandalous behavior, and payment for religious  
42 ceremonies. By translating the Bible from Latin to English, Wycliffe diluted  
43 the monopoly of access enjoyed by the priests. Yet, he made his case not as  
44 an outsider but as a devout Christian advocating a return to authentic  
45 Christianity.

1 The Pope and the English bishops did not see it that way and soon, he  
2 faced their wrath. Excommunicated by the Pope, he was charged with  
3 seditious teaching by an archbishop and was summoned before the King's  
4 council. But more than twenty lower clergymen allied with him, including John  
5 Ball, an influential clergyman who wrote verses backing the peasants' cause.  
6 Wycliffe and Ball inspired a peasant uprising that initially had much success  
7 but was eventually put down with extreme brutality by the King's army. Ball  
8 was hanged and Wycliffe was forced into retirement. Ball's body was later  
9 exhumed and burned. But their influence grew. Oppositional voices of this  
10 sort proliferated in other European nations too. Aghast at the wealth  
11 accumulated by the Church, charismatic radical reformers underscored the  
12 poverty of Jesus of Nazareth and promoted an egalitarian mode of life. Their  
13 anti-clerical fervor spawned mass uprisings. Palaces of the nobles were set  
14 afire. Believing that God was on their side, the peasants faced superior  
15 armies with assured fervor. As the movement for reform expanded, the days  
16 of the supreme status and power of the Catholic Church and the Pope were  
17 numbered. A nascent secular outlook that came with the growth of scientific  
18 knowledge contributed to this trend as well.

19 Martin Luther, a German theologian and scholar, struck the decisive blow  
20 to Papal authority when he published his *Ninety-five Theses* in 1517. The  
21 widely circulated document lambasted the sale of religious services by the  
22 clergy and practices that enhanced the revenue for Rome. It questioned the  
23 Biblical basis for the secular and religious authority of the Pope and declared  
24 faith in Jesus as the only way to achieve salvation. The invention of the  
25 printing press by Gutenberg promoted social literacy and Luther's translation  
26 and printing of the Bible into German facilitated the spread of his ideas.  
27 Independent reformers like John Calvin in Geneva generated diverse anti-  
28 papal doctrines. Despite expulsions and excommunications of the leaders,  
29 the movement was unstoppable, flowering in country after next.

30 Breakaway factions of Christianity emerged. Though now grouped under  
31 the banner of Protestantism, and known as the Reformation, the challenge to  
32 Papacy was not a unitary process. From inception and over time, it had  
33 theologically and organizationally distinct branches. What united them was  
34 rejection of Papal authority over religious and secular affairs, emphasis on  
35 faith, and acceptance of the Bible as the supreme authority.

36 Constituting nearly 40% of the Christians, Protestants are now found in  
37 all areas of the world. Their main denominations are Adventists, Anabaptists,  
38 Anglicans, Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, Pentecostals and Reformed  
39 Church. Numerous minor branches also exist. Many of them lack a central  
40 authority.

## 41 **7.6 CHRISTIANITY AND CAPITALISM**

44 The rise of Protestantism was contemporaneous with the beginning of a new  
45 social formation, capitalism, and the imperial incursion of European powers  
46 into Africa, Asia and the Americas. It was an era of discoveries in all domains

1 of science and technology. A phenomenal stream of innovations boosted  
2 efficiency in industry, agriculture, sea and land transport, construction of  
3 buildings, roads and canals, and warfare. Overseas ventures brought tea,  
4 sugar, tobacco, cocoa, cotton apparel and other items into wider circulation.  
5 With manufacturing plants run on steam power and complex machinery like  
6 the cotton loom, commodity production attained hitherto unthinkable heights.

7 These developments in the forces of production did not occur in a socially  
8 benign, autonomous process. They occurred at a humongous cost in human  
9 suffering and proceeded in tandem with major changes in the relations of  
10 production and the dominant world outlook. Brute physical force as well as  
11 massive economic force employed by the state and the capitalists hastened  
12 the transformation of feudalism into capitalism. The Enclosure Movements  
13 across Europe that rendered asunder communal property, enshrined private  
14 property, and detached massive acreages of land from the small holder to  
15 large commercial farmers formed the backbone of what Karl Marx called the  
16 primitive accumulation of capital. Landless families by their hundreds of  
17 thousands were driven to industrial centers to work for bare subsistence  
18 under dangerous conditions and to live utterly miserable lives.

19 Wage slavery of children and adults in Europe went together with the  
20 capture, transport and enslavement in Africa at the cost of millions of lives.  
21 Colonization in the Americas initiated the genocide of indigenous peoples,  
22 and conquests in Asia and Africa exacted a massive toll on local industry and  
23 peoples. As Marx succinctly put it:

24  
25 *If money ... 'comes into the world with a congenital bloodstain*  
26 *on one cheek,' capital comes dripping from head to foot, from*  
27 *every pore, with blood and dirt. (Marx 1867).*  
28

29 Capitalism could not function on the basis of the institutions and outlook of  
30 the feudal era. Laws and political and state institutions to guard its short- and  
31 long-term future were needed. It had to have its own ethic, a vision of nature  
32 and society, and validations of its norms and practices. It needed an ideology  
33 to psychologically lubricate and maintain the system.

34 Capitalism is inconceivable without science and technology. It entails a  
35 diffusion of the scientific outlook in society. The need for skilled workers and  
36 tasks that require expenditure of mental effort fostered the education system,  
37 high levels of literacy and numeracy, and wider distribution of written material  
38 like newspapers and books. The relentless drive for profits, and competition  
39 among capitalists and between capitalist nations need continual innovation.

40 Yet, the growth of capitalism and science did not lead to the abatement of  
41 Christian belief. On the contrary, by sanctifying an ethic and conduct  
42 consonant with the capitalist vision, Protestant churches grew in numbers and  
43 influence. In the early days, prominent scientists were deeply devout, or  
44 viewed science and spirituality as separate domains. Isaac Newton, the co-  
45 discoverer of calculus and a towering physicist, whose laws of mechanics  
46 revolutionized science, was a distinguished theologian. Apart from his

1 mammoth scientific output, he wrote books on interpretations of the Bible and  
2 spirituality. In his vision, the laws of nature revealed the magnificence of the  
3 mind of God.

4 The capitalist outlook which posits the pursuit of profit via the market as  
5 the prime goal spread. It held that as entrepreneurs compete for market share  
6 and profit, goods are produced efficiently and the society benefits. The path  
7 to progress is through individualized pursuits, not state intervention. It is  
8 imperative, especially in the nascent stages, for the entrepreneurs to save  
9 and reinvest profits to the maximum possible degree. Hard work, individual  
10 initiative and thrift form the gateway to success.

11 Protestant churches generally stressed aspects of the Christian ethic that  
12 buttressed the emergent capitalist ethic. They reinforced individualism by  
13 holding that the path to spiritual salvation was through personal faith in God,  
14 not communal rituals. Advocating a virtuous life, they praised diligence, self-  
15 control, moderation, wisdom and discretion in practical matters and decried  
16 laziness, and over-indulgence. Hard work in secular endeavors and thrift were  
17 elevated as acts of spiritual worship. When approached with a positive fervor,  
18 they not only made life fulfilling but also heralded the dawn of peace and  
19 prosperity referred to in the Bible. And by emphasizing and conducting  
20 training for practical skills, the Protestant churches added to the manpower  
21 needed for industrial development.

22 The capitalist ideology projected the view that if one is not doing well in  
23 life, it is a personal failing due to laziness, overspending or poor attitude. If  
24 one is well-off, it is due to hard work, frugality and prudent living. By stressing  
25 precepts that reflected the capitalist ethic, religion became psychologically  
26 fused to capitalism for both the poor and the wealthy.

27 But it was under the incursions by the developing capitalist nations into  
28 distant lands that the integration of Christianity, of both the Protestant and  
29 Catholic variety, into the affairs of a market based social order became most  
30 pronounced. From the end of the fifteenth century, the rulers of Portugal and  
31 Spain dispatched legions of soldiers, officials and missionaries to the West  
32 Indies and the Americas seeking gold, territory and loyal converts. With large  
33 ships, canons, guns and horses at hand, they expeditiously laid to rubble the  
34 civilizations they encountered. Violence and deceptive diplomacy preceded  
35 the establishment of governance structures and missions. The clergy in their  
36 cortege recruited indigenous souls for the church and cemented their roots in  
37 the area. Protestant laity and missionaries, who at first landed in North  
38 America, soon followed in their wake.

39 The colonies in the Americas and the Caribbean required cheap, docile  
40 labor for sugar, cotton, tobacco, rice and coffee plantations, silver and gold  
41 mines, construction, forestry and domestic servitude. Fierce resistance from  
42 the indigenous people and high mortality rates due to imported diseases ruled  
43 out the use of local labor. Poor immigrants from Europe did not meet the  
44 demand. From the early 1500s and for nearly four hundred years, millions of  
45 people were thereby captured in Africa, put in chains and transported across  
46 the Atlantic to serve the needs of capitalism.

1 Short of brutal torture, disfigurement and outright killing, nothing is more  
2 morally repugnant than converting humans into commodities who can be  
3 used as the purchaser desires. Slavery represents the denial of the humanity  
4 of the enslaved person. At every stage, it is a barbaric process. It is estimated  
5 that some 13 million Africans were put on slave ships. About a tenth perished  
6 during the arduous voyage. Those who died during capture and those who  
7 fled to avoid capture probably ran into the millions. And since the healthy and  
8 young were preferred, the long-term effect of removing the most productive  
9 individuals in villages ravaged by the slave traders was horrendous. African  
10 civilizations were set backwards by centuries.

11 The Roman Empire was founded on the slave mode of production. In  
12 Rome and the provinces, slaves performed the essential tasks in the  
13 economy and society. Slavery underwrote the prosperity and stability of the  
14 empire. Without any legal rights, the life and death of a slave were dependent  
15 on the whims of the master.

16 The Old Testament and the New Testament have multiple references to  
17 slavery. Their passages and stories delineate different types of slaves, their  
18 social and spiritual status, the relationship between slaves and slave owners,  
19 acceptable and proscribed ways of treating slaves. Scholars have for long  
20 pondered over these passages to ascertain if the Bible justifies or prohibits  
21 slavery. The holy book has contradictory passages that can be deployed to  
22 argue either case. Early Christian communities included slaves and  
23 slaveholders. It is fair to say that overall, the Bible views slavery as a fact of  
24 life. The relationship of the slave to the master is akin to that between man  
25 and God. The former must be faithful to and obey the latter, and the latter  
26 should not treat slaves harshly. The standard for what is deemed harsh  
27 treatment is low. It is an offence if a slave dies immediately after being beaten  
28 by the master. But if he recovers in two days, then by law, no wrong has been  
29 done.

30  
31 *In general, Christian texts do not only accept slavery as a*  
32 *reality and avoid protesting for a change of this inhuman*  
33 *practice, but also remind all members of the household –*  
34 *including slaves – of their duties for the harmonious existence*  
35 *of the Familia. (Kirchschlaeger 2016).*  
36

37 The question of whether slavery was compatible with the Christian ethic  
38 resurfaced centuries later as slaves in their millions were shipped from Africa  
39 to the Caribbean and the Americas. Citing verses that enjoined the slave to  
40 be submissive and obedient, the slave traders and slaveholders held that the  
41 Bible was on their side. Christian priests depicted Africans as descendants of  
42 the accursed sinner Ham (Bible, Genesis:9) who deserved to be enslaved.  
43 Others opined that Africans should be thankful for being enslaved as it  
44 brought them closer to Christianity, affording them the chance of saving their  
45 souls. Slaves should worship, but in segregated churches. It would make  
46 them submissive and diligent and accept life as divine destiny. A few clerics

1 disfavored slavery but their voices carried little weight. Bishop Stephen Elliott  
2 of Georgia took the opponents of slavery to task by asserting that slavery  
3 made 'a semi-barbarous people' learn the norms of civilized behavior. He  
4 estimated that there have been:

5  
6 [millions] *who have learned the way to Heaven and who have*  
7 *been made to know their Savior through the means of African*  
8 *slavery!* (Roe 2018).  
9

10 In the heyday of American slavery, Protestant and Catholic priests, in the US,  
11 Europe and England and their colonies either remained silent on or actively  
12 defended slavery. Public opinion also favored enslaving people with dark  
13 skins.

14 The abducted Africans and their progenies did not discard their ancestral  
15 religious beliefs. Many resisted conversion. Those who did convert adhered  
16 to both forms of beliefs. But slowly and particularly during the 18th century,  
17 slaves in the US and elsewhere adopted Christianity. At the same time, they  
18 distanced themselves from the churches of the slavers and racists to form  
19 independent churches with distinct modes of worship. As slaves escaped,  
20 formed solidarity networks and engaged in open revolt, these new churches  
21 became a prime vehicle in the struggle for the abolition of slavery.

22 The rank brutality on slave plantations induced Nat Turner, a former slave  
23 turned priest, to organize an emancipatory rebellion in Virginia in 1831. The  
24 uprising caused the deaths of over 50 white men, women and children. In  
25 retaliation, about 120 black men, women and children were killed by white  
26 mobs. The uprising was put down by state militias and federal forces; some  
27 50 rebels, including Turner, were executed after perfunctory trials. In the  
28 aftermath, laws were passed making life more restrictive for free and enslaved  
29 blacks in the state. Getting an education was made more difficult and  
30 preaching on the plantations was banned for a while.

31 Denmark Vesey was the key organizer of another church-based slave  
32 uprising. Disgusted by the insulting, discriminatory conditions imposed on  
33 black congregants in existent white dominated churches of South Carolina,  
34 he and Reverend Morris Brown established an independent church in the  
35 area sometime around 1817. About 4,000 ex-slaves joined in. The attendees  
36 were attacked by whites; the church premises were subjected to intrusive  
37 inspections. It could barely function. Drawing inspiration from the anti-slavery  
38 Haitian Revolution that had occurred two decades earlier, Vesey made plans  
39 for a major slave uprising. But it did not materialize; a leak had alerted the  
40 authorities. Vesey and his sixty-six compatriots were arrested. He was  
41 hanged together with thirty-four others and the rest were exiled. Though never  
42 convicted, Reverend Brown was imprisoned for a year. Later, the church  
43 building was burned down by a white mob. Yet, the church continued to  
44 operate underground. It came into the open after the US Civil War as the  
45 Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. With numerous branches  
46 across the nation, it now is an important African American institution.



1 State and church authorities in Europe occasionally passed decrees to  
2 free the slaves in the colonies. But little was done to enforce them. After the  
3 1750s, three factors enhanced the momentum to abolish slavery. One,  
4 persistent resistance leading to major revolts as in Haiti reduced profits and  
5 required funds for military expeditions. Two, in the southern parts of the US,  
6 slaves absconded, set up solidarity and support channels, and catalyzed a  
7 national drive to abolish slavery. Most white Christians and their conservative  
8 churches supported slavery, but the African American and progressive white  
9 Christian churches assisted anti-slavery struggles. And three, the dominant  
10 political circles and business groups came to see that slavery had become an  
11 impediment to profit. From being a source of start-up capital, it now generated  
12 barriers to the maturation of industrial capitalism. It was in that environment  
13 that the abolitionist movement in England and America came to the front. In  
14 addition to the multitude of African American churches, the Quaker groups  
15 and the Methodist churches in the UK and US took the lead role. Through a  
16 convoluted process, including a civil war in the US, slavery became illegal  
17 almost everywhere in the world by the end of the 19th century. But in some  
18 areas, it has continued in hidden forms.

19 By this time, Africa was viewed by the great powers as a vast source for  
20 cotton, rubber, oil, tea and other raw materials and goods for their factories  
21 and consumers; a market for the output of manufactured goods and a place  
22 where they could establish a strategic presence to counter rival imperial  
23 powers. The ensuing scramble for Africa led to the partition of the continent,  
24 with Britain and France securing the largest shares.

25 Colonial military and commercial intrusions in Africa were preceded by or  
26 worked in tandem with missionary drives to institute a Christian presence in  
27 Africa. The colonial state first aimed to firmly secure the colony. Any resisting  
28 community had to be defeated, with massive brutality if needed. A pacified  
29 populace laid the basis for a colonial administrative system that oversaw the  
30 production of agricultural raw materials and minerals for home industries, a  
31 tax system, an adequate supply of labor, an internal commercial network to  
32 export local produce and market goods imported from Europe, and a transport  
33 infrastructure.

34 The low plantation wages and crop prices did not meet basic subsistence  
35 needs of the workers. People resisted colonial directives. But use of force to  
36 quell dissent was not a viable long-term proposition. A missionary conversion  
37 effort was more effective in subduing the local populations and making them  
38 pliable to the colonial reality. The missionaries said that their aim was to  
39 'civilize' the African. But there was more to the story.

40  
41 *David Livingstone, the inspirational architect of missionary*  
42 *endeavor, portrayed Africa as a place of suffering souls to be*  
43 *saved from sin and damnation. His conception of redemption*  
44 *was, however, material and spiritual. Africa was in need of*  
45 *commerce as well as Christianity. (Hirji 2019).*  
46

1 Beginning in the coastal areas, Christian denominations from European  
2 nations established mission outposts on lands granted by the colonial state.  
3 Some were funded by business groups. These stations held Bible education  
4 and conversion sessions, and trained catechists to spread the word of God to  
5 distant areas. They also ran large farms, kept poultry and animal herds, and  
6 engaged in construction work. The work was done by low paid converts.  
7 Besides literacy and religious training, the missions provided training in  
8 carpentry, masonry, and other crafts to the locals.

9 The graduates of the mission schools manned the junior rungs of the  
10 colonial administration and provided the skilled labor for the settler farms and  
11 other sectors of the economy. But their major contribution was in the creation  
12 of a mindset that induced the locals accept the mandates of the colonial state  
13 and participate more fully in the economy. The state and the missions did not  
14 always see eye to eye and at times came into conflict. But their overall roles  
15 were complimentary. And for major banks, commercial houses, shipping  
16 companies and industries of Europe, the colonial ventures provided huge  
17 benefits at a low cost.

18  
19 *The Christian missionaries were as much a part of the*  
20 *colonizing forces as were the explorers, traders and soldiers.*  
21 *There may be room for arguing whether in a given colony the*  
22 *missionaries brought other colonialist forces or vice versa, but*  
23 *there is no doubting the fact that missionaries were agents of*  
24 *colonialism in the practical sense whether or not they saw*  
25 *themselves in that light. (Rodney 1972).*  
26

27 Nothing could extinguish people's desire for freedom and self-determination.  
28 They struggled in varied ways. And they turned tools that had been employed  
29 to pacify them, Christianity and education, into weapons against foreign rule.  
30 Many leaders of the African independence struggles emerged from Christian  
31 (and Muslim) ranks and many churches became focal points for organizing  
32 against Apartheid in South Africa and anti-colonial struggles in the continent.

## 33 **7.7 CHRISTIANITY SPREADS**

34  
35  
36 From the start of the 20th century, Christianity spread to all the corners of the  
37 world and became the dominant global religion. This section compares the  
38 impact of Christianity in the USA, South America and the Philippines.

### 39 **+ United States of America +**

40  
41  
42 With about 240 million followers, the US has more Christians than any other  
43 nation. About two-thirds of adults in the nation identify as Christians. About  
44 25% belong to evangelical Protestant denominations. The other main  
45 Protestants groups and the Catholics each account for about 20%. The rest  
46 are dispersed among varied smaller denominations and non-believers.

1 The long history of slavery, genocide, ethnic and racial discrimination is  
2 reflected in all walks of American life. Housing, area of residence, education,  
3 health care, income, employment and religion are affected by a deep, *de facto*  
4 racial and ethnic divide. About a half of white America is Protestant and a  
5 quarter is Catholic but nearly three quarters of the Latino Americans are  
6 Catholic and only a fifth is Protestant. While 80% of the African Americans  
7 are Protestants, they are mostly congregated in historically black churches  
8 that operate only in their areas.

9 Christianity has played an influential role in the political and economic  
10 affairs of the nation. The current version of the Pledge of Allegiance of the  
11 United States, recited in congressional sessions, schools and many venues,  
12 reads:

13  
14 *I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America,*  
15 *and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God,*  
16 *indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.*  
17

18 Despite the clauses mandating the separation of state and religion in the  
19 constitution, the US views itself as a Christian nation. The phrase 'In God We  
20 Trust,' engraved on US coins and printed dollar bills, is the official motto of  
21 the nation. In a nationwide poll conducted jointly by main media and polling  
22 groups, more than 90% of the Americans favored the placement of this  
23 inscription on US currency.  
24



25  
26 US Quarter Dollar  
27

28 Historically, the leadership of the major political parties, business entities, elite  
29 universities and foundations has disproportionately been wealthy and white,  
30 from Episcopalian or Presbyterian Protestant denominations, and often of  
31 British decent. John F Kennedy and Joe Biden are the only two Catholic  
32 presidents. Yet, the picture of different religious groups in the corridors of US  
33 power is more complex. We first consider this issue in relation to the  
34 operations of the security agencies of the US after World War II.

35 In the immediate aftermath of the war, all the major imperial powers and  
36 the USSR either lay in ruins or were deeply wounded. The US, on the other  
37 hand, was virtually unscathed, economically or otherwise. In the post-war era,  
38 its foreign policy envisioned a global order under which US military, economic  
39 and political hegemony extended to all the corners of the globe. All rivals,

1 existing or emerging, had to be subdued. As the horrendous atomic carnage  
2 unleashed on two Japanese cities demonstrated, any means could be  
3 deployed. Obstacles hindering the free operation of US corporations and  
4 institutions were to be dismantled. And to protect the global capitalist system  
5 against the looming socialist threat, the economies of the major allies—the  
6 UK, Germany and Japan—were revived but as surrogates of the US. A large-  
7 scale effort to dismantle the Soviet empire was initiated. The nationalist  
8 movements that were sweeping the dominated nations had to be steered so  
9 that they remained within the ambit of the global capitalist order. Nations and  
10 movements that showed signs of moving in the direction independence were  
11 to be brought to their knees through massive firepower.

12 Thus began an era of massive mayhem in North Korea, Vietnam, Laos,  
13 Cambodia, Indonesia, Latin America, and Africa during which dictators and  
14 brutal regimes received full American political, economic and military support.  
15 The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was a crucial element of that exercise  
16 and religion was a critical aspect of CIA operations.

17 Near the end of World War II, US General William Donovan, the head of  
18 the agency that was the forerunner of the CIA, received a prestigious and  
19 rarely bestowed papal knighthood from Pope Pius XII. A devout Catholic, he  
20 had provided funds and other support to Pro Deo, a Catholic intelligence  
21 group based in Europe. Its regular reports to the Vatican from bishops across  
22 the world were an invaluable source of information. Donovan used his links  
23 with Pro Deo to infiltrate the Vatican. Among other things, he obtained  
24 information that assisted the US military in selecting the bombing targets in  
25 Japan.

26 The award ceremony cemented the ties between the Vatican and US  
27 intelligence agencies that subsequently bloomed in the years of the Cold War.  
28 Unlike the presidency, four of the most influential directors and three out of  
29 five directors of the CIA prior to 2016 were fervent church going Catholics and  
30 often, members of secretive and elitist Catholic organizations.

31 It was not a case of the Vatican directing US foreign policy. Conversely,  
32 the anti-communist fervor of the higher Catholic clergy provided links to the  
33 CIA to recruit sympathizers and agents worldwide. The diverse and recent  
34 immigrant background of US Catholics was another plus.

35  
36 *Many of America's first spies were missionaries or came from*  
37 *missionary backgrounds. Often enough, they were the only*  
38 *Americans who had lived abroad—not just among locals but*  
39 *as locals. While other American spies learned about the world*  
40 *through books and couldn't really grasp its full range of quirks*  
41 *and complexities—'like tourists who put ketchup on their*  
42 *tacos,' as Sutton [2019] puts it—missionaries spoke several*  
43 *languages and knew the subtle differences between local*  
44 *dialects. They understood local cultures and faiths from the*  
45 *ground up and knew intuitively how to navigate between them.*  
46 *They knew, in short, 'how to totally immerse themselves in*

1           *alien societies'. But they always identified first and foremost*  
2           *as Christians and as Americans, and when they were called*  
3           *to serve the nation, they did not hesitate to do so. (Preston*  
4           2019).

5  
6 After the war, the US closely collaborated, overtly and covertly, with the  
7 Vatican to prevent the popular Italian communist party from winning the first  
8 major election. To foment a favorable atmosphere, right wing Italian groups  
9 received \$350 million for military and general programs. Secret funding was  
10 deployed to spread falsehoods, intimidate leftist politicians and destabilize  
11 their parties. Catholic missionaries from the US and within Italy joined in. And  
12 it worked. A pro-Western, Vatican-friendly coalition assumed power.

13 Ties with other religions and Christian denominations were also cultivated  
14 to the extent they conformed to the US goals. A one-of-a-kind congressional  
15 investigation in 1976 revealed that the CIA had recruited US media personnel  
16 and Christian missionaries for intelligence gathering tasks. The agency  
17 agreed to discontinue the practice, but loopholes like permitting use of part-  
18 time and voluntary services from reporters and clergy remained in place. And  
19 foreign media, religious institutions and other groups remained fair game.

#### 20 21   + The Mormon Church +

22  
23 The Mormon Church was founded in 1830 in the US by Joseph Smith after  
24 receiving visions from God, Jesus and John the Baptist. He originated *The*  
25 *Book of Mormon* which with the Bible and two other texts constitute the sacred  
26 canon of the Church. Mormons regard Smith as the founding prophet. While  
27 they claim they are Christians, many Christian churches point to their distinct  
28 values, ideas and practices, and declare that Mormonism is not a Christian  
29 denomination.

30 Mormons stand out by their adherence to a strict, disciplined lifestyle that  
31 prohibits use of intoxicating drugs, alcohol, tobacco, tea or coffee, and a code  
32 of conduct that values the family and service to the needy. Missionary work  
33 and respect for authority form an integral part of the Mormon ethic.

34 The Church is run by a hierarchy under the current prophet, who is also  
35 the president for life. Though mostly based in the US, it spans the globe with  
36 a total of about 15 million followers. In the US, they form less than 2% of the  
37 population. With a strong missionary and service tradition, it is a rapidly  
38 expanding faith. More than 150 million copies of *The Book for Mormon* are in  
39 circulation today.

40 The Church runs a vast business empire that spans the gamut from  
41 agriculture, ranching, real estate, shopping malls, newspaper, radio, TV,  
42 Internet and publishing companies, insurance corporations, consultancy and  
43 investment agencies that operate in North and South America and as far as  
44 Australia. Their total worth is in the tens of billions of dollars.

45 What is particularly apropos is the relatively large presence, in the past  
46 and at present, of Mormon officers in US security agencies—FBI, CIA and

1 Department of Homeland Security. Disciplined work habits, knowledge of  
2 other languages, practical experience in other nations and a willingness to  
3 serve make them ideal recruits for these agencies. Mormon candidates  
4 generally do not face difficulties in getting a security clearance. The main  
5 Mormon university, Brigham Young University, has been a traditional  
6 recruiting ground for the CIA and other agencies.

7 A similar picture can be painted for Lutherans and Presbyterians. But the  
8 presence of missionaries and religiously based personnel in the US agencies  
9 is just half of the story and not the most important one. The key factor is that  
10 since the advent of the Cold War, religion has been regarded by US policy  
11 makers as a potent weapon in the battle against nationalist and socialist  
12 movements and states. The use of Buddhism in this context was detailed in  
13 Chapter 6, and the case for Islam appears in Chapter 8. Here, the focus is on  
14 various denominations of Christianity. We deal with two areas: Eastern  
15 Europe and Latin America.

16 A major strand of the popular literature on the linkage between the Vatican  
17 and the US government and its agencies falls in the realm of 'conspiracy  
18 theories'. It holds that the Vatican is a powerful entity with secretive elite  
19 groups aiming to dominate the world. Selective evidence and omission of key  
20 socio-economic factors are used to make a case which does not hold up to  
21 critical scrutiny. By branding it a 'conspiracy theory,' mainstream outlets  
22 dismiss any evidence, however plausible, of a link and sideline the relevant  
23 socio-economic issues.

24 This book rejects both approaches. There is a strong relationship between  
25 religion and US foreign policy. And it arises from the long-term interests of US  
26 capitalism and projection of US imperial power. The US is the driving force.  
27 Indeed, conspiracies and competing rivalries are at play and much is clouded  
28 in secrecy and deception. But that bipartisan policy arises from the operation  
29 of the systemic factors.

30 The US government does not have a permanent preference for or hostility  
31 towards any religion or creed. Depending on the conditions at the time and  
32 place, if some religion can promote the strategic US policy goals, it will be  
33 used. And when that stand becomes counterproductive, it will be discarded.  
34 Besides religion, the media, publishing firms, student groups, trade unions,  
35 entertainment and cultural entities are also covertly employed as needed. It  
36 is not a conspiracy; it is a part of the standard operational policy.

### 37 38 **+ Eastern Europe +** 39

40 The 1980s were years of turbulence in the USSR and the allied Warsaw Pact  
41 nations. Having failed to live up to popular expectations, their authoritarian  
42 systems were under severe strain. Under the presidency of Ronald Reagan,  
43 the US worked to hasten that process, aiming to bring these nations into the  
44 world capitalist system, but under the American fold.

45 Internal US government assessments indicated that the days of the Soviet  
46 bloc were numbered, and the USSR did not pose an existential threat to the

1 US. The Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, made unprecedented overtures  
2 for a peaceful resolution of differences and genuine nuclear disarmament.  
3 Yet, instead of sitting at the negotiating table, and in a major boon to the US  
4 weapons manufacturers, Reagan ratcheted up the rhetoric of 'evil empire,'  
5 raised the military budget, shredded existing disarmament agreements and  
6 funded new weapons systems while reducing the budget for basic services  
7 like health care, education, and support for the needy.

8 In 1982, Pope John Paul II, a native of Poland and fervent anti-communist,  
9 entered into a secret agreement with Reagan which aimed to destabilize  
10 Eastern Europe, particularly Poland. The US embarked on a multipronged  
11 strategy that combined covert operations with providing economic aid for pro-  
12 capitalist 'reforms,' isolating the USSR, funding radio stations beaming  
13 propaganda at these nations, and using US labor unions and the Catholic  
14 Church in support of its aims. In this venture,

15  
16 *[the] key [Reagan] Administration players were all devout*  
17 *Roman Catholics -- CIA chief William Casey, Allen, Clark,*  
18 *Haig, Walters and William Wilson, Reagan's first ambassador*  
19 *to the Vatican. They regarded the US-Vatican relationship as*  
20 *a holy alliance: the moral force of the Pope and the teachings*  
21 *of their church combined with their fierce anticommunism and*  
22 *their notion of American democracy. (Bernstein 2001).*

23  
24 Some 95% of the Poles were Catholic. The Polish Catholic Church was an  
25 autonomous cultural and social counterforce to the state. Yet, there was fairly  
26 tolerant atmosphere towards the church and religious practice in Poland  
27 under socialist rule.

28 The emergence of an independent labor movement, Solidarity, led by  
29 Lech Walesa, altered the political equilibrium. Going beyond traditional union  
30 issues, it campaigned for the removal of civil restrictions and institution of an  
31 electoral process. The state reacted with a vigorous crackdown in which ten  
32 activists were killed, and senior leaders were placed in custody. Later, three  
33 security police killed a popular priest. They were prosecuted and jailed. But  
34 no mistreatment of jailed dissidents occurred. Yet, declaring that it was a sign  
35 of a hitherto unseen evil, the US mounted an extensive propaganda and  
36 covert action program to destabilize the Polish government.

37  
38 *[Until] Solidarity's legal status was restored in 1989, it*  
39 *flourished underground, supplied, nurtured and advised*  
40 *largely by the network established under the auspices of*  
41 *Reagan and John Paul II. Tons of equipment -- fax machines*  
42 *(the first in Poland), printing presses, transmitters, telephones,*  
43 *shortwave radios, video cameras, photocopiers, telex*  
44 *machines, computers, word processors -- were smuggled into*  
45 *Poland via channels established by priests and American*  
46 *agents and representatives of the AFL-CIO and European*

1 *labor movements. Money for the banned union came from CIA*  
2 *funds, the National Endowment for Democracy, secret*  
3 *accounts in the Vatican and Western trade unions. (Bernstein*  
4 *2001).*

5  
6 By the end of the 1980s, the USSR and the Soviet bloc were history. Contrary  
7 to the rhetoric about the 'evil-empire,' the rulers ceded power to the popular  
8 forces peacefully, without much bloodshed.

9  
10 **+ Latin America +**

11  
12 The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 categorically proclaimed that the US would not  
13 tolerate any interference in the affairs of the nations of South, Central and  
14 North America by any external power without its blessing. Latin America was  
15 an exclusive US domain. A key plank of this policy has been support for the  
16 dictatorial regimes giving a free reign to US companies to exploit the natural  
17 resources and labor. In an area of vast economic disparities, land ownership  
18 is concentrated in a few local families and US companies. The rural dwellers  
19 own small plots of land or toil as tenant farmers on large estates. Urban areas  
20 are blighted by poverty ridden slums. The horror filled ventures of the US  
21 banana companies typify the actualization the Monroe Doctrine.

22 During the Spanish and Portuguese colonial era, indigenous cultures and  
23 religions of South and Central America were decimated and often people  
24 were pressed to convert to Catholicism. An estimated 90% of the population  
25 of the region is now Christian. More than 70% is Catholic. Pentecostalism is  
26 the main Protestant denomination in most nations. Brazil is the world's most  
27 populous Catholic nation.

28 The Catholic Church enjoyed spiritual and material eminence. As one of  
29 the largest landowners in the region, it operated plantations and ranches and  
30 had significant urban real estate holdings. The Jesuit order controlled mines  
31 and factories in Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Panama, Paraguay, Peru  
32 and Venezuela. Allied with landowning aristocracy, the Catholic Church  
33 formed an integral part of the economic and political system and allied itself  
34 firmly with right-wing factions. Thus, when the generals deposed an elected  
35 government in Brazil 1965, and instituted twenty-five years of unbridled terror,  
36 they did so with support from the US, local upper classes, the local Catholic  
37 leaders and the Vatican.

38  
39 *[The] new dictatorship was swiftly endorsed by the Bishops'*  
40 *Conference of Brazil in June 1964: 'while giving thanks to God,*  
41 *who answered the prayers of millions of Brazilians and freed*  
42 *us from the communist danger, we are grateful to the military,*  
43 *who, at serious risk to their lives, rose up in the name of the*  
44 *supreme interests of the nation'. (McDonnell 2018).*

45



1 In addition to profits from many commercial ventures, the Church generated  
2 revenue from fees for services like baptism, and marriage and funeral rites.  
3 The special privileges granted to the clergy, the distance between them and  
4 the people, and the opulent lives of the senior clergy often drew popular ire.  
5 Its proclivity to partisan politics of the ruling elites produced discord between  
6 the church and the state in several countries and made their relationship  
7 unstable. Often it functioned in harmony with the ruling circles but now and  
8 then, it faced persecution. Some governments passed laws to restrict the  
9 privileges of the clergy. Occasionally, they were violently attacked by mobs  
10 and church property was looted. During the civil strife in Mexico between 1926  
11 and 1934, over 40 priests were killed, more than 3,000 were exiled, and  
12 churches were desecrated. On the whole, the state and the church in South  
13 and Central America functioned in a complementary basis.

14 From the 1950s, grinding poverty, political powerlessness and social  
15 exclusion fermented unrest in rural and urban areas. The state responded by  
16 brutally suppressing the organizations of the poor. Reformist governments  
17 introducing mild land redistribution were deposed by the army with aid from  
18 the US. Most opposition was driven underground. Increasingly, leftwing  
19 parties began to adopt armed struggle as the means to fight for a social order  
20 based on justice and equality.

21 A growing segment of the lower ranks of the Catholic clergy who were in  
22 daily, direct contact with the suffering masses were disenchanted by the  
23 alliance of the senior bishops with the rich and powerful, and the tepid aid the  
24 church provided to the poor. A few senior bishops were distressed as well.  
25 The wide discontent gave birth to a new school of Catholicism. Called  
26 liberation theology, it pointed to Jesus Christ as the savior of the poor, and  
27 stressed compassion over personal salvation. God is not just a distant,  
28 heavenly being but has a direct presence in human affairs. Liberation  
29 theology transcends traditional forms of reformism by holding that charitable  
30 assistance is insufficient. The social system that produced poverty and  
31 inequality must be transformed. And by advocating active participation in the  
32 struggle for change, it repudiates the customary separation of religion and  
33 politics.

34 Its radical stance brought liberation theology into close association with  
35 left wing ideas, especially Marxism. And ultimately, it morphed into a novel  
36 blend of Christian beliefs and Marxism whose principal text is the 1971 book,  
37 *A Theology of Liberation* by Father Gustavo Gutierrez of Peru. Archbishop  
38 Helder Camara of Brazil (Bishop of the Slums) was another architect. His  
39 much-quoted statement, found in varied versions, succinctly encapsulates the  
40 essence of liberation theology:

41  
42 *When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint.*  
43 *When I ask why they are poor,*  
44 *they call me a communist.*  
45 Don Helder Camara  
46

1 Paulo Freire, the innovative Brazilian educationist and author of the globally  
2 renowned *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, sympathized with liberation theology.  
3 The victory of the Cuban revolution was a major inspiration. Some Protestant  
4 clergy and social scientists worked in concordance with its leading  
5 proponents. Later the civil rights, anti-war, anti-colonial and feminist groups  
6 in the US and beyond formed alliances with promoters of liberation theology.  
7 An outgrowth of progressive practical struggles in the fight for social justice  
8 and progressive interpretation of the Bible, liberation theology embodied the  
9 egalitarian spirit of early Christianity in a unique manner.

10  
11 *An iconic moment in the development of liberationist*  
12 *Christianity was the death of Camilo Torres, a priest who*  
13 *organized a militant popular movement and then joined the*  
14 *National Liberation Army (ELN), a Castroist guerrilla*  
15 *movement in Colombia, in 1965. For Torres, 'the Revolution is*  
16 *not only permissible but obligatory for Christians'. He was*  
17 *killed in 1966 in a clash with the Army, but his martyrdom*  
18 *made a deep emotional and political impact on Latin American*  
19 *Christians. (McDonnell 2018).*

20  
21 The maturation of liberation theology was an extended reflective endeavor  
22 involving scores of theologians, clergymen and social justice activists across  
23 the world. Interestingly, the first congress of the Ecumenical Association of  
24 Third World Theologians which ultimately led to the formulation of the final  
25 overall framework of liberation theology was held in 1976 in my hometown,  
26 Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

27 The bulk of the local Catholic leadership and the Vatican were hostile to  
28 the doctrine from the start. Pope John Paul II and senior Vatican figures  
29 denounced it for invoking Marxist ideas, tolerating armed struggle and linking  
30 the church with politics. Ludicrous claims that liberation theology was a tool  
31 of the KGB, the Soviet secret service, were circulated. The fact the Latin  
32 American churches had often sided with violent regimes oppressing the poor  
33 and had been engaged with elitist politics was ignored in this discourse.

34 In an era of broad activism in South and Central America, intellectuals,  
35 students, journalists and priests joined hands with workers, trade unions,  
36 indigenous communities and peasants to fight for democracy, human rights,  
37 justice and equality. Armed guerrilla groups operated against dictatorial,  
38 aristocratic regimes. Clergy inspired by liberation theology organized  
39 thousands of grass-roots groups to discuss scriptures from the liberationist  
40 perspective and campaign for social action.

41 The local regimes and US countered with unleashing brutal attacks on  
42 peaceful and armed advocates of change. Even moderate governments  
43 aiming to implement mild reforms, as in Guatemala and Chile, were deposed.  
44 Tens of thousands of indigenous people and rural residents, at times whole  
45 villages, were massacred in El Salvador and beyond. In Chile under Augusto  
46 Pinochet, around 80,000 people were imprisoned, tens of thousands were

1 tortured and some three thousand students, journalists and activists were  
2 executed. More than 200,000 people, the majority civilians, died in the strife  
3 in Guatemala. Of these, more than 93% were killed by the government forces  
4 and right-wing death squads. The CIA assisted the regimes to establish a  
5 regional alliance of security agencies to locate and assassinate dissidents at  
6 home and elsewhere, including the US and Europe. Some 60,000 people died  
7 in the ferocious onslaught.

8 The US was in the forefront of destabilizing progressive governments and  
9 fighting leftwing organizations in Central and South America. It was the key  
10 player in the overthrow of the democratically elected socialist or reformists  
11 governments in Chile and Guatemala. The non-aligned government of Cheddi  
12 Jagan in Guyana was undone by British and US machinations. The US  
13 formed and armed the Contras, a rightwing terrorist group, in order to  
14 destabilize the socialist government in Nicaragua. The *modus operandi* of the  
15 Contras was to kill health staff, teachers, activists, and cooperative union  
16 leaders in the rural areas and disrupt development projects. The democratic  
17 government of Father Bertrand Aristide in Haiti was repeatedly deposed by  
18 US forces. On top of armed invasions, draconian economic and diplomatic  
19 sanctions were imposed on socialist Cuba. But dictatorial regimes in El  
20 Salvador, Honduras, Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Haiti, Colombia, Ecuador and  
21 the Dominican Republic were funded and armed by the US or its proxies and  
22 given a free reign to unleash massive violence on any opposition, unarmed  
23 or armed. The process continues to this day. A government that strays from  
24 the Washington decreed policy is sanctioned, destabilized and ultimately  
25 removed from power. Only Cuba has managed to survive, and that with a  
26 tremendous cost to its peoples and economy.

27 During the Cold War years, more than 300 priests in the region were killed  
28 by state agencies and right-wing death squads. Some prominent bishops who  
29 championed the rights of the poor were gunned down in broad day light. Over  
30 15 senior local and foreign Catholic priests in Guatemala were killed or  
31 forcibly disappeared, ten of them in 1981. Archbishop Oscar Romero of El  
32 Salvador, an outspoken backer of liberation theology was assassinated by a  
33 death squad while saying mass. Bishop Juan Jose Gerardi of Guatemala was  
34 killed in 1998 by military officers after he submitted a detailed report on human  
35 rights violations in the country. More than 40 of his parishioners and church  
36 workers had been murdered earlier.

37 It was a veritable reign of terror facilitated by US funds, technical and  
38 military assistance and diplomatic support. As atrocity after atrocity came to  
39 surface in Central and South America, the Reagan administration continued  
40 support. Dictators like Augusto Pinochet of Chile who projected themselves  
41 as devotees committed upholding the true Christian values were Reagan's  
42 principal allies in the region.

43 The influence of progressive traditions like liberation theology on social  
44 movements declined sharply after the fall of the USSR and the institution of  
45 neo-liberal economic policies. Instead of uniting for change, people turned to  
46 individual solutions. Religions that stressed personal salvation over

1 compassion gained more traction. People in South and Central America  
2 gravitated from Catholicism to Pentecostalism. Pentecostal churches based  
3 in the US were instrumental players in this process.

4 Reagan's anti-communism was distinctly ruthless. It meant '*constructive*  
5 *engagement*' with the inhumane Apartheid regime in South Africa and support  
6 for the virulent rebel forces in Mozambique and Angola. No alliance was  
7 unthinkable to prevent '*godless communism*' from securing a foothold in  
8 Africa. The RENAMO fighters of Mozambique, financed by the racist regimes  
9 in South Africa and Rhodesia, routinely burned villages and killed hundreds  
10 of civilians. Renowned for using child soldiers inducted into its ranks after  
11 being forced to kill their parents and relatives, RENAMO was a terrorist force.  
12 Yet, Reagan received the RENAMO leader at the White House, declaring his  
13 fighters '*freedom fighters*'. Several churches in the US raised funds for  
14 RENAMO. Many instances of the grossly immoral nature of Reagan's anti-  
15 communist creed can be given. Latin America provides a major example.

## 16 17 **7.8 TWO FORMS OF CHRISTIANITY**

18  
19 Ronald Reagan had no words of remorse for the barrage of human suffering  
20 the US unleashed in South and Central America. Yet, he was a devout  
21 Christian. His speeches advocated recitation of prayers in school, placement  
22 of the Ten Commandments in public places and renewal of Christian values  
23 to combat the evils of adultery, abortion, pornography, teen sex, and addictive  
24 drugs. His address to a major Christian convocation in 1984 epitomized his  
25 vision:

26  
27 *Politics and morality are inseparable. And as morality's*  
28 *foundation is religion, religion and politics are necessarily*  
29 *related. We need religion as a guide. We need it because we*  
30 *are imperfect, and our government needs the church, because*  
31 *only those humble enough to admit they're sinners can bring*  
32 *to democracy the tolerance it requires in order to survive.*

33 Ronald Reagan

34  
35 Protestant evangelical groups formed a key segment of Reagan's political  
36 base. A cursory examination of the role played by conservative Christians in  
37 US elections and the stand on religion of the US presidents after Richard  
38 Nixon, seems to show that religion played a major, if not a dominant role, in  
39 US electoral politics. Right wing organization, at the state and national levels,  
40 promote (Christian) family values, disparage feminism, demand a ban on  
41 abortion, condemn homosexuality, brand Islam a threat to America and decry  
42 the teaching of the theory of evolution in schools. Their platform coincides  
43 with that of Reagan. They are organized, galvanized and well-funded. They  
44 want a president, senators, congresspersons, state governors, legislators and  
45 Supreme Court judges who will implement their agenda. Liberal politicians in

1 the Democratic Party often espouse Christianity but adopt a more inclusive  
2 stance.

3 But viewing US politics from a primarily religious based perspective is a  
4 misleading exercise. Due to its history, the US society has deep social  
5 schisms not just along religious lines (evangelical Christians versus others)  
6 but also along race and ethnic (Native Americans, African Americans, Latino  
7 Americans and White Americans), gender-based, and nationality-related  
8 (locals and immigrants) lines. These divisions sit atop the most fundamental  
9 schism of the US society, namely that based on wealth and income. The US  
10 is one of the most unequal nations in the world and the level of inequality has  
11 risen sharply in the past three decades.

12 In recent years, the upper 10% of the earners garnered more than 50%  
13 of the total income while the top 1% secured 20%. The divide is sharper in  
14 terms of wealth. In 2019, the US had 621 billionaires, and the total wealth of  
15 the 400 richest among them was \$2.9 trillion. With a total fortune valued at  
16 \$250 billion, the three richest Americans had more accumulated wealth than  
17 the 50% of the people at the bottom combined.

18 Inequality translates into pain and suffering. The income of the bottom  
19 fourth of the workers—waiters, store clerks, nurse assistants, cleaners—puts  
20 them below the official poverty level. They often lack employer-funded health  
21 insurance, sick leave or pension benefits, and juggle between two or three  
22 part-time jobs to make ends meet.

23 Electoral politics and the legal system are predicated upon preservation  
24 and enhancement of the fortunes and power of the plutocrats and the  
25 corporations they control. The political seesaw between Republicans and  
26 Democrats places almost insurmountable barriers for other parties to gain  
27 seats in state and federal legislative bodies. Major presidential candidates  
28 raise billions of dollars for advertising and other campaign costs. Campaigns  
29 for other offices need tens of millions to hundreds of millions of dollars. Both  
30 parties are financed by major corporations which generally donate to from  
31 both parties. No independent electoral body, at the state or federal level,  
32 exists. Political debates are organized by a private entity composed of  
33 Democrats and Republicans. Independent and alternative voices are almost  
34 completely shut out in the debates and by the media.

35 Both the dominant parties are solidly bonded to the capitalist system, the  
36 wealthy upper class and aggressive militarism on the global front. Yet, real  
37 and apparent acrimonies and bitter rhetoric on social issues maintains the  
38 appearance of a vibrant democracy. It is a style of politics that keeps people  
39 bitterly divided over single issues. Either you support affirmative action or you  
40 do not, either you support a woman's right to choose or you do not, either you  
41 are for fair treatment for immigrants or you are not, either you support voucher  
42 schools or you do not, either you oppose teaching the theory of evolution in  
43 schools or you do not—a veritable litany of wedge issues keeps Americans  
44 so divided that they do not entertain the notion of uniting on the basis of the  
45 critical problems—inadequate health care, high cost of college education, job  
46 insecurity, poor pay, excessive work hours, inadequate benefits, old age

1 income and support and so on—that plagues all of them. Religion based  
2 divisions play an important role in this equation.

3 The early days of the US republic witnessed a vigorous debate between  
4 those of who wanted to make Christianity the official religion and those who  
5 promoted of the separation of the church and state. The latter prevailed:

6  
7 *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of*  
8 *religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.*

9 First Amendment to the US Constitution

10  
11 Yet, the influence and role of Christianity in social and political affairs did not  
12 abate. Racial divide was a key factor. White churches were often associated  
13 with anti-black, segregationist elements while black churches strove for racial  
14 equality. For example, in the 1930s, Catholic Father CE Coughlin spewed  
15 emotive fascistic, anti-Semitic, racist, anti-socialist diatribe from his Detroit  
16 radio station on a daily basis. At its zenith his program captured an audience  
17 of some 30 million.

18 The 1950s era McCarthyism fomented artificial fears of encroaching  
19 'godless' communism in the government and society. Senator McCarthy was  
20 a Catholic. As his anti-communism became vociferous, prominent Catholic  
21 clergy and news outlets lent him support. While his excessively wide dragnet  
22 backfired, and he fell into disrepute, his legacy of making anticommunism a  
23 central plank in American domestic and foreign policy endured.

24 Reverend Billy Graham, a conservative Protestant, was the main front  
25 man of the crusade. His fiery oratory in the 1960s drew tens of thousands to  
26 his rallies and his radio audience was in the millions. His vision was forthright:

27  
28 *Graham's message was principally one of fear: fear of a*  
29 *wrathful god; fear of temptation; fear of communists and*  
30 *socialists; fear of unions; fear of Catholics; fear of*  
31 *homosexuals; fear of racial integration and above all, fear of*  
32 *death. But as a balm for such fears, he promised listeners*  
33 *eternal life, which he said was readily claimed through*  
34 *acceptance of Jesus Christ as one's savior. (Bothwell 2018).*

35  
36 Reverend Graham condemned the civil rights and anti-war movements and  
37 lauded the police attacks against them. Starting from the Korean War, he  
38 stridently supported every war waged by the US. He went to Vietnam to boost  
39 the morale of the US troops. His support for pro-US dictators in Latin America  
40 and elsewhere was unabashed. His extremist position on issues like nuclear  
41 weapons, and suppression of anti-colonial movements brought him into  
42 regular contact with US presidents. Deemed the high priest of US imperialism  
43 and forerunner of modern-day Christian fundamentalism, he had bold  
44 business acumen. His commercial empire and brand name were worth  
45 millions. And moguls of oil, arms manufacturing and other corporations  
46 featured among his close allies.

1 Reflecting his uncompromising preaching, right wing politicians and  
2 religious groups castigated moderate welfare policies like provision of food  
3 stamps, child support and services for the needy. They saw these measures  
4 as signs of nascent communism. Poverty, they said, emanated from a lack of  
5 family values. As good Christians, the not well-off should seek betterment  
6 through prayer and work, not state charity. The National Rifle Association, a  
7 broad-based and immensely influential lobby group, which saw the right to  
8 bear military style arms as a god given constitutional right, was closely allied  
9 to these conservative groups.

10 Jerry L Falwell, head of a Virginia mega-church and founder of the Moral  
11 Majority, carried on Graham's legacy with gusto. He opposed desegregated  
12 education, secular public education and presided over racially exclusive  
13 academies. His televised sermons attracted tens of millions. Moral Majority  
14 became a weighty political lobby group and was credited with delivering the  
15 presidency to Reagan. With avowed racists as guests on his radio program,  
16 Falwell opposed Dr Martin Luther King and the US civil rights movement and  
17 backed the South African Apartheid regime not just in moral terms but also  
18 by promoting investment in the Apartheid economy. In his eyes, Archbishop  
19 Desmond Tutu of South Africa, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, was a 'phony'.  
20 His views on Islam were distinctly negative. Today his son, Jerry Falwell, Jr,  
21 carries on that legacy and remains firm supporter of the mendacious Donald  
22 Trump.

23 While the Protestant and Catholic churches generally sang the same tune  
24 with regards to communism in the international arena, apart from issues like  
25 abortion, the Catholic Church had more liberal policies in domestic affairs. On  
26 the matters of racial equality and justice, the Protestant African American  
27 churches parted company with the white evangelical churches.

### 28 29 **+ Progressive Christianity +** 30

31 African American churches played a lead role in the struggle against racial  
32 discrimination and for civil rights in the US. Dr Martin Luther King was no  
33 doubt the premier progressive American Christian activist and thinker of the  
34 twentieth century. Coming from a line of African American activists, Christian  
35 and secular, his steadfast commitment to racial equality and social justice  
36 made him the unofficial but undisputed leader of the civil rights movement of  
37 the 1960s. The movement included numerous priests, African American as  
38 well as from other racial and ethnic groups.

39 Black churches have played a complex role in the social justice struggles  
40 in the US. During the slavery and post-Civil War eras, they actively promoted  
41 civil and political rights of African Americans. Subsequently, they receded  
42 from the frontlines. Even as segregation, disenfranchisement and lynching of  
43 African Americans persisted, the Black clergy for the most part adopted an  
44 ambivalent stance. When Black radicals and socialists were persecuted, they  
45 were silent. Reflecting more the visions of a rising middle class than the  
46 interest of the masses, they did not venture far from extolling Christian tenets

1 like prayers, humility, and loving God and one's neighbor. At best, they  
2 envisioned reforms, not fundamental change, within the capitalist and racist  
3 US system.

4 The conformist bloc was countered by a tradition that views Christianity a  
5 force for social change. Now known as the Black Prophetic Tradition, it was  
6 initially a minority within the African American clergy. But after WW II, it  
7 gathered pace and evolved into a significant progressive force in American  
8 society. Dr King was the premier embodiment of this tradition. He prayed but  
9 also boldly spoke up, marched and acted.

10  
11 *I prayed for freedom for twenty years but received no answer*  
12 *until I prayed with my legs.* Fredrick Douglass (Barber 2017).  
13

14 King was globally admired for his unwavering dedication and for the tactic of  
15 direct, non-violent civil disobedience. Drawing inspiration from MK Gandhi, he  
16 was in the streets, starting from the bus boycott of 1955 to his final days in  
17 1968. Mounting rostrums to denounce racism and promote equality, his  
18 oratory attracted millions. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.

19 Yet, the FBI hounded him, branding him a communist and subjecting him  
20 to a vile campaign of slander and rumor. His later day agenda encompassed  
21 global peace, opposition to the US aggression on Vietnam, promoting racial  
22 and economic equality and ending poverty. Courageously calling the US  
23 government '*the greatest purveyor of violence in the world*' and boldly stating  
24 that it had '*committed more war crimes almost than any nation in the world,*'  
25 he recognized the criticality of systemic transformation.

26  
27 *Capitalism does not permit an even flow of economic*  
28 *resources. With this system, a small privileged few are rich*  
29 *beyond conscience, and almost all others are doomed to be*  
30 *poor at some level. That's the way the system works. And*  
31 *since we know that the system will not change the rules, we*  
32 *are going to have to change the system.*

33 Martin Luther King  
34

35 Ralph Abernathy and influential leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership  
36 Conference (SCLC) who were sympathetic to Dr King's vision met in early  
37 1968 to initiate the Poor People's Campaign. Aiming to pressurize the  
38 government and the Congress to implement programs to address the lack of  
39 jobs, poor housing, discrimination and other problems faced by people at the  
40 bottom rung of the economic system, it would demand the passage of a 12-  
41 billion dollar Economic Bill of Rights. It envisaged enlisting people from all  
42 racial and ethnic groups in a nation-wide civil disobedience drive leading up  
43 to a massive gathering in Washington DC. Addressing class-based issues in  
44 a multi-racial effort marked a major transition for the civil rights movement.

45 But King's expanded agenda drew the ire of important African American  
46 civil rights leaders and influential clergy. Content with pursuing civil rights



1 within Lyndon Johnson's Great Society program, they accused King of  
2 harming the fight for racial equality. But King marched on. Assassinated soon  
3 after launching the Poor People's Campaign, he remains an icon for humans  
4 everywhere. His birthday is an official holiday in the US. Memorials in his  
5 honor abound. But the Poor People's Campaign petered out in the 1970s.

6 Today, apart from Reverend William J Barber and Cornel West, hardly any  
7 African American Christian voice attends to the true legacy of Martin Luther  
8 King. Barber, who now heads a revived Poor People's Campaign, reminds  
9 religious and secular activists to comprehensively challenge racism, poverty  
10 and militarism—the 'triple evils' of US society identified by King. But in this  
11 era of identity politics, such voices have yet to gain political traction,

12 In addition to the progressive African American pastors, there was a small  
13 but significant progressive trend in other American churches. Dorothy Day  
14 was a lead figure. A journalist and social activist, she embraced a faith-based  
15 socialist outlook. A cofounder of the pacifist Catholic Worker Movement, she  
16 edited its influential magazine, *The Catholic Worker*, for nearly fifty years. In  
17 addition, she joined civil disobedience campaigns and guided direct action for  
18 the poor and homeless. While decrying Marxist politics, she supported Latin  
19 American radicals like Father Camillo Torres, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro.  
20 A multiplicity of arrests did not reduce her activism. It only ceased upon her  
21 death at a ripe old age.

22 Father Daniel Berrigan, a Jesuit priest and intellectual, was a courageous  
23 inspirational figure in the Christian social justice movement of the 1960s. He  
24 refused to pay taxes because it contributed to U.S. military spending. Along  
25 with leaders of other faiths, including Dr Martin Luther King, he founded  
26 several pacifist groups. His strident opposition to the US war on Vietnam took  
27 him on a visit to North Vietnam in 1968. In the same year, he, his brother  
28 Philip and seven other Catholic activists broke into a military recruitment  
29 facility and destroyed military draft board files. The statement they issued is  
30 telling:

31  
32 *We confront the Roman Catholic Church, other Christian*  
33 *bodies, and the synagogues of America with their silence and*  
34 *cowardice in the face of our country's crimes. We are*  
35 *convinced that the religious bureaucracy in this country is*  
36 *racist, is an accomplice in this war, and is hostile to the poor.*

37 Father Daniel Berrigan and Associates  
38

39 He was arrested and sentenced to three years behind bars. But his work had  
40 a major impact on the tactics employed by anti-war activists in the US. After  
41 the end of the war on Vietnam, he founded the Ploughshares Movement  
42 which called for total abolition of nuclear weapons. In 1980, he, his brother  
43 Philip and six associates secretly entered a nuclear missile site, damaged  
44 nuclear warheads cones and poured blood on the documents in the facility.  
45 Arrested and charged on many counts, they spent nearly ten years in prison.  
46 In his later days, Father Berrigan assisted people afflicted with AIDS.

1 Father Roy Bourgeois, a Catholic priest who was defrocked by the Vatican  
2 for conducting proscribed ordination of women, founded the School of the  
3 Americas Watch which publicized the training given by the US military to the  
4 militaries of the dictatorial regimes in Latin America. Their annual vigils  
5 outside the training facility and investigations played a key role in unmasking  
6 the details of this dastardly practice. Earlier he had been deported from  
7 Bolivia, where he had worked with social justice activists to oppose the  
8 ruthless regime of Hugo Banzer, a graduate of this school.

9 On returning to the US, he lived at a Catholic Worker facility to assist the  
10 poor. But he remained a vocal opponent of US policies in Latin America and  
11 helped document the role of graduates of the School of the Americas in the  
12 murder of US and local nuns and priests in El Salvador. He was arrested on  
13 several occasions and spent a total of nearly four years in prison.

14 Other Christian progressive organizations have also originated from the  
15 US. One of them is the American Friends Service Committee. Founded by  
16 Quakers, its goal is to promote peace and social justice. It is well known for  
17 giving assistance to injured civilians and combatants on both sides of the  
18 conflict. In the US, it has worked to promote the rights of the minority  
19 communities and oppose militarism and weapons production.

20 A 2005 nationwide poll of about two and a half million 2005 asked who  
21 was the greatest American. Dr Martin Luther King was ranked third in the final  
22 list. Though much has to be done to eradicate persistent institutional and  
23 attitudinal racism in the US, the outcome attests to the distance travelled in  
24 that direction since the 1960s. Yet, Ronald Reagan, who by objective  
25 standards should have faced charges of major crimes against humanity, was  
26 ranked first. The ethically mixed outcome reflects how imperial hubris,  
27 jingoistic nationalism, superficial moralizing, media bias and immersion into  
28 consumerism can triumph over humanism and truth.

## 29 30 **7.9 NEOLIBERAL CHRISTIANITY**

31  
32 Christianity spans the world. The survey of its societal function in this chapter  
33 leaves out many areas in Africa, Asia, the UK and Europe. The subject is too  
34 vast but some of these areas are covered in the next chapter that in which  
35 the relationship between Christianity and Islam is explored. This section looks  
36 at Christianity in the US under the presidency of Donald Trump.

37 The religious landscape of the United States has undergone a significant  
38 transformation over the past decade. Professed loyalty to religion has been  
39 declining. Fairly large sample surveys by the Pew Research Forum indicate  
40 that in 2009, 77% of the adult population identified themselves as Christians  
41 but a decade on, that declined to 65%. Earlier, regular church attendees  
42 outnumbered occasional attendees. Now the situation is reversed. That trend  
43 is more pronounced among white Americans than among African Americans  
44 or Hispanic Americans. While the decline is seen for Protestant and Catholic  
45 denominations, it is marked in the former.

1 Several factors are at work. Higher rate of college attendance, lower rate  
2 of marriage, an increase in single parent families, weaker traditional family  
3 ties, longer work hours, novel recreational and lifestyle routines, reduced  
4 rhetoric about 'godless communism,' decline of the religious consensus  
5 forged by the Cold War, shocking exposés of widespread sexual abuse of  
6 young boys by junior and senior Catholic priests, accusations of sexual  
7 molestation leveled at key Protestant figures, and the progressive stand of  
8 Pope Francis on social and economic issues are posited as contributory  
9 causes of reduced allegiance to the traditional Christian churches.

10 The proportion who lack a religious affiliation (atheist, agnostic or nothing)  
11 rose over the same decade from 17% to 26%. But religions other than  
12 Christianity have seen a modest growth in absolute and relative terms.

13 A marked generational effect is evident. While more than three quarters  
14 of the older age persons regard themselves as Christians, only half of the  
15 younger adults do so. Of the latter, some 40% identify with the unaffiliated  
16 and 10% follow faiths other than Christianity.

17 This trend is at odds with the perception that in the past few years and  
18 especially under the presidency of Trump, religion has played a major role in  
19 elections. Christian evangelicals exercise a greater influence on key state and  
20 federal policies and more politicians who brand themselves as devout  
21 Christians are taking up office.

22 Several analysts argue that these trends are not discordant. Since the  
23 early 1900s, religiosity in the US has followed a cyclical pattern of ups and  
24 downs but the basic bond between religion and politics remains. Weakened  
25 Christian identification does not necessarily imply adherence to rational,  
26 secular humanism. It often heralds an immersion into spirituality and esoteric  
27 beliefs. One survey found that a greater proportion of atheists and agnostics  
28 than the religious believed in aliens from other planets who had visited the  
29 earth in unidentified flying objects. And no matter the current trend, among all  
30 the affluent nations, the US is still the most religious nation, and among all  
31 the most religious nations, it is the most affluent.

32 Traditionally, churches provide free services like childcare, education,  
33 counselling and food and shelter for the homeless. Women participate in  
34 Sunday schools, assisting the elderly and looking after children in greater  
35 numbers. Such activities strengthen loyalty to the church.

36 Surveys on religion either leave out or pay minimal attention to economic  
37 factors. Neoliberalism has progressively weakened the social security net,  
38 and increased low-pay and low-benefits jobs. Decent, remunerative jobs with  
39 adequate vacation, sick leave, health insurance and retirement pension are  
40 scarce. The median income and poverty level have been virtually static, but  
41 inequality has mushroomed. Young adults have bleaker prospects compared  
42 to their parents. Pensions are now tied to the vagaries of the stock market.  
43 Newer technologies and corporate monopolies have accelerated the demise  
44 of established businesses.

45 These disconcerting trends are compounded by headline grabbing mass  
46 shootings, catastrophic weather events (storms, fires, hurricanes, extreme

1 heat), ratcheted propaganda about Islamic terrorism and now, the corona  
2 pandemic. For most Americans, it is an age of anxiety.

3 The dominant political parties remain in a fervent embrace of neoliberal  
4 policies that entrench corporate power and magnify economic inequality.  
5 Political subservience to money has been an integral part of the American  
6 republic since its inception. But now that has reached unabashed, blatant  
7 dimensions. For Clinton and Bush, Obama, Biden and Trump, corporate and  
8 plutocratic interests and militarism triumphed above all else. The more united  
9 they are on economic matters, the more divided they stand on social issues.  
10 And that becomes the basis of their electoral campaigns.

11 Aware of the business-oriented loyalties of the politicians on both sides of  
12 the aisle, the people have little trust for government, political bigwigs, banks  
13 and major companies. Realizing that economic reality will not vary no matter  
14 which party wins, voters favor politicians who are more likely to deliver on  
15 their favored social issues. As a consequence, antagonisms along lines of  
16 religion, race, immigration, abortion and gay unions reach a feverish pitch.

17 Attached to groups like Moral Majority, Focus on the Family and the  
18 Christian Coalition, white evangelicals are more energized than ever. It is a  
19 strong, stable base of activists whose religiosity remains undiminished.

20  
21 *The percentage of Americans who attend church more than*  
22 *once a week, pray daily, and accept the Bible as wholly*  
23 *reliable and deeply instructive to their lives has remained*  
24 *absolutely, steel-bar constant for the last 50 years or more,*  
25 *right up to today. (Stanton 2018).*

26  
27 This strong core of devout, well-funded Christians votes regularly. In a setting  
28 of general voter apathy, their votes often determine the outcome.

### 30 + Televangelism +

31  
32 Televangelism conveys sermons and holy tidings from Christian pastors and  
33 ministers to sizeable regional, national and international audiences via radio,  
34 TV and Internet channels. The faithful attend church service without going to  
35 church and converts accrue without a face-to-face encounter. It first bloomed  
36 in the US in the 1920s. Hundreds of Christian radio stations, some run by  
37 networks controlled by charismatic preachers, dominated the airwaves by the  
38 1940s. Their audience base was in the tens of millions. From the 1950s, such  
39 stations mushroomed in Latin America and Europe. A decade on, they were  
40 present in Africa and parts of Asia. Today they rule the radio spectrum in  
41 many nations. In some African nations, a half or more of the radio stations are  
42 run by Christian organizations.

43



Southeast Christian Church, USA

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Televangelism is now a multi-billion-dollar enterprise employing satellite and cable TV networks and the Internet. Famed, savvy evangelists operate from lavish megachurches and have virtual audiences that extend to all the four corners of the planet. US televangelism has long standing ties to the centers of economic and political power. Many televangelists operate from megachurches that can accommodate thousands of worshippers at a time.

The megachurch attendee and the remote viewer typically get a dose of passionate Biblical oratory interspersed with castigation of abortionists, liberals, homosexuals, same sex marriage, feminists and 'America haters'. Denigration of Islam and Muslims marks some sessions. And the faithful also obtain worldly rewards. Ministers proffer advice on health, self-help, finance, investment and exercise and give answers to personal issues. In the name of Prosperity Gospel, modern televangelism spiritually elevates the neoliberal capitalist ethic and equates financial success with blessings from God.

Some televangelists stage faith healing sessions in which the afflicted is embrocated with healing ointments and prayed for. Physical and mental illnesses are treated. At times apparent miracles occur as wheelchair bound persons start to walk unaided. The congregants connect to the Holy Spirit by entering a trance and speaking in tongues. Televangelist channels feature news, political commentary, sports and entertainments programs. It is not necessary to switch channels. Moreover, these programs are rendered in a Christian perspective. Books by famed televangelists can be ordered from the same source. Some of these books have sold in the millions. One description of a spiritual session goes:

*Over on God TV - part of a global TV network - Dr Rooney Howard-Browne is performing his Great Awakening in a Texas church. He touches people on the forehead and shouts: 'Fire of God!' They fall on the floor and writhe around. The audience laughs. He interviews whimpering, post-Fire-of-God*

1           *supplicants, and the audience laughs. People speak in*  
2           *tongues, and everybody laughs.* (Dowling 2007).

3  
4    Televangelists raise revenue through donations, subscriptions, sale of books  
5    and religious, paraphernalia, infomercials, investments and varied business  
6    ventures. Desperate folk facing serious illness, financial ruin, emotional angst  
7    and life crisis mail checks, maybe in three to four figures, in order to be prayed  
8    for by the evangelist and the congregation. Prayer has power. And they too  
9    desire a miracle. But, one undercover investigation revealed that in some  
10   ministries, the checks are cashed but the rest of what is in the envelope is  
11   dumped in the garbage. Some ministries encourage credit card donations.  
12   Religion friendly tax rules are employed liberally to protect their revenue  
13   stream.

14        The dominant players in this field are Trinity Broadcasting Network (the  
15   largest Christian media group in the world), The God Channel, and Christian  
16   Broadcasting Network. We list some of the leading American televangelists.

17  
18    **Kenneth** and **Gloria Copeland**, the CEOs of the Kenneth Copeland  
19    Ministries, have a net worth over \$750 million. Their 1500-acre campus in  
20    Texas has a megachurch, a private airstrip and a sumptuous residential  
21    bungalow. A jet plane for the Ministry and three jets for their private use are  
22    anchored at the site. Kenneth Copeland and Jesse Duplantis, also a  
23    televangelist, reportedly avoid travel on commercial planes as those planes  
24    are full of '*demons*'.

25  
26    **Pat Robertson**, a veteran televangelist, chancellor of Regent University and  
27    guru of the Christian Broadcasting Network champions conservative political  
28    causes. A confidant of US presidents, he is a best-selling author on politics  
29    and spirituality. His long-standing talk-show program, *the 700 Club*, features  
30    Christian causes and rightwing politics. Despite his age, he remains a  
31    presence on this show. He has also set up other TV programs. At one point,  
32    his cable TV programs had over 60 million subscribers in the US.

33        His interests extend to other media firms, mining and food companies. In  
34    addition to operating philanthropic and relief agencies, he has backed US  
35    imperial ventures since the 1960s. Among other things, he gave diplomatic  
36    and material support to ruthless tyrants in Africa like Charles Taylor of Liberia  
37    and Mobutu Sese Seko of Congo. In turn, he won lucrative diamond mining  
38    contracts from both. He was a fund raiser for the US backed terrorist force,  
39    the Contras, that strove to depose the Sandinista socialist government of  
40    Nicaragua, a supporter of the Apartheid regime in South Africa, and at one  
41    point, a trumpeter for the assassination of Hugo Chavez of Venezuela.

42        His sermons condemn homosexuality, abortion, pagans, feminism, liberal  
43    professors and advocates of civil liberties. Bandyng the notion of a global  
44    Jewish conspiracy, he has called Hinduism a '*demonic*' creed and expressed  
45    a strong aversion towards Islam:

46

1 [Islam is] *a violent political system bent on the overthrow of*  
2 *the governments of the world and world domination.* Pat  
3 Robertson (Wikipedia (2020 – Pat Robertson)).  
4

5 By secular standards, he has done well. His net worth has been put between  
6 \$200 million and \$1 billion.  
7

8 **Benny Hinn**, a traveling evangelist, leading icon of the Prosperity Gospel and  
9 author of books on faith healing conducts healing summits (*Holy Spirit Miracle*  
10 *Crusades*) in large, packed stadia in the US and abroad. With annual  
11 attendance in the millions, the summits regularly feature on major Christian  
12 TV networks. His ministry owns a jet plane and his personal wealth is about  
13 \$60 million. But of recent, he has been embroiled in multiple financial, tax-  
14 evasion, marital and miracle misrepresentation scandals. Since he has run  
15 into financial difficulties, he has issued contradictory verdicts on the power of  
16 the Prosperity Gospel.  
17

18 **Joel Osteen** preaches from one of the largest megachurches in the US. His  
19 services are streamed live on various Internet platforms and heard on his own  
20 radio station. A popular spiritual advisor, author of block buster books and  
21 sought-after speaker, he is worth around \$50 million. His primary residence  
22 is valued at \$10.5 million.  
23

24 **Creflo** and **Tafi Dollar** are the senior pastors of the non-denominational  
25 World Changers Church International. The main campus of the church is in  
26 Atlanta, Georgia. Their Sunday services promote the Prosperity Gospel and  
27 stream to twenty churches in the US, one church in Canada and one church  
28 in Australia. Around the year 2006, their church had 30,000 members and  
29 annual income of about \$70 million. Creflo Dollar is also in demand as a  
30 speaker at conferences and corporate venues. Owners of a jet plane, two  
31 Rolls Royce cars, multi-million-dollar properties, their net worth is about \$30  
32 million dollars.  
33

34 **Billy Graham**, a veteran evangelist broadcaster who passed on in 2018 was  
35 a true heavyweight in the field. An advisor and friend of many US presidents,  
36 his national and international outreach exceeded that of any other American  
37 evangelist. His overall lifetime listenership on radio and TV is estimated to  
38 have topped 2 billion. Some of his over 20 books on the Christian creed and  
39 lifestyle made publication history in terms of initial printing volume and sales.  
40 He wrote a newspaper advice column that appeared for over sixty years.

41 Loudly decrying homosexuality and feminism, he vociferously denounced  
42 communism and supported US foreign policy and the war on Vietnam. But he  
43 parted company most evangelists on the issue of racial discrimination. He  
44 supported the civil rights movement of the 1960s, held desegregated worship  
45 services and befriended Dr Martin Luther King. But when Dr King spoke out  
46 against the US aggression on Vietnam, their relationship soured. He also

1 promoted inter-faith cooperation. When he died, his estate was valued at over  
2 \$25 million.

3  
4 **Jesse Duplantis**, founder of Jesse Duplantis Ministries, is a seasoned  
5 televangelist, author, and a forceful presence in Christian broadcasting.  
6 Besides promoting the conservative Christian agenda, he is a prominent  
7 supporter of Israel and the US policy in the Middle East. He has a 3-million-  
8 dollar residence, a part of which is used for church related activities. His net  
9 worth is around \$20 million. His ministry has a private jet that he uses for his  
10 national and international evangelical peregrinations. He has a theological  
11 justification for that practice.

12  
13 *I really believe that if Jesus was physically on the earth today,*  
14 *he wouldn't be riding a donkey. Think about that for a minute.*  
15 *He'd be in an airplane preaching the gospel all over the world.*  
16 Jesse Duplantis (Wikipedia – (2020 Jesse Duplantis)).

17  
18 Other financially successful American televangelists include Rick Warren  
19 (\$25 million), Franklin Graham (\$25 million), TD Jakes (\$18 million) and Joyce  
20 Meyers (\$8 million). And there are more.

21 Televangelists in the US today spiritually energize millions of souls with  
22 their passionate sermons. Controlling hefty bank accounts and financial  
23 portfolios, they live like the super-rich. Venerated by millions of believers, they  
24 dispense all manner of questionable health advice such as avoiding  
25 vaccination and chemotherapy. They benefit from major tax exemptions, and  
26 lax tax audits. Modern evangelists not only preach the Prosperity Gospel, they  
27 live it and set an example for others to follow.

28 Inspired by American Christian televangelists, televangelism has become  
29 a global phenomenon, and is also being embraced by Hindu and Muslim  
30 denominations. Wealthy religious TV and radio networks led by charismatic  
31 indigenous preachers command large audiences in Latin America, parts of  
32 Africa, India, Australia and the Middle East. Their operations resemble  
33 televangelism of the US, though their grandiosity has yet to catch up. Many  
34 foreign Christian stations carry programs of US origin.

35 Traditional churches have for long run charity programs assisting the poor  
36 and homeless and women and children in distress. Many operate schools,  
37 colleges, hospitals and nursing homes. In the course of providing such  
38 services and church activities, they use business strategies for advertising,  
39 fund raising, setting priorities and resources use. Televangelism has further  
40 entrenched the tentacles of capitalism into the spiritual domain. Marketing has  
41 become an accepted, routine manner of conducting church affairs.

42 Commercialization of religion within an unjust system is epitomized by  
43 Christmas celebrations. An annual shopping bonanza in the US and Europe,  
44 it is a make-or-break event for the economy. Besides the billions spent on  
45 buying gifts, more than 25 million Christmas trees with lighting decorations  
46 and trinkets are sold each year in the US alone. While those who can afford



1 it get a live tree, others make do with artificial trees. For many, it is a time for  
2 feasting and being merry. Yet, more than one of five children in the US are  
3 officially poor; many go to bed hungry, even during Christmas. Many depend  
4 on charity programs to make the Christmas holidays bearable.

### 5 6 **+ An organized force +** 7

8 The senior leaders of evangelical churches and denominations in the US do  
9 not function in an autonomous manner. They covertly cooperate to attain their  
10 long-term goals. Their main umbrella group, The Family, has operated from  
11 the 1940s. Presently led by Doug Coe, the elite, fundamentalist group  
12 operates through a series of foundations. Its several thousand members  
13 include military officers, members of the judiciary including the Supreme  
14 Court, influential senators and congress persons, state governors, corporate  
15 executives, media personalities and think tank experts. With indurated ties to  
16 aerospace and energy companies, it has also cultivated relationships with  
17 political and social leaders across the world.

18 Adroitly christened *Jesus Plus Nothing*, its ideology calls for dismantling  
19 the constitutional edict mandating the separation of the church and state,  
20 making the Ten Commandments the basis for the US legal code and  
21 displaying them in schools and public places, banning abortion, and  
22 ostracizing secularists. Holding that the nation has sunk into a morass of  
23 immorality, this ideology has little regard for democratic governance. It favors  
24 rule by an enlightened Christian leader with strong authority. Thus, the Family  
25 supported brutal dictators like Papa Doc of Haiti, General Suharto of  
26 Indonesia, General Costa de Silva of Brazil, and General Park Chung Hee of  
27 South Korea. Held in awe by many of his followers, Doug Coe is deemed a  
28 spiritually advanced person close to Jesus Christ.

29 On the economic front, The Family promotes a robust neoliberal program  
30 stressing privatization and free markets and proscribing state interference in  
31 the economy. Denouncing welfare programs, public education and health  
32 care reforms, it rallies against labor unions everywhere. But wedded to US  
33 imperial designs and ventures, it has no issue with increasing governmental  
34 expenditure on the military.

35 The Family operates discretely. Membership is not made public. Media  
36 coverage is scant. Its cells in the military and other institutions, which hold  
37 prayer and planning sessions, are secret. Its financial affairs, weighty as they  
38 are, rest on murky grounds. But it wields influence. Reputed as the most  
39 influential religious group in the nation's capital, it owns a place of residence  
40 where US lawmakers put up at highly subsidized rates during congressional  
41 sessions.

42 The Fellowship Foundation, a subsidiary of The Family, organizes what  
43 maybe the most important ecclesiastic-political national event—The National  
44 Prayer Breakfast. In association with the Congress, the event has been held  
45 each year in February since its inception in 1953. It is usually addressed by  
46 the US President in office. In addition to priests, the 3500 invitees include

1 cabinet members, congresspersons, federal and state officials, foreign and  
2 UN diplomats, European Union legislators, top executives from American and  
3 foreign firms, students, politicians and dignitaries from 100 nations. Two or  
4 more foreign heads of state grace the event. Mother Teresa once attended  
5 the Breakfast.

6 The attendees, many of whom fork out the \$425 fee, are treated to a  
7 standard morning meal in a five-star hotel followed by prayers, seminars  
8 based on the theme of Christ's message, and lectures on varied topics for  
9 several days.

10 The Prayer Breakfast is more than a religious event. It is where business,  
11 political, social and cultural heavyweights of the nation and beyond cement  
12 their relationships, make lucrative deals, plan future projects and lobby for  
13 their products. Under a holy imprimatur, it is a distinct venue to further the  
14 interests of US capitalism and promote the neoliberal agenda.

15 Another impactful faith-based front is United in Purpose led by Bill Dallas,  
16 a convicted felon who was imbued with religiosity while in prison. Claiming  
17 that a holy visitation implored him to form a network of pastors, he embarked  
18 on a series of ventures towards that goal. With financial backing from major  
19 business figures, his drive evolved in 2010 to form United in Purpose, an  
20 entity now connected via satellite to thousands of churches and conservative  
21 ministers in the US.

22 United in Purpose is chaired by Ken Eldred, a multi-millionaire activist  
23 conservative who runs a major Silicon Valley technology firm and strives for  
24 the full integration of faith with work and life. It receives large donations from  
25 the military and security industry. With high-profile right-wing Christians in its  
26 board of directors—some of whom are in The Family— United in Purpose  
27 has now come to occupy the apex of the top faith-based political groups.

28 Though its basic motto is '*Biblical values above all,*' its real backbone is  
29 a cadre of experts that manage it as a sophisticated marketing and voter  
30 mobilization entity. Allied with seasoned pollsters, they use state-of-the-art  
31 statistical data collection and processing methods to formulate and promote  
32 the United in Purpose message. The data are gathered from church records,  
33 congregants and opinion polls. The main task is to support local, state and  
34 federal office candidates who seek to unite faith and politics on the basis of  
35 the traditional right-wing Christian agenda. Election of judicial officers with a  
36 conservative mindset is a key aspect of this endeavor.

37 United in Purpose has compiled a massive database of 200 million files  
38 with information that gives clues to the voting preferences of US voters. For  
39 each person, an index indicating his or her alignment to conservative beliefs  
40 and voting potential is computed. Those with high index values are targeted  
41 to bolster support for preferred candidates. The actual work is done by a  
42 battalion of volunteers from associated churches and sympathetic Christian  
43 bodies. The database is used to generate an electronic software package  
44 that is provided to pastors to enable them to monitor the extent of registration  
45 for voting and to track the past and current voting pattern of the church  
46 members. Pastors were enlisted in a systematic drive to mobilize 75% of the

1 congregants to vote in the 2020 presidential and congressional election. Its  
2 operative strategy features a media blitz in right-wing outlets, participating in  
3 religious events and political summits and awarding prizes to conservative  
4 opinion makers. Though its work is effectively partisan and political, United in  
5 Purpose and similar groups get tax exemptions as nonprofit corporations.  
6 And, despite this, they function in largely impenetrable secrecy.

## 7 8 **7.10 AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY IN THE AGE OF TRUMP** 9

10 Prior to being elected the president of the United States in 2016, Donald  
11 Trump was a real estate mogul owning and holding interests in hotels,  
12 casinos, skyscrapers, golf courses and a wide range of business entities  
13 operating in the US and across the world. With his net worth estimated to  
14 exceed \$2 billion in 2020, he was the first billionaire president of the US.

15 Trump entered the presidential fray at a critical juncture in US capitalism.  
16 The mega financial crisis of 2008 had shaken its major pillars. The actions of  
17 the US Treasury and Federal Reserve to bail out debt-ridden corporations  
18 had stimulated economic growth, expanded the job market, and stabilized  
19 international trade and finance. Investors celebrated as stock markets in the  
20 US and abroad resumed their upward pre-crisis ascendancy. But disquiet  
21 prevailed within the traditional global power houses—the US, Europe and  
22 Japan. Potential competitors—China, South Korea, Taiwan, India, Brazil—  
23 were coming of age. The meteoric development of the technological capacity  
24 of China, the extent to which its products were selling across the globe, the  
25 scale of its investments Africa, Asia and Latin America—all posed a veritable  
26 threat to the dominance exercised by Western and Japanese corporations.  
27 The rise of China was based on growth in productivity in the real economy  
28 while the economic expansion in the US derived to a significant degree from  
29 the financial sector. The US dollar is the international reserve and trade  
30 currency. The power of the IMF, World Bank and World Trade Organization  
31 that had enabled the West to reign in recalcitrant nations and advance its  
32 agenda no longer sufficed in the new setting. The unrivalled military muscle  
33 of the US has but limited effect, though the military sector significantly buoys  
34 up the US economy.

35 The corporate behemoths and the two major US political parties that serve  
36 their interests understood that something had to be done to ensure US global  
37 dominance far into the future. Yet, the economy was still riding on a huge debt  
38 bubble—public, credit card, student and business debt. New jobs were lower  
39 pay jobs bereft of benefits. Health care and higher education costs were a  
40 worry to even the middle class families. Urban rents and mortgage costs had  
41 gotten beyond the means of graduates from leading universities. Income and  
42 wealth inequalities had spiraled out of control. Disaffection was rising in all  
43 political sectors, from the left to the center and the right. Edged on by  
44 rightwing media, people blamed the Washington elite, globalization and big  
45 business for their problems.

1 Policy makers in the West were in a quandary: Should they work within  
2 the multilateral arrangements put in place after the fall of the Soviet Union,  
3 form regional alliances, or chart out their own path? Should they cooperate  
4 with Russia and China, or isolate them in global economic and diplomatic  
5 affairs? Trump represented the faction that favors ditching multilateral trade  
6 and investment agreements in favor of bilateral deals, alliance with Russia  
7 and aggressive isolation of China on the economic and political arenas.

8 Trump formulated his message in a populist style of appeal to the middle  
9 class and low class voters. He condemned globalization and unpatriotic  
10 corporations for transfer of jobs abroad, denounced uncontrolled migration for  
11 its negative economic effects, and proclaimed that unlike others he would not  
12 just talk but act firmly and decisively. That, together with other aspects of his  
13 social agenda, was sufficient for him to secure enough votes to gain the White  
14 House in 2017.

15 Running on the Republican ticket but having changed party affiliation  
16 three times before, he was a political novice with diffuse loyalties. He was  
17 famed as a shrewd business operator, boisterous TV talk show host, co-  
18 author of a bestselling book on his life and strategy for entrepreneurship and  
19 an ostentatious lifestyle punctuated with scandals. With rambling oratory,  
20 divisive agenda, litany of scandals, and proclivity for garbling facts, he was  
21 expected to lose at each stage of the election process. But he charted his  
22 own course. Alienating prominent figures in his own party, raising the ire of  
23 media pundits, mounting a thinly veiled racist campaign, lambasting the  
24 Washington elite, decrying immigration and denouncing globalization, he  
25 pledged to tear up international treaties, stand up to China, build a wall at the  
26 border with Mexico, bring back jobs and '*Make America Great Again*'. And it  
27 worked. Puncturing traditional Democratic strongholds, he smoothly sailed  
28 through each stage of the electoral process to land into the White House with  
29 a kingly grin on his face.

30 The white working class and rural population without a college degree  
31 formed the principal base of support for the billionaire candidate. They were  
32 strongly disaffected by the character of the economic expansion of the  
33 previous three decades. The economy had grown at a reasonable rate, and  
34 the jobless rate was low, but the new jobs paid lower wages, had fewer  
35 benefits and were insecure. College education, health care and childcare  
36 costs had risen precipitously, rents in cities had become unaffordable and  
37 personal debt had risen. They distrusted all politicians, especially the  
38 Democrats. But Trump was seen as an outsider who would deploy the tactics  
39 of a corporate boss to clean up the mess in Washington. In their quest for a  
40 tough guy, the voters brushed aside his improprieties, indiscretions, chicanery  
41 and lies. The light shone on him by the 'liberal' media was taken by them as  
42 nothing more than a confirmation of the 'elite conspiracy' to derail their  
43 candidate.

44 Guided by rightwing, white nationalist, anti-immigrant, religiously extreme  
45 advisors, his rallies drew huge crowds. His populist agenda resonated with  
46 the jingoistic vision—that the US is an exceptional nation chosen by God—

1 that has dominated American thinking and discourse since the end of WW II.  
2 With favored showings from white, male, older, non-union, conservative, anti-  
3 immigrant, anti-Islam, evangelical, Republican voters, he carried the day in  
4 the Electoral College. His repulsive remarks about African Americans,  
5 women, Mexicans, Muslims and people with disabilities hardly dented their  
6 faith in him. What mattered to his constituency was that he would defend  
7 America against the threats of Islamism and unregulated immigration and  
8 protect American jobs.

9 For the top 1% and the corporate sector, whether Trump or Hillary Clinton  
10 ascended to the presidency was fundamentally immaterial. Either would  
11 promote the domestic and international interests of US banks, financial firms,  
12 energy conglomerates, technology and communication giants, military  
13 industries, agribusiness, big pharma and major retail chains. That is a given  
14 facet of US politics. While some elements of the corporate sector expressed  
15 disquiet over his anti-globalization talk, they knew it was far from the rousing  
16 anti-corporate program of the socialistically inclined Bernie Sanders that  
17 widely resonated among young voters. Derailing the candidacy of Sanders  
18 was a critical factor in this election.

19 The victory of Trump reflected a global trend. The political spectrum was  
20 swinging towards ultra-nationalism and authoritarianism in all continents.  
21 Hardline rightist demagogues and parties were in control in Brazil, India,  
22 Poland, Hungary, Russia, Turkey, Egypt, Myanmar and Israel. Elsewhere,  
23 they were making gains. The Brexit vote in the UK reflected that nationalistic,  
24 exclusive outlook. Democracy was a façade in many African nations. The  
25 theocracies of the Middle East held their ground. State capitalism in China  
26 held on to authoritarian control. Successful popular uprisings, as in Sudan,  
27 Zimbabwe, Algeria, Chile, Egypt, Tunisia and Argentina, faced a strong  
28 backlash and were being reversed by neoliberal policies forced down their  
29 throats by the international financial agencies and Western powers.

### 30 31 **+ Christians for Trump +**

32  
33 Far right politicians typically form an alliance with fundamentalist religious  
34 movements. Trump was no exception. He won over evangelicals to his side  
35 with promises to end the perceived marginalization of Christians, nominate  
36 judges who would restrict abortion, uphold the death penalty, favor torture of  
37 terrorism suspects, oppose gun control and punish states where marijuana  
38 for medical purposes was legal. Convinced that their faith faces an existential  
39 threat from secularism, materialism, permissiveness, liberalism, feminism and  
40 Islam, they saw in Trump a savior who would combat social immoralities like  
41 rising pornography, drug abuse, suicide rates and children born out of  
42 wedlock. When he ascribed mass public shootings to the prevalence of moral  
43 turpitude, not guns, they nodded. During his campaign and throughout his  
44 presidency, eminent televangelists like Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell Jr, Eric  
45 Metaxas and Franklin Graham lauded him as a defender of religious freedom  
46 and rights, upholder of Christian values and the man to stave off *'brown-*

1 *shirted, fascist* Democrats. Some 81% of the evangelicals cast their vote for  
2 him. He reciprocated by espousing conservative values in his speeches,  
3 appointing faith-friendly judges and signing executive orders to curtail gay  
4 rights.

5  
6 *A huge majority of evangelical Christians has lined up behind*  
7 *Trump, as have white Catholics. .... Trump has repaid them*  
8 *with devoted attention to issues such as abortion, school*  
9 *vouchers, and religious liberty. (Graham 2020).*

10  
11 Fervent evangelicals occupied key positions in Trump's circle of advisors and  
12 senior cabinet appointees. Cabinet meetings included prayers led by a  
13 cabinet member. Mike Pompeo, his Secretary of State, gave a graduation day  
14 speech focusing on Christian leadership style and, with disregard for the  
15 constitutional separation of the church and state, posted it on the official State  
16 Department website. Senior members of his administration were prone to  
17 extremist declarations on contentious social issues. They all advocated a  
18 constitutionally Christian America.

19 According to Jerry Falwell Jr, the prime policy items for evangelicals are  
20 '[support] *for the state of Israel; strong national defense; traditional family*  
21 *values; and pro-life*'. (Sherwood 2018). Trump did well by them by moving the  
22 US embassy to Jerusalem and backing the annexation of the West Bank to  
23 Israel. He hiked up the US military budget to \$725 billion in 2020, which is  
24 more than a third of the global military spending, four times the Chinese and  
25 ten times the Russian spending on the military. Trump brazenly continued the  
26 Obama initiated illegal drone strikes that often killed civilians. In alliance with  
27 Israel and Saudi Arabia, he mounted a drive to destabilize Iran on economic,  
28 military and diplomatic fronts. And he unceremoniously tore up critical arms  
29 control, climate change and trade agreements, and gave the greenlight for a  
30 program to militarize space.

31 Formally, Donald Trump is a Presbyterian. But unlike Ronald Reagan, his  
32 faith-based credentials are next to nil. His sexual profligacy makes a mockery  
33 of any attachment to family values; his dubious business deals do not jive with  
34 the Biblical tenet to eschew greed; his routine of tweeting lies hardly marks  
35 him an honest person; his abhorrent decision to separate families and place  
36 young immigrant children in hazardous internment camps cannot mark him a  
37 merciful person; and more. Yet, just a few evangelical pastors publicly queried  
38 his standing as a good Christian. When asked whether Trump was a moral  
39 person, Jerry Falwell Jr, the son of the founder of the Moral Majority and  
40 president of one the largest and wealthiest Christian universities, said:

41  
42 *Absolutely. Ever since I've known him, he's been a good,*  
43 *moral person, a strong leader, a tough leader – and that's what*  
44 *this country needs. Jerry Falwell, Jr (Sherwood 2018).*

45

1 To the evangelists and their followers, he was at worst a sinner like every  
2 human. The litany of lies he spewed, even if indisputably exposed, did not  
3 affect their loyalty. They dismissed allegations against him as machinations  
4 of the elite, liberal media. On the contrary, the mounting evidence of his  
5 disregard for the rule of law energized them.

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9 While they were his firmest backers, Trump's support among religious  
10 communities extends beyond the evangelicals. Melanie Trump, the First  
11 Lady, is a Catholic. In the 2016 election, the Catholic vote was almost equally  
12 split between him and his rival, Hilary Clinton. During his presidency, the  
13 proportion of Catholics who viewed him with favor fluctuated. By early 2020,  
14 it showed signs of decline. Trump's immigration policies, especially the wall  
15 between the US and Mexico, mistreatment of families of undocumented of  
16 migrants and more rapid pace of deportations dissuaded the mostly Catholic  
17 Latino community in the US. These policies were criticized by prominent  
18 American archbishops and Pope Francis. But lay Catholics and their leaders  
19 supported his anti-abortion, anti-homosexuality drives and saw in him a  
20 champion of religious freedom. In early 2020, about a third of the American  
21 Christians viewed Donald Trump as a religious person and just about a fourth  
22 of the Catholics held that view.

23 Race was a central factor. Support for Trump among white Christians—  
24 Catholic or Protestant—was much higher than support from African  
25 Americans of the corresponding denominations.

26 The Jewish vote for Trump was divided. Leading Jewish organizations  
27 were enamored by his solid support for Israel's continued oppression of the  
28 people of Palestine, and the aggressive measures he took against Iran. Yet,  
29 his tweets smacked of anti-Semitism. The Trump presidency emboldened  
30 extremist White nationalists, who have a history of anti-Semitism. Jewish  
31 communities took note of the paucity of condemnations from Trump against  
32 the recent violent attacks of Jewish congregations. While his Democratic  
33 successor is as pro-Israel, he is not associated with the anti-Semitic crowd.  
34 Domestic considerations may swing more Jewish votes away from Trump.

35 American Muslims hardly approved Trump policies. However, due to his  
36 alliance with Narendra Modi, India's *Hindutva* demagogue, his rating among  
37 Hindu Americans was high.

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41 The major priority of the Trump administration was to protect the power of US  
42 corporations at home and abroad. Towards that end he made China the  
43 number one enemy. He imposed blockages on operations of Huawei and  
44 other large Chinese firms, provided incentives to US companies to move their  
45 operations to the US soil, threatened sanctions for maintaining ties with  
46 China, restricted cooperation between Chinese and US academics, and

1 initiated aggressive military moves against China. His attacks on multilateral  
2 institutions was followed by moves to initiate bilateral agreements that would  
3 give US companies greater power and advantage.

4 Internationally and domestically, his economic program abided by the  
5 classic neoliberal tenets—extensive privatization, defunding social services,  
6 reducing taxes on the wealthy, diluting environmental and other regulations  
7 on corporations, disempowering trade unions, defunding agencies like the  
8 Environmental Protection Agency, broadening the scope of operations of  
9 banks, financial enterprises, mining and energy firms, and firmly opposing  
10 measures to genuinely tackle the problem of global climate change. That his  
11 measures were wrapped in populist rhetoric and accompanied by outlandish  
12 tweets left even his most ardent supporters totally baffled.

13 The US establishment was strongly divided on the issue of relations with  
14 Russia. Trump favored allying with Russia, striking decisive blows on China  
15 and tackling it later. But a major faction wanted to isolate and tackle Russia  
16 and China at the same time. They were uneasy about the rapid pace at which  
17 he attacked the multilateral agreements that have well served US corporate  
18 interests. Hence the acrimony between him and his opponents was not an  
19 issue of the basic goal but how to achieve it. For both, Henry Kissinger's  
20 elucidation of globalization is as much a truism beyond doubt as the literal  
21 truth of the Bible is to the evangelist.

22  
23 *What is called globalization is really another name for the*  
24 *dominant role of the United States.* Henry Kissinger (Smith  
25 2017).

26  
27 Trump squarely placed US capital on a warpath with Chinese capital. No  
28 middle ground was possible.

29  
30 *Trump is the best student of neoliberalism because he applies*  
31 *its principles without concealment.* (Milanovic 2020).

32  
33 Combining free market fundamentalism, hyper-nationalistic populism with  
34 anti-Islamic, anti-immigrant, racially tinged tirades and measures that  
35 emboldened white nationalists and evangelical extremists, Donald Trump and  
36 his administration represented a curious and dangerous spectacle of the kind  
37 the world has rarely seen. Astonishingly major policy measures were  
38 intertwined with a barrage of obvious lies. In the light of their espoused  
39 adherence to high standards of morality, by aligning with such a president,  
40 evangelicals, their leadership and other religious groups became intertwined  
41 with a litany of immoralities and criminalities that defy justification.

42 In the 1960s, the presence of right-wing evangelical Christian leaders like  
43 Billy Graham who actively supported US imperial ventures like the war on  
44 Vietnam was counterbalanced by progressive Christian voices like Dr Martin  
45 Luther King and Father Daniel Berrigan. In the Trump and Biden eras,



1 retrogressive Christian leaders have bloomed but the voice of progressive  
2 Christians is barely audible and their footprint, not discernible.

### 4 7.11 THE PHILIPPINES

5  
6 Philippines—a nation of 100 million scattered in over 7,600 islands in 2015—  
7 is one of the two Asian nations where Christianity is the majority religion. It is  
8 also the third largest Catholic nation in the world. With no official religion, the  
9 government is constitutionally mandated to respect all religions equally. It has  
10 two official languages, Filipino and English. While data from varied sources  
11 conflict, it is fair to posit that 92% of the population is Christian (81% Catholic,  
12 11% Protestant and others), and 6% is Muslim. The remaining 2% practice  
13 folk religions, Buddhism, syncretism, or no-religion. Most Muslims, who  
14 predominantly are Sunnis, live on Mindanao and nearby islands. Shias and  
15 the Ahmadiyya are a minority. Over 10 million Filipinos reside in other nations.

16 In the sixteenth century, the archipelago islands formed a collection of  
17 communities loosely connected by trade and occasional conflict. People lived  
18 off agriculture, crafts and fishing under the rule of hereditary chiefs and rajas.  
19 Social stratification was low; cooperation based on traditional customs  
20 prevailed. Some islands had stronger links with mainland Asia.

21 Adhering to folk religions, now broadly labeled *Anito*, people believed in  
22 a diversity of gods who guarded their families and clan. Some creeds had a  
23 supreme creator god. If you disobeyed the gods, you would be punished now  
24 and after death. Spirit-infused mountains, animals, forests, trees and rivers  
25 were venerated. Wood carvings and metal statuettes represented the divine  
26 beings and their deeds. A bounty of flowery tales of creation, life, heroes and  
27 evil beings captured the imagination. Traditional medicine and faith healing,  
28 administered by shamans, were integral to all strands of *Anito* religion. While  
29 today it is an exclusive practice only for a tiny minority, most Filipinos indulge  
30 in its stories and observe its rituals in some fashion. Farmers observe the  
31 traditional *Anito* rituals at planting and harvest times. Folk Catholicism, which  
32 intertwines *Anito* with Christianity, still has a small following.

33 Traders from the Middle East brought Islam to the archipelago, directly  
34 and via Indonesia, in the 14th century. Islamic teachers and preachers who  
35 came with them managed to convert many islanders to their faith. The first  
36 mosque was built on the island of Mindanao in the 14th century. As their  
37 settlements expanded, Muslims formed kingdoms ruled by Islamic rajas and  
38 sultans. But Islam did not ever prevail across the archipelago.

#### 40 + Spanish colonial rule +

41  
42 In 1521, Christianity made a firm landing in the area with a naval expedition  
43 under the Spanish flag. The Spaniards had a three-fold objective: (i) get a  
44 share of the lucrative spice trade; (ii) establish a territorial base for trading  
45 ventures into mainland Asia; and (iii) spread Christianity. The arrival of more  
46 troops and naval vessels enabled them to seize control of one island after

1 another, build forts, and establish settlements for soldiers, traders and  
2 missionaries. Superior arms and the fragmented state of local rule facilitated  
3 colonization. Colonial forces and naval vessels were almost continually on a  
4 war footing in the first one and a half centuries. They battled firm resistance  
5 from some islands and attacks from Japanese pirates, Dutch forces from  
6 Indonesia, and warlords from China and Brunei.

7 As stability prevailed, the initial settlements grew into large, diverse towns  
8 populated by Spanish, Mexican, Chinese, Indian, Malay and local ethnic  
9 peoples. Conscripts from Spanish colonies in Latin America were present as  
10 well. A unified administration system based on a colonial legal code evolved  
11 gradually. A unified state, the Philippines, took form. The city of Manila on  
12 Luzon Island became the colonial capital.

13 Over time, the colony became a vibrant center of trade in goods from  
14 Spanish ruled Latin America, India, China, Indonesia, North Africa and  
15 Europe. Manila became the prime port where silver and gold from Mexico  
16 and Peru, liquor and olives from North Africa and Europe were exchanged for  
17 silk from China; fine fabrics, spices, gems and ornaments from India; spices  
18 and food products from Indonesia and Malaysia; and locally grown rice and  
19 other culinary items.

20 The islands were grouped into provinces under a top-down mode of rule.  
21 A bureaucratic hierarchy oversaw the administration of clusters of villages,  
22 towns and cities. The colonial governor was the final authority on matters of  
23 law, order, taxation and finance. But at the village level, compliant traditional  
24 chiefs were the low-level functionaries of the colonial state. The chiefly  
25 families came to form a landowning, wealthy elite detached from the people.  
26 Village elections were held but in ways that always ensured perpetuation of  
27 elitist rule.

28 For ordinary Filipinos, colonial life meant seizure of land and property,  
29 high taxes, forced labor, cultural indignities and restrictions on what they  
30 could do and where they could go. Authority had to be obeyed as the penalty  
31 for defiance was harsh. Language was a key tool of domination. Spanish was  
32 the language of administration, commerce and learning. But only some  
33 members of the local elite had access to education and learned Spanish. The  
34 common person had few means to understand the laws he or she was  
35 required to follow. Christian priests usually delivered their sermons in local  
36 languages. In this racist system, the brown skinned locals were derisively  
37 branded as Indians. The term Filipino was reserved for the white person.

38 According to one historian, Spanish rule left a toxic legacy of problems:  
39 (i) vast social and economic inequalities; (ii) pseudo-democratic mode of  
40 governance; (iii) bureaucratic, inefficient state institutions; (iv) pervasive  
41 corruption; (v) absence of accountability; and (v) theocratic influence in  
42 politics. (Robles 2017). That legacy was compounded by US colonialism and  
43 neo-colonialism. Yet, by generating a sense of national identity in the course  
44 of anti-colonial struggles, colonialism inadvertently created the Philippines.

45  
46 **+ Christianity under Spanish rule +**

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As stability prevailed and trade expanded, so did Christianity. Missionary endeavors did not face much opposition at the start, especially in areas outside Muslim rule. Though the rate of conversion was fairly rapid, it often implied the addition of one more god to the existent pantheon of gods. The first Christian house of worship was opened in 1591. Cathedrals, churches, monasteries and Christian centers sprouted throughout the archipelago from then on.

Saint Augustine Paoay Church shown below typifies the architecturally impressive structures of that era. Completed in 1710, it was designed to withstand earthquakes. Due to its cultural import, solid walls, imposing side and back buttresses, an attractive façade and a distinctive three-story bell tower, it is deemed a National Culture Treasure and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. And its history reflects the various phases of the history of the nation.



Saint Augustine Paoay Church

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During the Spanish era, the Catholic Church in the Philippines operated in a close similarity to its mode of operation in feudal Europe. In accordance with the papal decree to civilize and Christianize heathen peoples, the clergy condemned traditional belief systems as backward paganism, a path to hell. Conversion to Christianity was presented as the sole avenue for attaining salvation.

*The Spanish seldom had to resort to military force to win over converts, instead the impressive display of pomp and circumstance, clerical garb, images, prayers, and liturgy attracted the rural populace. (Miller 2020).*

The priests, however, did not venture beyond imagery to promote broad Christian enlightenment. Firmly opposed to schooling for the masses, they blocked the venues for ordinary Filipinos to learn Spanish, the language of official discourse. They could not read the Bible and other religious texts and

1 had to take what the priest said as a matter of faith. No other option was  
2 available for a long time.

3 The members of the local elite were, however, blessed with a modicum of  
4 spiritual and material crumbs. If they became Christians, they could learn  
5 Spanish, join lower ranks of the clergy and become the functionaries of the  
6 state. Being somewhat privileged and integrated into the colonial system,  
7 they came to view themselves as superior, socially and spiritually, to the  
8 common folk.

9 The Catholic Church formed a core segment of colonial governance. The  
10 priests knew local customs, language and the vast rural landscape, and had  
11 connections with the chiefs and elites. For the people, they were men with  
12 special powers, mediators between humans and the Lord in the Heaven.  
13 Their words had weight. These features made the Church an institution of  
14 special value for the state authority, an organized mechanism to control and  
15 administer the multitude of islands. It was said that to pacify the islanders a  
16 friar was more valuable than a battalion of soldiers. Residents of many islands  
17 were gathered into small townships (pueblos) where the church was the civil  
18 and ecclesiastical authority. By restricting traditional cultural events and  
19 holding regular prayer services, celebrating Christian holidays, setting the  
20 civil calendar, and officiating baptisms, weddings and marriages, the church  
21 became the dominant social and cultural authority of the area.

22 The varied orders of the Catholic Church used their distinct status to carve  
23 out specific spaces in the colonial system. They demanded and secured  
24 privileges and large land grants. As semi-feudal landlords, they amassed  
25 wealth and property and undertook commercial deals. The Church was an  
26 economic powerhouse in the rural areas and the cities. By favoring the local  
27 elite, it played a key role in internal class formation and the entrenchment of  
28 a rapacious, politically muscular landowning class in the nation.

29 The Spanish clergy exacted onerous tithes, interfered in the social affairs  
30 and made rules without consultation. As in Europe, their imperviousness to  
31 the welfare of their flock elicited resentment and opposition. People turned  
32 not against Christianity as such but against the overbearing, unaccountable,  
33 foreign priests. The growing anti-clerical sentiment sprouted the beginnings  
34 of Filipino nationalism. Campaigns against Spanish rule proliferated as the  
35 19th century drew to a close. Filipino intellectuals expressed the nationalist  
36 visions in finely crafted poems, plays, songs and literary works. Mass revolts  
37 broke out. Even as violent, furious backlash occurred, the fight for reforms  
38 and freedom went on.

39 Many demands for reform concerned the Catholic Church. Better access  
40 to education, blocked by the Church, was high on the list. Local priests, who  
41 were relegated to junior positions, demanded the right to perform the entire  
42 range of parish duties and ceremonies. Loud calls for replacement of foreign  
43 priests by Filipino priests ensued. Angered by the oppressive alliance of the  
44 Church and the colonial state, people called for the removal of the Church in  
45 the conduct of civil affairs.

1 Filipino priests played a central role in these anti-colonial struggles. They  
2 knew Spanish, the laws of the land and the rules of the game. And they used  
3 their facility with the Bible to their advantage. The hitherto agents of colonial  
4 rule now became forerunners of its grave diggers.

5 In 1872, 200 local soldiers and workers at the military fort in Cavite rose  
6 up in the hope of sparking a broad national uprising. Known as the Cavite  
7 Mutiny, it was a turning point in the fight for freedom. Though suppressed and  
8 with many rebels downed by the firing squad, its consciousness raising  
9 effects reverberated across the archipelago like a powerful earthquake.

10 Accusing them of instigating the mutiny, the Spaniards executed three  
11 Filipino activist priests—Jose Burgos, Mariano Gomez and Jacinto Zamora.  
12 A fourth of the 200 activists were exiled to a remote island by the military  
13 court. A quarter were priests. Burgos, Gomez and Zamora are now regarded  
14 as heroic martyrs of the Filipino nation.

15 Jose Rizal, the most eminent of the Filipino freedom fighters, was also the  
16 first Filipino ophthalmologist and eye surgeon. Truly a man of many talents,  
17 he penned fine novels, emotive poems and erudite social commentary;  
18 produced elegant sketches and paintings; sculpted evocative carvings; and  
19 skillfully ventured in varied disciplines in the social and natural sciences and  
20 technical fields. Further, he was accomplished in recreational activities like  
21 drama, swordsmanship and pistol shooting. Speaking twenty-two languages  
22 including Tagalog (Filipino), Filipino dialects and Spanish, he exchanged  
23 multilingual correspondence with distinguished scientists, artists, writers and  
24 freedom activists in Asia and Europe.

25 After specialist medical training in Europe, he could have lived a life of  
26 fame and comfort there. But he joined the burgeoning freedom movement in  
27 his homeland. Spurning the swinging social hobbies of fellow students, he  
28 put his mind to crafting poems and novels that boldly critiqued Spanish  
29 colonial rule and the Spanish friars who enabled it. The executions of Burgos,  
30 Gomez and Zamora had moved him deeply.



Jose Rizal

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1 In 1887, he published *Noli Me Tangere (Touch Me Not)*, a dramatic opus of  
2 romance set in the midst of the soulless cruelties of the colonial system.  
3 Simultaneously a laudatory exposition of Filipino culture and a trenchant  
4 critique of colonial injustices and hypocrisy as well as corruption of Spanish  
5 friars, its phraseology sparkles like a rare gem from start to finish. The book  
6 faithfully highlights the centrality of the Filipina woman in the colonial society.  
7 Its 1891 sequel *El filibusterismo (The Subversion)* and his final 1896-poem,  
8 *Mi ultimo adios (My Last Farewell)* had a profound impact on freedom  
9 struggles not just in his own nation but throughout Asia. Fertilizing the sense  
10 of a common identity and dignity for a people spread out in many islands, his  
11 ideas and conduct became an inspirational guide to justice-loving people of  
12 many lands.

13 But the authorities saw them as incendiary anti-colonial incitements. Both  
14 these books were banned upon first appearance, though smuggled copies  
15 circulated clandestinely and were read avidly. Like MK Gandhi, Rizal did not  
16 advocate violence. Yet, so great was the official fear of his pen and so  
17 incensed was the Catholic Church at his exposé of its misdeeds that he was  
18 arrested on trumped up charges of fomenting rebellion, tried and executed  
19 by a firing squad in 1896. His final poem was smuggled out of the prison  
20 where he languished awaiting his death.

21 Notwithstanding his strident attacks on the clergy, Rizal was not an  
22 atheist. Seeing himself a Christian, he denounced their crass misconduct and  
23 corruption. He felt that belief in God formed the essence of human existence.

24  
25 *To doubt God is to doubt one's own conscience, and in*  
26 *consequence, it would be to doubt everything; and then what*  
27 *is life for?* Jose Rizal (Wikipedia (2020 – Jose Rizal)).  
28

29 Rizal's works stand among the premier masterpieces of Asian literature and  
30 belong alongside the epic tomes of Leo Tolstoy and Rabindranath Tagore.  
31 Now deemed a national epic and a required read for school students in the  
32 Philippines, *Touch Me Not* has been translated into many languages and  
33 adapted into plays, operas and movies. Rizal busts and statues are found not  
34 just in the Philippines but also in several Asian and European nations.  
35 Streets, parks, buildings and educational institutions have been named after  
36 him.

37 Philippines remarkably elucidates the two societal facets of Christianity.  
38 The conduct of the Spanish friars reflects its deplorable side and Fathers  
39 Burgos, Gomez and Zamora, and Rizal embody its noble, progressive side.  
40 These two facets are aptly symbolized by the tall bell tower of the Saint  
41 Augustine Paoay Church: At first, it was associated with colonial domination  
42 but later it was used by Filipino freedom fighters as a watch tower in the  
43 armed struggle against the Spaniards in the 1890s and during the conflict  
44 with the Japanese forces in World War II.

45  
46 **+ American colonial rule +**

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Injustice cannot endure indefinitely. The Filipino people stood up defiantly to confront the exploitative Spanish rule as the 19th century drew to a close. The main anti-colonial movement was organized under the astute political and military skills of Emilio Aguinaldo. Employing versatile tactics, close links with the common folk and intimate knowledge of the local terrain, the patriotic forces managed to rout the Spanish battalions and set up a short-lived autonomous republic covering parts of the territory. But the colonialists regained the offensive, and most of the revolutionary leaders were forced into exile.

Yet, it was not all. The US, an emergent imperial power, had avaricious designs on the vast riches of the archipelago, and regarded it a strategic location from which to project influence throughout the Asia Pacific region. Viewing the moment opportune, it voiced support for the Filipino people and entered the fray. As tensions between the two imperial nations reached a fever pitch, the Filipino liberation forces resumed their struggles. The Spaniards were decisively defeated and in January 1898, the First Philippine Republic with its capital in Manila, was proclaimed.

But it was not to last. Determined to seize the archipelago, the US injected over 125,000 well-armed soldiers to wage a deadly campaign. Up to 20,000 Filipino combatants were killed. The US casualties were just over 4,000. The reckless, brutal, burn and slash tactics of the US forces caused the death of 200,000 Filipino civilians from hunger and disease. Recent studies have put that latter number to be much higher. After two years and three months, the first Philippine Republic was no more. President Emilio Aguinaldo was taken prisoner by the US forces in March 1901, and the Philippines was annexed by the US.

The new overlords administered the territory with a form of indirect rule. To deflect the ongoing opposition, a modicum of internal decision making was granted. Elections for the national assembly were held. But only a select few could vote. The assembly had limited powers and was subordinate to the US governor. The US talked democracy, but implemented a symbolic, handicapped form of government.

With new laws enacted, the civil service, police, judiciary and municipal governance were systematically reorganized. English became the official language. A public education system was established; health centers were built; urban sanitation and water supply were improved; and measures to protect public health were instituted. Roads, bridges, sea lanes, ports, official buildings and public parks were constructed. Cities and towns expanded as agriculture, manufacture and international trade grew. In no time, educated Filipinos by and large manned the civil service and the varied professions.

The US was not in the Philippines on a charitable mission. It was there to extend its political, economic and military influence. But its policy makers were at odds over how to attain that objective. Should it rule the nation as a formal colony or as a Latin American style neo-colony? Strong resistance from virtually all sectors of the Philippine society made the first option

1 potentially costly and unworkable. There was also the key matter of how to  
2 win support in the rural areas. Should the semi-feudal regime of the Spanish  
3 era be dismantled, and land redistributed to small holders or should it be kept  
4 in place? For the US, each had its advantages and disadvantages. It settled  
5 in favor of the landowners who exploited the peasantry under a semi-feudal  
6 system. The vast land extricated from the Catholic Church was to be utilized  
7 for public projects and distributed to poor peasants. Instead, a large portion  
8 ended up with the elite. It was a grossly unjust regime, just like similar  
9 neocolonial setups in Latin America. The deleterious effects of that decision  
10 ravage the Philippines to this day.

11 Colonial economic policies were designed to convert the Philippines into  
12 a dependent, profitable venue for US capital, a source of cheap primary  
13 agricultural and mining products and a secure, lucrative market for its  
14 manufactures. By the mid-1930s, the US was the source for two thirds of  
15 Philippine imports and the recipient for more than four fifths of its exports.  
16 The exports included hemp, sugar, tobacco leaf, and coconut products while  
17 imports included cigarettes, agricultural equipment, meat, dairy products,  
18 packaged foods, clothing, and sundry consumer items. Limits were placed on  
19 sugar, rice and cooking oil to ensure that the cheaper Filipino goods did not  
20 undercut the agri-business interests in the US. The small manufacturing  
21 sector, including grain milling and oil refining factories, was dominated by  
22 American companies.

23 Incensed by re-imposition of colonial rule and the moves to cement servile  
24 dependency, remnants of armed groups and civilian Filipino parties agitated  
25 for self-rule and freedom. Divisions between competing economic interests  
26 in the US Congress worked in their favor. The semi-independent Republic of  
27 the Philippines was established in 1935 as a compromise. Full autonomy was  
28 promised in ten years. The colonial administration, however, did not let the  
29 Filipinos decide their own destiny. It meddled in local politics in favor of the  
30 parties dominated by elitist, landowning interests that had a US-friendly  
31 stance. The parties and voices for genuine independence were covertly and  
32 overtly sabotaged, and progressive mass movements were subverted with  
33 harsh, violent measures.

34 The invasion of the archipelago by Japanese forces in WW II changed  
35 everything. Ejecting the US, Japan converted it into a colony of its own. The  
36 Filipino patriotic forces did not succumb but fought back. Though not as well  
37 armed, their large guerilla army inflicted heavy blows on the occupiers. Many  
38 perished on both sides. In the final stages, they managed, with the aid of US  
39 naval and air power, to defeat the new overlords. This victory represented the  
40 final demolition of colonial domination. The Republic of Philippines was born  
41 in July 1946.

#### 42 43 **+ Christianity under American colonialism +** 44

45 American troops first went to the Philippines under the presidency of William  
46 McKinley. A popular leader dubbed by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* a



1 'compassionate man,' McKinley dispatched the troops under the declared  
2 aim of discharging the American responsibility to promote the '*welfare of an*  
3 *alien people*'. The doctrine of Manifest Destiny, that the US had a God-given  
4 responsibility to lead humanity, underlay his intervention. His aim, he said,  
5 was to protect the Filipinos from domination by Spain and other imperial  
6 powers. The potent advantages that would accrue to the US companies were  
7 just unintended byproducts.

8  
9 [There] *was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and*  
10 *to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize*  
11 *them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them,*  
12 *as our fellow-men for whom Christ also died.* US President  
13 William McKinley (WFF 2020).

14  
15 The generals operating under his command interpreted his missionary zeal  
16 to authorize slash and burn tactics, and mercilessly subdue any opposition  
17 as the prelude to Christianize the Filipinos.

18  
19 *Instead of water over their heads, many of their bodies were*  
20 *immersed in pools of their own blood. Numerous Philippine*  
21 *towns were burned to the ground. Persons who collaborated*  
22 *with the Filipino revolutionaries were tortured. Churches were*  
23 *not spared the destructive wrath of the American army. More*  
24 *than half a million Filipinos died in the conflict.* (Gonzalez  
25 2002).

26  
27 The eminent novelist Mark Twain was among the few Americans of note who  
28 decried the hypocrisy of the US military operations in the Philippines. Though  
29 widely pilloried for his views, he boldly declared in the *New York Herald*:

30  
31 *We have pacified some thousands of the islanders and buried*  
32 *them; destroyed their fields; burned their villages and turned*  
33 *their widows and orphans out-of-doors; furnished heartbreak*  
34 *by exile to some dozens of disagreeable patriots; subjugated*  
35 *the remaining 10 million by Benevolent Assimilation. ... We*  
36 *are a World Power.* Mark Twain (Ciba 2015).

37  
38 Apparently, McKinley and his do-gooders were unaware that after 300 years  
39 of Spanish rule, the Philippines was as Christian a nation as the US. But it  
40 was not a brand of Christianity they were comfortable with. Not surprisingly,  
41 among the first acts of the US colonial administration was to annul the  
42 privileged status the Catholic Church had enjoyed under Spanish rule. Large  
43 tracts of the church owned land were purchased. The dominant, restrictive  
44 role it had played in education was nullified with the establishment of a free,  
45 public school system with English as the medium of instruction. Over 600  
46 teachers, many of them Protestant pastors, were initially imported. A formal

1 separation of the church and state was declared. The Protestant missionaries  
2 and teachers often ignored that edict and pilloried Catholicism in their public  
3 educational endeavors.

4 By alienating a powerful sector of the Philippine society, the colonial  
5 administration created a problem it would eventually need to rectify. Already,  
6 many a Filipino clergy had taken part in the peaceful and armed struggles  
7 against the US invasion. Continued conflict with the influential, now mostly  
8 Filipino Catholic clergy, was courting a public relations and political disaster.  
9 The remnants of the Spanish friars complicated issues further.

10 English took root and became an official language alongside Filipino, but  
11 Protestantism failed to make a significant headway. Converts were but a few.  
12 Catholicism was too deeply ingrained in the Filipino way of life to yield to the  
13 new imperial designs. But there was a redeeming factor. Like the Spanish,  
14 the US ruled by granting favors to the upper segment of the society with  
15 whom the Catholic hierarchy was linked. While minor differences persisted,  
16 the US colonial officials and the Catholic Church worked in complimentary  
17 ways. Catholic priests from the US brightened the image of America in the  
18 Filipino mind.

19 Two contrasting strands of Catholicism emerged during the American  
20 colonial era. On the one hand, the top Catholic hierarchy cultivated ties with  
21 the wealthy landowning and propertied classes and meddled in politics with  
22 a reformist but conservative agenda. On the other, a minor but determined  
23 segment of the clergy championed the cause of the masses and critiqued  
24 colonial rule at a fundamental level.

25 The key goals of the education system were to instill loyalty to America  
26 and instill the technical skills needed for the colonial system. In that era, it  
27 was not a comprehensive system. English fluency was confined to the upper  
28 social strata. Not designed to educate the nation, it was an elitist system that  
29 was a major conduit for the seepage of American culture into the Philippines.  
30 In addition to the Hollywood fare, American dress styles, cultivation of a taste  
31 for American foods, proliferation of daily use and luxury items from America,  
32 the education system facilitated, mainly through its impact on the elites, the  
33 creation of a pro-American mindset in the archipelago. A large segment of  
34 the elite was culturally oriented towards the American way of life. But there  
35 were also artists, writers, musicians, academicians and activists who strove  
36 to generate a vibrant, creative, authentic Filipino culture. Yet, it was an  
37 onerous undertaking as they had to swim against a financially powerful  
38 cultural behemoth imposed from outside.

39 Culture for the Filipino masses became a bifurcated affair. Regular church  
40 attendance, hymns, Biblical stories, holiday celebrations, church outreach  
41 events, Christian icons and photos coexisted with cheap, tantalizing novels,  
42 films, magazines, music, and educational influences from the US. The mix  
43 generated a dual mindset of values, visions and perceptions that provided  
44 psychological sustenance for the people. The former serves as the spiritual  
45 comfort zone and the latter, the secular comfort zone. Both served to pacify  
46 the spirit.

1 The Catholic Church had a strong voice in the universities. These were  
2 the formative places for professionals, nationalist politicians and senior state  
3 official. The academic disciplines in the universities—economics, social and  
4 natural sciences, arts and humanities, medicine and technical fields—  
5 resembled that in US universities. A rising number of Filipino graduates went  
6 to the US for further study. This combination of influences served to create a  
7 generation of politicians who called for independence but who at the same  
8 time were also attached to Catholicism and the capitalist world outlook.

9  
10 **+ Neo-colonialism +**

11  
12 We fast forward to the period starting from the 1960s. The Philippines was  
13 too valuable a possession to be allowed genuine sovereignty. It can have its  
14 own flag, anthem and parliament, but the imperialists had to call the shots.  
15 Hence in the transition to self-rule in 1946, and subsequently, the US deftly  
16 maneuvered trade and investment agreements, constitutional provisions and  
17 varied institutional arrangements to ensure that (i) US corporations enjoyed  
18 special protections and the ability to operate freely; (ii) the Philippine foreign  
19 policy was closely aligned with US interests; and (iii) it could operate three  
20 gigantic naval and air bases in the archipelago without any local oversight.  
21 These bases were crucial launching pads for US military operations in Asia  
22 and the Pacific, especially during the war on Vietnam. As elsewhere in the  
23 Global South, the instrumentality of the IMF and the World Bank was pivotal  
24 to the retention of the Philippines as a subordinate entity in the international  
25 capitalist order.

26 By 1970, some 800 US corporations with a total investment portfolio  
27 reaching \$2 billion operated in the nation. Nearly three quarters of the foreign  
28 investments were from US sources. Apart from 20,000 military personnel on  
29 the untouchable US bases, more than 40,000 Americans resided in the  
30 country.

31 These arrangements compromised national sovereignty, entrenched  
32 external economic dependency, stifled growth of local industries, generated  
33 poverty and expanded inequality. Apart from the state bureaucrats, military  
34 officers, hacienda owners, lackeys in the media and Western trained experts,  
35 they were strongly resented by virtually all sectors of the Philippine society.  
36 People protested peacefully, initiated labor strikes against US corporations  
37 and filed court cases. An armed insurgency was also launched. Filipino  
38 parliamentarians demanded nationalization without compensation of the US  
39 corporations and the Philippine Supreme Court ruled to remove the special  
40 status granted to them. The basic aim was to demolish neo-colonial servility  
41 and institute economic policies of benefit to the nation.

42 These moves occurred under the presidency of Ferdinand Marcos, an ally  
43 of the US who had sent over 10,000 Filipino soldiers to Vietnam in support of  
44 the US aggression on that nation. Renown for conducting for dirty, corrupt  
45 election campaigns, profligate channeling of state funds to symbolic projects  
46 and patently fraudulent deals, Marcos decided to extinguish these

1 progressive trends by declaring martial law in 1972. His move was later  
2 'ratified' in a demonstrably rigged election.

3 Marcos, who ruled until 1986, was among the most brutal and corrupt  
4 dictators of the 20th century. Due to the structural adjustment program of the  
5 World Bank he followed, US capital had a field day, venturing into mining, oil,  
6 service and other sectors. He did not tolerate any opposition. His security  
7 forces imprisoned, tortured, assassinated and disappeared thousands of  
8 democracy and social justice activists—students, journalists, academics,  
9 union leaders, priests, nuns, alleged rebels and civilians who fell under the  
10 suspicion of harboring anti-Marcos sympathies. Military operations were  
11 conducted ruthlessly, more so where Muslims were in a majority or a leftist  
12 armed group operated. Collective punishment and pillage of property were  
13 the norm. Besides hundreds of the combatants, over 30,000 civilians were  
14 killed in cold blood in the process.

15 After the 1986 popular uprising that deposed him, his family fortune was  
16 revealed to be between US \$5 and \$10 billion. Much of it was stashed away  
17 in offshore tax havens, Swiss bank accounts and undisclosed international  
18 investments. The exact amount is unknown. First Lady Imelda Marcos had  
19 the world's largest personal collection of shoes. At over 2,000 pairs, they  
20 included the most trendy, costly shoes one could buy. When the Marcos era  
21 ended, the national economy was in tatters, beset with mass poverty, high  
22 unemployment, declining per capita income, vast inequality, large public debt,  
23 devalued currency and debilitating economic dependency.

24 The Marcos fortune was an indirect reward for being a loyal minion of US  
25 imperialism, especially in relation to the war on Vietnam. Much of it accrued  
26 from under the table payments for the litany of large public works contracts.  
27 He diverted the billions of dollars in official loans and grants from the US and  
28 elsewhere. Companies of his relatives and cronies got lucrative deals while  
29 companies of competitors and political adversaries had a difficult time to  
30 operate under his reign.

31 Marcos was on good terms with all the US presidents that were in office  
32 during his reign. Despite his known corruption and excess, they showered  
33 him with a bounty of military and 'development aid'. They trained his military  
34 and security forces and provided a tonnage of arms and military supplies. In  
35 so doing, they were complicit in his financial criminality and deadly violations  
36 of the human rights of the Filipino people.

### 37 38 **+ Marcos and Christianity +** 39

40 Marcos had a mixed relationship with religion. He projected the image of a  
41 devout, elevated Christian dedicated to vanquish the scourge of '*godless*  
42 *communism*'.

43  
44 *Marcos, an Aglipayan Catholic and later a Roman Catholic,*  
45 *believed that he had a divine mandate to lead the Philippines*  
46 *and claimed to receive visions directly from God. He also drew*

1            *on Philippine mythology, referring to himself as malakas*  
2            *(strength) and Imelda [his wife] as maganda (beauty) in*  
3            *reference to the Philippine Adam and Eve. (RLP 2020c).*  
4

5 He maintained a pragmatic association with the Philippine Catholic Church.  
6 He courted it when it suited him but rallied against it otherwise. During his first  
7 term in office, his populist rhetoric and charisma drew support from many  
8 Filipinos. As the senior bishops remained in good terms with his government,  
9 the clergy mostly went along and remained politically subdued. When Pope  
10 John Paul VI paid a visit to the Philippines in 1970, Marcos used the occasion  
11 to bolster his Catholic aura. But the Pope, cognizant of the ugly side of the  
12 regime, did not reciprocate and focused on attending to the poverty-stricken  
13 areas that had earlier been ravaged by a major storm.

14            Martial law and the ensuing repression brought forth wide disaffection and  
15 ignited resistance movements in the cities and countryside. The progressive  
16 strand of Filipino Catholicism, whose influence had dwindled over the past  
17 two decades, now found a fertile soil. As the corruption and brutality of the  
18 Marcos regime intensified, virtually the entirety of the Catholic Church turned  
19 against him to form a major force in the struggle for democracy and human  
20 rights.

21            The investiture of Cardinal Jaime Sin as head of the Philippine Catholic  
22 Church in 1974 signified a major turning point. From then on, the Church  
23 leadership openly came out against martial law and for a return to democratic  
24 rule. Cardinal Sin urged the clergy to address poverty and social justice issues  
25 but without resorting violence. Branding the activist priests as troublemakers,  
26 Marcos restricted their public activities. But the moves only reenergized the  
27 clergy. Many of them now spoke out in open defiance of the regime.

28            The mounting tension between the state and the Catholic Church took  
29 place under the backdrop of a secular pro-democracy movement that had  
30 sprung up from the start of the Marcos era. Senator Benigno Aquino, its most  
31 prominent personality, galvanized the fight for restoration of civil liberties. To  
32 ensure his parliamentary majority, Marcos used the martial law powers to jail  
33 Aquino and other opposition figures and staged rigged elections. Yet, it only  
34 increased Aquino's popularity. Ultimately, a group of senior army officers  
35 assassinated him in 1983.

36            That was the final straw. A revitalized, broadened anti-Marcos opposition  
37 poured by the hundreds of thousands on the streets, peacefully chanting and  
38 blocking the thoroughfare. The command of the People Power movement, as  
39 it came to be known, was assumed by Corazon Aquino, Senator Benigno  
40 Aquino's widow. Her courage and charisma emboldened her followers; her  
41 tact and ability to unite the disparate factions strengthened the movement.  
42 Despite the violent reprisals they faced, people remained on the streets.

43            With the entire world transfixed at the unfolding events, even the military  
44 had second thoughts. As rank-and-file soldiers refused to fire at the crowds  
45 of civilians, prominent generals abandoned Marcos. The extent of the tumult  
46 across the nation implied that there was no way he could continue to rule. He

1 had to go. To save its face and continue its hold on future governments, his  
2 imperial master pulled the rug under him just when his downfall was imminent.  
3 The US could not, however, countenance the possibility of Marcos facing  
4 accountability and justice in his homeland. Instead, he and his family, with the  
5 ill-gotten riches still under their control, were flown out the country by  
6 American military helicopters in February 1986.

7 The Catholic Church under Cardinal Sin was a decisive force in the  
8 People Power movement. When most broadcast stations were intimidated  
9 into blacking out the funeral of Benigno Aquino, the Church radio station  
10 covered it in full. Catholic priests criticized Marcos and his cronies publicly  
11 and without reservation. Cardinal Sin became the main advisor of Corazon  
12 Aquino, and the murder of her husband and her plight were framed in Biblical  
13 terms. Marcos tried once again to use a papal visit, now by Pope John Paul  
14 II, in 1981 to whitewash his image. Though he rescinded martial law, his grip  
15 on power and security organs remained solid. The Pope did not reciprocate  
16 his overtures and kept a distance from him and his family, indicating that he  
17 was there as a guest of the Philippine church.

18 The annulment of martial law provided space for the Church to extend the  
19 anti-Marcos drive. Thousands of rosary wielding nuns and priests joined  
20 students and activists for extended sit-ins near military bases. Many were  
21 placed in custody. The military raided churches, mostly Catholic but some  
22 Protestant, and closed seminaries. But the ecclesiastic opposition to Marcos  
23 grew. The Church mobilized thousands of volunteers to monitor the 1986  
24 election, a crafty stratagem by Marcos to retain power. Voting was declared  
25 a Christian duty and people were urged to vote for Mrs Aquino, the candidate  
26 endorsed by the Church. After the doctored verdict for Marcos was  
27 announced, the Church gave sanctuary to the whistle blowers from the  
28 electoral body and helped expose the widespread irregularities in the vote  
29 count. The statement from the pulpit that Corazon Aquino had won left the  
30 Marcos regime reeling. The minor legitimacy it had left evaporated. Soon after  
31 his US engineered departure, Aquino assumed the presidency of the  
32 Philippines.

### 33 34 **+ Liberation Theology +** 35

36 As in many Global South nations, the racism, harsh injustice and flagrant  
37 inequality of the colonial and neo-colonial social orders spawned Filipino left-  
38 wing movements that strove to overhaul the system at its roots. The founding  
39 of the Communist Party of the Philippines under the leadership of Jose Maria  
40 Sison in 1968 was a critical landmark. In alliance with other leftist groups, it  
41 launched an armed struggle to depose the Marcos regime in 1969. Despite  
42 US backed attacks by the Philippine military, using guerrilla style tactics, their  
43 New People's Army was able to establish control in several rural localities.  
44 The Communist Party led broad-based National Democratic Front became a  
45 key segment of the rising pro-democracy movement. Hundreds of workers,  
46 peasants and students joined the Front.

1 As in Latin America, a fusion of Christianity and Marxism transpired.  
2 Father Edicio de la Torre, a disciple of liberation theology, founded a frankly  
3 leftist organization, Christians for National Liberation, allied with the National  
4 Democratic Front. Priest and nuns joined, making it the largest group within  
5 the Front. Some clergy embraced armed struggle. Some were captured and  
6 tortured. While the leftist clergy formed a minority in the overall Catholic anti-  
7 Marcos movement, their influence extended beyond their numbers. Marcos  
8 tried to discredit the pro-democracy movement as a whole by accusing it of  
9 promoting communism. But it was an absurd charge. Cardinal Sin, Corazon  
10 Aquino and their close allies did not harbor any ideas remotely connected to  
11 Marxism.

12 Cardinal Sin stood miles apart from the militant views of Archbishop Oscar  
13 Romero of El Salvador, Archbishop Don Helder Camara and Friar Leonardo  
14 Boff of Brazil. The latter deemed it the sacred duty of a Christian to combat  
15 economic, social and political inequities, and endeavor to institute structural  
16 changes for a social order based on economic fairness and social justice. In  
17 1984, Pope John Paul II issued a condemnation of the liberation theology  
18 stance of the Latin American Catholic notables. Incensed at the incorporation  
19 of Marxist ideas and tactics within theology, his reform program fell far short  
20 of the radical stand of Filipino bishops Antonio Fortich, Julio Xavier Labayen  
21 and Francisco Claver. On the other hand, the Pope had a friendly disposition  
22 towards Cardinal Sin.

23 The colonial history and neo-colonial developments after independence  
24 had pushed the Philippine Catholic Church in a reformist direction. From  
25 endorsing the extant social system, its senior leaders adopted a nationalistic  
26 stand that called for the alleviation of poverty and respect for human rights.  
27 Cardinal Sin was an embodiment of that legacy. He decried political tyranny,  
28 suppression civil rights and poverty but did not advocate replacement of  
29 capitalism with socialism. Corazon Aquino, a devout Catholic, had a similar  
30 outlook. She came from a major landowning family, and her cabinet was filled  
31 with elites of the traditional mold. Her presidency abjectly failed to tackle neo-  
32 colonial dependency and implement the promised, and much needed land  
33 reform. This constituted a betrayal of the hopes and dreams of the Filipino  
34 people. Under her presidency, economic ills abated somewhat but high-level  
35 corruption and impunity plagued public affairs, military brutality in rural areas  
36 persisted, inequality worsened, social insecurity and poverty endured, and the  
37 specter of authoritarian rule lurked around the corner. As it did for South Africa  
38 later, the US weakened her broadly beneficial economic policies by imposing,  
39 through international financial institutions, the repayment of the odious  
40 national debt acquired under the Marcos dictatorship. People were forced to  
41 pay for the crimes of their oppressor. Aquino's economic policies were  
42 scripted by the World Bank and neoliberal local and foreign economists,  
43 including the right-wing Philippines School of Economics at the University of  
44 Philippines.

45 The liberation theology minded priests and nuns were inspired by Jesus  
46 Christ's call to serve the poor. Yet, they also recognized the value of Marxist

1 analysis in elucidating the structural causes of poverty. It clarified the role of  
2 the state and the military in upholding the unjust poverty generating system  
3 and taught them the need for rising above charity. Without system change,  
4 poverty and suffering would persist. Moved by the plight of marginalized  
5 communities in city slums, Mindanao and other distant islands and the harsh  
6 repression they suffered, the leftist Christians worked in solidarity with the  
7 oppressed. Most were Catholics, but Protestant denominations were also  
8 represented.

9 Liberation theology declared that hunger would not abate just through food  
10 aid. It saw the unfair appropriation of the national wealth by the upper class  
11 as the root cause of poverty. It called for public control of industry and banks,  
12 protection of human rights including the rights of women, far reaching  
13 changes in the armed forces and removal of US military bases. It demanded  
14 banning the private militias and goon squads that were used by the landlords,  
15 merchants and factory owners to brutalize peasants, workers and students.  
16 The clergy and social groups inspired by liberation theology were a major  
17 force in the downfall of the Marcos regime.

#### 18 19 **+ Modern economy +** 20

21 The Philippine economy has become more linked to the economies of Asia,  
22 Europe and North America. While agriculture still accounts for a third of the  
23 total employment, manufacturing, services, mining, transport and  
24 communications now dominate the scene, both in terms of jobs and output  
25 value. Besides traditional items like coconut oil, fruits and clothing, exports  
26 include electronic goods, copper, petroleum derivatives and transport  
27 equipment.

28 As per official statistics and conventional criteria, the Philippine economy  
29 has been performing well. The growth rate has hovered around 6%, and the  
30 inflation rate has been below 4%. In 2019, per capita income was about US\$  
31 3,500, implying that the average Filipino earns US\$12 a day. Functional  
32 literacy exceeds 85%, over 2,200 universities and colleges exist, one doctor  
33 on average serves 850 people, dentists and nurses practice in good  
34 numbers, water services are affordable and improving, Internet use is among  
35 the highest in the world and the national debt is low. The nation seems to be  
36 on the march towards a status akin to South Korea.

37 But such numbers belie the reality. About 45% of the population lives on  
38 US\$2 or less a day with farmers and fisherfolk at the bottom of the ladder.  
39 Their earnings have hardly budged. Twenty million people live in packed,  
40 filthy slums. Manila holds the dubious distinction of having the largest slum in  
41 the world. The lives of poor children are blighted by lack of nutritious food,  
42 health care and education. Underemployment is high; the multitude in the  
43 informal sector have precarious lives—one day, sales are good, the next day,  
44 nothing.

45 Employers in many sectors, including factories producing top brand name  
46 goods for the Western consumers, fail to pay the minimum wage. Places of



1 work resemble sweatshops, with long hours, child labor and short-term work  
2 contracts. Work conditions often are unsafe. Dirty tactics are used to prevent  
3 workers from exercising their legal right to unionize.

4 Though a significant acreage of land has been redistributed over the past  
5 forty years, landownership is highly skewed with the most fertile lands in the  
6 hands of wealthy owners. Local people derive little benefit from the  
7 exploitation of resources in their areas. The messy, corrupt administrative  
8 system makes it very difficult for the small farmers to obtain title deeds and  
9 enables extensive land seizures by unscrupulous dealers. Illegal squatting is  
10 common.

11 The failure of the economy to provide decent jobs for even the educated  
12 professionals is dramatically illustrated by the fact that some 10 million  
13 Filipinos work and live abroad, in the US, Middle East and Europe. Nurses  
14 and doctors by the tens of thousands now efficiently staff the health systems  
15 of other nations while many Philippine islands have dire shortages of health  
16 personnel.

17 The richest families have stupendous wealth. Families of the 18 Filipino  
18 billionaires possess an aggregate fortune of 50 billion USD, equivalent to  
19 15% of the national income. It has been a boon time for foreign investors as  
20 well. Enduring maladies like crony capitalism, high- and low-level corruption,  
21 lack of accountability and administrative inefficiency constitute formidable  
22 obstacles to genuine, all-round economic development.

23 The Philippines is a constitutional republic with a presidential system.  
24 Elections are held regularly and there is a vibrant press. But vestiges of the  
25 Marcos era remain. Behind the scene political maneuvers enable plutocratic  
26 domination. The military remains a powerful force. In sum, the dreams of the  
27 Filipinos who flooded the streets to dethrone Marcos are far from realized.

28 Corazon Aquino instituted reforms in the system of governance but left  
29 the economic, political and military power structures intact. Her successors—  
30 Fide V Ramos, Joseph Estrada, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, Benigno Aquino  
31 III and Rodrigo Duterte—were wedded to neoliberalism as well. Due to his  
32 authoritarian tendencies, Joseph Estrada was deposed from office by a  
33 second People Power revolution in which the Catholic Church again played  
34 a major role.

### 35 36 **+ Rodrigo Duterte +** 37

38 A lawyer by profession, Rodrigo Duterte's political career took off after he was  
39 appointed a city vice-mayor in 1986. Subsequently, he served as the mayor  
40 of Davao, the third most populous city in the nation, from 1988 to 1998. It is  
41 a major center of trade, manufacture, fruit and food processing, petroleum  
42 production and fishing by local and multinational companies. Tourism,  
43 banking and retail trade form an important segment of the local economy.

44 Mayor Duterte introduced reforms but ruled with an iron fist, tackling street  
45 crime and the drug trade by authorizing summary killing of alleged criminals.  
46 Street children were not spared. A secretive, officially blessed death squad

1 stalked the city. Despite years of draconian policies, Davao still records the  
2 topmost murder rate and higher rates of other serious crimes than the other  
3 national cities. Child prostitution is rampant. Duterte also banned smoking,  
4 making Davao the first smoke-free city in the nation.

5 His populist, nationalistic presidential campaign platform posited crime  
6 and drug use as the central problems of Philippine society. He promised to  
7 deal with them as he had done in Davao. Boasting that he had personally  
8 killed criminals, he promised to eliminate traffic jams and corruption within a  
9 hundred days. His tough talk appealed to many. Assuming office in 2016  
10 through a plurality of votes, he set drug use and street crime at the top of his  
11 agenda. The other promises lingered in the background. Manila still ranks as  
12 one of the cities with the worst air pollution and traffic congestion in the world.

13 He withdrew the Philippines from the International Criminal Court to avoid  
14 broader accountability. A shoot to kill order was issued to the police dealing  
15 with drug pushers. The age of criminal responsibility was lowered from 15  
16 years to 9 years. The ensuing ferocious campaign launched in 2016 has  
17 involved arbitrary arrest and detention, extra-legal execution and unsolved  
18 disappearances. The victims mostly have been small time drug users, low  
19 level drug dealers, petty criminals and street children. Some opponents of the  
20 governments have perished too. The National Drug Enforcement Agency has  
21 recorded over 5,000 killings in the campaign. Independent and human rights  
22 groups put the number in the region of 25,000. The police are deemed to be  
23 responsible for about half of the killings. Vigilante groups and death squads  
24 have perpetrated many killings as well. Over a hundred young children have  
25 lost their lives. Yet, with sanction from the highest authority, almost total  
26 immunity prevails.

27  
28 *Hitler massacred three million Jews. Now there are three*  
29 *million drug addicts. I'd be happy to slaughter them.* President  
30 Duterte (Wikipedia 2020 – Philippine Drug War).

31  
32 *Leading 'political, trade union members, dissident and/or social figures, left-*  
33 *wing political parties, non-governmental organizations, political journalists,*  
34 *outspoken clergy, anti-mining activists, agricultural reform activists, members*  
35 *of organizations that are allied or legal fronts of the communist movement'*  
36 have suffered from state harassment and intimidation. Spurious prosecution  
37 has become more common. The thuggish Marcos era tactics have been  
38 revitalized under Duterte (Wikipedia 2020 -- Extrajudicial Killings and Forced  
39 Disappearances in the Philippines).

40 Investigative journalists, independent monitors and government critics  
41 are at a high risk. The new cybercrime and anti-terrorism laws that give the  
42 security forces the right to search without a warrant, detain for extended  
43 durations, monitor and censor content, drag them into an endless nightmare  
44 of lock up, months of hearings, lawyer fees, loss of earnings and family  
45 suffering. In a nation that has witnessed the murder of 175 journalists since  
46 1986, his venomous words are chilling:

1  
2 *Most of those killed, to be frank, have done something. You*  
3 *won't be killed if you don't do anything wrong. ... Just because*  
4 *you're a journalist you are not exempted from assassination if*  
5 *you're a son of a bitch.* President Duterte (Wikipedia (2020 –  
6 Rodrigo Duterte)).  
7

8 Such a rationalization for the deaths of their colleagues silenced the critical  
9 spirit in most media outlets. Self-censorship became the order of the day.

10 Duterte's presidential bid was backed by the moneyed, influential family of  
11 Ferdinand Marcos. Upon taking office he fulfilled the promise he had given  
12 them. With the blessing of the Supreme Court, and to the consternation of  
13 human rights bodies and many Filipinos, he allowed the cryopreserved body  
14 of Marcos to be buried at the Heroes Cemetery. The burial was done with  
15 military honors and a 21-gun salute. The press was barred from the event—  
16 a clear indicator of his preferred style of governance.

17 Duterte is a master of political hypocrisy. Despite branding himself as a  
18 'socialist' and 'anti-imperialist,' he vigorously pursues Marcos' style assaults  
19 to contain the decades old armed struggle by the Communist Party and  
20 Islamic forces in the resource rich, poverty plagued areas like Mindanao  
21 islands. Estimates value the potential wealth on and beneath these lush  
22 lands—agriculture, gold, copper, chromite, nickel, silver, manganese, iron  
23 ore, lead, zinc, oil, natural gas—at over US\$1 trillion. American, Chinese and  
24 other multinational corporations eagerly await the opportunity to expand their  
25 operations. For the first time since the Marcos era, these areas have been  
26 placed under martial law. Bombings and brutal military attacks in which  
27 civilians lose lives and livelihoods continue with impunity.  
28



29  
30 Human Rights Activists Memorializing Victims of Drug War  
31

32 In 2016, the US signed an agreement with the Philippine government that  
33 allows it to operate five large, permanent air and army bases in the territory.  
34 A part of the region-wide Operation Pacific Eagle, the presence of a few

1 Islamic State fighters has become the justification for this extension of the so-  
2 called War on Terror. The true aim though is to bolster the projection of US  
3 military power and economic hegemony over Asia. Despite his public anti-US  
4 bluster, the US is a key partner in his military campaigns against 'Islamic  
5 terrorists' and 'communists'. It gives arms, supplies, logistic support and  
6 counterinsurgency training. Given the growing investment and trade links with  
7 China, he has tried to play off China against the US. But whoever he aligns  
8 with, it is only to further his authoritarian domestic agenda.

### 9 10 **+ Duterte and religion +**

11  
12 Duterte's political profile and ruling style is in the same league as that of  
13 Narendra Modi of India, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil and Donald Trump of the US.  
14 But he differs from his proto-fascistic colleagues on a crucial matter. While  
15 they embody some manner of holy imprimatur, his relationship with the  
16 Catholic Church has largely been an unfriendly, if not an outrightly hostile  
17 one. Sounding like an atheist, he has ridiculed Biblical ideas.

18  
19 In July 2018, Duterte called God 'stupid' and slammed the idea  
20 of original sin and the biblical teaching of creation. 'What kind  
21 of religion is that?', he said then. (Soriano 2019).

22  
23 But, as is often the case, he subsequently somersaulted:

24  
25 *I never said I do not believe in God. What I said is your God is*  
26 *stupid, mine has a lot of common sense. That's what I told the*  
27 *bishops. I never said I was an atheist. Rodrigo Duterte*  
28 *(Regencia 2018).*

29  
30 In the course of his campaign in 2015, he called Pope Francis, a 'son of a  
31 whore'. He later apologized. Further down the road, his anti-Catholic tirade  
32 reached higher heights:

33  
34 *[In 2018] on All Saints Day, as people gathered by the*  
35 *thousands in cemeteries to pay respect to departed loved*  
36 *ones, Duterte questioned the foundation of the holiday. 'Those*  
37 *Catholics are crazy,' he said, dismissing their saints as 'fools'*  
38 *and 'drunkards' and proposing himself as a worthier object of*  
39 *worship: 'Santo Rodrigo'. Earlier this year, he aimed his*  
40 *favorite insult even higher than the pope, calling God himself*  
41 *a 'son of whore,' and asking, 'Who is this stupid God?' (Wills*  
42 *2018).*

43  
44 Duterte claims that he was a child victim of sexual abuse by a priest. The  
45 Philippine Catholic Church has not budged from its retrogressive stand on  
46 social issues like abortion, family planning, homosexuality, divorce and

1 reproductive health. He was a rare candidate who went against the Catholic  
2 doctrine and promoted birth control and the death penalty. After a leading  
3 bishop issued a pastoral letter calling him a '*morally reprehensible*' candidate  
4 who had little regard for the rights of the people, he retaliated by calling the  
5 Catholic Church '*the most hypocritical institution*'.

6 But the greater source of animosity between these heavyweights of  
7 Philippine society revolves around social justice issues. In the atmosphere of  
8 fear and media silence that ensued after Duterte took office, the Catholic  
9 Church and its outlets were among the few voices critical of his ferocious war  
10 on drug users and dealers. He did not take it kindly. He chastised the priests  
11 for misusing state funds and donations, failing to stem drug use,  
12 homosexuality and child abuse, and promised to expand family planning  
13 programs. Singling out the most vocal oppositional priests, he called them  
14 thieves and drug users.

15  
16 *You criticize the police, you criticize me. For what? You have*  
17 *the money. You are all crazy ... when we were making*  
18 *confessions to you, we were being molested. They are*  
19 *touching us. What is your moral ascendancy, religion? What is*  
20 *the meaning of it? ..... If you cannot mend your ways, if you*  
21 *cannot even give justice to the small boys that you have*  
22 *molested in the past, you do not have that moral ascendancy*  
23 *to lecture on the sanctity of life.* President Duterte (Morales  
24 2017).

25  
26 In August 2016, the Archbishop of Manila roundly criticized extrajudicial  
27 killings, likening them to abortion, exploitative labor practices, wastage of  
28 food and peddling of illegal drugs. Prominent priests have noted that  
29 Duterte's anti-drug campaign targets small time actors, not the drug barons.  
30 The Church gives support to survivors and families of victims of extrajudicial  
31 attacks. It also takes an active stand on matters of democracy, social justice,  
32 poverty, human rights and environmental protection. For example, the plans  
33 for large scale mining ventures on Samar and other islands being promoted  
34 by the government carry the potential to inflict significant damage on the  
35 aquatic and land ecosystems, pollute a large area and impoverish the  
36 indigenous communities further. Siding with them, the Church has strongly  
37 opposed such projects.

38 Taking an enlightened stand on the social conflicts in the Filipino society,  
39 the Church seeks structural, not punitive solutions. For example, in relation  
40 to the involvement of poor youth in the drug trade, it has declared:

41  
42 *Children in conflict with the law reflect a society in deep crisis.*  
43 *The grim reality of joblessness, landlessness, lack of social*  
44 *services, high inflation rate, among others, have made this*  
45 *society more vulnerable, unsafe and violent for our children.*

1 The National Council of Churches in the Philippines (Soriano  
2 2019).

3  
4 The autocratic president has little tolerance for the vocal, persistent volleys  
5 casting aspersions on his policies. Some bishops and priests were charged  
6 with sedition and attempting to depose the government. While the ludicrous  
7 case was dropped, the harassment took its toll.

8  
9 *These bishops that you guys have, kill them. They are useless*  
10 *fools. All they do is criticize.* Rodrigo Duterte (Regencia 2018).

11  
12 This diatribe occurred as three Catholic priests were murdered in a span of  
13 12 months. He once more renounced his words. But it was not a matter of  
14 verbiage. His message reverberated with the rightwing vigilante groups. Five  
15 bishops and priests who openly criticized the drug war thereupon received  
16 death threats. Security organs surveilled and kept tabs on outspoken clergy,  
17 and the crimes against them remained unsolved. The grim warning sank in  
18 as kind-hearted nuns, priests, and activist Christians thought twice before  
19 working on projects to assist the families of individuals targeted in the ghastly  
20 drug war.

21 The Catholic Church formed several large voting blocs in the past. Voters  
22 often followed guidance from the pulpit. Alienating the Church was a risky  
23 proposition. But, the democracy-espousing, Church-backed leaders from  
24 Corazon Aquino onwards enriched the upper class and did little to tackle the  
25 long-standing problems of joblessness, crime, inflation, corruption, urban  
26 blight, rural misery, poor health services and deficient access to education.  
27 As voters felt let-down by the 'middle roaders,' the credibility of the Church  
28 suffered. The disillusioned sought an alternative. Duterte's arrival on the  
29 scene occurred at an opportune moment. He talks tough and does not seem  
30 beholden to the 'elites' or special interests. He exposes the Church's weak  
31 side by pointing to pedophile priests and the Church's stand against family  
32 planning. The status of the Church as a cultural institution is weakened by  
33 the penetration of consumerist, self-centered, and Internet and cell phone  
34 driven culture. Exposés of financial and sexual scandals among the clergy  
35 and the cover-up attempts undermined its moral authority. Regular weekly  
36 church attendance among the Filipinos declined from over 60% around 1990  
37 to 40% around 2015. The stage was set for a major popularity contest.

38 Duterte won the initial round, but not by a majority. Many heeded the call  
39 of the Church. But it was not enough. His ratings skyrocketed as he launched  
40 his anti-drug crusade and bodies piled up on the street and ramped up his  
41 rhetoric against his opponents. By 2019, opinion polls put his approval rating  
42 in the region of 80%. For the rich, the poor or the middle class, Duterte was  
43 the man. In the 2019 senatorial election, Catholic, Protestant and Aglipayan  
44 church leaders endorsed opposition and independent candidates. But for the  
45 first time in nearly seven decades, none of them won. Voters ignored the holy

1 edicts. Candidates close to Duterte and those not taking a stand against him  
2 made a clean sweep.

3 Duterte gained a following among Catholic and Protestant priests as well  
4 as devout lay Christians. Seeing him standing against elitist Catholic prelates  
5 and bishops, they brushed aside his personal failings. Many Filipinos regard  
6 him an authentic leader sent by God, like the Biblical King Josiah, to cleanse  
7 the society of its accumulated evils through administration of swift justice.

8 Duterte commands loyal allies among Baptist and Evangelical pastors  
9 and ministers of the well-endowed megachurches. Apollo Quiboloy, pastor of  
10 the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, a megachurch that claims six million followers,  
11 is a staunch political ally and personal friend. He allowed Duterte to use his  
12 private planes in his election campaigns. Megachurches have experienced a  
13 rapid growth in membership in the recent years. Unlike the traditional Catholic  
14 churches, they mostly adopted an attitude of silence or implicit endorsement  
15 towards his anti-drug crusade. At best, they issued calls for spiritual renewal  
16 of drug users and misbehaving police officers. While the progressive Catholic  
17 clergy reflect the interests of the downtrodden, the megachurch pastors  
18 increasingly reflect the interests of the affluent but insecure middle class and  
19 the superrich.

20  
21 *For megachurch pastors, the war on drugs is a 'righteous*  
22 *intervention' on the part of a God-ordained administration.*  
23 *(Cornelio and Maranon 2019).*  
24

25 As in the US, some megachurches have been afflicted by mega-scandals. In  
26 January 2018, pastor Apollo Quiboloy and five other passengers on board of  
27 the pastor's aircraft were arrested by US agents in Honolulu just as it was  
28 about to take off for Manila. An undeclared stash of 350,000 US dollars and  
29 parts to assemble military grade rifles were found on the plane. One person  
30 was charged with illegal cash smuggling. She is a devout supporter of the  
31 pastor and his megachurch.

32  
33 +++++  
34

35 Pope Francis has taken more measures than previous popes to mold the  
36 Catholic Church as the church of and for the poor and has granted a friendly  
37 audience to the Latin American founders of the liberation theology. Today  
38 liberation theology is barely visible in its land of origin. Though weakened from  
39 the 1970s, the clergy espousing it in the Philippines remain active and firmly  
40 oppose the Duterte regime, especially its violent onslaught against the  
41 marginalized rural communities plagued by hunger and extreme poverty.  
42 Exposing military misdeeds, they organize Basic Ecclesial Communities to  
43 empower the people, provide educational and health support and implement  
44 a non-neoliberal mode of development. A few priests have joined the armed  
45 wing of the National Democratic Front of the Philippines.

46

## 7.12 SEXUAL ABUSE AND THE CHURCH

In the eyes of his congregation, the pastor is a two-way emissary to God. He is a conveyor of the words of God who also transmits their devotion to God into the heavenly realm. Respected as a spiritual advisor, secular counselor and the keeper of intimate secrets, the congregation expects him to adhere to high moral standards in all matters including sexuality and be a role model for the youth. The bishops of the Catholic Church have to abstain from sexual relations and not marry. Protestant ministers may be married, but they need to abide by the standards of a Christian union.

This image of clerical piety has been shattered in the past twenty years as revelations of long standing, egregious sexual abuse of minors, especially boys, rocked the Catholic Church in country after country. Not only have ministers respected by the community wantonly preyed upon their youthful charges but their abusive proclivities were too often known by their superiors and fellow priests. Yet they had kept quiet. Parish after parish has been shocked as the victims finally gathered courage in a cumulative fashion to come out in the open and reveal their abusers. It started from major exposés in the US in 2002. In no time, the revelations of sexual abuse by priests tarnished the entire Christian realm.

The abuse revelations, many vindicated by court rulings, are grim. Internal investigations, independent inquiries, official commissions, legal records and media reports jointly show that serious or moderate level of sexual abuse of children, vulnerable adults and women occurred for decades in virtually all Christian denominations and orders in many nations. We first consider the situation in three countries, the UK, Australia and USA.

### + The United Kingdom +

Almost all the Christian churches in the UK—the Church of England, the Church in Wales, the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales, the Methodist Church, the Baptist Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Catholic Church in Scotland—have been stained by the malady of sexual abuse of minors and women. With recorded cases over the past few decades ranging from hundreds to thousands, it has been a saga of denial, neglect and cover up. Sexual abuse occurred not just in the local churches, but also in schools, nurseries and events run by the churches.

Thus, in 2016, the Church of England looked into 3,300 complaints of priestly sexual abuse. Fifteen priests in the Diocese of Chichester were found guilty of sexual abuse in 2015. Among them, the Bishop of Lewes was given a 32-month sentence for abuse of 18 youth. Eleven other priests were under investigation for similar offenses. Senior Church leaders had connived to hush up the crimes and shield the offenders, and accusers were harassed into silence. Priest seen as persistent abusers were assigned other duties or defrocked but their grave assaults were not reported to the police. A similar pattern has prevailed across the British religious landscape.



1 Now the tables have turned. As much is coming out into the open, a new  
2 attitude towards sexual abuse prevails. Church prelates now adopt a policy  
3 of zero-tolerance for sexual crimes, reporting the allegations to the police and  
4 instituting measures to protect potential victims. Senior bishops and ministers  
5 are disciplined for not taking needed actions to curb or reporting sexual  
6 abuse. Apart from a few false accusations, the complainants have a valid  
7 case. As priest after priest goes off to jail, victims get compensation. Strict  
8 background checks for people who will deal with children are done and  
9 thousands of parish level safeguarding officers are being trained.

10  
11 **+ Australia +**  
12

13 Australia has also been rocked by the scandal of sexual abuse in the church.  
14 The Royal Commission—the highest investigative body in the nation—  
15 released a landmark, detailed report on the issue in 2017. It documented  
16 thousands of cases of severe sexual abuse by the clergy over a time span of  
17 more than 50 years. The victims were mostly 10 to 14 years old, but some  
18 were younger. On average, the abuse lasted three years. Most frequent in  
19 the Catholic Church, the vile acts included fondling, masturbation and rape.  
20 Psychological denigration, punishments and depravation went hand in hand  
21 with sexual assault. Sexual abuse also occurred in schools and homes for  
22 children run by churches. Children of the Aborigines and disadvantaged  
23 minorities forcibly taken from their families suffered disproportionately.

24 The victims were further traumatized by being blamed for their own abuse,  
25 given threats of landing in hell, or made to beg forgiveness from their abuser.  
26 Many endured years of impairment of physical and mental health, including  
27 depression, anorexia, alcoholism and suicidal feelings. That on average it  
28 took 24 years for victims to make the abuse public is a clear indicator of the  
29 intense pain they had endured. The few who spoke up at the time of their  
30 abuse had faced hostility from the clergy and the community. In some cases,  
31 even parents had refused to believe their own children.

32 Over the past several decades, about 7% of the Catholic priests in the  
33 nation were suspected as abusers. In one church, 4 out of 10 priests were  
34 alleged abusers. Yet, colleagues and senior prelates all the way up to the top  
35 and the Vatican conspired to suppress the crimes. At best, superficial  
36 inquiries occurred at a slow pace, and even serial abusers got but a slap on  
37 the wrist. Denial was common practice. Serious criminality was portrayed as  
38 a spiritual failing. The perpetrators were transferred without taking due  
39 precautions to prevent them from re-engaging in sexual abuse. While police  
40 reporting was mandated in 2010, police and state officers dragged their heels  
41 in such cases. Pope John Paul II (in 2001) and Pope Benedict (in 2008)  
42 issued tepid apologies for these acts but without calling them serious criminal  
43 offenses or mentioning compensation for the victims.

44 It was only when the aggrieved families of a few victims, advocates of  
45 children's rights, dogged journalists and one rank-breaking senior police  
46 officer launched a determined campaign to expose and redress these crimes

1 that the government formed the Royal Commission to investigate church-  
2 related sexual abuse in Australia. Despite the scope and tragic nature of the  
3 abuses it revealed, the Vatican and the Australian Catholic Church leaders  
4 reacted too mildly to satisfy the victims and children rights bodies.

5 The case of Cardinal George Pell, the Archbishop of Sydney from 2001  
6 to 2014, is instructive. The Cardinal was a high-profile public personality,  
7 writing and speaking frequently on religious and social issues in the popular  
8 media and scholarly venues. A recipient of high civil decorations, he was  
9 credited with taking novel steps to deal with sexual abuse in the church. But  
10 his reputation took a nose-dive after 2002 when allegations emerged that he  
11 had been a party to sexual abuse of minors over a long period of time. He  
12 was eventually brought to trial, convicted, and his appeal was rejected. But in  
13 2020, after he had spent over a year in prison, the High Court of Australia  
14 overturned his conviction and freed him. Dismayed at the reversal of his  
15 verdict, his accusers and children's rights groups are pursuing civil suits  
16 against him. Police are investigating his other cases.

17 Of particular focus is his tenure in the diocese of Ballarat, a city where  
18 thousands of minors were abused by some of the most notorious priests in  
19 the nation. Over 50 suicides in the city are attributed to clerical sexual abuse.  
20 George Pell served as a senior parish priest in the city from 1973 to 1983.  
21 During that time, he was the main witness for the defense of Gerald Ridsdale,  
22 a priest charged with and found guilty of committing over a hundred crimes  
23 against children in four trials. The Royal Commission report declared that  
24 despite being aware of widespread sexual abuse of children, Pell and fellow  
25 priests did not act to curb it. Instead, they sent the abusers to other parishes.  
26 Christian Brother Edward Dowlan was one. Pell knew about his improper  
27 sexual conduct but did not inform his superiors. Dowlan abused scores of  
28 more minors in five other parishes and was jailed twice for his crimes over the  
29 next decades.

30 While the High Court of Australia has released Pell who says he did  
31 nothing wrong, the victims of clerical sexual abuse in Ballart have started a  
32 campaign for revocation of Pell's clerical titles and positions. But having once  
33 been the principal financial adviser of Pope Benedict, Bell is not a lightweight  
34 in the Vatican circles. When the High Court verdict in his favor was  
35 announced, it was greeted by the Pope. The chance that Cardinal Pell will be  
36 defrocked is miniscule.

### 37 38 **+ The United States of America +** 39

40 The USA proudly sees itself as the most Christian nation in the Western world.  
41 Yet, American Christianity is also tainted by priestly sexual abuse of minors.  
42 Though mostly affecting the Catholic Church, it occurred in the other  
43 denominations as well. The pattern of reaction by the churches is like that in  
44 the UK and Australia: cover up, denial, transfer of the abusers and blaming  
45 the victims at the outset. But when media publicity and court cases make that

1 stand untenable, the church authorities relent, admit the indisputable facts,  
2 and institute effective steps to protect children from sexual abuse.

3 A grand jury investigation in Pennsylvania uncovered over a thousand  
4 cases of sexual and physical abuse of minors by more than 300 Catholic  
5 priests during a span of seven decades. They had stripped, bound, whipped  
6 and raped minors, made teenage girls pregnant, and taken pornographic  
7 photos—all on church grounds. Despite being aware of the abuse, their  
8 superiors not only kept quiet but also denied and falsified the reality. Though  
9 the evidence in the 2018 report was solid, the statute of limitations in the state  
10 shielded the surviving perpetrators and their abettors from criminal  
11 proceedings. It was unclear whether they would be sanctioned even by the  
12 church. As an aggrieved Christian commentator put it:

13  
14 *Evil is real, and it walked the earth in Pennsylvania. It entered*  
15 *through our church doors.* (Bruenig 2018).  
16

17 According to a US research body affiliated with the Catholic Church, there  
18 were about 3,500 allegations of sexual abuse by priests in the 1970s, 2,100  
19 in the 1980s, 500 in the 1990s and 200 in the 2000s. Another source puts the  
20 number of victims at 16,000 and the involved clergy at 3,700. It has been  
21 estimated that only about 5% of the child abuse claims were reported to the  
22 police in the past. In light of the length of time taken to report abuse, and  
23 recording and reporting bias, the known numbers of abused children are likely  
24 underestimates. It is just in the past two years that the Catholic Church  
25 acceded to long-standing demands to reveal the names of accused priests to  
26 the public and released 5,300 names. But in-depth investigations by the  
27 Associated Press showed that the church list excluded nearly 900 alleged  
28 child abusers. A further 400 names of perpetrators were uncovered for the  
29 dioceses that had not reported any. Among the unnamed priests were over a  
30 hundred who had been found guilty of a litany of serious sexual offences.  
31 Many abusive pastors and lay employees in church schools or those who had  
32 peddled pornographic material were not included. Others were excluded due  
33 to technicalities and lax standards for judging the credibility of the accusation.  
34 In places like New York, the bishops had deliberately left out some names  
35 from released lists. Church sources claimed that the number of complaints  
36 was decreasing, but independent investigations indicated it was not the case.

37 As shown in a 2017 study by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops,  
38 instances of false accusations of child abuse against priests occur but rarely.  
39 Such considerations imply that the true scope of the malady of abuse of  
40 minors in the church is unknown. Having experienced how high clergy cover  
41 up sex abuse incidents, a senior law enforcement officer stated:

42  
43 *You can't put much stock in the lists that the church voluntarily*  
44 *provides because they cannot be trusted to police themselves.*  
45 *Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro* (Lauer and  
46 *Hoyer 2020).*

1  
2 Sexual molestation of children occurred in the American Protestant churches  
3 as well. By 2019, hundreds of such cases had come to light in the Southern  
4 Baptist Church, the largest Protestant denomination in the US. Other Baptist  
5 churches were likewise affected. It emerged that in the past two decades  
6 some 400 junior and senior Southern Baptist clergy had been found guilty of  
7 committing sex offenses involving more than 700 victims. Two prominent  
8 pastors accused of sexual harassment had resigned from their post.

9 Hitherto, painting it as a problem of the Catholic Church, the Southern  
10 Baptist leadership had deployed the tactics of cover up and misdirection as  
11 well. But now that it was the subject of headlines, legal scrutiny and potential  
12 exodus of its congregation, it featured on the agenda of the Southern Baptist  
13 Convention in June 2019. The Church president called for repentance,  
14 elimination of abuse and cover-up, and accountability for wayward priests. A  
15 guideline to care for the victims was issued. The picture for several other  
16 Protestant churches in the US is similar.

17 Some data suggest a preponderance of Catholic Church-based sex  
18 abuse. In Western New York, of the 105 initial childhood abuse lawsuits filed,  
19 98% had Catholic defendants. The US Catholic Church has paid more than  
20 \$3.2 billion since 2002 to settle an average of 700 sexual abuse lawsuits per  
21 year. The corresponding figures for the Protestant churches is about \$100  
22 million for an average of 260 cases per year. The payment time spans for the  
23 two bodies are not the same but the disparity is striking. Some analysts  
24 attribute the disparity to the greater public focus on the Catholic Church and  
25 think that in time, many more cases will be uncovered among the Protestant  
26 churches.

### 27 28 **+ The Vatican +** 29

30 The inner circles in the Vatican City have been afflicted with the problem of  
31 sexual abuse. Cardinal George Pell, whose tribulations were noted above,  
32 was a member of a select group of senior advisors to the Pope and served  
33 as the head of the economic and financial affairs of Vatican City from 2014 to  
34 2019. In 2019, Vatican City's ambassador to France was forced to resign after  
35 being accused of molesting children.

36 While previous popes were reluctant to recognize the seriousness of the  
37 malady of sexual abuse in the church, Pope Francis, who took office in 2013,  
38 has adopted a firmer policy. Calling the crimes 'atrocities,' he acknowledged  
39 their existence in full, met abuse survivors, broadened the criteria for abusive  
40 conduct, and insisted that all bishops must adopt a policy of 'zero-tolerance'  
41 towards sexual molestation in their dioceses and take steps to weed it out. In  
42 2019, he put an end to the practice of maintaining secrecy in child abuse  
43 cases and allowed the names of accused priests to be made public. Though  
44 he proposed the establishment of a tribunal to try the priests involved in cover  
45 up of sex crimes, it has been stalled by the inertia of the Vatican. These

1 measures are long overdue. And, advocates for the victims fault him for not  
2 going far enough and failing to codify his words into Vatican law.

3  
4 +++++

5  
6 Clerical sex crimes are a world-wide, cross-denomination, cross-religion  
7 phenomenon. In 2019, a prominent British priest and his three colleagues at  
8 St Michael's Catholic Boarding School in Soni, Tanzania were exposed as  
9 pedophiles who had repeatedly fondled students, photographed them without  
10 clothes and otherwise abused them. In 2004, five Catholic priests in the Indian  
11 state of Kerala were placed under arrest to face several counts of rape and  
12 abuse of children.

13 Sexual abuse of children is a socially dispersed occurrence. Studies  
14 across nations indicate that 6% to 13% of children experience abuse—in the  
15 home, school or elsewhere, and from teachers, priests, care givers, priests or  
16 others. Studies comparing abuse in religious and non-religious institutions are  
17 rare. One such investigation was done in Germany. Using a sample of 1050  
18 victims from an official database and telephone interview data, the  
19 researchers compared the nature and effect of childhood sexual abuse in  
20 Roman Catholic, Protestant and non-religious institutions in Germany. 38%  
21 of the abused individuals were from Roman Catholic, 12% from Protestant,  
22 and 50% from non-religious institutions. The gender divide for the victims was  
23 60% male to 40% female, and for the abuser, it was 85% male to 15% female.  
24 The key finding was that the three types of institutions were similar in terms  
25 of manner (physical, sexual, emotional), frequency, duration, and severity of  
26 abuse and gender of the abusers. The pattern of psychiatric problems among  
27 the victims was similar as well. The authors concluded:

28  
29 [Child] *sexual abuse in institutions is attributable to the nature*  
30 *of institutional structures and to societal assumptions about*  
31 *the rights of children more than to the attitudes towards*  
32 *sexuality of a specific religion.* (Sprober et al. 2014).  
33

34 Church-based pedophilia receives much exposure. But molestation and rape  
35 of women by priests remains an unaddressed concern. In the nations of Latin  
36 America, Africa and Asia, it overshadows sexual crimes against children. In  
37 addition to other factors, the revelations on sex crimes by clergy and at times,  
38 personal encounters of sexual advances at their local churches are among  
39 the major reasons that young people give for reduced attendance in church  
40 services and activities. Surveys indicate that in general, people feel that sex  
41 abuse occurs almost equally in the Catholic Church and other Christian  
42 denominations, and that it is an ongoing problem.

### 43 44 7.13 STATUS OF WOMEN 45

1 A global study reinforced a longstanding observation: Measuring the level of  
2 religiosity via identification, attendance in church, mosque or temple service,  
3 and prayer frequency, women are more religious than men by a margin of  
4 85% to 80%. And of those not affiliated to a religion, men were 55% and  
5 women, 45%. But there were exceptions in some countries and for some  
6 religions. The gender divide was most clear cut for Christianity, and for the  
7 US where religiosity is at a higher level than in most Western nations. A  
8 gender divide on belief in heaven and hell was not seen for American  
9 Christians. The daily prayer rate was 64% for women and 47% for men in the  
10 US while in France these percentages were 15% and 9%, respectively.

11 The gender gap in religiosity is in part due to women being central to key  
12 life events that involve a religious ceremony—birth, child rearing, marriage,  
13 illness and death. Children absorb religious ideas more from their mother  
14 than father. Factors like poverty, lower paying jobs, higher existential  
15 insecurity, family and cultural patriarchic norms, gender-based violence and  
16 older age induce women to seek spiritual solace at a higher rate than men.  
17 One commentator stresses the social benefits of religiosity.

18  
19 *In the end, I think religion is more appealing to women*  
20 *because, at a community level, it has more social benefit to*  
21 *women. I've known a lot of women from my mother's and my*  
22 *grandmother's generations who would have been lonely*  
23 *without a church to provide a focus and a purpose in*  
24 *their lives, to offer company and a place to go once the*  
25 *children had left home and their husbands had gone (as they*  
26 *so often do, since women live longer). (Orr 2015).*

27  
28 Yet, despite their higher level of participation in religious functions, not only  
29 are women distanced from power and decision making but are also subject  
30 to discriminatory norms and practices. Women work, men decide, not just in  
31 the home but also in the church.

32 Christianity, like all major religions, is afflicted with gender inequality at  
33 the scriptural, institutional and functional levels. The problem is more acute  
34 in Catholicism. But unlike the other religions, more exchanges on this front  
35 have transpired in many Christian denominations in the recent decades and  
36 noteworthy progress towards gender equality has been observed.

### 37 38 **+ Bible and gender +**

39  
40 The story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is a major fulcrum for the  
41 debate on what the Bible says about the equality between men and women.  
42 God first created Adam. He then created Eve from his rib as his companion.  
43 But Eve was the first to sin by eating the forbidden fruit. Women seduce men  
44 towards evil, away from spirituality into baser instincts. Another fulcrum  
45 comes from the Biblical that implore the wife treat her husband as her Lord  
46 and be submissive to him while he is urged to love her. Some passages are

1 cited to claim that Christianity accords equal dignity to men and women while  
2 others are invoked to argue that it places women in an inferior position. The  
3 wordings and asymmetry of Biblical narrations have been parsed in creative  
4 ways by theologians, scholars, priests and feminists to make the case both  
5 for gender equality and gender inequality. Feminist Catholic and Protestant  
6 theologians from several countries have endeavored to produce a version of  
7 the Bible that will redress its male orientation and incorporate feminist values.  
8 A French version of *A Woman's Bible* already exists. The quest for gender  
9 equality within the scriptural arena is a voluminous but unending saga.

10 Yet, female oppression does not primarily emanate from scriptures. It  
11 derives from the societal structures that have institutionalized patriarchy and  
12 misogyny. Inequality between men and women derives from economics,  
13 politics and the general culture, of which the church is but one domain.  
14 Without a major drive in all these domains, the prospects for gender equality  
15 in religion are dim.

### 16 + A short history +

17  
18  
19 Several well researched texts argue that during the early phase of the faith of  
20 Jesus Christ, many women became loyal adherents and acquired a status  
21 that distinctly elevated as compared to the past. As Christianity took hold,  
22 degrading practices like female infanticide, forced abortion, incest, divorce,  
23 polygamy, promiscuity, adultery and forced marriage declined. Women  
24 benefitted from greater security in the monogamous family, acquired more  
25 rights and secured better treatment from husbands. Under the new creed,  
26 widows were assisted and not coerced to remarry. Women had more  
27 autonomous roles in liturgical and practical church activities and acquired  
28 positions of responsibility. Some nunneries became independent Christian  
29 institutions, a force to reckon with. While the extent to which it occurred is  
30 debatable, that there was progress is widely accepted.

31 But these trends were weakened after Christianity became the religion of  
32 the Roman Empire. As the general patriarchic culture infused the Church,  
33 according an inferior status to women, in theory and practice, became integral  
34 to the Christian ethos. Even luminaries of the Reform Movement like Martin  
35 Luther and John Calvin held that '*the woman's place is in the home*'.

36



Inquisitional Dunking

1  
2  
3  
4 Christian maltreatment of women reached its apex during the era of the Holy  
5 Inquisition that began around 1,200 CE and lasted over four centuries.  
6 Alleged misdeeds that previously were punished by banishment or seizure of  
7 property and excommunication now exacted torture and execution. The  
8 ingenuity in the design and construction of the torture devices used by the  
9 Church and the state was astonishing. Calibrated water dunking, often to the  
10 point of death, pictured above, was a favored device for penalizing an  
11 accused witch.

12  
13 *The victim was tied to a chair which was elevated by ropes*  
14 *above a pond or vat of water. The victim was then lowered into*  
15 *the water until completely submerged. The chair was raised if*  
16 *the victim was about to pass out, or to give the victim a chance*  
17 *to confess. Often, some form of plug or more simply, a piece*  
18 *of fruit, was placed in the victim's mouth and nose beforehand,*  
19 *so they couldn't get a good breath before being dunked. If the*  
20 *victim confessed, they would most likely be killed. This method*  
21 *was widely used during the Spanish Inquisition and in England*  
22 *and France. The victim was usually intermittently submerged*  
23 *for many hours until he or she revealed information or death*  
24 *had occurred. (Wikipedia 2020 -- List of Methods of Torture).*

25  
26 A large portion of the victims were women accused of casting evil spells when  
27 epidemics, natural disasters, war and other calamities struck, or when a town  
28 or village defied church or Papal authority. The 'witches' generally were single  
29 women, widows and women living in the margins of society. The exact  
30 numbers are in dispute but likely some 40,000 to 100,000 alleged  
31 sorceresses were brutally tortured under the Inquisitions of European nations.  
32 About a half perished in the process.

33  
34 **+ Leadership +**  
35



1 The history of Christianity has no dearth of women—saints, queens, nuns,  
2 scholars, educators, health care providers and social reformers—who have  
3 exercised a significant influence both in the church and broader society.  
4 Among the well-known from Europe are Joan of Arc, Queen Isabella I of  
5 Spain, Queen Elizabeth I of England, Catherine the Great of Russia, and  
6 Florence Nightingale. Despite the presence of such eminent women and the  
7 progressive pro-feminist history of the early days, the senior leaders and  
8 prelates of the Christian denominations almost exclusively have been men. It  
9 is a reality that persists. Nuns and junior female clergy perform important  
10 tasks in the church. Yet, the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church  
11 prohibit full ordination of women. But now voices for change are emerging. In  
12 Ireland, a nation with a dominant Catholic tradition, an influential group of  
13 Catholic priests supports the ordination of women.

14 Many Protestant churches have a liberal policy on female ordination. The  
15 first female ordination in the US was in 1815. Kenya and Uganda obtained  
16 their first ordained women priests, five in all, in 1983. Apart from a few  
17 exceptions, more progress on bridging the male-female gap has occurred in  
18 North American and European churches as compared to African, Asian and  
19 Latin American churches. It reflects the social pressure created by the  
20 progress of women in education and in securing well-paid, higher positions in  
21 the corporate, state, scientific, medical, academic and civil society  
22 organizations in the industrialized nations. Men in the West, moreover, are  
23 now more disposed towards gender equality, and undertake domestic tasks  
24 that once were the sole purview of women. In the US, where women have  
25 made large strides in the secular arena, over 50% of the Protestant churches  
26 permitted fully ordained female ministers by 2000.

27 There are also strong holdouts like the Presbyterian Church. After an  
28 internal exchange of views on the subject, it affirmed the traditional anti-  
29 women stance and refused to entertain any form of ordination for women. In  
30 some churches, women congregants with a Master of Divinity degree from  
31 reputable seminaries find themselves locked out of non-pastoral leadership  
32 roles. The pace of ascendance of women to high positions is slow even in the  
33 denominations with a liberal policy. By 2012, only one out of 10 the local  
34 churches and one out of 100 of the major American churches had female  
35 leaders.

36 A sprinkling of women bishops within the Anglican Church exists in a few  
37 places—Australia, Canada, Cuba, India, New Zealand, Swaziland, South  
38 Africa, the UK and the US. Africa's first female Anglican bishop assumed her  
39 post in Swaziland in 2012. The Anglican Church of England has been  
40 embroiled in a bitter dispute on the issue. A conservative faction—male and  
41 female, clerical and lay—questions the authority of a woman bishop on  
42 theological grounds and is aghast at the prospect of her participation in the  
43 selection of future bishops. It holds that God has assigned different roles to  
44 men and women in the church and life. But it was outvoted, and the Church  
45 of England had its first female bishop in 2014. The vote threatens to split the  
46 Church and generate an exodus. A similar conservative faction holds sway in

1 some Australian Anglican churches. It holds that women should remain silent  
2 when in church. At home, their menfolk can tell them what they need to know.  
3 A few Pentecostal churches require women to dress modestly without  
4 makeup and jewelry and cover their heads while in church. Yet, some  
5 churches are open to junior positions of moderate authority for women. New  
6 interpretations of the Gospel together with ascribing more feminine qualities  
7 to God are paving the way towards greater equality for women in some  
8 denominations.

9 Across the board, equality for women in authority and responsibility in  
10 Christianity is far from being realized. But while pastors, theologians and lay  
11 Christians agonize over whether the Bible supports complementarianism—  
12 meaning women are equal to men but have separate roles in church and  
13 family—the world has moved on. Women now acquire advanced degrees in  
14 all fields including medicine and engineering, garner major scientific and  
15 literary awards, assume leadership of scientific, professional, business, civic,  
16 academic, cultural and international bodies, and are voted into the highest  
17 offices in the land. That a woman surgeon can perform heart transplant  
18 surgery, be a best-selling author, but may not lecture about the Bible in the  
19 church is a modern-day anachronism.

## 20 21 **+ Marriage +** 22

23 Traditional Christianity regards the nuclear family as a sacred covenant,  
24 blessed by God through a church marriage between one man and one woman  
25 '*till death do us part*'. Endorsing the sanctity of marriage, the Catholic Church  
26 disparages divorce. But divorce is not treated as a sinful act and marriage  
27 may be declared null and void under special circumstances. Yet, without an  
28 official annulment decree, a Catholic may not remarry. Otherwise, he or she  
29 risks excommunication. Other Christian denominations discourage divorce  
30 but take a liberal stand and do not place restrictions on remarriage. And some  
31 Catholic pastors emphasize the need for counselling and support for divorced  
32 couples and estranged couples on the verge of divorce.

33 In most countries, marriages are no longer solely conducted in a religious  
34 ceremony. Many couples marry by a civil ceremony, and divorce laws permit  
35 couples to separate. The nature of marriage and family, and the attitudes  
36 towards them have changed over time. As economic conditions improved, the  
37 large, extended family unit with many children of the past gave way to a  
38 nuclear family with two or fewer children, an informal union, single parenting  
39 or single living. At the same time, marital stability has weakened, especially  
40 in the industrialized nations. In the US, the rate of marriage is on the decline.  
41 Up to a half of the adults remain single or have an unmarried partner. Many  
42 are single parents. The age at first marriage is also rising. In 1960, men and  
43 women on average married at the age of 21 years. By 2013, it was 28 years.  
44 About a third to a half of first unions end in a divorce. Church marriages are  
45 on the wane. These trends affect Catholics, Protestants and the non-religious

1 almost equally. They are catalyzed by economic and broader socio-cultural  
2 factors, not religion.

3 About a fifth of the adult American Catholics have gone through a divorce  
4 proceeding as compared to a quarter of the general population. In many  
5 mainly Catholic nations, divorce has been a bone of political contention. It  
6 was illegal in Mexico until 1917, in Brazil, until 1977, in Argentina, until 1987,  
7 and Chile until, 2004. Today it remains illegal only in the Vatican City and the  
8 Philippines.

9 The conservative Christian take on marriage and family strays beyond the  
10 spiritual domain into the political domain. It claims that:

11  
12 *[Only] through Christianity did women receive full marriage*  
13 *rights and gender equality in fidelity. The private,*  
14 *monogamous family has served well the human needs for love*  
15 *and companionship, economic and social well-being, and the*  
16 *rearing of children. (Theroux 2015).*  
17

18 And it attributes social ills like teenage pregnancies, juvenile crime, drug use,  
19 pornography, and gang violence to the breakdown of the family and Christian  
20 values. It also says that welfare policies encourage separation and single  
21 living and add to social maladies.

22 This viewpoint conflates association with causation. The changing nature  
23 of the family and social maladies derive from changes in the capitalist  
24 economy, weak welfare policies, institutionalized racism, punitive not  
25 preventive policing, and other factors, not religion. It is not a matter of  
26 glorifying divorce, single living or alternative lifestyles. Families provide love  
27 and comfort, but can create hate, discord and domestic violence. Divorce has  
28 a deleterious psychological impact on children, but it is a venue for women  
29 and children to escape abusive conditions. Constraints on the right and ability  
30 to separate in the setting of a macho culture is a license for domestic abuse.  
31 People should have the right, opportunity and community support to make life  
32 choices they feel are best for themselves and their loved ones. Theocratic  
33 injunctions limit their choices and may cause unneeded harm.

34 Another arena of concern is the place of women (and men) who marry  
35 late, remain single or are homosexuals. Many find themselves alienated from  
36 the family events held by the churches. They relish spiritual engagement but  
37 value personal autonomy. Some liberal churches in the West are more  
38 sensitive towards such issues and strive to create a welcoming environment  
39 for those ignored or excluded in past.

#### 40 41 **+ Abortion +** 42

43 Health centers and hospitals run by Catholic and Protestant churches in  
44 Africa provide vital services that often are less costly than in other private  
45 hospitals and give better care than what is available in public hospitals.  
46 Except in the area of reproductive health. In particular, the policy of the

1 Catholic Church on family planning runs counter to the health and welfare of  
2 women and families. In the African health centers, it operates, abstinence is  
3 advocated but contraceptives and comprehensive birth control guidance are  
4 not provided. It hardly bodes well for control of sexually transmitted diseases  
5 including HIV.

6 Globally, about two of five pregnancies are unintended. The rate varies  
7 from place to place. Multiple factors—young age, poverty, low education,  
8 social disadvantage, informal relationship, coercion, abusive marriage—are  
9 associated with sexual intercourse without contraception and higher risk of  
10 unforeseen conception. The absence of effective family planning services and  
11 health education contributes to the problem. Such pregnancies carry higher  
12 risks for the health and wellbeing of the mother and child, and lead to  
13 abortions. Prevention of unintended pregnancies is a critical public health  
14 problem. But governments in this neoliberal era have failed to adequately  
15 fund effective countermeasures.

16 Abortion is illegal in Honduras, Nicaragua, Surinam, Senegal, Mauritania,  
17 Congo Brazzaville, Angola, Madagascar, Egypt, Iraq, the Philippines and  
18 Laos. With some restrictions on gestational age, it is available upon request  
19 in North America, Russia and nations of former Soviet Asia, Turkey, China,  
20 Vietnam, Australia, New Zealand and Europe, except Poland, Finland and the  
21 UK, where some extra requirements are in place. In the remaining nations of  
22 Africa, Asia and Latin America, abortion is legal only under special conditions.  
23 In Saudi Arabia, it is legal only for saving the woman from the risk of grave  
24 illness or death. In Brazil, it is permitted to save the woman's life and in cases  
25 of rape, incest and congenital fatal brain conditions. Else, the woman and the  
26 provider face three to four years in prison. The constitution of the Philippines  
27 gives equal status to the life of the woman and the unborn fetus and does not  
28 stipulate a condition under which a pregnancy can be terminated. All parties  
29 involved in an abortion face mandatory prison terms. The penalty is harsher  
30 if it is done after rape. While abortion is legal and available in the West, in  
31 practice the influence of Christian fundamentalists can impede it. In Germany  
32 in 2013:

33  
34 *[when] a student was raped, two Catholic hospitals refused to*  
35 *examine her and secure the evidence because they would*  
36 *then have had to prescribe the morning-after pill, which would*  
37 *have been a violation of their 'Christian ethos'. (Nunning*  
38 *2017).*

39  
40 Strict restrictions and harsh penalties do little to stem the tide of unintended  
41 pregnancies and abortion. The abortion rate in Brazil is 44 per 1,000 women,  
42 more than twice that in North America (17 per 1,000 women). Making the  
43 procedure illegal increases the dangers women face. Of the nearly 500,000  
44 abortions in Brazil each year, about half lead to emergency room visits.  
45 Unsafe abortions cause the death of some 200 women in Brazil each year,  
46 and the emergency room visits are a drain on the health and criminal justice

1 system budgets. They also lead to future reproductive and psychological  
2 complications. But where medically supervised abortions are legal, only about  
3 5% of the women need further medical care.

4 According to the WHO, a quarter of all pregnancies across the globe,  
5 numbering over 55 million, are aborted each year. Of these, 25 million are  
6 unsafe. Most are in the poor nations. Nearly 75% of the abortions in Africa  
7 and Latin America are risky. Africa has the highest rate of maternal death  
8 from abortion related complications. Unsafe abortions lead to about 7 million  
9 hospitalizations in the global south each year. The solution to the tragedies is  
10 within reach:

11  
12 *Unsafe abortion can be prevented through: (i) comprehensive*  
13 *sexuality education; (ii) prevention of unintended pregnancy*  
14 *through use of effective contraception, including emergency*  
15 *contraception; and (iii) provision of safe, legal abortion. (WHO*  
16 *2019).*

17  
18 Despite the egregious outcomes of the unscientific, ill-advised restrictions,  
19 pedantic ecclesiastical forces (Catholic, Christian Evangelical and Islamic)  
20 continue their drive to enact or strengthen anti-abortion laws. A major political  
21 drive by the Catholic Church in Nicaragua resulted in the enactment of such  
22 a prohibitory abortion law in 2007 that it was deemed a violation of human  
23 rights by the UN Human Rights Committee. In the Philippines, the otherwise  
24 progressive Catholic Church firmly stands against any move to liberalize the  
25 stringent anti-abortion clause in the constitution.

26 Criminalization, poverty and religious opposition breed underground or  
27 self-induced termination of pregnancies, especially among young girls. It is a  
28 serious issue that has to be addressed by enhanced female education,  
29 empowerment and economic development, not through stigmatization and  
30 state power. Further, since unwanted or unintended pregnancies can never  
31 be totally eliminated, and as no one but the woman has the right to choose  
32 what happens to her own body, safe, medical, publicly funded abortion and  
33 general health services are an essential component of the fundamental rights  
34 of women.

35 Christian conservatives, Catholic and Protestant, make their case by  
36 claiming that life, in legal, scientific and theological terms, starts with the  
37 formation of the embryo. Banning abortion is necessary to protect the life of  
38 the unborn. For them abortion is murder. Yet, while the Bible has much to say  
39 about childbirth, menstruation, infertility, sexual desire, prostitution, infidelity  
40 and rape, it is silent on the question of abortion.

41  
42 *[Given] the certitude of abortion opponents that abortion*  
43 *violates God's Word, it might come as a surprise that neither*  
44 *the Old Testament nor the New mentions abortion—not one*  
45 *word. (Pollitt 2014).*

46

1 On the broader societal plane, the zeal for protecting life among evangelical  
2 Christians has been quite dismal. They have cheered on imperial wars,  
3 supported and called for extension of the death penalty, and opposed funding  
4 for policies that improve the health and well-being of poor children, mothers  
5 and the elderly and increase their chances of living longer, better quality lives.  
6 The various claims about the causes, effects and dangers of abortion made  
7 by anti-abortion activists derive from spurious, distorted data. Despite the  
8 great strides in saving premature babies, no medical authority envisions  
9 bringing a ten-week old fetus to life. While the conservatives declare that life  
10 begins at conception, no one disputes that a newborn is real, innocent life.  
11 The supposed adamant advocates of the right to life have little compunction  
12 in supporting neoliberal policies that defund services for newborns in poor  
13 families.

14 The questions of abortion and homosexuality in the USA have become a  
15 part of a political game of see-saw between the Republican and Democratic  
16 parties that serves to mask the pro-corporate agenda of both. Evangelical  
17 luminaries and wealthy ministers of the megachurches are key players in that  
18 charade which prevents fair electoral decision making through lack of  
19 comprehensive information on major issues and humane ethical standards.

20 Religious authorities often oppose sex education, the key to prevention of  
21 teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and abortion. In 2019, the  
22 Ministry of Health in Ghana in collaboration with UNESCO launched the  
23 Comprehensive Sexuality Education for schools in the country. But it  
24 immediately encountered vociferous attacks from a group of 200 Christian  
25 churches and the main Islamic bodies in the nation.

26  
27 *I won't call it Comprehensive Sexuality Education; it is*  
28 *Comprehensive Satanic Engagement.* Reverend Dr PY  
29 Frimpong-Manso (Peace 2019).  
30

31 As the well-designed, health and safety promoting program was falsely  
32 branded a Western cultural drive to promote homosexuality, which it was not,  
33 state authorities were moved to cancel it. Opposition from respected voices  
34 subsequently erected further barriers on attempts to curb child sexual abuse,  
35 teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

### 36 37 **+ Sexual abuse +** 38

39 Sexual abuse by the clergy harms not just children but adults as well. Most of  
40 the adult victims are women. While the former problem has at last received  
41 the attention it deserves, the latter remains under the radar. But it is a serious  
42 problem, in religious settings and at home, work, school and other places, in  
43 many nations.

44 Research in the UK indicates that an adult woman has three times the  
45 likelihood of being abused by a priest as compared to a child. Data from an  
46 abuse survivor's network show that about half of the cases of sexual abuse

1 by the clergy involve an adult. The offenders are from junior to senior levels  
2 of church leadership. The victims refrain from or take long to report their  
3 ordeal due to shame, guilt, and fear of not being believed, social opprobrium  
4 and harassment. Victims who reported abuse to senior pastors were not  
5 taken seriously or told to let it pass. The Church of England has devoted little  
6 attention and resources to combatting this form of abuse. Revelations of  
7 sexual abuse in the Baptist churches in the US included hundreds of adult  
8 female victims. The paucity of investigations has meant that its general scale  
9 and gravity remain unknown. The rising numbers of related lawsuits may  
10 unearth evidence of a systemic problem.

11 In the Third World nations, sexual abuse of women, including nuns, by  
12 male priests reflects the inferior social and economic status of women and  
13 persistence of misogynist norms. In South Africa gender-based violence has  
14 become a sickening blight. About 200 rapes are reported to the police every  
15 day. Recent court cases indicate that the malady exists in the religious  
16 domain as well.

17 In the Jesus Dominion International Church, based in the Eastern Cape,  
18 famed televangelist Timothy Omotoso projects prophecies and miracles.  
19 Claims of repeated rape made by a 22-year old student resulted in charges  
20 of 97 counts of sexual assault, rape and human trafficking in 2018, against  
21 him and two female co-defendants. Earlier, his followers made death threats  
22 against the student. In early 2020, Reverend June Major of the Anglican  
23 Church of South Africa attempted to re-assert claims of sexual abuse by a  
24 fellow priest. Going on a hunger strike, she said that she did not receive a fair  
25 hearing in the first instance. Now the Church and the state prosecutor are  
26 looking into the case.

27 The Enlightened Christian Gathering church was in the news in 2020 after  
28 one of its pastors appeared in court to face the count of rape of a 23-year-old  
29 woman. After she made her claim, members of the pastor's congregation  
30 threatened the victim and packed the courtroom in his defense. The main  
31 office of the church asserted a zero-tolerance policy against gender-based  
32 violence and suspended him. In another case, the pastor at the Worship of  
33 God Church was charged with rape of three 10 to 14-year-old girls.

34 On the positive side, women like United Methodist deaconess Bulelwa  
35 Ndedwa are active in the struggle against rape and violence against women  
36 in the nation. They speak up, march, raise awareness, and advocate reforms  
37 in the justice system. Provision of a safe environment for women and girls  
38 throughout the society is a primary demand.

39 At around 72,000, the nuns and temporary female religious workers in the  
40 African Catholic churches constitute over 10% of the global body of Catholic  
41 nuns and clerical work force. Apart from religious duties, they are involved in  
42 social work (assisting refugees, street children, orphans and people with  
43 disabilities), education (as teachers and administrators), health care (as  
44 doctors, nurses and counselors) and support staff in a variety of Catholic  
45 Church institutions. While some African sisters have advanced degrees and  
46 well remunerated positions, many are from poor families and need to care for

1 parents and siblings. The churches often fail to give adequate material  
2 support to enable them to deal with their personal health and family issues.  
3 Despite their dedication to work in a challenging setting, they languish at the  
4 bottom of the church hierarchy, under the absolute command of the diocesan  
5 bishop.

6 Their subordinate status puts them at risk of sexual harassment and  
7 abuse from their male superiors. An official Vatican report on African nuns  
8 highlighted the general challenges they face but did not refer to this problem.  
9 Yet other investigative and media reports indicate that it is far too common. A  
10 multi-national investigation focusing mainly on Africa revealed that priests  
11 who are held in high regard by the community often target nuns for sexual  
12 favors (Schaeffer 2001). Though she has taken a vow of refraining from sex,  
13 the victim has no option but to endure the assaults and the ensuing emotional  
14 and physical afflictions. Young nuns from poor families are more vulnerable.  
15 Some become pregnant, are forced to abort, or are disgraced and cast out  
16 from the diocese. The priests provide no support for the children they have  
17 fathered. Thus:

18  
19 *[In] a 1988 case from Malawi ... a bishop dismissed the*  
20 *leaders of a women's religious order because they complained*  
21 *that 29 nuns had been made pregnant by local priests. .... [A]*  
22 *priest arranged for a nun to have an abortion; the nun died*  
23 *during the abortion, and the priest then officiated at her*  
24 *funeral.* (Poggioli 2019).

25  
26 A nun victimized by priestly rape considers the church environment so risky  
27 for nuns that:

28  
29 *In fact, it is safer for an African woman to be out in the world.*  
30 *Sister Laura* (Schaeffer 2001).

31  
32 Chapter 5 detailed how women, especially poor women, and low caste people  
33 are discriminated in all walks of life under the dominant parochial order in  
34 India, and how they are fighting back to reclaim their basic rights. The Indian  
35 Christian Women's Movement is a movement founded in 2014 by activists  
36 from many walks of life. It aims to confront gender, caste, social and religion-  
37 based oppression in an integrated, multi-faith manner. Thus, while it  
38 campaigns against exclusion of women and marginalized people from many  
39 religious ceremonies and celebrations, it also strives to combat violence  
40 against women in general life. In addition to writing petitions to church leaders,  
41 it educates women parishioners conditioned to express automatic loyalty to  
42 the church hierarchy. Joining up with other national groups that are working  
43 to combat the assaults and killings of women that have proliferated under the  
44 *Hindutva* regime of the BJP, it takes part in the protests and extends support  
45 to women victims.



1 Nuns and women workers in many Indian churches are overworked and  
2 at the mercy of the male leadership. They are made to believe that by serving  
3 the priest unconditionally they serve Jesus. The Indian Christian Women's  
4 Movement aims to change this mindset and empower the nuns and women  
5 in the church and has taken up the issue of sexual abuse of nuns and women  
6 parishioners by male priests. Where such abuse has occurred, it calls for  
7 independent inquiry, accountability for the abusers and those who covered up  
8 the offense, and support for the victims. One of its noteworthy projects is the  
9 systematic collection of data on gender discrimination and abuse in Christian  
10 institutions. Reliable facts and figures help activist groups mount stronger  
11 campaigns and assist the victims to secure justice. However, because of the  
12 broad support they enjoy from the community, including women, the bishops  
13 can and have ignored the movement and its petitions. The forces of  
14 oppressive, outdated tradition remain strong in India.

15 In no part of the world have nuns been spared of abuse and rape by male  
16 clergy. In 2002, the Philippine Catholic Church issued an apology for sexual  
17 offenses committed by 200 priests over the past two decades. Yet, in the  
18 following year, over 34 priests were exposed for sexually abusing women and  
19 nuns and were suspended. Some clerical sexual predators continue to be  
20 protected by senior bishops. Similar incidents have occurred in Mexico and  
21 the Pacific Islands.

22 The Vatican and leaderships of Protestant denominations have been well  
23 aware of the extent and seriousness of sexual abuse of women and nuns in  
24 the church. But official Vatican reports documenting such deeds in the past  
25 were shelved. Though more attention is being given under Pope Francis, the  
26 names of the accused have not been released. As more victims speak up,  
27 women's rights groups call for a comprehensive, transparent investigation. A  
28 global front to protect women from sexual abuse in the church is in the  
29 formative stage. In many Christian denominations, there are calls to institute  
30 participatory organizational structures that would enshrine gender equality  
31 and ordain women. Groups like Catholics for Choice stand for the right of  
32 women to make autonomous decisions in reproductive matters including  
33 abortion. It is time for the leadership in the Vatican and other Christian  
34 denominations to heed these voices.

#### 35 36 **7.14 MOTHER TERESA** 37

38 Two decades after her death, upon certification by the Vatican that she had  
39 performed at least two miracles, she was canonized as Saint Teresa of  
40 Calcutta. Her unofficial title was the Angel of Mercy.

41 The extraordinary honors and applause this diminutive nun garnered stem  
42 from the humanitarian work of Missionaries for Charity, the organization she  
43 established in 1950. Starting from a single hospice in Calcutta in turbulent  
44 times and with meagre resources, the Charity established rest homes for  
45 people with terminal HIV/AIDS, leprosy and tuberculosis, health and nutrition  
46 clinics, orphanages, schools, care centers for the elderly, disabled, blind and

1 refugees, soup kitchens for the destitute and homeless, adoption services  
2 and family advice centers around the world.

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4



Mother Teresa with a Child

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8 In 2020, it serviced 760 centers in 139 countries. India had 244 centers; 19  
9 were in Calcutta. The centers are staffed by a total 5,167 sari-clad nuns.  
10 Mother Teresa also founded or cofounded other charitable ventures, some of  
11 which were multi-denominational, and travelled to many sites of natural and  
12 man-made disasters to console the victims. Transcending national and racial  
13 barriers, she expressed concerns for social outcasts everywhere. Images of  
14 the Mother interacting with needy children and the poor attained an iconic  
15 status and made her one of the most admired persons in the world.

16 Fluent in five languages and with a magnetic persona, she came across  
17 as a deeply humble and noble being solidly committed to the cause she had  
18 embraced. She had a close relationship with Pope John Paul II. Of her own  
19 work, she surmised:

20

21 *We know only too well that what we are doing is nothing more*  
22 *than a drop in the ocean. But if the drop were not there, the*  
23 *ocean would be missing something. .... Many people are*  
24 *talking about the poor, but very few people talk to the poor.*

25

Mother Teresa

26



Medal of Freedom, USA, 1985.

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Nonetheless, such pronouncements and the saintly images projected by the global media have masked a somewhat unsavory reality. Papers published in *The Lancet* in 1994 chastised the iconic Calcutta care center for deficiency of medical supervision, poor diagnosis, erroneous prescriptions, inadequate nutrition, poor diagnostic testing, and non-usage of pain medication. Nuns with a modicum of medical knowledge and skills were in charge of patients with serious illnesses, and at times, surgeries were done without anesthesia. Lack of good hygiene was a serious issue. Patients with TB comingled with other patients. Routine reuse of unsterilized injection needles placed the residents at risk for deadly infections. Investigations by Canadian health experts and other doctors revealed similar problems. Media reports have noted children being tied to their beds, harshly shaken and beaten at some centers.

Missionaries of Charity is not a cash-strapped institution. Every year, it receives some tens of millions of dollars in donations. About 3 million dollars come from Germany alone. Indian law requires all charitable organizations to make their accounts public. Mother Teresa's organizations have flouted the law but have faced no sanction. Transparency and accountability for the donations and expenditures of the Missionaries of Charity do not exist. Some 7% of the donations were used to run the Charity. In the past, the rest were deposited in secret accounts controlled by Mother Teresa. Secrecy persists to this day.

Ranging from \$10 to \$100, the bulk of the donors are from ordinary folk. But governments, corporations, foundations and other institutions also fork out cash, property, and other things. Checks for \$50,000 also come along. And there are some well-heeled donors. Charles Keating, a devout Catholic who ran the largest anti-pornography organization in the US was one. As the CEO of two banking firms, Keating engaged in speculative investments that played a central role in the savings and loan associations scandal of the 1980s. He was found guilty of several counts of fraud in state and federal courts and served over four years in prison. As a mark of her appreciation for his donation of \$1.25 million and permission to use his private jet, Mother

1 Teresa not only gave him a personalized crucifix but also wrote a letter to the  
2 trial judge attesting to his services for the poor. After he was convicted, the  
3 state prosecuting attorney requested her to return the money she had  
4 received from Keating to those he had swindled. There was no reply. Another  
5 benefactor of the Charity was Robert Maxwell, a media British tycoon who  
6 embezzled hundreds of millions of dollars from life savings of pensioners and  
7 others. Mother Theresa accepted the ill-gotten gains without objection, and  
8 even granted him an audience.

9 The Charity also receives donations in kind. It often works from freely  
10 given public and private buildings and gets food and other daily use items  
11 gratis from local merchants. Yet, there exists a distinct stinginess about the  
12 use of its vast resources. Donations earmarked for a particular cause by the  
13 donor are often just placed in its bank accounts. Many centers rely on food  
14 donations. In some centers, if bread donations are not received, bread is not  
15 purchased; the residents have to make do without bread on that day. Despite  
16 being among the most endowed charities in the world, astonishing stories of  
17 neglect of its wards in many cities have surfaced over time.

18 When the Union Carbide chemical plant in Bhopal, India exploded causing  
19 over 2,500 deaths and injuring tens of thousands, she rushed to the area  
20 armed with medallions of Virgin Mary and prayers and urged the survivors to  
21 '*forgive*' and '*forgive*'. She did not advocate judicial inquiry into the tragedy or  
22 compensation for the victims and her charity did not offer cash or material aid  
23 either. It was a repeated tendency.

24 Secret baptism of critically ill Hindu and Muslim inmates to Christianity  
25 was another accusation often levelled at the Charity. Many Christian groups  
26 in India have been attacked by *Hindutva* extremists for allegedly converting  
27 Hindus to their religion. But apart from some criticisms from BJP politicians,  
28 the centers of the Charity had not until recently faced official or public  
29 backlash on this issue. Mother Teresa's iconic stature had immunized her  
30 organization from scrutiny.

31 Mother Teresa had dubious linkages with Haiti, a predominantly Christian  
32 nation where nearly three out of five people are Catholic. Haiti was the first  
33 nation in the Western hemisphere to valiantly abolish slavery. Yet, it remains  
34 the poorest nation in the region. Almost continuous rule by a series of brutal  
35 dictators operating under the hegemony of the United States has been the  
36 primary reason why its children languish in abject poverty and malnutrition  
37 while a small elite leads a luxurious lifestyle. From 1971 to 1986, it was ruled  
38 by the pretentiously moderate yet actually thuggish Jean-Claude Duvalier  
39 who looted millions from the national treasury, oversaw the torture or death  
40 of thousands, suppressed independent media, allowed multinational firms to  
41 operate sweatshop factories and did little to alter the social and economic  
42 policies that kept the majority of Haitians mired in penury.

43 Mother Teresa was in good terms with JC Duvalier and his wife Michelle.  
44 She not only accepted the Haitian Legion of Honor Award from him, praised  
45 the couple profusely but also proclaimed the obvious falsehood that the poor  
46 of Haiti were close to them. In a similar spirit, when she went to Guatemala, a

1 nation wracked by decades of genocidal pogroms against the rural and native  
2 peoples, death squad termination of tens of thousands of lives, and utter  
3 misery, she called it a place of peace.

4 This saintly Nobel laureate had a creative definition of peace. Holding rigid,  
5 extremely conservative views on divorce, birth control and abortion, she  
6 called abortion the '*greatest destroyer of peace*', an evil act impermissible  
7 under any circumstance. Her admonitions against abortion were echoed in a  
8 pro-life amicus brief that her representatives had filed in the US Supreme  
9 Court and in her presentations to major international forums on women's  
10 rights. Taking the stand to its most extreme, she opposed abortion for the  
11 hundreds of Bosnian women who had been raped by Serbian forces and the  
12 women of Bangladesh raped by Pakistani soldiers.

13  
14 *Any country that accepts abortion, is not teaching its people to*  
15 *love, but to use any violence to get what it wants.*

16 Mother Teresa  
17

18 Education on contraception, family planning and abortion in cases of rape,  
19 serious congenital conditions and to protect the health and life of the woman  
20 are essential components of a sound public health policy. Had Missionaries  
21 for Charity spent even a small part of the hundreds of millions in its coffers on  
22 prevention of unplanned pregnancies, control of sexually transmitted  
23 diseases and pre-natal and post-natal care services, it would have saved  
24 more lives and reduced more suffering than through its hardline approach on  
25 sexuality and childbirth.

26 Formally designated as a Missionary of Charity, the sari-clad sisters form  
27 the backbone of the Charity. After screening for eligibility, they undergo nine  
28 years of training and practical engagement to be Missionaries of Charity. The  
29 training covers English, scriptural and religious courses, Church history, the  
30 constitution of the Charity and operational training, with an evaluation at each  
31 stage. A fully qualified Missionary wears the sari with three blue stripes and a  
32 metal crucifix, and is vowed to poverty, chastity and obedience and is to  
33 render '*wholehearted free service to the poorest of the poor*'. The trainees  
34 come to regard Mother Teresa as the most holy woman, outranked only by  
35 Virgin Mary. To disobey her edict is to commit a sin.

36 A missionary sister lives a spartan, disciplined, restricted life with a bare  
37 minimum of material possessions. She is provided with food and shelter but  
38 no cash payment. She can write to her family only once a month and pay  
39 them a visit once in ten years. Each home or center is run by around five  
40 sisters under a superior sister. Scores of short- and medium-term volunteers,  
41 who only get a brief orientation, are usually on hand to assist. A few are  
42 trained nurses. All donations are handled in total secrecy by the sisters.

43 Missionary of Charity is an arduous life-long vocation requiring deep  
44 commitment and empathy for children and inmates. Missionaries of Charity  
45 has in many ways alleviated the suffering of thousands of people. The issue  
46 is the degree to which the policy of maintaining simplicity in all activities is

1 enforced, and the unnecessary, preventable harm it inflicts on children and  
2 inmates is overlooked.

3 Though the missionary sister serves seriously ill inmates, she does not  
4 get a systematic exposure to basic ideas in public health and nursing. The  
5 same holds for the volunteers. Mother Teresa's rigid policy has meant that  
6 despite more than adequate funding, basic items like soap, disinfectant and  
7 washing cloth are in short supply and food is cooked in unsanitary conditions.  
8 Child abuse exists. In 2002, the senior sister at the Missionaries of Charity  
9 center in Calcutta was found guilty of scalding a seven-year-old girl with a hot  
10 knife. One under-cover investigation at the main Missionaries of Charity home  
11 in Calcutta in 2005 produced shocking revelations:

12  
13 *Some of the children retched and coughed as rushed staff*  
14 *crammed food into their mouths. Boys and girls were*  
15 *abandoned on open toilets for up to 20 minutes at a time.*  
16 *Slumped, untended, some dribbling, some sleeping, they*  
17 *were a pathetic sight. Their treatment was an affront to their*  
18 *dignity, and dangerously unhygienic.* (Macintyre 2005).

19  
20 Many serious issues at the Missionaries of Charity centers can be resolved  
21 with a few months of training, a hygiene maintenance protocol, qualified  
22 medical supervision and adequate nutrition, basic medical drugs and  
23 equipment, which would hardly dent the Charity's finances. These measures  
24 would also protect the health of the sisters and volunteers.

25 The volunteers are mostly foreigners, not locals. In many Indian centers  
26 the volunteers are predominantly if not exclusively from Europe and the US.  
27 Many are young people inspired by what they have heard about the work of  
28 Missionaries of Charity. They may not like how things are done but the tenet  
29 of obedience keeps them silent. Adverse publicity from media exposés in the  
30 recent years has, however, begun to perturb the fundamentalist policies of  
31 Mother Teresa and led to basic improvements. But there is a long way to go  
32 before the Charity can claim that it does its best not to harm its wards.

33 While the main media and officialdom assumed that there could not be  
34 serious breaches of human rights in an organization run by a saintly nun and  
35 her Spartan sisters, two skeptics disagreed. Christopher Hitchens, author of  
36 *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* and Amit  
37 Chatterjee, producer of the TV documentary, *Mother Teresa: The Final*  
38 *Verdict* were the first to ring alarm bells and catalyze others to investigate  
39 further. Their revelations generate basic questions: Were Mother Teresa's  
40 dealings with the likes of JC Duvalier and Charles Keating aberrations, or did  
41 they arise from a consistent worldview? Were the shortfalls in hygiene and  
42 care seen at the homes temporary, local problems or were they integral to the  
43 mode of operation of the Charity as a whole?

44 Mother Teresa cultivated friends in high places—in Calcutta, West  
45 Bengal, India, the US, UK and other nations. They welcomed her not just for  
46 reasons of political expediency but also because their visions of society

1 rested on a common ground. Take the case of Haiti. As in other nations in the  
2 hemisphere, the oppressive status quo in this US neo-colony was under  
3 attack from popular grassroots movements that aimed to establish justice and  
4 democracy. Liberation theology espousing Catholic priests were at the  
5 forefront. Opposing the people was a joint alliance of the US, the local rulers  
6 and the Vatican. The masses were brutalized without concern for human  
7 rights or innocent lives. Whether she realized it or not, Mother Teresa's gentle  
8 intrusion in Haiti and Guatemala masked the ugly truth. A similar pattern  
9 existed for her intrusions into other international events.

10 Mother Teresa's intrusions were profoundly political. They legitimized the  
11 existing neo-liberal, imperially dominated socio-economic system. She did not  
12 ask why poverty was rampant or why injustice was so widely prevalent.  
13 Suffering for her was a '*gift from God*'. She did not express concerns about  
14 the numerous Catholic priests and nuns being butchered by death squads in  
15 the region. JL Duvalier was being challenged by Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a  
16 Catholic priest whose sermons and life were rooted in the lives of slum  
17 dwellers. JC Duvalier represented the ruling elite. Mother Teresa, in tandem  
18 with Ronald Reagan and the Vatican, sided with the dictator, not the  
19 humanistic priest.

20 Mother Teresa's creed was not to ask why the world is the way it is. One  
21 does not question God but works within the existent conditions and according  
22 to God's will. Her creed sanitized the *status quo*. As Hitchens aptly surmised:  
23

24 *[Mother Teresa] was not a friend of the poor. She was a friend*  
25 *of poverty. She said that suffering was a gift from God. She*  
26 *spent her life opposing the only known cure for poverty, which*  
27 *is the empowerment of women and the emancipation of them*  
28 *from a livestock version of compulsory reproduction. (Hitchens*  
29 *1995).*

30  
31 In the city where she spent most of her life, people are ambivalent about her  
32 legacy. While some revere her as a saint, others say by that branding it a  
33 poverty-stricken city of lepers, she brought Calcutta, a vibrant city with a rich  
34 cultural history, into disrepute. In either case, there is little doubt that the  
35 decades of presence of the Missionaries of Charity homes in the city has had  
36 no tangible effect on the economic disparities, homelessness, conditions of  
37 the children or the plight of people lacking adequate care in the city. It is not  
38 even a worthy example of how a wealthy charity should operate.  
39

## 40 **7.15 POPE FRANCIS AND SISTER MARIANI**

41



Pope Francis (2021)

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4 **Pope Francis**, the first pope from the Global South, has recognized the  
5 gravity of predicament facing humanity and Christianity today. Despite his  
6 checkered political background in Argentina, he places issues like social  
7 justice, religious tolerance and dialogue, and poverty at the forefront of his  
8 agenda. He rallies against wanton consumerism and calls for sound policy  
9 measures on a global level to tackle climate change. In a break from tradition,  
10 he introduced more transparency in the affairs of the scandal riven Vatican  
11 Bank.

12 While Pope Francis has not budged from the conservative Catholic stand  
13 on marriage, divorce, female ordination, contraception and sexual orientation  
14 in a significant manner, he declared that these issues should not be the main  
15 focus of the Church. The Church should amicably engage with people having  
16 different views on these matters. Placing women in senior administrative  
17 positions in Catholic organizations, he has launched '*an all-out battle against*  
18 *the abuse of minors*' by clergy and ended the usual practice of maintaining  
19 secrecy in such cases.

20  
21 Going beyond his predecessors on questions of economic justice, he calls for  
22 effective actions to tackle poverty and inequality and urges lay Catholics and  
23 priests to befriend and embrace the poor.

24  
25 *We go our way in haste, without worrying that gaps are*  
26 *increasing, that the greed of a few is adding to the poverty of*  
27 *many others.* Pope Francis (O'Connell 2019).  
28

29 While the pontiffs before him had expressed disdain for liberation theology,  
30 he invited the Dominican priest and philosopher Gustavo Gutierrez Merino, a  
31 key figure in the foundation of liberation theology, to the Vatican for an  
32 exchange of views. Expressing solidarity with native communities in the  
33 Amazon rainforest, he exhibited atypical tolerance towards their religious  
34 beliefs and declared protection of the rainforest an urgent task. And he has



1 lavish praise for Greta Thunberg, the teenage environmental activist who has  
2 taken the world by storm.

3 To the consternation of conservatives—Protestant and Catholic—he is  
4 breaking new ground on theological questions and the role of the Church in  
5 society. On the issues of social and economic justice, he has outdone all his  
6 predecessors and has been inching towards abandonment of neo-liberalism  
7 and urging system change. Yet, there are some reservations. On issues like  
8 abortion, marriage, sexual orientation and ordination of women, he does not  
9 deviate significantly from the past. At times, his pronouncements are warped  
10 in elusive terminology. Yet, his edicts point a new direction for the Church.  
11 His message is that it is not enough to tackle spiritual penury. The religious  
12 agenda must prioritize confronting hunger and deprivation, earthly injustice,  
13 individualism and unbridled accumulation as well. He has been lauded by  
14 many but has also been accused of heresy in a representation to the Vatican  
15 Council made by a group of 1,500 orthodox bishops. His attention to equality  
16 and economic justice and criticism of financial capitalism has ruffled the  
17 feathers of many senior Catholic clergy who are close to the economic and  
18 political elites in their nations.

19  
20 *It is increasingly intolerable that financial markets are shaping*  
21 *the destiny of people rather than serving their needs, or that*  
22 *the few derive immense wealth from financial speculation*  
23 *while the many are deeply burdened by the consequences.*  
24 Pope Francis (Santiago 2015).

25  
26 Filipino **Sister Mariani C Dimaranan** (1925 – 2005) was a Christian whose  
27 vision and life model an evolved form of the spirituality espoused by the  
28 current head of the Catholic Church. Believing that the teachings of Jesus  
29 Christ required her to assist the poor, Sister Mariani went against her family's  
30 objection to become a nun and take part in charity work from an early age.  
31 After getting higher degrees at De La Salle University, Manila and Maryknoll  
32 School of Theology, New York, she taught and did office work at a college  
33 and a seminary in Quezon. Directed by church superiors, she embarked on a  
34 survey on the effect of martial law on the social and economic conditions of  
35 rural people in the Philippines. Disliking her project, the army arrested and  
36 detained her for six weeks. In that time, she was subjected to repeated, hours-  
37 long, exhausting interrogations.

38 Since she was a nun, she was spared the treatment usually meted out to  
39 detainees. But she came to know about the gruesome torture methods used  
40 from fellow inmates. The detention was an ordeal, but it did not lessen her  
41 resolve. Upon release, she joined and soon became the chair of the Task  
42 Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP), a position she held for 22 years.  
43 The TFDP worked to locate people placed in military custody for political  
44 reasons, document their cases, cater to their physical and psychic needs,  
45 publicize—locally and internationally—their illegal detention and abuse, and  
46 fight for their release. During her tenure at TFDP, she went in person to more

1 than 100 detention camps in remote, hard to navigate areas with needed  
2 supplies, hope and a smile for the detainees. Hundreds of volunteers and  
3 nuns joined the TFDP, made such trips, visited detainee families, wrote  
4 petitions, presented legal cases and launched international drives to secure  
5 their release.

6 Despite threats to their personal well-being and the onerous nature of the  
7 work, under her courageous stewardship, the activists established 56 TFDP  
8 branches and obtained astounding results.

9  
10 *From September 1972 to February 1986, when Marcos was*  
11 *ousted in the popular People Power Revolution, the [Task*  
12 *Force Detainees of the Philippines] was able to document*  
13 *5531 cases of torture, 2537 cases of summary execution, 783*  
14 *cases of involuntary disappearance and 92,607 cases of*  
15 *'public order violation' arrests, mainly of people joining street*  
16 *rallies and protests. (PWAG 2020).*

17  
18 To Sister Mariani, service to the poor meant linking charity with immersion in  
19 their struggle for economic justice and a better life. The TFDP notion of human  
20 rights and activities were extended to cover '*food and freedom, jobs and*  
21 *justice*'.

22 Besides playing a pivotal role exposing abuses perpetrated by  
23 soldiers and security organs, progressive nuns in TFDP and groups like  
24 Concerned Citizens for Justice and Peace view empowerment of poor  
25 women in the marginal areas a key issue. They deal with the difficulties  
26 rural women face: pregnancy and childbirth, under-nutrition, lack of  
27 education, childcare, sexual violence, overwork, and social stigma, and  
28 are high-profile actors in grassroots community organizations. There is  
29 little doubt that the activism of nuns combined with the pro-democracy  
30 efforts of Corazon Aquino dealt a major blow to the sexist, macho-  
31 oriented Filipino culture. But the nuns paid dearly for their devotion to  
32 social justice. On top of regular harassment and surveillance, many  
33 were attacked, raped, tortured, imprisoned, killed and disappeared.

34



Sister Mariani Dimaranan

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3  
4 Due to declining health, Sister Mariani gave up the chair of the TFDP in 1996  
5 but remained active until she passed away in 2005 at the age of 81. By then  
6 she had been nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize and honored by her  
7 alma mater De La Salle University with the Star of the Faith Award. Now  
8 known as the '*Father of the Human Rights Advocacy*' in the Philippines, her  
9 name features prominently on the Wall of Remembrance for heroes who  
10 fought the Marcos dictatorship. Her influence went beyond her country as  
11 well.

12  
13 *[Mariani] Dimaranan was an exemplary teacher who taught by*  
14 *example. She trained countless volunteers in gathering*  
15 *reliable data, and trained staff and paralegals in development*  
16 *work. Today many Filipino aid workers who learned from her*  
17 *serve humanitarian organizations all over the world.*  
18 *(Bantayog 2020).*

19  
20 The citation for the De La Salle award declared that Sister Mariani was a  
21 valiant, selfless '*symbol of collective courage ... [a] true daughter of the*  
22 *Church, [who] shall remain in the hearts and minds of Filipinos as a woman*  
23 *who showed the nation the true essence of justice*'. (Ramirez 2006).

24 The history of the Filipino Catholic Church is generally a story of alliance  
25 with wealthy and ruling classes. Focusing on tackling poverty of the spirit, it  
26 ignored actual suffering of the discriminated, poor classes and was linked to  
27 power, elitism and subjugation of the masses from the colonial era. But the  
28 nature of colonial rule and political developments after Independence put a  
29 major segment of the Church on a long-term trajectory to engage in the  
30 struggle for freedom and social justice. Some priests embraced liberation  
31 theology and supported armed struggles against military and US imperial  
32 domination. It is truly remarkable that thousands of nuns were at the forefront  
33 of these progressive drives for change. And in the process, they redefined the  
34 role of women in the Church and society and opened up new vistas for gender  
35 equality. Along with Sister Mariani, these nuns represent a vision for the role

1 of Christianity in modern society quite distinct from that projected by Mother  
2 Teresa.

### 3 4 **7.16 CHRISTAINITY AND SOCIALISM**

5  
6 Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and until recently, the broad consensus was  
7 that socialism (communism) is a failed doctrine. Politicians boasted it had  
8 been buried for good. Economists opined it did not and cannot work as it is  
9 against human nature. Senior religious figures called socialism a devilish,  
10 secular entity whose aim is to annihilate religion.

11 Yet, the historical record reveals a long, vibrant socialist tendency within  
12 the Christian church. Setting aside assertions that Jesus was a socialist and  
13 the communitarian leanings of medieval theologians and starting in the 19th  
14 century, we find influential Christians and Christian organizations with an  
15 explicitly socialist orientation. William Morris of the Socialist League and the  
16 Episcopal Church Socialist League are two cases. The connection between  
17 these two doctrines was proclaimed in clear term in a 1914 issue of *The*  
18 *Christian Socialist*:

19  
20 *The Christian Church exists for the sole purpose of saving the*  
21 *human race. So far, she has failed, but I think that Socialism*  
22 *shows her how she may succeed. It insists that men cannot*  
23 *be made right until the material conditions be made right.*  
24 *Although man cannot live by bread alone, he must have bread.*  
25 *Therefore, the Church must destroy a system of society which*  
26 *inevitably creates and perpetuates unequal and unfair*  
27 *conditions of life. These unequal and unfair conditions have*  
28 *been created by competition. Therefore, competition must*  
29 *cease, and cooperation take its place.* Bishop FC Spalding  
30 (Wikipedia (2020 – Christian Socialism)).

31  
32 While papal encyclicals decreed the incompatibility of Catholicism with  
33 socialism, progressive Catholics like Dorothy Day in the US and the Irish  
34 Father Michael O’Flanagan held views sympathetic to socialism. The  
35 liberation theology movement of the 1960s was founded upon an explicit  
36 integration of Marxism and Christianity. Pro-socialist strands of Christianity in  
37 that era adopted progressive social (anti-war, anti-colonial, anti-racist,  
38 feminist) causes. Many Christian denominations had a minority faction that  
39 leaned towards socialist ideas. Nationalist movements in the Global South  
40 also connected religion with socialism. In a 1965 policy document prepared  
41 for the People’s National Party of Jamaica, Bertel Ollman resorted to Biblical  
42 exhortations like:

43  
44 *Let everyone who possesses two shirts share with him who*  
45 *has none and let him who has food do likewise.* Bible, Luke,  
46 3:11.

1  
2 to make the case that socialism is practical Christianity because socialism  
3 means brotherhood, justice, equality, allying with the poor, opposing the  
4 greedy rich, seeking solutions to social problems, living by the Golden Rule,  
5 and recognition of the right of the people to own their country. The 1965 policy  
6 document states that socialism is not what its detractors say it is. It is not  
7 against Christianity but is a manifestation of noble Christian values that can  
8 be attained by the efforts of ordinary people (Ollman 1965).

9  
10 *Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and ye shall find; knock,*  
11 *and it shall be opened to you. Bible, Mathew, 7:7.*

12  
13 The religious wing of socialist politics in the US was composed of groups like  
14 Christians for Socialism that worked with socialist and liberation theology  
15 movements in Latin America. Sister Kathleen Schultz, Father Daniel Berrigan  
16 and others stood on the frontline of opposing the war on Vietnam and  
17 militarism and fighting for civil rights and social justice.

18 The fall of the Berlin Wall, however, eclipsed the religious-socialist trend.  
19 Scholars and theologians claiming compatibility of the vision of Jesus Christ  
20 with capitalism gained the upper hand in the public mind and evangelical  
21 Christianity gained more traction. But the financial crisis of 2008 and its  
22 extensive reverberations engineered a reversal. While still derided by the  
23 financial elites and their ideologues, socialism has once more entered the  
24 mainstream political lexicon across the world. The change of direction, though  
25 still partial, is evidenced by the leader of the Catholic world:

26  
27 *Pope Francis has shown sympathy to socialist causes with*  
28 *claims such as that capitalism is ‘Terrorism against all of*  
29 *Humanity’ and that ‘it is the communists who think like*  
30 *Christians. Christ spoke of a society where the poor, the weak*  
31 *and the marginalized have the right to decide’.* Pope Francis  
32 (Wikipedia (2020 – Christian Socialism)).

33  
34 The Pope’s pronouncements appear in the context of an international revival  
35 of youth activism. The young are waking up to the fact that the politicians and  
36 influential personalities have at best paid lip service to deal with the major  
37 problems facing humanity and at worst, have added to the problems. They  
38 march for sound policies to tackle climate change, rising inequality, corporate  
39 irresponsibility, poverty, racism, and high cost of education. They demand  
40 real change, democracy and accountable governance—in Tunisia, Algeria,  
41 Egypt, Sudan, Chile, Argentina, India, Thailand, Hong Kong and elsewhere.  
42 Greta Thunberg (Sweden), Camilla Vallejo (Chile), and Alaa Salah (Sudan)  
43 present the visible waves faces of a surging tide. Former leftist student leader  
44 Gabriel Boric was elected Chile’s youngest president in December 2021. With  
45 a female majority cabinet that includes former student radicals, he had  
46 campaigned on a socialist platform. The nation and the world await

1 implementation of the major changes to the existing neoliberal policies  
2 promised during his campaign.

3 That change is stirring in the center of global capitalism as well. What was  
4 deemed an apolitical generation has embraced progressive causes in larger  
5 numbers. While most of recently surveyed American adults over 50 put their  
6 faith in capitalism, a majority of those under 30 did not. One out of six of the  
7 latter declared themselves socialists while one of three favored socialism.  
8 Some 70% of people under 30 had no qualms about voting for socialist  
9 candidates. The causes they backed ranged from a public system of health  
10 care, living wage, empowerment of trade unions, prison, justice system and  
11 police reform, public education, easing student debt, control of corporate price  
12 gauging, and sound environmental action.

13 Disillusioned by the pro-corporate double talkers of the Democratic Party,  
14 young volunteers—religious and secular—formed the backbone of the  
15 candidacies of Bernie Sanders and others running on a socialistic slate at  
16 local, state and national levels. Democratic Socialists of America, a party that  
17 had languished in stasis for quite a while, is one of the beneficiaries of this  
18 awakening. In the past four years, its membership has risen from 5,000 to  
19 35,000, and its local chapters have quadrupled to 180. Widely popular  
20 youthful politicians in the leftwing of the Democratic Party like Alexandria  
21 Ocasio-Cortez have policies similar to those proposed by the socialists. And  
22 the two groups often work together.

23 Veterans from previously active but now defunct groups like Christians for  
24 Socialism form a part of that coalition. Sister Kathleen and her fellow nuns,  
25 for example, continue to take part in community actions like preventing utility  
26 shutoffs, home foreclosure, and requiring property developers to be bound by  
27 contracts protecting low-income people in Detroit, and have been arrested for  
28 engaging in civil disobedience. They are in the company of retired Bishop  
29 Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit whose decades of anti-war, social justice  
30 activism has at times landed him behind bars and the vibrant Poor People's  
31 Campaign led by William Barber II and Liz Theoharis. There is also a group  
32 of feisty nuns working in low-income areas under the banner of Nuns on the  
33 Bus. They make annual tours across many states to promote varied causes  
34 like health care reform, supporting homeless shelters, food pantries, public  
35 schools and health care for the uninsured. Led by Sister Simone Campbell,  
36 they oppose federal budget cuts that target programs to assist the poor and  
37 children. Their bus is usually welcomed in the communities it passes through,  
38 but it also is heckled by extremist right wingers. And there is the intrepid,  
39 distinguished scholar-activist Cornel West. He has for decades eloquently  
40 rallied against class, race and gender injustice as well as imperialism from a  
41 unique blend of Christian and Marxist perspectives and inspired many young  
42 progressive activists to embrace socialism.

43 Sexual abuse and financial misdeeds in the Christian denominations have  
44 prompted young congregants to detach themselves from organized religion  
45 or abandon religion in favor of secularism. When asked if Jesus would prefer  
46 capitalism or socialism, three out of five Americans said neither or not sure.

1 Yet the number who picked the latter (one out of four) outranked the number  
2 (one out of seven) who picked the former.

3 Opposition to socially harmful neoliberal policies from religious figures is  
4 a global phenomenon. We have seen this for the Philippines. Another shining  
5 case is the Sister Teresa Forcades, an activist doctor in Spain who promotes  
6 socialist causes in public health. In some African nations, outspoken clergy  
7 often are the only voices standing up to the authoritarian, neo-liberal policies  
8 of the government. The Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference issued a  
9 pastoral letter in August 2020 blaming the military dominated government for  
10 policies that have deepened poverty, shortages, inflation and corruption. The  
11 government was also criticized for suppressing dissent and abduction and  
12 torture of activists.

13 Conservative Catholics and evangelicals are alarmed by progressive  
14 activism in the Church and its appeal to the youth. It nullifies the pro-capitalist  
15 'Prosperity Gospel' the televangelists espouse. Instead of lauding individual  
16 initiative and regarding wealth a blessing from God, it endorses cooperation  
17 and prudent living. Conservative ministers once again are using the pulpit,  
18 the Internet and other media to denounce the 'evils' of socialism. Thus, with  
19 quotes from the Bible, Julies Roys makes the conservative case in a recent  
20 issue of *The Christian Post*. She pointedly declares that socialism is not  
21 Christian because: (i) *Socialism is based on a materialistic worldview*, (ii)  
22 *Socialism punishes virtue*, (iii) *Socialism endorses stealing*, (iv) *Socialism*  
23 *encourages envy and class warfare*, and (v) *Socialism seeks to destroy*  
24 *marriage and family*. (Roys 2016). In the past, her arguments would have  
25 received broad accolades from the American public. Now many find them  
26 unconvincing. The youth largely reject them.

## 27 28 **7.17 REFLECTIONS**

29  
30 Christians worship an all-powerful, all-knowing God, accept that Jesus Christ  
31 is the Son of God and that he was resurrected after death. They regard the  
32 Bible as a guide for spiritual and worldly conduct, and hold that humans were  
33 created in God's image. Christians embrace Biblical precepts of compassion,  
34 forgiveness and love, and assuming stewardship of all of God's creations.  
35 Some Christians posit the Bible the literal truth in spiritual and worldly affairs;  
36 some believe Biblical stories are a source of inspiration; and some believe  
37 they are symbolic narrations subject to interpretation. Thus, some Christian  
38 denominations regard the story of creation in seven days as narrated in the  
39 Genesis the exact truth while others hold that it is a symbolic account that is  
40 not inconsistent with the theory of geological and biological evolution.

41 Christians believe that humans have a soul that survives physical death  
42 and God judges them according to their deeds. Beyond that basic view,  
43 different denominations have varied dispositions over notions like the Trinity,  
44 heaven and hell, second coming of Jesus Christ, the day of judgement,  
45 Original Sin, the nature of salvation and the Devil and his role. The central  
46 venue through which Christians worship God is the Sunday church service.

1 Christianity has three main denominations—Catholicism, Protestantism  
2 and Orthodoxy. Besides different interpretations of the Bible and modes of  
3 worship, they have different institutional organization and hierarchy. Some  
4 denominations have taken major steps to dismantle the barriers that hinder  
5 gender equality but, generally, the status of women in Christianity remains a  
6 subordinate one.

7 Over the course of two millennia, Christianity provided billions with a  
8 sense of community, spiritual solace and meaning in their lives and made  
9 significant contributions in all the societal domains. Under the patronage of  
10 Christian rulers, the Church or of their own accord, Christians produced  
11 magnificent works of art, literature, music and architecture, generated diverse  
12 ideas on social organization and modes of governance as well as contributed,  
13 directly and indirectly, to the development of language, science, technology,  
14 mathematics and logical ways of discourse.

15 While the ethical injunctions in the Bible are not always consistent, the  
16 ethical code enshrined in the Ten Commandments and the Seven Heavenly  
17 Virtues and Seven Cardinal Sins—shorn of their purely religious edicts—  
18 represents a universal, socially decent, elevated ethical code. Observance of  
19 such ethical tenets has fostered lives of harmony and peace in family and  
20 society and motivated people to assist their fellow human beings.

21 Christianity began as a religion that stood against the social injustices of  
22 the Roman Empire. It was a vision embraced by the downtrodden, poor and  
23 marginalized strata including women and slaves, as well as by elements of  
24 the alienated middle class. Yet, once it became the official creed of the Empire  
25 and later, of the feudal monarchies and dominions overseen by the Pope of  
26 Rome, it functioned as the ideology of a hierarchical, unjust social order. For  
27 the masses, submission to God was translated into submission to the King.  
28 Deviation from what the Church decreed entailed draconian penalties. Papal  
29 authority triumphed over the authority of the Bible. Churches accumulated  
30 enormous wealth and vast tracts of land, exacted onerous tributes from their  
31 flock and were loyal to landlords, nobles and rulers, not the commoners. The  
32 moral depravity of institutionalized Christianity reached its zenith in the era of  
33 the Inquisition. Tens of thousands of perceived rebels, freethinkers, Jews and  
34 witches were tortured and executed in horrific ways. Catholic persecution of  
35 major scientists hindered the development of science and knowledge.

36 As the feudal order began to fall apart as a result of growth of trade, crafts,  
37 transport, industry and towns, reformist, rebellious schisms arose across the  
38 Christian lands. Significant factions broke away from Papal oversight to form  
39 diverse Protestant orders whose interpretation of the Bible was more in tune  
40 with a new social order based on the ethic of buying and selling, saving and  
41 investing, private property, wage labor and the accumulation of wealth. It was  
42 through a convoluted process involving secular and religious forces that a  
43 parliamentary, representative system of governance evolved in the lands  
44 where Christianity prevailed. Science also grew by leaps and bounds.

45 At the same time, these nations of Europe sent traders, explorers and  
46 armadas to the West, East and South in search of prized commodities, to



1 acquire territory and spread the teachings of Christ. Over four centuries, an  
2 unprecedented growth in production and distribution goods occurred and the  
3 general mode and standard of living were revolutionized. Infectious diseases  
4 were controlled, the rate of early death plummeted, education expanded, and  
5 transport and travel of goods and people became faster and efficient.

6 These developments in the West occurred at an enormous human cost,  
7 mostly in the rest of the world. The barbaric trans-Atlantic slave trade, the  
8 genocidal onslaught on the native peoples of the Americas and Australia, and  
9 rapacious colonial ventures in Africa and Asia laid tens of millions of lives  
10 asunder and destroyed livelihoods to create economic structures servile to  
11 Western interests. Workers and children in the West were exploited ruthlessly  
12 until their political struggles effectuated the passage of laws and regulations  
13 that improved wages and working conditions.

14 Christianity played a bifurcated role in all these ventures. At the outset, it  
15 was employed to justify slavery, but later Christian groups were in the  
16 forefront of opposing slavery. It was used to sanctify colonial rule and pacify  
17 indigenous peoples, but later, local Christian converts played a lead role in  
18 the overthrow of colonial rule. Some Churches in South Africa and the US  
19 openly supported racist domination, but African and African American clergy  
20 staunchly opposed it. After WW II, the US deftly utilized Buddhism, Islam and  
21 Christianity to further its imperial designs in Asia, the Middle East, the Soviet  
22 Bloc, China, Africa and Latin America. In the name of anti-communism, some  
23 US churches and senior clergy in the dominated nations backed this drive.  
24 Prominent American evangelists supported the US aggression on Vietnam,  
25 but an activist group of priests launched militant civil disobedience to oppose  
26 it. A segment of the grassroots clergy in Latin America and the Philippines  
27 adopted the principles of liberation theology to champion freedom, justice and  
28 equality in their nations. Many of them were tortured and killed by death  
29 squads of regimes supported by senior evangelical priests.

30 Presently Christianity remains firmly entrenched in Africa, Latin America,  
31 and the Philippines. But it is undergoing a decline in absolute and relative  
32 terms in Europe and North America. Apart from various socio-economic  
33 factors, exposés of sexual abuse by priests and the wanton profligacy of the  
34 televangelists steer young people away from religion. Yet, the share of the  
35 population who firmly adhere to Christian beliefs and practice remains fairly  
36 stable. And this dedicated minority of mostly evangelical Christians exercises  
37 a strong influence in the centers power, and is allied with the most rightwing,  
38 pro-capitalist, pro-imperialist forces in the Western nations. While a potent  
39 cultural and religious counterweight to the right wing religious and secular  
40 tendencies in the 1960s existed, today it is diluted and almost muted.

41 Humanity and the planet stand at a critical, existential juncture today. The  
42 mounting threats of devastating climate change, war between major powers,  
43 pandemics and global economic meltdown are literally issues of life or death  
44 for the entire biosphere. The old social order is beginning to crumble. Two  
45 contrasting paths lie ahead. One leads to an authoritarian or fascistic system  
46 primarily serving the interests of a small enormously wealthy class and the

1 major corporations it controls and the other leads to a democratic socialist  
2 order functioning in the interest of the people.

3 To maintain its moral credibility, Christianity cannot sideline or dismiss the  
4 gravity of problems like climate change, pollution and species extinction. It  
5 has to inspire its adherent to engage in struggles to tackle these problems.  
6 Christianity must distance itself from the super-rich and corporate entities who  
7 gut public assistance programs. But it has to transcend philanthropy, and  
8 work to create conditions where philanthropy is rendered superfluous. It has  
9 to abandon the pomp and magic cures of Prosperity Gospel espousing  
10 wealthy televangelists and expose the plethora of ills created by capitalism  
11 and militarism. It must stand against xenophobic nationalism, patriarchy and  
12 homophobia and adopt an internationalist outlook, grant full equality to  
13 women, treat people with alternative sexual lifestyle with dignity and respect.  
14 And it must provide a safe environment for children and women and provide  
15 complete transparency and accountability for cases of priests egregiously  
16 treating them as objects of pleasure.

17 Many Christians are now energized and divided over issues like abortion,  
18 sexual orientation, stem cell research, religious symbols in public places and  
19 religious education. Politicians win or lose according to their stand on a single  
20 issue. In the process, key issues like racism, militarism, gender equality and  
21 economic justice get the short shrift. Some Christian denominations stand  
22 against aspects of neoliberal policies and support state assistance for the  
23 poor and marginalized peoples. But principled opposition to neoliberalism,  
24 militarism and international economic injustice is rare. Not having a systemic  
25 alternative, they remain ensconced with the capitalist framework.

26 There is the pseudo-Christianity of Donald Trump and the Bible thumping  
27 officials of his administration—Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of State  
28 Mike Pompeo, Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Attorney General  
29 William Barr—and the fundamentalist ministers of modern megachurches. It  
30 is the creed of Jair M Bolsonaro and his fundamentalist backers in Brazil, the  
31 televangelist glorifiers of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and the far right,  
32 white ultra-nationalist parties across Europe, some of which are close to the  
33 centers of power. This Christianity celebrates charitable endeavors like those  
34 of Mother Teresa. It is a Christianity of rank hypocrisy:

35  
36 *In my office, I keep a Bible open on my desk to remind me of*  
37 *God and his word, and the truth.* US Secretary of State Mike  
38 Pompeo (Wong 2019).  
39

40 On the other hand, there is the unblemished, brave, tolerant Christianity of  
41 Sister Mariani and her fellow nuns who unite with in the struggles for a more  
42 humane and dignified world. It reflects the Christianity of Dr Martin Luther  
43 King, Archbishop Oscar Romero, Don Helder Camara, Camilo Torres, Father  
44 Daniel Berrigan, Sister Dorothy Day, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Reverend  
45 William Barber II and the Christian socialists of the yesteryears. It is the  
46 progressive, socialist Christianity of Cornel West:

1  
2 *To be a Christian - a follower of Jesus Christ - is to love*  
3 *wisdom, love justice, and love freedom. .... If the Kingdom of*  
4 *God is in you, you should leave a little bit of heaven wherever*  
5 *you go.*

6 Cornel West

7  
8 The evolving global realities require Christians to choose between one or the  
9 other path. An effusive middle-of-the-road way just means functioning in  
10 harmony with neoliberalism and militarism. It is no longer feasible. The choice  
11 is either far-right religiosity or democratic, socialist spirituality. The choice is  
12 not between a Donald Trump and a Joe Biden, but between a militaristic,  
13 neoliberal and a bold leader espousing the visions of Martin Luther King.

14 This will not just be a theological struggle. Christian nationalists in the  
15 most powerful nation on earth are focused on behind the curtain diffusion of  
16 their message and organizing. Conservative fronts like The Family, United in  
17 Purpose and televangelists exercise a powerful influence on the political  
18 scene. United in Purpose played a key role in linking Donald Trump to  
19 evangelical pastors. It uses its wide network of churches and a vast database  
20 of voters to mobilize millions of voters for right-wing politicians. They are the  
21 ideologues of the plutocracy, the real rulers of nations. Allied with proto-  
22 fascist regimes and groups in Brazil, Eastern Europe, Western Europe and  
23 Africa, this brand of Christianity is spreading across the world.

24 Christians must unite with like-minded people of other faiths, humanists,  
25 and socialists to organize, occupy the streets, educate the masses, vote for  
26 progressive candidates and work to institute fundamental system change that  
27 will place political and economic power in the hands of the global majority.  
28 That goal accords with what Jesus Christ unequivocally proclaimed:

29  
30 *A new command I give you: Love one another.* Bible, John  
31 13:34.

32  
33 Fully embracing this fundamental edict is the basic moral challenge for  
34 Christians today.  
35

# CHAPTER 08: ISLAM



*Islam means peace.*

Malala Yousafzai

*I will not disgrace my religion, my people,  
or myself by becoming a tool to enslave those  
who are fighting for their own justice, freedom, and equality.*

Muhammad Ali



ISLAM EMERGED IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA around the year 610. Muhammad ibn Abdullah, now known as Prophet Muhammad, was its founder. With almost one of every four persons a Muslim, it is the second largest religion in the world today. Muslims are in the majority in 50 countries. Indonesia, with over 230 million Muslims, leads the group, closely followed by Pakistan and India, both of which have more than 200 million Muslims. Each of Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Nigeria and Bangladesh are home to between 80 and 160 million Muslims. The Asia-Pacific region stretching from Turkey to Indonesia accounts for more than 60% of the global Muslim population. Just about 20% of the Muslims reside in Arab nations while some 15% are in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Quran is the holy book of Islam.

Most Muslims fall into one of two major denominations, Sunni and Shia, with some 90% being Sunni. Both denominations, more so the Shias, are further segmented into several sects. About 75% of the Shias reside in Iran, Azerbaijan, Bahrain and Iraq.

This picture needs qualification at two levels. First, a survey done in 38 nations revealed that in a number of them, many Muslims did not express a denominational identity and saw themselves as 'Just a Muslim'. In Jordan, 93% of the respondents deemed themselves as Shia, none as Sunni and 7% as Just a Muslim, the corresponding figures for Bangladesh were 92%, 2%, 4% and 2% did not respond. In Egypt, 88% identified as Sunni and 12% as Just a Muslim while in Tunisia, 58% deemed themselves as Sunni, 40% as Just a Muslim, and 2% did not respond. In Iraq, 42% identified as Sunni, 51% as Shia, 5% as Just a Muslim and 1% did not respond. Yet in Kazakhstan

1 16% said they were Sunni, 1% said Shia, a full 74% said Just a Muslim and  
2 10% did not give an answer. In Indonesia 26% said they were Sunni, none  
3 said Shia, 5% said mentioned another sect, while a majority, 56%, said Just  
4 a Muslim and 13% did not respond.

5 Sufism and Salafism provide another aspect of Islamic identity. Sufism is  
6 a pan-denominational mystical Islamic tradition. There are Sunni Sufis and  
7 there are Shia Sufis. Sufis follow different orders (tariqas). In Malaysia, 17%  
8 of the Muslims follow a Sufi order; in Indonesia, only 3% do. In Bangladesh,  
9 26% of the Muslims say identify with a Sufi order and in Senegal a whopping  
10 92% identify as Sufis.

11 Salafism is a distinctly conservative variant but not a sect of Sunni Islam.  
12 Muslims of varied denominations also have divisions based on adherence to  
13 a specific school of jurisprudence (Sharia). A number of small Islamic sects  
14 also exist. A few of them are not accepted by most Muslims as being a part  
15 of the Islamic faith.

## 16 17 **8.1 ORIGIN** 18

19 The Arabian Peninsula at the start of the 7th century was composed of clan-  
20 based or tribal principalities ruled by princes or eminent families. In the arid  
21 environment, trading, livestock raising, small scale crafts, servant or slave in  
22 a wealthy household were common occupations. Where water supply was  
23 adequate, fruits, vegetables and olives were cultivated. The hardy date palm  
24 was a ubiquitous source of food and useful material. Nomadic Bedouin tribes  
25 maintained large herds of camels, goats and sheep. Camel milk and dates  
26 were staple food items.

27 Arabia was a conduit for flourishing interregional trade in spices, grain,  
28 fine fabric, crafts, gold and other metals, perfumes, leather goods, utensils,  
29 tools and domestic animals. Two cities, Mecca and Medina, were the hubs  
30 through which large merchant caravans plied in both directions. Bedouin  
31 tribes served as camel-providers and guards for the caravans.

32 People believed in powerful deities related to natural phenomena like the  
33 sun, moon and the stars, rain and floods, oases of water, hills and large trees.  
34 These supernatural deities were symbolized in shrines and statuettes. Rituals  
35 like animal sacrifice were performed to appease them and for help in resolving  
36 personal and tribal problems. Diviners who could communicate with the  
37 deities were consulted. Each tribe had its own gods and rituals. Jews,  
38 Christians and Zoroastrians were settled in the area as well.

39 Apart from being a major commercial hub, Mecca was reputed for the  
40 numerous holy shrines and sites located within its boundary. Idols of almost  
41 every tribe in the area had a presence. *Kaaba*, a rectangular ancient stone  
42 structure with statuettes of over 600 deities, was the most revered shrine in  
43 Arabia. Pilgrims from across the land and far beyond arrived each year to  
44 perform days-long rituals in the vicinity of *Kaaba*. Merchant caravans often  
45 diverted their journeys to pass through Mecca.

1 Muhammad ibn Abdullah was born, presumably in the year 570, in a sub-  
2 clan of the powerful clan controlling this vibrant center of trade and religion.  
3 Born into a poor family, he was orphaned at the age of six. He did not fare  
4 well in early life. It was only after he was recruited by an uncle to assist in his  
5 trading ventures that his fortunes rose. Marriage to Khadija, a wealthy widow,  
6 and ably managing her caravan trade ventures, cemented his social status.  
7 Traders respected him for his honesty and intelligence. His fair negotiating  
8 style made him a sought-after advisor for resolution of trade, land and other  
9 disputes.

10 Islamic belief holds that at the age of forty, Muhammad had a nightly  
11 encounter with angel *Jibril* (Gabriel) who implored him to believe in Allah, the  
12 one and only supreme God, and informed him that he was the *Rasul* (Prophet)  
13 of Allah. Petrified at the intensity of the experience, he did not know what to  
14 do. Khadija's support rescued him. Soon, he became a regular sight in the  
15 streets, preaching the divine messages he continued to receive and urging  
16 people to submit to Allah. His charisma, integrity and simplicity lent credibility  
17 to his words. Many people, notably from the lower social strata, flocked to his  
18 faith. Some merchants joined as well.

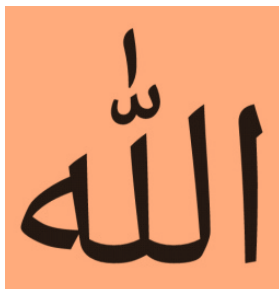
19 The nature of his message and his unyielding monotheistic stance drew  
20 the ire of the powerful aristocrats of Mecca. Facing persecution, he and his  
21 devotees departed for Yathrib, a distant town in the north. This date denotes  
22 the start of the Muslim calendar. As Muhammad successfully reconciled the  
23 feuding parties in the town and established civil order, his reputation solidified.  
24 Setting aside their traditional beliefs, people took up his religion, later  
25 designated Islam—the faith of submission to Allah. Renamed Medina, the  
26 City of the Prophet, it was the site of the first Islamic mosque. In a short while,  
27 a disciplined Islamic army was formed. To sum up an involved story, after a  
28 series of skirmishes, Muhammad's forces were able to subdue his opponents  
29 and pave the way for his return to Mecca. The Meccans and tribes across the  
30 peninsula converted to the new religion with remarkable rapidity.

31 Muhammad exercised supreme and religious authority. He was not only  
32 the prophet of Islam but also the civic, political and military leader of the lands  
33 of Islam. Under his edict, the statuettes of the deities in *Kaaba* and vicinity  
34 were smashed. The string of messages he received from Allah were written  
35 and recorded. New spiritual and practical rituals that reflected his teachings  
36 evolved. And Islam began to acquire the key features that persist to this day.

37 Muhammad died from a short illness in 632 CE at the age 62. By then  
38 Islam was the dominant religion across the Arabian Peninsula. It formed the  
39 ideological anchor for unity, stability and peace in a hitherto conflict-ridden  
40 area and laid the foundation for unprecedented economic and cultural  
41 progress. In a hundred years after his death, Muslim presence stretched as  
42 far west as the French-Spanish border and as far east as northern India.

## 8.2 CORE BELIEFS AND TEXTS

1 Muslims of all denominations and sects believe in a unitary, all-powerful, all-  
2 knowing, omnipresent, eternal, and most merciful God (Allah) who created  
3 and controls all that exists.  
4



5  
6 Arabic Inscription for Allah  
7

8 Muslims assert that Muhammad was a prophet of Allah, the bearer of His  
9 messages to humanity, and the last prophet. The basic precepts of Islam are  
10 encapsulated in the oft recited Shahada.  
11

### The Shahada

*lā 'ilāha 'illā llāh*                      *There is no god but God.*  
*muḥammadun rasūlu llāh*      *Muhammad is the messenger of God.*

12  
13 The general tenets of Islam are: A Muslim must unconditionally submit to  
14 Allah. Allah has at his command ethereal, supernatural angels with defined  
15 duties. Among other things, they observe and record our conduct. *Azazil*, a  
16 senior angel who disobeyed Allah and fell by the wayside, now directs the  
17 people towards evil deeds. The Quran, which has the direct messages of  
18 Allah, was conveyed to Prophet Muhammad by *Jibril* (Gabriel), an archangel.  
19 It represents divine wisdom and absolute truth on all secular and spiritual  
20 matters. Allah has sent many prophets to the world, including Adam, Noah,  
21 Abraham, Moses and Jesus. But Muhammad was the last and most elevated  
22 prophet. Every Muslim should abide by the Five Pillars of Islam (see below)  
23 and follow Islamic ethical principles. Allah knows everything, especially the  
24 destiny and time of death of humans. Yet, humans have the freedom to  
25 choose between good and bad deeds and are responsible for the choices  
26 they make. All people who have ever lived will be resurrected on the Day of  
27 Judgement. Good deeds will be weighed against bad ones. Those who pass  
28 the test will ascend to *Jannat* (heaven) and those found wanting will be  
29 relegated to perpetual suffering in *Jahannam* (hell).

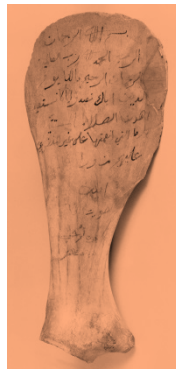
30 Islamic scriptures contain detailed elaborations of these tenets. Some are  
31 evocative and sublime; some are graphic and unnerving. Muslims concede  
32 that the Judaic and Christian holy books also came from Allah, but the Quran  
33 supersedes all.

1 Shia Muslims hold that beginning from Ali, husband of Muhammad's  
2 daughter Fatima, a lineage of Imams imbued with divine powers by Allah has  
3 existed. But the Shii sects disagree over when and where the lineage ended.  
4 The Ithnasheri (Twelver Shia), the main sect that covers about 85% of the  
5 Shias, holds there were twelve Imams in all. The last Imam is in hiding and  
6 will emerge on the Day of Judgement. Other Shia sects include Ismaili and  
7 Bohra. The Shias view the Imam as a divine persona with the authority to  
8 interpret the Quran and issue binding religious rulings. He wields secular and  
9 political authority as well. Accordingly, there is an additional line to the Shia  
10 Shahada:  
11

### The Shia Shahada

<i>lā 'ilāha 'illā llāh</i>	<i>There is no god but God.</i>
<i>muḥammadun rasūlu llāh</i>	<i>Muhammad is the messenger of God.</i>
<i>aliyyun waliyyu llāh</i>	<i>Ali is the representative of Allah.</i>

12  
13 Like the Bible, the Quran was not written by its founder. But unlike the former,  
14 segments of what was later called the Quran were transcribed onto page  
15 while he was alive. Muhammad urged his followers to memorize and recite  
16 the revelations he received from Allah. His close associates and designated  
17 scribes wrote them down on stone tablets, bones, leather material and date  
18 palm fronds.  
19



20  
21 A Quranic *Sura* Inscribed on a Camel Bone  
22

23 The vast body of revelations was compiled into a unitary text after the death  
24 of the prophet. But inconsistent compilations circulated in the initial years,  
25 causing discord in the Muslim world. The issue was tackled around 650 CE  
26 by a committee established by Caliph Uthman. Headed by Zayd, the person  
27 at the center of the earlier documentation work, it produced a text that, apart  
28 from minor discord over meaning, stands to this day as the standard version  
29 of the Islamic holy text. Its copies were distributed across the fast expanding  
30 domain of Islam in the ensuing years. Historians generally agree that it is a  
31 valid representation of the words spoken by Muhammad.



1 The Quran is composed of 114 *suras* (chapters) that include over 6,200  
2 *ayas* (verses). Almost all the *suras* begin with the word *Bismillah* (In the Name  
3 of Allah). The first *sura* begins:  
4

5 *In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful.*  
6 *Praised be Allah, Lord of the Universe, the Beneficent, the*  
7 *Merciful and Master of the Day of Judgment; You alone we do*  
8 *worship and You alone we call on for help. Guide us to the*  
9 *right path, the path of those whom You have blessed, not of*  
10 *those who have earned Your wrath or of those who have gone*  
11 *astray. Quran, 1:1-7 (Malik 1997, page 111); Wikipedia (2019*  
12 *– Quran); (Ruthven 2012).*  
13

14 The *suras* of the Quran expound—resonantly and authoritatively—the basic  
15 precepts of Islam: supremacy, uniqueness and magnificence of Allah;  
16 features of the Day of Judgment; the existence and functions of angels; the  
17 obligations of the believer and the fate of non-believers; key Islamic practices  
18 like prayer and charity; avoidance of idolatry and sin; legal injunctions, lives  
19 and teachings of the preceding prophets and deviations of their followers;  
20 marriage and family duties; tales with ethical, legal, economic and spiritual  
21 ramifications; and more. It also offers advice on food, health and personal  
22 issues. The Quran is a guide on how to live, enabling Muslims to separate  
23 right from wrong, good from bad. Progressive interpretations of the Quran  
24 assert that it accepts that all religions are equal and advocates a peaceful  
25 coexistence between them. But it also takes polytheists and idol worshippers  
26 to task.

27 Translations of the Quran in most major languages are now in print and  
28 electronic forms. But the standard Arabic version is the authentic Quran for  
29 all Muslims. Only it may be used in prayers and religious rites. A translation  
30 may be used for study and contemplation. While all Muslims concur as to the  
31 standard text, interpretations of specific *suras* differ. Some authorities cite  
32 Quranic verses to claim that disputation about the Quran is proscribed. Others  
33 use the same verses to argue that it is permitted, even encouraged, if done  
34 in a well-intentioned, informed way and under appropriate conditions. Shia  
35 Muslims believe that only Prophet Muhammad and the Imams know the true  
36 meaning of the Quran. Human understanding is limited and subject to debate.

37 The Islamic canon also has a voluminous body of scriptural texts known  
38 as *Hadiths*. Compilations of these texts began sometime after 632 and  
39 continued for several centuries. Their spiritual and secular import is second  
40 only to the Quran. Regarded representative of the words, actions, guidance  
41 and declarations of the prophet as related by his family, the Caliphs,  
42 associates and contemporaneous disciples, there are in totality tens of  
43 thousands of verses that elaborate and extend Quranic ideas. The *Hadiths*  
44 constitute the primary source of Islamic customs, ethical behavior, religious  
45 rites (modes of prayers and ceremonies) and form the basis for Sharia law,  
46 the Islamic legal code and economic policies. They contain guidelines on the

1 role and treatment of women, slaves and servants; dealings with unbelievers;  
2 as well as on the minutiae of daily life like dressing, mealtime manners, social  
3 etiquette and personal hygiene. The *Hadiths* also form a key source for the  
4 early history of Islam.

5 That said, the *Hadiths* are a prime basis for division among the Muslims.  
6 The Sunnis have six *Hadiths*, while the Twelver Shias have four separate  
7 *Hadiths*. The Ismaili Shias have their own set of *Hadiths* compiled during the  
8 Fatimid Caliphate. What for one sect are reliable and authentic sources for  
9 the *Hadiths* are not so for the other sects. The proliferating *Hadiths* written  
10 decades and centuries since the birth of Islam relied on secondhand, third-  
11 hand, fourth-hand and more distant sources. Many of them were of dubious  
12 historical value.

13  
14 *By the ninth century, when Islamic law was being fashioned,*  
15 *there were so many false Hadiths circulating through the*  
16 *community that Muslim legal scholars somewhat whimsically*  
17 *classified them into two categories: lies told for material gain*  
18 *and lies told for ideological advantage.* (Aslan 2011, page  
19 68).  
20

21 Despite concerns expressed by Islamic scholars about their validity and  
22 concordance with the Quran, the *Hadiths* were the springboard for the  
23 development of Islamic law, social customs, religious rites and moral  
24 standards. That process was affected more by the interests of the wealthy  
25 and politically powerful strata in the Muslim societies than by regard for  
26 spiritual or historical authenticity. The reverberations of those developments  
27 persist to this day.

### 28 29 **8.3 ETHICS AND MORALITY** 30

31 Arabia of the early 600s was a bifurcated society. The nomadic and rural  
32 tribes had relatively egalitarian structures that limited the powers of the  
33 leaders. The code of conduct stressed collective good over individual rights.  
34 Punishment reflected the misdeed. If you stole a camel, you gave back a  
35 camel. Weakest members of the tribe were protected. Tribal stability and  
36 security overrode all else. Yet, conflicts over land and resources between  
37 tribes were common. Moral tenets did not apply to tribal foes; battle captives  
38 became slaves.

39 In the urban areas, more so Mecca, powerful merchant families controlled  
40 secular and religious affairs. Their concern was to enhance their privilege and  
41 economic power. With slaves, servants and fighters at their behest, their rule  
42 was authoritarian. The masses lived in a state of penury and insecurity.  
43 Indebtedness and exorbitant interest rates led to enslavement. Orphans and  
44 widows were particularly vulnerable. Strict patriarchy prevailed.

45 His poverty-riven childhood sensitized the Prophet to the suffering of the  
46 common folk. He had come to value honesty, uprightness and compassion in

1 his dealings. These ethical precepts were reflected in his teachings. He saw  
2 human deeds as good or evil. The former yielded heavenly rewards and  
3 earthly gain, but the latter condemned you to suffer in this life and thereafter.  
4 In the Islamic ethical framework, especially of the early times, loyalty to Allah  
5 and Islam is the primary virtue. Selfishness, acquisitiveness and arrogance  
6 are decried while charity, compassion and humility are extolled. People are  
7 urged to be aboveboard in deal with others and act through mutual consent,  
8 not coercion or deception. This applies particularly to commercial contracts.  
9 Theft, dishonest business dealings, usury and exploitation of the destitute are  
10 proscribed. Sharing wealth by charity is stressed. Vendetta, revengeful  
11 conduct and mob justice are also denounced. Only an authorized body can  
12 decide and administer punishment. Orphans, women, slaves and ill persons  
13 are accorded more rights and a higher degree of protection than before.  
14 Idolatry is condemned but followers of other monotheistic faiths are tolerated.  
15 Only Allah has the prerogative to punish their transgressions. Extramarital  
16 sex, and consuming pork and alcohol are prohibited.

17 Overall, Muhammad's teachings inveigh against rigid hierarchy, greed  
18 and a vast gap between the wealthy and the poor. They favor an egalitarian  
19 social compact that gives opportunities for advancement to everyone. The  
20 Quranic creed holds that Allah has given humans the ability to discern right  
21 from wrong and act according to their choice. People are responsible for their  
22 conduct. Rich or poor, a person of power or a commoner, one is subjected to  
23 the same rules, some of which were later codified in law. Tribal loyalty was  
24 no longer a justified defense for criminal deeds.

25 The subsequent proliferation of *Hadiths* and emergence of Sharia law  
26 generated much debate about Islamic ethics among Muslim theologians, and  
27 led to the classification of human acts into five subtypes: (i) mandatory, (ii)  
28 laudable but not compulsory, (iii) ethically neutral, (iv) distasteful but not  
29 penalized, and (v) banned and punished.

30 While early Islamic rules do not reach modern standards of human rights,  
31 they represent a significant progress over how conduct had been judged and  
32 penalties given in the pre-Islamic days. Many aspects of current Sharia law  
33 and Islamic ethical code derive from the later-day *Hadiths*, not the Quran.  
34 They reflect the authoritarian, hierarchical and misogynist structures of the  
35 ensuing Islamic caliphates.

#### 36 37 38 39 40 **8.4 WORSHIP, SYMBOLS AND CULTURE**

41  
42 The Islamic calendar, based on the cycles of the moon, starts from the day  
43 Prophet Mohamed went to Medina. Each year is composed of 12 lunar  
44 months of 29 to 30 days and has 354 or 355 days. Each week has seven  
45 days. The day begins and ends at sunset. Friday, the day of communal  
46 prayer, is an official holiday in many Muslim majority nations. The dates for

1 religious holidays and ceremonies are set by the Islamic calendar. Sunnis and  
2 Shias do not have the same first month and differ on the observance of some  
3 annual holidays. For example, the date 7 January 2020 in the Gregorian  
4 calendar corresponds to day 12 of the 5th month of the Islamic year 1414.

5 The core of Islamic faith is expressed in the Five Pillars of Islam. The first  
6 pillar is declaration of faith in Allah and allegiance to Prophet Muhammad  
7 (shahada). The second pillar is prayer (*salah*). The other three pillars are  
8 giving alms (*zakat*), fasting during the month of Ramadhan (*sawm*) and at  
9 least one pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca (Hajj).

10  
11 **Prayer:** Muslims pray five times a day, at home or in the mosque. You face  
12 Mecca while praying. It is customary to wash hands and feet before prayer.  
13 The prayer involves standing, repeatedly bringing open hands near the chest,  
14 bending, kneeling and touching the ground. As the phrase *Allahu Akbar* (Allah  
15 is Great) is recited, open hands are raised to the ears.

16 Mosque attendance peaks on Fridays. Surveys done in 2010 showed a  
17 wide range in the rate of at-least-once-a-week mosque attendance. It was  
18 highest in the 15 countries of Africa, with Ghana leading at 100%, and Mali,  
19 standing last at 79%. Next was Indonesia where the attendance rate was  
20 72%. In the theocratic Islamic states Iran and Saudi Arabia, the attendance  
21 rate stood at a surprising low level, just 27%.

22 Reciting the Quran according to the correct intonation is a key part of  
23 Muslim education. In non-Arab nations, most Muslims have a limited  
24 understanding of the meaning of the text. Ability to memorize the Quran in its  
25 entirety is a mark of distinction. Competitions to flawlessly and elegantly recite  
26 the 114 Quranic *suras* from memory are held in many Muslim communities.  
27 The Quran has to be handled with respect under all circumstance. In a  
28 bookstack, it should be kept above the other books.

29 Shia Muslim sects subscribe in essence to the five pillars but augment  
30 them with other tenets. They profess faith in Allah, the Prophet, and their  
31 Imam. Under the authority of the Imam many beliefs and rituals are modified.  
32 Some Shia sects combine the five prayer-times requirement into three and  
33 pray while seated. Shia prayers draw on verses from the Quran and the words  
34 of the Imams. Singing hymns composed by eminent missionaries is a key part  
35 of the prayer session. Muslims use rosaries made with 99 beads—denoting  
36 the 99 known names of Allah—during prayer, meditation and other religious  
37 occasions.

38  
39 **Alms:** Giving alms reflects the Quranic enjoinder to assist the needy and  
40 share wealth (*zakat*). It was reformulated in the *Hadiths* to principally denote  
41 payment of 2.5% of the annual income (or total wealth) to a community body.  
42 The money is used for maintenance of mosques, support religious activities,  
43 and assist the needy, travelers and others. A person unable to pay *zakat* may  
44 do free work for the community. Muslims are forbidden to charge interest on  
45 loans. At times, loans may be given for compassionate reasons and without  
46 a collateral.

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**Fasting:** Ramadhan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, marks the period during which Prophet Muhammad began receiving messages from Allah. It is a holy month for spiritual reflection and purification that is marked by fasting, special prayers, enhanced charity and avoidance of sin and worldly pleasures. Apart from specified exceptions, adult, healthy Muslims do not eat or drink from dawn to dusk and abstain from daytime sex and smoking. Fasts begin the day after the crescent moon is sighted and end 29 or 30 days later when it reappears in the sky. According to a survey of 39 Muslim nations and communities in 2012, the rate of fasting was higher than 90% in more than 20 places.

Traditionally the fast is broken in the same way as Muhammad is said to have done, with a few dates and water. It is followed by the main meal of the day. For affluent families, it is a month of savoring sumptuous dishes. Weight gain during the holy month of fasting is not unheard of. Some mosques and wealthy Muslims provide free meals to the poor during this month.



Crescent Moon

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The end of Ramadhan is celebrated as the holiday of *Eid al-Fitr*, a day of special morning prayer, amusement fairs, musical events, culinary feasts and exchange of gifts among relatives and neighbors. Children look forward to it as a day when they get new clothes and presents.

**Hajj:** Once in a life pilgrimage to Mecca is obligatory for Muslims with the means and physical ability to do it. Occurring over a six-day period in the last month of the Islamic calendar, it involves performing a series of rites including walking seven times around the *Kaaba*. Of recent, between 2 to 2.5 million Muslims have each year attended the Hajj. About 75% were from nations other than Saudi Arabia. The end of the Hajj is celebrated by the festival of *Eid al-Adha* across the Muslim world. For the Twelver Shia sect, pilgrimage to the Karbala in Iraq is as important as the Hajj. (The corona pandemic has drastically reduced Hajj attendance.)

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**Mosques:** Muslims have built numerous large and small places of worship with architecturally exquisite exterior and stunning interior design that are spread around the world. In the Eritrean town of Massawa stands a rundown small structure originating from the time of Prophet Muhammad. Built by his companions who had fled from Medina, it is one of the two oldest mosques of Islam. The minaret and other features of the present mosque were added much later.



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Mosque of the Companions, Massawa



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*Jama Masjid, Delhi*

The *Jama Masjid* in Delhi is the largest mosque in India. Built in the Mughal era, it has tall minarets and large domes that characterize many present-day mosques. At prayer times, a caller stands at the high point in the minaret to beckon the faithful. Besides being prayer venues, mosques host marriage and funeral ceremonies, and provide basic services to the needy. Some conduct Quranic education as well.

22  
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25

**Dress and Appearance:** Islamic custom, in part based on Quranic *suras*, requires Muslim men and women to wear loose fitting, clean clothing that conveys a dignified, modest appearance. But, contrary to the impression generated by the Western media, Islamic nations and communities display

1 widely varied styles of dressing that are as much influenced by local custom  
2 and culture as by religion.

3 In Arab nations, Muslim men wear a long, multi-layered white robe and a  
4 head scarf secured by a band. Women adorn loosely fitting attire of various  
5 colors covering their bodies except hands and face. In Indonesia, the world's  
6 most populous Muslim nation, a rich diversity of regional styles that blend  
7 tradition, Islamic inclination and Western influence prevail. Men dress in *Batik*  
8 shirts, a black hat like the Turkish fez, with trousers or sarong. Women wear  
9 a plain or embroidered *kebaya* made from cotton, rayon or silk. Women and  
10 men on different islands display a distinct mix of regional, Islamic, national or  
11 Western dress styles.

12 In Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda some Muslim men wear a full length  
13 white robe with a plain or elegant, hand-woven cap while most Muslim men  
14 put on the standard shirt-trouser combination and no a head gear. Some  
15 Muslim women wear dark clothes covering most of the body. But the majority  
16 integrate with the prevailing fashion—a Western style top with a colorful  
17 *khanga or kitenge* wrapped over the lower part of the body. Educated Muslim  
18 women often dress in a Western style. Clothing styles also vary among the  
19 Islamic sects.

20 While common imagery shows Muslim men with beards, little uniformity  
21 over this practice exists. Some sects and nations value well-trimmed beards;  
22 others, a shaven face with a moustache; others, a long beard; and yet others  
23 show no preference in this respect.

24  
25 **Food and Drink:** Apart from prohibitions on pork and alcohol, Muslims eat all  
26 kinds of foods. But animal meat—cow, goat or poultry—has to come from  
27 animals that have been slaughtered in the *halal* method.

28  
29 **Music:** Music has been an integral part of the culture of Islamic nations and  
30 communities for many centuries. Nations of northern Africa, from Morocco to  
31 Somalia, of the Middle East and Asia, including Afghanistan, Pakistan, India  
32 and Indonesia to former Soviet nations and the Muslim groups of China have  
33 distinctive repertoires of song, poetry, hymns and dance in which the secular  
34 and religious strands intermingle. But Sunni and Shia traditions differ in terms  
35 of content, style and mode of expression in music.

36 Devotional chants and song, with or without musical instruments, provide  
37 communal cultural sustenance. The instruments—wind, string, reed, gong,  
38 drum, harmonium and others—vary by nation. Bands and orchestras may  
39 feature in the renditions of religious songs. Songs express love for Allah,  
40 revere Imam Ali and other Imams, praise the Prophet, convey moral edicts  
41 and ponder on the vicissitudes of life. New compositions augment traditional  
42 songs and hymns to enliven religious dramas and plays. Joint endeavors by  
43 lyricists, singers, instrumentalists and music directors render melodious,  
44 enchanting, evocative words and sounds that sink into the heart. The sacred  
45 and secular musical strands coexist in many Islamic societies.

1 The Egyptian singer, lyricist and actress Umm Kulthum mesmerized  
2 millions across the Middle East and North Africa with resonating, flawlessly  
3 rendered performances of classical and modern songs. By age twelve, she  
4 had memorized the Quran. Encouraged by her father, she learned classical  
5 Arabic music and songs and later embarked on an acting and singing career.  
6 Her remarkable talent attracted important lyricists and music directors to her  
7 side. Her ability was nothing short of phenomenal. A typical performance had  
8 two or three songs lasting three to four hours. Often, she improvised without  
9 missing a beat. The audience for her virtuoso monthly radio concerts was in  
10 the tens of millions.

11 Though her repertoire shone with songs of love, pain and romance, she  
12 was a singer with a social conscience. In a time when the people of the region  
13 were revolting against Western domination and for self-determination, her  
14 songs reflected patriotic and Pan-Arab sentiments. Her musical reputation  
15 and political influence extended well beyond the Arab lands. She adhered to  
16 classical Arabian musical styles at a time when many singers were falling  
17 under the influence of Western music. Under President Gamal A Nasser, one  
18 of her songs was made the National Anthem of Egypt. A fair number of her  
19 songs projected Islamic spirituality. In collaboration with leading poets, she  
20 enchantingly brought the words of Sufi sages like Rumi to the masses. Her  
21 song *The Prophet is Born* calls Prophet Muhammad 'The Imam of socialism'.

22 Qawwali sessions encapsulating a centuries old Sufi poetic musical genre  
23 are central to the South Asian Islamic culture. Through intense, melodic,  
24 extended recitation of devotional chants and phrases, or love poetry, the  
25 qawwal guides the audience towards spiritual bliss. *Tabla* and harmonium  
26 accompaniments enliven the session. Besides evocating divinity, qawwalis  
27 ponder on love and the vagaries of life as well. The Pakistani singer,  
28 composer and instrumentalist Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan was the undisputed star  
29 in a field shining with talented artistes. His intense voice, sublime phraseology  
30 and majestic persona exuding deep spirituality attracted millions in the Indian  
31 subcontinent. He toured over 40 countries to be the global face of Islamic  
32 music.

33 Born in a family that had been immersed in qawwalis since the Moghul  
34 times, Ali Khan collaborated with famed singers in Indian cinema as well as  
35 musicians in several other countries. While he usually sang in Urdu, at times,  
36 he sang in four other regional languages. A recipient of dozens of local and  
37 international awards, including the 1955 UNESCO Music Prize, he was twice  
38 nominated for a Grammy award. His albums have sold in the millions and  
39 command a vast following on the Internet.

40  
41 *Widely considered one of the greatest voices ever recorded,*  
42 *[Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan] possessed an extraordinary range of*  
43 *vocal abilities and could perform at a high level of intensity for*  
44 *several hours.* (Wikipedia 2020 – Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan).  
45



1 The Pakistani singers of renown include Noor Jehan, Mehdi Hassan, Munni  
2 Begum and Abida Parveen. They sang thousands of religious and film songs,  
3 qawwalis and ghazals. Some were composers and music directors as well.  
4 Varied musical and dance renditions of religious songs and Sufi poems, often  
5 with traditional instruments, have a long history in Afghanistan, Egypt, India,  
6 Indonesia, Iran, Morocco, Syria, Turkey and the former Soviet nations.

7 *Taarab*, a musical genre that formed in the late nineteenth century Islamic  
8 culture of Zanzibar and coastal areas of Kenya and Tanzania blends Swahili,  
9 Middle Eastern and Indian musical traditions. Infused with romantic  
10 evocations and Islamic values, female and male vocalists accompanied by an  
11 ensemble of instrumentalists intone vibrant Swahili songs for weddings, *Eid*  
12 festivals and community events. Its founding vocalist, Sitti Binti Saad was  
13 dubbed the Lata Mangeshkar and Umm Kulthum of East Africa. Other  
14 legendary *Taarab* vocalists include Juma Bhalo and Bibi Kidude. It was one  
15 of the few areas of the Islamic culture in which women stood abreast of men.  
16 Now spread throughout East Africa, it is increasingly adopting Westernized  
17 styles and instruments.

18 Umm Kulthum, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and more vocalists glitter in the vast  
19 musical culture of Islamic nations and communities. Religious and secular  
20 music interact and influence one another. Yet, Muslim theologians remain at  
21 odds over the compatibility of music with Quranic teachings. Citing verses  
22 from the Quran and *Hadiths*, some say it is not. And others cite other verses  
23 to claim that so long as it reflects faith in and praises Allah and the Prophet  
24 and abides by Islamic values, it is a valid form of Islamic practice. Some sects  
25 allow singing but without instruments.

26 Conservative nations like Saudi Arabia proscribe music in totality. A few  
27 fundamentalist Islamic sects deem it satanic. While music and singing on  
28 radio and TV were generally banned in the early days of the Islamic Republic  
29 of Iran, now they are permitted and popular. An Egyptian Muslim cleric has  
30 declared belly dancing an art form that is not forbidden in Islam. The Islamic  
31 sects that deplore music and dance are in a minority:

32  
33 *Whoever says that all music is prohibited,*  
34 *let him also claim that the songs*  
35 *of birds are prohibited.*  
36 Imam Al-Ghazali  
37

38 **Literature:** As embodied in the colorful *A Thousand and One Nights* and the  
39 mystical compositions of JM Rumi, a gigantic library of creative literature of  
40 prose and poetic forms in multiplicity of languages exists in Islamic societies  
41 across the world. The field is too vast to cover here. Linguistic scholars concur  
42 that the prose-poetic style, terminology and expressive subtleties of the  
43 Arabic text of the Quran make it *'the finest work in classical Arabic literature'*.  
44 (Wikipedia (2019 -- Quran)). Islamic scriptures were the major impetus for the  
45 development of the modern Arabic alphabet and language as well as  
46 calligraphy and decorative textual styles.

1  
2 **Symbols:** Islam stands apart from Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity in  
3 the non-use of pictorial human symbols in a religious context. Though done  
4 in the distant past, modern Islamic authorities proscribe making images of  
5 Prophet Muhammad. Islamic religious literature, items and structures do not  
6 use photos or artistic drawings of humans and living beings. Islamic authors,  
7 artists and architects compensated this lacuna with geometrical patterns and  
8 elegant calligraphy. The crescent and star image is commonly used. Another  
9 example is *Rub el Hizb*. With two overlapping squares and a central circle, it  
10 marks the end of chapters in books, and is found on emblems and flags of  
11 Islamic nations and groups.  
12



*Rub el Hizb*

## 8.5 MUSLIM EMPIRES

13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20 Prophet Muhammad not only founded a religion but also laid the basis for an  
21 expansive social formation. Trade and cultural interactions had effectively  
22 unified the Arabian Peninsula by the time he was born. But riven by parochial  
23 clans and tribes with varied modes of governance, conflicts were chronic. The  
24 time was ripe for a visionary, bold leader with an appealing doctrine to make  
25 the people feel that they belonged to single community with a common  
26 destiny.

27 Muhammad was the man of the hour; a wise, able man of action. Within  
28 two decades of his divine revelation, the key elements of a unitary Islamic  
29 state were in place in nascent forms. A new governance structure, code of  
30 interaction between communities, textual authority for law and personal  
31 conduct, system of revenue collection, and a standing, disciplined army had  
32 been formed. He was the political, military and spiritual commander of the  
33 emergent order. Given the degree of social fragmentation and hostile terrain,  
34 that he unified Arabia in a short period was a remarkable accomplishment.

35 When Muhammad died, the immediate question was: who will lead the  
36 *Ummah*, the Muslim nation? The wealthy Quraysh merchants jockeyed to  
37 regain the political authority they had lost. Some tribes appeared intent on  
38 disavowing their allegiance to Islamic rule. The risk of re-fragmentation was

1 high. His companions and close disciples—many youthful idealists—acted  
2 decisively to forestall that possibility. At the community gathering in Medina  
3 that was debating the succession, they deftly maneuvered to have Abu Bakr,  
4 one of the two main companions of the Prophet, elected the leader of the  
5 *Ummah*. Some scholars see this as the first time in history that a leader of  
6 such authority was elected in a fairly democratic fashion. But democracy was  
7 compromised in that once elected, he ruled for the rest of his life.

8 Muhammad’s family and a minority of Muslims felt that Ali, the other  
9 senior companion and the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, was the rightful  
10 choice. But after seeing the broad support Abu Bakr enjoyed, they relented.  
11 Thus commenced a long history of the empire of Islam. The ruler, the Caliph,  
12 exercised supreme secular power and a modicum of religious authority. He  
13 did not have the spiritual status of a prophet. The first four Caliphs, including  
14 Abu Bakr, had been close associates of the Prophet. They together with the  
15 fifth and sixth Caliphs were chosen with the general consent of the elites in  
16 Arabia, if not the commoners, of the *Ummah*. The sixth Caliph made the  
17 Caliphate hereditary. The major Islamic Caliphates are listed below.  
18

**Table 8.1: Major Islamic Caliphates and Empires**

Rashidun Caliphate	632—661 CE
Umayyad Caliphate	661—750 CE
Abbasid Caliphate	750—1517 CE
Fatimid Caliphate	909—1171 CE
Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba	929—1031 CE
Almohad Caliphate	1147—1269 CE
Mughal Empire (India)	1526—1857 CE
Ottoman Caliphate	1517—1924 CE

19  
20 The history of the Islamic Caliphate is a story of intense rivalry, acrimony, civil  
21 war and assassination. Discord over the choice of the first Caliph generated  
22 the primary split in Islam. The Sunnis accepted the leadership process  
23 initiated by Abu Bakr. But the Shias held that only Ali and his designated  
24 descendants had the divine mandate to lead the *Ummah*. The struggle for  
25 secular power had religious connotations. Ali and his successors were called  
26 Imams: not only secular leaders but infallible personages with a direct link to  
27 Allah. Shias cite Prophet Muhammad’s sermon at *Ghadir Khummn* in March  
28 632 to support this position. While Ali became the fourth Caliph and his son  
29 succeeded him, the divide persisted, and generated a permanent schism.  
30 The Shias moved their headquarters to Iraq under the leadership of their  
31 Imams. But they too were divided over the issue of succession. The two main  
32 Shia sects today are Ithnasheri (Twelver Shia) and Ismaili. The latter has  
33 further subdivisions. Shias have frequently faced intense, violent persecution  
34 in Sunni majority areas.

1 Despite internal conflict and splits, Islamic rule expanded rapidly, setting  
2 up mostly stable, prosperous empires across large swathes of land beyond  
3 Arabia. After moving its capital to Damascus, the Umayyad Caliphate  
4 prevailed in the East up to India, took over large chunks of northern Africa  
5 and conquered Spain in 711. At its height, it had about 62 million subjects  
6 spread over an area of 15 million square kilometers. The Abbasid Caliphate  
7 that followed ruled from Baghdad over a slightly smaller land mass. Starting  
8 from 1526, the Islamic Mughal Empire prevailed in India for over three  
9 hundred years with a population of nearly 150 million within its dominion. The  
10 Ottoman Empire based in Istanbul, Turkey, was the longest lasting Islamic  
11 empire. During nearly 700 years of existence, it prevailed in Eastern Europe,  
12 large areas of North Africa, Persia and beyond.

13 Islamic empires were driven primarily by a desire for wealth, territory,  
14 resources and political power by the ruling elites. Religion was not the basic  
15 motive force for imperial expansion. Yet, Islam provided a unifying and  
16 motivating force for the troops and administrators. The Caliphs established  
17 authoritarian, hierarchical social and political structures in the new lands that  
18 were brought under their control. While some consulted with clan leaders,  
19 elders and wealthy merchants, nothing resembling modern democratic rule  
20 was instituted. The large-scale conversions to Islam that occurred in the  
21 process had religious and secular aspects. Converting to the faith of the ruler  
22 gave higher prestige and material advantages like exemption from certain  
23 taxes. Islam provided a cohesive ideological glue for the populations of the  
24 captured lands. Islam also spread through trading links and culturally  
25 adaptive proselytizing efforts of Muslim missionaries.

26 Islamic empires were not that distinct, in social structure and principle,  
27 from societies where other religions held sway. In the current polarized era,  
28 both the anti-Islam voices labeling Islamic rule as despotic and backward and  
29 the voices idealizing it detract from a complex reality. For an insight into the  
30 characteristics of these empires, we overview three specific cases.

## 31 32 33 34 **8.6 THE EARLY ABBASID CALIPHATE** 35

36 The Abbasid Caliphate was born when an army led by a descendent of  
37 Prophet Muhammad deposed the reigning Umayyad Caliph. It was 750 CE.  
38 The Caliph and his family were executed. Only a young prince managed to  
39 escape (see the next section). In 762 CE, Al-Mansur, the new Caliph, moved  
40 the headquarters of the caliphate from Damascus to a distant place between  
41 the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Named Baghdad, the nondescript area was  
42 converted into a populous city of architectural magnificence. A solid circular  
43 defensive wall, proximity to abundant water supply, location along a key trade  
44 route and moderate weather established a large city that became the  
45 fountainhead of the Golden Age of Islam, an age that spanned five centuries.

1 With some 1.5 million residents at the pinnacle of its glory, it was likely the  
2 largest, and certainly the most prosperous city of the day.

3 Under the Umayyad Caliphate, the Islamic Empire had spread from the  
4 Middle East into parts of West Asia and Europe and much of North Africa,  
5 including Egypt. Asserting his dominion over these regions and extending  
6 their boundaries, Al-Mansur established a decentralized system of rule under  
7 which the Emirs, the regional governors, had more autonomy and power. The  
8 civil service was manned by Muslims and non-Muslims. There was a large  
9 presence of Persians, some in positions of authority. In the long run,  
10 administrative decentralization, undue reliance on foreign bureaucrats and  
11 the recruitment of Turks into the army fostered the fragmentation of the  
12 Abbasid Caliphate. Ambitious regional Emirs utilized their economic and  
13 military might to set up *de facto* mini caliphates in Spain, Italy, Iran, Morocco  
14 and Egypt. The central caliphate exercised spiritual and moral authority but  
15 not much more. Yet, even in that fractured state, the progressive trends set  
16 in motion at the outset continued to operate in the central and most of the  
17 regional caliphates.

#### 18 19 + Politics and power + 20

21 The principal features of Abbasid rule were economic prosperity, a well-  
22 organized civil service, an efficient mode of tax collection, a large standing  
23 army, a well-developed education system, and religious authority.

24 The Caliphate ran on a decentralized system. While exercising supreme  
25 authority, the Caliph appointed the Vizier (chief minister) for day to day  
26 running of the affairs of state. He oversaw *Diwans* (secretaries) who headed  
27 four key departments, each with several sub-departments. The portfolio of  
28 the *Diwan* of Finance covered the personal treasury of the Caliph, revenue  
29 collection, state expenditure, charity, agriculture and manufacture; of the  
30 *Diwan* of the Judiciary included the courts, public complaints and market  
31 supervision; of the *Diwan* of Security included the army, navy and police,  
32 conversion to Islam and mailing service; and of the *Diwan* of Administration  
33 covered records, official documentation, official seals and certification. Each  
34 region of the vast empire was placed under an Emir or a Sultan. Instead of  
35 relying purely on Arab aristocrats, able non-Arabs and non-Muslims were  
36 also recruited for senior and low jobs in the civil service. Theologians and  
37 secular scholars guided the state authorities on matters of policy. A bevy of  
38 informants kept the center informed of the events and undercurrents  
39 throughout the Empire. The Vizier, Emirs, *Diwans*, senior state officials and  
40 military commanders were amply remunerated.

41 The empire was consolidated by a formidable army, a swift naval armada  
42 and forging alliances with adjacent and distant kingdoms. For example, it  
43 maintained friendly diplomatic relations with the Tang Dynasty in China.

#### 44 45 + Economy + 46

1 Construction of Baghdad over several years was a strong stimulus for the  
2 regional economy. Tens of thousands of stone masons, wood and metal  
3 workers, painters and laborers worked under hundreds of architects and  
4 planners to build the round city wall, defensive moat, houses, palaces and  
5 roads. A long-standing location for caravans from all directions, the new city  
6 stood to prosper from trade in a wide range of commodities and resultant tax  
7 revenue. Placement of the major external gates facilitated entrance and exit  
8 of traders and travelers from distant lands and Mecca bound pilgrims.

9 Food, clothing, utensils, tools and other goods for the burgeoning  
10 population of the city stimulated agriculture, crafts and trade. The abundant  
11 water supply was channeled through canals, aqueducts and pipes. Using  
12 techniques like pulleys and the Archimedes Screw, windmills and watermills  
13 drew large volumes of water to greater heights. Vast irrigation systems  
14 watered farms, enhancing the quantity, stability and variety of agricultural  
15 goods. Baghdad was a beacon for major developments in Iraq as a whole. As  
16 documented by Ibn Battuta, a famed traveler, various cities of the area were  
17 renowned for their own distinctive products.

18 The tributaries of the four major roadways leading to the city center were  
19 lined with many markets and shops. Good supply of water and raw materials  
20 boosted book production. Many items were exported by caravans and ships,  
21 bringing profits and prosperity to the nation. The range of commodities sold  
22 in the city markets by area of origin were: Basra (pearls, gems, silk, linen,  
23 henna, perfume, silver, fish, Quality dates, medicinal material); Baghdad  
24 (quality turbans, shawls, apparel, mats); Kufa (exotic turbans, perfume,  
25 dates); Wasit (fish, draperies, fine cloth); Numanniya (wool garments); Mosul  
26 (metal buckets, knives, arrows, chains, grains, honey, fats, cheese, salted fish  
27 and meat, pomegranates, melons); Nasibin (nuts, dried fruits, weigh scales,  
28 inkstands); Raqqa (soap, olive oil, reed pens); Harran (honey, wine jars,  
29 cotton, weigh scales); Malathaya (grapes, fruits, hemp, dried meat) (Source:  
30 Lindsay 2008, page 102).

31 Over time, new crops like almonds, citrus fruits, sugar cane and rice found  
32 their way into the market stalls in the city and beyond. Though only the well-  
33 to-do bought exotic items like silk, perfumes, carpets, jewelry and spices,  
34 many of these items featured in the diet and belongings of the commoners as  
35 well.

36 Strict state supervision of merchandise quality, valuation of coinage,  
37 changing currency, and accuracy of weights and measures attracted  
38 purchasers from outside. A trusted system of banking and money lending  
39 facilitated business transactions. City traders ventured far to establish  
40 profitable trading posts and rest centers. Gold, silver and copper coinage of  
41 the Caliphate prevailed as the currency of international trade.

42 The Abbasid era economy, as of other Caliphates, was a market economy  
43 based on private property in which the state played a major complementary  
44 role. But there were occasions when the Caliph used his power to seize  
45 privately held lands and structures.

1 **Societal Hierarchy:** The dynamic, bubbling economy operated in the context  
2 of a social and political hierarchy. In terms of political power and civil rights,  
3 the highest to the lowest strata were the caliph and his heirs; the vizier, emirs,  
4 *diwans*; jurists, religious and secular scholars, professionals; Arab and  
5 converted Muslims; Christians, Jews, and others; and at the bottom, women  
6 and slaves. In terms of economic status, the highest to the lowest ranked  
7 groups were the caliph and his family; the vizier, emirs, wealthy merchants,  
8 money lenders, large landowners; shopkeepers, owners of craft works,  
9 scholars, professionals, and favored slaves; low-grade workers, craftsmen,  
10 soldiers, tenant farmers; and lastly, slaves.

11 The social hierarchy combined rigidity with flexibility. While Christians,  
12 Jews and Zoroastrians had fewer rights than Muslims, people of these faiths  
13 had a presence in the upper echelons of the political, economic hierarchy.  
14 Persian Zoroastrians held senior bureaucratic positions. Jews and Christians  
15 were among the wealthy merchants, bankers and landowners. Many non-  
16 Muslims were respected, affluent scholars, professionals and doctors. And  
17 one could raise one's social status by converting to Islam.

#### 18 19 + Legal system + 20

21 Besides drawing upon traditional Islamic tenets based on the Quran and  
22 *Hadiths*, the legal system under the Abbasid dynasty drew from the work of  
23 scholars in the several schools of law established in Baghdad. Contributions  
24 of religious authorities were supplemented by the influence of a diversity of  
25 juridical thinkers.

26 An elaborate body of laws governing religious affairs, public spaces, land  
27 rights, personal conduct and obligations, commercial transactions, role of  
28 women, treatment of slaves and other matters came into being. Apart from  
29 the Caliph and his family, no person had special birth rights. Under Islamic  
30 law, Muslims had the most rights, followed by Jews, Christians and  
31 Zoroastrians. Women and slaves were below everyone else. New converts  
32 to Islam, whatever their prior religion, held the same rights as other Muslims.  
33 Specific rules about dressing, public expression of faith and other matters  
34 restricted the conduct of non-Muslims in public spaces. But often they were  
35 not enforced, and Muslims, Jews, Christians and others generally interacted  
36 freely in most walks of life.

37 A special tax was levied on non-Muslims. Court sessions and hearings  
38 before senior government officials were held in public and were open to  
39 comment. Market inspectors, usually persons of integrity, were given the  
40 power to enforce ethical business practices. Those found in breach, whatever  
41 their status, could receive instant public flogging.

42 The fundamental basis of the legal and political system was to ensure the  
43 operation and legitimacy of the Caliphate and the social order. Social  
44 prosperity was a sign of divine blessing and power bestowed on the Caliph.  
45 But in times of strife and economic downturn, that doctrine formed the basis

1 for the Caliph's betrayal of the divine mandate and justified actions to depose  
2 him. (Compare with the doctrine of mandate from heaven in Confucianism.)

### 3 4 **+ Education and scholarship +**

5  
6 Economic advancement together with the comingling of cultures due to trade  
7 and travel induced the first five Caliphs, especially Harun al Rashid (786--809  
8 CE), to generously fund scholarly inquiry and acquisition of knowledge.  
9 Espousing personal interest in philosophy, science and medicine, they  
10 oversaw the transformation of Baghdad into the most vibrant center of global  
11 erudition. Scholars—Muslim and non-Muslim—translated texts from Greek,  
12 Latin and Sanskrit into Arabic and Persian, wrote commentaries, conducted  
13 investigations and produced a worthy library of original works. It is generally  
14 accepted that had it not been for the extensive translations done by Muslim  
15 scientists of that era, much of the developments of the ancient Grecian times  
16 and elsewhere would have been lost to the world.

17 The foundation for the burgeoning scholarship was laid with provision of  
18 elementary schooling in the urban centers. In the *maktabs* and mosques,  
19 children—rich and poor—learned to read and write Arabic and recite the  
20 Quran, imbibed tales about the Prophet and mastered basic arithmetic.  
21 Young boys and girls often studied together. Wealthy families engaged  
22 private tutors. In the rural areas, where children worked on family farms and  
23 trades from an early age, the sole form of non-practical learning they acquired  
24 was recitation of the Quran in the mosques.

25 Some children proceeded to study theology, interpretation of the Quran,  
26 Islamic law and literature, and calligraphy in higher level schools. And a few  
27 advanced students were exposed to science, history, geography, music and  
28 mathematics.

29 Established in the 8th century, the House of Wisdom in Baghdad was the  
30 first prototype of a modern university. What initially was a library set up by the  
31 Caliph evolved into a center for inquiry and advanced instruction. Guided by  
32 esteemed scholars and scientists, students ventured into science, foreign  
33 languages, mathematics, astronomy, astrology, philosophy, jurisprudence  
34 and music. There was no formal curriculum. The teacher had ample leeway  
35 to convey the subject to his students. While memorization was a core aspect  
36 of education, public debate, discussions and independent inquiry occurred  
37 regularly. A good supply of paper and ink was always at hand. Philosophical,  
38 scientific and general works from Greece, Italy, India and Persia were  
39 translated into Arabic. Held in high prestige, these scholars were amply  
40 rewarded by the state. In addition to translating and transmitting scientific and  
41 philosophical treatises from faraway places, they produced original works in  
42 mathematics (geometry, algebra, arithmetic and trigonometry), physics  
43 (astronomy, optics and mechanics), medicine, surgery, chemistry and  
44 geography whose reverberations are felt to this day. Passages from the  
45 Quran that counsel believers to seek knowledge inspired the scholars and



1 precipitated the emphasis on education and research. Women, however,  
2 were hardly represented in this process.

3 The House of Wisdom library eventually housed a massive collection of  
4 diverse material—local and foreign original and translated texts. Many other  
5 libraries flourished in Baghdad and other cities under Abbasid rule. And they  
6 were complemented by numerous bookstores where students and inquiring  
7 minds could satisfy their intellectual needs. A glimpse of the scope of the total  
8 collection of books and manuscripts was obtained when the Mongols  
9 ransacked Baghdad in 1258. While one scholar was able to send off 400,000  
10 books elsewhere, the Mongols threw what they found into the river.

11  
12 *The books from Baghdad's libraries were thrown into the Tigris*  
13 *River in such quantities that the river ran black with the ink*  
14 *from the books. (Wikipedia (2020 – House of Wisdom)).*

15  
16 As epitomized by the collection of enchanting folk tales—*One Thousand and*  
17 *One Nights*—emergence of popular, entertaining literature was a key feature  
18 of that era. Artistic output, often geometric in nature, graced mosques,  
19 buildings, public places, drapery, decorative items and written material. One  
20 domain of the scholarly endeavor in the Islamic empires was mathematics.

## 21 22 **+ Mathematics +**

23  
24 Drawing upon the progress in mathematics from ancient Greece, India and  
25 China, Islamic scholars made novel advances in algebra, arithmetic and  
26 geometry. Muhammad Al-Khwarizmi (780—850 CE), one of the first senior  
27 regents of the House of Wisdom, was the principal mathematical luminary of  
28 that era. Among his contributions were popularization of the ten-digit numeral  
29 system (1 – 9, 0) obtained from India, a systematic method of solving  
30 quadratic equations and writing a text that laid the basis for modern algebra.  
31 He developed instruments for astronomical observations and wrote a major  
32 treatise on geography.

33 Muhammad Al-Karaji made further advances in algebra, pioneered the  
34 mathematical induction method and used it to prove the binomial theorem in  
35 the tenth century. Three centuries on Nasir al-Din al-Tusi unified and  
36 extended plane and spherical trigonometry and gave the sine rule for plane  
37 triangles. Still later, Omar Khayyam, a gifted poet, eminent writer, but also a  
38 mathematician and astronomer extended the methods for finding square and  
39 cube roots developed in India to higher roots. His methodical, algebraic study  
40 of cubic equations yielded to solutions for some types of equations and laid  
41 the basis for eventual general solutions of higher degree equations.

42 The contributions of other mathematicians included use of the decimal  
43 notation, properties of special numbers, calculation of areas and volumes,  
44 circle geometry, summation of power series, conic sections, combinatorics,  
45 continued fractions, and formal algebraic notation. By depicting elaborate

1 geometric patterns on buildings, structures and publications, the artists of  
2 those days enlivened and extended two-dimensional geometry.

3 Many of the works of Islamic era mathematicians and scientists were later  
4 translated into Latin, widely studied, and used in science education in Europe  
5 for centuries. They provided a significant impetus to further advancement of  
6 these fields and made everlasting imprints. For example, they extended and  
7 popularized the base-ten numerical symbolism and decimal notation. It is now  
8 taught in schools everywhere. Without it, the emergence of the modern world  
9 of science, industry and commerce would have been held back for centuries.  
10 Yet, their contributions are sidelined in the mainstream histories of science.  
11 At best, they are depicted but as preservers and translators.

### 12 **8.7 MUSLIM RULE IN SPAIN**

13  
14  
15 The Iberian Peninsula in the beginning of the 8th century was a poverty-  
16 ridden, culturally barren place ruled by a despotic Christian Visigoth ruler. In  
17 711, a disciplined, motivated Abbasid Caliphate force launched an invasion  
18 and defeated the Visigoths with ease. The invaders behaved in a way atypical  
19 of conquerors: they did not butcher or plunder but offered amnesty to their  
20 foes without penalty. As such, they gained a firm foothold across the  
21 peninsula without shedding much blood in a few years. However, strong  
22 resistance from French forces prevented them from marching into Northern  
23 Europe.

24 Islamic rule over Spain and adjoining areas ended decisively in 1492.  
25 Spanning over more than 750 years, it involved multiple Muslim dynasties  
26 with divergent political, religious philosophies and modes of governance.

27 In the initial four decades, discord between the North African Berber rank-  
28 and-file soldiers and the Syrian Arab commanders, administrators and  
29 merchants prevented initiation of major projects. The scenario changed with  
30 the unexpected arrival of Abd al-Rahman, the young heir of the Umayyad  
31 dynasty who had escaped from Damascus five years earlier when the  
32 Abbasids had deposed his father and killed all the other members of the ruling  
33 family. The determined prince astutely leveraged his royal status to secure  
34 sufficient support to prevail over the Emir and take over the helm of the state.  
35 An Umayyad Caliphate was instituted in all but name in the western outpost  
36 of the Abbasid Caliphate in the year 756 CE.

37 Abd al-Rahman was a visionary, able and popular leader. He united  
38 discordant Muslim factions and initiated the process of social, economic, and  
39 cultural development that eventually converted the Iberian Peninsula into '*The*  
40 *Ornament of the World*'. (Minocal 2002).

41 Social and political stability for nearly 250 years stimulated all sectors of  
42 the economy—agriculture, trade, manufacture and construction. Expansive  
43 irrigation with improved devices multiplied the output of traditional crops—  
44 wheat, sorghum, grapes—and the new ones like banana, citrus, date palm,  
45 melon, rice, pomegranate, apricots and eggplant. Innovations in glass  
46 making, textile weaving, paper production, ceramics and metal work raised

1 the quantity and quality of manufactured goods. Wealthy merchants carried  
2 local products to and brought goods from distant places, across land and sea  
3 routes.

4 Swelling of state coffers funded major infrastructural development. Well  
5 laid out cities, especially Cordoba, with clean, paved and lit streets became  
6 vibrant centers of trade and culture. Besides an array of palaces, mosques  
7 and libraries, at its zenith, Cordoba and its environs had more than 110,000  
8 buildings housing slightly less than half-a-million people. In this, the largest  
9 city in Europe, several thousand shops stocked general goods and fancy  
10 items for the elite like tooth cleaning mixtures, perfumes, jewelry, rare food  
11 items and crystal glassware. An adequate supply of water fed 300 public  
12 baths. Major progress in literature, art, culture, science and medicine  
13 concurred with establishment of diplomatic relations with Christian kingdoms  
14 in the north and powerful tribes in North Africa. Besides economic  
15 developments, the key features of Islamic Iberia can be grouped as follows:

### 16 17 **+ Social structure and governance +**

18  
19 Islamic Spain was a hierarchical society based on political status, wealth and  
20 religion. In the earlier days, Muslims were about 15% of the population (5%  
21 Arab and 10% Berber), Jews about 10% and the rest were Christians. Later  
22 day conversions, however, turned it into a Muslim majority area. The Arab  
23 rulers, wealthy aristocrats and merchants were at the top of the economic and  
24 social order. They were followed by commoner Muslims—Berber and  
25 converted. Apart from those engaged in trading and banking, Jews stood at  
26 the next level. The Christian majority was at the bottom of the rung. A system  
27 of laws based on a moderate version of Islamic Sharia law was enforced  
28 across the territory by the agents of the Caliph.

### 29 30 **+ Treatment of non-Muslims +**

31  
32 Islam and Islamic institutions had priority in all aspects of public life. Jews and  
33 Christians could practice their faith in private without hindrance and were not  
34 forced into segregated ghettos or slavery. But they could not practice in  
35 public. While Muslims paid the *zakat*, they paid a special, more onerous tax.

36 Quite a number of Jews and Christians converted to Islam. Of those who  
37 did not, many adopted Muslim dress styles, cuisine, etiquette and routines.  
38 Islamic and Christian music intertwined with and enriched each other. Menial  
39 work, avoided by Muslims, was done by non-Muslims. Yet some Christians  
40 and Jews were employed in the lower and higher rungs of civil service, owned  
41 shops, traded in gold and jewelry, ran money lending agencies and were  
42 recognized as eminent scholars and writers as well. Religion did not constitute  
43 an impenetrable barrier to social and economic progress.

44 Muslim Iberia stood head and shoulders above the intensely anti-Semitic  
45 atmosphere of that time in Europe. Jews fared significantly better compared

1 to how they had fared prior to the arrival of Muslims and also after their  
2 departure.

### 3 4 **+ Education and scholarship +**

5  
6 Arabic was the official language for public affairs, education and business.  
7 Literacy rate rose as Muslims, Christians and Jews learned to read and write  
8 Arabic. Increased availability of paper, a product much cheaper and easier  
9 than parchment, papyrus or plant leaves, led to a vastly expanded output of  
10 books. Scribes were trained to copy new and old books. Elegant calligraphic  
11 writing was the norm. Poets and writers of prose proliferated in a setting of  
12 respect for scholarship.

13 Institutions of basic and higher learning, and well stocked libraries came  
14 into being. The main royal library at one point housed 500,000 volumes. In  
15 comparison, the best contemporary libraries elsewhere in Europe counted  
16 their holdings in few thousands. Muslim, Christian and Jewish scholars and  
17 students from the vicinity and distant lands joined the famed University of  
18 Cordoba. Significant progress was made in fields ranging from science and  
19 philosophy to geography and medicine. Besides translations, original literary  
20 and scientific works were produced. The influence of the scholars of Islamic  
21 Spain was felt across Europe.

22 After nearly three centuries of relative stability and marked prosperity,  
23 Islamic rule in the Iberian Peninsula underwent a process of decline caused  
24 by internal and external factors. Persistent factional strife for greater share of  
25 wealth and power within the ruling circles weakened the state and the army.  
26 Innovations in production and growth of trade suffered as the corrupt elites  
27 became preoccupied with intrigue and luxurious living. Reversals of the  
28 earlier policies of religious tolerance antagonized non-Muslim subjects.  
29 Bickering among each other, they were unable to mount an effective defense  
30 against intruding armies of Christian nations from the north and the strong  
31 Islamic tribes from North Africa. Progressively crumbling bit by bit, Islamic rule  
32 in the area ended decisively in 1492.

33 The new monarchs acted decisively to ensure Catholic hegemony in the  
34 land. Hundreds of mosques, well-stocked private and public libraries, bath  
35 houses and palaces were plundered or destroyed. Arabic was banned and  
36 public practice of Islam was punishable by the Inquisition. Muslims were  
37 ordered to convert to Christianity. Hundreds of thousands who refused to do  
38 so were expelled from Spain in a brutal fashion. The Jewish population was  
39 expelled.

40 Just about 2% of the population of Spain now is Muslim. Almost all are  
41 recent migrants from North Africa. Yet, the marks of Muslim rule on cuisine,  
42 architecture, music and buildings in Spain remain but are not acknowledged.  
43 In an era of rising Islamophobia across Europe, visible aspects of that legacy  
44 are being erased and revisionist stories about the nature of Muslim rule in  
45 Spain are gaining greater credence. Polls indicate that about two thirds of  
46 Spaniards consider Islam incompatible with the Western way of life. The

1 gigantic, magnificent Mosque of Cordoba is now the Cathedral of Cordoba.  
2 Muslim visitors are tracked by security guards to ensure that no one prays or  
3 meditates within its building or gardens. Only a few seeking to profit from it  
4 acknowledge the Muslim heritage of Spain. Forgotten is the fact that when  
5 the Muslim armies first landed there they were welcomed by Spanish villagers  
6 as liberators from the oppressive Visigoth rule.

## 8.8 MUGHAL RULE IN INDIA



Cheraman Juma Masjid, Kerala, India

11 The entry of Islam in India began in the days of Prophet Muhammad. ('India'  
12 here covers Pakistan, Bangladesh and parts of Afghanistan.) Arab traders  
13 plying along established sea and land routes now brought not only dates,  
14 herbs and perfumes but also their religion. Many in South India embraced  
15 their faith. Cheraman Juma Masjid, one of the first two mosques in India, was  
16 built in Kerala in 629.

17 Muslim presence expanded through conversion and immigration. Initially,  
18 it was a slow process. But it turned around when an invading Umayyad force  
19 of 6,000 took control of Sindh in 712. In the ensuing nine centuries, capture  
20 of new areas combined with missionary endeavors, inter-marriage, social  
21 benefits deriving from conversion, and especially the conversion of local  
22 rajas, laid the basis of a vast permanent presence of Islam in India. In the  
23 Islamic sultanates that emerged in different parts of India, long periods of  
24 political stability and a degree of inter-religious tolerance were interspersed  
25 with a few years of bloody conflict and destruction on both sides.

26 The intrusion of a Mongolian Muslim army led by Zahir Babur in 1526  
27 opened a new chapter for Islam in India. Regional rulers were either swiftly  
28 defeated or made into allies in a process that laid the basis for the Mughal  
29 Empire that eventually was to cover most of India for the next two centuries.  
30 It was not a simple Muslim versus Hindu conflict as Babur and his successors

1 faced opposition from Muslim sultans and formed alliances with a number of  
2 Hindu and Sikh rajas as well.

3 The initial years of Mughal rule focused on conquest and consolidation, a  
4 process that never stopped completely. Babur and his seven successors,  
5 listed below, had their own styles of governance. Yet, the common features  
6 transformed India into a stable, relatively peaceful and prosperous society  
7 governed by a complex but efficient administrative system. Importantly, India  
8 became the dominant player in the global economy.

9  
10 **+ Governance +**

11 History recounts seven main Mughal Emperors.  
12  
13

**Table 8.2 The Main Mughal Emperors**

Emperor	Years of Reign
Zahir Babur	1526—1530
Humayun	1530—1556
Akbar	1556—1605
Jahangir	1605—1627
Shah Jahan	1628—1658
Aurangzeb	1658—1707
Bahadur Shah I	1708—1712

14  
15 The foundation of the Moghul system of government was laid by Akbar, the  
16 most distinguished of the Moghul rulers. The challenge was to effectuate  
17 governance with supreme authority in a land of multiple demographics with  
18 several ethnicities with their own languages (Tamil, Bengali, Gujarati, etc.),  
19 religions (Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism), Hindu rajas and Muslim  
20 sultans, and systems of social stratification (*varna* and *jati* caste systems). As  
21 Sunni Muslims, the Moghul rulers had to gain credibility with the sizeable  
22 numbers of Shias and Shia nobles in the area.

23 Akbar resolved the conundrum by instituting an intricate, hierarchical  
24 mode of administration with semi-autonomous regions, districts, towns and  
25 village communities. He retained existent local authority but in a manner that  
26 projected his paramount status. His council of advisors included Muslim,  
27 Persian, Hindu, Sikh, Jesuit and Jain scholars and religious personalities. At  
28 the executive level, the prime minister ran the general civil administration with  
29 assistance from ministers responsible for revenue collection, control of  
30 expenditure, and justice and religious affairs.

31 The imperium was divided into fifteen provinces, each with a governor, a  
32 chief minister, a military commander, a religious affairs minister and a chief  
33 judge. The provinces were divided into towns and districts whose councils  
34 controlled matters such as sanitation, policing and administration of justice.  
35 The duties of all functionaries were clearly defined. Absence of overlapping

1 authority minimized discord. Agents who gathered vital information for the  
2 central authorities operated throughout the Empire.

3 The Moghuls appointed existing rajas, nabobs and clan leaders as local  
4 governors, facilitating their compliance and cooperation. People of varied faith  
5 and background manned the regional and central bureaucracy. Rajput men  
6 (warrior caste) were recruited as officers and fighters in the army and police.  
7 Their commanders were given the status of nobility. The large landowners  
8 (*zamindars*) were won over by being allowed to largely carry on as in the past  
9 but were now made responsible for tax collection. State functionaries at all  
10 levels were handsomely rewarded. Rajput officials, for example, received  
11 large land grants.

12 It was a well-organized system of divide-and-rule that artfully blended  
13 adaptation with adoption, and consultation with imposition. The autonomy  
14 granted to local rulers notwithstanding, it was never in doubt where the true  
15 authority lay. In terms of enriching the state coffers, ensuring peace and  
16 cooperation, and generating a vibrant economy, it was a successful system.  
17 By 1690, the Mughal Empire covered an area of some four million square  
18 meters and had a population of about 160 million.

### 20 + Economy +

21  
22 The Moghul economy was founded on agriculture, crafts, and trade—local  
23 and international—with banking, transportation and construction providing the  
24 supportive infrastructure.

25 Agriculture was the mainstay of the economy. Fertile soil, good rain fall in  
26 most years, water supply from wells, streams, rivers and lakes, crop rotation,  
27 use of animal dung as fertilizer and fuel, wood and iron tools for planting and  
28 harvest, oxen drawn ploughs and carts—the traditional bases of Indian  
29 agriculture—were enhanced by canal construction, water tanks and wider use  
30 of irrigation. Regional diversity of traditional crops—rice, wheat, barley,  
31 sorghum, green millet, beans, pulses, fruits, nuts, oil seeds, vegetables and  
32 spices—was supplemented with sugar cane, pineapples, cotton, indigo,  
33 opium, tobacco, coffee, guava, potato and tomato. Yogurt and milk fat were  
34 a basic part of the daily diet. Abundant output and stable, affordable prices  
35 enhanced the nutritional status among all the strata in society.

36 The arrival of traders from Portugal, France and England led to exports of  
37 large quantities of agricultural goods and fine clothing to Europe. British  
38 merchants sent Indian opium to China. Mined saltpeter found a good market.

39 The centuries-old, elaborate Indian textile, drapery and mats making  
40 sector underwent a major expansion under the Mughals. Printed and plain  
41 fabrics and clothes made from cotton, muslin, silk and calico were in high  
42 demand abroad. Carpets from Gujarat were highly valued. Cotton growing,  
43 ginning, yarn production, weaving, embroidery and trade in these items  
44 provided livelihoods for millions. The variety, quality and output of Indian  
45 fabrics were unrivalled. Each region and city had its unique brand of textile

1 material and dresses. Woolen shawls from Kashmir fetched a high price in  
2 European capitals.

3 Skilled artisans across India made bells, utensils, tools and ceremonial  
4 swords from copper and brass as well as carvings and items for daily use  
5 from marble, wood and stone. Gold and silver necklaces and bangles made  
6 in India had international fame. Yet, despite the diversity of exports, imports  
7 into India were limited in scope, mostly precious metals like gold and silver.  
8 State policies and initiatives played a central role in the expansion of the  
9 output of craft industries and export of their products.

10 Gold and silver coins minted by the Moghuls were the primary means of  
11 exchange for internal and external trade. Mints were established in several  
12 cities of India. Mughal economy was a mammoth enterprise.

13  
14 *Mughal India was a world leader in manufacturing, producing*  
15 *about 25% of the world's industrial output up until the 18th*  
16 *century. (Wikipedia 2020 – Islam in India).*

### 17 18 **+ Societal structure +**

19  
20 Wealth is generated by labor, physical and mental. India's prominence in the  
21 global economy reflected the creativity, sweat, and toil of the peasants, tenant  
22 farmers, artisans, builders, and other workers of the Empire. Yet, the  
23 producers retained only a small fraction of the value they produced.

24 Sizeable appropriations, endorsed by law and custom, enabled the  
25 opulent lifestyles of the upper classes and construction of magnificent  
26 residential, religious and public structures. It was the material foundation of  
27 the Mughal societal hierarchy. At the apex was the ruling family (Emperor,  
28 queen, royal offspring and relatives) followed by the upper class (Emperor's  
29 council, vizier, rajas, sultans, military commanders, jurists, senior religious  
30 figures), then by the propertied class (large landowners, wealthy merchants,  
31 industry owners, bankers) under which was the middle class (professionals,  
32 scholars, junior civil servants, tax collectors, etc.), then the toiling class  
33 (peasants and tenant farmers, artisans, servants, laborers) with the abused  
34 class (slaves, Dalits, beggars) at the very bottom.

35 Taxes on agricultural and artisanal goods were the main pillars of state  
36 revenue. Tax on farm output was based on an estimate—derived by careful  
37 examinations of past records—of ten-year average yield. The years when the  
38 land was left idle were taken into account. The assessed tax had to be paid  
39 with the Empire's silver currency, a rule that further entwined peasants and  
40 landowners into the market economy. The tax rate varied from a third to a half  
41 of the average output. Landowners and money lenders additionally retained  
42 a good portion of the after-tax wealth of the producer.

43 Independent artisans and those who worked for a master craftsman were  
44 at the mercy of traders. The latter decided what was to be made, how much  
45 and for what price. And they relied on moneylenders for the capital needed to  
46 purchase raw materials and tools. Like the farm workers and peasants, they



1 were caught up in a perpetual cycle of indebtedness. Additional taxes,  
2 including export levies, were imposed as the commodities moved from the  
3 producer to the consumer.

4 Overall, it has been estimated that in the Mughal era, the primary producer  
5 retained about a third of the value of the produce. In comparison, when the  
6 Mughal Empire was replaced by British India Company rule, the producers  
7 retained less than 10% of the worth of their labor.

#### 8 9 **+ Status of non-Muslims +**

10  
11 Prior to the arrival of Babur, the parts of India already under Muslim rule,  
12 particularly the Delhi Sultanate, had undergone a degree of culture synthesis  
13 between Muslims and Hindus. Once the main opponents had been quashed,  
14 the Mughals reduced their reliance on overt force. Instead, they deployed  
15 cultural compromise and economic incentives and relied on extant norms to  
16 maintain their dominance. While Muslim rulers in Spain and Baghdad had  
17 instituted a fair degree of tolerance towards other faiths, they went further.  
18 Critically, Akbar cancelled the poll tax on non-Muslims and the pilgrimage levy  
19 paid by Hindus. Ending these unpopular taxes broadened the Mughal support  
20 base.

21 Akbar's council of advisers had a multi-faith composition. Non-Muslims  
22 occupied high positions in the state hierarchy. But the benefits extended  
23 beyond the elite level. Hindus and people of other faiths were accorded  
24 greater freedom to worship in public. Permits to build new temples were  
25 issued. A major threat was diffused by allowing the Rajput warriors in the army  
26 to carry on with their ancient rituals. Proselytization by Muslim preachers  
27 continued but did not become state policy. Several Mughal rulers married  
28 Hindu princesses and visited temples. They also patronized Hindu poets and  
29 were attracted to Hindu musical practices. And, crucially, they did not enforce  
30 the traditional Muslim injunctions against idol worship.

31 While the Mughal rulers were Sunni, there were many Shias in India and  
32 a number of Sultans in their domain were Shia. Maintaining cordial relations  
33 with Shia Muslims was a key aspect Mughal rule, especially under Akbar.  
34 Babur, the first Mughal, was allied with the Ismaili Shia sect. The Mughal  
35 vision of Islam emphasized its mystical, philosophical tendencies. Sufi saints  
36 were esteemed, and purist rules and practices based on Sharia law were not  
37 stressed. In fact, Akbar launched a new religion that synthesized Islam with  
38 Hindu and Buddhists faiths. Perhaps that was the only one of his initiatives  
39 that did not secure any traction. The pluralistic, nonsectarian policies aiming  
40 to harmonize divergent cultures which characterized the middle hundred  
41 years of Mughal rule were exemplary not just by the standards of the day but  
42 also by modern standards. As one historian puts it:

43  
44 *Even though it was certainly true to the spirit of the Quran,*  
45 *Akbar's pluralism was very different from the hardline*  
46 *communalism that had been developing in some Sharia*



1  
2 *One of the most remarkable astronomical instruments*  
3 *invented in Mughal India is the seamless celestial globe. It was*  
4 *invented in Kashmir by Ali Kashmiri ibn Luqman in 998 AH*  
5 *(1589–90 CE), and twenty other such globes were later*  
6 *produced in Lahore and Kashmir during the Mughal Empire.*  
7 *Before they were rediscovered in the 1980s, it was believed*  
8 *by modern metallurgists to be technically impossible to*  
9 *produce metal globes without any seams. (Wikipedia 2020 –*  
10 *Mughal Empire).*

11  
12 In theory, places of learning were free and open to all. But children of the  
13 artisans and rural toiling classes only acquired skills for the family occupation  
14 from their elders. Their formal education was limited to recitation of religious  
15 texts.

16 Mughal education had three limiting features. One, public education was  
17 restricted to boys. Girls were taught at home by private tutors, and this was  
18 possible only in the upper-class families. Given their abundant wherewithal  
19 and support from the rulers, many Mogul princesses attained remarkable  
20 levels of erudition in poetry, literature and music.

21 Two, despite increased interactions with Europe, acquiring European  
22 languages and using new discoveries in science and technology (physics,  
23 printing, mechanical contraptions, etc.) from abroad were sidelined. The two-  
24 way process of technological interchange between the Islamic Middle East  
25 and India that had started earlier continued during the Moghul era. A number  
26 of advances in practical chemistry—for example, in soap making—were  
27 made.

28 Three, critical intellectual inquiry of the type and scale that had occurred  
29 in Iraq under the Abbasids and in Islamic Spain did not transpire in the Mughal  
30 era. While the Mughal's engaged in geographical and astronomical  
31 explorations, foundational studies of nature did not attract much attention.  
32 Instead, their scholars generally delved into law, philosophy, languages and  
33 the arts—music, poetry and literature. Libraries were established. But their  
34 stock was in the thousands whereas the Islamic libraries of Iraq and Spain  
35 had carried hundreds of thousands of volumes.

### 36 37 **+ Arts, culture and architecture +**

38  
39 The magnificent forts and tombs they erected under the Mughal Empire have  
40 left an indelible mark on India. Apart from the incomparable Taj Mahal in Agra  
41 visited by millions every year, the other Moghul structures appearing in the  
42 UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites are Agra Fort, Lahore Fort, Red Fort,  
43 Fatehpur Fort and the Tomb of Humayun. This is a partial list of an admirable  
44 architectural legacy. They also constructed elegant gardens and orchards  
45 with a variety of flowering and vegetable plants.

1 The Mughals backed creative arts like painting, production of elegant  
2 textiles, jewelry and sculpture. Taking a keen interest in composition and  
3 recitation of poetry, music and secular and spiritual songs, they refined the  
4 use of Indian musical instruments. The Indian and Urdu musical pantheon of  
5 today owes a huge debt to Mughal patronage. The mouthwatering menu of  
6 Mughal cuisine continues to delight many a palate. Such endeavors blended  
7 Islamic, Persian and Indian traditions to form a sparkling tapestry integral to  
8 the subcontinental cultural milieu. Yet, in this era of *Hindutva* dominance, their  
9 contributions are denied and disparaged.

#### 10 + Decline and fall +

11  
12  
13 The decline of the Mughal Empire was caused by a series of interrelated  
14 internal and external factors. The 50-year reign of Aurangzeb laid the seeds.  
15 He abolished decentralized governance and reversed policies that had  
16 maintained stability and prosperity over the vast expanse of the Empire.  
17 Alienating the local rajas and nobles fomented dissent and generated  
18 administrative inefficiency and revenue losses. Annulment of the privileges of  
19 the Rajput nobles antagonized a critical segment of the army. Re-imposition  
20 of the special tax on non-Muslims, pursuance of an extremist interpretation of  
21 Islam, placing restrictions on Hindu festivals and destruction of temples  
22 undermined the legitimacy of the state. Aurangzeb launched extended but  
23 unsuccessful military drives that drained the treasury, demoralized the  
24 soldiers, compromised discipline and catalyzed mutinies. As internal and  
25 external strife intensified, trade and industry were neglected. Adoption of new  
26 technology, especially from Europe virtually ceased. The closure of avenues  
27 for at least a modicum of upward social mobility that had hitherto existed  
28 disaffected people in the lower social strata.

29 Underlying these tendencies were the extravagant lifestyles of the ruling  
30 family and nobility. Living beyond their means, they drained the state coffers.  
31 Mismanaged finances weakened the rapport between the royal court and the  
32 merchants and bankers. Bickering, treachery and bribery eroded their ability  
33 to rule. To maintain a revenue stream, Muslim and Hindu landowners, nobles  
34 and merchants, with governmental backing, exploited peasants and caused  
35 people to work to the point of exhaustion. Rural uprisings erupted. Revenue  
36 officials came under attack. In the ensuing sustained period of destabilization,  
37 the army suffered from the loss of trained soldiers and delayed salary  
38 payments and was unable to prevent the erosion of law and order. Civil  
39 anarchy became the order of the day.

40 Neighboring kings took advantage of the situation by mounting attacks  
41 that damaged Moghul rule further. The intrusion of the British India Company  
42 put the final nail in the coffin of the once glorious empire.

#### 43 44 8.9 ISLAM, COLONIALISM AND NEO-COLONIALISM 45

1 By the beginning of the 20th century, most nations with a Muslim majority or  
2 a significant Muslim presence—Algeria, Afghanistan, Egypt, India, Indonesia,  
3 Iraq, Malaysia, Nigeria, Sudan, Tanzania, etc.—were colonies of or semi-  
4 colonies of a Western power. From being a religion of the rulers, Islam  
5 became a religion of the ruled. As no people want external domination,  
6 Muslims had firmly resisted imposition of colonialism and later struggled  
7 valiantly to expel the foreigners. Their tactics ranged from non-cooperation,  
8 civil disobedience and strikes to armed revolt. The struggles movements  
9 espoused secular and religious ideologies. Parties with an Islamic program  
10 operated in Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Somalia, Sudan, West Africa, Iran, India,  
11 Malaysia and Indonesia. Some parties espoused Islamic socialism.  
12 Intellectuals and artists—secular and religious—broadened the base of the  
13 struggle and influenced its agenda and policies. The anti-colonial struggle  
14 took varied, evolving forms. At the outset, it was a localized effort over specific  
15 grievances. Over time, it acquired a national character, evolving from seeking  
16 reforms to ending colonial domination.

17 The struggle for independence was colored by the relationship between  
18 the social strata that had developed during the colonial era as well as by the  
19 interventions of the colonial power to redirect it. The educated Westernized  
20 elite and traditional elite were on both sides—those allied with the colonial  
21 masters and those against them. Colonialism had strengthened the bonds of  
22 nationhood. For Muslims, the notion of belonging to a religion group  
23 competed with the notion of belonging to a nation. Ethnicity, culture and  
24 nationalism differentially factored into the anti-colonial struggle. Some  
25 political parties placed the issue of economic and social justice in the post-  
26 colonial society at the top of their agenda.

27 The anti-colonial movement in the Muslim world was composed of a mix  
28 of religious, secular nationalist, ethnic and socialist parties, but the nature of  
29 the mix varied from nation to nation. Pan-Islamic parties that had begun as  
30 charitable organizations running schools and hospitals came to operate in the  
31 political arena. The Muslim Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in 1928, later  
32 assumed a transnational dimension with branches and parties in Muslim and  
33 non-Muslim nations. Its various branches share a global spokesperson and  
34 a common agenda—democracy, peaceful activism, upholding Sunni Islamic  
35 traditions and a right wing anti-socialist ideology. But in practice each branch  
36 is an autonomous entity with its own tactics and program. Similarly, parties  
37 under the umbrella of the Islamic Party operate in Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka  
38 and Bangladesh. In actuality, they work as national parties without material  
39 ties to the other branches.

40 The outcome of the anti-colonial struggle was a tilted one; some benefits  
41 for the masses but consolidation of the elites who were economically allied to  
42 imperial interests. The post-colonial era was fraught with a foundational  
43 tension: the expectations for economic progress and freedom among the  
44 people competed with the elitist tendencies of the rulers and the top-down  
45 nature of the state. Even where the leaders desired to implement policies of  
46 broad benefit, neo-colonial constrictions circumscribed their ability to do so.

1 It was a recipe for instability. Many post-colonial states were rocked by  
2 military takeovers. Between 1936 and 1997, more than twenty-five military  
3 coups occurred in the Islamic nations of the Middle East area (Iraq, Syria,  
4 Turkey, Yemen), North Africa (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Somalia) and  
5 Asia (Indonesia, Pakistan). Some new military rulers (Iraq, Libya, Syria and  
6 Egypt) had a strident nationalistic agenda and sought to make their nation  
7 less beholden to the West while others (Indonesia and Pakistan) took the  
8 opposite direction. Many military takeovers were prompted by interventions  
9 of the United States and other Western nations.

10 This general structural portrait was affected by a considerable degree of  
11 historical, cultural and economic diversity between the former colonies. The  
12 role of religion in this process also varied from place to place, a truism that  
13 held for Muslim and non-Muslim nations. In the following three sections, we  
14 look at the function of Islam in the colonial and subsequent periods in Iraq,  
15 Indonesia and Nigeria.

### 16 17 **8.10 ISLAM IN MODERN IRAQ** 18

19 The area called Iraq today was the center of the Mesopotamian civilization  
20 dating back to 5,000 BCE. It is regarded as the birthplace of organized urban  
21 dwelling, written language, sophisticated numerical science, small scale  
22 industry and an elaborate farming culture. And for some three centuries after  
23 750, it was the heartland of the Golden Era of Islam. Baghdad, its capital,  
24 was pillaged during the Mongol invasion of the 11th century. Subsequently  
25 the area came under Ottoman rule and was divided into three provinces. The  
26 days of glory had ended, and Iraq underwent a significant economic and  
27 political decline.

28 After World War I and end of Ottoman rule, Britain, with the backing of the  
29 US, successfully maneuvered to have this potentially resource rich territory  
30 declared as a League of Nations protectorate under its control. British forces  
31 came with a promise of liberation. But it was a vacuous pledge. Instead of  
32 gaining autonomy, Iraq became an exploited precinct of a voracious empire.  
33 Its vast oil wealth was apportioned between US, British, French and Dutch  
34 firms with Iraq only getting token royalties. King Faisal, a pliant import, was  
35 made the titular head of state. The British held a series of elections to gain  
36 legitimacy. But they were sham elections for a symbolic legislature. The local  
37 elite were granted some favors, but the people of Iraq had no say. More  
38 reliant on brute force than sound policy, the *de facto* colonial state showed  
39 but superficial respect for local culture, tried to coopt the senior religious  
40 clergy and utilized aspects of traditional Islamic laws to maintain control.

41 The Iraqi spirit was not broken; the people did not accept these indignities  
42 lying down. From day one, various localities witnessed uprisings. The scale  
43 and intensity of the resistance took the British commanders by surprise. No  
44 effort was spared to subdue the rising tide. Tens of thousands of lives were  
45 lost, and villages destroyed in extended, ferocious campaigns that involved

1 aerial bombardment and indiscriminate use of poison gas. There were many  
2 casualties on the British side as well.

3 A few years on, wide scale protests reemerged. In response, the British  
4 changed course and granted the territory formal self-rule in 1932. But they  
5 retained their military bases, trained the local security forces, controlled the  
6 oil sector, instituted a complaint regime and forced it to sign one-sided  
7 contracts. It was old-fashioned colonialism in disguise. Poverty rose as the  
8 Iraqi oil wealth was siphoned off. The rural populace remained at the mercy  
9 of owners of large estates. The so-called free nation continued to experience  
10 social and political agitation against a patently corrupt, illegitimate state  
11 authority. A nationalist group of army officers overthrew the monarchy and  
12 established an independent republic in 1958. Direct British rule in Iraq finally  
13 ended. But it was not a major systemic break. The repressive structures of  
14 the colonial state and its legal framework were largely carried over.

15 Two important features of the Iraqi anti-colonial struggle are noteworthy.  
16 One, it generally was a non-sectarian process that united Sunnis with Shias,  
17 Arabs with Kurds, secular nationalists with Islamists, radicals and moderates  
18 and rural with urban folk.

19  
20 *The history of Iraq under British rule from 1920-1958 was the*  
21 *history of one rebellion after another, rebellions in which the*  
22 *people of all communities and religious affiliations joined.*  
23 *(Becker 2004).*  
24

25 Two, the Iraqi Communist Party, founded in 1934 by Hussain al-Rahhal,  
26 played a prominent role in the popular mobilizations of the era. It was then  
27 the largest communist party in the Arab world. Its stand against corruption,  
28 social inequalities, feudal practices and the oppression of women gathered  
29 wide traction, especially among students. Despite the intense persecution  
30 they faced, leading Iraqi scholars and writers were associated with the party.  
31 Its newspaper was banned, rallies were broken up and activists were jailed  
32 but its influence did not wane.

33 The Iraqi Communist Party was a distinctly homegrown entity. Unlike the  
34 Communist Party of India, it was not beholden to the USSR. Its secular  
35 nationalism and programs for social equality, democracy and accountability  
36 countered the conservative agenda of the theocrats favored by the British.  
37 That this occurred in a place with centuries of a strong Islamic tradition is  
38 remarkable. It speaks volumes about the extent to which the sense of national  
39 Iraqi identity came to displace ethnic, sectarian and Pan-Islamic identities.  
40 Intermarriage, between Shias and Sunnis, and between Kurds and Arabs,  
41 was common. Intermingling of Islamic denominations was common in many  
42 neighborhoods. Thus, the religious parties of Iraq ascribed more to Iraqi  
43 nationhood than to a purely religious or sectarian identity.

44 The population of modern Iraq is two-thirds Shia and one third Sunni. And  
45 some 80% is Arab, and 20% is Kurdish. Nearly four out of five Kurds are  
46 Sunni; the rest are Shia. The city of Karbala has the holiest shrine for Shias.

1 Christians form less than 3% of the population. There are hardly any Jews  
2 left in Iraq today. The millennia old Iraqi Jewish population of about a quarter  
3 of a million was harshly expelled in the regional hostilities that ensued after  
4 the creation of the State of Israel.

5 The history of Iraq and the role of religion since 1958, including under the  
6 rule of Saddam Hussein, the Iran-Iraq War, the brutal American led wars and  
7 sanctions on Iraq and the developments since the ouster of Saddam Hussein  
8 are too involved and complex to be covered here. Suffice to say that under  
9 the over three decades of Saddam Hussein's rule, Iraq became one of the  
10 most prosperous, and educationally and health-wise advanced nations in the  
11 Middle East. At last, the Iraqi oil wealth was being used to benefit the majority  
12 of the people, a fact that made it a prime enemy of US imperialism. During  
13 this time, Iraq was a leading member of the bloc of Non-Aligned Nations and  
14 gave strong support to the anti-colonial and anti-racist movements in Africa  
15 and elsewhere.

16 Yet, Saddam Hussein was a dictator who tolerated no opposition. Any  
17 group, religious or socialist, that dared to stand against him was dispatched  
18 with violence. A large-scale Shia uprising in the South was suppressed with  
19 utmost brutality. Nonetheless, prosperity and mutual coexistence between  
20 the different ethnic and religious factions generally prevailed under his reign.

21 Today, after decades of single minded, deadly imperialist efforts, Iraq is  
22 basically a vassal state of the United States, occupied, much impoverished  
23 and riven with violent ethnic and religious divisions. The US assaults grossly  
24 damaged its state-of-the-art health, educational, infrastructural and cultural  
25 edifice. Libraries were torched, museums were looted, sites of archeological  
26 significance despoiled, hospitals bombed and over a thousand academics  
27 mysteriously murdered. In the power and spiritual vacuum, the hydra of a  
28 monstrous Islamic Caliphate powered by young Sunni fanatics and former  
29 Baathist soldiers gained a foothold, spread with rapidity, attacked state and  
30 civilian targets, displaced tens of thousands, and killed many, at times via  
31 gruesome beheadings. It was contained only after an equally violent spate of  
32 indiscriminate attacks by US and Iraqi puppet governmental forces. In the  
33 fragile peace that prevails, elitist, corrupt religiously based political parties  
34 compete for power in the context of a mismanaged, chaotic administration  
35 wedded to neoliberal economic policies. The exhausted people protest now  
36 and then but so far to no avail.

37 The land where once upon a time Islam had provided the umbrella for  
38 economic and scientific excellence, social stability and unrivalled religious  
39 tolerance is now a place where Islam offers unsavory recipes for sectarian  
40 strife, elitist misrule and imperial economic and military domination.

## 41 42 **8.11 ISLAM IN INDONESIA** 43

44 Indonesia, a nation of more than 17,000 biologically diverse, resource rich  
45 islands whose fertile soil produces a wide range of crops, is home to more  
46 than 250 million people of hundreds of ethnically diverse ancient cultural and



1 linguistic traditions. About half reside on one island, Java. Nearly one out of  
2 every eight Muslims in the world lives in Indonesia. With about 225 million  
3 Muslims, it is also the largest Muslim nation. Muslims constitute nearly 90%  
4 of the national population. Some 9.3% are Sunni, 0.5% (1 million) are Shia  
5 and 0.2% (400,000), Ahmadiyya. Indonesia has no official religion, yet it is  
6 not a secular state either. The legal and actual relationship between state and  
7 religion in Indonesia is complex and convoluted.

8 Unlike India, external conquest had no role in the arrival and spread of  
9 Islam in Indonesia. It was brought here by traders from Arab lands possibly  
10 starting from the 8th century. Seeking gold, rice, nutmeg, peppers, cloves,  
11 cinnamon and other oriental wares, they set up outposts on a few islands.  
12 Their fine wares were prized by the local elite. Trade brought prosperity.  
13 People were attracted to the faith and ways of worship that had sailed with  
14 the merchant ships. Conversion was limited at the outset, but it accelerated  
15 in the 13th century when Muslim missionaries and Sufi *Pirs* arrived from India,  
16 Middle East and adjacent areas of Asia. Besides proselytization, the foothold  
17 of Islam was cemented by conversion of local rulers and intermarriage  
18 between merchant and princely families. Around the same time, Muslims  
19 from China also established trade and farming enclaves on some islands.

20 Wealthy traders built mosques for the burgeoning faithful. Over time,  
21 Islamic enclaves and sultanates arose along the coast. The rise of Islamic  
22 political power encountered stiff opposition from indigenous rulers. Conflict  
23 between different sultanates also occurred. Despite a long era of ups and  
24 downs, the cumulative process of Islamization made Islam the dominant faith  
25 in many of the islands by the end of the 18th century.

26 The Islamic missionaries found a people practicing Hinduism, Buddhism  
27 and varied traditional religions. By incorporating traditional beliefs with the  
28 message of Islam, they made their faith palatable. The meditational, mystic  
29 practices, poems and stories of the Sufis blended with Buddhist and Hindu  
30 mystical norms and literature. Recitation of the Quran became a meditational  
31 activity. People in fringe social groups found solace and hope in the Islamic  
32 tenet of equality among the faithful. Impositions favoring Islam over other  
33 faiths were put in place in some places. A variant of Islam that accepted the  
34 core Islamic tenets but integrated elements of the local culture in the practice  
35 began to evolve. Muslim communities with rites that melded Chinese and  
36 Islamic cultures sprang up on a couple of islands.

### 37 38 **+ Colonial rule +** 39

40 A new chapter in Indonesian history opened with the landing of Portuguese  
41 traders in 1512. Dutch merchant ships followed in 1596, and soon displaced  
42 their rivals. Enamored by the fabulous profitability of the initial expeditions  
43 and prodded by their government, the merchants formed a unified trading  
44 company, the United East India Company. Known by its Dutch acronym,  
45 VOC, it had a royal charter granting it monopolistic protection and authority  
46 to colonize distant lands. Basically, it was an armed imperial enterprise.

1 The primary goal was to establish undisputed supremacy in the region.  
2 Well-armed ships and a fighting force guarded its trading centers. Rulers of  
3 the islands who defied its encroachment were overthrown and their people  
4 were forcibly ejected. Towns were set ablaze. Trade with other entities was  
5 banned. Local princes—traditional and Muslim—were pitted against each  
6 other. Those who complied enjoyed commercial favors. While rebellions  
7 against the VOC persisted for a long time, its monopolistic economic power  
8 and authority blanketed the archipelago. Batavia, the present-day Jakarta,  
9 became the company headquarters.

10 Company rule brought settlers from the Netherlands who set up large  
11 plantations and processing enterprises. High value crops like tea, cacao,  
12 coffee, tobacco, rubber, sugar and opium were introduced and grown for  
13 export. Company and settler plantations, local landowners and peasant  
14 producers supplied these and traditional commodities. Pitifully remunerated  
15 forced labor, agricultural restrictions, quotas, and high land rent and taxes  
16 filled the company coffers.

17 It was a veritably profitable undertaking. In the first ninety years, the  
18 annual VOC dividend rate was nearly 20%. As Karl Marx poignantly opined  
19 on the Dutch colonial rule, the massive profits generated by '*treachery,*  
20 *bribery, massacre and meanness ... signaled the rosy dawn of the era of*  
21 *capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momentum of*  
22 *primitive accumulation*'. (Karl Marx (Sprague 2011)). These revenues laid the  
23 basis for capitalist development in the Netherlands, and through the  
24 international banking system, in Britain as well.

25 By the end of the 18th century, company rule was no longer tenable. In  
26 1800, it was replaced by direct Dutch governance that lasted until 1956 when  
27 Indonesia became an independent nation. In these 150 years, global and  
28 domestic factors affected major changes in the mode of colonial rule. The  
29 goal was to subjugate the populace and coopt the local elites into the colonial  
30 system. Measures to expand peasant production for export and ensure a  
31 good supply of labor for the plantations, sugar factories, oil extraction  
32 construction projects were implemented. Work conditions and targets were  
33 atrocious, and taxes remained onerous. The volume of valued goods—sugar,  
34 coffee, tobacco, rubber, coconut and oil—rose year after year. Technological  
35 improvement was utilized only to the extent it enabled the consolidation and  
36 expansion of the colonial economy.

37 From the days of VOC rule, the Dutch had employed the ethnic Chinese  
38 as middlemen in the import-export economy. As collectors of taxes on land,  
39 local produce and imported goods, and as favored merchants and skilled  
40 workers, they held a higher economic status than the local ethnicities. Their  
41 relations with the broader population soured accordingly. Later on, pressure  
42 from Dutch settlers restricted Chinese immigration and businesses. Among  
43 other things, their monopoly over the salt trade was abolished and their right  
44 to own land was curtailed.

45 The onset of the 20th century saw more rivalry among European imperial  
46 powers, global economic instability and agitation for improvement from the

1 people in the European nations and their colonies. The US was making its  
2 presence felt where European supremacy prevailed. The colonial economy  
3 was undergoing change. From mainly being a source of consumer items and  
4 raw materials for the metropole, it was now seen as a key outlet for European  
5 factory products as well. New agriculture and manufacturing ventures were  
6 set up, and the products from the colony were exported to the home nation  
7 and other nations.

8 Economic growth brought forth changes in social conditions. Hospitals,  
9 schools and social amenities improved but were reserved for the families of  
10 the administrators, settlers, missionaries and professionals from abroad.  
11 Local princes, traders and middlemen had a modicum of access to these  
12 services. The commoners had virtually none.

13 A modest expansion health and educational services occurred in the first  
14 half of the twentieth century. Higher demand for junior civil servants, skilled  
15 workers, agricultural extension workers, railway and bank clerks, farm  
16 supervisors, health personnel, teachers, technicians, plumbers, junior police  
17 and army officers, generated more schools and training institutions. Public  
18 health protection in plantations, urban and rural areas required local doctors,  
19 nurses, laboratory technicians and sanitation workers, and better basic health  
20 facilities for the average person.

21 Nonetheless, the Dutch did not invest in social services beyond the bare  
22 minimum. Christian missionaries ran a few health centers and schools. A  
23 handful of state colleges and trade schools with moderate enrollment were  
24 set up. Local initiative mainly drove educational expansion, especially at the  
25 basic level. Some community schools united Islamic and secular subjects.  
26 Education for girls took hold. Sponsored by family or community, students  
27 joined colleges in the Middle East and Europe. Colonial investment in  
28 schooling was a drop in the bucket. The literacy level in 1940 was around  
29 6%. Most people just had access to traditional Islamic schools. Only a few  
30 Indonesian children were given entry into schools meant for the Europeans.

31 The Dutch government and administrators in Indonesia were acutely  
32 aware of the two-pronged nature of education, secular or religious. On the  
33 one hand, it provided essential manpower to run the colony, legitimized  
34 colonial rule by partially satisfying a popular demand and created an elite  
35 stratum with a Westernized world view. But education also brought forth  
36 social enlightenment, nationalist visions and Islamic ideas from afar. The  
37 expanded mental horizons of the educated connected them to nationalist  
38 movements in the global colonial world. Jobs for the educated were limited  
39 while the demand for education was high. For the colonial policy makers, the  
40 educated but jobless constituted an *intellectual proletariat*, potential recruits  
41 to the nationalist cause. '*Excessive education*' engendered '*communist  
42 radicalization*'. In the Dutch parliament, liberals and hardliners argued where  
43 to draw the line. Their elegant, adversarial rhetoric, however, provided a cloak  
44 for their common agenda to maintain a control over the colony in a least-cost  
45 but effective manner.

1 They also expressed similar ambivalence towards Islam. On one part,  
2 giving favors to Muslim chiefs and princes, permitting Islamic education,  
3 allowing Muslims to visit Arab nations, and go to the Hajj diffused opposition  
4 to colonial rule. Yet, these practices enhanced Muslim solidarity and brought  
5 Indonesian Muslims in touch with Muslim anti-colonial activists elsewhere.  
6 Thus, at times a fairly liberal policy towards Islam prevailed and at times, strict  
7 controls and crackdowns were imposed.

### 8 9 **+ Anti-colonial struggles +**

10  
11 The changes in the economy and education created a literate middle class  
12 uneasy with colonial rule. Oppressed peoples globally were starting to firmly  
13 assert their basic right to self-determination. Socialist ideas were in the air;  
14 Russia was in the throes of a revolution.

15 When the Europeans arrived in the area, it was a collection of islands with  
16 loose links and distinct cultures. The ensuing 350 years of growing economic  
17 integration and joint experiences of colonial oppression formed a sense of  
18 national identity that came to supersede ethnic and religious identities.  
19 Education enhanced nationhood. Influenced by external progressive visions,  
20 the intelligentsia began to articulate the undercurrent of mass sentiments for  
21 a better life.

22 Abdul Muis—a product of Westernized education—was an activist and  
23 journalist whose pioneering articles openly and roundly lambasted Dutch rule.  
24 Besides editing a nationalist newspaper, he joined protests against forced  
25 labor and high taxation, and led worker strikes. Despite harassment, arrests  
26 and internal exile, he went on, joining and rising to the senior ranks of Sarekat  
27 Islam, an Islamic trade cooperative which later became the first nationalist  
28 party in Indonesia. His anti-colonial novel, *Salah Asuhan (Wrong Upbringing)*,  
29 written during exile, is regarded as a masterpiece of Indonesia literature.

30 Health workers were central to the independence struggle. In early 20th  
31 century, two medical colleges were set up for training personnel to provide  
32 basic health services on plantations and in towns. But supplies and funds  
33 were limited, and local medical staff could not address the litany of prevalent  
34 maladies. Considered inferior to Dutch doctors, they were paid low salaries.  
35 Discriminatory conditions spurred health workers into general activism. Dr  
36 Abdulla Sivai, the first person from Indonesia to secure medical training in  
37 Europe, edited a pioneering local language magazine, *Star of the Indies*. For  
38 the first time, articles exposing the realities of colonial rule in Indonesia  
39 appeared on a regular basis. Not surprisingly, it was banned after a few  
40 issues.

41 Through their work, the health personnel learned in concrete terms that  
42 poor environmental hygiene and poverty generated by colonial policies were  
43 the primary causes of ill health. They organized cultural associations to  
44 promote awareness of the role of education, science and medicine for  
45 improving the conditions of the people. Many youth took part. Over time,

1 these associations assumed a political character and formed an umbrella  
2 organization that laid the seeds for the growth of overtly nationalist groupings.

3 Doctors turned into activists, writers and journalists. Standing at the fore  
4 of the emerging nationalist movement, a few were elected to the colonial  
5 legislature. With international contacts, scientific knowledge and first-hand  
6 experience, they wrote trenchant, grounded critiques of the colonial system.

7  
8 *Some came to criticize the colonial administration for its*  
9 *limited commitment to health and medicine compared to other*  
10 *colonial powers. Others established hospitals and clinics or*  
11 *started to provide public health education. Several physicians*  
12 *joined city councils advocating the provision of sewers and*  
13 *fresh drinking water, which were known to reduce disease and*  
14 *promote health. .... The first generation of politically*  
15 *engaged Indonesian physicians wanted to improve conditions*  
16 *within the colonies while maintaining its fundamental structure.*  
17 *Many representatives of the second generation, however,*  
18 *came to advocate independence. (Pols 2018).*

19  
20 The evolving nationalist movement had four tendencies. Some traditional  
21 parties based their agenda on a purely Islamic or Pan-Islamic vision; some  
22 welded Islam with secular nationalism; some adopted a social democratic,  
23 secular form of nationalism; and a few espoused a variant that incorporated  
24 radical socialism.

25 In the initial phase, Islamic organizations played the key role of unifying  
26 multiple ethnicities and mobilizing them against colonial rule. And they faced  
27 the wrath of the police. Strict controls were imposed. Their leaders were  
28 arrested. Muslim schools faced restrictions. Students and pilgrims returning  
29 from Islamic nations were surveilled and subject to arrest. That suppression  
30 and the formation of secular nationalist parties diminished the influence of the  
31 Islamic parties, though an undercurrent of Islamic sentiment in the nationalist  
32 cause remained.

33 The 1917 October Revolution in Russia galvanized socialist activism in  
34 the Netherlands. Dutch socialist parties extended their political work to the  
35 colonies. Agitation by Dutch communists induced a contingent of colonial  
36 soldiers in Indonesia to revolt in 1917. But it was brutally put down. It was in  
37 this atmosphere that the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) was founded in  
38 May 1920 by Indonesian students in the Netherlands who were allied with  
39 Dutch socialists. Supported by a major Dutch anti-imperial socialist party, the  
40 PKI published a newspaper and worked with a reformist Islamic group, the  
41 Islamic Union. Organizing labor unions, initiating strikes and broad anti-  
42 colonial activism, it filled the vacuum left by the removal of Islamic parties  
43 from the scene and soon became the central player in the freedom struggle.

44 The PKI program called for land reform, reduction of inequalities and the  
45 creation of an independent socialist state in Indonesia. Its plan to initiate a  
46 broad-based uprising in 1926 was, however, quashed by the police. More

1 than 4,000 activists were exiled to a remote island, and over a thousand were  
2 incarcerated. The party was banned in 1927. A number of activists died in  
3 prison. While it continued to operate underground, the voice of the PKI was  
4 muted for two decades. Yet the program and actions of the PKI in this short  
5 period provided a strong momentum to the freedom struggle.

6 The presence of a large number of Dutch settlers who ran plantations,  
7 factories, trading firms and financial agencies prompted a particularly callous  
8 colonial response. The Dutch administrators were on assignments of limited  
9 duration. But the settlers had come to stay. Many had lived there for  
10 generations and regarded it as their land. They opposed the favors granted  
11 to Chinese and other local traders, and Muslim and non-Muslim traditional  
12 rulers. In their worldview, the local population had no other role but to serve  
13 them in perpetuity.

14 During World War II, Japanese rule replaced Dutch rule. At the outset,  
15 the Japanese were seen as liberators. But their merciless reign turned the  
16 tide. Under a united front of the four major parties—a moderate Muslim party  
17 (Masjumi), a conservative Islamic party (Nahdlatul Ulama), a social  
18 democratic party (the Nationalist Party) and the PKI—the people fought back.  
19 But as soon as the British forces ejected the Japanese army, the Dutch  
20 returned. Yet, with the colonial state now weakened, the political momentum  
21 generated by the anti-Japanese efforts could not be stopped. A series of  
22 strident uprisings, spontaneous and PKI-led, and guerrilla attacks broke out  
23 across the archipelago. Sukarno and Hatta, the main nationalist leaders,  
24 returned from exile. A unilateral declaration of independence was issued in  
25 August 1945. These two leaders enjoyed popular support and the backing of  
26 most political parties. Belligerent campaigns by the Dutch forces in which  
27 thousands perished could not pacify the nation. Colonial rule finally ended in  
28 1949 when the Dutch formally recognized the Republic of Indonesia.

29 The 1940s had been a period of suffering in Indonesia. In that decade,  
30 more than two million people from all sides died. But self-rule did not portend  
31 political and social tranquility. A new era of authoritarianism and killings was  
32 soon to begin.

### 33 34 + Religion in Indonesia + 35

36 By the time of Independence, some 90% of the population was Muslim. The  
37 Indonesian version of Islam fused Islamic beliefs with Hindu, Buddhist and  
38 traditional cultural rites and norms.

39  
40 *Islam didn't obliterate the preexisting culture; rather, it*  
41 *incorporated and embedded the local customs and non-*  
42 *Islamic elements among rules and arts and reframed them as*  
43 *the Islamic traditions.* (Wikipedia 2020 – Islam in Indonesia).  
44

45 *Kebatinan*, for example, is a brand of Islam practiced by some communities  
46 and several historical personages in Indonesia. While abiding by the main

1 tenets of Islam, it blends Hindu, Buddhist and traditional faith systems into a  
2 distinct faith system. It now has formal legal recognition. Indonesia also has  
3 its own version of Sufism.

4 Distinctive music and dance styles have been a part of the diverse  
5 cultures of the Indonesian archipelago from the pre-Islamic times. During and  
6 after the end of colonial rule and to this day, they remain popular, coexisting  
7 and often integrated with Islamic musical forms of local origin.

8



9

10

Sundanese Traditional Folk Dance

11

12 The interplay of religious traditions is evident in the places of worship. Due to  
13 the predominance of Islam, mosques vastly outnumber temples. The Demak  
14 Great Mosque in Central Java, built in the 15th century, is the oldest existing  
15 mosque.

16



17

18

Demak Great Mosque

19

20 Lacking a round dome and minarets, and built with timber, its Javanese  
21 architectural style is distinct from typical mosques in most Islamic nations.  
22 The motifs carved on its main doors depict traditional religious beliefs. Until  
23 into the 19th century, many mosques in Indonesia were of a similar design  
24 and structure. In the modern era, old mosques have been renovated to  
25 include a minaret and a dome.

1



A Modern Mosque in Central Java

2

3

4

5

More than two hundred Hindu temples, some quite imposing structures, are spread out across the islands. The largest number is in Bali, home to many Hindu communities.

6

7

8



Prambanan, the Largest Hindu Temple Compound in Indonesia

9

10

11

12

Several remarkable Buddhist temples also exist in Indonesia. The Borobudur Buddhist Temple in Central Java is the largest Buddhist temple in the world.

13

14



15



1 Borobudur Buddhist Temple, Central Java

2  
3 Tourism constitutes a large sector of the modern Indonesian economy. The  
4 extensively varied character of Indonesian culture—art, music, dance,  
5 cuisine, beaches, natural habitats, flora and fauna and ancient structures—  
6 are a major attraction for the foreign visitors. The Borobudur Temple, for  
7 example, is one of the sites they most frequently visit. The official policy since  
8 the Suharto era, even for mosques, is to retain the features that reflect past  
9 traditions. But breakneck building construction in cities has ridden roughshod  
10 over that intent. Newer mosques, however, are similar in style to those in the  
11 Middle East.

12  
13 **+ Independence +**

14  
15 Indonesia after Independence was an arena of competing economic and  
16 political interests. Large landowners, major businessmen and multinational  
17 corporations prospered from the labor of rural and urban working classes and  
18 monopolized the benefits derived from national resources. Sandwiched in  
19 between was a middle class of small businesspeople, shop keepers,  
20 teachers, professionals and the like. Land reform, a key popular demand in  
21 the anti-colonial struggle, now became a major bone of contention between  
22 the elites and the small farmers. Worker unions demanded higher wages and  
23 better working conditions than what had prevailed under Dutch rule. At the  
24 political level, the conservative, Islamic parties were allied with the elite, and  
25 the PKI, with the rural and urban working poor.

26 Sukarno, the first president of Indonesia, worked to balance the diverse  
27 interests in society. Seeking unity and harmony, he launched a social-  
28 democratic program that would appeal to all. In the process, he laid the  
29 foundation for the official philosophy of the Indonesian state, Pancasila. While  
30 it has undergone several iterations, the essence of its five principles remains.  
31 These are:

32  
33 *Belief in one and only one God (under different religions); Just*  
34 *and civilized humanity; The unity of Indonesia; Democracy*  
35 *guided by inner wisdom arising from deliberations among the*  
36 *people's representatives; Social justice for all the people of*  
37 *Indonesia.* (Wikipedia 2020 – Pancasila).

38  
39 The Pancasila is embedded in the National Emblem of Indonesia. Criticizing  
40 it is a criminal offense carrying a long jail term or a hefty fine.

41 Intent and actuality did not align. Sukarno's middle-of-the-road approach  
42 led to nowhere. Two major land reform laws were enacted but implemented  
43 mostly in default. Presidential power rose and parliamentary accountability  
44 weakened. Dutch companies were nationalized but without a viable plan for  
45 industrial and agricultural development. Multinational firms from elsewhere  
46 took up the slack from the inefficiency in state enterprises and projects. The

1 elitist bureaucrats had little incentive to direct state resources for the benefit  
2 of the working people and the poor. Misuse and abuse of public funds took  
3 root as Sukarno dilly-dallied with grand projects. Both the lower and the upper  
4 classes were dismayed. The former because promises did not provide  
5 sustenance, and the latter because they formed a potential threat. Inflation  
6 and economic hardship generated discontent. Rumors of a military coup  
7 circulated.

8 Not content with the half-way, inefficient programs, the socialist PKI allied  
9 with trade unions, peasant associations, radical students, and prominent  
10 intellectuals to pressure the Sukarno government to effectively implement a  
11 systematic socialist program, especially land redistribution. In some areas, it  
12 worked with the rural poor to oppose exploitative plantation owners. While it  
13 had a radical agenda, the PKI was a civilian, unarmed, legal party with a wide  
14 social base and did not call for armed struggle.

15 The elite classes wanted a total abandonment of the socialist rhetoric.  
16 They had two powerful supporters: the rightwing Islamic parties and crucially,  
17 the senior officer corps of the Indonesian military, which was being trained  
18 and armed by the United States. For the US, Indonesia was valued not only  
19 for its rich resources, a vast potential market for American goods but also as  
20 an ally in the ongoing aggression against Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and  
21 the drive to contain China. The US was adamantly against the PKI gaining  
22 more ground in the political arena and could not stomach the foreign policy  
23 adopted by Sukarno. Many nations of the Global South had jointly formed the  
24 Non-Aligned Movement in which Sukarno was a prominent personality. US  
25 agencies thus undertook propaganda and insurgency efforts to destabilize his  
26 government from 1958. In this populous, strategic Asian nation, nothing but a  
27 regime fully in line with the US policies was acceptable.

28 This set the stage for a gruesome scenario. In September 1965, six senior  
29 military officers were kidnapped and killed by an armed group. The military  
30 quickly blamed the PKI, alleging that it was a part of a plot master-minded by  
31 China to foment a general uprising. Independent investigations have now  
32 shown that these were charges fabricated at the behest of the US embassy  
33 in Jakarta. But at that time, they stuck and turned a large section of the public  
34 opinion against the PKI. In the unfolding imbroglio, the Dutch, American-  
35 trained General Suharto and his associate General AH Nasution launched a  
36 coup that deposed Sukarno and instituted a military regime. The generals  
37 then turned on the PKI and its supporters. In their bid to drive the party into  
38 oblivion, a carnage of vile proportions ensued.

39  
40 *Jakarta's police information chief told the U.S. ambassador in*  
41 *mid-November that with the 'blessing' of the army, '50 to 100*  
42 *PKI members are being killed every night in East and Central*  
43 *Java by civilian anti-communist groups'. The Australian*  
44 *embassy estimated on December 23 'about 1,500*  
45 *assassinations per day since September 30th'. By February*  
46 *1966, two confidential Western agencies agreed on 'a total of*

1           *about 400,000 killed,' and the deputy U.S. ambassador*  
2           *thought that the full toll could be 'much higher'. (GSP Editor*  
3           *2020).*  
4

5       The atrocities occurred across the nation. The PKI leaders, its members and  
6 anyone suspected of faint sympathy to its ideas were targeted. Most killings  
7 occurred in Java and Bali, the two provinces where the PKI had secured many  
8 votes in past elections. In the former, most of the victims were Muslim  
9 peasants while in the latter province, they were mostly Hindu peasants. The  
10 ethnic Chinese Indonesians suffered in large numbers. Workers, union  
11 leaders, peasant association officials, students, academics and intellectuals  
12 were ensnared in the dragnet which consumed up to a million lives. Torture,  
13 rape, false imprisonment, disappearance, forced labor, and exile affected  
14 hundreds of thousands. It was a one-sided affair in which the virtually  
15 unarmed PKI and its supporters were hunted down like armed insurgents.

16       In the wake of this episode, the US, the UK and Australia gave diplomatic,  
17 tactical and material support to the Suharto regime. Even as clear evidence  
18 of mass killings emerged, American diplomatic staff and the promoted the  
19 contrived China-backed PKI plot story; provided names of some 5,000 PKI  
20 members and supporters to the Indonesian military; unconditionally provided  
21 weapons and communication equipment to the military. Their diplomatic  
22 cables expressed a clear enthusiasm for the outcome.

23  
24           *US diplomats and the CIA's Indonesia station left little to*  
25           *chance: they gave the army money, mobile radio equipment*  
26           *and lists of Indonesian communists. .... US officials knew most*  
27           *of [Suharto's] victims were entirely innocent. US embassy*  
28           *officials even received updates on the executions and offered*  
29           *help to suppress media coverage. (Bevins 2017).*  
30

31       Major US media like *The New York Times* helped to camouflage the atrocities  
32 unfolding in Indonesia, making it probably the most covered up mass killing  
33 of the 20th century.

#### 34 35           **+ Islam, violence and dictatorship +** 36

37       A key aspect of the carnage of 1965-66 needs to be highlighted. Most of the  
38 killings were not done by soldiers in uniform but by the militias of extremist  
39 Islamic groups and secretive death squads. The military officers directed and  
40 supervised the killings and protected the perpetrators. It was justified on the  
41 basis of a spurious assertion that the PKI aimed to eradicate religion from the  
42 nation. But the social base of the PKI was multi-ethnic, multi-religious.  
43 Muslims, Hindus, Christians, traditional religion believers and secular  
44 socialists from many provinces sympathized with its program. What united  
45 them was their desire to redress social injustice and willingness to stand up  
46 to authority.

1 Different dynamics operated in the various provinces. Muslim groups in  
2 some areas were coerced by the military to kill '*communists*'. In other areas,  
3 long-standing acrimony between the PKI and Muslim parties, especially over  
4 land reform, needed but a tiny military-inspired fuse to ignite the inferno.  
5 Elsewhere a few fanatics created sufficient social pressure to rope in the  
6 moderate Muslim youth into the mayhem. Among other things, PKI members  
7 were beheaded, and their heads were placed on roadside stakes.

8  
9 *In Medan, two officials of the Muslim youth group Pemuda*  
10 *Pancasila separately told US representatives that 'their*  
11 *organization intends [to] kill every PKI member they can catch'.*  
12 *(GPS Editor 2020).*

13  
14 **Nahdlatul Ulama** (Revival of Ulama -- NU), a Sunni Muslim body founded in  
15 1926, was a major actor in the killings. It subscribes to a locally adapted,  
16 culturally flexible, moderate version of traditionalist Islam, and has, since its  
17 early days, opposed the staunchly conservative Wahhabism emanating from  
18 Saudi Arabia. At least in theory, it stands for '*moderation, compassion, anti-*  
19 *radicalism, inclusiveness and tolerance*' and endorses the UN Declaration of  
20 Human Rights. With between 40 and 60 million members in 2019, it is the  
21 largest Islamic group in Indonesia, and possibly, the world.

22 While not a political party, NU was involved in politics from the very start.  
23 In the colonial era, it took part in the consultative bodies set up by the Dutch  
24 and also engaged in anti-colonial agitation, for which it faced harsh  
25 suppression. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the NU leadership was allied with  
26 land-owning and elitist interests and opposed Sukarno's reformist socialistic  
27 agenda as well as the radical program put forward by the PKI. While it framed  
28 the dispute with the PKI in religious terms, in reality it reflected the tension  
29 between the social classes the NU and the PKI represented. Sharing the  
30 antipathy towards the PKI with the generals, the NU leaders were in essence  
31 protecting the economic and political privileges of the upper class.

32 The NU countered the PKI's work with peasant communities to implement  
33 the stalled land reform program through a two-fold strategy. As it expanded  
34 the elite funded charity work to win over the peasants, it also recruited ex-  
35 soldiers to set up a paramilitary network. Many religiously inclined Islamic  
36 youth and some Catholics were recruited into the militias. When the military  
37 began to act against Sukarno and the PKI, the NU was ready and well  
38 prepared. Immediately backing Suharto, it consulted with General Nasution,  
39 and went into action. Echoing the condemnations of the PKI for the killings of  
40 the five army generals and coup attempt—allegations now known to be  
41 baseless—the NU leaders issued orders to eliminate the '*communists*'. And  
42 the NU militias prepared to kill the PKI members and sympathizers in their  
43 areas. With their houses marked in red, suspect persons were detained and  
44 brutally interrogated. The mostly unarmed PKI members were caught off-  
45 guard, unable to resist the armed militias.



1 On top of prevalent corruption, suppression of basic rights, the malaise  
2 generated by the 1997 Asian financial crisis provided the last straw. A bold,  
3 sizeable student and civil movement against military rule emerged. The  
4 regime's violent response magnified public anger. Streets were awash with  
5 citizens. The NU leadership joined the anti-Suharto bandwagon, mobilizing  
6 its large membership against him. Key elements of the military and the elite  
7 abandoned him. Suharto was left with no option but to relinquish power.  
8 Today, formal democratic rule has returned in the nation. The military retains  
9 real power but acts behind the curtain. And total impunity for the Suharto era  
10 crimes prevails.

### 11 **+ Democracy and reform +**

12  
13  
14 Suharto was replaced by a transitional government that released thousands  
15 of political detainees and organized more credible elections. Abdurrahman  
16 Wahid, who had earlier led the NU for decades, was now the candidate of the  
17 party it backed. He became the President of Indonesia in 1999. But the  
18 military remained a major power bloc with strong political clout.

19 Among other things, President Wahid tackled some of the dark vestiges  
20 of the Suharto era. He abolished rules that had legalized discrimination  
21 against Chinese Indonesians, issued an apology for what the NU had done  
22 in 1965 and tried to remove the political privileges of the military. And that was  
23 his undoing. The apology was rejected by the NU leaders, which held that it  
24 legitimized communism. The military worked to undo his presidency as well.  
25 As major corruption scandals during his term decisively dented his popularity,  
26 he was forced by the parliament to resign just two years into his term.

27 Indonesia now is a constitutional republic run under a parliamentary and  
28 presidential electoral system with Pancasila, the official state philosophy. The  
29 current President, Joko Widodo, an ex-businessman, ex-Mayor of Surakarta  
30 and ex-Governor of Jakarta, hails from the Indonesian Democratic Party of  
31 Struggle (PDI-P). Some political parties have an Islamic program or are  
32 associated with major Islamic groups. The Prosperous Justice Party and the  
33 National Mandate Party are two pro-Islamic parties. The latter is linked to  
34 Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's second-largest Muslim front. Widodo is not  
35 connected to an Islamic group, promotes inter-faith tolerance and stands for  
36 separation of religion and the state. But Prabowo Subianto, a retired senior  
37 general from the Suharto era and his principal challenger, is allied to the two  
38 major Islamic parties. The military does not have a direct political role but  
39 remains a major power broker and influential behind the scene actor with ties  
40 to key political, business and Islamic entities. Probowo stands accused of  
41 major human rights violations including the mass killings in East Timor and  
42 kidnapping of pro-democracy activists. But that is not an impediment. Politics  
43 now is like a game of shifting alliances based on personalities and minor  
44 disputes, not fundamental policy differences.

### 45 **+ Modern economy +**

46

1  
2 Based on numerous agricultural products, fishery, oil, mining, forestry  
3 products, light and heavy manufacturing, tourism and services, the economy  
4 of Indonesia underwent rapid growth in the past two decades. The per capita  
5 GDP in 2019 was about \$4,500. Official statistics indicate that the proportion  
6 of the population in poverty is about 10%. As a result of sustained pressure  
7 by labor unions, student movements and NGOs, there is now a national health  
8 insurance program that covers primary and specialist care. A monthly cash  
9 transfer scheme for people in extreme poverty was launched in 2014. A  
10 program to develop roads, water supply, small and medium enterprises and  
11 tourist facilities in villages and townships across the nation has been initiated.

12 Yet, the reality behind the overall data is not rosy. First, the official poverty  
13 line, at slightly less than US\$1 a day, is patently unrealistic. Scaling it up to  
14 US\$2 a day, which hardly implies a decent mode of living, raises the poverty  
15 rate to nearly 50%. Rural poverty is more prevalent than urban poverty. Many  
16 unemployed and self-employed low-income persons cannot make the basic  
17 premium for health insurance. The insurance scheme is stymied by poor  
18 cooperation of private health facilities, fraud, difficulty of access and  
19 bureaucracy. While there are over 25,000 health centers of different types,  
20 most are in urban centers, and on average, 1 doctor serves 2,000 people. A  
21 third of the children are malnourished or overweight. Anemia affects a fourth  
22 of the adolescents. Tobacco control is minimal; smoking prevails widely.  
23 Provincial disparities—in income, jobs, health status, access to electricity and  
24 social amenities—are high: 17 of the 33 provinces are deemed poor. About a  
25 tenth of the population resides in congested slums with abysmal sanitation  
26 and water quality. People at the lower end of the economic scale are  
27 particularly affected by persistent fuel price increases, privatization of water  
28 services, environmental damage, air pollution, high cost of education and  
29 inflation. Many governmental development programs are slow to take off and  
30 implemented inefficiently.

31 Pancasila economics is presented as a centrally planned path to equitable  
32 development that remedies the major deficiencies of free market capitalism  
33 and state socialism, encourages public and private partnerships and protects  
34 the vital interests of the nation. Also called new socialism, in practice, it is a  
35 partial attempt to remedy the major shortcomings of neo-liberal economics  
36 while firmly remaining in the capitalist ambit. *De facto* neo-liberalism has  
37 sharply widened the gap between the rich and poor. About half of the national  
38 income now accrues to the top 20%.

39  
40 *In the past two decades, the gap between the richest and the*  
41 *rest in Indonesia has grown faster than in any other country in*  
42 *South-East Asia. It is now the sixth country of greatest wealth*  
43 *inequality in the world. Today, the four richest men in*  
44 *Indonesia have more wealth than the combined total of the*  
45 *poorest 100 million people. (Oxfam 2020).*  
46

1 Multinational corporations reap handsome rewards. Foreign mining firms  
2 egregiously violate basic human rights. Their operations generate intense  
3 social conflicts, yet the state often takes their side.

4 The major environmental challenges facing Indonesia—urban and rural  
5 habitat degradation, deforestation, forest fires, biodiversity loss, toxic and  
6 regular waste products, and pollution of water sources and waterways—have  
7 not received due attention from the government. Global and local mining and  
8 logging companies, the tourism industry and palm oil producers, the key  
9 actors in environmental damage, are but minimally regulated.

10 No matter their outward programs, the major political parties reflect the  
11 interests of the different sections of the dominant class in the nation—big  
12 business, large land and property owners, political dynasties and senior  
13 military brass. They do not have a unified position on the IMF/World Bank  
14 privatization schemes, concessions to foreign capital and protection of local  
15 businesses. The lessons of the 1997 economic crisis, emanating from the free  
16 reign given to foreign capital, still reverberate. Widodo has restricted the  
17 operations of foreign oil firms and nationalized some of their assets. The  
18 commanding general of the military recently warned against the dangers of  
19 granting privileges to the multinational firms. Yet, the differences between the  
20 elite factions are not fundamental differences. Their visions remain within the  
21 global capitalist framework as speculative investments in finance, real estate  
22 and major shopping centers; and the crony-capitalist ways of the Suharto era  
23 persist.

#### 24 25 **+ Accountability +** 26

27 Since Independence, Indonesia has seen gross violations of human rights by  
28 the military, security forces and religious organizations. Apart from the killings,  
29 torture and false imprisonment stemming from the 1966-65 anti-PKI pogrom,  
30 the military has staged ferocious attacks against civilians in East Timor, West  
31 Papua and Aceh. After the illegal but US-blessed invasion of East Timor in  
32 1975, nearly a third of its population was killed within twenty-five years. The  
33 brutal assaults in West Papua and Aceh persist.

34 In the past decade, a series of meticulous journalistic and scholarly  
35 reports and books augmented by documentary films, done mostly by people  
36 outside Indonesia but some from within, have uncontroversibly brought the  
37 truth to light. Decades of cover up is being exposed. As noted earlier, the mild  
38 attempt by President Wahid to take up the issue backfired. His apology on  
39 behalf of the NU was rejected, and he was removed from power within two  
40 years. But in light of the mounting evidence, a case on behalf of the victims  
41 was heard by the International People's Tribunal in The Hague in 2016.  
42 Presided by an eminent South African jurist, it ruled that there was  
43 unequivocal evidence that the killings of 1965-66 and ensuing torture, rapes,  
44 disappearances and incarcerations were '*genocidal*' '*crimes against*  
45 *humanity*'. The Tribunal called upon the Indonesian government to place the



1 perpetrators on trial and also ruled that there was sufficient evidence to show  
2 that the USA, Britain and Australia were complicit in these crimes.

3 In response to this ruling and internal campaigns by civil society groups,  
4 the Widodo administration sponsored a national symposium on the 1965-66  
5 events. Wide ranging recommendations were made to promote justice and  
6 reconciliation. But there was no follow up. Even a South Africa style truth and  
7 reconciliation exercise did not transpire. In fact, President Widodo declared  
8 categorically that no official apology for the victims would be issued. And to  
9 the dismay of the victims, the former commander of an American trained elite  
10 force responsible for grave human rights violations and killings in East Timor  
11 was appointed the minister responsible internal security. Hopes for attaining  
12 justice and accountability for past crimes have been dashed.

13 The military and the extremist Islamic groups adamantly opposed both the  
14 Hague Tribunal and the reconciliation symposium. Retired Suharto-era  
15 generals branded the Tribunal ruling a PKI-inspired set of lies. Organizing  
16 mass rallies, hard core groups like Islamic Defenders Front, United Islamic  
17 People Forum and Betawi Rembuk Forum affirmed that no common ground  
18 between '*communism*' and Islam existed. Members of Bela Negara, the 1.2  
19 million strong civilian militia controlled by the military, joined these rallies in  
20 uniform. Claiming that the parliament had been infiltrated by the PKI, they  
21 threatened to unseat President Widodo. Pamphlets spuriously calling him a  
22 PKI member were spread. Spurred on by a false rumor that a PKI meeting  
23 was being held, radical Islamist students ravaged the Jakarta office of the  
24 Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation, a group that has stood against past and  
25 current human rights abuses. The generals also held their own symposium to  
26 denounce the attempt to investigate the past. While the main Islamic groups  
27 and the MUI decried these hysterically charged rallies, they did not join in the  
28 pursuit of the truth regarding the 1965-66 events.

29 The NU, for its part, has taken a few steps to redress the wrongs of the  
30 past. Syarikat, an NU youth organization formed on International Human  
31 Rights Day in December 2000, is engaged in an effort to reconcile former  
32 political prisoners and members of the NU who had taken part in the 1965-66  
33 anti-PKI pogroms. It has given material support to women victims of that era,  
34 staged educational workshops about the deadly events and lobbied the  
35 parliament for restoration of the rights of former prisoners. Commendable as  
36 they are, these moves are just the start of a long journey towards truth,  
37 accountability and justice in the nation.

38 Today, only a few voices raise the matter in public fora. Women's rights  
39 groups have taken up the case of female victims of that era. Otherwise, the  
40 topic is virtually taboo. The military remains a respected, venerated entity that  
41 is beyond reproach. An inordinate amount of the budget is expended on the  
42 military, including the purchase of sophisticated weaponry from the US, UK  
43 and elsewhere. Militarized repression in Aceh and West Papua persists. More  
44 than half a million West Papuans have perished over the past five decades.  
45 Extrajudicial killings, suppression of media, high unemployment, poor health  
46 care and education and environmental damage add further misery to their

1 lives. In that regard, the Widodo administration remains faithful to the Suharto  
2 era repressive norms.

### 3 4 **+ Religion and politics +** 5

6 The semi-secular Constitution of Indonesia states that the nation is '*based on*  
7 *the belief in the one supreme God,*' but there is no state religion. Six  
8 religions—Buddhism, Confucianism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Islam and  
9 Protestantism—are granted equal status, and the law protects the right of  
10 their followers to pursue their faith. Traditional religions are tolerated, and  
11 there is no injunction against people who do not subscribe to any religion. As  
12 of 2006, citizen identity cards state the person's religion, which has to be one  
13 of the six officially recognized religions.

14 All the Islamic groups operate under the Suharto-era Indonesia Council  
15 of *Ulema (Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI))*, the highest Islamic authority in the  
16 land. The MUI sets general policy guidelines for Islamic organizations and  
17 issues holy decrees (*fatwas*) concerning social and personal matters. It  
18 defines what is deviant or blasphemous from the Islamic viewpoint, gives halal  
19 certification for food, cosmetic and medicinal products, indicates the  
20 acceptable dress norms and sets the days for Islamic festivals. The  
21 Ahmadiyya and Ahlul Bait Indonesia, a Shia organization, are barred from  
22 joining the MUI.

23 Legal provisions for the state to interfere in religious belief and activity  
24 exist. The Prevention of Blasphemy and Abuse of Religions Presidential  
25 Decree of 1965 prohibits '*deviant interpretation*' of religious teachings. A  
26 group deemed in violation of the decree faces a presidential ban. Accused  
27 individuals face a prison sentence. Of the numerous prosecutions that have  
28 occurred under this decree, all related to blasphemy against Islam, not any  
29 other religion. Two examples: A university lecturer was charged and placed  
30 under house arrest for five days by the police after a large Muslim crowd  
31 gathered to protest an article he had written. Entitled '*Islam: A Failed*  
32 *Religion,*' it linked Islamic bodies with corruption. In 2006, a high school  
33 Islamic religion teacher was jailed for six months after being accused by a  
34 relative for the '*heretic*' and '*deviant*' practice of whistling during prayers.

35 The year 2006 law that requires a municipal license to open or operate a  
36 house of worship is one avenue for religious discrimination as. In areas where  
37 conservative Islamists control the municipal council, it has been used against  
38 churches and temples. Hundreds of Buddhist, Hindu and Christian houses of  
39 worship have lost their operating license or been forced to close. In a few  
40 Christian dominated areas, mosques have suffered a similar fate. During his  
41 electoral drive, President Widodo promised to remove this law. But his actions  
42 since assuming office have only reinforced it. Doubling in the past two  
43 decades, Indonesia now has more than 500,000 mosques.

44 The NU projects itself as a moderate member of the MUI, a tolerant and  
45 inclusive face of Islam whose goals are to promote Islam and charity. It runs  
46 nearly 7,000 Islamic schools and 44 universities that teach Islamic subjects

1 and agriculture, business studies, computer science and general science. It  
2 cooperates with the Ministry of Internal Security and Western organizations  
3 to combat religious extremism through training the Muslim youth. It supports  
4 community level poverty alleviation projects and funds hospitals and health  
5 centers that provide family planning services in some areas.

6 While the NU differs from American aid agencies over social issues, it  
7 generally takes positions that are in line with American foreign policy. For  
8 example, NU leaders visited Jerusalem at the invitation of the American  
9 Jewish Committee, a move that only served to undercut the right of the people  
10 of Palestine for freedom and self-determination. The NU economic agenda  
11 does not deviate far from the dominant neo-liberal doctrine. The business  
12 courses taught in its educational institutions, though designed to infuse  
13 Islamic ethics in business, promote capitalist management practices, sanction  
14 privatization in education and other sectors, and emphasize higher labor  
15 productivity to boost profits. While combating corruption is one of the  
16 objectives, the systemic roots of corruption are not addressed. The  
17 Muhammadiyah, the other major Islamic organization in Indonesia is  
18 generally more conservative and stands to the right of the NU.

#### 19 20 **+ Religious intolerance +**

21  
22 When secular, egalitarian, multi-ethnic spaces in society are limited and filled  
23 with obstacles, intolerant and fundamentalist religious creeds have a fertile  
24 soil. Religion becomes a solution for all social ills. The two competing trends  
25 in Indonesian Islam reflect this process. One looks to make Islam the central  
26 facet of social and political life while aligning with a pluralist, democratic,  
27 capitalistic state. Its vision accords with the Pancasila philosophy. The other  
28 abhors all compromise with so-called Western notions and calls for a firmly  
29 entrenched theocratic state where all the rites and rituals of Islam are  
30 compulsory, the Quran is interpreted in a literal sense and violators of Islamic  
31 norms are punished severely. The problems of the youth are blamed on  
32 Western culture, not the West inspired economic system, and the solution is  
33 Islamic education.

34 The NU vision exemplifies the former tendency. For example, it  
35 discourages usage of the descriptor '*kafir*' (infidel) for non-Muslims. But in the  
36 recent years, it has been losing ground to the conservative Salafist-Wahhabi  
37 doctrine emanating from Saudi Arabia. Calls to enact Sharia laws and enforce  
38 dress codes for women now proliferate. Sharia laws are already used widely  
39 in the province of Aceh where strict dress codes exist, and public music  
40 concerts are banned.

41 The *fatwas* issued by the MUI reflect the growth of the intolerant brand of  
42 Islam.

43  
44 *In July 2005, the [MUI] issued 11 fatwas. One concluded that*  
45 *religious pluralism, liberalism and secularism were contrary to*  
46 *Islam. The council also ruled that Muslims, in matters of*

1 *religious belief (aqidah) and worship (ibadah), were to take an*  
2 *exclusivist position in the sense that it is unlawful (haram) to*  
3 *incorporate the beliefs and worship of other religions into*  
4 *Islam. (Alatas 2013).*  
5

6 One of these *fatwas* reinforced an earlier ruling that Ahmadiyya was not a  
7 legitimate Muslim sect and urged the government to ban it. Anyone who  
8 joined it was declared an apostate. A later *fatwa* dealt with female genital  
9 mutilation; a practice common in many Muslim communities. It was banned  
10 in Indonesia in 2006. But strong opposition from the MUI and its members  
11 reversed the blanket ban. Instead, it was required that female genital  
12 mutilation be performed by medical professionals. Despite its otherwise  
13 liberal stand, the NU supports this and other *fatwas* issued by the MUI. While  
14 these *fatwas* have been criticized in the media and by academics, scholars,  
15 and civil society organizations, they resonate widely in a populace unhappy  
16 about the existing state of affairs. As large voting blocs, the major Islamic  
17 groups now exercise an increasing influence on the political process.

18 The presence of diverse folk belief systems and cultural practices among  
19 Indonesian Muslims however acts as a barrier for the dissemination of more  
20 conservative brands of Islam. Many Indonesian Muslims have a more flexible  
21 and liberal vision of their religion. Thus, an international survey of Muslim  
22 nations found that 26% of Indonesian Muslims identified themselves as  
23 Sunni, none as Shia, 5% as of some other sect, 13% did not respond but a  
24 majority, 56%, identified themselves in non-denominational terms as Just a  
25 Muslim.

26 Yet, Islamization is occurring in decidedly curious ways. Being cognizant  
27 of the high popularity of Western music and music styles among the youth,  
28 an American style punk rock band has staged concerts to promote Islamic  
29 values and decry democracy as un-Islamic. With tattooed bodies, ragged  
30 dresses and punky hair styles, it hardly appears Islamic. It is but a strange  
31 spectacle of hardline Islamists using foreign cultural tools banned by other  
32 Islamic hardliners to promote the supremacy of Islam.

### 33 34 **+ Religious terrorism +** 35

36 Legitimized intolerance evolves into hate. It leads some to quick solutions, to  
37 kill and destroy to establish the supremacy of their faith. In a confluence of  
38 local and global trends, a tiny segment of the Islamic youth in Indonesia has  
39 become radicalized and taken up arms against perceived '*kafirs*,' their  
40 institutions and the state. Influenced by austere, religiously elevated figures,  
41 they have launched the fight for a traditional Islamic state through violent  
42 means.

43 'Terrorism' is an ideologically loaded term. In the Indonesian context, the  
44 armed struggles by liberation fighters in East Timor, Aceh and West Papua  
45 are called terrorism. Yet, the reality is the unleashing of massive, Western  
46 supported, state terrorism, from the skies and on the ground against, on the

1 fighters and the civilian populations. In East Timor, attacks by the military  
2 reached genocidal proportions. Armed struggle in those areas is an act of  
3 self-defense, not terrorism.

4 Acts of terrorism perpetrated by Sunni extremists have often punctured  
5 life in Indonesia in the past three decades. Concealed explosive devices, car  
6 bombs, shooting sprees and stabbings have been deployed against Buddhist  
7 temples, Christian churches, Ahmadiyya and Shia mosques, the Stock  
8 Exchange, transport facilities, markets, diplomatic facilities, homes, foreign  
9 tourists, fast food outlets and hotels run by US companies, markets, and  
10 government facilities and officials. Many were low level incidents. But others  
11 killed hundreds and injured more. The coordinated car-bomb and suicide-  
12 bomb attacks on tourist areas in Bali in October 2002 killed 202 and injured  
13 over 250. The majority were foreign tourists. Suicide bomb attacks on three  
14 churches in East Java in 2018 killed 28 persons, including the bombers, and  
15 seriously injured over 40. Some incidents were spawned by economic strife  
16 between Muslims and Christians. The most active terrorist group now is an  
17 al-Qaeda affiliated entity, Jamaah Ansharut Daulah. It was responsible for all  
18 the attacks in 2018 and 2019. Highly trained security forces have killed or  
19 captured many of their leaders and key experts. But their current strength  
20 remains unclear.

21 For the state security organs, terrorism is a blessing in disguise. What the  
22 terrorists relish is the generalized fear they cause. Effective action by the state  
23 forces to destroy them brings a sense of relief to the person in the street. It  
24 also legitimizes the tactics they use and the suspension of normal civil  
25 liberties. Security organs get higher funding, the latest weaponry and a bigger  
26 political clout. Their past misconduct is forgiven and forgotten. The same  
27 tactics are later used against non-violent street demonstrators and human  
28 rights groups without raising much alarm. All state actions are framed as  
29 actions against terrorism. Democratic norms are eroded in a step-by-step  
30 fashion until full blown authoritarianism firmly grips the polity.

31 While the Indonesian state has acted firmly against the Islamic terrorist  
32 groups, the broad-based acts of intolerance and communal violence noted  
33 earlier and which feed the terrorist mentality, have not elicited the attention  
34 they deserve. Racism against ethnic Chinese Indonesians, a long-standing  
35 feature of the Indonesia society, is also on the ascendance and is generally  
36 neglected.

### 37 38 **+ Social justice and human rights +** 39

40 President Widodo seemed to be charting a new path with his unconventional,  
41 simple style, charismatic espousal of the Pancasila doctrine and promising  
42 welfare and developmental programs. His popularity among the general  
43 public and major religious, ethnic groups is high. Yet, the Indonesian society  
44 remains ensconced within the capitalist framework. Economic disparities are  
45 wide and growing. Politics is dominated by an elite faction. Poverty and grave  
46 environmental problems endanger the quality of life.

1 Elite interests drive the angst caused by social problems along religious,  
2 nationalistic and cultural paths. An authentic socialist framework, like that of  
3 the PKI, must be avoided at all costs. History repeats itself as Sukarno's  
4 middle of the road approach is being reincarnated. Widodo's politics and the  
5 Pancasila philosophy nonetheless ultimately reflect long term elite interests.  
6 And just as Sukarno could not reconcile the antagonistic classes in society,  
7 Widodo faces sustained pressures from above and below.

8 The military and the hard-core Islamists are pushing the line that the PKI  
9 still exists, and Indonesian society faces grave dangers from secularism,  
10 immorality, use of illegal drugs and homosexuality. The military brass has  
11 labeled communism a threat to national security. The 'red-scare' has provided  
12 the rationale for training an armed civilian militia to combat enemies who  
13 allegedly are secretly conspiring to take over the nation. With 1.2 million  
14 recruits, it impinges on peaceful civilian affairs.

15 Marxist books, teachings and the PKI are legally proscribed. Meetings,  
16 film shows, book launches, and other events staged by human rights and  
17 leftist groups, or massacre survivors are raided by the police and the militia.  
18 The vigilantes even victimize individuals selling or wearing T-shirts with  
19 insignias said to be communist in spirit. It appears that the paramilitary groups  
20 that carried out the 1965-66 killings under the military's guidance are being  
21 reborn.

22 As hardline Islamic groups and well-known politicians promote communist  
23 phobia, President Widodo has chimed in by raising the bogey of drug use as  
24 a major national threat and ratcheted up the annual executions for drug  
25 crimes. Absurd exaggerations now dominate the political landscape.

26 Undertaking any event that threatens elite interests is risky. The attempt  
27 to organize a peaceful meeting on the sidelines of 2018 the World Bank/IMF  
28 forum in Bali by Indonesian and international human, labor and women's  
29 rights groups was suppressed by the police. Yet, despite the demise of the  
30 PKI, the spirit of resistance to injustice and capitalism and for human rights  
31 endures. In late 2020, hundreds of thousands of workers, students, feminist  
32 groups and civil society activists staged militant demonstrations against the  
33 passage of a law that strengthened the rights and privileges of the investors,  
34 weakened worker benefits and dues and diluted the rules for protecting the  
35 environment. Provisions like overtime pay, paid leave for childbirth and  
36 severance pay were removed to attract foreign investors. The police  
37 responded in force with water cannons and tear gas. Many protestors were  
38 injured, some quite severely.

39 To their credit, prominent Muslim, Christian and traditional religious  
40 leaders united to publicly criticize the law and called for its repeal. Declaring  
41 that it harmed '*workers, poor farmers and poor urban society and indigenous*  
42 *communities*' and the environment, they launched an online petition that in no  
43 time gathered more than a million signatures.

44  
45 *Roy, a young Muslim cleric, called for interfaith groups in*  
46 *Indonesia to unite in criticizing what he called oligarchic*

1 *practices and social injustices manifested through the newly*  
2 *passed law. (Oktavianti 2020).*  
3

4 The lands and livelihoods of indigenous communities have long been  
5 severely damaged by mining and logging companies. Their leaders also  
6 castigated the law.

### 7 8 **+ The unravelling +** 9

10 Despite the electoral drama and elegant political rhetoric from moderate  
11 politicians like Widodo and the nationalist, hysterical drives by the military,  
12 conservative Muslim groups and rightwing politicians, a considerable level of  
13 disquiet prevails among the mass of the population. They see politics as a  
14 process that holds little promise for better life and accountable governance.  
15 The state and political parties, liberal or otherwise, serve the wealthy class,  
16 not those at the bottom.

17 But a national movement representing the interests of the people does  
18 not yet exist. An alternative unifying, inspirational vision is absent. In this  
19 vacuum, people are driven to support strong arm, militaristic figures who  
20 promise to clean up the rote and improve people's lives. Their rhetoric of  
21 demolishing so-called enemies of the nation gains greater credence. Even  
22 moderates like Widodo inch towards authoritarianism and form alliances with  
23 the hardcore fear-mongering ultranationalists.

24 With intolerance, communal strife and incidents of terrorism on the rise,  
25 the semblance of Indonesia being a secular, pluralist nation is unravelling.  
26 Not only is religious diversity under an existential threat, but the culturally rich,  
27 ethnically varied forms of Islam in Indonesia are under pressure to conform  
28 to a monolithic brand. In the name of preserving tradition, an authentic,  
29 millennia old tradition is being eroded.

30 The trend towards authoritarianism reflects a global trend. Neoliberalism  
31 is no longer a viable worldview in advanced, middle income and poor nations.  
32 Free markets, globalization and democracy have been exposed as venues  
33 for a few to accumulate massive wealth and make life insecure for the rest.  
34 People place their bets on chest thumping, nationalistic populists who raise  
35 the specter of immigrants, ethnic minorities, immoral ideas, other nations and  
36 secularism as the main enemies. Yet, as hard line religiosity and xenophobia  
37 gain the upper hand in politics, the essential economic ideas of neoliberalism  
38 effectively continue to rule national policies.  
39

## 40 **8.12 ISLAM IN NIGERIA**

41  
42 Nigeria is the most populous nation in Africa. Almost half of the more than  
43 200 million Nigerians are under the age of eighteen. In a land of several  
44 hundred diverse cultures, nearly 70% of the population belongs to one of  
45 three major ethnic groups—Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo. Some 10% of the  
46 Nigerians adhere to traditional beliefs, and the rest are almost equally split

1 between Islam and Christianity. Syncretism is the norm: most Muslims and  
2 Christians engage with their ancient cultural rituals and beliefs. The majority  
3 of the Muslims reside in the North.

4 By Constitution, Nigeria is a secular state. Of the 90 million Muslims, over  
5 95% are deemed to be Sunni, and approximately 3 million, Shia. But the  
6 picture is not that straightforward. Notably, many Nigerian Muslims have a  
7 flexible attitude towards their faith. When asked in a broad survey, only 38%  
8 of the Nigerian Muslims identified as Sunni. A larger portion, 42%, chose a  
9 non-denominational category, Just a Muslim. 12% identified as Shia, 5% as  
10 some other sect and 4% did not give a response. English is the official  
11 language in Nigeria, but personal communication is dominated by local  
12 languages.

13 Some 3,000 years ago, this part of Africa was home to organized, semi-  
14 urban cultures. Later, several kingdoms based on agriculture, crafts and  
15 regional trade flourished. Use of metallic items became common. Traders and  
16 missionaries brought Islam in the 12th century. Subsequent incursions by  
17 Islamic forces from North Africa, conversion of local kings and evolution of  
18 local Islamic kingdoms entrenched the faith. The Islamic Fulani Kingdom  
19 covered most of central and north Nigeria during much of the 19th century.  
20 Islamic mosques sprang up across the land. Local cultures were modified as  
21 Islamic conversion grew and the economy expanded.



22  
23  
24 Gobarau Minaret, Nigeria  
25

26 The 15-meter high Gobarau Minaret in Katsina, built around 1400, is perhaps  
27 the oldest mosque in Nigeria. Besides serving as the main place of worship  
28 in a major center of commerce, this first multi-story structure in the area later  
29 became a famed place of Islamic higher education. Interestingly, like the Saint  
30 Augustine Paoay Church in the Philippines, its tower was used as a  
31 watchtower in times of conflict. The original building has been renovated  
32 several times since then.



1 The massive, impressive Abuja National Mosque built in 1984, is the  
2 national mosque of Nigeria. Apart from a large prayer area, it houses a  
3 sizeable library and conference room, and is open to members of any faith  
4 during non-prayer times.  
5



6  
7  
8

Abuja National Mosque



9  
10  
11

The National Christian Center

12 Aptly symbolizing the religious diversity of Nigeria, an equally majestic  
13 interdenominational Christian church, the National Christian Center, stands  
14 just a short distance away. Completed in 2005, it is the principal Christian  
15 place of worship in the nation. With a colorful garden, it also has guided tours  
16 for the general public.

17  
18  
19

**+ Colonial rule +**

1 The economic and political trajectory of the area altered decisively with the  
2 intrusion of European merchants and conquerors in the 16th century. The  
3 ensuing barbaric Atlantic slave trade wreaked havoc. A few coastal ethnic  
4 rulers—Muslim and non-Muslim—prospered by participating in the capture  
5 and transport of slaves. Thousands of villages in the interior were destroyed,  
6 young men and women put in chains, and the elderly and infirm left to fend  
7 for themselves. Millions perished. Severe disruption of production and trade,  
8 ethnic conflicts and atrophy of indigenous cultures laid the groundwork for  
9 total foreign conquest.

10 British forces, merchants and missionaries ventured inland from around  
11 1800. After annexing coastal towns in the 1850s, they imposed company. The  
12 people put up a strong fight but were unable to drive off the better armed and  
13 organized imperial forces. All the regions of Nigeria were integrated into a  
14 formal British colony in 1914.

15 The British deployed the stratagem of divide and rule to exert control over  
16 production and trade of valued items like cotton, palm oil, ground nuts, cacao,  
17 tin, leather and coal. Alliance with the Sokoto Caliphate in the 1800s  
18 significantly widened their sphere of influence. Emirs and chiefs across the  
19 territory were recruited by varied tactics to enforce colonial directives, collect  
20 taxes and maintain law and order. Muslim and non-Muslim elites prospered  
21 in the service of the colonial masters, but people suffered, and traditional  
22 bonds of trust were frayed. Where the local rules remained recalcitrant, the  
23 British appointed new chiefs of their own creation.

24 Christian missionaries played a key role in legitimizing colonial rule and  
25 training skilled, literate cadres for the administrative apparatus, police, army  
26 and various sectors of the economy. Missions trained local priests to spread  
27 the gospel inland and promote the superiority of Christianity and European  
28 culture over local religions and cultures. Provision of basic health services  
29 boosted conversion rates, especially in the South. In the North, the Muslim  
30 elites were able to leverage their service to the British to have restrictions  
31 placed on Christian missionary work in their areas.

32 Colonial Nigeria was an externally dominated society that was divided into  
33 several classes. At the apex was the ruling class composed of the British  
34 governor, colonial officers, business managers. Under then was the upper  
35 class comprising Muslim and non-Muslim chiefs, local senior civil servants  
36 followed by the local propertied class made up of Lebanese and Nigerian  
37 merchants, landowners, and local factory owners together with the middle  
38 class of Nigerian professionals, teachers, junior civil servants, etc. that sat  
39 atop the toiling class of laborers, peasants, artisans, and servants, etc.

40 The oppressive features of colonial rule—anemic wages, low payments  
41 to peasant producers, high taxes, duties and water service rates, and racial  
42 discrimination—generated discontent among the toiling and middle classes  
43 from the early days. The emergent African intelligentsia—mostly products of  
44 Christian missionary and state education—began to challenge British rule in  
45 the South. Nigerian soldiers who had served overseas on the British side  
46 during the two world wars were disturbed by the poor benefits they received

1 upon return. They brought home ideas of freedom and national self-  
2 determination. Petitions, protests and strikes ensued.

3 New rules for taxation and higher duties on palm oil in 1929 sparked the  
4 uprising of women in Ibo land. Women, many of whom earned their living by  
5 selling fruits, vegetables, beans and palm oil in local markets, were agitated  
6 by the prospect of more deductions from their meager earnings. Thousands  
7 gathered near the tax assessor's dwelling in protest. Rapidly spreading to  
8 other towns, the uprising covered an area with over two million people. Large  
9 police contingents could not subdue the women dominated crowds. They  
10 chanted and marched for days. Along the way, some courts and public offices  
11 were damaged. The uprising was put down only after the police fired bullets  
12 and imposed collective punishments on local communities. In one egregious  
13 incident, thirty-two protestors were shot dead and thirty-one were wounded.  
14 It took several weeks of ferocious suppression to contain the uprising.

15 This was but one of several major protests that rocked the colony during  
16 the twentieth century. A time-honored device to appease opponents is to  
17 make concessions that appear to involve them in decision making even as  
18 you retain the final word. And that is what the British did. The territory was  
19 divided into three regions and the capital city (Lagos) to be governed under a  
20 federal system. Each region had its own elected legislature. Yet, the final word  
21 rested with the governor.

22 Northern Nigeria was the breadbasket of the nation, the source of much  
23 of the agricultural products for local consumption and export. Islam was the  
24 dominant religion here. But services like health and modern education in the  
25 area suffered from neglect and poverty levels were higher as compared to the  
26 South. Yet, the northern Muslim chiefs were accorded a higher political status  
27 by the British. Christianity was the main religion in the South, but Islam and  
28 traditional religions had sizeable followings too. With better educational  
29 facilities, the predominantly Christian South produced more professionals—  
30 doctors, civil servants, engineers, judges, teachers, accountants, lawyers,  
31 senior police officers—than the mostly Muslim South. But in the high political  
32 and military circles, Muslims had a larger representation. The colonial era  
33 federal system along with regional disparities in income, education and  
34 access to key services laid the basis for a long term political and religious  
35 conflict within and between regions and communities.

36 The 20th century unfolded with a global proliferation of anti-colonial  
37 drives. Freedom fighters in one locality drew inspiration from and cooperated  
38 with compatriots elsewhere. The Pan-African movement gathered steam.

39 Nigeria was in the thick of this process. Envisioning a unified drive to end  
40 colonial rule, Herbert Macaulay founded the first political party in the nation.  
41 Among its key goals was to halt colonial land acquisitions. A militant worker's  
42 movement was seeded in 1912 by the formation of the National Union of Civil  
43 Servants. Starting with demands for better salaries and work conditions, it  
44 went on to agitate against racial discrimination and ventured into the political  
45 arena. Numerous labor actions occurred under the leadership of Michael  
46 Imoudu. The general strike of 1945 exemplified the unity and militancy of the

1 working class. The colonial response to labor actions was generally swift and  
2 brutal. For example, 21 protesting miners were killed and 55 wounded by the  
3 police at the Enugu Coal Mines in 1949.

4 A host of political parties sprang up under the stewardship of luminaries  
5 like Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Ahmadu  
6 Bello, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Chief Anthony Enahoro and others. Most  
7 leaders were Nigerians who had obtained higher education. The agendas of  
8 these parties focused on national unity, total independence and democratic  
9 governance. The influence of radical socialist doctrines was not significant in  
10 Nigeria.

11 An undercurrent of regional and religious discord prevailed during the  
12 independence struggle. The northern chiefs who had a privileged status  
13 under colonial rule aspired to reclaim it once self-governance was attained.  
14 They mobilized their poverty-stricken subjects with divisive religious rhetoric.  
15 The Westernized, mostly Christian southern politicians disparaged their  
16 outlook and tactics. Regional divisions engendered by the policy of divide and  
17 rule weakened the independence struggle.

### 18 **+ Independence +**

19  
20  
21 Nigeria attained self-rule in 1960 and became a democratic republic with a  
22 federal governance system in 1963. Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe was elected the first  
23 President. But state executive power was in the hands of the Prime Minister,  
24 Abubakar T Balewa. A tumultuous period, marked by uncertainties and  
25 conflict, in which religion was to play a key role, lay ahead.

26 Nigeria is endowed fabulously with oil and other natural resources. It was  
27 popularly expected that with Independence, this wealth would be redirected  
28 to create a broad-based economy and uplift the lives of the people. Abject  
29 failure to realize this expectation has been at the root of the political and  
30 religious troubles in the nation for over six decades. In that period, Nigeria  
31 has been one of the two major African suppliers of oil to the US.

32 Western oil firms and a few Nigerians have been the main beneficiaries  
33 of Nigeria's riches. Many of the latter occupied top governmental positions.  
34 As Western companies reaped hundreds of billions of dollars, Nigerian  
35 presidents and ministers stashed away hundreds of millions in Swiss and  
36 European banks. But people in the oil producing areas remained mired in  
37 poverty. The environmental despoliation by the reckless operations of the oil  
38 firms undermined fishing, agriculture and national resources. Africa's most  
39 populous nation gained the dubious distinction as a haven for corruption, drug  
40 smuggling and conmanship. In congested cities, crime was rampant, youth  
41 unemployment was too high, and the police were notorious for their brutal  
42 tactics. Just a small upper class lived in veritable opulence.

43 People protested but to no avail. A series of Western supported military  
44 coups undercut accountability. Much of the time Nigeria has been under a  
45 direct or masked form of military rule that has little room for dissent. Elections  
46 were rigged and stolen to favor politicians close to the military. Champions of

1 the fight for freedom, social justice and accountability were harassed and  
2 jailed by the thousands and killed by the hundreds. Among them were Ken  
3 Saro-Wiwa, the valiant environmentalist; Wole Soyinka, the winner of the  
4 Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986; and Fela Kuti, the legendary, pioneering,  
5 incomparable Afrobeat musician. Western governments issued tepid  
6 condemnations of the outrages committed by the Nigerian state agencies but  
7 continued to arm and support the military. It is only in the recent years that  
8 moves to recover the funds illegally placed by Nigerian politicians in external  
9 banks are beginning to bear some fruit. But it is only a trickle. Accountability  
10 for the Western oil firms for causing environmental damage, supporting  
11 corrupt regimes and excess profiteering is not on the radar as yet.

12 Religious sentiment and the religion of the candidate play a major role in  
13 Nigerian politics. Election campaigns and outcomes are marred by violence  
14 between Muslims and Christians and, at times, cause deadly riots. Religious  
15 leaders on both sides take partisan positions. Yet, cloak of religion conceals  
16 disputes about land, resources, employment and social services. And it is a  
17 convenient stratagem for the politicians of all faiths to disguise their loyalty to  
18 neo-liberalism.

19  
20 *Religion by its very nature and content appeals not so much to*  
21 *reason. It's a heart matter and carries with it huge emotions*  
22 *When religions like Christianity and Islam have a huge*  
23 *following of hungry not very educated people on both sides*  
24 *then politicians will explore the areas of religion to get them on*  
25 *their sides. That's a very dangerous and bad thing to do. It's*  
26 *not fair and it's not right.* Archbishop Benjamin Kwashi of Jos  
27 (Ross 2015).

28  
29 Decades of disgruntlement over persistent poverty and injustice has led to  
30 armed opposition in the oil rich areas, especially Ogoni land and the North.  
31 Vicious counter attacks by the Nigerian military that did not spare unarmed  
32 civilians intensified the armed struggle.

33 In 2002, an Islamic group known as Boko Haram (meaning 'Western  
34 education is a sin') began a drive to oppose Western education and influence  
35 in northern Nigeria and institute Sharia law. Its initial tactics were peaceful  
36 and above-board. But after violent reprisals by the state security forces and  
37 Christian militias, it took up arms and launched a violent campaign in 2009,  
38 the likes of which Nigeria had not seen before. At first it targeted military and  
39 police units but then went on to attack civilians in villages and towns, schools  
40 and public offices. Ferocious counter attacks against Boko Haram bases and  
41 adjoining villages were then launched by the Nigerian military. About 27,000  
42 people, mostly civilians, have perished in this conflict since 2009; about three  
43 quarters of them at the hands of Boko Haram.

44 Boko Haram and the Nigerian military stand accused of war crimes and  
45 crimes against humanity. The military has flagrantly attacked villages, caused  
46 many fatalities, detained thousands in abominable conditions, and tortured

1 and disappeared hundreds. Boko Haram's power was weakened by joint  
2 operations of the Nigerian forces and armies of the adjoining nations with  
3 logistic and financial support from the Western nations. The main Boko Haram  
4 strongholds were taken over by the army. Yet, the group still has the ability to  
5 launch deadly attacks. The conflict has had a serious impact on the education  
6 in northeastern Nigeria, a region with an already inferior education system.  
7 Over the past decade, around 2,300 teachers have been killed; over 1,400  
8 schools and colleges have been destroyed or seriously damaged. Insecurity  
9 and fear have made millions of children drop out of school.

10 Ubiquitous corruption within the Nigerian establishment affects the anti-  
11 Boko Haram drive. Independent investigations revealed that of the \$6.8 billion  
12 budgeted for this effort, \$2.1 billion were diverted to political coffers of the  
13 president. Nigeria also lost \$3.3 billion in recent years from unwarranted tax  
14 breaks granted to three Western oil companies.

15 The people of Nigeria remain within the iron grip of neoliberalism and  
16 pseudo-democratic authoritarianism with the attendant tendencies to  
17 generate insecurity, crime and violence. Elitist politicians exploit religious and  
18 ethnic divisions to gain votes and too many ordinary people succumb to their  
19 toxic rhetoric. Brutal violence of the extremist groups is countered by an  
20 equally brutal response of the military. As people remain divided over  
21 religious lines, the room for a unified movement for justice, genuine  
22 democracy and better life for the masses narrows. Muslim and Christian  
23 luminaries have yet to step up to the plate and launch a unified campaign for  
24 real change.

### 25 26 **8.13 SUFISM**

27  
28 As in Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity, there is a strand within Islam that  
29 focuses on the meditative, mystical dimension of faith. Called Sufism, it is not  
30 a sect of Islam since it is practiced by Sunni as well as Shia Muslims. It  
31 complements the five pillars of Islam with meditational sessions that extoll the  
32 mercifulness, magnificence and omnipotence of Allah and the majesty of His  
33 creation. *Dhikr*, the nucleus of Sufi devotional practice, involves focused  
34 veneration of God. The devotees pay fealty to Allah and Prophet Mohamed  
35 via extended, intense sessions of melodious chanting and recitation of divine  
36 poems and Quranic verses. Shia Sufi poetry and song espouse fidelity to Ali,  
37 the Prophet's son-in-law, and their major Imams as well. *Dhikr* intonations are  
38 at times musically enriched with traditional instruments. Exotic dance by an  
39 individual or a group is also a part of some forms of *Dhikr*. Incense burning  
40 and use of prayer beads also occur. *Dhikr* may occur in a community or small  
41 group session and even in a solitary form. Some *Dhikr* styles entail long, silent  
42 focused attention in a darkened place to a single word symbolizing the  
43 almighty.

44 Sufism is not a unitary creed. Basic Sufi ideas emerged about a century  
45 after the death of Prophet Muhammad. Formal Sufi orders were founded by  
46 Muslim *Pirs* (saints, missionaries, *Walis*) in the 12th century. In the ensuing

1 centuries, charismatic *Pirs*, erudite scholars, philosophers and esteemed  
2 poets crystalized over a hundred Sufi orders across the Islamic world. At  
3 present, some 5% of the Muslims formally identify as Sufis. But the majorities  
4 in some Muslim nations partake in Sufi celebrations and practices. Sufism is  
5 a global phenomenon, and some modern Sufis regard themselves as  
6 universal spiritualists, not Muslims.

7 Sufism emerged in reaction to the perception that Muslims had become  
8 too worldly and had betrayed the essence of the Quran and the example set  
9 by the Prophet. Unduly indulging in matters of the flesh and seeking status  
10 and privilege, they rigidly stressed rituals to the exclusion of love for Allah,  
11 which fomented a spiritual void in their lives. Sufism also reflected disdain for  
12 the authoritarian, divisive and corrupt tendencies of Islamic Caliphs, and the  
13 complicity of religious elders and state officials in this state of affairs.

14 Sufism aims to purify the soul through simple living, forsaking worldly  
15 goods, mundane pleasures, ambition, and acquisitiveness, and focusing on  
16 inward spiritual reflection. But it does not advocate a hermitic life. Instead,  
17 Sufis fuse an ascetic lifestyle and disciplined devotion to the essence of Islam  
18 with an ethical engagement with society. Embracing the unitary of nature of  
19 God's creation, Sufism draws motivation from the Prophet to advocate  
20 compassion and love for all beings. Respectful unity with humanity is central  
21 to Sufism. As subjects of Allah, all have equal divine worth. Sufism values  
22 tolerance and expresses respect for all faiths.

23 Sufis regard the founder of their order a saint blessed with divine insight.  
24 Recitation of his poems and hymns and reflective rumination of his writings  
25 are essential to Sufi practice. Celebrating his birthday and pilgrimage to his  
26 tomb or shrine are basic features of Sufi life. Some Sufi orders have more  
27 than one *Pir*. Most *Pirs* were men but a few women *Pirs* of high eminence  
28 have also featured across history.

29 The major Sufi personages, philosophers and *Pirs* include Abdallah ibn  
30 al-Hanafiyah (Iran), Rabia al-Adawiyya (Iraq), Abu al-Ghazali (Arabia), Ibn  
31 al-Arabi (Spain), Bahauddin Naqshband Bukhari (Turkey), Mullah Nasruddin  
32 (Turkey), Najmuddin Kubra (Central Asia), Khawja Moinuddin Chisti (India),  
33 Jalal al-Din Rumi (Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan), al-Shadhili (Egypt), Bibi Fatima  
34 Sam (Iran, Iraq, India), Ahmad Sirhindi (India) and Amir Khusrau (India).  
35 Akbar was also inspired by Rumi and Ibn al-Arabi, two eminent Sufi saints.

36 Sufi missionaries played a vital role in the non-conquest related spread  
37 of Islam across Africa, Asia and Europe. Blending local beliefs and cultures  
38 with Islamic values and ideas, and composing stories and poems in local  
39 languages anchored them into the communities they entered. People paid  
40 heed and many converted to Islam as the *Pirs* seamlessly molded elements  
41 of Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and traditional faiths with Islam. Espousal of  
42 pluralism and tolerance diffused hostility from other faiths. Thus, instead of  
43 denigrating Hinduism as pantheistic idolatry, Sufi *Pirs* traveling across India  
44 integrated aspects of Hinduism into the Islamic creed and wrote hymns in  
45 Gujarati and other Indian languages. Some Shia *Pirs* taught that their Imam  
46 was the 10th, long expected *avtar* (incarnation) of Lord Vishnu.

1 Sufism first gained a firm foothold in India during the Delhi Sultanate of  
2 the 11th century, and later spread to other areas. Advocacy of the harmony  
3 of the cosmos, equality, kindness and usage of love as metaphors to express  
4 the human longing for oneness with God resonated well among people who  
5 were dissatisfied with the restrictions of the caste system.

6 The liberal leanings of Sufi mystics informed the policies of a number of  
7 Muslim rulers. The tolerant, pluralist vision of the Mughal Emperor Akbar was  
8 influenced by Abul Fazl, his confidant and Vizier, and a renowned Sufi scholar  
9 and historian. Rumi and Ibn al-Arabi, two eminent Sufi saints, also inspired  
10 him. Dara Shikoh, the son of Emperor Shah Jahan, was a Sufi scholar who  
11 translated Hindu scriptures into Persian and forged a philosophy that  
12 attempted to reconcile Hinduism with Islam. Though, he was later executed  
13 for blasphemy.

14 Sufism has enriched Islamic culture in multiple ways—poetry, literature,  
15 historical tracts, philosophy, music, dance and art. Eminent Muslim scholars,  
16 philosophers, jurists, and poets—Jalal al-Din Rumi, Omar Khayyam, Al-  
17 Ghazali, Ibn Arabi, Ibn Sina, Muhammad Iqbal—were drawn to Sufism. Their  
18 influence went beyond the world of Islam. Rumi's poetry has been translated  
19 into many languages, and he has a large following in the West. Prominent  
20 politicians, writers and scientists have declared their attraction to Sufism.

21  
22 **+ Ibn Arabi +**  
23

24 Ibn Arabi, a prolific Sufi poet and philosopher, was born in 1165 CE in Islamic  
25 era Spain and died in Damascus in 1240 CE. Seeking knowledge and  
26 wisdom, he traveled far and wide, interacting with scholars, theologians and  
27 dignitaries wherever he stopped. In all, he wrote about 800 books, of which  
28 about 100 have survived in print form. His main books are several thousand  
29 pages long, and some have been translated into English, Urdu, Persian,  
30 French and other languages. Though he was a Sunni, he is revered by Sunni  
31 as well as Shia Muslims.

32 Ibn Arabi differentiated two forms of truth, each valid in its own domain.  
33 There is truth acquired through rational inquiry and there is truth obtained by  
34 intuitive, meditative insight. Only the latter, based on acknowledgement of the  
35 integral singularity of Allah, can bring a human being close to Him. In line with  
36 the central tenet of Sufism, he decried excess attention to formal rules and  
37 laws and pursuit of material gain and pleasure, both of which divert the  
38 believer from spiritual excellence.

39  
40 *How can the heart travel to God,*  
41 *when it is chained by its desires?*

42 Ibn Arabi  
43

44 Taking the Prophet of Islam as his ideal, he advocated attaining spiritual  
45 perfection through continuous reflective devotional relationship with Allah.  
46 The striving for perfection enables you to fathom your essence. He was of



1 the view that he himself had attained a high degree of perfection. And he  
2 espoused tolerance for all faith systems.

3  
4 *Do not praise your own faith so exclusively that you disbelieve*  
5 *all the rest. ... God the omniscient and omnipresent cannot be*  
6 *confined to any one creed. Ibn al-Arabi (Armstrong 2014).*

7  
8 **+ Jalal al-Din Rumi +**  
9

10 Jalal al-Din Rumi, the acclaimed Sufi poet and scholar, was born to Persian  
11 parents in 1207 at a location near Afghanistan. He grew up in a centuries-  
12 old, yet vibrant, center of Persian culture and Sufism. His father—a preacher  
13 and jurist—overrode his fascination with Sufism and directed him to study  
14 Islamic law. He began adult life as a local judge and religious studies teacher.  
15 But close interactions with a Persian poet of repute and several ascetic  
16 mystics changed his outlook. Discarding worldly pleasures, he plunged  
17 headlong into lifelong mystical, philosophical and poetic pursuits.

18 His literary and expressive abilities matured under the tutelage of a Sufi  
19 master. Composing volumes of enchanting, elegant verses that resonated  
20 with a mixture of evident, cryptic and paradoxical phraseology gained him a  
21 large following over a vast area. He mostly wrote in Persian, but some of his  
22 poetry was in Arabic, Greek and Turkish.

23 Rumi was a multi-culturalist *par excellence*. His outlook, lectures and  
24 poems transcended ethnic, religious and national barriers. His followers and  
25 admirers included Jews and Christians. Though a Sunni, he had a following  
26 among Shias as well. After his death, his son and close devotees established  
27 the Mevlevi Sufi Order to propagate his work and philosophy. Today, it is a  
28 Sufi order with an international reach greater than of any other Sufi order.

29 Rumi was a devout Muslim. He strictly adhered to the Islamic tenets like  
30 praying five times daily. His philosophy reflected an unquestioned devotion  
31 to Allah and the Quran. The tenets he championed—universal love, truth,  
32 generosity, beauty, iconoclasm, resoluteness, optimism, gratitude and living  
33 in the moment—were informed by Islam. The most important place in the  
34 world, in his view, was within oneself, in the heart, the palace of the soul. He  
35 saw spiritual devotion akin to ecstatic intoxication with the sublime infinitude  
36 of the divine. Taking reverence of God as the basis of all faiths, he advocated  
37 and practiced a remarkable degree of tolerance. He regarded the ability to  
38 forgive a heroic trait, and compassion, a mark of nobility. The powerless and  
39 the powerful, rich or poor, were attracted to this humble, charming man who  
40 expressed his wisdom in a witty manner. Though the ruling circles were irked  
41 by his iconoclastic verses at times, his popularity insulated him from their  
42 vendetta.

43 Rumi was an accomplished musician especially adept composing  
44 numerous riveting tunes on the reed flute. Music and graceful body  
45 movements were, for him, sublime avenues for attaining spiritual bliss:  
46

1 *Rumi believed passionately in the use of music, poetry and*  
2 *dance as a path for reaching God. For Rumi, music helped*  
3 *devotees to focus their whole being on the divine and to do*  
4 *this so intensely that the soul was both destroyed and*  
5 *resurrected. (Wikipedia 2020 - Rumi).*  
6

7 Rumi composed two major works of poetry: the six-volume *Masnavi (Spiritual*  
8 *Couplets)* and *Diwan-e Kabir (Great Work)*. They contain tens of thousands  
9 of evocative, quixotic, rhyming couplets, quatrains and extended verse forms  
10 that have permeated the popular culture in many nations. His poems are  
11 tinged with natural objects and processes—sun, moon, stars, day and night,  
12 water, birds, flowers, trees—as well as with human proclivities—love, pain,  
13 longing, separation, wine, song and ecstasy. A small sample gives a taste of  
14 his vast repertoire:

15  
16 *You were born with wings, why prefer to crawl through life?*

17 +++++

18 *Everything in the universe is within you. Ask all from yourself.*

19 +++++

20 *I want to sing like the birds sing,*  
21 *not worrying about who hears or what they think.*

22 +++++

23 *You wander from room to room*  
24 *Hunting for the diamond necklace*  
25 *That is already around your neck!*

26 +++++

27 *You are the universe in ecstatic motion.*

28 +++++

29 *You are not a drop in the ocean.*  
30 *You are the entire ocean in a drop.*

31 +++++

32 *Put your thoughts to sleep,*  
33 *do not let them cast a shadow*  
34 *over the moon of your heart.*  
35 *Let go of thinking.*

36 +++++

37 *The rose's rarest essence lives in the thorns.*

38 +++++

39 *Gamble everything for love,*  
40 *if you're a true human being.*

41 +++++

42 *Shine like the whole universe is yours.*

43 +++++

44 *Maybe you are searching among the branches,*  
45 *for what only appears in the roots.*

46 Rumi

1  
2 Rumi's poetic works, particularly the *Masnavi*, are ranked by scholars as  
3 among the premier works of global mystical literature.

4  
5 *The Masnavi weaves fables, scenes from everyday life,*  
6 *Quranic revelations and exegesis, and metaphysics into a vast*  
7 *and intricate tapestry.* (Wikipedia 2020 - Rumi).

8  
9 His numerous talks and sermons, generally rendered in a popular style, form  
10 two lengthy volumes. A separate volume contains his often extended, erudite  
11 correspondence with major personalities of his times. Rumi has exercised a  
12 phenomenal influence across the world. His books have been translated into  
13 all the major languages. His life and work are the subjects of scores of  
14 international conferences. Universities teach courses on Rumi. A specific  
15 scholarly journal devoted to his works and philosophy exists, and he is the  
16 subject of many biographies and commentaries. Dramatic and musical  
17 performances and films utilize his ideas. Well attended sessions for reciting  
18 and reading his poetry occur on a regular basis. And above all, the dance  
19 shows of the Whirling Dervishes always sell out in Western cities. The 800th  
20 anniversary of his birth in 2007 was a day for pomp and ceremony in Iran,  
21 Afghanistan, Turkey and beyond. UNESCO declared the year 2007 the  
22 International Rumi Year.

23  
24 *Few religious figures in the history of civilization have as*  
25 *successfully crossed borders of faith, language and geography*  
26 *as nimbly as Jalal al-Din Mohammad Rumi, the great 13th-*  
27 *century theologian and mystic poet.* (Moaveni 2017).

### 28 29 **+ Mullah Nasruddin +**

30  
31 Mullah Nasruddin was a Sufi who composed of thousands of short tales and  
32 anecdotes for children and adults that became a part of the folklore in the  
33 Middle East, Southern Europe, Indonesia, Uzbekistan, China, India and East  
34 Africa. Claimed by many cultures as their own, varied versions of his birth,  
35 name, life and death exist. He likely lived in 13th century Turkey. His tales,  
36 recorded in multiple languages, are narrated at parties, family gatherings, and  
37 radio shows. Some filtered across the West and are incorporated into popular  
38 European literature.

39 The pointed tales, which usually feature him as a subject, shine with wit  
40 and humor. The punchline is usually evident, but at times, it takes a moment  
41 to sink in. The few lines typically convey a sarcastic comment on the vagaries  
42 of human life. No one—the author, his family, townsfolk, eminent scholars or  
43 rulers—is spared a biting verdict from the Mullah. Lurking underneath is the  
44 Sufi view of the illusory, transient, unjust nature of existence and the futility of  
45 formal rituals. The three anecdotes below are a sampling.

46

## Young and Old

At a gathering where Mullah Nasruddin was present, people were discussing the merits of youth and old age. They had all agreed that, a man's strength decreases as years go by. Mullah Nasruddin dissented.

'I don't agree with you gentlemen, he said. In my old age I have the same strength as I had in the prime of my youth'.

'How do you mean, Mullah Nasruddin?' asked somebody. Explain yourself.

'In my courtyard,' explained Mullah Nasruddin, 'there is a massive stone. In my youth I used to try and lift it. I never succeeded. Neither can I lift it now'.

## It Was Just My Clothes

Nasruddin's wife heard a loud noise in the next room. She went to inspect it, and saw her husband sitting on the floor.

'What was that?' she cried.

'It was just my clothes,' replied Nasruddin. 'They fell down'.

'But how could your clothes make such a loud noise?' she asked.

'Because I was in them,' replied Nasruddin.

## A Good Time to Eat

Man: 'Nasruddin, when is a good time to eat?'

Nasruddin: 'Well, for the rich, anytime, and for the poor, anytime they find food'.

++++

Earlier, we noted the centrality of Sufi music, especially the qawwali form, in Islamic music. This musical genre, together with its instruments, bloomed in the Indian sub-continent during the Mughal era. Today, tens of millions of Muslims in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and beyond find rapture and joy from qawwali renditions by scores of artistes. Women qawwals feature among the leading qawwals. Turkey, Iran, Egypt, the Arab nations, the former Soviet

1 nations and Indonesia have their own repertoire of Islamic and Sufi music.  
2 The qawwali form also attracts large audiences in non-Muslim nations and  
3 communities, especially in the Western nations.

4 Many prominent Muslim theologians, scholars and jurists of the past and  
5 in the present have endorsed the permissibility of music within Islam. For a  
6 number of Shia sects, it is a key element of worship and festival celebrations.  
7 Some sects place restrictions on where and when music is allowed, the use  
8 of instruments, and participation of women in the choir. A few but large Sunni  
9 sects forbid it.

10  
11 +++++  
12

13 Some Sufi orders have rather disquieting practices. They demand absolute  
14 obedience from an initiate to the local Sufi master. In a test of sincerity and  
15 devotion, the initiate sits alone on a mat in a room for 40 days. And he may  
16 be denied sleep. Later, he has to swallow broken glass or endure the pain of  
17 metal pins piercing his skin. Only if one passes these grueling tests is one led  
18 to the path to Allah through spiritual discipline and meditation. Sufi orders in  
19 Malaysia teach martial arts and have dance ceremonies with traditional  
20 weapons. But many Sunni and Shia sects do not approve such practices.  
21 (The discussion of Sufism is continued later.)

## 22 23 **8.14 SALAFISM** 24

25 The companions of Prophet Muhammad and the first two or so generations  
26 of his followers are known as the *Salaf* or pious predecessors and are seen  
27 as exemplary Muslims who lived faithfully by the precepts of the Quran and  
28 the precedent set by the Prophet. Salafism is a Sunni Islamic school formed  
29 in the 14th century by Ibn Taymiyyah, a conservative jurist and theologian.  
30 He assessed that Muslims had strayed from the true path set by the *Salaf* and  
31 had abandoned the wisdom of the Quran. It was not an uncommon view. But,  
32 unlike others, he took an unforgiving stand towards the deviants. Islam had  
33 to be cleansed and unified. All Muslims, Shia, Sufi or Sunni, had to follow true  
34 Islam, that is, his vision of Islam. Else they faced excommunication or worse.

35 While the Sufis faulted undue stress on ritual, preoccupation with worldly  
36 pleasures, avarice and the moral corruption of the regimes of self-centered,  
37 authoritarian rulers as the bases for the malady, Taymiyyah blamed it on the  
38 absence of strict adherence to the tenets and rules of Islam. He posited  
39 external cultural and political influence, neglect by religious elders, and  
40 spread of Shia Islam as the major factors behind the deviation from true Islam.  
41 With its disposition for tolerance and integration of other religious beliefs and  
42 practices into Islam, Sufism was singled out as a major culprit.

43 The Salafist doctrine sees strict adherence to the five pillars of Islam, strict  
44 fidelity to the strictures enshrined in the *Hadiths* and emulation of the spiritual  
45 nobility of the *Salaf* as the remedies. It obligates a literal acceptance of the

1 *suras* of the Quran, without qualification or reinterpretation, tackling deviant  
2 tendencies, and coercive enforcement of the rituals and rites of Islam.

3 Over time, Salafism diverged into three schools. Quietist Salafism, the  
4 majority school, stresses personal endeavor as the way to true Islam. Each  
5 Muslim has to be guided to strictly abide by Islamic norms. And it disdains  
6 socio-political activism. The second school, Reformist Salafism, holds that  
7 persuasion by itself does not work. A need to create conditions conducive to  
8 the flourishing of true Islam exists. Hence, Muslims should participate in public  
9 and political life as an organized body. They should form political parties, take  
10 part in civil affairs, engage in charity work, contest local and national elections,  
11 but avoid violent, illegal means. The third school, Militant Salafism, concurs  
12 with the activist Reformist Salafism but has room for militant action, including  
13 armed action. Its goal is to create Islamic Caliphates based on strict  
14 enforcement of Sharia law. The last two activist Salafist schools stress group  
15 loyalty to combat external corrosive influences. If hostile conditions in one  
16 place prevent Muslims from abiding by their faith, they should move to places  
17 where they can do so.

18 Apart from this tripartite divide, Salafist schools attach varied importance  
19 on the main tenets of Islam and on distinguishing between major and minor  
20 sins, honest errors and willful deeds, and the nature of punishment for such  
21 transgressions. The Salafists are often identified more by what they oppose  
22 than by what they believe. Their stand is rigid and unwavering. Only their  
23 beliefs are correct; all else is heresy or apostasy. It is a dogmatic, intolerant  
24 creed that denigrates the more than 95% of the global Muslim population,  
25 Sunni and Shia.

26 Salafism remained a fringe school for over three centuries. But it gained  
27 a firmer footing when Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, an embattled tribal chief and a  
28 Salafist theologian, formed an alliance with Muhammad bin Saud, a Sunni  
29 ruler with a sizeable military force. Their coalition managed to establish a  
30 strong Muslim state over much of the Arabian Peninsula. The House of Saud,  
31 a hereditary dynasty came into being. Yet, conflict with the Ottoman Empire  
32 fed into internal strife to cause much instability for a century and a half. But  
33 from the early 1900s, Ibn Saud, the ruler at that time, launched a series of  
34 military drives that eventually unified the territory and established the present-  
35 day theocratic Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932.

36 It was an era when Britain and the US sought a firm foothold in the region.  
37 The potential for large oil and gas deposits and the strategic location were  
38 vital. Using their military and diplomatic might in support of the Saudi rulers,  
39 they gained an influential ally disposed towards their interests. Ironically,  
40 while the conservative Saudi rulers abhorred foreign cultural influences, they  
41 had no qualms about allying with Western nations, the main source of those  
42 influences.

43 With a population of nearly 35 million, enormous energy reserves, and  
44 vast accumulated finances, Saudi Arabia now is an absolute hereditary  
45 monarchy without an elected legislature. Wahhabism, a rigid Salafist brand of  
46 Sunni Islam, is the governing theology. Islamic Sharia law forms the

1 foundation of its legal system. A person accused of committing a crime has  
2 few rights; the judge does what he pleases. Eliciting confession by torture is  
3 common. Public flogging was legal until recently. Public behavior—in regard  
4 to dress, consumption of alcohol and practice of other religions—is strictly  
5 enforced by the Religious Police.

6 Workplace rights are minimal. Trade unions are illegal. Foreign workers  
7 are mistreated. There is no free, independent press, and no democratic rights.  
8 Expressions of dissent receive harsh penalties. Saudi Arabia is one of the few  
9 nations that is not a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.  
10 All major decisions are made by the King, members of his inner circle and the  
11 top Muslim clerics. Public accountability does not exist. And under its  
12 patronage, Salafism, particularly in the form of Wahhabism, has spread  
13 almost everywhere where there is an Islamic presence.

14 There is extensive disagreement among scholars, Islamic organizations  
15 and states about what the terms Salafism and Wahhabism mean. But often it  
16 is a juggling of abstruse words that just muddies the waters and masks the  
17 realities. Wahhabism is a brand of Salafism that has elements of Reformist  
18 Political Salafism and Militant Salafism within its purview. It sees the Saudi  
19 Kingdom as the ideal Islamic state and endorses strident activism to create  
20 theocratic Muslim states.

21 Saudi Arabia holds a special status for Muslims because it houses two of  
22 the three holiest mosques in Islam and is the place where over a million  
23 Muslims go for the annual Hajj pilgrimage. Besides the weight it carries in the  
24 world of Islam, it is a major player in Middle Eastern and global affairs. But  
25 that is not due to religion. Vast reserves of oil and gas, the accumulated  
26 financial muscle and nearly a century of diplomatic and military support from  
27 the US and Britain underpin its global leverage. Protecting the wealth and  
28 power of the Saudi ruling class is central to the Western imperial agenda in  
29 the region and beyond. They have provided security guarantees to the  
30 monarchy for almost a century. In return, Saudi Arabia serves as a base for  
31 their forces and uses its dominant position in the oil economy to chart a  
32 trajectory that accords with Western economic interests. It plays a major role  
33 in maintaining the US dollar as the leading currency for international trade  
34 and finance. And for decades, it has been a huge market for general and  
35 advanced military weaponry and supplies from the US, UK, France, Canada  
36 and other Western nations. In recent years, it has spent about 10% of its GDP  
37 on the military. At \$68 billion in 2016, it was the fourth largest global spender  
38 on the military, surpassing the UK, France and Japan, and is now one of the  
39 two largest importers of advanced weapons in the world. Currently, the US  
40 has an arms deal worth some \$60 billion with the Kingdom. Nearly two-fifths  
41 of UK's arms exports also land there.

42 For the US, UK and France, supplying billions of dollars in sophisticated  
43 military hardware and supplies to the two alleged adversaries—Israel and  
44 Saudi Arabia—is a game of financial and political seesaw that has kept their  
45 arms sector afloat even in recessionary times. Military manufacturers owe a  
46 great deal of their profitability to Saudi Arabia's unwavering largess. Every

1 producer of instruments of mass destruction aspires for a deal with the  
2 Kingdom. Saudi Arabia and Israel compete for advanced US and European  
3 weapons. Supplying arms to both sides in a conflict, directly or via a proxy, is  
4 a time-honored US tactic. Other examples include Turkey and Greece, China  
5 and Taiwan, Iran and Iraq, and India and Pakistan.

6 The Saudi kingdom is the world's largest exporter of oil and the doctrine  
7 of Salafism. It is the main base and launching pad for the extremist brand of  
8 Salafism. Saudi sourced theological exports occur in a diversity of ways.  
9 Foreign workers and students return with Salafist ideas to their homelands.  
10 The Kingdom maintains a generous budget for building mosques, and Islamic  
11 schools, promoting Muslim preachers, and distributing free copies of the  
12 Quran. It gives overt and covert political, financial support to like-minded  
13 political parties and states across the globe. An uncompromising brand of  
14 Salafism has thus found a fertile audience, especially among young Muslims  
15 across the world.

## 16 **8.15 POLITICAL ISLAM**

17  
18  
19 Since the 1970s and more so after the end of the collapse of the USSR, the  
20 coverage and commentaries on Islam and Muslims in the mainstream media  
21 and discourse by scholars in the academy and establishment think-tanks  
22 have been dominated by the idea of Political Islam. The official discourse sees  
23 Islam as a politically oriented, intolerant faith that aims to extinguish other  
24 religions and establish a global Islamic theocracy. Muslims are accused of  
25 embracing *Jihadism*, a violent creed. The Iranian revolution of 1979, the  
26 Iranian hostage crises, the bombings of US targets including embassies and  
27 naval ships, the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001, the terrorist  
28 attacks in European cities, rampages of groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria  
29 and Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria are adduced as evidence in support  
30 of this thesis. Harsh anti-Islamic pronouncements by Western politicians and  
31 personalities anchor the view that Islam and Muslims, with a few exceptions,  
32 are violent entities antithetical to the democratic way of life. The word  
33 'terrorism' in their parlance denotes 'Islamic terrorism'.

34 Deconstructing point of view needs to begin with the meaning of the term  
35 'politics' and the link between politics and religion in a general, historic setting.  
36 Politics is about the affairs of the state, and interactions with the centers of  
37 power in society. Such interactions may be direct, explicit or formal, and may  
38 or may not involve a political movement.

39 The expositions of the major and minor religions in this book demonstrate  
40 that religions are rooted in existing social, economic structures. As organized  
41 entities, they have served political goals. Some religions have served as  
42 official ideologies of the state. From their inception to today, Hinduism,  
43 Buddhism and Christianity have functioned as socio-political doctrines with a  
44 diversity of connections to the ruling and ruled classes.

45 Hinduism sanctified the rule of the rajas and caste-based exploitation of  
46 working peoples in ancient India and promoted unity as well as divisions in



1 the anti-colonial struggles against the British. In the form of the *Hindutva*, a  
2 part of it has congealed into a hardline politicized entity. Buddhism, born as a  
3 protest movement of the downtrodden, later was a state religion in several  
4 Asian nations, and served to sanctify exploitative semi-feudalistic realities as  
5 in Tibet. Buddhist monasteries became wealthy, powerful entities. Buddhist  
6 monks joined anti-colonial and anti-military struggles. Christianity displayed  
7 similar characteristics from the Roman era to feudal times and into to the eras  
8 of capitalism and imperialism.

9 All religions have been on both sides of the political divide, of the rulers  
10 and of the ruled. Christian dignitaries who supported slavery and colonialism  
11 sided with the oppressor. When African American churches and some white  
12 churches in the US joined the struggle against slavery, or when Christian  
13 churches in Africa worked to end colonial rule and Apartheid, they took a  
14 political stand on the side of the downtrodden masses. When the American  
15 churches maintained silence over the deadly sanctions on Iraq that killed half  
16 a million Iraqi children, they took a political, patriotic stand. When evangelical  
17 churches lend support to authoritarian nationalists like Donald Trump of the  
18 USA or Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, they are taking a political stand. And when  
19 the Pope criticizes neoliberalism, he too is indulging in politics.

20 The three tendencies in Salafism—Quietist, Reformist and Militant—have  
21 existed in varied forms in Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity as well as in  
22 some minor religions. The militants have been in a minority but due to the  
23 nature of their deeds, have had an impact far beyond their numbers. What  
24 they did often molded public perception about religion. Several examples of  
25 militant religious activism were given in the previous chapters.

26 Whether a formal separation between the church and state exists or not,  
27 religion serves broader social, economic and political interests. It affects  
28 political choice and influences attitude towards the existing social system.  
29 Religion and politics, at the personal and institutional level, are inseparable.

30 And Islam is not an exception. From its early days it was a political entity.  
31 And its politics have varied over time and place. But these politics cannot be  
32 reduced to the simplistic, biased notion of Political Islam prevailing in the West  
33 today. It requires a concrete historical analysis.

34 Salafism plays a direct role in the affairs of the state and has wider political  
35 ambitions. A nuanced approach to Islam in the West differentiates between  
36 moderate and extremist Islam. Decrying Salafism as the embodiment of the  
37 latter, it celebrates Sufism as an apolitical, sublime quest for eternal bliss. In  
38 contrast to the Muslim preachers who pour venom on Western culture, Sufis  
39 are regarded as the epitome of open-minded Muslims who have no political  
40 agenda.

41 In line with the growth in the popularity of Buddhist and Hindu meditative  
42 and spiritual practices since the 1960s, Sufism enjoys a decent following in  
43 the West. Many in the US are attracted to Rumi's poems, in print and video  
44 formats. His verses are recited by TV gurus, spiritual masters and Hollywood  
45 stars. They adorn mugs, T-shirts, mats, cellphone covers and calendars.  
46 Several editions of his poems are in print. Sufi musical traditions from

1 Pakistan and India and Sufi dance performances from Turkey and former  
2 Soviet Islamic areas attract large audiences.

3 Yet, the Sufism and Rumi of the West are entities that would not meet the  
4 approval of the ancient sage. The consumer culture has trimmed off his  
5 unwavering loyalty to Islam and the Quran, and turned him into an emblem of  
6 abstract mysticism, advocate of psychic intoxication and icon of romantic  
7 bliss. Like Western Buddhism, Western Sufism is an entity distinct from what  
8 it means to the millions of its devotees in Africa and Asia. While Rumi would  
9 be at ease with the multi-faith origins of his admirers, he would be disturbed  
10 that they do not accept the divine grandeur of Allah. He certainly would not  
11 approve the commercialization of his vision and verse by entities for which  
12 generating profit is the basic aim.

13 To regard Sufism simply as a spiritual pursuit devoid of political links and  
14 connotations is a limited and flawed perspective. Sufism was often close to  
15 the seats of power and wealth and influenced state policies. During the initial  
16 phase of Moghul rule in India, it affected public policy by promoting religious  
17 plurality to ease communal tensions. Later, Sufi cultural practices became the  
18 fixation of a self-indulgent ruling class. As the British encroached upon India,  
19 the Mughal aristocracy neglected production and trade, and became  
20 engrossed with mystical poems, classical dance and elegant architecture.  
21 Thereby, Sufism factored in the ensuing precipitous decline of Moghul rule.

22 During the waning periods of the Caliphates in the Middle East and North  
23 Africa, some Sufi orders were key centers of political power. The initial phase  
24 of the Ottoman Empire was marked by an amicable relationship between the  
25 state and Sufi orders. The propensity of Sufi preachers for tolerance and  
26 integrating local culture and customs into Islamic practice facilitated the  
27 spread and stabilization of the Empire. But the marriage did not last, and later  
28 the Sufis found themselves at the receiving end of a conservative backlash.

## 29 30 **8.16 JIHAD AND TERRORISM**

31  
32 Jihad is an Arabic word which denotes a diligent endeavor to attain a noble  
33 goal. In the Islamic context, it has a three-fold meaning: One, it is the  
34 disciplined spiritual and practical effort by Muslims to abide by their faith. This  
35 includes learning the Quran, subduing negative feelings like anger and hate,  
36 joining voluntary programs to help the needy, working for social justice and  
37 fastidiously adhering to the Five Pillars of Islam. Two, it is the organized  
38 collective drive by the Muslim community to establish a moral social order.  
39 Three, it is the military struggle to liberate Muslims from internal and external  
40 tyranny, defend Islam, and protect the right of Muslims to practice their faith.

41 The military form of Jihad is governed by rules that resemble the modern  
42 international law on warfare. War must be the last resort, after peaceful  
43 attempts have failed. Offensive or colonizing war, attacks on civilians, rape of  
44 women, damage to enemy property, forced conversion, poisoning the  
45 environment and undue prolongation of fighting are prohibited. Captured  
46 enemy soldiers are to be treated in a decent manner.

1 Needless to say, practice deviates from the ideals. With some exceptions,  
2 wars waged by Islamic Caliphs entailed mistreatment of civilians and enemy  
3 soldiers, pillage and looting. They were wars to extend the power and wealth  
4 of the ruling classes. With a few exceptions, Muslim armies were not that  
5 different from Christian, Hindu, Buddhist or Shinto armies.

6 'Jihad', however, is one of the most misused words in the Western  
7 dominated global media. Jihadism is equated with terrorism, with the  
8 implication that Muslims in general are inclined to violence.

### 9 10 **+ Terrorism +**

11  
12 An act is a terrorist act if:

13  
14 *It is carried out for political, nationalistic, ethnic, religious or*  
15 *military goals and is designed to or likely to injure and kill*  
16 *civilians and cause damage to their property. A terrorist group*  
17 *may operate in domestic or international arenas, or in both.*

18  
19 Terrorism is perpetrated not just by non-state or insurgent groups but also by  
20 states (governments).

21  
22 *A state may take terrorist actions against a segment of its own*  
23 *people or against a foreign nation and people, or both. A state*  
24 *may have laws that permit terrorist actions by the police,*  
25 *security agencies and military on domestic and external*  
26 *arenas. And a state may, usually covertly, support, fund, and*  
27 *sponsor groups and other states who employ terrorist tactics.*

28  
29 Terrorism is also a much-abused term in modern political and journalistic  
30 lexicon. Often it is employed just for acts committed by Islamic Jihadists, while  
31 similar acts by other groups are labeled as atrocities, mass killings, but not  
32 terrorism. There is no question that the aircraft attacks on the Twin Towers in  
33 New York, suicide bombings by Muslim militants in Egypt, Nigeria,  
34 Philippines, Europe, the UK and India, car bomb attacks on US embassies in  
35 Kenya and Tanzania, knife attacks by Muslim fanatics in Paris and elsewhere,  
36 killing of Israeli Olympic athletes, attacks on civilians by Islamic State fighters  
37 in Iraq and Syria, Taliban attacks on civilian facilities, Al-Shabab attacks on  
38 hotels and malls in Somalia and Kenya that at times killed hundreds were acts  
39 of terrorism. But the gruesome rampages by white nationalists in Norway,  
40 New Zealand and the US were terrorist attacks too. When discussing  
41 terrorism, two historical facts need to be kept in mind.

42  
43 *While terrorism committed by non-state actors usually*  
44 *backfires in the long run, state terrorism can be brutally*  
45 *effective. And terrorism by non-state groups usually*  
46 *emboldens state terrorism and acts as a financial, material and*



1 Africa, Middle East and Asia. A central part of the US strategy was to train,  
2 fund and arm militant Islamic groups to counter the influence of secular anti-  
3 imperialist parties and states, and work with pro-imperial states in the Middle  
4 East. Secular, socialistically inclined governments such as Iran under  
5 Mohammad Mosaddegh, Libya under Muammar Gaddafi, Egypt under Gamel  
6 Abdel Nasser, Algeria under the National Liberation Front, Iraq under  
7 Saddam Hussein, Syria under Bashar al-Assad, and the Soviet-supported  
8 government of Afghanistan were destabilized, undermined, or overthrown to  
9 achieve these goals. The growing popularity of the Palestinian Liberation  
10 Organization in Palestine was countered by funding and permitting Islamic  
11 political groups to function in the territories occupied by Israel.

12 The roots of modern-day Islamic extremism are three-fold: One, it  
13 emerged from the ashes of the Cold War era fires stocked by the Western  
14 imperial interventions. Afghanistan is a major case in point. The fighters  
15 recruited from Muslim nations into the Afghani Mujahedin warlords' fighting  
16 forces against the Soviet backed government did not embrace civilian life  
17 once that government was deposed. Organizing in secret to continue what  
18 they saw as the fight to restore the glory of Islam, for them, the Soviet Union  
19 was but one enemy. Imperialism led by the US, their erstwhile backer, was  
20 an equally hated foe. The militants were especially angered by the stationing  
21 of US troops in Saudi Arabia, the home to the holy mosques, the ongoing  
22 oppression of the people of Palestine as well as by the Indian occupation of  
23 Kashmir. Under the leadership of the CIA trained Osama bin Laden, the Al-  
24 Qaeda front was formed with the aim of bringing the war into the imperial  
25 heartland and replace governments in Islamic nations that had betrayed the  
26 cause of Islam. The terror tactics and technical skills they had learned from  
27 CIA operatives in Afghanistan converted them into a disciplined and effective  
28 fighting force.

29 The second factor behind the rise of Islamic militancy was the failure of  
30 the World Bank and IMF supported governments, as well as of the pseudo-  
31 socialist states as in Egypt, Nigeria and Algeria, to significantly improve the  
32 lives of the masses. Ruthless suppression of discontent by the state led a  
33 minority of activists to take up arms. In the vacuum created by the absence  
34 of strong secular, socialist parties, Islam became their organizing ideology. A  
35 multiplicity of social and economic factors fed the perception that Muslims  
36 were marginalized and discriminated against, and that the resources of their  
37 nations had mainly benefitted outsiders and the wealthy rulers. It reflected the  
38 reality, but instead of being viewed in terms of national and class lines as  
39 done in the past, now it was viewed along religious lines.

40 The third factor was the spread, through Saudi Arabian sponsorship, of  
41 the Salafist doctrine. In nation after nation, Saudi Arabia built mosques,  
42 funded Islamic schools, sponsored preachers, gave scholarships to young  
43 Muslims, donated food during Islamic festivals and freely distributed copies  
44 of the Quran, Islamic literature and videos. Salafism, till then a fringe outlook  
45 among Muslims, entered the mainstream. As its message of a pure Islam took  
46 hold, Sunnis and Shias, who for ages had coexisted harmoniously with each

1 other and the followers of other religions, grew less tolerant. Rigid dress  
2 codes and strict adherence to Islamic rituals began to prevail. Calls for  
3 enactment of Sharia law as the law of the land became louder. How the  
4 Salafist influence took root varied from nation to nation, but the overall trend  
5 was similar everywhere. Sunni Muslim communities in non-Muslim nations  
6 and the West were affected in a likewise manner.

7 The confluence of these three factors together with the instability caused  
8 by imperial interventions led to the emergence of several extremist Islamic  
9 organizations. We note some important ones.

10  
11 **Islamic State** (IS – *Daesh*) founded in 1999 by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was  
12 an off shoot of Al-Qaeda. With Wahhabism as its guiding doctrine, IS seeks  
13 to establish a global Sunni Caliphate along the lines of the early days of Islam.  
14 The chaos left in Iraq after the US invasion and the anger within the Iraqi  
15 Sunnis provided a launching pad for IS military operations in 2014. In no time,  
16 its forces routed the Iraqi armed forces, captured key cities like Mosul,  
17 established control over a large area in Iraq and Syria, and declared itself an  
18 Islamic state.

19 IS imposed and harshly enforced a doctrinaire form of Sharia law. The  
20 key goal was to eliminate the impurities that had crept into Muslim life across  
21 the world. IS operations were marked by massacres and mistreatment of  
22 civilians. Women were raped and forcibly married. Conversions to Islam were  
23 enforced. Unique, ancient cultural sites were vandalized or destroyed.  
24 'Deviant' faiths like the Yazidi, Druze, Sufism and enemy combatants were  
25 treated with brutality. Some were beheaded or their limbs were amputated.  
26 Video broadcasts of these acts clearly revealed the barbaric character of this  
27 organization.

28 The videos had a calculated propaganda aim. And it worked. IS ranks  
29 surged. By 2015, IS had a global force numbering about 30,000 fighters and  
30 a budget of about one billion dollars. It controlled areas in Iraq and Syria that  
31 had about 10 million people. IS operations were started in Afghanistan and  
32 Pakistan and IS affiliates began to form in 18 countries including Mali, Egypt,  
33 Somalia, Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines. More than 5,000 young  
34 Muslims from distant lands—central Asia, Europe, the US and Africa—joined  
35 IS operations. Women generally had second class status in IS controlled  
36 areas. Some women performed supportive roles in IS operations and trained  
37 and fought as combatants. About 10% of the IS foreign fighters were women  
38 from European nations.

39 Extensive air bombardments and attacks from US forces, the Iraqi army,  
40 the Syrian army operating under Russian support, and Turkish brigades  
41 managed to substantially reverse the gains IS had made in Iraq and Syria. Its  
42 founder is dead. But IS remains a force to reckon with and its affiliates  
43 continue to mount deadly terrorist attacks across the world. In addition to Al-  
44 Qaeda and IS, several other domestic and international Islamic extremist  
45 groups also operate today. Earlier, we described the actions of Boko Haram  
46 in Nigeria.

1  
2 **Al-Nusra** is a Syrian Islamic extremist group affiliated to Al-Qaeda. Founded  
3 in 2012, it is a highly organized, capable Salafist movement whose aim is to  
4 unite Sunni Muslims and establish an Islamic state in Syria. Its principal  
5 operations are conducted against the Syrian army, air bases and state  
6 institutions. On top of frontal military engagement, car bombs, suicide bombs  
7 and kidnapping are a part of its tactical arsenal. It has also engaged in  
8 skirmishes against IS forces.

9 Al-Nusra also attacks the Muslims it deems heretics. Thus, it has attacked  
10 Druze, Alawite and Sufi communities, summarily executed their followers,  
11 expropriated their property and destroyed their cultural sites and relics.  
12 Christians and Shias have faced its firing squads. A strict form of Sharia law  
13 is applied wherever it has secured jurisdiction.

14 Al-Nusra has nearly 10,000 fighters under its command. A few are child  
15 soldiers. About 70% are Syrians. Most of the foreign fighters are from Iraq,  
16 Afghanistan, Central Asia and Gulf Arab states. But a minority comes from  
17 Europe and the US. Al-Nusra has received significant financial and other  
18 forms of support from the government and donors in Qatar. Though it does  
19 not target Western entities, it has been attacked by US and Russian fighter  
20 jets. A portion of the weapons covertly supplied by the US to Syrian insurgents  
21 since 2012 have landed in Al-Nusra hands. A duplicitous aspect of US policy  
22 is that while it has designated Al-Nusra as a terrorist organization, the major  
23 funder of Al-Nusra, Qatar, is a strategic US ally that houses large US military  
24 and air force bases.

25  
26 **Abu Sayyaf** is a Sunni Wahhabi front operating in the Philippines, Malaysia  
27 and Indonesia. It was founded by Filipino Muslims who fought alongside  
28 Mujahedin fighters in Afghanistan in the 1980s. With substantial funds from  
29 Al-Qaeda to establish a Wahhabi militant group in the region, it began as an  
30 affiliate of Al-Qaeda. But later it switched its allegiance to IS after the latter  
31 gained international prominence. Abu Sayyaf operates from the Muslim  
32 majority islands of Mindanao and Jolo, two of the poorest places in the  
33 Philippines, where the Moro National Liberation Front has been waging an  
34 armed struggle for self-determination since the 1970s. While the latter has a  
35 broad popular base, and a federalist, egalitarian agenda, Abu Sayyaf has  
36 stringent Islamic aims and seeks to displace the Moro Front. The size of the  
37 Abu Sayyaf fighting force has declined from about 1,000 a decade ago to  
38 about 500 in the recent years.

39 Over the years, it carried out a series of high-profile actions to further its  
40 cause. It placed explosive devices on a crowded ferry, a market, and a  
41 prominent church. The ferry bombing in 2004 killed over a hundred and  
42 injured more. On top of the money received from sympathizers in the Middle  
43 East, it enriched its coffers by millions of dollars through kidnapping tourists,  
44 businessmen, foreigners, scientists, state officials, priests, sailors and  
45 journalists. If the ransom demand is not met, the captive is killed, sometimes  
46 by beheading. It has also launched mortar attacks and drive by shootings

1 against a variety of targets. Abu Sayyaf activists have committed rape, sexual  
2 assault of children and forced marriages.

3 Despite the group's espousal of a stringent Islamist agenda, its activists  
4 display poor knowledge of Islam and the Quran. It operates more like a  
5 criminal gang than an extremist religious force. The Philippines military in  
6 conjunction with US forces carried out major campaigns against Abu Sayyaf  
7 targets involving air attacks, artillery and ground forces, which also seriously  
8 harmed civilian life in the affected areas.

9  
10 +++++

11  
12 Extremist Islamic groups have carried out hundreds of terrorist attacks on  
13 civilians and civilian facilities in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, Russia,  
14 China and the US over the past two decades. Deaths and injuries ranged  
15 from the single digits to hundreds. The incidents noted below give a flavor of  
16 the diversity of locations and types of attacks carried out by Islamic militants  
17 from 1998 to 2019.

18  
19 **1998:** Car bomb attacks on US embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es  
20 Salaam, Tanzania, killed more than 200 and injured more than 4,000. Most  
21 of the victims were Kenyans and Tanzanians.

22 **2001:** Four hijacked planes plunged into major structures or exploded in the  
23 air, in New York and Washington, DC. About 3,000 died and more than 6,000  
24 were injured. Many suffered long disability from exposure to fumes and dust.  
25 Property damage exceeded 10 billion dollars.

26 **2002:** Explosive devices placed in tourist areas of Bali, Indonesia, killed more  
27 than 200 and injured about 250.

28 **2004:** Explosive devices on trains in Madrid, Spain, killed more than 190 and  
29 injured about 2050.

30 **2004:** Over 1,000 civilians, mostly children, were held hostage in a school in  
31 Beslan, Russia. In the ensuing fire fight with the security forces, more than  
32 330 died and many were injured.

33 **2005:** Suicide bombers in trains and on a bus London, UK, killed over 50 and  
34 injured over 750.

35 **2005:** Bombs in shopping malls and hotels in Sham El Sheikh, Egypt, killed  
36 about 90 and injured about 150.

37 **2005:** Bombs placed in markets in Tentena, Indonesia, killed about 60 and  
38 injured more than 180.

39 **2005:** Suicide bombings of hotels in Amman, Jordan, killed about 60 and  
40 injured more than 110.

41 **2006:** Train bombings in Mumbai, India, killed over 200 and injured over 700.

42 **2008:** Shootings and bombings at various sites in Mumbai and Ahmedabad,  
43 India, killed more than 220 and injured more than 500.

44 **2010:** Attacks on two Ahmadi mosques in Lahore, Pakistan, killed more than  
45 90 and injured about 50.



- 1 **2011:** Churches bombed and attacked in various cities, Nigeria, killing more
- 2 than 40 and injuring more than 60.
- 3 **2013:** Attack on a shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya, resulted in about 70
- 4 deaths and more than 170 injuries.
- 5 **2015:** Attack on a university college in Garissa, Kenya, killed about 150.
- 6 **2015:** Bombs at railway stations in Ankara, Turkey, killed over 100 and injured
- 7 over 400.
- 8 **2015:** Explosives on a Russian civilian plane flying over Sinai, Egypt, left more
- 9 than 220 dead.
- 10 **2015:** Shootings and suicide bombs in Paris, France, killed about 140 and
- 11 injured about 370.
- 12 **2015:** Truck bombs in civilian areas in Tell Tamer, Syria, killed about 60 and
- 13 injured about 80.
- 14 **2016:** Armed attack on a hotel in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, left more than
- 15 20 dead and more than 15 injured.
- 16 **2016:** Suicide bombings at an airport and on a train in Brussels, Belgium,
- 17 killed about 35 and injured more than 300.
- 18 **2016:** Suicide bombs at a church in Lahore, Pakistan, killed about 70 and
- 19 injured about 300.
- 20 **2016:** Shootings at a bar in Orlando, United States, left about 50 dead and
- 21 more 50 injured.
- 22 **2016:** Truck and roadside bombs in shopping areas of Karrada, Iraq, killed
- 23 over 300 and left more than 220 injured.
- 24 **2016:** A truck driven into crowds Nice, France, killed about 90 and injured
- 25 more than 430.
- 26 **2016:** Suicide bombing at a Sufi shrine in Sehwan, Pakistan, killed about 90
- 27 and injured more than 100.
- 28 **2016:** Suicide bombs at two churches in Tanta and Alexandria, Egypt, killed
- 29 about 50 and injured more than 100.
- 30 **2016:** Truck and knife attacks on pedestrians in London, UK, killed about 10
- 31 and injured about 50.
- 32 **2018:** Suicide bombings in Mubi, Nigeria, killed about 90 and injured about
- 33 60.
- 34 **2018:** Suicide bombing and explosive devices at election rallies Bannu and
- 35 Mastung, Pakistan, killed more than 150 and injured more than 220.
- 36 **2019:** Bombs at a Cathedral in Jolo, Philippines, killed more than 20 and left
- 37 over 120 injured.
- 38 **2019:** Bombs at churches, luxury hotels, shops and guest houses in several
- 39 cities of Sri Lanka killed about 260 and injured over 500.

40  
41 It is a gruesome record of the horrific deeds perpetrated by followers of what  
42 is proclaimed as a religion of peace.

43  
44  
45

++++

1 Historically, terrorism has been perpetrated by groups expressing fidelity to  
2 religion from all the major religions, several minor religions and by secular  
3 groups. States often perform terrorist acts. No religion has been purely a  
4 religion of peace. Religious terrorism generally reflects existent economic,  
5 nationalist, political, racial and ethnic contradictions. Religious terrorism often  
6 aims to establish the supremacy of an orthodox version of the religion.  
7 Terrorist groups have been a minority in any setting. The majority usually  
8 does not approve terrorist tactics. But there have been occasions where the  
9 majority has silently stood by them. The current tendency to apply these  
10 observations just to Islam is misguided. It serves the interest of the imperial  
11 powers and is employed to justify their military interventions.  
12

### 13 8.17 ISLAMOPHOBIA

14  
15 Persecution of Jews, Muslims and Gypsies is a centuries-old tale in Europe.  
16 The United States was founded on the genocide of Native Americans,  
17 enslavement of Africans, many of whom were Muslims, and interventions,  
18 killings and exploitation in Mexico, Latin America and the Caribbean. It has a  
19 long history of discrimination against immigrants—Jews, Italians, Chinese,  
20 Irish, Japanese and Muslims. Some were accused of bringing communism,  
21 disease and poverty to America. In addition to lynching Black Americans, the  
22 Ku Klux Klan held major rallies against Catholics and Jews.

23 Currently, the victims in this ongoing saga of discrimination in Europe are  
24 people of African and Asian origin, immigrants from Africa and the Middle  
25 East, and Muslim citizens. In the US, they are African Americans, Native  
26 Americans, immigrants from South America and Muslim lands, and Muslim  
27 citizens. Anti-Semitism persists but it is not a mainstream malady.

28 Politics that keep working people divided is integral to capitalism. Their  
29 organizations lose strength, wages can be kept low and businesses thrive.  
30 Scapegoating minorities is integral to capitalist politics. A nativist mentality  
31 that demonizes outsiders and embroils the masses in social and cultural  
32 divisiveness is a key ingredient of the elitist, imperial drive.

33 Since the 9 September 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and  
34 the Pentagon, demonization of Muslims and Islam has become a core aspect  
35 of Western politics and culture. Not just those who practice the religion but  
36 the religion itself is also castigated. A new term, Islamophobia, has entered  
37 the vocabulary.  
38

39 *Islamophobia is irrational fear of, aversion to, or*  
40 *discrimination against Islam or people who practice Islam.*

41 Merriam Webster Online Dictionary  
42

43 Islamophobia affects Muslims, Arabs, Iranians and people who 'look like  
44 Muslims' in varied ways. They face institutionalized discrimination in finding  
45 jobs and housing. A fifth to a third of survey respondents in Western nations  
46 do not want Muslim neighbors. About half of the Muslim Americans say they

1 have faced some kind of social discrimination, a slightly larger percentage  
2 than among African Americans or Hispanic Americans who say the same  
3 thing.

4 Muslims are stereotyped in movies and TV shows as unreliable people  
5 prone to violence. Their cultural practices are denigrated. Cases of terrorism  
6 by Islamic extremists are covered in a one-sided manner in the media.  
7 Absence of the overall context creates the impression that Islam is a violent,  
8 intolerant faith. Between a fifth and a third of Germans, French and Britons  
9 feel that Muslims in general support international terror networks like al-  
10 Qaeda. Some 40% to 60% of respondents in Germany, Switzerland, the UK,  
11 Spain and France doubt the compatibility of Islam with Western values and  
12 perceive Islam as a threat.

13 Pronouncements of prominent politicians and conservative Christian  
14 priests reinforce the negative impressions. Islam is now the most disfavored  
15 religion in the West. About a third of Americans feel that a Muslim should not  
16 sit on the Supreme Court or hold the presidency.

17 Condemnations of acts of terror by Muslim fanatics by Muslim leaders and  
18 the majority of Muslims are downplayed. That they often cooperate with the  
19 authorities to curb terrorism is also ignored.

20 Islamic dress styles like the hijab and construction of mosques and Islamic  
21 schools are restricted. Some 20% to 40% of Germans, Britons and French  
22 regard the hijab a threat to European culture. A 2009 referendum to ban the  
23 construction of minarets in Switzerland secured favorable votes in 22 out of  
24 26 voting districts. At the same time, the majority of Swiss voters did not feel  
25 the vote violated the rights of Muslim citizens and said that Muslims could be  
26 loyal Swiss citizens. Yet, actions speak louder than words.

27 In several Western cities, mosques, Islamic centers, and places housing  
28 refugees from Muslim lands have been vandalized or sprayed with graffiti.  
29 After the 2001 attacks in New York, Sikhs who wear turbans and keep a beard  
30 were targeted because they looked like Muslims. Many Muslims have  
31 encountered verbal abuse and threats in public places or received online hate  
32 messages. Terrorist attacks against Muslims generate further copycat attacks  
33 and an increase in hate crimes against Muslims.

34  
35 *After the September 11 twin-tower attacks in the United States*  
36 *in 2001, hate crimes against Muslims and Arabs increased*  
37 *1,600% from 28 incidents in 2000 to 481 in 2001. A smaller but*  
38 *still substantial increase in hate crimes occurred after the 7/7*  
39 *London bombings in July 2005. (Wilson 2020).*

40  
41 There were 950 anti-Muslim criminal offences in Germany in 2019, a rise of  
42 about 5% from the previous year. Two Muslims were killed and 33 injured in  
43 these attacks. According to research done by a US think tank, between 2012  
44 and 2018, there were a total of 763 anti-Muslim incidents at the municipal and  
45 state level in the US. These included passage of anti-Sharia legislation,  
46 moves to oppose refugee resettlement, measures against mosques, Muslim

1 cemeteries and schools, anti-Muslim statements by elected and appointed  
2 officials, and hate incidents against mosques and Islamic centers.

3 Anti-Muslim prejudice prevails across the political spectrum. For the left,  
4 it is a question of upholding secular values and human rights, for the liberals  
5 it is a matter of defending democracy and for the right, it is to protect the  
6 Judeo-Christian culture. Politicians talk deceptively. While declaring they are  
7 not against Islam, they pass measures that in practice mainly affect Muslims.

8 The presidency of Donald Trump in the US raised the anti-immigrant, anti-  
9 Muslim fervor to a higher pitch. His ban on immigration from seven Muslim  
10 nations, upheld by the Supreme Court, complemented the tirades against  
11 Islam by evangelical ministers, a key part of his political base. Right wing  
12 politicians across Europe and the US are emboldened to institute anti-Islamic  
13 measures. Militant white nationalists and neo-Nazis are catalyzed to mount  
14 violent attacks on Muslims, mosques, synagogues and immigrants. One  
15 report claims that there has been '*a 320% rise in racist terrorism in the West  
16 in the past five years*'.

17 Recent serious acts of anti-Muslim violence in the West include: Fatal  
18 shooting of an Imam and his coworker near their mosque in New York in  
19 August 2019. Shootings of Muslims in and near a mosque that wounded three  
20 and killed one in Zurich in December 2016. Six worshippers were killed and  
21 19 injured in a gun attack in a mosque Quebec City in January 2017. Two  
22 men were stabbed to death and one was injured in an incident involving hate  
23 slurs against Muslim women in Oregon in May 2017. A van driven into a  
24 group of worshippers exiting a mosque killed one and injured nine in London  
25 in June 2017. In August 2017, mosques in several Spanish cities were  
26 firebombed and desecrated and Muslims were attacked. A gunman attacked  
27 worshippers in two mosques killing 49 people in New Zealand in March 2019.  
28 In February 2020, a gunman opened fire at people of immigrant background,  
29 mostly Muslim Turks, in two bars in Hanau, Germany and killed nine.

### 30 **+ Islamophobia in France +**

31  
32  
33 Of the 67 million people in France, about 47% are Christian, mostly Catholic;  
34 40% profess no religion; 9% are Muslim, mostly Sunni; and Buddhists and  
35 Jews are 1% each. A smattering of other religions makes up the rest. The six  
36 million Muslims in France form the largest Muslim minority in Europe. Most  
37 originate from Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. Settled here for three or more  
38 generations, they generally are well integrated within the French society. In  
39 recent years, turbulence in North Africa and the Middle East has brought new  
40 migrants from those regions.

41 Once upon a time, Catholicism dominated political and general life in the  
42 nation. But now religion is a private affair, banished from the political arena.  
43 The French Constitution upholds religious freedom but disfavors religious  
44 influence in public and political affairs. It forbids state interference in religious  
45 activities. The French take a particular pride in the firm secular disposition of  
46 their nation.

1 Any depiction of the role of Islam and Muslims in France has to consider  
2 the history of French colonial ventures. Starting in the mid-seventeenth  
3 century, trade ventures for agricultural goods and minerals, engagement in  
4 the Atlantic slave trade and subsequent military conquests laid the basis for  
5 the French empire. By the start of the 20th century, France had colonized or  
6 dominated 35% of Africa, key areas in the Middle East, and parts of the  
7 Americas and Asia. Its African colonies or semi-colonies included Algeria,  
8 Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Djibouti,  
9 Gabon, Guinea, Mali, Morocco, Senegal and Tunisia.

10 French colonialism was impelled by thirst for valued commodities, fertile  
11 land and secure markets. A primary goal was to attain strategic advantage  
12 against rival imperial powers. The colony provided a lucrative home for the  
13 settlers from France. The national motto of France—liberty, equality and  
14 fraternity—applied in a superficial manner in the colonies. A colonial subject  
15 who learned French, got educated, adopted French etiquette and cultural  
16 norms, and espoused loyalty to France was in principle eligible for French  
17 citizenship with full rights like any other citizen. In practice, it was an option  
18 for a miniscule minority. The exceedingly low level of investment in education  
19 and poor opportunities for good jobs made it virtually impossible for the rest.  
20 French language literacy rates in most African French colonies in the 1950s  
21 were between 1% and 5%.

22 The policy of assimilation disparaged local languages, traditions, culture  
23 and religion. As a precondition for assimilation, the 'native' had to be cleansed  
24 off 'backward' ideas and practices and civilized. A reasonable implementation  
25 of this policy required large scale investment in modern, French-oriented  
26 education in the colonies. But this was never in the cards. Education for the  
27 local people was largely to train the manpower required for the colonial  
28 system to function. It had specific goals: Training clerks and junior civil  
29 servants, skilled craftsmen and technicians, agricultural and veterinary  
30 extension workers, medical assistants and primary school teachers.  
31 Opportunities for higher education for the locals were few and far in between.



33 *N'êtes-vous donc pas jolie? Dévoilez-vous*  
34

1                                    *(Are you not pretty? Reveal yourself!)*

2                                    A Colonial Poster from French-ruled Algeria

3  
4 Local cultures were actively disparaged. Catholicism and French language  
5 were promoted over local religions and indigenous languages. Missionaries  
6 trained priests and teachers who spread a pro-colonial outlook. Where  
7 prevalent, Islam, Islamic practices and Arabic were placed on the chopping  
8 block. The aim was not to create a potential French citizen but a colonial  
9 subject loyal to France.

10        The campaign in Algeria with the ostensible goal of emancipating Algerian  
11 women is a case in point. They were urged to discard the traditional, full body  
12 length *haik*, use makeup and dress in the Western style. Besides placing anti-  
13 *haik* posters in public places, public ceremonies in which some Algerian  
14 women unveiled themselves and burned the *haik* were held. Wives of French  
15 settlers went around harassing *haik* wearing women.

16        But Algerian women were not duped. The *haik* symbolized resistance to  
17 colonial cultural norms. Wearing it expressed national identity. It turned into a  
18 tool in the anti-colonial struggle as women and men activists of the National  
19 Liberation Front wore it to conceal documents and weapons. Activist women  
20 changed to Western dress to escape the attention of the French military.

21        For the majority in the colonies, assimilation meant low wages from long  
22 hours of back breaking work, low prices for the goods they produced and  
23 unfair taxation. Forced labor persisted even after slavery was abolished. Any  
24 transgression invited brutal penalties. Collective expression of resistance was  
25 met with bullets and batons. The colonized person had little recourse to due  
26 process and justice.

27  
28                                    *[Uprisings] initiated by those fighting for France in the World*  
29 *Wars with the promise of independence were violently*  
30 *suppressed. The five-century colonial period and wars of*  
31 *independence in the [French colonies in Africa] killed more*  
32 *than two million Africans. (Ozcan 2019).*

33  
34 Despite the use of massive force and massacres, the struggle for freedom  
35 was unstoppable. One after another French colony attained political  
36 autonomy. Nonetheless, France instituted post-colonial arrangements in the  
37 military, political, economic and financial sectors to assure its continued  
38 control over the affairs of the former colony. It left behind laws, a central  
39 bureaucracy and local authorities acclimatized to domination and control, not  
40 consent and accountability. The post-colonial civil service, police and army  
41 were trained in the elitist, overbearing tradition of the colonial era. A system  
42 adept at staging rigged elections and disregarding the will of the people came  
43 into existence. The inherited structures of economic dependency and power  
44 of the World Bank and IMF ensured that the former colonies remained within  
45 the ambit Western capital.

1 The French established a virtually exclusive neo-colonial zone with the  
2 inauguration of Francophone Africa. Comprising seventeen former colonies  
3 of France, it has a common currency (CFA Franc) under the rubric of the  
4 French treasury. French is the official language across the zone. The judicial  
5 and state structure, education system, and cultural institutions operate under  
6 a strong French influence. *Agence Francaise de Developpement* dominates  
7 foreign aid programs and French scholarships for higher education factors  
8 into the perpetuation of French hegemony. As a scholar has noted:

9  
10 *Through its cultural imperialism the common imprint of France*  
11 *upon this immense region is expressed in the French*  
12 *language, as well as its accompanying traditions of law,*  
13 *administration, and education. Through an ingenious system*  
14 *of bilateral cooperation accords, France has installed*  
15 *privileged relations with its former African colonies in culture,*  
16 *education, natural resources, aid, trade, finance, security,*  
17 *defense, and a common currency. Through continuous military*  
18 *interventions, France has perpetuated its strategic armed*  
19 *dominance. (Yates 2018).*

20  
21 French companies derive monopolistic benefits from oil, uranium, mining,  
22 agricultural and forestry products in the ex-colonies. Pliant but dictatorial,  
23 corrupt rulers who sign preferential contracts for French companies enjoy  
24 armed and financial French support while unfriendly rulers were deposed by  
25 military intervention, fomenting coups and financial blackmail. Unpopular,  
26 corrupt regimes survived only through French support. Many French leaders  
27 maintained secretive personal ties with the local elite which permitted the  
28 latter to stash their ill-gotten wealth in French cities.

29 France established semi-permanent military bases, trained and supplied  
30 weapons to national armies, and entered into so-called defense agreements  
31 that allowed it to intervene in African affairs as and when it desired. France  
32 maintains a 45,000-strong rapid deployment force for its external ventures. It  
33 backed and armed the genocidal regime in Rwanda before, during and after  
34 that horrid event.

35 French forces conducted 33 military operations in Africa in the five-year  
36 period from 1997 to 2002, allegedly to preserve 'democratic values'. In the  
37 Cold War, it was to shield Africa from 'communism' and now it is to protect  
38 Africa from 'terrorism' or undertake 'humanitarian intervention'. And now such  
39 interventions are done in conjunction with UN forces. But in every case, the  
40 real goal is to maintain French and Western neo-colonial hegemony. These  
41 operations, which often consume many civilian lives, bring about temporary  
42 stability but in the long run perpetuate the underlying conflict.

43  
44 **+ Algeria +**  
45

1 Despite its large oil wealth, Algeria by the 1990s was a society of haves and  
2 have-nots, with many unemployed and semi-employed youth. In 1990, the  
3 Islamic Salvation Front, a legitimate political party with an Islamic agenda,  
4 secured more than 50% of the votes in the municipal elections. Its economic  
5 program stressed support for the private sector, especially local small-scale  
6 enterprises and Islamic banking. Foreign investment would be curtailed. It  
7 stood for replacing French with Arabic in higher education and official affairs  
8 and reducing French cultural influence. Its social program entailed greater  
9 segregation between men and women in public life and more incentives for  
10 women to work from home. The Front's essentially nationalist, pro-capitalist  
11 agenda wrapped in a religious garb gave it a large base of support among the  
12 youth and small-scale traders. By 1992, it was on the verge of winning the  
13 national elections.

14 But the military intervened. Staging a coup, it annulled the elections,  
15 banned the Islamic party and imprisoned its leaders in remote locations in the  
16 Saharan desert. As France and the US gave backing to the military, the Front  
17 took up arms. A decade-long civil war followed in which nearly 60,000 people  
18 were killed. The Algerian military was responsible for most of the deaths. As  
19 a leader of the Front noted, the democratic standards of the West are flexible  
20 enough to designate an unconstitutional military coup as a pro-active  
21 democratic measure.

22 Islamophobia in France, mostly directed at Muslim immigrants from North  
23 Africa, has roots in the French colonial and neo-colonial interventions in  
24 Africa.

### 25 26 **+ Burka, Niqab and Hijab +** 27

28 In the past three decades, wearing Islamic dress, especially the burka (full  
29 body covering loose dress), niqab (face covering) and hijab (head scarf), has  
30 taken center stage in the French cultural and political discourse. With a few  
31 exceptions, it is now illegal to wear full face covering or full body dress in  
32 public areas in France. Three girls were expelled from school for wearing the  
33 hijab in 1989. Two Muslim schoolgirls suffered a similar fate in 2005. Muslim  
34 women wearing dresses deemed 'Islamic' or 'too long' have been denied  
35 university entrance. Placement of religious symbols in schools is also against  
36 the law. The burka-hijab ban is supported by rightist, centrist, leftist and  
37 radical socialist parties. It was also upheld by the European Court for Human  
38 Rights. Apart from the Muslim community, opponents are few. Dress bans,  
39 with varied levels of restrictions, are now in force in thirteen European nations,  
40 five African countries and Sri Lanka and Turkey. India is the latest to enter  
41 the scene. But they have been criticized by the UN Committee on Human  
42 Rights and Amnesty International as infringements on the rights of religious  
43 and personal freedom.

44 The burka-hijab ban supporters in France claim that it is a security related  
45 move that also liberates women and protects the secular character of the  
46 state. But the reality is that while adhering to Islamic practices to a degree,



1 Muslims in France largely abide by the norms of French society in terms of  
2 attire, cuisine, language, education and musical preference, and usually  
3 espouse loyalty to France. Very few Islamic schools exist in France, and they  
4 are vastly outnumbered by Catholic schools. Of the around two million Muslim  
5 teens and women, it is estimated that only between 500 and 2000 wear the  
6 burka. If the number is rising, it is a symbol of protest against the externally  
7 imposed dress codes.

8 France, a global leader in fashion and style, has also been the source of  
9 fashionable innovations in Muslim dress style. These include the Burkini, a  
10 body-length swimwear, and the sports hijab, used by female runners and  
11 athletes. Presumably, the designers fashioned them as profitable ventures  
12 into the Muslim world. But they elicited mostly negative reactions from the  
13 French public. In a place where virtual nudity in public is tolerated, these  
14 beautiful, colorful dresses caused outrage. Several municipalities banned the  
15 Burkini in public swimming pools. The company making the sports hijab was  
16 compelled to cease the production line due to public pressure. Adult Muslim  
17 women accompanying children on school trips are not allowed to wear a  
18 headscarf. Were it not for the angst they generate, these actions seem  
19 comical, especially in a nation that prides itself as a champion of personal and  
20 religious freedom.

### 21 22 + The Charlie Hebdo affair + 23

24 Terrorism is not new to France. Over the 20th century, assassinations and  
25 planting explosive devices in public places were done by far right, far left,  
26 ethnic-separatist, pro-Algerian and pro-colonial groups. In 1961, a far-right  
27 pro-settler group opposing independence for Algeria bombed a Paris bound  
28 train that killed 28 and injured over 100. From the start of 2012 to the end of  
29 October 2020, there were a total 38 terrorist incidents on French soil which  
30 killed 298 persons, including some of the attackers, and injured 962. All  
31 except one were ascribed to individuals or groups with an Islamic agenda.

32 In November 2011, *Charlie Hebdo*, a French left-wing satirical weekly  
33 printed a derisive image of Prophet Muhammad on its cover. In September  
34 2012, it published cartoons showing the Prophet in a grossly indecent light.  
35 For the cartoonists and the editors, these were but expressions of their  
36 tradition of lampooning authority—political, cultural and religious—with no  
37 holds barred. For Muslims the depiction of the Prophet in human form and  
38 desecration of the Quran are grave offenses. Showing him in a pornographic  
39 manner is incalculably worse. The weekly was following the precedent set by  
40 a Danish daily which had published derogatory cartoons of the Prophet in  
41 2005.

42 The reaction in the Muslim world was predictable, especially in the light of  
43 the volatile geopolitical tensions created by Western imperial intrusions. A  
44 firebomb was hurled at the office of *Charlie Hebdo*. Three years later, an  
45 armed attack killed 12 people including the publisher and some of the

1 cartoonists. Some of the 38 terrorist attacks between 2012 and 2020 noted  
2 above had their roots in this incident.

3 The cartoons generated angry demonstrations and retaliatory attacks in a  
4 number of Muslim nations. French embassies, cultural centers and schools  
5 were closed in 20 countries. More than nine churches were set alight in Niger,  
6 killing ten and injuring many. There were violent protests in Algeria, Jordan  
7 and Pakistan while peaceful rallies of tens of thousands occurred in  
8 Chechnya, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal and Sudan.

9 Leaders of the Western world, including French ministers, branded the  
10 cartoons as absurd and insensitive, but also defended freedom of speech.  
11 After the *Charlie Hebdo* office was attacked, they adopted a harsher tone.  
12 French President Sarkozy said it was an act of 'most extreme barbarity'. Other  
13 Western leaders with the exception of the Quixotic Trump chimed in.  
14 Solidarity rallies took place across the Western world. Media outlets raised  
15 funds for the families of the victims and the government of France awarded 1  
16 million Euros to the magazine. Nearly five million copies of the next issue of  
17 *Charlie Hebdo* were sold, up from the usual 60,000 copies. But it was hardly  
18 the end of this sad affair. In September 2020, *Charlie Hebdo* reprinted its  
19 earlier caricature of the Prophet. A couple of Muslim fanatics subsequently  
20 staged a knife attack on the magazine's office in Paris.

21 French President Emmanuel Macron defended the right of *Charlie Hebdo*  
22 to publish the cartoons and opined that Islamist radicalism posed an  
23 'existential' threat to France. Accordingly, on 1 October 2020, he unveiled a  
24 new policy to protect France and its secular values from this threat. Focusing  
25 on Islam and Islamic institutions, the policy was based on the premise that  
26 Islam 'is in crisis all over the world today'. Thereby, it sought to reform Islam  
27 and liberate Islamic practice in France from 'foreign influences'.

28 For a start, it would criminalize advocacy of religious separatism and give  
29 local and central authorities more powers to deal with religious extremism. By  
30 funding relevant research and educational programs, it would promote  
31 knowledge of Islamic civilization and culture. There would be strict controls  
32 on mosques, Islamic institutions and schools, including monitoring of their  
33 funding. To be eligible for state funds, Islamic institutions would have to abide  
34 by a 'secular charter'. A special certificate program to train Muslim imams  
35 would be started. Groups promoting ideas not in line with the values of the  
36 French republic would be shut down. And more money would be invested to  
37 improve the living conditions in marginalized locales, where most French  
38 Muslims resided. The Minister for Interior suggested closure of the separate  
39 halal and kosher meats sections in supermarkets.

40 Macron's unvarnished defense of *Charlie Hebdo* and his new policy had  
41 fatal consequences. It nurtured a cycle of terrorist attacks and counterattacks.  
42 One incident began in October 2020, when schoolteacher Samuel Paty  
43 showed the disparaging pictures of the Prophet to his class. He presented it  
44 as a case of freedom of speech. But some unhappy students complained. A  
45 Muslim fanatic was incensed, and beheaded Paty. Later that month, two

1 women worshippers and the church warden were fatally stabbed or beheaded  
2 in a church in Nice. And more attacks ensued.

3 Macron's words also provoked palpable anger in Muslim nations. People  
4 viewed his project to 'reform' their faith as a serious affront. The vast majority  
5 of Muslims do not condone terrorism. Muslim leaders regularly condemn it.  
6 Now the blame for the vile deeds of a minority was being placed on their faith.  
7 To them Macron's rhetoric was reminiscent of France's behavior in the  
8 colonial era. Demonstrations occurred in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Gaza,  
9 Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Pakistan, Qatar, Turkey and the UAE. An Iranian  
10 newspaper branded Macron the 'Demon of Paris'. The French flag and  
11 Macron's effigy were set alight outside the French embassy in Baghdad. Calls  
12 to boycott French goods and impose sanctions on France echoed loudly in  
13 the Muslim world; French ambassadors were called to the foreign ministries;  
14 French websites were hacked; and security alerts for French citizens abroad  
15 were issued. Turkish President Recep T Erdogan publicly cast doubt on the  
16 mental status of Emanuel Macron, raising the already high tension between  
17 France and Turkey to a feverish pitch.

18 Political leaders often react against terrorist violence by exaggerating its  
19 scope and danger, curtailing civil rights, pushing for militarized policing within  
20 the nation and launching military assaults abroad. It was no different in  
21 France. In the drive to defend '*democratic values*,' not just a tiny fanatic fringe  
22 but Islam and Muslims were viewed as grave dangers to the 'civilized' world.  
23 When the mayor of Nice demanded the removal of 'Islamofascism,' Macron  
24 flew to Nice and promised stern action against mosques and Muslim groups  
25 promoting violence. High level security meetings transpired. Battle lines were  
26 drawn and a new fault line in the confrontation with Islam and Islamic  
27 extremism opened up.

28 Police raids affected Muslim communities, educational and charitable  
29 groups, mosques and other sites without regard to linkage with criminal  
30 activity. More than 50 Islamic organizations were affected. A senior state  
31 minister declared that it was aimed to 'send a message'. A group that  
32 criticized Paty was immediately banned and even humanitarian agencies  
33 were slated for closure on spurious grounds. Encouraged by these actions,  
34 right-wing vigilantes attacked mosques. As Muslims received more  
35 discriminatory treatment and insults, many citizens began to equate Islam  
36 with terrorism. When Muslims marched in Paris in protest against  
37 Islamophobia, they were roundly condemned by virtually the entire spectrum  
38 of French political parties—from the radical right to the socialists and  
39 communists. Only a rare few stood on their side.

40 Rather than promote a tolerant, harmonious and secular social order in  
41 which people would be free to practice their faith in the private domain, the  
42 policies and actions of the Macron administration further polarized French  
43 society, embittered both sides and made French Muslims second class  
44 citizens.

45 But Macron is not alone. By 2020 adorning the burka in public places was  
46 illegal in six more European nations—Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark,

1 Germany and Latvia. In 2019, the French-speaking Canadian province of  
2 Quebec became the first jurisdiction in North America to pass a law banning  
3 civil servants from wearing at work clothing that symbolize a religious faith. It  
4 affects teachers, law enforcement officers and other employees. The  
5 prohibited items include Islamic head coverings and scarves, Jewish  
6 skullcaps and Sikh turbans. Muslim women who wear face veils would not be  
7 able to access state funded services including public transportation, medical  
8 and childcare, public education and training, and other social services.  
9 Though a judge temporarily blocked the law from taking effect, it set an  
10 ominous precedent:

11  
12 *Prohibiting specific religious dress is a textbook example of*  
13 *religious persecution. .... The message is an authoritarian one:*  
14 *Dress, think, believe like us — if you don't, you are not one of*  
15 *us. (Maimona 2019).*  
16

17 The passage of the law prohibiting religious symbols did not affect the large  
18 golden crucifix that hangs atop the speaker's chair in the State Assembly. It  
19 was left untouched under the rationale was that it was a cultural, not a  
20 religious symbol.

21 The claim that the French state is secular and neutral towards religions  
22 has glaring loopholes. For nearly a hundred years, the appointment of senior  
23 Catholic bishops is done through a process of consultation between the  
24 Vatican and the French government, with the latter having a veto power. In  
25 that respect, it is unique among the nations of the West. The French  
26 government also influences the employment of administrators in church  
27 institutions and teachers in Catholic schools.

28 The French Catholic hierarchy usually holds a major presence in political  
29 and electoral affairs. In the 2017 election, Macron and his main opponent,  
30 Marine Le Pen of the extreme right National Front, vied for the Catholic vote  
31 and visited churches. The main Catholic grouping comprising of thirty-eight  
32 organizations came out against Le Pen but did not directly endorse Macron  
33 because of his support for measures that undermined 'family values'. Still,  
34 Macron was endorsed by La Croix, a popular Catholic newspaper. And once  
35 elected, the head of the bishop's conference in France gave him a hearty  
36 welcome. That Macron had run on a neoliberal agenda of cutting corporate  
37 taxes and reducing public services, an agenda hardly in conformity with the  
38 church's call for combatting poverty, was set aside.

39 The relationship with the Catholic church together with Macron's new  
40 policy to control Islam in France and his government's actions after the recent  
41 terrorist attacks do not signify a secular state independent of religious  
42 considerations. But rather, they reflect the opportunism of the French political  
43 establishment that uses religion when needed to further its agenda.

44  
45 **+ The Yellow Vests +**  
46

1 Certain interest groups welcome the Western War on Terror. Its rhetoric and  
2 dragnet manner radicalize Muslim youth and generate recruits for extremist  
3 groups. It is a boon for security agencies, the military, suppliers of equipment,  
4 weapons, and all manner of battle hardware from drones to advanced aircraft  
5 and naval gear. Many sectors in the economy face fluctuating markets but  
6 stocks of companies associated with the War on Terror are safe investments.  
7 The security sector is a source of well-paid jobs. For the politicians, it serves  
8 as a diversion from major problems in society, problems which their neo-  
9 liberal policies have created and for which they cannot offer viable solutions.

10 But undercurrents of opposition to these policies also persist among the  
11 people. In November 2018, an energetic mass movement called Yellow Vests  
12 burst onto the French political arena. Spread out across French towns and  
13 cities, it did not have a central leadership. All members wore yellow vests but  
14 essentially operated independently. Saturday was the day to block traffic,  
15 march boisterously, occupy public places and crossroads and make their  
16 voices heard. With between 100,000 and 200,000 young and old, low income  
17 and middle class, workers, farmers, self-employed, professionals,  
18 unemployed and retirees taking to the street, normal economic activity was  
19 disrupted on that day. The vast majority protested civilly and peacefully. Their  
20 demands resonated with the French public: reduction of rents and fuel tax,  
21 more funds for education and health care, protection of retirement benefits  
22 and worker rights, and grants for small farmers. They also rallied against  
23 corporate and state-controlled media outlets which unfairly vilified them and  
24 blocked genuinely alternative views.

25 In sum, they opposed the neo-liberal program of privatization, unfair  
26 taxation, defunding of public services that Macron and his predecessors had  
27 enacted. It had made the cost of living exceedingly onerous. Despite their  
28 intrusive tactics, they won support from three quarters of the French public,  
29 rivalling that enjoyed by Macron. People gave them food, water and money.  
30 A movement formed via the social media became a nationwide political block  
31 operating with diverse modalities. Misinformation campaign and repressive  
32 efforts—tear gas, flash-bombs, beatings, serious injuries, mass arrests, unfair  
33 trials, stiff fines and jail terms—withstanding, they stood strong and  
34 unbowed for over six months, and drew support from environmentalists,  
35 feminists, student unions and eventually, the major trade union in France.

36 But this vibrant movement was weakened by the intrusion of Black Block  
37 anarchists, far-right militants and possibly agent provocateurs into their mix.  
38 Adorning face masks, they looted shops, defaced monuments, damaged  
39 offices and violently confronted the police. Their destructive tactics gave the  
40 media and officialdom reasons to demonize the movement as a whole and  
41 gave the police an excuse to react with tear gas and batons to contain the  
42 ensuing chaos. The Yellow Vests posed the strongest political challenge  
43 faced by President Macron. After initially trying to appease them, he portrayed  
44 them as a hardline, extremist, anti-Semitic mob that was a major threat to the  
45 French way of life. At one point, he considered imposing a nationwide state  
46 of emergency.

1 The Yellow Vests had a glaring weak spot. It was overwhelmingly white.  
2 Apart from rare individuals and organizations, non-white marginal groups and  
3 immigrants—mostly Muslims, people even more affected by neo-liberal  
4 reforms—did not join in. In part, it was because they were already subdued  
5 by the strong-arm tactics the police often employed against them. Though  
6 minorities form six percent of the French population, they constitute about  
7 30% of the prison population.

8 But the main factor behind their low level of participation in the Yellow  
9 Vests movement stemmed from the effective manner by which neo-liberal  
10 governments and their pliant media have managed to divide people along  
11 racial, ethnic and religious lines. Such a division was also reflected in a few  
12 incidents of racist abuse in Yellow Vests protest marches.

13 Viewed in this context, the attacks by fanatic Muslims provide a needed  
14 diversionary respite for the establishment. It is deployed, as the words and  
15 tactics of Macron illustrate, to further militarize the society and undermine the  
16 liberal values the politicians claim to defend. It serves to score points against  
17 political foes like the Yellow Vests and Marine Le Pen. Terrorism and abuse  
18 by the security forces complement and feed into each other in a deadly spiral.  
19 Often, it is a rationale for brutal military campaigns abroad. Islamophobia is a  
20 key pillar on which the trend towards plutocratic authoritarianism in the West  
21 rests. It is not a fringe phenomenon but an embedded aspect of the neoliberal  
22 system, a part and parcel of the imperial doctrine of clash of civilizations.

## 23 24 8.18 INTRA-ISLAMIC CONTRADICTIONS

25  
26 Islamophobia, the discriminatory practices associated with it, and the acts of  
27 terrorism perpetrated by fanatic Muslims against non-Muslims are but one  
28 facet of the problems faced by Muslim communities. A more lethal problem  
29 is the conflict between different traditions and sects of Islam. For the most  
30 part, it is a three-way antagonism between Sunni Islam, specifically Salafism-  
31 Wahhabism, Shia Islam and Sufism. It also embroils other minor  
32 denominations of Islam like the Ahmadiyya, Druze and Yazidi. Brewing over  
33 the past two decades, these antagonisms show no signs of abating. The  
34 discrimination suffered by the Ahmadiyya from other Muslims was described  
35 in Chapter 3. And above, we noted the brutal attacks by IS forces on several  
36 minority Islamic sects in Iraq. In this section, we delve further into attacks  
37 against Sufis and Shias by Salafist movements.

38 Sufism has a presence wherever Muslim communities exist, but it has a  
39 wide following in Afghanistan, the Balkan nations, Central Asia, Egypt, India,  
40 Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and Turkey. The intra-religious tensions  
41 induced by the growing influence of Wahhabism has occasioned numerous  
42 attacks on Sufis as well. We note some recent incidents of such attacks.

43  
44 **Pakistan:** Sufi norms and spiritual practices are popular among both Shia  
45 and Sunni Muslims in Pakistan. Among them are weekly visits to holy shrines  
46 and tombs of venerated *Pirs*, prayers and prolonged recitations of devotional

1 poetry. Qawwali music and dance are central to some Sufi orders. But Sufi  
2 practices are strongly disapproved by the Salafi influenced fundamentalists.  
3 From 2005 to 2020, a total of 29 attacks against Sufis using suicide bombers,  
4 explosives, rocket attacks and shootings took some 210 lives and injured  
5 nearly 560. Their central targets were eminent Sufi community and religious  
6 leaders, poets, musicians and faith healers. A few were kidnapped and  
7 beheaded. Some attacks occurred during Islamic festivals. Numerous Sufi  
8 shrines and tombs were also blown up, vandalized or burned. Two militant  
9 local segments of the Sunni Islam and IS have been responsible for most of  
10 the attacks.

11  
12 **Egypt:** With over 70 Sufi orders in the nation, more than a third of Egyptian  
13 adults are registered Sufis. Millions more ascribe to Sufism in some way and  
14 participate in Sufi festivals. Young, well-educated Egyptian Muslims gravitate  
15 towards the mystical, poetic and devotional Sufi rituals. Adherence to Sufi  
16 philosophy has for long been customary among Egyptian academics and  
17 university students. Of the many Sufi festivals and ceremonies held annually,  
18 some draw over a million people at a single location. The relationship  
19 between the State and the Sufi orders has swung from hostility, neutrality to  
20 official endorsement. Presently, all Sufi orders operate under the Supreme  
21 Council for Sufi Orders which is answerable to the Office of the President of  
22 Egypt. This is an aspect of the general policy whereby all mosques and  
23 religious bodies in Egypt are supervised by the state.

24 As noted above, numerous terrorist attacks have occurred in Egypt since  
25 2005. They have targeted foreign tourists in resorts, hotels and shopping  
26 malls, a commercial airplane, judges, police and military convoys, and  
27 Christians in churches, buses, and the streets. A new chapter in this saga  
28 was opened in November 2017 when over twenty gunmen bearing the IS flag  
29 threw bombs and opened fire on worshippers at a Sufi mosque in the Sinai  
30 Peninsula. More than 310 were killed and over 120 were injured. The attack  
31 was widely condemned within and outside of Egypt, in Muslim and other  
32 nations. Days of national mourning were observed in Egypt and Turkey. The  
33 Egyptian air force later carried out massive bombings in areas of Sinai where  
34 the terrorist groups are suspected to have their bases. The number of civilians  
35 killed and injured in these air raids has not been reported. In the years prior  
36 to this incident, about 15 Sufi shrines were vandalized in Egypt.

37  
38 **Libya** after the Western imperial overthrow of the Muammar Gaddafi in 2011  
39 has become a theatre of internecine carnage among competing groups  
40 backed by Western powers and regional nations including Egypt and Turkey.  
41 Among other things, Islamic militants have vandalized many Sufi shrines and  
42 graves. An unknown number of people have died in the process.

43  
44 **Mali** is one of the nations destabilized in the aftermath of the Western  
45 intervention in Libya. Energizing the Islamic movement fighting for regional  
46 autonomy, it turned Mali into a deadly battle ground with both rebels and

1 governmental forces shedding pools of civilian blood, causing much damage  
2 and committing war crimes. The latter gets support from European nations.  
3 French and British jets have bombed rebel positions and French troops are  
4 aiding governmental forces. The rebels, who declared loyalty to Al Qaeda,  
5 have a Salafist agenda that aims to create an Islamic state. In particular, they  
6 are singularly hostile to the vibrant Sufi cultural tradition that has existed in  
7 Mali for several centuries. In 2012, they caused extensive damage to more  
8 than half of the ancient mausoleums of Sufi saints scattered over Timbuktu  
9 and ransacked its ancient library of priceless age-old Islamic texts. Similarly,  
10 when the Islamic group Al-Shabab took control of **Somalia**, it prohibited Sufi  
11 rituals and destroyed Sufi shrines.

### 12 + Tunisia +

13  
14  
15 Tunisia is a constitutionally Islamic state. Freedom of religion is protected by  
16 law and the state is mandated to promote religious tolerance. But the national  
17 president has to be a Muslim. Over 99% of the population of about 12 million  
18 is Muslim. Nearly three out of five are Sunni and some two out of five regard  
19 themselves as non-denominational Muslims. Shias form a tiny minority. While  
20 Arabic is the official language, French plays a crucial role in education, media  
21 and state affairs.

22 Tunisia underwent a fundamental change when after some two centuries  
23 of Ottoman domination, it was invaded by a large French force in 1881 and  
24 made a French protectorate. Over 250,000 French and Italians settled in the  
25 country in the next 50 years. Colonial rule ended after sustained internal  
26 struggles within the context of the wave of decolonization sweeping Africa  
27 after WW II led to independence in 1956. Habib Bourguiba was the first  
28 President of Tunisia.

29 But autonomy came with limitations. The society was dominated by a  
30 Westernized elite and a wealthy class dominated society. Repressive laws  
31 and security institutions of the colonial era remained in place. While the  
32 relationship between his government and France was strained, Bourguiba  
33 cultivated strong ties with the West. Distancing himself from Pan-Arabism and  
34 the anti-imperialist governments in Algeria, Egypt and Libya and inviting  
35 foreign investment, he became a valued ally of the US in North Africa and the  
36 Middle East.

37 Yet, Bourguiba launched a modernization drive with progressive features.  
38 A secularized state-run education system focusing on science and French  
39 was established and existing Islamic schools and university were brought  
40 under its purview. Sharia law courts were dismantled, property owned by  
41 Islamic foundations was nationalized and the Islamic Ulema was absorbed  
42 into the civil service. Family law was markedly transformed. Inter-faith unions  
43 were permitted, polygamy became illegal, marriage needed consent from  
44 both parties and divorce could be initiated by the wife as well as the husband.  
45 Veils were not permitted in schools and colleges. Sale of contraceptives was  
46 allowed and ten years on, abortion was legalized.



1 The Western media and leaders projected Tunisia an easy-going place  
2 run by an enlightened modernizer whose economic policies were a model for  
3 others to emulate stood. In 2008, he won praise from French President  
4 Sarkozy for his 'improved' human rights record. It was pictured as a stable,  
5 peaceful land of splendid beaches and resorts, a prime vacation. The tourists  
6 spent their time in luxurious enclaves guarded from intrusion by the common  
7 folk by the police. Few ventured outside. Their impression of Tunisia bore  
8 little resemblance to the real Tunisia.

9 Real Tunisia was a democracy in name only. Under President Bourguiba  
10 and then under his successor Ben Ali, a ruthless regime prevailed for nearly  
11 six decades. They expounded socialism but practiced bureaucratic, crony  
12 capitalism. The regime gave lucrative contracts to Western corporations in  
13 tourism and other sectors. Press freedom was non-existent. Political dissent  
14 was harshly suppressed. Torture was commonplace. Ben Ali and his family  
15 looted the national treasury. Cronyism and bribery flourished. Thus, using soft  
16 loans from state banks, members of his clan and a family related to his wife  
17 Leila came to own a chain of hotels, and communication, real estate, and  
18 transport companies. Like Imelda Marcos of the Philippines, Leila Ali had a  
19 depraved penchant for luxury shopping in Western capitals. She once bought  
20 a coat from Paris worth \$33,000.

21 A product of military training in France and the USA, Ben Ali was a firm  
22 ally of the West. From his time as the director of state security and throughout  
23 his reign, he worked closely with the CIA.

24 The modernization program bestowed more benefits to the middle and  
25 upper social segments. A broad-based modernization did not take hold under  
26 the Western backed neo-colonial tyranny. Garnering few benefits, a typical  
27 family struggled to make ends meet. Especially under Ben Ali, life became  
28 intolerable and excessively restrictive for the majority. People wanted jobs  
29 and their due share in the nation's wealth but lived in fear and economic  
30 insecurity.

31 Public anger simmered under the surface. The fuse was lit in December  
32 2010 when Mohamed Bouazizi, a vendor hardly making ends meet, publicly  
33 immolated himself after being harshly accosted by the police and failing to  
34 get his complaint heard. As the news of the sad incident spread, street  
35 protests ensued. The brutal response of the police only led to more protests.  
36 In a few weeks, the momentum became so large and vocal that Ben Ali had  
37 no option but to flee to Saudi Arabia with his family. As a last act of perfidy,  
38 he took about 1.5 tons of gold from the state central bank with him.

39 Tunisians rejoiced as democratic rule was instituted and restrictions on  
40 the press were lifted. Now they could conduct their lives and trade without  
41 having to bribe an official at each step. As a progressive constitution that  
42 protected basic human rights, gender rights and freedoms was enacted, a  
43 competitive electoral process unfolded. Tunisia was the spark of a series of  
44 regional uprisings now known as the Arab Spring. But it was not a revolution.  
45 Ben Ali was gone but the system he had instituted remained. Virtually all the  
46 political parties carried on the neoliberal economic agenda. The repressive

1 state structure and institutions was intact. Apart from a few changes, those  
2 who had implemented Ben Ali's edicts retained their jobs. The Truth and  
3 Dignity Commission with the mandate to investigate human rights abuses  
4 since 1955 was established in 2014. It conducted extensive inquiries, held  
5 open hearings and tackled over 60,000 complaints. At the end, it issued a  
6 detailed report and referred many cases to the courts. Yet, no action was  
7 taken.

8  
9 *To this day, Tunisian courts have not delivered a single*  
10 *sentence in any of the TDC cases. What stood in the way of*  
11 *the commission was the fact that the current Tunisian state is*  
12 *in many ways just the continuation of the Ben Ali regime. (Amri*  
13 *2019).*

14  
15 As officials and associates of the Ben Ali regime occupied key positions in  
16 the state, governing party and the parliament, economic policies of the past  
17 persisted. Unforgiving pressure from the international financial agencies and  
18 Western governments ensured persistence of the austerity policies of the  
19 past. Western companies and local moguls reaped major rewards as wages  
20 and incomes stagnated, unemployment rose, and inflation mounted. For the  
21 commoner, life became more insecure.

22  
23 *Corruption practices were frequently denounced after the*  
24 *revolution, yet the post-2011 governments failed to address*  
25 *it. What is more, in 2017, the Tunisian parliament passed a law*  
26 *which granted amnesty to all officials accused of corruption*  
27 *under the toppled dictator, despite a nation-wide campaign*  
28 *denouncing it. As a result, the economic elite of the Ben Ali era*  
29 *has remained just as rich and just as powerful in post-*  
30 *revolution Tunisia. (Amri 2019).*

31  
32 In the 2011 uprising, people had imbibed the neoliberal propaganda that free  
33 market, elections, and entrepreneurship were their salvation. But the right to  
34 vote and freedom of speech did not put food on the table. Despite numerous  
35 complaints by human rights groups, the expanded police force made arbitrary  
36 arrests and brutalized citizens at the slightest provocation. The police and the  
37 courts ignored the fine clauses in the Constitution with impunity. As a wise  
38 man had opined a while ago:

39  
40 *Those who make revolution by half measures*  
41 *are only digging a grave for themselves.*  
42 *Saint Just*

43  
44 People wondered what it had been for. Frustration mounted and social  
45 tension once more intensified. Politics fractured while the nation searched for  
46 a new direction. The wealthy and the old guard banded into a party of their

1 own and two types of opposition movements took root. Nine left oriented  
2 parties, including the Marxist Tunisian Workers Party, formed an electoral  
3 alliance under the banner of the Popular Front. Its program attracted a good  
4 many Tunisians, but two of its main leaders were assassinated in 2013, likely  
5 by state agents. The Front faces an uphill battle.

6  
7 +++++  
8

9 With Islam the predominant religion, according to a major global survey, 58%  
10 of the Tunisian Muslims self-identified as Sunni, 40% as Just a Muslim and  
11 2% did not respond. There are some 5,000 mosques, many of distinctly  
12 elegant design and construction in Tunisia. Nearly 4,200 are major mosques  
13 where Friday prayers are held. The oldest and largest mosque was built by  
14 an Arab general in the city of Kairouan some 50 years after Islam was brought  
15 here (670 CE). With stupendous prayer halls, courtyards and minarets  
16 covering over 9,000 square meters, it is deemed the most majestic Islamic  
17 structure in North Africa.  
18



19  
20  
21 The Great Mosque of Kairouan – External and Internal Views  
22  
23

24 Tunisian Islam shares with Islam in Egypt and Mali a long history of intimate  
25 engagement with Sufism. Sufi missionaries had helped entrench Islam in the  
26 area by establishing charity and educational centers. Some Sufi orders had  
27 exercised local civil authority. With nearly half as many Sufi holy sites as  
28 mosques, Sufism is an integral aspect of Islamic practice in the nation today.  
29 Many locales are named after Sufi saints, and a large portion of Tunisians  
30 trace their family lineage to a Sufi saint. Formal membership in a Sufi order

1 is small, but Sufism is a popular practice. Some 45% of Tunisians of all ages  
2 attend a ceremony at a Sufi shrine once a year or more often.

3 Until the 2011 uprising, the state had strictly controlled religious practice  
4 and institutions. The politicians espoused loyalty to Islam but constrained  
5 religious freedom. The leaders of Islamic parties were tortured and exiled.  
6 Tunisia was hailed by the West for its secular modernization and for  
7 containing 'Islamic terrorism'. After 2011, controls over religion were reduced  
8 but not abolished. All mosques are registered with and regulated by the  
9 government. Mosques are not permitted to engage in political activity and the  
10 government also controls the curricula of Islamic schools.

11 The relatively relaxed atmosphere brought three Islamist parties into the  
12 political arena. Two are Salafist parties. Disdaining secular modernization,  
13 they demand an Islamic state. Owing to lavish funding from Saudi Arabia,  
14 Salafism has spread in the country. About a fifth of the mosques are now run  
15 by clerics who espouse the message of Wahhabism. They find a receptive  
16 ear among the youth frustrated by the lack of opportunities for advancement.  
17 When the young folk hear that modernization and Westernization are the  
18 causes of their misery, they tune in.

19 The majority of Salafists favor constitutional politics. But imbibing the  
20 message of Al-Qaeda, IS and other militant groups, a minority has taken up  
21 arms. A suicide attack using a truck filled with gas canisters on a synagogue  
22 in 2002 which killed some 20 people, mostly German tourists, and injured  
23 over 30 was one of the few cases of terrorist attacks on civilian targets in  
24 Tunisia. The number of militant attacks has gone up since 2015. Most of them  
25 have targeted security and military personnel. But two, both in 2015, were  
26 high profile assaults on civilians. Three gunmen took hostages at the National  
27 Museum in Tunis. Some 20 people died and over 50 were injured in this  
28 attack. In another incident, a well-armed gunman stormed two hotels in a  
29 tourist resort, killing 40 people and injuring about 40. Most of the victims of  
30 these incidents were European tourists.

31 With radical clerics condemning Western military assaults in the Islamic  
32 world, Tunisia has become a fertile recruiting ground for IS, Al-Qaeda and  
33 militant groups operating in the Middle East and North Africa. Many have  
34 teamed up with the Islamic groups fighting against French intervention in Mali  
35 and the Western backed government of Algeria. Several thousand Tunisian  
36 fighters are involved in the fight against the government of Syria.

37 Sufism is another key aspect of the post-2011 religious environment in  
38 Tunisia. It survived the tight controls on religion under Bourguiba and Ben Ali,  
39 went underground, and now has resurfaced as a popular pursuit. Though  
40 formal membership in Sufi orders is only around 300,000, some two out of  
41 five Tunisians often visit Sufi shrines. More ascribe to Sufi philosophy and  
42 rituals. An organized network of 30,000 Sufi devotees takes care of the  
43 multitude of Sufi shrines and mausoleums spread across the land. The  
44 periodic Sufi ceremonies held at these places attract large numbers of  
45 Tunisians. The Sufi orders provide meals to the attendees and shelter needy

1 people from nearby areas. Sufism is a collective way of attaining emotional  
2 balance in these difficult, unsettled days for Tunisians.

3 The theological flexibility, liberal attitude towards the role of women in  
4 social and religious affairs, and veneration of founding saints of Sufism does  
5 not please the Salafists. To them, it is a heretical, un-Islamic, paganist creed  
6 whose influence must be combatted. Salafi clerics sermonize against it and  
7 threaten those who practice it. And Salafist organizations assist the poor and  
8 attract followers away from Sufism. Militant Salafists vandalized or burned 40  
9 Sufi shrines in 2012. Increased security at the shrines has decreased the  
10 number of such attacks. The tension between Sufism and Salafism remains  
11 acute. Nonetheless, Sufism remains a popular creed among all segments of  
12 the society that provides a sense of identity, unity and tolerance in turbulent  
13 times.

14 The recrudescence of hardline Salafism, enhanced recruitment into  
15 militant groups and the resilience of Sufism are more than the products of a  
16 conflict between competing Islamic philosophies. They reflect historically  
17 shaped socio-economic and cultural contradictions, and the modern neo-  
18 colonial realities. Though people have freedom of expression, it is the World  
19 Bank and the IMF and their local functionaries that determine where the  
20 economy is headed. The old guard largely mans the security apparatuses of  
21 the state. People, notably the youth, are thereby turning to the fiery rhetoric  
22 of the Salafist preachers. Salafism does not have an economic program to  
23 counter neo-liberalism. But it infuses them with the hope that Salafist Islam  
24 will work where the other political doctrines have not.

25 More are attracted by Sufism, but not as a means of changing the socio-  
26 political order but as a vehicle for staying emotionally afloat in a system that  
27 appears unchangeable. Life is difficult in many ways. The youth feel hopeless.  
28 Withdrawing from the social arena, people reject collective political struggle  
29 and turn to mystical sessions to assuage their troubles. A similar resurgence  
30 of Sufism under a similar socio-economic environment is evident in Turkey as  
31 well.

32 Western commentators regard Sufism as an apolitical philosophy. While  
33 Islamophobia gathers steam in the West, they hail Sufism as a moderate,  
34 enlightened, mystical facet of Islam, an acceptable alternative to 'Jihadism'  
35 and 'Political Islam'. They ignore the fact that in Tunisia, Iran and elsewhere,  
36 Islam was politicized under Western backed regimes.

37 But Sufism is not apolitical. Historically, it was intertwined with economic  
38 and state power. Sufi orders in the past often built fortified centers, collected  
39 tax revenue, built an education system and became autonomous centers of  
40 wealth and power that the Caliphs had to reckon with. Their shrines served a  
41 dual purpose, a prayer venue and a military outpost. In the colonial era, Sufi  
42 luminaries played an important role in the civilian and armed freedom  
43 movements in many Muslim nations. More than 30 Sufi orders with a strong  
44 network of branches operated under the Ottoman Empire. The Naqshbandi  
45 order, the strongest of the lot, had a contentious relationship with the state.  
46 At times, it was promoted by the authorities and at times, it rebelled against

1 the state. It also launched armed expeditions in the confrontations between  
2 Turkey and both Czarist and Soviet Russia. While the secular government of  
3 Kamal Ataturk imposed strict controls on Islam and Sufism in Turkey, it  
4 flourished underground. The Naqshbandi order is one of the most prominent  
5 Sufi orders in Turkey and across the world today. The three largest Sufi  
6 orders own major corporations that run schools, publish magazines and daily  
7 newspapers, control radio and TV stations and have a stake in banking and  
8 commercial concerns. The followers of the Sufi orders form a key voting bloc.  
9 Politicians compete for their support. The Sufi Gulen movement seeks to  
10 establish an Islamic state. The Turkish military, the main center of power in  
11 Turkey, has cracked down on any move to bring religion into politics. Yet,  
12 Gulen sympathizers in its ranks have staged coup attempts in a bid to take  
13 over state power. President Recep T Erdogan and his Muslim Brotherhood  
14 oriented Islamist party have made several changes in law and state  
15 structures to dilute the secular character of the Turkish Constitution. After a  
16 recent coup attempt, tens of thousands of military personnel, police officers,  
17 civil servants, journalists, teachers and academics—of secular and Sufi  
18 bent—were summarily fired. And many were imprisoned.

19 Sufism has also had a rocky relation with the state in Shia dominated Iran,  
20 especially after the Islamic revolution of 1979. Many Sufis have faced arrest,  
21 and their shrines have been demolished. They have also organized protests  
22 against the authorities. Yet, at other times, Sufism has enjoyed the blessings  
23 of the hardline rulers, and some orders have allied themselves with the Shia  
24 theocrats in the fight against Al-Qaeda.

25 The Iraqi Naqshbandi Sufi order was a part of the anti-US resistance after  
26 the US invasion of Iraq. Led by Saddam Hussein era army officers, its highly  
27 disciplined armed wing at one point posed a major challenge to the pro-US  
28 government forces. It cooperated with the IS forces at the outset. But later it  
29 was attacked and weakened by IS fighters, who sought to disarm it and make  
30 it submit to their Caliph. Some Kurdish fighter groups in Iraq also draw  
31 support from the Sufi orders in their areas.

32 These examples dismantle the portrait of Sufism as an apolitical, peaceful  
33 counter to the 'militant' or 'violence prone' Islamic groups like the Muslim  
34 Brotherhood, IS and Al-Qaeda. It is at best a half-truth. Even where Sufi  
35 orders explicitly decry involvement in politics, they remain political in a  
36 profound sense of the term. Withdrawing from politics in a society facing  
37 grave problems is akin to legitimizing the existing order and accepting the  
38 authority of the leaders who violate human rights.

39 This, for instance, is the case in present day Egypt. Many Sufis took part  
40 in the ouster of the dictator Hosni Mubarak, and many backed the election of  
41 the Muslim Brotherhood government that followed in its wake. But after facing  
42 discriminatory action from that government, they switched sides. At present,  
43 Sufism in Egypt enjoys the blessings of Abdel Al-Sisi, a former army officer  
44 who leads the nation in a brutal, dictatorial manner. Viewed as an alternative  
45 to militant Islamism, Sufi ceremonies and orders enjoy lavish state support.  
46 To the millions of Egyptians who attend, they offer a respite from the multitude

1 of troubles of life and a solace for the profound anguish they feel at the failure  
2 to achieve the noble goals of their pro-democracy uprising. But the other  
3 Islamic activist groups including the Salafists view this withdrawal from  
4 politics as a betrayal and thereby have begun to target Sufis as well. It is as  
5 much a political conflict as it is one deriving from varying interpretations of  
6 the Quran. A similar case can be made with Westernized Sufism that has  
7 made peace with capitalism and imperialism by espousing political neutrality.

8 The contrasting portrayal of Sufism as apolitical Islam and Salafism as  
9 political Islam is an oversimplification. Quietism that explicitly endorses an  
10 existing government also affects Salafism. During the Arab Spring, several  
11 Salafist branches opposed political activism. In Saudi Arabia, the majority of  
12 Salafist preachers are not only faithful to Wahhabism, the state doctrine, but  
13 they also regard political activism against the Saudi King and state as an un-  
14 Islamic misdeed.

15 The morality of passivity within an unjust system, neutrality towards laws  
16 that oppress people, silence in a time of major crisis was of deep concern to  
17 Dr Martin Luther King:

18  
19 *There comes a time when silence becomes betrayal.*

20 Martin Luther King

21  
22 Today humanity is afflicted with stupendous inequality, widespread poverty  
23 and misery, abject consumerism, growing authoritarianism, a lethal and  
24 spreading pandemic and disregard by the powerful for sustainability of life on  
25 the planet. In that instance, not joining hands with fellow humans to deal with  
26 these dangers is a political act, a tacit endorsement of the existing state of  
27 affairs. Prioritizing mystical experience over social justice is a political act.  
28 Quietism with political connotations is not just a feature of Sufism, Salafism  
29 and Islam but runs the gamut of all religions.

## 30 31 **8.19 STATUS OF WOMEN**

32  
33 The role and status of women in any religion can be interrogated at four  
34 levels. With respect to Islam, these are:

35  
36 **Scriptures:** How are the spiritual worth and role of women portrayed in the  
37 Quran, the *Hadiths*, stories of the life of Prophet Mohamed, the distinguished  
38 Imams and *Pirs*?

39  
40 **Personal Beliefs and Conduct:** Do Muslims believe in and act in ways to  
41 foster gender equality?

42  
43 **Institutional Proclamations and Rules:** Do the pronouncements and rules  
44 of the various Islamic institutions and their leaders promote gender equality?  
45

1 **History and Social Structure:** How has the role of women in Islamic  
2 societies changed over time? How was it affected by social and economic  
3 structures? Have women played an important role in Islamic history?  
4

5 A wide range of views and practices on these issues exists between and  
6 within Islamic denominations and sects, and between Islamic nations and  
7 legal scholars. Tackling the issue of gender equality in Islam and Muslim  
8 societies in a comprehensive manner is a tall order, beyond the scope of this  
9 book. We sum up the key points. Our presentation is predicated on the  
10 premise that any form of gender-based discrimination violates basic human  
11 rights and is unacceptable.  
12

### 13 + Scriptures + 14

15 There are two conflicting interpretations of what the Quran says about the  
16 role and status of women. Traditionalist clerics and theologians hold that  
17 Allah has made men superior to women. It is a divine rule that cannot be  
18 challenged or changed by human beings. Yet, men are obliged to treat  
19 women humanely and with respect, fairness, dignity. Other traditionalists say  
20 that men and women are equal but different. Verse 4:34 of the Quran is  
21 generally cited as the principal authority behind this view.  
22

23 *Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the*  
24 *one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their*  
25 *property [for the support of women]. So good women are the*  
26 *obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As*  
27 *for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and*  
28 *banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. The Quran,*  
29 *4:34 (Power 2015).*  
30

31 Another translation of the same verse reads:  
32

33 *Men are the caretakers of women, as men have been*  
34 *provisioned by Allah over women and tasked with supporting*  
35 *them financially. And righteous women are devoutly obedient*  
36 *and, when alone, protective of what Allah has entrusted them*  
37 *with. And if you sense ill-conduct from your women, advise*  
38 *them 'first', 'if they persist,' do not share their beds, 'but if they*  
39 *still persist,' then discipline them 'gently'. But if they change*  
40 *their ways, do not be unjust to them. Surely Allah is Most High,*  
41 *All-Great. Quran, 4:34 (Khattab 2020).*  
42

43 A scholar who holds that the Quran honors men and women in an equal  
44 manner, leaves out the first two sentences and renders the same verse as:  
45



1 *And as for those women [wives] whose protuberant behavior*  
2 *[nushūzahunna] you have reason to fear, reprove them [first];*  
3 *then desert them in bed; then jolt them; and if thereupon they*  
4 *pay you heed, do not seek to harm them. Behold, Allah is*  
5 *certainly most High, Great! Quran, 4:34 (Al-Asi 2020).*

6  
7 Other verses expressing more rights and higher social status for males also  
8 exist. For example, on the question of inheritance, it is decreed that:

9  
10 *Allah commands you for your children's [inheritance]: to the*  
11 *male, a portion equal to that of two females. Quran, Surah Al*  
12 *Nisa (Ibn Kathir 2020).*

13  
14 Liberal, reformist Islamic sheikhs and scholars and promoters of women's  
15 rights cite verses like the following two to support the position that the Quran  
16 confers equal spiritual and practical status and rights to men and women, and  
17 thus gender inequality is un-Islamic.

18  
19 *And for women are rights over men similar to those of men*  
20 *over women. Quran, 2:228. (Arif-Fear 2015).*

21  
22 *Their Lord responded to them: 'I never fail to reward any*  
23 *worker among you for any work you do, be you male or female*  
24 *– you are equal to one another'. The Quran, 3:195. (Arif-Fear*  
25 *2015).*

26  
27 Taken together with the voluminous *Hadiths* and decrees of the Imams and  
28 *Pirs*, and different schools of Sharia law, an almost interminable room for  
29 disputation on the issue exists. Arguments range over the authoritativeness  
30 and accuracy of the translations of the Quran. Such ambiguities exist in all  
31 religions.

32 Religion was not the primary factor behind the birth and persistence of  
33 patriarchy, and nor can it be eliminated through theological discourse. If the  
34 aim is to combat gender discrimination and attain gender equality, the focus  
35 has to be on prevalent beliefs, personal conduct, social norms, official rules  
36 and laws and the social and economic structures that underpin them.

### 37 **+ Personal beliefs and conduct +**

38  
39 A multi-continental, large sample survey by the Pew Research Center that  
40 was reported in 2013 elicited the views on four key issues in Muslim  
41 communities: veils (37 countries), status of marriage partners (20 countries),  
42 divorce (22 countries) and inheritance (22 countries). The main questions  
43 asked, paraphrased below, elicited the following responses.

44  
45 **Question 1:** Should women have the choice to wear a veil?  
46

1  
2 In 18 out of the 37 countries, the majority of respondents were against  
3 granting women the right to choose their attire. Sub-Saharan nations were  
4 the most conservative on this issue. In Nigeria and Afghanistan, only 30%  
5 accepted the right of a woman to not wear a veil. The Quran requires  
6 everyone to dress modestly but does not mention the veil. Different kinds of  
7 veils exist, and what is worn by Muslim women varies from place to place.  
8 Such beliefs are culturally rather than scripturally derived beliefs.

9  
10 **Question 2:** Can a wife disobey her husband?

11  
12 In 15 out of the 20 countries where the question was asked, more than 75%  
13 of the respondents supported complete subordination of the wife to the  
14 husband. It is indicative of the prevalence of die-hard patriarchy in many, if  
15 not most, Muslim nations.

16  
17 **Question 3:** Do women have the right to divorce?

18  
19 The right of women to initiate divorce was accepted by the majority in just 9  
20 out of 20 countries. While in Bosnia and Kosovo, nearly 90% conceded that  
21 women had this right, in Iraq, only 14% agreed and in Malaysia, the worst  
22 performing place on this issue, only 8% did so.

23  
24 **Question 4:** Do men and women have equal inheritance rights?

25  
26 Granting equal inheritance rights to both genders was rejected by a majority  
27 in 11 out of 22 nations. In Tunisia and Morocco, the worst performers on this  
28 issue, only 15% of the respondents agreed to giving women equal rights to  
29 share the property of parents. The law in Morocco grants a male offspring  
30 twice the share of such property as compared to a female offspring. In  
31 Tunisia, family law has been put on a semi-Westernized footing since the  
32 1950s. But the changes instituted by the autocrats had little impact on public  
33 views regarding the status of women in society. A further analysis of the  
34 survey data revealed that people who want Sharia law to be the law of the  
35 land tend to have negative views on granting more rights to women.

36 The general conclusion is simultaneously bleak and hopeful. People in  
37 Islamic nations and communities often have strong patriarchal views. Even  
38 while conceding that women have the same spiritual standing in the eyes of  
39 Allah, they still see women as inferior beings. But considerable variation  
40 exists. There are Muslim majority nations where people have permissive and  
41 non-patriarchal views. Patriarchy thus results more from history, culture and  
42 economics than from religion.

43 Possibly due to logistical and political reasons, the Pew survey did not  
44 cover the theocratic Gulf states, Saudi Arabia and Iran, where Sharia law has  
45 a firmer footing and rules of public conduct are patriarchic. It is difficult to  
46 predict what freely given responses in these nations would be. Another

1 limitation of this survey was that in two of the 37 nations, the respondents  
2 were mostly men and in three nations, mostly women. But its findings reflect  
3 the general scholarly view on the issue.

4 Surveys on other religion related issues in Iran, for example, have shown  
5 that many people, especially from the younger generation, do not accept the  
6 official policy. Examples from Iran, Pakistan and Yemen highlight the public  
7 perception of women's rights in Muslim countries.

8  
9 **Iran:** Iranian law requires a woman to wear a hijab that covers all parts of her  
10 body and hair except her face. A female cyclist riding about in public with her  
11 hair uncovered was arrested in an Iranian town in October 2020. Riding on  
12 the main street and near the central mosque, her conduct aroused much  
13 anger not just from the local clerics but also from the public. A large rally was  
14 held to protest what was perceived as an insult to the Islamic dress tradition.  
15 Women in Iran have creatively adopted dress styles that try to circumvent the  
16 rigid dress code but without seeming to do so.

17  
18 **Pakistan:** Dating and associating with members of the other sex before  
19 marriage is generally frowned upon in Muslim societies. A short online video  
20 posted in May 2020 showed two girls, aged 16 and 18, in Pakistan talking to  
21 a young man in an isolated area. The family of the girls was so enraged that  
22 their two male relatives shot and killed them. It was but one case of the about  
23 1,000 'honor killings' that take place in Pakistan every year. The barbaric  
24 practice is against the law but persists because prosecution and conviction  
25 are few. Many perpetrators literally get away with murder.

26  
27 **Yemen:** Nujood Ali was born into a poor Yemeni family living in difficult  
28 circumstances. Her jobless father had two wives and 14 children. One of her  
29 elder sisters was killed and another was raped. In part to assure Nujood's  
30 safety but mostly to secure the dowry payment of about US\$ 750, her father  
31 married her off to a thirty-year old man when she was just 9. It was not an  
32 uncommon practice in Yemen. The man, who had promised not to have  
33 sexual relations with her before she menstruated, began subjecting her to  
34 horrid sexual abuse right from the first day.

35 But Nujood was an unusually brave child. A year later, during a visit to her  
36 parent's house, she secretly took a taxi and went to the town court to lodge  
37 her complaint and ask for divorce. Lucky to find a supportive lawyer, she  
38 secured the divorce. Her case drew national and international attention and  
39 was the subject of a best-selling book translated into many languages. The  
40 precedent it set spurred the passage of a law setting the minimum age of  
41 marriage to seventeen years.

42 But it was not the end, for Nujood or Yemen. Nujood was forced out of her  
43 home by her father who also deprived her the money sent by the French  
44 publisher from the sale of the book about her. Her younger sister now faces  
45 a similar predicament because of a backward slide engineered by hardline

1 conservatives. Branding the law anti-Islamic apostasy, prominent Muslim  
2 preachers raised such a degree of political clamor that the law was repealed.

3 Underage marriage and abuse of women occur within the economic and  
4 political context. On a scale of multidimensional human suffering, Yemen  
5 today is one of the two or three worst places in the world. Nearly 85% of the  
6 population is hungry, child malnutrition abounds, and safe drinking water is a  
7 luxury. A cholera epidemic had nearly a million cases with 4,000 deaths.  
8 Dengue fever has also resurfaced. On top of that, a veritable hail of bombs,  
9 mortars and bullets has taken a massive toll on human lives since 2015.

10 Civil war, the ensuing chaos, a dysfunctional police force and judiciary,  
11 corruption, chronic poverty and misery have virtually erased respect for basic  
12 human rights in Yemen. Across the fragmented nation, the little gains to lower  
13 the rate of child marriage made after Nujood Ali's case have been reversed.  
14 Parents unable to feed their children, seeking dowry payment or a more  
15 secure place for their young girls are resorting to marrying them off in rising  
16 numbers. A UN humanitarian agency reported that slightly over a half of the  
17 married females in Yemen had been married before they were 18. It was  
18 estimated that the incidence of underage marriage would more than double  
19 in the coming few years. The teenage bride usually lands into a life of cruelty  
20 and despair from which escape is almost impossible. Besides suffering from  
21 various ailments affecting reproductive organs, she faces a high risk of  
22 pregnancy related complications and mortality. Her offspring are also at a  
23 greater risk for disease and early death.

24 In early 2020, Hind, a 12-year-old Yemeni girl was informed by her father  
25 that she had to marry a 30-year old convicted drug smuggler. It transpired  
26 when she was visiting her imprisoned father. The prospective husband was  
27 incarcerated in the same prison. This was the third case of child marriage in  
28 the family. The same thing had happened to one of her sisters. Another sister  
29 had also been married at a tender age. Fortunately, Hind's mother was able  
30 to get a court order to annul the marriage contract. Though Hind continues to  
31 get threats from the man, it was a rare victory in a desolate place.

32  
33 In **Indonesia**, the world's largest Muslim nation, gains in the fight against child  
34 and forced marriage have been slow. Until September 2019, the law allowed  
35 men and women who had reached the age of 21 to marry at their own volition.  
36 But for girls aged 16 to 21 and boys aged 19 to 21, parental permission was  
37 a prerequisite. Under a provision in the law, parents could seek an injunction  
38 from a religious court or municipal official to allow marriage for a girl younger  
39 than 16. For such cases, the lowest age was not specified.

40 UNICEF surveys indicate that one out of seven females in the nation had  
41 been married before 18 and one out of a hundred, before 15. As a result,  
42 Indonesia has about 1.5 million women who at one point were child brides.  
43 The long-standing struggle by local and international human rights groups to  
44 turn this situation around received a decisive boost when the parliament  
45 amended the old marriage law in September 2020. Passed with support from  
46 religious and secular parties, the new provisions made 19 years the minimum

1 age for marriage with parental consent and 21 years without it. The age limits  
2 were the same for girls and boys.

3 Yet, polygamy with a maximum of four wives remains legal, though it  
4 comes with condition of equal treatment of and ability to support all the wives.  
5 At the same time, the ruling party has other designs. Since 2019, it has  
6 considered tabling a new law that, among other things, would criminalize sex  
7 outside of marriage, homosexuality and cohabitation without marriage. The  
8 proposed law includes fines for promoting contraception and jail terms for  
9 unauthorized abortions. Stuck within the draft is a clause that makes it a crime  
10 to attack 'the honor or dignity' of the country's president and vice-president,  
11 and insult state institutions. Associating with Marxist organizations is an  
12 offense. Taken together with continued impunity for the massive human rights  
13 violations of the past and further militarization in the name of the 'War on  
14 Terror', it heralds a partial return to the days of the Suharto dictatorship.  
15 Consideration of reduced revenue from the possible impact on tourist traffic  
16 from the West has, however, slowed down the legislative agenda on this front.

17 Despite prohibitory laws, child marriages are most common in South Asia  
18 and sub-Saharan Africa. In Niger, the worst affected nation, nearly four out of  
19 five females are married before age 18. And girls are disproportionately more  
20 affected than boys. Currently, Yemen and Saudi Arabia are the only two  
21 nations in the world that do not have a legal minimum marriage age, for boys  
22 or girls. In Iran, the respective minimum marriage ages for girls and boys are  
23 13 and 15. In Sudan, the law permits marriage for a girl as young as 10 if  
24 permission is granted by a judge.

### 25 26 + Sexual abuse + 27

28 Sexual abuse of girls, boys and women plagues Islamic institutions as it does  
29 Christian churches (Chapter 7). But it is not as well explored and exposed.  
30 We note some major recent cases in Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan and Britain.

31  
32 **Iraq:** Repeated US invasions of Iraq replaced a stable, prosperous social  
33 order with chaos, violence and an economically insecure underclass. Loss of  
34 breadwinners tore apart families. Young girls and women in good numbers  
35 lacked means of support and became susceptible to abuse. The area near  
36 the shrine of Imam Kadhim, an exalted Shia shrine that attracts visitors year  
37 around, is one place where such abuse is rife. The shrine is located in a  
38 market area that has many offices licensed to perform Sharia law marriages.  
39 But, as a year-long undercover investigation by local and BBC reporters  
40 uncovered, some of these offices are a front for other activities. The clerics  
41 who run them ensnare vulnerable teenage girls and women into unions that  
42 turn out to be short-term 'pleasure marriages'. For a fee, the man who comes  
43 to the offices can get a wife that he can divorce as soon as he has satisfied  
44 his desires. Once deceived, the victim is trapped into a cycle of repeated  
45 'marriages,' some of which are but a few hours long. But since her sexual  
46 abuse occurred within a marriage that was legal according to Sharia law,

1 there is not much she can do about it. At times, the cleric marries a young girl  
2 and then 'rents' her out to friends and associates. Ostracized by family and  
3 community, she has little option but to endure the horrific abuse.

4 Explicit 'pleasure marriage' is illegal in Iraq, but the practice exists in large  
5 cities like Karbala as well. Yet, the police and the courts do not deal with it.  
6 Many of the rogue clerics are politically connected and enjoy the support of  
7 local Shia militias. Eight of ten clerics in one area were found ready, for a  
8 sum, to legalize a marriage, no questions asked. The custom of seeking  
9 parental consent for a young girl is ignored.

10 George Bush said that the US was going into Iraq to liberate the people  
11 from tyranny. For women and children, 'liberation' has weakened the secular  
12 legal system that protected their rights. Now the men who subjected them to  
13 gross abuse do so with virtual impunity. The conservative Islamist politicians  
14 do not regard protection of women's rights a priority. And the Western media  
15 houses like the BBC that shine their torch on the issue do not acknowledge  
16 their complicity in the assault on Iraq which was consciously designed to tear  
17 the Iraqi society apart.

18  
19 **Nigeria:** The population of Nigeria is almost equally divided into Christians  
20 and Muslims. Northern Nigeria is predominantly Muslim. Many localities here  
21 use Sharia law. Cases of sexual abuse of girls and women have been  
22 reported in both Christian and Islamic institutions and places of worship. But  
23 it is felt that these cases represent the tip of a hidden iceberg. Better known  
24 instances of religion related sexual and other forms of abuse are (i) those  
25 perpetrated by the extremist Boko Haram forces and (ii) those taking place in  
26 Islamic schools.

27  
28 **Boko Haram:** The egregious crimes perpetrated by Boko Haram operations  
29 in northern Nigeria include abduction of women and schoolgirls. The most  
30 publicized incident was the April 2014 kidnapping of 276 girls from a boarding  
31 secondary school. Of ages between 16 and 18, most of them were Christian.  
32 About 60 girls escaped shortly, 82 were released later, and some have died.  
33 The fate of over a hundred remains unknown. To date, the group has seized  
34 over 2,000 people. Most have been women and girls. To cite recent cases: In  
35 December 2020 more than 300 boys in a secondary school were abducted  
36 but were later released; in February 2021, more than 300 girls from one  
37 school were abducted; and in the same month, 27 boys at a college were  
38 kidnapped. As criminal gangs seeking ransom money have also been  
39 involved in these crimes, the exact role of Boko Haram is not known. Yet,  
40 kidnapping is a major fund-raising tactic for the group. Boko Haram has held  
41 the captives as bargaining chips for the release of their members from state  
42 custody.

43 The captive female, adult or child, does chores like cooking and cleaning  
44 in the Boko Haram camps. Many of them are sexually abused and forcibly  
45 married to the fighters. Some are trained as combatants and some are made  
46 to carry out suicide bombings. In one case, three girls sent by Boko Haram

1 exploded suicide vests in a refugee camp and killed 38 people. Brutalization  
2 of women and girls by Boko Haram has no other modern equivalent.

3  
4 **Islamic Schools:** Besides secular public and private schools, many Islamic  
5 schools exist in Nigeria, especially in the Muslim majority north. Over ten  
6 million children attend such schools, but official oversight and regulation are  
7 poor. The fee-charging schools, with students from better off families, have  
8 good facilities and combine religious studies with conventional subjects.  
9 Children of the poor attend the more numerous free schools which focus on  
10 recitation and memorization of the Quran. Many children in the area attend a  
11 public school in the morning and an Islamic school later in the day.

12 Some free Islamic schools are boarding schools, mainly catering to boys.  
13 In both the day and boarding schools, it is customary to dispatch students to  
14 beg for money in the streets in the morning hours. Their collections, meant to  
15 pay for tuition, room and board, are handed over to the *mallam* (senior  
16 teacher). Discipline is strict. Caning and whipping are common. The children  
17 may also work in the school farm, clean the school area and rooms, and do  
18 chores for the teacher's family. Such treatment, accepted by the parents too,  
19 is seen as a way of instilling good work habits, humility, endurance and a  
20 sense of respect among the children.

21 Islamic schools for the rehabilitation of youth with mental and behavioral  
22 issues and drug addiction problems also exist. Most of the enrollees are boys.  
23 The guiding creed is to reform the errant child by combining recitation of the  
24 Quran with strict discipline. The child may remain at the school for years. The  
25 students at some schools number in the hundreds. Yet, until recently, official  
26 inspection or control over these schools was minimal. For reasons as yet  
27 unclear, the authorities decided to take a closer look in 2019. In October that  
28 year, the police raided a large rehabilitation center in Katsina. Instead of  
29 rehabilitation activities, they found about 500 hungry youngsters, packed in  
30 six rooms, wallowing in filthy conditions. Many were shackled to the wall and  
31 had signs of being beaten. Some had been sexually abused. Of recent, life  
32 had become so bad that some inmates had escaped.

33 It was the third facility to get a visit from the police. At each place, similar  
34 conditions were encountered. In all, about a thousand youth, of age 7 to 40  
35 years, were rescued. Besides physical and sexual abuse, the common  
36 complaints were denial of food and money that was being sent by the parents  
37 and making parental visits difficult. After these raids, a few facilities closed  
38 shop on their own accord.

39 Following extensive national and international outrage, the government  
40 has pledged to close all schools where such abuse occurs and modernize the  
41 curricula of Islamic schools. Some abusers have been arrested and children  
42 have been reunited with their parents. But concerned scholars and activists  
43 say that the governmental response is far from satisfactory. With respect to  
44 the rehabilitation centers, they point out that it is not a matter of religion, but  
45 the outcome of the pitifully low resources devoted to address mental and  
46 physical health problems and education in poor communities. Caning is used

1 in many secular schools as well. Some state governments had already  
2 banned begging by school children. But implementation is slow. Lacking other  
3 ways of generating meal funds, many schools continue the practice of  
4 begging.

5 Sexual abuse and maltreatment of women and children in Nigeria occurs  
6 in secular and religious—Muslim and Christian—settings as well as at home.  
7 Official survey data show that among females of age 15 to 49, some 30%  
8 have experienced sexual abuse. In 2020, 11,200 rape cases were reported  
9 to the police. But that is hardly the real figure. Fear of reprisal and ridicule,  
10 shame, the tendency to blame the victim and excuse the perpetrator and lax  
11 police and prosecutorial action inhibit victims from reporting their assailant.  
12 Rape cases are at times settled informally by small payments, and at times,  
13 the police are bribed to ignore the complaint. There has been an upsurge of  
14 rapes in several Nigerian cities during the corona pandemic era.

15 Political leaders have issued strong statements after high profile cases of  
16 rape of minors. Action, funding and support for the victims have not lived up  
17 to the rhetoric. A few NGOs, some foreign funded, work on rape prevention,  
18 raising awareness, and supporting the victims. But it is a drop in the bucket.

19 Nigeria requires a program to promote gender equality and justice, curb  
20 gender-based discrimination, abuse and violence, and tackle the culture of  
21 misogyny. The public education and health systems must be funded and  
22 improved to serve all Nigerians. The resources and funds for these purposes  
23 exit. But presently the wealth of the nation largely ends with up foreign  
24 conglomerates, corrupt rulers, and the local elite. The recapture of these  
25 funds needs popular action to combat the authoritarian, corrupt political  
26 system and the neo-liberal system. The struggle for gender equality and  
27 justice has to be contemporaneous with the general struggle for equality and  
28 justice.

29  
30 **Pakistan:** Due to lack of comprehensive registration, the number of  
31 madrassas (Islamic schools) is not known but may be as high as 40,000. A  
32 majority are part-time schools. Their curricula are dominated by religious  
33 subjects (studies of the Quran and *Hadith*, Sharia law and Arabic), but may  
34 contain a few related secular subjects. A typical madrassa is free, provides  
35 food and shelter, and as such is popular among poor families. An unknown  
36 number but possibly many get funds from Salafist-inclined Saudi Arabian  
37 sources. The well-endowed madrassas offer an eight-year program to train  
38 the students to be imams (preachers) in mosques across the country. Over  
39 90% of the madrassas adhere to Sunni Islam. Only a minority are Shia.

40 Prior to the 1980s, Pakistani Islamic schools enrolled boys only. But in the  
41 recent two decades, women only madrassas have mushroomed. Now about  
42 2,000 registered madrassas enroll about 250,000 girls and women. An  
43 unknown number of unofficial Islamic schools that cater for both sexes also  
44 exist. The female-only madrassas charge fees, enroll secondary school age  
45 students, teach regular and religious subjects, and prepare the students for  
46 secondary school exams. Their reasonable fees and efficient management



1 make them a viable alternative to the poorly run Pakistani public education  
2 system. Thus, they are popular among lower middle-class families. Girls from  
3 these schools usually outperform boys in the national examinations and have  
4 good career prospects. In a society with a multitude of barriers that constrict  
5 female advancement in many spheres, these schools are like an oasis in the  
6 desert.

7 Many prominent madrassas have existed in a state of confrontation with  
8 the government and the US allied security, military establishment. They  
9 accuse the government of corruption, neglect of people's welfare, and call for  
10 the enforcement of Sharia law edicts. Since some imams espouse loyalty to  
11 Al-Qaeda, these schools are accused of fostering terrorism. A violent week-  
12 long standoff between militant students and the army at the Red Mosque  
13 seminary in 2007 highlighted the conflict. Hundreds of students died. About a  
14 hundred were female students. The radical madrassas have been branded a  
15 risk to national security and the government has instituted a reform program.  
16 But critics call it a flawed measure. As in Nigeria, what is needed is a  
17 comprehensive program, with adequate funding and manpower to revamp the  
18 entire public education system. In many parts of the country, poor families at  
19 present have no option but to send their children to a madrassa.

20 The madrassa system is tainted by the malady of physical and sexual  
21 abuse of minors. Rumors, backed by anecdotal evidence, about some clerics  
22 being pedophiles have circulated for a while. Some police investigation was  
23 done, yet no prosecutions occurred. Media scrutiny has now brought those  
24 police records to light. The records and interviews with police officers indicate  
25 that respected imams in a number of Islamic schools are child molesters.  
26 There are cases in which 11-year-old boys and girls were sexually molested  
27 by a cleric that were recorded but not pursued. Media inquiries with victims  
28 and their families revealed shocking incidents of violent rape and physical  
29 injury. The abuser had often earned the trust of the child and his family by  
30 appearing kind and concerned.

31 There is strong pressure on family members to bury the assaults on their  
32 children. There is fear that their claims will be dismissed, and they will be  
33 ostracized and isolated by the community. There is concern that allegations  
34 by children against respected clerics will be found to lack credibility. Fellow  
35 clerics rally behind their colleague. The accusers are accused of defaming  
36 Islam and blasphemy, a grave misdeed. Some aggrieved families are  
37 intimidated into forgiving the accused, making it hard for the police to pursue  
38 the case. In other cases, the victim was too ashamed and traumatized to  
39 speak. (In Chapter 7, we saw a similar dynamic operating for the litany of  
40 sexual abuse cases in the Catholic Church.) In one instance, a concerned  
41 doctor who saw a child with signs of multiple sexual injuries reported the  
42 matter to the police. The cleric was arrested but later released on bail. Despite  
43 DNA evidence proving his guilt, he freely walks the streets. The family has  
44 yet to get a modicum of justice. A mullah caught red handed molesting a  
45 young girl has thus far evaded a trial for his crime. In another case, a 14-year-  
46 old girl was taken by her family to a Muslim cleric, a reputed powerful healer,

1 for advice on her persistent migraine headaches. The healer said she was  
2 possessed by an evil spirit and that it would take several sessions to cure her.  
3 He raped her during those sessions, and she became pregnant. The father  
4 filed a complaint with the police, but supporters of the cleric said he was  
5 innocent.

6 Concerned police officers and activists indicate that such cases are but a  
7 small part of a pervasive problem. The cases of sexual abuse that come out  
8 into the open generate much anger among the public. Acknowledging that it  
9 is a serious problem, the government has promised strong measures to deal  
10 with it. But, as in Nigeria, action and allocation of resources have not matched  
11 the words. Opportunistic politicians need votes but seek to balance the  
12 interests of the religious establishment with those of their Western imperial  
13 backers. They stand with large landowners and big businessmen, not the  
14 common folk. They are more focused on aggressive actions to pursue the  
15 effusive 'War on Terror' than addressing the socio-economic problems that  
16 have made Pakistan what it is today. Thus, faced with the unresolved issue  
17 of sexual abuse in the madrassas, a concerned policeman laments:

18  
19 *It is the hypocrisy of some of these mullahs, who wear the long*  
20 *beard and take on the cloak of piety only to do these horrible*  
21 *acts behind closed doors, while openly they criticize those who*  
22 *are clean shaven, who are liberal and open minded. In our*  
23 *society so many of these men, who say they are religious, are*  
24 *involved in these immoral activities.* Superintendent S Baloch  
25 (Gannon 2020).  
26

27 **Indonesia:** Reports of cases of violence against women, most of which are  
28 sexual violence, have been rising steeply of recent in the most populous  
29 Muslim nation. According to the National Commission on Violence Against  
30 Women, some 340,000 cases of sexual violence were lodged in 2021. The  
31 corresponding number for 2020 was 220,000. Among these are cases of rape  
32 of very young girls as well. The Commission concedes that the reported  
33 number is just the tip of an iceberg.

34 Shame, loss of family reputation, fear of retaliation and the lack of a  
35 comprehensive legal framework prevent most victims from reporting their  
36 abuse to the authorities. Human and women's rights organizations have for  
37 some time been campaigning for the institution of an effective mechanism to  
38 bring the abusers to court, give adequate penalties as well as to prevent such  
39 crimes. Their efforts finally paid off as the Indonesian parliament finally  
40 passed a comprehensive law relation to sexual abuse in April 2022. Setting  
41 out nine different types of sexual abuse, it provides jail terms ranging from  
42 four to nine years for those convicted under the law. Victims of sexual abuse  
43 are eligible for counselling and compensation. Conservative Islamist parties  
44 had blocked the passage of the bill for five years. But moderate Islamist  
45 parties and nationwide Islamic organizations like Nahdlatul Ulama favored it.  
46 But major implementational issues remain. Will more victims come forward

1 now? Will major efforts to prevent violence against women be undertaken?  
2 These are open questions.

3  
4 **Britain:** Numbering about 3.5 million, Muslims constitute some 5% of the  
5 British population. The majority originate from what once was British colonial  
6 India (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh). Sunnis outnumber Shias by a large  
7 margin. Apart from a small wealthy segment, the Muslim community is divided  
8 into two strata—a middle class consisting of small to medium size business  
9 owners, lawyers, doctors, academics, engineers, journalists, civil servants,  
10 and a low income stratum with menial, often part-time, jobs or no job. Living  
11 in sub-standard houses, the latter generally have low educational credentials  
12 and face higher risk of chronic health problems compared to the rest of the  
13 British society. The rate of degree-level qualification among British Muslims,  
14 however, is comparable to other religious and secular groups.

15 The vast majority of Muslim children in the UK attend public schools but a  
16 minority attend the 190 or so madrassas that operate in the country. One of  
17 seven madrassas receive state funding while others are private schools.  
18 While some are part-time institutions focusing on Quranic studies, many are  
19 Form VI level schools that combine religious training with high quality secular  
20 education. Students from Muslim schools have outperformed students from  
21 Catholic and secular schools in Form IV and Form VI level examinations for  
22 over a decade. In 2019, of the top ten ranked schools in England, four were  
23 Muslim schools and the Tauheedul Islam Girls High School in Blackburn, with  
24 an all-female student population of nearly 800, sat in the first position.

25 As with Christian institutions, egregious cases of sexual abuse also have  
26 surfaced within Islamic institutions and schools in the UK in recent years. A  
27 veteran 81-year-old Islamic studies teacher and preacher at a mosque in  
28 Cardiff was convicted of several charges of molesting four 5 to 11-year-old  
29 girls in 2017. Over 400 complaints of physical abuse occurring in Islamic  
30 schools were lodged with municipal authorities from 2009 to 2011. Only ten  
31 were prosecuted and only two offenders were convicted. The cases related  
32 to harsh physical punishment, rape and sexual violations of minors. An imam  
33 from Stoke-on-Trent was found guilty of sexual abuse of two boys, aged 11  
34 and 15. But families are often pressured to withdraw their allegations.

35 Due to the growing number of complaints, the Independent Inquiry into  
36 Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) in the UK extended its investigations beyond the  
37 Catholic Church to cover Islamic institutions. The submissions to the IICSA  
38 presented two starkly contrasting portraits of the problem. Officials from the  
39 Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board which speaks for the nearly  
40 600 mosques in Britain claimed that child sexual abuse was a rarity in Muslim  
41 communities. Hardly any reports of such misdeeds had been received by this  
42 organization. The Muslim Women's Network and Muslim Council of Britain in  
43 contrast testified that it was a real problem but was underreported due to  
44 associated social stigma and coercion. The victims are afraid to voice their  
45 ordeals. Faith Associates, a Muslim consultancy foundation, deposed that

1 cases of child abuse in mosques and madrassas, though frequent, were  
2 completely suppressed in one way or another.

3 The story of Nabil Sharma (not her real name), who regularly went to a  
4 mosque in Birmingham as a child, is indicative. The Imam, a conniving  
5 pedophile, maintained friendly relations with her parents and earned their  
6 trust as he secretly began to fondle her. Buying her silence with sweets and  
7 threats, he abused her from the age of seven to eleven. Just as he was about  
8 to proceed to serious abuse, he was apprehended while abusing another girl.  
9 It took Nabil Sharma more than twenty-five years to bring her case into the  
10 open and write a book on it. Her aim is to alert the public about the prevalence  
11 of child abuse in the institutions they respect and trust.

12  
13 *A lot of Muslim people have got in touch through my Facebook*  
14 *and Twitter sites to say the same thing happened to them*  
15 *when they were younger, and they never spoke out for fear of*  
16 *shame and dishonor to their community. ... I never saw the*  
17 *Imam again until three years ago. ... I decided to report him to*  
18 *the police, but they didn't feel they would ever find him. The*  
19 *problem is children never know the names of the Imams so I*  
20 *couldn't tell the police his name. They can't find records from*  
21 *that time.*

22  
23 *The Muslim community is very good at hiding and hushing*  
24 *things up, and the police seem scared of upsetting the Muslim*  
25 *community. Nabila Sharma (Chamberlain 2013).*

26  
27 British crown prosecutors and the police believe that the cases of child abuse  
28 exposed in the media and official inquiry represent a tiny segment of the  
29 reality. Some major Muslim organizations have now placed a high priority on  
30 tackling harsh punishment and sexual abuse in Islamic institutions. As with  
31 the Catholic Church, one may assume that 95% of the Muslim clerics have a  
32 kind, caring attitude towards children. But child abuse festers when they  
33 close-ranks to protect that one out of twenty among them who is a pedophile,  
34 and when officialdom fails to take timely action on the allegations of abuse.

### 35 36 **+ Illustrious Muslim women +**

37  
38 Despite the social and cultural obstacles they faced, Muslim women rose to  
39 the pinnacle of social, political, business, academic, scientific and cultural  
40 circles in many nations, in the past and at present. A bright star among them  
41 was Fatima Al-Fihri, a 9th century Tunisian Muslim woman educated in Sharia  
42 law and *Hadith*. Of wealthy parentage, she used her money to build a  
43 mosque-based school of higher learning that became the first university in the  
44 world. Providing instructions in Islamic studies, languages, science,  
45 mathematics and astronomy, it attracted students from distant places. In the  
46 Golden Age of Islam, Al-Fihri was in distinguished company:

1  
2 *Women at the time participated in all fields of life. There were*  
3 *women who championed educational and cultural efforts like*  
4 *Fatima al-Fihri, others who excelled in mathematics such as*  
5 *Sutayta al-Mahamili, the medical field, administration and*  
6 *management, philosophy and the arts. Others played key*  
7 *political roles and ruled important territories in the Muslim*  
8 *Civilization, some of those included Labana of Cordoba of 10th*  
9 *century (Spain), Sitt al-Mulk of 11th century (Egypt), Melike*  
10 *Mama Hatun of 12th century (Turkey), Razia (or Raziyya)*  
11 *Sultana of Delhi of 13th century (India) and many more... (Editors*  
12 *2021).*

13  
14 In the past, there have been numerous women Sufi saints across the Islamic  
15 world. Rabia al Adawiyya was born in a poor family in Basra, Iraq in 717. Yet,  
16 she became a person of learning whose ideas on faith and worship earned  
17 her wide respect. No formal Sufi orders were in existence in those days, but  
18 over the course of her eight-and-a-half decades of life she acquired a large  
19 following, especially among women. Her way of life questioned conventional  
20 gender roles and her teachings regarding unconditional love of Allah were a  
21 prototype of the future day visions of major Sufi luminaries.

22  
23 *Oh God! If I worship You for fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and*  
24 *if I worship You in hope of Paradise, exclude me from*  
25 *Paradise. But if I worship You for Your Own Sake, grudge me*  
26 *not Your everlasting Beauty. Rabia al Adawiyya (Mesdaghi*  
27 *2019).*

28  
29 Bibi Fatima Sam was born near the Iran-Iraq border but spent most of her life  
30 in Delhi, India. Her mystical practice and theosophical ruminations made her  
31 the first and perhaps the most illustrious Sufi *Pir* of India. She attracted a  
32 large male and female discipleship who venerated her as a spiritual guide.  
33 When she passed on in 1246, her tomb became a major Sufi shrine where a  
34 memorial attended by thousands is held every year.

35 We fast forward to modern times and look at the heads of state of Muslim  
36 nations. The list of female Muslim prime ministers and presidents is telling:  
37 Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan), Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina (Bangladesh),  
38 Tansu Ciller (Turkey), Mame Madior Boye and Aminata Toure (Senegal),  
39 Megawati Sukarnoputri (Indonesia), Roza Otunbayeva (Kyrgyzstan), Atifete  
40 Jahjaga (Kosovo), Cisse Mariam Kaidama Sidibe (Mali), Sibel Siber (Northern  
41 Cyprus), Ameenah Gurib (Mauritius), Halimah Yacob (Singapore), Samia  
42 Suluhu Hassan (Tanzania) and Najla Bouden Romdhane (Tunisia).

43 Hundreds of Muslim women have been and are prominent, award-winning  
44 media personalities, actresses, singers, models, poets, academicians,  
45 writers, scientists, doctors, engineers, lawyers, and judges. Two stars among  
46 them are the Iranian mathematician Maryam Mirzakhani who won the Fields

1 Medal, the equivalent of the Nobel Prize in Mathematics, in 2014, and the  
2 Pakistani education advocate Malala Yousafzai, the youngest winner of the  
3 Nobel Peace Prize in 2014. Among the singers and actresses of international  
4 repute are Umm Kulthum (Egypt), Nurjehan, Munni Begum (Pakistan), Janet  
5 Jackson, Bella Hadid, Shohreh Aghdashloo, Iman Abdulmajid (USA),  
6 Madhubala, Mumtaz and Shabana Azmi (India).

7 To get a glimpse into the vast world of Muslim women writers of fiction we  
8 start with Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (Begum Rokeya) who championed  
9 women's rights in colonial India. She worked on improving education for  
10 women and wrote imaginative fiction, including a distinctive work of science  
11 fiction. Another outstanding female physician-writer was the intrepid Nawal  
12 El-Saadawi, who fought against dictatorial rule and misogyny and penned a  
13 series of fabulous works of fiction and non-fiction.

14 A sampling of these writers (alphabetically listed by last name) with their  
15 focus and one work is: Randa Abdel-Fattah (Palestine), *The Lines We Cross*;  
16 Leila Aboulela (UK), *The Kindness of Enemies*; Susan Abulhawa (Palestine),  
17 *Mornings In Jenin*; Layla Al-Ammar (Kuwait), *The Pact We Made*; *Monica Ali*  
18 *(UK), Brick Lane*; Amani Al-Khatahtbeh (USA), *Muslim Girl: A Coming of Age*;  
19 Rajaa Alsanea (Saudi Arabia), *Girls of Riyadh*; Hala Alyan (Palestine), *Salt*  
20 *Houses*; Tahmima Anam (Bangladesh), *The Good Muslim*; Fatima Farheen  
21 Mirza *(India), A Place for Us*; Isabella Hammad (France), *The Parisian*; *Zahra*  
22 *Hankir (UK), Our Women On The Ground*; Nadia Hashimi (Afghanistan), *The*  
23 *Pearl That Broke Its Shell*; Rajia Hassib (Egypt), *A Pure Heart*; Nandini Islam  
24 *(Bangladesh), Bright Lines*; Sheba Karim (USA), *That Thing We Call A Heart*;  
25 Porochista Khakpour (Iran), *The Last Illusion*; Ausma Zehanat Khan  
26 *(Kosovo), The Unquiet Dead*; Hena Khan (Pakistan), *Amina's Song*; Uzma  
27 Aslam Khan (Pakistan), *The Geometry of God*; Mariam Khan (UK), *It's Not*  
28 *About The Burqa*; Laila Lalami (Morocco), *The Other Americans and The*  
29 *Moor's Account*; Shereen Malherbe (Palestine), *Jasmine Falling*; Ayisha  
30 Malik (Pakistan), *This Green and Pleasant Land*; Azar Nafisi (Iran), *Reading*  
31 *Lolita in Tehran*; Dina Nayeri (Iran), *The Ungrateful Refugee*; Azareen Van  
32 der Vliet Oloomi (France), *Call Me Zebra*; Zainab Salbi (Iraq), *Between Two*  
33 *Worlds*; Marjane Satrapi (Iran), *The Complete Persepolis*; Elif Shafak  
34 *(Turkey), Three Daughters of Eve*; Leila Slimani (France), *The Perfect Nanny*;  
35 Zeba Talkhani (India), *My Past Is A Foreign Country*; Jasmine Warga (Syria),  
36 *Other Words for Home*; G Willow Wilson (USA), *Alif, The Unseen*.

37 In 1991, 35% of all students in BSc programs in Arab states were women.  
38 The academic staff of the medical schools in Egypt in 1995 was 30% female.  
39 Female representation in science, medicine and other fields across the  
40 Islamic worlds gets larger by the day. Currently, in Iran some 60% of the  
41 students in undergraduate and master's level programs in Physics are  
42 female, and about half of the Physics PhD degree candidates are female. The  
43 barriers facing Muslim women are not lack of talent or skill, but social  
44 obstacles that deny them equal opportunities.

## 8.20 ISLAMIC SOCIALISM

1  
2 Many anticolonial struggles of the 20th century were influenced by socialist  
3 ideas. Parties with a socialist or Marxist program were established in some  
4 colonies and some intellectuals became renowned socialist theoreticians.  
5 Political philosophies that blended local traditions with socialist ideas also  
6 emerged, for example African Socialism in Africa, Arab Socialism in the Arab  
7 nations, and Islamic Socialism in Muslim nations.

8 Islamic Socialism is based on the notion that the Quran and the teachings  
9 of Prophet Mohamed are consonant with building a society that gives equal  
10 opportunities in life to everyone, are particularly sensitive towards assisting  
11 the poor and downtrodden, and offer a realistic middle path between Western  
12 capitalism and Soviet communism. Among the major theoreticians of Islamic  
13 Socialism were Ubaidullah Sindhi, Hafiz R Sihwarwl, Ghulam A Parvez and  
14 Dr Khalifa A Hakim, Hanif Ramay, Muhammad Iqbal (India and Pakistan),  
15 Michel Aflaq and Salah ad-Din al-Bitar (Syria), Ali Shariati (Iran) and Tan  
16 Malaka (Indonesia).

17 In contrast to conservative Islamic scholars, they argued that not just  
18 Western but specifically capitalist ideas had polluted Muslim societies. Islam  
19 and capitalism were incompatible since the Quran proscribed injustice and  
20 inequality. Charity and taxation (*zakat*), a pillar of Islam, were devices to  
21 bridge the gap between the rich and the poor.

22  
23 *The clergy and conservative ulema have hijacked Islam. They*  
24 *are agents of the rich people and promoters of uncontrolled*  
25 *Capitalism. Socialism best enforces Quranic dictums on*  
26 *property, justice and distribution of wealth. Islam's main*  
27 *mission was the eradication of all injustices and cruelties from*  
28 *society. It was a socio-economic movement, and the Prophet*  
29 *was a leader seeking to put an end to the capitalist exploitation*  
30 *of the Quraysh merchants and the corrupt bureaucracy of*  
31 *Byzantium and Persia. Ghulam A Parvez (Paracha 2013).*

32  
33 Some Islamic socialist theoreticians said that the *Hadiths* deviated, in spirit if  
34 not in fact, from the essence of the Quran, and had become instruments of  
35 domination by authoritarian rulers. Along with the Sharia law, which was  
36 derived from them, the *Hadiths* should be discarded by Muslims.

37  
38 *A socialist path is a correction of the medieval distortion of*  
39 *Islam through Sharia. Ghulam A Parvez (Paracha 2013).*

40  
41 They proposed that Muslim states should abolish feudal practices, institute  
42 land reform, nationalize banks and major firms, establish state enterprises,  
43 plan the economy, expand free public education with emphasis on science,  
44 use economic planning, involve workers and people in running economic  
45 entities, provide free health care to all and have democratic governance. The  
46 state should not control or interfere in religious affairs. Islamic Socialism has

1 much in common with African Socialism; both are akin to the British Fabian  
2 socialist doctrine and the concept of a democratic welfare state.

3  
4 **Sir Muhammad Iqbal** was a leading poet, philosopher and freedom activist  
5 in colonial India in the first quarter of the 20th century. His advocacy of a  
6 separate state for the Muslims of India was instrumental in the foundation of  
7 Pakistan. His vast compendium of spiritual, Islamic, patriotic, philosophical  
8 motivational, historical and romantic poems and couplets captured millions of  
9 hearts. Many of his poems remain popular in the Hindi and Urdu speaking  
10 worlds, and a number have been translated into other languages.

11 Iqbal was an Islamic socialist. Excoriating capitalism, landlordism and  
12 imperial domination without reservation, he viewed socialism as a moral and  
13 spiritual doctrine. Islam was a socialistic faith because:

14  
15 *[it] visualizes a democratic fraternity of dignified individuals,*  
16 *conscious of divine guidance and a centralized welfare*  
17 *organization, with sufficient scope for individual initiative in*  
18 *thought and action, subject to the limits imposed by the Islamic*  
19 *shariah. (Lone 2019).*

20  
21 Iqbal was familiar with the works of Karl Marx and generally agreed with the  
22 Marxian critique of market capitalism. He labelled *Das Capital*, the 'bible of  
23 Socialism,' but in contrast to Marx, he held that socialism should be attained  
24 by love and solidarity, not class struggle. His elegant poems on socialism and  
25 capitalism praised and criticized the Marxian perspective in the same breadth.  
26 In one, he critiqued Marx for overly attending to material forces and sidelining  
27 spirituality.

28  
29 *The author of 'capital' comes of the tribe of Abraham,*  
30 *He is a prophet, without Gabriel.*  
31 *For, in his error there is a hidden truth,*  
32 *With the heart he is a Fidel, with the brain a heretic.*  
33 *The people of the West have lost the heaven,*  
34 *They seek the pure spirit (soul) in the stomach.*  
35 *The pure spirit does not receive color and fragrance from the body,*  
36 *But socialism has no concern other than with the body.*  
37 *The religion of this prophet who does not know the truth,*  
38 *Is founded on the equality of stomach.*

39 Muhammad Iqbal (Lone 2019).

40  
41 Yet, Iqbal sympathized with the socialist struggles in Russia. He regarded the  
42 1917 revolution in Russia as a victory for working people everywhere, saying  
43 that in severing the chains of capitalism and Tsarist oppression, it was the  
44 dawn of a new order. But he opposed the Stalinist regime that ruled Russia  
45 after the death of Lenin. Iqbal influenced the introduction of welfare state  
46 policies in later day Pakistan.



1  
2 **Hadji-Ali Abelkader** was an Algerian thinker and activist who played a key  
3 role in the leftist struggles in France in the 1920. A prominent member of the  
4 French Communist Party and the main trade union confederation in France,  
5 he also struggled to launch a worker union and a communist party spanning  
6 the North African region. He argued that communists in the West should pay  
7 as much attention to the national liberation struggles as they did to the  
8 emancipation of the working class.

9 Despite adopting Marxism as his guiding political philosophy, Hadji-Ali  
10 was a practicing Muslim throughout his life, and implored communists to  
11 adopt a non-dogmatic position towards Islam. They should recognize that  
12 French imperialism was based on denigration of traditional culture, including  
13 Islam. They should oppose arbitrary colonial restrictions on Islamic practices.  
14 Their secular disposition notwithstanding, the French left should not go along  
15 with imposing an external vision on other people. They can disagree and  
16 educate, but people have the right to national and cultural self-determination.

17  
18 +++++  
19

20 Many political parties and leaders who assumed power after the removal of  
21 formal colonial rule had progressive anti-imperialist and socialist leanings. It  
22 was the case in Muslim and non-Muslim nations. In the former, the uptake of  
23 socialist ideas included, in diverse ways, Islamic Socialism. The prominent  
24 leaders in this vein were Gamal A Nasser (Egypt), Saddam Hussein (Iraq),  
25 Hafez al-Assad (Syria), Ahmed Ben Bella (Algeria), Salim R Ali (Yemen),  
26 Muammar Gadhafi (Libya), Jaafar Nimeiry (Sudan), Mohamed Siad Barre  
27 (Somalia), Mohammad Mossadegh (Iran), Sukarno (Indonesia), Zulfikar A  
28 Bhutto (Pakistan), and Nur M Taraki and Babrak Karmal (Afghanistan).

29 These leaders instituted radical reforms of the inherited colonial setup,  
30 unified the nation, nationalized major companies, implemented welfare state  
31 policies, improved the social status of women, sought economic assistance  
32 from the USSR and China, and supported Pan-Islamic and Third World  
33 solidarity organizations. They stridently opposed the Israeli oppression of the  
34 Palestinian people, the Apartheid regime in South Africa and gave material  
35 and diplomatic assistance to anti-colonial movements in Africa and across the  
36 globe. Their policy pronouncements were often colored with Islamic  
37 references.

38 In the early years of their rule, a fair degree of progress on the economic,  
39 educational, health and social arenas occurred. In places like Libya and Iraq,  
40 the standard of living improved dramatically. In several nations, a liberal  
41 discourse on Islam and its social role occurred. But eventually, all of them  
42 were undone in varied ways through prevarication and corruption among the  
43 senior state officials, flawed implementation of announced policies, inability  
44 to disengage from the global capitalist system and its financial agencies,  
45 imperial machinations and military interventions, and loss of public support.  
46 Purgings and persecution of radical socialists and harsh suppression of the

1 opposition undermined their base. Some of the erstwhile Islamic socialists  
2 (like Siad Barre and Nimeiry) later became firmly ensconced within the US  
3 economic and military fold, while Gadhafi and Saddam Hussein were ejected  
4 from power by brutal Western military invasions.

5 Though it has lost its earlier import, the debate on whether Islam is more  
6 compatible with socialism or capitalism continues to some extent, particularly  
7 among the youth disenchanted by modern neo-liberalism. Thus Akyol (2021)  
8 holds that Islam is compatible with capitalism because Islamic empires were  
9 based on a free-market economy, not planned economies. He argues that  
10 while the Quran emphasizes social justice, it takes the existence of rich and  
11 poor for granted and supports the right to private property and inheritance.  
12 Noting that *zakat* is not collectivization of wealth but tax-cum-charity to assist  
13 the poor, he points out that the Prophet was a trader who cherished trading  
14 and, when he took command, refused to fix market prices.

15 On the other side, Hassanein (2020) states that Islam and socialism are  
16 compatible because both uphold human equality and equal rights. Noting that  
17 the Constitution of Medina drafted by Prophet Muhammad established an  
18 orderly civil society with emphasis on communal responsibility and care for  
19 all, he claims that Abu Bakr, the first Muslim Caliph, provided guaranteed  
20 basic income to all within his dominion and Omar ibn al-Khattab, the second  
21 Muslim Caliph, established a welfare state with a wide range of benefits for  
22 all strata in society. He holds that the obligatory 2.5% *zakat* payment is a  
23 device to prevent hoarding of wealth, and that by banning interest, Islamic law  
24 protects people from exploitation by financial institutions.

25 Such debates have transpired for other major religions too. It is interesting  
26 that the two sides examine the same history and scriptures but draw opposite  
27 conclusions.

## 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46

### 8.21 REFLECTIONS

31 Islam is the religion based on the beliefs that Allah, the all-powerful, most-  
32 merciful supreme being created and controls the universe; Muhammad was  
33 the last prophet sent to earth by Allah; and the Quran is the infallible book  
34 revealed to Prophet Muhammad to guide humans. The five pillars of Islamic  
35 conduct are faith in Allah, loyalty to Prophet Muhammad, compassion and  
36 charity, fasting during Ramadhan and pilgrimage to Mecca. Muslims believe  
37 in the day of judgment and Heaven and Hell. They subscribe to the *Hadiths*,  
38 which relate the example set by the Prophet and elaborate upon the Quranic  
39 teachings.

40 As the second largest religion in the world, Islam is the source of spiritual  
41 support, a guide to moral conduct and a provider of meaning to life for  
42 hundreds of millions. Over fifty nations are Muslim majority nations and large  
43 Muslim minorities exist in several nations.

44 Muslims are divided into two major denominations, Sunni and Shia. The  
45 latter believe that Ali, the son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad and his direct  
46 descendants (Imams) are spiritual beings empowered by Allah to guide

1 Muslims. There are four major schools of law (Sharia law) in Islam and many  
2 Muslims identify with one of the two principal Islamic philosophical traditions:  
3 Sufism and Salafism.

4 Soon after its birth, Islam became the ideological basis for unifying the  
5 hitherto unstable Middle Eastern region under a single Caliph, and rapidly  
6 expanded its domain to North Africa, Spain, India and beyond. The early  
7 Islamic empires represented elaborate systems of governance and were the  
8 global centers of economic and technological development, trade, science,  
9 mathematics, architecture, art, philosophical discourse and more. They also  
10 provided an atmosphere of tolerance and inclusiveness unparalleled in those  
11 times. But especially after the 15th century, imposition of Western imperial  
12 domination and internal disarray propelled a long term decline of Islamic rule.  
13 Despite formal independence, the deleterious effects of that history persist to  
14 this day in most Muslim majority nations.

15 Like in the Bible, the Quran has moral and ethical injunctions that are not  
16 always consistent. They concern, for example, slavery and the status of  
17 women. But overall, the ethical code in Islam is similar to that found in the  
18 other major religions. But there are differences in some practical matters like  
19 consumption of halal foods and alcohol.

20 Historically, Islam has served both as the faith of the downtrodden and as  
21 a doctrine at the service of the rulers. In the colonial era and at present, there  
22 have been Islamic organizations and political parties with progressive as well  
23 as retrogressive agendas. Some Islamic parties have allied with imperial  
24 powers and authoritarian regimes, and some Islamic parties have struggled  
25 for national liberation and representative governance. Islam has been linked  
26 with tolerant, liberal governance and with genocidal and terrorist movements.

27 Currently, Muslims in several Asian states face draconian suppression  
28 and even genocide, and Islamophobia has spread in an epidemic fashion in  
29 the West and elsewhere. On the one hand, as the extremist Wahhabi school  
30 spreads its tentacles, a minority of extremists are adopting terrorist tactics,  
31 the strife between Shia and Sunni Muslims intensifies, and Sufism faces more  
32 attacks. Harsh attitudes towards blasphemy prevail. The secularists, in  
33 particular, face extreme danger in some Muslim nations. Yet, many youth in  
34 the Muslim communities are adopting secular ideas and rejecting the  
35 orthodox Islamic doctrines. Muslims communities generally have a long way  
36 to go to assure the issue of equality of women in social and economic life and  
37 religious affairs. The progress on this front is slow and is at times marked by  
38 setbacks arising from expansion of Salafist tendencies. Like in Christian  
39 communities, the problem of sexual abuse of children and women by priests  
40 and in the home needs more serious investigation and control.

41 The future of Islam as a moral vision will depend on the stand and actions  
42 Muslims will take on the grave problems confronting humanity today: poverty,  
43 inequality, authoritarian rule, militarism, race and sex discrimination, cultural  
44 intolerance, nationalistic and religious extremism, climate change, species  
45 extinction. Will Muslims join hands with other religious and secular forces to

1 tackle these problems? Will they remain in harmony with neo-liberalism or will  
2 they gravitate towards a humane, socialistic framework?

3 It is imperative the Muslims act as members of a single human family and  
4 dispel the unedifying verdict cast on them by a champion of human rights who  
5 was also astute scholar of religions.

6  
7 *The brotherhood of Islam is not*  
8 *the universal brotherhood of man.*  
9 *It is the brotherhood of Muslims for Muslims only.*

10 Bhimrao R Ambedkar

11  
12 The Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change issued from the  
13 International Islamic Climate Change Symposium held in Istanbul, Turkey in  
14 August 2015 shows a way forward. Drafted by Islamic experts in engineering,  
15 environmental studies, wildlife protection, bioethics, theology, philosophy and  
16 Islamic history, the Declaration invokes the authority of the Quran and the  
17 *Hadiths* to lay out a comprehensive, science-based environmental protection  
18 policy that will focus on phasing out greenhouse emissions, utilization of non-  
19 polluting energy sources, remodel the existent profit-oriented financial system  
20 and limit consumption while avoiding harm to marginalized and poor peoples.

21  
22 *He raised the heaven and established the balance*  
23 *so that you would not transgress the balance.*  
24 *Give just weight – do not skimp in the balance.*  
25 *He laid out the earth for all living creatures.*

26 Quran 55: 7-10

27  
28 Affirming the overwhelming consensus statements of the climate scientists  
29 and with support from twenty global Muslim leaders, the Declaration calls  
30 upon Muslims and everyone to recognize that:

31  
32 *We human beings are created to serve the Lord of all beings,*  
33 *to work the greatest good we can for all the species,*  
34 *individuals, and generations of God's creatures. (IFEES 2015).*

35  
36 Muslims across the world need to reject narrow-minded, conservative and  
37 exclusionary ideas and align themselves with such bold, enlightened and  
38 inclusive visions and join hands with the rest of humanity to assure peace,  
39 dignity, equality and environmental sustainability in this world. Else, the moral  
40 authority of their faith may not be sustainable.

41

# CHAPTER 09: SECULARISM



*I am a deeply religious nonbeliever –  
this is a somewhat new kind of religion.*

Albert Einstein

*Humanism is the only –  
I would go so far as saying the final –  
resistance we have against the inhuman practices  
and injustices that disfigure human history.*

Edward Said

*Man makes religion;  
Religion does not make man.*

Karl Marx



THE TERM SECULARISM HAS two meanings: (i) It is a political philosophy that regards religion and state as separate domains. In a secular state, religious beliefs and practices do not determine law or intrude into public institutions, state policy and public education. A secular state guarantees the freedom of religion and non-religion but maintains neutrality towards all faith systems. In contrast, in a theocracy, a particular religion influences public policy and law. (ii) It is an umbrella term for disbelief in divine beings, realms and events. A secularist does not follow an established religion. The terms non-religious and irreligious are often used interchangeably with secularism. Unless stated otherwise, we use secularism in the second sense of the term and define it as:

**Secularism** is a system of beliefs and practices shared by a community that (i) does not accept the existence of supernatural being(s) and/or supernatural realms, and (ii) regards reason and science as the venues for discovering the truth about nature and society.

1 Secularism has two strands. **Atheism** outrightly rejects the existence of divine  
2 entities while **agnosticism** maintains a neutral stand - their existence or non-  
3 existence has not been or cannot be proved or disproved. Secularists have  
4 different specific beliefs and values, and adorn varied labels such as agnostic,  
5 atheist, secularist, freethinker, humanist, irreligious, naturalist, non-religious,  
6 non-theist, non-believer, rationalist, skeptic, spiritual but not religious, and  
7 nothing in particular. Their relationships with religion are also not uniform.

8 **Humanism**, a more organized form of secularism, has a large following.  
9 It is a secularist outlook which holds that morality can and does exist without  
10 religion. Aptly put, '*Goodness can exist without God*'. An internationally  
11 recognized definition of Humanism appears in the Amsterdam Declaration  
12 issued by the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) in 2002.

13  
14 *Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance which*  
15 *affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to*  
16 *give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the*  
17 *building of a more humane society through an ethic based on*  
18 *human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free*  
19 *inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does*  
20 *not accept supernatural views of reality.*

21 The Amsterdam Declaration 2002.

22  
23 We use the following definition of humanism.

24  
25 ***Humanism** is a system of beliefs and practices shared by a*  
26 *community that does not accept the existence of supernatural*  
27 *beings or supernatural realms, has humane ethical norms of*  
28 *human origin and regards reason and science as the venues*  
29 *for discovering the truth about nature and society.*

30  
31 Humanism is the highest form of secularism. An atheist or an agnostic is of  
32 necessity a secularist. But he or she may not subscribe to all the tenets of  
33 humanism.

34 A global survey conducted in 2015 revealed that one out of six persons  
35 was not affiliated with any religious faith. Out of the world population of 7.5  
36 billion, the non-affiliated block had 1.8 billion people. But this vast group does  
37 not constitute a unified entity. The number of self-identified humanists across  
38 the world are estimated as somewhere between 4 to 5 million, that is, less  
39 than 0.1% of the global population. The proportion of humanists shows  
40 significant variation across nations. But such low numbers are not consistent  
41 with global estimates of non-believers that reach 1.8 billion. The inconsistency  
42 in large part is due to the type of questions posed in the survey, reluctance to  
43 openly identify as secularist and non-inclusion of nations like China in many  
44 surveys. More detailed within-nation surveys indicate that *de facto* humanists  
45 globally number in the hundreds of millions.

1 This chapter explores the history, character, key personalities and social  
2 function of secularism and its three major strands—atheism, agnosticism and  
3 humanism—together with their relationship to religion. It is important to bear  
4 in mind that the literature lacks uniformity in the usage of these terms. We  
5 look at three questions on secularism-cum-humanism: Whether it is a religion,  
6 whether it can provide a moral anchor to individuals and society, and what is  
7 its function in human psychology, history and society.  
8  
9

## 10 **9.1 ORIGIN**

11  
12  
13 Attitudes towards religion in all cultures, past and present, have spanned a  
14 spectrum. One, there are the devout believers (fundamentalists) who see in  
15 every tenet of their faith an absolutely true revelation from a divine power and  
16 scrupulously adhere to the decreed practices. In their eyes, only their religion  
17 counts; all else is sinful. Two, there are people who formally identify with a  
18 religion, more or less accept its tenets, and to a degree, partake in its rites  
19 and ritual. More tolerant of other faiths, they do not view a compromise on an  
20 aspect of the doctrine as a betrayal and do not defend their faith zealously.  
21 Three, there are people who maintain a neutral stand on religious belief  
22 (agnostics). They regard divine powers or supernatural domains to be  
23 marginal to human affairs and abstain from theological discourse. Four, there  
24 are skeptics (atheists) who regard religion is an outcome of cultural history.  
25 They claim that stories about supernatural realms and divine beings arose to  
26 serve psychological and social purposes. But they acknowledge the social  
27 utility of religious belief in certain circumstances. And five, there are fervent  
28 skeptics (activist atheists) who deem religion a harmful, unscientific doctrine  
29 and practice that ought to be relegated to museums.

30 Thinkers critiquing the prevailing faith have existed in most cultures where  
31 religion flourished. But no specific person can be credited as the founder of  
32 secularism, humanism or any of its strands.

33 The Indian Caravaka and Lokayata schools that have existed from the  
34 Vedic era dispensed with divine beings, eternal souls and did not accept the  
35 authority of the Vedas. Instead, they stressed pursuit of knowledge through  
36 reasoning and investigation. Original works from these traditions do not exist  
37 and the degree of their disbelief is open to question. The Confucian and Taoist  
38 traditions in China formulated secular codes of ethics under which rulers and  
39 citizens were autonomous beings who bore responsibility for their conduct.  
40 While they discarded beliefs in ghosts, life after death and superstition, they  
41 utilized ideas like divine mandates and heavenly realms in their philosophical  
42 formulations.

43 Buddhism was born as a non-theistic philosophy, a path to ease suffering  
44 and attain enlightenment via righteous thought, conduct and compassion.  
45 Yet, while rejecting the ideas of soul and a supreme power, it allowed for  
46 rebirth and hellish realms. Jainism takes a similar stand on divine creation

1 and rebirth. It too stresses non-violence and simple living as paths to spiritual  
2 exaltation. Zoroastrianism accepts the presence of an omnipotent being yet  
3 says that people have the capacity to make autonomous ethical judgements.  
4 People, not divinities, are responsible for their own conduct.

5 Available evidence suggests that disbelief in divinities and worlds beyond  
6 in the distant past was usually of a partial nature. However, since what we  
7 know is mostly from writings of religious scholars, the actual story remains  
8 unknown.

9 Ancient Greek society was inundated with rituals involving many deities.  
10 Legends referring to heavenly domains permeated the popular psyche. Yet,  
11 rational, logical inquiry into human and natural affairs received their prime  
12 impetus in those times. Thales, Democritus, Pythagoras, Aristotle, Socrates  
13 and Archimedes, among others, formulated ideas and modes of reasoning  
14 that laid the ground for the eventual development of the scientific method.  
15 Apart from polymaths like Archimedes, Greek science was constrained by  
16 preference for deductive reasoning over empirical inquiry. The emphasis on  
17 rational thought provided an environment in which several philosophers cast  
18 doubt on the tales of the gods and goddesses of Greek mythology.

19 Diagoras of Melos, who lived about 400 years before the birth of Jesus  
20 Christ, is generally deemed the premier atheist of the Greek era. He is  
21 particularly known for his pointed dissection of theological thinking. Thus,  
22 when asked why there were many portraits of ships that had survived storms  
23 after those on board had prayed to gods, he responded by asking why  
24 portraits of ships that had sunk during storms were not on display. Noting the  
25 abundance of acts of immorality, he queried how gods can protect morality.  
26 He also disputed the usual line that invoked godly intervention as an  
27 explanation for all phenomena and emphasized the role of reason in  
28 interpreting them. As that was too much for the good citizens to swallow, he  
29 was chastised and banished from Athens.

30 Melos had company. Thinkers like Anaxagoras, Epicurus, Euhemeros,  
31 Protagoras, Thucydides and Xenophanes assailed Greek religious rituals,  
32 and beliefs about how gods related to the kings, the tradition of envisioning  
33 gods in anthropic forms and assigning them extraordinary powers. Epicurus,  
34 for example, proposed that humans could have happy, fulfilling lives through  
35 peaceful friendly relationships, seeking knowledge, simplicity and control of  
36 anxiety. Gods were not necessary. Some thinkers noted the social utility of  
37 inducing fear of gods. Yet, the atheistic views of the Greek rationalists had  
38 limitations.

39  
40 *We have solid evidence for the existence of people in ancient*  
41 *Greece who criticized certain aspects of traditional Greek*  
42 *religion and we even have solid evidence for the existence of*  
43 *people in ancient Greece who might be termed 'agnostics,' but*  
44 *we have no clear, unambiguous, contemporary historical*  
45 *evidence for the existence of people in ancient Greece who*



1            *outright denied the existence of all deities altogether.*  
2            (McDaniel 2019).

3  
4    A marked degree of tolerance towards other religions existed under several  
5    Islamic caliphates in the Middle East, North Africa and Spain, and the Moghul  
6    Empire in India. Their rulers allotted extensive resources to scientific and  
7    philosophical inquiry, valued translation of ancient texts and original writing,  
8    and built libraries housing hundreds of thousands of volumes. Under royal  
9    patronage, scholars—Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian—worked side  
10   by side and investigated, discovered, debated and produced a large body of  
11   new and translated literature in disciplines relating to the natural, social,  
12   medical and religious matters. Arabic was the main language of science  
13   across nations in that era.

14  
15            *The brand of Islam between the beginning of the ninth and the*  
16            *end of the 11th century was one that promoted a spirit of free*  
17            *thinking, tolerance and rationalism.* (Al-Khalili 2008).

18  
19    In this atmosphere of free thought and candor, some scholars ventured into  
20    critical scrutiny of Islamic religious beliefs and tenets. And some espoused  
21    mild to moderate forms of atheism and humanism. The ability to reason, they  
22    held, enabled humans to demarcate right from wrong without supernatural  
23    intervention. Morality was an intrinsic human trait. Directing their criticism at  
24    Islam, Judaism and Christianity, they did not contest the existence of God but  
25    disputed the view that God had used prophets to convey his wisdom to  
26    people. Meticulously dissecting the holy books of these faiths, they brought  
27    to light the numerous inconsistencies within and between them. Miraculous  
28    events defied common sense. As such, they dismissed them in the same  
29    manner as claims about sorcery and magic. Stories about angels were seen  
30    as myths. They also held that religious rituals such those done during the Hajj  
31    were cultural acts that had little spiritual significance.

32            Ibn al-Muqaffa—a distinguished Persian-Islamic writer, translator and  
33            philosopher of the early Abbasid era—was particularly dismayed by the strife  
34            between religions. Arguing that there was no cause to view any religion as  
35            the most elevated, he favored equal treatment and protection for all people.  
36            Emphasizing critical reflection of religious beliefs, he said people should have  
37            the freedom to choose religion rather than be made to submit to the faith they  
38            were born into. But he did not voice doubts about the existence of God. He  
39            was later executed, not due to his iconoclastic position, but due to political  
40            discord with the Caliph.

41            Jaber Ibn Hayyan—a pioneering chemist, developer of the scientific  
42            method and philosopher, also of the Abbasid era—represented a group of  
43            scholars who wrote a series of books relating to science, cosmology,  
44            medicine and philosophy. Dabbling in esoteric matters such as numerology,  
45            astrology and mysticism, they also speculated about the creation of life in the

1 laboratory. As such ideas transcended what was acceptable in the prevailing  
2 discourse, they were regarded as non-believers.

3 Other poets, philosophers, scientists, Sufi mystics—Abu Alaa al-Maarri,  
4 Abu Nuwas, Omar Khayyam—cast doubt on prevailing beliefs and customs,  
5 and emphasized the primacy of human beings in the creation of moral codes.  
6 A part of an Omar Khayyam poem is illustrative:

7  
8 *Oh, threats of hell and hopes of paradise!*  
9 *One thing at least is certain: this life flies;*  
10 *One thing is certain, and the rest is lies;*  
11 *The flower that once has bloomed forever dies.*  
12 Omar Khayyam

13  
14 The scope of freethinking in Islamic societies of the past is summed up by an  
15 award-winning physicist and historian of science who also served as the chair  
16 of the British Humanist Association.

17  
18 *Many medieval Muslim thinkers pursued humanistic, rational*  
19 *and scientific discourses in their search for knowledge,*  
20 *meaning and values. A wide range of Islamic writings on*  
21 *history and philosophical theology show that medieval Islamic*  
22 *thought was open to the humanistic ideas of individualism,*  
23 *secularism, skepticism and liberalism. (Al-Khalili 2008).*  
24

25 The tolerant, inclusive Moghul rule in India under Emperor Akbar arguably  
26 made it a pioneering precursor of the modern secular state. However,  
27 subsequent Mogul rulers reverted to discrimination of other religions. Free  
28 thinking, rudimentary as it was, declined thereafter as well.  
29

## 30 31 32 **9.2 THE AGE OF REASON**

33  
34  
35 The seeds of atheism and humanism were laid around three thousand years  
36 ago in India and China. They flowered to a degree in ancient Greece and  
37 medieval Islamic empires, but a full blooming had to await the transition from  
38 feudalism to capitalism in Europe.

39 The fragmentation created by the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 CE  
40 generated a vacuum that was filled by warring states, cultural stasis and  
41 dormant economies. A highly exploitative feudal mode of production took  
42 hold. And gradually, the Catholic Church under the papacy in Rome emerged  
43 as the dominant political force exercising varying degrees of authority over  
44 local rulers.

45 After the 10th century, innovations in agriculture, crafts, and transport,  
46 growth of regional trade and standardization of languages stimulated

1 emergence of prosperous cities and towns. Mercantile capitalism evolved.  
2 Frequent grassroots rebellions countered feudal excesses. As the powers of  
3 the nobility weakened, long held beliefs and customs came under scrutiny.  
4 The Protestant Reformation, a process under which the ecclesiastical and  
5 political authority of the Bishop of Rome was critiqued, unfolded, at first by  
6 spurts and then by leaps and bounds, across Europe.

7 The changing economic environment, and the import and dissemination  
8 of works by Islamic scholars—Grecian books that they had preserved and  
9 their original contributions—laid the basis for a sustained, cumulative growth  
10 of science, technology and medicine in the European nations. As fields like  
11 Astronomy, Biology, Chemistry, Physics and Geology established firmer  
12 footing, beliefs held inviolable by the Catholic Church fell under a cloud of  
13 suspicion.

14 Yet, the Catholic hierarchy remained obdurate. What did not accord with  
15 the official doctrine was declared heretical. Books were banned. The Holy  
16 Inquisition and associated tribunals put on trial hundreds of thousands of  
17 Jews, Muslims, Protestants, scientists and so-called witches for alleged  
18 transgressions of Christian teachings. Thousands were tortured and burnt  
19 alive. Giordano Bruno, a brilliant astronomer, mathematician, poet and  
20 philosopher suffered this fate for declaring, on the basis of available data but  
21 contrary to Church dogma, that the Sun, not the Earth, was at the center of  
22 the solar system. Galileo, another distinguished scientist who espoused the  
23 same theory, was placed under house arrest.

24 As the feudal order was gradually transformed at the root, the secular and  
25 theological authority of the Church waned. Democratic institutions slowly  
26 displaced monarchical rule. Concomitant developments in all the branches of  
27 science fueled the rise, under disparate guises, of a worldview doubting that  
28 blessings of a divine power were indispensable for order and morality.  
29 Rationality began to displace faith as the driving intellectual engine. This  
30 outlook gained a firmer footing across Europe in the 18th century, the Age of  
31 Reason.

32 Our understanding of natural phenomena, from the microstructure of  
33 matter to the motion of heavenly bodies, from the physiology of plants and  
34 animals to evolution of life, from different forms of energy and motion to the  
35 properties of elements and molecules was revolutionized by the monumental  
36 discoveries of a succession of mathematicians, scientists and thinkers—  
37 Roger Bacon, Tycho Brahe, Nicolaus Copernicus, John Dalton, Charles  
38 Darwin, Rene Descartes, Leonhard Euler, Michael Faraday, Fibonacci, Pierre  
39 de Fermat, Carl Friedrich Gauss, William Harvey, Heinrich Hertz, Robert  
40 Hooke, Isaac Newton, Johannes Kepler, Antoine Lavoisier, Antonie van  
41 Leeuwenhoek, Carolus Linnaeus, Ada Lovelace, James Clerk Maxwell,  
42 Gregor Mendel, Dmitri Mendeleev, William of Ockham, Alessandro Volta,  
43 Alfred Wallace, James Watt and others. Science spawned, and in turn, was  
44 stimulated by technological breakthroughs. Industrial production rose  
45 prodigiously. Capitalism became the dominant mode of production.

1 The Age of Reason stood on the foundation of an emergent vision of life  
2 and a new political reality. Scholars dissected ethics, morality, existence,  
3 meaning of life, essence of knowledge and truth, role of religion and validity  
4 of religious belief in painstaking, critical, systematic ways. Intellectual effort,  
5 not perusing holy texts, was seen as the pathway to enlightenment. Not just  
6 the Catholic beliefs but Christianity as such came under rational inquiry and  
7 was found wanting. We look at three rationalists of this era.

8  
9 **Voltaire** was a French rationalist whose caustic satire pummeled intolerant,  
10 absolutist political and religious authorities as well as thinkers who justified  
11 the existing state of affairs. A vocal proponent of civil liberties, freedom of  
12 speech and freedom of religion, he promoted the disassociation of the church  
13 and state. His most popular work, *Candide*, is a novella about a decent, naive  
14 young man who has been taught by an eminent professor that he lives in the  
15 best of possible worlds. But as he makes his way through life, he encounters  
16 a plethora of daunting tribulations as well as horror-filled events and settings  
17 that ultimately shatter that optimistic vision. First published in 1759, the witty,  
18 engrossing work lampoons, in a thinly veiled style, the powerful institutions of  
19 society—church, government and military—and prominent theologians and  
20 secular thinkers. Simultaneous translations into major languages and  
21 publication in three European countries facilitated a wide readership. But the  
22 officialdom was not amused. Declared heretical and treasonable and banned  
23 in many places, it circulated beneath the surface. Regarded as an important  
24 work in Western literature and philosophy, *Candide* is now taught in many  
25 college and high school courses.

26 Voltaire expressed unease on the view held by Leibniz and personages  
27 of eminence that progress in science and governance and religion-based  
28 morality would rid humanity of civil strife, war, injustice or famine. History was  
29 complex and uncertain. To him, all propositions were subject to inquiry.  
30 Humans risk quagmire by blindly following authority:

31  
32 *Those who can make you believe absurdities*  
33 *can make you commit atrocities.*

34 Voltaire

35  
36 Voltaire did not elaborate an alternative vision beyond implying that people  
37 should seek improvements within their own microsomes. Collective struggles,  
38 he claimed usually recreated the problems of the past. In that sense, he also  
39 effectively rationalized the *status quo*.

40  
41 **Immanuel Kant:** The German philosopher Immanuel Kant formulated an  
42 intricate theory of ethics, aesthetics and knowledge which made reason the  
43 supreme arbiter. His perspicacious ruminations influenced thinkers of his day  
44 and beyond. Now regarded a star of Western philosophy, he held that every  
45 person had an endowed ability to reason. Decrying swimming with the tide,

1 he was for autonomous moral reflection, and held that subjecting held beliefs  
2 to the test of reason was the key to enlightenment and social progress.

3 The prime imperative for human conduct was the sense of duty or intrinsic  
4 moral obligation. Act as you feel duty bound to, without regard for what may  
5 ensue. Personal material or psychological gain should not be the decisive  
6 factors. His basic ethical tenet is known as the Categorical Imperative:

7  
8 *Act according to the maxim that you would wish*  
9 *all other rational people to follow,*  
10 *as if it were a universal law.*  
11 *Immanuel Kant*

12  
13 One should not be kind to gain popularity or abstain from thievery out of the  
14 fear of being caught but make such choices because of their intrinsic moral  
15 worth. His moral creed required dignified, respectful treatment of individuals,  
16 never to be used or abused as a means to an end. But he was not an atheist  
17 and accepted the existence of God and afterlife. Invoking the premise that the  
18 purpose of life was to attain happiness and ethical excellence, he claimed that  
19 these propositions were derivable by rational discourse. But now his intricate  
20 reasoning along those lines is generally disputed.

21  
22 **Baruch Spinoza**, a versatile Dutch rationalist who eschewed status, wealth  
23 and fame, and was undaunted by excommunication from Judaism has been  
24 called the Prince of (Western) Philosophy. Valuing intellectual autonomy, he  
25 earned his bread by grinding lenses and lived in modest seclusion to evade  
26 restraining institutional norms. Yet, his fame spread across Europe. From his  
27 humble abode, he actively corresponded with and had occasional visits from  
28 renowned philosophers and scientists.

29 His eminence derives from *Ethics*, his magisterial opus. Nature and God  
30 therein emerge as unitary, inseparable phenomena. Nature is God, and God  
31 is nature. And it is not the God depicted in Judaic and Christian holy books.  
32 He did not endorse divine revelation or a God who judges people according  
33 to their deeds and subjected the Bible to critical analysis. His philosophical  
34 inquiries went beyond ethics and foundation of knowledge to politics, religion  
35 and science. Distasteful of church dominated, intolerant states, he preferred  
36 secular modes of government. His atypical stand on existing theological and  
37 political doctrines ruffled official feathers. His ideas were called sacrilegious  
38 and he was branded a noxious atheist. All but one of his books, including  
39 *Ethics*, were published after his death.

40 Spinoza espoused a rationalist, rigorous, systematic method of analysis.  
41 To lend objectivity to his conclusions, he deployed the axiomatic method—  
42 step by step derivation from a set of axioms—of geometry. Nothing in nature  
43 is of accidental origin; everything has a cause or causes; change from one  
44 state to the next is governed by specific laws; there is no free will. Using this  
45 deterministic framework and a few axioms, he ‘proved’ the existence of God-  
46 cum-Nature, an entity that is also the ultimate Cause in Itself. Another tenet

1 of his philosophy is that the ethical character of a deed is to be evaluated not  
2 in abstract but within the context in which it occurred.

3 Spinoza's axioms, method and conclusions have spawned extensive  
4 critical commentary. The centrality of God-cum-Nature within Spinozism  
5 precludes it from being called an atheistic school in the modern sense of the  
6 term. Nonetheless, he continues to be heralded because of his skepticism  
7 towards the dominant religious beliefs and powers, his emphasis on reason  
8 as the basis for ethics, his attempt at rigorous derivation of human beliefs,  
9 and his liberal, secular stand on modes of governance. Spinoza departed  
10 from organized religion and converted philosophical and scientific inquiry into  
11 a modality for attaining liberation from the uncertainties and angst of life. He  
12 was a spiritual pantheist.

13  
14 +++++

15  
16 The scientists named earlier—who were not necessarily irreligious—and  
17 philosophers like Spinoza, Voltaire and Kant were among many who laid the  
18 foundation for modern atheism and humanism. Dissident theologians and  
19 priests from established religions also made a mark in this process.

20 Atheism and humanism did not emerge overnight. Nor were they invented  
21 by a single person. Like science and in association with science, these world  
22 views emerged in spurts, but cumulatively, within the ambit of a theologically  
23 pervasive social milieu to mature into the forms we encounter today.

### 24 25 **9.3 HUMANIST INSTITUTIONS**

26  
27 Secularists (atheists, agnostics and humanists) exist worldwide, but their  
28 presence varies from nation to nation. Most secularists have no institutional  
29 affiliation. Believing what they believe, they pursue their lives without linking  
30 up with others who share their beliefs. Only a minority engages in activities  
31 that promote and celebrate the secular and humanistic values and outlook.

32 Secularists are organized by local and international non-governmental  
33 associations. Spread across continents, some are a century or two old and  
34 some were born recently. They include the American Humanist Association,  
35 Atheists in Kenya Society, Council of Australian Humanist Societies, Council  
36 for Secular Humanism, Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association, Humanistic  
37 Association Netherlands, Humanist Association of Germany, Humanist  
38 Association of Ghana, Humanist Association of Ireland, Humanists UK,  
39 Humanist Canada, Indian Humanist Union, Norwegian Humanist Association,  
40 Philippine Atheists and Agnostics Society, Sapiens Foundation (India),  
41 Skeptics Society (USA) and Think Anew (Tanzania). And this is just a partial  
42 list.

43 Membership in such organizations is open to everyone but often requires  
44 payment of an annual fee. They hold conferences, discussion sessions and  
45 education programs in which members and non-members take part. Their  
46 officials comprise activist members of long standing and individuals elected

1 by the members. Many engage in social and civic work and promote human  
2 rights and women's rights, champion the cause of discriminated groups,  
3 promote religious freedom and tolerance, and work for projects to improve  
4 health, education, water and other services in poor communities. They have  
5 from below a hundred to several hundred thousand members. A few have  
6 over a million members.

7 Several international humanist bodies exist. The International Humanist  
8 and Ethical Union (IHEU), also called Humanist International, amalgamates  
9 several hundred atheistic, humanist, rationalist and related organizations from  
10 all over the world. The Amsterdam Declaration issued by the IHEU in 2002,  
11 which was unanimously accepted by its members, is now regarded as the  
12 principal document embodying the values, aims, principles of humanism. The  
13 European Humanist Federation links sixty-three similar organizations from  
14 European nations. Their focus varies from education, social activism,  
15 religious freedom, family celebration, counseling and meditation to officiating  
16 birth, marriage and death ceremonies. Atheist Alliance International and the  
17 Skeptics Society also have an international reach.

#### 18 **9.4 HUMANIST CHURCHES**

19  
20  
21 Churches, mosques and temples are more than places of worship. Besides  
22 reinforcing communal bonds, they provide childcare and educational service,  
23 counselling and food to the homeless. For some, it is a place for participation  
24 in singing and musical activities. People adorn their finest clothing for holiday  
25 service. And it is through a church, mosque or temple that families conduct  
26 birth, wedding and funeral rites. A center for worship is also a venue for joyful  
27 and needed activities as well as a source for emotional solace. An atheist who  
28 has lost a loved one may be comforted by the spiritual atmosphere of and  
29 sense of solidarity emitted through a religious funeral. Feeling that your  
30 beloved is not lost for good is an important coping mechanism. People pray  
31 for relief from economic and social problems and natural calamities. The rites  
32 associated with places of worship have millennia of traditions behind them  
33 and are deeply ingrained in the psyche of the community.

34 At first glance, the idea of a humanist church is a contradiction in terms.  
35 How can one who rejects divinities pray? But in recognition of the social role  
36 of places of worship, atheistic and humanistic 'churches' or 'temples' that  
37 serve similar functions can be envisaged.

38 Humanistic and atheistic organizations too often focus on the intellectual  
39 aspects of their vision, and deal with education, scientific insight and critical  
40 analysis of religious doctrines. They are viewed in terms of what they reject—  
41 divine piety—but not as entities with a rationale of their own.

42 That likely is a major cause for their relatively low membership. People do  
43 not get by in life just by logical reasoning. Rational and intuitive thought  
44 complement each other. Custom and camaraderie among the members are  
45 important too. Institutions that provide important services like birth, marriage,  
46 and funeral rites and community activities attract families. Recognizing this,

1 some humanist groups have established places where atheists, agnostics,  
2 free thinkers, humanists and skeptics can congregate on a regular basis with  
3 their families and find the kind of communal atmosphere and services that a  
4 church, mosque or temple provides.

5 The Seattle Atheist Church, in Seattle, USA, is an example. In an area  
6 where there are nearly 800 Christian churches, it is a unique place that holds  
7 regular Sunday services focused on humanist beliefs. Anyone can attend the  
8 sessions which are led by invited speakers and community members. After  
9 the sermon, congregants sit in circles, relish fruit juice and cookies, and  
10 discuss varied issues in a respectful manner. People come with their families.  
11 Children have a space of their own. The church activities are run by unpaid  
12 volunteers.

13 Humanist Canada, a nationwide body with chapters across Canada, is  
14 one of the few humanist organizations with a priesthood. Called officiants,  
15 they are trained to conduct personal and family services like naming a  
16 newborn, coming of age rites, marriage, divorce advice, conflict resolution  
17 and funeral ceremonies. Officiants need a sound knowledge of humanist  
18 principles, good interpersonal and communication skills and organizational  
19 ability. In some provinces, they are licensed to solemnize marriage. Similar  
20 humanist initiatives are active in the UK.

21 But such initiatives are a drop in the bucket. Even atheists are unaware  
22 of their existence. Religions have conducted these activities for centuries.  
23 Humanists have a long distance to traverse before they enlist participants in  
24 similar functions in proportion to their global or national numbers.

## 25 26 **9.5 CORE PRINCIPLES** 27

28 Humanist organizations have varying aims and statements of principles. Over  
29 the course of the last century, several manifestos were issued by national and  
30 multilateral humanist groups. Today, however, there is a single document—  
31 the Amsterdam Declaration 2002—which is accepted by most of the humanist  
32 organizations as the primary defining document for their movement. We  
33 summarize the main principles of this declaration:

34  
35 *Humanism is ethical. It affirms the worth, dignity and*  
36 *autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being*  
37 *to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of*  
38 *others.*

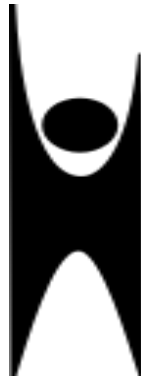
39  
40 *Humanism is a life stance aiming at the maximum possible*  
41 *fulfilment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living*  
42 *and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the*  
43 *challenges of our time. Humanism can be a way of life for*  
44 *everyone everywhere.*

45 The Amsterdam Declaration 2002.  
46



1 The Declaration emphasizes that humanists are duty bound to care for  
2 humanity, now and of the future; they need to respect the scientific approach  
3 and use science creatively to search for solutions to world's problems; they  
4 must support broad-based democracy and human rights; they should value  
5 artistic endeavors like music, literature, performing and visual arts; they  
6 should desist from depending on divine revelations for moral tenets; and they  
7 must eschew indoctrination, respect all religions, and promote non-dogmatic  
8 education for all.

9 In 1965, the International Humanist and Ethical Union adopted the Happy  
10 Human icon as its official symbol. It is now used, in varied forms, as the official  
11 icon by many humanist organizations.  
12



13  
14 The Happy Human  
15

16 The Declaration sees humanism a voluntary, ethical, rational, empathetic,  
17 equitable, rational worldview that respects humanity and nature, and enjoins  
18 personal rights with social responsibility.

19 That is humanism in theory. But what is the practice? We address this  
20 question in the following sections. We start with describing the lives, ideas  
21 and deeds of some of the modern-day luminaries of humanism.  
22

## 23 **9.6 EXEMPLARY HUMANISTS**

24  
25 Humanists are everywhere, in varied occupation and modalities of life. The  
26 April 2020 list of distinguished humanists, past and present, has 204 names.  
27 It includes eminent novelists, poets, playwrights, editors, essayists, singers,  
28 musicians, drummers, pianists, composers, actors, directors, journalists, TV  
29 stars, comedians, sports champions, academics, philosophers, physicists,  
30 biologists, geneticists, chemists, mathematicians, doctors, surgeons,  
31 engineers, inventors, computer scientists, psychologists, anthropologists,  
32 historians, economists, educationists, lawyer, judges, social, human and  
33 women's rights activists, peace activists, politicians, left-wing radicals, right  
34 wingers, military specialists, corporate moguls and high tech pioneers. The  
35 full list is:

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*Clerk Adams, Steve Allen, Woody Allen, Ralph Alpher, Nayef Al-Rodhan, Philip Warren Anderson, James J Andrews, Isaac Asimov, Michael Atiyah, AJ Atiyah, Margaret Atwood, A J Ayer, Ronnie Barker, Jeremy Bentham, John Bercow, Maria Berenice Dias, Marshall Berman, Leonard Bernstein, Niels Bohr, Hermann Bondi, Paul D Boyer, Johannes Brahms, Jacob Bronowski, Lester R Brown, Roy W Brown, Warren Buffet, Mario Bunge, Mary Calderone, Helen Caldicott, George Carlin, Anton J Carlson, Owen Chamberlain, Charlie Chaplin, Noam Chomsky, Winston Churchill, Arthur C Clarke, Auguste Comte, Aaron Copland, Andrew Copson, Brian Cox, Francis Crick, Paul J Crutzen, Marie Curie, Clarence Darrow, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Johann Deisenhofer, John Dewey, John H Dietrich, Paul Dirac, Matt Dillahunty, Baron Dubs, Ann Dunham, Roger Ebert, Umberto Eco, Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Barbara Ehrenreich, Albert Ellis, Friedrich Engels, Greg M Epstein, Richard Feynman, Joseph Fletcher, Tom Flynn, Larry Flynt, Joseph Fourier, Sigmund Freud, Betty Friedan, Jerome Isaac Friedman, Stephen Fry, R Buckminster Fuller, John Kenneth Galbraith, Murray Gell-Mann, Pierre-Gilles de Gennes, Sheldon Lee Glashow, Rebecca Goldstein, Stephen Jay Gould, AC Grayling, David Gross, Greg Graffin, Goparaju R Rao, Daniel Handler, Matt Harding, Sam Harris, Hubert Harrison, Stephen Hawking, Herbert A Hauptman, Bill Hayden, Sam Heads, Matthew Healy, Katharine Hepburn, Dudley R Herschbach, Bill Hicks, Christopher Hitchens, Pervez Hoodbhoy, Julian Huxley, Albert Jacquard, Penn Jillette, Harry Kroto, Margaret E. Kuhn, Paul Kurtz, Corliss Lamont, Norman Lear, Simon Le Bon, Stewart Lee, Yuan T Lee, Robert Lees, John Lennon, Andre Michel Lwoff, Lovato Lovati, Paul MacCready, Seth MacFarlane, Bill Maher, Ashley Montagu, Marvin Minsky, Abraham Maslow, Jonathan Meades, Jonathan Meades, Mario J Molina, R Lester Mondale, Henry Morgentaler, Hermann Joseph Muller, PZ Myers, Jawaharlal Nehru, Erwin Neher, Huey P Newton, Kathleen Nott, Gary Numan, Bill Nye, Joyce Carol Oates, J Robert Oppenheimer, Ellen Page, Linus Pauling, Neil Peart, Steven Pinker, Charles Francis Potter, Karl Popper, Sir Terry Pratchett, Ilya Prigogine, Philip Pullman, James Randi, A Philip Randolph, Curtis W Reese, Anne Rice, Oscar Riddle, Alice May Roberts, Richard J Roberts, Gene Roddenberry, Carl Rogers, Richard Rorty, Joseph Rotblat, MN Roy, Arnold Ruge, Salman Rushdie, Bertrand Russell, Carl Sagan, Edward Said, Jonas Salk, Andrei Sakharov, Margaret Sanger, Jean-Paul Sartre, John Ralston Saul, FCS Schiller, Erwin*



1 Albert Einstein is ranked by many as the greatest scientist of all time. But  
2 he was not just a physicist. He was a man of the world. Because of his Jewish  
3 background and opposition to Nazism, he had to flee Germany, the land of  
4 his birth. He spent the rest of his life in the US, where he rallied against war,  
5 fascism and use of nuclear weapons. Espousing racial equality, social justice  
6 and freedom from colonial rule, he maintained close contact with leading  
7 figures—Paul Robeson and WEB Du Bois among them—in the US civil rights  
8 movement. Likening the status of African Americans to that of Jews in Nazi  
9 Germany, he visited African American colleges, paid college tuition for Black  
10 students, participated in anti-lynching crusades and served as a character  
11 witness for activists in court cases. His letter urging noncooperation with the  
12 US Senator McCarthy’s pernicious witch hunt was a true sign of courage in  
13 perilous political circumstances.

14 Though Einstein felt a strong bond with the Jewish people and keenly  
15 empathized with the enormous suffering they had endured, especially in Nazi  
16 Germany, he adamantly opposed the Zionist program to establish an  
17 exclusive Jewish state in Palestine, and compared the tactics of the extremist  
18 Jewish parties to those used by the Nazis.

19 And there was more. Einstein in his later years was a committed socialist.  
20 In his article in the first issue of *Monthly Review*—an outlet that became the  
21 premier Marxist magazine in the US and across the world—he explained his  
22 distaste for capitalism and preference for socialism in no uncertain terms.  
23 Under the title *Why Socialism*, he wrote:

24  
25 *[Capitalism] as it exists today is, in my opinion, the real source*  
26 *of evil. I am convinced there is only one way to eliminate these*  
27 *grave evils, namely through the establishment of a socialist*  
28 *economy, accompanied by an educational system which*  
29 *would be oriented toward social goals. In such an economy,*  
30 *the means of production are owned by society itself and are*  
31 *utilized in a planned fashion. (Einstein 1949).*  
32

33 Albert Einstein’s views on religion and God were of a complexity that defies a  
34 simple label. He had no affinity with an organized religion and did not pray or  
35 take part in religious ceremonies or rituals. He did not accept the existence of  
36 an omnipotent creator God who judges humans by their deeds and punishes  
37 or rewards them. And he rejected the notions of an eternal soul and afterlife  
38 and dismissed the idea that the holy books of major religions were infallible  
39 divine revelations.

40 Yet, he jettisoned labels like atheist or pantheist to describe himself. In  
41 line with Spinoza, he adopted determinism as his basic philosophical stance.  
42 All events have sufficient causes; nothing happens by chance. A person’s  
43 decision to eat rice instead of bread is, like rain and thunder, determined by  
44 prior events. There is no free will. But while Spinoza purportedly derived the  
45 existence of an ultimate cause and identified it with God, Einstein viewed the  
46 cosmos, with its majestic, sublime features as a God-like entity. Scientific

1 inquiry, which attempts to penetrate these mysteries was, in that regard, a  
2 religious activity. He delineated three types of religious belief:

3  
4 **Religion of Fear**, that emanates from the desire to alleviate the multiple  
5 problems and uncertainties of life—illness, pain, hunger, death, natural  
6 calamities—by appeals to and appeasement of divine powers.

7  
8 **Religion of Morality**, which holds that all goodness—love, honesty,  
9 kindness, altruism—derive from divine sources, and all social and personal  
10 ills emanate from failures to uphold these values.

11  
12 **Religion of Wonder**, which derives from an innate human curiosity to inquire  
13 into the mechanisms of natural phenomena and explore the subtleties of the  
14 creations of the human mind.

15  
16 While all three forms of religion have been present in a conjoined fashion, he  
17 felt that as human society develops, and life becomes more stable the first  
18 two forms will recede and the last will acquire greater import. Morality will  
19 eventually have a secular foundation.

20  
21 *A man's ethical behavior should be based effectually on*  
22 *sympathy, education, and social ties and needs; no religious*  
23 *basis is necessary. Man would indeed be in a poor way if he*  
24 *had to be restrained by fear of punishment and hopes of*  
25 *reward after death.* (Einstein 1930).

26  
27 And he asserted an unusual integration of religion with science.

28  
29 *[The] cosmic religious feeling is the strongest and noblest*  
30  *motive for scientific research ... [and] that in this materialistic*  
31  *age of ours the serious scientific workers are the only*  
32  *profoundly religious people.* (Einstein 1930).

33  
34 Within Einstein's framework science and religion enrich each other.

35 The multi-talented, ascetic Bengali poet, writer, artist and musician  
36 Rabindranath Tagore was the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in  
37 Literature. His vast compendium of works expresses profundity, elegance,  
38 simplicity and charm that delicately conveys an unconventional commentary  
39 on the complexities and duplicities of life. He supported the Indian struggle  
40 for freedom from British colonial rule and promoted communal tolerance. His  
41 spiritual and earthly ruminations earned him global fame. Tagore approached  
42 religion in non-dogmatic, non-ritualistic, inclusive and mystical terms:

43  
44 *Religion is not a fractional thing that can be doled out in fixed*  
45  *weekly or daily measures as one among various subjects in*  
46  *the school syllabus. It is the truth of our complete being, the*



1 *scientists and other important men, to try and have our own*  
2 *question answered.*

3  
4 *We will feel greatly honored if you will answer our question:*  
5 *Do scientists pray, and what do they pray for?*

6  
7 *We are in the sixth grade, Miss Ellis's class.*

8  
9 *Respectfully yours,*  
10 *Phyllis*

11  
12 *January 24, 1936*

13 *Dear Phyllis,*

14  
15 *I will attempt to reply to your question as simply as I can. Here*  
16 *is my answer:*

17  
18 *Scientists believe that every occurrence, including the affairs*  
19 *of human beings, is due to the laws of nature. Therefore, a*  
20 *scientist cannot be inclined to believe that the course of events*  
21 *can be influenced by prayer, that is, by a supernaturally*  
22 *manifested wish.*

23  
24 *However, we must concede that our actual knowledge of*  
25 *these forces is imperfect, so that in the end the belief in the*  
26 *existence of a final, ultimate spirit rests on a kind of faith. Such*  
27 *belief remains widespread even with the current achievements*  
28 *in science.*

29  
30 *But also, everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of*  
31 *science becomes convinced that some spirit is manifest in the*  
32 *laws of the universe, one that is vastly superior to that of man.*  
33 *In this way the pursuit of science leads to a religious feeling of*  
34 *a special sort, which is surely quite different from the religiosity*  
35 *of someone more naive.*

36  
37 *With cordial greetings,*  
38 *Your A. Einstein*

39  
40 Einstein was an enigma. While espousing determinism and rejecting free will,  
41 he actively promoted peace, non-violence, and racial and economic equality  
42 and was in the advisory committee of the Humanist Society of New York.  
43 While he portrayed scientific activity in spiritual terms, he rejected the idea  
44 that science could provide a basis for constructing a code of morality. While  
45 ridiculing stories in holy books as childish, he said he was not an atheist. For  
46 him, as for Tagore, music was a deeply spiritual activity. Though the most

1 famous personality of his era, he took anonymous walks in poor  
2 neighborhoods and mingled with people. Like Tagore, he had a humble  
3 persona, embraced a simple lifestyle and emitted exquisite prose. He was a  
4 veritable supernova of humanism. Yet, he was under constant surveillance  
5 by the FBI while in the US and was subjected to a despicable campaign to  
6 smear his name, brand him as a Soviet spy and destroy his reputation.

### 7 8 **+ Bertrand Russell +** 9

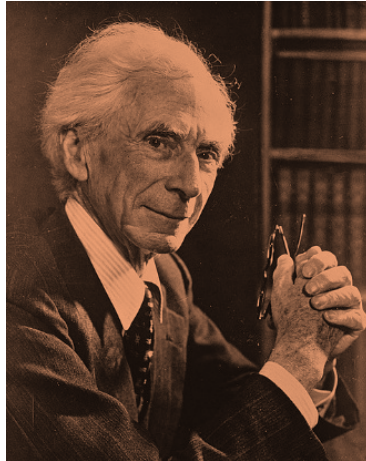
10 Born into a premier British aristocratic family and immersed into esoteric and  
11 radical ideas from an early age, Bertrand Russell bloomed into one of the  
12 most acclaimed mathematicians and philosophers of the 20th century.  
13 *Principia Mathematica*, a mammoth tome authored by him and Alfred N  
14 Whitehead, attempts to derive all of mathematics as an integrated framework  
15 from basic logical axioms. Though the project was eventually shown to be  
16 logically infeasible, its methodology and his other works mark a major point  
17 of departure in mathematical logic and analytic philosophy. Overall, his work  
18 exercised a significant influence not just in mathematics and philosophy but  
19 also in linguistics, computer science and psychology.

20 Russell, like Einstein, did not confine himself to academic pursuits. A man  
21 of conscience and integrity, he became active in social and political causes.  
22 Twice he landed behind bars: once for his strident pacifism during World War  
23 I, and next in 1961, when at the age of 88, he led a march against nuclear  
24 weapons. His activism and unorthodox views earned him a dismissal from  
25 Trinity College, the annulment of his professorship at the City College of New  
26 York and compromised his academic career. The aggressiveness of the Nazi  
27 regime tempered his anti-war stance during World War II. But as the Cold  
28 War gathered steam, he became a leading voice for nuclear disarmament  
29 and was the founder president of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament  
30 launched in 1958. A 1955 manifesto prepared by him and Albert Einstein and  
31 signed by eleven eminent scientists and scholars from capitalist and socialist  
32 nations boosted the efforts against the testing and production of nuclear  
33 weapons and led to the signing of the partial nuclear test ban treaty in 1963.  
34 He also favored admission of China into the UN and a permanent seat for  
35 China in the UN Security Council.

36 During and after the Suez Crisis of 1955, Russell opposed Western  
37 imperial interventions in the Middle East. While he had backed the  
38 establishment of a Jewish state earlier, from 1967 on he opposed Israeli  
39 aggression against Arab nations and stood up for the rights of the people of  
40 Palestine. He had also supported India's struggle against colonial rule. As the  
41 US escalated its war on Vietnam, he and Jean Paul Sartre chaired the  
42 international tribunal to investigate US acts of genocide in that brutal war.  
43 While there were a few blotches in his anti-nuclear stance and attempts to  
44 promote international cooperation during the Cold War, his overall record  
45 leaves no doubt about the side he stood on. He also served as an official of  
46 two humanist organizations in Britain.



1 Bertrand Russell's political vision encompassed promotion of peace,  
2 thoroughgoing international cooperation, democracy and Fabian socialism,  
3 cultural liberalism and educational reform. While he saw no scientific value in  
4 the ideas of Hegel and Marx, was not impressed by VI Lenin or the Russian  
5 Revolution, and firmly denounced the Stalinist regime, he deemed himself a  
6 socialist and opposed greed, hate and concentration of wealth and power.



Bertrand Russell

8  
9  
10  
11 And as if that was not enough, he was a prolific author of popular books,  
12 pamphlets, articles and newspaper letters dealing with physics, philosophy,  
13 scientific method, ethics, politics, international solidarity, education, marriage  
14 and sexuality, freedom of thought and expression, religion and other topics.  
15 His views were quite controversial at the time, and many remain so.

16 Russell garnered distinguished honors and awards for his academic and  
17 political efforts. The outstanding, accessible and sizeable character of his  
18 popular writings earned him the Nobel Prize in Literature 1950, a rare feat for  
19 a man whose major tome was readable by less than a hundred people. A  
20 topic on which he gave public lectures, debated and wrote several books and  
21 pamphlets, and which factored in his Nobel Prize, was religion.

22 Russell began to reflect on and then parted company with Christianity and  
23 religion by the age of 18. He found the usual arguments for religion and God  
24 superfluous—that an ultimate cause of all that exists has to exist; that the  
25 complexity of nature implies a designer; that religion is indispensable for  
26 morality. Like Einstein, he admired Spinoza, and did not believe in life after  
27 death or hell or divine revelations.

28 Observing that it was impossible to attain certainty on an issue like God,  
29 he viewed himself an agnostic in philosophical terms. But in practical terms,  
30 he was an atheist who refused to attend church service for any reason. He  
31 vocally critiqued the tales and rituals of dogmatic faith and rallied against the  
32 institutionalized religion. Holding that they were largely based on fear, lack of  
33 knowledge and superstition, he opined that the harmful effect of religious

1 belief overrode its beneficial effect and that religion had played a key role in  
2 fostering war, domination, cruelty and human hardships.

3 Yet, in tandem with Einstein, he did not part company with spirituality.  
4 Valuing some of the ethical tenets of Christianity, he was struck by a cosmic  
5 feeling that arises from contemplation of the mysteries of nature and life, and  
6 saw it as the basis for compassion, love and tolerance in personal and social  
7 lives.

8 Scientific excellence aside, Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell were, in  
9 words and deeds, paragons of humanism with a mystical side who exercised  
10 a profound influence on the world they lived in. Despite the horrors they had  
11 witnessed, they remained optimistic, and retained faith in science and human  
12 resolve. Both were internationalists who saw socialism as the framework for  
13 organizing society. There is a big gulf between what they stood for and what  
14 the leading lights of humanism and New Atheism of today stand for.

## 15 **9.7 HUMANISM AND RELIGION**

16  
17  
18 Is humanism a religion? What is the source of its ethics? Are humanists more  
19 or less ethical (moral) than the religious? Will humanism supplant religion?  
20 Will it morph into a rigid institutionalized creed? Will it develop into a medium  
21 for genuine human liberation and harmony, or will it become an ideology of a  
22 secular elite that controls society through advanced technology like  
23 nanotechnology, quantum computing and artificial intelligence?

24 Crucial as they are, for now only tentative, speculative responses to such  
25 questions exist. But one thing is evident. Clarity on these issues cannot be  
26 attained by simply examining the ideals, ideas and deeds of the luminaries of  
27 humanism or atheism. The social, ethical role and significance of religion  
28 cannot be garnered simply from looking at what Martin Luther King, Bishop  
29 Desmond Tutu, Archbishop Oscar Romero and Father Daniel Berrigan said  
30 and did. In both cases, a study of history and reality is a critical requirement.

31 That is where we face a quandary. Full blown humanism is a barely two  
32 centuries old phenomenon. The humanists and atheists of the past, in the  
33 East and West, critiqued aspects of religious belief and practice, but held on,  
34 even if tenuously or just in public, to the tenets of the prevailing religion. They  
35 had little choice. Intolerant theocracies made frank atheism a life-threatening  
36 condition. Humanism as a social creed is a recent entity. The less religious  
37 socialist societies of the former USSR, Eastern Europe, Asia and Cuba have  
38 too short a history to draw definitive conclusions. Separating people as  
39 believers or non-believers oversimplifies the reality. Religiosity is a non-binary  
40 complex, multi-faceted continuum in both theory and practice.

41 Earlier we partitioned the spectrum of religious belief as follows: devout  
42 believers, moderate believers, neutral persons, moderate atheists and devout  
43 atheists. It resembles the seven-point scale devised by Richard Dawkins, a  
44 famed evolutionary biologist and leading atheist. He categorizes the  
45 probability of belief in the claim that 'God exists' as Strong Theist (Absolutely  
46 Sure), De-facto Theist (Highly Likely), Weak Theist (Likely but Not Sure), Pure

1 Agnostic (Uncertain), Weak Atheist (Likely but Not Sure), De-facto Atheist  
2 (Unlikely but Not Sure) and Strong Atheist (Absolutely Not). This scale is  
3 utilized in the context of the major monotheistic religions and belief in a single  
4 God. Our classification applies to a broader setting that also includes  
5 pantheism. Further, we go beyond belief and factor in practice as well.

6 Consider classifying belief on three levels—devout, moderate, none—and  
7 adherence in three levels—regular, occasional, never—and look at the two  
8 factors, belief and adherence, in a bivariate fashion. Ideally, only the three  
9 main diagonal groups that display consistency between belief and practice  
10 (devout regular attender, moderate occasional attender, none believing never  
11 attender) should exist. But life is not simple. An atheist may attend church  
12 service to appease the family, or to not stand out among colleagues and  
13 neighbors. Or a devout person may accept a holy book as the word of God  
14 but never visit the prayer house because of conflict over organizational or  
15 financial issues.

16 Syncretism—simultaneously following two or more religious creeds—is  
17 another complicating factor. In Africa, most Christians and Muslims partake  
18 in ancestral religious rituals. In the West, particularly in the US, marked  
19 portions of Christians, Muslims and Jews ascribe to alternative spiritualist or  
20 New Age creeds such as astrology, spiritual healing, meditation, crystal and  
21 magnet therapy, shamanism, reincarnation and life force.

### 22 23 **+ United States of America +** 24

25 The following table has results from a year 2017 random sample survey  
26 conducted in the USA. It combines the responses to two questions: ‘Do you  
27 believe in (a Biblical) God?’ and ‘Do you believe in a spiritual force?’

28 Some 80% of the responders asserted belief in a Biblical God while 19%  
29 did not express such a belief. And some 33% of the responders asserted  
30 belief in a spiritual force 66% did not express such a belief. The responses of  
31 1% were unclear. A further breakdown of the data showed that 24% believed  
32 in both a Biblical God and a spiritual force, 56% in the former but not in the  
33 latter, 9% in the latter but not the former and 10% in neither (PRC 2018).

34 Hence, if we consider responses to the question ‘Do you believe in God?’  
35 about one in five are non-believers. But if we combine that with responses to  
36 ‘Do you believe in a spiritual force?’ the proportion of non-believers in any  
37 kind of a divine power falls to one in ten.

38 A classification based on a different question placed the responders into  
39 three groups—Highly Religious (39%), Somewhat Religious (32%) and Non-  
40 Religious (29%). About a quarter of the highly religious and about a fifth of  
41 the Non-Religious took up New Age type of beliefs as well. The rest of the  
42 Non-Religious, mostly male, white, affluent and highly educated, rejected all  
43 forms of supernatural beliefs. Persons of young age or liberal political views  
44 were more inclined to detach themselves from religion than older persons or  
45 political conservatives.

1 The self-identified atheists, agnostics or 'nothing in particular' advanced  
2 varied reasons for lacking a religious affiliation. In order of importance, these  
3 were: doubts about religious teachings, disagreement with the social and  
4 political stand of church, distrust of religious organizations, disbelief in God,  
5 irrelevance of religion and mistrust of religious leaders.

6 Another survey first done in 2012 and redone in 2017 posed the queries:  
7 'Do you consider yourself religious?' and 'Do you consider yourself spiritual?'  
8 In 2012, some 65% of the responders espoused religiosity while 35% did not  
9 express such a belief. And some 78% were inclined towards spiritualism, but  
10 22% were not. By 2017, only 54% espoused religiosity while 46% did not. And  
11 75% were inclined towards spiritualism, but 25% were not. A further  
12 breakdown of the data showed that in 2012, 59% espoused religiosity as well  
13 as spiritualism but by 2017, that group had gone down to 48%. Further, in  
14 2012, 16% of the responders had distanced themselves from both religiosity  
15 and spiritualism, but by 2017, such responders had increased to 19%. (Lipka  
16 and Gecewicz 2017).

17 The decline in religiosity over five years is striking. The fall is restricted to  
18 the subgroup that is both religious and spiritual while most of the gain was  
19 seen among those who saw themselves as spiritual but not religious. Firm  
20 atheists, non-religious and non-spiritual, experienced a relative increase but  
21 by a smaller margin. When these data were adjusted for various factors, the  
22 overall trend in decline of religiosity persisted across gender, racial, ethnic,  
23 age, education and political lines.

24 A year 2019 survey reinforced these findings. Over the past decade, the  
25 proportion of self-identified Christians fell by 12 percentage points while the  
26 atheist, agnostic or 'nothing in particular' category rose by 17 percentage  
27 points. About one quarter of the adults now fall in the latter group. Within this  
28 non-religious group, about a third are self-identified atheists and agnostics.  
29 Thus, from 2009 to 2019, the proportion of atheists rose from 2% to 4% and  
30 those of the agnostics from 3% to 5%, making their total rise from 5% to 9%  
31 (Lipka 2019).

32 These changes are not just manifested in belief but in church attendance  
33 as well. The change, occurring within all social and political strata, is more  
34 acute among young adults. Financial wellbeing was associated with religious  
35 disbelief, and poverty with religious belief (Sherwood 2019).

### 36 + United Kingdom +

37  
38  
39 Britain has an established semi-official church, the Church of England. With  
40 the Queen as the supreme governor, it boasts 18,000 ordained and 10,000  
41 lay ministers. With churches littered across the landscape and extensive  
42 property, its investment portfolio exceeds \$10 billion. Twenty-six of the senior  
43 bishops have the right to a seat in the House of Lords. Yet it no longer rules  
44 the theological sphere as it once did. In 2011, the number of people attending  
45 church service at least once a month stood at 1.7 million. By 2017, that had  
46 gone down to 1.1 million.



1 Several atheist organizations have operated in the country since the early  
2 1800s. Some attained international fame. Eminent Indians of the modern era  
3 have been non-believers. Among them were: Jawaharlal Nehru (first Prime  
4 Minister), MN Roy (Marxist-humanist, eminent political theorist, international  
5 activist), Bhagat Singh (socialist freedom fighter), PEV Ramasamy (social  
6 reformer), VD Savarkar (freedom activist and anti-superstition campaigner),  
7 GR Rao (Gora) and Saraswathi Gora (social reformers, authors and atheist  
8 conference organizers), Khushwant Singh (distinguished lawyer, journalist,  
9 diplomat, politician and popular author), Amartya Sen (Nobel Prize winning  
10 economist and philosopher), H Narasimhaiah (physicist, educator, writer and  
11 freedom fighter) and Meghnad Saha (astrophysicist).

12 Yet, India remains a religious nation. The number of non-believers today  
13 is unclear. The 2001 National Census of India recorded 700,000 persons in  
14 the 'Other' (minor religion or no religion) category. In 2011, 2,870,000 (0.3%  
15 of the population) stated 'no religion' as their status. But other national and  
16 state-wide surveys and related indicators paint a different picture.

17  
18 *According to the 2012 WIN-Gallup Global Index of Religion*  
19 *and Atheism report, 81% of Indians were religious, 13% were*  
20 *non-religious, 3% were convinced atheists, and 3% were*  
21 *unsure or did not respond. (Wikipedia (2021 – Irreligion in*  
22 *India)).*  
23

24 A 2006 survey by a Japanese research center estimated that about 7% of  
25 Indians did not follow a religion. Disbelief in religion varies from state to state.  
26 Membership of the communist parties, many of whom presumably are non-  
27 believers, is over two million. It is thus likely that there are three million or  
28 more non-believers in India today and many of them are atheists.

29 As in the West, but to a lesser degree, irreligiosity is more common among  
30 Indian scientists. A 2007 survey of 1200 Indian scientists found that 11% of  
31 them were not affiliated to any religion. A comparative survey of 1,581 British  
32 and 1,763 Indian scientists showed that 68% of the former never attended  
33 religious services, and only 19% of the latter never did. And among the British  
34 persons of science, 49% conceded that religions were not devoid of basic  
35 truths but among the Indians that view was expressed by 73%.

36 Courts have ruled that 'atheist' is not a legal category and have blocked  
37 attempts to take an oath using the Constitution instead of a religious book.  
38 Declaration of religion is not required for official documents like certificate of  
39 birth and passport. However, it has to be declared when converting from one  
40 religion to another.

41 Ravi Kumar, a 33-year-old man whose official name now is Ravi Kumar  
42 Atheist, is perhaps the most celebrated atheist (*nastik*) in India today. The  
43 word 'Atheist' is artfully tattooed on each of his forearm; his door nameplate  
44 reads Ravi Atheist. To gain official recognition, he petitioned the government  
45 of Haryana state to issue him a document stating he had no religion, caste or  
46 God. The certificate was duly issued but was later withdrawn after his case

1 came in the spotlight. His appeal to the state High Court was denied but he  
2 has launched a further appeal to a higher court to regain the certification.

3 Ravi parted company with Hinduism, his birth religion, at an early age as  
4 he felt that he would not get what he wanted through prayer.

5  
6 *God is man's creation. God doesn't exist. It is just a word.* Ravi  
7 Kumar Atheist (BBC 2019).

8  
9 He feels that religion is being exploited by politicians to hoodwink and divide  
10 people and justify war and violence. He does not visit temples and says that  
11 money spent on religious activities should be spent on education and health  
12 care instead.

13 His avowed lack of religiosity has earned him ridicule from relatives,  
14 friends and neighbors and made it difficult to get a wife or secure a steady  
15 job. His consolation is that his previously devout parents now agree with him  
16 and no longer go to the temple. But, unlike other prominent atheists in India,  
17 he has thus far been spared violent assault from Hindu extremists.

#### 18 19 **+ The Global South +** 20

21 Many nations of the Global South presently have legal atheist and humanist  
22 organizations. But in many, atheists are persecuted, officially and socially. In  
23 some, to profess lack of religious belief is to court death. It makes accurate  
24 estimation of the number of atheists difficult. But general indications are that  
25 it is quite low. Yet, atheists exist in the most conservative and repressive of  
26 places.

27 An international survey of 57 nations done in 2011 indicated that 97% of  
28 Ghanaians and 93% Nigerians are religious, placing them at the top of the  
29 religiosity scale. Yet, in these and other African nations like Tanzania and  
30 Kenya, legally registered atheist or humanist bodies exist. Their meetings  
31 attract but a few. The atheists in Ghana and Nigeria comprise less than 0.5%  
32 of the population. To utter in public that you do not follow a religion is to invite  
33 ridicule and insult as a devil worshipper.

34 Associated with political power and wealth, Catholicism has been the  
35 historically dominant creed in Latin America. Movements challenging the  
36 official religion arose now and then, but they did not last for long. During the  
37 Cold War years, there was the emergence of liberation theology and of highly  
38 conservative brands of evangelical Christianity. Brutal suppression, assisted  
39 by the US, of the former has placed conservative Christianity in the driving  
40 seat in many nations.

41 Brazil, a nation with high levels of economic inequality, crime, social  
42 violence, drug use, ghetto life and attacks on indigenous communities, is a  
43 case in point. In the past, belief systems other than Catholicism were in a  
44 precarious position. During the Cold War, atheism was officially linked with  
45 socialism and liberation theology. The penalty was torture and death at the  
46 hands of right-wing death squads. With support from US churches, anti-

1 socialist evangelical Christianity made large inroads in the nation. Adherence  
2 to Catholicism declined from about 95% in 1960 to less than 60% at present.  
3 The vacated space has been taken up by a conglomeration of Protestant  
4 denominations, many of which actively promote conservative agendas of the  
5 sort found in US elections. Political rhetoric now abounds with calls to protect  
6 Christian values, which are said to be under threat from rising secularism.  
7 Abortion, homosexuality, traditional African religions, evolution theory, gun  
8 control and atheism dominate political campaigns. Public and political views  
9 on atheism express disgust, calling it devil worship. Atheists are regarded as  
10 no better than drug addicts.

11 The election of archconservative, fascistically inclined JM Bolsonaro to  
12 the presidency is pushing the right-wing agenda to the extreme.

13  
14 *There is no such thing as a secular state. The state [Brazil]*  
15 *is Christian. Those who do not agree to this can move out.*  
16 President JM Bolsonaro (AAI 2019).

17  
18 Such virulent rhetoric provides an effective cover to curtail civil liberties, follow  
19 neoliberal economic policies that entrench and extend economic inequality,  
20 unleash a reckless drive to denude the Amazon rain forest and divert attention  
21 from the basic causes of the panoply of grave social ills.

22 In Turkey, which historically was the most secular Muslim majority nation  
23 in the Middle East, the nearly two decades of strenuous effort by the ruling  
24 party to promote conservative Islamic values and practices seems to be  
25 backfiring. While funding for religious departments, schools and clergy has  
26 increased, the younger generation is turning away from theocratic versions of  
27 Islam and the idea of religion in greater numbers. Fewer pray regularly, fast  
28 during Ramadhan or cover their hair. A survey indicated that those who saw  
29 themselves as very faithful went down from 32% in 2008 to 7% in 2019.

30  
31 +++++

32  
33 We draw several conclusions from our brief survey of the global trends in  
34 religiosity and irreligiosity. One, irreligiosity is gaining traction across the  
35 world, even in places where it is a minor feature of the social landscape.  
36 Religiosity is declining at faster rates in the affluent, economically stable  
37 nations while high levels of religiosity persist in nations in which most people  
38 are mired in misery and economic uncertainty. Two, growing irreligiosity in  
39 the West is accompanied with a paradoxical countertrend. Extreme right-wing  
40 politicians whose base includes not just the corporate sector, but also  
41 evangelical Christian denominations often dominate municipal, regional and  
42 national offices. Religion intrudes more and more into public policy. The major  
43 churches are succumbing to theological dogmatism as well. Religion and  
44 parties with extremist religious, xenophobic agendas are gaining more ground  
45 in the poverty afflicted nations. India and Brazil exemplify the trend but  
46 generally it is more pronounced in Muslim majority nations. Three, in the



1 affluent nations, irreligiosity is more prevalent among well to do people but is  
2 markedly less pronounced among the poor and socially marginalized strata.  
3 In the poor nations, fervent religiosity prevails not just among those at the  
4 bottom but also among the globalized middle classes.

## 5 6 **9.8 GOOD WITHOUT GOD?** 7

8 Conduct counts more than belief. Ultimately, one's behavior towards family,  
9 community and others is a truer test of character.

10 The key questions in exploring the association between religiosity and  
11 ethical or moral conduct are whether religion is a prerequisite for ethical  
12 conduct, whether irreligiosity engenders unethical behavior, and whether the  
13 ethical tenets of the religious differ from those of the non-religious, and  
14 ultimately, whether a person can be good without God.

15 Accurate answers to these questions require long-term studies of the  
16 actual behavior of religious and non-religious peoples. Such studies are not  
17 feasible. But surveys have instead elicited opinions on such questions. A  
18 2011/2013 survey of some 37,000 respondents in 39 nations posed the  
19 question: Is belief in God essential to be a moral person? The results are  
20 summarized below.

21 In the Western nations, the assenting percentages stood below 50%, and  
22 in six nations, it was less than 30%. On the other hand, in the less affluent  
23 Third World nations, it was above 50%, and in eight, it was over 90%. The  
24 nations with the highest levels of concurrence were Indonesia (99%), Ghana  
25 (99%) and Pakistan (98%) and those with the lowest levels were Spain (19%),  
26 Czech Republic (19%) and France (15%). The US, with the highest level of  
27 'yes' responses (53%) among the Western nations, was an exception.

28 Another survey that posed a slightly different question indicated that even  
29 in the US, the proportion of the population that deems religion to be essential  
30 for morality has declined in the recent years. Thus in 2011 it was 48% but by  
31 2017, it had fallen to 42% (Smith 2017).

32 Detailed analyses in both surveys indicated that in North America and  
33 Europe, respondents of lower age and higher education were more likely to  
34 say 'no' as compared with older, less educated respondents. In the UK, 55%  
35 of the respondents of a survey said that atheists and religious people do not  
36 differ in terms of morality.

37 In a questionnaire-based study of 656 subjects, levels of empathy and  
38 moral reaction to six troubling scenarios were scored and analyzed in terms  
39 of religious affiliation, degree of religiosity and socio-demographic features.  
40 The findings indicated that broadly atheists and theists had the same ethical  
41 standards.

42  
43 *Nonreligious and religious participants had similar levels of*  
44 *empathy and showed similar patterns of moral reactions to*  
45 *different moral violations involving both disgusting and non-*  
46 *disgusting contents. (Rabelo and Pilati 2019).*

1  
2 One area where the religious differ from the non-religious is participation in  
3 political affairs. In many nations of the West where voting is not compulsory,  
4 the former, especially the actively religious, are as or more likely to vote in  
5 local and national elections than the latter. But their participation is more on  
6 the right-wing side. Religious institutions have a long history of charitable and  
7 social service activities. Of recent, humanist and atheist organizations are  
8 also getting involved in activities like feeding and providing basic necessities  
9 to the homeless.

10 Long standing tradition held that crimes were conducted by people who  
11 were influenced by the devil; that church goers were not likely to engage in  
12 unlawful activities. Many studies to assess the association between religious  
13 belief and participation in religious activities, on the one hand, and criminal  
14 conduct, on the other, have been done in the US. Some studies show a  
15 positive association, but other studies show an absence of a link along these  
16 lines. Current overall reviews of the literature have concluded that many  
17 studies had methodological problems and no solid evidence exists to say that  
18 religion is or is not associated with criminality (ECJ 2021; Sumter et al. 2018).

19 On the issue of attitude towards beliefs other than one's own, surveys in  
20 the West indicate that a similar, wide degree of tolerance prevails among both  
21 religious and non-religious groups. Books written by prominent atheists have  
22 topped the best seller lists. Such results, though, are not consistent with the  
23 well documented rise of Islamophobia among the general public, political  
24 leadership and main media in the West. Elsewhere, intolerance of other faiths  
25 and virulent hostility towards atheism are ascendant trends.

26 Overall, there is no basis to support the proposition that lack of belief in  
27 divinities or divine realms signifies a moral deficit. Atheists, agnostics,  
28 humanists, or the unaffiliated go about their lives—in family and social affairs,  
29 and at work and school—in much the same way as those who pray in  
30 churches, mosques and temples. The moral and ethical standards of the two  
31 groups appear equivalent.

## 32 33 **9.9 MARX, ENGELS AND LENIN ON RELIGION**

34  
35 Conventional wisdom points to the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 as solid  
36 proof that socialism and communism are unworkable, harmful systems, and  
37 have been buried for good. Free market capitalism and globalization are the  
38 sole viable options for all nations, including China and Vietnam. Karl Marx  
39 and his ideas were summarily dismissed or denounced by the main media,  
40 scholars and politicians worldwide. Only a few die-hards promoted socialist  
41 ideas and even fewer held on to the Marxist theoretical framework.

42 The extensive damage caused by the international financial crisis of 2008  
43 put a pause on the pro-capitalist exuberance. Economists conceded that  
44 perhaps some ideas of that bearded fellow had relevance. And, for the first  
45 time in nearly a century, the presidential candidacy of Bernie Sanders made

1 socialism a non-pejorative term in the US, the global headquarters of  
2 capitalism.

3 It was common until the 1970s for humanists and atheists to identify as  
4 socialists. Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russel were prime exemplars of that  
5 conjunction. Today, 'socialism' has been expunged from the humanist and  
6 atheist lexicon. Even as its program borrows liberally from socialist doctrines,  
7 no major humanist organization includes promotion of socialism as one of its  
8 goals.

9 In this section, we explore the relationship between socialism, humanism  
10 and religion by examining key ideas of three prominent socialist humanists,  
11 Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and VI Lenin.

### 12 **+ Marx and Engels +**

13  
14  
15 The idea of a society based on cooperation and equality has a long history.  
16 But among the numerous thinkers that have propounded it, none have been  
17 more influential than Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. In their investigation of  
18 the structure and dynamics of human society, particularly capitalism, they  
19 delved deeply into philosophy, history, economics, literature, politics, social  
20 movements, religion and science. The framework they developed is called  
21 Marxism. First, we summarize the main Marxist ideas.

22 Marx and Engels critiqued utopian socialists for believing that an ideal  
23 society based on cooperation would emerge through educational endeavors  
24 and appeals to goodwill. The struggle for socialism has to utilize empirical,  
25 interdisciplinary analyses of the historical development of human society.  
26 Humans make their own history, but human endeavors face constraints  
27 imposed by existent economic and social conditions. Other than in the early  
28 hunting-gathering social formations, human society has been divided into  
29 classes—the ruling class, the producing classes and intermediate strata.  
30 Social change is driven by the development of productive forces and the  
31 ensuing conflict between the classes. Yet, all societies did not experience a  
32 uniform process of historical change.

33 The capitalist society has two major classes, capitalists—owners,  
34 controllers of the means of production and exchange—and the working  
35 people. Human labor is the source of value, but the system of wage labor and  
36 market mechanisms enable the capitalists to appropriate the wealth (surplus  
37 value) generated by working people (workers and peasants). The relations of  
38 production, together with state institutions and laws, and the dominant belief  
39 system enable the ruling class to appropriate the wealth generated by the  
40 producers. Through intensive exploitation of the working class and rapacious  
41 intrusion into overseas territories, a fantastic growth of productive forces  
42 precipitated unprecedented improvements in all walks of life in the dominant  
43 nations. Yet, operating via the profit motive, capitalism is an inherently  
44 unstable system. It cannot serve humanity. The gap between the rich and  
45 poor will widen, and the chances of a decent life and genuine freedom will be  
46 curtailed for the working people.

1 The struggle in the economic and political arenas between the capitalists  
2 and workers for the division of social wealth has the potential for opening the  
3 door to the birth of a socialist society. The workers must wrest the control of  
4 state power from the capitalists and institute more egalitarian relations of  
5 production and representative governance.

6 Marx and Engels firmly stood for international unity of the working people.  
7 They revealed that the ideological mechanisms of society—education  
8 system, media, political and intellectual elites, cultural institutions and  
9 religion—complement the repressive apparatus of the state and act, for the  
10 most part, as barriers preventing the people from understanding the essence  
11 of the capitalist system and embarking on a united effort to overthrow that  
12 system.

13 Marx and Engels were activist philosophers with close connections to the  
14 working-class movements. They were hounded by the authorities for their  
15 ideas and activism. They did not advocate violence but accurately noted that  
16 the ruling class would react violently and use the power of the state to crush  
17 any move from below to initiate even minor changes in the *status quo*.

18 Marxism is not a static system of thought. Many subsequent thinkers have  
19 modified and enriched it. It is not a homogenous system either. Disputations  
20 among varied Marxist schools exist. The contentions have emanated from the  
21 socio-economic and cultural changes that have taken place across the globe  
22 over the past two centuries, the experiences of socialist nations and the  
23 modern endeavors to attain socialism. Change is not an anomaly but a feature  
24 of a grounded, dynamic discipline. But when it was espoused by state  
25 authorities, as in the USSR and China, Marxism lost its living feature and  
26 became ossified into a bureaucratically enforced dogma. That also occurred  
27 within some sectarian Marxist tendencies and parties.

28 The analytic methodology formulated by Marx and Engels and later  
29 extended by others remains relevant to this day. A succinct, erudite case for  
30 Marxism today appears in the series Thompson (2011a, 2011b, 2011c,  
31 2011d, 2011e, 2011f, 2011g, 2011h) and Gosh (2017).

### 32 + Marx and Engels on religion +

34  
35 Marx and Engels were atheists, in theory and practice. Popular renditions of  
36 their views on religion are limited to a single sentence: '*Religion is the opium*  
37 *of the people*'. Their detractors say that they were anti-religious zealots who  
38 advocated a total ban religious worship and institutions. Nothing is further  
39 from the truth. Their views were complex and nuanced.

40 Marx and Engels viewed religion as a form of social consciousness, a  
41 mental reflection of humanity's struggles against the forces of nature, painful  
42 vagaries of life and constrictions of class societies. They observed that  
43 historically, religion had fulfilled two social roles, a liberationist role and a  
44 repressive role. In the early stage, religion often expresses dissent against  
45 tyranny.

46



1 A popular uprising in 1917 overthrew the Tsarist regime after a protracted  
2 struggle. The Bolshevik party, headed by VI Lenin, took the helm of the first  
3 ever triumphant socialist revolution. Lenin is the most influential Marxist after  
4 Marx and Engels. His meticulous tome, *The Development of Capitalism in*  
5 *Russia*, his analysis of the nature of the state, and his elucidation of the  
6 international, imperialist character of the capitalist system made him a  
7 foremost Marxist theoretician. His innovations in the strategy and tactics of  
8 socialist movements as well as his vibrant critique of pseudo socialist ideas  
9 exercised a long-term influence on the struggle for socialism in the world.

10 Lenin's views on the history and function of religion did not differ, except  
11 in some matters of detail, from those espoused by Marx and Engels. As  
12 visions that claimed to explain nature and society, religion and science are  
13 incompatible. Religion rewards the toilers in the afterlife, and thereby affords  
14 a venue via charity for the exploiters to justify their comforts in the present  
15 life. He excoriated the Russian Orthodox Church for its role in social  
16 exploitation and urged the clergy to break their ties with the Tsarist police.  
17 Noting that a portion of the clergy had allied itself with local and international  
18 forces to overturn the socialist revolution by arms, he said that a violent  
19 response against them was justified.

20 Lenin stood for a secular state that did not have an official religion and in  
21 which freedom of religion was a basic right. In particular, he advocated the  
22 separation of the church and state, removal of teaching of religion from  
23 schools and eliminating the provision of state funds for religious education.  
24 The state should not grant subsidies churches and religious institutions. Yet,  
25 he opposed any move to ban religion and declare atheism as the official  
26 creed.

27  
28 [Discrimination] *among citizens on the account of their*  
29 *religious convictions is wholly intolerable. Even the mere*  
30 *mention of a citizen's religion on official documents should*  
31 *unquestionably be eliminated.* (Lenin 1965, page 8).

32  
33 Lenin said that while the program of the Bolshevik party had a non-theist,  
34 scientific basis, religious people who accepted socialist principles could join  
35 the party. Advocating a broad program of scientific education which would  
36 not hurt the sentiments of the faithful, he urged party members to '*enrich their*  
37 *minds with a knowledge of all the treasures created by mankind*'. (Lenin 1965,  
38 page 54).

39 The views of Marx, Engels and Lenin on religion are dispersed within  
40 broader works which are strewn with abstruse polemics. Karl Kautsky and  
41 Rosa Luxemburg provided the earliest cogent and currently pertinent Marxist  
42 analyses of the role of religion in society. The two pamphlets by the latter—  
43 Luxemburg (1903) and Luxemburg (1905)—are good guides on the Marxist  
44 analysis of religion. An insightful document from India on Marxism and  
45 religion was written by the freedom activist Bhagat Singh (Singh 1930).

## 9.10 SOCIALIST HUMANISM

As systems of thought that eschew divine revelation and see morality as a historic, social construct, Marxism and socialism are integral to the humanist tradition. In addition to the pioneering socialists—Marx, Engels, Lenin, Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg—the usual lists of humanists and atheists can be expanded to include a global bevy of socialist thinkers and activists: Eqbal Ahmad, Tariq Ali, Louis Althusser, Samir Amin, Paul Baran, Simone de Beauvoir, Ben Bella, Waldon Bello, JD Bernal, Charles Bettelheim, Amílcar Cabral, Fidel Castro, Aime Cesaire, Angela Davis, Régis Debray, WEB Dubois, Frantz Fanon, Ruth First, Andre Gunder Frank, Erich Fromm, Eduardo Galeano, Antonio Gramsci, Che Guevara, Chris Hani, Michael Harrington, William Hinton, Eric Hobsbawm, George L Jackson, DD Kosambi, Alex LaGuma, RD Laing, Oscar Lange, Georg Lukacs, Samora Machel, Ernest Mandel, Herbert Marcuse, Fatima Meer, Ho Chi Minh, EMS Namboodiripad, Joseph Needham, Kwame Nkrumah, Sembene Ousmane, James Petras, Eslanda Robeson, Paul Robeson, Walter Rodney, Jean-Paul Sartre, Joseph Stalin, Paul Sweezy, Leon Trotsky, Mao Zedong, Howard Zinn and hundreds of others. That these names are absent in most of the listings of humanists speaks to the pro-capitalist bias of modern humanism.

Another reason why socialists are not found here reflects the disrepute brought to socialism by the authoritarianism of Stalinist USSR. Marxists reacted by declaring Stalinism a betrayal of Marxism and that the USSR was a bureaucratic capitalist state. Impelled to revisit the foundation of Marxism, they stressed its humanistic basis. Socialist Humanism (Marxist Humanism) was born as a school of thought. Among the principal figures of this school were Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, Raya Dunayevskaya, Herbert Marcuse, CLR James and Erich Fromm.

Socialist Humanism (in varied forms) took its cue from the early writings of Marx to place the individual—not the state, party, institutions, or economic plans—at the front and center. Society should provide individuals with the freedom, environment and means to grow to their full potential. But that cannot be freedom for some and denial of freedom for others. True freedom does not endorse egoism or narcissism. It is a derivative of love and empathy for fellow human beings. Freedom makes you value and respect the freedom of your neighbor and of people from another culture.

*The goal of [socialist] humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good. (Hoelscher 2016).*

Socialist Humanism argues that inequality and capriciousness inherent in capitalism constrain freedom for individuals. The profit motive imprisons all—rich, middle class and the poor. The latter are further shackled by material deprivation and low opportunities in education, job market and good housing. The consumer culture, formal democracy, education and private media

1 foment the vision of a free society. New technology promises to eliminate  
2 drudgery and open up a world of possibilities. But pervasive corporate  
3 influence and control, orchestrated through subtle institutional mechanisms,  
4 make those freedoms a sham. One's resources and time are not spent the  
5 way one likes. People remain at the mercy of forces beyond their control. And  
6 furthermore, the war economy and the campaigns to exploit, destabilize and  
7 attack other nations imply that the freedom for the few in the dominant nations  
8 is at the expense of suffering and misery for a vast segment of humanity. A  
9 humanistic doctrine that fails to recognize the acquisitive nature of capitalism  
10 and overlooks the maladies and insecurity imposed upon the poor nations  
11 and people by neoliberalism and militarism betrays itself by endorsing  
12 capitalist values and norms.

13  
14 [Humanism] is utterly incoherent if it fails to focus on the  
15 problems of poverty and economic oppression. (Hoelscher  
16 2016).  
17

18 Socialism embodies a mature form of humanism. Historically, Marxism was  
19 the significant force that brought atheism closer to humanism. Socialist  
20 Humanism challenges divinely inspired doctrines on rational grounds.

21 But that is a start. It is also essential to critique and work for the elimination  
22 of the conditions that engender such beliefs. Yet, today most of the humanist  
23 and atheist organizations and thinkers have made peace with capitalism and  
24 abandoned radical socialist ideas. In the 1960's, any bookshelf casting a  
25 critical psychological perspective on consumer capitalism would invariably  
26 stock Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (Marcuse 1991) and Erich  
27 Fromm's *The Sane Society* (Fromm 1990). Both noted that the dazzling but  
28 superficial choices in the marketplace, the ethos of the American Dream,  
29 permissiveness, and loose cultural norms induced conformism, alienation and  
30 social irresponsibility. The psyche adapted itself to the ills of inequality,  
31 racism, patriarchy, nationalism, gluttony, insatiable shopping and  
32 environmental damage. Yet, instead of succumbing to cynical pessimism,  
33 these books envisioned promises of human liberation in the counterculture  
34 movement and other struggles of their times.

35 These and other works of towering socialist humanists are as relevant  
36 today. Yet, such works remain alien to the bulk of modern left-wing, feminist,  
37 anti-racist and humanist activists and thinkers. At best, the new breed of  
38 humanists advocate tinkering with some aspects of capitalism but not its  
39 complete overhaul.  
40

## 41 9.11 RELIGION AND THE PARIS COMMUNE

42

43 The Paris Commune was the first attempt to establish a state with an explicit  
44 socialist program. It emerged following a popular uprising in Paris in March  
45 1871. Occurring in the middle of mass misery, state dysfunction and reckless  
46 war, the Commune gave the world a glimpse of what socialism could look



1 like. With support from patriotic elements of the National Guard, a firmly  
2 democratic and progressive rule was instituted. State officials were elected  
3 and were subject to recall. Child labor, night labor and employer-imposed  
4 fines were banned. Rent increases were banned too. The homeless were  
5 sheltered in public buildings. The poor freely retrieved their pawned items.  
6 Pension support widened. Education and access to cultural sites became free  
7 for all. Workers had the right to take over abandoned factories, but the owners  
8 were entitled to compensation. Women chaired committees, conducted  
9 political agitation and played a front-line role at the barricades. A feminist  
10 agenda was in the works. These measures, far reaching for Europe of that  
11 era and even now, were implemented quite rapidly.

12 But they could not be sustained. A ferocious assault by the national army  
13 demolished the Commune within two and a half months. Some 20,000 men  
14 and women died defending it. Internal dissent, lack of support in the rural  
15 areas, organizational ineptitude, inability to form an alliance with the middle  
16 classes, tactical shortfalls of a vacillating leadership, and shortage of military  
17 supplies also played a role. What the Commune lacked, above all, was time.

18 The Christian Church was a wealthy, anti-democratic power broker in  
19 France. Living in opulence amidst deep poverty, the senior clergy had strong  
20 monarchist leanings. In the urban areas liberal modes of thinking had some  
21 influence, but in rural areas, the Church dominated the lives and emotions of  
22 the masses.

23 Right at inception, the Commune instituted a separation of church from  
24 state, disallowed teaching and practice of religion in schools, and converted  
25 church property to state property. The churches were allowed to conduct  
26 services but had to open their doors for public meetings.

27 Some untoward actions occurred in the atmosphere of insecurity. The  
28 archbishop and his lieutenants were put behind bars and used as bargaining  
29 chips to secure the release of commune sympathizers imprisoned by the  
30 state. Two of them were later executed. Despite its short life, the long-term  
31 influence of the Commune on the development a firmly secular democratic  
32 society was unmistakable. It brought the fragile dynamic between organized  
33 religion and state under socialism to the fore as well.

## 34 35 36 37 **9.12 RELIGION IN CHINA** 38

39 For centuries, Chinese people had followed a fluctuating mix of Confucian,  
40 Taoist and Buddhist beliefs sprinkled with folk belief systems. Islam and  
41 Christianity arrived on the scene in the 7th century. The former gained a  
42 foothold in a few areas, but the latter almost died out. Colonial intrusions by  
43 Western powers in early 18th century set the stage for a wider spread of  
44 Christianity in China, Catholic and Protestant.

45 The British export to China of opium grown in colonial India was a key  
46 fulcrum. Britain demanded special trading rights and territorial concessions

1 from the Chinese rulers to conduct the perfidious trade. After two punitive  
2 naval wars waged by Britain and France, the Chinese government had no  
3 option but to enter into treaties that compromised its sovereignty and cede  
4 control of major trading ports to Western powers. As British firms prospered  
5 by fueling opium addiction, Christian missionaries from the West secured  
6 special rights to operate and proselytize. It was a combination of real and  
7 ideological opium the likes of which the world has not ever seen.

8 As Christianity spread, so did anti-Christian sentiments. Churches were  
9 accused of abusing treaty rights to avoid tax payment and secure deals for  
10 their followers. Foreign powers were blamed for keeping China in poverty. By  
11 the end of the 19th century, humiliation and exploitation reached a boiling  
12 point, erupting in the Boxer Rebellion of 1900. Cities were besieged, foreign  
13 owned buildings and churches were looted. Many Westerners and Chinese  
14 Christians were killed. Western powers and Japan deployed massive force to  
15 put it down. With hundreds of thousands dead on its side, China was made  
16 to pay 300 million dollars as reparation to the imperial powers.

17 Yet, anti-foreign sentiment did not subside. Military attacks by Japan and  
18 Russia sparked a nationalist fervor. The overthrow of the Qing dynasty and  
19 founding of the Republic of China in 1911 incorporated anti-feudal, anti-  
20 imperialist as well as anti-religious, especially anti-Christian, tendencies into  
21 state policy. Reformist officials and intellectuals denounced religious belief  
22 and called for abolition of religion in state affairs and institutions. But mixed  
23 signals prevailed as the appeal of Western culture rose in the growing cities  
24 and more people converted to Christianity. But now another factor operated  
25 on the scene—militant student and worker movements that espoused anti-  
26 imperialism, anti-feudalism and advocated socialism. Fierce reprisals from  
27 the state led to the murder of hundreds of leftist, patriotic students, workers  
28 and intellectuals. Thousands were forced to flee to the countryside between  
29 1919 and 1928. But the central government was weakened by Japanese  
30 incursions and dominance of warlord armies in the provinces.

31 Christian missionaries in China engaged in charity, promoted education  
32 and modern medicine, opposed opium use and practices like foot-binding of  
33 women. But they were an integral part of Western imperial designs as well.  
34 Some leaders of the Republican movement were Christians. But reformers,  
35 especially students, viewed Western practices and ideas as instruments of  
36 cultural and political domination. The militant Anti-Christian Movement of  
37 1923 was but one expression of that line of thinking.

38 From the 1930s on, the struggle against semi-feudalism, landlordism,  
39 warlords, autocratic central government and Japanese imperialism was led  
40 by the Communist Party of China headed by Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai.  
41 An outstanding feature of this struggle was that unlike the warlord battalions  
42 and the Japanese army, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) maintained  
43 friendly, humane relations with the rural masses. The warlord and Japanese  
44 forces looted temples and churches with impunity, but the PLA refrained from  
45 banditry. The main pillars of the Communist Party program were to unify and  
46 rapidly develop the nation, eliminate poverty, nationalize and expand

1 industry, agriculture and transport, establish rural cooperatives and provide  
2 effective, free educational and health services to the entire nation.

3 While Marxism was the guiding philosophy of the state, religion as such  
4 was not a central part of its program. Because of the continued Western  
5 hostility toward China, CIA support for the armed Tibetan exiles from India,  
6 and desire for cultural autonomy, religious groups seen as serving external  
7 interests were proscribed. In the 1950s, due to their allegiance to the anti-  
8 communist, reactionary papacy, the local Catholic churches had a difficult  
9 time operating. But, at the same time, the Protestant churches grew in size.

10 From the start of the 20th century, China witnessed repeated struggle  
11 against archaic ideas, customs and practices that were seen as a hindrance  
12 to national development. The Cultural Revolution of 1966 launched to counter  
13 elitist, autocratic trends in the Communist Party, was a continuation of the  
14 struggle. But led by overzealous, dogmatic youth and students, it fast  
15 degenerated into unprincipled and at times violent, attacks on independent  
16 thinkers, senior academics, and anyone rightly or wrongly branded as a  
17 capitalist roader. Ultimately it petered out, and the Communist Party landed  
18 in the hands of an elite bent on instituting a capitalist style economy under  
19 the supervision of the state.

20  
21 +++++  
22

23 Presently, as a result of the socio-economic developments since the 1949  
24 socialist revolution, nearly three of four people in China are not affiliated to  
25 an organized religion. The 1978 Constitution of China enshrines the freedom  
26 of religion. Public institutions are prohibited from promoting religious belief or  
27 non-belief, and from granting favors to any religion. Five main religions are  
28 recognized: Taoism, Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam. Most  
29 generally operate autonomously but linkages with Western institutions are  
30 viewed with suspicion. Religious teaching is disallowed in schools and  
31 religious groups cannot engage in politics. Confucianism and traditional  
32 Chinese faiths are also protected.

33 Religions, especially those of Chinese origin are regarded as a part of the  
34 national culture and supported in various ways. Academic study of religion  
35 has gained greater ground and funding. The first World Buddhist Forum was  
36 held in China in 2006. China has also hosted other international religious  
37 conferences. Like elsewhere, new religions and cults have risen. Some have  
38 faced state sanction because of their extremist mode of operation.

39 National and international organizations have conducted many surveys  
40 of religion in China in the past two decades. Most show similar results. A year  
41 2014 survey found the following rates of beliefs in divinity; Buddhism (16%),  
42 Unspecified or popular sects (7%), Taoism (1%), Protestantism (2%),  
43 Catholicism (0.5%), and Islam (0.5%). But 73% of the respondents said they  
44 were not affiliated with any religion, making China the most secular nation in  
45 the world.

1 Yet, as in the West, disassociation from a mainstream religion does not  
2 necessarily imply adoption of atheism on rational grounds. Many irreligious  
3 people in China take part in traditional Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian rituals  
4 and celebrations as a matter of cultural tradition and many ascribe to old and  
5 new, local and imported, spiritualist beliefs. Thus, the multi-billion dollar,  
6 multi-episodic, participatory global video game World of Warcraft featuring  
7 avatars and extraordinary beings in fantasy universe attracted hundreds of  
8 the youth in China. For many, it seemed to fill the void left by the lack of  
9 spiritual anchor.

10 Many Chinese view Christianity as a foreign cultural import not linked to  
11 authentic Chinese culture. Nonetheless, it has, of recent, experienced a rapid  
12 growth. Millions of copies of the Bible and hymn books have been distributed  
13 throughout China. And hundreds of new and thousands of old churches with  
14 thousands of priests continue to operate across the land.

### 15 **+ Islam in China +**

16  
17  
18 The roots of Islam in China stretch back 1,400 years. At present, somewhat  
19 less than 2% (or 25 million people) of the total population is Muslim. Though  
20 scattered among all the ethnic groups in China, Hui Muslims (10 million) and  
21 Uyghur Muslims (8 million) are the largest Muslim ethnicities. Most Chinese  
22 Muslims belong to the Sunni branch of Islam. About 40,000 mosques led by  
23 nearly 50,000 Muslim clerics exist across China. Institutions that focus on the  
24 study of Islam and the Quran also exist. In comparison, though about 20% of  
25 the Chinese people (250 million) adhere to Buddhism, the number of  
26 Buddhist temples in China is about 30,000.

27 Chinese Muslims existed in communities with disparate levels of cultural,  
28 economic and political integration with the other ethnic, religious groups from  
29 the earliest days. There were times when Muslim traders were the major  
30 players in the economy, especially in the import export sector; times when  
31 Muslims were represented in the Emperor's court, civil administration and  
32 military units; times when Muslim generals were powerful warlords; and times  
33 when Muslim ethnicities faced harsh repression. Their status and fate were  
34 affected by economic and political factors, not religion.

35 Muslims in China are not a unified block. In the 19th century and the first  
36 part of the 20th century, some Muslim ethnic groups united with non-Muslim  
37 Chinese groups to oppose Western and Japanese domination, but others  
38 remained on the sidelines. Muslim leaders from some ethnicities were allied  
39 with Kuomintang whilst others remained neutral or sided with the communist  
40 forces. Muslims as well as non-Muslims were killed in large numbers during  
41 the conflict between warlords, central government and foreign forces. And  
42 intense antagonism between Hui and Uyghur forces emerged from time to  
43 time. A larger number of Muslims were massacred by other Muslims.

44 The history of Islam in China is a complex mix of political and economic  
45 integration, cultural assimilation, coexistence and conflict, and reflects the  
46 dynamic picture of stability and turbulence in the broader Chinese society. It

1 is erroneous to describe the Muslims in China as a long-standing persecuted  
2 minority.

3 The Muslim communities in China vary a lot in terms of culture and mode  
4 of living. In some areas, the dress codes are conservative while elsewhere  
5 Muslim women rarely adorn head gear. Some ethnicities retain pre-Islamic  
6 marriage rules. Weddings and special occasions are marked with unique  
7 local rites. Popular literature blends Islamic and traditional texts. A vibrant  
8 repertoire of folk music and dance styles prevails among these communities.  
9 Chinese Muslim cultural practices do not always accord with those in the  
10 Middle Eastern Islamic theocracies. Many mosques in China combine local  
11 architectural styles with the classic minaret. And Chinese Muslim cuisine has  
12 many commonalities with non-Muslim Chinese cuisine.

13 Most Muslim groups have coeducational schools while a few do not. Hui  
14 Muslims generally speak Mandarin Chinese while others mainly rely on the  
15 local language in family and community affairs. Hui Muslims have liberal  
16 attitudes on consumption of alcohol, do not strictly abide by prayer rituals,  
17 have low circumcision rates and integrate aspects of Buddhism in their lives.  
18 Their education curricula combine modern science with studies of Confucian  
19 literature, Arabic language and the Quran. In areas where Hui and Uyghur  
20 Muslims are present, they have separate residential areas and mosques.

21 After the socialist revolution of 1949, the experience of Chinese Muslims  
22 in terms of removal of feudal bondage, collectivization, education, health  
23 economic advancement, social stability and peace was similar to the rest of  
24 the society. As for other religions, as long as it did not intrude into political  
25 activity, counter the socialist requirements or have external ties, Islam was  
26 allowed to function without undue interference from the state. Like Christianity  
27 and Buddhism, Islam was targeted by the Red Guards during the Cultural  
28 Revolution. They burned the Quran as they put the Bible to flames. After the  
29 1978 relaxation of laws on religious practice, Muslims found as great a scope  
30 for adhering to their faith as followers of other religions.

### 31 32 **+ Uyghur oppression +**

33  
34 The bulk of the Uyghurs live in Xinjiang province where they constitute 45%  
35 of the population of the province. About 45% are Han, and the rest are Hui  
36 and other ethnicities.

37 Over the past decade, the picture of a placid existence for religions in  
38 China has been tainted by many blemishes, mostly in relation to the Muslim  
39 Uyghurs. Breakneck development of capitalism has generated deleterious  
40 consequences, but unevenly. Removal of the social safety net of the Maoist  
41 era, sweatshop, low paid labor, labor migration and skewed investment  
42 patterns have enhanced economic inequality and social insecurity in China.  
43 The overall standard of living has risen in Xinjiang province, but the Uyghurs  
44 are among the groups for whom the pace of improvement has been lower  
45 and the adverse effects more severe. Poverty prevails in Uyghur villages.  
46 Over one million Uyghur adults have migrated to distant places in search of

1 jobs, most of which provide poor remuneration. They resent the fact that  
2 locally, Han workers get the better jobs. Seizure of their land for road, mining  
3 and other projects is a major complaint. When they complain of mistreatment  
4 the state officials remain unconcerned. The police do not deal with them fairly.  
5 A number of young Uyghur men have been shot by the police for minor  
6 alleged infractions. Uyghur cultural and religious practices are looked down  
7 upon by Han people and the officialdom. Cultural barriers add fuel to the fire.

8 As a result, social tension has been rising, now and then spilling over into  
9 physical confrontation. Incidents feed into each other, multiply and produce  
10 violent reactions on both sides. Resentment of the policies of the local and  
11 central governments is high among the Uyghurs. For long, a minor separatist  
12 sentiment has persisted. It is gaining more ground. Influenced by the global  
13 Islamic Jihadism, a small radical minority has violently confronted the police  
14 and local authorities and killed scores of civilians in several terrorist attacks.

15 The turning point was the 2009 demonstrations by Uyghur workers over  
16 maltreatment by management and Han workers. Use of excessive force by  
17 the police in response to peaceful protests sparked off widespread looting. In  
18 the ensuing confrontations, hundreds on each side were killed. The true  
19 number of casualties in the incident and the later Han counter attacks is not  
20 known. Such incidents have entrenched bitterness on both sides.

21 The response of the central government was swift, draconian and not  
22 even handed. Thousands, mostly Uyghurs were rounded up. A large number  
23 were tried and imprisoned after speedy trials. Some were tortured. A few were  
24 sentenced to death and executed.

25 Yet, militant separatists continue to mount small scale but violent attacks.  
26 Civilians died and state repression became harsher. Tens of thousands of  
27 Uyghur adults are presently confined in internment camps where they are  
28 required to learn Mandarin, undergo 'political education,' and sing patriotic  
29 songs. Some camps, where detention is indefinite, are forced labor factories.  
30 Extensive police presence and check points restrict movement in the urban  
31 areas. Security cameras are ubiquitous. Clampdowns on the social media  
32 and internet are more stringent than elsewhere. There is strict control over  
33 issuance of passports. Returnees from Muslim majority nations face intense  
34 scrutiny. High tech monitoring devices, facial identification algorithms and  
35 biometric data—DNA, blood type, fingerprints—are deployed for control  
36 purposes. The government justifies the highly restrictive, intrusive measures  
37 in the name of fighting 'separatism, terrorism and religious extremism'. But to  
38 the Uyghurs and Turkic Muslims in the province, they amount to a full scale  
39 siege.

#### 40 **+ Islam under attack +**

41  
42  
43 Over the past five years, social control measures have been extended  
44 beyond Xinjiang and the Uyghurs to Muslims from other ethnicities. They  
45 translate into a broad assault on the practice of Islam. As with Islamophobia  
46 in the West, China has conflated terrorism with religion. Official anti-Islamic

1 actions include closing mosques, destroying mosque minarets and domes,  
2 banning the traditional call to prayer, barring Ramadhan fasting for Muslims  
3 in civil service, prohibiting long beards and wearing a face veil in public,  
4 controlling Islamic education and teaching of Arabic, allowing pilgrimage to  
5 Mecca only in government controlled groups, confiscating prayer mats and  
6 copies of the Quran, banning the Islamic banking system, and ending halal  
7 certification for meat and other food items.

8 Thus far, these actions do not constitute a national trend. In areas where  
9 the government does not sense a political threat, Muslims go about their lives  
10 and religious practice as they have traditionally done. Even Buddhist monks  
11 and temples face a degree of suppression when state officials resent the  
12 political implications of their teachings and activities. Chinese policy is driven  
13 by the desire to maintain national unity, dominance of the Communist Party  
14 and President Xi Jinping, high rates of economic growth and to counter  
15 Western measures that seek to undermine China. Religion is a secondary  
16 factor in this equation.

17 For the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, there is an additional commercial factor. Not  
18 only is the area rich in valued mineral resources but the extensive security  
19 measures implemented there are a boon to Chinese technology companies  
20 and are an ideal testing ground for their products. Lucrative state contracts  
21 have added millions of dollars to their revenue.

22  
23 *Controlling the Uighurs has also become a test case for*  
24 *marketing Chinese technological prowess around the world. A*  
25 *hundred government agencies and companies from two*  
26 *dozen countries, including the US, France, Israel and the*  
27 *Philippines, now participate in the highly influential annual*  
28 *China-Eurasia Security Expo in Urumqi, the capital of the*  
29 *Uighur region. The ethos at the expo, and in the Chinese*  
30 *techno-security industry as a whole, is that Muslim populations*  
31 *need to be managed and made productive. Over the past five*  
32 *years, the people's war on terror has allowed a number of*  
33 *Chinese tech startups to achieve unprecedented levels of*  
34 *growth. In just the last two years, the state has invested an*  
35 *estimated \$7.2bn in techno-security in Xinjiang. (Byler 2019).*  
36

37 As Silicon Valley companies compete for a share of the growing market, US  
38 policy makers remain placid about the sale of high-end electronic technology  
39 to China. (Under Trump and Biden, a comprehensive, aggressive anti-China  
40 drive has been launched). In China as in the US, Europe and India, neoliberal  
41 economics and politics drive policy and official action. Religion and anti-  
42 terrorist rhetoric provide a public relations cover for the process.

43  
44 +++++  
45

1 The evaluation of the situation in China needs to take US policy into account.  
2 Since the presidency of Barrack Obama, the US has followed a strong anti-  
3 China policy on matters of domestic and global economy, arms sales, military  
4 strategy, economic influence in Africa, and China's support for nations like  
5 Iran and Venezuela. Protecting US corporations facing stiff competition from  
6 Chinese companies, encircling and isolating China—as was the case prior to  
7 1971—are the key planks of this policy. In order to secure domestic and global  
8 support, these imperialistic goals are masked under the rubric of promoting  
9 freedom and democracy, protecting religious freedom and minority rights. The  
10 security and public relations agencies of the US have a sophisticated  
11 propaganda machinery to create a global atmosphere to implement its foreign  
12 policy goals. Inspired by the work of EL Bernays, deploying that machinery  
13 was a standard operating procedure in the Cold War. Among other things, it  
14 was successfully used to deceive the world in the decade long war on Iraq.  
15 Now that same effort is underway against China. With the generous  
16 assistance from rightwing think tanks, Evangelical Christian groups, and  
17 conservative and liberal mass media, the anti-China cacophony churns out  
18 one negative story about China after another on a daily basis. Britain, the  
19 loyal ally of the US, has contributed in in a big way.

20 Donald Trump attained global fame for the brazen, mind-boggling lies he  
21 uttered on varied subjects on a daily basis. Fact-checking scholars and  
22 journalists have listed more than 18,000 lies he spoke in public from 2017 to  
23 the end of his term in 2020. In that spirit, his administration trumpeted blanket  
24 distortions and lies about China and Chinese companies on a voluminous  
25 scale. Yet, when it came to China, he and his senior officials got the benefit  
26 of the doubt from the media that had castigated his usual lies. What was said  
27 about China was reported in non-critical terms and repeated often enough to  
28 give it an aura of credibility. Independent voices and Chinese officials were  
29 ignored, or their views were presented in disparaging terms.

30 In December 2020, John Ratcliffe, the most senior intelligence official in  
31 the US, declared that China was attempting to dominate the world and thus  
32 represented the most serious threat to '*democracy and freedom since World*  
33 *War Two*'. He also urged preparations for an open conflict with China. His  
34 wild assertions were dismissed by a Chinese government spokesperson as a  
35 '*hypocritical, prejudiced concoction of lies*'. Unlike the US, China does not  
36 have hundreds of military bases across the world, is not engaged in  
37 aggressive military actions in the Middle East and Africa, does not employ  
38 economic sanctions and arm-twisting by the global financial institutions to  
39 bring nations under its influence. The record since World War II clearly shows  
40 that what China is falsely accused of doing is precisely what the US has done  
41 and is doing. Such truculent rhetoric helps sell billions of dollars in advanced  
42 weaponry and build a coalition to surround China. That was what Ronald  
43 Reagan did in relation to the USSR. The more Mikhail Gorbachev, the USSR  
44 leader, strove for peace and disarmament, the more outlandish did his  
45 rhetoric about '*the evil empire*' become. Yet, today even senior liberal media  
46 gurus disdain to reveal this history and reality to the public. At best, a part of



1 the long-term strategy is framed in terms of the misdeeds of a decidedly  
2 Quixotic president.

3 This propaganda machinery affects what the US and global media say of  
4 the Uyghurs. Without adducing credible evidence, US officials label the plight  
5 of the Uyghurs a genocide. Estimates of the Uyghurs in internment camps are  
6 put from a million to three million. The current count of detainees is conflated  
7 with the count of those who have passed through the camps. And both  
8 numbers are wildly exaggerated. The US State Department places the  
9 number in the camps at three million.

10  
11 *China is home to one of the worst human rights crises of our*  
12 *time. It is truly the stain of the century.* US Secretary of State  
13 Mike Pompeo (Hassan 2019).  
14

15 Yet, photos of only a few detention centers exist. Cases of maltreatment are  
16 generalized without evidence. Respected human rights organizations, other  
17 Western governments and progressive groups sing the same tune. But many  
18 governments seeking economic favors from China, including those in Muslim  
19 majority nations, remain silent or echo the Chinese line.

20 When the adamantly Islamophobic US senators and senior officials who  
21 could not care less about the fate of the Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar or  
22 about religious discrimination and violence in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh  
23 and Saudi Arabia are overnight reborn as champions of Muslims in China, it  
24 is time to take stock. While firmly standing for justice everywhere, we must  
25 not be duped into echoing the falsehoods espoused by certified violators of  
26 human rights. Pointing fingers at others is not to absolve any party. But it  
27 provides context and perspective. For the most part, China is a nation where  
28 people of diverse religious beliefs as well as non-believers go about their lives  
29 in a peaceful, cooperative fashion and where the government is not  
30 particularly hostile against any religion. What it is hostile to are threats to its  
31 authority and the sovereignty of the nation. And in any case, it is misleading  
32 to regard the current Chinese scene as a confrontation between socialism  
33 and religion. China is a capitalist nation, a nation of billionaires and hundreds  
34 of millions of have-nots, in which the state bureaucracy exerts decisive power  
35 over the economy and society.  
36

### 37 **9.13 NEW ATHEISM**

38

39 A new brand of atheism has dominated the discourse on belief and non-belief  
40 in religion in the West since the late 1980s. The principal celebrities in this  
41 upsurge—called **New Atheism**—are Richard Dawkins (evolutionary  
42 biologist), Sam Harris (neuroscientist, science writer), Christopher Hitchens  
43 (writer and journalist, deceased), Daniel Dennett (philosopher, cognitive  
44 scientist), and Victor Stenger (physicist, philosopher, deceased).

45 Like traditional atheism, New Atheism is skeptical about the existence of  
46 supernatural realms and beings that are beyond human cognition. Placing

1 science and reason at the center of the search for knowledge and human  
2 progress, it declares that no field, religion and morality included, is immune  
3 from dissection via the methods of science. New Atheism is not just an aloof  
4 entity. It is a vocal, out-in-the-trenches brand of atheism imbued with the  
5 same type of zeal as that of the colonial era Christian missionaries who went  
6 to Africa to civilize the 'natives' and free them from 'superstitious' beliefs.

7  
8 **Richard Dawkins**, a senior professor at the University of Oxford, is probably  
9 the most outspoken proponent of atheism at this time. His 1986 book, *The*  
10 *Blind Watchmaker*, gave a jump start to the rise of New Atheism. A cogent  
11 exposition of the Darwinian theory of evolution, it describes how a complex  
12 organ like the eye can—over millions of years—emerge from a step-by-step,  
13 cumulative process based on natural selection. An instant best seller, it was  
14 a strong counter point to the conservative tide striving to expunge the theory  
15 of evolution from school curricula. His later book, *The God Delusion*, is the  
16 premier text of New Atheism. Evidence, logic and probability-based analysis  
17 form the hallmark of his approach.

18  
19 **Sam Harris** is an erudite, outspoken neuroscientist, philosopher and  
20 podcaster whose research spans ethics, religion, cognitive neurology,  
21 artificial intelligence, politics and terrorism. A forthright critic of religion, he is  
22 the author of several bestselling, widely translated books including *The End*  
23 *of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (2004), *Letters to a*  
24 *Christian Nation* (2006) and *The Moral Landscape: How Science Could*  
25 *Determine Moral Values* (2012). His major concern has been to expose and  
26 defuse the harm that may ensue from actions based on blind religious faith.

27  
28 **Christopher Hitchens**, the only one without a footing in the natural sciences,  
29 was a famed journalist, academic and cultural critic. An author of many books  
30 on cultural, social and political issues and distinctive biographies of historic  
31 and contemporary personages, his politics prior to around 2000 differed from  
32 those of the other four. While they have espoused liberalism of the US  
33 Democratic Party variety, he started off as a Trotskyist and, with Noam  
34 Chomsky and Edward Said, staunchly opposed US imperial aggression  
35 (Vietnam, Panama and Yugoslavia). Yet, after the attacks on the New York  
36 Twin Towers, he swung over to ally with rabid neo-conservatives and  
37 enthusiastically supported the war on Iraq.

38 On matters of religion, science and morality he was at par with the other  
39 four New Atheist luminaries. He saw little good and much harm in religious  
40 belief and championed the firm separation of the church and state. His  
41 disdain of religious hypocrisy is typified in his iconoclastic exposé of Mother  
42 Teresa in *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*,  
43 and his no-holds-barred assault on the social reality of religion in *God Is Not*  
44 *Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.

1 **Daniel Dennett**, a neuroscientist and philosopher, is a soft-spoken, least  
2 combative of the five the sages of New Atheism. His insightful book *Breaking*  
3 *the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, published in 2006, details the  
4 emergence and evolution of religion along scientific lines. Like Dawkins, he  
5 views religion as a social system involving belief in supernatural phenomena  
6 that has emerged from long term biological and cultural evolution. As such, it  
7 is a human, not a divinely derived, phenomenon.

8  
9 **Victor Stenger**, physicist, philosopher, popularizer of science and skeptic,  
10 wrote many essays and popular books on quantum mechanics, science,  
11 cosmology, psychic phenomena and religion. Approaching entities like God  
12 and divine purpose from varied perspectives, his books adduce not just the  
13 paucity of evidence for such phenomena but also reasonable evidence for  
14 their non-existence. He has authored fourteen books dealing with scientific  
15 interpretation of religion. Among them, *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for*  
16 *Science and Reason* is hailed as a simple, clear and polished guide to the  
17 subject.

18  
19 +++++  
20

21 New Atheism has evolved into a militant, activist doctrine concerned with  
22 advocacy of scientific rationality, critical analysis of holy texts, debunking  
23 religious beliefs, and delinking state and religious institutions. Religions are  
24 not, if they ever were, neutral or beneficial belief systems. Likening them to  
25 harmful dogmas that impede human progress, they are to be contested with  
26 vigor. While most atheists and humanists have an attitude of live-and-let-live  
27 towards religious belief, the gurus of New Atheism proclaim—just as the  
28 religious fundamentalists do—that the two sides are in a mortal ideological  
29 combat. In the process, New Atheism has become enmeshed in local and  
30 global politics, including matters of social justice, women’s rights, terrorism,  
31 war and peace. Among the major religions, Islam is singled out by the new  
32 atheists as the key obstacle to a peaceful, humane and rational way of life.

33 The relationship between religion and science at the technical level,  
34 including the contribution of New Atheism, is dealt with in *Religion, Science*  
35 *and the Pandemic*. Here attention is on the societal facets of New Atheism,  
36 as shown in the views of five major new atheists. As they do not concur on  
37 all issues, our summary is based on their common ground. First, we look at  
38 their operational style.

39 New Atheism urges people to base their ideas and opinions on science,  
40 rationality and secularism. Every idea that depends on some form of  
41 supernatural phenomenon has to be denounced. Since political and cultural  
42 opinions are vigorously debated, it asserts that religious views should be held  
43 to the same standard. It implores non-believers to openly discuss religion and  
44 explain their disagreements with the scriptures and tenets of the major faiths.  
45 It calls upon atheists to emerge in the open, show that they form a sizeable  
46 group, promote their ideas boldly and publicly ridicule religious teachings. It

1 presents survey data indicating that many scientists, civic and political  
2 leaders, educated people and members of the clergy, are non-believers but  
3 do not announce it in public. New Atheism claims that this is done in order to  
4 protect job, position, housing and reputation. It holds that moderation  
5 empowers extremism. It deems deists and agnostics as illogical fence sitters  
6 whose neutral stand only sustains backward ideas. It deems teaching religion  
7 to children an imposition that violates their right to freedom of belief. Schools  
8 should teach children to think in scientific ways. Scientific education should  
9 be mandatory.

10 True to their words, the gurus of New Atheism often appear in the media,  
11 conferences, websites, and podcasts to pontificate and debate their ideas and  
12 visions. Not believing in a common ground between faith and science, they  
13 brook no compromise. Their mode of operation—you are with us, or you are  
14 against us—is reminiscent of the declaration of US President George W Bush  
15 at the start of the final war Iraq.

16 The New Atheist position uses probabilities and science, not certainties  
17 and beliefs, to derive conclusions. Like any aspect of human society, religion  
18 is subjected to objective, scientific investigations. Religion is unlikely to be of  
19 divine origin as ample evidence shows that it is a product of long term natural  
20 and cultural evolution. Analogous to the DNA molecule, whose propagation,  
21 mutation and selection drives natural evolution, New Atheism posits that  
22 memes—self-replicating packets of social information—drive cultural and  
23 social evolution. Accordingly, religion, morality and political beliefs can be  
24 analyzed as memes. Morality is not inextricably tied to religious belief. It too  
25 emerged from natural, cultural evolutionary processes and likely preceded  
26 beliefs in divine entities. Pointing to the double standards, inconsistencies  
27 and grossly immoral behavior, including rape, child abuse, xenophobia and  
28 genocide endorsed in the sacred texts of major religions, it holds that  
29 scriptures are a poor guide for codes morality. Seeing the limits of reason, it  
30 also allows room for trust, reciprocity and intuition in human relations, and  
31 stresses the importance of reason in tackling the ethical dilemmas in society.  
32 While accepting that there are political, social and environmental threats to  
33 the future of humanity, it declares that violence based on religious faith is a  
34 major factor that may precipitate the demise of human civilization. New  
35 Atheism says in a loud tone that humanity must devote serious effort to tackle  
36 religion-based extremism. And it singles out Islam, not just the extremist  
37 Muslims, as the principal danger facing civilization.

### 38 **+ New Atheism and Islam +**

39  
40  
41 The US government both used and turned against Islam, Islamic states and  
42 Islamic movements during the Cold War. It depended on the context. Thus,  
43 in Afghanistan, Islamic terrorist groups were funded and armed to counter the  
44 Soviet Influence. In Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, the  
45 military was armed, funded and diplomatically shielded in its genocidal

1 campaign to subdue the struggle for self-rule by the people of East Timor, a  
2 small, overwhelmingly Catholic nation.

3 Foreign policies of the US and Western allies are not founded on religion.  
4 They derive from the drive to control strategic resources, promote economic  
5 interests, attain military supremacy and exercise political dominance across  
6 the globe. Religion is a tool for use as the situation demands.

7 After the 1991 war on Iraq, escalating tensions in the Middle East and the  
8 September 2011 attacks on prominent US targets by a Jihadist group, the  
9 anti-Islamic tendency has gained the upper hand. Western military assaults  
10 on Muslim majority states (Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, Libya) and the  
11 subjugation of the Palestinian people together with the retaliatory attacks by  
12 the Jihadist groups in Europe have generated virulent tirades against Islamic  
13 terrorism and Islam from the leaders of the West. Intense media barrage  
14 along such lines has produced a broad and dramatic rise of Islamophobia in  
15 the West.

16 Despite the avowed aim of New Atheism to tackle all issues on evidence-  
17 based, scientific grounds, on the question of Islam, it has been overtaken by  
18 irrational prejudice. While the stands of the gurus of New Atheism differ  
19 somewhat, their overall position can be summed up as follows.

20 In the New Atheist mindset, while all religions are bad, Islam of today is  
21 the worst of the lot and is branded as the main force propagating evil in the  
22 world (Savage 2014, Sparrow 2019). In a Twitter exchange dated 1 March  
23 2013 with Todd Kiancannon, Richard Dawkins opined:

24  
25 *Haven't read Koran so couldn't quote chapter & verse like I can*  
26 *for Bible. But often say Islam greatest force for evil today.*

27 Richard Dawkins

28 ([https://twitter.com/RichardDawkins/status/307369895031603](https://twitter.com/RichardDawkins/status/307369895031603200)  
29 200).

30  
31 *We are not at war with terrorism. We are at war with Islam.*

32 Sam Harris (Savage 2014).

33  
34 *Islam, more than any other religion human beings have*  
35 *devised, has all the makings of a thoroughgoing cult of death.*

36 Sam Harris (Savage 2014).

37  
38 The New Atheists mostly support the US led imperial wars (Iraq, Libya), the  
39 so-called War on Terror (Afghanistan and Somalia) and the brutal Israeli  
40 domination of the people of Palestine. As in the colonial era in Africa, the  
41 aggressive incursions are seen as missions to civilize primitive people.

42 The New Atheists largely regard violence against Muslim nations and  
43 groups as necessary and ethical. They endorse bombing civilian areas, use  
44 of cluster and chemical bombs, torture, assassination, state surveillance, and  
45 suppression of democratic rights as just means towards a noble end.

46

1           *Given what many of us believe about the exigencies of our war*  
2           *on terrorism, the practice of torture, in certain circumstances,*  
3           *would seem to be not only permissible, but necessary.* Sam  
4           Harris (Brown 2009).

5  
6           With reference to Iran, a preemptive nuclear strike is legitimate for the most  
7           vociferous New Atheists.

8  
9           *The only thing likely to ensure our survival may be a nuclear*  
10          *first strike of our own.* Sam Harris (Savage 2014).

11  
12          *As for that benighted country [Iran], I wouldn't shed a tear if it*  
13          *was wiped off the face of this earth.* Christopher Hitchens  
14          (Savage 2014).

15  
16          They favor bans on the wearing of burqas and hijab, restricting the reading of  
17          Quran, halting mosque construction, controlling Islamic schools, curtailing  
18          immigration from Muslim nations, outlawing female genital mutilation and  
19          other norms to counter the existential threats to the '*liberal and freedom loving*  
20          *Western civilization*' from a '*monstrous enemy*'. Enmeshed in the '*clash of*  
21          *civilization*' thesis propounded by the arch-conservative political ideologue  
22          Samuel P Huntington, New Atheism declares that Islam cannot be reformed;  
23          it must be vanquished. At times, its leaders appear to be wallowing in  
24          gratuitous killings.

25          The New Atheists visualize themselves as inheritors of the science-based  
26          atheism of the past and pay homage to Bertrand Russel and Albert Einstein.  
27          But, with regards to social agenda, nothing is further from the truth. Russel  
28          and Einstein took firm pacifist stands, spoke up against war, and worked for  
29          the abolition of nuclear weapons. While Einstein and Russel had socialist  
30          orientations, the New Atheists ally with social analysts who declare, on shaky  
31          grounds, that capitalism has not only brought much progress to the entire  
32          human race, but also that it represents the only viable social and economic  
33          system.

34          New Atheism gained momentum in opposition to the Evangelical Christian  
35          drive against the theory of evolution. Yet, in no time, it joined hands with the  
36          same extremist religious right to demonize Islam, project US imperial power,  
37          and fraternize with patent war criminals like Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz  
38          in the Bush Jr administration.

39          The bellicose style of the New Atheists stands in contrast to the dignified,  
40          respectful pronouncements of the icons of old atheism. It also deviates from  
41          how Charles Darwin, their premier hero, envisioned dealing with people of  
42          religious faith.

43  
44          *It appears to me ... that direct arguments against Christianity*  
45          *and theism produce hardly any effect on the public; and*  
46          *freedom of thought is best promoted by the gradual*

1 *illumination of men's minds which follows from the advance of*  
2 *science.* Charles Darwin (O'Neill 2007).  
3

4 Marx, Engels and Lenin did not advocate a combative approach towards  
5 religious belief. Instead, socialists should strive to replace the exploitative  
6 economic structure and alienating social relations of capitalism with one in  
7 which people control the economy and collectively determine the course of  
8 their own lives. They opined that as the degrading conditions that estrange  
9 people from reality and sustain mystical, supernatural beliefs dissipate, the  
10 need for people to depend on such beliefs for emotional solace would wane  
11 as well.

12 A significant portion of the modern humanist movement dislikes the hard-  
13 hitting style of the New Atheists. Most non-believers do not ridicule religion in  
14 public. They respect the emotional attachment of people to their faith. They  
15 hold that the New Atheist tirades alienate people, leaving no room for dialogue  
16 and damage the atheist cause. And it strengthens religious extremism. Many  
17 humanists feel that believers and non-believers can find common ground in  
18 their views towards science and morality, and especially in the urgent task of  
19 improving the human condition and addressing problems like poverty, hunger,  
20 inequality and homelessness. For New Atheism, these are not primary  
21 concerns. It essentially views the human condition as a function of the  
22 progress of science and rationality, and thereby becomes detached from the  
23 concerns of the common person. Humanism favors broad alliances; New  
24 Atheism declares that our way is the only way.  
25

26 *[New Atheism] ... shifts the focus from the social ills wrought*  
27 *by unjust economic arrangements to an external singularity*  
28 *called 'religion'. .... Beneath its superficial rationalism, [it]*  
29 *amounts to little more than an intellectual defense of empire*  
30 *and a smokescreen for the injustices of global capitalism. It is*  
31 *a parochial universalism whose potency lies in its capacity to*  
32 *appear simultaneously iconoclastic, dissenting, and*  
33 *disinterested, while channeling vulgar prejudices, promoting*  
34 *imperial projects, and dressing up banal truisms as deep*  
35 *insights.* (Savage 2014).  
36

#### 37 **9.14 WOMEN, ATHEISM AND HUMANISM** 38

39 The history of all the major religions has been a history of discrimination  
40 against women. Though their status has improved of recent, it remains  
41 uneven. In some nations, women's rights are severely suppressed while in  
42 others, they enjoy greater freedom, and almost equal access to education,  
43 and well-paid jobs. However, even in the best of circumstances, they too face  
44 a glass ceiling in ascending to the executive, decision making ranks and are  
45 more likely to work in low-paying temporary jobs. The key factors promoting

1 gender equality are general economic development, responsive governance,  
2 secularization of the legal system and separation of religion and state.

3 Take the case of Africa. In the colonial era, women faced two barriers—  
4 those emanating from tradition and those imposed by the colonial economy.  
5 After Independence, many nations adopted a secular constitution which  
6 protected the basic rights of women. Marriage and inheritance laws were  
7 improved. Women made reasonable progress in education, politics and the  
8 professions in the early years. But due to the neo-colonial nature of the  
9 economic policies and resultant political instability, the momentum of the early  
10 days was not sustained. Gender parity thus remained an elitist process.

11 The link between secularization, greater national economic autonomy and  
12 a responsive government, on the one hand, and enhancement of the status  
13 of women was, with some exceptions, also evident in the Muslim majority  
14 nations. While the social and civil rights of women in Saudi Arabia and other  
15 theocratic Gulf states were seriously curtailed, women made good strides for  
16 attaining equality in Turkey, Iraq (under Saddam Hussein), Afghanistan (prior  
17 to US destabilization in the 1980s), Libya (under Gaddafi), Malaysia,  
18 Indonesia, Sudan (prior to the 1990s), Egypt (under Gamel A Nasser) and  
19 Algeria. The failure of the secular, nationalist governments to institute broad  
20 based development programs, imperial interventions and political instability  
21 allowed a resurgence of movements advocating Islam as the state religion.  
22 Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkey and Iran (with their own peculiarities) are examples  
23 of the trend. In the process, the achievements in the arena of freedom and  
24 equality for women began to crumble.

25 A comparison between India and China is illustrative. In 1949, women in  
26 both nations were at the bottom rung of the society, oppressed among the  
27 oppressed. Among the multitude of social restrictions they faced in one or the  
28 other place were punitive domination by parents, husbands, and in-laws, foot  
29 binding, arduous widowhood, dowry payment, domestic and external  
30 violence, isolation during menstruation, domestic drudgery, poor educational  
31 chances, limited property rights, restrictions in religious and public functions,  
32 and rape. India at Independence adopted a secular constitution that accorded  
33 equal status to men and women. Enlightened public, educational policies  
34 enabled a significant section of Indian women to surmount traditional barriers  
35 and advance in the economy, politics, business, academia, media,  
36 entertainment industry, and civil service. Many now occupy senior positions.  
37 But the mass of Indian women and girls, especially in the rural areas, are  
38 forced to endure a misery-filled back-breaking life littered with discriminatory  
39 practices. Neoliberalism has magnified the gender-based oppressive facets  
40 of Hinduism.

41 In secular, socialist China under Mao, foot binding and all social norms  
42 restricting women's lives were abolished, education for women (and men)  
43 was vastly expanded, and their health and social status improved in a marked  
44 fashion. Now, even as representation of women in the upper echelons of  
45 power in China remains poor, the general conditions of girls and women there



1 are much better than what prevails in India. The status and situation of women  
2 in capitalist Taiwan and South Korea are similar to that in China.

3 Whatever the nature of the political system, a decent level of economic  
4 progress, secularization, fair educational and employment policies, and  
5 sustained curtailment of cultural and religious impositions on women are key  
6 ingredients for the improvement of the social and economic conditions of  
7 women. Religions that do not reform their beliefs and norms with regards to  
8 women, and transition towards granting equal spiritual and practical status to  
9 men and women are, in the long run, only undercutting their own credibility.  
10 One half of humanity cannot be marginalized forever.

### 11 **+ Women in religion +**

12  
13  
14 We laid out the history, doctrinal tenets and the actuality of women in each of  
15 the four major religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam in the  
16 previous chapters. We further note that the divine entities and prophets of  
17 most religions are either male figures or have masculine features. A gender-  
18 neutral God, as in Islam, is uncommon. Hinduism, with its multiplicity of gods  
19 and goddesses is an outlier.

20 The holy scriptures of most religions provide an ambiguous guide on the  
21 question of spiritual and worldly equality of men and women. Some sections  
22 imply that men are superior to women while other sections seem to accord  
23 them an equal status. Sikhism and Bahai teachings strongly proclaim gender  
24 equality. They are a rarity.

25 The senior leaders—gurus, temple priests, monks, lamas, ministers,  
26 bishops, imams and sheikhs—of most religions still are predominantly men.  
27 But especially in the Western world, women are beginning to break through  
28 traditional barriers to lead religious bodies and conduct prayers and other  
29 important rituals.

### 30 **+ Humanism and women +**

31  
32  
33 We now examine the status of women within atheism and humanism. Prior to  
34 the mid-1800s, patriarchy prevailed all across the globe. Like all social  
35 institutions, professions and creeds, the atheist movement was a male  
36 dominated movement. But as a result of worker and socialist struggles in  
37 Europe and America and the rise of anti-colonial struggles in Africa, Asia and  
38 Latin America, women became more active in the political arena. Some  
39 blended a degree of religious faith with humanism and some had outright  
40 socialist tendencies. Women played a major and active role in the institution,  
41 operation and defense of the Paris Commune. From the 1960s, women were  
42 at the frontline and many sacrificed their lives in the struggle for freedom from  
43 Portuguese colonial rule in Mozambique. Women played a key role in the  
44 defense and consolidation of the socialist revolution in Cuba. In many places  
45 though, once independence was attained, women suffered a setback.

1 No charter of the secular, humanist or atheist organizations has clauses  
2 that subordinate women to men. The problem here is not a doctrinal one. It is  
3 that of practice. Patriarchy persists even where secularism has made major  
4 inroads. Humanist and atheist organizations are also tainted with patriarchy.  
5 Practice at times deviates from principles.

### 6 7 **+ Gender and religiosity +** 8

9 The association between gender and degree of religious belief is a key factor  
10 in understanding the persistence of patriarchy under secularism. When  
11 secular, irreverent ideas were coming to the fore after the French Revolution  
12 and during the age of Enlightenment in Europe, female non-believers were  
13 viewed with revulsion even by some liberal voices. Some held that women  
14 were biologically incapable of expressing doubt on religious matters and  
15 atheism was incompatible with female frailty and beauty. Some writers  
16 branded female atheists as wretched leeches akin to child killers and a  
17 menace to society. The extent of anti-female prejudice was summed up in  
18 1813 by the founder of the British Royal Humane Society:

19  
20 *Men contemplate a female atheist with more disgust and*  
21 *horror than if she possessed the hardest features embossed*  
22 *with carbuncles.* Thomas Cogan (Englehart 2013).  
23

24 Other than in theocratic nations, attitudes of this kind are rare today. But  
25 women still are a minority of the atheist community everywhere. Take the  
26 case of the United States. About a fifth (and growing portion) of the US adult  
27 population disavows religious affiliation. A random sample survey of over  
28 35,000 adults reported in 2014 investigated the relationship between gender  
29 and religiosity. Both genders were equally represented. The primary finding  
30 was that there was a consistent chasm between men and women on several  
31 measures of belief and practice. Thus, 75% of the men but 81% of the women  
32 were affiliated to a religious tradition. Among women, 69% were absolutely  
33 certain about their belief in God but among men it was 57%. Among women,  
34 64% prayed at least once a day but among men only 46% did so. 38% of the  
35 women relied on religion for moral guidance but only 28% of the men did so.  
36 34% of women said the Bible was absolutely the word of God but only but  
37 only 27% of men thought so (PRC 2014a).

38 The general message—that women are more religious than men—has  
39 been replicated in anecdotal and sampling studies done worldwide. The basic  
40 reasons for the disparity are not biological but derive from upbringing and  
41 socio-economic status, and the reality of women in patriarchal societies.  
42 Often confined to the home, burdened with responsibility of childcare, and  
43 with lower rates of participation in paid work, they gravitate towards church or  
44 temple as an escape from the daily drudgery of domestic life, a chance to  
45 mingle with people and a venue for emotional solace. One analysis found that  
46 the level of workforce participation was the main factor in that regard. The

1 same story holds in India and Africa. Secularist institutions do not have the  
2 resources, and organizational structures to be able to have a significant  
3 impact on women. The forces pulling women towards religion are much  
4 stronger than those pulling them towards secularism.

### 5 6 **+ Sexism, racism and atheism +** 7

8 A factor limiting the appeal of atheism, humanism to women, especially those  
9 from minority racial and ethnic groups, is the presence of sexist and racially  
10 insensitive tendencies within the secularist movements. The overwhelming  
11 majority of their members are male, and in Europe and America, are white  
12 male. The leaders, prominent spokespersons and conference speakers at  
13 major atheist and humanist conferences are mostly men. Reporting biases  
14 downplay the achievements of female atheists. Women have penned critical  
15 works on atheism, founded acclaimed secular journals, and made significant  
16 contributions to the sociology of religion but have not been given due credit.

17 On top of that, a good number of male atheists do not seem to have shed  
18 their misogynic or racist views and conduct. Being a numerical minority, even  
19 a few incidents of sexual misconduct generates a hostile atmosphere for  
20 women. When a couple of women experience sexual harassment at an  
21 atheist conference, and their claims are casually dismissed, it affects all the  
22 female participants. And when the accused are senior leaders of the atheist  
23 movement and other leaders rally to their defense with spurious arguments,  
24 it pours salt on the raw wound. Feminist atheists are lectured by the  
25 distinguished male atheists to not make mountains out of molehills. They are  
26 told that should not compare their situation with that of women in Muslim  
27 nations. Male misconduct is rationalized in terms of biological (natural and  
28 intrinsic) factors.

29 The New Atheist movement in particular has been afflicted by sexism and  
30 patriarchy. The anti-feminist tweets and pronouncements issued by its  
31 prominent figures have generated extensive controversy and rebuke from not  
32 just women's groups but also from other humanists. At times, they retract  
33 what they have said, only to repeat it later on. As a result, the gulf between  
34 atheism and feminism has widened. Women atheists do not expect to  
35 encounter within an organization of rational thinkers the type of behavior they  
36 experience in the irrational external world.

37 Compartmentalization is another malady. Modern atheist agendas mostly  
38 focus on anti-religious skepticism to the exclusion of issues like social justice,  
39 racism and patriarchy. In the past, that was not the case, at least not to the  
40 extent it is today. Feminists, secular and religious, organizing for the right of  
41 women to vote, for example, worked alongside socialists and social justice  
42 advocates. Trade unions and socialist parties championed racial and gender  
43 equality. Large numbers of women joined the anti-war movements in the  
44 1960s and supported anti-colonial and anti-Apartheid struggles in Africa.

45 Progressive activism now has shed its integrative dimension. Each group  
46 drives its own agenda. Some campaign for racial justice, some for abortion

1 rights, some for environmental causes, some for universal free health care,  
2 some for supporting the homeless, some for occupational safety, some for  
3 children with disability, some for protection of women from domestic abuse,  
4 some for removal of religion from public education, and so on. The sense that  
5 these issues are interconnected and would benefit by sheer numbers, and  
6 pursuance in a coordinated manner would enhance their prospects is not  
7 emphasized.

8 Feminism and atheism today are afflicted with the separatist malady as  
9 well. In the US, mainstream feminism becomes, especially during the critical  
10 election period, a single-issue movement. Candidates who favor women's  
11 right to have an abortion, no matter their stand on imperial wars, pro-corporate  
12 policies, funding for public education, or universal health care, are supported.  
13 Promotion of secularism is a non-issue. On the other hand, the atheist  
14 movement at best pays lip service to the feminist demands and in practice,  
15 ignores them. Sexism exhibited in the New Atheist movement drives women  
16 away from atheism whilst the feminist backlash reinforces the sexist  
17 perceptions of the white males who are the majority of the atheists.

18 Humanist organizations outside the New Atheist tendency and the skeptic  
19 groups allied with it have agendas that cover social justice and women's  
20 rights, and combatting sexism, racism and homophobia. They have many  
21 women members and leaders. The family-oriented events they organize  
22 encourage female attendance. The words of a leading feminist atheist reflect  
23 an ideal combination of the two visions.

24  
25 *[I] cultivate an ethics of interpersonal and community*  
26 *engagement with other people based on principles of civic*  
27 *mindedness. In this way, my atheism directly informs my*  
28 *feminism. I reject society's demand that I submit to men. I*  
29 *reject the objectification of women. The ethics of choice—a*  
30 *person's right to decide what they believe in and what they do*  
31 *with their body—unites the two philosophies. (Bianco 2016).*  
32

33 In a climate engulfed by patriarchic ideas and practices, without serious,  
34 deliberate steps to combat sexism and other dehumanizing tendencies, the  
35 future of atheism is bleak. Rationalism cannot be sustained on the basis of  
36 an immoral and illogical foundation that sidelines one half of humanity.

### 37 38 **9.15 THREE FEMINIST HUMANISTS**

39  
40 In the multiple lists of prominent atheists and humanists found on the Internet  
41 only about one in eight are female. But as we noted earlier, these lists have  
42 a pro-Western bias and exclude, with a few exceptions, socialist and Marxist  
43 humanists. Additionally, they also reflect gender and race bias. The key role  
44 played by female humanists and secular feminists in the Third World nations  
45 is hardly noted in the history of humanism. Yet, secular women often featured

1 prominently, both on the intellectual and practical domains, in major events in  
2 history. Take the atheistically oriented Paris Commune of 1871.

3  
4 *All sectors of the poor supported the Commune, but its leading*  
5 *activists were skilled workers, craftsmen — and women. Adult*  
6 *men were the majority, but more women were involved in the*  
7 *Paris Commune than in any revolution preceding it. .... As a*  
8 *general political movement, the Commune was a failure, but*  
9 *as a gender event, it was an extraordinary landmark in the*  
10 *history of the emancipation of women. ... For all its other*  
11 *failings, the Commune maintained the centrality of women's*  
12 *emancipation as a necessary precondition of democracy.*  
13 (Holmes 2014, pages 102, 124, 143).  
14

15 Major contributions of female humanists and atheists in drives to institute  
16 social change are often a blank page in history. And that is especially so if  
17 they espoused an anti-capitalist program. Radical female humanists have  
18 been active not just in the West but also elsewhere. But the mainstream  
19 atheist and humanist literature does not do justice to that picture.

20 A current case concerns the Sabarimala Temple controversy described in  
21 Chapter 5. Located in the Indian state of Kerala, it has traditionally restricted  
22 entry to women of the menstruating age under the rationale that doing so  
23 would offend the Temple god and endanger his celibacy. After contention  
24 from feminist groups, the case landed in the courts. In 2018, the Supreme  
25 Court of India declared the practice unconstitutional. Priests and the mass of  
26 devout men and women were outraged. Riots ensued as some women tried  
27 to enter the Temple. Two women managed to gain entry in January 2019, but  
28 only under police protection. But, for the most part, the police have sided with  
29 the Temple priests. The case is now before the Supreme Court.

30 Though the issue is an intra-religious one, it is women from secular and  
31 Marxist groups from Kerala and adjoining states that are leading the fight.  
32 Castigated by senior members of the *Hindutva* espousing national ruling  
33 party. they have endured hateful vitriol and extensive harassment.

34  
35 *Why is entry into temple so important for atheists?* (Aazhi  
36 2019).  
37

38 For the activists, the barrier faced by women is not just a religious one. It is  
39 integral to the norms that denigrate women. As such, all women, believers or  
40 not, are affected by it, and have to struggle against it. Some of these bold  
41 women activists have been pelted with stones, attacked in their homes,  
42 received death threats, faced travel restrictions and jailed on spurious  
43 charges. Some have gone into hiding, fearful of the safety of their families.  
44 Yet, they persist.

45 Below we examine the lives and ideas of three secular feminists who are  
46 regularly overlooked in the lists of atheists and humanists.

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**+ Eleanor Marx +**

Eleanor Marx, the youngest daughter of Karl Marx, was born in 1855. Her formal schooling was quite limited, in part due to the family's poor finances and in part, reluctance on her part. Not that she was averse to learning. In their cramped, poorly furnished home, shortages of food, clothing and medicine prevailed. Rent and doctor's bills were always overdue. But writing material and books were in abundance, a haven for the inquisitive reader that she was. Apart from acting and gymnastic lessons, she was a product of home schooling, self-education and informal tutoring by parents, sisters and family friends. The major socialist and cultural luminaries of the time were among her informal teachers.

Her two principal teachers were her father Karl Marx and god-father Friedrich Engels. And what a fabulous education it was. As she played around her father writing *Capital* on a cluttered desk, she pestered him with queries. He put her on his lap and continued a long story that brought his theory of political economy alive in a fictional form. That story bloomed into the keen insight she gained into Marxian economics. Gently guiding her via letters, home visits, and tours of working-class areas, Engels showered her with books and ideas to ponder on.



Eleanor Marx

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In that multilingual abode, she began to speak and read German, French and English from an early age. She had a fun-filled literary diet that combined a wide range of popular children's books with Homer, Shakespeare, *Don Quixote*, Shelly, *the Arabian Nights* and more. Many were read to her by her father. By the time she was five, she recited their sections with alacrity. Her list of early readings spanned a diverse, voluminous terrain. So as to better grasp the plays of Ibsen, she taught herself to be proficient in Norwegian. Chess was a welcome diversion. Imbibing tactical moves from nanny Helen

1 Desmuth, she deployed them successfully to trounce her venerated father.  
2 From Engels, she learned Chess history, widening her cultural horizon in the  
3 process. With family and others, she went to sea resorts, museums, parks,  
4 bookshops and, when her parents could afford it, theatrical and musical  
5 shows. When they later moved to a roomier place, she took delight in caring  
6 for the new residents—kittens, puppies and birds. It was a one-of-a-kind  
7 education in an atmosphere brimming with love and erudition.

8 She had formed independent views on Irish, Polish, English and Italian  
9 politics and working class struggles from her early teen years. By the time she  
10 was 16, she was effectively Marx's secretary, going with him to meetings and  
11 exchanging ideas with leading voices from all walks of life. Eleanor's  
12 intellectual rapport with her father was such that before he died in 1983, he  
13 anointed Engels and herself as the executors of his literary estate. He left  
14 them the arduous task of bringing out his unpublished work and facilitating  
15 translations of his main works. It was a task she executed with diligence.

16 So as not to drain the meagre family income, Eleanor worked as a private  
17 tutor and schoolteacher, wrote articles for magazines and did paid odd jobs  
18 for writers and publishers. Yet, she was an activist above all. She and her  
19 elder sister landed in Paris under assumed names when the Paris Commune  
20 was on the defensive. At a great risk to themselves, they channeled letters  
21 between the communards and their supporters, and were briefly locked up by  
22 the police. Later, Eleanor worked with a leading communard to write, translate  
23 and revise the *History of the Commune of 1971*, a primary source for books  
24 and papers on the Paris Commune that were written afterwards.

25 Eleanor's views on women in society were rooted in the pleasant and  
26 loving care she had from her mother Jenny, nanny Helen and de facto aunt  
27 Annie Burns. Their dignified resilience, elemental sagacity and love for family  
28 and humanity inspired and infused her with profound empathy for women  
29 everywhere.

30 The Paris Commune reinforced those feelings. Among the lessons she  
31 imbibed from the short-lived state was the centrality of women in the struggle  
32 for a just society and the need to fight for gender equality in tandem with the  
33 fight for basic economic transformation. It was a time when women in Europe  
34 were confined to domestic servitude or the worst paid, risky jobs. They could  
35 not vote, hold office, enter universities or join the professions. Socialists often  
36 posited attainment of socialism as a prerequisite for gender equality. Middle  
37 class feminists sought the right to vote, education and equal pay for equal  
38 work without attention to basic social change. Disagreeing with both views,  
39 Eleanor proclaimed that the miserable lives of working-class women could be  
40 transformed only by integrating class struggle with the struggle for equality  
41 between men and women—in the home, education, public affairs and work.  
42 She earnestly began to implement that strategy in 1876 by assisting female  
43 candidates standing for municipal office, combatting sexism in trade unions  
44 and political groups, advocating sex education and repeal of anti-women  
45 legislation, and lectures on socialism to female workers. One of her  
46 campaigns covered Jewish women working in hazardous, abysmally paid

1 jobs and who were also victimized by anti-Semitism and misogyny. To better  
2 interact with them and give support to their strike, she enhanced her linguistic  
3 repertoire by learning Yiddish.

4 Eleanor enriched feminism in practice and theory. Her feminist vision  
5 emanated from Marx and Engels, in particular, the incisive analysis of Engels  
6 in the *Origin of Private Property, Family and the State* and from contact with  
7 women at home and work. Her articulation of progressive feminism was  
8 clearer and more poignant than Marx or Engels. Further, she proposed a  
9 concrete program for socialist feminism and joined many struggles waged by  
10 working class women. The book she co-authored with her common law  
11 partner Edward Aveling—*The Woman Question*—remains one of the most  
12 erudite works on the liberation of women. One example it gives is:

13  
14 *In Germany at the present day the woman is a minor with*  
15 *regard to man. A husband of low estate may chastise a wife.*  
16 *All decisions as to the children rest with him, even to the fixing*  
17 *of the date of weaning. Whatever fortune the wife may have*  
18 *he manages. She may not enter into agreements without his*  
19 *consent; she may not take part in political associations.*  
20 (Aveling and Marx 1886).

21  
22 Such restrictions imply that:

23  
24 *Women are the creatures of an organized tyranny of men, as*  
25 *the workers are the creatures of an organized tyranny of idlers.*  
26 *Even where this much is grasped, we must never be weary of*  
27 *insisting on the non-understanding that for women, as for the*  
28 *laboring classes, no solution of the difficulties and problems*  
29 *that present themselves is really possible in the present*  
30 *condition of society. All that is done, heralded with no matter*  
31 *what flourish of trumpets, is palliative, not remedial. Both the*  
32 *oppressed classes, women and the immediate producers,*  
33 *must understand that their emancipation will come from*  
34 *themselves.* (Aveling and Marx 1886).

35  
36 Arguing that misogyny derives not from natural law but from social structure  
37 and combatting sexism has to be a priority in the struggle for socialism, it  
38 critiques those who remain content to work within the confines of capitalism  
39 and mostly deal with the problems of middle-class women:

40  
41 [Those] *who attack the present treatment of women without*  
42 *seeking for the cause of this in the economics of our latter-day*  
43 *society are like doctors who treat a local affection without*  
44 *inquiring into the general bodily health.* (Aveling and Marx  
45 1886).  
46



1 While women should unite across class lines, working class women should  
2 be aware of the role of upper-class women in their subjugation. On the other  
3 hand, working men subjugate working women, and do little to alleviate the 24-  
4 hour domestic drudgery women endure. Patriarchic tendencies within trade  
5 unions and workplaces must be eliminated. Yet, solidarity across class lines  
6 should not come at the expense of solidarity between working women and  
7 men. Eleanor's feminism enriched and was enriched by radical feminists like  
8 Annie Besant, Rosa Luxemburg, Olive Schreiner and Clara Zetkin with whom  
9 she interacted. In 1909, Clara Zetkin and other radical women took the  
10 initiative of the Socialist Party of America a step further to launch the  
11 International Women's Day, a day that is now celebrated each year. Though  
12 Eleanor was no longer alive, her vision lived on.

13  
14 *Eleanor Marx, ... the mother of socialist feminism, ... was one*  
15 *of the first and most prominent leaders of the new [British]*  
16 *trade unionism, bringing feminism into the heart of the*  
17 *movement. (Honan 2015).*

18  
19 Her involvement in trade union and worker's struggles was nothing short of  
20 legendary. Starting with the Women's Trade Union League in 1886, she  
21 focused on publicizing work conditions in factories employing young girls,  
22 organized industrial action and galvanized support for the strikers. As one of  
23 the leaders of the Bloody Sunday demonstration in London in 1887 and later  
24 day rallies, Eleanor not only organized behind the scene, but also gave  
25 speeches and stood in the front-line facing police batons. When men activists  
26 took to their heels, she stood her ground, imploring others to do likewise and  
27 was roughed up. Her publicized reports castigated police violence against  
28 activists and women.

29 Eleanor was a major force in the establishment of political parties with a  
30 socialist program. After joining the Social Democratic Federation and being  
31 elected to its executive board, she became disenchanted with the reformist,  
32 chauvinistic agenda adopted by its main leaders. With William Morris and  
33 others, she founded the Socialist League. Sidelined by conservative, envious  
34 male union leaders, she still managed to attend the inaugural conference of  
35 the Independent Labor Party as an observer. Yet, her efforts to direct the  
36 Party's program towards socialism based on class struggle did not take off,  
37 and she returned to a reinvigorated, radicalized Socialist League. Even when  
38 her views failed to carry the day, her spirited, lucid oratory often moved the  
39 delegates.

40 Eleanor was a valued editor and a prolific translator. She edited four key  
41 works of Karl Marx and translated the book on the Paris Commune she had  
42 helped to write, a book on anarchism by G Plekhanov, and several works by  
43 leading German socialists into English. She was a presence on the cultural  
44 arena too, translating four plays of Henrik Ibsen and the highly controversial  
45 *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert. Besides, she acted in plays, wrote two  
46 incisive essays on Shelly that depicted him as a socialist poet and engaged

1 in extended dialogue with literary luminaries like George Bernard Shaw, Olive  
2 Shriner and William Morris. She felt that the stage was an important medium  
3 for highlighting women's issues and advancing the feminist cause. After  
4 extensive research for a biography of her father, she began a draft, but death  
5 intervened before it could be completed. Yet, even the draft provides material  
6 unavailable from other sources. And this is but a limited listing of the products  
7 of her pen.

8 As a public orator, she had few equals. Her vibrant speech at the first May  
9 Day rally in London in 1890 highlighted the event. Her lectures in thirty-five  
10 American cities drew large, appreciative crowds. In plain, clear terms, she  
11 negated the gross distortions about socialism and socialists in the media. For  
12 working people, they were an eye opener. Lambasting the hazardous, dire  
13 conditions in factories and mines, she joined the ongoing campaign for an 8-  
14 hour workday and against child labor. Where a strike was going on, she joined  
15 in. Even the largely hostile main media could not fail to express appreciation  
16 at her erudition, charisma and modest demeanor.

17 Like Marx and Engels, Eleanor was an internationalist who decried the  
18 jingoistic attitudes of union and political leaders. When the occasion arose,  
19 her sympathies extended to the conditions of people in South Africa, India  
20 and Sudan. Thus, when British imperial forces under General Gordon were  
21 handed a defeat by the Sudanese resistance, she said it was a victory for the  
22 working people and spoke out against the cries for punitive revenge.

23 At the personal level, Eleanor was a compassionate, respectful, dignified  
24 being whose courtesy and charm extended to allies and foes alike. Yet, her  
25 mild-mannered persona, distinctly modest attire and plain hair style did in no  
26 way detract from a magnetic presence. The incisive, fruitful exchanges that  
27 were her hallmark took place in a friendly fashion. Only the utter bigot failed  
28 to feel good in her welcoming presence. Her voluminous correspondence with  
29 comrades, family, Engels, and others attest to a distinct combination of  
30 qualities.

31 Totally devoted to her family, she spent three years taking care of her  
32 ailing parents. Her partner's reluctance prevented her from bearing a child.  
33 But she loved children and was delighted when her nephews paid a visit. Like  
34 her father had done for her, she spoilt them while educating them at the same  
35 time.

36  
37 +++++  
38

39 It was on the question of religion that many strands of Eleanor's outlook and  
40 personality came together. As a child, she was never baptized, made to pray  
41 or attend church service. Her father quenched her inquisitiveness on religion  
42 by telling her stories about Jesus Christ, the prophets and early Christianity.  
43 She learned that in the early stage, Christianity had stood for the underdog  
44 but later it was appropriated by emperors, kings and popes for their own ends.  
45 To those who ascribed the oppression of women to purely religious and

1 cultural factors, she said, that women's 'social condition is a question of  
2 economics, not of religion or of sentiment'.

3 Though a life-long socialist atheist, she respected the right of people to  
4 practice their faith and appreciated the basis of popular religiosity. Valuing the  
5 cultural heritage of Judaism and Christianity, she had no qualms about  
6 Christmas celebrations for children.

7  
8 *We cannot too soon make children understand that Socialism*  
9 *means happiness. Perhaps some friends .... will object to a*  
10 *Christmas tree. If they ... should, I will only remind them of the*  
11 *origin of the Christian festival – of the beautiful old Pagan feast*  
12 *that celebrated the birth of light. Let us, like the Christians,*  
13 *adopt this old story to our purpose. Is not Socialism the real*  
14 *'new birth', & with its light will not the old darkness of the earth*  
15 *disappear?* Eleanor Marx (Thompson 1976).  
16

17 Tragically, the life of this majestic human being was smudged by a lasting  
18 dark stain. In 1884, she became the common law wife of Edward Aveling, a  
19 well-known secularist and socialist. It took her a while to realize that Aveling  
20 was a serial womanizer who loved luxurious living and financially cheated her  
21 and many acquaintances. He even misappropriated union and party funds,  
22 and never accounted for his extravagant expenses. Despite being warned,  
23 she remained loyal to him and excused his behavior as due to some infirmity  
24 and took care of him whenever he was ill. In 1898, just after she had nursed  
25 him back to his feet, she learned that Aveling had married a younger woman.  
26 It was the last straw, and she ended her anguish with poison. The ultimate  
27 irony was that a noble, kind woman who had valiantly campaigned for women  
28 and against misogyny was felled down by an abysmally vulgar misogynist.

### 30 + Eslanda Robeson +

31  
32 Eslanda Robeson was born in 1895 in a middle class, progressive, cultured  
33 African American family. It was an era of intense racism in the US. A star in  
34 school, she overcame pervasive racial barriers to secure a scholarship and  
35 graduate with a degree in Chemistry from Columbia University (1920). Her  
36 subsequent education comprised a masters level degree in Economic  
37 Anthropology from the London School of Economics (1938) and a PhD in  
38 Anthropology from Hartford Seminary (1946). At LSE, she was mentored by  
39 Bronislaw Malinowski, a leading anthropologist of the day.

40 After her first degree, she joined in the Surgical Pathology Laboratory in  
41 the Columbia Presbyterian Hospital as an analyst. Within a short time, she  
42 headed a hospital laboratory—a first for an African American. In that time, she  
43 met Paul Robeson, and in 1925, they got married. As Paul continued to hone  
44 his skills in song, music and stage acting, she supported the family. Realizing  
45 that without full-time firm support his career prospects would be dim, she left  
46 her promising job and became his guide and manager. Unlike him, she had a

1 solid business acumen. Connecting him with movers in the world on  
2 entertainment, she handled all essential matters like selecting voice trainers,  
3 making travel plans, booking venues, organizing auditions, making  
4 performance schedules, handling bills and controlling finances.

5 Their child, Paul Jr, was born in 1927. To her chagrin, her husband turned  
6 out to be an inveterate philanderer, having one affair behind her back after  
7 another. Much turmoil ensued, and at one point, they were on the verge of  
8 divorce. A shared progressive vision and activism, feelings for each other and  
9 practical concerns saved the union. But it was with the tacit acceptance that  
10 while Eslanda would continue as his business and household manager, she  
11 was also free to strike out a path of her own.  
12



13  
14 Eslanda Robeson  
15

16 Eslanda's world outlook derived from her outspoken socialist, anti-racist,  
17 feminist mother. And the Black cultural renaissance blooming in New York,  
18 London and Paris swept her and Paul further to the left. The list of their close  
19 associates—Langston Hughes, Zora N Hurston, WEB Dubois, Shirley Du  
20 Bois, Emma Goldman, CLR James, JBS Haldane and many others—attests  
21 to their worldview. Eventually, their activism extended beyond working to end  
22 racial segregation in the US to supporting anti-colonial struggles in Africa,  
23 India and the Caribbean, promoting global socialism, and opposing fascism  
24 and imperial wars. These were not passing concerns but central, defining  
25 features of their lives. While Eslanda and Paul worked side by side in some  
26 political work, she also charted out an independent trajectory on many fronts.  
27

28 *I realize the people are not going to live my life for me. I am*  
29 *going to have to live it myself.* Eslanda Robeson (Ransby  
30 2013).  
31

32 And that she did in a unique style. Meeting African supporters of Marcus  
33 Garvey galvanized in her a keen interest in African affairs. Over a twenty-five-

1 year period starting from 1936, she went to Africa—Congo, South Africa,  
2 French Equatorial Africa, Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Zanzibar, Kenya—  
3 many times. But these were not tourist trips. In many a place, she put up for  
4 three to six months, grounding with the common folk, middle class Africans  
5 and European missionaries. It was often under the gaze of European  
6 intelligence agencies. She kept a detailed diary and records of her interviews.  
7 Along the way, she developed an appreciation of how colonial exploitation  
8 and racism kept Africa poor, under-educated and a degrading place for  
9 women. She drew close parallel between Africans and African Americans in  
10 southern states of the US. Depicting Africa with racist anthropological  
11 constructs was the norm in that era. Rejecting it, her 1945 book *African*  
12 *Journey*, affirms the dignity of African people, shows their reality from a non-  
13 colonial perspective, highlights African culture and illuminates the abject  
14 plight of African women. Endorsed by Pearl S Buck, it garnered wide acclaim  
15 from quite disparate sources.

16 Eslanda became an unflinching, firm advocate of African independence  
17 after her first trip. It was her initial trip that catalyzed Paul's support for that  
18 cause. She was the key behind-the-scene player in the Council on African  
19 Affairs, the main organization promoting African freedom in the US founded  
20 and led by Paul Robeson and WEB Dubois. She and Paul connected with key  
21 African leaders—Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah—and African artistes  
22 like Habib Benglia. Eslanda worked for Black and Pan-African women's rights  
23 groups, one of which she had helped to found.

24 She was among the few females at the All-African Peoples Conference in  
25 the newly independent Ghana in 1958. The conference opened as she and  
26 Shirley Dubois walked arm-in-arm with President Kwame Nkrumah into the  
27 meeting hall. Here she rubbed shoulders with Julius Nyerere, Sekou Toure,  
28 Patrice Lumumba, Frantz Fanon and other African giants. While she and  
29 Shirley supported the agenda, they expressed dismay at the paucity of female  
30 delegates and the patriarchal conduct of the male delegates. She rounded  
31 the year with trips to Nigeria and Trinidad. When their passports were revoked  
32 by the US government, Paul and Eslanda were offered citizenship by Ghana.  
33 But they declined. Refusing to declare defeat, they fought until the passports  
34 were revalidated. Her perceptive message about Africa was:

35  
36 *Africa is in revolution.*

37 Eslanda Robeson (Ransby 2013).  
38

39 Another anti-colonial cause Eslanda embraced was India. Indian and African  
40 American thinkers and activists had begun to join hands from the 1920s. For  
41 her it started with an interview of none other than MK Gandhi in London in  
42 1931. She met him as he sat on a cold office floor, spinning his cotton wheel.  
43 Besides his devotion to non-violence and utter simplicity, she was struck by  
44 his firm espousal of equality for all races. After this meeting, support for India  
45 became a life-long pursuit.

1 Her bonds with India were cemented through family level friendships with  
2 JL Nehru and his activist sister, VL Pandit. A dinner at the Robeson house in  
3 London in 1938 began a conversation that would last over two decades.  
4 Nehru and Paul later addressed a major rally for Indian self-rule. Of like mind  
5 and mood, Eslanda and Nehru frequently exchanged letters, opinions and  
6 books. When Nehru, Pandit and other Indian leaders were imprisoned by the  
7 British, she campaigned for their release. When Indian leaders visited the US,  
8 they yearned to attend plays in which Paul performed. When Nehru sought to  
9 visit the USSR, she enabled him to secure a visa. When Pandit's daughters  
10 studied in the US, they spent weekends at the Robeson's. To them, Eslanda  
11 was a surrogate mother and Paul Jr, a brother who took them to the theatre  
12 and cultural venues. She and Pandit connected in person when the latter  
13 became a senior UN official and she, a UN correspondent. The Cold War era  
14 antipathy of the US government to Paul and Eslanda created difficulties in  
15 relations with Nehru and Pandit. Yet the warm ties endured.

16  
17 *[Eslanda's] relationship with [Nehru] and the Pandits*  
18 *represented the kind of cross-cultural Third World solidarity*  
19 *that [she] thought was essential to the realization of peace and*  
20 *justice in the postcolonial world. (Ransby 2013).*

21  
22 An additional anti-colonial struggle with which Eslanda was associated was  
23 Guyana. And it was also bolstered by personal ties with the independence  
24 leader Chedi Jagan and his wife Janet Jagan. She, Shirley Dubois and Janet  
25 were *de facto* sisters. The UK and US governments conspired and worked  
26 against the Jagans because of their leftist politics. Eslanda, for her part,  
27 exposed the colonial realities in Guyana in articles and talks. Remarkably,  
28 both Jagans were later elected, at different times, the Prime Minister and  
29 President of Guyana.

30 Paul and Eslanda were internationalists who connected their views on  
31 racism with class oppression and imperial domination. Influenced early by  
32 WEB Dubois, they linked up with Marxist and socialist activists, artists and  
33 thinkers from across the world while they were in London. CLR James was  
34 one. They backed trade union actions in North America and UK. Paul acted  
35 in plays that countered negative media propaganda and portrayed unions in  
36 a sympathetic light. He also used his stardom to publicize their cause, giving  
37 free concerts for striking miners and factory workers. And Eslanda stood  
38 behind the curtain to cheer him.

39 During the anti-fascist struggles in Spain in the 1930s, they joined the  
40 international socialist brigades to visit the dangerous front lines to boost the  
41 morale of the resistance. From then on, they paid a series of visits to the  
42 Soviet Union. Welcomed as distinguished guests, they encountered Soviet  
43 life under Stalin and his successors. Two of Eslanda's brothers were working  
44 in the USSR. Paul sang in flawless Russian to cheering audiences in city after  
45 city. Upon enrolling Paul Jr in a local school, they remarked that in doing so,  
46 he was spared the rabid racism he would have experienced in a typical US

1 school. Paul and Eslanda developed close camaraderie with prominent  
2 artists and senior leaders in Russia including Nikita Khrushchev. They  
3 returned to Russia several times to attend conferences, vacation and get  
4 medical treatment.

5 And they went to China two months after the communist revolution of  
6 1949 overthrew centuries of feudal tyranny. Meeting senior party leaders and  
7 through organized tours, they witnessed the unfolding of the most gigantic  
8 social transformation of the twentieth century. Eslanda also participated in  
9 the founding of the United Nations.

10 Their socialist activism only earned them extreme hostility from the US  
11 establishment. Though hounded during the anti-communist witch hunt of the  
12 McCarthy era, they refused to yield, even after their passports were seized  
13 and they were forced to cancel important engagements abroad. As Eslanda  
14 quaintly observed:

15  
16 *All I ever feared were cats.*  
17 Eslanda Robeson (Ransby 2013).  
18

19 During trips covering nearly 40 countries, Eslanda's prolific pen poured out  
20 poignant commentaries many which were published in magazines and  
21 newspapers. They gave authentic yet critical accounts of key events and  
22 issues that otherwise failed to receive fair or adequate coverage. The book  
23 she co-wrote with Pearl S Buck, *American Argument*, was a major success.

24 Veritably Eslanda was a multitalented person—campaigner, in words and  
25 on the streets against racism, social injustice, colonial rule and war; eloquent  
26 public speaker; influential anthropologist; author of notable books and  
27 papers; investigative journalist and correspondent for the UN; and a fervent  
28 champion of women's rights. Human rights groups sought her endorsement.  
29 And she wrote plays, novels and biographies and was a fine vocalist, movie  
30 star and producer. Laden with responsibilities, including supporting Paul's  
31 musical career, she could not pursue those lines of interest as much as she  
32 would have like to. To cap it all, she was an excellent photographer. Never  
33 without a camera, the arresting snapshots of the places she visited and  
34 people she met received applause for artistic merit. It is unfortunate that much  
35 of her huge body of photos has been lost.

36 Though Paul popularized classic Negro Spiritual songs, he and Eslanda  
37 were secular humanists, not religious believers. He sang for freedom and  
38 dignity. They regarded African American churches and religiosity a part of a  
39 valued cultural tradition of resistance that stretched back to the days of  
40 slavery.

41 This is a brief sketch of a one-of-a-kind human, all the more remarkable  
42 in that her writing and activism persisted despite battling the ongoing malady  
43 of cancer in the 1950s and 1960s. She also had to provide bedside care for  
44 Paul whose health declined seriously. Before she succumbed to cancer in  
45 1965, a number of events to honor her contributions to human, gender and

1 ethnic rights were held, and she was awarded several prestigious  
2 international prizes and medals. Her life genuinely embodied of dictum:

3  
4 *In fighting a just cause, in resisting oppression, there is dignity.*  
5 Eslanda Robeson (Ransby 2013).

6  
7 **+ Nawal El Saadawi +**  
8



9  
10 Nawal El Saadawi

11  
12 Born in 1931 in rural Egypt into a large middle-class progressive family, Nawal  
13 El Saadawi was a precocious child eager to learn. With support from her  
14 parents—an uncommon thing for a girl in Egypt then—she excelled in school,  
15 won a scholarship to pursue medicine at the University of Cairo and  
16 graduated as a psychiatrist in 1955. Her parents died early, leaving her the  
17 responsibility to care for her brothers and sisters.

18 Nawal had grown up with a strong distaste for female circumcision that she  
19 endured as a child. The tradition of arranged early child marriage had almost  
20 been her fate. Medical practice in her hometown sensitized her more to  
21 patriarchal customs that compounded the destitution of rural women. The  
22 Marxist outlook she had developed in the course of her university studies led  
23 her to posit women's issues beyond cultural constructs and link them with  
24 economic injustice and imperial domination of the Arab nations.

25 Her medical experience and passion for writing were fused into an on-the-  
26 site as well as a broad-based campaign to combat misogyny and improve the  
27 status of women in Egypt and the Arab world. Her forthright, unsparing  
28 criticism of female genital mutilation, child marriage, domestic violence,  
29 restrictive female dress codes, traditional marriage and divorce rules elicited  
30 strong opposition from the orthodox Islamic hierarchy and local power  
31 brokers. She also fought for the rights of her female patients, many of whom  
32 had been mistreated in their homes.

33





1 After a long sojourn of teaching, writing and activism in the US and other  
2 places, she returned to Egypt in 1996, her voice and pen sparkling as ever.  
3 In 2011, at the robust age of 80, she was in the streets in the anti-Mubarak  
4 protests in Egypt.

5 El Saadawi's phenomenal literary output includes eleven novels, eight  
6 short story collections, four plays, six memoirs and ten non-fiction books.  
7 While she also speaks English and French, she writes in Arabic. Many of her  
8 acclaimed books have translations in 30 languages, and a number are global  
9 blockbusters. In a passionate yet eloquent and elegant prose, her books and  
10 essays propagate themes that resonate beyond the Arab world to vibrantly  
11 tackle gender, political, theocratic and imperial domination. With a plethora of  
12 honorary degrees and prizes from international institutions under her belt, she  
13 remains an unassuming yet rambunctious and unbowed voice for human  
14 dignity, and opponent of theocratic rule and imperial interventions. Even as it  
15 is risky to read some of her books, book discussion clubs devoted to her work  
16 exist in Egypt. According to her, there is a long way ahead before billions of  
17 women across the world can feel liberated:

18  
19 *Women in most countries have not achieved much, because*  
20 *they can't be liberated under the patriarchal, capitalist,*  
21 *imperialist and military system that determines the way we live*  
22 *now, and which is governed by power, not justice, by false*  
23 *democracy, not real freedom.*

24 Nawal El Saadawi

25  
26 +++++  
27

28 Eleanor Marx, Eslanda Robeson and Nawal El Saadawi are, in words and  
29 deeds, stellar atheists and humanists. Yet, you will not find these superstars  
30 and many like them in most of the lists of prominent atheists and humanists.  
31 Such omissions mask the link between humanism and socialism and distort  
32 the history and essence of humanism. Humanism without socialism is like a  
33 peacock without its dashing feathers, lackluster, unappealing and devoid of  
34 the social power to take off towards a humane future.

### 35 36 **9.16 ATHEISTS: AN ENDANGERED SPECIES?**

37  
38 Apostasy or renouncing the 'true' faith is a sinful deviation in Christianity and  
39 Islam. Heresy or beliefs and acts that contradict, modify or depart from the  
40 scriptures or cast doubt on the authority of God are sinful under Catholic,  
41 Protestant and Muslim viewpoints. Blasphemy or anti-religious utterances,  
42 mocking sacred ideas and denigrating holy practices are as well proscribed.  
43 In Islam, where conversion to other faiths is disallowed, terms like infidel or  
44 *kafir* have similar connotations. For centuries, and under most faith systems,  
45 heretics, atheists and skeptics have endured discriminatory offenses ranging  
46 from prejudice, isolation, denial of civic rights and imprisonment to execution.

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**+ Hinduism +**

In theory, Hinduism does not vilify disbelief. But life has not always reflected theory. Hindus have often opposed and engaged in deadly strife with other faiths and deviant tendencies. We noted many instances of Hindu-Muslim, Hindu-Sikh and Hindu-Christian violence in Chapter 5. These conflicts had political and economic undertones as well.

The emergence of *Hindutva* as the dominant political ideology and the rule of BJP under Prime Minister Modi have heightened intolerance among Hindus. Liberals, secularists, free thinkers and atheists who criticize official policies have increasingly faced violence from militant Hindus. Well-known secularists have been murdered by the zealots. N Dabholkar, a Pune doctor who combined social work with exposing the perils of blind faith and 'miracle cures,' was the first prominent victim. He was shot while on a morning walk in 2013. The secularists G Pansare and MM Kalburgi were killed a few years on. P Murugan, a campaigner against superstitious beliefs, and his family received death threats in 2019. KS Bhagwan, another skeptic, faces similar peril. Others have received serious injuries.

The extremists intimidate atheists and secularists by disrupting meetings, staging mock funerals, vandalizing property and invading homes. There is an under-the-surface organized network that mobilizes and trains these gangs. The *Hindutva* groups that constitute the social base of the ruling BJP are the ultimate instigators of the network. That the police rarely give priority to cases in which Hindu extremists stand accused emboldens them. Often the assailants escape detection, and if they are apprehended, it takes years for charges to be filed. At times, the police and state authorities are complicit in these assaults against the secularists.

Every Indian citizen is categorized by religious affiliation. Courts have ruled that 'atheist' is not a legal category and attempts to take an oath using the Constitution instead of a religious book have been blocked. The secular Constitution notwithstanding, each Indian must declare a religion to get state services. Nonetheless, there are many longstanding secular and atheist organizations in India, and some of their leaders have attained international fame for their contributions to humanist and atheist thought.

Census data and other sources on the number of secularists in India are not consistent. Membership of the established communist parties, many of whom presumably are non-believers, is over two million. It is thus likely that there are three million or more non-believers and atheists in India today. Under the climate of fear and intimidation, most have double-lives and participate in holy rituals to retain an outward appearance. To openly be an atheist or a vocal critic of *Hindutva* in India today is a risky proposition.

**+ Buddhism +**

1 Buddhism does not scripturally sanction apostasy or atheism. To renounce  
2 his or her faith or espouse deviant beliefs does not entail a penalty, at least  
3 in the earthly domain. But as observed in Chapter 6, Buddhists organizations  
4 run by firebrand monks have gained greater political influence in Myanmar,  
5 Sri Lanka and Thailand. Spewing rhetoric of authentic Buddhism, they have  
6 unleashed violent campaigns against Muslims. But attacks on atheists as  
7 such have not been reported.

8 Japan, constitutionally a secular state which protects freedom of religion,  
9 is an interesting case. With 98% of the population of Japanese ethnicity, it is  
10 an ethnically and culturally homogenous nation. Officially it is projected as a  
11 visitor-friendly, multicultural society. But astute analysts depict it as cosmetic  
12 multiculturalism. A strong undercurrent of disdain for foreign cultures and a  
13 sense of uniqueness prevails in Japan. Thus, though it is a highly educated  
14 nations and Muslims are less than 0.1% of the population, two out of three  
15 Japanese adults see Islam as an extremist religion and favor restrictive  
16 practices on Muslims like those in force in European nations. Anti-Muslim  
17 prejudice prevails across the political spectrum.

18 A significant majority of the Japanese follows Buddhism or Shintoism or a  
19 combination of the two. An annual official survey of religion found 69%  
20 attending Shinto rituals, 67% attending Buddhist rituals and 8%, rituals of  
21 other faiths. But an earlier survey found that 69% did not belong to any  
22 religion. Another survey found that about a third of the adults are 'convinced  
23 atheists' even though they partake in Buddhist and Shinto ceremonies. Such  
24 data imply that the majority does it for cultural rather than 'religious' reasons.  
25 Associating religion with belief in a God or gods, only about one in eight say  
26 they are religious. Yet, two out three ascribe to a spiritual belief. While two  
27 out three Japanese mistrust religious bodies, only one in five mistrust major  
28 companies and only one in ten express mistrust of schools. People take pride  
29 in and trust local institutions but have a negative perception of 'foreign'  
30 entities. Further, Japan has a long history of suppressing beliefs that  
31 challenge state authority or the dominant national outlook.

32 Japan has for long been atheist friendly. With about a third of the people  
33 openly ascribing to irreligiosity, atheists and free thinkers have not faced and  
34 do not face discrimination in Japan. Prime ministers, politicians, scholars,  
35 writers, and philosophers have explicitly worn the badge of a non-believer.  
36 Since the 1930s, secular organizations have been active in Japan. Besides  
37 opposing superstition, their agendas have broad-based socialist and anti-  
38 imperial clauses. Some of them faced harsh crackdowns in the past, but that  
39 was more due to their political and not anti-religious activism.

40 Earlier we saw that tolerance of other faiths does not necessarily imply  
41 tolerance for lack of faith. Japan, in contrast, shows that tolerance of atheism  
42 does not necessarily imply a tolerant attitude towards other faiths. National  
43 chauvinism can override religion.

44  
45 **+ Christianity +**  
46

1 After designation as the official religion of the Roman Empire, transgressions  
2 from Christianity— disbelief, apostasy, heresy and blasphemy—became  
3 punishable offences. During the 11th century, a veritable Catholic terror  
4 machine, the Inquisition, dealt with the offenders. The penalty for the sins  
5 ranged from excommunication, property confiscation to death. Death at the  
6 stake for heretics and alleged witches was commonplace. Fear of the  
7 Inquisition drove skeptical thinkers, writers and scientists to modify how they  
8 presented their ideas. Drawing the ire of the theological authority was highly  
9 risky.

10 The onset of the Protestant Reformation in 16th century offered little  
11 respite. Eminent European scholars, philosophers and jurists held that civil  
12 rights should not be extended to people who did not believe in God or the  
13 immortality of the soul. Among them were Thomas More (author of the famed  
14 socialistic novel *Utopia*), Thomas Aquinas (eminent philosopher) and John  
15 Locke (political theorist, father of liberalism). As apostates and enemies of  
16 Christ, Jews were punished *en masse*. Protestant reformer Martin Luther held  
17 that they were possessed by the devil. Note, the Jewish *Torah* requires the  
18 believer to put to death any person, even a close family member, who entices  
19 him or her away from the true God.

20 Tens of thousands had been executed for faith related transgression by  
21 the Christian authorities in Europe and the Americas by the early 1800s. Of  
22 course, more often than not, potent political and economic motives lurked  
23 behind the punishments. Not so much querying the doctrine but questioning  
24 the rulers was the key misdeed. The last known imposition of apostasy related  
25 death in Europe occurred in 1826. Now such a punishment is illegal.

26 In Europe and the UK, the number of those who identity as non-affiliated  
27 or non-believer, have been rising. In some of these nations the proportion of  
28 'convinced atheists' is now at levels that were previously the domain of firm  
29 religious believers. Thus, in Norway, it is about 40%, Czech Republic, 35%,  
30 France 20%, Australia 15%, and Iceland 15%. Laws that discriminate against  
31 atheists do not exist in Europe, the UK, Canada and Australia. Atheists are  
32 elected to the legislature, hold high office and run major public institutions  
33 without controversy. In the UK, successive conservative governments have  
34 tried to counter the anti-religious tide by funding private church affiliated  
35 schools and other measures. In 2012, funds from a billionaire supporter were  
36 secured to distribute the Bible to schools. However, the humanist community  
37 was able to counter this move by securing permission to distribute the *Young  
38 Atheist's Handbook* to public schools in 2014.

39 The US stands out among the Western nations on this issue. Even as  
40 humanism and non-belief are rising, public espousal of firm atheism remains  
41 rare. Prejudice towards atheists is rife among the public. They are associated  
42 with low morality, criminality, hedonism, and socialism. One survey indicates  
43 that some 40% of the electorate, Republican or Democrat, would not vote for  
44 an atheist for president. A recent count found that of the more than 10,000  
45 state legislators in the US, only one was an admitted atheist. And only one  
46 Congressperson was a declared non-believer.

1 In the US, institutionalized and hidden discrimination against atheists has  
2 been detected in relation to jobs, professional opportunities, social networks  
3 and within the judicial system. Non-religious parents have been denied child  
4 custody. Politicians and officials utter derogatory views about secularists in  
5 the media without suffering backlash. Only Muslims are held in lower esteem  
6 than atheists.

7 A Christian majority nation where atheists face daunting social, political  
8 obstacles is Brazil. The anti-atheist tide has intensified with the election of JM  
9 Bolsonaro as president in 2019. The targets of his right-wing agenda and  
10 authoritarian governance have included atheists. After his declaration that  
11 Brazil is God's country, harassment of atheists and followers of traditional  
12 African religions has multiplied. People liken them to drug addicts. In part, this  
13 is the legacy of the Cold War and the violent suppression of liberation  
14 theology in the 1960s.

15 Rising Islamophobia has energized white supremacist, Christian identity  
16 groups in the West. Inspired by hate-filled rhetoric of right-wing politicians,  
17 they have attacked mosques and Muslims, immigrants and racial minorities.  
18 But no report of directed assaults on atheists from such groups has hit the  
19 headlines as yet.

## 20 21 + Islam + 22

23 Apostasy and related acts are crimes under Islamic (Sharia) law. Doubting  
24 the authority of Allah, questioning the authenticity of the Quran and casting  
25 aspersions on the Prophet are major offences. Inducing Muslims into other  
26 faiths is proscribed. Penalties range from annulment of marriage, seizure of  
27 children and property to death. Recantation, if done in a timely manner, is  
28 often taken as a mitigating factor.

29 The Islamic world is an outlier in relation to dealing with heresy, apostasy  
30 and atheism in the modern era. Such acts remain criminal offenses in 16 out  
31 of 46 Muslim majority states. In Iran and Saudi Arabia, the death penalty may  
32 be imposed, but actual executions are rare. At times Islamic leaders issue  
33 edicts calling for the death of prominent apostates. Two well publicized cases  
34 include the author Salman Rushdie and the producers of cartoons about  
35 Prophet Mohamed in Denmark. Large numbers of Muslims support severe  
36 punishment for apostates and unbelievers.

37 In the last two chapters, we took note of Muslim terrorist fronts like Al-  
38 Qaeda, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, ISIL, Daesh), Taliban, Boko  
39 Haram and Al Shabab that have operated in recent years. These groups have  
40 primarily attacked Western forces, civilians and institutions and their  
41 perceived allies. Now we look at how atheists are faring in the Muslim world.

42  
43 **Indonesia**, the most populous Muslim nation, has historically practiced a  
44 tolerant form of Islam. Traditional belief systems in the islands functioned  
45 alongside Islam in a syncretic fashion. By constitution, it is a secular state.  
46 Freedom of expression is protected by law. Six major religions are accorded

1 official recognition. Public criticism of religion, especially Islam, invites social  
2 ostracism and legal sanction. A declared atheist who had placed material on  
3 Prophet Mohammed online in 2012 was jailed for two and a half years. A  
4 similar fate awaits a university student who posted critical views on Allah and  
5 the Quran in 2018. The anti-blasphemy law of 1965 has been used against  
6 Shia Muslims, Christians and Ahmadiyyas as well as atheists.

7 Fundamentalist schools of Islam propagated by hardline religious leaders  
8 and populist politicians have gained ground of recent. Militant Islamic fronts  
9 are perpetrating bombings of tourist areas and Christian centers. Muslim  
10 mobs have also attacked Buddhist temples and the Ahmadiyya community.  
11 Atheists have been warned by tirades issued by conservative theologians.  
12 Even though they form a tiny minority, they feel they are next. Meetings and  
13 online communication among atheists are fraught with risk. Atheists tread  
14 cautiously, assuming double identities—religious in public but not among  
15 fellow disbelievers. Open gatherings of atheists that began in 2008 now draw  
16 fewer participants.

17  
18 **Pakistan** has alternated military rule with democratic governance since the  
19 1950s. Relations with the US, India and Afghanistan have played a central  
20 role in its socio-political trajectory. It was infected with US sponsored Islamic  
21 extremists operating in Afghanistan during the 1970s. Conflict with India over  
22 the status of Kashmir made it an operational base for Kashmiri freedom  
23 fighters, who over time adopted a fundamentalist Islamic ideology.

24 Religion was a tool for the military and ruling political parties to legitimize  
25 sectarian, landowner dominated and economically deficient rule. Moves to  
26 turn the nation into a fully Islamic state, however, did not succeed. A vibrant  
27 opposition movement championing the rule of law, freedom of expression,  
28 democracy, separation of religion and state, and socialism managed to thwart  
29 such moves. The military, the all-powerful national intelligence agency and  
30 hardline Islamic clerics continue to pillory, intimidate, persecute and assault  
31 human rights and democracy advocates. Yet, the oppositional voices persist.

32 Pakistan is formally a multi-party state with stipulated roles for the different  
33 organs of the government. The judiciary in particular has often played an  
34 independent corrective role for executive abuse. On the other hand, Islamic  
35 groups are more vocal and aggressive in politics and education. They also  
36 oppose vaccination drives for polio and other diseases (including the corona  
37 virus). Sectarian strife between Sunnis and other sects of Islam periodically  
38 assumes violent proportions with the latter paying a large price in terms of  
39 lives and property. The call to make Sharia Law the law of the land becomes  
40 louder by the day. Now it commands the majority opinion. To get an identity  
41 card, one must register one's religion. Changing the religious designation is  
42 not allowed.

43 The political slide towards religious extremism has generated a counter  
44 tendency. A noticeable minority of Pakistanis have turned towards secular  
45 outlooks. Polling done by an international agency found that the proportion of  
46 non-believers (atheists, agnostics, skeptics) rose from about 1% of the adult

1 population in 2005 to about 2% in 2012. Some secularists have openly or  
2 anonymously taken religious extremism to task on online platforms and the  
3 media. Advocating removal of religion-based restrictions in public life, they  
4 stand for peaceful resolution of sectarian differences. And some have put  
5 Islamic beliefs under scrutiny.

6 The religious conservatives, often backed by the state, are fighting back.  
7 Atheists and blasphemers are in the crosshairs of the police. Charges are  
8 leveled against people who upload what is said to be anti-Islamic content on  
9 social media. Many legislators have demanded firm action; a High Court judge  
10 has branded them as 'terrorists'. A media campaign to expose them has been  
11 launched and their online accounts are being frozen. An unknown number of  
12 free thinking and atheist bloggers were abducted, presumably by a state  
13 agency, and held for several weeks in January 2017. Some were tortured,  
14 and some later fled to safer shores. Under the new cybercrime law, online  
15 blasphemy may elicit the death penalty.

16 The ruling party tries to appease and neutralize radical Islamic groups by  
17 cracking down on secular voices. Draconian laws propel the mainstream  
18 media into self-censorship. Avenues of expression for free thinkers, liberals  
19 and socialists are narrowing. Critical Twitter feeds from both sides, especially  
20 around the 12th of February, the birthdate of Charles Darwin, that used to  
21 proliferate in the past, have become muted. An atheist in Pakistan has no  
22 legal identity, civil rights and medium for expression, and faces grave risks.

23  
24 **Bangladesh** was a part of the province of Bengal during the British rule in  
25 India. The partition of India in 1947 made it a part of Pakistan, and in 1971,  
26 after a gruesome struggle, an independent nation. From the Mughal era to  
27 the British era, and in tandem with the rest of Bengal, it developed a rich  
28 literary, poetic, musical, cross-religious culture unified by the Bengali  
29 language and a broad-based education system. Bengali culture integrated  
30 Hindu, Bengali and Muslim views and customs with a spattering of English  
31 and Christian ideas and practices. People in Hindu majority West Bengal and  
32 in Muslim majority East Bengal identified themselves more as Bengalis rather  
33 than as Hindu or Muslim.

34 A crucial feature of the post-1947 Bengali landscape was the presence of  
35 an active communist movement with membership in the millions. Its legacy  
36 extends into present day Bangladesh. Atheism and secularism have been a  
37 minor but tolerated part of the Bangladeshi culture for quite a while.

38 After gaining autonomy in 1971, the elitist ruling parties failed to follow  
39 economic, social and political policies that would generate across the board  
40 improvement in quality of life, accountable governance and social stability.  
41 Mass poverty endured, especially in the rural areas. Presently Bangladesh is  
42 a major global sweatshop center. Tens of thousands of lowly paid workers,  
43 many females, toil for long hours under hazardous conditions to make high-  
44 priced designer apparel and other items for Western consumers. Exploitative  
45 practices of the landowners and merchants drive farmers and fishermen into  
46 debt and poverty. Formal democratic, constitutional rule is a façade. Abuse



1 of human rights—torture, kidnapping, and extrajudicial killings—by state  
2 agencies is the norm. The US and UK governments have, for their part,  
3 funded and trained these agencies in the name of countering international  
4 terrorism. Independent media are routinely suppressed.

5 While the Constitution protects freedom of religion, the atmosphere of  
6 tolerance on the religious front is eroding, both due to populist pandering by  
7 politicians and the actions of the radical Islamic parties that have recently  
8 gained traction. Religious conflicts are on the rise. Muslim militants attack  
9 Hindu, Buddhist and Christian communities and places of worship. Though  
10 their influence waxes and wanes, they are propelling Bangladesh towards a  
11 state where Islam is the official religion.

12 Of recent, the poverty-ridden nation has become a distinctly deadly place  
13 for people promoting secular ideas. If you are seen to publicly disparage  
14 religion, especially Islam, or criticize the fundamentalist movements you are  
15 in deep trouble. While secular groups seek to enshrine a firm separation of  
16 religion and state and the ouster of extremist parties from the political arena,  
17 radical Islamic groups declare war on atheism and blasphemy, and demand  
18 that atheist bloggers should be hanged.

19 The secularists resort to words and occasional peaceful marches. But the  
20 religious extremists issue death threats and take up machetes. Instead of  
21 providing them constitutional protection, the police detain prominent atheists,  
22 seize their books from bookshops and charge them with insulting people's  
23 religious sentiments. As the secularists promote multi-cultural tolerance and  
24 deride narrow minded mullahs, their publishers face official harassment and  
25 their online accounts are regularly suspended. And it gets worse.

26 From the 1990s, Bangladeshi authors, academics and secularists have  
27 risked death for critiquing religious fundamentalism. Humayun Azad was a  
28 distinguished writer and professor who had authored numerous critical but  
29 elegant books of poetry, fiction and non-fiction. Islamic extremists however  
30 did not respect his erudition and progressive outlook. In early 2004, he was  
31 assaulted with cleavers by four militants from an extremist Islamic party. He  
32 died few months later. Though the party was banned, the killings did not stop.

33 Three well known atheists were hacked with machetes in 2013; one died  
34 from his wounds. Two prominent secularists were hacked to death in 2015.  
35 The wife of one lost her finger. In the same year, an atheist blogger writing for  
36 a science magazine received death threats. His blog was banned, and he had  
37 to flee abroad. In 2017, the same fate befell a young atheist blogger.  
38 Journalists and academics have also been targeted by the extremists. On top  
39 of relentless harassment and death threats from the vigilantes, the shops that  
40 sell books by Bangladeshi free thinkers have been vandalized.

41 The nature of intolerance is illustrated by the tragic case of RK Siddiquee,  
42 Professor of English at Rajshahi University, the second largest university in  
43 the nation. An erudite, mild-mannered, well-liked and respected academic, he  
44 was highly knowledgeable in English literature. He edited a literary journal as  
45 well. Not an atheist, he adhered to Islamic practices, gave funds for the repair  
46 of a mosque in his hometown, and sponsored cultural groups.

1 As a diligent academic, he strove to give his students a broad perspective  
2 by exposing them to multiple strands of English literature. Some students of  
3 a fundamentalist bent however felt that some of his material insulted Islam.  
4 On a fine day in April 2016, he was accosted by four men while walking to  
5 work. And they butchered him. Though the deed was done in open, his killers  
6 have vanished into thin air.

7 His murder sparked months of protests by students and teachers at his  
8 university. Lecturers at all public universities in the nation staged a three-day  
9 strike in his memory. Nonetheless, the deed sent a chilling message to the  
10 academic community—stray out of line and you will be next. The parallels  
11 with the attacks by Hindu extremists on Professor Feroz Khan at the Banaras  
12 Hindu University in 2019 are striking.

13 The attacks by the Islamic extremists are occurring at the same time as  
14 the state authorities undertake widespread suppression of journalists and  
15 leftist opposition voices in Bangladesh. Other professors have also received  
16 death threats and a hit list of 40 at-risk academics has been found. The effects  
17 are multiplicative. Lecturers, researchers, reporters, members of the NGOs  
18 as well as secularists are driven into self-censorship and silence. As the  
19 government fails to act against the killers, the Islamist view of putting religion  
20 at the helm of politics becomes more popular and fundamentalist  
21 radicalization of the students makes further headway in the academic arena.  
22 Voices of tolerance, social justice and rational discourse in Bangladesh are  
23 in grave danger. As an indicator of laxity of the authorities to pursue cases of  
24 egregious violence against secularists, it took nearly 18 years for the courts  
25 to convict four men for the murder of Human Aziz. They were sentenced to  
26 death in April 2022.

27  
28 **Nigeria** has a relatively small group of open secularists who mainly operate  
29 under the umbrella of the Humanist Association of Nigeria. They mostly hold  
30 discussions and conferences and promote secularism through educational  
31 writings. Yet, Mubarak Bala, the President of the Association has spent more  
32 than two years in police custody. Bala rose into prominence after renouncing  
33 Islam in 2014. Many conservative Muslim clerics were deeply angered. That  
34 he was the son of a respected Islamic scholar made it worse. His family had  
35 him confined to a psychiatric facility for 18 months, but he did not relent.

36 In April 2020, after posting comments that criticized various aspects of  
37 Islam on social media, he was arrested by the police. Charged with violating  
38 religious crime and cybercrime laws, he was denied visits by his wife and  
39 lawyer for many months. Even after the ruling of the Nigerian Supreme Court  
40 that he be freed on bail and appeals by UN Human Rights Committee and  
41 other international organizations, he remained in custody with no explanation  
42 given to his legal defense team. Two years on, under a process that violated  
43 basic judicial norms, Bala was convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to 24  
44 years in prison. Had he been tried under Sharia law, as conservative clerics  
45 had demanded, he could have got the death penalty.



1 The speeches of President George W Bush regularly invoked God and  
2 promoted religious tolerance. The fine words crafted by his speech writers  
3 described Islam as a '*peaceful, vibrant faith*' that brings '*hope and comfort to*  
4 '*billions of people*' and '*inspires countless individuals to lead lives of honesty,*  
5 '*integrity, and morality*' (Bush 2002). But actions count more than words. As  
6 any fair assessment of his domestic and foreign policies would show, his faint  
7 claim to morality was extinguished by the sheer brutality of the attacks he  
8 authorized on Afghanistan and Iraq, and the ensuing toll on civilians and  
9 civilian infrastructure.

10 Under President Barack Obama, signals on matters of religion took an  
11 effusive hue. His executive orders relating to religion sent mixed signals.  
12 Though his political base did not contain a distinct faith group, he continued  
13 the faith-based initiatives—criticized for eroding the separation of state and  
14 church—begun by his predecessor. At the same time, he spoke as a broad-  
15 minded leader who valued the freedom of religious and non-religious people  
16 alike. In December 2016, he signed an amendment to the 1998 law which  
17 extended the protection of freedom of belief to non-believers. Atheists and  
18 humanist organizations in the US were elated by the move. Finally, they had  
19 official recognition and support.

20 But words did not match deeds. While the US annual report on religious  
21 freedom for 2016 strongly excoriated Egypt and Saudi Arabia for religion-  
22 based discrimination, he continued, in the name of fighting terrorism, to  
23 provide military weapons amounting to billions of dollars and security support  
24 to these repressive regimes. He was an outstanding salesperson for the US  
25 arms industries during his tours of Asian nations. He institutionalized drone-  
26 based extra-judicial killings. He was responsible for the record numbers of  
27 combatant and civilian deaths by drones in Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq.  
28 Among his crowning glories was the total demolition of Libya, throwing it into  
29 utter chaos and destabilization of the neighboring nations. He bears the main  
30 responsibility for the deadly civil wars, chaos and religion-based violence that  
31 ensued in the region. At home, he strongly supported big business and major  
32 banks, did little to remedy the adverse effects of the 2008 financial crises on  
33 the common person, and only took baby steps to address the major problems  
34 of delivery of decent, affordable health care to all. His loyal political base, the  
35 African American community, experienced little change in economic status.  
36 And as he continued militarizing the police, disproportionate, deadly police  
37 violence against people of color proceeded as usual. It is difficult to grasp how  
38 humanists can support such a double dealer. Yet, they did and still do.

## 40 9.17 REFLECTIONS

41  
42 Non-believers comprise a sixth of the global population. But they do not  
43 constitute a unified organizational or philosophical community. Ranging from  
44 people who explicitly deny the existence of divinities to those with a neutral  
45 stand on the issue, they have diverse views on social, political and economic  
46 matters. People unaffiliated to a faith system have included prominent social

1 and natural scientists, writers, philosophers, media and entertainment stars,  
2 lawyers, social reformers, human rights activists, business moguls, feminists  
3 and politicians. Some non-believers are political conservatives while some  
4 are socialists.

5 Historically virtually all cultures had thinkers espousing views with an aura  
6 of agnosticism, atheism or humanism. But mature manifestations of atheism  
7 came about within the process of development of capitalism and expansion  
8 of scientific knowledge in Europe and the US. Today atheism and humanism  
9 are a global phenomenon.

10 Adherence to the prevailing religion, particularly Christianity, has been  
11 falling in a dramatic fashion in the Western world. But in the US, it is less  
12 marked. But declining religiosity has however occurred at the same time as  
13 increasing beliefs in spiritualism. Apart from a few Asian nations including  
14 China, religiosity remains unchanged or has risen elsewhere. Because of the  
15 severe consequences of being an atheist or humanist in many Third World  
16 nations, their numbers are not known. Many atheists and humanists who took  
17 a public, critical stand on religious issues and extremism have been attacked  
18 and murdered. Besides religious fanatics, state forces have also been  
19 complicit in these deeds. Atheism is an endangered belief system in most  
20 nations.

21 According to most surveys and studies done on the issue, there are no  
22 significant differences between believers and non-believers in terms of moral  
23 and ethical standards, in theory and practice. Believers as well as non-  
24 believers may have admirable ethical values and perform worthy deeds in an  
25 altruistic fashion. At the same time, it is important to realize that believers and  
26 non-believers capable of ascribing to debased ethical standards and  
27 committing morally repugnant deeds also exist.

28 Take the case of Islamophobia—irrational hatred of Muslim people and  
29 Islam. Over the past two decades, Islamophobia has been rising in Western  
30 nations. Egged on by right wing politicians and the media, the majority of their  
31 people view Islam and Muslims with suspicion. Many back restrictions on  
32 Muslim dress codes, mosque construction, and Islamic schools. Yet, atheism  
33 and generally tolerant attitudes are also rising in these nations. The only way  
34 to reconcile the apparently contradicting trends is to presume that  
35 Islamophobia prevails among the atheists and humanists as well.

36 The leaders of New Atheism effectively if not explicitly and unashamedly  
37 take stands that not just denigrate Muslims and Islam but advocate merciless  
38 attacks on Muslim majority nations as well. Their proclamations on Islam  
39 resonates on the same frequency as the rhetoric of radical white nationalist  
40 groups.

41 Atheism and humanism face criticism from a religious angle and from a  
42 socialist angle. The former blames these outlooks for the obsession with  
43 materialism (consumerism), loss of a moral anchor and break down of social  
44 harmony. Lacking the unifying spiritual compass of religion and God, moral  
45 relativism, under which all kinds of misdeeds will be justified, will dominate  
46 humanity, and lead to chaos and suffering. The religious perspective points

1 to the USSR under Stalin to oppose atheism. But that is a knee jerk form of  
2 critique without a sound evidentiary basis and conceptual foundation.

3 On the other hand, modern day atheism and humanism are critiqued by  
4 socialist writers for playing up rational skepticism and individual conduct and  
5 according scant attention to the sociological and historical dimensions of  
6 religious faith. They are also faulted for scientifically unjustified extrapolation  
7 of the laws of natural evolution into the societal domain (Social Darwinism).  
8 Human societies, while subject to biological forces, have trajectories that are  
9 governed by a complex interplay of social, economic and cultural factors.  
10 Social evolution is not reducible to random genetic mutation and natural  
11 selection. Further, secularism has been taken to task for placing humanity at  
12 the center, akin to what theologians do, and ignoring its interrelationship with  
13 nature and all life on earth.

14 Another charge levelled at modern atheism and humanism is that they  
15 function within the structural and ideological framework of capitalism, notably  
16 its neoliberal variety. When they recognize the ills of neoliberalism like  
17 economic inequality and racism, they propose reformist solutions that leave  
18 the foundation of capitalism intact. It is of interest to note that Steve Wozniak  
19 (electronics expert, cofounder of Apple Inc., and philanthropist) and Warren  
20 Buffet (astute investor, CEO of Berkshire Hathaway and philanthropist) are  
21 atheists or agnostics. These multi-billionaires, who regularly feature at the  
22 upper end of the list of the richest people, are among prime beneficiaries of a  
23 global economic system that exploits working people across the globe,  
24 spawns militarism and social instability and undermines democracy. Their  
25 philanthropy but marginally addresses the malignant maladies brought on by  
26 neoliberalism and provides it with a positive public image. As they and their  
27 ilk, with the assistance of governments, pocket billions even in times of crisis,  
28 hundreds of millions of people become poor and face extreme hardships.  
29 Payment of adequate taxes by the multi-millionaires and billionaires would  
30 suffice to tackle problems like malnutrition and inadequate health care on the  
31 planet. Their presence in the list of atheists is often seen as a positive sign by  
32 atheists. In reality, it is anything but.

33 Neither religiosity nor absence of religious faith guarantee moral conduct.  
34 Both are capable of inducing moral decency as well as gross immorality.

35  
36 *What will it mean to have a predominantly godless country?*  
37 *The great difficulty with answering this question is that*  
38 *theology and morality are only tenuously related. Habits of*  
39 *kindness, decency and tolerance come from practice rather*  
40 *than belief. Religions are justly feared because they often*  
41 *don't practice the more loving parts of what they preach. But*  
42 *atheism is no guarantee of moral virtue or even tolerance, as*  
43 *the rhetoric of the 'New Atheist' movement towards Muslims*  
44 *made very clear. Any set of beliefs about God can be used to*  
45 *justify selfishness and cruelty. (Editorial 2019).*  
46

1 If humanity has to have a future, the religious and the irreligious have to set  
2 aside their divinity related differences and join hands upon a common moral  
3 imperative to combat social injustice, economic inequality and reckless  
4 environmental damage. There is no other alternative.

## 5 CHAPTER 10: NEOLIBERALISM



6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12 *We have not reached the consensus*  
13 *that to eat is a basic human right.*

14 *This is an ethical crisis.*

15 *This is a crisis of faith.*

16 Jean-Bertrand Aristide

17  
18 *All the world has been converted*  
19 *and Washington is the modern Mecca.*

20 CLR James

21  
22 *When the church hears the cry of the oppressed*  
23 *it cannot but denounce the social structures*  
24 *that give rise to and perpetuate*  
25 *the misery from which the cry arises.*

26 Archbishop Oscar Romero



27  
28  
29  
30 TODAY THERE EXISTS a faith system whose influence and power exceeds  
31 that of any religion. Though not a religion in the traditional sense, it has many  
32 features of a religion. Called **Neoliberalism**, it is akin to a religion in that it  
33 has a powerful force that is revered, and its core beliefs are almost beyond  
34 disputation. Though it lacks a single founder, prophet or exact date of origin,  
35 Neoliberalism has venerated sages whose texts have amplified its doctrine.

### 36 37 10.1 ORIGIN AND BELIEFS

38  
39 The theoretical roots of Neoliberalism were laid in the 18th century during the  
40 initial phase of the development of capitalism. Liberal economics of that era  
41 glorified individualism and free markets. But that faith was shaken by the

1 catastrophe visited upon the global economy in the 1930s. Policy makers  
2 became receptive to the ideas of John Maynard Keynes who theorized that  
3 stabilizing the economy and ensuring sustained growth needed a greater  
4 state involvement. It would also neutralize worker militancy and the threat of  
5 a socialist take over. But it was after WW II that the welfare state came into  
6 operation. The Keynesian dictum brought health care, education, water and  
7 power services under public purview. The state invested in rail and urban  
8 transport and key industries, exercised greater control over the financial  
9 sector, provided pensions, and enhanced worker and disability benefits.

10 Neoliberalism seeks to reverse such measures and the other gains won  
11 through student and worker struggles in the 1960s. The capitalist class now  
12 wants the entire pie. The demise of the socialist system in 1990 and weaker  
13 popular movements gave it the chance it needed. Presently, neoliberalism is  
14 the central economic system in the world. Monopolistic proselytization and  
15 economic arm twisting by the powerful financial titans have ensured that few  
16 can escape from its vice like grip.

17 Neoliberalism reasserts the primacy of the classical liberal economics. Its  
18 fundamental pillar is belief in a powerful entity called the Market, or the Free  
19 Market. You cannot see, touch, hear or talk to it, yet it is omnipresent. It has  
20 power over humanity and the global ecosystem. Respect and obey the Free  
21 Market, else its forces will rip your community apart. But, like an unpredictable  
22 god, it may cause dire effects even when you faithfully abide by its laws.  
23 Humans cannot fathom the divine wisdom of the Market, but its 'invisible  
24 hand', makes it a self-correcting entity. Despite ups and downs, universal  
25 prosperity (economic *Nirvana*) will prevail eventually. The five basic  
26 commandments of Neoliberalism are:

### The Commandments of Neoliberalism

- 01 The Market, only the Market is Divine
- 02 Work Hard, Invest, and Buy and Sell
- 03 Compete, Accumulate and Consume
- 04 Maximize Profit, Minimize Cost
- 05 Privatize, Privatize, Privatize

28  
29 Neoliberalism instructs individuals that accumulation and spending are the  
30 ideals of a noble life. Its tenets include: greed is good, charity is bad; austerity  
31 is virtuous, entitlements are sinful; and liberalization is holy, protection is  
32 satanic. Neoliberalism requires unhindered **globalization**, that is, opening up  
33 of national economies, free transit of goods and services, special  
34 dispensation for multinational corporations and financial institutions and  
35 unimpeded repatriation of profits. Big government, nationalization and  
36 economic planning are abominable entities, the enemies of the Free Market.  
37 It mandates curtailment of trade unions and social justice organizations. As  
38 promoters of 'class war' they are 'barriers to progress, enemies of the poor'.



1 To advocate socialism is blasphemy of the highest order. Poverty arises  
2 from laziness and lack of initiative. Work hard, be creative, be a true believer  
3 (entrepreneur) and you will prosper. People are responsible for their own life  
4 and situation. Sloth should not be rewarded by state handouts (corporations  
5 are mysteriously exempt from this rule).

6  
7 *[Neoliberalism] is a holistic ethos and vision for society, one*  
8 *that aims to remake as many areas of life as possible on the*  
9 *model of market competition. (Kotsko 2021).*

10  
11 By projecting the Darwinian notion of the survival of the fittest onto human  
12 society, Neoliberalism configures competition as the prime feature of human  
13 existence, converts citizens to consumers, designates workers as associates  
14 and limits freedom of speech to the marketplace of ideas. Higher education  
15 is recast from intellectual exploration into training for employable skills, and  
16 business and management departments acquire more prestige and funding.

17  
18 *Attempts to limit competition are treated as inimical to liberty.*  
19 *Tax and regulation should be minimized, public services*  
20 *should be privatized. The organization of labor and collective*  
21 *bargaining by trade unions are portrayed as market distortions*  
22 *that impede the formation of a natural hierarchy of winners and*  
23 *losers. Inequality is recast as virtuous: a reward for utility and*  
24 *a generator of wealth, which trickles down to enrich everyone.*  
25 *Efforts to create a more equal society are both*  
26 *counterproductive and morally corrosive. The market ensures*  
27 *that everyone gets what they deserve. (Monbiot 2016).*

28  
29 Neoliberalism has two major denominations: Fundamentalist Neoliberalism  
30 and Moderate Neoliberalism. Both operate within the ambit of capitalism. No  
31 other way to organize the economy is feasible. The former holds that smooth,  
32 sustained growth mandates strict adherence to the tenets of Neoliberalism.  
33 But the latter advocates partial relaxation of the Keynesian variety, especially  
34 in times of general economic malaise. Each has its influential political and  
35 media backers. Neoliberalism prefers a façade of democracy whereby choice  
36 is confined to parties wedded to one of its denominations. But it can effectively  
37 function under theocratic or secular authoritarianism as well.

38 Neoliberalism forms the core of modern day economics. It is not a fringe  
39 sect. The disputations within economics are not between Neoliberalism and  
40 anti-Neoliberalism but between Moderate Neoliberalism and Fundamentalist  
41 Neoliberalism.

## 42 **10.2 PROPHETS, SCRIPTURES AND CATHEDRALS**

43  
44  
45 If a single prophet of Neoliberalism has to be identified, it must be the 18th  
46 century political economist Adam Smith. His pioneering work, *The Wealth of*

1 *Nations*, opened up new vistas in economic thought and presented valuable  
2 insights into the operation of the capitalist system. Despite his cautionary  
3 messages, it ultimately rationalized capitalism, enshrined the worship of the  
4 Free Market and was later instrumental in the birth to Neoliberalism. It did for  
5 capitalism what Catholicism had done for feudalism.

6  
7 *What Catholicism does and what economics does is kind of*  
8 *act as dogma. The point of dogma is to remove doubt, because*  
9 *where there is doubt ... there is fear.* (Yablon 2020).

10  
11 Adam Smith's economic philosophy was expanded and modified by a series  
12 of apostles. Friedrich Hayek, author of the widely read anti-socialist work, *The*  
13 *Road to Serfdom*, deemed individualism a positive characteristic and  
14 dismissed the notion that all humans are born equal. Inequality arises from  
15 human nature. Hayek deemed the Market an efficient inventor and distributor  
16 of knowledge, and castigated planning and public education. Ludwig von  
17 Mises, a fervently anti-socialist economist and political thinker, displayed his  
18 theories in numerous works. His 1949 book, *Human Action: A Treatise on*  
19 *Economics*, remains a basic book for economic studies. He and Hayek were  
20 attendees of a conference in 1938 in Paris where the term Neoliberalism was  
21 first used.

22 Libertarian Ayn Rand (*The Fountain Head, Atlas Shrugged*) and the  
23 philosopher of science, Karl Popper (*The Logic of Scientific Discovery, Open*  
24 *Society and Its Enemies*) are two sages whose ideas enriched Neoliberalism  
25 but from different angles. Milton Friedman was no doubt the premier guru of  
26 modern-day Neoliberalism, and the Chicago School with which he was  
27 associated, one of its top sanctuaries. The neoliberal order is scattered  
28 across the globe, consisting of economists, econometricians, development  
29 specialists, marketing experts and financial consultants. They preach in  
30 academies, governmental finance and developmental ministries, thinktanks  
31 and other institutions. Their total number is around a hundred thousand.  
32 Sainthood in this belief system is granted through the bestowal of the Nobel  
33 Prize in Economics.

34 The principal cathedrals of Neoliberalism are located in the US and, to  
35 some extent, in the UK. One is the Open Society Foundation set up by the  
36 multi-billionaire investor George Soros. Soros was inspired by Karl Popper.  
37 Other promoters of Neoliberalism are the American Enterprise Institute, the  
38 Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Institute of Economic Affairs, the  
39 Centre for Policy Studies and the Adam Smith Institute (Monbiot 2016). The  
40 London School of Economics is a hallowed premier institute for Moderate  
41 Neoliberalism. The Mont Pelerin Society, founded in 1947 in a meeting of key  
42 ideologues of capitalism that was chaired by Friedrich Hayek, continues to be  
43 an influential but under the surface driving force of the doctrine.

44 However, Neoliberalism did not prevail just from intellectual discourse. Its  
45 supremacy is principally owed to the support it garnered from the two most  
46 powerful leaders of the capitalist world in the 1980s: Margaret Thatcher and

1 Ronald Reagan. The former famously opined ‘*There Is No Alternative*’. Both  
2 aggressively attacked worker unions, instituted pro-corporate policies,  
3 weakened the social safety net, pressured Third World nations to open up  
4 their economies, and worked to bring the socialist nations to their knees. The  
5 first country to fully adopt the neoliberal agenda was Chile under the dictator  
6 Augusto Pinochet. Lee Kuan Yew, who led Singapore for several decades,  
7 was an erudite global voice espousing an admixture of Fundamentalist  
8 Neoliberalism and Moderate Neoliberalism. The luminaries of Moderate  
9 Neoliberalism now include Joseph Stiglitz, Robert B Reich and Amartya Sen.

10 The US dominated financial behemoths, the IMF and the World Bank, had  
11 the practical task of bringing nations across the world into the neoliberal fold.  
12 The pro-corporate World Trade Organization enforces the rules of the game.  
13 It has the legal power to override national parliaments. The US government  
14 is the ultimate inquisitorial enforcer of Neoliberalism. The truly recalcitrant  
15 deviants face the wrath of the Pentagon. From 1991 on, global leaders of all  
16 shades, leftist, liberal, social democratic, conservative, theocratic and  
17 dictatorial have come under the spell of Neoliberalism. Only Cuba remains  
18 outside its ambit. But possibly not for too long. Veritably a new global religion,  
19 Neoliberalism, has been revealed.

20  
21 *Economics offers a comprehensive doctrine with a moral code*  
22 *promising adherents salvation in this world; an ideology so*  
23 *compelling that the faithful remake whole societies to conform*  
24 *to its demands. It has its gnostics, mystics and magicians who*  
25 *conjure money out of thin air, using spells such as ‘derivative’*  
26 *or ‘structured investment vehicle’. And, like the old religions it*  
27 *has displaced, it has its prophets, reformists, moralists and*  
28 *above all, its high priests who uphold orthodoxy in the face of*  
29 *heresy. (Rapley 2017).*

### 30 31 **10.3 A RELIGION?**

32  
33 Economists say that Economics is a science. Wide usage of empirical data  
34 and sophisticated mathematical models give the impression that that is  
35 indeed the case. Intricate models constitute the heart and soul of modern  
36 economics. Suffused with sophisticated formulas, most papers in Economics  
37 journals can be deciphered only by those initiated into the creed.

38 But modern economics, especially its neoliberal wing, is not a science. Its  
39 models lack a critical scientific property: testability. The summary measures  
40 it deploys have basic flaws, much of the data are of questionable accuracy,  
41 the models have poor explanatory power, and its prescriptions often spell  
42 economic hardships for the majority of national populations. And it has an  
43 ingrained elitist bias. There is a general lack of recognition that Third World  
44 nations that strictly adhered to the neoliberal recipes from the IMF and the  
45 World Bank generally landed in the sordid pit of mass poverty. Those that  
46 prospered did so because they did not implement their major prescriptions.

1 As was demonstrated by the Asian Financial Crises of 1997 and the global  
2 economic meltdown of 2008, capitalism remains an unstable system prone to  
3 major catastrophes. Even as major signs of an impending crisis accumulated,  
4 mainstream economists remained theocratically wedded to their models.  
5 Later, it was called 'irrational exuberance'. When the blow fell, veritable chaos  
6 ensued that was contained only through trillions of dollars in bailouts for banks  
7 and major firms by the central banks.

8 Subsequently, it was grudgingly conceded that the mathematical models  
9 of economic analysis did not allow for singularities in which the usual course  
10 of action would produce the opposite consequences. Mainstream economics  
11 gurus said that the bearded apostate (Karl Marx) perhaps had a point. But it  
12 was a temporary concession, soon forgotten, as stock prices rebounded. The  
13 return to normality had entailed massive transfers from public coffers into  
14 corporate accounts and enriched the erstwhile speculators. But those realities  
15 were pushed under the rug by the media, politicians and neoliberal thinkers.

16 Religion forbids doubt. Facts and reason are irrelevant. Only faith matters.  
17 Correspondingly, Neoliberalism, more so the fundamentalist denomination,  
18 forbids doubt in the power of the Market, and demands faithful adherence to  
19 its commandments no matter the consequences. Eminent economists from  
20 the Harvard University conveyed that message to Russia in the 1990s. The  
21 result was bread shortages, dismantled academies and scientific institutions  
22 and a major reduction in life expectancy. Since Vladimir Putin has abandoned  
23 the draconian neoliberal prescriptions, he is Enemy No 1. Disasters ensued  
24 as urban water systems across Africa were privatized. Major state bailouts  
25 were needed to resolve the crisis. Yet, the problem was ascribed to bad  
26 actors; faith in privatization did not suffer. The core beliefs of Neoliberalism  
27 are sacrosanct.

28  
29 *Just as any religious service includes a profession of faith,*  
30 *membership in the priesthood of economics entails certain*  
31 *core convictions about human nature. Among other things,*  
32 *most economists believe that we humans are self-interested,*  
33 *rational, essentially individualistic, and prefer more money to*  
34 *less. These articles of faith are taken as self-evident. (Rapley*  
35 *2017).*

36  
37 Extensive research showing that cooperation has always been central to  
38 human survival and prosperity is ignored or ridiculed by neoliberal pundits. A  
39 failure of its prescriptions, however resounding, only calls for more extreme  
40 neoliberal measures.

41 Despite some degree of conservatism, dissension is the norm in science  
42 and established laws are also subject to reappraisal. But that is not so with  
43 Neoliberalism. It harbors virulent intolerance towards disbelief, in principle  
44 and practice. Professors, junior faculty and graduate students in economics  
45 must toe the neoliberal line. Else they risk effective excommunication.  
46 Research grants may dry up; journals may not accept articles for publication;

1 promotion may take too long; and thesis advisors may be hard to find. With  
2 the exception of a few established intellectuals, dissidents and doubters of  
3 Neoliberalism have a hard time surviving in the modern pro-corporate world.

4 In Chapter 3, we adopted the following definition of Religion.

5  
6 *Religion is a system of beliefs and practices shared by a*  
7 *community that is based on acceptance of the existence of*  
8 *supernatural beings and supernatural realms and has stories,*  
9 *rules of conduct (ethical norms) and rituals that are taken to*  
10 *be of divine origin.*

11  
12 Along that conceptual perspective, Neoliberalism qualifies as a doctrine of  
13 faith. But one feature distinguishes it from traditional religion. For example, a  
14 devout Hindu knows that he is Hindu and is proud of the fact. The fate of many  
15 more humans depends on Neoliberalism than is the case for any religion.  
16 Valuing individualism and competition over solidarity and cooperation, private  
17 initiative over state intervention, billions of adults have, in some fashion, been  
18 indoctrinated into this creed. Yet, only a few are acquainted with the term  
19 Neoliberalism and even fewer know what it means. Like a secret faith system,  
20 the neoliberal creed and its deity (the Market) rule by anonymity.

21 How can people unite against what they are not aware of? They say this  
22 politician had bad policies but the system escapes blame. It has no name.  
23 People remain divided over ethnic, race, gender, religious and national lines.  
24 Electoral choice revolves around wedge, sectarian issues. Like a religion,  
25 Neoliberalism is dogmatic and serves the interests of the dominant class.  
26 Unlike most religions, it does not have room for ideas that uphold social justice  
27 and equality. While Christian Socialism and Islamic Socialism are established  
28 tendencies, Neoliberalism is profoundly inimical to socialist ideas.

29 A caustic poem entitled 'IMF: International Mitumba Foundation' penned  
30 by the stellar Kenyan poet, author and activist Ngugi wa Thiongo exposes the  
31 duplicity of the prescriptions of the gurus of Neoliberalism. It is a protest to  
32 the downsizing of a Kenyan university. Mitumba is a Swahili word for second-  
33 hand throw away items dumped on African nations from the West; MaTumbo,  
34 meaning stomach, refers to potbellied politicians and academics of African  
35 nations; bakshish means reward and kubwa means large.

### 36 37 **IMF: International Mitumba Foundation**

38  
39 *First, they gave us their tongues.*  
40 *We said, it is okay, we can make them ours.*  
41 *Then they said we must destroy ours first.*  
42 *And we said it is okay because with theirs we become first.*  
43 *First to buy their aircrafts and war machines.*  
44 *First to buy their cars and clothes.*  
45 *First Buyers of the best they make from our Best.*  
46 *But when we said we could best them*

1                                *By making the best from our best*  
2    *Our own from our own*  
3                                *They said no, you must buy from us*  
4                                *Even though you made the best out of your best.*

5  
6                                *Now they make us buy the best they have already used*  
7                                *And when we said we could fight back and make our own*  
8                                *They reminded us they know all the secrets of our weapons.*  
9                                *Yes, they make us buy the best they have already used*

10    *Second hand, they call it.*

11    *In Swahili they are called Mitumba.*

12    *Mitumba weapons.*

13    *Mitumba cars.*

14    *Mitumba clothes.*

15    *And now IMF dictates mitumba universities*

16    *To produce mitumba intellectuals.*

17    *They demand we shut down all departments*

18    *That say*

19    *We have to stand on our ground,*

20    *The best ground from which to reach the stars.*

21    *But mitumba politicians kneel before IMF,*

22    *International Mitumba Foundation,*

23    *And cry out*

24    *Yes sirs*

25    *We the neo-colonial mimics milk the best bakshish.*

26    *Mitumba culture creates MaTumbo kubwa*

27    *For a few with Mitumba Minds.*

28    *Ngugi wa Thiongo (Prashad 2021).*

## 30    **10.4 RELIGION AND NEOLIBERALISM**

31  
32                                In practice, if not in theory, religious leaders and institutions across the world  
33                                today have adapted to the tenets of Neoliberalism. Its opponents within the  
34                                religious circles are few. The character of the adaptation and opposition to  
35                                Neoliberalism varies from religion to religion.

### 36    **+ Hinduism +**

37  
38  
39                                In Hindu tradition, Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth, prosperity, youth and  
40                                beauty. Submitting offerings to and reciting special sutras for this powerful  
41                                deity who can grant one a good life is a central part of the Hindu tradition. Her  
42                                flower bedecked photos and statues adorn temples and homes. Stories in the  
43                                Hindu scriptures invoke Lakshmi and other deities and commend individual  
44                                initiative and effort, accumulation of wealth and ethical business practice.  
45                                praise making money, individual effort and empathic business management

1 style. Hindus perform special rituals to obtain her blessings. Displeasing  
2 Lakshmi may anger her and plunge the family into poverty and suffering.

3 Tales and teachings about Lakshmi are cited by Hindu thinkers that  
4 Hinduism is compatible with pursuance of financial gain, prosperity and  
5 capitalism. The union of Hinduism with capitalism was strengthened from the  
6 1980s as the RSS, a Hindu supremacist movement, rose into prominence in  
7 the social and political arenas.



Sri Gaja Lakshmi

9  
10  
11  
12 Firmly opposing the Nehru era welfare state policies, RRS and BJP, its  
13 political wing, attracted the newly increased ranks of rich farmers and the  
14 urban middle class. RRS and BJP strove to transform India into a Hindu  
15 nation through exploiting sensitive issues like cow slaughter and the Babri  
16 Masjid dispute that resonated with Hindus from all the social strata. And they  
17 complemented their fundamentalist goals with a pro-business economic  
18 program. During his tenure as the Chief Minister of Gujarat, the BJP leader  
19 Narendra Modi launched business-friendly policies aimed to make India a  
20 modern, powerful Hindu nation. India needed to abolish central planning and  
21 focus on technology, private initiative, foreign and local investment, and trade.  
22 India could embrace Neoliberalism without being Westernized if this program  
23 was implemented according to Hindu values and traditions.

24 In 2015, Modi won the premiership with a huge majority. He was popular  
25 with the masses, Hindu priests and the CEOs of the major corporations. BJP  
26 rule is characterized by the state-temple-corporate (STC) complex in which  
27 religion is highly commercialized and the state and major corporations are  
28 intertwined in Hindu affairs. The RSS is now formidable nationwide force with  
29 an armed militia. Modi's rule is increasingly authoritarian, filled with pro-Hindu,  
30 anti-Muslim rhetoric. Employing measures that exacerbate religious tensions  
31 and violence, he has undermined freedom of the press, academic freedom,  
32 public education, the secular Constitution, and democratic governance. Yet,  
33 his popularity extends beyond India into the diasporic Indian communities

1 across the world. While a strong secular, student and Muslim opposition to  
2 BJP policies exists, there are too few voices within the Hindu priesthood that  
3 firmly oppose *Hindutva* flavored neoliberal programs and are of little political  
4 import.

5 *Hindutva*-draped Neoliberalism in India has made little indent on extreme  
6 poverty and the caste system and has generated a vast economic divide. It  
7 has heightened communal and religious tension to a feverish pitch. By early  
8 2022, rampages by *Hindutva* vigilantes directed against mosques, Muslim  
9 residence and shops were regular feature of life across the nation. Saffron  
10 clad militants armed with swords and pistols were provocatively redirecting  
11 Hindu religious processions through Muslim areas, shouting anti-Islamic  
12 slogans, vandalizing mosques and sparking off communal violence. Bigoted  
13 pronouncements by major politicians, a not-evenhanded police response and  
14 tepid words from Prime Minister Modi and his senior associates emboldened  
15 the extremists. As one witness said:

16  
17 *A Hindu mob smashed beer bottles inside the mosque, put up*  
18 *saffron flags there and chanted Jai Shri Ram [Hail Lord Ram].*  
19 *A caretaker of the mosque started resisting them, leading to a*  
20 *brawl. It was only after they started to desecrate the mosque*  
21 *that Muslims got angry and clashes started, and stones were*  
22 *thrown.* Tabreez Khan (Ellis-Petersen and Hassan 2022).

23  
24 By keeping the common folk divided, *Hindutva* religiosity effectively cloaks  
25 neoliberal fundamentalism. The two belief systems complement each other.

## 26 27 **+ Buddhism +**

28  
29 Compassion, interconnectedness, austere living, preserving animal life and  
30 respect for the environment are important tenets in the teachings of Gautama  
31 Buddha. Buddhism parted with the caste system and enhanced the status of  
32 women. For such reasons, Buddhism earned the respect of eminent scientists  
33 like Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell, Stephen Hawking and personages like  
34 BR Ambedkar. The Dalai Lama, the global voice of Buddhism today, has  
35 rallied against national and international inequality, poverty and hunger,  
36 rampant consumerism, exploitation of poor nations by multinational firms, and  
37 environmental damage. Along with Noam Chomsky, he endorsed the World  
38 Localization Day, a program convened by veteran activist Helena Norberg-  
39 Hodge to dismantle pro-corporate globalization. And he has allied himself with  
40 human rights causes of varied kinds.

41 The Dalai Lama criticized the Soviet economic system during a 2014  
42 event organized by the American Enterprise Institute, a major neoliberal  
43 thinktank. He then followed it up by criticizing the American economic system  
44 for lacking compassion, stressing greed and creating vast inequalities. These  
45 characteristics of Buddhism and its major luminary appear to set it apart from  
46 Neoliberalism.



1 The global reality, however, reveals another picture of the relationship  
2 between Buddhism and Neoliberalism. The Asian nations with a Buddhist  
3 majority and leaders professing loyalty to Buddhism—Sri Lanka, Myanmar,  
4 Thailand—have adopted unblemished neoliberal policies. Dispensing with  
5 the Buddhist tenet of universal compassion, these leaders have launched  
6 draconian pogroms against minority populations, particularly the Muslims.

7 Earlier we noted the astounding growth of the meditation and mindfulness  
8 movement in the Western nations. It is now a multi-billion dollar enterprise  
9 with centers in most cities of the West. Drawing from Hindu and Buddhist  
10 traditions, meditation and/or mindfulness is prescribed for control of stress,  
11 depression, hypertension and promoting a balanced, healthy lifestyle. It is  
12 also utilized by corporations to reduce stress and anxiety generated by the  
13 neoliberal work environment and enhance productivity. State institutions use  
14 meditation and mindfulness to ameliorate the problems created by austerity  
15 measures. In sum, meditation and mindfulness has become a balm to relieve  
16 the painful symptoms caused by Neoliberalism and divert attention from their  
17 root causes. The focus is on salvation at the individual level; cooperative  
18 struggles for systemic transformation are eschewed. It is a two-sided tool.

19  
20 *Stripped of its ethical and contextual roots, mindfulness-based*  
21 *practices borrowed from Buddhist and Zen lineages risk*  
22 *shoring up the very sources of suffering from which the*  
23 *Buddha set out to liberate himself and others. But practiced*  
24 *correctly, mindfulness – aligned with and informed by*  
25 *acknowledgement of powerful institutional sources of suffering*  
26 *– can be a pathway to critical engagement and resistance.*  
27 (Doran 2018).

28  
29 On several occasions, the Dalai Lama has expressed ambivalent, if not  
30 distasteful, views towards the role of women in Buddhism, refugees arriving  
31 in the Western nations and life-conditions in Buddhist nations. Inconsistent  
32 stand on neoliberalism is not uncommon among Buddhist luminaries.

33 In practice Buddhism and Neoliberalism can operate in harmony. The  
34 brutal generals of Myanmar, the self-proclaimed true defenders of Buddhism,  
35 are devotees of neoliberal economics as well.

### 36 37 **+ Christianity +** 38

39 The verses and parables in the Bible relating to money, poverty and wealth  
40 lack consistency. Some verses castigate money changers and the wealthy,  
41 deprecate hoarding, and sympathize with the poor, but some promote wise  
42 investment and acquisition of wealth. For example, the passage

43  
44 *[It] is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than*  
45 *for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. Bible, Matthew*  
46 *19:24.*

1  
2 is taken to mean that wealth is a barrier to eternal salvation. The Parable of  
3 the Sheep conveys that those who are kind to others, especially without  
4 expectation of anything in return, are blessed while the selfish who pass up  
5 the chance to assist the needy are unlikely to ascend to Heaven. A passage  
6 imploring generosity reads:

7  
8 *Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one*  
9 *who would borrow from you.* Bible, Matthew 5:42.

10  
11 But the Parable of Talents (Bible, Matthew 5:16-30) has a pragmatic take on  
12 wealth generation. A wealthy person embarking on a journey entrusts his  
13 wealth to three employees. The two with the larger portion invest it, make  
14 profit and give the master double the entrusted amount upon his return. But  
15 the one with the lowest amount puts it in a safe place and returns the exactly  
16 entrusted amount. The master rewards the former for their initiative and  
17 castigates the latter for his laziness and dismisses him. Jesus thus declares:

18  
19 *For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an*  
20 *abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will*  
21 *be taken from them.* Bible, Matthew 25:29.

22  
23 Some theologians and scholars point to parables reflecting a critical attitude  
24 towards money making to claim that Christianity does not endorse capitalist  
25 and neoliberal values and practices. But others single out the parables that  
26 elevate profit making as a positive activity to argue that Christian ethics are  
27 in harmony with capitalist and neoliberal ethics.

28 In terms of their proclamations, the former represent the majority. While  
29 conservative evangelical churches liken investment and profit to a religious  
30 duty, the main Catholic and Protestant denominations stand against greed  
31 and profiteering. Justin Welby, the senior prelate of the Church of England  
32 has criticized Neoliberalism. As the corona virus was spreading across the  
33 planet, he opined:

34  
35 *The next wave coming is the economic one ... We have a*  
36 *choice there as a nation and as a society and as a world. Do*  
37 *we take hold of our destiny and make sure the differences are*  
38 *mitigated, abolished where possible — or do we just let things*  
39 *happen, do we let the market rule, in which case there will be*  
40 *enormous suffering.* Archbishop Justin Welby (Murphy 2020).

41  
42 To the displeasure of Western leaders, Pope Francis, the head of the global  
43 Catholic Church, has trenchantly criticized Neoliberalism.

44



1           *The truthful and trustworthy businessman will be in the*  
2           *company of Prophets, saints and martyrs on the Day of*  
3           *Judgment.* Jami-al-Tirmizi, Vol 3, Chapter on Business, *Hadith*  
4           Number 1209. (IEP 2022).

5  
6       The Islamic empires in the Middle East, North Africa, Spain and India were  
7       prosperous centers of trade, production of fine goods, and development of  
8       science and technology. That commercial activities occurred under a defined  
9       legal system designed to ensure fair, just and transparent transactions was a  
10      key reason underlying their prosperity.

11      In terms of principles and practice, Islam is compatible with mercantile  
12      capitalism. But the Muslim empires of the past did not transition into mature  
13      capitalist formations based on wage labor. After the middle of the 19th  
14      century, virtually all Muslim nations came under direct or indirect Western  
15      imperial control. Their economies were structured into dependencies of  
16      Western economies. Islam often became a religion of resistance to foreign  
17      rule and anti-capitalist Islamic parties appeared on the scene.

18      Fast forward to the present. Like the rest of the world, all Muslim nations  
19      function under neoliberal economic policies. Be they theocratic nations like  
20      Saudi Arabia and Iran, *de facto* dictatorships like Kazakhstan and Egypt, or  
21      pseudo-democracies like Indonesia, Tunisia and Bangladesh, the economic  
22      rules of the game are those favored by the IMF and the World Bank. Some  
23      retain broad welfare policies, but privatization, liberalization, globalization and  
24      suppression of worker movements drive the policy. Some analysts have  
25      claimed that the presence of crony capitalism, wide scale corruption, bloated  
26      administration and favoritism in granting business licenses in many Muslim  
27      nations shows that free market capitalism and Islam are not compatible. That  
28      is a spurious argument. The anomalies are normal features of dependent  
29      capitalist nations, be they Muslim or non-Muslim.

30      Muslim leaders say that measures like Islamic banking, obligatory zakat  
31      payment by corporations, credit cards that disallow buying alcohol, income  
32      support for citizens, broad charity drives, free health care and education  
33      ensure that even as the nation follows free market policies, the government  
34      primarily serves the community (*ummah*). But facts demonstrate otherwise.  
35      Despite the Quranic injunction against excessive accumulation of wealth,  
36      their nations sport billionaires and multi-millionaires whose collective wealth  
37      vastly exceeds that of the majority. Their opulent lifestyle mirrors that of the  
38      wealthy elsewhere. Despite the aura of Islam in public life, the youth and the  
39      middle classes in Muslim nations are fixated by Western culture and  
40      propensities. For a large segment of the population in neoliberal Nigeria,  
41      Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sudan and other Muslim countries, abject poverty and  
42      suffering are the norm.

43      At times, the councils of Islamic scholars (*ulama*) inveigh against aspects  
44      of neoliberal economic practices like stock trading and declare them haram.  
45      But these are minor contradictions in the context of an overall compliance with  
46      the neoliberal order. Corporations in Muslim nations function in much the

1 same way as corporations in non-Muslim nations. They maximize returns to  
2 their stockholders, not the *ummah*.

3  
4 *Today, Islamic banks follow the same practices that non-*  
5 *Islamic banks do (including the use of derivatives) but describe*  
6 *them differently, so that they conform with Sharia. (Sorman*  
7 *2011).*

8  
9 Influential, decades old Islamic movements have openly fallen in line with  
10 Neoliberalism. As an economist with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood said:

11  
12 *Our economic program is a free-market society in order to*  
13 *pursue social justice. Sameh al-Barqui. (Sorman 2011).*

14  
15 Islamic scriptures and traditions do not formulate economic policy in Muslim  
16 nations. Neoliberalism overrides any economic policy edict issued by Muslim  
17 clerics.

## 18 19 20 21 **10.5 REFLECTIONS**

22  
23 Neoliberalism exercises greater influence over humanity than any religion. Its  
24 tenets of individualism, privatization and reliance on the Market dominate  
25 individual thought and public policy, in rich and poor nations. Yet, even the  
26 guardians of the neoliberal doctrine concede that it exacerbates inequality  
27 and, if unchecked, may generate to another major global economic crises.  
28 Discerning analysts indicate Neoliberalism fertilizes daunting problems like  
29 hunger, extreme poverty, refugee crisis, authoritarianism and extremism,  
30 global climate change and loss of biodiversity. Yet, its dominance in national  
31 and international policy platforms remains. When rough seas are abreast,  
32 only a temporary veer towards Moderate Neoliberalism is contemplated.

33 Neoliberalism has been a stumbling block in dealing with the corona virus  
34 pandemic that began in late 2019. Governments across the world have shown  
35 themselves incapable of controlling corporate power in health and related  
36 sectors, and instituting tax and revenue policies that would shift wealth and  
37 income to the bottom segments of the population. They have issued massive  
38 economic relief and stimulus packages for citizens, but the corporate sector  
39 has been the most significant beneficiary. As a result, corporate monopolies  
40 cemented their dominance, their profits skyrocketed, billionaires reaped  
41 immense rewards, the poor became poorer and inequality reached an  
42 unprecedented level. This point is elaborated in the forthcoming sequel to this  
43 volume, *Religion, Science and the Pandemic*.

44 Neoliberalism is a dogmatic faith-based, not an evidence-based, doctrine.  
45 It serves the interests of the 1%, not humanity. It is an eminently syncretic  
46 doctrine in that billions of people who follow other faith systems ascribe to the

1 tenets of Neoliberalism as well. Most of the atheists and irreligious today  
2 abide by neoliberal tenets. At best, they seek to reform, not eliminate, it. The  
3 only consequential challenge to this doctrine comes from a democratic but  
4 uninhibited socialist perspective. Control of the state has to be wrested away  
5 from the corporate sector and the super-rich to the broad majority. Only that  
6 can ensure that policies that will effectively tackle the major, daunting global  
7 problems are instituted.

8 The fundamental ethical-moral challenge to the followers of all religions—  
9 Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Shintoism, Confucianism,  
10 Judaism and traditional religions—and the secular community is whether they  
11 will recognize the existential threat to humanity and the planet posed by this  
12 pernicious doctrine and join in the struggle to banish it, or will they continue  
13 with business as usual?

14  
15 *Our civilization – so competitive, so individualistic, with its*  
16 *frenetic rhythms of production and consumption, its*  
17 *extravagant luxuries, its disproportionate profits for just a few*  
18 *– needs to downshift, take stock, and renew itself. Pope*  
19 *Francis (Murphy 2020).*  
20

# CHAPTER 11: RUMINATIONS



*Religion is an embodied phenomenon  
because the human religious way of being  
has evolved for millions of years  
as the bodies of our ancestors interacted  
with the other bodies around them.*  
Brandon Ambrosino

*I conceive of God, in fact,  
as a means of liberation  
and not a means to control others.*  
James Baldwin

*Community is more important than faith.  
Belonging is more important than belief.  
Gathering is more important than God.*  
Phil Zuckerman

*Religion is regarded  
by the common people as true,  
by the wise as false,  
and by the rulers as useful.*  
Lucius A Seneca



PEOPLE POSSESS an explicit or implicit worldview, a framework of ideas, which they take as self-evident and which helps them make sense of the world and give meaning to their lives. For five out six of the over 7.5 billion humans, religion is a key element of their worldview. One out of six, some 1.2 billion, have however cast aside notions and practices deriving from conventional religions.

Belief in divine beings (God, Allah, Brahman, *bodhisattva*, Dalai Lama, Prophet, Imam, Angels, *Nyame*) and supernatural realms (heaven, hell, purgatory, *Naraka*) is the primary basis of religion. It projects that life does not end after physical death. A soul, spirit, element of a universal soul, lives on.

1 Some religions say it is reborn. There are monotheistic religions with a single  
2 supreme deity, and there are polytheistic religions with a blend of gods and  
3 goddesses. Some religions incorporate an interventionist God, while a few  
4 see Him as a creator who remains aloof from His creation.

5 Pantheists see nature as a spiritual phenomenon. Secularists, who doubt  
6 the existence of divine entities, span the gamut from atheists, agnostics,  
7 skeptics, rationalists, humanists to nothing-in-particular. The spiritual-but-not-  
8 religious are spiritually inclined but do not formally associate with a traditional  
9 religion. Many of them connect to a dazzling array of creeds that are labeled  
10 New Age Beliefs, Alternative Beliefs or traditional faiths. Syncretism, or belief  
11 in more than one religion or spiritual creed, is common across the world.

12 Humans are social animals. Faith systems are shared beliefs and rituals.  
13 They unite people, infusing a sense belonging, security, meaning and giving  
14 emotional solace. But they also desensitize people to the suffering of others  
15 and induce them to accept injustice and inequality or participate in unethical  
16 conduct.

17 Religions are dynamic entities. They reflect and reinforce social structure.  
18 As society evolves, so does religion. Scriptures acquire modified meanings  
19 and new rituals are observed. Some religions decline or die off. New religions  
20 or denominations are born.

21 Founded by Zoroaster about 3,500 years ago in Persia, Zoroastrianism  
22 was the first major monotheistic religion in the world. After a millennium, with  
23 a large priesthood, majestic temples and an elaborate theology, it was the  
24 official religion of the Persian Empire with millions of followers. A thousand  
25 years on it was supplanted by Islam. With less than 200,000 devotees today,  
26 mostly in India, Iran and the West, it is headed towards extinction.

27 This chapter summarizes the history and features of religion and outlines  
28 its positive and deleterious features. It also gives responses to the seven key  
29 questions posed in Chapter 1 and gives a prescription for promoting interfaith  
30 tolerance and enhancing the positive features of religion.

## 31 32 **11.1 HISTORY**

33  
34 The religious generally say that their religion came into being through divine  
35 revelation, or a special form of enlightenment. Scientific investigations into  
36 the past point to biological, environmental, social, economic and cultural  
37 factors that over half a million years engendered the evolution of beliefs that  
38 later congealed into rudimentary religions. Some scholars argue that moral  
39 norms essential to group unity and survival preceded belief in divine beings.  
40 Moral norms—respecting the space of other members, refraining from inner  
41 group conflict and sharing food—are present in basic forms in many animals.

42 Paleolithic communities had a primal religion that blended polytheism with  
43 pantheism. People in that era lived by hunting, gathering and fishing for the  
44 most part. Social stratification, division of labor and trade were rudimentary.  
45 A shared vision of existence created a basis for group identity and fostered



1 within group unity and empathy. It embodied a code of morality that served  
2 as a mechanism to control behavior.

3 People ascribed divine powers to natural objects and worshipped them.  
4 These powers provided hope in hazard-filled, unpredictable circumstances.  
5 Tribal shamans guided worship, provided spiritual comfort and healing herbs  
6 and linked people to the ancestors. Myths about the origin and fate of the  
7 universe and humanity that gave meaning to life and events abounded. A  
8 diversity of rituals including trance inducing dances marked special events.  
9 Primal religions were an inextricable segment of the cultural and knowledge  
10 base, and as such, guided the survival of the group. Occurring in thousands  
11 of distinct forms, only a few survive to this day.

12 Reflecting the absence of exploitative social hierarchies, primal religions  
13 were egalitarian doctrines that fostered respect for nature as well as unity,  
14 empathy and reconciliation within the group. Primal religion was the glue that  
15 bonded a classless society, provided psychological sustenance and fulfilled  
16 the intellectual curiosity of the people.

17 As humans settled in sedentary communities, lived off agriculture, animal  
18 husbandry, manufacturing and trade, human society became more stratified.  
19 An accepted medium of exchange, harnessing of animals and use of carts  
20 with improved wheels extended trade. Discoveries of the properties of natural  
21 objects and events, and accurate time keeping improved production.  
22 Language and mathematical knowledge attained higher vistas. Instead of  
23 immediately being consumed, grains, staples, smoked meats, and other food  
24 items were stored. The spectrum of healing herbs expanded as well. Towns  
25 and cities emerged.

26 In the process, a few persons came to own large acreages of land, large  
27 animal herds, trading entities, buildings, gold and other items. The masses  
28 worked for them as slaves or dependents or undertook their own small scale  
29 economic activities. A stratum with special skills straddled the middle ground.  
30 Inequality reached its zenith as kings and emperors took the helm.

31 In the light of the material inequalities, maintaining stability became more  
32 critical in the permanent settlements. And that unity had to derive from an  
33 internalized outlook. Thus, from the shamanistic creeds of the Paleolithic era,  
34 religion evolved to a formalized and elaborate system of beliefs and rituals  
35 overseen by a bevy of priests under the tutelage of the king and the upper  
36 social echelons. Religion evolved as an institutionalized, systematized creed  
37 with an elaborate theology, impressive rituals and rules, large temples and a  
38 dedicated priesthood

39 Gradually shedding the egalitarian features of primal religion, now it paid  
40 homage to the king in heaven and to the king on earth. The latter represented  
41 the former or was blessed by him. Religion gave solace, spiritual comfort and  
42 meaning to the individual but rationalized and sanctified the existent social  
43 inequalities as well. Religious rituals bonded the adherents, but for purposes  
44 good as well as bad.

45

1 *Rituals help us to live out our values and make us less anxious.*  
2 *Ritualistic practices can help to bring a degree of predictability*  
3 *to an uncertain future. Ritualistic behavior can improve social*  
4 *bonding when we practice it collectively. Rituals can stimulate*  
5 *inter-group bias. And cause harm. (Ambrosino 2019a).*  
6

7 Stratified societies were major engines of economic, cultural and political  
8 development. Accumulation, competition and war by the powerful catalyzed  
9 innovation. Elaborate laws promoted social stability. August religious creeds  
10 sported ethical norms that improved interactions in different domains of life,  
11 and substantively contributed to the knowledge base of society. Yet, in the  
12 long run, as the elite strata receded into excessive indulgence and neglected  
13 production and welfare of their subjects, the societies ossified. Progress was  
14 stalled as elite factions fought for power, and the dejected masses rose up in  
15 revolt after revolt. The elites as well as the commoners invoked religious  
16 sentiments, in their own fashion, to justify their cause. Weakened by internal  
17 strife, some societies degenerated into chaos while others succumbed to  
18 invading forces. In some cases, more dynamic social formations emerged. It  
19 was an uneven process.

20 Religion in class societies provided hope to the common folk but, implicitly  
21 if not directly, also served injustice and tyranny.  
22

23 *[All] religions, faiths, theological philosophies, and religious*  
24 *creeds and all other such institutions in the long run become*  
25 *supporters of the tyrannical and exploiting institutions, men*  
26 *and classes.*

27 Bhagat Singh  
28

29 Elite profligacy in kingdoms and empires tainted the priestly stratum. The  
30 religious orders amassed land and wealth, engaged in usury and political  
31 intrigue, conducted majestic rituals to honor the king and became alienated  
32 from the bulk of the devotees. Becoming targets of popular uprisings, their  
33 holy evocations fell from grace. And new belief systems under differently  
34 stratified societies emerged.  
35

36 *We take it for granted that religions are born, grow and die –*  
37 *but we are also oddly blind to that reality. When someone tries*  
38 *to start a new religion, it is often dismissed as a cult. When we*  
39 *recognize a faith, we treat its teachings and traditions as*  
40 *timeless and sacrosanct. And when a religion dies, it becomes*  
41 *a myth, and its claim to sacred truth expires. Tales of the*  
42 *Egyptian, Greek and Norse pantheons are now considered*  
43 *legends, not holy writ. (Paul-Choudhury 2019).*  
44

45 The Neolithic era social stratification had not only brought forth a vast gap  
46 between the few at the top and the multitude, but also induced mass poverty,

1 more deadly warfare and poor environmental stewardship. Despite the major  
2 progress in science and technology and increased average life span since  
3 then, these problems remain as the fundamental problems facing humanity  
4 today. Religions have factored in both the causation and control of these  
5 problems.

6 Modern day religions embody the progressive, sparkling features and the  
7 retrogressive, blemished features of the ancestral faith systems. Here we  
8 supplement the examples of the dual character of religion given earlier with  
9 two more examples.

10  
11 +++++

12  
13 **Myanmar:** Some 90% of the 54 million people in Myanmar are Buddhist. The  
14 landscape is dotted with imposing, exquisite monasteries and pagodas. An  
15 estimated 500,000 monks and 75,000 nuns preside over religious rites and  
16 ceremonies. Subjected to exacting training from a young age, the priests are  
17 a respected, popular, disciplined social group. Support from the sangha is  
18 essential for political legitimacy: all the governments vie for their blessings.

19 Monks and nuns in large numbers were involved in anti-colonial struggles.  
20 Their activism endured after Independence. Tens of thousands of monks and  
21 nuns have been in the frontlines of opposing military rule. Instrumental in the  
22 partial restoration of democratic rule under Aung Suu Kyi, they refilled the  
23 streets after the military assumed total control in February 2021 and arrested  
24 her. Yet, before and under Suu Kyi and to this day, a significant segment of  
25 the monks and nuns actively took part in the military backed pogroms against  
26 Rohingya Muslims and ethnic minorities subscribing to traditional religions.

27 By law, monks cannot form or join political parties, or give sermons that  
28 pertain to politics. The monasteries fall under state jurisdiction and receive  
29 governmental support. Yet, their political influence remains immense. The  
30 number of monks and nuns slightly exceeds the size of the military.

31 The generals in power now have a two-pronged strategy to deal with the  
32 religious (and civilian) opposition to their rule. Liberally using brute force, they  
33 violently attack and gun down street marchers, including monks and nuns,  
34 vandalize and loot monasteries, withhold their funds and launch intimidation  
35 campaigns. Yet, by visiting temples, praying and giving alms, the generals try  
36 to appease the sangha by casting themselves as defenders of Buddhist and  
37 Burmese culture. Some senior monks have received lavish gifts from the  
38 military regime.

39  
40 *The military often tries to tap into the religious sentiments of the*  
41 *Burmese for their purposes. The generals often appear on*  
42 *television overseeing the construction of temples and capping*  
43 *stupas with jeweled umbrellas. (FAD 2022).*  
44

45 Though a large number of monks and nuns continue to oppose them, the  
46 generals have won support from leading nationalist monks, and to a degree,

1 have driven the majority into silence. As hundreds of monks languish under  
2 lock and key, the military leader, General Aung Hlaing, has unveiled plans to  
3 construct *'the biggest sculpture of a sitting Buddha in the world'*. (Mendelson  
4 2022).



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32  
Sister Ann Rose Nu Tawng

But many monks and nuns are unimpressed. In tandem with the Buddhist priests risking their lives is Sister Ann Rose Nu Tawng, a Catholic nun. Witnessing an anti-military demonstration in March 2021, and envisioning a hail of bullets, she interjected herself into the standoff, bravely kneeling down and urging the soldiers not to shoot the protestors. *'Shoot me instead,'* she said. The stalemate was diffused.

Conservative pro-military monks like Bhamo Sayadaw and Sitagu Sayadaw combined with the religiosity of General Aung Hlaing are the pugnacious face of religion; Sister Ann Rose Nu Tawng and her Buddhist counterparts denote its admirable, noble face.

**Rwanda:** Rwanda is a Christian majority nation with 44% of the population Roman Catholic, 38%, Protestant, and 12% Seventh Day Adventist. The remaining 6% are Muslim, Jehovah's Witness, non-religious or other. At 85% of the population, the Hutus form the largest ethnic group. The rest are Tutsi, at 14%, and Twa at 1%. Its population in 1994 was below 8 million.

This small nation has a long history of ethnic conflict. From April to July 1994, it was engulfed by a horrific genocide in which more than 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were slaughtered in a planned campaign by the Hutu Interahamwe militia, governmental forces and civilian allies. We focus on how Rwandese churches and clergy related to the genocide.

Media reports of the time and subsequent investigations by international war crimes tribunals revealed beyond doubt that the Christian church was heavily implicated in the genocide. While a few Hutu clergy opposed state sanctioned

1 discrimination of the Tutsi, and a small number acted with great courage to  
2 protect them, many Hutu priests and nuns, mostly Catholic but also  
3 Protestant, willingly cooperated with the genocidal forces.

4 Archbishop Vincent Nsengiyumva, the top Catholic prelate in the nation,  
5 was a senior figure in the ruling party and was close to the hate-espousing  
6 regime. Not only did he deny that there was a genocide in progress but also  
7 stood by as Tutsi clergy were captured and killed by the Interahamwe.

8 Other bishops went further. Preaching the gospel of hate from the pulpit,  
9 they encouraged Hutu civilians to participate in the killings and played a  
10 frontline role in it. When about 2,000 Tutsis took refuge inside a church, its  
11 pastor, Father Athanase Seromba gave the key to the Interahamwe with the  
12 approval for the church to be bulldozed so as to kill those inside. Father  
13 Wenceslas Munyeshyaka, the senior priest at the Holy Family Cathedral in  
14 Kigali, actively aided the Interahamwe in the rape and killings of hundreds of  
15 Tutsi refugees and civilians. The Ntarama Catholic church was a killing site  
16 for some 5,000 people. Around 200 Tutsi priests and nuns were also killed.

17  
18 *[The] Church in the Rwandan genocide was key in the escalation*  
19 *of violence. ... Its culpability does not rest on the actions of a few*  
20 *within the clergy. Rather, the Church is to blame as an*  
21 *institutional entity. (Deliperi 2020).*  
22



23  
24 Sister Felicite Niyitegeka

25 While the extremist senior and junior Hutu priests joined the murderous  
26 rampage, most Catholic and Protestant clergy apparently approvingly kept  
27 quiet. Only a few spoke out or actively protected the victims. One hero was  
28 Sister Felicite Niyitegeka. Though a Hutu, she gave shelter to Tutsis in her  
29 church and home and helped them flee to neighboring Zaire. But the  
30 Interahamwe caught up with her and killed her and the 30 Tutsi then present  
31 at her place.

32 Archbishop Vincent Nsengiyumva was killed in June 1994 by the Rwanda  
33 Patriotic Front forces. Some major pro-genocidal priests were later brought to  
34 trial and convicted in local and international courts, but some prominent

1 extremist priests escaped to Europe. Aided by priests in Italy, France and the  
2 UK, they secured jobs, protection and at times, a new identity. The Vatican  
3 played a vital role in this cover-up effort.  
4

5 *After the genocide, a Catholic network helped priests and nuns*  
6 *who had been complicit in the violence to reach Europe and*  
7 *evade justice. (Sherwood 2017).*  
8

9 *After the violence ended, the Vatican spirited guilty members of*  
10 *the clergy out of the country, and over time, quietly worked them*  
11 *into parishes across Europe. (McGreal 2014b).*  
12

13 After years of silence and denial, the Conference of Catholic Bishops in  
14 Rwanda admitted in 2016 that ‘*church members planned, aided and carried*  
15 *out the genocide*’ and issued a formal apology (AP 2016b). The Vatican did  
16 not give the matter serious consideration until Pope Francis admitted to the  
17 visiting Rwandan President Paul Kagame in 2017 that Catholic priests and  
18 nuns had participated in the genocide and asked for forgiveness. But his  
19 admission fell short of full accountability. The Church of England has also  
20 faced accusations of harboring priests alleged to have been party to mass  
21 murder and official cover up of the genocide.

22 While Archbishop Vincent Nsengiyumva and his compatriots must  
23 languish in religion’s Hall of Shame, Sister Felicite Niyitegeka is among its  
24 gems. She was posthumously bestowed with the Imena Award, the highest  
25 national honor in Rwanda.  
26

27 *There are very good Christians who are compassionate and*  
28 *caring. And there are very bad Christians. You can say that*  
29 *about Islam, about Hinduism, about any faith. That is why I*  
30 *was saying that it was not the faith per se but the adherent.*  
31 *People will use their religion to justify virtually anything.*

32 Archbishop Desmond Tutu.  
33

## 34 **11.2 HIGH POINTS**

35

36 On average, 82 of 100 people in the world today follow one of the four major  
37 religions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism), 16 are irreligious or  
38 secular, and 8 follow smaller religions or faith systems. This book has delved  
39 into the beliefs, scriptures, rituals, rites, organization, priesthood, history and  
40 social function of the four major religions, five smaller religions (Ahmadiyya,  
41 Confucianism, Sikhism, Seventh Day Adventism, Traditional African Religion)  
42 and Secularism. It observed that religious systems had contributed positively  
43 to human culture, ethical advancement, and social harmony but had also  
44 instituted beliefs and practices that rationalized and backed social injustice,  
45 greed, and conquest. A synopsis of the constructive features of the four major  
46 religions follows.

1  
2 **+ Language and literature +**  
3

4 The venerated texts of the four major religions (the Vedas, the Pali Canon,  
5 Bible and Quran) and the associated compendium of the scriptural texts are,  
6 by any standard, literary masterpieces of gargantuan scope. Written when  
7 books were a rarity, material for writing was scarce and vocabulary was  
8 limited, they represent milestones in linguistic development. The Vedas and  
9 other Hindu canons enhanced Sanskrit and Hindi. The Pali Canon and other  
10 Buddhist texts enriched diverse Asian languages. The Bible boosted Latin,  
11 and its translations enriched European languages including English, German  
12 and Spanish. And the Quran substantially advanced Arabic style and lexicon.

13 Brahmin gurus, Buddhist monks, Christian clergy and theologians and  
14 Muslim and Sufi theologians were among the small stratum of literate people  
15 in their days. Scribes copied the volumes of religious and secular works on  
16 varied issues they wrote. The copies were distributed widely. The ensuing  
17 demand for paper, ink, pen and stylus stimulated production and improved  
18 the technology used for writing and production of books. While requirements  
19 of civil administration and commerce influenced the process, religion was a  
20 critical stimulus as well.

21  
22 **+ Ethics +**  
23

24 Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam emerged in settings with diffuse,  
25 unfair and unevenly applied moral and ethical codes. The powerful, the rich,  
26 the special groups were favored over the commoners and the marginalized.  
27 The status and treatment of slaves, servants, women, captives and outsiders  
28 were subject to the whims of the master or the governor. The emergent  
29 religions conveyed the basic message that every person held the same  
30 spiritual status. Everyone deserved fair and equal treatment. Promoting good  
31 will towards all, empathy, compassion and charity, they taught that attending  
32 to people in distress was an act of faith and was as important as prayer.

33 Important ethical edicts were codified: Laws of Manu, Eightfold Noble  
34 Path, Ten Commandments, and Five Pillars of Islam. These edicts shared  
35 basic values. Each of the four religions, most minor religions and humanistic  
36 codes incorporate the Golden Rule. Stated in three forms, it reads:

37  
38 **Golden Rule**

39 *Treat others as you would like others to treat you.*

40 *Do not treat others in ways that you would not like to be treated.*

41 *What you wish upon others, you wish upon yourself.*

42 Wikipedia (2022 – Golden Rule).  
43

44 The Golden Rule identifies the individual with humanity (Lord's creation) and  
45 comes out as the central ethical percept in the four major religions. It covers  
46 and supersedes other important ethical percepts. To give an example:





1  
2 Hindu and Buddhist emperors, Christian kings and Muslim Caliphs promoted  
3 learning and innovation. They set up schools, libraries, universities, research  
4 institutions and hired religious and secular scholars and experts. Universities  
5 in the world have religious roots; many are still run by religious organizations.  
6 Yet, the philosophic roots of science and religion are fundamentally  
7 antithetical.

8  
9 *Religion is a culture of faith;*  
10 *Science is a culture of doubt.*

11 Richard P Feynman  
12

13 Nonetheless, it is inaccurate to claim that religion has been against science  
14 throughout history. At the applied level, religion has often marched along with  
15 science. The centers of learning in religious empires pursued secular and  
16 scientific subjects under the rationale that God implored humans to grasp the  
17 wonderous nature of His creation. Laws of science were laws set in motion  
18 by God. Scientific discoveries were blessings from God. Leading scientists  
19 were firm devotees; some were theologians of repute. Disputations among  
20 the religiously inclined scholars and scientists were common and did not  
21 generally elicit clamp downs from the authorities.  
22

### 23 **+ Tolerance +**

24

25 Interfaith tolerance was observed in varying degrees in several kingdoms  
26 where one religion was the dominant or official faith. Though its adherents  
27 received preferential treatment, members of other religions had a leeway to  
28 practice their faith and were represented in the higher political and economic  
29 echelons. Examples include the Ashoka Empire (Buddhism), the Abbasid  
30 Caliphate and the Mughal Rule under Akbar (Islam). Some theologians  
31 proclaimed the fundamental equality of religions. As a Catholic theologian of  
32 the liberation theology tradition and an icon of Hinduism both opined:

33  
34 *In the Father's house we shall meet Buddhists and Jews,*  
35 *Muslims and Protestants...*

36 Halder Camara  
37

38 *I am a Christian and a Hindu and a Moslem and a*  
39 *Jew....Looking at all religions with an equal eye, we would not*  
40 *only not hesitate but would think it our duty to blend into our*  
41 *faith every acceptable feature of other faiths. MK Gandhi*  
42 *(Nazareth 2022).*

43  
44 Adoption of neoliberal economic norms and associated cultural practices by  
45 religiously varied national populations favor intercultural and by extension,  
46 interfaith tolerance. Thus, religious holidays—Christmas, Eid and Diwali—are

1 enjoyed, albeit in commercialized guises, across faith and national  
2 boundaries. For example, visiting the imposing Christmas Tree at the  
3 Rockefeller Center in December is an annual ritual for New Yorkers of all  
4 backgrounds. Families go to admire the sights, the lights, the Snowman and  
5 have fun. With a Christian stamp in formal terms, it exemplifies secularization  
6 and unification of religions. As a scholar ponders:

7  
8 *Have we all – Jews, Muslims, Hindus, atheists, agnostics,*  
9 *shamans, etc. – become Christianized or has the Christmas*  
10 *tree itself assumed a whole different set of meanings?*  
11 (Dabashi 2021).  
12

13 Taking the cue from a resolution passed by the UN General Assembly, King  
14 Abdullah II and Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad of Jordan initiated the World  
15 Interfaith Harmony Week. In operation since 2010, it is observed during the  
16 first week of February of each year. Based on two tenets—*Love of God and*  
17 *Love of the Neighbor* or *Love of the Good and Love of the Neighbor*—the  
18 principal aim is to ‘*create mutual tolerance among the followers of different*  
19 *religious denominations*’ and ‘*to build a society of respect and tolerance*  
20 *without resorting to protests, harm, and loss to others*’. (WHIW 2022). The  
21 two formulation these tenets assures inclusivity of all kinds of faiths, spiritual  
22 traditions, and secular and irreligious persons and groups as well.

23 This UN recognized project receives funds from governments, religious  
24 bodies, philanthropic organizations and individual donors. Each year, the HM  
25 King Abdullah II of Jordan Prize is awarded to individuals or organizations for  
26 their exemplary efforts to promote interfaith harmony. The recipients of the  
27 2021 prize were: Wellington Interfaith Council, New Zealand; The Religion  
28 and Politics Forum, Japan; and Institute of Harmony and Peace Studies,  
29 India. Over 1,000 events fostering interfaith dialogue are held across the  
30 world under the auspices of WIHW every year. Attempts to broaden the  
31 purview of WIHW beyond faith issues to social justice and global environment  
32 have been made but have yet to gain official recognition. It is noteworthy that  
33 King Abdulla, the main patron of WIHW, has been a strong ally of the United  
34 States whose imperial policies have been responsible for fertilizing the seeds  
35 of religious conflict throughout the world. Have WIHW related activities  
36 affected grassroots level attitudes on interfaith tolerance or are they mainly  
37 elite level events of the neoliberal NGO variety? That question remains.  
38

### 39 **+ Comfort and support +**

40  
41 Religious rituals, especially prayer, are a primary fountain of emotional  
42 support for billions. The faithful prays to enter a realm beyond the ordinary, to  
43 connect to a higher power, to express love for the master of the universe, for  
44 forgiveness, blessings and protection from worldly and spiritual harm. The  
45 hustle, bustle and anxieties of life evaporate. Prayer soothes the mind. Making

1 doubts vanish, it anchors life. It provides relief. The divine being is there for  
2 you. Undoubtedly, prayer is integral to religion.

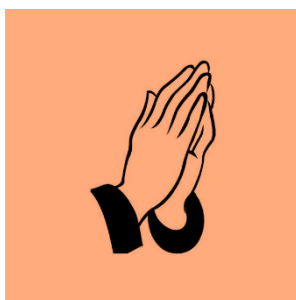
3  
4 *Prayer is the key of the morning*  
5 *and the bolt of the evening.*

6 MK Gandhi  
7

8 For many, prayers are as much a part of life as meals, rest and sleep. Hindus  
9 pray to Brahman, Krishna, Lakshmi and other deities; Buddhists pray to  
10 Buddha, a *bodhisattva* or to connect to cosmic consciousness; Christians  
11 pray to God; Muslims pray to Allah; Sikhs pray to a God beyond description;  
12 and Jews pray to Yahweh (Adonai). They pray at different times, in varied  
13 styles, in special or usual attire. They pray individually and with other faithful,  
14 at home, prayer house, or public venues. They sit, stand, kneel or make other  
15 movements as they pray. An enchanting variation of praying styles between  
16 and within religions exists.



17  
18 Christian Prayer Symbols  
19



20  
21 Hindu Prayer Symbol  
22



23  
24 Muslim Prayer Symbol  
25

1 Prayers generally involve moving hands. Clapping, raising or waving one or  
2 both hands in different ways occurs as the devotee recites the holy words and  
3 chants, or sings. Hands are common prayer symbols.  
4 Prayer connects and bonds people. Praying is caring. You pray for your  
5 child, spouse, parent, relative, and the departed ones. You pray for the nation  
6 and humanity. You pray for a stable, prosperous life. Faith and prayer sustain  
7 people in times of grief and calamity. When a loved one dies, a serious illness  
8 strikes, an accident or a job dismissal occurs, praying assuages the pain.  
9 Centuries old funeral rituals with communal participation are of incalculable  
10 benefit in coping with the loss of a parent or a child. That one lives on in the  
11 nether world raises the possibility of an eventual reunion. People pray for rain  
12 or peace when drought or war strike. It gives hope amid uncertainty.  
13



14  
15  
16

Buddhist Monks Praying



17  
18  
19

Muslim Women Praying for Eid al Fitr

1 Buttressed by centuries old communal customs, the psychological benefit of  
2 religion to the believer is undoubtedly significant. And that emotional effect is  
3 amplified when praying with fellow believers in a church, mosque, temple or  
4 other venue. Congregational prayers generate bonding and empathy.

5 A severe drought in Ethiopia in January 2022 put millions at risk from death  
6 due to malnutrition and hunger. An affected mother complained to a reporter:

7  
8 *We don't have milk to give to the children. My child is sick due*  
9 *to lack of food, and this happened because of the drought ...*  
10 *Our cattle have been harmed by the drought. We have lost so*  
11 *many. We pray to Allah for rain.* Shems Dire (Ayene and  
12 Davies 2022).

13  
14 The issue here is not whether prayers have an objective positive effect. No  
15 solid scientific evidence to support such claims exists. The relevant studies  
16 remain controversial. Yet, people pray no matter the outcome. Whether their  
17 loved one did or did not survive, the blessings of the divine savior are sought.

18 The question is: Do prayer, meditation and related rituals affect the person  
19 who prays? Studies indicate that prayer can alleviate stress, subdue fear and  
20 anger, combat loneliness, enhance inner peace, provide encouragement and  
21 relief, ameliorate depression and anxiety, improve mental health, foster  
22 empathy and augment the sense of purpose in life. It anchors an uncertain,  
23 unstable existence. Spiritual meditation works better than secular meditation.  
24 Prayers do not induce miracles. They should not replace effective measures.  
25 But they are a useful adjunct with little or no adverse sequelae. Billions pray  
26 and derive emotional benefits. Atheists who doubt the material effects of  
27 prayer still advocate it as a harmless activity that has emotional benefits and  
28 generates empathy.

29 Sharing a meal has evolutionary roots with religious overtones. Reciting  
30 words of gratitude before and after meals, grace, cuts across religions and  
31 cultures. Some faith traditions practice a minute of meditative silence before  
32 commencing a meal. A Protestant grace can be:

33  
34 *For what we are about to receive*  
35 *may the Lord make us truly grateful, Amen*

36  
37 Before putting food in the mouth, Muslims say:

38  
39 *Bismillah ir rahman ir rahim*  
40 *(In the name of Allah, the gracious, the merciful)*

41  
42 And they end the meal with:

43  
44 *Alhamdulillah*  
45 *(Praise be to Allah)*  
46

1 Hindu and Buddhist traditions have pre- and post-meal chants drawn from  
2 their scriptural texts and historic custom. A Zen meal invocation (*gatha*) is:

3  
4 *We receive this food in gratitude to all beings*  
5 *who have helped to bring it to our table,*  
6 *And vow to respond in turn to those in need*  
7 *with wisdom and compassion.*

8  
9 An extended humanist grace declares:

10  
11 *For what we are about to receive*  
12 *let us be truly thankful*  
13 *...to those who planted the crops*  
14 *...to those who cultivated the fields*  
15 *...to those who gathered the harvest.*

16  
17 *For what we are about to receive*  
18 *let us be truly thankful*  
19 *to those who prepared it and those who served it.*

20  
21 *In this festivity let us remember too*  
22 *those who have no festivity*  
23 *those who cannot share this plenty*  
24 *those whose lives are more affected than our own*  
25 *by war, oppression and exploitation*  
26 *those who are hungry, sick and cold*

27  
28 *In sharing in this meal*  
29 *let us be truly thankful*  
30 *for the good things we have*  
31 *for the warm hospitality*  
32 *and for this good company.*

33 Source: Wolf (2016).  
34

35 While people focused on food and the company may just say 'bon appetite'  
36 (good appetite), benedictions of grace embody a spirit of humility, gratitude  
37 and compassion. In essence, they place believers of diverse faith as well as  
38 secularists and humanists on a common plane. Grace harmonizes humanity.

### 39 40 **11.3 BLEMISHES**

41  
42 The benefits bestowed by religion are counterbalanced by four opposing  
43 factors: inconsistency in the scriptures; subservience to unjust, oppressive  
44 secular authority; intolerance of other faiths and non-believers; and adoption  
45 of anti-science viewpoints.

46

1 **+ Distorted ethics +**

2  
3 The scriptures and derivative holy texts of the four major religions contain  
4 ambiguous, contradictory statements on important events and ethical edicts.  
5 Violence and peace, revenge and forgiveness, treatment of other doctrines,  
6 punishment for law breakers, status of women, and prayer versus practice,  
7 among other things, evoke contradictory prescriptions. Two pairs of Biblical  
8 statements are indicative:

9  
10 *For by grace are ye saved through faith...not of works.* Bible,  
11 Ephesians 2:8,9

12 *Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by*  
13 *faith only.* Bible, James:24 (Goad 2014).

14  
15 *Submit yourself to every ordinance of man...to the king, as*  
16 *supreme; Or unto governors.* Bible, I Peter 2:13

17 *We ought to obey God rather than men.* Bible, Acts 5:29 (Goad  
18 2014).

19  
20 The religious say that the holy texts were transcribed by humans. It was they,  
21 not God, who introduced the inconsistencies. Yet, which is divinely ordained,  
22 and which is erroneous? There is no clear answer. Genuine contradictions  
23 are called paradoxes that need to be resolved through prayer and reflection.

24 The issue transcends theological disputation. The major point is practice.  
25 Historically scriptures were used both to validate and oppose slavery, war,  
26 colonialism, ethnic cleansing, genocide, dictatorial rule, patriarchy and  
27 discrimination of women and minorities. Venerated priests, mullahs, monks,  
28 lamas, *swamis* and gurus were involved in abuse, fraud, discrimination and  
29 even violent deeds.

30 The keeper of noble ethics perpetrated ignoble deeds. Words and action  
31 too often differed. As Isaac Asimov, the famed science communicator, opined  
32 about the multi-millionaire American televangelists:

33  
34 *If I were not an atheist, I would believe in a God who would*  
35 *choose to save people on the basis of the totality of their lives*  
36 *and not the pattern of their words. I think he would prefer an*  
37 *honest and righteous atheist to a TV preacher whose every*  
38 *word is God, God, God and whose every deed is foul, foul,*  
39 *foul.*

40 Isaac Asimov

41  
42 The spiritualist movements that came into being in the West since the 1970s  
43 are now mostly run like business entities. Compared to historical churches,  
44 they are more likely to be tainted by financial misdeeds.

45

1        *Those looking for spiritual community and teachers in late*  
2        *capitalism—outside of historically robust religions that*  
3        *integrate and nurture pro-social projects —will encounter very*  
4        *few organizations that are not business pyramids organized*  
5        *around leaders who have little to offer beyond charisma.*  
6        (Remski 2021).

### 7 8                    **+ Abuse of children and women +** 9

10        Child abuse and sexual predation on women are veritably ugly blotches that  
11        have stained religious institutions across continents. No religion or nation has  
12        been immune from this malady. Here we note two additional examples.

13  
14        **USA:** A broad survey of yoga training by Hindu gurus and meditational  
15        training by Buddhist monks mostly in the US revealed that almost all are run  
16        like profit-making businesses and that sexual abuse of women was present  
17        across the board. Almost no yoga or meditational tradition was exempt, but a  
18        culture of silence hid the misdeeds for too long. An authentic spiritual guru is  
19        a rarity in the neoliberal environment.

20  
21        **UK:** The year 2021 report of an official inquiry into sexual abuse of children  
22        in England and Wales covered ‘*38 religious organizations and settings in*  
23        *England and Wales, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baptists, Methodists,*  
24        *Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, Hinduism, Buddhism and nonconformist Christian*  
25        *denominations*’ (Sherwood 2021). Concluding that sexual abuse had  
26        occurred in many situations, it faulted many religions for failing to provide  
27        adequate protection to children. Thousands, if not more, children are at risk.

### 28 29                    **+ Theocratic intolerance +** 30

31        Each of the major and minor religions has deviated from the principles of  
32        equality espoused in its holy texts. When religion was allied with wealth and  
33        political power, the deviation became sharper. Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and  
34        Islamic institutions across history were the backbone of theocratic and  
35        dictatorial rulers and regimes and were complicit in the maltreatment of their  
36        people. People professing faiths other than the official faith were subject to  
37        discriminatory laws and treatment and reduced to the status of second class  
38        citizens. The citizens in these states adopted an us-versus-them mentality  
39        and looked down on other religions. Only devotees of their faith could attain  
40        spiritual salvation; the others would roast in hell. The extremist factions went  
41        beyond sanctioning belief and social discrimination to killing and elimination.

42        The Islamic theocracies of the Middle East and other Islamic nations, the  
43        fundamentalist backed regimes of Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), Donald Trump  
44        (USA) and Narendra Modi (India), the exclusivist governments of Myanmar  
45        and Sri Lanka vividly illustrate the officialization of intolerant tendencies. A  
46        few recent cases of official and broad-based religious intolerance are in order.



1  
2 **Christmas in India:** The year 2021 Christmas season was far from a festive  
3 season for several Christian communities in India. Alleging that Christian  
4 missionaries were using the event and giving gifts to convert Hindus and  
5 Hindu children to their religion, extremist Hindu mobs entered churches and  
6 disrupted prayers and celebrations. The vandals smashed statues of Jesus  
7 Christ and destroyed Santa Claus effigies. Attacks on Christians in India  
8 involving physical violence, burning the Bible and more increased 60% from  
9 2016 to 2019. Some 300 such attacks occurred in the first nine months of  
10 2021.

11 Following the latest incidents, the government of India for the first time  
12 acted against the Missionaries of Charity, an organization founded by Mother  
13 Teresa. Its bank accounts were frozen, and restrictions on foreign funding  
14 sources were placed. Fundamentalist Hindu groups had for long accused the  
15 organization of converting Hindus. Thus far its international clout has  
16 immunized it from state control. That is no more; the fundamentalists have  
17 prevailed. Some Indian states have enacted or are in the process of enacting  
18 laws against supposedly 'forceful' conversions.

19  
20 **Tripura:** Religious violence in the Indian state of Tripura has historically been  
21 rare. Bordering with Bangladesh, it had 25 years of communist governance  
22 until 2018. In that year, the *Hindutva* espousing BJP became the ruling party  
23 in the state. Attacks on the Muslim community, which accounts for 9% of the  
24 state population, have increased. Frenzied mobs from an affiliate of the RSS,  
25 the parent body of the BJP, have targeted Muslim facilities and Muslims in  
26 several towns in the state. They vandalized 16 mosques, burning prayers  
27 mats and smashing other items therein, in the second half of 2021. Muslim  
28 homes and shops were set alight. The attackers say they are avenging the  
29 attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh. They escape apprehension most of the  
30 time. Though the central and state government ministers publicly deplored  
31 the attacks, local and Delhi-based lawyers investigating them have faced  
32 official harassment. The BJP sees these anti-Muslim moves as a means to  
33 consolidate its political base in the state. But, given the longstanding fraternal  
34 relationship between Hindus and Muslims, many Hindus are deeply troubled.

35  
36 **Muslims in India:** Several cities in India have of recent placed restrictions on  
37 Muslims holding Friday prayers sessions at open public venues. Among them  
38 is Noida, a township outside New Delhi. The state and city administrations  
39 are under BJP control. Muslim prayers in public parks were the norm until  
40 2018, when a ban was imposed. An opposition politician opined:

41  
42 *The BJP wants to create division between Hindus and Muslims*  
43 *so they can get votes in the election. It's a direct attack on the*  
44 *Muslim population. (Kumar 2018).*

45

1 Gurgaon, a city near New Delhi, is witnessing rightwing Hindu mobs staging  
2 vociferous protests at public places where Muslims have prayed for decades.  
3 As a result, the number of prayer sites shrank from 108 in 2018 to 20 in  
4 December 2021. Yet, the extremists are not satisfied. Gathering support from  
5 Hindus in the city, they accuse the Muslims of engaging in 'land jihad,' or  
6 surreptitious land seizures. To their credit, some Sikh and Hindu leaders have  
7 expressed support for the Muslims and offered them the use of their venues  
8 for prayers. Largely poor migrant workers, most Muslims reside near the city  
9 center where there is an acute shortage of mosques.

10  
11 *Gurgaon's town planners have allocated space for more than*  
12 *42 temples and 18 gurdwaras but just one plot for a mosque*  
13 *in the newly developed parts of the city, according to the*  
14 *Gurgaon Muslim Council. Five years ago, two Muslim trusts*  
15 *failed in their bid to acquire government plots being sold for*  
16 *religious purposes. (Biswas 2021).*

17  
18 Religious extremism has a common cause with the political establishment in  
19 India. On the other side, Muslim theocracies in the Middle East have severe  
20 restrictions on the construction of Hindu temples and Christian churches.

21  
22 **Nigeria:** Some 50% of the 200 million Nigerians are Muslim. And over 90%  
23 of the Muslims are Sunni. Since the emergence of Boko Haram militancy over  
24 a decade ago, the mostly Muslim northern Nigeria has been engulfed in deep  
25 turmoil. Many civilians have died or otherwise suffered at the hands of Boko  
26 Haram and the army. In addition, the Shia minority feels marginalized as its  
27 religious activities are blocked by the authorities. In 2015, the army opened  
28 fire on a Shia religious procession, killing some 350 Shias. Their leader was  
29 charged with terrorism and he and his wife were placed in custody. In  
30 September 2021, a group of Shias were marching in a traditional festival. It  
31 was a peaceful event. Yet, the police attacked them with tear gas and bullets.  
32 At least 8 Shias were killed. Despite calls by human rights organizations,  
33 accountability for such the killings does not exist. Nor have Sunni Muslim  
34 leaders condemned these atrocities.

35  
36 **Brazil:** In 1971, 90% of Brazilians were Catholics. Now Catholics form 51%  
37 and Protestants form 31% of the population. The rest follow the traditional  
38 Afro-Brazilian religion or are irreligious. Most Protestants are evangelicals  
39 whose creed has an orthodox, literal interpretation of the Bible. Their  
40 denotation—born again Christians—projects that only they are the authentic  
41 Christians. Brazilian evangelism is a politically activist creed aiming to make  
42 Christianity the official state religion. Its support was instrumental in the  
43 election of Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency of Brazil. Events and policies  
44 adopted since then have boosted the prospects of a theocratic Brazil. One

1 state institution after another is falling under the evangelical spell. The  
2 Supreme Court is the latest to fall in line.

3 Evangelism is aligned with neoliberalism. The upper class reaping major  
4 rewards from neoliberal policies is its objective base. The double dealings  
5 and misguided policies of the past left governments influenced many in the  
6 middle and poor classes to shift their support to the right wing parties backed  
7 by the evangelicals. Evangelism has a major presence in the crime-ridden,  
8 drug-infested, poor shanty towns. Even the leaders of the violent gangs in  
9 these areas claim to be born again Christians.

10 The ascendancy of evangelism in the political arena has come along with  
11 increasing religious intolerance. Hate speech by state officials and attacks on  
12 minority religions have risen. The Afro-Brazilian community is a major target.  
13 Its places of worship of traditional religion have been torched and vandalized,  
14 and worshipers have suffered injuries. As in the US, religious fundamentalists  
15 are keen on placing existing progressive measures for racial equality,  
16 abortion, birth control, sexual orientation and influence of religion in education  
17 on the chopping block.

18  
19 **Pakistan:** A Sri Lankan national managing a factory in Sialkot, Pakistan, was  
20 alleged to have taken down posters with Islamic verses from the walls in the  
21 work premises. Accused by enraged Muslims to have committed blasphemy,  
22 he was attacked and beaten to death. Later, his body was set on fire and his  
23 car was overturned. Horrific images of the slogan-chanting perpetrators were  
24 posted on social media. The murderous attack created wide national and  
25 international outrage. As the victim was a foreign national, the incident had  
26 the potential to create diplomatic tension. The police acted swiftly. Ninety-two  
27 people were arrested and charged with murder before the Anti-Terrorism  
28 Court. Convicted a year later, six received the death penalty, nine were jailed  
29 for life and the rest got sentences ranging from one two years. Yet, blasphemy  
30 is a crime with a possible sentence of death and lynching after accusation of  
31 blasphemy is a part of life here. Death penalty, by the state or a mob, does  
32 not resolve anything.

33  
34 **France:** In August 2020, Mira, a sixteen year old French girl posted a strong  
35 anti-Islam message on Instagram. Her video proclaimed:

36  
37 *The Quran is a religion of hatred. There is only hatred in it.*  
38 *Mira (Durie 2021).*  
39

40 Earning 10,000 followers, she received about 100,000 messages of hate as  
41 well. After investigations by the French police, eleven people were charged  
42 with online harassment and convicted under a recent cyber-bullying law. It  
43 became an issue of freedom of speech, nothing else. Her right to free speech  
44 was supported by the major and the far right French politicians. Blasphemy  
45 and criticizing religion are not crimes in France, online bullying is. Despite

1 having had to change school, Mira continues with her spiteful online tirades  
2 against Islam, blacks and Arabs.

3 But the matter transcends freedom of speech. This episode comes in the  
4 context of a long colonial history of denigration of Islam and immigrants from  
5 North Africa. Reflective of the rising tide of Islamophobia in Europe, the UK  
6 and USA, it is linked to the Western imperial drive to dominate the global  
7 landscape. In early 2022, as France entered the national election season with  
8 Emmanuel Macron, the incumbent rightist and Marine Le Pen, his far right  
9 challenger being at the forefront, Islamophobic political rhetoric and disputes  
10 on immigration issues diverted attention from concerns about neoliberalism  
11 that had been raised by the popular Yellow Vests just a short while back.

12  
13 **India:** A particularly egregious episode of Islamophobia transpired in India in  
14 December 2021. Speakers at a rally organized by Hindu religious leaders in  
15 Uttarakhand state openly encouraged mass murder of Muslims in the nation.

16  
17 *Even if just a hundred of us become soldiers and kill two million*  
18 *of them, we will be victorious ... If you stand with this attitude*  
19 *only then will you be able to protect 'sanatana dharma' [an*  
20 *absolute form of Hinduism]. (Al-Jazeera 2021c).*

21  
22 Several speakers echoed the same line, and one called for a unified pogrom  
23 of the kind being pursued against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. One senior  
24 member of the BJP, the national ruling party, was a guest at the event. The  
25 police say they are investigating. But the BJP leadership has been silent.  
26 Such an official stance has only encouraged militant Hindu mobs to attack  
27 mosques, Muslim shops and residences, causing extensive damage and  
28 injury to many. The militants seem elated when they are able to place their  
29 saffron colored Hindu flags inside the Muslim places of worship.

30  
31 **Sweden:** In April 2022, a far right anti-immigration, anti-Muslim Swedish party  
32 announced a plan to stage public burnings of the Quran in April 2022, which  
33 overlapped with the Muslim holy month of Ramadhan. As the burnings began,  
34 riots and violence broke out. The extremists clashed with protestors opposed  
35 to their plans. With police cars and a bus set on fire and stones being thrown,  
36 the police had a hard time containing the violence. Several people were  
37 injured, and scores were placed under arrest. Quran-burning had occurred  
38 several times in the past five years.

39 The current burning plan was the beginning of an electoral campaign of  
40 the far right, nationalist party. Its Swedish-Danish leader talks about Muslims  
41 in the same way as Adolf Hitler talked about Jews.

42  
43 *The enemy is Islam and Muslims. The best thing would be if there*  
44 *were not a single Muslim left on this Earth, then we would have*  
45 *reached our final goal. Rasmus Paludan (Al-Jazeera 2022b).*

1  
2 Angering Muslims across the world, many governments of Muslim nations  
3 condemned the Quran-burning event. That such events occur in nations that  
4 were once upon a time seen as bastions of tolerance and supporters of anti-  
5 colonial movements in the Global South is a sad indicator of how far to the  
6 right the pendulum of inter-faith tolerance has swung today.

7  
8 +++++  
9

10 This is a small sampling of hate and intolerance that people and institutions  
11 of religions are capable of demonstrating in this modern era of information  
12 and global connectivity. No question, the active extremists are a minority, and  
13 often causes beyond religion are at play. But persistence of intolerance and  
14 the lack of decisive action by faith leaders to eradicate it are troubling. The  
15 verdict of a personage of global eminence almost a century ago still  
16 reverberates:

17  
18 *For while religion prescribes brotherly love*  
19 *in the relations among the individuals and groups,*  
20 *the actual spectacle more resembles*  
21 *a battlefield than an orchestra.*

22 Albert Einstein  
23

#### 24 + Anti-science disposition + 25

26 Religion has a two-sided relationship with science. There were religious  
27 societies where science and technology flowered and religious societies  
28 where the opposite prevailed. Some luminaries in science were religious  
29 believers and some were atheists or agnostics. Some held that religion and  
30 science are complimentary; some held that they are mutually exclusive. In the  
31 modern times, orthodox believers have opposed teaching of the theory of  
32 evolution in schools, promoted pseudo-scientific doctrines like Intelligent  
33 Design and opposed stem cell research. An in-depth exposition of the linkage  
34 of science and religion is presented in the forthcoming *Religion, Science and*  
35 *the Pandemic*.

### 36 37 11.4 SECULARISM 38

39 Secularism, or the disposition to disbelieve in the divine, occurs in several  
40 forms—atheism, agnosticism, humanism, skepticism and irreligious. It has  
41 been present in association with all the major religions from the early times.  
42 But its flowering ensued at the onset of the Age of Enlightenment in Europe.  
43 The constitution of most modern states is based on the separation of the  
44 church and state.

45 Today, about one of six persons does not follow an established faith. The  
46 secular world view has taken hold dramatically in the Western nations over

1 the past decades. But it is more a generational, not age-related effect. Some  
2 studies project that despite the current political prominence of evangelical  
3 doctrines, formal religions are heading towards extinction in the West. But in  
4 Africa and much of Asia and Latin America, religiosity is stable, if not on the  
5 rise, even among the educated middle class. Secularism there is a socially  
6 insignificant and perhaps an endangered entity. China and Japan are  
7 exceptions to the rule. Here the level of religiosity is low though most people  
8 adhere to some of spiritual belief.

9 As a philosophical doctrine, secularism takes two forms. One sees religion  
10 and irrational thinking as the principal barrier to progress and enlightenment.  
11 It campaigns for broadened science education and open criticism of religious  
12 and pseudo-scientific beliefs. And the other sees the social system in which  
13 religion prevails as the major barrier to progress and enlightenment. Criticism  
14 of religion is augmented by criticism of politics, and of economic and social  
15 structures. Humanism is a form of secularism with embedded moral  
16 principles.

17 Socialism is a form of humanism. Cognizant of the unscientific nature of  
18 religious beliefs, it critiques the role religion has played in justifying injustice  
19 and mystifying the masses. Yet, it also recognizes a positive side to religion  
20 and does not preclude allying with religious forces to work for a society based  
21 on social justice. Christian Socialism and Islamic Socialism exemplify that  
22 alliance. And so does the liberation theology doctrine of Latin America and  
23 the Philippines that involves the integration of Christianity and Marxism.

24 Humanist and atheist organizations currently operate worldwide. Their  
25 constitutions do not have the contradictory ethical declarations found in the  
26 religious scriptures. They do not denigrate any belief system in a selective  
27 fashion or condone discrimination of women. Sexual abuse of children and  
28 women that has tainted religious institutions is a rarity in humanist groups.  
29 Social science studies and surveys generally show that the religious and the  
30 irreligious do not differ significantly in terms of moral and ethical standards.  
31 The idea that as societies become more secular, moral standards will decline  
32 has no factual foundation. The opposite may be true. A broad international  
33 comparison concluded:

34  
35 *It is the highly secularized countries that tend to fare the best*  
36 *in terms of crime rates, prosperity, equality, freedom,*  
37 *democracy, women's rights, human rights, educational*  
38 *attainment and life expectancy. ... And those nations with the*  
39 *highest rates of religiosity tend to be the most problem-ridden*  
40 *in terms of high violent crime rates, high infant mortality rates,*  
41 *high poverty rates and high rates of corruption. (Zuckerman*  
42 *2015).*

43  
44 A year 2011 UN study of homicide found that the ten nations with the highest  
45 homicide rates were highly religious nations while those with lowest homicide  
46 rates were amongst the most secular nations. A similar conclusion emerged

1 from an examination of homicide and child abuse and religiosity in the states  
2 of the US. Yet, there is a major caveat to such data:

3  
4 *It is, of course, impossible to conclude from any of this data*  
5 *that secularism, in and of itself, causes societal well-being, or*  
6 *that religiosity causes social ills. Peacefulness, prosperity and*  
7 *overall societal goodness are undoubtedly caused by*  
8 *multiple, complex factors — economic, geographic, cultural,*  
9 *political, historical and so forth. (Zuckerman 2015).*

10  
11 Conservative pastors claim that those who abandon the church are inclined  
12 to sinful deeds; they look down upon believers and hate God. But they give  
13 no evidence to support such claims.

14 In the face of serious illness and calamities, even atheists and humanists  
15 are said to remember God and pray. To test this claim, an international team  
16 of researchers obtained online responses from 1,000 non-religious people  
17 drawn from the UK, US, Netherlands, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland,  
18 Turkey, Brazil, Canada and Australia. Asked to recall the times of major  
19 personal problems in their lives, it was inquired whether their secular  
20 worldview had assisted them to understand their plight and cope with it. The  
21 respondents generally indicated that belief in science, randomness in life,  
22 impermanence of living entities, humanistic ideals, and living a responsible  
23 life had assisted them to accept what had occurred and cope with the loss.  
24 Overall, they retained an optimistic disposition.

25  
26 *We have one life. We have this one opportunity to enjoy our*  
27 *brief moment in the sun, while doing the most good we can to*  
28 *help our fellow creatures and protect the natural environment*  
29 *for future generations. Survey Responder (Xygalatas 2020).*

30  
31 The overall conclusion of the survey did not support the claim of secularists  
32 turning to prayer in times of distress.

33  
34 *What this research suggests is that worldviews and beliefs,*  
35 *whether religious or secular, can provide comfort and meaning*  
36 *in even the very toughest situations. (Xygalatas 2020).*

37  
38 Paradoxically, the rise of irreligiosity does not imply that people are adopting  
39 scientific, rational criteria to explain and judge personal and general events.  
40 Their views are influenced by multiple biases relating to economic status,  
41 race, ethnicity, national origin and media content. Religion is a single and not  
42 the key factor. A computerized perusal of millions of fiction and non-fiction  
43 books written in the past two centuries found that logical, evidence-based  
44 modes of expression rose after the 1850s. However, since the 1970s,  
45 emotive, faith-based modes of expression have gained greater currency. It is  
46 not just a Trump era 'post-truth' phenomenon. Neoliberalism generates a vast

1 gap between perception and reality, and cements confirmation bias. Evidence  
2 that confirms what you 'know' is remembered and that which casts doubt on  
3 it lands in the dustbin.

4  
5 +++++  
6

7 Secularism (atheism, humanism) is tainted with major blemishes as well.  
8 Historically, well known secularists and secularist organizations often strayed  
9 beyond their shining principles and landed in a deep ethical quagmire. In  
10 tandem with Christian missionaries, they supported colonialism in the name  
11 of 'civilizing the native'. As social democrats, they saw the welfare state as  
12 the ideal state. Capitalism was acceptable provided it was reformed. With  
13 dependence on a skewed vision of science, many secularists supported the  
14 doctrine of eugenics that climaxed in the Nazi era concentration camps (see  
15 *Religion, Science and the Pandemic*).

16 Of recent New Atheism has become the face of modern atheism. Rooted  
17 in the natural sciences, it campaigns not just against religious and irrational  
18 beliefs in general but takes a particular aim at Islam. By labelling Islam as the  
19 root of all evil, the New Atheists have supported deadly Western imperial  
20 ventures like the war on Iraq. Paradoxically, in this crusade they allied with  
21 their supposed foes, the fundamentalist Christian evangelists. New Atheism  
22 is a middle-class movement enamored by the progress of science but is  
23 suspicious of feminism, anti-racism, post-modernism and socialism. Of  
24 recent, secularist organizations have also faced accusations of sexism and  
25 discrimination of women and minorities.

26  
27 *A progressive stand on religion does not see it as a foe to be*  
28 *vanquished but a symptom of social alienation. It works to*  
29 *transform the system that engenders profound alienation, a*  
30 *system based on inequality, social injustice and militarism.*  
31 *Religion is not a product of genes. It is a product of humanity's*  
32 *interaction with nature and the evolution of class-based human*  
33 *society.*

34  
35 *I would submit, then, that to insist, as the New Atheists do, that*  
36 *religion must be thrown onto the scrapheap of history*  
37 *forthwith, while at the same time mostly ignoring the problems*  
38 *of poverty and inequality, is the height of irrationality. As a*  
39 *matter of pure logic, it's really no different than believing in the*  
40 *existence of angels. (Hoelscher 2019).*

41  
42 To remain relevant and have a broad appeal, secularism, like religion, needs  
43 to concern itself with the problems of global humanity, and focus on empathy  
44 and communal connections rather than mostly on debunking paranormal  
45 claims or on intellectual discourse over religion.  
46



## 11.5 TENTATIVE RESPONSES

Our survey of the beliefs, scriptures, practices, social function and history of major and minor religions, secularism and neoliberalism gives a foundation upon which we may address the seven crucial questions posed in Chapter 1. Now I present my ruminations about these questions. But I do so with a proviso: The corona pandemic has drastically transformed religious practice. Started prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, this book barely covers these changes. Further, the answers given below need delineation of the linkage of religion to science, mathematics and eugenics. These matters are covered in the sequel to this book, *Religion, Science and the Pandemic*. Hence, while my answers may need modification, the issues are important enough to warrant tentative responses at this juncture.

These answers are my conclusions. I encourage my readers to cast a critical eye at them and draw their own conclusions.

**Question 1:** Are some religions more exalted than other religions?

The scriptures and histories of the institutions, leaders and followers of religions do not provide evidence to designate any religion truer or more spiritually exalted than any other religion. The ethical injunctions of the major religions are comparable. Each religion has been associated with ennobling deeds, and each has demonstrated the capacity for pungent deeds. The religious should heed the advice proffered by the venerated sage of non-violence:

*I came to the conclusion long ago . . .  
that all religions were true  
and also that all had some error in them,  
and whilst I hold by my own,  
I should hold others as dear as Hinduism.*  
Mohandas K Gandhi

and heeds the words of an influential Muslim leader:

*And I further pray that all  
who truly and sincerely believe in GOD,  
be they Christian, Jew, Buddhist  
or Brahmin, who strive to do good and  
avoid evil, are gentle and kind,  
will be joined in Heaven and be granted  
final pardon and peace.*  
The Aga Khan III

**Question 2:** Is religion essential for morality?

1  
2 Religious belief and practice do not guarantee moral conduct; neither does  
3 lack of religious faith and non-participation in religious activities imply  
4 proclivity to immorality in words and deeds. Yet, a secular worldview does not  
5 shield people from influence by a host of biased, ethically dubious ideas  
6 prevalent in the modern era. Moral conduct is more determined by social,  
7 cultural, political and economic factors rather than by religiosity as such.

8 The religious and the irreligious stand on an equal moral ground. Equal  
9 proportions of each value family loyalty, freedom, compassion and believe  
10 that life has an underlying meaning. For the former, the meaning emanates  
11 from divine sources while for the latter, it derives from history, social norms,  
12 a scientific outlook and evolutionarily internalized factors. People possess an  
13 intrinsic ability to lead their lives in ways they consider worthy and purposeful.

14  
15 **Question 3:** Can secularism and religious belief coexist?

16  
17 History and current conditions show that generally religions can function  
18 relatively freely in secular societies, but secularism is rarely tolerated in  
19 theocratic societies.

20  
21 **Question 4:** Are science and religion compatible?

22  
23 The foundations of religion and science are not compatible. The scientific  
24 disposition values doubt, the religious mindset abhors it. Yet, in practice,  
25 religious people have adapted to the theories and innovations of science.  
26 Scientists have a flexible attitude towards religion. Some scientists are  
27 agnostics, some are very religious and some reject and castigate religion  
28 outright. Fundamentalist believers often campaign against the theories and  
29 practices of science they say violate scriptural teachings. Though politically  
30 influential for now, in the long run, they probably stand on the wrong side of  
31 history.

32  
33 **Question 5:** Do divine beings and divine realms exist?

34  
35 My response to this crucial query has to await the relevant exposition in the  
36 sequel to this book: *Religion, Science and the Pandemic*.

37  
38 **Question 6:** What is the future of religion in a neoliberal world?

39  
40 The survey-based projections of the future of religion and secularism alluded  
41 to above presume the persistence of Neoliberalism as the dominant global  
42 social formation. Given the existential challenges faced by humanity and the  
43 conflicts generated by the sharp increase of inequality within and between  
44 nations, that assumption is of dubious validity. If these challenges are not  
45 tackled successfully, the future of humanity and our ecosystem will be  
46 endangered. Dogmatic believers may proclaim it as a sign of salvation, but it

1 will be a vacuous claim. Religion cannot have a morally upright future unless  
2 it truly embraces love for all humans and joins the struggle against social  
3 injustice, inequality, racism, patriarchy, corporate greed, militarism and  
4 environmental despoliation. And the same holds for secularism.

5  
6 **Question 7:** How can harmony between faith systems be promoted?

7  
8 Currently there are hundreds of national and international organizations  
9 engaged in promoting peaceful coexistence between different faiths. But their  
10 effect on attitudes and actions at the grassroots level, especially in places  
11 where a significant discord exists, has been not that dramatic. In the next  
12 section, I add to these voices and give my proposals to promote interfaith  
13 harmony.

### 14 11.6 SPIRITUAL HARMONY

15  
16  
17 To reiterate, I am a secular humanist and do not believe in the existence of  
18 divine entities and supernatural realms. But I fully respect the right of people  
19 to have and practice religious beliefs. I observe that religion is an essential  
20 component of life for the vast majority of humanity. I appreciate the positive  
21 contributions of religion to individuals and communities but am dismayed at  
22 its association with oppressive, human rights violating forces, and at the  
23 injurious interreligious and intrareligious conflicts in the past and at present.



24  
25 Religious symbols from left to right, top to bottom:  
26 Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism,  
27 Judaism, the Bahai Faith, Eckankar, Sikhism,  
28 Jainism, Wicca, Unitarian Universalism, Shinto,  
29 Taoism, Thelema, Tenrikyo, and Zoroastrianism.

1 In my opinion, interfaith harmony is a prerequisite for a humane future on this  
2 planet. Religions must coexist in harmony and curtail faith related conflicts,  
3 including conflicts with the irreligious. The influence of supremacist voices of  
4 any type has to be reduced through education and social ostracism.

5 Promotion of interfaith harmony needs to transcend the praiseworthy but  
6 basically elitist World Interfaith Harmony Week type of endeavors and stress  
7 broad-based anti-neoliberal activism as an essential ingredient of genuine  
8 harmony. Despite my secular disposition, I now take the liberty to proffer a  
9 set of ideas to promote interfaith harmony and enhance the positive features  
10 of religion.

11  
12 **Declaration of Spiritual Equality:** Whatever their belief system, religious or  
13 not, all humans have equal spiritual worth. A person's moral and spiritual  
14 standing is determined by his or her deeds, period. No religion has a greater  
15 divine right than any other to worldly resources and benefits.

16  
17 *When two-three different religions claim*  
18 *that only their own religions are true*  
19 *and all other religions are false,*  
20 *their religions are only ways to Heaven,*  
21 *conflicts cannot be avoided.*

22 Rabindranath Tagore.  
23

24 Adoption of a Declaration of Spiritual Equality along these lines by all faiths  
25 should be the foundation of promoting harmonious existence between them.  
26

27 **Common Ethical Principles:** Three versions of the Golden Rule and the two  
28 tenets—*Love of God and Love of the Neighbor* or *Love of the Good and Love*  
29 *of the Neighbor*—together with accepted ethical norms like respect for truth,  
30 honesty, non-violence and equal treatment of people in legal, public and  
31 economic matters should be enshrined in a universal moral code adopted by  
32 all nations, religions and secularists.  
33

34 **Separation of Religion and State:** Religion is a personal matter; it does not  
35 pertain to broader societal matters. Societal laws and the legal system, and  
36 the basic rights of citizens, including freedom of speech should not be based  
37 on the scriptures of any religion. Blasphemy laws and similar restrictions on  
38 free speech should be abolished. Claims or reparations for injury and insult  
39 on religious grounds should be pursued in the courts using accepted legal  
40 standards of defamation and libel. Religious bodies must declare mob justice  
41 and terror attacks totally unacceptable. Hate speech, incitement to violence  
42 on religious grounds and faith-based denigration of people must be dealt with  
43 by the civil authorities in accordance with the law.

44 There are priests who excoriate other faiths in hateful or derogatory ways.  
45 A Muslim doctor in Sri Lanka was alleged to have secretly sterilized 4,000  
46 Buddhist women. Though the charge was without foundation, Warakagoda

1 Sri Gnanarathana Thero, a senior Buddhist monk went on national TV to  
2 declare:

3  
4 *Some female devotees said [the Muslim doctor] should be*  
5 *stoned to death. I do not say that. But that's what should be*  
6 *done. Don't eat from those [Muslim] shops. Those who ate*  
7 *from these shops will not have children in future. WSG Thero*  
8 *(Al-Jazeera 2019).*

9  
10 On the other hand, an African American pastor who combines religious faith  
11 with social justice activism expresses profound tolerance and compassion:

12  
13 *We cannot let narrow religious forces hijack our moral*  
14 *vocabulary, forces who speak loudly about things God says*  
15 *little about while saying so little about issues that are at the*  
16 *heart of all our religious traditions: truth, justice, love, and*  
17 *mercy. Reverend William Barber II (Kilgore 2018).*

18  
19 Religious people should distance themselves from the former voices and  
20 embrace the latter.

21 **Religion, Science and Education:** The methods of science, not religion,  
22 should form the foundation of knowledge. The content of school education  
23 and books used therein should not be restricted or affected by religious  
24 doctrines. What is taught in Biology or History, for example, has to be set by  
25 the experts in the field, national authorities and civic organizations. Valid  
26 disagreements over teaching methods and topics must be resolved through  
27 transparent, ongoing dialogue.

28 Religious Studies should be a subject taught in primary and secondary  
29 schools. Using an historical, sociological approach it should cover diverse  
30 belief systems without bias towards any. The primary school course should  
31 cover basic material on the beliefs, practices and history of religions, and the  
32 secondary school course should contain more advanced material. A global  
33 organization like the UNESCO could be the umbrella body under which the  
34 standard curricula and course material are prepared. Depending on local  
35 priorities, they could be translated and modified. Religious communities  
36 should be free to teach about their religions to their children but that should  
37 be done after school hours and in their own settings.

38 In December 2021, the Indian Minister of Education informed the Indian  
39 parliament about the proposal to mandate the teaching of the Bhagavat Gita  
40 in schools, colleges and technical institutes in the nation. He noted that parts  
41 of the Hindu scriptures were already being taught. Some state governments  
42 have also introduced such proposals. These proposals are in accord with the  
43 supremacist doctrine being pursued by the ruling party and the extremist  
44 organization that form its social base.

45 Educational policies that are biased towards a particular religion or which  
46 denigrate religion as such have no room in a democratic, humane society.

1 They will not only miseducate the children but also entrench animosity  
2 towards other religions in the young minds and lead to violent conflict.

3  
4 **Dress and Clothing:** Subject to laws about indecent exposure and which are  
5 cognizant of gender equality, neither the government nor any other body,  
6 religious or secular, should dictate what people can or cannot wear in public  
7 spaces. What to wear is an exclusively individual decision. Organizations may  
8 have specific dress codes on their premises, but this authority should not  
9 apply elsewhere.

10 Yet, this common-sense dictum has increasingly come under attack in the  
11 past two decades as one European nation after another has restricted or  
12 banned the wearing of face and body coverings by Muslim women. Though  
13 phrased in religion neutral terms, these regulations are a part of the tide of  
14 Islamophobia sweeping across Europe. Instead of upholding women's right  
15 to determine their own personal lives, Western feminist and humanist groups  
16 have succumbed to anti-Muslim prejudices. Such dress injunctions have of  
17 recent been instituted in Myanmar and parts of India and China.

18 Educational institutions have borne the brunt of the restrictions. Ensuing  
19 tensions have led to school closures, as in India. Some schools traditionally  
20 required all students to wear a specified school uniform. Other schools have  
21 been more flexible. Making sudden changes to school dress rules is rarely  
22 justified. Often, they further marginalize minorities and heighten interreligious  
23 tension. If deemed necessary, changes to school uniforms should be made  
24 only after extensive community consultations and dealing with cultural  
25 sensitivities.

26  
27 **Principled Tolerance:** While rituals and symbols are important elements of  
28 religious practice, they should not form a basis for inciting violence towards  
29 people who express them in ways not agreeable to the devotees. People  
30 should have the right to critically review religious scriptures and express their  
31 views in public and the religious have an equal right to respond and criticize  
32 them. Fatwas against writers or speakers who express different views are  
33 absolutely unacceptable. Devotees need to inculcate a confident vision of  
34 their faith and peacefully but firmly ignore or verbally react to their detractors.  
35 Principled tolerance is a sign of strength, not weakness.

36  
37 *Is Islam such a weak religion that*  
38 *it cannot tolerate a book written against it?*

39 *Not my Islam!*  
40 Malala Yousafzai

41  
42 Zealous focus on symbols and rituals signifies insecurity not confidence.  
43 There is no prohibition of the images of Prophet Muhammad in the Quran.  
44 Historically, a more tolerant attitude prevailed in Muslim societies. But now,  
45 conservative clerics have taken the matter to extreme in order to shore up  
46 their dwindling authority.

1  
2 *If religion, instead of being the manifestation of a spiritual ideal,*  
3 *gives prominence to scriptures and external rites, then does it*  
4 *disturb the peace more than anything else.*

5 Rabindranath Tagore  
6

7 People of faith and secularists should focus on spiritual essence, not symbols.  
8

9 **Acceptance of Conversions:** Religions are in decline in some parts of the  
10 world and remain stable or are on the increase elsewhere. But presently the  
11 decline is primarily not due to conversion from one religion to another or from  
12 religiosity to irreligiosity. Conversions occur everywhere but do not have a  
13 major impact on the overall numbers. It is a generational effect. People who  
14 are born say Hindu or Muslim largely remain so and people with a secular  
15 outlook were generally inclined as such (through family and other influences)  
16 at an early age. Usually, people do not alter their belief system as they age.

17 But some do. Consider two conversions. Jeffrey Lang, a Professor of  
18 Mathematics at University of Kansas, departed from Christianity and adopted  
19 atheism. Dissatisfied at a later age, he became a Muslim:  
20

21 *I had hard questions when young, like ‘why God allows*  
22 *innocent people to suffer on earth?’... I became an atheist...*  
23 *When I was 28 and read the Quran, it was original. It gets you*  
24 *to ask questions and then gives answers and then creates*  
25 *more questions but a couple of passages later I would see an*  
26 *answer. Jeffrey Lang (Caglar 2020).*  
27

28 Daniel E Barker, an evangelical preacher for two decades, one day took the  
29 decision, with his wife, to reject religious belief and now is a lead secularist  
30 voice in the US.  
31

32 *I was happy with the fulfillment of my Christian life; on the other*  
33 *hand, I had intellectual doubts. Faith and reason began a war*  
34 *within me, and it kept escalating. I would cry out to God for*  
35 *answers, and none would come... When I finally discarded*  
36 *faith, things became more and more clear. Daniel E Barker*  
37 *(Caglar 2020).*  
38

39 As enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights, people have the  
40 unconditional, fundamental right to practice the religion of their choice and  
41 change their religion at any time in their adult life. Those who chose to convert  
42 have the right to do so and are to be treated in a respectful manner.

43 Every religious body has the right to publicize its faith, invite people into  
44 it, and hold public, educational programs that can be attended or viewed by  
45 anyone. But proselytization must not be based on any form of compulsion—  
46 economic, political, social or cultural. Christianity became the main religion in

1 Africa during the European colonial era because of its linkage with the colonial  
2 rulers. Religious institutions with large endowments, connections to centers  
3 of power, and extensive manpower should not leverage them to proselytize  
4 and gain converts. An interfaith commission should oversee a fair interplay of  
5 religious and secular ideas in the public sphere.

6 The Bible encourages Christians to spread the message of Christ. Today,  
7 several Christian organizations, especially the evangelicals, have programs  
8 to target people of different faith backgrounds, present them with arguments  
9 casting doubt on the spiritual worth and validity of their faith and imploring  
10 them to be saved through Jesus Christ. Well-funded organizations, mostly  
11 based in the US, openly or covertly advocate Christian proselytization under  
12 a supremacist framework that implicitly or explicitly denigrates other faiths.  
13 Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist organizations have prepared guidelines with  
14 answers for their followers to counter the Christian conversion drive.

15 The Fuller Seminary is a graduate level American Christian college with  
16 over 3,500 local and international students. The statement of faith of this  
17 multi-campus, multid denominational, evangelical institution affirms:

18  
19 *God, by Word and Spirit, creates the one holy catholic and*  
20 *apostolic Church, calling sinners out of the whole human race*  
21 *into the fellowship of Christ's Body.*

22  
23 *As evangelicals, we believe men and women are lost without*  
24 *Jesus Christ; we believe that terrible judgment awaits all who*  
25 *reject Jesus as Lord and Savior. Fuller (2022).*

26  
27 Decrying 'theological liberalism,' it affirms the scripture as 'the final authority  
28 for Christian faith and practice' and enjoins all believers to spread the word of  
29 God. It also runs the Fuller Studio, a multi-media body that creates videos,  
30 and blogs related to the beliefs and practice of Christianity and publishes a  
31 magazine. While promoting interfaith dialogue, it also features voices that  
32 decry multicultural, postmodernist compromise, and call for an unapologetic,  
33 frontal effort to bring everyone into the Christian fold.

34  
35 *Fellow evangelicals, evangelize, evangelize, and then*  
36 *evangelize some more. Preach the Word and reach the world.*  
37 *Do not buy into contemporary sociocultural discourse and*  
38 *betray the truth of the Gospel. Jesus is unmatched. The*  
39 *Gospel is irreplaceable. Salvation in Christ alone is a must.*  
40 *Ayman S Ibrahim (Ibrahim 2022).*

41  
42 The gentle, innovative proselytization drive initiated by a group of nuns of  
43 different national backgrounds but resident in Italy, stands in contrast to that  
44 aggressive advice. Inspired by Pope Francis to be more outgoing and active,  
45 a group of nuns of different national backgrounds, but residing in Italy have  
46 recently formed a women's football team. Competing in women's football



1 leagues, they train seriously. For them, it is more than just fun and sport. They  
2 see it as an avenue to attract young people to their faith and promote women's  
3 rights. They proselytize by kicking the ball.

4  
5 *[We] are fortunate in that we can unite our passion for football*  
6 *while evangelizing.* Sister Livia (Giuffrida 2022).

7  
8 Following the Quran, Muslims are required to abide by 'dawah', that is, to  
9 invite non-believers to Islam and educate them about Allah, the Prophet and  
10 the wisdom of the Quran. However, this has to be done without coercion or  
11 compulsion. Content to adhere to the five pillars of Islam, most Muslims do  
12 not engage in proselytization. Some Muslim organizations like the Tablighi  
13 Jamaat focus on public education drives. They have manuals, books, videos  
14 and Internet material as well as programs to train those who will spread the  
15 message of Islam. Some Wahabi (Salafi) groups funded by Saudi Arabia and  
16 fundamentalist groups promote 'true Islam' through political activism and  
17 even violence. Their aim is to establish an Islamic caliphate across the globe.

18 Other than in Europe and the US, conversion into Hinduism rare. Unlike  
19 the other major religions, Hinduism is mostly confined to India, the land of its  
20 birth. Most of the Hindus across the world, particularly the Global South, are  
21 Hindu migrants from India or their descendants. One major reason for this is  
22 that to be a Hindu, one must be in a caste. Caste membership is determined  
23 at birth. One cannot just join a caste.

24  
25 *It's a fact that caste is a South Asian problem and no religion*  
26 *can claim that its followers do not practice caste in some form*  
27 *or another. But the difference is that among the Hindus, caste*  
28 *has religious sanction whereas caste among non-Hindus it is*  
29 *without religious consecration. This makes the caste practice*  
30 *among Hindus rigid and thus prevents them from welcoming*  
31 *others into their fold.* (Mandal 2021).

32  
33 Religious people must castigate groups that utilize compulsion, coercion or  
34 unfair advantage to bring people into their faith or restrict people from leaving  
35 their faith on their own free will. Religion based discriminatory stratification  
36 that prevents people from joining a religion should be nullified. If converts are  
37 misguided, God will judge them, that should be the stand. Public educational  
38 proselytizing efforts conducted with civility and respect are acceptable; force  
39 and denigration of others are not. As Prophet Muhammad declared:

40  
41 *There is no compulsion in religion.*  
42 *Quran 2:256.*

43  
44 Yet, in many Muslim majority nations, it is against the law to leave Islam, and  
45 in 13 nations, it is an offence punishable by death. Such laws should be  
46 repealed immediately.

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25

**Gender Equality and Sexual Preference:** All religions and secular traditions must embrace unrestricted, comprehensive equality of women and men. Women should have the same rights and opportunities to participate in religious activities, be ordained as priests, conduct prayers and rituals, be involved in decision making and assume leadership positions. Continual, thoroughgoing efforts to eliminate and police gender-based discrimination and abuse including sexual abuse of children and adults should be in place within each religious and secular community and organization. The accused perpetrators should be reported immediately to the appropriate authorities.

Discrimination against and spiritual denigration of homosexuals and people with alternative sexual preferences should be prohibited by religious authorities. Religious bodies should participate in development of a public-health based sex education program in secondary schools and beyond.

**Joint Celebrations and Inter-Faith Prayers:** When celebrating their holy days, religious communities should make concerted efforts to invite people of other faiths into the celebrations and festivities. Interfaith prayers should be held on a regular basis and involve the clergy and lay folk from all the religious traditions. Secularists should be invited as well.

Promotion of harmony between religions and between religions and secular traditions is a matter of ongoing communal effort, not to be restricted to a few symbolic occasions.

# CHAPTER 12: FINALE



*No religion which is narrow  
and which cannot satisfy the test of reason,  
will survive the coming reconstruction of society  
in which the values will have changed and character,  
not possession of wealth, title or birth will be the test of merit.*  
Mohandas K Gandhi

*When I meet a new person,  
I don't see race or religion. I look deeper.  
We must learn to satisfy our conflicts peacefully  
and to respect one another.*  
Muhammad Ali

*One can never predict or foresee what lies ahead  
when it comes to humans and religion.*  
Phil Zuckerman



AS WE REACH THE END of this book, there remain fundamental questions about religion. Does religion have a future? Is a particular religion more likely to prevail than other religions? Is an offshoot of an existing religion or a new religion with a large following likely to emerge? And does secularism have a future?

Our earlier review of these issues mostly reported projections based on survey results. The key findings were: Traditional religions are on the decline in Western nations but not so in the Global South. Secularism, including atheism, is on the rise in Western nations but is a perilous creed elsewhere. Abandoning traditional religions, however, does not imply that a spiritual perspective has been abandoned. Many people retain belief in some type of a higher power. And many adhere to more than one faith. New alternative faith systems tend to crop up now and then, but at best they operate within a marginal corner.

1 In this chapter we examine why and how some individuals changed their  
2 faith system, explore the psycho-social underpinnings of religious belief and  
3 look at Quakerism to illustrate the dynamic nature of faith systems. We aim  
4 to gain a further insight into the questions posed above. We then look at five  
5 ethically illustrious individuals—religious and non-religious—whose visions  
6 and actions are not only conducive to peace and interfaith harmony but also  
7 for the formation of a united front to confront the constellation of the grave  
8 problems facing humanity today.

## 10 12.1 TRANSITIONS

11  
12 Most people remain faithful to their childhood faith system. Some venture  
13 away from it, and transit to other belief systems or exhibit plain disbelief. Later,  
14 some revert to their original religious base. Among those who change, many  
15 embrace more than one faith system. Spiritual paths are highly varied. Why  
16 individuals change between religiosity and disbelief or from one faith to  
17 another can give vital clues regarding the persistence and future of religion.

18  
19 **Bryan Mealer**, a 40-year old Texan with three children, began to distance  
20 himself from his ancestral evangelical creed because it was increasingly  
21 being dominated by intolerant, conservative clergy and right-wing politicians.  
22 The exposure of child abuse scandals in churches magnified his doubts. As  
23 a freelance journalist in the Congo, he came across extensive suffering  
24 caused by civil war and was perplexed why God did not come to the rescue  
25 of the largely Christian Congolese people. Once he came across a distraught  
26 mother cuddling the dead body of her infant. When she ascribed it to God's  
27 will, he lost his faith. Aghast at the toxic vitriol of the US evangelicals against  
28 '*immigrants, refugees, minorities, and the poor and the sick,*' he stopped  
29 going to church altogether, and did not expose his children to Christian beliefs  
30 anymore.

31 One day during his routine morning jogs he met and befriended David  
32 Peters, an Episcopalian priest. Growing up in a strict evangelical family, David  
33 became a priest at a young age, enlisted in the US army as a chaplain and  
34 participated in the 2003 US aggression on Iraq. The ugly realities of war,  
35 family break up and the isolation he experienced upon return shook his faith.  
36 David slid into mounting depression until one day he heard a strange voice  
37 that rekindled his faith. Returning to the fold, he became a pastor at a broad-  
38 minded Episcopalian church.

39 After their encounter, Bryan began an extended conversation on theology,  
40 war and life with David which influenced him to join the Episcopalian church.  
41 Now spiritually content, he feels that his new spiritual home is more inclusive  
42 and has values suitable for his children.

43  
44 *I'm reclaiming my faith at a time when American Christianity is in*  
45 *crisis, when the institution of Jesus Christ – a radical*  
46 *humanitarian who was killed by the police – has been co-opted*

1 *by corporate conservative interests, culture warriors, and the*  
2 *false religion of Fox News, just as it was by slavers and*  
3 *segregationists. (Mealer 2017).*  
4

5 **Darren Hewer** grew up agnostic within a loving, well-to-do family, with little  
6 knowledge about religion. Embarking on university studies in computer  
7 science and with a circle of atheist friends, he too rejected the existence of  
8 divine entities. Though he secured good grades in his courses, towards the  
9 end of his degree program he felt a psychic void in his life. He could not  
10 pinpoint what, but something was amiss.

11 It was then that he looked at religion in a serious manner. He closely  
12 examined Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Mormonism and Christianity with the  
13 aim of finding a faith that not only provided emotional solace but also rang  
14 true. He was not enamored with Hinduism and rejected Buddhism because  
15 of its ambivalence about the existence of God. Comparing Prophet  
16 Muhammad, the Mormonism founder Joseph Smith and Jesus Christ, he was  
17 struck upon realizing that the first two claimed to have the right way, but Jesus  
18 said that he was the right way; that he was God.

19  
20 *The person of Jesus Christ struck me as being authentic, in a*  
21 *way that the others didn't. (Hewer 2022).*  
22

23 He studied the Bible with care. Initially he doubted its historical accuracy. But  
24 after further exploration he concluded the New Testament is the most reliable  
25 among all the records from those days. After attending church services and  
26 being inspired by the preacher to seek God in his own way, he embarked on  
27 Biblical contemplation and nightly prayers. Reading a Biblical tale about a  
28 farmer and a flock of birds one night, he had an intense emotional moment,  
29 started to cry and found God. Today, he is a devout Christian with a message  
30 to his fellow humans:

31  
32 *It is today my humble prayer that you will know God via His only*  
33 *begotten Son, Jesus Christ, and thereby know the intense and*  
34 *life-changing love that God has waiting for you. (Hewer 2022).*  
35

36 **Ismail Sloam** was raised as an Episcopalian in the US state of Virginia. From  
37 a young age, he raised pointed questions in Sunday school. Thus, he queried  
38 why, if Jesus was the son of God, did he have to die at the cross. The  
39 response he got most of the time—have faith and accept—only pushed him  
40 away from the church. His brother, on the other hand, was an ideal Christian,  
41 almost never missing Sunday service. Ismail saw the Bible as an error-filled  
42 history book written by multiple authors.

43 A year 1976 visit to Afghanistan brought him, for the first time, in contact  
44 with Muslims and Islam. Impressed by their culture and by how the Quran  
45 provides a comprehensive guide to life, he began an extended study of Islam.  
46 Feeling that the Quran accorded equal spiritual status to all religions and

1 contained satisfactory answers to the questions that had been swirling in his  
2 mind for long, he became a Muslim.

3  
4 **Ioni Sullivan**, born in a middle-class, atheist British family, is now married to  
5 a liberal Jordanian and has two children. Like her parents, she has a higher  
6 degree. Work assignments in Egypt, Jordan, Palestine and Israel brought her  
7 in touch with Muslims and the Quran. People led difficult lives yet drew  
8 strength from their religion. She found Islamic tenets of fasting, charity and  
9 modesty as admirable avenues for self-control and spiritual purity. After  
10 reading an English translation of the Quran and learning Arabic, she became  
11 a Muslim. Now a local authority employee in Lewes, UK, she is the only  
12 woman in town who wears the hijab.

13  
14 **Anita Nayyar**, a social psychologist in London, comes from an Anglo-Indian  
15 background. A devout Christian, she was immersed in church activities in her  
16 teenage years. Some of her Hindu relatives had been killed by Muslim mobs  
17 during the partition of India. As a result, her view of Islam was a fairly negative  
18 one.

19 Later, after joining college, she acquired many Muslim friends. She found  
20 them as pleasant and considerate as her Christian friends. Debating religious  
21 issues with them, she became enamored with Islam and, at the age of 18,  
22 converted. Her father accepted the fact, but other family members were not  
23 too pleased. Today, she is a practicing Muslim who regularly meets her five-  
24 times-a-day prayer obligation. But she does not wear a hijab. And as a  
25 feminist, she is dismayed that women cannot pray in a mosque.

26  
27 **Dr Annie (Amina) Coxon** is a seventy-two year old consultant physician and  
28 neurologist in London. Though from a Catholic background, she had not  
29 drawn spiritual satisfaction from Catholicism. For years she searched for an  
30 alternative. It was well after getting her medical qualifications and under the  
31 influence of some of her Muslim patients and a series of dreams that she  
32 found it and became a Muslim at age 51. Adorning the hijab only during  
33 Ramadhan, she adheres to all Islamic tenets. But, as a white person, she has  
34 had a hard time finding a welcome among the ethnic, immigrant Muslim  
35 communities in the UK. Now she has many Muslim friends. But most of them  
36 are from Africa. Islam, she says, has given her '*serenity, wisdom and peace*'.

37  
38 **Kristiane Backer**, a TV presenter of age 47, was raised in a not-that-devout  
39 Protestant family in Germany. Rising to fame, she was stationed at a major  
40 Europe-wide channel in London, UK. In her show, she interviewed prominent  
41 global personalities. By material standards, she had a successful life. Often,  
42 she partied in elite circles. Yet a lacuna of the spirit, a psychic angst, lurked  
43 underneath. After meeting a leading Pakistani cricketer, reading the books on  
44 Islam he gave her, and touring many parts of Pakistan upon his invitation, she  
45 was deeply impressed by the spirituality she encountered.

46

1           *The Muslims I met touched me profoundly through their*  
2           *generosity, dignity and readiness to sacrifice for others. The*  
3           *more I read, the more Islam attracted me. I converted in 1995.*  
4           Kristiane Backer (Mistiaen 2013).

5  
6       Ten years later she fell in love with and married a Moroccan-American man.  
7       However, things have not gone well for her. After her conversion became  
8       public knowledge, she was vilified in the German media and was fired from  
9       her prestigious position. Her marriage ended in a divorce because she felt her  
10      husband was too controlling. But she remains a faithful Muslim and works for  
11      a UK TV station. Her programs deal with presentation of Muslim lifestyles and  
12      values. Her outlook remains positive.

13  
14           *I have no regrets. On the contrary: my life now has meaning*  
15           *and the void that I used to feel is filled with God, and that*  
16           *is priceless.* Kristiane Backer (Mistiaen 2013).

17  
18      **Andrea Chishti**, aged 47, teaches in a secondary school in Watford, UK. She  
19      also gives reflexology therapy. Originally from Germany, her father was an  
20      atheist, but mother was a devoted Christian. Christianity was a key part of her  
21      early education. In college, she fell in love with a Pakistani Muslim born in the  
22      UK. Over the course of a three-year relationship, she developed a keen  
23      interest in Islam, converted and married him. Their parents were not happy  
24      but eventually reconciled to her conversion and marriage. Now she has two  
25      children and a contented family life. She wears the hijab only when she  
26      attends religious functions. But as a white person, her interactions with the  
27      Muslim community often become awkward. Taking such matters in her stride  
28      as common issues of life, her faith remains strong.

29  
30           *Islam has strengthened my ethics and morals and given a*  
31           *good foundation for our family life.* Andrea Chishti (Mistiaen  
32           2013).

33  
34      **John Campos** is a Mexican-American living in Texas, USA. As an adult, he  
35      waded through books on religion in search of a spiritual home. Enticed by its  
36      beliefs, scriptures, life philosophy and practices like yoga, he finally found it  
37      in Hinduism. Now a practicing Hindu, he regularly prays at the local Hindu  
38      temple. He is dismayed to find that many Hindu youth in the US have ceased  
39      to value their faith and have embraced a Westernized outlook and lifestyle.

40  
41           *When I'm asked why I chose to practice Hinduism, my answer*  
42           *is founded on my practical experience of the spiritual*  
43           *happiness that it has brought me.* (Campos 2004).

44  
45      Hindu scriptures prescribe the religious functions one is allowed to perform  
46      according to one's caste. Every Hindu in India has a caste; a casteless Hindu

1 is a bird without feathers; it cannot fly. Without a caste, is John Campos an  
2 authentic Hindu?

3  
4 **Syed Waseem Rizvi** was, until recently, a high profile Muslim leader in the  
5 Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. As a Syed—recognized descendent of Prophet  
6 Muhammad—he had the uppermost status within Islam. As the chairman of  
7 the Shia Waqf Board, he oversaw the management of Muslim endowments  
8 and property in the state.

9 But after claiming that some verses in the Quran sanctioned violence, he  
10 had become a controversial figure in the Muslim community. He also but not  
11 with success petitioned the courts for the removal of these passages. Upon  
12 writing a book that was critical of Prophet Muhammad, he began to receive  
13 death threats. Even his family severed their ties with him, and he was forced  
14 to live in isolation.

15 In December 2021, he formally abandoned Islam and became a Hindu.  
16 His new Hindu name is Jitendra Narayan Singh Tyagi. His induction was  
17 officiated by YN Saraswati, a rightwing Hindu priest who heads the large  
18 Dasna Devi temple and is one of the most senior Hindu priests in India.  
19 Formerly, the Dasna Devi temple was open to everyone. Under the tutelage  
20 of Saraswati, it has instituted a police-enforced rule that forbids entry of  
21 Muslims.

22 Rizvi's conversion has major religious and political implications. By allying  
23 with the hate-spewing anti-Muslim Saraswati, he has handed a political bonus  
24 to the BJP and its parent organization, the RSS. Roping in a high-rank Muslim  
25 into their fold boosts the exclusionary *Hindutva* ideology.

26 But the conversion entails a theological enigma. Since a Hindu must have  
27 a caste, Rizvi, as his new last name shows, was assigned to the Tyagi caste,  
28 the caste of his inductor. The Tyagi caste is a middle level farming caste. It  
29 thus downgrades Rizvi from a Muslim of the highest rank to a middling Hindu  
30 rank. Induction into the highest Hindu caste was out of the question. A  
31 Brahmin is born a Brahmin. The Brahmins would automatically reject him. The  
32 downgrading is unlikely to inspire any Muslims to become Hindu. Further,  
33 whether the Tyagi caste members will welcome Rizvi as one of them is also  
34 open to question.

35  
36 **Kusala Bikhshu** grew up in a Lutheran family in Iowa, USA. After moving to  
37 Los Angeles in his teens, he was influenced by the questioning atmosphere  
38 of the 1960s and became an agnostic. Experiencing an emotional crisis when  
39 he was twenty-eight years old, he left his job, and rambled across the state  
40 trying to understand what life was about. Subsequently, he returned to his  
41 previous employer but started a more disciplined life. Inspired by a devout  
42 woman, he attended church services. But the attachment did not last.

43  
44 *I wasn't feeling anything sitting passively in a pew, I wanted to*  
45 *be an active participant in my own salvation.* (Bikhshu 2022).  
46



1 Venturing into books about religions, he was strongly drawn to Buddhism. He  
2 started learning the intricacies of meditation at the International Buddhist  
3 Meditation Center in Los Angeles that had been founded by a Vietnamese  
4 monk. Inspired by the sermons of Buddhist monks, he took the vows of a lay  
5 Buddhist and was given the name Kusala. His journey into Buddhism took  
6 him into a fifteen year discipleship of a senior Sri Lankan Buddhist monk.  
7 Undergoing the various stages of training for a monk, he was ordained as 'a  
8 *Bhikshu (monk) in the Zen tradition of Vietnam*'. He had finally found his  
9 calling.

10  
11 **Thubten Chodron** had grown up with a typical middle class upbringing  
12 within a not-that-religious Jewish family in a Christian neighborhood in Los  
13 Angeles. Her boyfriend during her teenage years was a Catholic. It was the  
14 era of protests against the war on Vietnam, racial discrimination and gender  
15 inequality. She posed questions of life and death, war and peace, prejudice,  
16 family stability, consumerism, suffering and meaning of life to her teachers,  
17 parents, rabbis and priests.

18  
19 *I could not understand why a compassionate God would punish*  
20 *people, and why, if he were omnipotent, didn't he do something*  
21 *to stop the suffering in the world? (Chodron 2010).*

22  
23 She was told that such questions were futile, and was urged to have faith to be  
24 saved. Being of a scientific persuasion, she could not accept that type of  
25 answer.

26 After graduating from a California university, she qualified and worked as  
27 a teacher and married. One day, in 1975, she found herself at a lecture  
28 session in a bookstore given by two Buddhist monks. To her surprise, she  
29 found that the questions which had plagued her since childhood were being  
30 raised there.

31 Months of immersion in Buddhist literature, attending meditation sessions,  
32 and encountering humble and happy Buddhist nuns convinced her to adopt  
33 the Buddhist Dharma. It suited her countenance.

34  
35 *Buddhism respects our intelligence and does not demand*  
36 *blind faith. We are encouraged to reflect and examine. Also, it*  
37 *emphasizes changing our attitudes and our heart, not simply*  
38 *having a religious appearance on the outside. (Chodron 2010).*

39  
40 She resigned from her teaching job and joined a monastery in Nepal to lead  
41 a life of meditation, learning and community work. Ultimately, she decided to  
42 become a Buddhist nun. Her marriage did not endure, but her parents came  
43 to accept her choice. After ordination in a Tibetan Buddhist order, she traveled  
44 across Asia and the West learning, teaching, going on silent retreats, and  
45 interacting with nuns and lay people.

1 Now Chodron is a venerated nun and scholar in the Buddhist world. The  
2 author of several books on Buddhism, she heads a Buddhist monastery in  
3 Newport, USA, and teaches Buddhist psychology and philosophy. In her  
4 interactions with Buddhists in Asia, she has faced challenges relating to  
5 gender equality, language, unquestioning attitudes, initiative, hierarchy and  
6 the chasm between Western and Asian Buddhism. She attributes the barriers  
7 to institutions and culture, and not to the teachings of the Buddha. Her  
8 attachment to Buddhism remains vibrant and robust. But she has not voiced  
9 concern about the violent pogroms against the Muslims in Myanmar that is  
10 being supported by Buddhist monks and nuns.

11  
12 **Muhammad Syed**, born in the US but raised in Pakistan in an assiduously  
13 religious environment, returned to the land of his birth when he was slightly  
14 over 20 years of age. In the era of unrelenting attacks on Iraq, he joined the  
15 anti-war movement but was dismayed at the rise of fundamentalist views  
16 among his Muslim friends. Both his parents had doctoral degrees and he had  
17 acquired a liberal, science-oriented perspective.

18 Exchanges with friends on issues of religion and politics prompted him to  
19 a deeper study of the Quran and the *Hadiths*. Unable to reconcile what he  
20 found there with science and history, he left Islam. When he informed his  
21 parents, they were shocked but also concerned about his spiritual wellbeing  
22 and safety. Muhammad felt isolated and desolate until he met others who had  
23 distanced themselves from Islam. One among them was **Sarah Haider**, a  
24 person with a similar family background, who had also distanced herself from  
25 Islam. Together they initiated a support group, Ex-Muslims of North America,  
26 to assist people who had left Islam but were facing strong opposition from  
27 family and the community to relent and return to the fold. Some young  
28 Muslims had left their faith because of excessive parental control over what  
29 they should wear, and who they should associate with. A number were afraid  
30 for their own safety or were facing psychological trauma.

31 Today the support group has about 1,000 members. These former  
32 Muslims now are atheists. The group tours university campuses and cities in  
33 the US and conducts open discussion sessions. Because of the threats they  
34 have received, a police officer is usually present during their meetings. A  
35 similar group operates in the UK.

36 Muhammad is well read. Unlike the New Atheists, he does not castigate  
37 Islam in a blunt way but takes a science-based, historic perspective:

38  
39 *You can find beauty within Islam itself. It's an amalgam of*  
40 *many, many ideas. Some are good, some bad. A lot of them*  
41 *are outdated, because it was the 7th Century. It doesn't mean*  
42 *they're all bad. Personally speaking, one of the better things in*  
43 *Islam is the emphasis on charity.* Muhammad Syed (Amos  
44 2017).  
45

1 **Mahad Olad**, a Kenyan now resident in the US, began to walk away from  
2 Islam after he heard a Muslim priest justify the terrorist attack that had killed  
3 a child and wounded nine people in a suburb of Nairobi. He does not observe  
4 Muslim rituals anymore.

5  
6 *I realized I couldn't overlook the fact that today's Islamic*  
7 *extremists are driven by a political ideology, an ideology*  
8 *derived from Islam's most sacrosanct texts. (Olad 2017).*  
9

10 His parents, siblings and friends are displeased at the turn his life has taken.  
11 Many no longer communicate with him. But through the Internet, he located  
12 the Ex-Muslims of North America and is now happier in the company of like-  
13 minded people.

## 14 **12.2 WHY RELIGION?**

15  
16  
17 The spiritual transitions described above illuminate the diversity of spiritual  
18 needs of humans. They are but a small sample of a much broader diversity.  
19 They tell us that even in this age of science and technology, people have a  
20 need to believe, to reach out to a higher power. Religion is a more resilient  
21 social phenomenon than was projected by sociological studies done in the  
22 1960s. It remains a vibrant entity in the early twenty first century. At the same  
23 time, these stories also illustrate that people can have a satisfactory spiritual  
24 life without formally adhering to a religion and that no particular religion will  
25 implant spiritual satisfaction to all.

26 Transitions between faith systems occur mostly among the educated  
27 middle classes of the economically advanced nations. Overt transitions are  
28 possible when people can choose. But in most parts of the world, such a  
29 choice is explicitly or effectively denied. The poor rarely have luxury to rethink  
30 their religious beliefs. Yet, looking at between religion transitions gives a vital  
31 insight into the answers to the questions stated at the outset of this chapter.

32 Which religion will attract the most recruits? Will irreligiosity prevail over  
33 religiosity? Will a new major religion emerge? History educates us that the  
34 landscape of faith is not a static one. But in what direction the change will  
35 occur is not easy to forecast. A multiplicity of factors, group level and  
36 individual level, are at work. Economics is a major factor, but its effects are  
37 neither simple nor direct.

### 38 **+ Group level factors +**

39  
40  
41 **Social Stability:** Historically, religion unified societies and gave a common  
42 set of acceptable rules and modes of conduct. Religion was a means for  
43 social control. Today, only in overtly theocratic nations is that the case, and  
44 even there its influence has waned. In stable secularized nations of today, the  
45 values and practices enshrined in the Constitution, the legal, political and  
46 education systems, and the mass media unify nations and control social

1 conduct more than religion does. Fealty to the nation, race or ethnicity  
2 override fidelity to religion. But when social stability is jeopardized by internal  
3 conflict, economic disarray, war or natural calamities, the level of religiosity  
4 tends to increase. More people pray for divine intervention to set things right.  
5 Yet, a few people who cannot come to terms with why God has been so  
6 unkind to them, or their families turn away from religion.

7  
8 **Prosperity:** Broad-based economic progress and ensuing social stability  
9 tends to make the nation less religious. Absolute poverty and life insecurity  
10 intensify religious belief. And so does economic inequality. Individuals do not  
11 necessarily become less religious as they make material gains. The emergent  
12 middle class in some nations of the Global South where absolute poverty and  
13 high inequality exist is more devout than the generation of their parents. In  
14 general, the prevalence of secularism is associated with economic prosperity,  
15 social stability, a social safety net, education, race and improved race and  
16 gender relations.

17  
18 **Economic Equality:** In rich and poor nations, economic disparity is strongly  
19 associated with religiosity. That was a key conclusion emanating from an  
20 analysis of data collected between 1981 and 2007 from 76 nations:

21  
22 *[Economic] inequality increased the probability that the typical*  
23 *person considered himself or herself to be religious, held God*  
24 *in high importance for his or her life, believed in an afterlife,*  
25 *and believed in hell. (Didonato 2013).*

26  
27 For the masses, religion provides emotional support. By teaching them to  
28 ascribe their problems to divine forces, posit the hand of God behind all things  
29 and value spiritual rewards over worldly gains, religion sanctifies the existent  
30 social order and its unequal structure. The wealthy engage in charity and  
31 donate funds to religious institutions, earning favorable opinions from the  
32 common folk. The often well-publicized presence of the super-rich at major  
33 religious events raises the public profile of the upper class. Religion  
34 smoothens the friction within an unequal social order.

35  
36 **Wealth and Power:** Religion today is a global multi-billion dollar enterprise.  
37 Many prayer venues and religious institutions—Christian, Muslim, Buddhist  
38 and Hindu—own substantial financial assets and property. Many have large  
39 revenue streams from their adherents, and many get large donations from  
40 very wealthy individuals. Religious institutions often invest their funds in the  
41 stock market and have a vested interest in the maintenance of the economic  
42 status quo. Further, in nations with an official religion and other nations too,  
43 state funding and proximity to state power affect the scale of religious activity.

44 Wealth and power enable religious organizations to conduct activities that  
45 help retain and expand their membership. The proliferation of televangelism  
46 and mega-churches, mosques and temples across the world illustrates this

1 process. Other examples are the growth of evangelical Protestantism in Latin  
2 America, the increasing influence of Salafism in the Muslim world fueled by  
3 Saudi Arabian largess and solidification of fundamentalist Hinduism in India.  
4 Atheist and humanist organizations, in comparison, have a miniscule financial  
5 muscle or property base.

6  
7 **Migration:** Either through normal interactions spawned by globalization or  
8 often due to outbreak of civil war and imperial interventions, many people in  
9 the recent past have moved across borders in search of safe havens for their  
10 families. A risky transition for hundreds of thousands, they end up in an abode  
11 that is culturally alien and where the welcome mat, if there was one, soon  
12 wears thin. Though many blend into the mainstream by adopting newer  
13 cultural norms, migrant communities tend to turn inwards and become more  
14 religious for varied reasons. Establishing their enclaves, they build places of  
15 worship and hold communal events that will bring them and their families into  
16 contact with each other on a regular basis and provide a psychological blanket  
17 to deal with the discrimination they face at work, school or in public places.  
18 Thus, in the West, even as religiosity (Christianity) overall is on the decline,  
19 among the immigrant communities (Muslim, Hindu, Catholics or other), it is  
20 not. That also applies to the historically marginalized minorities in the West.

21  
22 **Demographics:** The populations of the Global South nations have grown at  
23 a faster rate than those of the prosperous nations of the West and Asia. And  
24 the level of religiosity has remained stable or has been increasing in the  
25 poorer nations. These two trends imply that in the long run, unless the socio-  
26 economic conditions improve significantly, the overall level of religiosity  
27 across the globe will increase. That applies equally to Hinduism, Buddhism,  
28 Islam and Christianity. In the Western nations, the embrace of irreligiosity is  
29 more marked among the youth but that is not yet the case in the Global South  
30 where a much larger proportion of the population is young. If marked general  
31 prosperity ensues and initiates a demographic transition, the Global South  
32 may mimic the trend towards irreligiosity in the Western youth.

33 Women and marginalized communities generally have lower educational  
34 and economic opportunities. With limited life horizons, they are less drawn to  
35 atheism than are the economically secure men from the dominant stratum.  
36 Religion tends to provide them a supportive environment even as it does not  
37 address their basic underprivileged status. They find a traditional sanctuary  
38 in the church, temple or mosque that is denied to them in the world beyond.

39  
40 **Role Model:** Priests and religious leaders are expected to be morally upright,  
41 selfless, sincere individuals devoted to the spiritual and worldly well-being of  
42 their flock. Generally, a small segment of the clergy are morally exemplary,  
43 self-sacrificing, inspirational persons. The majority perform their duties in line  
44 with their rank, get along well with their congregations, do not cheat or abuse,  
45 but do not venture beyond the call of duty. It is a minority who, while adorning

1 a noble façade, engage in financial, sexual and other forms of misconduct  
2 and criminality.

3 The problem is that these rotten apples get away with their misdeeds for  
4 too long, and often because of protection from church and state officials.  
5 Thus, when the horrific conduct and the cover-up become public knowledge,  
6 the priesthood is tainted. The revelations induce some followers to leave the  
7 religion and discourage outsiders from joining. In particular, they alienate the  
8 youth, and make them less religious.

9 The multitude of clerical scandals that have been exposed in the past two  
10 decades notwithstanding, investigations on this front still have a long way to  
11 go. According to a report based on a nationwide investigation, from 1950 to  
12 now, about 330,000 children in France were sexually abused. In Canada,  
13 Ireland, Belgium, Australia, Spain, Italy, Portugal and the UK, campaigns by  
14 the victims and media revelations prompted the authorities to investigate the  
15 allegations. In some nations, comprehensive inquiries have been conducted  
16 but in other nations, they are just taking off. In Latin America, home to nearly  
17 40% of the world's Catholic population, substantial anecdotal evidence of  
18 clerical misconduct exists. But the often close linkage between the church  
19 hierarchy and the state has meant that few official inquiries have been  
20 launched. All major and some minor religions are affected by clerical  
21 misdeeds, but the investigative process has gone the furthest for Christianity,  
22 and mainly for the Catholic churches. Official investigations of abuse of  
23 children, women and nuns by priests in the non-Christian nations are either  
24 non-existent or at a nascent stage.

25 When priests promote discrimination and violence against some social  
26 groups, it can be a double-edged sword. Some believers will be attracted by  
27 their words, but others will be repelled. Some will disassociate themselves  
28 with institutionalized religion—the church and the clergy—but continue to  
29 practice their faith on a personal basis.

30  
31 **Syncretism:** Asian Buddhists combine Buddhism with Hinduism, Shintoism,  
32 Confucianism or traditional religions. Muslims and Christians in Africa follow  
33 the rituals and hold the beliefs of their ancestral religions. The majority of  
34 Christians in the US subscribe to a New Age belief creed such as astrology,  
35 crystal healing, reincarnation, and paranormal phenomena. By providing a  
36 flexible worldview, syncretism broadens the religious base.

37  
38 **Enduring Religiosity:** Religiosity breeds religiosity. Parents transmit their  
39 religion and values to their children who are acclimatized to religious ideas  
40 and functions from an early age. Such an influence is stronger in the nations  
41 of the Global South. Religious bonds within communities here are strong, and  
42 adherence to the religion of birth tends not to diminish from one generation to  
43 the next.

44  
45 **+ Individual level factors +**  
46

1 **Moral Compass:** People generally regard themselves in a positive light, as  
2 good persons who care for others. To the believers, religious precepts provide  
3 a moral compass, a guide to conduct, and come to be a part of their mental  
4 repertoire. If they give money to a homeless person, they feel happy. They  
5 have done their duty to their faith. They are content.

6  
7 **Coping Instrument:** A religious outlook serves as a coping mechanism in the  
8 midst of personal and general adverse events in life. Why did your child get  
9 cancer; why was your house destroyed in a flood; why did your mother die?  
10 It was God's will or the consequence of your past-life deeds. Religious beliefs  
11 cushion the impact of life's difficulties and induce emotional tranquility. Fellow  
12 believers provide a supportive community and aid the congregant come to  
13 terms with a sad reality.

14  
15 **Life Regulator:** The rites, rituals and celebrations of religion lend order and  
16 structure to life. The adherent is conditioned to the ensuing rhythm and  
17 feelings of tranquility and harmony with fellow adherents. Internalization of  
18 such conditioning from an early age becomes a powerful magnet attaching  
19 him or her to the faith.

20  
21 **Universal Explanator:** Religious belief provides a general and handy  
22 explanations for small and large events. Why did it rain today? Laws of  
23 meteorology and analysis of weather data give a probability-based  
24 explanation. A person of faith may add that it was God who made those laws.  
25 Why was she involved in road accident today, even though she was driving  
26 safely she usually does? Investigations from different vantages may provide  
27 the causative factors. But whatever that factor, the question will remain. Why  
28 was it as it was? The person of faith, like many eminent philosophers, would  
29 reason that there has to be an ultimate cause, the supreme universal being.  
30 Some scientists ascribe the laws of science to God's design.

31  
32 **Pillar of Spiritual Quest:** Humans are inquisitive animals. Hundreds of  
33 thousands of years of evolution has instilled in them a sense of wonder at the  
34 occurrences around them and beyond. It has provided a survival and  
35 developmental advantage over predators and calamities. Despite major gains  
36 in understanding the huge multiplicity of natural and social phenomena, many  
37 things remain inexplicable. What is life? What is consciousness? Is there life  
38 after death? And so on. Such a gap has propelled people to believe that there  
39 is a spiritual dimension, a world beyond this world that subsumes all  
40 phenomena.

41 Religion answers big questions on life, death and reality: Where did this  
42 universe come from? What is the meaning of life? Are people responsible for  
43 their actions? By providing clear answers, it helps people fulfill a spiritual void.

44 The answers come in distinctive forms. Rarely based on rational analysis  
45 or objective evidence, they mostly derive from faith-based feelings and life  
46 experience. Even the non-religious are susceptible to such tendencies.

1  
2 [Around] *three-quarters of atheists and nine out of 10 agnostics*  
3 *are open to the existence of supernatural phenomena, including*  
4 *everything from astrology to supernatural beings and life after*  
5 *death.* (Paul-Choudhury 2019).  
6

7 **The Cost of Disbelief:** It is not easy to abandon behaviors, a vision on life  
8 and a supportive community that has been you from childhood. Leaving a  
9 religion is often an anguish-filled process. The leaver has to find a new social  
10 life. Without adequate support from like-minded persons, she may sink into  
11 deep depression. These costs help maintaining religiosity, especially among  
12 the youth.  
13

14 +++++  
15

16 Which societal and personal level factors will exercise the dominant influence  
17 upon humanity and what forms of religiosity or non-religiosity will come to  
18 prevail are matters rather difficult to predict. Perhaps a completely new belief  
19 system with a large following will emerge. One major international study  
20 projected that over the next thirty years, the global level of religiosity will  
21 increase from 84% to 87%. Christianity and Islam will have almost equal  
22 representation, and the proportion not attached to a formal religion will  
23 decrease slightly. But this study assumed that neoliberalism will remain the  
24 dominant global social formation.  
25

### 26 **12.3 FOUR ICONS**

27

28 Now we describe the life and work of four icons of religion and humanism.  
29

#### 30 **+ Desmond M Tutu +**

31

32 *God's love is too great to be confined*  
33 *to any one side of a conflict*  
34 *or to any one religion.*

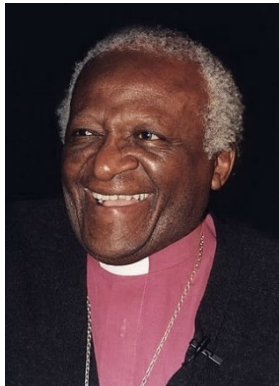
35 Desmond Tutu  
36

37 Born in South Africa in 1931, Desmond M Tutu was baptized a Methodist but  
38 later joined the Anglican church. He wanted to study medicine. But health  
39 problems and poor family finances prevented him from doing so. Instead, he  
40 trained as a teacher, earned a bachelor's degree, and taught in a high school.  
41 In 1958, outraged by the passage of discriminatory legislation that limited the  
42 scope and quality of education for Africans, he resigned from teaching. It was  
43 a dreary time. Africans and colored communities faced stricter restrictions in  
44 education, residence, travel and employment. New Pass laws compelled non-  
45 whites to carry identity cards all the time. Long-term family separation added



1 to their misery. Racial discrimination was being institutionalized in all the  
2 domains of life.

3



Desmond M Tutu

4

5

6

7 Influenced by Reverend Trevor Huddleston, an anti-Apartheid cleric, Tutu  
8 became a priest. Ordained in 1960, he went on study theology at a college in  
9 London, UK, and gradually rose up the ladder of the South African Anglican  
10 church. Besides serving in various priestly capacities in Lesotho and South  
11 African churches, he taught theology at a South African seminary. Under the  
12 sponsorship of the World Council of Churches, he traveled across Africa and  
13 Asia, trips that also enabled him to connect with social justice and freedom  
14 activists.

15 Having begun to publicly express his views against the racist Apartheid  
16 system in the mid-1960s, he used the pulpit to mobilize people to undertake  
17 non-violent struggles to dismantle it. He firmly supported a global economic  
18 and political boycott of the racist regime. With many South African freedom  
19 fighters in prison or exile, he became one of loudest internal voices standing  
20 up to racist rule. His valiant, bold efforts earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in  
21 1984.

22 He was ordained the Archbishop of the Anglican Church in South Africa  
23 in 1986, making him the first African to hold that position. Even after white  
24 minority rule unraveled in 1991 and South Africa held its first free election in  
25 1994, his activism continued. Appointed to chair the Truth and Reconciliation  
26 Commission, he was tasked with looking into major human rights violations  
27 during the Apartheid era. The Commission was mandated to induce the  
28 perpetrators to confess their criminal deeds and apologize to the victims and  
29 the nation. Hearing gruesome, gut-wrenching testimonies from the victims  
30 and perpetrators, he was often moved to tears. Only a person of unblemished  
31 moral credibility and resolve could have guided the process in a way as to  
32 make the hitherto deeply divided nation move towards unity.

33 Tutu saw the Commission as a first but necessary step in a long journey.  
34 He did not rest with the promotion of interracial harmony but campaigned for  
35 economic justice, equality and good governance as well. In particular, he

1 criticized the policies of the African National Congress whose rule had made  
2 a few Africans stupendously wealthy, done little to reduce the wealth gap  
3 between the races and left the masses in the townships and rural areas in  
4 misery. In 2013, he announced that he would no longer vote for the ANC  
5 candidates. He also stridently rallied against corruption, homophobia and  
6 violence against women.

7 As a respected statesman, he worked on the international front to promote  
8 peace in conflict ridden zones such as Cyprus, Northern Ireland and Kenya.  
9 Likening the treatment of Palestinians by Israel to that of Africans under the  
10 Apartheid system, he also condemned the US war on Iraq and opposed the  
11 Chinese control of Tibet. He supported the people of neighboring Zimbabwe  
12 by criticizing the authoritarian, incompetent rule of Robert Mugabe. Teaming  
13 up with senior religious figures in different nations, he was at the forefront of  
14 promoting global religious tolerance and harmony. His God was the God of  
15 the downtrodden.

16  
17 *People often speak of God being even-handed.*  
18 *God is not even-handed. God is biased,*  
19 *in favor of the weak, of the despised.*

20 Desmond Tutu

21  
22 Desmond Tutu understood the severe ramifications of global climate change,  
23 especially for the poor nations. Calling it a major moral challenge, he urged  
24 immediate action to deal with it.

25 Tutu faced the sad, unjust reality around him with optimism, resolve and  
26 a unique sense of humor. His steadfastness and endearing, smiling persona  
27 earned him local and international fame and respect and popularity. When he  
28 died in December 2021, he was mourned as a heroic icon for human rights in  
29 the nation and abroad.

30  
31 *[Desmond Tutu] was South Africa's Martin Luther King – a*  
32 *Christian clergyman who worked, non-violently, for racial*  
33 *justice and equality. Steven Gish (Reinl 2021).*

34  
35 **+ Janani J Luwum +**

36  
37 Janani J Luwum was the Catholic archbishop of Uganda and adjacent areas  
38 when the army commander, Idi Amin, overthrew the democratically elected  
39 government of Milton Obote in 1972. Though initially supported by Britain and  
40 Israel, Amin soon turned against them, and instituted a draconian regime of  
41 persecution, torture and murder that killed up to 500,000 Ugandans,  
42 displaced many more and expelled the entire Ugandan Asian community from  
43 its homeland. His corrupt mode of governance turned the economy into  
44 shambles.

45 The internal opposition was terrorized into silence. One of the few voices  
46 that bravely criticized him in public and demanded an end to the killings was

1 that of Archbishop Janani Luwum. The government accused him and fellow  
2 Christian leaders of treason and planning a coup. Though the charges were  
3 baseless, he was placed in custody, beaten and shot without a trial.

4 Today, Archbishop Janani Luwum is honored as a hero in Uganda and a  
5 martyr by Anglican churches across the world. His day of birth, the 16th of  
6 February, has been a public holiday in Uganda since 2015.



Janani J Luwum

**+ Malala Yousafzai +**

*I truly believe the only way we can create global peace  
is through not only educating our minds,  
but our hearts and our souls.*

Malala Yousafzai

17 Malala Yousafzai was born in 1997 in the hinterland of Pakistan in a Sunni  
18 Muslim family of slightly above average means. Her father composes poetry  
19 and operates several private schools in the area. Largely educated by him,  
20 she became fluent in Pashto, Urdu and English at a young age.

21 Her home area was dominated by the Pakistani Taliban who had slapped  
22 a ban on education for girls. Among other things, they destroyed more than a  
23 hundred girls' schools. Barely 11, Malala could no longer attend school. But  
24 she did not just sit back. With encouragement from her father, she teamed up  
25 with a local BBC reporter to campaign against the cultural restrictions and  
26 denial of education and freedom of movement to girls and women. As it was  
27 a risky work, her initial blogs and reports appeared under a pseudonym. Her  
28 lucid, moving narrations received broad online and media attention. Besides  
29 castigating the Taliban, she also criticized the Pakistani military for not taking  
30 adequate and timely action to protect the local population from the Taliban.

31 The adverse publicity generated by her reports, solidarity actions by boys'  
32 schools, and military assaults pressurized the Taliban to partially lift the ban  
33 on school attendance for girls. Even though her home area remained a

1 conflict zone with the people suffering from bombs being dropped by both  
2 sides, she continued her educational activism in national and international  
3 fora. But It made her a prime target for the Taliban. Her father had already  
4 received death threats. In October 2012, as she was on a bus returning home  
5 from a school examination, she was singled out by a Taliban gunman and  
6 shot. The attack caused serious face, neck and shoulder wounds. But after  
7 several months of treatment in Pakistan and the UK, she survived and made  
8 an almost complete recovery. Two other girls on the bus received minor  
9 injuries.

10



Malala Yousafzai

11

12

13

14 The widely publicized assassination attempt was condemned by global  
15 leaders. Large scale protests were held in Pakistan and elsewhere. In the  
16 aftermath, the first Right to Education law was ratified in Pakistan. Further,  
17 fifty prominent Muslim clerics in Pakistan derided the attack and issued a  
18 fatwa against the gunmen who had carried it out. It was also denounced by  
19 the local council of Islamic scholars. Yet, the Taliban had no regrets.

20

21 *Sharia says that even a child can be killed if he is propagating*  
22 *against Islam.* Pakistan Taliban Spokesperson (Wikipedia 2022 -  
23 Malala Yousafzai).

24

25 Unceasing threats from the Taliban have not deterred Malala. Her campaign  
26 for women's education goes on. Now a global celebrity, she was a co-  
27 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014, the youngest person to secure the  
28 prize. She has garnered many national and international awards. Her 2015  
29 book, *I am Malala*, is an international best seller.

30

31 Continuing her education in the UK, Malala secured high grades in the O-  
32 level and A-level examinations, and in 2020, graduated with honors from the  
33 University of Oxford. She is widely recognized as a champion for women's  
34 and children's rights, has addressed the UN and other institutions and has  
been received by international leaders and celebrities. She oversees a not-

1 for-profit fund, the Malala Fund, that supports girls' education worldwide. She  
2 has castigated the mistreatment of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, supported  
3 Palestinian people and Syrian refugees, derided anti-Muslim policies of India  
4 including the occupation of Kashmir, faulted the asylum policies of Australia  
5 and criticized the Western intrusion in Iraq and Afghanistan.

6 But her reception in Pakistan has been a mixed one. Conservative Muslim  
7 clerics and some media columnists have criticized her views. Officials of the  
8 173,000 strong federation of private schools castigated her for promoting  
9 secular education and banned her book in their schools. She and her father  
10 have been branded as 'anti-Islam,' 'agent of the West,' 'anti-Pakistan,' and 'a  
11 Jewish agent'. Public events to oppose her ideas have also been held.

12 Malala is an articulate and consistent champion of women's and children's  
13 rights and of global peace, justice and decent lives for all humans. Instead of  
14 according attention to her progressive vision and placing her actions in the  
15 context of the pro-democracy struggles in Pakistan, the media in the West  
16 projects her as a lone, but extraordinary person in the conservative world of  
17 Islam. Reflecting the prevailing Islamophobia in the West, it is a picture that  
18 paints Muslims as narrow-minded people. While the media highlight her  
19 criticism of the Taliban, they downplay the fact that she is a firm opponent of  
20 US drone strikes in Pakistan and Afghanistan. During her visit to the White  
21 House, she told US President Barack Obama that the drone strikes were  
22 killing civilians, worsening the lives of the people and fomenting hatred in the  
23 region. But that was lost in the media coverage of the event.

24 Malala is a practicing Muslim who married according to Muslim rites and  
25 has clearly declared her loyalty to Islam, Pakistan and Pashtun ethnicity. And  
26 her progressive, tolerant vision of Islam demarcates culture from scripture.

27  
28 *Traditions are not sent from heaven.*  
29 *They are not sent from God.*  
30 *It is we who make cultures and*  
31 *we have the right to change it and we should change it.*  
32 Malala Yousafzai  
33

34 Holding that misogyny, oppression of women and child marriage derive from  
35 history and culture, she says:

36  
37 *Nowhere is it written in the Quran*  
38 *that a woman should be dependent on a man.*  
39 *The word has not come down from the heavens*  
40 *to tell us that every woman should listen to a man.*  
41 Malala Yousafzai  
42

43 Men have no divine right to dictate what women should wear. Only the woman  
44 has the right to decide what she should wear. She opposes both the  
45 imposition of the burka by the conservative Islamists and the bans on the

1 burka and hijab in Western nations and parts of India. Let the woman be free  
2 to decide, be it burka, hijab, jeans, shalwar kameez, bikini or whatever.

3  
4 *Women are constantly being told to put on or take off various*  
5 *items of clothing, constantly sexualized or suppressed. We are*  
6 *beaten at home, punished at school and harassed in public for*  
7 *what we wear. Malala Yousafzai (TET 2022).*

8  
9 She does not wear the burka. Her favored dress is a modest, colorful shalwar  
10 kameez commonly worn by urban Pakistani women and a shawl that partly  
11 covers her hair. To her, education is the key to women's liberation. More funds  
12 are needed for schools, books and pens, not for bombs and the military:

13  
14 *[Education] is our basic right. Not just in the West; Islam too*  
15 *has given us this right. Islam says every girl and every boy*  
16 *should go to school. In the Quran it is written, God wants us to*  
17 *have knowledge. He wants us to know why the sky is blue and*  
18 *about oceans and stars.*

19 Malala Yousafzai

20  
21 Malala is also a socialist who sympathizes with Marxism. Thus, to an  
22 audience of Pakistani Marxists, she had no reservations to assert:

23  
24 *I am convinced Socialism is the only answer .... Only [it] will*  
25 *free us from the chains of bigotry and exploitation.*

26 Malala Yousafzai

27  
28 Malala is an astonishingly articulate, clear-headed visionary who smoothly  
29 blends the struggle for emancipation of women with an unapologetic loyalty  
30 to Islam, a strong distaste for the Taliban with firm criticism of Western  
31 intervention in Afghanistan and Pakistan, commitment to education with a  
32 socialist outlook and serious dedication to her cause with a joyful demeanor.

33  
34 **+ James Baldwin +**

35  
36 *The moment we cease to hold each other,*  
37 *the moment we break faith with one another,*  
38 *the sea engulfs us, and the light goes out.*

39 James Baldwin

40  
41 James A Baldwin was born to a single mother in Harlem, New York in 1924.  
42 Three years later, she married a Baptist preacher. Growing up poor in a racist  
43 environment, and a conflict-ridden relationship with his stepfather, he had to  
44 take part-time jobs from an early age to support his family. Fond of literary  
45 master pieces and movies, he excelled at school. His teachers encouraged  
46 him to pursue creative writing. His essays, stories and poems were published

1 in church and local outlets, winning prizes and accolades. Impressed by his  
2 talents, some teachers went out of their way to familiarize him with the vast  
3 world of theatre and literature. He also edited the high school magazine.

4 The realities of life for young black persons in the US were restrictive and  
5 dispiriting. Prospects for a sound education or a good job were very limited.  
6 At age fourteen, Baldwin was anguished about the direction his peers were  
7 heading. Boys and girls had detached themselves from their families and  
8 school to indulge into drugs, alcohol, petty crime and worse. Tensions with  
9 his stepfather made him unhappy. The narrowminded efforts of the priestly  
10 stepfather to protect his son from the 'evils' of modernity, reading and movies,  
11 had alienated Baldwin from the church. Yet, desolate, afraid of being sucked  
12 into a life of aimless bluster, unable to fathom his budding homosexuality, but  
13 determined to get an education, Baldwin sought love and refuge in the church.

14 To support the large family, he, the eldest son, discontinued his schooling.  
15 For a sensitive young man, it was a difficult choice. He lurched from one low-  
16 paid manual job to another, encountering racist treatment from white workers  
17 and employers everywhere. Yet, the frustrations of life notwithstanding, he  
18 continued writing essays and short stories and later embarked on crafting full  
19 length novels.

20



James Baldwin

21

22

23

24 Expecting respite from racism, Baldwin migrated to Paris when he was 24  
25 years old. And it was there, in the company of eminent writers, poets, artists,  
26 philosophers and activists, that his literary and conceptual bearings became  
27 solidified. By 1956, he had published two novels (*Go Tell It on The Mountain*  
28 and *Giovanni's Room*) and a collection of essays (*Notes of a Native Son*) to  
29 great critical acclaim as well as controversy. The civil rights movement in the  
30 US was gathering steam and he could not just stand by. Returning home, he  
31 immediately plunged into the thick of the struggle. Marching, writing and  
32 speaking, he interacted with progressive leaders, activists and personalities  
33 of the day. Later, he returned to Paris and spent the major portion of his life

1 there. In both places, he often lived in poverty and lacked a fixed abode. His  
2 personal life was marred by difficult relationships with other men, depression  
3 and occasional suicidality.

4 Baldwin wrote five outstanding novels, several plays and short stories and  
5 numerous essays. His luminous prose, erudite reflections, commentary on  
6 the American society and insights into human psychology and sexuality made  
7 him one of the most prominent literary figures of the era and won him awards  
8 and fellowships. Baldwin also connected, often in close, personal terms, with  
9 an array of distinguished writers, activists, social scientists, musicians,  
10 celebrities, philosophers and historians in the US and Europe, and a few from  
11 Africa as well. A number of upcoming writers and artistes, who later rose to  
12 fame in their fields, credited him for the positive influence he had exercised  
13 upon them.

14 Baldwin's political philosophy transcended the struggle against racism. It  
15 should not be just about equality for a race but equality for all citizens. He was  
16 a humanist who held that socialism was the remedy for the deep-rooted  
17 problems of American society. An outstanding thinker and activist, a crafter  
18 of sparkling gems of prose, verse and commentary, he was a steadfast  
19 champion of human rights and gay rights.

20  
21 +++++  
22

23 James Baldwin's views on religion defy simple classification. His father was  
24 a Pentecostal preacher, his mother, a devout Christian. The overbearing  
25 demeanor of his father had alienated him from the church. Yet, faced with a  
26 disheartening life around him in his teen years, he attended church services  
27 where he found the ecstatic devotional Pentecostal atmosphere soothing.  
28 Church hymns and rites fascinated him. Encouraged by the local minister, he  
29 trained to be a Junior Minister at age 14. He attended school as usual but  
30 preached on Sundays. His enticing voice, youthful ardor and vibrant delivery  
31 made him a popular preacher. It boosted his confidence. With support from  
32 his teachers, his literary output bloomed at the same time.

33 As he studied the Bible and explored church life, he saw that the religions  
34 of the black folk and the white folk were the same. Both worshipped the same  
35 God in the same way. But their lives were so different. After three years of  
36 preaching, one question vexed him day and night:

37  
38 *And if [God's] love was so great, and if He loved all His*  
39 *children, why were we, the blacks, cast down so far? Why?*  
40 (Baldwin 1962).  
41

42 Unable to get a satisfactory explanation, he sought an alternative. The world  
43 around him offered two choices: racial 'integration' or separation. Rejecting  
44 the first as tokenism within a white, Christian power structure, he turned to  
45 Islam, and engaged with Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam.  
46 But the racially exclusionary creed he encountered there was abhorrent to



1 him. Discrimination cannot be solved by discrimination. It can be solved only  
2 by love and respect.

3  
4 *The glorification of one race and the consequent debasement*  
5 *of another—or others—always has been and always will be a*  
6 *recipe for murder. .... Whoever debases others is debasing*  
7 *himself.* (Baldwin 1962).

8  
9 Ultimately, after early age immersion into Pentecostalism and three years of  
10 delivering eloquent sermons during his teenage years, he parted company  
11 with organized Christianity. He visualized African-American Christianity as an  
12 outcome of cultural genocide that had accompanied slavery. The church was  
13 a unifying institution for blacks, during slavery and now. But it united them on  
14 terms provided by the white world. It limited their aspirations, gave room for  
15 hope when there was none and made people too willing to accept suffering.  
16 The white man's church and God were not his church and God. His God was  
17 a God of liberation.

18  
19 *If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only*  
20 *be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do*  
21 *this, then it is time we got rid of Him.* James Baldwin (Baldwin  
22 1962).

23  
24 In 1970, Baldwin engaged in a wide-ranging, seven-and-a-half hour public  
25 exchange with the anthropologist Margaret Meade. She claimed that despite  
26 its practical shortfalls, Christian values were the ultimate source of morality.

27  
28 *You and I, what we have in the belief in the brotherhood of*  
29 *man, of all men, of the power of love, we got out of the*  
30 *Christian tradition.* Margaret Mead (Popova 2015).

31  
32 Alluding to the contradictions in the Bible and the ugly historical record, he  
33 depicted the dominant white Christianity of America in blunt terms:

34  
35 *I remember the photographs of white women in New Orleans,*  
36 *several years ago, during the school integration crisis, who*  
37 *were standing with their babies in their arms, and in the name*  
38 *of Jesus Christ they were spitting on other women's children,*  
39 *women who happened to be black, women with their babies in*  
40 *their arms. ... I cannot understand that religion.* James Baldwin  
41 (Popova 2015).

42  
43 Yet, Baldwin did not advocate abandonment of Christianity. He realized that  
44 the church had become integral to African-American life and that black people  
45 had imprinted on it a stamp that transformed it into an institution of their own.  
46 It was a venue where black people spoke their minds, eased the pain inflicted

1 upon them by the white society and expressed solidarity. With its rousing  
2 music, singing and movements, it nourished the soul, provided release, and  
3 strengthened resolve. *We Shall Overcome*, the song that effectively was the  
4 anthem of the civil rights movement, had its roots in the black churches.

5 Even though church-centered life made African Americans more resilient,  
6 it also induced submissiveness, undue patience and hope on a divine entity  
7 to change their lives. Priests were a major portion of the leadership of the civil  
8 rights movement. Most were inclined towards gradualist integration within the  
9 existing socio-economic structure and did not fathom the hollow nature of  
10 American democracy. Accommodating to the *status quo* was not Baldwin's  
11 vision. He also decried the homophobia prevalent in the black churches.

12 Yet, Baldwin did not align with the rejectionist vision of Malcolm X either.  
13 Envisioning human unity under a fundamentally changed social and political  
14 structure, he advocated unity based not on blind belief but on reason and  
15 knowledge.

16  
17 *It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is*  
18 *the most ferocious enemy justice can have.*

19 James Baldwin  
20

21 Baldwin did not regard himself an atheist. Enamored with the ebullient spirit  
22 of black Christian worship, he was attracted to pastoral eloquence, enticing  
23 hymns and music and the humble, fired up congregants. A spiritual essence  
24 existed even within the racially debased white church.

25  
26 *In spite of everything, there was in the life I fled a zest and a*  
27 *joy and a capacity for facing and surviving disaster that are*  
28 *very moving and very rare. .... The church was very exciting.*  
29 *It took a long time for me to disengage myself from this*  
30 *excitement, and on the blindest, most visceral level, I never*  
31 *really have, and never will. There is no music like that music,*  
32 *no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners*  
33 *moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming*  
34 *together and crying holy unto the Lord. There is still, for me,*  
35 *no pathos quite like the pathos of those multicolored, worn,*  
36 *somehow triumphant and transfigured faces, speaking from*  
37 *the depths of a visible, tangible, continuing despair of the*  
38 *goodness of the Lord. James Baldwin (Baldwin 1962).*

39  
40 Though Baldwin lambasted Christian practice and theology in his novels and  
41 essays, he retained the essence of the spirituality he had imbibed from his  
42 days at the pulpit throughout his life.

#### 43 44 **12.4 A MODEL BELIEVER** 45

1 Hindus cremate the dead. At times, the family has a shrine (samadhi) made  
2 for the departed one which is placed in the crematorium grounds. The master  
3 sculptor of shrines at Barisal Mahashashan, the largest Hindu crematorium in  
4 Bangladesh, is a Muslim named **Taher Ali Khan**. Over the past three and half  
5 decades, he has crafted more than ten thousand samadhis.

6 In a nation where the Hindu minority has often found itself under siege from  
7 fundamentalist Muslim groups, Khan is a shining beacon of interfaith amity. A  
8 humble man of modest means, he does not cut corners but sculpts what the  
9 family desires with single minded diligence. He is respected and admired by  
10 the Hindus but is often criticized by fellow Muslims. They say that by making  
11 idols, he betrays the spirit of Islam. But Ali Khan sees it in another light:  
12

13 *My prophet said to find bread by honest work. And he advised us*  
14 *to refrain from stealing, hurting others or committing any crimes.*  
15 *I work here constructing tombs. I don't see anything that would*  
16 *jeopardize my religion. I consider Hindus to be my brothers and*  
17 *sisters. Taher Ali Khan (Al-Jazeera 2021).*  
18



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33  
34  
Taher Ali Khan

22 Would the world embrace the humility and moral decency of Taher Ali Khan,  
23 it would be a far better place than it is now.

## 12.5 QUAKERISM

*Stand still in that which is pure.*

George Fox

30 Quakerism, formally the Religious Society of Friends, is a faith tradition that  
31 was founded by **George Fox**, a Protestant dissident, in Britain in the middle  
32 of the 17th century. Arguing that Christians had deviated from the piety of the  
33 apostolic era and decrying rigid organizational structures and undue attention  
34 to rituals, Fox advocated ethical living and cultivation of the 'Inner Light,' the

1 spirit of God present in each person. His ideas were rejected by the main  
2 Christian denominations, and he was imprisoned eight times on charges of  
3 heresy. Yet, his charisma and enticing vision earned him a growing but  
4 modest following. Facing persecution for their beliefs and nonconformism in  
5 Britain, many Quakers migrated to North America where they established  
6 strong and influential branches but still remained a distinct minority.

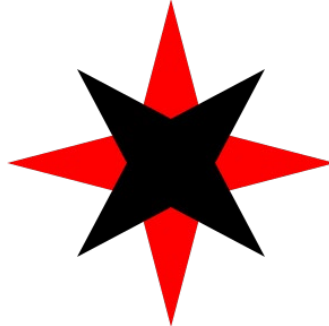
7 Today the adult Quakers (Friends) number less than 400,000. Though  
8 spread out across the world, about half are in Africa, particularly East Africa.  
9 There are more Quakers in Kenya than in any other nation. Quakerism does  
10 not have a central organization, a formal hierarchy or a priesthood though the  
11 Quaker groups in Africa partly operate like traditional churches and employ  
12 pastors. In most nations, local branches hold monthly meetings to deal with  
13 practical matters. Members may also raise other issues. An annual meeting  
14 of representatives of local branches is convened as well. Followers of faiths  
15 other than Christianity also attend Quaker meetings.

16 Quakers congregate once a week for worship, but those sessions are less  
17 formal than in a typical Christian church and may be held on any day of the  
18 week. Non-members may attend. The sessions comprise periods of collective  
19 silence punctuated by expression of the thoughts by persons touched by the  
20 spirit. Quakers avoid rigid ceremonies, baptism and sacraments and do not  
21 observe the Sabbath or even the main Christian holy days like Easter and  
22 Christmas. Refusal of oaths of obedience toward authority is a basic part of  
23 their creed.

24 Quakers believe in Jesus Christ and generally accept that the Bible is an  
25 infallible, divinely revealed book. But they do not regard it as the sole source  
26 of spiritual enlightenment and, reflecting their tolerant spirit, they consult the  
27 books of the other faith traditions. They also accept personal insight acquired  
28 through meditational communion with God as a source of spiritual wisdom. In  
29 case of a conflict, the Bible has the primacy. With a flexible stand on heaven,  
30 hell and afterlife, they reject the notion of original sin and hold that there is  
31 inner goodness in all humans. Instead of ritualized worship, they emphasize  
32 moral living based upon non-violence, pacifism, equality, modest dress and  
33 living, honesty, abstinence from gambling and smoking, and minimal use of  
34 alcohol. Quakerism has a better record than other Christian denominations in  
35 promoting gender equality and accepting homosexuals within its fold. Some  
36 Western branches carry out same-sex marriages as well. Quakers oppose  
37 the death penalty and do not favor a stringent ban on abortion, divorce, birth  
38 control or euthanasia. But they urge people facing such quandaries to seek  
39 counselling and medical guidance before deciding.

40 Quaker women activists have played, often in creative ways, a key role in  
41 the struggle for women's rights. **Margret Fell**, a founding Quaker, utilized the  
42 Bible and Quaker belief in the spiritual equality of all humans to make a case  
43 for the equality of men and women in secular affairs as well. Arrested for her  
44 beliefs, she spent many years in prison.

1 *Quaker activist Anne Knight wrote what is usually considered the*  
2 *first leaflet calling for women to have the vote, arguing that a*  
3 *female influence on Parliament would lead to more peaceful and*  
4 *just decisions. (QSS 2020).*  
5



6  
7 Quaker Star  
8

9 While Quaker scientists have contributed to fields like botany, psychology,  
10 astronomy, chemistry, entomology, pharmacy and crystallography, Quakers  
11 have been divided on the validity of the Theory of Evolution ever since it was  
12 first described by Charles Darwin. But after strong initial opposition, most  
13 Quakers in the West accept the theory but those in Africa largely reject it in  
14 favor of creationism.

15 Quakerism is not a theologically unified entity. Several divisions based on  
16 the emphasis placed on the different aspects of Christian faith, practice and  
17 social activism exist, but all ascribe to the basic tenets laid down by George  
18 Fox. Interestingly, an atheistic-cum-agnostic strand that values collective  
19 action through a religious organization also exists within Quakerism.

20 Quakers value practice over pronouncements and encourage individuals  
21 to set an example for others through ethical conduct. Driven by the firm belief  
22 in equality and dignity of all humans and stress on moral integrity, Quakerism  
23 became a socially engaged tradition devoted to justice and human rights from  
24 its early days. Opposing war, slavery, racial discrimination and the opium  
25 trade in China conducted by British companies, they campaigned for women's  
26 right to vote, prison reform, poverty alleviation and improved public education.  
27 During the first world war, they assisted many conscientious objectors. But  
28 going beyond pacifism, they seek to identify and address the root causes of  
29 international conflict. Recognizing their stellar contributions to global peace,  
30 the year 1947 Nobel Peace Prize was bestowed upon the principal American  
31 and British branches of Quakerism.

32  
33 *Quakers are not just opposed to war, but to all forms of*  
34 *violence. George Fox was personally opposed to the use of*  
35 *violence. He refused to defend himself when he was attacked*  
36 *and often, when the violence was over, had kind words or*  
37 *actions for his attackers. (BBC 2009).*

1  
2 With a deep sense of responsibility towards life and future generations,  
3 Quakers are committed to the protection of the planetary environment. But  
4 they hold that measures to safeguard the environment should not unduly  
5 harm poor peoples and nations. The rich nations must bear the major costs  
6 of the efforts, reduce wasteful consumption patterns and fossil fuel usage to  
7 the levels recommended by scientists. The red and black star symbol is used  
8 by many Quaker relief and service agencies.

9 Despite having an ethical code that emphasizes social justice and equality,  
10 Quakers and important Quaker personalities have stood on both sides on key  
11 issues like capitalism, colonialism, imperialism and corporate globalization.  
12 Quaker opposition to slavery was contemporaneous with slavery becoming  
13 an impediment to the development of industrial capitalism based on wage  
14 labor. Their emphasis on thrift and avoidance of debt reflected an emerging  
15 capitalist ethic of saving and investing. David Ricardo, one of the fathers of  
16 liberal economics, was a Quaker. Importantly, Quaker investors founded  
17 major banks, insurance agencies, iron works, pharmaceutical, match and  
18 footwear industries, railways and shipbuilding enterprises, and chocolate,  
19 confectionary and biscuit making factories.

20 Quaker entrepreneurs were the forward-looking drivers of the process of  
21 transformation of mercantile capitalism into industrial capitalism. But in order  
22 to assuage their humanitarian ethic, they promoted capitalism with a human  
23 face. They envisaged a system where workers would get a fair wage, work  
24 under safe conditions and be treated decently. Companies would avoid  
25 deceptive advertising even as the owners strove to profit and accumulate.  
26 Joseph Rowntree and George Cadbury, the pioneering leaders of the global  
27 chocolate industry, and especially the latter, championed an idyllic brand of  
28 capitalism.

29  
30 *John Cadbury, who founded a tea-and-coffee shop in*  
31 *Birmingham in 1824, practiced a brand of 'Quaker capitalism' that*  
32 *valued hard work and 'wealth creation for the benefit of the*  
33 *workers, the local community, and society at large,' rather than*  
34 *large profits only for the entrepreneurs themselves. (Reynolds*  
35 *2010).*

36  
37 But despite some successes on their part, their dream was not sustainable in  
38 the context of fierce competition between capitalists and capitalist nations.  
39 Colonization of overseas territories to find raw materials for their industries,  
40 and markets for their manufactures which entailed brutal suppression of the  
41 colonized peoples and use of highly exploited labor was central to industrial  
42 capitalism. And capitalist nations fought brutal wars in the bid to establish their  
43 colonies. It was a reality that mocked any idea of a benign 'Quaker capitalism'  
44 and peace between the major capitalist nations.

45 From the early days of chocolate manufacture, cacao, its basic ingredient,  
46 was produced using forced, and in places, slave labor. Farmers who grew it

1 in small plots were paid pitifully. Today, cacao is grown in many nations of the  
2 Global South but nearly three quarters of the total is from West Africa. The  
3 top ten producers are Ivory Coast, Ghana, Indonesia, Nigeria, Cameroon,  
4 Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, Dominican Republic and Colombia. The cacao bean is  
5 largely purchased for the factories of the major chocolate makers like Mars,  
6 Hershey's and Nestlé. The global cacao industry is now worth more than 100  
7 billion dollars.

8 In the recent decades, the cacao industry has seen numerous exposés of  
9 egregious violations of human and labor rights at primary production level.  
10 Use of child trafficking and child labor and long hours of work under unsafe  
11 conditions are common. In West Africa alone, over two million children work  
12 on cacao farms. In places like Brazil, use of slave labor persists. Many farm  
13 workers and small-scale farmers earn less than the pitiful \$1.90 poverty level  
14 set by the World Bank. Living in miserable conditions, many are plagued by  
15 ill health due to exposure to toxic chemicals and backbreaking toil. The child  
16 worker is fed poorly; malnutrition is rampant. Abject poverty induces families  
17 to sell their children to the traffickers.

18 Some NGOs have launched fair trade drives to ensure a fair return for the  
19 cacao producers and eliminate child labor. Some confectionary makers have  
20 faced lawsuits and have pledged to not purchase products tainted with child  
21 labor. But at the same time, they have thrown a denser blanket of secrecy  
22 over their sources and taken minimal public relations type of action to address  
23 the problem. The usual corporate bluster and whitewash prevail but children  
24 and adults working on cacao farms continue to suffer. Seeking to boost export  
25 earnings, the neoliberal governments of the producing nations have failed to  
26 take adequate action to protect children and farmers.

27  
28 *Chocolate companies keep certifying their products to tell*  
29 *consumers that they source their cocoa ethically, but these*  
30 *companies continue to enable abuse on cocoa farms. (FEP 2022).*

31  
32 The modern cacao production and chocolate manufacturing industries are a  
33 legacy of Quaker capitalism. Quakerism was not as much an anti-colonialist  
34 and anti-neocolonialist creed as it was an anti-slavery creed.

35 Reviewing the history of Quaker contributions to capitalist development,  
36 a Quaker analyst declares that:

37  
38 *[Quakers] helped to create the modern prison system with the*  
39 *innovation of the penitentiary [and were] the driving force*  
40 *behind the industries and economic structures that shaped*  
41 *emerging industrial capitalism. (Davison 2006).*

42  
43 But he goes on to lament that Quakerism was instrumental in the creation of  
44 an economic system that:

45

1           *has become carcinomic, an engine of unlimited consumption*  
2           *and growth, not to mention the blood on its hands, from the*  
3           *Western Front in World War I to the streets of Baghdad.*  
4           (Davison 2006).  
5

6 Quakerism quintessentially epitomizes the paradoxical nature of religion. On  
7 the one hand, its luminaries have included outstanding reformers, champions  
8 of human rights, respected writers and popular entertainers. Quakers feature  
9 among the founding personalities of human rights, peace, disaster relief and  
10 human rights agencies like Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Campaign  
11 for Nuclear Disarmament and Oxfam. Many Quakers take a progressive  
12 stand on pro-corporate globalization, punitive sanctions, neoliberalism and  
13 protecting the environment.

14 Notorious leaders and purveyors of neoliberalism, racism and imperial  
15 aggression have also stood within the Quaker ranks. For example, Herbert  
16 Hoover, the frankly racist and inept 31st President of the United States, was  
17 a Quaker. Eminent Quakers have profited from the establishment of and  
18 masking exploitative child labor in the nations of the Global South.

19 Quakerism has vacillated from open activism against discrimination and  
20 injustice to quietism and tacit acceptance of the status quo. Today, some  
21 chapters of Quakerism stand out as the most humanistic, internationalist, anti-  
22 racist, feminist and anti-neoliberal faith movements. A minority, mainly in the  
23 West, openly espouses socialism. The Quaker Socialist Society in Britain is  
24 a leading voice among them. But in Africa, where the majority of the Quakers  
25 live and where violations of human rights are a major concern, their churches  
26 have mostly taken a conservative stand on social and political issues and  
27 have rarely been immersed in local struggles for human, civil and economic  
28 rights.

29 Church service in most Western Quaker groups is without pastoral lead  
30 and is like a silent spiritual vigil, a far cry from traditional Christian worship.  
31 But in the African branches, it often is led by a pastor and includes rousing  
32 hymn singing sessions. Quakerism manages to blend adherence to the main  
33 tenets of Christianity with Sufi-like cultivation of the inner spirit and social  
34 activism. It is flexible enough bring conventional religiosity, atheism, socialism  
35 and neoliberalism under one roof. Not a homogeneous movement over time  
36 and space, its history demonstrates the contradictory complexity of religion.

37 That religion is a paradoxical, dynamic entity is exemplified by two leading  
38 lights of Protestantism, each of whom founded a major Christian tradition.  
39 One swung towards social injustice and the other, towards social justice.  
40

41 **Jonathan Edwards**, an 18th century American philosopher and pastor is  
42 regarded as the principal theologian of Puritanism and Evangelicalism. His  
43 works constitute a part of the canon of the conservative Christian circles to  
44 this day. As an unapologetic segregationist slave owner, he regarded slave  
45 labor to be vital to the American economy. To justify his stand on theological



1 grounds, he was not averse to using selected and distorted extracts from the  
2 Bible to attack the opponents of slavery. Edwards held that:

3  
4 *So long as slaves ... were purchased legally, humanely treated,*  
5 *and every effort was made to convert them to Christianity—it was*  
6 *all fine.* (Poletti 2022).

7  
8 **John Wesley**, who also lived in the 18th century, was an influential British  
9 theologian and pastor. As the main founder of the Methodist tradition within  
10 the Anglican church, he changed many liturgical practices and steered the  
11 church towards social activism, including the abolition of slavery and prison  
12 reform. Though persecuted at the outset for his unconventional views, later  
13 on he became one of the most popular pastors in England. His opposition to  
14 slavery was forthright:

15  
16 *Ever since I heard of [slavery] first I felt a perfect detestation*  
17 *of the horrid slave trade.* (Poletti 2022).

18  
19 Here we have two influential luminaries of Protestantism projecting widely  
20 divergent views on a matter of central importance to humanity. Yet, each saw  
21 his position to be in consonance with the Bible, which to them was the word  
22 of God.

## 23 24 **12.6 UNITY AND STRUGGLE**

25  
26 Religious conflict is a part of several major interrelated problems confronting  
27 humanity today. Human-caused dramatic climate change and environmental  
28 degradation combine with disastrous famines and outbreaks of pandemics to  
29 threaten planetary life and enhance the social instability caused by vast  
30 economic disparities, oligarchy and poverty. The growing complexity of the  
31 global economy and the short-term, profit-centered horizons of the major  
32 economic actors add to the intrinsic cyclical instability of capitalism. Rivalries  
33 between major powers, the grotesque nature of modern military technology  
34 and militarism threaten peace everywhere. And growing divisiveness based  
35 on ethnicity, race, and religion induced by authoritarian political parties have  
36 the potential to cause damaging social chaos and civil conflict.

37 The existence of life on this planet is at risk. It demands international  
38 grassroots level unity and action by people from all religious and secular  
39 traditions. It is a struggle against the elitist forces and institutions that crop up  
40 and benefit from the socio-economic system that forms the foundation upon  
41 which these problems rest.

42 Unified action for change is hard to envision if the religious—some six out  
43 of seven humans—accept that suffering arises from sin or past deeds. In  
44 truth, both the sinful and the virtuous suffer. Thereby, and in the spirit of  
45 interfaith cooperation, they need to concur that humans are not able to fathom  
46 the mind of a divine power. Hence, they and the irreligious need to focus on

1 matters humans can grasp, that is, on the natural, historic, societal forces and  
2 outlooks that induce and enhance the human plight, and devise strategies to  
3 deal with them. They have to place the struggle against neoliberalism, the  
4 globally dominant socio-economic system that underlies these problems, as  
5 the primary priority, both at the spiritual and secular levels.

6  
7 +++++  
8

9 The over-a-century of Western intrusion in Afghanistan typifies the neoliberal  
10 system. The latest phase witnessed horrific bombings, drone attacks and  
11 operation of special forces. In early 2022, the Western invaders withdrew in  
12 a chaotic manner. The billions they expended stupendously benefited the  
13 arms manufacturers in the West. But it did not and was not meant to institute  
14 a stable, democratic social order in the nation. The puppet regime they had  
15 propped up collapsed rapidly, enabling the Taliban to once again swiftly seize  
16 power and impose a theocratic order. Western governments have now seized  
17 Afghanistan's overseas assets and blocked financial transfers for the country,  
18 worsening its status from an emergency to a calamity. The nation faces a  
19 huge crisis of hunger and joblessness. Over 90% of the families are food  
20 deficient. Women and women-led families are the most affected by job losses  
21 and severely curtailed education. Health conditions are abysmal from one end  
22 of the country to another.

23 The liberal Western media can only engage in lamenting how the US and  
24 its allies abandoned the Afghan people. But the US military was never there  
25 to uphold their interests, liberate women, or deal with religious extremism and  
26 terrorism. It was there to serve a profit-driven, imperial system. Under its  
27 hegemony, growing opium became the sole reliable way to earn a living for  
28 large numbers of rural people. That the Afghans are now immersed in deep  
29 poverty under a harsh, theocratic regime and women are egregiously being  
30 denied their fundamental rights is a logical consequence of the nature of the  
31 US intervention. As in Iraq, it could not have been otherwise. Militarism is the  
32 obverse side of neoliberal economics.

33  
34 +++++  
35

36 The current projections are that at least for the next thirty years, around 85%  
37 of humanity will remain within the formal embrace of a religious system. Of  
38 the rest, the greater portion will adopt a spiritual perspective. Frank secularists  
39 will not only remain a minority but also decline from around 7% of the global  
40 population today to around 5% in 2050. Due to the existent odium towards  
41 atheism in many countries, sociologists feel that atheists are often reluctant  
42 to identify themselves as such and their true proportion may be twice as high  
43 as what is suggested by survey data. The bulk of the secularists will continue  
44 to be, as they are now, in China.

45 Even a trenchant, erudite critic of religion concedes that religion will not  
46 wither away any time soon. It has become too integral to human existence.

1  
2 *Humans need comfort in the face of pain and suffering, and*  
3 *many need to think that there's something more after this life,*  
4 *that they're loved by an invisible being. There will always be*  
5 *people who believe, and I wouldn't be surprised if they remain*  
6 *the majority.* Phil Zuckerman (Nuwer 2014).  
7

8 But what kind of religion will prevail? Will it rationalize the unjust neoliberal  
9 social order, or will it advocate a humane order based on universal dignity,  
10 equality and harmony? That is the primary choice facing both religion and  
11 secularism at this critical phase of the neoliberal era.  
12

13 *Religion emerges as a culture of resistance but then it gets*  
14 *absorbed by the power structures. Nonetheless, a resistant*  
15 *strain survives as part of popular resistance and reemerges*  
16 *from time to time. However, victories gained by this resistance*  
17 *can be reabsorbed by the dominant structures as resistance*  
18 *weakens.*

19 Professor Abdul Paliwala (personal communication).  
20

21 The next thirty years constitutes a decisive period for humanity. It is the period  
22 during which the fate of humans and life on this planet will probably be  
23 decided. People of faith and secularists must decisively reject neoliberalism  
24 and embrace the culture of resistance. Else, the chance of a harmonious,  
25 stable, just, prosperous but environmentally sustainable future for humans will  
26 decline precipitously.

27 The faithful of all traditions, spiritualists of all shades and secularists have  
28 to be cognizant of retrogressive ideas that lead to inequality and divisiveness.  
29 They must form a united front against neoliberalism and its economic, political  
30 and military institutions. Progressive religious and secular groups often  
31 campaign against specific neoliberal, pro-corporate policies. Now they have  
32 to firmly oppose all its ills: privatization, war, inequality, worship of the market,  
33 pro-corporate free trade, divisiveness, downsizing of education, public health,  
34 and militarism. To date, hardly any major faith has clearly opposed capitalism  
35 and imperialism, and none has enunciated a systemic alternative. It is time to  
36 go beyond volunteering, charity and narrow development projects, propose a  
37 systemic objective and act accordingly. Capitalism and militarism have to go.

38 Going beyond halfway programs, the religious, secularist and progressive  
39 movements must promote a democratic socialist program based on peace  
40 and international solidarity. Their program must be guided by science and  
41 ethical tenets of compassion, equality and universal solidarity. Racism, ethnic  
42 discrimination, gender bias, religious preference and nationality-based bias  
43 have no place within this program. While adopting non-violent means of  
44 struggle, they should not desist from open civil disobedience. They need to  
45 work for a governance that will place state power under popular, transparent

1 control, manage the economy in a cooperative manner, expunge economic  
2 inequality and ensure sound environmental management.

3 Humans need to embrace a universalized Golden Rule, have deep seated  
4 respect for different beliefs, adopt a morally edifying outlook and reject creeds  
5 that rationalize divisiveness, plutocracy, authoritarianism and theocracy.  
6 Many icons of the past and presents have shown us the way.

7  
8 **Archbishop Desmond Tutu** was a valiant campaigner against apartheid and  
9 an uncompromising champion of social justice and global harmony. It  
10 behooves upon people of goodwill to endorse his enunciation of God's dream.

11  
12 *God's dream is that you and I and all of us*  
13 *will realize that we are family, that we are made for*  
14 *togetherness, for goodness, and for compassion.*

15 Desmond Tutu  
16

17 **Malala Yousafzai**, a model of women's rights, justice and human decency,  
18 wisely warns us that quietism and complacency cannot take us far.

19  
20 *If people were silent nothing would change.*

21 Malala Yousafzai  
22

23 **James Baldwin**, the visionary writer and anti-racist and social justice activist  
24 who decried segregationist and homophobic religion, eloquently informed us  
25 that with collective and sustained effort, fundamental change is within reach.

26  
27 *The impossible is the least that one can demand.*

28 James Baldwin  
29

30 **John G Whittier**, a 19th century American poet, ardent anti-slavery activist  
31 and a fervent Quaker, had a simple recipe to enjoin faith with practice for a  
32 collective struggle against capitalism. In a gender-balanced form, it reads:

33  
34 *O noble human!*  
35 *fold to thy heart thy brother and sister;*

36 *Where pity dwells,*  
37 *the peace of God is there;*

38 *To worship rightly*  
39 *is to love each other,*

40 *Each smile a hymn,*  
41 *each kindly deed a prayer.*

42 John Greenleaf Whittier  
43

44 **Rumi**, the celebrated Sufi sage and scholar, saw the essence of the spiritual  
45 quest not in rituals or places of worship but within the depth of one's being.

46

1 *I looked in temples, churches and mosques.*  
2 *But I found the Divine within my heart.*

3 Jalal al-Din Rumi  
4

5 **Pope Francis**, a visionary pontiff, adds that our spiritual quest is incomplete  
6 without concrete actions to promote justice and human dignity.  
7

8 *The great biblical tradition enjoins on all peoples the duty*  
9 *to hear the voice of the poor.*

10 *It bids us break the bonds of injustice and oppression*  
11 *which give rise to glaring, and indeed scandalous, social inequalities.*

12 Pope Francis  
13

14 **Muhammad Ali** was the boxing champion who adamantly refused to join the  
15 aggressive US war on the people of Vietnam. Though he risked his title, a  
16 heavy fine and a jail sentence, he did not budge from his pacifist stand that  
17 derived from his religious belief. Ali poignantly informs us that compassion is  
18 a fundamental human obligation.  
19

20 *Service to others is the rent you pay*  
21 *for your room here on earth.*

22 Muhammad Ali  
23

**He asked this girl:  
Are you Hindu, christian or  
muslim ?  
She answered: I am hungry.**



**Make Humanity your Religion**

24  
25  
26  
27

People of faith and secularists must draw inspiration from these and other morally decent humans to struggle for a just, humane, and egalitarian social

1 order. The dispiriting answer given by this beautiful child must be, once and  
2 for all, be relegated to the trash can of history.  
3

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*The important thing is not to stop questioning.  
Curiosity has its own reason for existing.*  
Albert Einstein



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*Truth has nothing to do with the conclusion,  
and everything to do with the methodology.*

Stefan Molyneux



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## FRONT MATTER

Yin-Yang Symbol

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Yin\\_yang.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Yin_yang.svg)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Eternal Knot, Buddhist Symbol

<https://www.ancient-symbols.com/images/buddhist-symbols/original/eternal-knot.jpg>

Multifaith Poster

Pass a Method, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=25255735>

## 2. LEXICON

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*That which can be asserted without evidence,  
can be dismissed without evidence.*

Christopher Hitchens



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# AUTHOR PROFILE



*Write what should not be forgotten.*

Isabel Allende

*How vain it is to sit down to write  
when you have not stood up to live.*

Henry David Thoreau



Karim F Hirji is an award-winning retired Professor of Medical Statistics who has published many statistical and biomedical research papers together with articles on education, politics and other issues, six nonfiction books and one novel.

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