



Chapter Overview

In the final chapter of *World Religions: Western Traditions*, Hussain and Amore widen the descriptive lens to examine some broad-scale issues concerning the study and practice of religion in the contemporary world, as well as the religious dimensions expressed in current political and cultural discourses. In so doing, they describe various instances wherein religious communities are responding to the challenges of negotiating their place within modern, pluralistic, globalized societies.

Hussain and Amore explore how the nature of political events in the last few decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first have forced political and media analysts to engage with explicitly religious concerns underlying political actions. The authors pay considerable attention to contemporary debates within the field of bioethics, wherein traditional religious views concerning the soul and the dogmatic limitations upon human authority can figure into assessments of various medical interventions, such as euthanasia or abortion.

Likewise, environmentalism is also considered in some detail, with particular attention paid to the various ways that the world's religious traditions have influenced ideas concerning humans' relationship to the natural world and how changes in the interpretation of scripture (from granting humans dominion over the world, to making us stewards of the earth) can offer alternative understandings of our place within the natural world and our responsibilities to it. The authors also delve into the discussions regarding gender equality and women's access to leadership positions within religious communities, along with a consideration of inclusivity regarding the full participation and rights of LGBTIQ persons within the religious traditions with which they feel an affinity.

In the conclusion of this chapter, Hussain and Amore explore the related concepts of pluralism and interfaith dialogue. In particular, they suggest that the religious traditions of the world can be analyzed and engaged with based on a consideration of the ways that they help their adherents to address questions regarding the human condition within the context of modernity. Hussain and Amore argue that through the study of different religions we can expand both our understanding of others, as well as of ourselves. Further, they assert that the open, critical, and self-reflecting stance associated with a pluralistic approach to engagement with others (in contrast to the closed, self-protective nature of toleration and relativism) will force us to re-think and modify our own positions on issues of global importance. The authors cite the view expounded by Wilfred Cantwell Smith that interrelation is the order of life and that to understand the other as connected to oneself is to better appreciate our own stance within the world.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you are encouraged to

- understand that religious issues are often intricately intertwined with political developments in global affairs, and an understanding of the religious dimension is necessary for critical engagement in contemporary discourse;
- understand that fundamentalists often perceive a struggle between good and evil forces in the world, and advocate strict adherence to doctrinal orthodoxy and orthopraxy as a moral imperative;
- understand that the tensions between religious and scientific perspectives described in matters concerning bioethics is often rooted in religious communities' concerns over humans' usurpation of the divine and transgression of the divine will;
- Understand that the growth of the environmental movement in the modern period has precipitated a re-imagining of humans as stewards of the earth within environmentally conscious religious communities;
- understand that the equality of women's involvement in religious practice and access to leadership positions has been subject to a great deal of discussion in recent decades, and gains have been made on the equality front in several different religious communities;
- understand that LGBTIQ persons have struggled to gain acceptance within the religious traditions with which they feel an affinity;
- understand that the success of missionary religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism may have something to do with their material culture and technologies (especially writing systems);
- understand that pluralism is different from relativism, and that tolerance is the commitment to an open engagement with another's beliefs, practices, and worldview in an attempt to gain a substantive understanding of the other based on their own account of themselves.

Key Terms

Bioethics The field of study pertaining to the ethics of medical and biological research; and discussions pertaining to issues within the field. (pp. 408–410)

Fundamentalism Label applied to conservative religious movements, often advocating scriptural literalism, and traditional forms of orthopraxy. (pp. 406–408)

Interfaith dialogue A quest for a patient and appreciative relationship that can persist despite disagreement. (pp. 418–419)

LGBTIQ An acronym referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, intersex, questioning persons. (pp. 413–415)

Nationalism Political philosophy advocating identification with one's nation, its interests and the hegemony of a common national culture (often including religion). (pp. 404–408)

Pluralism An attitude of openness to religious, cultural, political difference. Critical engagement with the beliefs of others, and critical reflection upon one's own. (pp. 415–420)

Relativism The notion that all beliefs are relative to their context, and that any assessment of truth, or value is relative to the context within which the specific claims regarding truth, or value are made. (p. 415)

Secularism The exclusion (in principle) of all religious groups, institutions, and identities from public support and public decision making. (pp. 417–418)

Study Questions

See below for answers with page references.

1. What elements of the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution do Hussain and Amore describe as having confounded development economists and politico-military strategist at the time?
2. What did Samuel Huntington argue in his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* regarding religions?
3. How did the conflict in Sri Lanka spur a resurgence of Buddhist fervor amongst the Sinhalese faction?
4. In what ways is the application of the term “fundamentalism” problematic?
5. To what does the term “Hindutva” refer?

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways do you see religious influences as active within your own local political environment?
2. How would you respond to the claim that “all religions are the same”?
3. What do you think of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's assertions regarding the interconnectedness of different religious traditions?
4. Do you think that religion constitutes an important part of your nation's identity? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
5. Do you think that interfaith dialogue represents an important element of international diplomacy and negotiation? On what grounds do you base your conclusion?

Research Paper Topics

1. Outline the tensions which currently exist between the Chinese government and specific religious groups. Present a clear analysis of the common themes expressed in the conflicts between the government and these different groups?
2. Cite, describe, and present a comparative analysis of examples of orthopraxy across three different religious traditions.
3. Present a descriptive comparison of attitudes regarding euthanasia from two different religious traditions. What are the common points, where do they differ, and to what extent do these religious communities involve themselves in political action in support of their religious convictions regarding euthanasia?
4. In what ways might Jainism and Buddhism be described as environmentally conscious religious traditions? Advance an argument asserting whether or not elements from these religions might be applied to non-religious environmental awareness campaigns.
5. On what basis does the Dalai Lama contend that science and Buddhism are compatible? Present an analysis of this claim and advance a clear argument either affirming or negating it.
6. How has the issue of same-sex marriage affected the Anglican Communion? Present a descriptive analysis of the historical development of the issue within the community and any major events associated with it.
7. How is the subject of homosexuality treated in traditional Buddhist societies? Describe and analyze some of the social and political consequences derived from traditional attitudes towards LGBTIQ persons in Buddhist societies.
8. Present a descriptive analysis contrasting the historical development of religious toleration in the West alongside the emergence of a pluralist ethos in Western societies. Cite specific historical examples to support the necessarily broad tone of your analysis.
9. How has the phenomenon of interfaith dialogue developed over human history? Cite specific examples of formal and informal interfaith exchanges from different historical periods. Advance an argument regarding whether or not interfaith dialogue might be described as having progressively improved over time.
10. Describe and analyze the ways in which missionary religions exhibit political and technological dimensions. Compare two different historical missionary campaigns and identify how these elements manifested themselves, respectively, within each case.

Additional Resources

Audio-Visual

Fremont, USA: A City's Encounter with Religious Diversity. 2009. Rachel Antell and Elinor Pierce (dirs.). 57 minutes.

Hold Your Breath. Maren Graingger-Monsen (dir.). 2005. Fanlight Productions. 58 minutes.

Print

Clayton, Philip and Zachary Simpson (eds.). 2006. *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Cornille, Catherine (ed.). 2013. *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Seager, Richard Hughes. 1993. *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices from the World's Parliament of Religions 1893*. La Salle, IL: Open Court.

Internet

<http://www.oikoumene.org/en>

<http://pluralism.org/>

Study Questions: Answer Key

1. Hussain and Amore explain that the wide-spread assumption in the West, that the decline of religious influence within Western society represented a global phenomenon left Western experts completely unprepared to respond to a political revolution ignited by religious commitment. Thus, when the Shah's government was overthrown in 1979 by an insurgent movement led by Islamic clerics, who enjoyed the support of the majority of the Iranian people, Western experts were stunned. From a secular Western perspective the willingness to fight and die in defence of religious values, and the popular acclaim of a clerical leadership, seemed completely alien. (p. 404)
2. In his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* Huntington argued that in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War ideological battle between communism and capitalism, a new global ideological struggle had emerged. In the place of competing economic ideologies, Huntington asserted that conflicting religious ideologies were now at the heart of a "clash" between different civilizations. (p. 404)
3. Although the origins of the Sri Lankan civil war had to do with a campaign for regional autonomy on the part of the Tamil minority, the conflict quickly took on religious overtones. The fact that the Tamil faction is overwhelmingly Hindu, and the Sinhalese majority overwhelmingly Buddhist, allowed for the struggle to be characterized as a competition between religious worldviews. The Sinhalese faction rallied behind a new Buddhist nationalist political party which helped elect Buddhist monks to parliament for the first time in the nation's history. The emergence of this religious fervor amongst the Sinhalese at a time of civil strife, when they perceived

their identity as being threatened, is a powerful example of the intertwined nature of the religious and the political in human affairs. (p. 406)

4. The term “fundamentalism” can be read as problematic in several different ways. In one respect the use of the term to characterize non-Christian religious movements ignores the fact that the term is derived from a particular Christian response to modern secularization and the historical critique of Christian scripture. Thus, it could be argued that describing an Islamic group as fundamentalist represents a misappropriation of the term, and the imposition of a Christian conceptual framework upon a non-Christian tradition. Furthermore, the majority of Christian groups which are described as fundamentalists do not identify with the term. Rather, these groups often describe themselves as “evangelical.” Thus, in this case the term once again represents a category and understanding imposed on a group by outsiders. (pp. 406–408)
5. The term “Hindutva,” literally meaning “Hindu-ness,” was created in the 1920s by the Indian independence activist V.D. Sarvakar to describe a nationalist attitude which championed a view of Hinduism as the one true religion, apprehended India as a dominion of Hindu supremacy, and justified sectarian violence. (p. 408)