SOCIOLOGY FOR A NEW CENTURY

GODS IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS IN SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

LESTER KURTZ

Gods in the Global Village

The World's Religions in Sociological Perspective

Lester R. Kurtz
University of Texas, Austin

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Dedicated to Jeannie Kurtz
and the memory of Merwin Kurtz,
my first teachers

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lester R. Kurtz is Associate Professor of Sociology and Asian Studies at the University of Texas-Austin and has been a visiting professor at Tunghai University, Republic of China, and Delhi University, India. He received a Master of Arts in Religion from Yale University and a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Chicago. His book *The Politics of Heresy* (University of California Press, 1986) won the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion's 1987 Distinguished Book Award. He was Director of Religious Studies at the University of Texas, 1986–1989, and is chair-elect of the Peace Studies Association and of the Peace and War Section of the American Sociological Association.

His research focuses on the relationship between religion and social conflict; he is author of *The Nuclear Cage: A Sociology of the Arms Race* (1988) and co-editor of two forthcoming books: *The Web of Violence* (with Jennifer Turpin) and *The Geography of Nonviolence* (with Sarah Beth Asher). He is currently writing a book on Mohandas Gandhi's nonviolent legacies in India. He is a husband and the father of two daughters and hopes to bring a third daughter, Shanti, from India to join the family in the near future.

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Foreword

Sociology for a New Century offers the best of current sociological thinking to today's students. The goal of the series is to prepare students, and—in the long run—the informed public, for a world that has changed dramatically in the last three decades and one that continues to astonish.

This goal reflects important changes that have taken place in sociology. The discipline has become broader in orientation, with an ever-growing interest in research that is comparative, historical, or transnational in orientation. Sociologists are less focused on "American" society as the pinnacle of human achievement and more sensitive to global processes and trends. They also have become less insulated from surrounding social forces. In the 1970s and 1980s sociologists were so obsessed with constructing a science of society that they saw impenetrability as a sign of success. Today, there is a greater effort to connect sociology to the ongoing concerns and experiences of the informed public.

Each book in this series offers a comparative, historical, transnational, or global perspective in some way, to help broaden students' vision. *Gods in the Global Village* responds to the multicultural interests of today's diverse student population by treating classic issues in the sociology of religion—rituals, beliefs, ethics, secularization, religious conflict—in a variety of religious contexts. Lester Kurtz gives students the tools they need to understand religious life in today's world, first by considering the manifold global interconnections among beliefs and believers (as well as among those who oppose them), and second by introducing students to the fundamentals of each of the world religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. With this knowledge base established, *Gods in the Global Village* goes on to help students understand the interplay between social change and religion, addressing such questions as why modernization seems accompanied by renewed religious conflicts or why, in a society like ours, which is characterized by separation of church and state, religion continues to be one of the fault lines dividing Americans

from each other. As provocative as it is informative, this book will spark heated classroom discussion and careful reexamination of some of our conventional understandings about the role of religion in the modern and postmodern world.

Preface

The Buddha is said to have argued that if a house is on fire, we should not sit around debating how to put it out but should set to work immediately. A scholar's inclination, however, is to think carefully about a problem before writing about it, let alone acting on it.

Humanity's common house is on fire in a very real sense: even after the end of the Cold War and its reign of nuclear terror, we live in a time of acute crisis. Despite our technological advances and abundant natural resources, millions of people die of starvation every day and millions more are malnourished; wars and various armed conflicts between religious and ethnic communities plague the planet, which is itself still booby trapped for self-destruction with thousands of nuclear weapons. Peoples around the world find their familiar societies being torn apart by a rapid globalization of the economy and culture of the human community that is producing a dizzying pace of change. The Earth itself has been seriously abused by civilization and it is not clear that we have the will to stop further damage, let alone repair what we have already done.

This book focuses on a central aspect of that common crisis—the relationship among the major religious traditions that inform the thinking and ethical standards of most people in the emerging global social order. It would be a better book if I spent another twenty-five years writing it, but the topic's urgency justifies this preliminary attempt to use sociological tools to assess the state of religious life in a globalizing world. Trying to synthesize the material in this book has been a humbling experience, and I hope that my readers will accept it in the spirit in which it is offered—as a tentative analysis, a first step in a process that will require more research and more action.

Since Max Weber's plea in 1918 for a value-neutral sociology and the professionalization of academia and the social sciences after World War II, sociologists have been divided about the manner in which they may properly address social issues—or whether these issues should be addressed at all. Mainstream sociology, especially in the United States, has

tended to favor the objective, dispassionate approach avoiding both personal biases and political positions according to the canons of science. Alongside this trend, however, a more critical sociology has persisted since the founding of the discipline, gaining added momentum in the 1960s, when questions were raised not only about the morality but even the possibility of objectivity in the study of pressing social problems. *Gods in the Global Village* falls clearly in the latter camp; it employs the scientific model to investigate religious life but does not pretend to be entirely value free. It is necessary, therefore, to begin our argument by outlining some underlying assumptions.

A major assumption of this book is that all knowledge is shaped by the social context of the knower; therefore, both religious traditions and our studies of them are shaped by the context in which we construct them. That is not to say that the pursuit of objectivity is not valuable—we must always try to overcome our own biases in our pursuit of the truth—but that we will never fully attain it. We cannot know the world in and of itself, but only as it is filtered through the categories of the mind. Like other scholars, sociologists cannot pretend to be objective because their biases, explicit or implicit, will shape their work; nonetheless all scholars should attempt to transcend their own social and disciplinary contexts.

A second assumption is that religious pluralism will be a necessary precondition of the global village for the foreseeable future. The question that faces us as a human community is not "Which religious tradition is true?" or even "Is any religious tradition true?" but "How can we enable the various religious and secular traditions to coexist peacefully on the planet?"

A third assumption is the belief that the sociology of religion—itself a pluralistic discipline—can provide invaluable insight into the most pressing problems of the late twentieth century. That is not to say that sociologists should therefore lead the way in solving these problems (as Auguste Comte thought) nor that they should simply loosen the soil for contemplative thought (as Max Weber contended). Rather, sociologists should use their analytical tools to assess religion in the global community and become involved in the lively debates about the future of humanity that will ensue.

Finally, in the classroom I believe it is important to inform my students of my biases from the beginning so that they do not have to play guessing games. I will do the same here, because I think my background shapes what I see and how I interpret it. I am the son of a Methodist preacher, from a long line of clergymen, who became politically conscious in the

1960s and has participated in civil rights and peace movements. I continue to be a practicing Christian although I have reinterpreted some of the church's doctrines in my own way. My study of the world's religions, along with time spent living in India and China, has further shaped my personal beliefs, as did two years working on a master of arts in religion at Yale Divinity School. My wife and two daughters are Jewish, and we go to Quaker meetings on a regular basis as well as attending other religious ceremonies from various faiths. The astute reader will detect these shaping influences in the pages that follow.

Lester R. Kurtz

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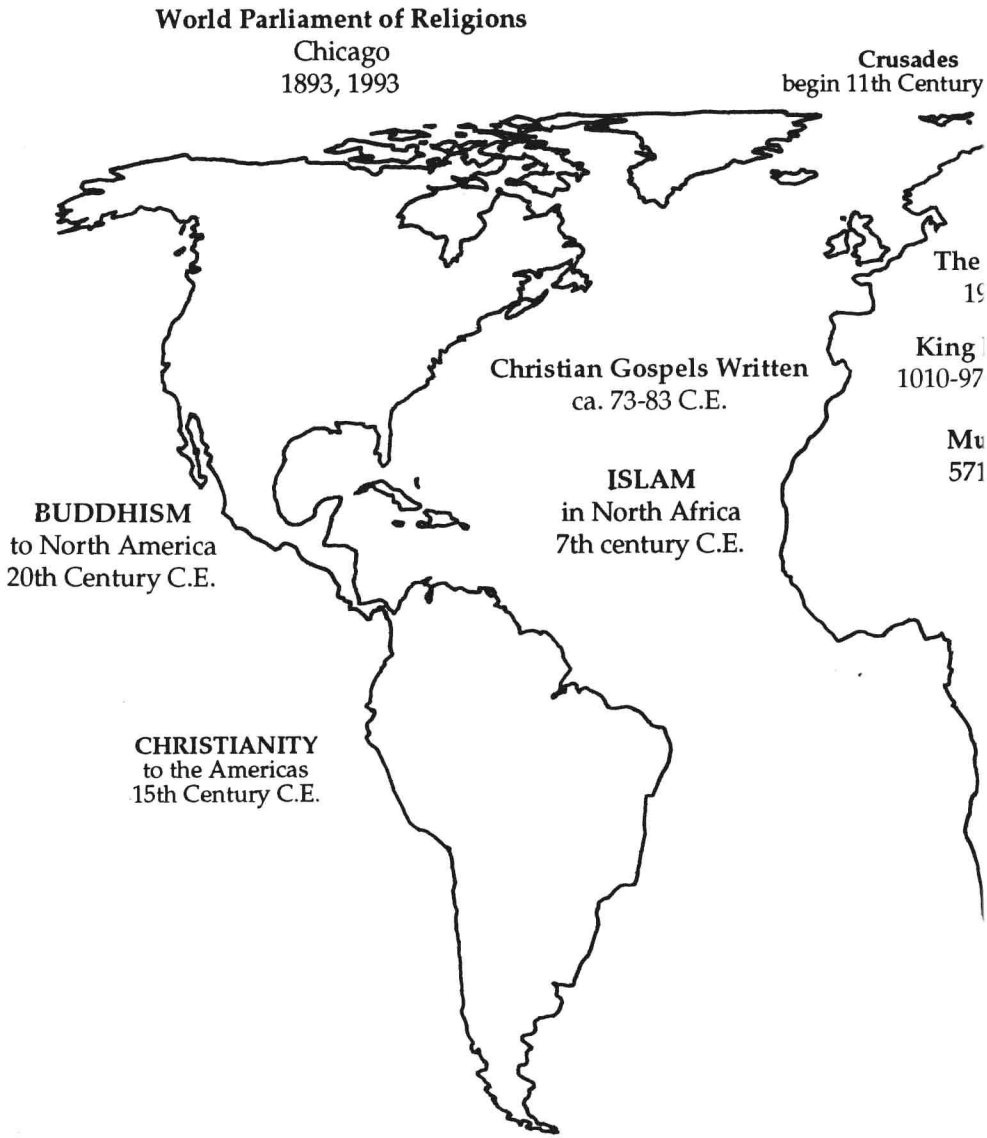
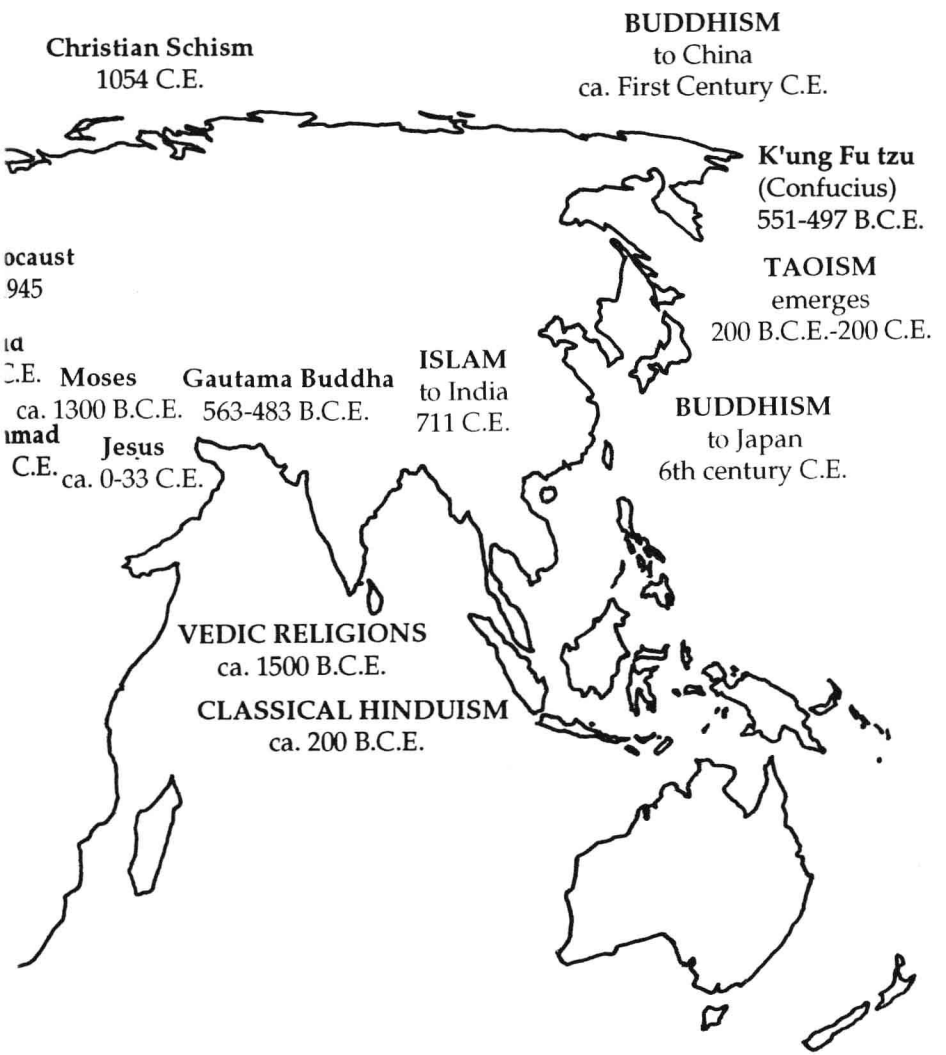


WORLD'S MAJOR RELIGIONS



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Religious Life in the Global Village

Jews from around the world can now fax their prayers to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. Fortunetellers in China provide computer-generated astrological charts. Telecommunication satellites link isolated religious communities at separate ends of the earth; American television offers its viewers Christian preachers and Buddhist teachers. In the summer of 1993, representatives of religious communities met at a Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago to establish a process for ongoing dialogue and to initiate a debate on a declaration of a global ethic. At lectures given by a Hindu teacher in Texas, a large color portrait of the Indian guru Sai Baba is framed by a vase of fresh flowers and a candle painted with an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. In the middle of Colombo, Sri Lanka, sits St. Anthony's Cathedral, a pilgrimage center for hundreds of thousands each week, 90 percent of whom are not Christians but Buddhists and Hindus.

The pleasant coexistence of religious traditions is only one side of the story, however. In early 1994, an Israeli doctor entered a mosque in Hebron at the Cave of the Patriarchs, where Abraham is supposed to be buried, and murdered over thirty Muslims at prayer. He in turn was beaten to death, and violence broke out again between Jews and Muslims throughout the region. In India, Hindus and Muslims have been killing each other in a flare-up of a centuries-old conflict, now focused on the destruction of a Muslim mosque by Hindu nationalists at a disputed site in Ayodhya. Catholics and Protestants have been fighting one another viciously in Northern Ireland, and Muslim militants have targeted "officials, police officers, Christians and occasionally tourists" in an effort to replace the secular Egyptian government with a more traditional Islamic theocracy (Ibrahim 1994). The Ku Klux Klan still marches in the United States, using religious arguments to denounce African Americans, Jews, and others. In the former Yugoslavia, Serbian Orthodox Christians have been engaged in a campaign of "ethnic cleansing" of Muslims that involves wholesale slaughter.

The global village is becoming a reality economically and socially, if not politically, as every isolated corner of the planet is being knit together into a world system. This global order, emerging for several centuries, has become a reality in the twentieth century,[1] as all humans increasingly participate in a "shared fate" (Joseph 1993; cf. Durkheim 1915; Wallerstein 1984). Our economic and social institutions, our culture, art, music, and many of our aspirations, are now tied together around the world. But the human race is constructing a multicultural global village full of conflict and violence as well as promise.

Just as the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union ended in the 1990s and astounding progress was made in solving old conflicts, ethnic and religious nationalism exploded in violence around the world. Mark Juergensmeyer contends that rather than witnessing the "end of history" (see Fukuyama 1992) and emergence of a worldwide consensus in favor of secular liberal democracy, we may see the coming of a new Cold War, one between the secular West and numerous new religious nationalisms. "Like the old Cold War," says Juergensmeyer (1993: 2), "the confrontation between these new forms of culture-based politics and the secular state is global in its scope, binary in its opposition, occasionally violent, and essentially a difference of ideologies."

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

Much of the best and worst of human history has been created in the name of its gods, and religious traditions continue to provide both an ethical critique of, as well as a justification for, much bloodletting. The central thesis of this book is that the sociological study of religion has important insights into the central issues of how we can live together in our multicultural global village as well as helpful tools for investigating the problems created by our newly created common life with its diverse norms and values. Our task here is to review those insights, assess the

tools, raise questions, and develop some tentative conclusions about the role of religions in promoting chaos or community as humanity moves into the twenty-first century. Whether or not we can discover a means for sustaining a diversity of religious traditions and a wide range of ethical values and still live together remains an unanswered question.

The world's religion will be an integral part of the process, for better or for worse. Faith traditions "work" because they answer fundamental questions in a comprehensive way. That very strength, however, sometimes results in exclusivistic claims to a monopoly on the "Truth," which, in a multicultural global village, often precipitates fatal conflicts among competing religious claims and the people who make them. The very things that hold a community together can also tear it apart.[2]

Religion and the Globalization of Social Life

Our ancient ancestors sat around the fire and heard stories about their forebears—about the time when life first emerged in the universe, about lessons for living their lives. When people gather today, the flickering light comes from a television rather than a fire, but we still hear stories about the nature of reality as it is perceived in our own culture. Many of the Earth's previous inhabitants heard only one story about creation during their lifetime, but today most people hear more than one as the various religious traditions of the world—as well as newer scientific ones—diffuse widely through modern means of mass communication. We are surrounded not only by our own cultures but those of countless other peoples. Encountering these different perspectives on life is stimulating and enticing, but the overall process of cross-cultural contact is highly complicated because meaningful differences do exist among religions and sometimes provide the basis or excuse for confrontation.

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

Many conflicts occurred throughout the history of Christianity, of course, but none so radical as those precipitated by the crisis of modern-