CHAPTER 11. ORIGINS AND DISTRIBUTION OF RELIGIONS

CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

Religion is one of the key components of culture and, like language, can both unify or divide humans. Like language, but in a different way, religion confers identity. Religion dominates the lives and behavior of billions of people worldwide. In the world of the late 1990s, modernization, urbanization, secularism, and resurgent fundamentalism appear to be on a collision course. The question facing the world of the twenty-first century will be whether the modern-secular fundamentalist religious countries can coexist. The study of religion has many geographic dimensions today.

Like languages, religions are constantly changing. In the process, the great religions of the world have diffused across cultural barriers and language boundaries. Persuasion will not lead people to change the language they speak, but it can induce them to convert to a new faith—conversion still goes on today. Just as the map of languages continues to change, so do patterns of religious affiliation. The cultural landscape is marked by religion—churches and mosques, cemeteries and shrines, statues and symbols, modes of dress, and personal habits. In industrialized societies, such overt religious displays have declined, but they are still common in more traditional societies.
The Geography of Religion

In many parts of the world, especially in non-Western areas, religion is such a vital part of culture that it practically constitutes the culture. Thus it becomes difficult to define exactly what a religion is, because religion manifests itself in so many different ways. In some societies, religion—at least in organized form—has become less significant in the lives of many people. In many societies in Africa and Asia, religious doctrine exerts tight control over much of the behavior of the people, through ritual and practice and even the orientation of the sleeping body at night. Even where religion is less dominant, its expression is still evident in many practices and beliefs.

Organized religion has powerful effects on human societies. It has been a major force in combating social ills, sustaining the poor, educating the deprived, and advancing medical knowledge. However, religion has also blocked scientific study, supported colonialism and exploitation, and condemned women to an inferior status in many societies. Like other bureaucracies, large-scale organized religion has all too often been unable to adjust to the times.

Major Religions

The distribution of the major religions among various world regions is depicted in Figure 11-1. The information on this map should be viewed as a generalization of a much more intricate set of distributions. Nevertheless, the map does reveal the dominance of the Christian religions, the several faiths of Christianity having been diffused through European colonialism and aggressive proselytism, Thus Christianity is today the world’s most widely dispersed
There are more than 1.6 billion Christians in the world today, divided between Roman Catholics (the largest segment), the Protestant churches, and Eastern Orthodox. Together, Christians account for nearly 40 percent of the world’s members of the world’s major religions.

The second true global religion (also called ‘universal faiths”) is Islam. Despite the fact that it is the newest” of the global religions—it arose in the western Arabia area in the sixth century—it is today the fastest growing of the world’s major religions, and like the other major faiths has more than one branch. Like Christianity, Islam has diffused widely, but mainly in Africa and Asia. It dominates in Southwest Asia and North Africa and extends eastward into the former Soviet Union and China, with clusters in Indonesia, Bangladesh, and the Philippines. It even has adherents in the United States (see: Focus on: Americas Black Muslims). Islam has more than 1 billion adherents, of whom more than half are outside the cultural realm often called the Islamic World. Southwest Asia and North Africa, however, remain the Islamic heartland, with about 400 million adherents. A comparison between Figures 11-1 and 7-1 shows that the largest Muslim country is Indonesia, with about 165 million believers. Christianity and Islam together hold the allegiance of nearly half the world’s population (see Table 11-1); no other faith even comes close. The third global religion, Buddhism, claims slightly less than 350 adherents. The third largest faith numerically, Hinduism, is not a global but a cultural faith concentrated in a single geographic realm, and is regarded as the world’s oldest organized religion. The vast majority of the 750 million Hindus live in India, although Hinduism extends into Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.
In this chapter we have viewed the spatial distribution of the world’s major religions and assessed their strengths in terms of number of adherents. In the next chapter we will examine the three geographic characteristics of religions: their locational origins, routes of diffusion, and their imprints on the cultural landscape.

CHAPTER 12. RELIGION: LOCATION, DIFFUSION, AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

Religion is the most recent major component of culture to develop. As a result, we know more about the development and dispersal of the major religions than we do of languages. In a world where cultural isolation is a thing of the past and religion is such an important part of culture, it is important to understand the different religions and their effect on the cultures of which they are a part. This chapter traces the spread of the belief systems that have contributed to the formation of modern cultural regions. It is remarkable that, after tens of thousands of years of human development and migration, the great faiths all arose within a few thousand kilometers of each other in South and Southwest Asia (Figure 12-1).

Hinduism

Hinduism is the oldest of the world’s major religions and one of the oldest extant religions in the world. It is a cultural religion, having emerged without a prophet or a book of scriptures and without evolving a bureaucratic structure comparable to that of the Christian religions. Hinduism appears to have originated in the region of the Indus Valley.
in what is today Pakistan (see Figure 12-1) perhaps as much as 4000 years ago. Hinduism reached its fullest development in India, and spread into Southeast Asia before the advent of Christianity. It has not been widely disseminated. Hinduism has remained essentially a cultural religion of South Asia and is more than a faith; it is a way of life. The cultural landscape of Hinduism is the cultural landscape of India. Temples and shrines, holy animals by the tens of millions, and the sights and sounds of endless processions and rituals all contribute to a unique atmosphere. The faith is a visual as well as an emotional experience.

**Buddhism**

Buddhism, with fewer than half as many adherents as Hinduism, arose in the sixth century B.C. in India. It was a reaction to the less desirable features of Hinduism such as its strict social hierarchy that protected the privileged and kept millions mired in poverty. Buddhism was founded by Prince Siddhanha, known to his followers as Gautama. The Buddha (enlightened one) was perhaps the first prominent Indian religious leader to speak out against Hinduism’s caste system. The faith grew rather slowly following the Buddha’s death until the middle of the third century B.C. when the Emperor Asoka became a convert. During Asoka’s rule there may have been more Buddhists than Hindu adherents in India, but after that period the strength of Hinduism began to reassert itself. Today Buddhism is practically extinct in India, although it still thrives in Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, Nepal, Tibet, Korea, and Xapan. The Buddha received enlightenment as he sat under the Bodhi (enlightenment) tree and because of its association with the Buddha, the tree is revered and protected; it has diffused as far as China and
Japan and marks the cultural landscape of many villages and towns. Buddhism’s architecture includes some magnificent achievements, with the pagoda as perhaps the most familiar structure. Buddhism is experiencing a revival that started two centuries ago and has recently intensified. It has become a global religion and diffused to many areas of the world.

China

Confucianism was founded on the teachings of Confucius in the sixth century B.C. Taoism is believed to have been founded by an older contemporary of Confucius Lao-Tsu, who had great and lasting impacts of Chinese life. In his teachings, Lao-Tsu focused on the proper form of political rule and the oneness of humanity and nature. According to Lao-Tsu, people should learn to live in harmony with nature (see Focus on: “Feng Shui”). Taoism became a cult of the masses. Following his death, the teachings of Confucius diffused widely throughout East and Southeast Asia. From his writings and sayings emerged the Confucian Classics, a set of 13 texts that became the focus of Chinese education for 200 years and the Guide for Chinese civilization. In the more liberal atmosphere in Communist China today, both the Chinese religions of old and the Christian and Islamic faiths are reviving, and Confucianism and Taoism continue to shape Chinese society.

Judaism

Judaism grew out of the belief system of the Jews, one of several nomadic Semitic tribes living in Southwest Asia about 2000 B.C. It is the oldest religion to arise west of the Indus River and the history of the Jews is filled with upheavals. In the face of constant threats, the Jews have
sustained their faith, the roots of which lie in the teachings of Abraham, who united his people. Table 11-1 shows the Jewish faith has about 18 million adherents, but the distribution of Jews proves that Judaism is indeed a world religion and has a global importance far greater than its numbers would indicate

Christianity and Islam

Christianity’s three major branches (Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Orthodoxy) have diffused throughout the world by expansion combined with relocation diffusion. The cultural landscapes of Christianity’s branches reflect the changes the faith has undergone over the centuries. Certain denominations have more durable cultural landscapes in which the authority and influence of the church remain visible. Islam, the youngest of the world religions, has two major sects, the majority Sunni and the minority Shiah (see Figure II -I). This division occurred almost immediately after the prophet Muhammad’s death and took on regional overtones when Shiism became the state religion of Persia (now Iran). Like Christianity, Islam has diffused globally, but is a classic example of expansion diffusion from its Arabian source, followed by relocation diffusion (Figure 124). Islam achieved its greatest artistic expression, its most distinctive visible element, in architecture.

CHAPTER 13. RELIGION, CULTURE, AND CONFLICT

CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

Of the forces shaping the geography of culture, language and religion are two of the most powerful, but as a divisive force religion plays a more prominent role. People may
speak the same language but have quite different beliefs either as members of different major religions or different branches of the same faith. As you read this chapter you will gain insight into the perpetuating of cultural strife by religion, a problem that adds to the difficulties of peaceful human coexistence. It is important for you to realize that religious conflicts usually involve more than differences in spiritual practices and beliefs. Religion functions as a symbol of a much wider set of cultural and political differences. The key points of this chapter are discussed below.

**Interfaith Boundaries**

Compare Figure 11-1 with a political map and you will see that some countries lie entirely within the realms of individual world religions, while other countries straddle interfaith boundaries, the boundaries between the world’s major faiths. Boundaries between major religions that cross countries can be powerful sources of conflict, with serious implications for political cohesion and stability.

Examine Figure 13-1 and you will see that several countries in Africa are in this situation, including Nigeria, Africa’s most populous state. Nigeria is a multilingual country of 110 million inhabitants. Superimposed on its linguistic diversity is religious regionalism: the north is a Muslim zone, whereas Christianity prevails in the south along with local traditional religions. Ethnic groups in the north and south see religion as the focal point of differences that go much deeper than that. Will Nigeria’s location astride an interfaith boundary ultimately destroy the country? The potential for a fracture along religious lines is growing, and any such development would have enormous social and political consequences. Nigeria is a crucible of West African culture and has served
as a model for other countries with two or more religious groups within their borders. The breakup of Nigeria would indeed have far-reaching consequences.

Intrafaith Boundaries

Boundaries between branches of a major religion are generally less divisive than boundaries between different religions. A number of Western European countries have Catholic as well as Protestant communities, and often these are reflected in the regional distribution of the population, as in the case of Switzerland (Figure 13-4). In the late 1990s the great majority of these countries were not experiencing religious or ethnic conflict. But intrafaith boundaries are still capable of producing cultural conflict that can threaten the stability of entire countries. Consider the situation in Northern Ireland, where a Protestant majority and a Catholic minority are in conflict over coexistence and their future. This issue is not strictly religious, but stems from a time when all of Ireland was a British dependency and British Protestants migrated to Ireland. Most settled in the northeastern corner of the island (see Figure 13-5) where, following partitioning, they constituted the majority of the population and held all the economic and political advantages. The conflict today is over access to opportunities, civil rights, and political influence. But religion and religious history are the banners beneath which the opposing sides march.

Religious Fundamentalism

In the world of the late 1990s, religious leaders and millions of their followers are seeking to return to the basics of their faith. This drive toward religious fundamentalism is often
born of frustration at the perceived breakdown of society’s mores and values, loss of religious authority, failure to achieve economic goals, corruption of political systems, and loss of a sense of local control in the face of the globalization of culture and economy. People of one society often fear fundamentalism in other societies without recognizing it in their own. In the United States, fundamentalism is often associated with Islam. However, religious fundamentalism is a world-wide phenomenon that affects virtually all religions, including Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism. Fundamentalism and extremism are closely related, and their appeal is global. Today religions are affected by modernization. Education, radio, television, and travel have diffused notions of individual liberties, sexual equality, and freedom of choice; questions about religions as well as secular authority; and other ideas that may clash with religious dogma. The drive toward fundamentalism in Christianity and Islam alike is creating a climate of mistrust that could lead to strife. The cultural cores of Christianity and Islam lie in close proximity in Europe and Southwest Asia, North Africa; the prospect of disharmony and conflict between them is growing.