



# GOD IS NOT ONE

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*The* EIGHT RIVAL RELIGIONS THAT RUN *the* WORLD  
—*and* WHY THEIR DIFFERENCES MATTER

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Their Differences Matter*

Stephen Prothero

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*Human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in  
perpetual rivalry with one another.*

—Isaiah Berlin

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# Contents

[Cover](#)  
[Title Page](#)  
[Epigraph](#)  
[A Note on Dates and Diacriticals](#)  
[Introduction](#)  
[Chapter One - Islam](#)  
[Chapter Two - Christianity](#)  
[Chapter Three - Confucianism](#)  
[Chapter Four - Hinduism](#)  
[Chapter Five - Buddhism](#)  
[Chapter Six - Yoruba Religion](#)  
[Chapter Seven - Judaism](#)  
[Chapter Eight - Daoism](#)  
[Chapter Nine - A Brief Coda on Atheism](#)  
[Conclusion](#)  
[Notes](#)  
[Index](#)  
[Acknowledgments](#)  
[About the Author](#)  
[Praise](#)  
[Copyright](#)  
[About the Publisher](#)

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## [A Note on Dates and Diacriticals](#)

Scholarly books on religion often use diacritical marks to indicate how a word is pronounced in Sanskrit or other sacred languages. In fact, use of diacriticals is a key way to signal one's scholarly bona fides. But diacritical marks are gibberish to most readers—is that a breve (˘) or a cedilla (,)?—so I avoid them here except in direct quotations, proper names, and citations. If an “s” with a mark underneath or atop it is pronounced like “sh,” then it appears here as “sh”: the Hindu god Shiva instead of Śiva, the Hindu goal of moksha instead of mokṣa. Diacritical marks also present a barrier to the integration of non-Christian religious terms into English—a barrier that is better torn down than built up. One reason the Sanskrit term *nirvāṇa* made it into English dictionaries was its willingness to drop the macron over the a and the underdot accompanying the n. And Hindu scriptures such as the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana are already finding wide acceptance among English speakers without their respective circumflexes.

Religious Studies scholars also typically date events either as C.E. (Common Era) or B.C.E. (before the Common Era), in an effort to avoid the Christian bias inherent in A.D. (Anno Domini, “in the year of our Lord”) and B.C. (“before Christ”). This is sleight of hand since these dates continue to mark events in relation to the life of Jesus whether or not those events are said to have occurred in C.E. or A.D. However, since the use of A.D. and B.C. indirectly imply belief in Jesus as both “Lord” and “Christ,” I use C.E. and B.C.E. here. Muslims have their own calendar, which begins with the *hijra* (“flight” or “emigration”) of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in 622 C.E. So while this book appears in 2010 C.E., it is also being published in A.H. 1431.



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## Introduction

At least since the first petals of the counterculture bloomed across Europe and the United States in the 1960s, it has been fashionable to affirm that all religions are beautiful and all are true. This claim, which reaches back to *All Religions Are One* (1795) by the English poet, printmaker, and prophet William Blake, is as odd as it is intriguing.<sup>1</sup> No one argues that different economic systems or political regimes are one and the same. Capitalism and socialism are so obviously at odds that their differences hardly bear mentioning. The same goes for democracy and monarchy. Yet scholars continue to claim that religious rivals such as Hinduism and Islam, Judaism and Christianity are, by some miracle of the imagination, essentially the same, and this view resounds in the echo chamber of popular culture, not least in Dan Brown's multi-million-dollar *Da Vinci Code* franchise.

The most popular metaphor for this view portrays the great religions as different paths up the same mountain. "It is possible to climb life's mountain from any side, but when the top is reached the trails converge," writes philosopher of religion Huston Smith. "At base, in the foothills of theology, ritual, and organizational structure, the religions are distinct. Differences in culture, history, geography, and collective temperament all make for diverse starting points. . . . But beyond these differences, the same goal beckons."<sup>2</sup> This is a comforting notion in a world in which religious violence often seems more present and potent than God. But is it true? If so, what might be waiting for us at the summit?

According to Mohandas Gandhi, "Belief in one God is the cornerstone of all religions," so it is toward this one God that all religious people are climbing. When it comes to divinity, however, one is not the religions' only number. Many Buddhists believe in no god, and many Hindus believe in thousands. Moreover, the characters of these gods differ wildly. Is God a warrior like Hinduism's Krishna or a mild-mannered wanderer like Christianity's Jesus? Is God personal, or impersonal? Male, or female (or both)? Or beyond description altogether?

Like Gandhi, the Dalai Lama affirms that "the essential message of all religions is very much the same."<sup>3</sup> In his view, however, what the world's religions share is not so much God as the Good—the sweet harmony of peace, love, and understanding that religion writer Karen Armstrong also finds at the heart of every religion. To be sure, the world's religious traditions *do* share many ethical precepts. No religion tells you it is okay to have sex with your mother or to murder your brother. The Golden Rule can be found not only in the Christian Bible and the Jewish Talmud but also in Confucian and Hindu books. No religion, however, sees ethics alone as its reason for being. Jews understand *halakha* ("law" or "way") to include ritual too, and the Ten Commandments begin with how to worship God.

To be fair, those who claim that the world's religions are one and the same do not deny the undeniable fact that they differ in some particulars. Obviously, Christians do not go on pilgrimage to Mecca, and Muslims do not practice baptism. Religious paths do diverge, Huston Smith admits, in the "foothills" of dogma, rites, and institutions.<sup>4</sup> To claim that all religions are the same, therefore, is not to deny the differences among a Buddhist who believes in no god, a Jew who believes in one God, and a Hindu who believes in many gods. It is simply to claim that the mathematics of divinity is a matter of the foothills. Debates over whether God has a body (yes, say Mormons; no, say Muslims) or

whether human beings have souls (yes, say Hindus; no, say Buddhists) do not matter, because, as Hindu teacher Swami Sivananda writes, “The fundamentals or essentials of all religions are the same. There is difference only in the non-essentials.”<sup>5</sup>

This is a lovely sentiment but it is dangerous, disrespectful, and untrue. For more than a generation we have followed scholars and sages down the rabbit hole into a fantasy world in which all gods are one. This wishful thinking is motivated in part by an understandable rejection of the exclusivist missionary view that only you and your kind will make it to heaven or Paradise. For most of world history, human beings have seen religious rivals as inferior to themselves—practitioners of empty rituals, perpetrators of bogus miracles, purveyors of fanciful myths. The Age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century popularized the ideal of religious tolerance, and we are doubtless better for it. But the idea of religious unity is wishful thinking nonetheless, and it has not made the world a safer place. In fact, this naive theological groupthink—call it Godthink—has made the world more dangerous by blinding us to the clashes of religions that threaten us worldwide. It is time we climbed out of the rabbit hole and back to reality.

The world’s religious rivals do converge when it comes to ethics, but they diverge sharply on doctrine, ritual, mythology, experience, and law. These differences may not matter to mystics or philosophers of religion, but they matter to ordinary religious people. Muslims do not think that the pilgrimage to Mecca they call the hajj is inessential. In fact, they include it among the Five Pillars of Islam. Catholics do not think that baptism is inessential. In fact, they include it among their seven sacraments. But religious differences do not just matter to religious practitioners. They have real effects in the real world. People refuse to marry this Muslim or that Hindu because of them. And in some cases religious differences move adherents to fight and to kill.

One purpose of the “all religions are one” mantra is to stop this fighting and this killing. And it is comforting to pretend that the great religions make up one big, happy family. But this sentiment, however well-intentioned, is neither accurate nor ethically responsible. God is not one. Faith in the unity of religions is just that—faith (perhaps even a kind of fundamentalism). And the leap that gets us there is an act of the hyperactive imagination.

## Allergic to Argument

One reason we are willing to follow our fantasies down the rabbit hole of religious unity is that we have become uncomfortable with argument. Especially when it comes to religion, we desperately want everyone to get along. In my Boston University courses, I work hard to foster respectful argument. My students are good with “respectful,” but they are allergic to “argument.” They see arguing as ill-mannered, and even among friends they avoid it at almost any cost. Though they will debate the merits of the latest Coen brothers movie or U2 CD, they agree not to disagree about almost everything else. Especially when it comes to religion, young Americans at least are far more likely to say “I feel” than “I think” or (God forbid) “I believe.”

The Jewish tradition distinguishes between arguing for the sake of victory (which it does not value) and “arguing for the sake of God” (which it does).<sup>6</sup> Today the West is awash in arguments on radio, television, and the Internet, but these arguments are almost always advanced not in service of the truth but for the purpose of ratings or self-aggrandizement or both. So we won’t argue for anyone’s sake and, when others do, we don’t see anything godly in it. The ideal of religious tolerance has morphed into the straitjacket of religious agreement.

Yet we know in our bones that the world's religions are different from one another. As my colleague Adam Seligman has argued, the notion of religious tolerance assumes differences, since there is no need to tolerate a religion that is essentially the same as your own.<sup>7</sup> We pretend these differences are trivial because it makes us feel safer, or more moral. But pretending that the world's religions are the same does not make our world safer. Like all forms of ignorance, it makes our world more dangerous. What we need on this furiously religious planet is a realistic view of where religious rivals clash and where they can cooperate. Approaching this volatile topic from this new angle may be scary. But the world is what it is. And both tolerance and respect are empty virtues until we actually know something about whomever it is we are supposed to be tolerating or respecting.

## Pretend Pluralism

Huston Smith's *The World's Religions* has sold over two million copies since it first appeared in 1957 as *The Religions of Man*. One source of its success is Smith's earnest and heartfelt proclamation of the essential unity of the world's religions. Focusing on the timeless ideals of what he calls "our wisdom traditions," Smith emphasizes spiritual experience, keeping the historical facts, institutional realities, and ritual observances to a minimum. His exemplars are extraordinary rather than ordinary practitioners—mystics such as Islam's al-Ghazali, Christianity's St. John of the Cross, and Daoism's Zhuangzi. By his own admission, Smith writes about "religions at their best," showcasing the "cleaner side" rather than airing their dirty laundry, emphasizing their "inspired" philosophies and theologies over wars and rumors thereof. He writes sympathetically and in the American idioms of optimism and hope. When it comes to religion, Smith writes, things are "better than they seem."<sup>8</sup>

When Smith wrote these words over a half century ago, they struck just the right chord. In the wake of World War II and the Holocaust, partisans of what was coming to be known as the Judeo-Christian tradition were coming to see Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism as three equal expressions of one common faith. Meanwhile, fans of Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945) and Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) were denouncing the longstanding human tendency to divide the world's religions into two categories: the false ones and your own. The world's religions, they argued, are different paths up the same mountain. Or, as Swami Sivananda put it, "The Koran or the Zend-Avesta or the Bible is as much a sacred book as the Bhagavad-Gita. . . . Ahuramazda, Isvara, Allah, Jehovah are different names for one God."<sup>9</sup> Today that approach is the new orthodoxy, enshrined in bestselling books by Karen Armstrong and in Bill Moyers' television interviews with Joseph Campbell, Huston Smith, and other leading advocates of the "perennial philosophy."

This perennialism may seem to be quite pluralistic, but only at first glance. Catholic theologian Karl Rahner has been rightly criticized for his theory that many Buddhists, Hindus, and Jews are actually "anonymous Christians" who will make it to heaven in the world to come. Conservative Catholics see this theory as a violation of their longstanding conviction that "outside the church there is no salvation." But liberals also condemn Rahner's theology, in their case as condescending. "It would be impossible to find anywhere in the world," writes Catholic theologian Hans Küng, "a sincere Jew, Muslim or atheist who would not regard the assertion that he is an 'anonymous Christian' as presumptuous."<sup>10</sup>

The perennial philosophers, however, are no less presumptuous. They, too, conscript outsiders into their tradition quite against their will. When Huxley's guru Swami Prabhavananda says that all

religions lead to God, the God he is imagining is Hindu. And when my Hindu students quote their god Krishna in their scripture the *Bhagavad Gita* (4:11)—“In whatsoever way any come to Me, in that same way I grant them favor”—the truth they are imagining is a Hindu truth. Just a few blocks away from my office stands the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society. Its chapel looks conspicuously like a mainline Protestant church, yet at the front of this worship space sit images of various Hindu deities, and around the room hang symbols of the world’s religions—a star and crescent for Islam, a dharmachakra wheel for Buddhism, a cross for Christianity, a Star of David for Judaism. When my friend Swami Tyagananda, who runs this Society, says that all religions are one, he is speaking as a person of faith and hope. When Huston Smith says that all religions are one, he is speaking in the same idiom.

I understand what these men are doing. They are not describing the world but reimagining it. They are hoping that their hope will call up in us feelings of brotherhood and sisterhood. In the face of religious bigotry and bloodshed, past and present, we cannot help but be drawn to such vision, and such hope. Yet, we must see both for what they are, not mistaking either for clear-eyed analysis. And we must admit that there are situations where a lack of understanding about the differences between, say, Sunni and Shia Islam produces more rather than less violence. Unfortunately, we live in a world where religion seems as likely to detonate a bomb as to defuse one. So while we need idealism, we need realism even more. We need to understand religious people as they are—not just at their best but also their worst. We need to look at not only their awe-inspiring architecture and gentle mystics but also their bigots and suicide bombers.

## Religion Matters

Whether the world’s religions are more alike than different is one of the crucial questions of our time. Until recently, most sociologists were sure that religion was fading away, that as countries industrialized and modernized, they would become more secular. And religion is receding today in many Western European countries. But more than nine out of every ten Americans believe in God, and, with the notable exception of Western Europe, the rest of the world is furiously religious. Across Latin America and Africa and Asia, religion matters to Christians who praise Jesus after the birth of their child, to Muslims who turn to Allah for comfort as they are facing cancer, and to Hindus who appeal to the goddess Lakshmi to bring them health, wealth, and wisdom. And it still matters in Western Europe, too, where Catholic attitudes toward women and the body, for example, continue to inform everyday life in Spain and Italy, and where the call to prayer goes up five times a day in mosques from Amsterdam to Paris to Berlin.

But religion is not merely a private affair. It matters socially, economically, politically, and militarily. Religion may or may not move mountains, but it is one of the prime movers in politics worldwide. It moves elections in the United States, where roughly half of all Americans say they would not vote for an atheist, and in India, which has in the *Hindutva* (Hinduness) movement its own version of America’s Religious Right. Religion moves economies too. Pilgrims to Mecca and Jerusalem pump billions of dollars per year into the economies of Saudi Arabia and Israel. Sales of the Bible in the United States alone run roughly \$500 million annually, and Islamic banking approaches \$1 trillion.<sup>11</sup>

All too often world history is told as if religion did not matter. The Spanish conquered New Spain for gold, and the British came to New England to catch fish. The French Revolution had nothing to do with Catholicism, and the U.S. civil rights movement was a purely humanitarian endeavor. But even if religion makes no sense to you, you need to make sense of religion to make sense of the world.

In the twenty-first century alone, religion has toppled the Bamiyan statues of the Buddha in Afghanistan and the Twin Towers in New York City. It has stirred up civil war in Sri Lanka and Darfur. And it has resisted coalition troops in Iraq. In many countries, religion has a powerful say in determining what people will eat and under what circumstances they can be married or divorced. Religious rivalries are either simmering or boiling over in Myanmar, Uganda, Sudan, and Kurdistan. The contest over Jerusalem and the Middle East is at least as religious as it is economic or political. Hinduism and Buddhism were key motivators in the decades-long civil war that recently ravaged Sri Lanka. And religion remains a major motivator in Kashmir, where two nuclear powers, the Hindu-majority state of India and the Muslim-majority state of Pakistan, remain locked in an ancient territorial dispute with palpable religious overtones. Our understanding of these battlefields is not advanced one inch by the dogma that “all religions are one.”

## Toxic and Tonic

The beginning of the twenty-first century saw dozens of bestselling books in both Europe and the United States by so-called New Atheists. Writers such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Michel Onfray preach their own version of Godthink, aping the perennial philosophers by loading all religions into one boat. This crew, however, sees only the shared sins of the great religions—the same idiocy, the same oppression. Look at the Crusades, 9/11, and all the religiously inspired violence in between, they say. Look at the ugly legacies of sexist (and sexually repressed) scriptures. Religion is hazardous to your health and poisonous to society.

Of course, religion does not exist in the abstract. You cannot practice religion in general any more than you can speak language in general. So generalizing about the overall effects of religion is a hazard of its own. Nonetheless, the main thesis of the New Atheists is surely true: religion *is* one of the greatest forces for evil in world history. Yet religion is also one of the greatest forces for good. Religions have put God’s stamp of approval on all sorts of demonic schemes, but religions also possess the power to say no to evil and banality. Yes, religion gave us the Inquisition. Closer to our own time, it gave us the assassinations of Egypt’s president Anwar Sadat by Islamic extremists, of Israel’s prime minister Yitzhak Rabin by a Jewish gunman, and of India’s prime minister Indira Gandhi by Sikh bodyguards. But religion also gave us abolitionism and the civil rights movement. Many, perhaps most, of the world’s greatest paintings, novels, sculptures, buildings, and musical compositions are also religiously inspired. Without religion, there would be no Alhambra or Angkor Wat, no reggae or Gregorian chant, no *Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci or *Four Quartets* by T. S. Eliot, no Shusaku Endo’s *Silence* or Elie Wiesel’s *Night*.

Political scientists assume that human beings are motivated primarily by power, while economists assume that they are motivated primarily by greed. It is impossible, however, to understand the actions of individuals, communities, societies, or nations in purely political or economic terms. You don’t have to believe in the power of prayer to see the power of religious beliefs and behaviors to stir people to action. Religion was behind both the creation of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan in 1947 and the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, both the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s.

When I was a professor at Georgia State University in Atlanta, I required my students to read Nazi theology. I wanted them to understand how some Christians bent the words of the Bible into weapons aimed at Jews and how these weapons found their mark at Auschwitz and Dachau. My Christian students responded to these disturbing readings with one disturbing voice: the Nazis were

not real Christians, they informed me, since real Christians would never kill Jews in crematories. I found this response terrifying, and I still do, since failing to grasp how Nazism was fueled by ancient Christian hatred of Jews as “Christ killers” allows Christians to absolve themselves of any responsibility for reckoning with how their religion contributed to these horrors.

After 9/11 many Muslims absolved themselves too. The terrorists whose faith turned jets into weapons of mass destruction—who left Qurans in their suitcases and shouted “*Allahu Akbar*” (“God is great”) as they bore down on their targets—were not real Muslims, they said. Real Muslims would never kill women and children and civilians. So they, too, absolved themselves of any responsibility for reckoning with the dark side of their tradition.

Is religion toxic or tonic? Is it one of the world’s greatest forces for evil, or one of the world’s greatest forces for good? Yes and yes, which is to say that religion is a force far too powerful to ignore. Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu extremist convinced that he had given too much quarter Muslims when he agreed to the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan. But Gandhi’s strategy of *satyagraha*, or nonviolent resistance, was inspired by religion too, deeply influenced by the Jain principle of *ahimsa* (noninjury) and by the pacifism of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount. Yes, religion gave the United States the racist hatred of the Ku Klux Klan, but it also put an end to discriminatory Jim Crow legislation.

Today it is impossible to understand American politics without knowing something about the Bible used to swear in U.S. presidents and evoked almost daily on the floor of the U.S. Congress. It is impossible to understand politics in India and the economy of China without knowing something about Hinduism and Confucianism. At the dawn of the twentieth century, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W. E. B. DuBois prophesied that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.” The events of 9/11 and beyond suggest that the problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of the religion line.<sup>12</sup>

## Koyaanisqatsi

What the world’s religions share is not so much a finish line as a starting point. And where they begin is with this simple observation: something is wrong with the world. In the Hopi language, the word *Koyaanisqatsi* tells us that life is out of balance. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* tells us that there is something rotten not only in the state of Denmark but also in the state of human existence. Hindus say we are living in the *kali yuga*, the most degenerate age in cosmic history. Buddhists say that human existence is pockmarked by suffering. Jewish, Christian, and Islamic stories tell us that this life is not Eden, Zion, heaven, and Paradise lie out ahead.

Religious folk worldwide agree that something has gone awry. They part company, however, when it comes to stating just what has gone wrong, and they diverge sharply when they move from diagnosing the human problem to prescribing how to solve it. Christians see sin as the problem, and salvation from sin as the religious goal. Buddhists see suffering (which, in their tradition, is *not* ennobling) as the problem, and liberation from suffering as the religious goal. If practitioners of the world’s religions are all mountain climbers, then they are on very different mountains, climbing very different peaks, and using very different tools and techniques in their ascents.

Because religious traditions do not stay static as they move into new centuries, countries, and circumstances, the differences inside each of the world’s religions are vast. Religious Studies scholars are quick to point out that there are many Buddhisms, not just one. And so it goes with all the world’s

religions. Christians align themselves with Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism, and fast-growing Mormonism may well be emerging as Christianity's fourth way. Jews call themselves Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and secular. Hindus worship a dizzying variety of gods in a dizzying variety of ways. And as every American and European soldier who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan can attest, Shia and Sunni Islam are in many respects quite distinct.

While I do not believe we are not witnessing a “clash of civilizations” between Christianity and Islam, it is a fantasy to imagine that the world's two largest religions are in any meaningful sense the same, or that interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims will magically bridge the gap. You would think that champions of multiculturalism would warm to this fact, glorying in the diversity inside and across religious traditions. But even among multiculturalists, the tendency is to pretend that the differences between, say, Christianity and Islam are more apparent than real, and that the differences *inside* religious traditions just don't warrant the fuss practitioners continue to make over them. Meanwhile, the worldwide Anglican Communion splinters over homosexuality, and in the United States hot-button issues such as abortion and stem-cell research drive Protestants into two opposing camps.

For more than a century, scholars have searched for the essence of religion. They thought they found this holy grail in God, but then they discovered Buddhists and Jains who deny God's existence. Today it is widely accepted that there is no one essence that all religions share. What they share are family resemblances—tendencies toward this belief or that behavior. In the family of religions, kin tend to perform rituals. They tend to tell stories about how life and death began and to write down these stories in scriptures. They tend to cultivate techniques of ecstasy and devotion. They tend to organize themselves into institutions and to gather in sacred places at sacred times. They tend to instruct human beings how to act toward one another. They tend to profess this belief or that about the gods and the supernatural. They tend to invest objects and places with sacred import. Philosopher of religion Ninian Smart has referred to these tendencies as the seven “dimensions” of religion: the ritual, narrative, experiential, institutional, ethical, doctrinal, and material dimensions.<sup>13</sup>

These family resemblances are just tendencies, however. Just as there are tall people in short families (none of the men in Michael Jordan's family was over six feet tall), there are religions that deny the existence of God and religions that get along just fine without creeds. Something is a religion when it shares enough of this DNA to belong to the family of religions. What makes the members of this family different (and themselves) is how they mix and match these dimensions. Experience is central in Daoism and Buddhism. Hinduism and Judaism emphasize the narrative dimension. The ethical dimension is crucial in Confucianism. The Islamic and Yoruba traditions are to a great extent about ritual. And doctrine is particularly important to Christians.

The world's religious rivals are clearly related, but they are more like second cousins than identical twins. They do not teach the same doctrines. They do not perform the same rituals. And they do not share the same goals.

## Different Problems, Different Goals

After I wrote *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't* (2007), I received many letters and emails from readers confessing their ignorance of the world's religions and asking for a single book they could read to become religiously literate. This book is written for them. It attends to the idiosyncrasies of each of the great religions: for example, Yoruba practitioners

preoccupation with power, Daoists' emphasis on naturalness, and Muslims' attention to the world to come.

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At the heart of this project is a simple, four-part approach to the religions, which I have been using for years in the classroom and at lectures around the world. Each religion articulates:

- a *problem*;
- a *solution* to this problem, which also serves as the religious goal;
- a *technique* (or techniques) for moving from this problem to this solution; and
- an *exemplar* (or exemplars) who chart this path from problem to solution.

For example, in Christianity . . .

- the problem is sin;
- the solution (or goal) is salvation;
- the technique for achieving salvation is some combination of faith and good works; and
- the exemplars who chart this path are the saints in Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy and ordinary people of faith in Protestantism.

And in Buddhism . . .

- the problem is suffering;
- the solution (or goal) is nirvana;
- the technique for achieving nirvana is the Noble Eightfold Path, which includes such classic Buddhist practices as meditation and chanting; and
- the exemplars who chart this path are *arhats* (for Theravada Buddhists), *bodhisattvas* (for Mahayana Buddhists), or *lamas* (for Vajrayana Buddhists).

This four-step approach is admittedly simplistic. You cannot sum up thousands of years of Christian faith or Buddhist practice in four sentences. So this model is just a starting point and must be nuanced along the way. For example, Roman Catholics and Protestants are divided about how to achieve salvation, just as Mahayana and Theravada Buddhists are divided about how to achieve nirvana (or whether nirvana is an “achievement” at all). One of the virtues of this simple scheme, however, is that it helps to make plain the *differences* across and inside the religious traditions. Are Buddhists trying to achieve salvation? Of course not, since they don't even believe in sin. Are Christians trying to achieve nirvana? No, since for them suffering isn't something that must be overcome. In fact, it might even be a good thing.

This book is addressed to both religious and nonreligious people. You don't have to believe in God to want to understand how beliefs in God have transformed individuals and societies from ancient Israel to contemporary China. And you don't have to be baptized into Christianity or married to a Muslim to want to understand the work that rituals do to the people who undergo and administer them. So this book is written for nonbelievers. But it is written for practitioners too, and for seekers on sacred journeys of their own. The spiritually curious searching for new questions or new answers will find plenty of both in the lives of the Hindus, Confucians, and Jews explored in this book. And even those who are settled in their religious (or nonreligious) ways should find opportunities to reimagine their religious commitments (or lack thereof) by comparing and contrasting them with different ways of being religious.

Much is missing here. Shinto is not covered. Neither is Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Wicca, or the



Baha'i faith. Also neglected are new religious movements such as Rastafarianism and Scientology. But the religion I most regret excluding is Sikhism. I am the adviser to Boston University's Sikh Association, and some of my best students have been Sikhs. I had to draw the line somewhere, however, and I drew it on this side of the world's 25 million or so practitioners of Sikhism.

Included in this book are the great religions of the Middle East (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), India (Hinduism and Buddhism), and East Asia (Confucianism and Daoism). Also included is the Yoruba religion of West Africa and its diasporas. In textbooks on the world's religions, this tradition is often lumped in with Native American, Australian, and other African "primitive" or "primal" religions. But Yoruba religion is a great religion, too, claiming perhaps 100 million adherents and spanning the globe from its homeland in West Africa to South America, Central America, the Caribbean, and the United States.

Although these religions appear here in discreet chapters, none really stands alone. As Confucians are quick to remind us, no human being is an island, and as Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel once wrote, "No religion is an island" either.<sup>14</sup> One of the great themes of world history is interreligious contact, and interreligious conflict, collaboration, and combination have only accelerated in recent times. So this book aims to present the eight great religions not in isolation but in contact, and comparison. You can learn a lot about your own religion by comparing it with others. As the German philologist and comparative religionist Max Müller famously put it, "He who knows one, knows none."<sup>15</sup>

## Great Is Not Necessarily Good

Muslims have long insisted that only God is great. Still, this book refers to the world's major religions as great. What does this mean? First, it does not mean that they are good. For more than a generation, writers on religion have acted on the conviction that the way toward interreligious understanding was to emphasize not only the similarities of the world's religions but also their essential goodness. This impulse is understandable. No fair-minded scholar wants to perpetuate stereotypes, often rooted in missionary polemics, about Islam as sexist, Hinduism as idol obsessed, or African religions as satanic. But it is time to grow out of this reflex to defend. After 9/11 and the Holocaust, we need to see the world's religions as they really are—in all their gore and glory. This includes seeing where they agree and disagree, and not turning a blind eye to their failings.

Since 1927, *Time* magazine has named a person of the year. Some of these men and women—Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Winston Churchill come to mind—have been great in the sense of good. But goodness has not been a requirement for *Time*'s editors, who try simply to identify the person who, "for better or worse, has most influenced events in the preceding year." (Hitler was *Time*'s choice in 1938, and Stalin in 1939 and 1942.) In selecting the religions for this book, I have not made any effort to separate the wheat from the chaff. I have simply tried to include religions that are both widespread and weighty—religions that "for better or worse" have been particularly influential over time and continue to influence us today.<sup>16</sup>

The world's religions appear here not in chronological order of their founding but in order of influence—from the most to the least great. But how do you determine greatness? Statistics obviously matter. Strictly by the numbers, Christianity and Islam, which together account for over half of the world's population, are the greatest; Judaism, with a mere 14 million adherents, is in last place by far. But another key factor is historical significance. On this score Judaism may well be the greatest, since

it gave birth to both Christianity and Islam. In the end, however, the rankings presented here focus first and foremost on contemporary impact—to what extent each religion moves us and shakes us and sends us scrambling after words.

While researching this book, I asked friends and students which religion they thought was the most influential. I got back a litany of possibilities, including communism. A strong case was made for Confucianism, which has been a prime mover behind the East Asian economic miracle of the last generation and is booming in China now that the government is promoting Confucian ideals as a supplement to (and a possible replacement for) dying Marxist and Leninist ideology. But Christianity and Islam are the two greatest religions today. They are the traditions that draw the atheists' ire. And they are the ones that are redrawing the geopolitical map.

## The Greatest Religion

The case for Christianity's preeminence is compelling. In the United States, the most powerful country in the world, Christianity is the religion *par excellence*. The world's number one bestseller, the Bible, is the scripture of American politics, widely quoted in inaugural addresses and on the floors of the House and Senate. And the overwhelming majority of U.S. citizens call themselves Christian, as has every U.S. president from Washington on. In the wider world, however, there is no major religion. In fact, no one religion claims more than a third of what is an intensely competitive global religious marketplace. So worldwide the question of greatness is not so cut-and-dried.

Nonetheless, Islam is the Muhammad Ali of the world's religions. Statistically, it is second to Christianity, but its numbers are growing far more rapidly. Over the last century, the Christian portion of the world's population has declined slightly—from 35 percent in 1900 to 33 percent today. And in Europe many of these Christians are nominal practitioners at best. Over this same period, Islam's numbers have skyrocketed—from 12 percent of the world's population in 1900 to 22 percent today.<sup>17</sup> According to the World Religion Database, Islam is growing 33 percent faster than is Christianity, largely thanks to high birth rates in Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Egypt, Iran, and other countries where Islam predominates.<sup>18</sup> So while Christianity's market share has stalled, Islam's is racing ahead at a breakneck pace.

Numbers aside, Islam is the leader of the pack in terms of contemporary impact. Many Christians render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's, restricting their faith to the private realm. Muslims, by contrast, have never accepted this public/private distinction. Most see Islam as both a religion and a way of life. This way of life affects how they dress, what they eat, and how they invest, spend, and lend money. So the religious commitments of Muslims have a huge impact on the world around them.

Islam and Christianity are both missionary religions that have been competing for converts since the birth of Islam in the seventh century. As the modern age opened, Islam was ascendant, taking Constantinople in 1453 and rapidly expanding over the next few centuries across Europe and the Middle East into North Africa, India, and Southeast Asia. Over the last few centuries, however, and especially since the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, Christianity has been ascendant, thanks to the economic, technological, and military might of the colonial powers of Europe and the United States. In today's postcolonial era, Muslims are again on the march, and in the news. In a world in which oil runs our cars, power plants, and (increasingly) our lives, the sheikhs of Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich Islamic nations hold extraordinary influence. Almost all of the world's political hot spots involve

Muslims in some way. Finally, the impact that Islamic extremists in al-Qaeda and other jihadist organizations have had on contemporary life is incalculable. Their actions have redirected trillions of dollars in government budgets and transformed not only how we travel and wage war but also how we imagine the future of the planet. Islam, in short, is the globe's most-talked-about religion. It is no accident that journalist Christopher Hitchens has aimed his poison pen first and foremost at Islam. "Allahu Akbar," say the Muslim faithful: "God is great." "God is not great," says Hitchens. "Religion poisons everything."<sup>19</sup>

Muslims are now engaged in a historic conversation about the course they should chart into the modern world, not least about the proper relationship between mosque and state. This conversation is by no means restricted to extremists, or to the Middle East. It is vibrant in Indonesia, whose Muslim population (the world's largest) has shown little interest in extremism. It is also lively in the West, where "Progressive Islam" is strong. There are over a thousand mosques in the United States, and politicians there are taking note of the political power of Muslims in swing states such as Michigan and throughout the Tri-State Region of Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York. In the United Kingdom, Muhammad (or Mohammed) is now the third most popular boy's name (just ahead of Thomas and Harry, and just behind Jack and Oliver).<sup>20</sup> Islam is also the fastest growing religion in Europe, which has seen the number of Muslims triple over the last thirty years.<sup>21</sup>

## Sports and Salvation

In choosing the religions for this book and in ordering these rivals in terms of contemporary impact, I have obviously been influenced by my own biases. I have tried, however, to be fair. While in Jerusalem researching this book, I struck up a conversation with an elderly Muslim. When I told him I was writing a book on the world's religions, he looked at me sternly, pointed a finger in my direction, and instructed me to be honest. "Do not write false things about the religions," he said. Religion Studies scholars are rarely honest enough to admit this in person, much less in print, but we all know there are things that each of the world's religions do well, and things they do poorly. If you want to help the homeless, you will likely find the Christian Social Gospel more useful than Hindu notions of caste. If you want to find techniques for quieting the mind through bodily exercises, you will likely find Hindu yogis more useful than Christian saints.

But being honest also requires being true to these religious traditions themselves—by writing chapters to which adherents can say "Amen" and otherwise wrestling with the fact that in writing about any religion, one is treading on dreams. While researching this book, I repeatedly came across respected scholars of Hinduism and Buddhism referring to "sin" and "salvation" as if these were Hindu and Buddhist concepts.<sup>22</sup> But these are Christian ideas, so when writing about Hinduism and Buddhism, I will not use them. For similar reasons, I will not refer to the Muslims' Paradise or the Buddhists' nirvana as heaven. Similarly, I do not assume here that scripture is as important to Hindus as it is to Protestants, or that it is used in a similar way. The Vedas are the Hindus' most sacred scriptures, but hardly any Hindu gives a fig about their content; as almost any Hindu can tell you, what matters are their sounds, and the sacred power these sounds convey. Neither do I assume, as many Protestants do, that religions are about faith and belief. Religions cannot be reduced to "belief systems" any more than they can be reduced to "ritual systems." Belief is a part of most religions, but only a part, and in most cases not the most important part. (You can be a Jew without believing in God, for example.) So while I will refer to Protestants as "believers" and to their religion as a "faith,"

I do not refer to religious people in general as “believers” or to their traditions as “faith-based.”

There is a long tradition of Christian thinkers assuming that salvation is the goal of all religions and then arguing that only Christians can achieve this goal. Huston Smith, who grew up in China as a child of Methodist missionaries, rejected this argument but not its guiding assumption. “To claim salvation as the monopoly of any one religion,” he wrote, “is like claiming that God can be found in this room and not the next.”<sup>23</sup> It might seem to be an admirable act of empathy to assert that Confucians and Buddhists can be saved. But this statement is confused to the core, since salvation is not something that either Confucians or Buddhists seek. Salvation is a Christian goal, and when Christians speak of it, they are speaking of being saved from sin. But Confucians and Buddhists do not believe in sin, so it makes no sense for them to try to be saved from it. And while Muslims and Jews do speak of sin of a sort, neither Islam nor Judaism describes salvation from sin as its aim. When a jailer asks the apostle Paul, “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30), he is asking not a generic human question but a specifically Christian one. So while it may seem to be an act of generosity to state that Confucians and Buddhists and Muslims and Jews can also be saved, this statement is actually an act of obfuscation. Only Christians seek salvation.

A sports analogy may be in order here. Which of the following—baseball, basketball, tennis, or golf—is best at scoring runs? The answer of course is baseball, because *runs* is a term foreign to basketball, tennis, and golf alike. Different sports have different goals: basketball players shoot baskets; tennis players win points; golfers sink puts. So if you ask which sport is best at scoring runs, you have privileged baseball from the start. To criticize a basketball team for failing to score runs is not to besmirch them. It is simply to misunderstand the game of basketball. So here is another problem with the pretend pluralism of the perennial philosophy sort: just as hitting home runs is the monopoly of one sport, salvation is the monopoly of one religion. If you see sin as the human predicament and salvation as the solution, then it makes sense to come to Christ. But that will not settle as much as you might think, because the real question is not which religion is best at carrying you into the end zone of salvation but which of the many religious goals on offer we should be seeking. Should we be trudging toward the end zone of salvation, or trying to reach the finish line of social harmony? Should our goal be reincarnation? Or escape from the vicious cycle of life, death, and rebirth?

## Big Questions

Every year I tell my BU undergraduates that there are two worthy pursuits for college students. One is preprofessional—preparing for a career that will put food on the table and a roof overhead. The other is more personal—finding big questions worth asking, which is to say questions that cannot be answered in a semester, or even a lifetime (or more). How do things come into being? How do they cease to be? How does change happen? How does anything stay the same? What is the self? Who (or what) is God? What happens when we die? As predictably as fall follows summer, incoming college students bring into classrooms big questions of this sort. Just as predictably, many professors try to steer them toward smaller things—questions that can be covered in an hour-long lecture, and asked and answered on a final exam. But the students have it right. At least in this case, bigger is better.

Before I came to describe myself as religiously confused, I thought I had the answers to the big questions. I now know I didn’t even have the questions right. If, as Muhammad once said, “Asking good questions is half of learning,” I was at best a half wit.<sup>24</sup> Today I try to follow the advice of the

German poet Rainer Maria Rilke to “love the questions themselves,” not least this one from the American mystic Walt Whitman:

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*. . . what saw you to tell us?*

*What stays with you latest and deepest? of curious panics*

*Of hard-fought engagements or sieges tremendous what deepest remains?*<sup>25</sup>

There are all sorts of reasons to try to become more religiously literate. One is civic. It is impossible to make sense of town or nation or world without reckoning with religion’s extraordinary influence, for good and for ill. There are also personal reasons to cultivate religious literacy, including the fact that learning about the world’s religions empowers you to enter into a fascinating, multimillennial conversation about birth and death, faith and doubt, meaning and confusion. American philosopher Richard Rorty has called religion a conversation stopper, and who hasn’t had the experience of a knock on the door and a conversation run aground on the rocks of dogma?<sup>26</sup> But religion also serves as a conversation starter. We human beings ask questions. We want to know why. Our happiness depends upon it (and, of course, our misery). To explore the great religions is to stand alongside Jesus and the Buddha, Muhammad and Moses, Confucius and Laozi; it is to look out at a whole universe of questions with curiosity and awe; it is to meander, as all good conversations do, from topic to topic, question to question. Why are we here? Where are we going? How are we to live? Does God exist? Does evil? Do we?

When people ask me how I became a Religious Studies professor (it *is* an odd profession), I usually say that I discovered the study of religion just as I was losing the Christian faith of my youth and that this discipline gave me a way to hang in with religious questions (which continued to fascinate me) without the presumption that any answers were close at hand. When, to paraphrase Saint Augustine, I became “a question to myself,” even bigger questions called out to me, and my ongoing conversation with the great religions began.<sup>27</sup>

One of the most common misconceptions about the world’s religions is that they plumb the same depths, ask the same questions. They do not. Only religions that see God as all good ask how a good God can allow millions to die in tsunamis. Only religions that believe in souls ask whether your soul exists before you are born and what happens to it after you die. And only religions that think we have one soul ask after “the soul” in the singular. Every religion, however, asks after the human condition. Here we are in these human bodies. What now? What next? What are we to become?

This book explores the different answers each of the great religions has offered to the different questions they have asked. It aims to demonstrate how practitioners have lived the biggest of the big questions and to suggest ways that each of us today might also live these questions, not least the deceptively simple yet complex question of how to become a human being.

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## Chapter One

### Islam

#### **The Way of Submission**

Most Europeans and North Americans have never met a Muslim, so for them Islam begins in the imagination, more specifically in that corner of the imagination colonized by fear. They see Islam through a veil hung over their eyes centuries ago by Christian Crusaders intent on denouncing Islam as a religion of violence, its founder, Muhammad, as a man of the sword, and its holy book, the Quran, as a text of wrath. Buddhism conjures up the Dalai Lama and his Nobel Peace Prize, but Islam conjures up Osama bin Laden and his assault rifle. So Islam is women imprisoned in black burkas in Pakistan, Taliban rulers in Afghanistan blowing up ancient statues of the Buddha, and Saudi hijackers armed with airplanes, annihilating thousands of innocents for God and for virgins.

Islam has been an on-again, off-again obsession of Westerners for centuries, and not only in the imagination. Muslims took Jerusalem from Christians in 637 C.E., Crusaders took it back in 1099, Saladin seized it on behalf of Islam in 1187, and the British recaptured it on behalf of Christianity in 1917. But Islam first burst into modern Western consciousness with the rise of the Ayatollah Khomeini during the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the capture in Tehran of fifty-two U.S. diplomats who were held hostage for 444 days before being released in 1981. Since 9/11, Islam has been hotly debated worldwide. What role did Islamic piety play in motivating terrorists to hijack four jets and kill close to three thousand people? Is Islam a religion of terror? Are Christianity and Islam now engaged in a clash of civilizations? Or do Muslims stand peaceably alongside Jews and Christians as siblings in one tripartite family of religions?

Unfortunately, this crucial conversation rarely advances beyond a ping-pong match of clichés in which some claim that Islam is a religion of peace while others claim that Islam is a religion of war. One side ignores Quranic passages and Islamic traditions that have been used to justify war on unbelievers, while the other ignores Islam's just-war injunctions against killing women, children, civilians, and fellow Muslims (hundreds of whom died in the Twin Towers on 9/11). The reason for this ignoring is our collective ignorance. We are incapable of reckoning with Islam because we know almost nothing about it. Still, when Americans are asked for one word that sums up Islam, "fanatical," "radical," "strict," "violent," and "terrorism" all spill from their collective imagination.<sup>1</sup> In Germany, Spain, and Great Britain, majorities believe there is a fundamental conflict between being a devout Muslim and living in a modern society.<sup>2</sup>

After 9/11 there was a rush to reconceive of the Judeo-Christian tradition as the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. And Islam does share much with its predecessors. Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all "people of the book" who believe in one God who speaks to His people through prophets. In fact, the phrase "people of the book" is Islamic (*Ahl al-Kitab*), used to describe Jews and Christians as brothers and sisters in Allah. The scriptures of these three great religions also share many key

concepts. Islam's most frequently cited articles of faith—belief in one God, angels, scriptures, prophets, Judgment Day, and destiny—can be found in Judaism and Christianity too. The Hebrew Bible, Christian Bible, and Quran also share the patriarch Abraham, who according to all three traditions is the progenitor of monotheism.

Yet sibling relations in this Abrahamic family are dysfunctional at best. In one of the iconic incidents of his life, his “night journey” from Mecca to Jerusalem, Muhammad is said to have prayed with Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. But can Jews, Christians, and Muslims learn to get along in a similar fashion? Or are they destined to face off as bitter enemies in an internecine clash of civilizations? After 9/11, U.S. president George W. Bush and U.K. prime minister Tony Blair spoke repeatedly of Islam as a religion of peace, but revivalist Franklin Graham called Islam “a very evil and wicked religion,” and televangelist Jerry Falwell denounced Muhammad as a “terrorist.”<sup>3</sup> Muslim groups worldwide responded to 9/11 by denouncing its crimes as anti-Islamic and emphasizing Muslims' commonalities with Jews and Christians, even as Islamic jihadists proclaimed that Jews and Christians were unbelievers deserving of death in this life and eternal torment in the next.

The events of September 11, 2001, yanked conversations about Islam around to questions of war and terror. But any conversation about Islam must reckon with the word *Islam*, which is related to the term *salaam*, which means peace. Muslims greet one another with “*Salaam alaykum*” (“Peace be upon you”) and respond to this greeting with “*Wa alaykum as salaam*” (“And upon you be peace”). The word *Islam* means “submission” or “surrender,” however. So Islam is the path of submission, and Muslims are “submitters” who seek peace in this life and the next by surrendering themselves to the one true God. They do this first and foremost by prostrating themselves in prayer. “Are you prostrate or are you proud?” this tradition asks. *Masjid*, the Arabic term for mosque, literally means “place of prostration.” And some who surrender to this practice develop a mark on their foreheads that the Quran refers to as a “trace of prostration” (48:29).<sup>4</sup>

## Prayer

Five times a day, 365 days a year, for more than a millennium, Muslims have heeded the call to pray, going out from mosques and minarets in cities and towns scattered across the globe. This invitation, the *adhan*, is almost always done in Arabic, because according to Muslims it was in Arabic that God delivered His final revelation, the Quran, to his final prophet, Muhammad. It varies a bit across the Muslim world and over the course of the day. Before dawn, for example, there is the reminder that “prayer is better than sleep.” But this is the most common formulation:

*God is great*

*God is great*

*God is great*

*God is great*

*I bear witness that there is no god but God*

*I bear witness that there is no god but God*

*I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God*

*I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God*

*Make haste toward prayer*

*Make haste toward prayer*

*Make haste toward success*

Make haste toward success

God is great

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God is great

There is no god but God

Over one billion people—roughly one-fifth of the world’s population—self-identify as Muslims, placing Islam second only to Christianity in terms of adherents. Like Christianity, Islam is typically classified as a Western religion, and Islam predominates in such Middle Eastern countries as Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. But most of the world’s Muslims live in Asia. Indonesia has more Muslims (roughly 178 million) than any other country—three times as many as in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and Iraq combined—and it is followed by three more Asian nations: India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Of the ten countries with the largest Muslim populations, only two (Egypt and Iran) are plainly in the Middle East. Three (Nigeria, Algeria, and Morocco) are in Africa (as is Egypt, of course). The remaining country (Turkey) straddles Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.<sup>5</sup> The Central Asian states of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan all have Muslim majorities. In Europe, Muslims form majorities in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo, and there are small but rapidly growing populations across Europe and North America.

By some estimations, close to 20 percent of those who came to the United States as slaves were Muslims, but Islam first became visible there through the Nation of Islam (NOI), which recruited both activist Malcolm X and heavyweight boxer Muhammad Ali to its heterodox combination of black nationalism and Islam. After the death in 1975 of Elijah Muhammad, who had led the NOI since the mysterious disappearance of founder Wallace D. Fard in 1934, this organization moved under the leadership of his son W. D. Muhammad in the direction of mainstream Sunni Islam. After W. D. Muhammad disbanded the NOI, Louis Farrakhan revived it, but today the overwhelming majority of African-American Muslims in the United States are mainstream Sunnis rather than NOI members.

Islam’s rapid growth in Europe has set off a series of controversies about free speech and the head covering for Muslim women known as the *hijab*. While France prohibits the hijab in public schools for reasons of church/state separation, Sweden allows it in the name of religious liberty. Meanwhile, relations between Muslims and non-Muslims are tense in many European countries. A recent survey found that a majority of adults in the Netherlands have an unfavorable view of Islam. Another survey found that most Muslims in Germany believe that Europeans are hostile to Muslims. Meanwhile, sizeable majorities of Muslims and non-Muslims alike report that relations between Westerners and Muslims are “generally bad.”<sup>6</sup>

Islam also has a presence in American and European popular culture. While Buddhists are typically portrayed at the movies in a positive light—think *Kundun* and *Seven Years in Tibet*—Muslims almost always play the bad guys. There are some favorable portrayals—Omar Sharif’s Sherif Ali in *Lawrence of Arabia* and Morgan Freeman’s Azeem in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*—but action films especially tend to depict Muslims as people who do little more than pray and kill, and not necessarily in that order.<sup>7</sup>

I have never heard the *adhan* at the movies, but I have heard it ring out on four continents. Nowhere was it more striking than in Jerusalem, where it seemed to follow me wherever I went. I heard it while standing at the Western Wall. I heard it while sitting inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. I heard it as I was walking through the Damascus Gate into the Old City’s Muslim Quarter. In each case I was reminded of how intimate the Western monotheisms are in this most contested of cities—never out of earshot of one another—and of how Islam is a recited religion, spread throughout



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