CULTURE IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD

Religious Fundamentalism: A Global Response?

Throughout history, religions have been one of the main ways in which people have attempted to make sense of the changing world around them. Although we may associate globalization with the fast pace and seemingly shrinking world of the last 30 years or so, people from diverse cultures have been in contact across the globe for thousands of years. So how have religions helped people to cope with the changes brought by new ideas, new ways of doing things, and new belief systems?

One response is acceptance. The Muslim conquest of Iberia in the eighth century brought a centuries-long flourishing of culture to modern-day Spain and Portugal. Islamic rule here was noted for its humane and enlightened nature, while the rest of Western Europe languished in the Dark Ages. The Muslims who ruled Iberia were renowned for their religious tolerance, and they included Jews and Christians as valued members of their governmental, scientific, and artistic communities.

Another response is intolerance. When Buddhism branched off from Hinduism, its parent religion, not all Hindus were pleased at the way Buddhism replaced Hinduism in some areas. Angkor Wat (see Figure 12.11), a temple complex in Cambodia, is replete with bas-relief carvings of Buddha figures with their faces entirely chipped off or recarved to resemble Hindu deities. Hindus intolerant of the Khmer king Jayavarman VII's Buddhist beliefs were responsible for defacing these sacred images upon the king's death in A.D. 1220.

Today, many religions are experiencing intense fundamentalist movements, including Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam. Fundamentalism means a return to the founding principles of a religion, which may include a literal interpretation of sacred texts and an attempt to follow the ways of a religious founder as closely as possible. Fundamentalists draw a sharp distinction between themselves and other practitioners of their religion whom they do not believe to be following the proper religious principles, and between themselves and adherents of other faiths. Fundamentalism can be seen as an attempt to purify religious belief and practice in the face of modern influences that are thought to debase the religion. These tendencies have led to fundamentalists being viewed as antimodern and intolerant, although their possession of these traits is strongly disputed by fundamentalists themselves.

Fundamentalism is an emotionally charged term, because it is often used to portray its followers derogatorily as radical extremists. The tendency of the U.S. media to use the term *Islamic fundamentalists* as a synonym for *terrorists* is an unfortunate example of this. Yet there are connections between politics and religious fundamentalism. The political agenda of the U.S. government on matters of abortion, adoption, marriage, foreign policy, domestic security, and the curriculum in public schools has become notably influenced by conservative religious groups. Although not all these groups are entirely fundamentalist in nature, many do embrace fundamentalist Christian beliefs that espouse creationism and the sinfulness of homosexuality, as well as questioning the separation of church and state. *Islamism,* a political ideology based in conservative Muslim fundamentalism, holds that Islam provides the political basis for running the state. Similar to the influence of Christian fundamentalism, Islamist influences in several Muslim-majority countries have set a conservative social agenda and have strongly questioned the separation of church and state.

Is violence a necessary corollary to religious fundamentalism? No, but unfortunately the two have had a close historical association. From the Hindu backlash against Buddhism in thirteenth-century Cambodia to the ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, the bombings of dozens of abortion clinics in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, and the Al-Qaeda–led assault on the World Trade Center in 2001, fundamentalism, intolerance, and violence have too often been the response to the threats perceived in increasing globalization.

Jews. Intolerance of other religions, or of those felt not to follow the proper ways, is associated with **fundamentalism** rather than orthodoxy. Many who consider themselves orthodox are also quite tolerant of other beliefs (see Culture in a Globalizing World).

The importance of religion to the contemporary study of cultural geography will be explored through our five themes. First, religious beliefs differ from one place to another, producing spatial variations that can be mapped as **culture regions.** Second, these religions spread and evolved through **cultural diffusion** involving many sorts of interactions among peoples and places. Violent conquests, diasporas, and the geographic expansion of religions through conversion have all played a role in shaping the contempo-