

INTRODUCING  
.....  
**WORLD**  
.....  
RELIGIONS

A CHRISTIAN ENGAGEMENT

CHARLES E. FARHADIAN

  
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To my family,  
Katherine, Gabriel, Gideon,  
Jeanette, Thea, Dorothy,  
whose love and encouragement mean  
the world to me

And to my students,  
who make teaching such a joy



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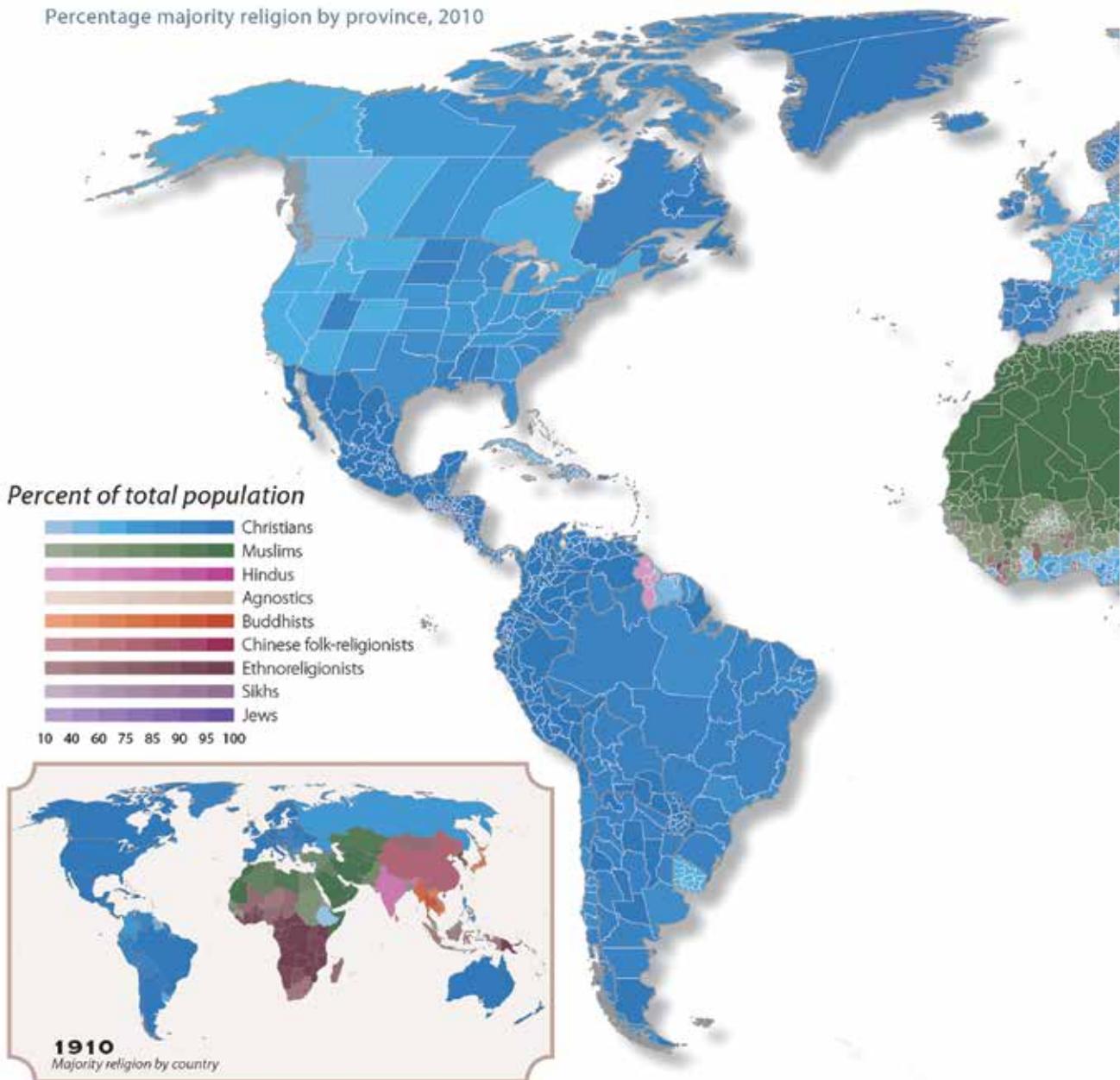
My parents have been wonderful supporters of my work. My father, a second-generation Armenian, Edward Charles Farhadian, owned a small “Oriental” rug store in Berkeley, California—Imperial Rug Company—from which he had an endearing reputation among, in his words, “friends” rather than “customers.” While we did not talk much about religion in his shop, mostly because he was a quiet man, I recall one day as a young boy when he mentioned that Muslims intentionally insert an incorrect knot into a rug, since they believe that only God is perfect. That statement intrigued me. To think, religion had something to do with rugs. And, as it turned out, in that little shop we were in fact hand repairing and selling prayer rugs, so the link between religion and rugs was far from artificial. My mother, Jeanette Farhadian, also a second-generation Armenian, is a remarkable model of Christian faith. Countless hours around the kitchen table, reflecting on questions she raised about everything from personality to religion to food to politics, have imbued me with a strong curiosity about a wide range of topics. I wish I could live several lives to explore the topics we discussed at the kitchen table. I am grateful for her kindness and her words of unflinching encouragement, wisdom, and prayer.

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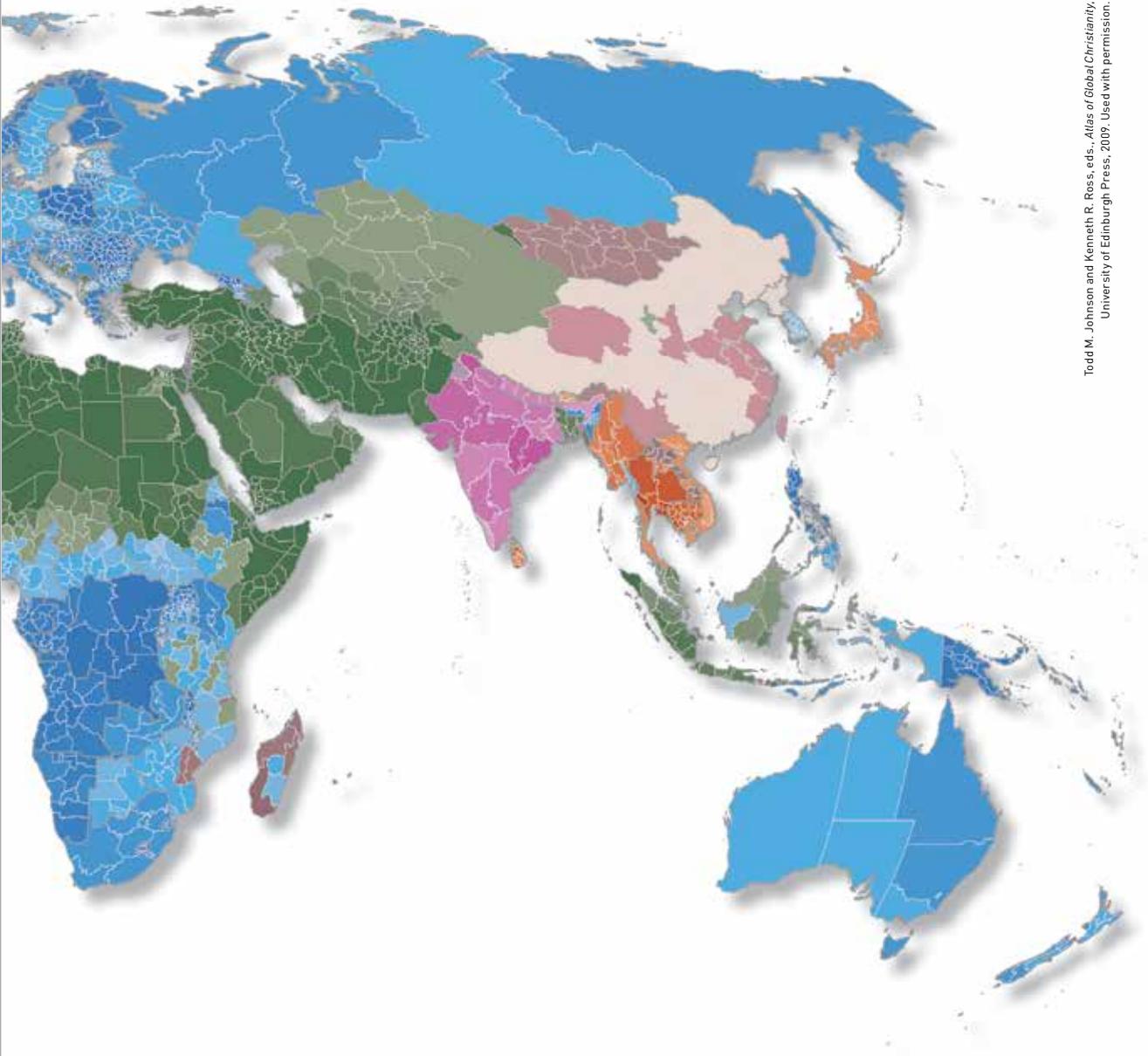
Percentage majority religion by province, 2010



Religions 1910–2010

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Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross, eds., *Atlas of Global Christianity*, University of Edinburgh Press, 2009. Used with permission.



# one

## The Persistence of Religion

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### The Inescapable Context of Religion

We all live in contexts. We are contextual beings. No matter where we live, what we believe, or how we practice our faith, our contexts profoundly impact our formation as people. Yet it is far too easy to overlook the importance of our contexts. Contexts are universal, consisting of many shared elements. Our families serve as one of the most important and earliest contexts of our lives. We cannot understand religions without making sense of their broader psychological, social, cultural, historical, environmental, and religious contexts. Religions have always been deeply influenced by their contexts, but just how have they been shaped by their local conditions? The kinds of human problems addressed by a religion are problems that emerge in part out of local contexts, and the human needs reflected in any given location are a mixture of universal needs and those unique to a particular people and region. Even the natural environment, climate, and weather patterns can impact religion and religious life. The bottom line is that there are many people around the world who live with gods in their midst.



Stephan Babujak

Figure 1.1. We all live in contexts

David Haberlah



Charles E. Farhadian



Charles E. Farhadian

Figure 1.2. Families (Sudan, Papua, United States)

### *Defining Religion*

This is a book about religion, but what is *religion*? In this book, I follow what has been called a phenomenological approach to understanding religion. Given the vast diversity of religious traditions in the world, it is nearly impossible to establish a concise and precise definition of religion broad enough to capture all phenomena in all religions, without inaccurately representing some aspect of a particular religious tradition. However, Winston King, who wrote the definition of religion for the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, offers eight characteristics of religion that are useful general categories, even if they do not provide a succinct definition of religion itself (see sidebar 1.1).

First, religions are marked by **traditionalism**.<sup>1</sup> King suggests that religions are inherently conservative and traditional because devotees continually find strength and guidance in the original creative action recorded by the religion. Whether it is the life and works of an individual founder or the words of foundational sacred scriptures, these original actions and words function



Stephen Babujak

Figure 1.3. A Hindu-Balinese God keeps watch

as models of pristine purity, for faithful living, and of power. Believers often look back to the original scriptures or actions and words of the founder for guidance and direction in the contemporary world. These original actions and words are fully authoritative for the believing community. How do devotees make sense of changing social or cultural conditions? What are the sources

#### SIDEBAR 1.1

### Eight Characteristics of Religion

According to Winston King, religions are characterized by the following:

1. *Traditionalism*: the importance of the original creative act or words of the founder
2. *Myth and symbol*: stories about origins carried in symbols (language, actions, objects)
3. *Ideas of salvation*: saving people from something, to something (a better reality)
4. *Sacred objects and places*: objects and places set apart from ordinary objects and places
5. *Sacred actions*: ritual actions that communicate with the divine or reality
6. *Sacred writings*: recorded words of the founder or early disciples
7. *Sacred community*: sense of belonging that provides structure and place of worship
8. *Sacred experience*: varieties of perceptions of transcendence or depth

King, "Religion," 12:284  
 Charles E. Farhadian, *Introducing World Religions*  
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*Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the “beginnings.” In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality—an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a “creation”; it relates how something was produced, began to be. Myth tells only of that which really happened, which manifested itself completely.*

Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 5–6

of knowledge that they utilize to navigate their world? The sources for religious people lie in the religious traditions themselves. Indeed, Christian churches are often modeled on a “New Testament model” of the church. It would be strange for a church today to be modeled on a “medieval model” of church, since the paradigm of church was established in the New Testament. Reform movements seek to reform the religion in terms of its more holy past, for example, to “be the New Testament church.”

Second, religions employ **myth** and **symbol**. Myths are stories about the origins of life. As such, myths serve an explanatory function—they explain all kinds of things, such as the creation of the universe, the emergence of human beings, and the origins of disease and death. Symbol is the language of myth, for myths are saturated with heavily symbolic meaning. Ordinary language simply cannot fully communicate a religion’s truth, so symbolic language is necessary. Symbols can be linguistic or physical. Linguistic symbols consist of words, or discourse, that communicate more than their literal, surface meaning. Physical symbols point beyond themselves to communicate insights of the religion. To a Christian, a cross is not just two intersecting lines but rather conjures up the cost of salvation.

Third, religions promote concepts of **salvation**, **liberation**, and **release**. Winston King notes that all religions claim to save people from and to something. Religions presume that all kinds of problems need to be surmounted, and that a paradise, heaven, better existence, or even nonexistence awaits those who faithfully follow a particular religion. The promise of deliverance powerfully motivates people to adhere to the tradition and can be a source of courage in the face of tragedy or other personal or corporate trial. Additionally, each tradition offers the specific ways that one can be saved into paradise or at least out of the suffering of existence. Consequently, believers can spend much energy learning to live according to their religious tradition, with the hope of being delivered from the troubles of their present condition.

Wikimedia Commons



**Figure 1.4.** Religious symbols. First row: Christian cross, Jewish Star of David, Taoist Yin Yang. Second row: Islamic star and crescent, Buddhist wheel of dharma, Shinto torii. Third Row: Sikh khanda, Baha'i star, Jain swastika.

**Figure 1.5.** A nkisi nkondi (power figure) from Kongo Central Province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A nkisi nkondi serves as a container for potent ingredients used in magic and medicine. A ritual expert activates the figure by breathing into the cavity of the abdomen and immediately seals it off with a mirror. Nails and blades are driven into the figure, either to affirm an oath or to destroy an evil force.



Brooklyn Museum/Wikimedia Commons

Fourth, religions offer **sacred places** and **sacred objects**. The idea of the sacred denotes being set apart, a separation from and discontinuity with the surrounding world, from that which is ordinary, mundane, routine. Some areas and objects are considered special, set apart from ordinary areas and objects. Often physical actions accompany the entrance into the sacred place, for example, bowing, removing footwear, kneeling. The handling of sacred objects is not to be done casually but is usually accompanied by special words, chanting, or physical performance. Demarcating sacred places and objects are different types of boundaries that function to separate human beings from the sacred.

Boundaries of the sacred can be physical, ritual, and psychological. Crossing these boundaries requires some form of action on the part of the devotee. Physical boundaries, such as gates, doors, and curtains, require that one physically cross from the ordinary to the sacred space by passing through them. Ritual boundaries, such as bowing and kneeling or washing with water prior to entering the sacred place or encountering the sacred object, have a performative role in preparing an individual or community to communicate with the divine. And psychological boundaries entail recognition that since one is encountering the sacred, one must be prepared emotionally and psychologically, which is usually accompanied by the need to purify oneself, say, through confession or repentance, before facing the sacred.

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Allah made the Ka'ba [Qa'abah], the Sacred House, a means of support for men, as also the Sacred Months, the animals for offerings, and the garlands that mark them: that you may know that Allah has knowledge of what is in the heavens and on earth and that Allah is well-acquainted with all things.

Qur'an 5:97<sup>2</sup>

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*Since sickness is the action of spirit, therapeutic action is sacramental. The sickness is only a symptom of the spiritual condition of the person, which is the underlying cause of the crisis, and it can only be cured by expiation—sacrifice—for the sin which has brought it about. This, then is a further characteristic of sin. It causes physical misfortune, usually sickness, which is identified with it, so that the healing of the sickness is felt to be also the wiping out of the sin.*

Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 192

Fifth, religions employ **sacred actions (rituals)**. Human beings are ritual beings. So much of our lives is ritualistic, whether for sacred or communal ends, and we participate in ritual action in all sorts of ways. Ritual involves order and usually has a communicative function. Generally, rituals communicate something, either to a transcendent being or to other human beings. Rituals involve elements of order, routine, and a commonly accepted set of meanings, although specific rituals do not require universal acceptance. If you have traveled outside your own country or state, you quickly recognize that there are a host of ritual activities that need to be learned in order to avoid offending others. Ritual and culture are closely related. Moreover, ritual actions can be simple or complex, sacred or mundane. And they can involve stylized sayings or chanting, bowing, kneeling, or **sacrifices** (e.g., of animals, vegetables, money).

Ritual action pervades all communities, whether modern or traditional, urban or rural. We engage in simple ritual behaviors in our daily lives. When we enter an elevator, how do we act and move, and what do

we say or not say? After entering an elevator, we immediately turn around—it would not seem quite normal to enter the elevator and remain facing the rear of the elevator when everyone else has turned around and faced the elevator doors. If the elevator is full, we may bump the person next to us. A social infraction has occurred, tearing the social fabric of that small space. A ritual needs to be performed—and we perform such mundane rituals daily. Typically, the offender of the social infraction will say something along the lines of, “Oh, excuse me, I’m sorry.” And the response is: “That’s okay” or “No problem.” This simple, mundane ritual action mends the social fabric that was strained for a moment in that elevator space.

**Figure 1.6.** Hindu-Balinese village priest blessing students and workers for protection in Bali, Indonesia



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