Faith and Identity in the Global Era:

What has Changed and What has Endured

Mark Juergensmeyer, Ph.D.
Senior Fellow

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The Center for Faith, Identity, and Globalization
1050 Connecticut Ave., NW Washington, DC 20036
T (202) 429-1690
E cfig@rumiforum.org

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Faith and Identity in the Global Era

Mark Juergensmeyer, Ph.D.

Religion is a difficult term to define. I found that out the hard way when I was a graduate student doing sociological research in rural India.

I met with some villagers and wanted answers to my extensive questionnaire. The first question was hard enough – "what is your name?" That was difficult to answer since often lower caste villagers had different names for different occasions: religion, occupation, family background, caste, and so forth.

But the whole effort floundered with the second question.

"What is your religion," I tried to ask. I wanted to ask this, but my Punjabi translators hesitated. "What do you mean by religion," they wanted to know.

"You know, religion," I said, as if it should be self evident.

"There are lots of words for the English term religion," they said. They explained that it could be *mazhab*, beliefs; or *panth*, a fellowship around a religious master; or *dharm*, the term that Christian missionaries often used, which means law or natural order; or it could be *qaum*, which means a large community or nation.

"What word did I want to use," they asked. I wanted to say "all of them," but I realized that there was no single term that covered the range of meanings that are ascribed to the English word, religion. So I settled on *qaum*, the religious community that signified their social identities, whether they were Hindu, Sikh, Christian, or Muslim. Often this identity would be literally be worn on their sleeves, evident in the clothes that they wore, or in the family names they used.

For many of the villagers I met, however, they felt an even stronger loyalty to the religious fellowship, the *panth*, that they had joined. Though outwardly identifying as Sikh or Hindu, they might follow a Muslim pir, or one of the many gurus whose congregations rivalled that of the more established Hindu temples and Sikh gurdwaras in the region.

Their faith and beliefs, their *mazhab*, might also be different from the orthodox Hindu, Muslim or Sikh traditions to which they identified. Many of the lower caste villagers believed in the spirit world of ghosts and powerful local healers. For them their faith, their *mazhab*, was inextricably linked with who they were, and how their viewed the world.

This diversity of religiosity is not just a peculiarity of rural North India. It is part of what makes religion varied and complex everywhere. Perhaps this has never been more the case than the present, the global era in which contesting forms of faith and identity are everywhere.

The endurance of faith

Because the English word "religion" can mean so many different things, several scholars of religious studies have suggested that we abandoned our use of the term. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a Canadian scholar of religious studies who for years was director of Harvard's Center for the Study of World Religions, argued that we use the terms "faith" and "tradition" instead.

In an arresting book, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, he claimed that the term "religion," had no analytic value and he advocated discontinuing its use.[1] For one thing, Smith wrote, similar terms scarcely exist in traditions outside of Christianity. Moreover, religion was a relatively new term even in English. Smith scoured old manuscripts and could find little use of the term before the seventeenth century.

Smith objected to the notion that religion could do anything by itself. It wasn't a thing that could influence this or that. It was part of people's world views.

For that reason, Smith said you could use term in adjective form—religious roles, religious organizations, religious beliefs, and the like—but not as a noun since that indicated that it had some sort of independent existence. He preferred instead the

terms “cumulative tradition” to describe the cultural heritage associated with the great religious communities around the world, and “faith” in relationship to individual acts of religious belief and practice.

One scholar who admired Smith but found a different way of speaking of religion was Robert Bellah, perhaps his generation’s leading sociologist of religion. Bellah thought that it was possible to think of religion as both faith and tradition: as a religious worldview, an alternative view of reality.[2] It was not just a matter of religious this or that, Bellah reasoned, the term signified a different way of looking at the world. Where and how did this perception arise, and what role has it played in humanity?

To find answers to these questions Bellah embarked on a lengthy scholarly journey. He had retired from teaching at this point in his career, so he had the luxury of taking the whole sweep of history into consideration in trying to understand where religion had come from and how it had changed over time. I must confess that I knew Bellah during the years he was working on the book—we had been colleagues at Berkeley when I was the coordinator of the religious studies program there and Bellah was the chair of its advisory committee—and I recall that when we met while he was working on the project he could not wait to talk about what new nugget of knowledge he had acquired about ancient India or Babylonia, or about astrophysical theories regarding early forms of life.

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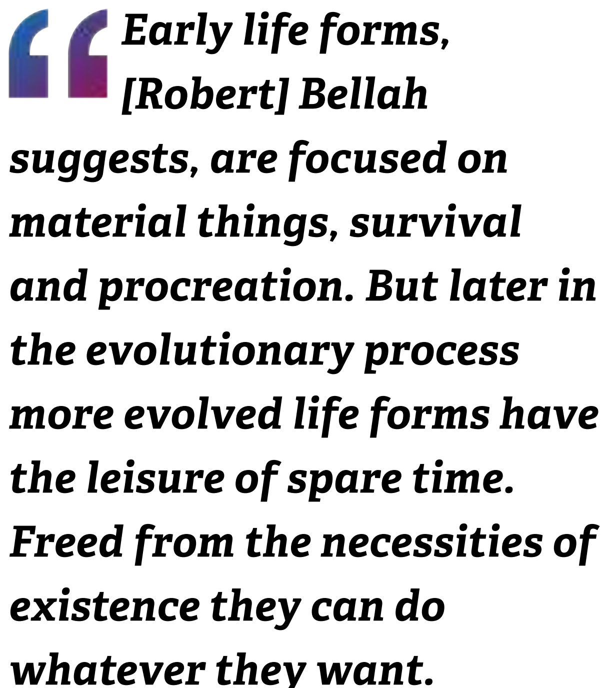
Bellah’s project was published as *Religion in Human Evolution*.[3] It is a huge book, as impressive in its scope as it is rich in detail and insight. In it he takes the long view, beginning 13.8 billion years ago with the Big Bang and the creation of stars and planets, including our own, and then the emergence of living cells in the primal ooze, and the beginning of animate life forms. He ends the book at the Axial Age, the rise of new

modes of conceptual activity in the 6th century BCE, a period when intellectualism was sprouting around the world, from Greek thought to philosophical developments at the end of India's Vedic period.

It is in this grand historical narrative that he addresses the idea of what religion is, and relates it to the development of living species. Early life forms, Bellah suggests, are focused on material things, survival and procreation. But later in the evolutionary process more evolved life forms have the leisure of spare time. Freed from the necessities of existence they can do whatever they want. And what they often do is unstructured and arbitrarily structured activity, doing things for no apparent purpose. They are like school children finally released from their boring classrooms for a few precious moments for recess. What they do during recess time is to run around and have fun and explore the world. It is something that we call "play."

Following the lead of the Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga, Bellah affirms that play is the beginning of all forms of culture, including religion.[4] It is the ability for humans to be creative, to roam and discover. Initially it is primarily an activity. This is true of religion as well. The early forms of religiosity—such as the rituals described in Leviticus and the rites detailed in the Vedas of ancient India—are focused on activity, on what priests do to interact with God or the gods. It is only later, in the Axial Age of the 6th century BCE that religion becomes more introspective and cerebral, and this is when we can describe religion as a product not just of creative activity but of creative thought: the religious imagination.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One illustration that Bellah gives of the process by which activity related to religion becomes conceptualized is his description of the development of the Greek idea of *theoria*. Before Plato, this referred to a practice in which an emissary of one Greek state would go to another state to observe their religious festivals and come back and give a report on what they saw. *Theoria* was a report on a different kind of religion. Plato took this concept and related it to

the intellectual adventure of going out to search, not just for religious festivals but for truth. The classic example that Plato gives is the analogy of the cave, in which most of us venturing into the cave see shadows cast on the wall and think that is what is truly real. If we turned around to see the source of those shadows the bright light behind the objects that were casting the shadow would be so intense that most of us would flinch and turn back to the shadows. Only the bold would go where other people dare not go, in search of the real objects, the truth. These are the *theoria* that Plato admires, the searches for truth. Later Aristotle would refine this further in a way that we all know, in which the idea of theory is related to identification of truthful concepts.[5]

Hence religion in Bellah's understanding is something, or rather some perception. It is an imagined world of being, "a general order of existence," as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz describes it. Bellah goes further in labelling it "religious reality," one of various multiple realities that "calls the world of daily life into question."[6]

Faith, then, is the personal commitment to seeing the world through the lens of spirituality. It opens up the windows to a whole new alternative reality. For some people, their faith is simply a subtle awareness of a deeper stratum of meaning in the world. It may just be the certainty that there is an ultimate reality, as the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich described it. For many, however, including a large number of Evangelical Protestants in the United States, it is a vibrant and startling reality that could break into the normal world at any moment. Behold, the rapture may be at hand.

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To accept the alternative reality of religion is to peer through the looking glass and see that there is a Wonderland behind the ordinary world, and it is only a few steps away. Like Wonderland it both mirrors ordinary reality and alters it. It provides a sense of community, a kinship with the fellow faithful that can be more binding than any

allegiance to a political party or national society. The alternative reality of religion is not a passive gift; one must do something to find it. One must believe and follow its commandments.

The Wonderland of religion is comforting simply because it exists, at least for those who accept its existence. It provides a way of thinking about the world—an alternative vision of reality—that takes the disturbing uncertainties of life, the anomalies, the dangers and the nagging sense of chaos, and gives them meaning. It locates disorder within a triumphant pattern of order. It does this especially effectively in thinking about the most difficult moment of chaos in one's personal life—in thinking about death. For the faithful, the spiritual life is more enduring.

The perils of identity

But faith is not the only form of religiosity that endures in the 21st century. The term ***qaum*** that I learned when asking questions in the Punjab villages points to another important part of being religious. It gives us a sense of social identity.

For many of the faithful this is comforting, to know that they are part of a large community of faith. Perhaps nothing is more powerful than being part of the crowds of people at Mecca who are on *haj*, a pilgrimage of faith. The African American civil rights leader, Malcolm X, wrote in his autobiography about the dramatic influence that this experience had, not just on his Muslim faith, but also on his outlook towards the world. It helped him see the potential of the unity of humankind.

But the social identity of religion also demarcates "we" as opposed to "they." When people say, "thank God we're not like them," they are perhaps unconsciously revealing an ethnocentric bias that in its extreme form is a kind of religious othering. This phenomenon has spread throughout the world in the first decades of the 21st century, and in its political form has led to ethnic cleansing and strident

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anti-minority hostilities. Increasingly it is becoming a phenomenon that is shaped by the forces of globalization.[7]

It is global in its scope, though often it is expressed as anti-globalism, and as an attempt to reassert the primacy of traditional national cultures. Perhaps the most disturbing feature of the global age is the emergence of a new tribalism, often organized around ethnic and religious identities.

At the end of World War II, the world seemed to be on the verge of a bold new order. About to abandon the great empires, much of the world was turning towards the notion of the secular nation-state. Fundamental to this construct was the idea of secular nationalism—the understanding that peoples in a particular region were to be represented by governments that were free from the taint of any kind of ethnic, religious or any other social prejudice. Perhaps nothing exemplified this new world order better than the United Nations, created to be a parliament representing nations from every corner of the planet. More than a symbol, the UN was created to be the instrument of international peace.

But the notion of nationalism, even secular nationalism, contained a fatal flaw. It contained within it the assumption that there were natural communities of people in particular places who collectively comprised nations. In Europe, where the idea of the nation-state first took hold in the modern world, these national communities were demarcated by cultural and social origins. Most French, for example, spoke French; their ancestors were French; and their religion was largely a Roman Catholic Christianity. Even secular nationalism contained ethno-religious assumptions about the homogeneity of peoples within a national community.

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To some extent the United States was an exception, being a nation of immigrants. But until relatively recently it was largely a nation that privileged European immigrants along with an African working class, first as slaves and then as less

privileged citizens. The US had a unified language, English, and its religion was largely Christian with a smattering of Jews, but they were largely European Jews. So the basic assumptions about nationalism embracing a social and cultural homogeneity applied to the U.S. as well, at least for a while during much of the twentieth century.

In other parts of the world the twentieth century business of carving out nation-states from old empires was often undertaken by British and other European officials following the two great world wars of that century, or by local elites that took over colonial institutions. To a large degree, nation-states in Africa and the Middle East were drawn around ethnic and cultural lines, replicating the European pattern. In South Asia, British India was split apart on religious lines, creating a Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India; in the Middle East, the holdings of the Ottoman Empire were chopped into the states of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel. The problem, however, was that few of these states in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East were completely homogeneous, and much of the political conflict in recent years has been due to the simmering ethno-religious tensions created by these artificial demarcations.

All these problems have been compounded by a new development, globalization. Increasingly in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first, the global population has been on the move. The easy access to international travel, the instant communications provided through cell phones and social mobility, and the desperate search for safe harbor in areas of social and political unrest have created a situation where increasingly large numbers of people can live everywhere, and do. This is a direct challenge to the old notion of a cultural homogeneity of nationhood. Increasingly most European countries are confronting fellow citizens in their populations who look differently, speak differently, and worship differently. When a large section of Brussels is comprised of Algerian Muslim refugees, even a multi-cultural country like Belgium finds it difficult to cope.

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In other parts of Europe, the resentment against the new immigrants and refugees has taken a right-wing political turn. The second decade of the twenty-first century has witnessed the sudden successes of *Fidesz*, the Hungarian Civic Alliance, headed by Victor Orban; the Polish party, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* ("Law and Justice"), founded by Lech and Jaroslaw Kaczyński; and the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) in Germany. Similar parties have appeared elsewhere in Europe, including the National Front in France, the Italian *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy), and right wing movements in Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark and the Netherlands. Much of the support for the campaign for Brexit in the U.K. has come from anti-immigrant right-wing groups.

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Across the pond in the United States the 2016 election of Donald Trump was supported by strident anti-Muslim anti-Jewish White supremacy nationalist movements opposed to anyone in the U.S. whose ancestry could not be traced to Christian European ethnic roots. White xenophobia was not new in the US, however. The history of the United States is clouded with White hate movements, most notably the Ku Klux Klan, which reached its zenith in the first half of the twentieth century. Later, Black Muslims became a target for hatred. The fact that many African Americans had embraced Islam provided a double reason for many White supremacists to despise them. For a time the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (the FBI) secretly scrutinized the movement considering them dangerous and possibly treasonous. By the end of the century and the opening decades of the twenty-first century the White xenophobia surfaced again in new forms, often in vicious ways.

The violence of contemporary right-wing White Supremacist movements in the United States was graphically demonstrated by the ugly protests in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2018, the massacre of Hispanic immigrants in El Paso, Texas in 2019, and the White Supremacy character of the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the nation's Capitol building. By the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century, White Supremacists had overtaken Muslim extremists as Americans' greatest fear of terrorism on native soil.

The US has joined a troubling phenomenon that is found around the world. From Myanmar to Moscow, new movements of religious nationalism have recently emerged. Perhaps the first significant movement of religious nationalism in contemporary experience was the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1978-79 that privileged Shi'a Islam as the organizing principle of the state.

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Movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt that have been in the background for years have risen to new prominence, and in the Egyptian case the Muslim Brotherhood briefly controlled the reins of power. The rise of the ISIS, the Islamic State, was largely due to disaffected Sunni Arabs in both Iraq and Syria who joined forces in protest against their political marginalization. In Israel there has been a hardening of nationalist sentiment that privileges Jewish identities, and in India the Hindu *Bharatiya Janata Party* has been accused of fostering anti-Muslim sentiments and attempting to redefine nationalism along Hindu lines. The rise of Buddhist nationalism in Southeast Asia has led to tragic violence, with thousands of Myanmar Rohingya Muslims persecuted and banished. It seems, therefore, that religion-related neo-nationalism has a global reach.

These movements are products of globalization in two ways. The demographic mobility associated with globalization has led to a strident resentment of newcomers and a defensive protection of traditional cultures and societies. Globalization has eroded trust in the secular nation-state and allowed a new defensive ethno-nationalism to take root. At the same time these phenomena are global in another sense. Since they appear around the world at roughly the same time in history, they give credence to the idea that they are themselves aspects of globalization and somehow connected to one another—they are aspects of a global rise of anti-globalism.

At the heart of these political movements are personal fears. Individuals have seen the arrival of newcomers as threatening to their way of life. Accompanying this sense of being culturally assaulted is the cultural pretension that the newcomers are insufficient in many ways—not just culturally and socially but intellectually and morally. The phrase, "thank God we're not like them" expresses this feeling that the outliers are a distant "other" to which the traditional society is vastly superior, and that this attitude is blessed by God.

Globalization and nationalist sentiments shape the dynamics of religious othering today, but they didn't create it.[8] Negative stereotypes about other beliefs are probably as old as religions themselves – we find traces of them in the Bible, the Qur'an and many other ancient sacred texts. The Roman Empire witnessed systematic religious persecutions, first against Christians who refused to participate in the official state cult and then, starting from the fourth century, by the Christian majority against the adherents of the former official religions. In the third century BCE, the newly founded Qin dynasty embarked on a broad anti-Confucian campaign, burning books and arresting hundreds of scholars. Religious othering was usually an integral part of such violent suppression.

We could easily extend the list of religious violence throughout history. The European Middle Ages would provide us with rich materials, as would the early modern period with all its religious wars, and we could provide many additional examples from the worlds of Buddhism, Islam and other religions in all corners of the globe. In most cases, religious violence was not motivated by religious beliefs: it might be rooted in social tensions, political conflicts or tied to economic interests. This is also the case today. Religious identities certainly play a strong role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,

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the hostile relationship between Shiite Iran and Sunni Saudi-Arabia or the more recent persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar; but even these identity struggles cannot be properly understood without taking other factors and forces into the picture. These range from local political interests to geopolitical rivalries, and while religious identities might not be absent from them, much more profane logics are at work when political interest groups and states clash with one another.

But the construction or intensification of negative stereotypes doesn't necessarily depend on state authorities or other political forces. In many cases, the driving forces involved in religious othering are figures like priests, imams, shamans, monks and nuns, frequently using forms of religious expression ranging from sermons to prayers and chants. They deploy their spiritual authority and sometimes their personal charisma to portray other religious communities as menacing, as a demonic other.

At its very core, religious othering is grounded in negative stereotypes and the systematic buildup of an imagined divide between one's own faith and other creeds. It deemphasizes communalities and exaggerates the significance of differences. Particularly when it endorses violence, it portrays the religious other not as a tolerable alternative, but as a hostile force that threatens one's own community. The alleged threat could be aggression from the other side, or something much subtler. Religious authorities often mobilize their believers against a religious other that they perceive as already having begun infiltrating their ranks. For example, many forms of Islamic fundamentalism put the Muslim *umma* in opposition to a West that is defined partly as Christian civilization and partly as an empty, secular form of modernity. Many imams related to these fundamentalist branches ring rhetorical alarm bells against members

of local society whom the imams think have already sold out their religious integrity to the West. In the Maghreb, Afghanistan and many other places, girls' schools have been ambushed by Muslim extremists who claim the schools educate women to lead un-Islamic lives. The first steps to these ambushes occur at a rhetorical level, when these schools are described as other – as agents that will lead to the disintegration of local life and religious bonds.

We could add a long list of modern and pre-modern examples from Christianity, Buddhism, and other religious groups that illustrate the same point: othering is often rooted not in profound differences, but in the perceived dangers of assimilation.

To put it a different way, the proponents of othering can also fight against what they see as the dangers of a growing sameness. The rise of modern anti-Semitism certainly had deep roots in European history, but at the same time, it was also an expression of anger, prejudice and hatred against the growing assimilation of Jews in late nineteenth-century France or Germany. Today some of the same hostile attitudes are directed toward Muslim immigrants. A millennium before the rise of modern anti-Semitism, some essentialist Confucian circles threw their weight behind anti-Buddhist campaigns. They weren't worried that Buddhism was too strange to be feasible in their world. To the contrary, they were concerned about Buddhism becoming too influential within the Chinese state and its surrounding scholarly landscapes. Religious othering is often meant to benefit those who fear that they will be losing from the growing acceptance of pluralism in their own society.

Today's new media have a great impact on religious othering. The internet and social media have become important tools for the self-presentation of religious communities, which can go hand in hand with spreading stereotypes about non-believers or other faiths. As so often, the new medium influences the message: the possibility of spreading brief text messages to a large number of people facilitates the circulation of brief stereotypes of others. Moreover, video clips are a great tool for identity politics – they convey scandalous and dramatic moments like segments of a speech or the mistreatment of people, which can rapidly enrage a large audience and spread like a wildfire. As a general trend, social media make it harder to convey complex, multifaceted arguments and easier to broadcast brief images. We can already see how social media shapes the dynamics of religious othering: for example, religious communication has become more visual and faster than in the age of the print media.

The current media revolution has also changed other important facets of religious life. Religious communities learn from each other faster than ever before, even across boundaries of languages and faith systems. For instance, some conservative Islamic groups in Turkey have adopted arguments for de-secularizing the state from Christian fundamentalists in the United States. While the Turkish Islamic right certainly has no interest in the Christian message, they see the value of Christian fundamentalist critiques of modern states as godless institutions. The circulation of ideas, images and narratives between different creeds doesn't mean that religions necessarily grow more appreciative or tolerant of one another. Instead, they may pick up approaches from other creeds and use them to fortify the boundaries between "us" and "them" or between believers and unbelievers.

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In today's world, religious othering takes place amid an awareness that religions and societies are interconnected, and is often framed as a battle against global entanglements. Yet what many agents actively involved in religious othering usually fail to admit (or even recognize) is that religions around the globe have been tied to a common web of exchanges and have come to share key concepts. Issues of religious identity are part and parcel of the globalization of the modern world.

Thus faith and identity have entered into the 21st century as sometimes hopeful and sometimes harmful dimensions of religious life. The challenge to the faithful is to hold true to the rock of spirituality that is at the heart of every religious community and tradition without falling prey to the intolerant excesses of tribalism that can be fostered by extreme emphases on religious identity. Within every religious tradition the

faithful are urged not to let their pride overtake their compassion, and to walk humbly with their fellow humanity. It is these religious guides that may provide a corrective for the prejudice of religious othering.

Hence we witness a profound paradox. The cure for the harmful aspects of religion may come from religion itself, and faith may provide a cure for the dangers of religious identity.

References

[1] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962.

[2] I explore further the notion of religion as alternative reality in my book, *God at War: A Meditation on Religion and Warfare* (Oxford University Press, 2020) from which some of the ideas in this section of the essay are taken.

[3] Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.

[4] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture,* London: Routledge, 1949; first published in German in Switzerland in 1944.

[5] Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution,* 577.

[6] Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 5.

[7] I explore further the impact of globalization on religious othering in the opening paragraphs of the introduction to the book, *Religious Othering: Global Dimensions*, edited by Mark Juergensmeyer, Kathleen Moore, and Dominic Sachsenmaier (Routledge 2022).

[8] Many of the following paragraphs were drafted by Dominic Sachsenmaier, and are taken from the introduction to the book, *Religious Othering: Global Dimensions,* edited by Mark Juergensmeyer, Kathleen Moore, and Dominic Sachsenmaier (Routledge 2022).

About CFIG

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About the Author

Mark Juergensmeyer is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Global Studies, Sociology, and an affiliate of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he was the founding director of the Global and International Studies Program and the Orfalea Center for Global and International Studies. He is also William F. Podlich Distinguished Fellow and Professor of Religious Studies at Claremont McKenna College. He is an expert on religious violence, conflict resolution, and South Asian religion and politics, and has published more than three hundred articles and thirty books, including When God Stops Fighting: How Religious Violence Ends (University of California Press, 2022), God at War: A Meditation on Religion and Warfare (Oxford, 2021) and Terror in the Mind of God (University of California Press, 4th Edition, 2017).

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