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Introduction

This participation of all men in suffering weighs heavily on the mind of the Beloved of the Gods.

—from an edict of Indian emperor Ashoka,
third century BCE

The Generosity of the Poor

Why do some very poor people give money to some very rich people? The question was at the forefront of my mind as I talked to a young woman I will call Grace, in Accra, the capital of Ghana, in February 2015. She had come to a room at the Central University College to take part in an economic experiment with my team of researchers. Grace was twenty-four years old, simply but neatly dressed, with a quiet but alert composure. I guessed her to have a reasonable education and to be working as a clerk in a small business or a government office.

I could not have been more wrong. Six days a week Grace walks up and down between the lines of cars that queue at the traffic lights on one of the main roads into Accra. She sells iced water in little plastic sachets stored in a basket above her head. From this she earns the equivalent of a little over a dollar and a half a day. After twelve hours of this debilitating work, inhaling exhaust fumes on a hot and dusty highway six days a week, she goes home to a tiny house she has built in a slum neighborhood with her aunt, with whom she came to the city a few years ago.



The public torture and execution in 1762 of Jean Calas, a French Protestant convicted on trumped-up charges of killing his son to prevent him from converting to Catholicism. The memory of this was still very fresh in Toulouse when Adam Smith began his visit to the city in 1764, a visit during which he began writing *The Wealth of Nations*.

Credit: Chronicle / Alamy stock photo.

On Sundays, she goes to church. She's an usher, greeting people as they come into the church and directing them to their seats in the pews. She then sings in the choir, and is an assistant in a Sunday school group. She gives money to the church, by paying tithes—the traditional 10 percent of her tiny income—as well as by giving to the collection during services, which brings the total she gives up to around 12 percent. She is aware that the money she gives to the church can't be used for other purposes, like paying for medical treatment for her aunt, who is often sick.

The main beneficiary of her donations and the leader of her church, whom I will call Pastor William, is an energetic, smiling, and charming man who is very rich, and wants everyone to know it. He drives a large Mercedes, and wears a belt with a big round buckle decorated with a dollar sign. He no more needs Grace's money than he needs another impeccably pressed suit. Yet Grace gives him her money, willingly. Why?

The one answer you can't give is that Grace is stupid, or deceived. She knows exactly what she's doing; she's more lucid about her finances than I am about mine. She knows that she could choose to go to another church, or remain in this one and avoid paying her tithes or putting money in the collection box. Yet she stays in this church, and she pays regularly, and always on time.

A more promising answer would be that there's nothing surprising about Grace's generosity because poor and not-so-poor people give money to rich people all the time—indeed, that's the main reason rich people are rich. The people who pay don't usually describe what they are doing as making a donation, though. They're usually aware that when they buy food from Walmart, or renew their Netflix subscription, or buy a Louis Vuitton handbag, or charge their credit card for an Amazon delivery, they're contributing to making a few very rich people even richer than they were before. But whether or not this bothers them (and it might even please them, if the person they're paying is a certain kind of celebrity), it's a by-product of paying for a product or a service. Maybe we should think of what Grace is doing in the same way. Suppose that, instead of giving money to Pastor William because she thinks he needs it or deserves it, she's giving him money because she believes she's getting something in return. What kind of product or service might she be paying for?

Without visualizing in detail the exhausting awfulness of Grace's everyday labor, it may be hard to understand why going to church on Sunday means so much to her. She can wear a clean dress; she can greet people and be greeted respectfully as she shows worshippers to their seats. In Sunday school she can take some responsibility for younger and even more vulnerable people than herself. She can sing with other singers; she can chat to different people from the street hawkers with whom she spends her working days. She has some chance of finding friends—and who knows, maybe one day even a husband, one who is less likely to drink or to beat her than alternative suitors she might find at random in this scary city. She can do all this as part of a community that recognizes and respects her. If going to church costs her an eighth of her income, it may even seem cheap at the price. We, the observers, might wonder by what right the very rich Pastor William asks this very poor woman to pay her tithes. But for Grace that's not the question: if the tithes are what she needs to pay to belong, she will pay.

There's a further twist. If you don't pay your Netflix subscription you will no longer be able to stream; if you don't pay at the checkout in Walmart you can't take your groceries out the door. But even if Grace no longer pays her tithes, she will still be welcome at the church. Only perhaps she may not feel quite so welcome as she did before—the pastor's smile may be replaced by a concerned frown; one of the assistant pastors may ask her whether she's all right. She may wonder whether her trusted position as a Sunday school assistant is secure. The esteem she feels in her community, in such sharp contrast to the aggression and contempt she receives every day in her working environment, depends not only on her coming to church but on her coming there willingly, prepared to make a donation that's big enough to hurt. Both Grace and Pastor William understand this. He, and the community he manages, can make her feel special. They do this all the more effectively because Grace believes that Pastor William stands in a special relationship to God.

Billions of people around the world in the twenty-first century respond to the call of religious leaders by giving time, energy, and money to the movements they lead. Like Grace, they mostly do so lucidly and reflectively, and as a result religious movements have accumulated

tremendous power. Sometimes religious leaders go even further: they may ask, literally and not metaphorically, for people's lives.

Icons into Battle

At four o'clock in the morning of February 24, 2022, nearly three thousand Russian battle tanks, accompanied by many thousands more troops in trucks and lightly armored vehicles, began a journey across the border between Russia and Ukraine. Inside the tanks were thousands of young men, many barely more than schoolboys, who had been ordered into battle to defend an idea. It was fundamentally a nationalist rather than a religious idea, but it had been supported by some heavy religious artillery the previous day, in a fiery sermon by Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church.¹ Over the following weeks and months, Patriarch Kirill would redouble his rhetoric in support of the war. He urged soldiers to fight as their patriotic duty, and promised them that "sacrifice in the course of carrying out your military duty washes away all sins."² He also offered them the protection of religious equipment, such as a gilded icon of the Virgin Mary, which he donated in March 2022 to General Viktor Zolotov, director of the Russian National Guard, and of which Zolotov in his acceptance speech said "this icon will protect the Russian army and accelerate our victory."³

The young men in the Russian tanks certainly needed protection. They had been told they would be met with welcome smiles and posies of flowers, but in fact they were met with antitank missiles, fired by men of their own age. In the days and weeks to follow, priests of the Ukrainian Orthodox and Catholic Churches would use prayer and biblical exhortation to stiffen their countrymen's will to resist. And among the outpouring of support and offers of military and humanitarian supplies, many thousands of rosaries have been manufactured and delivered to Ukraine, to raise the morale of both civilian refugees and frontline troops.⁴

Icons and rosaries are just two of an immense variety of religious technologies that have been deployed throughout the ages to stiffen the resolve of young men ordered by their elders into combat: a recent study in the violent eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo

reported forty-six different objects, potions, and rituals used by armed groups.⁵ Religions also deal centrally with the aftermath of war—the edict of Emperor Ashoka that I quoted at the beginning was carved on several rock surfaces in India to express his remorse at the brutal slaughter he had inflicted during the conquest of Kalinga, remorse that would lead him later to become a major patron of Buddhism. The text is in some ways shocking in its narcissism, giving as much prominence to the troubled emotions of the emperor as to the violence he had unleashed. But it also illustrates one of the most poignant features of the great world religions. Their ambition, and an important part of their appeal, lies precisely in their seeking to find some meaning in the vast suffering in the world, and some call to account even of the powerful, though religious leaders have so often contributed to the suffering by their calls to violent sacrifice.

Warfare is only one of the many theaters of religious persuasion. From battlefield to ballot box, from boardroom to bedroom, religious movements enjoy immense power in the world today. This power arises mainly because the leaders of these movements have persuaded their members to grant it to them—most religious people, including Grace in Accra and many millions like her, are enthusiasts, not prisoners. Their relationship with their religious leaders is mostly voluntary (often much more so than their relationship with their political and military leaders). There's a real problem in some Muslim-majority countries where the fact that the law prescribes the death penalty for apostasy or blasphemy creates a climate of fear for those who wish to renounce Islam publicly or even to leave it quietly.⁶ But there are many nominal Muslims who are only minimally observant if at all, and the enthusiasm of the majority cannot be attributed to coercion. Still, the bad news is that, since most of the world's religious people are not prisoners, it's difficult to hold a reasoned discussion about how to make the leaders of their movements accountable, to ensure this power is not abused—as it has certainly been abused on the battlefields of Eastern Europe, and in many other places too.

This book is about how the world's religions have gained such power, what they do with it, and how abuses of this power can be constrained.

When we see politicians instrumentalize religion as they so often do, it's easy to conclude that the most important source of religious power is political influence. It's true that political leaders have often granted vast powers to religious movements—by establishing them as official religions, by granting them subsidies and tax breaks, or by giving them legal power to punish people who don't accept their authority. But this doesn't explain why political leaders—who as a rule don't like giving power to anybody—should want to grant it to the leaders of religion. The truth is that they do so because religious movements have gained their power independently, through persuading people like Grace to join them. Political leaders are envious of the legitimacy that comes with it. The question that will occupy us here is how religious movements gain that power.

A natural way of thinking about this is that religions flourish because they preach a particularly moving spiritual message, a narrative that speaks to important human needs. While convincing as far as it goes, this doesn't explain *why* some messages succeed in moving their hearers more than others do. After all, most of the spiritual movements that were ever founded have disappeared without trace. What makes the best religious messages so moving, then—so enchanting, in the best sense of that multifaceted word, whose several meanings we'll return to unpack later in the book? There's a surprising answer to this question: it's economics. What exactly does that mean?

Religious movements may preach in poetry, but for their work to be effective they must minister in prose. They must be the fruit of system, not just of serendipity—and the more modern the movement, the more important is the system. The messages religious movements send to their members and potential members may be practical or uplifting, informative or transfiguring. But it's not their content alone that gives them their power. The organizations themselves that make up these movements—churches, mosques, madrassas, synagogues, temples, prayer groups, ashrams, monasteries, meeting houses—must engage in what the nineteenth-century economist Alfred Marshall called “the ordinary business of life.”⁷ They recruit, raise funds, disburse budgets, manage premises, organize transport, motivate employees and

volunteers, and get their message out. They do this while being keenly aware that they compete—for funds, loyalty, energy, and attention—with other religious organizations, potentially no less inspiring than they are, as well as with secular rivals and the pull of lassitude, indifference, skepticism, or outright hostility. Without economic resources behind them, the most beautifully crafted messages will struggle to gain a hearing in the cacophony of life. The velvet glove of enchantment clothes an iron fist of organization.

Saying that religions compete does not imply they are motivated by greed or profit (though they might be), any more than a restaurant owner, winemaker, theater director, or manager of a biotech or software start-up must be motivated by greed or profit. They may be driven by passion or pragmatism, but competing is what they must do to command the necessary economic and human resources to survive and flourish.

Religions, in short, are businesses. Like most businesses, they are many other things as well—they're communities, objects of inspiration or anxiety to observers from outside, cradles of ambition and frustration to their recruits, theaters of fulfilment or despair to those who invest their lives or their savings within them. But they are legitimate businesses—a fact that should give pause to some of their detractors, but also empower those (their supporters as well as their critics) who believe they should be accountable to society as other businesses are. And they need to be understood in terms of their organization as well as in terms of the mission they inherit from their founders. A convincing account of the success of businesses like Microsoft or Apple can't stop with charming stories of their teenage founders coding obsessively in their parents' garages. It needs to understand the current structure of these businesses, their logistics, and their corporate culture. A convincing account of the success of religious movements requires no less comprehensive an investigation.

The history of religious movements has focused overwhelmingly, and for good reason, on the personalities of their founders and the poetry in the messages they communicate. This book is about the underlying prose, which shapes what it is possible for others to hear. It has made all the difference between a message that may move a few hearers before

fading into oblivion and one that continues to thunder down the centuries. Pastor William is an intriguing man, but we're going to see much more of Grace and her friends, as well as their counterparts in Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and the world's other religions, than we see of him in the pages to come.

Religion and Economics—an Age-Old Partnership

It may seem strange that the power of an other-worldly message to move multitudes could be shaped by such a worldly constraint as economic competition, but to Scottish philosopher and economist Adam Smith in the eighteenth century it was only common sense. Theologians in the Church of England were much preoccupied with the growth in popularity of the so-called New Dissenters, and particularly the Methodists led by John Wesley. In terms reminiscent of the way some populist politicians are discussed in broadsheet newspapers and on digital media today, Methodist preachers were accused of “bewitching” their listeners, making “people go mad,” and persuading them that the parsons of the established Church were “blind guides and false prophets.”⁸ But an Irish minister may have revealed more than he meant to when he set about the Methodist preacher John Smythe with a club, exclaiming “how dare you go about preaching, setting the whole neighborhood out of their senses, and thinning my congregation.”⁹

For Adam Smith this was the whole point: what was going on was competition to attract an audience. He thought the reason the Methodists were good at it was that they had stronger incentives. As Smith wrote in book 5 of *The Wealth of Nations*, Methodists faced a different set of economic rewards than the parsons of the Church of England. Parsons typically enjoyed a comfortable salary independently of how well they preached. But a Methodist minister who could not summon an enthusiastic congregation would not earn a living. As Smith put it with gentle sarcasm: “The clergy of an established and well-endowed religion frequently become men of learning and elegance, who possess all the virtues of gentlemen.” But they were much less interested in, and therefore much less good at, filling the pews.¹⁰

Smith was interested in how economic incentives might shape not just the quality but also the content of the message delivered by churches. This was literally a matter of life and death. Europe in Smith's time still bore the scars of the violent wars of religion that had convulsed the continent for over a century leading up to the end of the Thirty Years' War. There were still periodic outbursts of religiously fueled violence, as well as persistent repression of religious minorities such as the Protestant Huguenots in France.¹¹ Smith began writing *The Wealth of Nations* in 1764, during a long visit to my home city of Toulouse, in southwest France. Toulouse had been wracked during the previous two years by recriminations over the torture and execution of Jean Calas, a Protestant, on the false charge of killing his son. The son had committed suicide, but it was alleged that Calas had murdered him to stop him from converting to Catholicism. The case had been taken up by the philosopher Voltaire, who made it a centerpiece of his attacks on the intolerance of the Catholic Church.¹² Amid the swirling controversies about religion, violence, and persecution, Smith must have reflected very hard about why he was living in such religiously turbulent times.¹³

Voltaire often wrote as though he thought religion was essentially intolerant, and many partisans of one religion would argue that the intolerance they perceived in rival religions was part of their intrinsic nature. Smith strongly disagreed. Whether religions preached a tolerant or an intolerant message, he wrote, was not the result of some quality inherent in religion, but the result of the incentives religious leaders faced. Just as in other fields of life competition was good and monopoly was bad for ordinary people, he argued that when many religions competed with one another on an equal basis, they would be obliged to preach a more benevolent message.¹⁴ It's clear Smith meant rivalry between any movements that had the freedom to shape their own message, including rival Protestant churches in the same town. Only if the number of religions in a society were limited to a very few, he claimed, would their leaders be able to preach violence and discord. And this in turn was likely to happen only if *political* leaders granted protection to some religious movements over others.

So why would political leaders want to do this? What benefit could they gain from granting power to religious movements? Smith thought they might, for example, offer the protection of the state to one or a small number of privileged faiths, sheltering them from competition in return for legitimation of the state's political leaders by the religion's ideological leaders.¹⁵ He developed this idea into a theory of the natural life cycle of religious movements: new movements would be energetic and dynamic, and the successful ones would attract the envy of political leaders, who would offer them privileges and protection in return for their ideological support. Politicians like nothing better than to have priests, pastors, rabbis, or imams preaching to attentive congregations on their behalf. But Smith warned that protection would weaken religious leaders' incentives to listen to their members, so they would eventually become unable to compete effectively against even newer religious movements that challenged them in turn.

Smith's point was not that the content of the message preached by religious leaders didn't matter—far from it. Nor was he suggesting that religious leaders were interested only in economic gain. His point was rather that their teachings responded to the economic and political circumstances in which the leaders of the various movements found themselves. There was no point in urging the churches to change their message if that was the one it was in their interest to deliver. And, as poor Jean Calas discovered to his cost, a church that was entitled by law to break him and kill him if he disagreed with its teachings had no incentive to do the hard work necessary to make those teachings more persuasive.

In the two and a half centuries since Smith wrote, we have learned much more than he knew about both economics and religion, and of course our societies have changed almost beyond recognition, so we are no longer studying the same world. Almost . . . but not entirely. We'll see that Smith's conclusions are often inaccurate to describe today's world, but his way of thinking about the problems of his time remains astonishingly relevant even in the twenty-first century.

Religion today is big business—a study published in 2016 estimated that faith-based organizations in the United States received revenues equal to 378 billion US dollars. That's an enormous inflow of resources,

greater than the revenues in the same year of Apple and Microsoft combined, and greater than 2 percent of total personal income in the United States.¹⁶ It's 60 percent of the revenues of the media and entertainment industries—film, gaming, books, music, the lot.¹⁷ It's half of what all the restaurants in America earned together.¹⁸ That doesn't even count the time, energy, and contributions in kind made by members of faith-based organizations. It's impossible to get comparable international figures, so we can only conjecture what may be happening elsewhere. But there are quite a few countries, particularly in Africa (Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, for instance) and Latin America (Brazil, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, for instance), where there is a strong Pentecostal presence and where it's reasonable to think that at least one adult in ten is paying tithes (10 percent of their income). If another two adults in ten are paying 5 percent of their income, then even if no one else is paying anything, this would yield total revenues of faith-based organizations of similar importance relative to the size of their economies.

Religion and Politics

Religion is also big politics, just as Smith predicted. Political leaders around the world, in countries from Azerbaijan and Brazil to Yemen and Zimbabwe, have sought legitimacy for their regimes from religious authorities.¹⁹ The more theocratic among them justify their repression of dissent by claiming that political opposition is tantamount to rebellion against the Almighty, as in the case of the Iranian rapper executed in December 2022 for “waging war against God,” which raises the question why the Almighty should be so much in need of human defense.²⁰ The government of Israel that took office in December 2022 has a finance minister who has called for the restoration of the Torah justice system as “in the days of King David.”²¹ Russian president Vladimir Putin has extolled the virtues of the Russian Orthodox Church, and even referred to the destiny of Russian Orthodoxy in support of his 2022 invasion of Ukraine. As we saw earlier, the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church continued to support the invasion enthusiastically even as the human costs of that invasion became more visible.²² President Recep Tayyip

Erdogan has made his personal religiosity a key component of his political strategy for Turkey since his time as mayor of Istanbul in the 1990s, turning initiatives like the reinstatement of the Hagia Sophia as a mosque into major political statements.²³ And the initiative does not come only or even mainly from leaders with a previous track record of religious conviction. Whether it's Donald Trump discovering the attractions of praying with evangelical pastors, Narendra Modi worshipping at Hindu temples, Xi Jinping sponsoring the reconstruction of Buddhist temples, or Binyamin Netanyahu presiding over a religious transformation of educational curricula in Israel, leaders who were never known for their piety have shown growing enthusiasm for cultivating their inner devotee.²⁴ Perhaps the weight of office provokes greater humility before the mysteries of the spiritual life. Then again, perhaps not.

As we'll see in later chapters, there are many reasons why politicians turn to religion. Sometimes it's as simple as the fact that many citizens listen to religious leaders in deciding whether and how to cast their vote—there's convincing evidence, for instance, that church attendance has a positive causal impact on political turnout.²⁵ Sometimes it's a way for political leaders to claim to be more honest or more morally righteous than they would otherwise appear. It can be more subtle: religious leaders often have a talent for articulating narratives that make sense of sacrifice and loss, predicaments that politicians usually struggle to explain to their citizens, but which they may hope to legitimate by expressing them in religious language.

Whatever the motivation for the transaction, when religion and politics are entwined, the stakes are high. In return for their explicit or implicit support, religious organizations favored by politicians can be granted great privileges. The Christian Church, for example, acquired enormous material resources after its political establishment in Europe in the Middle Ages; it's estimated that by the year 750 CE the Church owned around one-third of all the agricultural land in western Europe.²⁶ Much of this accumulation came in the form of donations and bequests from wealthy patrons who believed that their fate after death might be influenced by the piety to which these donations bore witness. Similar processes have been documented over the same centuries for Hindu

and Buddhist temples across Asia and for mosques throughout the Islamic world.

The Catholic Church lost most of those resources again, massively, after the Protestant Reformation. This happened not only through the Dissolution of the Monasteries in England, spearheaded by Henry VIII's minister Thomas Cromwell, but throughout Europe where the Reformation spread, as recent research has shown.²⁷ But even churches that are not established often enjoy great material privileges even today. Though they take money from members of the public, they typically pay no tax. In many countries they publish no accounts (unlike secular charities), and are partly exempt from the laws that govern the employment and other practices of firms.²⁸ They are often enabled (and sometimes encouraged) to use the law against members of the public who oppose them, whether these are members of rival religions or simply ordinary citizens who wish to live their lives in ways of which other people disapprove. When this happens, it's tempting to think that religious organizations are powerful because they enjoy these privileges; there is some truth in that. More importantly, though, they enjoy these privileges because they are independently powerful. And they are powerful, by and large, because they have persuaded their members to make them so.

It follows that privileges cannot make religious organizations durably powerful unless they've already won this power through gaining committed followers. We see this in the repeated failure of political leaders to undercut the legitimacy of some religious organizations by granting privileges to rivals that the political leaders prefer, but that have not passed the basic test of developing a following of their own. As I write, the French government is seeking to combat Islamic radicalism by launching a "moderate" Islamic Council, having apparently learned nothing from the failure of a previous attempt to do the same nearly two decades earlier.²⁹ The Chinese government has for years supported an "official" Chinese Catholic Church, as well as official Protestant and Muslim organizations, but none of these appear to enjoy as much popular support as the unofficial organizations in these traditions. For similar reasons, there are signs that the increasing political influence of

evangelical Christian organizations over the Republican Party in the United States is leading many Americans to turn away from evangelical churches, attending church less often even if they may still identify as evangelical.³⁰ As Adam Smith had already warned, political power may be a poisoned chalice that churches come to regret.

Power can also be damaging to religion in another way. In recent years, thanks to investigations by many individual reporters and media outlets, and brave decisions to break silence on the part of victims, we have come to understand the massive scale of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse perpetrated by many people elevated to positions of trust within religious movements. This abuse is continuing to come to light, and in organizations of all religious traditions and denominations. Abuse can occur in all social environments, secular as well as religious, but it's most common in those that grant leaders unchecked authority over vulnerable people. The veneration accorded to charismatic religious leaders makes it particularly hard for their victims to protect themselves, or even sometimes fully to believe what is happening to them, to call abuse by its proper name. They fear, often rightly, that even if they can believe their own senses they may not be believed by others. When the truth eventually emerges it can discredit not only the individual abusers but the whole culture that enabled and protected them. Though it may be painful to admit it, religious organizations have everything to gain from avoiding the accumulation of too much unchecked power over their members.

The Questions This Book Will Answer

What this book will show is both simple and novel. Religious movements are a special kind of business—they are *platforms*. Platforms are organizations that facilitate relationships that could not form, or could not function as effectively, in the platforms' absence. Platforms reward those who create and manage them by appropriating some of the benefits those relationships make possible.

In the twenty-first century the word “platforms” conjures up the digital universe of search engines, social media, and smartphone applications for everything from dining to dating to decorating. Their ubiquity

online blinds us to the fact that platforms using predigital technology—the voice; the handshake; the song; the dance; the drinking cup; the knife, the fork, and the spoon—have been around since the dawn of history. They have included the matchmaker who introduced couples; the interpreter who united linguistic strangers; the market trader who helped farmers and artisans find buyers; the merchant adventurer whose wanderings brought silks, spices, and the plague to people who had never traveled away from their birthplace; as well as the temple, the church, the mosque, and the synagogue that built communities. But community building is not magic—it's the fruit of hard work and organization as well as inspiration, and religious movements have found ways to marry hard work with thoughtful strategy to create enchantment. This book will recount how it has been done, from prehistory to the twenty-first century. It will show that as religious movements have modernized, they have moved the platform component of their operations to center stage. In the process we shall see how to bring accountability to the exercise of the immense power these religious movements have built.

The book will address difficult questions that many standard accounts of religion struggle to answer. These questions are of three main kinds. First, there are the intimately personal questions: What are the needs in individual human beings to which religious movements speak? Is religiosity a distinct psychological trait, or is it a bundle of diverse traits that have little in common? How can religion claim to bring order to the unweeded garden of human perceptions and desires? How can it give so many people a sense of purpose in their lives that secular institutions often struggle to articulate? If religion really does speak to universal human needs and longings, why has it been claimed that women are on average more religious than men? And why is religion booming in many parts of the world when observers in Europe and North America are convinced it's in terminal decline?

The second type of question the book will address is organizational. Why do religious movements take so many different forms, from tiny cults to vast international organizations? What are the most important differences between religious platforms and secular ones? How does technological innovation, from cave painting to printing to artificial

intelligence, affect the intensity of rivalry between religious movements? When is such rivalry peaceful and when does it become angry, even violent? Why do religious movements so often clash over abstruse points of theology or ritual that are hard for most of their members to understand, let alone decide? When do religious movements flourish and grow, when do they splinter, when do they die? Can a large, centralized movement like the Catholic Church survive in the modern world, or is it destined to break up? How do movements as different as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Protestant Christianity maintain fidelity to their practices and rituals in the absence of centralized authorities to enforce orthodoxy?

The third type of question is political, in the broadest sense of the word: these are questions about power, its use and its abuse. Why have movements that affirm moral values seen an epidemic of sexual abuse? Why do political leaders so often claim religious support for war and repression? When are religious hostility and religious violence directed at perceived heretics within religious movements, and when are they directed at members of different movements? And, finally, can authoritarian religious messages survive in a world of increasing education, falling fertility, and female emancipation? Or will religion provide the secret sauce for a successful authoritarian backlash against the hard-won gains of the last two centuries in equality, democracy, and freedom for minorities?

The platform model of religious movements casts new light on all these questions and more. These features of religion are the fruit of countless commitments made by individuals to the religious platforms that invite them to join. They owe their form to competition between those platforms to attract members and resources, competition that will shape what is possible for religious movements and their political backers in the coming century.

Outline of the Book

Part I will begin by defining what religion is and describing what religion looks like in the world today. It will show that, despite what many have claimed, religion is not in decline; it is in many ways more powerful than it has ever been.

Part II will then look at what religious power consists in, and where it comes from. The most successful religious organizations have developed their competitive strategies over thousands of years, and have continued refining them in recent decades. They're successful because they speak more convincingly than many of their secular rivals to needs shared by most, though not necessarily all, human beings. These include both material and spiritual needs, including the need for a sense of community and for a compelling shared narrative of our lives and our place in the universe. The secular institutions of twenty-first-century democratic industrial capitalism have furnished our lives abundantly with appliances and activities, but citizens of the modern world are still often in search of ways to furnish them with meaning. Some find that meaning without any help from religion, but many find it more fully in religion than anywhere else. The genius of religious movements has been to provide meaning through the creation of platforms—communities that create shared meaning not as an abstract idea, as in a philosophy class, but as the natural product of shared experiences. These may be lived in a group or lived alone, but they are interpreted through a language and a symbolism that make sense only in the light of the group. It is through the group that discipline can paradoxically create and nourish enchantment. The most successful religious movements today are those that have been developing and adapting the platform model for the demands of the twenty-first century.

Part III will look at how religious organizations use their power—politically, socially, economically, psychologically, sometimes to good ends and sometimes to bad ones. Mostly we shall try simply to understand how they do so, without judgment. However, in part IV we'll look to the future, and see whether our understanding of the sources and uses of religious power can suggest ways to manage that power for the good of everyone, the religious and the nonreligious alike.

Anyone who cares about how power is exercised in the modern world should care about why religions have so much of that power. So should anyone who cares about the beauty and poetry of religious messages. Those messages have reached us only because of the hard work and strategic thinking of the entrepreneurs and their successors who

found ways to convey them. We may all, to varying degrees, have within us the potential to be moved by the mysteries of existence, whatever explanations of those mysteries we may choose to believe. And we should be endlessly curious about the processes by which religious leadership, like the poet's pen in the words of Shakespeare, "turns to shapes the forms of things unknown, and gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name."³¹

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