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## The Exalted Cranes: the Question of Purity and Impurity

‘What! Shall ye have male progeny and God female? This were indeed an unfair partition. These are mere names and your fathers named them such.’ (Qur’an 21.3.)

### The Buddhas of Bamian and religious exclusion

In March of 2001 the Taliban government of Afghanistan destroyed the colossal Buddhas of Bamian. The two statues were the largest of several Buddhas found in this area of Afghanistan, which from the second century until the time Islam entered the region in the ninth century was a thriving centre of Mahayana Buddhism. Bamian was situated along the Silk Road, and since Graeco-Roman times it has played an important role in the transfer of both ideas and goods between the East and the West. In fact, the statues themselves represented a style of standing Buddha called the Gandharan style that was deeply indebted to Greek art. The ruling group during the ninth century, called the Gui-Shang or Kushang, were wildly eclectic in their religious tastes. At an earlier time, they seem to have been fire worshippers in the Zoroastrian tradition, but it was eventually Buddhism that flourished in the kingdom, spurred by increased trade with China and Central Asia. Hellenism also retained its presence in Afghanistan, and excavations in the region have yielded thousands of examples of Gandharan art exhibiting the hybrid Hellenic-Buddhist style. In and around the statues, small caves and niches were homes to early Buddhist monks. When the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang visited Bamian in AD 630 he described the valley as a bustling Buddhist centre ‘with more than ten monasteries and more than a thousand monks’. The town of Bamian was destroyed by the invading Mongol armies in AD 1221, but many of the statues, including the massive Buddhas, survived, even as Buddhism ceased to exist as a living religion in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup>

With the arrival of Arab armies in AD 637, most of Afghanistan began to embrace Islam, but deep ethnic, cultural and linguistic fractures opened. The culture remained (and continues to be) primarily tribal and clan-based. Islam has had an overarching impact on the country, primarily when strong and popular leaders have used it as a rallying cry or

when external enemies have threatened the country. Although the importance of Islam in Afghan society cannot be overstressed, there are equally important, and not as widely known, local 'feudal' practices, which are often at odds with Islamic law. Vendettas, both individual and collective, are common and many have been maintained for generations, often contradicting the strictures of Islamic justice.<sup>2</sup>

The clan-based nature of Afghan culture often causes its groups to fall outside the legal norms of strict Sunni Islam. In addition, Afghanistan had, before the Taliban regime came to power, a small but significant number of religious minorities who were not Muslims. A population of Jews, Hindus and Sikhs resided in the country, mainly in the urban centres, and far older populations of non-Muslims existed well into modern times. An intriguing group called the Nuris, or Nuristanis, currently live in the north-east of the country. They were forcibly converted to Islam at the beginning of the twentieth century, but before that time were known as *kafir* (infidels) and practised a form of polytheism, carving wooden figures to adorn the graves of their dead. Many Nuris have light skin and eyes, red or blond hair, and claim ancestry from Greek settlers, but a more probable theory holds that they are the aboriginal people of Afghanistan, forced into the remote highlands by later migrants.<sup>3</sup>

A strong tradition of Sufism exists in Afghanistan that is unlike the staunch Wahhabi type of fundamentalism practised by the Taliban; several Sufi mystical orders, the most prominent being the Qadiriyya and the Naqshbandiyya, with their veneration of *murshits* or *pirs* (spiritual teachers) are strong in some areas of the country. Unlike the political quietism of some branches of Sufism, Afghan Sufism had been closely intertwined in politics and opposed to foreign influence. During the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, several Sufi *pirs* were involved in uprisings against the British and at a local level, Sufism and *pir* veneration are still extremely popular, as witnessed by the *ziarats* (tombs or shrines) with fluttering flags that are a common site in the Afghan countryside.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this history of cultural and even religious diversity (and notably, even diversity within Islam in Afghanistan) the Taliban government decided to destroy the statues and all pre-Islamic art in Afghanistan in early 2001. Although the final explosion that brought down the Buddhas was broadcast worldwide, it took nearly a month to destroy the statues completely. The Taliban Information Minister Quadratullah Jamal explained that 'this work of destruction is not as easy as people may think. You can't knock the statues by shelling as both are carved into a cliff; they are firmly attached to the mountain.'

But despite the mechanical difficulty they were destroyed, after having survived in the Bamian valley for nearly 1,500 years. The destruction of the Buddhas was roundly condemned by UNESCO, Western nations and most Muslim governments,<sup>5</sup> but the destruction, as bad as it was, was

only a harbinger. The destruction of the Buddhas was a herald: in early 2001 the world was alerted to the dangers of a phenomenon that been quickly growing since the close of the Cold War, but had not yet fully taken the world stage. Many scholars had noted the rise of fundamentalism in the Abrahamic faiths – Christianity, Islam and Judaism – as one of the most salient features of the post-Cold War era. But the public had yet to take note. For the rise of fundamentalism went against the grain of the expected trajectory of the post-modern world. Rather than conform to the growing trends of secularism, democracy and a liberal open society – the very values that seemed victorious after the struggle of the Cold War – fundamentalism veered in the very opposite direction. The kind of uncompromising stance of the Taliban regarding the Buddhas took the world by surprise. The menace of fundamentalism was not fully understood, so few knew how to even ask the question: Why were these people so enraged?

Eventually, of course, the West was forced to ask that question. The fact that other, more open versions of the three Abrahamic faiths have always existed and the idea that they eschew the dogmatics of exclusion that lie at the heart of fundamentalist agendas was lost in the debate about modern fundamentalism. The destruction of the Bamian Buddhas became an early model for much of the West's thinking about Islam in the Age of Terrorism. The images of Islam as wholly exclusionary and militant were difficult to avoid. This view excluded the marvellous variety within Islam. In this paradigm, Islamic fundamentalism was the only version of Islam considered, and many people fully accepted it, never asking if Islam had ever practised accommodation with the faiths and cultures around it. The history of the type of religious practice explored in this book, called syncretism, gives ample evidence that such accommodation has occurred. The Taliban were unwilling to incorporate the elements of pre-Islamic Afghan culture and religion in their Islamic practices, but other groups in other places were not so rigid. In the next section, we will explore an example of religious inclusion that is closer to home.

### **The Green Man and religious accommodation**

Looking up, one views leafy faces that are revealed and simultaneously concealed, and one cannot help but be struck by this polarity, for although Green Men are merely architectural adornments, they can be oddly, even electrically, alive. Green Men inhabit the nooks of Christian sacred spaces all over Europe, and their lack of centrality to the pageantry of Christian worship is actually an excellent marker of their importance. They could not be wholly discarded by the propagators of the Christian faith in the early years of its arrival in Northern Europe, yet they could

not be too completely incorporated. A kind of compromise was worked out. Green Men would be ornaments; they would inhabit the cracks between Christianity's towering physical and theological structures; they would be reminders of what came before the entry of Christ into such places as Norwich, Exeter and Canterbury. In the space between pre-Christian religions and the arrival of the Church, the subtle reminders of the precursor – the native religion – comfortably dwell. Sometimes forgotten, sometimes remembered, they have never been wholly erased.

For such a simple symbol, there exists a bewildering array of variations on the Green Man theme. Most often, a face peers down from the top of a column or ledge, from behind a veil of leaves and branches. The most salient features of the human face remain: the eyes, mouth, and often, a nose. But the vegetation is the paramount image – and what makes the Green Man *green* – and it is what originally gave him a place of honour in some of Europe's sacred Christian spaces, both great and small. Sometimes the green of the Green Man is merely a mask. At other times, the green leaves and bowers grow from his open mouth and spread in a wild profusion, much like that other figure of disquieting vegetative fecundity sometimes found in old English and Irish churches, Sheela-Na-Gig, who opens her vagina with outstretched hands, releasing plumes of leaves and sprigs of flowers.<sup>6</sup> And like Sheela, there is a definite impression that the Green Man is in some fashion responsible for the fertility of the world, both of fauna and flora, and of humans and their earth.

The Green Man's presence becomes more explicable when we see the rites associated with him in pre-Christian times and the folk traditions still enacted after the coming of Christianity – some of which are still performed today. Sometimes called Green George, or Jack in the Green, or the Old Man in the Woods,<sup>7</sup> his cult was celebrated in the spring and associated with the rites of vegetative rebirth. Often, a Green Man substitute, usually a manikin, was thrown into a body of water and his literal and symbolic death brought about the renewed life of a nascent, budding spring. The Green Man cult was celebrated through morris dancing, a form of folk dance meant to wake up the slumbering earth through the stomping of feet and banging of sticks on the ground; often, the dancers wore wooden clogs to add to the tumult and sported elaborate floral costumes, top-heavy headdresses, and brightly coloured rags and streamers, as if to illustrate to nature, quite concretely, what she needed to do.

The Green Man was associated with death and renewal; his death was an individual sacrifice for the continuous well-being of the community. The devotees of his cult long understood that his worship was a symbol of a mighty cosmic truth: for life to continue there must be death. It becomes quite easy to see how the Green Man became a logical complement and accompaniment to churches where the newly arrived cult of the risen Christ preached a similar, if not almost identical message.

The survival of the Green Man image is really a splendid example of the psychology of religious conversion. Conversion involves shedding one set of beliefs and practices for another, but that transfer is never wholly complete; some notions, and often very important ones, pass over the bridge between worlds as others are left behind. The Green Man's survival, whether through conscious attempts to ease the burdens of conversion, or through the unconscious transference of like elements to like elements, speaks with a certain understated and bold dignity about the power of the common people to give themselves what they need. Ecclesiastical powers may want a converted people to accept their novel religion wholesale and undiluted. But repeatedly through history, the people – the *folk* – have mixed their creeds to suit their needs, and they have done this despite attempts by religious authorities to impose a foreign orthodoxy and conformity. The faith of the Green Man was a polytheistic, earth-bound religion. It represented a plurality of moving forces in the world, and stood against the notion of a singular god looming above creation, a notion which belongs to the Judaeo-Christian heritage and the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Christianity carries a binding moral code that, while altered somewhat by the arrival of Christ, it brought from Judaism. The Green Man faith, while no less lofty and morally binding, was a faith of natural necessity. Things are born and die not because they are fulfilling a plan, but simply because things must die for other things to live. People in northern Europe brought along the Green Man when they embraced Christianity, despite the pressure to move from a polytheistic creed – with all its associations of impurity, chaotic worship, local practice and parochialism – to monotheism, which carried the badge of universality, and as such, the supposed imprint of a higher moral and ethical stature. Why did the converted people do this? Why bring the Green Man along? Why be 'impure' when one can be 'pure'?

This book is about notions of purity and impurity in religion – how the notions began, and what they mean to religiously inclined people. Why is there a drive for purity? Why is it important to some people, at some times, to have a singular religious unanimity, while at other times it seems of no importance whatsoever? Does the drive to purity say something essential about a people's origins? Does the ability to live with the contradiction of a mixed heritage state a human truth no less important? For the individual person, hiding one's origins is often of no real consequence. But organized religion at the beginning of the twenty-first century continues to illustrate the need for disclosure of its foundations in dramatic ways.

How can a mostly complacent West try to understand Islam now that the dramatic differences between Islam and the West are continually imperilling Western lives? How are we to explain or understand

the motivations of *other* people who are so convinced they are right in their actions and thoughts, when we believe that they are fundamentally wrong? How can we convince the self-proclaimed *pure* to accept our ‘impurities’? How do situations that allow for such violent disparity arise, historically, religiously, socially and cognitively? Were things always this way? Were there alternatives?

### Syncretism defined

We will attempt to answer some of these questions. In a sense, our mission is simple, because our topic – borrowing – is simple. Borrowing is an easy concept to grasp. We borrow a ladder from our neighbour to clean our windows. When we return the ladder, if we have not broken it, it still belongs to our neighbour wholly and intact, just as our windows continue to belong to us wholly and intact. The exchange involves no admixture of our neighbour and us or his ladder and our windows. But we will examine syncretism, a type of borrowing that takes place in religions, an area of study that is rife with complexity and has strange dynamics. Syncretism, in the dictionary definition, is a reconciliation or fusion of differing systems of belief in religion, especially when the result is heterogeneous (incongruous or dissimilar). So unlike borrowing a ladder from a neighbour, syncretistic borrowing involves exchange and transformation. It is as if windows and ladders could merge into hybrid objects, both similar and dissimilar to their component parts.

Syncretism occurs when one religion adopts, absorbs or otherwise accepts elements of another religion. But this simple definition masks a great deal of complexity, which reveals itself most fully when we see some of the reactions that Islam, Judaism and Christianity have had to the practice. Syncretism has often been the sworn enemy of the three great Abrahamic monotheistic religions of the West. Whereas other religious traditions often openly adopt the practices, customs, styles of worship and even the deities of other religions, the Abrahamic faiths have infrequently acknowledged the debt they owe their predecessors and contemporaries. In the crucible that creates religious movements, a certain self-serving amnesia seems necessarily to accompany the creation of a new religion. Orthodox Jews, Muslims and Christians will seldom acknowledge *borrowing* from other traditions even though the Abrahamic religions show a marked preference for accepting from other people’s credal formulae, sacred writings and practices. Syncretism is a suspect notion to fundamentalists even when it is obvious, to the eye unaffected by a religious agenda, that the categories we use to separate religions are not as fixed as they appear.

### ***The Satanic Verses* controversy and syncretism**

The problem here involves our notions of what separates one religion from another, and who borrows what from whom. This problem may seem remote, but it continually rears its head and causes perplexing crises. In 1988, *The Satanic Verses*, by Salman Rushdie, became an unlikely conductor of syncretism. A novel about transformations, *The Satanic Verses* creates a fictional world where anything can transform into anything, and as such, this novel is necessarily the enemy in a religious system that requires stasis in heaven and earth.<sup>8</sup> The novel, among other things, acknowledges the hidden foundations of the faith of Islam, and Islam's deep indebtedness to the milieu of sixth-century cult practices in pre-Islamic Arabia. Much of the controversy surrounding the novel centres on the satirical treatment of a prophetic character who resembles Muhammad and his early followers, the first Muslims of the Islamic era. But much of the invective aimed against *The Satanic Verses* was surely directed against the title, and the historical weight of what the term 'Satanic Verses' means to religious Muslims. These verses, allegedly part of an early version of the Qur'an, were referenced in early Arab biographies of the Prophet (but not in current versions of the Qur'an), and were meant as a conciliatory gesture by Muhammad to the priests and devotees of the polytheistic cults of Mecca. They were meant as a compromise between the religion that existed in Mecca before the advent of Islam, and what Muhammad wanted to create: an all-Allah faith in Arabia. (It has long been known that Muhammad had predecessors in this regard: the *hanifs* of Arabia were reformers who preached an all-Allah, monotheistic creed which was gaining popularity with time and was further bolstered by the spread of Christianity and Judaism in Arabia.) But the tradition of the verses is clear: they were provided not by the angel Gabriel but by Satan, who in exercising his traditional role as an adversary, was trying to fool the Prophet into error. According to tradition, the verses were quickly retracted. The uncompromising stance of Muhammad and his early followers toward Arabic polytheism resumed, but the taint of the verses remained. The spectre of a less than holy alliance with a power (polytheism, or the belief in a plurality of divine beings) that Islam, as a pillar of the divine unity and singularity of God, would see as an utter anathema, lingered like an after-image: faint but still somewhat unsettling to view.

Sura 53 of the Qur'an (which is called 'The Star' because it deals with the astral worship of pre-Islamic Arabs) begins:

Have you thought upon al-Lat and ul-Uzza  
And Manat, the third, the other?

The Satanic verses, which were excised from the canonical versions of the *Qur'an*, then followed:

These are the exalted cranes  
Whose intercession is to be hoped for . . .

Birds are animals with a special place in spiritual narratives; they can fly to the heavens, and as such, can be intermediaries with God. Muhammad, however, calls al-Lat, ul-Uzza and Manat birds euphemistically to soften what he is saying and to hide what he is implying: that they are goddesses, consorts, daughters (or both) of Allah, the supreme God in the Arab pantheon. In Rushdie's novel, the ghost of the goddess returns. The exposure of a syncretistic compromise, initially made but then abandoned, reveals a human framework beneath a faith that claims to be of strictly divine origin. The Prophet faltered, blundered and recovered. Ultimately, it is not the recovery that matters – it is the fact that he could have blundered in the first place that is a matter of such importance.<sup>9</sup>

Even outside the pages of the *Qur'an* and its expurgated elements, one can see the deep indebtedness of Islam to its predecessors and contemporaries, in particular in the practice of the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. It has long been known that ceremonies practised at Mecca have a pre-Islamic origin. The *al-hajarul aswad* (the black stone at the Ka'ba), the casting of pebbles at the demons at *Mina* and the mountains outside of Mecca called *Jabalu r-Rahma* were all pre-Islamic pilgrimage sites and practices, which were subsequently incorporated into an Islamic framework. Even the most important image in the Islamic world, the crescent moon, points to a pre-Islamic origin: pre-Islamic Allah, who was head of a family of wives, daughters and sons, was associated with the moon, and may well have been a lunar god. Muhammad and his followers, as residents of Mecca, were no doubt very aware of this. It seems that the pagan practices of what would become the *hajj* were not the problem in themselves, so Islam simply absorbed them.<sup>10</sup>

This state of affairs seems to have been quite conscious. All aspects of Islam's pre-Islamic origins, and the syncretistic nature of this last of the Abrahamic revealed religions, are masked by a strategy of dominance. Islam certainly portrays itself as superior to the paganism that preceded it and also presents itself as the final answer to the corruptions and unanswered questions untidily left by Judaism and Christianity. Islam incorporated into the *Qur'an* stories from the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, as well as from apocryphal Jewish sources, the Gospels and extra-canonical traditions about Jesus. These reiterations were viewed by Muslims as a sign of Islam's status as the final revealed religion – a complete wrapping up of the semi-fallacious and corrupt stories of its antecedent religions – but certainly not marks of syncretism.<sup>11</sup>

We have every right to call this type of syncretism one of domination, and concealed domination at that. Islam needed to hide the extra-Islamic origins of absorbed cultic practices, creeds and canonical works behind the façade of revelation. These were all to have come unaltered from God in heaven, the tradition states, unsullied by a compromising human hand.

By many, syncretism is viewed as a corruption of the original revelation of Moses or Jesus or Muhammad – a sullyng, in human hands, of a wholly divine message through such diluting avenues as political and social compromise with one's neighbours or the ignorance or isolation of one's religious community. So syncretism, in the eyes of some religious authorities, is a form of deception. Every religion starts somewhere. Every peripheral place may be central to someone else's world. And syncretism, in its numerous forms, lies at the genesis of the Abrahamic faiths. But the politics of movement-building and the consolidation of religious traditions made it all but impossible for the early representatives of these religions to acknowledge their past debts.

Ultimately, one reason *The Satanic Verses* controversy produced a visceral reaction was because it struck at the heart of this conception of an 'immaculately revealed' religion. Even *debate* about issues of the formation of the monotheistic Abrahamic faiths carries a threat, since simple acknowledgement that there could have been non-divine factors at work in the making and compiling of a religion (and its sacred works, and its line of transmission through history) has great destructive potential.

### Syncretism, folk religion and a summary of the topics

But even above and beyond this type of syncretism (the syncretism of religious origins), there is a more overt variety. This syncretism occurs once an established religion moves beyond the borders of its cradle and far from its traditional territorial bounds, and makes progress through areas that are founded on different cultural footings. As we shall see, the Muslim clerics who spread Islam through the recently captured Ottoman Turkish lands in the Balkans were schooled in more heterodox forms of mystical Islam known as Sufism. They were not interested in orthodox standards of purity, instead propagating a more easy-going brand of Islam – an Islam we could call folk Islam. They viewed this version of the faith of Muhammad as primarily akin to the folk Christianity practised by the peasants of the Balkans.<sup>12</sup> For the most part, these Sufi mystics saw the outward rites of organized religion as a veil – as a series of formal conventions meant to express in a starkly tangible form certain deeper, inner truths for people. The expression of faith, for these Ottoman mystics, was but the rind of the fruit; for them, Islam, Christianity and

Judaism were ultimately and merely the revealed patinas on the surface of Supreme Truth. We shall see how the Ottoman Turkish rulers, eager to have a cushion of converted (or even half-converted) people in their conquered Balkan holdings, did not ask uncomfortable questions about the orthodoxy or heterodoxy of its subjected people. In this environment, discussed in Chapter 3 and parts of Chapter 4, a distinctly native European variety of Islam took root and grew.

This sort of syncretism, where a lax political system creates a hybrid religion that blends elements of folk Islam and folk Christianity, can be contrasted with a form of syncretism created by the opposite political impulse: the drive to create a national and religious uniformity. This can be seen in the attempts, by the royal houses of Spain and Portugal in the late thirteenth century, to solidify political gains by uniting the peoples of the Iberian peninsula (who were a mix of indigenous Jews, Christians and Muslims) as Roman Catholics. Forced conversions of Jews and Muslims led not to the greater homogenization of people on the Iberian peninsula (at least not at first) but to creeping fear of crypto-converts: Marranism and Moriscoism.<sup>13</sup> This fear of crypto-ism, or the outward profession of Roman Catholicism and the secret, mostly domestic practice of Judaism or Islam, led to an atmosphere of distrust on the Iberian peninsula which only really disappeared in the nineteenth century; and for some areas of rural Portugal, that distrust continued well into the century we have just vacated. Attempts to root out this phenomenon failed because crypto-Judaism transformed into Marranism, a hybrid religion that is a syncretistic cocktail of Roman Catholicism and Judaism. Marrano practices were altered through the effects of time and the erosion of individual and collective Jewish memory, and more importantly, through the self-conscious alteration of Jewish rites in order to make them clandestine.

The discovery of Marranism in the town of Belmonte in Portugal at the beginning of the twentieth century, its rediscovery in the early 1990s and the attempts to bring Marranos back into the fold of normative Judaism illustrates this point.<sup>14</sup> Marranism is neither Judaism nor Christianity; it is both and neither. Attempts to re-Judaize Marranos en masse always failed, because the kernel of Judaism in Marrano life had long ago been transformed by external pressure and the isolation of communal life into something distinctly different from both Roman Catholicism and Judaism; once uprooted from the traditional soil of the heartland of Marranism (rural north-east Portugal), it all but dies.

Another form of syncretism, related to Marranism but different in key ways, occurs not from the purposeful laxness of rulers in converting subject peoples, or movements to create religious uniformity, but from isolation. Isolation, along with its cousin, ignorance, creates a decidedly rural, folk-based syncretism. We see this most often in the cults of saints. All three Abrahamic religions have or have had thriving cults for their saints,

both officially and unofficially venerated. Saint worship is traditionally the great storehouse for folk-based, demotic expressions of religion, most often of a syncretistic variety. The Roman Catholic Church excised much of the corrosive influence of syncretistic elements in saint cults by incorporating and formalizing that worship through official channels, but the folk element is always visible through the haze of ecclesiastical officialdom. The brown Madonna of Guadalupe, worshipped as she is in a location that was once the centre of the veneration of the Aztec Goddess Tonantzin, on Mount Tepeyac, is a rather obvious nod by the church in Mexico to its aboriginal antecedents. Here the Virgin was said to have been sighted by an Indian, and the Madonna conveniently addressed him in his native tongue, the language of the gods and goddesses of the Aztecs.<sup>15</sup>

One of the other great events in Mary's career, the appearance of the Virgin at Lourdes, also occurred to a peasant. Bernadette's conversations with Mary in the local French vernacular, the Bigourdan dialect, commenced with: '*que soy era Immaculada Councepciou*' ('I am the Immaculate Conception.') This reference to a recently promulgated papal doctrine in a vernacular tongue is surely a turning point in the history of worship on a par with the appearance of the Virgin in Mexico. Purely local manifestations of the Virgin, expressed in vernacular tongues (one of a conquered people in Mexico, and the other of a rural people in France, near the border with Spain, whose language is viewed as debased and mongrel) are surely the syncretistic blending of elements of indigenous religions and cultures with that of their conquerors. In a very real sense, Lourdes and Guadalupe were acts of sabotage by converted peoples. If we must take your gods, these manifestations of Mary tell us, we will mould them to our liking.<sup>16</sup> The Roman Catholic Church, for the most part, had come to realize the necessity of flexibility, and rather than fight the propensity, it harnessed it for the greater good of the Roman version of Christ's Church on earth. When it failed, the Church suffered losses. One such failure involved the Rites Controversy in China, in which the Dominicans, convinced that Confucianism was a religion, refused to allow Chinese converts the right to practise the veneration of ancestors. At the same time, the Jesuits, convinced that Confucianism was only a social custom and secular philosophy, permitted it. The ensuing debate crippled the Church during what turned out to be the narrow window allowed to the Roman Catholic Church for its activities in China.<sup>17</sup>

So the shrines of Mary at Lourdes and Guadalupe started as parochial movements but became, through the force of their primitive usefulness, international shrines, fully sanctioned by national and ecclesiastical authorities.<sup>18</sup> This impulse to graft elements of an old religion onto a new one is even more evident in the host of minor and often unofficial saints found in the Roman Catholic world. In many cases, the hidden identity

of the male or female saint as a previous god or goddess is concealed beneath the thinnest of membranes. This is a syncretism of the vestigial kind: the old divinities of the glades, forests, mountains, glens and pools are dressed in flimsy Christian costume. Far away from the centres of ecclesiastical power, or even in the cracks close to the locus of control, the old gods and goddesses of the subjected people performed much the same role they did in the old regime, but with a shifted emphasis. We will also see this in the final chapter, where we briefly examine the New World syncretistic religion Santeria.

For the Islamic world, saint veneration was most often expressed in Sufism, the mystical movement(s) in Islam. Varieties of this form of mysticism, the same kind that produced a hybrid Islam in the Balkans, also spread the faith in India, Pakistan and Indonesia. In the long and successful history of Islam on the Indian subcontinent, the common folk venerated Muslim saints, and quite often, Hindus and Muslims worshipped Muslim holy men and women in acts of public worship. In equal measure, some Muslims venerated Hindu saints, and to a great degree, elements of cultic practice from both faiths deeply penetrated each other. Where else but on the Indian subcontinent, with the Hindu faith as a model of vast, dizzying inclusion, where alien religions easily take root and throw on the guise of native Indianness, could this occur? That Islam, Judaism and Christianity, when rooted in India, could take on the foundational flavour of that country is a tribute to that land's long history of religious harmonization.<sup>19</sup> We will also examine saint veneration in Morocco among both Jews and Muslims. Looking at examples from this North African country, and also from India and the Balkans, we will quite clearly see the cross-cultural elements of saint veneration peering out through the changes of dress, climate, language and the procession of time.

We will also see how Akbar, the great Mogul ruler of seventeenth-century northern India, becomes a single representative of syncretism writ large in Indian life. As a man brought up in Orthodox Islam, and having taken upon himself the role of the secular guarantor of Islam's hegemony in India, his actions were wildly ironic. As we will see, Akbar's quest to create a religion that was a mixture of all the major religions of India, in a real and unimagined way, becomes the spiritual journey of both his time and ours. He had, in the bold ways we now also have, the power to impose his will on traditions that were malleable in his powerful hands. India, a land of many faiths, becomes a laboratory for living with religious complexity, and living with complexity is the central problem of our own time.

Finally we will examine a hero of syncretism from syncretism's Golden Age. We will survey the life, career and vast and fantastic migrations of Apollonius of Tyana, as written in Philostratus' *The Life of Apollonius*

of *Tyana*. A demi-god of syncretism, his idealized (but by no means sanitized) wanderings all over the map of Graeco-Roman antiquity will illustrate for us how a pagan faith can be morally lofty while being culturally and religiously relativistic, how it can be monotheistic while embracing a divine plurality, and how it can reform but not seek to create religious innovations. Apollonius was the pagan answer to Christ in the first and second centuries, so much so that Eusebius, the famous church historian, wrote a small treatise against *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. We are lucky to have an original pagan document and the Christian and Orthodox reaction to it to compare, contrast and scrutinize.

### Syncretism as a vital part of religious transformation

Inevitably, when we examine the problem of syncretism, we repeatedly encounter the same set of problems, which goes something like this: a religion is *revealed* by God to a prophet. The revelations are written down (either by the prophet himself, or by his immediate followers), and the substance of these revelations differs so radically from its predecessors that it constitutes, either by design or by accidental confluence, a wholly different religious movement from what came before. The prophet and his immediate followers set out to spread the faith, through warfare, through missionary endeavours, or both, and in the process of this engagement with a world already set in its ways, aspects of the new faith begin to transform. Former goddesses, through sleight of hand, become exalted cranes, and Jesus' mother (who has such a minor role in the Gospels), becomes a *de facto* goddess. Similarly, as we shall see, God is viewed as one essence in the most important doctrinal statement of orthodox Judaism, the *Shema*, but in the Kabbala, Judaism's mystical movement, God is broken apart into ten spheres or divine emanations (in Hebrew, the *sephiroth*). These pieces of God, in some of these Kabbalistic traditions, behave very much like the cavorting gods and goddess of any pagan pantheon.<sup>20</sup> In all these cases, a process of accommodation begins to transform the movement, to a greater or a lesser degree, from the vision of its founder. Change, endemic to the universe, becomes ingrained even in our supposedly immutable religions.

After a time, reformers emerge whose mission it is to purge a faith of these erroneous foreign or extraneous elements. This impulse to get at the fundamental level of the prophet or law-giver's original faith can lead to wars, iconoclastic violence, regicide, sectarianism and schism. Fundamentalism cleaves to monotheistic religions because a historically revealed faith *must* have a starting point. The Abrahamic religions, Islam, Christianity and Judaism, do not view time cyclically. To them, time is a traditional narrative: it has a beginning, middle and end. These

religions tend to view time as a progressively corrosive force – especially with regard to human corruptibility. Each generation is more sinful than the last. Time corrodes the magic purity of the faith's genesis. There is an enchantment in Islam with the Prophet and his original followers and the first four 'rightly guided' Caliphs, in Christianity with Jesus and his early disciples, and in Judaism with Moses and Aaron (and the sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud). The fundamentalists of these religions act as if the laws that govern human life – the psychological, social and political fractiousness that invariably accompany history – did not exist during those fabulously enchanted early days of the faith. Things are worse now; things were better then.

This mania for purity is an interesting impulse. How do we explain it? This trend stands in stark opposition to syncretism, which is about evolution, accommodation and mutation. As we saw in the example of the Taliban's iconoclastic tendencies, we see fundamentalism strongly represented in Islam today; but ironically, Islam spread (in part) due to its adaptation to the cultures it found in the burned shell of the old Roman Empire. Islam became heir to the West's great flowering of classical culture not because the faith refused to incorporate outside influences, but because it accepted them greedily. One writer even stated that 'Islam [has a] dogmatic imperviousness to pagan achievements', and ignored centuries of Muslim eagerness to absorb elements of the Graeco-Roman world.<sup>21</sup> Various Islamic fundamentalist movements, like the Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia, and like puritanical strains in all religions, have tried to turn the clock back on this broad heritage, to lay bare the essential message of the Prophet in its primal simplicity and purity.

Similarly, Christianity spread like wildfire throughout Rome not merely because of Constantine's legalization of the cult, but because of the early movement's flexibility in adapting itself to local conditions. The Reformation began to peel back this trend. A strong component of evangelical Christianity (the Reformation's most stringent heir in the United States and elsewhere) is a rejection of 'pagan' elements that Christianity absorbed in its western Mediterranean cradle and carried abroad. In the same way, rabbinical Judaism is the heir to a Jewish tradition that was once far more pluralistic than it is today. Before the destruction of the Second Temple by Titus' armies, there were several Judaisms.<sup>22</sup> The compilers of the Oral Law tried to conceal this fact with some historical sleight of hand in one of the early tractates of the Mishnah, the *Pirkei Avot*, or the Chapters of the Fathers. Rabbinical Jews are the heirs of the Pharisees, who in the New Testament and other places were accused of creating laws that are not in the Torah.<sup>23</sup> The so-called Oral Law, the body of Pharisaic interpretations of the Torah, was put in writing in the early years of the growing strength of the Christian Church (and most likely, in part, in response to that growing power). In the famous

first chapter of the *Pirkei*, we are given the line of transmission of the Oral Law from Moses down to the very men that compiled the Mishnah, and whose sayings are found within it. The message is clear: a divine stamp had been given to a venture that the Pharisees' enemies viewed as a purely human folly.<sup>24</sup> Eventually, Jewish groups cried out against the rabbis' laws, and one of Judaism's rare schisms was inaugurated. In the end, 'pure' origins were created, but not everyone completely accepted them.<sup>25</sup>

### Purity and interpretation

This impulse toward purity, as we shall see, has many sides. As with the examples we have briefly mentioned, it almost always involves some sort of active subterfuge. Something new is portrayed as something old. But fundamentalism is a uniquely modern phenomenon. Fundamentalist groups often use the conceptual and political tools and concepts that they reject in secular modernity.<sup>26</sup> Part of the origin of the fundamentalist impulse is inherent in the design of a revealed religion that has a book or sacred scripture as its centrepiece. When a book becomes canonized and set, interpretation becomes the centrepiece of a faith – and there will always be differing views of what words mean, as there will always be readers who claim to know the original meaning of these words.<sup>27</sup> So fundamentalism is endemic to monotheistic and revealed religions.

This drive to purity is often politically motivated, and in the hands of certain rulers, it has been a tool for political consolidation. Additionally, and most interestingly, this impulse toward purity is psychological. Religious fundamentalists often seem to desire that life be completely explicable. They crave transparency to life and to history – a universe in a glass box revealed by God to a prophet and sent down in a book. They seek a blueprint that parses existence's multiplicity into a simple unity. Syncretism is their sworn enemy; it reeks of impurity and is unpredictable and often radically and frighteningly mutable. It bears the marks of human handiwork, and as a human creation, it seems to them a sullied article.

### The structure

Syncretism is often ad hoc and this book will not attempt to present the ad hoc in a systematic way. We need to learn the language, tempo and rhythm of syncretism by examining examples. We are in danger, of course, of trying to use a language to learn an identical language – a circular pursuit that would surely end with dry conclusions. But looking at individual instances allows us to learn the language of syncretism.

Although our theme (religious borrowing) is rather simple, the questions surrounding it are complex. Can a strictly human pursuit be truly religious? Can faith operate even if overwhelmingly guided by human hands?

The examples in the following chapters are primarily from Europe and the Middle East. This is a stylistic choice, and in no way reflects a lack of examples from other regions of the world. In fact, syncretism is found in nearly every religion, at every time, and has a nearly universal and cross-cultural reach.<sup>28</sup> Each chapter will begin with an example of contemporary fundamentalism closely tied, religiously and culturally, to the topic of the chapter. This will illustrate some of the key differences between syncretistically oriented religious traditions and fundamentalist ones.

### Chapter summary

Religious fundamentalism has been called one of the most pressing issues of our time.<sup>29</sup> One of the paramount reasons for its ascendance is the growth of a world culture, and with it the ease of communication and transportation. Quite suddenly, geographical areas that had been previously isolated from other cultures, and particularly from the West, were confronted by them. Where there once had been a single option for religious faith, there is now a bewildering multiplicity. Fundamentalism has been called a crisis about the ‘awareness of differences’<sup>30</sup> and, in part, it is a rejection of modern plural culture and its crisis of freedom and choice.

The former Taliban regime turned its back on the vast historical heritage of Afghanistan in order to embrace a narrow and ideological definition of Islam, and in so doing ignored or suppressed native elements of Islamic expression which had existed in Afghanistan for centuries. The Taliban sought to eradicate Sufism in Afghanistan, rid the country of religious minorities, including Jews, Hindus and Sikhs, and finally, in a rigid interpretation of Islamic strictures against the display of images,<sup>31</sup> rid the country of its pre-Islamic heritage – the greatest expression being the destruction of the Buddhas at Bamian.

Other religious traditions, both Islamic and otherwise, have had a more expansive view of importing elements of other religions and cultural traditions. As we saw, so-called Celtic Christianity may have been an example of this. The form of Christianity practised by the Celts appeared to have a more lenient attitude toward pre-Christian, pagan practices and images and incorporated them. Syncretism is the vital component in this mechanism.

Syncretism stands opposite to fundamentalism. Rather than reject multiplicity, it embraces it. Where the three Abrahamic religions do not exercise the rites of exclusivity of their fundamentalist cousins, we can see

interesting variations of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. We saw one example in this chapter: the early worshippers of Christianity in England in its Celtic and Anglo-Saxon forms, who adapted some of their traditional and pagan symbols to their new faith. A form of syncretism was at work here,<sup>32</sup> which stands in stark contrast to the Taliban's violent iconoclasm, where a break with Afghanistan's past was self-consciously pursued, and a radical form of fundamentalism was practised which sought rigid lines of demarcation from elements of other religions.

### **Draw your own conclusions**

How are fundamentalism and syncretism both reactions to cultural change and stress?

Why do groups like the Taliban destroy or suppress elements of previous religious traditions?

Why do other groups, like the early Celtic Christians, incorporate elements of previous religious traditions?

Is religious innovation possible? Or are ideas and practices always borrowed?

Is it possible to get at the 'original meaning' of the New Testament, the Hebrew Bible, or the Qur'an?

Is fundamentalism inevitable in revealed religions like the Abrahamic faiths?

### **Further reading**

For a wide look into the relationships between three Abrahamic faiths: John Corrigan, Frederick M. Denny, Martin Jaffee and Carlos M. N. Eire (1998), *Jews, Christians and Muslims: A Comparative Introduction to the Monotheistic Faiths*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

For more on fundamentalism in the Abrahamic faiths: Malise Ruthven (2004), *Fundamentalism: A Search for Meaning*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
Karen Armstrong (2000), *The Battle for God*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

For the numerous aspects of *The Satanic Verses* controversy: Daniel Pipes (1990), *The Rushdie Affair*, New York: Birch Lane Press.

For a short history of the rise of Islam, see the early chapters of: Albert Hourani (1991), *The History of Arab Peoples*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard.

For a short work on the subject of Celtic Christianity and its relationship to nature, see:

Ian Bradley (1999), *Celtic Christianity: Making Myths and Chasing Dreams*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

## Notes

1 Martin Ewens (2002), *Afghanistan: A Short History of Its People and Politics*, New York: HarperCollins, p. 15.

2 Ewens, *Afghanistan*, pp. 5–6.

3 Ewens, *Afghanistan*, p. 8.

4 Ewens, *Afghanistan*, p. 7.

5 W. L. Rathje (2001), 'Why the Taliban are Destroying the Buddhas', in *USA Today* (22 March). Available online at [www.usatoday.com/news/science/archaeology/2001-03-22-afghan-buddhas.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/science/archaeology/2001-03-22-afghan-buddhas.htm).

6 Perhaps the best-known example of Celtic syncretism is the Irish saint Brigit. Many scholars consider her cult a continuation of a Celtic fire goddess. The site of her worship has been identified by archaeologists as Kildare, and her feast on 1 February coincides with the pre-Christian spring festival of *Imbolc*. See Richard Fletcher (1997), *The Barbarian Conversion*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, p. 241.

7 Sir James George Fraser (1993), *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, New York: Wordsworth Reference. Fraser writes of the Green Man in Chapter X, 'Relics of Tree Worship in Modern Europe' p. 129, as part of an overall discussion of tree veneration and, regarding the Green Man, spring rites. Here we read that:

In England the best-known example of these leaf-clad mummers is the Jack-in-the-Green, a chimney-sweeper who walks encased in a pyramidal framework of wickerwork, which is covered with holly and ivy, and surmounted by a crown of flowers and ribbons. Thus arrayed he dances on May Day at the head of a troop of chimney-sweeps, who collect pence. In Fricktal a similar frame of basketwork is called the Whitsuntide Basket. As soon as the trees begin to bud, a spot is chosen in the wood, and here the village lads make the frame with all secrecy, lest others should forestall them. Leafy branches are twined round two hoops, one of which rests on the shoulders of the wearer, the other encircles his calves; holes are made for his eyes and mouth; and a large nosegay crowns the whole. In this guise he appears suddenly in the village at the hour of vespers, preceded by three boys blowing on horns made of willow bark. The great object of his supporters is to set up the Whitsuntide Basket on the village well, and to keep it and him there, despite the efforts of the lads from neighbouring villages, who seek to carry off the Whitsuntide Basket and set it up on their own well.

8 Salman Rushdie (2000), *The Satanic Verses*, New York: Picador Press.

9 Daniel Pipes (1990), *The Rushdie Affair*, New York: Birch Lane Press. Most of the material here about both the Satanic Verses in Islamic tradition and the novel *The Satanic Verses* comes from Daniel Pipes' masterful book about this subject. There Pipes delineates the historical, religious, social, artistic and political impact of Rushdie's novel, pp. 56–9.

10 John Corrigan et al., *Jews, Christians and Muslims*. For a discussion of the origins of the *hajj* pilgrimage, see p. 265. For the normative explanation of the symbol of Allah, the crescent moon, (the *Hilal*), see the same, pp. 263–7.

11 Hourani, *The History of Arab Peoples*, p. 21.

12 The costly war in Yugoslavia, and then in Bosnia and Hercegovina, and later the attempts by Milosevic to ethnically purge Albanian Muslims, were unfortunate reminders for most Westerners that there is a native Islam in Europe. Work on Islam in the Balkans was gleaned from Peter F. Sugar's (1997) *South-eastern Europe Under Ottoman Rule, 1354–1804*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, and an article by S. Vryonis Jr in *Aspects of the Balkans*, whose notes are detailed in the bibliography for Chapter 3.

13 The Moriscos, the crypto-Muslims of Spain, will not be a topic of this book, because this community suffered different vicissitudes than the Jews of Spain. The *Columbia Encyclopaedia* (available online at [www.bartleby.com/65/mo/Moriscos.html](http://www.bartleby.com/65/mo/Moriscos.html)) explains:

Moriscos [Span.,=Moorish], Moors converted to Christianity after the Christian reconquest (11th–15th cent.) of Spain. The Moors who had become subjects of Christian kings as the reconquest progressed to the 15th cent. were called Mudéjares. They remained Muslim, and their religion and customs were generally respected. After the fall of Granada (1492), Cardinal Jiménez converted many Moors by peaceful means. However, the rigorous treatment of those who refused conversion or apostatized from the new faith led to an uprising (1500–1502) in Granada. This was soon suppressed. Faced with choosing between conversion or banishment, the majority accepted conversion, but many continued secretly to practise Islam. The Moriscos at times provided the Ottoman Turks with information facilitating Turkish raids on the Spanish coast. Persecuted by the Spanish Inquisition and subjected to restrictive legislation (1526, 1527), the Moriscos rose in a bloody rebellion (1568–71), which Philip II put down with the help of John of Austria. The Moriscos prospered in spite of persecutions and furthered Spanish agriculture, trade, and industries. However, in 1609 Philip III, influenced by Lerma, decreed their expulsion for both religious and political reasons. Bibliography: See H. C. Lea, *The Moriscos of Spain* (1901, repr. 1969).

14 Frederic Brenner and Stan Neuman, Directors, (1997), *Les Derniers Marranes: The Last Marranos / Les films d'Ici*, Canaan Production. *The Last Marranos*, an important documentary about Belmonte's crypto-Jews, was filmed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in Belmonte and the towns that surround it, which formed a kind of last vestige of authentic Marranism in Portugal. Among the many interesting elements in this film is the conflict between the new religion (the reintroduction of normative Judaism to Belmonte) and the old one (Marranism, practised in Belmonte for nearly 500 years). Crypto-Jewish practices were, by their very clandestine nature, domestic routines, and the lore of Marranism was transmitted almost exclusively by women. The baking of Passover matzoth and the lighting of Sabbath candles are Jewish rites that are house-bound, and as such, in the domain of women. The reintroduction of normative Judaism in Belmonte was a male initiative. The tension of this curious mixture of the old and the new (many of the film's subjects even confuse themselves by speaking of

Judaism as the 'new' religion, and Marranism as the 'old' one) and the impossibility of their peaceful coexistence, form one of the poignant elements of the film.

15 C. Ebertshäuser, H. Haag, J. H. Kirchberger and D. Sölle (1998), *Mary: Art, Culture and Religion through the Ages*, New York: A Crossroad Herder Book, p. 206.

16 Ebertshäuser et al., *Mary: Art, Culture and Religion through the Ages*, p. 207.

17 Michael Pollack (1980), *Jews, Mandarins and Missionaries*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, pp. 15–38. This book about the Jews of the Chinese city of Kaifeng explores, among other topics, the Western reactions to the discovery of this unique Jewish community. Pollack also examines the inner life of this community. Interestingly enough, he explores how Chinese customs gradually became mixed with Jewish rites, including a Hall of the Ancestors adjacent to the synagogue, where figures from Jewish history, like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses were venerated in a Confucian style.

18 George H. Tavard (1996), *Mary of a Thousand Faces*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, pp. 171–87.

19 Islam and Sufism on the Indian subcontinent will be taken up later. Suffice it to say here that the same eclecticism that marked Hinduism also left a deep mark on Indian Islam.

20 Rafael Patai (1990), *The Hebrew Goddess*, Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 'The Kaballistic Tetrad', pp. 113–30.

21 For a general discussion of Islamic learning, see Hourani, *The History of Arab Peoples*, pp. 75–8. See in particular in this section about the great age of translation (the eighth to the tenth centuries) when Muslim intellectuals translated into Arabic works of Indian, Iranian and Greek science, art, mathematics and medicine. The quote here is from William McNeil (1963), *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community*, New York: New American Library, p. 521.

22 The first-century Jewish historian Josephus provides us with glimpses of the different sects of First Temple Judaism mainly in his works *The Jewish War* and the *Antiquities*. See Corrigan, *Jews, Christians and Muslims*, p. 17.

23 In *NJB* Mark 7. 8–10, p. 1153, Jesus says that the Pharisee's 'laws' are human creations, not divine.

24 R. Abraham, J. Elrich and A. Tomaschorf (trans.) *Pirkei Avot*, A Kaplan Kusick Foundation Project. *Pirkei Avot*, often translated as the Chapters of the Fathers, is considered the oldest of the Mishnah, preserving the early sayings of late Pharisee and early Rabbinical leaders.

25 The Karaites rejected Jewish oral law, spawning what was in effect a fundamentalist movement within Judaism:

During the ninth century, a number of sects arose that denied the existence of oral torah. These sects came to be known as Karaites (literally, People of the Scripture), and they were distinguished from the Rabbanites or rabbinical Judaism.

The Karaites believed in strict interpretation of the literal text of the scripture, without rabbinical interpretation. They believed that rabbinical law was not part of an oral tradition that had been handed down from God,

nor was it inspired by God, but was an original work of the sages. As such, rabbinical teachings are subject to the flaws of any document written by mere mortals.

The difference between Rabbanites and Karaites that is most commonly noted is in regard to the Sabbath: the Karaites noted that the Bible specifically prohibits lighting a flame on the Sabbath, so they kept their houses dark on the sabbath. The Rabbanites, on the other hand, relied upon rabbinical interpretation that allowed us to leave burning a flame that was ignited before the sabbath. Karaites also prohibited sexual intercourse on the sabbath, while Rabbanites considered the sabbath to be the best time for sexual intercourse. The Karaites also follow a slightly different calendar than the Rabbanites.

According to the Karaites, this movement at one time attracted as much as 40 per cent of the Jewish people. Today, Karaites are a very small minority, and most Rabbinical Jews do not even know that they exist. (From <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/Karaites.html> – the Jewish Virtual Library.)

26 Armstrong, *The Battle for God*. See Armstrong for modern fundamentalism's deep debt to the modernity it seeks to eradicate, especially Chapter 9, 'The Offensive (1974–79)', and Chapter 10, 'Defeat? (1979–99)', pp. 278–371.

27 For the formation of the canon, see Bard Ehrman (2003), *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 203–27. Also consult this book for an overview of the variety within Christianity in its first three centuries. Additionally, see Elaine Pagels (2003), *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, New York: Random House, pp. 114–42. This small work provides some details about the dynamics of the formation of the Christian canon, and the role of interpretation in that dynamic.

28 Kurt Rudolph (1987), *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, San Francisco: Harper. In an aside in his masterful overview of Gnosticism, Kurt Rudolph says 'every religion is strictly a syncretistic product, pure religions only existing as theoretical constructions by scholars', p. 286.

29 Ruthven, *Fundamentalism*, for a fuller treatment of these issues.

30 Ruthven, *Fundamentalism*, p. 48.

31 It seems the iconoclastic stance of the Taliban did not extend to their leadership. After the American invasion of the country in late 2001, the Taliban leader Mullah Omar's home was discovered outside Kandahar. The spacious and well-furnished home, luxurious beyond compare for Afghanistan, was adorned with paintings. See Justin Huggler, 'Mullah Omar, The Ascetic With Golden Chandeliers', *The Independent* (UK), 13 December 2001.

32 Ian Bradley (2003), *The Celtic Way*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd. Celtic Christianity is held out as an exemplar of an egalitarian, pluralistic, nature-respecting, form of Christianity. Ideas such as this are explored in *The Celtic Way*, by Ian Bradley, especially Chapters 2 and 3. Also, the syncretism of Christianity with its pagan predecessor in the British Isles and Ireland is discussed on pp. 93–4. Many scholars debate the existence of a 'Celtic' Christianity. Richard Fletcher has this to say of it: 'For example, the notion widely entertained today, especially by dewy-eyed ecologists, that the spirit of the so-called Celtic

church was a pollen-strewn blend of love and nature and Irish mythology is one of the silliest misconceptions which the mushy credulity of our age has devised.' Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion*, p. 520. Also, p. 92, for brief comments. For a fuller treatment, see Donald Meek (2000), *The Quest for Celtic Christianity*, Edinburgh: Handsel Press.