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## God, Man, and Facebook

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“I dreamed  
That stone by stone I reared a sacred fane,  
A temple; neither Pagod, Mosque, nor Church,  
But loftier, simpler, always open-doored  
To every breath from Heaven; and Truth and Peace  
And Love and Justice came and dwelt therein.”

— LORD ALFRED TENNYSON (1809–1892), *AKBAR’S DREAM*



## STATUS UPDATE (ETERNITY TO NOW)

- ❖ Men and women seek a Universal God.
- ❖ The first global interfaith dialogue takes place in Chicago, USA. A *Cyclonic Monk* from India and a *Yankee Mohammedan* from the USA draw attention.
- ❖ God's fans exceed six billion.
- ❖ A human invents Facebook, which reaches more than one billion fans in fewer than eight years.
- ❖ God's fans forget God's universal message of compassion; so, God decides to open a Facebook account to bring everyone to the same page.

## NOTES FROM HISTORY (TIMELINE: ETERNITY TO NOW)

### MAN GOES GLOBAL

Thousands of years ago, men and women emerged on the vast, lonely theater of time and space on the planet Earth. They knew not the meaning of their destinies, nor were they able to make sense of the furies of the thunderous storms, the devastating floods, and the angry fire. They noted with awe and wonder that a large fireball appeared every day, from a specific direction; they named the fireball “Sun” and the direction “East.” Then they named the opposite direction “West.” Thus, they divided the world into the East and the West, and then into the North and the South.

Then came a time when men and women began to feel the mysterious presence of something sublime that baffled them with the joy of elevated thoughts, as they wondered endlessly about the rising and setting of the sun, gazed with bewilderment at countless stars in the night sky, and pondered the tossing and turning of ocean waves. They did not have to wait long for that mystery to become manifest as God came down from the heavens and met men and women in the deep, dark shadows of their consciousness. Soon thereafter, men and women started worshipping God because doing so gave meaning to their existence and made living valuable and tolerable. That was the beginning of the relationship between Man and God, representing Man’s aspiration to rise in dignity through tireless striving towards perfection.

Then many thousands of years passed; men and women migrated from one place to another in every possible direction, from the East to the West and from the South to the North, in search of food and shelter. Those were the baby steps towards a phenomenon that later humans would name “globalization.”

The worshipping of God remained constant among humans, wherever they went, although variations in geography, climate, and human experiences in different parts of the world gave rise to different methods of worship, which they named “religion.” God was pleased with the dedication of the worshippers and decided to expand the definition of “religion” to include additional guidance on how to live worthily and morally. He chose a few wise men to transmit his messages to the common men and women. Those wise men were later called “prophets” and God’s messages were called “scriptures.”

For thousands of years, men and women taught their religions to others and preached messages of selfless love, as well as self-preserving retribution. At the same time, they fought many wars over the differences among the religions, and killed millions of their own species.

More “globalization” happened and more theories of human religiosity and its impacts surfaced. Some predicted that humankind was inevitably progressing towards a “*Clash of Civilizations*” in the twenty-first century—as if that hadn’t already taken place through all the wars, local and global, of the past centuries. Some hypothesized that future conflicts would be along cultural and religious lines. Some opposed this prediction, arguing that men and women hold multiple identities (religious, national, cultural, ethnic, philosophical, linguistic, political, etc.), and that classifying individuals according to a

single religious identity is an expression of intellectual confusion that ignores the inherent diversity within each civilization. Some others thought that if there were an imminent global clash, it would be a "*Clash of Ignorance*."

Amidst all these theorizations and disputations, one fact remained constant: most acts of compassion and terror were conducted in the name of God, who did not like the horrors of war and internecine strife. So God, in his infinite wisdom, chose few wise men and women to preach the need for peace among religions. These wise men and women began local and global meetings among worshippers of God of all religions, and they called these meetings "interfaith dialogues."

In the meantime, the theater of time and space, which had initially been vast and lonely, became smaller and less lonely thanks to unprecedented human progress in science and technology. Men and women seemed to have found the meaning of their blind destinies and also to have comprehended the mysteries of natural forces. It appeared that the Universe could have no existence independent of Man because the moral and scientific conception of it must be that of the moral and scientific Man. Thus the relationship between God and Man continued through a perpetual process of reconciliation until the end of nineteenth century. At the dawn of twentieth century, it took a tumultuous turn when God was almost banished from public life in the West, while remaining front and center in the East.

Then came the *Internet* and *Facebook*, connecting the East and the West, and the North and the South, in a complex web of networked computers. Men and women went fully global and coined the term "social networking", ushering in an era of unprecedented level of dialogue among humans from all corners of the world. This development seemed to reverse the journey that had begun millions of years ago when early men and women had dispersed in all directions in search of shelter and food, and made the entire geography of the earth their own. Now, the *Internet* and *Facebook* had created an opportunity for modern men and women from all corners of the world to embark on a different journey that would bring them together in search of shelter and food for their spiritual souls.

As the *Internet* and *Facebook* proliferated, the Almighty God, who was present with men and women in all their endeavors through the ages, came down from the heavens and announced his sublime presence in the vast virtual theater of *Facebook*. Thus, men, women, God, and *Facebook* became entangled in a complex and interdependent relationship that surpassed all imagination.

Then, God gave this author the idea to document this relationship in *God's Facebook*, to deepen and widen human understanding of God and foster a *Friendship of Civilizations* that will counter the terrifying prospect of a "*Clash of Civilizations*."

The rest is merely history.

## **THE CYCLONIC MONK**

On September 11, 1893, exactly one hundred and eight years before the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack in New York, a unique event took place in Chicago, USA. A select audience of 7,000 enlightened people, from the East and the West and from the North and the South, gathered in the lecture hall of the Art Institute of Chicago on 111 South Michigan Avenue. For the first time in human history, people of ten world religions from

all over the world gathered at the first World Parliament of Religions to discuss their faiths, with the hope of discovering common ground for cooperation and peaceful co-existence.

A man, 5 feet 9 inches tall and 30 years old, stood at the podium, with an orange turban wrapped around his head. He was from Bengal, India, a country where Muslim Emperor Akbar the Great (1542–1605) had once acted on a dream to unite all religions, and had held the world’s first interfaith summit among Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Jains, and Sikhs. The man from Akbar’s country, standing at the podium of the first World Parliament of Religions, had an olive complexion and his eyes were large, with prominent, heavy lids. There was an aura of kingliness in his stature as he stood and glanced with anticipation at the audience. He bowed and said: “*Sisters and Brothers of America.*” Instantly, the magic of his rich and deep voice and the sincerity of his utterance transformed the audience’s mood to an overwhelming feeling of togetherness, as if “*We are all a part of God’s great big family.*” The audience responded with a standing ovation that lasted for more than two minutes.

When silence was restored, the young man from India continued his brief lecture, which focused on religious tolerance. He cited two immensely meaningful quotations. The first was a Sanskrit hymn:

“As the different streams  
Having their sources in different places  
All mingle their water in the sea,  
So O Lord, the different paths which men take,  
Through different tendencies,  
Various though they appear  
Crooked or straight,  
All lead to Thee.”

The second was a verse from the Bhagavad Gita (“Song of God”), an ancient Hindu scripture:

“Whosoever comes to Me, through whatsoever form, I reach him;  
All men are struggling through paths that in the end lead to Me.”



The young man was Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), who introduced the *Vedanta* philosophy and yoga to America and Europe and became the messenger of Indian wisdom to the Western world. The US press dubbed him “*The Cyclonic Hindu Monk of India*” for his oratory. *The New York Herald* wrote: “Vivekananda is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions.”

Vivekananda studied at the Scottish Church College in Calcutta, India, and obtained his Bachelor degree at Calcutta University. Later, he became a disciple of Bengali sage Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886), who was regarded by many Hindus as an *Avatar* (“Incarnation of God”). In 1897, Vivekananda founded in India the Ramakrishna Mission, a large philanthropic organization that still exists.

Vivekananda died young, at just 39. But, he left a lasting legacy of philanthropy and spiritual philosophy. Before his death, he wrote to a Western follower: “It may be that I shall find it good to get outside my body, to cast it off like a worn out garment. But I shall not cease to work. I shall inspire men everywhere until the whole world shall know that it is one with God.”

Vivekananda was a man of unique personality. His biographer, French Nobel Laureate and writer Romain Rolland, wrote: “Equilibrium and synthesis are the keynotes of Vivekananda’s personality. In him is harmonized all the various energies, like faith and reason, science and religion, East and West, which are at variance and conflict with each other everywhere, but in Vivekananda’s personality they became perfectly harmonized.”

Vivekananda ended his 1893 speech at the World Parliament of Religions with these words: “I fervently hope that the bell that tolled this morning in honor of this convention may be the death-knell of all fanaticism, of all persecutions with the sword or with the pen, and of all uncharitable feelings between persons wending their way to the same goal.”

Unfortunately, Swami Vivekananda’s hope didn’t materialize. Fanaticism, an ancient social disease that has killed millions, continued with new fervor in the name of both religion and irreligion, causing untold human misery in the following centuries.

### **THE YANKEE MOHAMMEDAN**

Nine days after Swami Vivekananda’s speech on September 11, 1893 at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, an attractive and dignified man stood at the podium on the windy and rain-swept Wednesday morning of September 20, 1893. He was to speak on behalf of Islam and was, in fact, the only Muslim speaker at the World Parliament of Religions. The man was not an Arab, nor was he from any other populous Muslim country. He was wearing an impeccable Western suit and a red fez cap. He had large brown eyes and his radiant face displayed finely chiseled features that indicated a calm and deliberate mind. He was an American, born in New York, and was the first known white American convert to Islam. His name was Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb (1846–1916). In 1887, US President Grover Cleveland appointed Webb, then an assistant editor of the *Missouri Republican* in St. Louis, to be the US Consul to the Philippines, a Spanish colony at that time.



Webb embraced the faith of Islam in 1888, resigned from his diplomatic post in 1892, and returned to America to start an Islamic mission. He established the first Muslim house of worship in America in Manhattan, New York in 1893, predating the earliest mosques of Ross, North Dakota, and Cedar Rapids, Iowa, by more than three decades. From that house of worship, the people of Manhattan heard the Muslim call to prayer for the first time on December 10, 1893. The following day, the *New York Times* reported: “For the first time in New York’s history, cosmopolitan as the city is, the melodious call of the Muezzin, celebrated by every traveler in Mohammedan countries, was heard yesterday morning.” At the World Parliament of Religions, the US press dubbed Webb “*The Yankee Mohammedan*.”

Unlike Swami Vivekananda, Webb didn’t utter sparkling ripples of words at the World Parliament of Religions. Rather, he spoke in a slow and steady tone; yet his speech was

very forceful because it was apparent that he was moved by his convictions. In his speech on Islam at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893, Webb quoted two verses from the Quran. The first was from the tenth chapter:

“If the Lord had pleased  
All who are on the earth would have believed together;  
And wilt thou force men to be believers?”

– (QURAN, 10:99)

The second verse was from the second chapter:

“Let there be no compulsion in religion  
Now is the right way made distinct from error;  
Whoever, therefore, denieth Taghoot [literally, error]  
And believeth in God,  
Hath taken to hold on a strong handle that hath no flaw.  
And god is He who heareth, knoweth.”

– (QURAN, 2:256)

These two statements from the Quran epitomize the Islamic view of religious pluralism and religious tolerance, which, among other things, attracted Webb, a free-spirited American, to embrace Islam.

Mohammed Webb was not an ordinary man. His biographer, Umar Abd-Allah (Wymann-Landgraf), an American Muslim convert who received his doctorate from the University of Chicago, wrote: “His [Webb’s] adoption of Islam in late-nineteenth-century America was utterly out of the ordinary, but the manner in which he pursued it was not. Webb embraced Islam in the spirit of classical American individual initiative in religion. Moreover, Webb regarded his conversion as a perfectly natural alternative for himself and any other American who chose it. Webb founded his life and his vision for Islam in America on the same broad spiritual ethos through which he himself initially made his journey to the faith.”

Webb remained true to his American self and spirit, and never adopted the “*Arab dress*”, as was commonly done by Muslim converts. Thus, the title of “*The Yankee Mohammedan*” was a befitting one for him.

Unfortunately, Mohammed Webb’s hope of a tolerant Islam to be practiced throughout the world didn’t materialize, even after more than a century of spirited discussions begun at the first World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, where the East met the West and proclaimed to all quarters of the globe that there is God in every religion.

### **THE LORD’S PRAYER**

Swami Vivekananda and Mohammed Webb belonged to a very small group of non-Christians attending the first World Parliament of Religions of 1893, which was organized and attended primarily by Christians in a country whose inhabitants were predominantly Christians. In fact, the English-speaking Christian representatives delivered 152 (78%) of the 194 papers in the Parliament.

The inaugural ceremony on September 11, 1893, began with “an act of common worship to Almighty God”, and Psalm 100 of the Hebrew *Bible*, as paraphrased by the British hymn writer Isaac Watts (1674–1748), was sung first:

“Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise him, all creatures here below;  
Praise him above, ye heavenly host;  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”

Afterwards, Cardinal Gibbons led the attendees in saying the *Lord's Prayer* from *Bible*. The “Amen” at the end of the *Lord's Prayer* was followed by a reverent silence, which was then broken by the President of the World's Congress, Charles Carroll Bonney (1831–1903), a lawyer and judge from Chicago, with his welcome address. Bonney opened his lecture with these words:

“Worshippers of God and lovers of man—let us rejoice that we have lived to see this glorious day; let us give thanks to the Eternal God, whose mercy endureth forever, that we are permitted to take part in the solemn and majestic event of a World's Congress of Religions.”

A total of ten religions were represented in the Parliament: Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Shintoism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism. The seventeen-day program included a wide range of topics presented by a great variety of speakers. On September 27, 1893, the Parliament was officially closed with the *Lord's Prayer*, led by Emil G. Hirsch, a rabbi from Chicago.

### **EXCLUSIVISM, INCLUSIVISM, AND PLURALISM**

People of all major world religions came to the Parliament because of the American promise of cosmopolitanism exemplified in the ten official objectives of the Parliament. There was a clear attempt to create a true brotherhood of religions by enlightening each other through a sincere exploration and discovery of common ground. There was no agenda, implicit or explicit, to prove the superiority of one religion over another; rather, the Parliament—in an overwhelmingly Christian country—was posited, by design, against the exclusivist claim that Christianity is the only true divine religion and that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation and to God.

The Archbishop of Canterbury virulently opposed the Parliament from an exclusivist position, and wrote a strong rebuke to the organizers, refusing their invitation: “The difficulties which I myself feel are not questions of distance and convenience, but rest on the fact that the Christian religion is the one religion. I do not understand how that religion can be regarded as a member of a Parliament of Religions without assuming the equality of the other intended members and the parity of their position and claims.”

The European Roman Catholic hierarchy also opposed the Parliament, along with American evangelical leaders such as D. L. Moody, who camped outside the convention hall and prayed for the souls of the delegates.



In contrast, Charles Bonney's vision of the World Parliament of Religions was predicated on his belief in *pluralism*, which promotes peaceful coexistence of religions without any religion claiming superiority over others. His remarks in the welcome address were clairvoyant and inspiring:

“As the finite can never fully comprehend the infinite, nor perfectly express its own view of the divine, it necessarily follows that individual opinions of the divine nature and attributes will differ. But, properly understood, these varieties of view are not causes of discord and strife, but rather incentives to deeper interest and examination. Necessarily God reveals himself differently to a child than to a man; to a philosopher than to one who cannot read. Each must see God with the eyes of his own soul. Each must behold him through the colored glasses of his own nature. Each one must receive him according to his own capacity of reception. The fraternal union of the religions of the world will come when each seeks truly to know how God has revealed himself in the other, and remembers the inexorable law that with what judgment it judges it shall itself be judged.”

However, this attitude was not necessarily shared by all speakers and attendees. Many, including Reverend John Henry Barrows, the event chairman appointed by Bonney, viewed the Parliament as an unprecedented opportunity to present the Christian case persuasively to the admiration and consent of other religious leaders. His position was that of religious inclusivism, wherein one partially accepts the validity of truth in other religions but maintains the superiority of one's own religion, with the possibility of incorporating or subordinating the other religions into one's own. Barrows thought Christianity as the culmination of human religious progress and concluded: “The Parliament has shown that Christianity is still the great quickener of humanity, that it is now educating those who do not accept its doctrines, that there is no teacher to be compared with Christ, and no Saviour excepting Christ ... The non-Christian world may give us valuable criticism and confirm scriptural truths and make excellent suggestion as to Christian improvement, but it has nothing to add to the Christian creed.”

Barrows's *inclusivism* was surpassed by the zealotry and rhetoric of those who staked out a position of religious *exclusivism*, wherein one denies the validity of the truth claims of all other religions. Professor William C. Wilkinson dismissed Barrows's compromise position of religious *inclusivism* and declared this in his speech at the Parliament: “Of any ethnic religion, therefore, can it be said that it is a true religion, only not perfect? Christianity says, No.” Wilkinson further proclaimed: “Men need to be saved from false religion; they are in no way of being saved by false religion. Such, at least, is the teaching of Christianity. The attitude, therefore, of Christianity towards religions other than itself is an attitude of universal, absolute, eternal, unappeasable hostility.”

Fortunately, Wilkinson's view was only a minority view among the delegates and the participants of the first World Parliament of Religions. The dominant voice was one of tolerance and mutual respect. Charles Bonney's declaration in the welcome address rang true throughout the seventeen-day conference: “This day a new fraternity is born into the world of human progress, to aid in the upholding of the kingdom of God in the hearts of men.”

### **DOES GOD BELONG TO ANY RELIGION?**

The *Cyclonic Monk*, Swami Vivekananda, representing Hinduism at the Parliament, drove his pluralist views home with calls for a universal religion, without claiming the superiority or admitting the inferiority of his own religion. Instead, he proposed a genuine togetherness of all religions, in which “each must assimilate the others and yet preserve its individuality and grow according to its law of growth.”

In a similar vein, the *Yankee Mohammedan*, Mohammed Webb, representing Islam at the Parliament, highlighted the pluralist view of Islam in terms of other religions, with the hope of dispelling the false perceptions of his religion's apparent militancy towards others.

Despite all the conflicts and contradictions, the first World Parliament of Religions in 1893 stood out as a true brotherhood of religions and made a lasting positive contribution towards the growth of religious thinking in the next centuries. The Parliament was indeed a giant leap towards the *Friendship of Civilizations*. The men and women present at the Parliament learned that there are many ways to be religious and that no religion has a monopoly on God.

Unfortunately, throughout human history, many men and women have chosen to deny this eternal truth and have claimed a monopoly on God to promote their personal agendas in the name of God, causing enormous pain and suffering to their fellow humans. For example, Adolf Hitler, a Christian, wrote in his autobiography *Mein Kampf*: “I am convinced that I am acting as the agent of our Creator. By fighting off the Jews, I am doing the Lord's work.” Hitler was responsible for the deaths of over six million Jews. Osama bin Laden, a Muslim, proclaimed that hostility towards the West and its citizenry is a duty to God. Bin Laden was responsible for the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack, which killed more than 3,000 civilians in a single day. Nathuram Godse, the Hindu activist who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi, claimed that he acted alone to save the Hindus because he considered “my first duty [is] to serve Hindudom and Hindus.” Yigal Amir, the fanatic Jew who assassinated Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, was quoted as saying that he had “acted alone and on orders from God.”

The problem lies in the exclusivist thinking of different religious groups, which defies the scriptural logic of all religions. The *Cyclonic Monk*, Swami Vivekananda, cited the Hindu holy book, *Gita*, to tell us that all paths lead to God. Therefore, obviously, God is not a Hindu. The *Yankee Mohammedan*, Mohammed Webb, cited verses from the Muslim holy book, the Quran, as proof that it is God who created the diversity of faiths in this world. Therefore, God is not a God only of Muslims, but a God of all human beings. More than a century later, Bishop Desmond Tutu sharply criticized in his 2011 book, *God Is Not A Christian*, those Christians who believe that they received an exclusivist mandate from the Bible. He provided ample biblical evidence to prove that Christianity does not have an exclusive and proprietary claim on God, and that God is, indeed, not a Christian.

Truly, God is too big to fit into one religion.

**GOD’S SUBJECTS**

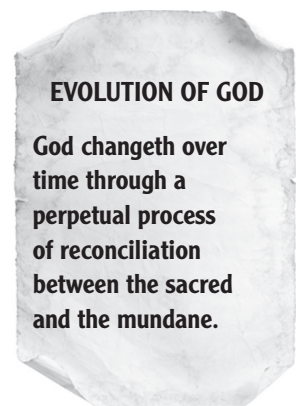
In 1893, when the first Parliament of World Religions was held in Chicago, the population of the world stood at about 1.5 billion, with a similar number of fans of God. Currently, God has a huge following that numbers more than six billions humans, as shown in the Table below.

<b>GOD’S SUBJECTS</b>		
<b>RELIGIOUS GROUP</b>	<b>WORLDWIDE POPULATION</b>	<b>NUMBER OF COUNTRIES</b>
CHRISTIANS	2.26 Billion (33%)	239
MUSLIMS	1.52 Billion (22%)	213
HINDUS	935 Million (14%)	127
AGNOSTICS/ATHEISTS	840 Million (12%)	239
FOLK/TRADITIONAL BELIEVERS	750 Million (11%)	220
BUDDHISTS	465 Million (7%)	141
SIKHS	25 Million (0.4%)	53
JEWS	15 Million (0.2%)	138
BAHA’IS	7 Million (0.1%)	222
JAINS	6 Million (0.1%)	19
SHINTOISTS	3 Million (0.04%)	8
ZOROASTRIAN	182,000 (0.003%)	25
<b>TOTAL WORLD POPULATION</b>	<b>6.83 Billion</b>	<b>239</b>

Source: Summarized from Britannica Book of the Year, 2010, Encyclopedia Britannica, 2011

**GOD CHANGETH OVER TIME**

As the number of people inhabiting the planet Earth changed over time, so did God. From time immemorial, God has been roaming wide and far with all his might, geographically from the river banks of the Nile to the megalopolises on the shores of the Atlantic, and down the centuries from the Sumerian abacus to the Cray XT5 supercomputer, which can perform 1.759 quadrillion floating point operations in one second. If the XT5 were to process a digital image of God from the brain scans of all humans living on earth, we would find out that God today is not the same as God who existed at the beginning of human consciousness. This finding would be consistent with the evolution of *Homo sapiens*—we are not what we were when we began our journey on the planet Earth. Similarly, our God (or rather, our understanding of God) has also changed through a perpetual process of reconciliation, as we changed with the progression of time.



## DOES GOD MATTER?

Why do we need to understand God? Does God matter? Does religion matter? Is interfaith dialogue important? American sociology professors Paul Froese and Christopher Bader offered an answer to one of these questions in an article published in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, concluding that “God matters and lies at the heart of philosophical, ethical, and political differences in the world.” Hans Küng, a Swiss professor of ecumenical theology and a prolific author, underscored the importance of interfaith dialogues by proclaiming, “There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions.”

Political scientists Monica Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Shah went even farther, declaring the twenty-first century to be God’s century. In a 2011 book entitled *God’s Century*, they argued that God and religion have been on the rise in the socio-political arena all over the world since the 1970s, and will wield significant influence in setting the political agendas of this century.

The resurgence of religion and God can be attributed to the failures of socialism and secularism to fulfill the hopes, expectations, and inherent spiritual needs of modern men and women. Ironically, the very forces expected to “kill” God, such as industrialization, democratization, modernization, and globalization (recall *Time* magazine’s 1966 cover, “Is God Dead?”) had actually given a new life to God, as modern men and women again found themselves, like their earliest ancestors, lost in a “spiritually lonely” world where they knew not the meaning of their destinies in the face of rapid and complex changes. The Internet and Facebook nurtured this resurgence by connecting religiously minded people all over the world for common causes—political, social, moral, and theological. God and religion, like any other powerful forces, can be used for both peacemaking and violence. For their specific interpretations to prevail, the terrorists and bigots bank on the ignorance of the masses regarding holy scriptures and sacred history. The peacemakers, therefore, need to nurture and promote a culture of respectful education and engagement among people of all religious backgrounds, such that misinformation and disinformation cannot seize the imaginations of the uninformed.

Therefore, God surely matters for world peace.

But is that all? Doesn’t God matter for human souls too? Hasn’t God played a role in bestowing mental peace upon humans for as long as they have existed on the face of the earth? It is often said that “Man created God out of fear.” But history points in a different direction. God, or the human conception of God, may have changed over time, but one thing that remained constant is that God is a supernatural being to be revered and worshipped. It was not all fear, as many would like to believe. Truly, the relationship between God and humans is similar to that between a kind, protecting parent and a child. God can get angry at times, but that anger is temporary and paternal. As such, God needs to be feared as a parent needs to be feared. However, the permanent attitude of God towards humans is one of compassion, forgiveness, and love. Karen Armstrong, in her book *The Case for God*, remarked that “Religion’s task, closely allied to that of art, was to help us to live creatively, peacefully, and even joyously with realities for which there were no easy explanations and problems that we could not solve: morality, pain, grief, despair,

and outrage at the injustice and cruelty of life.” The same statement could also be made about God.

Therefore, God matters also for the health of the human soul.

### **REVIVAL OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUES**

A long silence fell on global interfaith dialogues after the first World Parliament of Religions in 1893. Indeed, not until a hundred years later, in 1993, was the second World Parliament of Religions held, again in Chicago. The event was attended by 8,000 people belonging to different religious faiths. Bangladesh-born American spiritual master Chinmoy Kumar Ghose (1931–2007), known worldwide as Sri Chinmoy, led the opening meditation. Unlike Swami Vivekananda in 1893, Sri Chinmoy did not speak. But he later explained that during his silent meditation he had prayed for the oneness of all religions. During his 43 years of living in the USA, from 1964 to 2007, Sri Chinmoy propagated what Swami Vivekananda had started in the West: the practice of yoga combined with spiritual philosophy. The essence of Sri Chinmoy’s belief is summarized in these words: “I was born into the Hindu religion, but now my only religion is to love God and to be of service to God. Love of God embraces all religions: Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam and others.” This echoes the same sentiments expressed by numerous speakers at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions.

During the lull in interfaith dialogues between the first and second World Parliament of Religions, another set of revolutionary changes were taking place in Chicago, in the field of tall buildings design, which would make possible the construction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. Fazlur Rahman Khan (1929–1982), a Bangladeshi-American Muslim engineer working in Chicago, introduced the idea of the “tube” structural system in the 1960s. He was the chief structural designer of the Sears Tower (now Willis Tower) in Chicago, the tallest building in the world from 1973 to 1998. Khan’s tube structural system was used in the construction of the Twin Towers, the Petronas Tower of Malaysia, and the current tallest building in the world, the Burj Khalifa of Dubai.

The irony of fate was that the Twin Towers, made possible by the brilliant invention of a Muslim engineer in the 1960s, were destroyed in the name of God by a group of Muslim religious fundamentalists from the Middle East on September 11, 2001. This act of terror killed 2,606 people. Among the dead, excluding the terrorists, were Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Atheists, Agnostics, and citizens from more than ninety countries. The ages of those who died in the attack ranged from 3 to 82.

The tragedy of September 11 reawakened the humanity to the grim dangers of religious fanaticism and the need for dialogue among religious adherents. It also gave a strong impetus to the revival of global interfaith dialogues that had begun in Chicago in 1893. Since 2004, the World Parliament of Religions takes place every five years, and many other interfaith initiatives occur elsewhere throughout the world.

In March, 2011, US President Barack Obama launched the *President’s Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge*, an initiative that promotes co-operation between

believers and non-believers. Taking a pluralist position, the President stated: "I know that as we go forward it is going to take all of us, Christian and Jew, Hindu and Muslim, believer and non-believer, to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century." The inclusion of non-believers in interfaith dialogues is a key step towards fostering a *Friendship of Civilizations*, because atheists and agnostics account for about 12% of the world's population.

The tragedy of September 11 has turned into an inspiration, and there have been more interfaith initiatives in the world since that tragedy than ever before. It appears that the *Cyclonic Monk's* last wish may have come true: "I shall inspire men everywhere until the whole world shall know that it is one with God."

### **THE CHICAGO CONNECTION**

In 1893, Chicago gave birth to the first modern global interfaith dialogues by hosting the first World Parliament of Religions. In the 1960s, Chicago gave birth to a series of tall buildings, two of which, through their violent destruction on September 11, 2001, gave a strong impetus to the revival of interfaith dialogues. In 2002, Eboo Patel, an Indian Muslim from Chicago and a Rhodes scholar with a doctorate in the sociology of religion from Oxford University, founded the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC), which has the potential to revolutionize the landscape of interfaith cooperation in the world in the twenty-first century.

Headquartered in Chicago, the IFYC supports religious pluralism and hopes to diffuse the faith line to stop the *Clash of Civilizations*. It argues: "The faith line does not divide people of divergent faith traditions, or religious people from secular people. Instead, this line divides religious totalitarians from religious pluralists." Eboo Patel, the founder of IFYC and an advisor to President Obama (who also hails from Chicago), took his inspiration from what Charles Bonney, a Chicago judge and the President of the 1893 World Parliament of Religions, declared in his concluding address: "Henceforth the religions of the world will make war not on each other, but on the giant evils that afflict mankind."

IFYC is building an interfaith youth movement, using service to fellow humans as a bridge. The *New York Times* commented in January, 2011: "Until Mr. Patel came along, the interfaith movement in the United States was largely the province of elders and clergy members hosting dialogues and, yes, book clubs—and drafting documents that had little impact at the grass roots."

IFYC has now gone global, spanning five continents and over 200 college and university campuses. It is building bridges towards a *Friendship of Civilizations*, not a clash.

### **FACEBOOK GOES GLOBAL**

Amidst the turmoil and wars after September 11, 2001, a momentous event that would in a few years change the course of human history was taking place in a tiny corner of a small dormitory room at Harvard University in Boston, Massachusetts. A sophomore student by the name of Mark Zuckerberg (1984– ) was diligently writing a computer code that would allow his fellow students to use his website to vote for the "hottest" (i.e., best-looking) person from a selection of student photos. He named his website *Facemash.com*.

He had no idea that his work would have impacts far beyond his wildest imagination. His website gained immediate popularity and brought Harvard's computer servers down. The university authority shut down his website, and Zuckerberg apologized for his unauthorized use of student photos.

Nonetheless, impressed by the popularity of his website, Zuckerberg expanded upon his ideas. In February, 2004, he launched "Facebook" from his dormitory room. In fewer than five years, *Facebook* profoundly changed the world by jump-starting the era of online social networking, a new way of connecting with people across the globe without the travails of journeying thousands of miles. On Facebook, users can post their ideas, share their thoughts, pictures, and videos, and communicate with others—whether they are neighbors or unknown people on the other side of the globe—instantly and at no cost.

Zuckerberg's Facebook spurred a revolution that touched the entire world and now has a fanatical following that rivals any of today's major religions. As of October 2012, *Facebook* had more than one billion active users, and it continues to grow.

### **POPE BLESSES FACEBOOK**

The power of communication through Facebook was soon realized by the Vatican. In 2009, the Vatican launched a Facebook application, *Pope2You*, which allowed the faithful to "meet" the Pope on Facebook, hear his words, see photos, and receive his messages in the form of "virtual cards." The purpose was to build a network around the Pope. However, users didn't receive an email saying the Pope had added him/her as a friend, nor could the user "poke" the Pope or write on his wall. The following year, in March 2010, the Vatican launched its first Facebook page to celebrate the Pope's forthcoming visit to England in September 2010. This event-themed *Facebook* page remains open, with about 10,000–15,000 fans checking in from time to time.

The eighty-three-year-old pontiff doesn't have a personal Facebook account, but he endorsed the use of social networking in a January 2011 address entitled "Truth, Proclamation and Authenticity of Life in the Digital Age." This allowed many devout Christians to start using Facebook without feeling any Catholic guilt. The Pope encouraged social networkers to be open and honest in their communications, and warned: "It is important always to remember that virtual contact cannot and must not take the place of direct human contact with people at every level of our lives."

### **GRAND MUFTI BLESSES FACEBOOK**

In 2010, there was widespread protest in the Muslim world against *Facebook*, in response to the page "Everybody Draw Mohammed Day", which carried sacrilegious, anti-Muslim content. Pakistan and Bangladesh temporarily blocked access to *Facebook*. India requested *Facebook* authorities to disallow access to the page. Numerous Muslim clerics called for an outright ban of Facebook among Muslims. But young Muslims didn't heed these calls. As an alternative to Facebook, some Muslim entrepreneurs started *MillatFacebook*, a Muslim-oriented social networking website, in 2010. However, the user experience was so abysmal that *MillatFacebook* was not able to attract even five percent of the 6.5 million Facebook users in Pakistan. A few investors are now working on the launch of a new Muslim Facebook, called *Salamworld*, scheduled for release in 2012. The investors hope to

gain 50 million users by 2015.

In the Muslim world, there is ongoing debate about the use of *Facebook*, or any other social networking site, because of the lack of control over the content uploaded by users. In an interview in 2012, Sheikh Ali Gomaa (1952– ), the Grand Mufti (highest official of Islamic law) of Egypt, rejected calls for a ban on social networking. As one of the world's most respected Islamic jurists, Sheikh Gomaa called for caution and understanding in guiding young Muslims to confront both the dangers and the benefits of the *Internet* and social networking. "If you close one form of communication," he said, "people will find a way around it." The Grand Mufti himself has a Twitter account and uses the *Internet* to communicate with followers.

### **JESUS TOPS FACEBOOK RANKING**

Today, the biggest star on *Facebook* is not Eminem, Rihanna, Justin Bieber, Lady Gaga, or President Obama. The biggest star is Jesus. In September 2011, ABC News, citing *AllFacebook.com*, a website that keeps track of Facebook traffic, reported that a Facebook page called "Jesus Daily" ranked as the most engaging page in terms of number of posts, number of comments, number of likes, and number of responses. With only 11 million fans, *Jesus Daily* had about 6 million interactions. In contrast, the *Justin Bieber* page, which has about 40 million fans, had only 690,000 interactions over the same period. The second and third most engaging pages are also religion related: during the same period, the *Dios Es Bueno* (God is Good) page had 2.9 million interactions and *The Bible* page had 1.8 million. The *I'm a Muslim & I'm Proud* Facebook page ranked thirteenth, with 568,000 interactions, while the *ILoveAllah.com* Facebook page ranked fifteenth, with 559,000 interactions.

### **WHAT IF GOD HAD A FACEBOOK?**

Amidst Facebook's popularity as a preferred way to remain in touch with others, it is not at all irrational for men and women to imagine a Facebook for God. So, if God had a Facebook, what would be written on it? How many fans would visit? Could *facebook.com* handle more than six billion fans of God, which would far outnumber the one billion current active users of Facebook?

If history is a slate, then God's Facebook had its beginning a long time ago, when individual *Homo sapiens* first started writing their thoughts and prayers. Men and women of the past centuries contributed to God's Facebook in accordance with their beliefs, cultures, and socioeconomic conditions. They spoke not only through words, but also through elaborate artworks: paintings, symbols, idols, and music. They built magnificent temples that show how they valued their devotion to God. They fought countless wars to establish their own ideas about God, such as who and what God is, and what God wants. At the same time, men and women of all epochs embarked on magical missions of love to help fellow human beings in the name of God. Thus, God and humans lived in an indivisible co-existence and spoke to and about each other in commandments, prayers, and simple statements. This fascinating story of God, Man, and Facebook is recorded in this book for the first time in human history.



**I HEARD GOD LAUGHING**

Yet, we should remember that words alone, human or divine, however powerful they may be, can't capture the essence or the totality of God. In that sense, this book may be nothing more than a source of enjoyment for us to share some laughs, as the great Persian lyrical poet and Sufi mystic, Hafiz (1315–1390), once said:

“I have a thousand brilliant lies  
For the question:  
How are you?  
I have a thousand brilliant lies  
For the question:  
What is God?  
If you think that the Truth can be known  
From words,  
If you think that the Sun and the Ocean  
Can pass through that tiny opening called the mouth,  
O someone should start laughing!  
Someone should start wildly Laughing –Now!”

– [TR. BY D. LADINSKY: I HEARD GOD LAUGHING:  
POEMS OF HOPE AND JOY, BY HAFIZ]

## CHAPTER DIGEST

**E**ast met West at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, USA, which marked the beginning of globalization of interfaith dialogues. At that momentous event, a *Cyclonic Monk* from the East brought Yoga and the message of a universal religion to the West and wished for the death of fanaticism. Yoga became popular but fanaticism didn't die. A *Yankee Mohammedan* from the West also spoke at the event, highlighting the message of tolerance in Islam, but that message didn't register in the popular imagination in the West because of the acts of Muslim fundamentalists in later centuries.

The religious exclusivists thought that God belonged to their religions; the inclusivists condescendingly accepted other gods as lesser gods; and the pluralists believed that God is too big to fit into one religion.

Humans invented *Facebook*, which reached a fan count of one billion in less than eight years. The Pope blessed Facebook and opened a *Facebook* page. The Grand Mufti of Egypt opined against banning the social networking site and opened a Twitter account. *Jesus Daily* became the most popular Facebook page, ahead of the pages dedicated to rock stars.

God, inspired by the success of Facebook, decided to open a Facebook page and motivated the author to write *God's Facebook* to deepen and widen the understanding of God.

Thus God, men, women, and Facebook entered into a fascinating relationship, which provided an inspirational basis for a *Friendship of Civilizations*.