Globalization involves much more than our newfound ability to telephone friends on the other side of the world. It involves more than the complex network of trade relations that bring coffee and tea to our breakfast tables. It even involves more than the interconnected financial markets that let us use our credit cards in Timbuktu but can collapse with worldwide repercussions, as they did in Mexico in 1994, East Asia in 1997, Russia in 1998, or in the U.S. tech stock crash of 2001. As significant as these links are, they are only part of the global picture. These connections both support and depend on an increasingly globalized culture—one that imagines the world much differently than was the case in previous eras. In this chapter I shall explore certain aspects of this emerging global culture, focusing on the role that religions have played and are playing in it. This role is not one-sided, as global culture shapes today’s religions as much as it is shaped by them.

Let me start by noting what I do not mean by ‘global culture’. I do not mean the rise of the Internet, the spread of hip-hop and rock music to all corners of the globe, the Davos World Economic Forum, and so on. Although technology, art, and interlocking economic elites are all aspects of our globalized world, they are not the level of culture that I believe salient. To an anthropologist, culture is a communal matter. It involves a group’s core outlook on the world as it manifests itself in daily living. It consists of that group’s root assumptions about the world. This includes the ways in which these assumptions generate both the taken-for-granted rules for living and the ‘things everyone knows’ about a given social scene.

What distinguishes the global era from others is the spread of certain cultural assumptions worldwide. It is not just that we connect (or don’t connect) with one another, listen (or don’t listen) to the same music, and watch (or don’t watch) the same mass entertainment. More importantly, we share core ideas—ones that our various ancestors would have found strange.
Among other things, we observe that people throughout the world increasingly see themselves as individuals. They see themselves as having individual ‘rights’, whether or not they can articulate these at any depth. Furthermore, they see everyone as having such rights, no matter to which government they owe allegiance. These rights are seen as ‘universal’—a result of being human, nothing more.

Among these rights is the right to ‘place’—a right to citizenship in one or another locality. This locality is typically a nation, but it can also, for some, be a tribe, a clan, or a region. Many people see themselves as having ‘ethnic’ ties to these nations, tribes, or clans, and they see these ties as being somehow primordial. To use Michael Ignatieff’s (1993) phrase, “blood and belonging” are seen to go together, especially in the nationalist violence that has wracked much of the world in recent years. The notion that ‘they’ve been fighting for hundreds of years’ has much cachet today, if little reality.

Interestingly, people simultaneously see themselves as global citizens, part of a common humanity-at-large that shares an essential status as rights-bearing human beings—including the right to associate with others of like ethnicity. The dual notion that everyone is simultaneously a citizen of a nation-state, often an ethnically based one, and also a world citizen is something new.

Also new is the idea that all people have (or don’t have) a religion, and that they have (or ought to have) a certain kind of relationship to this religion (or non-religion). Specifically, ‘religion’ is something in which people are supposed to believe and to whose organizations they are supposed to belong.

Until recently, Euro-American intellectuals argued that religions would fade as world society grew more technical and scientific. This is now questioned, but such elites still assume that religion is more strongly held by ‘less-developed’ peoples.

Religious people claim that religion should be a center-point that orients people’s lives. Even those who oppose religious conflict in such places as Iraq, Sri Lanka, and Gujarat, see that conflict as somehow ‘natural’—as an outgrowth of deeply held religious loyalty. And they, by-and-large, see the loyalty (though not the conflict) as a good thing, the perversions of which only education and strong government can overcome.

In some situations, ‘religious’ ties act just like ‘ethnic’ ones. ‘Shiite’ versus ‘Sunni’ in Iraq presents itself as an ethnic conflict, for example,