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RELIGION

# Most Major Religions in Final 'Folk' Stage

By JOHN DART, Times Religion Writer

Most of the major world religions, including Christianity, have entered into their final "folk religion" stage and are likely to fade slowly into the spiritual sunset, according to a provocative, recently published theory.

The exception seen among five religions is the younger faith of Islam, which is just beginning a robust "reformation" period, says Robert Ellwood, director of USC's school of religion.

Buddhism and the Chinese religions of Confucianism and Taoism started losing their spiritual force in society more than 300 years ago, while classic Hinduism and Christianity entered into the fifth and apparently last stage only in recent decades, Ellwood contends.

Ellwood says the fifth stage is one in which "folk," or popular, religious expression in charismatic and traditionalist enclaves is most visible and the religious establishment has lost much of its public persuasiveness.

"When the great tradition finally reaches its point of self-consumption and goes into a black hole, the folk religion [version of that faith] is left in high visibility to carry the torch for the faith," Ellwood said in an interview to discuss his book, "The History and Future of Faith" (Crossroad).

**500-Year Scenarios**

However, the first four stages in Ellwood's scenario average 500 years, and the scholar does not rule out the possibility that Christianity, now rooted in every continent, could rebound to earlier influential heights in society as a whole.

In the meantime, Ellwood noted the low church attendance in Europe and English-speaking countries other than the United States is but one sign of decline. "Religion as a cultural force is losing power to influence the course of music, literature, art and intellectual life," he wrote.

For modern popular Christianity as for folk religion, religious communication from Scripture, testimony or preacher is essentially miraculous, experimental and charismatic. The words of the Bible are miracle-producing charms, not historical texts whose exegesis requires people of elite education; the revivalist or TV preacher is a

Prof. Robert Ellwood of USC theorizes that four of the five "great religions" are in their final "folk religion" stages whereas Islam has just entered the Reformation period.



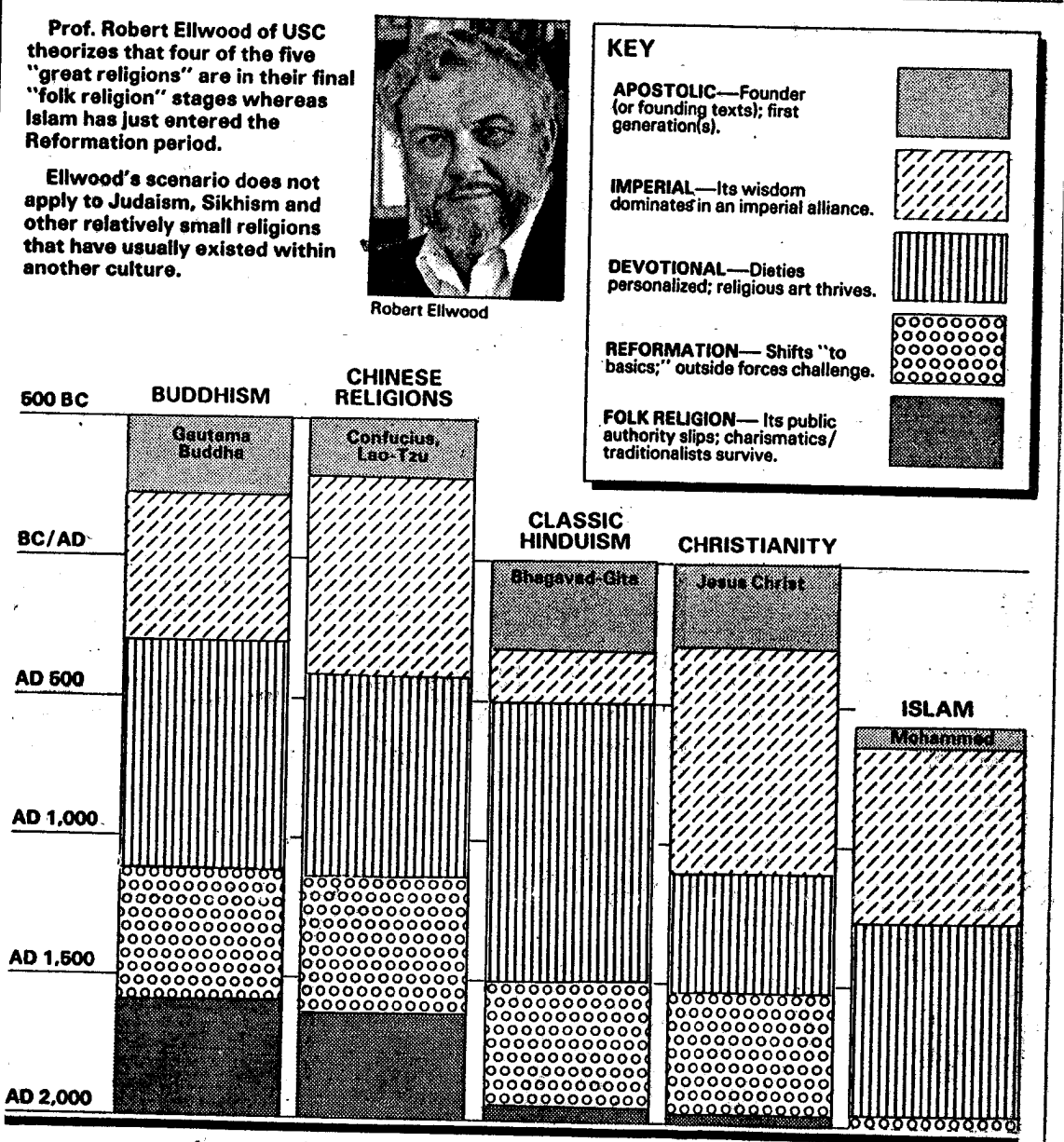
Robert Ellwood

Ellwood's scenario does not apply to Judaism, Sikhism and other relatively small religions that have usually existed within another culture.

**KEY**

- APOSTOLIC**—Founder (or founding texts); first generation(s). [Solid grey box]
- IMPERIAL**—Its wisdom dominates in an imperial alliance. [Diagonal lines box]
- DEVOTIONAL**—Dieties personalized; religious art thrives. [Vertical lines box]
- REFORMATION**—Shifts "to basics;" outside forces challenge. [Dotted circles box]
- FOLK RELIGION**—Its public authority slips; charismatics/traditionalists survive. [Dark grey box]

ARE MOST WORLD RELIGIONS IN THEIR FINAL, FADING STAGES?



SOURCE: "The History and Future of Faith," by Robert Ellwood.

shaman evoking an Other World of miracle and meaning, not a lecturer whose words require reasoned reflection," he said.

Ellwood says that such smaller religions as Judaism or Shintoism do not follow the historical pattern he finds elsewhere. "It has nothing to do with their value," he said. "What I am talking about are the great religions which have always encompassed hundreds of millions

of people and vast culture areas." His proposals have been called "fresh and stimulating" by Ninian Smart of UC Santa Barbara. Both Ellwood and Smart are much-published analysts of world religions.

Ellwood, professor of Oriental Studies at USC, is "an able historian of religion [who] has earned the right to operate in such a broad-sweep speculative mode," said Leo Sandon of Florida State University

at Tallahassee. Sandon called the book "important . . . risky but a worthy undertaking." But a newsletter edited in the Fordham University theology department terms the book "certainly provocative and worth consideration even though it is not particularly convincing."

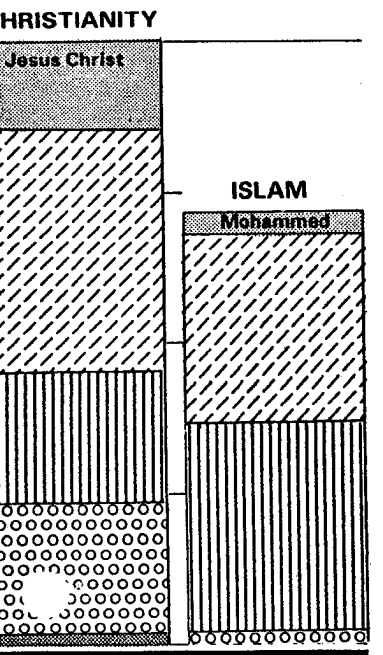
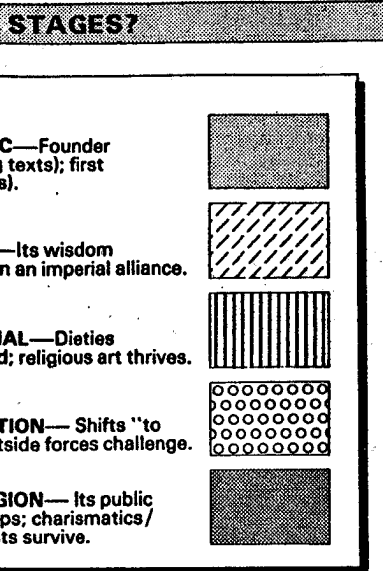
Regardless of the book's reception, however, some elements of Ellwood's theory

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# Folk' Stage, Scholar Theorizes



tractive because they provide new answers to puzzling religious trends.

● Islam often appears much different from other world religions in its power to mobilize intense feelings, most recently in reaction to "The Satanic Verses," a book said to defame the Prophet Mohammed and Muslim beliefs. Islam is also notable for the lack of a significant theologically liberal wing, a factor that often frustrates formal inter-faith dialogues.

Islam's resurgence is sometimes explained in terms of a worldwide "fundamentalist" revival, a trend also present in Christianity and Judaism. But many scholars have been uncomfortable in using the "fundamentalist" label for the dynamics in Islam.

Ellwood's theory has the advantage of comparing Islam's turbulence to the earlier reformation periods of other major religions. Islam since about 1970 has displayed "a response to secularizing trends, an inward fervor, the early desire to create an ideal society, the emergence of a new kind of elite, a drive to return to the religion's source and simplify Islam" to the

practice of religious laws, Ellwood said.

Just as Christianity's 16th-Century Reformation took place in Germany, Switzerland and England—away from the established seat of religious authority, (Rome)—the changes in Islam are taking place in Iran and other regions away from the Arab heartland, he said.

● It was a common prediction 50 years ago that Christianity would decline in public impact, but, at least in the United States, polls and other indicators show that religious practice and beliefs still flourish, most exuberantly in the charismatic-Pentecostal churches.

At the same time, mainstream churches are suffering steady membership losses while conservative church leaders, no matter how well their churches do, complain that their viewpoints on abortion, pornography, school prayer and other moral issues are too often ignored in the public arena.

This seemingly contradictory coexistence of secularizing trends and high religiosity in America has

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at Tallahassee. Sandon called the book "important . . . risky but a worthy undertaking." But a news

# THEORY: Scholar Claims Most Religions in Slow, Fading Stage

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confounded many analysts, who try to decide which phenomenon will win out in the end.

But adapting earlier theories, Ellwood says that this situation is typical for the fifth stage in his theory: Christianity's intellectual and sociopolitical influence has diminished while manifestations of popular, or "folk religion," retain their appeal.

Christianity accommodates itself more to the non-religious side of society. "Modern Christians celebrate Christmas and other holidays as both secular and religious festivals," he said.

## Undiluted Practice

Individual believers may be able to find like-minded people to continue a faithful, undiluted practice of their religion for centuries, Ellwood indicated. Yet, he warned, "private religion cannot forever survive a loss of public function or social reason for its world view."

Ellwood declares that the great religions began in response to the problem of history—the realization "things changing and not changing back." The apostles of the fledgling religion declare that a pivotal event has happened with the advent and teachings of their founder figure and the faith develops a mission "to accomplish in historical time," he suggested.

Hinduism is technically the oldest of the five religions, but Ellwood said that it did not begin its five stages until the first centuries

of the current era. In this case, the Bhagavad-Gita, a founding document, substitutes for a human founding figure, he said.

A great religion then moves into a period, he said, when it is adopted by imperial rulers and the religion's wisdom becomes dominant.

"Zoroastrianism is an interesting case because it follows the scenario about up until the end of its imperial period," Ellwood said. "But because of its conquest by Islam in Persia, it cuts off there and becomes a small minority religion."

The third period in Ellwood's theory is a devotional one. The deities are increasingly personalized and adored, and religious art thrives. In the following reformation period there are competing political and social forces. The religion's "fundamental perception at this point [is] that the faith must rediscover what its essentials are and press them to the exclusion of all else," Ellwood wrote.

In the folk religion stage, Ellwood said, the "value" of the religion is questioned "when value is measured in materialistic utilitarianism." While hope for a broadly revived reverence for life and spiritual matters will undoubtedly

persist, especially if people become sufficiently disenchanted with secular approaches, Ellwood still points to stronger signs that only popularist religion will carry on.

In contrast to earlier eras, skeptics abound on the reality of reli-

gious claims. While not saying that it is satisfactory to the human psyche, Ellwood observed: "When the social nature of the sacred is discovered, its days are numbered and sociological knowledge has replaced religious truth."