Liberty is the first requisite for the sound health and vigorous life of a nation. A foreign despotism is in itself an unnatural condition and if permitted, must bring about other unhealthy and unnatural conditions in the subject people...Foreign rule cannot build up a nation—only the resistance to foreign rule can weld the discordant elements of a people into an indivisible unity.

Aurobindo Ghose

Welcome to The History of the Twentieth Century.

Episode 220. An Unnatural Condition.

When we left off last time in our survey of Indian history, we had finally gotten to the dawn of the twentieth century. Hooray! Lord Curzon was now the Viceroy and Governor-General of India, although I closed last time on an ominous note that implied this would be a troubled rule.

It’s not that Lord Curzon stands out in the roster of Viceroys. He wasn’t especially bad or callous or foolish. The beginning of his tenure coincided with yet another famine in India. Curzon oversaw famine relief efforts, although he worried whether “indiscriminate alms-giving weakened the fibre and demoralized the self-reliance of the population.” He was far from alone among British administrators in taking that attitude toward the people he governed.

Lord Curzon was also behind the British expedition to Tibet that I told you about in episode 39.

He did some good things, like reducing the tax on salt, which was a major source of government revenue but despised by the people of India. He initiated restoration projects on some of India’s ancient monuments, including the Taj Mahal. Curzon himself would point to these restorations as the accomplishment in India of which he was most proud. He also did some not-so-good things, like reducing Indian control over Indian universities, which were hotbeds of nationalist sentiment.
Nevertheless, Curzon’s tenure as Viceroy is most often remembered today for the Partition of Bengal. I’ll remind you that the British established themselves in India first at three points: Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta, and from these three places their influence spread throughout India. The British-ruled territories centered on these cities were called “presidencies.” The largest of these was the Bengal Presidency. Its capital, Calcutta, was also the capital of all British India.

The Bengal Presidency included what is in our time all of eastern India and Bangladesh. In the early twentieth century, the population of the Bengal Presidency was approaching eighty million people, nearly double the population of the British Isles. And even the British Isles are subdivided into four countries, Ireland, Wales, Scotland, and England. British administrators had complained for years that the Bengal Presidency was too large to rule efficiently and some kind of reorganization was required.

There were various ways this could have been accomplished. It was actually accomplished by drawing a new north-south border through the middle, roughly corresponding to what is today the western border of Bangladesh, This divided Bengal into East Bengal and West Bengal. The Partition was completed in 1905.

Mass opposition to this plan appeared as soon as it was announced. What was so controversial? The new East Bengal province would be predominantly Muslim. Recall that the Indian nationalist movement was at this time primarily driven by middle-class and nouveau riche Hindu Indians, and they perceived this partition as an attempt to win the support of Muslim Indians for perpetuating British rule. The British pitch to the Muslims in India had always been that if the nationalists had their way, Muslims would become a disenfranchised and disadvantaged minority within a Hindu-dominated Indian state.

Remember that the British Empire of this period was the world’s largest Muslim political entity, in which hundreds of millions of Muslims from Egypt to Borneo lived peacefully. The British government took it as read that Britain alone among European nations had the understanding and the expertise required to govern a multi-faith empire in which Christians and Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists could live together in harmony.

The new East Bengal would be a majority Muslim province in which most of the middle and upper class would be well-to-do Hindus, who would now find their political clout curtailed, despite the wealth they controlled. Middle- and upper-class Hindus in Bengal were an important element of the nationalist movement, as were the faculty and students of the University of Calcutta. The partition was regarded on the one hand as a slap in the face to Hindus generally, and to the class of people who organized and supported the Indian National Congress in particular, and on the other hand as a bribe to the Muslim community, a message that read: Look how much better off you are under British rule. It was seen as a strategy of “divide and rule.”
Was this intentional, or were the nationalists reading too much into what was in fact merely an administrative decision? Historians still argue that in our time, but it’s hard to overlook the fact that this plan drew sharp and ongoing criticism from Hindus and nationalists as soon as it was announced, yet the British administration pushed ahead with it anyway.

In the early twentieth century, there was a new generation of Indian nationalists entering into leadership. These were more extreme opponents of British rule, people who had lost patience with their elders’ strategy of “constitutional agitation” as it was called. That the British were forging ahead with the Partition of Bengal despite all the lawful political opposition the nationalists could muster was itself evidence that constitutional agitation was ineffective and more extreme measures were required.

A few other things had changed. In the early twentieth century, three important books were published. The first was *The Economic History of India* by Romesh Chunder Dutt, a Bengali retired from the Indian Civil Service and a former President of the Indian National Congress. Another was *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*, by Sir Dadabhai Naoroji, a Parsi Indian who moved to Britain, became a professor at University College London, and later was elected the first Asian Member of the House of Commons, and “Prosperous” *British India*—that’s with “prosperous” in quotation marks—by the English journalist William Digby. All three books outlined an economic argument similar to the one I laid out for you last week, that British rule, far from bringing modernity or enlightenment to India, had reduced a once far-more-prosperous nation into a land of poverty, famine, and degradation, quite contrary to the British government’s own stated principles and goals.

There were important historical events in this period that changed the thinking of Indian nationalists, along with nationalists in many other parts of the various colonial empires. There was the Ethiopian victory over the Italians at Adwa in 1896, the first victory of an African army over a European army in modern times; the Boer War of 1899-1902, in which a relatively small number of Boer irregulars thoroughly embarrassed the British Army; and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, the first victory of an Asian army over a European army in modern times. We covered all these events in detail on this podcast, back in the Belle Époque days; their cumulative effect was to signal to the subjects of colonial empires across Africa and Asia that the Europeans were not ten feet tall, they were not omnipotent, and they were not invincible. They could be resisted. Sometimes, they could even be beaten.

So by 1905, there were many in the Indian National Congress and the nationalist movement who had had quite enough of constitutional agitation, thank you very much. They tended to be younger people, of the new generation. Some of them were prepared to turn to violence in the service of the nation. I already told you the story of the assassination of Walter Charles Rand at the end of last week’s episode.
But there’s also a wide range of political actions that fall between polite petitions and full-on bloodshed. And the nationalists employed them. There were speeches, petition drives, and protest marches. On October 16, 1905, the day the Partition became official, thousands protested in Calcutta and shops and markets were shuttered.

But the most distinctive, and the most significant, form of opposition that came out of the protest against the Partition was the Swadeshi Movement.

I should explain that. The Swadeshi Movement was a boycott. Kind of. I use the word “boycott” because it is likely more familiar to you, dear listener, than “swadeshi.” A “boycott” is a targeted refusal to engage in certain transactions as a form of protest. The term originated in the movement for land reform in late 19th century Ireland. The original boycott was targeted against an Englishman named Charles Boycott who served as a land agent in Ireland, and involuntarily donated his name as a descriptor for a certain kind of political protest. That was in 1880.

By 1905, the word “boycott” was in common use in the English language. But the leaders of the Swadeshi Movement, including Aurobindo Ghose, whom I quoted at the top of the episode, rejected this term as a description of their effort, preferring instead their own word, swadeshi. It was coined by combining two Sanskrit words, swa, meaning “self” or “own,” and desh, meaning “country.” The i suffix makes the word into an adjective, so swadeshi could be understood as meaning “from our own country.”

The Swadeshi Movement urged Indians to buy Indian products rather than products imported from Britain. The principle was more than just a boycott of British goods. It was an affirmation of Indian goods. If you think back to last week’s episode, when I talked about the economic relationship between India and the UK, I pointed out that India had once been one of the great pre-industrial manufacturing centers of the world, and that under British rule, most of this domestic Indian manufacturing withered away in the face of cheap British imports, promoted by government policy that favored British manufacturing over Indian manufacturing.

The Swadeshi Movement sought to reverse this development. That’s why it was more than just a boycott. It was that, but it was also an affirmation that India had once had a vibrant domestic manufacturing economy and that it was capable of rebuilding it. It represented Indian consumers rejecting one of the worst features of British rule: the kneecapping of domestic Indian manufacturing.

The Partition of Bengal went ahead anyway, despite the protests, but the Swadeshi Movement did not die out. To the contrary, it gathered force. Sales of British textiles plummeted as Indians conducted bonfires in which they burned clothing made from imported fabrics, while clothing made from hand-woven domestic cloth became high fashion. Indian textile factories worked around the clock and artisanal spinning and weaving made a comeback. From Bengal, the Swadeshi Movement spread across India, while the more radical nationalists began speaking an even more radical word: swaraj. Self rule.
Even moderate nationalists thought swaraj was going too far, and tended to expel the extremists from their organizations. Extremists organized on their own, some taking up arms, but the British rulers were able to crack down on them, while at the same time, offering concessions to the moderates. January 1906 saw the election of a new, Liberal House of Commons and government, as you know from episode 38. With them came a new Liberal Secretary of State for India and a new Viceroy, who came into office convinced that Indian demands for a larger role in the governance of their own country could no longer be disregarded.

[music: Eastern Musings]

The Indian nationalist movement was largely a movement of middle- and upper-class Hindus who achieved their middle- or upper-class status either through a university education or through land ownership, or business, or trade. Far fewer members of India’s Muslim community embraced either a secular Western education or trade with the British, and consequently, one found far fewer Muslims in the middle and upper classes. But toward the end of the 19th century, during the period of the British Raj, this began to change.

A seminal figure in promoting this change was Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, a Muslim Indian scholar who also served on the British Viceroy’s Council for a time. Sir Syed wrote scholarly and theological works, in which he promoted a pragmatic, modernist Islam that encouraged the study of Western literature and Western science, especially through the All-India Muhammadan Educational Conference, which he began in 1886.

Sir Syed passed away in 1898, at the age of 80, but the movement he helped launch carried on after his passing, leading to the establishment of the All-India Muslim League in 1906. The Muslim League was created in part in response to the Indian National Congress and predominantly Hindu political opposition to the Partition of Bengal. At least some Muslim political leaders saw value in the way Bengal was partitioned, giving greater political power to the Muslims of East Bengal. To the Muslim League, talk of independence was troubling, as that would leave Muslims a minority group within a Hindu-dominated India. Muslim League leaders argued that the current arrangement, under which India was ruled by the British, a people neither Muslim nor Hindu, would be more likely to guarantee equal treatment of the two communities than a Hindu government would. Indeed, the British might not be Muslim, but they were “people of the book,” the Muslim term for Christians and Jews, people whose faith may not be Islam, but was intertwined with Islam historically and theologically, as opposed to the Hindus, whose beliefs had nothing at all in common with Muslims.

Thus, while the Indian National Congress was calling for self-government for India, opposing the Partition of Bengal, and supporting the Swadeshi Movement, the Muslim League was adopting statements expressing loyalty to the British Raj, supporting the Partition of Bengal and opposing the Swadeshi Movement.
This is not to say that all Muslims supported the League or that only Hindus supported the Congress. In fact, a prominent figure in the Congress at this time was Muhammad Jinnah, a Muslim Indian barrister in Bombay who endorsed the Congress vision of India as a single large nation made up of many peoples of different faiths and ethnicities and who was frequently critical of the League, calling it self-appointed and questioning whether it really did speak for India’s Muslims.

In this way, the Partition of Bengal opened a fault line in Indian nationalism. Or perhaps it merely cast a spotlight on a fault line that already existed, depending on your point of view. It is at this time that you begin to hear the word “communalism” in connection with Indian politics. It is a fraught word, most often used as an epithet against one’s political opponents. It is meant to describe a form of politics that emphasizes the interests of individual communities within India over the overarching interests of the nation as a whole.

But this doesn’t mean that the Congress and the League agreed on nothing. They were united in calling for a greater role for Indians in Indian government. The Liberal-controlled Parliament in Westminster agreed to this in 1909, passing the Indian Councils Act, which allowed for greater numbers of elected Indians in Indian provincial legislatures. The catch here is that in each council, a fixed number of seats were reserved for Muslims, proportional to the percentage of Muslims in that region. The Muslim League welcomed this development, but the Congress viewed it as another expression of British “divide and rule” tactics. In Britain, the argument was made that Muslims were more loyal to British rule, while Muslim discontent posed a risk to an Empire that had so many Muslim subjects, thus the importance of keeping the Muslims content.

Two years later, in 1911, with the Swadeshi Movement still going strong, the British made a key concession to Hindu nationalists by reversing the Partition of Bengal. That same year, the British also announced they were moving the capital of British India from Calcutta to Delhi.

Like the Partition of Bengal, this was a move that could be justified for purely administrative reasons. Delhi was more centrally located and therefore a more convenient location for the central government. It had been the seat of government during the Mughal Empire. But it could also be construed as a rebuke to the people of Bengal, punishing the region for its resistance to the partition.

The government moved to Old Delhi almost immediately, although the British also undertook construction of a new section of the city to house government offices. This became New Delhi, and was completed in 1931.

The Great War began three years later, episode 77. I touched on the role of India and Indian soldiers here and there during our narrative of the Great War. Indians served on the Western Front, they were at first Britain’s preferred fighters in East Africa, although Indian soldiers did not fare well under East African conditions; neither did South African soldiers. Indians were the backbone of the British Army in the Mesopotamian campaign and were part of the Gallipoli and
Palestine campaigns, even though they are usually labeled “British” soldiers in the histories, including by me. After the war, most of the “British” soldiers that remained to occupy and garrison British holdings in the Near East were in fact Indian soldiers.

Over a million Indians served the British armed forces during the Great War. These Indian soldiers were justly proud of their contribution to the defense of Britain and its Empire, as were their families and friends. As in the case of African and other Imperial territories, Indians also hoped that their loyalty to the Empire would be rewarded after the war, rewarded with more autonomy, entrusted with more responsibility, and generally Indians would be treated not like stumbling students of a wiser master but as peers and equals. Did the British themselves not proclaim that the war was fought for the freedom of every nation to determine its own destiny?

But there was a small, radical fringe who, as was the case in Ireland, saw Britain’s moment of crisis as India’s opportunity. With much of the Indian Army out of the country, extremist Indian groups based in Japan and the United States, attempted to organize and encourage a revolt among the now-reduced garrisons of Indian soldiers remaining in India. These efforts sometimes received financial support from Germany, including a plot to run guns from the then-neutral United States to Indian revolutionaries. There were a few Army mutinies, notably among Indian soldiers in Singapore in 1915, but these were quickly crushed and the mutineers punished harshly, often by firing squad.

And of course, there was the Ottoman Sultan’s call to jihad against the British, which mostly went unanswered by Muslims, although a few of the more radical Muslims in India were swayed. Generally speaking, British intelligence services were on top of these various plots and conspiracies, and British rule in India was never seriously threatened. If the goal of the extremists was to liberate India, they had failed.

On the other hand, if the goal of the extremists was to provoke a harsh, even paranoid British response, well, here they were more successful. I suppose that if your intelligence services are uncovering multiple plots to incite mutiny and insurrection, it’s only natural that you would begin to wonder how many more plots your intelligence services are not finding. Perhaps even the one that will light the fire of open revolt.

These fears led to the enactment of the Defence of India Act in 1915. This was comparable to the Defence of the Realm Act in the UK, which we looked at in episode 159, and it allowed for such emergency measures as detention without trial and censorship of speech and writing. But in the UK, the Defence of the Realm Act was mostly used against foreign nationals. Ten civilians were executed in Britain during the war, but none were British subjects, though I’ll remind you that the very-much-a-British-subject Bertrand Russell was imprisoned for his public opposition to conscription.

Even so, implementation of the Defence of India Act in India was very different. The special powers granted to the government under this act were targeted almost exclusively against
Indians. A total of 46 people were executed in India for violations of the Act, and every one of them was an Indian national. Even moderate groups that did no more than hold meetings and publish pamphlets calling for swaraj were detained and prosecuted under the Act. As a result, the Defense of India Act became a source of resentment among politically active Indians. High taxes and food shortages also contributed to discontent in India, as everywhere else, as the war dragged on.

At the same time, the Indian National Congress’s most prominent Muslim leader, Muhammad Jinnah was at work trying to bridge the divide between the Congress and the Muslim League. By 1916, Jinnah had become president of the Muslim League, this without resigning his membership in the Congress. Jinnah helped nudge the League into supporting home rule for India, which made possible what history calls the Lucknow Pact in 1916, this was the year the Congress and the League held a joint meeting in the city of Lucknow, where they ironed out their differences and presented the British with a united front. As one of the compromises to create the pact, Congress dropped its opposition to separate elections for Muslim representatives to provincial legislatures.

This turn of events, in which the two largest political movements in India went from rivals to allies, increased the pressure on the British. That same year, the embarrassment of the surrender of the Indian Army after the Siege of Kut in April 1916, episode 120, eventually led to the resignation of the Secretary of State for India, Austen Chamberlain.

Chamberlain was succeeded by the Liberal MP Edwin Montagu, who came to the position convinced that political reforms in India were now essential. Specifically, reforms that would gradually increase the political power of Indians, along with protections of the rights of minorities, with the long-term goal of making India a self-governed nation within the British Empire.

We are now approaching the pivotal year 1919, a moment in history when several of these stories intersect. We have the repressive aspects of the Defence of India Act on the one hand, and Montagu and his hopes for reform on the other. We will pick up that story in two weeks, in the year 1919, but before we begin there, we have a bit of biographical catching up to do.

[music: Eastern Musings]

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born on October 2, 1869. He was the youngest child of Karamchand Gandhi by his fourth wife, he having been widowed three times previously. Karamchand was the diwan, the equivalent of prime minister, of Porbandar, a small princely state in British India. His family was Hindu. His mother, Putlibai, was a religiously devout woman who embraced an eclectic form of Hinduism and was a powerful influence on her son.

Mohandas was a slender, shy, bookish boy. At the age of 13, he was wed to 14-year old Kasturba. It was an arranged marriage. Mohandas would later recall that for him and his bride,
the occasion was memorable mostly as an opportunity to wear nice clothes, eat sweets, and play with their relatives. Nevertheless, the marriage would last sixty years, until Kasturba died in 1944, at the age of 74.

In 1885, when Mohandas was still just 16, he and his family experienced a double tragedy when first his father died, and then his and Kasturba’s first child died. That child lived only a few days. By 1900, the couple would have four more children, all sons.

At the age of 18, Gandhi enrolled in the local college, but soon dropped out. A family friend suggested that young Mohandas travel to London and study law. Gandhi was delighted by the suggestion. He saw England as the pinnacle of civilization and longed to be a part of it. In this he was supported by his older brother Laxmidas, who was already a lawyer himself. But his mother and his wife, who at that time had just given birth to their second child, opposed the idea of Mohandas leaving his family for so long and worried he would succumb to the temptations of life in the West. Mohandas won their approval by taking a vow that while in England he would not drink alcohol or eat meat and would remain faithful to his wife.

Mohandas Gandhi spent three years in London, a far more cosmopolitan environment than the one he had been reared in, and like many a young person from a relatively remote region, he struggled with the temptations of the big city. Of his three pledges to his mother, it turned out that the most challenging of them was the one on vegetarianism. His fellow law students not only teased him over it, but in accordance with the wisdom of the time, cautioned him that vegetarianism would weaken him and endanger his health. It would interfere with his studies. What was even the point of investing so much of your time and effort in coming to London and studying the law, if you are then going to handicap yourself by voluntarily starving?

The interesting thing about this moment in Gandhi’s life is that this shy and bookish young man did not succumb to this peer pressure, which is how you might expect this story to play out. Nor did he merely hunker down and keep to his vegetarianism, while enduring the mockery and disapproval of his fellow students.

To the contrary, he pushed back. He discovered a vegetarian restaurant, and that helped. He got involved with the London Vegetarian Society and became more firmly convinced than ever that vegetarianism was a moral imperative, a belief that would stay with him for the rest of his life. He read books on the subject to polish up his arguments, and debated those who tried to tell him that vegetarianism was unhealthy or foolish. And here we begin to get a glimpse of the intellectual warrior he was destined to become.

From his fellow vegetarians in London, he began to become involved with other offbeat groups like the peaceful socialists of the Fabian Society and the eclectic spiritualist Theosophists, people who rejected the values of Belle Époque industrial capitalism and stressed instead ideals of simple living and opposition to violence. Gandhi would embrace those ideas too, and integrate them into his own social philosophy.
Gandhi completed his studies and became a barrister in 1891, after which he returned to his home in India, discovering upon his arrival that his mother had passed away while he was in England, but the family had kept this news secret so that it wouldn’t disturb his studies. He attempted to practice law in the big city of Bombay, the same city where Muhammad Jinnah would establish a very successful practice about fifteen years later, but Mohandas Gandhi did not have the same good fortune. He was too quiet, too shy, too polite, and too deferential to really shine in the courtroom, either when cross-examining witnesses or arguing points of law. Gandhi came face to face with the terrible truth most students of the law confront after graduation: that despite what all your friends and family have been telling you, admission to the bar is not actually the same thing as a license to print money.

Unable to make a go of it in Bombay, Gandhi returned to his family in the smaller city of Rajkot, where he was equally unsuccessful until 1893, when a local merchant named Dada Abdullah approached him about a legal problem in South Africa. Abdullah owned a successful shipping business and therefore had wide-ranging interests, including in South Africa, where Abdullah was owed a substantial debt. He felt more comfortable hiring a lawyer from his own community to press his claim, and wanted to know if Mohandas Gandhi would be willing to spend a year in South Africa to get this mess sorted out. The fee would be £105, plus travel and expenses. This was big money to the 23-year-old lawyer, and it would only take a year, so he accepted.

He would remain in South Africa for the next 21 years.

But that is a story for next time. We’ll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Wolf and Craig for their kind donations, and thank you to Daniel for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Wolf and Craig and Daniel help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to everyone who has pitched in and helped out. If you’d like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons. The holiday season is here, so allow me to remind you that donations and patronages make the perfect gift, for me, and a gift you can be sure will never be returned. And they come in a variety of sizes to fit every budget. So how can you go wrong?

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Because next week is a bye week for the podcast, Christmas will come and go before I get the next episode to you. Last year, I put out an extra bonus episode on Christmas Day; it was my Christmas present to all of you. And you all seemed to appreciate it, if the emails I got were any
indication. So let’s go ahead and do that again this year. Last year, the Christmas bonus episode was about Poland and was just a continuation of the narrative I was already on at that time. I didn’t feel like that would be appropriate this year. The next episode is titled “The Kingdom of Satan,” which makes it particularly inappropriate as a Christmas episode. So I went to the inventory to look for something more in harmony with the season.

What I came up with was an episode on developments in astronomy. If you remember all the way back to the early days of the podcast, I mentioned then that in 1901, the scientific consensus was that the Earth and the solar system were twenty to forty million years old, and that our sun was an average star located in about the center of the Milky Way, an agglomeration of stars shaped roughly like a wheel and tens of thousands of light years across. And that was the Universe.

Plenty big enough for most people, but even in 1901, there were those who speculated there may be other Milky Ways, other galaxies, if you will, beyond the confines of our own. This was an extraordinary claim, and it is a principle of science that extraordinary claims demand extraordinary proof, and there just wasn’t any, not enough to persuade the skeptics, anyway. But over the first two decades of the twentieth century, as telescopes got better and our understanding of other stars became clearer, the evidence in favor of this extraordinary claim piled higher and higher until…The Great Debate, coming on Christmas Day.

And I hope you’ll join me again, the Sunday after Christmas, on The History of the Twentieth Century, as we forge ahead with the story of Gandhi in South Africa. The Kingdom of Satan, in two weeks’ time, here, on The History of the Twentieth Century.

Oh, and one more thing. In thinking about Mohandas Gandhi and the political philosophy he is destined to develop, it’s worth taking a moment to take note of the Indian virtue known as ahimsa. The word comes from Sanskrit. Himsa means injury and the a- prefix signifies negation. Asymmetric means not symmetric; ahimsa means non-injury or non-violence. Ahimsa is held up as a virtue in both Hinduism and Buddhism and it is a core principle of Jainism.

The requirement of ahimsa is subject to various interpretations. In its strictest forms, it demands not only absolute non-violence against other human beings, but against animals, and in extreme forms, even disapproves of injury to plants. Gandhi’s vegetarianism is notable an expression of his devotion to the principle of ahimsa. Later he will incorporate it into his political philosophy. Gandhi always maintained that ahimsa was a virtue not only in Indian religion, but in all religions, including Christianity and Islam, and his teachings on the subject would lift up, if not the word ahimsa itself, the principle of pacifism and nonviolence among religious people of many faith traditions around the world in the twentieth century.

[music: Closing Theme]