

Understanding Others: Different Beliefs Around the World

Religion has played a major role in shaping world events. In studying history, we find that almost every war has been based, at least in part, on religion. Many people have strong beliefs which can create conflicts.

Understanding others' beliefs can help us understand each other and thus prevent conflicts.

Almost half of the world's population practices one of three "western" religions: Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. Each of these religions originated from one of the Bible's great figures, a man called "Abraham." These western faiths worship one God, distinguishing them from "eastern" religions practiced primarily in Asia. Belief in one God is called "monotheism." Jews, Christians, and Muslims mostly live in North and South America, Europe, and Australia. They also live in Western Asia and North Africa.

In contrast, eastern religions seek to find enlightenment by looking within themselves. Hinduism and Buddhism are popular faiths in India, Southeast Asia, and Japan. Shinto is the traditional religion of many Japanese, but it has declined since Japan was defeated in World War II. Many Chinese follow the teachings of Confucius. Confucius was not a religious leader, but he was a wise man who was concerned with how people treated one another. Taoism is another philosophy centered in China. Taoists seek to balance what they call the opposing energies of yin and yang. Taoists believe this balance leads to freedom from desire and a more satisfying life.

There are also religions practiced by less populated cultures throughout the world. These are called "indigenous" religions. To be indigenous means to be native or "original to." These faiths are often "animistic." They believe that everything in the universe possesses a soul or consciousness.

People are often mistreated for their beliefs. The early Christians were persecuted by the Romans. During the Crusades, Muslims were persecuted by Christians. Later in Europe, Catholics killed Protestants. The Protestant Pilgrims came to America from Europe to find religious freedom. Once there, however, they persecuted other new colonists whose faiths differed from their own. In the last century, as many as six million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust.

Religious conflicts persist today in many parts of the world. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, were at least partly the result of a religious conflict. By understanding one another, we can hope to develop tolerance and respect for all people.