

Resource Article

Understanding World Religions

Suzanne Gosselin

Sorpheny is an 8-year-old living in Cambodia. Her family is Buddhist. When Sorpheny hears that Jesus died on the cross, she instantly thinks about karma—the belief that one’s circumstances, whether happy or miserable, are the result of one’s actions in a former life. She thinks Jesus must have been a bad man in another life to be subjected to such a terrible death.

Your students’ religious backgrounds can affect how they view Christian concepts, such as God in 3 Persons, the penalty of sin, and the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Understanding your students’ religious backgrounds will help you to explain biblical concepts more clearly and be prepared for the questions they may have.

Here are brief explanations of 10 major religions:

Islam—Founded in the early 7th century, Islam is a monotheistic religion based on the teachings of Muhammad as revealed to him by Allah, the Islamic name for the Old Testament God. Islam is the second-largest religion in the world. Muslims base their laws on their holy book, the Qur’an. Islam reveres Jesus as a wise teacher and miracle worker who was born of a virgin. Jesus is 1 of many prophets in the Islamic religion, with Muhammad being the last. Muslims deny that Jesus is God or God’s Son. They believe that He ascended into heaven, but they deny that He was crucified.

Atheism—Atheism is a lack of belief in gods or supernatural beings. Atheism is not a belief system or a religion because atheists do not have a common belief system, sacred scripture, or a spiritual founder or leader. Atheism exists all over the world, and atheist beliefs vary widely. Some atheists look to science for moral guidance and the answers to life’s big questions.

Hinduism—Hinduism, which began in India, is the religion of the majority of people in India and Nepal. Hinduism originated between the 12th and 6th centuries BC and is based on the teachings of a number of philosophers and holy books. Most Hindus believe in a supreme being, though he is called by many different names and is represented by many gods. Hindus believe that the human soul can be reborn in other bodies and that what happens in 1 life is dependent upon how the previous life was lived. This belief is called karma. Hinduism recognizes Jesus as a holy man and wise teacher who achieved “god-consciousness,” but they do not see Him as the One True God.

Buddhism—This religion is based primarily on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, a spiritual teacher born in modern-day Nepal. He lived and taught in India from approximately 563 BC to 483 BC and is known as the Buddha. Buddhists seek to reach a state of nirvana, or bliss, by following the Buddha’s example. The Buddha went on a quest for enlightenment, which Buddhists believe can be achieved through the practice of wisdom, morality, and meditation. Buddhists also believe in reincarnation and karma. They believe Jesus was an enlightened man and a wise teacher. They respect His sacrificial life, but they do not believe He is divine.

Taoism and Confucianism—Originating in China 2,000 years ago, Taoism has shaped Chinese customs and worldviews. The tao, usually translated as “the way,” is based

on the worship of the supernatural in the world, especially in nature. Taoists believe everything is life is connected in the tao and is balanced by the forces of dark and light called yin and yang. Taoists worship multiple deities. Because they believe in many gods, Taoists do not recognize Jesus as the One True God, though they generally do not reject other beliefs.

Founded in China during the 6th and 5th centuries BC, Confucianism is based on the teachings of K'ung-fu-tzu, a scholar and politician. More of a philosophy than a religion, Confucianism is a form of humanism founded on the idea that all humans are at least slightly good and can be improved through individual and community effort. Confucian beliefs also indicate that people should do to others what is done to them, whether good or bad. They do not recognize God or Jesus, as their beliefs are based on the idea that humans can be improved through their own efforts and have no need of divine intervention.

Judaism—Judaism is the religion of the Old Testament of the Bible. Jews believe there is only One True God and that they are His chosen people. Jews try to live holy lives by keeping God's laws, specifically the 10 Commandments. They believe Jesus was the son of Mary but do not believe that she was a virgin when she conceived Him. Though they believe in the same One True God as Christians do, Jews recognize Jesus as a well-respected teacher, not the Saviour. They believe that Jesus died on the cross but deny that He was resurrected. Instead, they believe that His followers falsely claimed that He rose again.

Spiritism/Spiritualism—Spiritism was founded in the 19th century by Frenchman Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail under the name Allan Kardec. Kardec participated in séances and observed phenomena that he believed were spirits interacting with the world. Spiritists believe that spirits can and do communicate with living people. They see humans as immortal spirits that temporarily live in physical bodies in order to learn and improve, even after death. These spirits may have good or evil influences as they progress on their journey through reincarnation. Spiritism is popular in Brazil and is part of the Vietnamese religion of Caodaism. Most spiritists believe that Jesus was the best possible example for mankind of how to reach spiritual perfection, but they do not see Him as the Saviour or recognize Him as the Son of God.

Spiritualism, also known as New Age, is similar to spiritism. Spiritualists believe that the source of truth and power lies within one's own self. Spiritualists recognize God as their Creator, but they see Him as a creative force rather than the Father of the universe. Though many believe in Jesus and recognize the Bible as a holy book, they do not believe that Jesus is the Saviour. They believe people can be saved by continually improving themselves.

Bahá'í—In 1863, a Persian named Bahá'u'lláh founded the Bahá'í faith. Bahá'u'lláh believed that all of religious history had been revealed through a series of messengers, including himself, sent by God. The Bahá'í religion recognizes the contributions of past religious leaders—including Muhammad, the Buddha, and Jesus. The Bahá'í believe that people must repay past misdeeds with good works in order to earn eternal deliverance. Bahá'í accepts many Christian principles. However, followers do not believe faith in Jesus is the only way to salvation or that His resurrection was an actual event.

Sikhism—Founded by Guru Nanak in India in the 15th century, Sikhism is the fifth-largest religion in the world. The goal of Sikhs is to have a close and loving relationship with their god, who is usually called Waheguru. They believe that

meditation is the only way to receive salvation. Sikhs also believe they must serve the community with good works as repayment for their sins. Sikhs believe that God does not take on human form, so they do not recognize Jesus as God. Sikhs believe that Jesus was a prophet who attained oneness with Waheguru, but they do not believe that He died for the salvation of humans.

Animism—Animism is the belief that all plants, animals, and objects have powerful spirits that must be worshipped so they will help humans instead of hurting them. It holds that there is no separation between the physical and spiritual world. Animism is often associated with indigenous tribal peoples, such as Native Americans and Australian Aborigines. Its beliefs are incorporated into many organized religions, including Buddhism and Hinduism. Animists often practice witchcraft or follow astrology. Modern animists may call themselves pagans. Since they believe that everything is the spirit of a god, they do not believe in the One True God or recognize Jesus as their Saviour.

Your students' religious beliefs may affect how they receive and understand Jesus' gifts of salvation and grace. Some may have difficulty understanding that He paid the price for their sins when they have always believed that their destiny is determined by karma. Some may struggle with the idea that Jesus is both God and man. Having a greater understanding of their backgrounds and beliefs will help you present Jesus in a way that answers their concerns. As you gain greater understanding of your students, you will be able to help them understand who Jesus is and what He came to do.