

**Our Daily Bread Christian University**  
This course was developed by  
*Christian University &  
Our Daily Bread Ministries.*



### Religious Diversity in America



In his book *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, Harold Netland tells us that in 1998, Harvard professor Diana Eck estimated that the population of the United States included 5.9 million Jews, 5.5 million Muslims, 1.3 million Hindus, 600,000 Buddhists, and sizable groups of Jains, Wiccans, and other faith systems. Muslim mosques, Jewish, Hindu, Jain, Zoroastrian, and Bahai temples, and worship centers for at least 23 other non-Christian groups dot the landscape of every major city in Western Europe and the United States. Some 40 percent of those who immigrate into Western countries come from the East, and this trend will likely continue (pp. 9-10).

As countries around the world open their doors to different ethnic groups, one of first challenges is to treat one another the way we want to be treated. We must learn to respect and care for one another in spite of our profoundly different spiritual and religious convictions.

### SIX PRINCIPLES OF RELATIONSHIP

Our desire to be good neighbors with people of other cultural and religious backgrounds leads us to consider at least six principles of relationship:

#### 1. Be genuine.



#### Be Genuine

First we need to do whatever we can to form genuine friendships with these members of our community. As our neighbors, they are people who will need our hospitality and help, and will probably be delighted to do the same for us as they are able.

By such actions toward neighbors of a different faith, our goal should be to show genuine concern for their welfare. Our friendship must not be contingent upon their acceptance of our own spiritual beliefs. We need to be kind and patient with them just as God has been kind and patient with us.

## 2. Be respectful.



When Jesus said to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39), He wasn’t just referring to neighbors of like faith. Neither did He assume that His people would always be the best example of a good neighbor. At one point, He told the story of a good Samaritan who, as a man of a different culture and faith, showed what it meant to be genuine in neighborly love (Luke 10:27-37).

### Be Respectful

As we learn what it means to love our neighbors, we will also learn to respect them as people of different customs and religions. Even though their beliefs are different from our own, we can invite them to tell us what they believe, and listen respectfully. Although some of their beliefs and practices may seem strange to us, we need to remember that they are rational and significant to them. They undoubtedly find some of our beliefs and practices strange when they first encounter them.

We will find that even though they believe in a god we could never accept, they are much like ourselves. Some know what they believe, while others are religious in name only. Some are firmly committed to their faith and will do all they can to convert others to their beliefs. The majority, however, are interested only in being able to enjoy freedom of life and religion in a land that has written those civil guarantees into its constitution. They deserve as much respect as we do.

### Be Humble

As we show respect for one another, we will learn more than culture and comparative religion. We will also learn humility. It is humbling to discover how little we know about the social customs and beliefs that shape other people’s lives.

The religions of the East are far more complicated than most of us realize.

Like many denominations and sects of the West, religions like Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism are divided into many groups that are significantly different from one another.

Christian scholar Harold Netland says that to really understand non-Christian religions would “require making careful empirical studies of shamanism, animism, and polytheism in local traditions; . . . learning about the endless variety of folk religious practices.” Netland goes on to say that if we are to grasp these

## 3. Be humble.

- Discover how little you know about what shapes their lives.
- **Be a good listener.**

#### 4. Be fair.



religions we have to be “sensitive to the remarkable diversity within particular religions so that, for example, we don’t simply identify Hinduism with the philosophical monism of Advaita Vedanta but acknowledge the numerous theistic, as well as polytheistic and even atheistic, Hindu traditions.” Netland also points out that there is “enormous diversity within Buddhism, ranging from the clearly nontheistic form of Theravada Buddhism to the more theistic forms of Pure Land Buddhism, as well as animistic strands of folk Buddhism” (*Encountering Religious Pluralism*, pp. 325-326).

If nothing else, seeing how little we know about Eastern religions will encourage us to be good listeners and keep us from attempting to put our “knowledge” on display.

#### **Be Fair**

Because we live in a free society, we may be tempted to call attention to the religious intolerance that marks some of our neighbors’ ancestral homelands.

To make such a case, however, is both unwise and unfair. Judeo-Christian history has also been marred by intolerance. Consider the Crusades of Christendom and the Salem witch trials. And remember the Old Testament story of Joshua, who was told by God to go into the Promised Land and kill not only resisting soldiers but also men, women, and children.

Jesus taught His followers to focus first on their own failures before being critical of others (Matthew 7:1-5). This doesn’t mean we should close our eyes to the facts of religious history. It just means we need to be fair. If we call attention to the intolerance of another religion, we must look just as carefully at our own history.

In giving consideration to our own faith, we believe the historical record must be kept in context. We believe that God had His purposes in requiring such extreme punishments during the days of Moses and Joshua.

Just as we believe we have explanations for such intolerance and God-ordained punishment, we need to realize that the people of other religions will also believe there is a way of explaining their own religious history.

#### **Be Discerning**

While we need to be fair, we must also be discerning. We can

## 5. Be discerning.

- Acknowledge common ground.
- **But don't overlook the differences.**

acknowledge common ground among religions, but we must not overlook the differences between us. There are differences—and they do matter. We need to think carefully about the popular idea that the only test of a religion's validity is whether or not it helps you. This view is expressed by some modern spiritual movements that do not recognize the existence of a personal God or believe that He has revealed Himself through sacred Scripture.

This kind of tolerance, however, is broader than any one group. Growing numbers of people who think of themselves as Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Bahaist, and Muslim are talking about the need to be open-minded toward other religions. In many cases, they are not merely talking about the need to respect the rights of people to believe differently. Many have concluded that all religions are pointing to the same Ultimate Reality. They believe that God is too great and kind to reject any person just because he was born into the wrong religion.

The Dalai Lama represents this view: “Everyone feels that his or her form of religious practice is the best. I myself feel that Buddhism is best for me. But this does not mean that Buddhism is best for everyone else” (*Encountering Religious Pluralism*, pp. 216-217).

We spend our lives trying to discern whether advertisers, newscasters, or family members are telling us the truth. In matters of religion as well, we need to ask, “What is the truth?”

### **Be Discreet**

Although honest discussion will uncover serious differences in our beliefs, we must deal with these differences with humility, courtesy, and discretion. These principles of character will not help us avoid disagreements. But they will help us avoid doing unnecessary harm to one another in the process.

The Bible encourages Christians to avoid being unnecessarily argumentative (2 Timothy 2:24-26). Angry characterizations push people apart. That's one reason the New Testament calls on followers of Christ to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). According to the Bible, such a gentle but persuasive attitude reflects the Spirit of God, who influences but never coerces. Winsomeness is an important factor for those who want to share mutual respect with neighbors who have other religious faiths.

## 6. Be discreet.

- **Deal with your differences with humility, courtesy, and discretion.**

The same humility, courtesy, and discretion is especially important when someone asks us what we believe about the eternal destiny of people who die in a faith other than our own. For instance, followers of Christ believe Him when He says, “No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). Such a quote is consistent with the New Testament claim that no one but Jesus has died as an atoning sacrifice for our sins and risen from the dead to prove it. But even with such convictions, we must be careful not to condemn others.

Even Jesus said, “God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him” (John 3:17). Judgment will happen. But it will be God’s prerogative, not ours.

Of God’s right to judge, Daniel Clendenin wrote: “Christians can be absolutely confident about the character of God when we deal with the problem of religions. While denying that all religions are equally valid or that all people will be saved, we remain utterly confident that God will treat every person with perfect love and justice. . . . For the Christian, it is unthinkable that God will treat any person of any time, place, or religion unfairly” (*Encountering Religious Pluralism*, p. 315).

In conclusion, to live peacefully with neighbors of differing religious convictions, we need to commit ourselves to be genuine, respectful, humble, fair, discerning, and discreet. This will help us create an atmosphere of respect for people as they interact with the Spirit of God who is calling all people to Himself.

This is the attitude we need even if our neighbors have chosen to reject religion for a more secular and scientific approach.