

THE PATH

The tool offers an opportunity to dive into real stories of people coming from different countries and explore their experiences, perceptions and values connected to their religious beliefs. During the game, players get characters/roles and a set of personal stories that belong to these characters, answer questions based on these stories and then try to guess which characters/ roles other players have.

Issues addressed:

- Inter-religious dialogue, diversity
- Stereotypes and prejudices
- Inclusion

Objectives

- to give participants an opportunity to learn more about other people's beliefs through getting acquainted with their personal experiences and perceptions of religion
- to promote empathy and understanding towards people who hold diverse religious beliefs
- to challenge prejudices and stereotypes based on religious affiliation and beliefs
- to evoke interest among participants towards learning about other religions/other perspectives on religion

Group Size: 5 - 10 people.

The game can be played individually (5 participants and 5 roles) or in pairs (10 participants and 5 roles). Alternatively, it can be played with large groups if they are divided into smaller groups.

Time: 1.5 hours (excluding debriefing and discussion).

Materials:

1. Printed attachments with stories and questions divided into four categories: My Background, My Beliefs, Me and My Beliefs, My Beliefs and Others.
2. Pieces of paper and pens that participants can use to take notes.

Preparation:

- Select the stories/roles that you would like to use with your participants. It is best to select 5 stories, and divide participants in pairs if you have a larger group.
- Print out attachments on colorful paper. Each story should preferably have its own color, so that it is easier for a facilitator to distribute cards during the game. For the same reason, each category of questions can be printed on a piece of paper of a different color.
- Cut the cards out, arrange them on the table depending on their color and put questions and roles separately. Make sure to put the cards with the text facing the table so that participants cannot see it.
- Think of which roles you will assign to your participants. You might want to think which role would help a particular player to get the most out of the game. For example, you might want to assign the stories in the way, that players get a story of a character who holds beliefs that are completely different from theirs.

Activity Description:

The tool is built on the idea that putting ourselves in somebody else's shoes helps to challenge our prejudices and stereotypes and build true understanding and empathy for others. The tool helps to get to know people with various values and beliefs who it might be difficult to meet and talk to otherwise in everyday life, which makes it suitable for playing with groups which lack diversity of perspectives on religion. The game focuses on people's perceptions on religions rather than what "the true way of a certain religion is" with the goal to acknowledge that we might perceive, interpret and understand the same religions differently.

The game has 7 stories of the following characters and their beliefs:

- Amin from Sweden, Muslim
- Simret from Malaysia, Sikh
- Damon from USA, Christian Protestant
- Salma from Egypt, Muslim
- Karl from Slovakia, Zen Buddhist
- Valentina from Belarus, Christian Orthodox
- Penelope from France, atheist

Both questions and stories are divided into four parts. This way players get to discover stories of their players gradually.

The category *My Background* gives some background of characters / roles to make it easier for players to identify with a certain character.

The category *My Beliefs* is devoted to personal perceptions of characters of their religions and beliefs, it reveals what they consider to be core values and principles of their beliefs.

The category *My Beliefs and Me* tells the story of why characters hold their beliefs, how they practise their beliefs and how their beliefs affect their everyday life.

The category *My Beliefs and Others* describes situations misunderstanding that the characters might have experienced based on their beliefs.

Instructions:

Part I.

Time: approximately 1 hour

1. Let the participants know that

“ The game is based on stories of real people who live in different countries of the world and shared their personal experiences of religion with the tool creators. Each player / pair will be assigned a certain character and will be given the first part of your story and asked to pick one question in that category. Then you will be given time to read the story and prepare an answer to the question. After that you will receive the second part of your stories and questions to answer. This will be repeated four times. At the end of the game you will try to guess which roles and beliefs every player had, so please make sure to take notes and listen carefully while others are sharing.”

2. Give each player the first part of the stories (*My Background*) and ask each player / pair to pick a question from the same category to answer.

3. Give the participants the following instructions:

- In this game you are going to play the role of a person whose story you hold and answer the questions you get from the point of view of this person. When answering the questions, try using “I” pronouns instead of “he/she” so that you can really try to put on other person’s shoes.
- When answering the questions, try to avoid using words which will make it too easy for other players to guess which religious beliefs you have. For instance, instead of saying a “Mosque, Church or Gurdwara”, you can say a “place of worship”.
- Try to base all your answers on the stories that you get. If there is no answer to the question, you can ask to get another question.

4. Give participants a few minutes to get acquainted with their stories and prepare an answer to their question.

5. Let them go in a circle and share their answers. You can ask additional questions if you find it necessary.

6. Continue the same process with parts 2, 3 and 4 of the stories and questions. There are two questions in the game for parts 2 and 3. You might ask participants to pick only one questions in these categories if you are short in time.

Part II

Time: approximately 30 minutes

1. At the end of the game, ask participants the following questions:

What kind of beliefs do you think each player / a pair of players holds and why?

Tip: It might be really hard for participants to guess which beliefs a person holds, and they might feel stressed about that their knowledge of religion is being tested. In this case you can just ask participants the following or similar question:

What in each story was surprising/interesting/ strange for you?

2. After everybody made their guesses, ask players to go one by one and reveal their stories. Ask them to provide a short background of the person (name, gender, country, their beliefs) and ask them to give answers to the following question.

What part of your story was the most memorable/ surprising/ interesting for you?

Debriefing

General questions:

- Did you manage to identify with your role? How did it feel to have your role? Was it hard to answer the questions from another person's perspective? Why/why not?
- Was it hard to understand what religions other players had? What did you base your conclusions on? Do you feel that you have enough information to understand which beliefs/religion each player has? Why/why not?
- Were there any similarities/patterns in players' stories that you have noticed? (If yes, which ones?) What does it tell you?
- What have you learned during this game about other people's belief that you did not know before? Was there anything that surprised you about other people's stories and beliefs?
- Which religions would you like to get to know more about? If you could choose to ask any person about their experience of religion, what person would that be?
- What have you learned during the game that can be used in real life? Have you learned anything about yourself, if yes, what?
- What do you think is important for having a successful inter-religious dialogue?

Stereotypes & Prejudices

- During the game we discovered personal stories and then religious labels. Does it usually work in the same way in everyday life? What role do labels & personal stories play in our interaction with people who are different from us?
- Which stereotypes that you held previously were challenged as a result of the game?
- What do you think is important for reducing stereotypes and prejudices that we hold?

Inclusion & human rights

- Some of the characters shared their stories of not feeling accepted on the basis of their beliefs. Have you ever experienced a similar situation? Would you like to share it with the rest of the group?
- Which groups in your community might feel excluded or discriminated on the basis of their beliefs?
- Do you think it is important that everybody in the society can express and practise their beliefs freely? Why? Why not? Should there be any limits to this right? Is yes, which ones?
- What can we do to make sure that people who hold beliefs that are different from ours feel included and respected by us?

Discussion angels:

- Similarities and differences between various religions.
- Stereotypes & prejudices.
- Why people believe - more on this topic in the part 3(*Me and my beliefs*) of the stories.
- Discrimination & inclusion & human rights- more on this topic in the part 4 (*My beliefs and other people*) of the stories.
- Inter - religious dialogue.

Tips for facilitators.

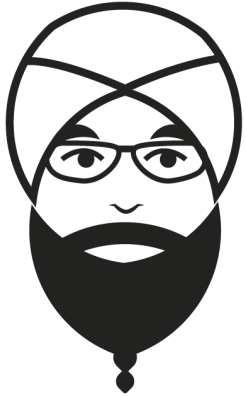
1. When playing the game we noticed that participants might feel frustrated that they do not have enough knowledge to guess the roles and religious beliefs of the characters correctly. In this case facilitators tried to emphasize that the game is not about winning or testing the knowledge, but learning about perspectives of other people.
2. If you are short in time, you can ask participants to pick only one question in the categories 2 and 3 (My Beliefs and Me and My Beliefs) instead of two, or even exclude one of the categories.

Suggestions for follow-up

1. The tool works well in evoking participants interest towards other religions and beliefs. So, it can be followed by an activity that helps to learn more about different religions.
2. After the activity, facilitators can encourage a group to share their own beliefs and experiences with religion and ask each other questions. In the past, it proved to be a great learning opportunity for the group.

1. My background

Simret



I live in Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur. I was born and raised here all my life. I come from a middle-income family, and we live in an ordinary mid cost suburb. I am currently 30 years of age and I have two younger brothers. With my family being a mid to low income family, going to college was financially tough. So, I worked hard and excelled in my studies to get a scholarship to study in a university in the USA. After finishing my studies, I returned to Malaysia and now I work as a Petroleum Geologist. Besides Geology I love playing football and researching on property investments. I also enjoy stand-up comedy and exploring other nations and cultures. My dream for the future is to open up a clinic or an orphanage to serve those that are in need and help to make a difference.

2. My beliefs

Simret

My religion is Sikhism. We believe in one God and this God is truth. The meaning of the word "Sikh" is to learn, and I believe that all Sikhs are students of life, learning through experiences and sharing the knowledge with everyone. Once a Sikh takes Amrit (gets baptized), there are rules to follow which includes no consuming of any intoxication, no altering any part of body including no cutting hair or making tattoos, we have a set of prayers to perform daily, and a set of articles of faith to wear with us to remind us of always living a truthful life (wooden comb, iron bracelet, a small knife and undergarments with a tie knot).

The pillars of my religion are to serve and do good deeds, pray and remember God, and share. Most importantly, a Sikh is to serve and to stand up for the oppressed and what is right. We believe in serving unconditionally. Every Sikh place of worship in the world is open for anyone and there will always be free vegetarian food served for everyone all day. We believe in equality in gender, race, religion. Our names are also meant to eradicate inequality: all Sikh boys have "Singh" as our last name which means "king" and all Sikh girls have "Kaur" as their last name which means "queen/princess".

We do not believe in converting anyone from a different religion. We believe a Muslim should be a good Muslim, a Hindu a good Hindu, a Christian a good Christian etc.

We believe that this body is not ours and our souls are using this body temporarily during this lifetime. With that in mind, we are to respect the body and do not alter any part of the body including not cutting hair and not piercing or harming any part of the body. Being intoxicated not being in full consciousness is also against Sikhism. Alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, are all intoxicating the body and it is harmful to us and the people around us.

3. Me and my beliefs

Simret

I was born into the Sikh faith since my parents were Sikh. As a kid I was always taken to the Sikh place of worship called a Gurdwara, which was not only a place of prayer but also a place to meet with other Sikh friends. When I was 12 years of age, my family travelled to India, it was a pilgrimage to the place where the religion was institutionalized. I decided then to get Baptized.

After getting baptized, I began to bring religious wisdoms in my life. With all this said, I was also an ordinary naughty teenage boy who had his first fight at 14, had a girlfriend at 15, had my first car accident at 18, and my first break up at 21. I lived like a normal boy and religion was a part of my daily life. I prayed in the mornings, I prayed before exams, I prayed to thank God for when I get good grades. I did not cut my hair and wore a turban. At some point however, I did think of cutting my hair and giving in to peer pressure I was going through just because I didn't look like everyone else.

As I grew the idea of religion has changed for me and it meant more than just prayer and keeping my hair uncut. Today my religion is more about helping the needy, serving others, teaching and sharing experiences, volunteering and being an activist.

4. My beliefs and Other People

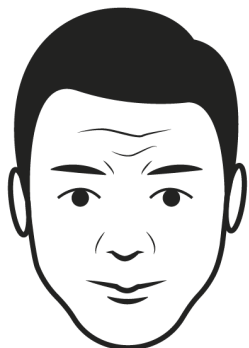
Simret

My religious beliefs have never been questioned but are very often disrespected. The idea people have about Sikhs are men with turbans and beards and they associate that with being too traditional or terrorist. The true fundamental spiritual wisdom of Sikhism is not understood, but everyone sees the outer look and begins judging the religion based on this image. I am usually very often stopped during immigration checks during my travels in the airports just because I wear a turban. Sometimes people around me stare and look at me because I look different and have a turban on.

I feel however totally accepted around people who know me and love me for who I am. Once they know that I am an ordinary person just like them, the turban does not make them feel like I am any different.

1. My background

Amin



I am 51 years old. I was born in Morocco. I studied in Austria where I met a beautiful Swedish girl and fell in love with her. We decided to move to Sweden and got children. Now I have lived in Stockholm for more than 25 years, but I still miss Austria. I worked with many different things, but I always dreamt of supporting others. Today I work for a non-profit organization in Sweden, and I am a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy professional. I work with families and youngsters who need support in society. I also work with people who experience violence in their families, especially when children are involved. I help them to build more peaceful relations. I feel my passion is to be helping others to have peace at their homes and in the whole world.

2. My beliefs

Amin

Let's take an iPhone, there were different kinds of iPhones, and they all have been the same but have a bit different functions. Similarly, for me Islam and other religions are different versions of the same thing. Religions borrow things from each other but at the end of the day it is an evolution of the same thing. For me Islam is younger and newer than some other religions, since it is only 1400 years and it is a copy of other religions but with some differences. Islam is a good religion if you ask me, but what fits me, might not fit you. In Islam people believe that God is one, and in other prophets, including Jesus. As a Muslim, I believe that we will be in a new life after death, there is a meaning that we are here, and we will see each other at some point. As Muslims, we do prayers five times a day; the correct times are 5 am, 12 pm, 3 pm, 7 pm and 9 pm. There is also Ramadan which is a month that lasts 4 weeks and happens once a year, during which Muslim people refrain from eating when the sun is up. What is also important in Islam is that a part of your money should go to the poor. For me, Islam means peace, and what we see very often on TV is war. I, as a Muslim, do not think people in ISIS are Muslims that goes against my beliefs, because in Islam nobody can force others to do things and everybody chooses for themselves. What is more, acceptance is a big part of the religion, in my opinion. As humans, we feel pain and get scared when things go wrong in our lives because we all like to have it always good. As a Muslim I believe that I can have tough times and I can deal with it, praying and fasting helps me keep calm and accept both good and bad moments of my life.

3. Me and my beliefs

Amin

I am born Muslim, my father taught me about religion, but I avoided thinking about it because I had everything as a child. But when I came to Vienna and I was all by myself, I needed something as support and Islam came back to me. For me, religion is not only about going to a mosque, it is about the way of being. My beliefs keep me going, they give me the meaning in why I exist and guide me. I choose to believe because it makes me feel good. My religion affects my everyday behavior and how I treat other people. It is important for me to respect, help other people and try to make them feel happier. I pray 5 times every day but not on the right time. I pray because my spirit needs some enrichment, the prayer helps me feel grateful for my life. Sometimes, I can skip praying because of a work meeting since in my opinion, religion is about flexibility and making my life easier, not harder. I also fast during Ramadan. And it is hard to do it in Stockholm because there are long days here in the north. Fasting is about letting my body rest and calm down, it helps me feel grateful and empathy towards other people who do not have simple things in life. What is more, I do not eat pork and do not drink alcohol.

4. My beliefs and Other People

Amin

When I was younger I had some people tell me that if I don't drink I cannot have fun. I felt a bit unpleasant because I did not feel like I was a part of the group and I felt excluded. Of course, when people accept me as I am, I feel more like a part of them. And of course, I have had my stories. For instance, once, long time ago, when I was young and when I waited for my girlfriend who was working at a restaurant in Austria, the owner of the restaurant asked me what my name was. When he learned my name, he told me to get out. I was not feeling so good and could not understand why he would do that. There is a text in Koran that says that there is no difference between me and you, only behavior makes difference between us. If somebody treats me bad, I feel sorry for them. If you judge me, I will accept it, I know what is good for me and I will still respect you.

1. My background

Damon



My name is Damon, I was born in 1951. I was born and lived all my life in the United States. To be honest, I never really found out what I want to be doing with my life, and I just took those jobs that I was offered. I worked as an auto mechanic, I sold vacuum cleaners, also repaired TVs, and worked in a gas station, iron factory and a corn plant.

Nowadays I am retired, and I live with my wife in a nice house in the countryside. I have two sons, four grandchildren and one great grandchild. Since I am retired, I really enjoy my free time and trying to spend as much time as possible with the family, my kids and grandkids. I also enjoy garden work and have a lot of different tools for house and garden.

2. My beliefs

Damon

My religion is Christian Protestant. For me, one of the most important parts of my religion is personal one-to-one connection with God. I believe that I cannot hold anything back from God and that he knows everything. I try to always love God first, with all my heart and then love myself and others.

In addition, what matters to me the most in my religion is knowing how to treat other people. God created all of us and wants us to love each other, and the Bible teaches that the main principle of treating others is how you want to be treated yourself. The main value of Christianity is our own happiness. And the way to be happy is through loving others and treating them in a respectful way.

Another thing that is very important to me is choosing my way myself through reading the Bible and understanding it myself rather than relying on others to interpret it. I believe that just because a person is my pastor, it does not mean that they know how the world is made. I realized that pastors understand religion differently and the truth is only in the Bible.

As a Christian, I believe that we all have a physical and a spiritual body. When our physical body dies, we come to the judgment before God in our spiritual body. I believe that we also have a natural spirit and a holy spirit in every one of us. The natural spirit lets us do horrific things that we do. And there is a holy spirit that puts us on the right track. I also believe that the spirit that we feed is going to live and be stronger. And the way to feed our spirits is by how we treat other people.

I also believe that it is impossible to make other people believe. I can only tell them about my beliefs, but it is up to them to believe or not.

3. Me and my beliefs

Damon

As a child I went to Methodist church with my family and I was a part of a religious group in high school. But I did not have much focus on being religious.

When I was 50 years old, I had a time when I was about to lose hope and had no control of my life. I remember getting on my knees and asking God for help. This was a moment when I recognized God's presence. After that, I was not afraid of death anymore. I still had problems, but I had an understanding that I will be there with God after death, and it brought me the feeling of calmness and security.

My religion gives me love for people that I don't know. That love gives me meaning in my life and happiness. Even though people do bad things, religion gives me love towards all of them.

I used to teach a Sunday school class for kids in church for 15 years and went to church every Sunday. But then I realized that the truth is only in the Bible and I stopped going to church. So, instead I meet with a group of men every Saturday and we read the Bible. I believe I am not going to be completely right in how I understand the Bible. But I also believe that the more I read, the closer I am to understanding it right.

4. My beliefs and Other People

Damon

My wife's brother, when we meet him, he can push the buttons and make me upset. He likes to knock my beliefs down. He kind of makes fun of my beliefs by attacking them.

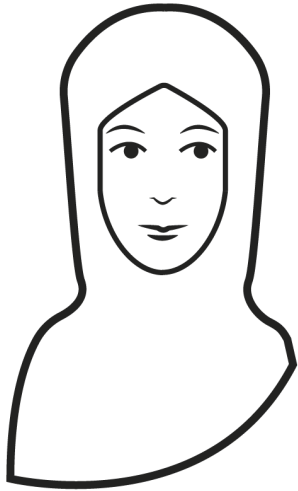
I don't get ashamed of my beliefs because I think that it is only because he does not understand me. I do not understand where he is coming from as well. This is because I do not know all the things that took place in their life.

And of course, it helps to understand how other people think and why they think so. It is important to love others. It is important to understand that other people's actions are determined by how they were brought up.

I feel very accepted to be a Christian. There are people who hate Christians, and I think this is because they just don't understand what Christianity is about. And I try to help other people to understand more about my religion.

1.My background

Salma



I am a 23-year-old Egyptian. I live in Cairo, the capital of Egypt. I lived in Egypt all my life except for 4 years when I lived in Saudi Arabia when I was 12 years old. I studied business administration. After I graduated, I took two years to work and travel and do different things as much as possible. Now I am project coordinator in a social enterprise that I started with three other people in 2014. I am interested in so many things; I have unending thirst to know more about the world, people and myself. I am interested in blowing my mind with my readings and travels. I am also passionate about the environment, international economics and coffee. My dream is to travel the world, draw more beautifully, go totally organic and help in making the world a little bit better.

2.My beliefs

Salma

I would like to state that religions are a very subjective matter, it relies on texts and books and not math or objective science. Religions are also a socio-system based to make human lives better. There are no science or experimental labs to debate the results.

I am one of millions who believe in Islam. What I say or what I believe is highly my individualistic experience with this socio-system and personal research and spirituality. Generally, Islam is a religion that teaches that there is one God and that Muhammed. Jesus, Ibrahim, Noah are all God's messengers.

Our holy book is Quran and it has the socio-system of how we should be actively better people in a community for the sake of God. We believe in heaven, hell and judgement day. The main core of being a Muslim is faith and I say the main core of any belief is faith.

Religion for me is two things: 1. Spirituality, the unspoken things that hit you and change you and settle things inside of you. The silent experience you have with God and meaning of believing in him. 2. Practical life, the practical practices of a religion. Faith in Islam has to be supported with 4 main things. 1- Praying (5 times a day.) 2-El-Zakah (Which means giving to the poor of your community. If you earn 10,000\$, you should give away at least 250\$, 2.5%) 3- Fasting the Ramadan Month (One of my favorite things in Islam). 4-Pilgrimage (Only if you have the money and the health). And of course, on the top of all that is faith that God is one and that Mohammed is his messenger.

As for the values, Islamic values that I support the most are that I am not in a place to judge anyone. I support modesty, hard work, generosity, Parents respect, sharing and honesty.

3.Me and my beliefs

Salma

I was born in a Muslim family. My family are considered moderate, they are religious and urban. I was raised to pray, fast, not to lie, respect the elders, forgive and to study, work, travel and be open and accepting of different people.

In the age of 14, I was in Saudi Arabia that time, I had the chance to be very spiritual. I used to never skip a prayer, and I was full of love, I prayed for people who suffer all over the world, I wanted to be kind to everyone, to be friends with people who has no friends and to be part of the solution not part of the problem. This high spirituality that I experienced at that young age never happened to me again.

Later on, at the age of 17, when I picked a book written by Plato, I asked myself a question "Why am I a Muslim?" I can say that I have always been somewhere in between of being extremely religious and liberal. And of course, I had my swings, rebellions and my fights, when I had to destroy my ancient believes to build new understandings and evolved faith.

As a Muslim, I cover my skin and hair, I am virgin, I do not drink alcohol or do drugs. I do not cause harm to a person, an animal or the environment around me.

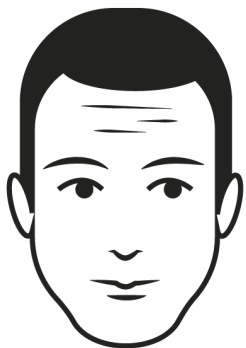
4.My beliefs and Other People

Salma

I live in Islamic society, I am accepted by everyone because we all share the same language, culture and most times religion. During my trips and interactions with people abroad I have only been shown kindness and love. However, I always feel people are cautious of my presence when I am participating in international programs/group activities. Since I wear a veil, that automatically builds some sort of barrier between me and everyone else. People who never interacted with Muslims before, especially Muslim girls who wear the veil, they usually have no idea how to talk to me. The first time I traveled, and I was surrounded with people from different nationalities and no Muslims at all. I had problems to really mingle because I didn't know how to talk to them as much as they didn't know how to talk to me. I felt everyone always had certain and defined expectations from the Muslim girl and I felt I should fulfill them. But later on, I learned that people have expectations and they have certain definitions for people who come from a certain country or religion is just because they haven't seen any examples to tell them otherwise.

1.My background

Karl



I was born in former Czechoslovakia. I was raised with love and care. At home, I felt very safe, but being a teenager in country under communist regime was not always easy. We were not free, we couldn't travel, we couldn't follow free media. We had to obey communist ideology, think and behave in the "right" way. I am 50 now. Czechoslovakia doesn't exist anymore, and I live an ordinary life in Slovakia, small central European country. I studied engineering and philosophy, I published two novels, worked as a journalist and now I am a coach and a trainer – I help students, teachers and company employees to develop their social skills. I am a happy father of two amazing young people and I don't have big ambitions – just to live simply, be a good friend for people around me, enjoy my days and perhaps be a wise helper for others.

2.My beliefs

Karl

Zen is a specific tradition of Buddhism originated in India. Zen is very practical – it doesn't deal much with ideas, concepts, philosophy – it is an invitation to freedom in everyday life.

Zen doesn't like long discussions about life and after-life, about God or any Creator. Zen is not like any other religion and in Zen tradition followers don't worship any God. We cannot intellectually understand Zen, we can live it. Zen is not a moral teaching, it does not require one to believe in anything – it points to our born nature, which is perfect. We are free and complete, we are Buddha already and we are connected with all other people and all beings. Only our busy mind and distracted thinking make barriers and says that we are separate. But we are not in reality.

Zen does not seek to answer deep or religious questions because these are not important issues for Zen. What really matters is our open presence in here and now: not God, not good or bad, only our sincere engagement in life is important. Zen, as I understand it, is a way to be fully connected with life. Every step, every act may be sacred, if it is performed wholeheartedly and without fear and calculations. Nirvana is now, right here.

3.Me and my beliefs

Karl

At the age of 17 I was lucky to find a book about Buddha – it was written by a forbidden author. And that book and story was just like a rescue and salvation for me! – it brought a great hope and many answers for a young man longing for freedom, human dignity a true meaning of life. Since then, I have been a sincere student of Buddha. I was not a devoted Buddhist then, but I found the most important "guidance" for my life.

As a child I was baptized and my grandmother used to take me to church. But my personality didn't allow me to become a devoted Christian. In my twenties (after the break of Communism and opening the doors to the world) I started to study and experience more intensively different traditions and schools of Buddhism. I met and visited different teachers, groups or practice centers and slowly I was deepening my understanding the Buddhist Way of life. For 2 decades, Buddhism was mainly intellectual interest for me, but when I was 40, I experienced much deeper understanding of Buddha teaching and wisdom. I started with meditation practices which influence my whole life, behavior, values, attitudes, my work, relationships...

Two years ago I became a student of the Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and I am formally tied with his Vietnamese Zen Buddhism tradition. I visited his monastery and I am devoted – here in my small town - to daily practices which are common for or monastic or lay members of this community.

4.My beliefs and Other People

Karl

I am lucky to live in Europe now, where I feel, my religion or belief is not questioned. Although I live in quite conservative environment with dominant Roman Catholic population, I can freely express my views. Usually people in my community don't understand and don't want to understand my Zen Buddhism way, but it doesn't affect me. There are few more people in Slovakia, who are formally connected with Zen Buddhism, we meet sometimes, but our small Zen community is quite insignificant. This community doesn't deal with adversity, only with light prejudices. But I am happy, I can freely devote to Zen practices and I know it is refining my life, my relationships and work. I have no doubts about Zen insights into the nature of Man and Life – and though it doesn't resemble other religions, Zen is a matter of life and death for me.

Valentina



I was born and live in Belarus, where most of my family lives. I come from a middle-income family. I have a daughter and an elder brother. I studied at the Minsk Institute for Foreign Languages. After graduation I worked as a teacher in different places in Belarus. I have already retired, but I work as a private tutor when my friends ask me to help their children with their studies. I am happy to have a daughter who often supports me in my life and helps me when I need something. Though we have different interests, but in the whole, we still understand each other. I am fond of gardening and traveling. I hope that my health and financial opportunities will make it possible to stay active and see new places in Belarus and other countries.

Valentina

My religion is Orthodox Christianity. We believe in God, to be precise - the Holy Trinity of Father (God), Son (Jesus) and Holy Spirit. God is the creator of heaven and Earth. Jesus Christ was born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. For the sins of people, Jesus was crucified on the cross. After that he was buried, but on the third day he rose again and went up to heaven to God, his father. According to our belief, the soul of those who die is separated from the body and then falls into the Divine Court, where it is decided if it will go to heaven, or go to hell, if the person whom the soul belonged to sinned and broke the commandments of God. The essence of these commandments Jesus Christ laid out like this: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind" This is the first commandment. The second one is "Love your neighbor as yourself".

Orthodox Christians attend churches for prayers. Frequency varies depending on the extent of religiosity of a person. There is a special set of prayers called "Morning Prayer Rule" and "Evening Prayer Rule". Prayers should be done every day. And it is important to go to church because it is in church that our prayers unite with prayers of other people and become stronger. Orthodox believers follow several fasting periods throughout the year. Fasting is not only about not eating certain food, it is also about not committing sins, not judging other people, not doing harm to others.

In my opinion, fasting is important because it is a way to live without some things that we are used to and show solidarity to Jesus who gave his life for the mankind. The Great Fast is connected to Jesus dying so it is a way to commemorate and remember him.

While visiting a church, a temple or a monastery, it is not recommended to have makeup, especially it is forbidden to have a lipstick. Women should come with a covered head (usually a scarf or shawl), while men - without any hat. Women should wear long skirts, if they do not have some, they can usually borrow one at the entrance. This is important because people should be themselves and look natural in front of God and not disturb other people.

A newborn child should be baptized as soon as possible, in order to get under the protection of angels.

Valentina

At the time I was born, religion was banned. Churches were mostly closed and usually used for as storage facilities. Children were often baptized secretly. Being religious could harm reputation or career.

My mom was an Orthodox Christian and I was baptized after birth. So I first encountered religion long time ago, but for me it was rather a tradition than a choice. A conscious return to religion was already through very difficult moments in my life and needed protection and help. So, religion has given me protection, help and hope. And it also gives me love towards others.

But to be very honest, there are still many things in my religion that I do not understand since I was brought up without religion. I wish I could ask about them somebody who is older, but there is nobody is alive.

I know that I do not follow everything that is required in my religion, sometimes because I just don't know how. I read every day morning and evening prayers. I believe that when I address God with my prayers, he helps me with what I ask for. Prayers also help to protect me and my family from bad things and evil people. They also help me to feel grateful for what I have.

I also attend church though I should do it more. I always wear a skirt and a scarf for church, but I tie it the way it looks better on me and I do not to hide my hair (though it is preferable).

I fast just partially and during fasts I try to keep my thoughts especially clean and confess my sins.

Valentina

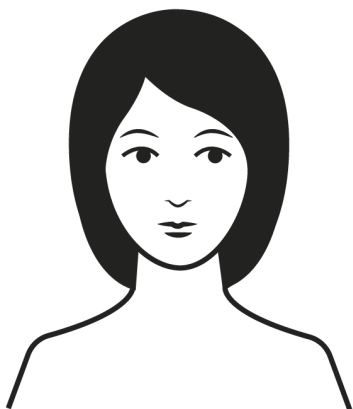
In the past it was not approved by the society to be religious. Now Orthodox Christianity is approved and even encouraged and supported in Belarus. There are also no problems between different denominations of Christianity in my country.

My religion doesn't affect at all my relations with friends. Yet it is very unpleasant and painful for me that my daughter and ex-husband do not share my religion, even though they both were baptized. In Orthodox Christianity, it is considered a sin if you are baptized and leave your religion. So, technically they are considered sinners and I am very worried that they would have to take responsibility for their disbelief in their life and after death, like facing bad things happening to them during life or, you know, even going to hell. And I, as a mother, am frightened that it can happen to my daughter.

In general, my daughter and my ex-husband do not interfere with my faith. But I do not feel real respect and understanding of my faith from them. And it really hurts me.

1. My Background

Penelope



I am 21 years old, I am a student in international business and languages. I am still looking for what I want to do later as a job but I do know that I want to travel and discover the world and meet lots of people. I was born in a classic family with two siblings, my parents are atheists too and divorced when I was a teenager. I feel concerned about ecology and gender equality. I love to do sport, play piano, draw, paint, learn new things. The things I remember the most is how I felt with people, my travels too. I would describe myself as a dreamer and ideologist.

2. My beliefs

Penelope

I do not believe that God exists. I am an atheist and I do not believe in anything except for what I can see.

I also think that nothing happens after death, and that is why I try to live my life to the fullest while I can and live it the way that I will have no regrets. If there was afterlife, I would prefer to go to a big village next to the sea with nice weather and a lot of flowers where I could live with all the people that I love.

I might be a sinner according to religious texts at least because I am not married and seeing guys. So, if religious rules are right, then I will go to hell. But I don't think I will. If I do not have regrets and did not commit bad things, and followed the principles that my family gave me, I should be able to go to heaven even if I did not believe. I think I am as good as my neighbour who decided to pray.

Some of these principles are being kind to everyone I meet, not blaming others, not having too many expectations from life and from others, being open-minded, seeing positive things even in bad things that happen in my life, being honest and true to myself and trying to enjoy my life as much as I can.

Although I am not religious I have my beliefs. For example, I strongly believe in equal rights for all people regardless of their gender, colour of skin, sexual orientation and religion. I think we are all equal and deserve to have equal opportunities. I was lucky to be born in the right family and place and I feel bad that other people do not have the same opportunities as I do just because they happened to be born in a different country, for example.

I also believe in love and cooperation. I think we need to love each other, respect each other, be open-minded and tolerant and work together to improve things in our society.

3. Me and my beliefs

Penelope

I first got in contact with religion when I and my mom visited churches to see their architecture. As a child, I also remember putting candles in a church for my guinea pig who died. Now sometimes I put candles in a church for my grandmother for her luck because she is a believer and it is a way to show that I think of her.

My parents are not believers. I think I am not a believer because I had no religious education and no reason to believe. As a kid, I knew that people believed in God, but nobody told me that there is God. Also, because in school I always got scientific explanations for all of my questions, and when I grew up and thought about religion, believing in something that could not be explained by science was hard for me.

However, I do celebrate some of the religious holidays with my family. For example, we celebrate Christmas, which is more about my family and presents for me, and Easter is all about chocolate.

Some of the ways that I practise my own beliefs is for example, by being a vegetarian, because I am against hurting animals. And also, by fighting to promote equality between people. Right now, I focus on promoting gender equality because I can relate to it more as a woman.

Overall, in my life I try to analyze how I am living and try to see if it respects my values and if not, I try to change the way I live.

And of course, I do feel scared about the unknown.

But I remember every time I was depressed my mom told me that I am on Earth because she wanted me to be. Life is a gift, I think I do not want to waste too much time worrying about these scary questions. I try to live my life to the fullest and enjoy every minute of it.

4. My beliefs and Other People

Penelope

Since I am surrounded by like-minded people like me, I do not have much issues with other people not accepting my way of thinking. Every time I go out of my close surroundings, people are very tolerant about my beliefs. In the past I met people who told me that there is a God and tried to persuade me. And when I showed them that I respect their beliefs and they realized that there is no way that I can see things the same way that they do, they stopped trying, and we kept our respecting relations. I even had debates with religious people, but it was always with respect and there was no anger or insults. Also, though I am not religious, I do not think that religious people are wrong. I respect them and their beliefs.

Questions. Part 1. My background

What makes you happy in life?	What are your interests?	What are your future plans?	What is your life like?
What are your passions?	What are your hobbies?	What are the most important events that happened in your life?	How would you describe yourself?

Questions. Part 2. My beliefs.

<p>What do you believe is the best lesson that your religion teaches/ what is the core of your beliefs?</p>	<p>What are the values that your religion has (you have) that are most important to you?</p>	<p>What would you like other people in the world to know about your religion/ your position regarding religion?</p>	<p>What are the centre-pillars of your religion/ your main values that guide you in life?</p>
<p>What is your religion about? / What do you believe in?</p>	<p>What is special about your religion/your personal beliefs?</p>	<p>What are the most important rules of your religion? / What are the most important things that you use as guidelines in your life?</p>	<p>According to your religion/beliefs, what should people's behaviour be like in everyday life?</p>
<p>What does your religion say/ what do you think about God(s)?</p>	<p>What do you think will happen after death?</p>	<p>Does your religious culture/ your beliefs suggest specific ways of dressing up/changing your appearance?</p>	<p>Is there a proper way to practice your religion/beliefs? Please, explain</p>
<p>What kind of attitudes and values does your religious culture/ do your beliefs encourage?</p>	<p>According to your religion/beliefs, how should people treat others?</p>		

Questions. Part 3. Me and my beliefs.

Can you describe your first encounter with religion?	How religious are you? What influenced the level of your religiosity?	Why do you believe in what you believe/ or why don't you?	How do you practice your beliefs?
How often do you worship? Why do you worship (or why don't you)?	What is one thing about your beliefs that affects your daily life?	What are your beliefs on the afterlife?	What does your religion/beliefs bring into your life?
How does your religion/beliefs affect how you treat others?	How does your religion/belief affect your appearance?	How do you practice your religion/beliefs? And what do these practices mean to you?	What has influenced your position regarding religion?

Questions. Part 4. My beliefs and Other People.

<p>How accepted do you feel by your society, friends and family, in regard to your beliefs? Please, explain why.</p>	<p>How is your religion affecting your relationships with others?</p>	<p>Have you ever felt that your beliefs were questioned or disrespected, please share a situation?</p>	<p>Have you ever felt discriminated on the basis of your belief? Please, explain.</p>
<p>How accepted do you feel by your society, friends and family, in regard to your beliefs? Please, explain why.</p>	<p>How is your belief affecting your relationships with others?</p>	<p>Have you ever felt that your beliefs were questioned or disrespected, please share a situation?</p>	<p>Have you ever felt discriminated on the basis of your belief? Please, explain.</p>