The Impact of World Religions (HAA)

The growth and spread of world religions had a great impact on society. Many effects were specific to particular cultures or regions, such as the influence of the Hindu caste system on India and Confucian ethics on China. But other effects were more global in nature. These broad effects cut across cultural lines to influence human society in general.

**Global Effects on Society**  
World religions helped shape society and culture in various ways. One key factor was the creation of large communities of people with shared beliefs. Before the rise of universal religions, most people had worshiped local gods in small communities. Because the new, universal religions had broad appeal and could be practiced anywhere, they produced much larger communities of believers.

These communities were linked by common belief systems and ethical values that helped people live together. They also brought economic and political benefits to their members. For example, Muslim traders did business with other Muslims in distant lands. They built large trade networks based on religious ties. Jewish communities provided strength and support, which helped Jews maintain their identity despite discrimination and periods of oppression. Early Christians helped each other survive in the face of Roman persecution.

The spread of world religions has created communities of people with shared beliefs and values across the world. For example, the Catholic Church, just one branch of Christianity, has 1.1 billion members spread around the world. Here Pope Benedict XVI greets Catholics on a visit to the African country of Benin.

World religions gave strength to people undergoing hardship and difficulties. They gave meaning to daily life and offered the hope of a better afterlife. Believers gained spiritual peace from prayer, meditation, and other religious practices. People in need also got aid and support from religious institutions. An emphasis on charity and caring brought comfort to the poor and afflicted in society.

The Blue Mosque, built in Istanbul in the 17th century, is just one example of the human creativity that religion has inspired. The ornate interior is decorated with natural motifs and verses from the Qur’an, all made of small mosaic tiles.
World religions also influenced social and political structures. Rulers and religious leaders often worked together to uphold the existing social and political order. Religious establishments supported rulers in return for official backing and protection. Churches often counseled believers to accept their place in society. They told them that faith and patience in this life would bring rewards in heaven.

At the same time, religious ideas also prompted social and political change. People sometimes rebelled against rulers who failed to uphold moral laws. Religious ethics also gave rise to legal codes that applied to everyone, regardless of social class. The Judeo-Christian idea that everyone was equal in the eyes of God supported the principle of democratic equality. Women, who were often portrayed as inferior to men, even gained some rights through religion. Islam, for example, guaranteed women’s property and inheritance rights. Christian monasteries provided a refuge for women. Religion also had a strong impact on art and culture. It helped spread cultural ideas and values around the world. Many great works of art—from cathedrals and temples to paintings and music—were inspired by religious faith. Religion also promoted literacy by encouraging people to read sacred texts. In this way, it expanded education and learning. In addition, religion influenced many cultural celebrations, holidays, and festivals. These events often merged religious beliefs with local customs and traditions.

As world religions expanded they sometimes came into conflict. One example of this is the Crusades, when Christian armies attempted to reclaim Jerusalem and the eastern Mediterranean from Muslims. The Crusades began in the 11th century and were the Christian response to centuries of Muslim wars of expansion.

Cultural and Religious Interactions As world religions expanded, they came into contact with diverse peoples and cultures. In the process, they adapted and changed. As Buddhism spread across Asia, for example, it absorbed many local customs. Regional variations of Buddhism developed in China, Tibet, Japan, and Southeast Asia. In some places, Buddhists continued to worship ancient, pre-Buddhist spirits. Shrines to these spirits even existed inside Buddhist temples.

Christianity also evolved as it spread across the Roman Empire. It blended Greek, Roman, and Germanic customs with its Jewish heritage. The celebration of Christmas, for example, combined Christian and pre-Christian beliefs. Christmas day was set on the date of an ancient feast day and celebration of the sun.

As they expanded, world religions also came into contact with each other. Sometimes the result was conflict. During the Crusades, Christians and Muslims fought over control of the eastern Mediterranean, especially the city of Jerusalem, which both saw as holy. Muslims also attacked Hindus as idol-worshipers during their conquest of India. Often, however, world religions coexisted. Muslims, Christians, and Jews lived together in the Muslim Empire. Buddhist and Confucian ideas mixed in China. Hinduism and Buddhism mingled in Southeast Asia.