I don't think that the former Beatle John Lennon had capitalism in mind when he wrote his famous song "Imagine" in 1971, but maybe the international capitalist system of trade has fulfilled the final sentiment of the song, "I hope . . . the world will live as one."

The human population has come closer together through the Internet, through easy communication via cell phone and through cheap and ready transportation via airplane. People on one part of the globe can access people on any other part. Through capitalist trade networks, we can purchase food grown by farmers halfway around the world and can buy products made by workers on the other side of the planet.

So maybe world-wide capitalism and its associated products have made the "world . . . live as one."

Not as Lennon envisioned it. Another verse suggests, "Imagine . . . a brotherhood of man. Imagine all the people sharing all the world." Capitalism's world is not one of sharing, but one of buying and selling, of making money. It is not a world of brotherhood, but a world of exchange and finance.

So what did Lennon convey about human brotherhood, about the unity of all people?

The song points to three features of human society that stand in the way of achieving this unity, suggesting that these are what divide us: Religion ("Imagine there's no heaven"), politics ("Imagine there's no countries"), and economics ("Imagine no possessions").

Capitalism applies to the last of these. It has eliminated barriers of trade, inspiring us to overcome separation deriving from geography, language and even nationality. It has brought us closer to each other, but it is based on having and acquiring possessions; it certainly does not eliminate them.

Of course Lennon's song is not admired because people want to get rid of their belongings. Its popularity comes from the opening line, "Imagine there's no heaven." It has been widely seen as anti-religion and has been used as a theme song by people questioning religions and their supernatural beliefs.

That's interesting, because in the capitalist push toward integration, the world's religions have proved most resistant to homogenization. While we all buy the same TVs and DVD players (e.g., Sony and Samsung), athletic shoes (e.g., Nike and Adidas), cars (e.g., Toyota and Ford), and cell phones (e.g., Nokia, Motorola, and Apple), few of us have changed our religion.

Despite population growth in recent decades, the percentage of members of the different religions remains more or less the same. There has been no big shift into or out of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism—to mention just the four largest religions.

So although the West has successfully peddled its products, its movies and entertainment, its clothing styles and its science and technology, it has failed to get others to accept its religion. While missionaries have been fruitful in pockets, these are the exception rather than the rule.

The imperviousness of the world's major religions to Christianity has stymied us. Despite the inner variety in each religion and the ongoing changes within each one, they seem an impenetrable wall to many of us, as something too massive to understand.

And since religions claim to define ultimate reality, that is bothersome. Being confronted with a strong religion whose adherents believe in an incompatible version of god (or gods) and the world beyond this one can be quite disconcerting. That confrontation causes doubt about one's own beliefs concerning the ultimate, which in turn causes shame and the denial of that doubt, and finally the rejection of the cause of the doubt.

Rather than naturally leading to tolerance of other religions, such religious differences bring unthinking rejection and even fear. We see this reaction to other religions, especially Islam, among many Americans today.

But the alternative of unthinking tolerance is only marginally better. Getting rid of rejection and fear as well as the hatred they engender is good, but tolerance without understanding requires the suspension of the faculties of evaluation and judgment we use daily. It returns us to an immature state of naiveté.

What we need is to understand other religions in greater detail. To engage them, we need to understand the varieties of belief, thought, and practice within them. We need to differentiate between the pronouncements of religious leaders, government representatives, demagogues and troublemakers, as we have finally learnt from the "Arab Spring" to understand the difference between rulers' claims and their people's desire for a good life. To translate Lennon's ideas, we have to listen to others and imagine their lives before we react to them.

Note: This column was inspired by the new play by Wyoming playwright William Missouri Downs, "Forgiving John Lennon."

Flesher is director of UW's Religious Studies Program. Past columns and more information about the program can be found on the Web at www.uwyo.edu/relstds. To comment on this column, visit http://religion-today.blogspot.com.