



Spiritual Due Diligence

Exploring questions of eternal significance

Study 6 Christ and other religions
presented by Links Players International

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Spiritual Due Diligence

Introduction to this study

WHEN A MAN OR WOMAN CONSIDERS making a significant financial investment, they normally do not rush into the decision. Rather, they begin a process commonly known as due diligence—a gathering of facts and considerations that will allow them to judge rightly whether this investment is appropriate for them.

Of course, due diligence does not guarantee success. However, if an investment fails and we ask the investors whether or not they did their due diligence, the most embarrassing answer they can give is, “No, we did not.”

While thousands of wise investors each year avoid that embarrassment by conducting due diligence in their financial endeavors, millions of people never take the same careful steps in their spiritual lives. While they have heard stories of God and the afterlife, and while they may have even toyed with such questions loosely in their minds, they have never set about the task of spiritual due diligence—considering the information that would support these eternally significant claims.

Intent of this series

The intent of this series, *Spiritual Due Diligence*, is to assist potential spiritual investors with regard to investigating the claims of the Bible, particularly as they point to a relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ. One study in this series (this one) will focus on the claims of other faith systems, but that is not our primary intent here. Instead, by a thorough examination of the Bible, you will have opportunity to study Christianity in depth, and thereafter you will have the tools necessary by which to measure other faiths and religions.

The audience for this series

At least three categories of readers should find great value in this series: those who are beginning their first serious investigation of the Bible, those who are desiring to increase their knowledge and understanding of the Bible, and those who may be speaking with others about their own established Christian faith.

Focus of this particular study

This study is the sixth in the series. Its particular focus is to consider what the Bible teaches about its central character, Jesus Christ, in comparison to what other notable religions teach about Christ and the Scripture that reveals Him. *Please know that it is in no way our intent to disparage the people who adhere to these other belief systems, as they are often more sincere and diligent than their Christian counterparts.* However, as you will see, unworkable logical problems exist that do not allow for opposing truths to be held simultaneously. For this reason, we find this study to be necessary in the progression of conducting spiritual due diligence.

— Jeffrey Cranford and Jeff Hopper, for Links Players International



Christ and other religions

Lesson One: Exclusivity and the problem of logic

YOGI BERRA. Just mention the name and most folks know exactly where you're headed: into the garden of impossible quotes uttered along the way by the Yankees Hall of Fame catcher. Among them was this one, from his days on the golf course: "Ninety percent of putts that are short don't go in." Clearly, poor Yogi had some problems with his logic.

As much as we would like to join the prevailing thought that all of religion's many roads essentially lead to the same place, two things do not allow us to do this: logic and the Bible.

Foundational logic

One of the foundations of logical reasoning has to do with direct opposition. It contends that two similar but opposing statements (or *propositions*) cannot at the same time be held to be true. Either one of them is true or neither of them.

Let's try this out. If we were to say that Jonathan is the sole owner of that red sports car over there, and then in the next breath say that Jackie is the sole owner of that same red sports car, our two statements would stand in immediate contradiction to one another. It could be that both of our statements are false and neither Jon nor Jackie owns that car. But what would be altogether impossible is for both Jon *and* Jackie to be the sole owner of the car. Both statements cannot, at the same time, be true.

When it comes to spiritual due diligence and evaluating the contention of Scripture and traditional orthodox Christian theology against the claims of other religions, we face a similar problem. Chiefly, that problem exists in this regard. Jesus Christ Himself and the biblical writers that followed Him asserted that Jesus was (and thus still is) God. No other belief system holds to the same proposition; they all deny that Jesus is God.

By itself, this creates an intellectual logical problem. Either Jesus Christ is God, or He is not. He cannot both be God and not be God at the same time. And in this case, we do not even have the option of two false propositions.

Jesus' most exclusive claim

Beyond this, however, we encounter a more significant problem, one that runs headlong into the prevailing logic that all religions lead to God and/or to eternity in heaven. That problem lies in Jesus' claims of exclusivity. The most daunting of these is John 14:6, where Jesus said,

"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

Although it was not Jesus' intent in the particular context of this passage to draw "a line in the sand," this statement does now stand as the dividing proposition between the Bible and the teachings of other religions. Either Jesus is the only way to God ("the Father")—and thus to all that God offers, including eternal life—or He is not. Although, we must admit that logically speaking there is the option here that all religions are wrong, and that no road leads to God. In fact, atheists will tell you (as we will explore in lesson two), all propositions that rely on the existence of God are untrue in their very assumption of His existence.

How do we draw a comparison?

None of this is intended to assess other religions as "good or bad." The balanced truth is that religions of nearly every stripe have contributed to the flow of society and history both positively (through benevolent cultural involvement) and negatively (through violent opposition to detractors). Rather, we must evaluate one religion's claims against another's if we at all intend to draw a conclusion about the truth of one over all the rest.

Our goal in this series of lessons is to line out some key areas of opposition between the statements of the Bible and the statements of other belief systems. We do this for two reasons. First, the Bible has been the basis of this entire group of studies—allowing you to explore what the Bible has to say about the topics that comprise one's spiritual due diligence. Second, we do this because, as previously stated, Christ set Himself up as the only way to God. Therefore, we do well to see whether other religious systems allow for this claim. In other words, in assessing the breadth of possible alternatives, we do best to see what they do with the person of Jesus Christ—do they add to Him, subtract from Him, or allow Him to stand as He said He was?

BIBLE STUDY

Read Mark 2:1-12. In what ways does this account point to Jesus Christ's deity? How did His detractors respond to His words and actions in this account? How about His supporters?

Read Colossians 1:15-16, 19-20. How does this passage draw direct parallels between Jesus Christ and God? How does this passage support the angelic announcement prior to Jesus' birth that He would fulfill Isaiah's prophecy by being called 'Immanuel,' which means 'God with us'?

FORGING AHEAD

As we move forward in the lessons of this study, what questions are you most hoping to have addressed?

MARK 2

¹When He entered Capernaum again after some days, it was reported that He was at home. ²So many people gathered together that there was no more room, not even in the doorway, and He was speaking the message to them. ³Then they came to Him bringing a paralytic, carried by four men. ⁴Since they were not able to bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above where He was. And when they had broken through, they lowered the stretcher on which the paralytic was lying.

⁵Seeing their faith, Jesus told the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

⁶But some of the scribes were sitting there, thinking to themselves: ⁷"Why does He speak like this? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

⁸Right away Jesus understood in His spirit that they were reasoning like this within themselves and said to them, "Why are you reasoning these things in your hearts? ⁹Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, pick up your stretcher, and walk?' ¹⁰But so you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," He told the paralytic, "I tell you: get up, pick up your stretcher, and go home."

¹²Immediately he got up, picked up the stretcher, and went out in front of everyone. As a result, they were all astounded and gave glory to God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

COLOSSIANS 1

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, ¹⁶because by Him everything was created, in heaven and on earth... ¹⁹For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him, ²⁰and through Him to reconcile everything to Himself, by making peace through the blood of His cross.



Christ and other religions

Lesson Two: Atheism

THE RISE OF THE SPORTS BAR DIDN'T INVENT THE BARROOM BET, but it sure has advanced it. You know, two friends locked in combat over some historical or statistical fact that can be debated until the lights go off. What one is hoping to find is the line of argument that settles it all—now.

For the atheist, the question of Christ's divine nature has long been settled, because to the atheist, there is no divine, there is no deity, there is no God. Without God, matters of messiahs and apostolic missives and evangelistic missions are not the least bit important. And to some of the more contentious atheists, these matters are downright annoying and even—as Christopher Hitchens contends—poisonous.

For this reason, many atheists would be upset to find themselves considered among religious alternatives to biblical Christianity. They want nothing to do with religion. But when the comparison is moved into the realm of belief systems, we must include atheism, for it is (1) most certainly systematic, and (2) popularly adhered to in many parts of the Western world, and most particularly in academic realms.

Key claims of atheism

While atheism has no established founder and no ruling leader, it does adhere to a commonly held set of beliefs. Let's look at these and hold them up to the biblical passages that would most speak to them:

- *Naturalism.* This is the assertion that all things can be explained by natural causes—that is, causes within the established orders of physical existence and physical laws, as opposed to causes from without, i.e. the hand of God. For the naturalist there are no miraculous occurrences, only circumstantial and, sometimes, coincidental ones.

Conversely, the Bible does allow for the hand of God. To begin, it was God who created the heavens and the earth, as well as the features and inhabitants of the earth, as He is credited with doing in the opening chapter of the Bible's first book, Genesis. This means, then, that God is also responsible for the physical laws that sustain the earth and the universe that surrounds it. Into the midst of these predictable laws, however, God may also operate apart from what we can measure through natural observation. For instance, in the second chapter of Mark, Jesus performs the miracle of instantaneously changing water into wine, thereby circumventing the natural process of fermentation over time.

- *Present and temporal existence.* According to the atheist, the life you live each day, within the observations and experiences of your senses, is all the life that exists. There is no "soul" separate from the physical body, and thus no need to attend to this soul, either for the sake of the present or the sake of life after

death. Additionally, when this physical life ends, the whole of your existence ends. There is no reason to look forward to or prepare for a “second life.”

Conversely, the Bible teaches that our earthly lives are only the beginning—and thus a very small portion—of our eternal existence. When He was here, Christ said that He had come to offer abundant life to those who follow Him, but His work on the cross went even further, the Bible declares, by making provision for eternal life with God.

- *Moral relativism.* The atheist posits that because there is no God, there is no overarching set of moral principles being imposed from above. Instead, each person is empowered to review his or her personal circumstances and make whatever decisions he or she sees fit. Depending on the secondary philosophies of the individual atheist (existentialism vs. humanism, say), each person may or may not be obligated to take others into consideration when making these personal choices.

Conversely, the Bible provides a large set of moral standards. In the context of the Old Testament, these standards were meant to govern both individuals and God’s established nation of Israelites. If followed, they would bring one in line with God’s holy standard. However, because sin entered the world, the laws of God, the Bible tells us, served only to reveal to us how distant we are from God.

Moving into the New Testament, the apostles who wrote to the young Christians in the scattered churches continued to offer instruction on righteous living, but only in response to what Christ had already done in purchasing their salvation by His sacrifice.

BIBLE STUDY

Read Psalm 14:1. Why do you think David wrote in this Psalm that those who do not believe in God are fools?

Read Luke 8:22-25. How does this passage show both the undeniable existence of powerful physical forces *and* Christ’s power to command those forces?

Read Luke 12:16-21. How does this passage demonstrate Jesus’ emphasis on the life to come?

Read Galatians 5:19-21. How does this list define some of God’s standards in a way that the world is reluctant to do? Do you believe we each possess an innate sense of the wrongness of these acts?

PSALM 14

¹The fool says in his heart, “God does not exist.”

LUKE 8

²²One day He and His disciples got into a boat, and He told them, “Let’s cross over to the other side of the lake.” So they set out, ²³and as they were sailing He fell asleep. Then a fierce windstorm came down on the lake; they were being swamped and were in danger. ²⁴They came and woke Him up, saying, “Master, Master, we’re going to die!” Then He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves. So they ceased, and there was a calm. ²⁵He said to them, “Where is your faith?”

They were fearful and amazed, asking one another, “Who can this be? He commands even the winds and the waves, and they obey Him!”

LUKE 12

¹⁶Then He told them a parable: “A rich man’s land was very productive. ¹⁷He thought to himself, ‘What should I do, since I don’t have anywhere to store my crops? ¹⁸I will do this,’ he said. ‘I’ll tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and store all my grain and my goods there. ¹⁹Then I’ll say to myself, “You have many goods stored up for many years. Take it easy; eat, drink, and enjoy yourself.”’

²⁰But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is demanded of you. And the things you have prepared—whose will they be?’

²¹“That’s how it is with the one who stores up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

GALATIANS 5

¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar, about which I tell you in advance—as I told you before—that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.



Christ and other religions

Lesson Three: Judaism and the Messiah

ALL OF US HAVE BEEN TOLD OF THE IMPORTANCE OF FIRST IMPRESSIONS. We probably had this preached to us first when we went job-hunting as teenagers. We were told by our parents and teachers that we would want to dress cleanly and wear a smile. We would want to use our best English and look the interviewer straight in the eye. And if we were called upon to shake that interviewer's hand, our handshake had better be firm.

All of this is good, but we have also learned in living our lives that first impressions are not always what they seem. Some people are great on an interview and lousy on a job, while some of the most dependable, hardest working people in the world are also the most humble of spirit, reluctant to speak of themselves.

The Jewish people of the Old Testament were given the distinct opportunity to know God intimately before all others. Both the Old and New Testaments give this nod to "God's chosen people," those originally blessed by Him.

As He led them, the Jewish people came to know God as the One True God, and as "the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love" (Exodus 34:6). They also came to know what He required of them, presented through the Mosaic law. But this was a law they could not keep, which was pointed out to them by the prophets God used to communicate with His people. Thus, He kept before them their need to be saved by one called the Messiah, or the Savior.

What the Jewish people could not shake, however, was the notion that this would be a political Savior, one who would rush in and lead His people to military victory and lasting liberation from their oppressors. They did not recognize that their greatest oppressor was the enemy, Satan, who led them into sins of great consequence. Therefore, they did not recognize that their ultimate need was for a spiritual Messiah, one who would rescue them from their sin. They were locked into their first impression of what their Messiah should look like, unable to establish a new idea.

And herein lies the great difference between the theological patterns of orthodox Judaism and Christianity: the idea of Jesus Christ being the promised Messiah of Judaism. (Note: Reform Judaism, which is prevalent among ethnic Jews today, does not attempt to adhere to all the traditional teachings of the faith, either in regard to God or to righteousness. Our assessment here is made in comparison to the orthodox/conservative Jewish tradition, which regards the Old Testament, or Torah, as authoritative.)

The essential test

In Lesson 1 of this study, we noted that the great question in comparing other religions to Christianity is whether they add or subtract to Jesus Christ. In a way, Juda-

ism does both. Judaism subtracts from the New Testament assertion that Jesus is God in human flesh (the incarnate God); both the Jewish people of Jesus' time and the Jewish people of today argue that Jesus was no more than an exceptional rabbi, if indeed He was that. Judaism subtracts from Jesus in a second way. Both then and now Jews say that Jesus' work on the cross was of no value to us in our own connection with God; rather what makes us right with God is our righteousness according to the Mosaic law. The Christian would argue that this second "subtraction" adds the righteousness of man to the grace of God as we seek His salvation.

Similarities and differences

As one might expect, with Christianity and Judaism sharing a key text, the Torah (or Old Testament), a number of important similarities exist between the two faith systems, particularly with regard to God. For instance:

- Both powerful and loving, God is in control of all things, even those events that are painful or evil
- God is personal and knowable to humanity, not just a distant force
- God remains active in the universe, and especially in His attempt to reach humanity
- Through Scripture, God has laid out behavioral standards for His people

But the substantive difference between the two is great, for in the New Testament of the Christian Bible, Jesus of Nazareth is presented as the promised Messiah (Savior), skillfully argued to be so by those who walked with Him in His earthly life—His disciples—and most of all by one notable former Jewish Council member, Saul of Tarsus, who would become known as the apostle Paul. And while oft-called Messianic Jews (who believe that Jesus was indeed Messiah) exist in increasing numbers today, orthodox and conservative Jews do not allow for such a belief.

BIBLE STUDY

Read the following prophetic passages: Isaiah 9:6-7, Isaiah 53:2-12, and Zechariah 13:7-9.

In what ways do these passages lay out God's plan for saving His people through the work of a Messiah?

How do these passages line up with what you know about the accounts of Christ's birth and death in the gospels?

Read Romans 11.

How does this passage both honor the Jewish people as God's people but show how they forsook their calling?

What role is faith shown to have in a saving relationship with God through Christ?

How did Paul direct the Gentiles to approach the Jewish people?

REFLECTION

Why do you suppose that Jewish people do not see Jesus as the Messiah? Do you see how important it is to know the Old Testament if you are going to speak intelligently and evangelistically with those who are Jewish?



Christ and other religions

Lesson Four: Islam and the prophets

THE STUNNING AND TERRIBLE EVENTS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, left many people deeply conflicted. Here was an act perpetrated by Muslims. But these were not the Muslims next door, hard-working and community minded. How could these people be of the same religion? How could they read the same holy book and come to such disparate conclusions about what God required of them?

While we would never want to connect the militant Muslims who advocate such terrorist acts with those who do live rightly in our neighborhoods and cities, the God they profess to live under, Allah, is the same. And so is the book they profess to take guidance from, the Koran. So in this way, we can group Muslims together: they are making a different appeal to heaven than the appeals of those who follow Christ.

The essential test

As in our other lessons in this study, let's begin with the essential test: what does Islam make of Jesus Christ? Is He the incarnated Lord of the Bible, or is He something else?

For the Muslim, salvation comes through outstanding adherence to the laws of the Koran. An outside agent of forgiveness and redemption does not exist. Therefore, Jesus Christ does not offer us anything that we cannot achieve for ourselves, except guidance.

Guidance from Allah and his agents, the prophets, is very important to a Muslim, for through them Muslims learn how to behave before Allah and within the context of society. For Muslims, then, Jesus of Nazareth is viewed as one of the great prophets who may offer us important guidance. His guidance, however, is inferior to that of the greatest prophet of Islam, Muhammad. It was to Muhammad that Allah is said to have delivered the Koran.

Thus, Muslims take away from Christ His deity and His headship among believers. And they add to His respected example of righteousness the need for righteous adherence on our own individual parts.

Similarities and differences

There are similarities between Islam and faith in Christ, though these are more general similarities than the specific similarities between Christianity and Judaism. Here are some of those similarities:

- Worship is granted to one God (the religions are monotheistic). For Muslims, this is Allah; for Christians, this is the Triune God, represented equally in the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Indeed, some Muslims would suggest that Christians do not actually believe in one God, but in three.

Meanwhile, other Muslims and Christians have suggested that Allah is the same God as YHWH of Judaism and the Heavenly Father of Christianity. Few orthodox adherents to either the Muslim side or the Jewish and Christian side would hold to this more liberal suggestion.

- Both Islam and Christianity (as well as Judaism) depend greatly on their respective holy books, the Koran and the Bible, believed them to be directly inspired by Allah or God. Both books include moral standards by which to live. Muslims believe that adherence to these standards provides an opportunity for eternal life; Christians, on the other hand, assert that salvation comes through faith in Christ, and that it is Christ's indwelling presence that allows one to keep standards that are reflective of His life in us.
- Both Islam and Christianity draw lines back to the Old Testament patriarch, Abraham. For Muslims, this is an important physical lineage, with Abraham fathering Ishmael, from whom the original Muslim adherents are descended. Meanwhile Christians, drawing from the letters of Paul, point to Abraham as the one whose "faith was credited to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:9), thereby making him the first recipient of God's spiritual covenant to all who would believe in Him.
- Both Islam and Christianity profess that a judgment of God will consign a person to eternity in either heaven (agreed to as a place of lasting reward) or hell (agreed to as a place of lasting torment). For the Muslim, eternal reward would follow a life of righteousness worthy of this reward; for the Christian, eternal reward would come only through faith in Christ but will consist of secondary rewards ("crowns") according to how one has demonstrated his or her faith.

BIBLE STUDY

Read Romans 4:1-25.

How are faith and law-keeping juxtaposed in the life of Abraham?

What meaning does Paul attach to this argument for all of us?

What reasons do the closing verses of the chapter give us for being thankful to Christ?

REFLECTION

The Koran states: "It is not meet for God to have children" (19:92). How does this statement match up with what we know to be the biblical relationship between God the Father and Jesus Christ?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

For advanced understanding of Ishmael's precedent among the Muslims, read Genesis 16:1-16 and 21:8-21.



Christ and other religions

Lesson Five: Buddhism's pursuit of perfection

BECAUSE THE MIDDLE EAST HAS BEEN TORN BY WAR during much of our lifetimes, it would be hard to fault those who seek peace above all things. But those who are realistic about the world around them must usually settle for “inner peace.” This is a sense that while the world may be in turmoil, one can maintain a steady demeanor and avoid the most common struggles.

At the forefront of religions that are meant to produce this inner peace is Buddhism, the ancient Far Eastern religion that has gained increasing followership in the West over the past two or three decades. More than a quest to discern who God is, Buddhism is a set of focuses and practices intended to produce enlightened understanding of one's self and one's place on the earth and in the universe. The eventual goal of these practices is to achieve *nirvana* (or *Nibbana*), a permanent state of transcendent understanding and existence. *Nirvana*, then, is not a place, but rather a position or state.

Forms of Buddhism

It should be noted that three major strands of Buddhism exist. The *Mahayana* school, practiced popularly in China, Japan, and the Korean nations, allows for a great number of gods. The older *Theravada* school thrives in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Southeast Asia, and does not give credence to the newer sutras (or teachings) of the *Mahayana* school. A third well-known strand is *Zen*, which is technically derived from *Mahayana* but is often more closely aligned with *Theravada*. In this lesson, we focus on common traits of the three.

The essential test

As with other religions, we begin by discussing what Buddhism's take on Jesus Christ is. Because Buddhism asserts no absolute god, Christ is not revered as God. Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama) suggested that the pursuit of God's identity was not a valuable endeavor. Instead, with enlightenment as the ultimate goal, and being a goal achieved by one's own pursuit, no need for a Savior exists in Buddhism. While Buddha (who preceded Christ) may have deemed Christ an attaine of enlightenment and an excellent example to us all, he would not have seen Christ as necessary to eternal existence before the One True God.

In the end, then, Buddhism both subtracts from Christ by removing from Him His deity, and adds to Him by requiring something other than His grace in order to be saved (though this is not a term that Buddhists would employ).

Similarities and differences

It can be difficult to draw direct comparisons between Christianity and Buddhism because they are so essentially variant. Let us begin by saying, however, that adherents of both religions are normally focused on improving their personal walk in life,

holding themselves to particular, stated moral standards and seeking to advance their character through personal discipline. The similarities almost completely end there. Here is why:

- A Christian pursues righteousness in an act of obedience and love to the One who “first loved us.” Moreover, a Christian is aware that all the moral effort in the world cannot buy eternal life. Conversely, a Buddhist considers gods to be almost human—capricious and generally powerless—and thus unable to contribute anything of worth to one’s attainment of enlightenment and *nirvana*.
- A Christian’s eternal state will include a new body on a new earth; hence, it will be both spiritual and corporeal. This state can be reached only through faith in Christ as the One able to save. On the other hand, the Buddhist’s efforts toward enlightenment are made in order to achieve that very goal: enlightenment (in its fullness).
- The Bible teaches that this life is our one chance to establish faith in and relationship with Christ. If a man or woman dies not having believed in Christ and His saving power, he or she will be judged to have rejected Christ not only in this life but for eternity. A Buddhist, while sometimes believing that one life well-lived is enough to attain *nirvana*, allows for future lives via rebirth, wherein knowledge can continue to be furthered as one moves toward permanent enlightenment.
- While for a Christian the ultimate error is a lack of faith that keeps a person from God in heaven, for the Buddhist the ultimate error is a lack of complete knowledge that keeps a person from enlightenment.

The difficulty of blending faiths

It is not uncommon for Buddhists to “borrow” from Christ’s teachings, or for some Christian leaders to suggest that there is truth to be gained from Buddhist thought and practice. Some of this suggestion is intentional capitulation for the sake of “peace,” but much of it is honest assertion that the two faiths—as with some other combinations of faiths—can co-exist. While this may be true in limited senses, in the most foundational issues, particularly the exclusivity of God’s role as Lord of our lives, the faiths oppose one another. No brand of logic could allow for an adherence to both faiths at once.

BIBLE STUDY

Read Deuteronomy 6:4-15. What are God’s claims to exclusivity in this passage? How would a plurality of gods, as allowed for in Buddhism, run counter to the strictures of this passage?

Read Acts 4:1-12 and Ephesians 2:4-10. How do these passages confirm the outworking of God’s love for us through Jesus Christ? What exclusive rights do they grant to Christ as our Savior? What do they say about our own ability to save ourselves through our “good works?”



Christ and other religions

Lesson Six: Hinduism

AS THE WORLD HAS OPENED UP TO TOURISM in recent decades, and as the Internet has advanced our ability to “see the world” from any thousand angles, we have been increasingly introduced to the cultural establishment of other countries, continents and hemispheres. West has met East more fully than ever before.

Included in that exchange have been the two great religions of the East: Buddhism, which we explored in the last lesson, and Hinduism, which is practiced most heavily in India, the world’s second most populous nation. Part of the interest in Hinduism rests with the respect assigned to Mohandas Gandhi, India’s political and spiritual leader in the first half of the 20th Century. It was Gandhi’s civil disobedience toward British colonialism that led to civil rights ideology and advancement in other parts of the world, including the United States. Many will recall seeing Gandhi’s life portrayed in the Academy Award-winning film *Gandhi*, which was released in 1982.

So what of the Hindu religion that played such a significant role in shaping a renowned man like Gandhi? How will we find its tenets as compared to those of Christianity?

Forms of Hinduism

Like Buddhism, Hinduism does not allow for easy categorization of its beliefs, because multiple forms of Hinduism exist. These include: (1) *Advaita Vedanta*, which is common in the West, and which allows for a identity between one’s self and the impersonal, ultimate God; (2) *Jainism*, which draws from the earliest forms of Hinduism, which dates to at least the fourth century B.C.; and (3) *Sikh*, a growing form of Hinduism, which blends elements of Islam into the Hindu tradition.

The essential test

The basic belief of Hinduism regarding God is that God is incarnated in many representations. Although there is one ultimate God, known as Brahman, this god is found in many other gods. Well-known among these other gods are Shiva and Vishnu, the latter of whom has shown himself through history in various incarnations, including Rama and Krishna. Access to God, however, does not come through God, but through the works people perform in their lives. If a man or woman continually performs excellent works through their “incarnations,” he or she will eventually escape the reincarnational cycle and either (according to the line of Hindu thinking to which one adheres) enter the presence of the loving God or be dissolved into the abyss of Brahman. Plainly, then, salvation is not the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf; His deity is reduced if not denied.

Similarities and differences

It is interesting that Hinduism has gained influence in the West as one of the many religions that “point the way” to God, for there are few similarities between Hinduism and other major religions, including Christianity. While similarities have been drawn between the peace-forging ways of Gandhi, for instance, and the “love your enemies”

teaching of Jesus, the full truth is that Christ also said His coming to live and die among humanity would bring division among even the closest friends. So while Jesus did teach that His disciples should love unconditionally, He certainly never expressed hope that this teaching would stand without significant opposition—and chiefly because He claimed exclusive rights to our souls.

Meanwhile, here are key differences:

- *A plurality of gods.* The God of Scripture, reinforced in Jesus' teachings, is One, and is to be worshipped alone.
- *Eternal destiny based on one's works.* The New Testament clearly lays out that salvation comes through Christ alone.
- *Continuing incarnations.* While Hinduism teaches that our spirits may live again and again on earth in a succession of "avatars," the Bible tells us that we live once and then meet God's judgment of our belief in Christ (for salvation) and the lives we have lived (for secondary rewards).
- *A formless eternity.* Many Hindus believe that one's eternal existence is an absence of personal experience and an assumption into a non-corporeal state, the Bible teaches that we will have new bodies and live on a new earth—a very physical eternity.
- *A strong caste system.* Hindus are born into rigid levels of earthly existence (known as castes) based on the moral quality and progression of their past lives. The Bible teaches that God favors the humble, and that people from all walks of life can have relationship with Him.

It is certainly difficult if not impossible, in light of such stark differences, to staunchly purport that the Hindu and Christian faiths can point their adherents in the same direction. As with other faiths set against Christianity, simple logic would not allow for both courses.

REFLECTION

In what ways would it be accurate to group Buddhism and Hinduism as much different than the religions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity? How does this grouping create problems for those who would try to "synthesize" these faiths?

BIBLE STUDY

Read 1 Kings 11:1-13. What was the reason that God stripped the kingdom from Solomon's line? Knowing that the God of the Bible holds strongly to His desire for worship of Him alone, and that He made this plain to all of His kings, including those before and after Solomon, how would we best assess God's desire for our worship today? And how does this desire contrast with the teachings of Hinduism and other polytheistic faiths?

Read Hebrews 9:24-28.

How does this passage point to Christ's preeminent role in providing a lasting atonement for our sins and salvation through that atonement? How also does it show that our eternal destiny is determined after just one life?



Christ and other religions

Lesson Seven: America's big players: Mormonism, Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses

IT'S EASY TO PIGEONHOLE GOLFERS, ISN'T IT? All your non-golfing friends have gotten quite good at it through the years. And not much of what they have to say casts the proverbial "positive light." Plainly put, golfers are made fun of!

So we know the value of being careful when speaking of others, especially when we address their most closely held beliefs. In the West, and particularly in the United States, three paths of faith have grown up through the decades and gained much interest. Some critics of these three—which are Mormonism (Latter-Day Saints), Christian Science, and Jehovah's Witnesses—have even classified them as cults. We want to avoid this simple classification, because in their present state they are not organized like cults: with adherence to single, dominant leaders or strict clamps on their followers (brainwashing, not allowing them to "leave the fold," etc.). However, the Bible would not hesitate to call these faiths "false religions," because again they do not give glory to Jesus Christ as God in the flesh, alone able to save. Let's look.

The essential test

If the essential test remains that Jesus Christ, authentically presented in the Bible, must not be added to or diminished in His power to save us, then each of these three newer popular religions fails the test.

Mormonism. Mormon doctrine allows for the resurrection of the dead through Jesus' atoning sacrifice, but insists that the experience of eternity ("degrees of glory") is dependant on one's works rather than on Christ's work. Additionally, Mormon patriarch Brigham Young once stated in a sermon that no one would attain heaven without the express approval of Mormon founder Joseph Smith. Thus, LDS theology both diminishes and adds to the exclusive role of Christ in our salvation and judgment with God. (Note: Mormon doctrine has shifted significantly through time, and it can be difficult to capture the doctrine for current assessment, a matter we will address in the New Revelation section below.)

Christian Science. Christian Science doctrine openly states its belief in Jesus as the Messiah, and upholds all essential elements of His life but this one: His deity. Christian Science doctrine insists that while Jesus was God's Son and embodied God's divinity, Jesus was not Himself divine. Additionally, Christian Science eliminates the need for eternal salvation by eliminating heaven and hell as literal places of eternal existence. Thus, Christ is diminished in His nature and in the eternal purpose of His saving work.

Jehovah's Witnesses. Similar to Christian Scientists, Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Christ's death made provision for our sins, but they do not hold Christ to be

God incarnate (“in the flesh”). While Jesus declared that “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30), official Jehovah’s Witnesses material says that Jesus is “inferior to God” (a matter that will be addressed in the Alternative Scriptures section below).

New Revelation

One of the significant differences between orthodox Christianity and the three American faiths is that each of them adheres to “new revelation”—that is, a strong set of teachings that add to the texts of Scripture.

In the Mormon faith, this began in the 1820s with Joseph Smith, who claimed to have received a full additional testament from God through the angel Moroni, this testament being called The Book of Mormon. Proceeding from Smith, the line of Mormon prophets continued through Brigham Young and each successive leader of the church, all seen as capable of dispensing new, extrabiblical revelation from God for the people.

Likewise, the Christian Science faith was formed through the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy, beginning in 1866. Common among Eddy’s teachings was the absence of real physical evil or error (she regarded these as unreal), in spite of Jesus’ clear teaching that His followers would face severe and actual hardship and in spite of His own physical death.

Meanwhile, the Jehovah’s Witnesses spent a great portion of their early years (particularly the 1920s), battling over the ever-shifting revealed dates of major events supposedly given to their second leader, Joseph Rutherford. Though this new revelation of prophetic occurrences was important to them, numerous specific prophecies never transpired, calling into deep question the authenticity of such revelation.

Alternative Scriptures

We have already referred to The Book of Mormon, which is a third testament used by the Latter-Day Saints. This book is upheld as equivalent to scripture and contains teachings found nowhere in the biblical canon (the group of biblical books accepted in the orthodox Christian Bible), including a visit by Jesus to America, premortal existence, degrees of glory in which people will spend eternity, the eternal connectedness of earthly families, and the ability for people to be saved after they die, among other doctrines. Additionally, the LDS church can shift away from plain teachings of the Bible by adhering to their statement that it is the Word of God “as long as it is translated correctly.”

The translation question is also of great importance to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, whose New World Translation, features many interpretations not found in any other translation of Scripture performed by the numerous teams of translators who have worked with original manuscripts through the centuries, including the idea that Jesus (“the Word”) was “a god” as opposed to “God” (John 1:1) and that Jesus was not crucified on a Roman cross, but impaled on a torture stake.

BIBLE STUDY

Read the following passages: Matthew 7:21-23, John 8:56-59, John 10:30, John 14:6-11, John 17:4-5, and Philippians 2:5-11. How do these passages display the deity of Jesus Christ? Which of these passages is especially compelling to you?



Christ and other religions

Lesson Eight: In review—how does Christ stand in the face of opposition?

EVERY GREAT BELIEF MUST BE ABLE TO STAND AGAINST OPPOSITION AND CRITIQUE. Biblical Christianity is no exception. Even when people say that they are not opposed to Christ as an important religious leader or teacher, we have seen through this study that other commonly held world faiths cannot coexist in a logical sense with Christianity. Principal doctrines stand opposed to one another. Let's spend some time in this lesson reviewing how this is the case.

Logical problem

What logical problem makes it difficult to compare religions across the board?

The essential test

What is the essential test that helps define the differences between orthodox Christianity and other faiths? Why is this test "essential?"

Key differences

In what ways do each of the following faiths not meet the standard of Jesus Christ as God, able to save us completely?

Atheism _____

Judaism _____

Islam _____

Buddhism _____

Hinduism _____

Latter-Day Saints _____

Jehovah's Witnesses _____

Christian Science _____

Conversation and respect

How does the information in this lesson assist you in conversing with those of other faiths? How do you maintain respect for one's person and beliefs, while holding firm to the key truths of Scripture regarding Christ?

WHAT'S NEXT?

This is the sixth in a series of studies on spiritual due diligence. The complete set of studies allow for a thorough investigation of some of a number of spiritual matters, including:

- The need for due diligence
- The nature of man
- The nature of God
- The nature of Scripture
- Death and life after death
- End times and eternity

The seventh study in the series, which you may explore next, is "The invisible realm."

Many people today are fascinated by the existence and activity of angels and demons. This is not an unholy fascination; the Bible speaks frequently of these beings and their involvement among people. In our next study we will explore the Bible's teachings about angels and demons against the common misconceptions that exist in what is often discussed today.

Through all of these studies, our hope is that you will gain a greater and greater sense of who God is and how He promises to interact with you as taught in the Bible. If this occurs, you will have accomplished what many have not—you will have conducted your spiritual due diligence.

What you decide to do with the knowledge you gain is surely a matter between you and God. But we also believe that God has designed us to live in community with other people. Therefore, it is also important that you discuss what you are thinking with others who are also considering the claims of Scripture, be they "seasoned veterans" of Bible study or quite new at the task. If you are not in a study with others at this time and would like to be, call Links Players at 800-90-LINKS and we'll offer some suggestions for groups who might encourage you in your thought and discussion.



Spiritual Due Diligence

Leading a group study

IT CAN BE DAUNTING TO BE CALLED ON to teach the Word of God. Indeed, many potential leaders have told us that while they are capable of and eager to bring a group together, or to act as host, teaching is an entirely different level, one for which they do not consider themselves prepared.

Others don't feel so much weight when it comes to teaching. They know their Bibles well, or they're naturals when speaking to a crowd.

It is, then, the precise goal of the structure of these Links Players Bible studies to provide a fully operational Bible study for those teachers who need much assistance and yet a format that leaves room for experienced leaders to bring their own learning to the table.

The lessons include these features:

- An **introduction** providing connections for the reader between what they see and know in their lives and the topic of study at hand. While we are primarily a sports-minded ministry aimed at golfers, our materials are used by many non-golfers. Therefore, these introductions use examples from more common experiences, as well as those tied to athletics.
- A **narrative** progressing through the main ideas of the lesson. Some leaders may choose to read this with the participants verbatim (or nearly so). Others may use it as a general guide for presenting the material.
- A **Bible study**, drawing from particular specific Scripture passages. In this more advanced study, the references are provided but most need to be read in an accompanying Bible. You may find that you wish to read the broader context for these passages as well. You may also wish to look up these passages in other translations to see how the alternate wording can assist in understanding.
- Sometimes a **reflection** is included, challenging participants to make some mental connections and decisions about what they have studied.
- Because of the scope of this study, "Christ and other religions," we recommend further reading, particularly suggesting works by Ravi Zacharias, Walter Martin, Josh McDowell, and Hank Hanegraaff—all available at sites such as *amazon.com*.

In addition to these studies, as your group grows together, you will want to include opportunity for prayer among the participants. Even with a study like this one, which may include a number of participants who are just beginning their investigations of God, Christ, and the Bible, prayer is often an open door for those who are truly seeking God. Offering to pray for personal and family needs is often the best way to begin this practice.

We also strongly encourage leaders to stay in touch with participants throughout the week, simply making themselves available for further questions and discussion.

In the same way, we are available to talk to group leaders about their experiences and to answer questions regarding the studies. You may call us Monday-Friday at 800-90-LINKS.

What is a Links Player?



Spiritual
Due Diligence

THE LINKS PLAYERS BIBLE STUDIES, including “Christ and other religions,” are produced by Links Players International, a Christian sports ministry aimed primarily at golfers. The good news is that sometimes in that aim, we miss! That is, there are plenty of non-golfers who have found benefit in the Daily Devotional, Bible studies, and magazines we have published through the years.

There is a reason for this, of course, and that is because truth transcends our human experiences. For instance, while we often hate to admit it, in many ways we cannot improve on how the previous generation lived. Technologically, we may have made some nifty advancements, but in terms of human interaction—and, we believe, humans interacting with God—we don’t make any real progress through time.

Therefore, whether or not you are a golfer, we think that the chief principles we teach and learn can apply to you. A Links Player tries, by the power of God’s Holy Spirit in them, to live according to the following principles:

LOVE GOD AND OTHERS. When asked the greatest commandment of Scripture, Jesus replied, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*” He went on to say, “*This is the greatest and most important commandment. The second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*” (Matthew 22:37-39)

INTEGRATE CHRIST’S REIGN AND INTEGRITY INTO ALL OF LIFE. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told the crowds, “*But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things (the necessities of life) will be provided for you.*” (Matthew 6:33)

NETWORK FRIENDS TOGETHER IN CHRIST. When the followers of Jesus met together after His ascension into heaven, it was said of them: *They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.* (Acts 2:42)

KINDLE COMPASSION FOR THE POOR AND NEEDY. Jesus told a parable of the eventual judgment of each man and woman by God. In it, He provided insight into the standards of this judgment: “*The King will answer them, ‘I assure you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did for Me.’*” (Matthew 25:40)

SHARE CHRIST. One of the chief of Christ’s apostles, Paul, wrote to the church at Corinth this reminder: *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ; certain that God is appealing through us, we plead on Christ’s behalf, ‘Be reconciled to God.’* (2 Corinthians 5:20)

Today, you may find that you have reason to be reconciled to God and to become a Links Player yourself. If so, you need to tell God in prayer: *Heavenly Father, Through Your Son Jesus Christ, I am prepared to offer my life to You. Please take it and all of my sin, and begin to renew me as Your ambassador. Amen.* If you have prayed that prayer, you will also want to share your decision with a trusted friend who knows Christ. This way they can encourage and lead you in your new walk of faith. It will be a challenge worth every step!

