

# *Jesus and the World's Religions*

## **WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

1<sup>st</sup> in a seven-part series

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*John 1:1–5 (NRSV)*

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being <sup>4</sup>in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

*Romans 1:18–23 (Common English Bible)*

<sup>18</sup>God's wrath is being revealed from heaven against all the ungodly behavior and the injustice of human beings who silence the truth with injustice. <sup>19</sup>This is because what is known about God should be plain to them because God made it plain to them. <sup>20</sup>Ever since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities—God's eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, because they are understood through the things God has made. So humans are without excuse. <sup>21</sup>Although they knew God, they didn't honor God as God or thank him. Instead, their reasoning became pointless, and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup>While they were claiming to be wise, they made fools of themselves. <sup>23</sup>They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images that look like mortal humans: birds, animals, and reptiles.

*1 Peter 3:13–18 (NRSV)*

<sup>13</sup>Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? <sup>14</sup>But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, <sup>15</sup>but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; <sup>16</sup>yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. <sup>17</sup>For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. <sup>18</sup>For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, . . .

*This week, we begin a seven-part series on the world's major religions.*

For the apostle Paul, God made it plain and clear to all that there is a god, a deity whose nature can be discerned from the world around us. Should we then be surprised that the religious impulse is universal? There are now seven billion people on this planet. Nearly all of them share at least one thing in common, the desire to believe in something or someone bigger than themselves.

For Carl Sagan, it was the Cosmos. For a Muslim, it is Allah. For a Hindu, it is Brahman, the Cosmic Spirit. For a Christian it is the Trinitarian God revealed in Jesus. Because humans are inherently social, this impulse to seek something or someone outside ourselves is often expressed in the form of a religion, of which there are thousands across the span of humanity; thousands more have come and gone over the millennia.

Trying to define “religion” is an unrewarding task. Wikipedia has this:

Religion is an organized collection of belief systems, cultural systems, and worldviews that relate humanity to spirituality and, sometimes, to moral values. Many religions have narratives, symbols, traditions and sacred histories that are intended to give meaning to life or to explain the origin of life or the Universe. From their ideas about the cosmos and human nature, they tend to derive morality, ethics, religious laws or a preferred lifestyle. According to some estimates, there are roughly 4,200 religions in the world.

Many religions may have organized behaviors, clergy, a definition of what

constitutes adherence or membership, holy places, and scriptures. The practice of a religion may also include rituals, sermons, commemoration or veneration of a deity, gods or goddesses, sacrifices, festivals, feasts, trance, initiations, funerary services, matrimonial services, meditation, prayer, music, art, dance, public service or other aspects of human culture. Religions may also contain mythology.

Ninian Smart, a scholar of religion, proposed this definition:

A set of institutionalized rituals, identified with a tradition and expressing and/or evoking sacral sentiments directed at a divine or trans-divine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenological environment and at least partially described by myths or by myths and doctrines.<sup>1</sup>

That's a lot to take in. For me, I tend to think that I know one when I see one. That's probably true for most of us. Fortunately, our task of studying the world's religions is simplified because the globe is dominated by a relatively few religions, despite the thousands that exist in some form or other.

In this series we are going to concentrate on the biggies: Hinduism/Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Mormonism, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,<sup>2</sup> and Christianity. These religions encompass about 80% of the planet. Each of them claims to correspond to reality, to speak the truth about how things really are. And all of them provide answers to the most fundamental questions humans have. In this, each of these religions embodies what it often called a worldview.

Worldviews seek to answer four questions:

- Who are we?
- Where are we?
- What is the problem?
- What is the solution?

Everyone has a worldview that guides their thoughts and actions. If you ever got in an argument with someone that went on until they exasperatedly slammed their fist on the table and shouted, "That's just how it is!" you've run head-on into their worldview, i.e., the assumptions they hold about how things really are.

An example will help. N. T. Wright helps us to get a handle on worldviews by looking at the answers provided by the historic, orthodox Christian faith:<sup>3</sup>

"(1) Who are we? We are humans made in the image of the creator. We have responsibilities that come with this status. We are not fundamentally determined by race, gender, social class, geographical location; nor are we simply pawns in a deterministic game.

(2) Where are we? We are in a good and beautiful, though transient, world, the creation of the god in whose image we are made. We are not in an alien world, as the Gnostic<sup>4</sup> imagines; nor in a cosmos to which we owe allegiance as to a god, as the pantheist<sup>5</sup> would suggest.

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<sup>1</sup> Hexham, I. (2011). *Understanding World Religions* (17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>2</sup> This one may not ring a bell. Though it is under the radar, it is one of the fastest growing religions in the U.S.

<sup>3</sup> This summary of the Christian worldview and story is from N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God, Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 32. Wright's work stands squarely in the midst of the historic, traditional, orthodox Christian faith.

<sup>4</sup> Gnosticism holds a dualistic world-view, in which spirit is good and material is evil. Thus, for the Gnostic, the human goal is to escape from the material world and body. This is accomplished by gaining access to some sort of special knowledge, the gnosis. Gnostic perspectives permeate much of the present-day religious and spiritual landscape. Sometimes people will try to escape this evil world by searching for their inner spirit, looking for the god within themselves. Others will attempt to escape by looking upward, seeking to climb some sort of spiritual ladder. There are two excellent books on American gnosticism:

(3) What is wrong? Humanity has rebelled against the creator. This rebellion reflects a cosmic dislocation between the creator and the creation, and the world is consequently out of tune with its created intention.

(4) What is the solution? The creator has acted, is acting, and will act within his creation to deal with the weight of evil set up by human rebellion, and to bring his world to the end for which it was made, namely that it should resonate with his own presence and glory. This action, of course, is focused upon Jesus and the Spirit of the creator.”

In our answers to such basic questions of human existence, in the stories we tell, in the symbols we cherish, and in the practices that make up our lives, all the world’s religions take shape and structure. All of these religions have their own vocabularies and we’ll learn a bit of it, remembering that the religions of the world often use the same words but mean very different things.

Each week in this series, we’ll learn a bit about the development of each religion, the basics of its worldview, and how its adherents practice the religion. We’ll look at who each religion understands Jesus to be. Doing so will help us to clarify for ourselves the Christian proclamation of Jesus. The question on which Christianity departs from all of the other religions is simply, “Who is Jesus?,” as we’ll see in each week of the series.

In addition, we’ll seek to learn from each of these religions. Given that all humans are made in the image of God, we shouldn’t be surprised to learn that the light of God shines in some measure across all humanity. Paul’s point in Romans 3 is that humans know God but often choose to ignore and dishonor him. This was true in Paul’s day and it is just as true now.

#### *A word about grace*

Taking on a series about the world’s religions is a daunting task for any preacher or teacher. All of us have friends and loved ones who are Jewish or Muslim or Mormon or otherwise not Christian. We owe them our respect and in this series, we will strive to be respectful always, even as we disagree . . . and we will, for only Christians claim that John was correct when he wrote: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”

There is no use pretending that all religions are basically the same or that what we claim about Jesus doesn’t matter, for it matters more than anything else matters. Pretending the differences don’t matter is disrespectful to both sides of a question.

Thus, we’ll confront the differences and, as Peter puts it, offer “an accounting for the hope” that is in us. And we’d also follow Peter’s teaching that we are to do so with “gentleness and reverence.” A fist in the face gets us nowhere.

Further, we’ll come to this series with a lot of humility and caution. We are Westerners. We are Christians. Most of us are white, middle-class Protestants. We have certain ways of thinking that reflect our families, our backgrounds, our cultures, our language and so on. We’d have to spend a long time “inside” any of these other religions for us to really understand the religion as we understand Christianity, which usually seems challenge enough. So, we will strive to remain aware of our limitations while staying committed to knowing the truth as best we can.

Finally, I hope that we will all strive to be grace-giving people. The preachers face a tough challenge. The issues are complex, difficult, and often emotion-laden. We’ll all need large doses of grace, God’s and our own, poured out on one another.

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Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992) and Philip J. Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Pantheism holds that god and nature are identical. God is in everything and everything is in god.

## N. T. Wright on Romans 1:18-23 -- The God Who Made Us All

Human beings were made to know, worship, love and serve the creator God. That always was and always will be the way to healthy and fruitful human living. It demands, of course, a certain kind of humility: a willingness to let God be God, to celebrate and honour him as such, and acknowledge his power in and over the world. Paul affirms that human beings have not lost this sense of God's power and deity, but he declares that they have chosen to suppress this truth, instead of honouring God and giving him thanks. It is important to remember this passage, since Paul will refer back to it when he describes in chapter 4 how the faith of Abraham, and of Christians, does in fact give God this honour and gratitude, thus revealing itself as the sign of the renewal of human beings. All trees are affected by the disease of the root; but the disease can be cured, and Paul will explain how.

Here he describes graphically how the disease spreads. What begins with humans suppressing the truth about God continues not, as we might suppose, with evil behaviour—that will come later—but with distorted *thinking* and a darkened *heart* (verse 21). This is the sobering truth which many philosophers have tried to ignore: there are healthy ways of thinking and unhealthy ways of thinking. Thought, all by itself, will not necessarily produce the right answers. By itself, human reason can no more be guaranteed to tell us which way to go than a compass in a room full of strong magnets. One of the tragedies of rebellious humankind is the sheer waste of God-given intellectual powers: think of the clever criminal working out cunning, detailed plans to commit the crime and escape undetected, or the clever dictator thinking how to crush opposition, to keep people in the dark as to his real selfish motives, and to stay in power. Fancy using your God-given thinking power for purposes like that.

Along with twisted thinking goes the darkened heart (some translations say 'minds' at the end of verse 21, but Paul uses his regular word for 'heart'). The human heart was seen by many ancient thinkers as the centre of motivation. It ought to be a source of light; but when humans rebel against God, it becomes dark. This is the fungus at the core of the root. The tree can still grow, perhaps for many years; it may deceive onlookers into supposing it is healthy; but it has already contracted a deadly disease. . . .

The first sign of the creeping death that spreads upwards from twisted thinking and a darkened heart into the rest of the human life in question is the failure of worship. We are made to worship the living God and to bear his image. Paul, who clearly has Genesis 1 in mind, points out with heavy irony that humans have instead created idols which are at several removes from reality. They represent the image of human beings, who are themselves mortal, subject to decay and death. Not content with that, they also worship images of sub-human species.

It's easy for people today to laugh at ancient idolatry. How funny they were back then, people think. They carved 'gods' out of wood and stone and worshipped them! But of course we do the same. The modern Western world has worshipped many idols, the most obvious being money, sex and power. Paul is not saying that every individual does all of this, but rather that the human race as a whole worships parts of the world rather than God himself. Twisted thinking, a darkened heart, and worship of non-gods: this is the disease, often unseen by the casual bystander, which will bring down the tree and anyone standing in the way.

## Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

### Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Genesis

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall on Tuesdays.

### Monday Evening Class – now studying the Gospel of Mark

Meets every Monday from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

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## Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: *World Religions*

Each week, we'll be going deeper into the topic for the week in the sermon series.

There will be plenty of time for Q&A. Join us to learn and consider more than covered in the sermon.