



CHRISTIANITY

AND THE

COMPETITION

WITH DR. PAUL L. MAIER

CHRISTIANITY and the COMPETITION Who is Right?

A Seminar with Dr. Paul L. Maier

INTRODUCTION

This Study Guide is intended for use with the video series, which is © 2010 by Paul L. Maier and produced by Tobias Communications. The eight segments run about 30 minutes each, leaving the balance of the hour for discussion. All parts of this Study Guide may be duplicated for use in discussion groups. A brief summary of the video segment is included in the upper half of each page, with issues and discussion questions following. Group leaders may wish to select some questions from the list and omit others, as well as supply some of their own.

Although Christianity is by far the largest of the world religions, it is increasingly challenged today by competing belief systems. In fact, the globe is littered with every possible variety of religious and parareligious spirituality. While a seminar such as this cannot hope to deal with them all, we shall address the major religious systems in both East and West, providing a brief summary of each in terms of its founder, its holy book (if any), its prime beliefs, and, in particular, its credibility.

As a model for this approach, we shall begin with Christianity, omitting detail on its founders and beliefs, since this series will primarily be used by Christians, but testing its credentials and comparing them with those of other world religious systems. In view of our multicultural climate, few tasks are more important today.

PART 1-- THE CREDENTIALS OF CHRISTIANITY

SUMMARY

In determining the credibility of a world religion, various tests can be applied, particularly if it has a holy book that serves as its basis, such as the Bible for Christianity. To gauge the reliability of Scripture, its material can be compared with outside evidence from the ancient world, particularly in the areas of geography, archaeology, and history. A great number of geographical place names appear in both Testaments, and these are *genuine* – not invented – locations. The same can *not* be said for many other religious holy books.

Archaeology provides *hard* evidence from the past, and here, too, discoveries at many sites in the Bible lands correspond extremely well with biblical records. A cornerstone inscribed with the name of Pontius Pilate, for example, was found at Caesarea, while the very bones of the Jewish high priest who prosecuted Jesus, Joseph Caiaphas, were discovered at Jerusalem.

Secular ancient literary sources also corroborate Scripture. Even the name of Jesus Christ shows up in the Roman historians Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny, as well as the Jewish rabbinical traditions, as well as Josephus. This first-century Jewish historian mentions Jesus twice, as well as John the Baptist, Pontius Pilate, James the Just of Jerusalem, and many others. The Bible, then, has much strategic confirmation from outside evidence. The same can *not* be said of other world religions.

DICUSSION

1. With so many faiths across the world, each claiming to possess the truth, what makes Christianity any different?
2. Why should we try to test the Bible? Isn't faith enough?
3. What if Luke's Nativity record began, "At a time long ago in Middle Earth, Jesus was born"? Are place names important?
4. Why has archaeology also been called "the smoking gun from the ancient world"?
5. If some ancient author contradicted a claim in the Bible, would this disprove Scripture?

6. What are some of the attacks on Christianity in the media that you've noticed recently?

PART 2 – THE RELIGIONS OF THE FAR EAST

SUMMARY

Hinduism: Among its many deities, three principal gods appear: Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, but there are many others. This faith has the problems of polytheism, idolatry, mythology, discriminatory ethics (the caste system), reincarnation, and the loss of identity in their beliefs regarding the afterlife.

Buddhism: The founder, Siddhartha Gautama, finds the answer to the mystery of life in an Indian forest in 530 B.C: the Eight-Fold Path. Now he was the first “Buddha” or “Enlightened One.” Disciples spread his message to China, Japan, and elsewhere. Its problems parallel those of Hinduism, with Nirvana (“Nothingness”) as the goal. -- **Sikhs:** Founded in India by Guru Nanak, this is a mixture of Hinduism and Islam. Its Golden Temple at Amritsar was desecrated by Hindus – and later avenged.

Confucianism: The great teacher of China, Confucius was a man of wisdom who was converted into a near-deity by later followers – a phenomenon common to Far-Eastern religions. -- **Taoism:** The native religion of China also involves ancestor-worship.

Shinto: The national religion of Japan suffered a setback when Emperor Hirohito stated that he was not a deity. – Besides the problems raised above, all the Far Eastern religions fail the tests for reliability mentioned in the previous segment.

DISCUSSION

1. How can Hinduism be the oldest religion when Judeo-Christianity begins with the Creation?
2. How can people in a modern, scientific age bow down to idols of wood, stone, ivory, gold – or any other material?
3. How “politically correct” is the caste system in Hindu India?
4. Do you know of any proof(s) for reincarnation? Do you wish it were true?

5. Was Buddha's Eight-fold Path good advice or something on which to base a religion?

6. Were the wise sayings of Confucius brilliant observations on life or something on which to base a religion?

7. Did the Japanese regard their emperor as a god-incarnate in World War II?

PART 3 -- RELIGIONS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

SUMMARY

Judaism: Our parent faith is the oldest of the three great monotheisms, and in the Hebrew Bible – Christians call it the Old Testament – are the very foundations for Christianity. Thus its Holy Book, like Christianity's, is also affirmed by outside evidence, and yet Christians outnumber Jews 125 to 1. Hebrews gave the world the precious gift of monotheism, yet suffered catastrophes from foreign invasion and persecution. Today Judaism has three main branches: orthodox, conservative, and reform.

Zoroastrianism: A Persian prophet, Zarathustra, taught that there are two deities: a good god– Ahura Mazda, and an evil god – Ahriman. Although its holy book, the *Zend Avesta*, was largely destroyed when Alexander conquered Persia, this faith survives into the present.

Manichaeism: Another Persian, Mani, founded this sect, borrowing ideas from Christianity but turning them into heresy. He claimed to be the Paraclete – the Holy Spirit – but Mani was flayed alive by the king of Persia. Manichaeism did not survive.

Montanism: Montanus founded this sect in Asia Minor in the late second century. It was a Christian heresy that coupled belief in an imminent return of Jesus with speaking in tongues. It did not survive.

Bahai: Founded in the 19th century, this religious system teaches the ultimate unity of all world religions and its circular temples are familiar today.

DISCUSSION

1. Jews today often speak of Jesus either as a false prophet or a great teacher. Why such opposite views?
2. What is the difference, if any, between a Hebrew, an Israelite, a Jew, and an Israeli?
3. If you've ever attended a synagogue service, describe your experience.
4. Have you ever talked religion with a Jew? If so, how did the conversation go?
5. Do Zoroastrians have a real solution to the problem of evil?
6. Do you see any parallels with Montanism today, especially regarding end-of-the-world prophecies and glossolalia -- speaking in tongues?
7. Do you know anyone who is a Bahai? If so, please comment.

PART 4 – ISLAM A

SUMMARY

The name of the second largest world religion is not Mohammedanism but Islam, Arabic for “Submission [to Allah].” Founded by Muhammad (A.D. 570-632) who claimed to be a prophet in line with Abraham, Ishmael, Moses, and Jesus, he reported a revelation in 610 from an angelic being named Jibril (Gabriel) who announced that there was but one God, and that Muhammad was his prophet. The polytheistic merchants of Mecca forced him to flee to Medina in 622 – the Flight or *Hegira* – which became the year 1 in the Muslim calendar.

The Medinans were more receptive to the new religion, and the first mosque was erected there. Now Muhammad gathered an army of followers who fought Mecca until a truce was reached with its merchant rulers, Muhammad promising that Islam would make pilgrimage to the Kaaba mandatory in Islam. By the time of his death, much of Arabia had abandoned polytheism for Islam.

Muhammad had some respect for “People of the Book” – i.e., Jews and Christians – but no agreement was possible. As for his personal life, Muhammad married twelve wives while limiting others to four. His death proved a crisis for Islam, since he had no male offspring who would have succeeded him as leader. His companion Abu-Bakr became the first caliph (Islamic Leader) in succeeding him, but later leaders would split between those who insisted that he be of Muhammad’s blood line through his daughter Fatima who had married Ali – the party calling itself the Shi’a Ali, while the majority opted for political selection following the *sunna* or Way, hence the Sunnis vs. the Shi-ites today.

DISCUSSION

1. Was the Bible corrupted through mistakes in manuscript recopying, as Muslims claim?
2. What about claimed private revelations to a religious founder? Are they reliable?
3. Was Christianity established by one founder?
4. Did Muhammad do well in turning Arabia from polytheism to monotheism?
5. Since “Allah” is the generic term for “God” in Arabic, do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?
6. Might violence passages in the Qur’an reflect Muhammad’s battles for survival rather than serving as a mandate for violence by some of his followers centuries later?

PART 5 – ISLAM B

SUMMARY:

To this day, the Islamic world is divided between the Sunnis who comprise 84% of its membership, and the Shi'a Ali or Shiites who make up 16 %. Both acknowledge the “five pillars” of Islam: to recite the *Shahada*, to pray five times daily, to give alms, to fast, and to make the *Haj* or pilgrimage to Mecca if able.

The Qur'an, their holy book, though its suras (chapters) are not in chronological order, is regarded much as Christians regard Christ. Clearly derivative from the Old and New Testaments, it also has major differences from Scripture: the flood took place in Moses' time, the Christian Trinity was composed of Father, Son, and the Virgin Mary; and, above all, the claim that Jesus never died at Golgotha. However, in claiming descent from Abraham through his *first*-born son Ishmael, Islam claims kinship with the other “People of the Book.”

Islamic expansion under the caliphs was formidable, its hordes pouring out of Arabia to conquer the Parthians, then all of North Africa, Spain, and half of France. In the east, the Turks converted to Islam and invaded not only Asia Minor, but all of southeastern Europe. The Crusades tried to reverse this, but were a failure. About A.D. 1000, Islamic culture was likely the highest in the world, yet declined after the Mongol invasion in 1288.

DISCUSSION

1. Which would seem more accurate: a holy book written soon after the events reported by eye-witnesses and near eye-witnesses, or a holy book compiled over six centuries later?
2. Could Noah's flood possibly have taken place in Moses' time?
3. Is Mary part of the Trinity?
4. Why is the fact that Jesus truly died so basic to Christianity?
5. Have you ever heard Christianity attacked because of the Crusades? Was that fair or logical?
6. One reason Islam declined culturally since its heyday c. A.D. 1000 was because its thinkers had to put on intellectual blinders. But the Medieval church did the same to Galileo. Is curbing pursuit of the truth ever justified?
7. Have you ever had a dialogue with Muslims? If so, report the experience.

PART 6 - RELIGIONS OF THE WEST

SUMMARY

In the free and independent climate of America, not only could Christians practice their faith openly, but so also could inventors of a variety of sects, some offshoots of Christianity, and others not Christian at all. All are characterized by a founder who claimed revelations or insights known only to him or herself, with followers without such visions blindly trusting those of the founder.

Christian Science originated with Mary Baker Eddy and her book, *Science and Health with a Key to the Scriptures*, published in 1866. Rejecting the reality of disease and death when both so obviously exist, this faith is on the decline in the modern world.

Jehovah's Witnesses: Charles Taze Russell founded the Zion's Watch Tower Tract Society in the late 19th century, which combined misinterpretations of biblical material with millenarian ideas. Their eager proselytizing is puzzling in view of their claim that only 144,000 will make it to heaven.

Mormonism: In the early 19th century, Joseph Smith, Jr., a Western New York teenager, claimed an appearance to him by God the Father and the Son, who said that the Christian scriptures had been corrupted and a corrected revelation would be provided him by the Angel Moroni. *The Book of Mormon* was the result, a document that can not be corroborated by *any* outside evidence whatever, while science and DNA positively refute it.

DISCUSSION

1. It's been said that Christian science is neither Christian nor science. True?
2. Must one disbelieve one's senses in order to believe a religion?
3. Why are Jehovah's Witnesses so diligent in trying to spread their odd views?
4. Why are Mormons so active in spreading *their* odd views?
5. If Mormonism is valid, why did God wait eighteen centuries to correct the Bible?
6. Have you ever talked religion with a representative of Christian Science or the Jehovah's Witnesses? If so, how did you respond?
7. If Mormonism were true, shouldn't there be *some* correlation between claims in the *Book of Mormon* and secular evidence in geography, archaeology, or history?

PART 7 – THE CULTS

SUMMARY

Beware any religious system established by one founder, who claims a special revelation not shared by his followers. To date, all have been wrong. The worst examples would be the founders of cults. (Christianity, by contrast, had many founders – patriarchs, prophets, evangelists, apostles, Jesus himself – a trustworthy throng offering the same message; A welter of cults clutter the religious scene today, many a modern reflection of ancient Gnostic heresy.

The New Age offers crystals instead of the cross; channeling in place of prayer, vortex forces in Arizona rocks, and “pyramid power” in Egypt.

The Unification Church (Moonies) was founded by Korean Sun Myung Moon, who suggests that he is the latter-day Messiah.

Scientology was invented by science-fiction writer, L. Ron Hubbard, and his *Diaanetics* is also fictional religion despite claims to the contrary by his litigious followers.

And there are many other cults, some of which lead to disaster even in this life. Jim Jones’ People’s Temple led to mass suicides by the hundreds in Guiana. The Solar Cult, founded in Switzerland and its counterpart in Montreal ended with all members dead, as did David Koresh’s compound in Waco, Texas and Marshall Applewhite’s followers in Southern California. 1 Timothy 4:3 (“itching ears”) is being fulfilled as never before. At the same time, an impressive amount of fresh evidence from the sciences, even astrophysics, demonstrates that the traditional record, even of Creation, is true.

DISCUSSION

1. What is the difference between a world religion, a sect, and a cult?
2. It’s been said that many large religions are merely cults with a huge following. Comments?
3. Ever converse with a New Ager? What was said?
4. Ever bought a flower from a Moonie?
5. Should Scientology even be called a “Church”?
6. Please read 1 Timothy 4:3 very carefully, and show how it applies today.

PART 8 - A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

SUMMARY

By contrast, Christianity has almost nothing in common with the other world religious systems. Not one of them (with the exception of Judaism) has a holy book that can be supported by outside evidence. Christianity, on the other hand, has much validation from purely secular geographical, archaeological, and literary sources.

From an objective viewpoint, what should be the ideal characteristics of a world religion? A list of them might well include the following:

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- Monotheism: polytheism is philosophically impossible.
- Many founders : not the word of one person and his/her claimed revelation.
- Claims supported by outside evidence: faith must not be divorced from fact.
- High ethical standards: If not, the religion would be disruptive, even demonic.:
- Positive impact on society: Its teachings must help, not hurt, human progress.
- Have a supernatural dimension: Otherwise that faith is not a religion.
- Logic and coherence in its doctrines: Otherwise its beliefs are irrational, blind..
- A high g eschatology offering salvation: Otherwise, why believe anything?
- Certitude of divine grace: Otherwise, a “monstrosity of uncertainty” if good works count toward salvation. (Luther)

Other world religions offer hardly any of these. Christianity offers them all, since this faith was not invented by people but revealed by God.

DISCUSSION

1. “Because of the group with which Christianity is associated, it should seek a different category from ‘religion’.” Agree or disagree?

1. Does it betray lack of faith to test the Scriptures against outside evidence?
2. Can you add more characteristics of a God-revealed faith to the list above?
3. “Christianity is not a religion: it’s a relationship.” Please comment.
4. Is it “politically correct” to critique other religious systems?
5. Is it ethically appropriate to critique other religious systems?
6. Is there a danger among Christians to “flaunt the faith” rather than engage in earnest dialogue with those of other religious traditions?
7. Are you “ready to give an answer to anyone who asks of you a reason for your hope?” as Peter advises? (1 Pet. 3:15)

8. And can you do it with “gentleness and respect,” as he also advises?
9. Must you be asked first, or do some asking on your own?

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Pontius Pilate

The Flames of Rome

A Skeleton in God's Closet

More Than a Skeleton

The Constantine Codex

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A Man Spoke, a World Listened

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See also the website: paulmaier.com

CHRISTIANITY AND THE COMPETITION

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The world horizon is littered with competing religions and philosophies. Which has it right? The bold claims of Christianity or other religious rivals... We'll look at

**In our multicultural age,
should we insist on the
*TRUTH of
Christianity?***

Sacred sources (biblical documents that are reliable and essentially unchanged over time) and secular sources (evidence from geography, archaeology, ancient history, etc.). Many Christians assume that other world religious systems have similar support. Let's take a look...

DISC ONE

1. Intro: The Credentials of Christianity
2. The Far East: Hinduism • Buddhism
Sikhs • Confucianism • Taoism
Shintoism
3. The Middle East: Judaism
Mithraism • Montanism
Manicheism • Baha'i
4. Islam: Part 1

DISC TWO

5. Islam: Part 2
6. Western Religions Part 1:
Mormons • Jehovah's Witnesses
7. Western Religions Part 2:
The Cults • Scientology
8. Conclusion: A Christian Response

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Dr. Paul L. Maier is Professor of Ancient History at Western Michigan University. He has authored over 15 books and videos which have been translated into 18 languages, including the #1 national best seller in religious fiction: *A Skeleton in God's Closet*.

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