

LEADER'S GUIDE

World Religions Basics

Course Lecturer: Dr. Sid Buzzell

If you have not already done so, it is important that you first review our [Leader's Packet](#) for specifics on how to open, facilitate, and close your group sessions.

This Leader's Guide walks you step by step through this lesson. Use as much of the suggested material as you find helpful. Some sections have more than one discussion question or idea so you can choose an option that fits your group. Feel free to add other ideas as well. You may also choose to extend this particular lesson to two or more sessions.

The Leader's Guide contains information that isn't covered in the Listening Guide so the group session adds value to those who have completed the Listening Guide.

Step by Step Through the Study

As you prepare for the session, you will find information you need to lead the discussion questions in this Group Leader's Guide.

Introduction

Introduce the Lesson

Introduce the lesson by reading or paraphrasing the following overview of Lesson 1. “In Lesson 1 we will provide a definition of religion and show its pervasive influence around our globe.”

Ask if there are questions about the session or about preparation for the session.

Review the Lesson Objectives

Review the Lesson Objectives below and briefly comment on any that you feel need elaboration.

By the end of this study, you should be able to

1. Define the term *religion*.
2. Understand a pie chart of different faiths approximating the percentage of adherents around the world.
3. Explain why a familiarity with the five most influential religions is foundational to exploring other belief systems.

While we provide comprehensive **lesson** goals, it is important that your group members also reflect on their own **personal** goals. Even if they choose to elaborate on one of the lesson goals that you provide, it helps to have their own reason for studying the lesson. The group will also have time to reflect on these personal goals at the end of the lesson to see how they have or have not been fulfilled, or perhaps have changed.

After you have explained the two levels of lesson goals, ask if anyone would like to share in a sentence their personal goal for the lesson.

Introduction

1. Open the session by introducing yourself. Then complete the following warm-up activity. Tell the group this is a general “get to know you” introduction, and you will talk about world religions and how we relate them to our own life’s spiritual dimensions later in the session.

If this is your first group session, it’s important that the group members feel comfortable with each other. The following ideas will help create a climate where people feel free and confident that they can ask questions, express opinions, and participate in group activities and discussions.

Depending on the size of your group, this exercise can be done with the whole group. If you have more than eight to ten people, you may need to break into smaller groups.

- Ask each person to find someone they do not know (if possible).
- Give them five minutes to interview each other and ask
 - ◊ Name;
 - ◊ Family — depending on married or not (either birth family or married family);
 - ◊ Where they were born;
 - ◊ Favorite teacher in school, and why;
 - ◊ The thing about them they would least think others in the group would know; and
 - ◊ The most impressive thing they did as a child.
- Have each person introduce the person they interviewed (either to the whole group or to their small group).
- If the group members introduced themselves in small groups, when they have finished ask each person to introduce their partner to the whole group, giving just the name and birthplace.

This does take some time, but if the group remains strangers, it will be difficult in coming sessions to generate discussions. This is not time spent; it is time invested.

2. Discuss the course purpose from the syllabus (printed below). You will introduce the session purpose in a few moments.

“The world is getting smaller all the time. People are moving into your neighborhood that have different religious beliefs than you do. How can you be respectful and genuine with them if you don’t really know and understand what they believe? The World Religions Basics course will provide you with an overview of the religious faiths and practices of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, comparing their beliefs about God, creation, sacred Scriptures, and salvation.”

3. Talk through the course goals listed below (we will review the lesson goals later).

Upon completion of this course, you should be able to

- Define the term “religion.”
- Explain why a familiarity with the five most influential religions is foundational to exploring other belief systems.
- Explain why studying other world religions is important and explore how other religions have affected you and your community.
- Understand some of the problems connected with the naturalistic view of God and creation.
- Explain how Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity view God and creation.
- Explain the central teachings of the sacred texts for Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.
- Explain the views of salvation for Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

Ask if anyone has questions about any of the goals.

Ask group members to talk about their current familiarity with various world religions.

- Ask if anyone knows someone who practices a religion different from their own and how they relate to that person: Converse about religion? Acknowledge the differences? Avoid the person? Feel a need to explain your own religious beliefs? Other?
- Ask if anyone has converted from one religion to another.

Discuss group members' personal expectations for the five group sessions.

- Strictly an academic study of various religions?
- Seeking answers to their own religious questions?
- Searching for a religious belief to adopt?
- It is helpful to discuss what the group members' expectations are and for this group study.
- Stress the fact that the term "basics" is an important one for this course and the group sessions. The course introduces in a very general way what these religions teach and is not in any way intended to be a comprehensive examination of their deeper belief systems.
- Share your own level of expertise as group leader. You may be well versed in one of more of these religions, or you may be largely dependent on the material in the course for your own instruction. Be up front and honest about your own limitations as an "expert" on these religions and adjust your group leadership accordingly. It's okay to be a fellow student who is simply leading a discussion of the course material.
- If, in preparation for leading the discussions, you wish to increase your understanding of these religions you may want to purchase a book on religions. We suggest:
 - ◊ *The World's Religions* by Huston Smith. New York: Harper Collins, 1991. Regarded by many as one of the best books in print on the topic of world religions.
 - ◊ *The World's Religions: Worldviews and Contemporary Issues* by William Young. New York: Prentice Hall, 2010. Provides additional background on the history and culture of each religion.

Discussion

Introduction

Discuss the question from the Listening Guide: "What gives meaning and moral guidance to people?" You can ask members of the group to volunteer to share how they answered the question or you can divide into smaller groups and allow them to share with one another.

(Listening Guide question 1)

Now let's get a little more personal. Ask the group to answer the question, "What are some things

that give meaning or moral guidance to you?”

Ideas for Discussion

- *Parental guidance, peer pressure? Cultural norms? Legal guidance? Standards from a “Higher Power”? Other?*
- *Which do you use most often?*
 - ◊ *What role does religion play in your peers’ decision-making process?*
 - ◊ *What role does religion play in your own decision-making process?*
 - ◊ *How similar is the process you use when you make private, individual decisions and when you make group decisions?*

Introduce the two questions you will discuss in this session:

Ideas for Discussion

- *What do we mean by religion? Ask group members how they use the word religion.*
- *What are some ways religion influences people’s lives? Individually? As a society?*
- *Ask group members to share briefly what their own religious experience has been.*

Ask if anyone would like to offer a definition of religion.

Discuss the definition given in the course lecture.

The following exercise will help the group personalize and internalize the course definition.

- *Print copies of the definition for each member of the group.*
- *Read it or ask someone else to read it to the group.*
- *Ask if someone can summarize their understanding of what it means to the group.*
- *Analyze the definition by points:*
 - ◊ *A religion is a set of beliefs and practices*
 - » *often centered upon specific supernatural and moral claims about reality, the cosmos, and human nature,*
 - » *often codified as prayer, ritual, or religious law.*
 - » *Note that this point focuses on “beliefs” and on “practices.” The first subpoint elaborates on beliefs (“often centered ...”) and the second on practices (“often codified ...”)*
 - ◊ *Religion also encompasses*
 - » *ancestral or cultural traditions, writings, history, and mythology,*
 - » *as well as personal faith and religious experience.*
 - » *Note that this point presents two sources of these beliefs. The first subpoint names authoritative sources (“ancestral or cultural”) and the second names personal, individual sources (“personal faith and religious experience”).*
 - ◊ *The term “religion” refers to both*
 - » *the personal practices related to communal faith*
 - » *and to group rituals and communication stemming from shared conviction.*
 - » *This point presents two kinds of practices related to the beliefs. The first subpoint names “personal practices” and the second names “group rituals.”*

Divide your group into smaller groups of twos and ask them to rephrase each of the three parts of the definition into their own words. How would they say what the definition is saying, but in a way that sounds like them saying it?

Ask the small groups to share their restatements and then see if you can construct a working definition that group members agree with and is quotable by group members.

The following exercise will prepare people to think in categories the course will follow in discussing religions:

Ideas for Discussion

- *Of the five major religions we will study in the coming lessons, do you find any of them more interesting than the others? Why?*
- *The lesson said we would study four aspects of each religion. Does anyone remember what those four aspects are?*
- *Of the four aspects, are any of them more interesting to you than the others? Why?*

If possible, reconstruct the pie chart on an overhead projector screen or on a piece of flip-chart paper so you can discuss it together.

Ideas for Discussion

- *Identify the five major religions you will discuss in the course.*
- *Explain why Judaism, though the smallest, is considered a “major” religion.*
 - ◊ *Because Christianity and Islam are sourced in the Hebrew Scriptures*
- *Explain why Judaism and Christianity are studied together as “Judeo-Christian.”*
 - ◊ *Because, though different, they are both sourced in the Bible.*

List the five major world religions and ask students what they know about each. Keep the discussion general at this point.

(Listening Guide question 5)

- *Judaism – 1%*
- *Christianity – 32%*
- *Islam – 21%*
- *Hinduism – 14%*
- *Buddhism – 6%*

Mention that we can divide the five religions into two groups:

- *Monotheistic — belief in one God who is personal and relational. Each defines God differently but each is based on the concept of a living, relating God.*
 - ◊ *Judaism*
 - ◊ *Christianity*
 - ◊ *Islam*
- *Pan or polytheistic — a more vague and less clearly defined concept of a higher power*

- ◇ *Hinduism*
- ◇ *Buddhism*

All five religions are subdivided within their own religious systems.

- *Judaism is divided into Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist.*
- *Christianity is divided into Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant.*
- *Islam is divided into Shi'ite, Sunni, and Sufi.*
- *Hinduism is generally divided into “devotional” Hinduism, “philosophical” Hinduism, and a number of reform movements.*
- *Buddhism is divided between the Theravada, the Mahayana, and the Vajrayana Buddhist traditions.*

As people attempt to make sense of their life, many find security and hope in their pursuit of God or gods or another higher order that helps answer major questions.

Ask what major issues the group believes humans are grappling with that religion helps them answer.

Ask what three or four major questions they wrestle with as individuals.

Past and Projected Growth of Major Religious Groups		
Religion	% of population in 2010	Projected % in 2050
Christians	31.4	31.4
Muslims	23.2	29.7
Unaffiliated	16.4	13.2
Hindus	15.0	14.9
Buddhists	7.1	5.2
Folk Religions	5.9	4.8
Other Religions	0.8	0.7
Jews	0.2	0.2
Source: “The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050” PEW RESEARCH CENTER		

Discuss the four aspects of each religion this course will examine:
(*Listening Guide question 6*)

Ideas for Discussion

- *How do we understand God?*
- *What is the origin of everything?*
- *What sources do we use to answer life’s ultimate questions? What are our sacred scriptures?*
- *What do we believe about “salvation”? From what, to what, and how?*

Essentially, people are asking their religions to answer the questions:

Ideas for Discussion

- *Who are we?*
- *Where did we come from?*
- *Why are we here?*
- *What's next?*

The following exercise is designed to give students insight into how God views a person's religious experience:

Ideas for Discussion

- *Read Deuteronomy 6:4–9. Since this is the first session, some students may not have a Bible with them, so you may want to make copies of the text for them.*
- *Either write the following questions on a chalkboard or large sheet of paper or make copies. It's important for students to have the questions in front of them.*
- *In light of Deuteronomy 6, have students discuss the following questions.*
 - ◇ *What was supposed to be the central focus of Israel's religion?*
 - ◇ *How often were they to remember their religious ideals?*
 - ◇ *What part(s) of their life were to be affected by their religious beliefs?*
 - ◇ *What is the central focus of your religious life? God? Other people? Religious practices? Other?*
 - ◇ *What differences does your religion make in your day-to-day life when you're not in a religious setting?*
 - ◇ *Are you satisfied with how your religion influences your life?*

Application

If someone were to ask you if you are “religious,” what would you say?

Reflection

It is important to promote this reflection time in each session of the course. Ask the members to think back over what they have just experienced and form at least one point they can add to their understanding of God's Word. These insights may or may not match what they expected at the beginning of the lesson. Have them reflect on those affirmations or changes.

Also emphasize that this part of the group session could be an important time for participants to

minister to other members of the group. Not everyone “sees” the same emphases and something one person highlights may be an added insight to others in the group.

Close in Prayer

You may want to ask if anyone is dealing with something they would like prayer for. Depending on the size of your group, it would be meaningful to pray for each person by name.

The Melting Pot

Introduce the Lesson

Introduce the lesson by reading the overview of Lesson 2. “In Lesson 2, we will examine the illustrations of the melting pot (i.e., the blending of cultural distinctives) and six principles of relationship of interacting with other faiths.”

Ask if there are questions about the session or about preparation for the session.

Review the Lesson Objectives

Review the Lesson Objectives below and briefly comment on any that you feel need elaboration.

By the end of this study, you should be able to

1. Explain why studying other religions is important to you.
2. Explore how other religions have affected you and your community.
3. Explain and apply six principles of relating when discussing differences.

While we provide comprehensive **lesson** goals, it is important that your group members also reflect on their own **personal** goals. Even if they choose to elaborate on one of the lesson goals that you provide, it helps to have their own reason for studying the lesson. The group will also have time to reflect on these personal goals at the end of the lesson to see how they have or have not been fulfilled, or perhaps have changed.

After you have explained the two levels of lesson goals, ask if anyone would like to share in a sentence their personal goal for the lesson.

Introduction

This exercise is designed to start people talking about attitudes toward other religions. You can either conduct the exercise with the whole group or break into subgroups.

1. What experiences have you had when meeting people of another religion?
2. After that experience, are you more comfortable with people who hold that religion or less comfortable? Why?

3. Discuss your attitude toward the homogenization of your world. Are you open to people who practice other religious beliefs?
4. What do you think are the greatest advantages and disadvantages of being exposed to people who believe and practice other religious convictions?

Discussion

Read the quote in the opening paragraph from Harold Netland's *Encountering Religious Pluralism* and discuss the following questions:
(*Listening Guide question 1*)

Ideas for Discussion

- *How does this growing pluralism influence you and your neighbors?*
- *How do you think people in your neighborhood or city respond to the growing influence of various religions in our country or community?*
- *What is your response to the growing influence of various religions in (y)our community?*

Be Genuine

Ask if anyone can think of any teaching or models from Jesus' life that can teach us about relating to people who practice another religion.

- *Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4*
 - ◊ *He opened with a request for her to help Him.*
 - ◊ *He listened to her and responded intelligently to what she said. Genuine dialog.*
 - ◊ *He stated the differences between their beliefs but did so in a kind and accepting manner.*
 - ◊ *Not only did He not offend her, but He convinced her that He was the Messiah.*
- *When Jesus was asked about who the neighbor is that we should love as ourselves, He told the parable about the good Samaritan — someone with a different religious belief (Luke 10).*
- *Jesus related kindly and helpfully to the Roman centurion who asked for help (Matthew 8:5–13).*
- *Paul's missionary journeys were in Gentile territories where many religions were practiced. He went to them out of compassion and love for them.*
- *James taught Christians to “not hold your faith in our Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism” (James 2:1) and cited the Royal Law as evidence for his command (James 2:8–13).*

Ask someone to summarize what this teaches us about our attitude toward people who differ from us in religious convictions.

Should Christians view people with other religious beliefs differently than non-Christians do?

Why or why not?

Ideas for Discussion

- *What does Matthew 18:18–20 command Christ’s followers to do?*
- *What did Jesus call His followers in Acts 1:8? And where are His followers to “be” what He commanded them to “be”?*
- *Read John 3:1–7 and discuss Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus. How emphatic was Jesus about our need to be born again?*

What should a Christian’s stance be toward those who do not practice the Christian religion?

How did Jesus go about responding to His conviction that everyone needed to heed His message about salvation from sin and being born again?

- *He was definite, and compelling, but He was gentle.*
- *A careful reading of the Gospels shows that the only people who were offended by Jesus were those who were threatened by His claim to be God’s Son. He was not offensive to them, but they took offense at Him because He refused to deny what He knew was true.*

Ask if group members agree or disagree with the following statement: “The question before the Christian is not whether we should build a relationship with people who do not accept Jesus’ message. The question is how do we relate to them in a winsome manner.”

Before we can form genuine friendships with those who hold to other beliefs and/or disagree with our beliefs, we have to examine our attitude toward those “others.”

Ideas for Discussion

- *Discuss how people in general tend to feel toward those who are “others” because of ethnicity or religious beliefs.*
- *Was anyone in your group raised with prejudice? Or had a bad experience with someone in another ethnic or religious group?*
- *How does the fact that every human is created in God’s image influence us?*
- *How does the fact that every human is so valuable to God that Jesus died for him or her influence us?*

Spend some time focusing on this foundational question of building a genuine relationship with a person who disagrees with you.

- *Martin Buber talks about an “I-Thou” relationship in contrast to an “I-It” relationship and emphasizes how important it is to relate to others as genuine, equally human beings and not as objects, regardless of differences between us.*

Ask the group for ideas about how we can show genuineness to others.

If the group doesn’t suggest the following points, you may want to include them.

- *We can carry on genuine dialog with others about what they believe. Here are five elements essential to creating a climate where dialog can be sustained.*

- ◇ *Genuineness: Each presents self to others without façade or fake front (Ephesians 4:15, 25). Paul modeled genuineness in Romans 7:21–24.*
- ◇ *Love: Each expresses nonpossessive love for the other (1 Corinthians 13).*
- ◇ *Presentness: Each is “engaged” in the conversation (Proverbs 18:13).*
- ◇ *Spirit of Mutual Equality: Regardless of society’s roles and rules, each treats the other as an equal (Philippians 2:2–4).*
- ◇ *Supportive Psychological Climate: Each feels “safe” to be honest, transparent – even to disagree or challenge (Romans 12:10; Galatians 6:1–2).*
- *Invite people into our home for coffee or for dinner.*
- *Be neighborly, lend tools, share recipes, help with tasks, etc.*
- *Ask about their family – nuclear and extended. Use the principle, “To be interesting, be interested.”*
- *Pray for them.*

Be Respectful

Ask the group how they feel about having a serious talk about religious beliefs with someone who practices another religion: Afraid? Not interested? Willing? Excited? Other?

Ask, “If you had a conversation with a person who has a different religious belief, what would your intention be? To learn? To refute? To convert the person to your belief? Other?”

Ask the group to share some ways we can show respect to another person.

- *Examine our listen/talk ratio: How much do we listen in relation to how much we talk? How much of our talk is about us and how much about them?*
- *Examine our question/answer ratio: How many questions do we ask (about them) in relation to how many we answer (about ourselves)?*
- *Examine our responses to others’ concerns and ideas.*

Discuss the importance of focusing more on similarities before focusing on differences.

- *Regardless of religious differences we are all concerned about providing for our family, safety for ourselves and our children, feeling we have a place in our community, being respected and esteemed, etc.*
- *Before we are Christian or Jewish or Muslim or Hindu, we are humans.*
- *Seek to understand the strengths of a person’s ethnic and religious preferences before expressing an opinion. Ask questions and respond to the answers.*

Discuss how someone who believes others should accept their religious beliefs can do so without violating the principle of being respectful.

Be Humble

Discuss the concept of humility.

- *One definition from Google, “A modest or low view of one’s own importance.” Then it lists “modesty” and “meekness” as synonyms.*
- *Read Romans 12:1–3 and discuss what verse 3 states as the task of the renewed mind. “Let no one think more highly of himself than [literally] it is necessary to think.” Then verse 3 continues: “But to think so that we have sound judgment because God has given to each of us a measure of faith.” The passage cautions us against pride (“thinking more highly than it is necessary to think”) but then urges us to carefully think (“but to think”) about what God has created in us and to be honest about the strengths He has given us.*
- *Read Philippians 2:3–4, which adds a second component to humility.*
 - ◊ *Verse 3, “regard others as more important than yourselves”*
 - ◊ *Verse 4, “look out for the interests of others”*
- *Combining Romans 12 and Philippians 2, we see that humility is not thinking less of ourselves but thinking more of others. When comparing ourselves with others, we don’t achieve humility by thinking less of our own importance but by raising our thinking about how important, capable, intelligent, and competent others are.*

Ask the group how showing respect for someone else teaches us humility.

(Listening Guide question 8)

- *We may discover that they know a great deal about their religion and can teach us. We can become their students and humbly learn from them. Humility breeds respect.*

Summarize Harold Netland’s comments and discuss them.

“To understand non-Christian religions would require making careful empirical studies of shamanism, animism and polytheism in local traditions.” He continues by saying we have to be “sensitive to the remarkable diversity within particular religions” so that we don’t oversimplify them.

The religions we study in this course are enormously complex — much more so than Christianity, which is perhaps the simplest of all religions to understand. Learning the complex systems of beliefs some people comprehend and faithfully practice in their pursuit of religion is truly humbling. We may disagree with sincere, practicing Jews, Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhists, but we must admire their commitment to what they believe.

Be Fair

This paragraph cautions us about focusing on the difficult aspects of another’s religion. Recent Muslim terrorism is a case in point. Hindus and Muslims have battled one another for centuries.

But the Christian church has its own history of intolerance and bloodshed. The Crusades (a series of attacks by European Christians against Muslim forces in the Holy Land in the eleventh century); the Spanish Inquisition (thirteenth-century persecution of Jews in an attempt to force

conversion to Christianity through torture); the Salem witch trials; the use of Scripture to defend slavery and the suppression of women are part of the church's history. Every religion has its difficult historical moments we don't want to admit or talk about.

Discuss why it's a good idea to avoid ridiculing or scolding people of other religions because of the intolerance in their religion's history.
(*Listening Guide question 10*)

Read and discuss Matthew 7:1–5.

As much as possible, keep the conversation on the positive, and admit that Christianity has as much “bad history” as other religions. Each religion has regrettable incidents that are difficult to discuss.

Be Discerning

Read this paragraph and discuss how the paragraph provides a balance that helps us avoid being “fair to a fault.”

“While we need to be fair, we must also be discerning. We can acknowledge common ground among religions, but we must not overlook the differences between us. There are differences — and they do matter. We need to think carefully about the popular idea that the only test of a religion's validity is whether or not it helps you. This view is expressed by some modern spiritual movements that do not recognize the existence of a personal God or believe that He has revealed Himself through sacred Scripture.”

Without being offensive or arrogant, and in a spirit of mutual inquiry, it is important to state the unique teachings that are *sine qua non* to Christianity.

- *Jesus clearly claimed that He was God incarnate. He was more than a great prophet (John 10:22–31; Luke 22:66–71).*
- *Jesus was crucified to pay the penalty for the sins of mankind (John 3:16–17).*
- *Jesus was raised from the dead and is alive today (Acts 1:1–3; 1 Corinthians 15:12–20).*
- *Jesus clearly stated that He is the only way to inherit eternal life (John 14:6).*

Read and discuss the Dalai Lama's quote:

“Everyone feels that his or her form of religious practice is the best. I myself feel that Buddhism is best for me. But this does not mean that Buddhism is best for everyone else” (Encountering Religious Pluralism, 216–17).

Ask if a Christian can believe about Christianity what the Dalai Lama believes about Buddhism.
(*Listening Guide question 13*)

Ideas for Discussion

- *What does Jesus' statement in John 14:6 indicate His response to the Dalai Lama would be?*

Be Discreet

How do you think we can be honest and disagree with someone without offending them or putting up barriers?

You may want to have members of your group role-play each of the principles discussed so far. Have them complete the sentence, “We obviously don’t agree here, but…”
(*Listening Guide question 14*)

Finish the statement in a way that specifically reflects genuineness. Then ask another person to complete it to reflect respect; then another, humility; another fairness; and another, discerning.

When we surface genuine disagreements between religious teachings in conversation with others.
(*Listening Guide question 15*)

- *Is it okay to acknowledge disagreement?*
- *Is it necessary to acknowledge disagreement?*

Read 2 Timothy 2:24–26; and Ephesians 4:15 and ask how these passages inform our approach to disagreement.

Read Ephesians 4:29–32 and discuss principles for talking with those with whom we disagree.

Discuss the following guiding principles this section of the lesson on “Be Discreet” teaches.
(*Listening Guide question 16*)

- *“A gentle but persuasive attitude reflects the Spirit of God who influences but never coerces.”*
- *“Winsomeness is an important factor for those who want to share mutual respect.”*
- *“[H]umility, courtesy, and discretion [are] especially important when someone asks us what we believe about the eternal destiny of people who die in a faith other than our own.”*
- *In reference to Jesus’ exclusive statement in John 14:6 about being the only way, “[E]ven with such convictions, we must be careful not to condemn others.”*

Exercise—Exploring the Six Principles

This exercise is designed to explore the six principles that guide how we talk with people of other religions than ours.

1. Divide your group into six smaller groups.
2. Assign each group one of the “Six Principles of Relationship” from Lesson 2. Ask each group to take the next 10 minutes to review the principle assigned to them and be prepared to teach the rest of the group
 - *What the main idea of the principle is.*

- *What the lesson suggested as some ways to be guided by this principle.*
- *Any additional suggestions your group members have about how to implement it.*
- *Any cautions or dangers you see if this principle is not followed.*
- *Any cautions or dangers you see if this principle is overdone.*

Exercise: Seeing the Six Principles in Action

This exercise provides opportunity for your group members to “see” the six principles in action.

1. Divide your group into smaller groups of two people each.
2. Assign each two-member group one of the six principles they studied in the lesson.
3. Give them each five minutes to review that principle and get its points clearly fixed in their mind.
4. One person in the group will play the role of a Christian and the other will take on the role of a person who practices one of the other religions you are studying in the course.
5. One member will talk to the other member about his/her religion, violating the principle they were assigned in as many ways as possible. Encourage humor, but emphasize substance. These are more than skits; they are learning exercises.
6. Then, depending on the size of your group,
 - *Either have each team join another team and perform their dialogs for each other and then debrief, discussing with the other team what the person violating the principle could or should have done differently if they had used the principle; or*
 - *Have each team of two present their skit to the whole group and debrief as described in the previous bulletpoint.*

Ask and discuss the following questions:

- *Do you believe it is always possible to live peacefully with neighbors of differing religious (or political) differences?*
- *How can we increase the probability that we can live peacefully with those who disagree with us?*

Exercise: A Christian’s Role in the “Melting Pot”

This exercise is designed to encourage thinking about a Christian’s role in the “melting pot.”

1. Divide your group into two groups. Or if a larger group, into a series of smaller groups of four or five and then divide the smaller groups into two groups.

2. Assign one group Matthew 28:16–20 and the other group Acts 1:6–9. Assure them that, in spite of their similarities, these are two separate events. Matthew 28 occurred on a mountain in Galilee and Acts 1:8 occurred on the Mount of Olives outside of Jerusalem. Matthew 18 is known as the Great Commission, and Acts 1:8 as the Final Commission.
3. Ask each group to prepare a five-minute presentation on what their passage commissions Christians to do in the world.
 - *Identify what Jesus commanded His disciples to do in the passage.*
 - *Include any details surrounding that main command (Matt. 28 — Make disciples; Acts 1:8 — Be my witnesses).*
 - *What does the passage say about the Christian’s ultimate goal in a relationship with a person who is not a Christ-follower?*
 - *How important is that for a Christian in a world of tolerance and acceptance?*
 - *How would a Christian incorporate the six principles we learned in this lesson while responding to Jesus’ commission in the passage?*
4. As a whole group, discuss ways we can effectively obey Jesus’ Commissions and use the six principles presented in Lesson 2.
5. Pray for God’s courage, wisdom, sensitivity, and compassion as we talk with people who do not know Christ as Savior.

Application

Give students time to talk about their personal relationship with Jesus. This can be done best in groups of two or three.

- *Gospel means good news! Have you personally experienced the good news of God’s salvation?*
- *Is it really good news to you? Have you ever told this good news to anyone else? In Acts 1:8 Jesus gave His final commission to His followers and He said, “You will be my witnesses.” Would you consider praying for one person by name with whom you could share this good news?*

Reflection

It is important to promote this reflection time in each session of the course. Ask the members to think back over what they have just experienced and form at least one point they can add to their understanding of God’s Word. These insights may or may not match what they expected at the

beginning of the lesson. Have them reflect on those affirmations or changes.

Also emphasize that this part of the group session could be an important time for participants to minister to other members of the group. Not everyone “sees” the same emphases and something one person highlights may be an added insight to others in the group.

Close in Prayer

You may want to ask if anyone is dealing with something they would like prayer for. Depending on the size of your group, it would be meaningful to pray for each person by name.

Introduce the Lesson

Introduce the lesson by reading or paraphrasing the following overview of Lesson 3. “In Lesson 3, we will examine the view of God and creation as held by naturalism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.”

Ask if there are questions about the session or about preparation for the session.

Review the Lesson Objectives

Review the Lesson Objectives below and briefly comment on any that you feel need elaboration.

By the end of this study, you should be able to

1. Understand some of the problems connected with the naturalistic view of God and creation.
2. Explain how Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity view God and creation.

While we provide comprehensive **lesson** goals, it is important that your group members also reflect on their own **personal** goals. Even if they choose to elaborate on one of the lesson goals that you provide, it helps to have their own reason for studying the lesson. The group will also have time to reflect on these personal goals at the end of the lesson to see how they have or have not been fulfilled or perhaps have changed.

After you have explained the two levels of lesson goals, ask if anyone would like to share in a sentence their personal goal for the lesson.

Discussion

Ask group members what they think most people in their culture believe about God.

Ask what they would say if someone asked them how they define God and/or explain what He is like.

Ask the group how they would answer a ten-year-old child if she asked how everything came into

being.

The following exercise is designed to stimulate the group's thinking about God and creation.

Ideas for Discussion

- *Open this discussion to the whole group or break into smaller groups of four or five.*
- *Ask the group members to reflect on their own education and what they were taught about origins.*
- *Did you or anyone else in your class present a creationist view in a school class?*
- *If not, what do you think the response of the teacher and class would have been to that view?*
- *If so, what was the teacher and/or class's response to that view — and to the person who presented it?*
- *How “safe” do you think a student is in presenting a creationist view in a public high school or college science class today?*
- *If you used smaller groups for this discussion, ask the group members to share what they discovered with the larger group, and then have an open discussion.*

Review the definition of religion from Lesson 1.

- *A religion is a set of beliefs and practices, often centered upon specific supernatural and moral claims about reality, the cosmos, and human nature often codified as prayer, ritual, or religious law. Religion also encompasses ancestral or cultural traditions, writings, history and mythology, as well as personal faith and religious experience. The term “religion” refers to both the personal practices related to communal faith and to group rituals and communication stemming from shared conviction.*

Then ask what it is about naturalistic and evolutionary science that would make it similar to a religion.

(Listening Guide question 2)

- *The lesson's answer to the question is, “Although secularism is not usually thought of as a world religion, it does compete with religious answers to explain the origin, meaning, and destiny of human existence.”*

In what way(s) is naturalism unlike a religion?

- *The key difference, from the lesson's definition of religion, is found in the phrase, “often centered upon specific supernatural claims about ...”*
 - ◊ *The clearest religious statement about origins is the opening sentence of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament): “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). The third word in the Hebrew Bible is Elohim (it is translated “God” and is the fourth word in the English translation). The acceptance or rejection of that word determines how one reads the rest of the Old and New Testaments. If there is no God (Elohim) the Bible's message about creation cannot be valid.*

The Naturalistic View of God and Creation

The major point that separates the naturalistic view from a purely religious view is its starting point that there is no God. If there is no Creator, there can be no creation.

Ask what the lesson suggests are some necessary conclusions a naturalistic view leads to.
(*Listening Guide question 3*)

- *There is no personal God for humans to relate to.*
- *Humans are the accidental product of a random evolutionary process.*
- *A naturalistic view opens us to the rejection of ultimate purpose or meaning.*
- *A naturalistic view also leads to the conclusion that our innermost feeling and thoughts are the products of chemical processes in the physical brain.*
- *At death we go out of existence.*
- *There will be a time when all life will be snuffed out into eternal nothingness.*

Note: You may want to stress that the purpose of the lesson is to explore the ideologies of various religions and not to debate them. This discussion on evolution and creation can be quite inflammatory and could derail your group discussion. The purpose of the lesson is not necessarily to “prove” creationism. It is to understand how different systems of religious and nonreligious people (in the case of naturalism) understand God and creation.

Gallup polls from 1982 to the present show that only 10 percent of Americans polled believe that life evolved strictly by chance and natural forces.

Ask the group:

- *Is this finding consistent with the conversations you have with people?*
- *Do you think more or less than 10 percent of people you associate with every day would strongly agree with a naturalistic view of the universe’s origin or of human origins?*

Ask group members what their own view is: Naturalistic evolution? Creation? Confused? Don’t care? Haven’t thought about it?

(*Listening Guide question 5*)

- *Stress once again that the point of the discussion is not debate or an effort to convince anyone of a particular belief. It is to explore and discover. Since the purpose of the course is defining various religions, viewpoints and not debating them — which requires a different kind of study than this course is designed for — the group’s time is more productively used if you discuss for clarity rather than debate which is superior. Understanding what each religion believes should be kept as the focus and not proving which is right, wrong, or superior.*

Ask how clearly individuals can state and explain their view of God and of creation.

(*Listening Guide question 6*)

Take a few minutes to ponder the following questions from the lesson:

Ideas for Discussion

- *What accounts for the fact that we can think about life’s meaning and communicate our thoughts?*
- *Why do people everywhere realize that certain things are morally right and others wrong, and that these distinctions are quite similar all over the world?*

- *Although all of us sometimes act against our own conscience, why is it that we all have a deep inner awareness that we ought to be better than we are?*
- *Why is it so hard to erase from our inner being the feeling that we are in some way accountable to our Maker?*

Do these questions affirm or challenge your current belief about God?

(Listening Guide question 7)

You may want to ask the group to consider the complexity of our own bodies: that is, how our eyes function, how our body processes the food we eat, the complexity of our brain and how it processes information, etc.

(Listening Guide question 8)

The amazing complexity of the mental, physical, and emotional creature that each human is provides an up-close and personal illustration of the design, order, and brilliance of the universe we inhabit. Many scientists in every field of study are strongly committed to God and to His act of creation. Their study of science brings them closer to God rather than raise doubts about Him.

You may want to discuss then next two paragraphs, beginning with, “Fred Heeren,” and with, “It’s important to see.” They support the fact that good science and good religion are not only not mutually exclusive but also highly compatible.

Discuss the difference between a professing atheist and a practical atheist.

What is a practical atheist? According to the lesson,

(Listening Guide question 10)

- *“Even though they identify with the religion of their culture, they give so little consideration to the existence of a personal God that they have more in common with naturalistic materialism.”*

Ask, “What, then, would a practical theist be like?”

(Listening Guide question 11)

- *Not only expressing a belief in God but also living as if He is real and His teachings are true.*

The Hindu and Buddhist views of God are very complex and could lead to a long and confusing discussion. The lesson introduces these religions’ teachings in very basic terms and provides an introduction to how they think about God and creation. In this discussion guide we will provide some additional definitions but stress the fact that neither the lessons nor the group sessions are designed to do more than introduce these religions’ teachings at more than an introductory level.

The Hindu View of God and Creation

Read each paragraph in this section and stress what each teaches.

Hinduism sees God and the universe as one eternal essence.

- *Hindus do not make a separation between God and the universe.*

It is a diverse and complex religious system that includes everything from atheists to theists.

- *There are many and varied ideas about God and gods and “no-gods” among Hindus.*

“But even Hindu theists, although sometimes speaking of the god Shiva as the sole creator and sustainer of the universe, do not believe in a transcendent, infinite, eternal, and personal God who relates to the universe as Creator and Sustainer.”

- *Ask group members to compare and contrast the biblical and Hindu views of God.*

Ask the group to work on how they would state the lesson’s next paragraph in their own words:

“To some degree, all Hindus speak of an eternal, infinite, neutral, all-embracing reality they call Brahman. He (or it) is described as without personal attributes or qualities.”

- *Discuss what this paragraph contributes to the previous one’s teaching about the Hindu concept of God.*
- *Although believing in a transcendent, infinite, neutral, all-embracing reality called Brahman, this reality is not a personal God in the same sense that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam define God or Allah.*

Although Hindus are by no means united on a single view of Brahman, they generally concur that Brahman is eternal, conscious, irreducible, infinite, omnipresent, and the spiritual core of the finite, changing universe.

Discuss the following paragraph from the lesson: “To sum it up: Hinduism sees God and the universe as one eternal entity. It does not speak of God as a personal being distinct from the material world.”

A few additional notes on the Hindu view of God.

- *The Upanishads (one of Hinduism’s foundational documents) speak repeatedly of Brahman as the one supreme reality from which all other reality comes.*
 - ◇ *Brahman is the sole principle of unity and is eternal, infinite, and unknowable.*
 - ◇ *Brahman is often presented as impersonal.*
 - ◇ *Brahman is beyond human capacity to understand and beyond the capacity of words to describe.*
 - ◇ *Most Hindus believe that Brahman is present in every person as the eternal spirit or soul called the atman. Atman, in Sanskrit, means “eternal soul.”*
 - ◇ *Hindus worship one Supreme Being, though by different names. Because of their diverse views of God, Hindus are tolerant of other religions, respecting the fact that each has its own pathway to the one God.*
 - ◇ *In Hinduism, God (or Brahman) is inside each and every soul, in the heart and consciousness, waiting to be discovered.*
 - ◇ *Knowing the One Great God in this intimate and experiential way is the goal of Hindu spirituality.*

Hindus believe that the universe was created out of the parts of the body of the cosmic man Purusha when his body was sacrificed. The four classes of Indian society come from his body: the priest from his mouth, the warrior from his arms, the peasant from his thighs, and the servant from his legs.

The Buddhist View of God and Creation

Buddhism grew out of and is, in some senses, a reaction to Hinduism. Although there are similarities between the Hindu and Buddhist concept of a higher being, Buddhism, like Hinduism, has various understandings of a supreme being.

Buddhism, like Hinduism ... As this paragraph in the lesson states, different sects of Buddhists define the idea of god or gods differently — ranging from atheistic to theistic. An attempt to discuss God from the perspective of a theistic worldview can be frustrating because God does not occupy the central place He has in monotheistic religious teachings.

- *Buddhism, like most Asian religions, is essentially nontheistic. God is not a major point of interest in Buddhist teachings. In fact, in some senses the idea of God conflicts with some fundamental Buddhist beliefs.*
- *But we should not, therefore, conclude that Buddhists refute God's existence as some worldviews do. It may be more accurate to say that the topic of God is of little interest to the Buddhist.*

Buddhism does not teach that the world was created. It has existed forever and continues to recreate itself. The world exists in a state of continued repetition of birth and death. Buddhists teach that there is no absolute truth when it comes to the beginning of the world. The universe and its inhabitants are infinite and the world systems continually appear and disappear within the universal structure.

The Islamic View of God and Creation

Discuss the paragraphs in the lesson that describe the Muslim view of God.

The most effective way to understand the Muslim view of God for those who read the Bible is to compare and contrast what the Muslim believe about Him with the biblical view of God.

Read the first paragraph of the lesson and discuss the individual points it makes about God. Ask the group if they agree or disagree with each point about the Muslim belief in God.

“Muslims, like orthodox Jews and Christians, believe in an ...

- *Eternal*
- *All-powerful*
- *Personal God*

And see Him as

- *Creator and*

- *Sustainer of all that exists.”*

In the lesson, the next two paragraphs discuss Muslim views of creation. Skip to the fourth paragraph to complete the discussion of God and then come back to the two middle paragraphs in a separate discussion of how Muslims view creation.

Paragraph four:

Muslims believe that God is so great that humans cannot presume to know Him.

- *The Bible describes God as infinite and beyond the capacity for humans to completely understand (Ps. 145:3; Isa. 55:8–9; Rom. 11:33–34).*

On the basis of His own will, He exercises His right to be merciful to some and unmerciful to others.

- *The Bible teaches that God Himself redeemed humans from sin’s penalty and that, whoever believes will have eternal life (John 3:16–17). Without getting into a discussion of God’s sovereign election and human free will, stress that the Bible does not teach that God chooses to be unmerciful, but that each human has the power to choose or reject God’s offer of salvation.*

Nothing in His nature demands that He be loving, kind, and righteous in every situation.

- *Read 1 John 3:16 and ask what John teaches us about God and love.*
- *Read Psalm 103:13 and ask what the psalmist said about God’s kindness.*
- *Read Numbers 23:19 and ask what Moses said about God’s righteousness.*

According to the Qur’an (Surah 37:94), “If God wishes to draw someone close to himself, then He will give Him the grace which will make that person do good works.”

- *The Bible does teach that God gives us His grace and mercy (Eph. 2:8–9) and the Holy Spirit convinces us of sin and draws us to God (John 16:8–11).*

If He wishes to reject someone and put that person to shame, He will create sin in him.

- *Read James 1:13–14 and discuss how the biblical view of God and this statement from the Qur’an differ.*

God creates all things good and evil. God creates people as well as their actions: He created you as well as what you do.

- *Discuss this statement in light of James 1:13–14.*

The greatest contrast between the Muslim and Christian views of God focuses on the doctrine of the Trinity and on Jesus’ deity. The centerpiece of Muslims’ view of God is that God is One. The Hebrew (Deut. 6:4) and Muslim views of God reject the Christian view of the Holy Trinity and believe that calling Jesus God violates that foundational belief.

Jesus, however, clearly stated and defended His deity (John 10:24–32). Muslims respect Jesus as a great prophet but adamantly deny His deity.

Summary: Muslim belief in God makes it abundantly clear that Allah is One. He is unique and indivisible. The Qur’an stresses strict monotheism and explicitly rejects polytheism and separates itself from the Christian concept of the Trinity and Jesus’ divinity. Jesus is a great prophet, but he is not God.

Read paragraphs 2 and 3 of the lesson under the heading, “The Islamic View of God and Creation” and discuss the Muslim view of creation.

Like the other two monotheistic faiths, Islam holds that God created moral beings with the capacity to worship and serve Him.

- *Ask if group members agree or disagree with this statement.*
- *The doctrine of imago Dei, or God’s image, supports this statement. Read Genesis 1:26–27 and discuss the fact that part of the image of God is the capacity to know and love Him and to communicate with Him.*

The section of the paragraph that addresses the creatures referred to as “jinn” is similar enough to the biblical doctrine of angels, demons, and Satan that, while not the same in some of its details, is still quite similar.

Read the third paragraph from the lesson, “The creation story in the Muslim holy book…”

Ask if someone can explain why the Muslim view of creation is like and unlike the Jewish and Christian views.

(Listening Guide question 20)

- *They are alike because Muslims honor the biblical prophets*
- *They’re unlike because Mohammad claimed that he was the final prophet through whom God spoke and that his revelation corrected and superseded the records of the biblical prophets’ revelations. His claim was not that the revelations given to the biblical prophets were wrong, but that their followers corrupted their revelations.*

The Judeo-Christian View of God and Creation

Genesis 1–2 clearly states the Hebrew and Christian view that God is the creator of all things.

Hebrews 11:3 further states that God created what is visible out of what was not visible and is the basis of the belief in creation *ex nihilo* (out of nothing).

According to the Bible, God is one in essence.

- *Deuteronomy 6:4 stresses that God is One.*
- *Jesus repeated Deuteronomy 6:4 as part of His answer to what the greatest commandment is, “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one’” (Mark 12:29).*
- *So both Judaism and Christianity teach God’s unity.*

Although the Old Testament suggests a plurality in this oneness, the word translated “God” in Genesis 1 and many other places in the Old Testament is the plural noun, *Elohim*.

The New Testament clearly teaches that the one true God exists in three coequal, coeternal persons.

- *The New Testament, while continuing to teach that God is one, also teaches that Jesus is God (John 10:24–32) and that the Holy Spirit is God (Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 2:10–11).*

Jews and Muslims regard this belief in the triunity of God as a denial of His unity and as incipient polytheism.

The Trinity is one of the notoriously difficult Christian doctrines to explain. Don't feel a need to clarify how God can be one and three at the same time. Many have tried, and most have failed.

The Judeo-Christian view of God sees Him not only as personal but also knowable.

- *Psalm 19:1–6 & Romans 1:19–20 state that God reveals Himself through His creation.*
- *Second Timothy 3:16–17 teaches that God has revealed His will through the Scriptures.*
- *First Corinthians 2:7–12 teaches that God has given His followers the Holy Spirit to teach them about His nature and will.*

Both the Old and New Testament say that God's plan was to reveal Himself.

- *Psalm 19:1–12 teaches that God reveals Himself in nature, and He reveals His will in the Scriptures.*
- *Second Timothy 3:16–17 and 2 Peter 1:20–21 teach that God revealed his nature and will in the Scriptures.*

...but also through a promised Messiah.

- *Hebrews 1:1–3 teaches that God spoke to Israel and that He spoke again to “us” in His Son.*
- *Jesus taught His disciples that “he who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9; see 14:5–11).*
- *Through nature, through the Scriptures, and through His Son (the Logos), God is revealing His nature and His will to the humans He created in His image.*

Discuss with the group the content of the last two paragraphs, which summarize the Judeo-Christian view of God.

You may also want to discuss the questions:

Ideas for Discussion

- *How is the Muslim view of God like the Jewish and the Christian views?*
- *How is it unlike each?*
- *Is the Muslim view of God more like the Hebrew view or like the Christian view?*

If time permits, break the group into smaller groups of two.

- *Ask them to summarize in a sentence or two how they would tell a ten-year-old child what the Judeo-Christian God is like.*
- *What is the difference between the Jewish and Christian concept of God?*
- *How is the God of Scripture different from*
 - ◊ *The Hindu God?*
 - ◊ *The Muslim God?*

Exercise: Exploring Views of God and Creation

This exercise is designed to help your group explore each of the five views of God and creation a bit more deeply.

1. Divide your class into five groups.
2. Assign each group one of the religion's views of God and creation.
3. Give the groups ten minutes to discuss the religion's view they were assigned, using the transcript from the course material and their answers on the Individual Study Guide for Lesson 3.
4. Ask one or more of the members of the Judeo-Christian group to join each of the other groups and try to convince them, using the principles from Lesson 2, that the biblical view of God and creation is the correct one. Ask the members of the group to argue back from "their" views of God and creation that were presented in this lesson.
5. After letting these discussions go on for five minutes, stop the discussion and debrief the groups. Discuss the following:
 - *How clearly did the members of the religious groups presented their positions?*
 - *How well did the Christian group members presented and defended their position?*
 - *How effectively did both groups use any or all of the principles from Lesson 2?*
 - *Identify reasons the Judeo-Christian position is believable and why people from other religions may not find it believable or acceptable.*
 - *On a chalkboard or large sheet of paper, summarize principles for discussing the Christian view of God and creation with people who do not accept the Christian view.*

Exercise: The Bible's View of God and Creation

This exercise focuses on the Bible's view of God and creation.

1. Divide into small groups of three or four (or into at least three groups). If your group is very small, you may want to do this as a single group. If you have more than three groups, subdivide your groups into smaller groups.
2. Assign each group one of the three passages: either Genesis 1:1–5 or Genesis 2:4–7 or Hebrews 11:1–3.
3. Remind them that these passages do not tell us when or how God created the *universe* and their purpose is not to debate those questions. These passages focus on who created everything. But each of these three brief passages focuses on a different aspect of the biblical teaching on creation.

4. The groups' task is to form a statement about their passage's view of God and his creation activity.
5. Come together and have each small group present what their passage teaches about God and creation.
6. As a whole group, generate a few summarizing principles about God and creation from these three passages.

Application

If someone asked you what you believe is the most important thing for someone to believe about your God, what would you say?

Reflection

It is important to promote this reflection time in each session of the course. Ask the members to think back over what they have just experienced and form at least one point they can add to their understanding of God's Word. These insights may or may not match what they expected at the beginning of the lesson. Have them reflect on those affirmations or changes.

Also emphasize that this part of the group session could be an important time for participants to minister to other members of the group. Not everyone "sees" the same emphases and something one person highlights may be an added insight to others in the group.

Close in Prayer

You may want to ask if anyone is dealing with something they would like prayer for. Depending on the size of your group, it would be meaningful to pray for each person by name.

Beliefs About Sacred Scriptures

Introduce the Lesson

Introduce the lesson by reading or paraphrasing the following overview of Lesson 4. “In Lesson 4, we will examine the religious texts considered sacred by each of the following: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.”

Ask if there are questions about the session or about preparation for the session.

Review the Lesson Objectives

Review the Lesson Objectives below and briefly comment on any that you feel need elaboration.

By the end of this study, you should be able to

1. Name the sacred scriptures for each of the following religions respectively: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.
2. Explain the central teachings of the sacred texts for each of these faiths.

While we provide comprehensive **lesson** goals, it is important that your group members also reflect on their own **personal** goals. Even if they choose to elaborate on one of the lesson goals that you provide, it helps to have their own reason for studying the lesson. The group will also have time to reflect on these personal goals at the end of the lesson to see how they have or have not been fulfilled or perhaps have changed.

After you have explained the two levels of lesson goals, ask if anyone would like to share in a sentence their personal goal for the lesson.

Introduction

Open the session with the following questions from the lesson that surface the subject of how we discover knowledge we can trust and live by.

Read the four questions posed in the lesson that people ask their religion to answer

- How do followers know about the Ultimate Reality claimed by Hinduism and Buddhism, the Allah of Islam, or the Yahweh of Judeo-Christendom?
- Where do they go to learn the principles and rules by which to live?
- Where do they find an authoritative source for answers to their questions about the

meaning of life?

- Where do they find an authoritative source for answers to their questions about what happens after death?

Ask group members

- How they think their peers answer them.
- How they think people in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity answer them.
- How they answer them

If your group is small enough to discuss as a group, ask each student to select the question that is most important to them. Ask them to tell

- What the question is.
- Why it's important to them.
- How they answered it.

If you have a larger group, ask students to meet in groups of four and five to complete the exercise. You may want to prime the pump by going first. If you use smaller groups, open the discussion to the whole group after the small group discussions.

Discuss the following questions about ultimate authoritative answers people can trust.

- How do followers find an Ultimate Reality (a higher being or god[s]) they can trust?
- Where do various people go to learn principles and rules to live by?
- Where do we find authoritative answers to life's complex questions?
- How do people answer questions about what happens after life is over?

Discussion

The Hindu View of Sacred Scripture

Hindus follow a number of sacred writings.

The four Vedas are the primary texts of Hinduism, and they also had an influence on Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Traditionally the text of the Vedas was considered as old as the universe. The Rig Veda, the oldest of the four Vedas, was composed about 1500 BC. The Vedas contain hymns, incantations, and rituals from ancient India and are among the most ancient religious texts still in existence.

The Upanishads (written between 800 and 400 BC) elaborate on how the soul (atman) can be united with the ultimate truth (Brahman) through contemplation and meditation, as well as the doctrine of Karma, which is the cumulative effects of a person's actions.

- *Karma is the Sanskrit word for “action” and is the law that explains human behavior as a series of causes and effects that determine a person’s life course. Karma is driven by a person’s desires and is what binds us to the continuous cycles of life, death, and rebirth. The actions in this life determine (or “cause”) the condition of our situation in the next life (which is the “effect” of our actions).*

The Epics (written 540 to 300 BC) are the national stories of India. The Bhagavad Gita, a portion of one of the two epics (dating from about 400 or 300 BC), is a central text of Hinduism and is one of the most popular of all Hindu scriptures. The Gita discusses selflessness, duty, devotion, and meditation, integrating many different threads of Hindu philosophy.

Dharma is a central Hindu concept. The lesson states that dharma is “understood as the principle of cosmic harmony that pervaded all things. It thus becomes an all-embracing ideology, encompassing ritual and moral behavior” (Vinoth Ramachandra, *Faiths in Conflict*, 65).

Dharma is the Sanskrit word for “duty” or how things are intended to be. It may also be translated as “law.” Hindus have traditionally believed that “social dharma” (or the duties that appropriately govern life in one’s caste) and “eternal dharma” (or the duties that govern our life in relation to the gods) defines the duty required to liberate one from the cycle of rebirth.

Read the paragraph from the lesson that begins, “Hinduism is not an ethical system...” and discuss the question:

How is Hindu moral teaching different from the Judeo-Christian teaching about morality?
(*Listening Guide question 6*)

- *Judeo-Christian teaching rejects a caste system and teaches equality for all (Galatians 3:28; James 2:1–13).*
- *Judeo-Christian teaching requires a single moral standard for all those who follow God, and it is clearly defined in both the Hebrew (Old Testament) and the Christian (both Old and New Testaments) Scriptures (Matthew 12:46–50).*

The Hindu Scriptures encourage moral behavior through the law of retribution (the principle of karma).

- *The word karma is Sanskrit for “action” or “work.” Karma explains human behavior as the chain of causes and effects that determines the quality of one’s next life in the cycles of rebirth.*

If a person lives a good life, his next will be better than this one. If a person does not live well in this life, the next will be worse.

Ideas for Discussion

- *Read Ephesians 2:8–9 and discuss how the Hindu incentive to live a moral life is like and unlike the Christian incentive.*
◊ *Which is preferable? Which is most apt to result in a better life after this one?*
- *Read James 1:12 and discuss what incentivise the Christian to live a good life.*

The Buddhist View of Sacred Scriptures

Present the three major Buddhist traditions and compare and contrast them. The explanations below are very limited and are not intended to be exhaustive treatments of this highly complex religious system.

- *Most texts date Siddhartha's birth around 563 BC.*
- *He left no teachings in print, but his followers gathered his teachings and passed them on orally. They were not formally written down until a century and a half after his death.*
- *The Buddha taught for forty-five years and produced an enormous body of ideas. By the time followers began to solidify his teachings, there were disputes about what he actually taught and two major Buddhist traditions arose.*
 - ◇ *The Hinayana Buddhists (also called Theravada Buddhists) follow the Pali canon (the Buddhist scriptures) more rigidly; focus on individual pursuit of nirvana; and eliminate any presence of a higher being to help humans in their quest for release from the cycles of life. They claim Buddha's statement, "Be lamps unto yourselves; work out your salvation with diligence."*
 - ◇ *Mahayana Buddhists opened Buddha's teaching to a larger audience and claimed to be "Buddhism for the people." They adopt Buddha's additional teachings that are not contained in the Pali canon; pursue nirvana as a community activity rather than individually; and look outside their personal ability to higher powers for assistance in their pursuit of nirvana.*
 - ◇ *Vajrayana Buddhism is a third Buddhist tradition. It grew out of the Mahayana community and is known as a more esoteric, philosophical tradition. It developed in the third century AD and claims it is the culmination and completion of the other two Buddhist traditions. It became the major Buddhist tradition in Tibet and is most famously represented by the Dalai Lama.*

Briefly present each of Buddhism's "Four Noble Truths" and ask the group if they agree or disagree with Buddha's observations about life.

1. *Life is essentially made up of disappointment and suffering.*
2. *Most suffering is the result of our desires for pleasure, power, and continued existence.*
3. *To experience the cessation of suffering and pain, we must abandon our desires.*
4. *The way to stop desiring is to follow the "Noble Eightfold Path."*
 - ◇ *Right views: A proper understanding of reality, largely as taught by Buddha.*
 - ◇ *Right intentions or aspirations: Freeing one's mind from sensual desires.*
 - ◇ *Right speech: Not speaking falsely or using harsh or vulgar language.*
 - ◇ *Right conduct: Not killing other creatures, or stealing, no illicit sex, no intoxicants.*
 - ◇ *Right livelihood: Forbids occupations that do not conform to Buddhist ideals.*
 - ◇ *Right efforts: Avoid any unwholesome action that will have negative karmic influence and pursue beneficial deeds. Teaches constant attention to actions.*
 - ◇ *Right awareness or mindfulness: Maintain a steady attention to thoughts and feelings and keep the mind in control of the senses and impulses rather than being driven by them.*
 - ◇ *Right concentration or meditation: Bring the mind into clear focus through the disciplined process of deep meditation and contemplation on the true Self, or the Being itself, the human's deepest and truest self.*

Discuss how Buddha's four ethical laws and eightfold path agree and disagree with group

members' own views of life.

Read the lesson's quote from Buddha, "He who meditates earnestly, he who is pure in conduct and mindful of every action, he who is self-restrained and righteous in his life, the fame of such a one shall increase." And then read Psalm 1:1–3 and ask how they agree and disagree.

- *They agree on the importance of meditation and right living.*
- *They disagree about what one should meditate on. The psalmist insists that we meditate on God's teachings, while Buddhists leave the focus of meditation to the person who is meditating.*

You could also discuss the Buddha's second quote in the lesson as it agrees/disagrees with Jesus' statement in Matthew 7:12.

The Islamic View of Sacred Scriptures

Although most Christians would agree with many of the Buddha's teachings, ask the group to name two or three ways Buddhism and Christianity are in sharp contrast.

- *God is secondary or irrelevant to Buddhist thought and is central to Christian belief.*
- *The Pali canon teaches self-salvation; Christianity teaches that salvation is God's gift.*
- *Both teach the importance of moral behavior, but Buddhists believe it is achievable through human effort. Christianity teaches it is possible only through dependence on the Holy Spirit's ministry.*

The Muslim faith is based on a series of "revelations" that Muhammad said he began receiving about AD 610.

- *Muhammad was born in AD 570 or 571 and in his fortieth year while meditating during the month of Ramadan the angel Gabriel appeared and commanded him to "Read in the name of thy Lord." For the next twenty-three years he continued to receive similar revelations.*

He (Muhammad) himself did not read or write, so he memorized the revelations and others put the content of these revelations into written form after he died.

Muslims believe that these "revelations" were a word-for-word transmission of the heavenly "Mother of the Book."

- *For Muslims, the Holy Qur'an is the direct word of Allah and is the final unadulterated record of God's direct message to all humanity. Allah has spoken through many prophets, but his definitive revelation was given to Muhammad in the seventh century AD. Muslims teach that Muhammad's revelation did not begin, but only completed Allah's revelation of his will. These revelations were given to all people through prophets beginning with Adam and Noah. Muslims recognize the scriptures of Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians as legitimate but corrupted revelations from Allah. The Qur'an, however, is Allah's final and definitive revelation, and it was given to all humanity through Muhammad.*

Muslims venerate the Qur'an so highly that they often refer to it as the eternal Word (a biblical term that is applied to Jesus Christ in the New Testament).

Ideas for Discussion

- *Combining this paragraph and the next five in the lesson, list some ways the Qur'an and the Bible are similar and different.*
- *Of the differences you listed, which one is most important to you?*

Here is some additional information about the Qur'an for your reference.

- *The Qur'an is holy and sacred and irrevocable.*
- *It cannot be translated into any language other than Arabic, for it is God's own speech and would be distorted through translation.*
- *It contains 114 chapters (surahs) and is about the length of the Christian New Testament.*
- *The contents of the Qur'an include hymns of praise to Allah, exhortations to pious living, stories of God's involvement with people through other prophets, guidelines for personal and social morality, and warnings about the coming Day of Judgment.*
- *Muslims recite verses from the Qur'an when they pray; and they sing, chant, and meditate on its contents.*
- *The Qur'an is the foundation for all aspects of Muslim life and is the basic law in Muslim societies.*
- *To touch "the Book" a Muslim must be ritually pure.*
- *Sharia, an Arabic word meaning "the right path," refers to traditional Islamic law. The Qur'an sets down basic standards of human conduct but does not provide a detailed law code. Only a few verses deal with legal matters. During his lifetime, Muhammad helped clarify the law by interpreting provisions in the Qur'an and acting as a judge in legal cases. Thus, Islamic law, the Sharia, became an integral part of the Muslim religion.*

The Sharia comes from the Qur'an, from the Prophet Muhammad's teachings and interpretations of those teachings by certain Muslim legal scholars. Around the year 900, the classic Sharia had taken shape. Islamic specialists in the law assembled handbooks for judges to use in making their decisions. The classic Sharia was a body of religious and legal scholarship that continued to develop for the next thousand years.

Discuss how Christians relate to God's moral laws. You may want to read portions of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) and discuss how closely your group believes most Christians (themselves?) adhere to Jesus' teachings.

- *The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–7)*
- *Interpersonal relationships (5:21–26)*
- *Purity of mind (5:27–30)*
- *Loving others (5:38–48)*
- *Trusting God (6:25–32)*
- *Judging others (7:1–5)*

Muslims believe that whether something is right or wrong depends on the will and decisions of Allah. They believe Allah has the right to decide what is right or wrong, based on his own will.

- *Discuss how the Muslim belief in Allah's right to determine right and wrong and the biblical teachings*

about God's right to determine right and wrong differ and agree.

◇ *Muslim teaching and biblical teaching — both Old and New Testament agree here.*

Muslims accordingly emphasize obeying and submitting to Allah more than meditating on a personal relationship with him. The Muslim views Allah as a master but not as a father.

Ideas for Discussion

- *Read Romans 8:12–17, 31–35 and discuss the differences between the Muslims' relationship with Allah and the Judeo-Christian relationship with God.*

Read Psalm 19:1–3 and ask how God has revealed Himself to humans.

Read Hebrews 1:1–3 and John 14:9 and ask how God has revealed Himself to humans.

Read 2 Timothy 3:15 and ask how God has revealed His will to humans.

Read 2 Peter 1:20–21 and ask where the Old Testament prophets received the content for the Old Testament messages.

- *Remind the group that Moses, the man God spoke through in writing Genesis through Deuteronomy, is referred to as a prophet (Deut. 18:17–18). Prophets wrote all the Old Testament books, Genesis through Malachi.*
- *The Old Testament texts were copied many times, giving us numerous ancient copies of each Old Testament book. Comparing these texts that were copied over the centuries gives textual critics (scholars who carefully study ancient texts) great confidence that the copyists so accurately copied these texts that the copies we use today are accurate and communicate the same message the original manuscripts contained.*

Ask if someone can explain what the Masoretic text is and why it is important.

- *The Hebrew text of the Old Testament is called the Masoretic text because in its present form it is based upon the Masora — the Hebrew, textual tradition of the Jewish scholars known as the Masoretes (or Masorites). The Masoretes were rabbis and scholars who, between AD 500 and 900 copied and preserved the ancient biblical texts.*

Ask if anyone can describe what the Dead Sea Scrolls are.

- *In the late 1940s some Old Testament scrolls were discovered in a cave near the village of Qumran in the Dead Sea region. The scrolls contain copies of Old Testament books that date from the second century BC. They agree so thoroughly with the Masoretic text that they provide further confirmation of how accurately the Old Testament copyists reproduced the Old Testament texts.*

What is the relationship between the Masoretic text and the Dead Sea Scrolls?

(Listening Guide question 24)

- *The agreement between the Masoretic texts from the eighth century and the Dead Sea Scrolls copied eight hundred years later demonstrates how carefully the Jewish rabbis and scholars copied the texts of the Old Testament books. We can confidently assert that what we read today in our Old Testament is precisely what the original texts contained.*

Talk through the following material taken from the Our Daily Bread Christian University course SF105, Bible Basics, Lesson 6 to confirm the textual accuracy of the New Testament:

- *The New Testament texts, like the Old, have been copied thousands of times, but have also been kept from error. New Testament textual critics have carefully studied the thousands of available manuscripts and they assure us that the texts we read today are identical to those written by the New Testament writers. There are minor differences in spelling, but no discrepancies have been found that in any way influence the meaning of a Bible passage in the Bibles we read today.*

Fortunately we have an enormous number of copies to examine. And they are amazingly close to their date of origin. Consider these comparisons with other ancient texts that are accepted as valid copies of their originals. We have

- *10 manuscripts of Caesar's Gallic Wars. Earliest date: AD 900*
- *20 manuscripts of Livy's History of Rome. Earliest date: AD 400*
- *8 manuscripts of Thucydides' History. Earliest date: 900*
- *8 manuscripts of Herodotus' History. Earliest date: 900*
- *14,000 manuscripts of New Testament writings. Earliest date: AD 125*

Discuss the fact that two Gospels were written by eyewitnesses (Matthew and John), one by a disciple of an eyewitness (Mark gives us Peter's recollections), and one by a medical scientist who based his writing on thorough research, including many eyewitnesses (read Luke 1:1–4).

To help students explore how confident they are in the Christian Scriptures and improve their ability to communicate their views to others, complete the following exercise.

1. The Lesson 4 Listening Guide, under the "Judeo-Christian view of sacred scripture" asked you to
 - *"Write a paragraph that would explain to a high school student why she can trust the validity of the Old Testament text she would read today."* and to
 - *"Write a paragraph to this same high school student that explains why she can trust the New Testament. Use specific evidence in your explanations."*

Review your answers to those two questions from the study guide and polish one of them to present to the group. Encourage the group to have at least one presentation from the Old Testament and at least one from the New Testament. Give them a few minutes to prepare their paragraph.

2. Ask each student to read the paragraph they selected to the whole group, or to a smaller group if the whole group is too large.
 - *Ask the other students in the group to respond to the paragraphs read.*
 - *Remind them to use the six principles from lesson 2 as they respond to the paragraphs.*
 - *Encourage them to monitor each other's responses on the basis of those principles.*

This exercise has a double focus. Students discuss why we can depend on the Old and New

Testament Scriptures *and* practice principles of effective interaction.

3. As a whole group, using a chalkboard or large sheet of paper, construct a “best paragraph” for both the Old Testament and the New Testament that the whole class can personalize and use. You may want to write one on the board that is rough and not complete to give the discussion a start.

Exercise—Exploring How Each Religion Views Its Sacred Scriptures

This exercise is designed to help students see how each religion views its own sacred scriptures.

1. Break the larger group into groups of four.
2. Ask the group to assign one member of the group to lead the discussion on one of the religious views of their sacred scriptures.
3. Give the groups five minutes for individuals to review their notes on the religion they were assigned by the group.
4. Work through the lesson, giving each individual five minutes to explain the view he or she was asked to represent.
5. Debrief by asking the whole group if anything came up in their small-group discussion that would be valuable for the whole class to hear.
6. Open the discussion to the larger group for a few minutes on each religion’s view.

Ask what difference it makes that Christians believe the Bible is God’s Word.

- *Since God is the Author of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20–21) the authority and veracity of the Bible’s message is as trustworthy as the One who wrote it. We believe the Bible is completely trustworthy in what it teaches.*

The following exercise is designed to help students clarify what the Bible says about its role as the Christian Scriptures.

1. Divide your group into two groups. Assign one group 2 Timothy 3:16–17 and the other group 2 Peter 1:20–21. If the groups have more than five in each group, subdivide each group into smaller groups of five. So you will have a group or groups of five students discussing each of the passages.
2. Give each group five to eight minutes to study the passage.

Ask the 2 Timothy group to identify

 - *Who the author of Scripture is.*
 - *What the Bible is profitable for.*

Ask the 2 Peter group to identify

- *Who actually wrote the Scriptures.*
- *What their source was.*
- *Describe the process that was used to give us the Bible.*

3. Ask the 2 Peter group or groups to present their findings first, and then the 2 Timothy group(s).
4. After both groups have presented, ask the whole group to make summarizing statements from these two passages about the Bible.
5. Conclude with a brief teaching about how we got the Bible and what its purpose is.

For many Christians the most powerful evidence of the Bible's truth lies in the fact that it "works" for them. They have experienced Jesus' new birth and discovered that their life is becoming a new life (2 Cor. 5:17). They are experiencing the Holy Spirit's presence and activity in their life (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

Application

Close with a group discussion about how God is at work in members' lives.

Reflect on the teachings of the Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim scriptures and discuss contrasts with God's message in the Old and New Testaments.

Reflection

It is important to promote this reflection time in each session of the course. Ask the members to think back over what they have just experienced and form at least one point they can add to their understanding of God's Word. These insights may or may not match what they expected at the beginning of the lesson. Have them reflect on those affirmations or changes.

Also emphasize that this part of the group session could be an important time for participants to minister to other members of the group. Not everyone "sees" the same emphases and something one person highlights may be an added insight to others in the group.

Close in Prayer

You may want to ask if anyone is dealing with something they would like prayer for. Depending on the size of your group, it would be meaningful to pray for each person by name.

Beliefs About Salvation

Introduce the Lesson

Introduce the lesson by reading or paraphrasing the following overview of Lesson 5. “In Lesson 5, we will examine what is meant by salvation and how it is attained in each of the following religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.”

Ask if there are questions about the session or about preparation for the session.

Review the Lesson Objectives

Review the Lesson Objectives below and briefly comment on any that you feel need elaboration.

By the end of this study, you should be able to

1. What is the moral dilemma of the human race?
2. How does the believer in this religion find salvation from this dilemma?
3. What is the responsibility of God and what is the responsibility of the individual to attain salvation?

While we provide comprehensive **lesson** goals, it is important that your group members also reflect on their own **personal** goals. Even if they choose to elaborate on one of the lesson goals that you provide, it helps to have their own reason for studying the lesson. The group will also have time to reflect on these personal goals at the end of the lesson to see how they have or have not been fulfilled or perhaps have changed.

After you have explained the two levels of lesson goals, ask if anyone would like to share in a sentence their personal goal for the lesson.

Discussion

Ask the group to discuss the final sentence in the opening paragraph of the lesson that states, “followers of the various religions touch upon the question closest to the heart: what is going to happen to me after I die?”

Ideas for Discussion

- *How do they think most people they know would answer that question?*
- *How do they honestly answer the question, and how confident are they that the answer is the right one?*

The Hindu View of Salvation

Hindus see themselves and their gods as manifestations of an inexpressibly great and impersonal Brahman. They see themselves as extensions of God rather than as unique and distinct image bearers of Brahman.

- *Because Brahman is the one unifying supreme reality from which all other reality comes, humans too are connected to Brahman.*
- *Every living being is an eternal soul called the atman, which is one with Brahman.*

Ask the group to discuss the difference between the Hindu concept of being one with Brahman and the biblical concept of being God's image bearer (Gen. 1:27).

(Listening Guide question 2)

- *The God of the Bible created humans with the capacity to know and love Him, but we are not part of Him or extensions of His being.*

Hindus accordingly do not speak of personal salvation from sin or an expectation of conscious everlasting bliss. Salvation for the Hindu is liberation from a potentially endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Ideas for Discussion

- *Ask the group how they would respond if a Hindu were to ask them why Christians don't accept the teaching of reincarnation.*
 - ◇ *In the Bible even God's great prophets and faithful followers died (Heb. 11:13, 21–22).*
 - ◇ *The Bible clearly states that it is appointed for each person to die (Heb. 9:27).*
 - ◇ *Christianity teaches that the human soul is eternal and lives on forever, but not in a reincarnated form. We will be resurrected to a new, spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:42–44).*

Hindus live under the ongoing law of karma, the Hindu doctrine of retribution.

Ideas for Discussion

- *Karma means "action" in Sanskrit. The principle of karma views human behavior as a chain of causes and effects and binds humans to the cycle of rebirth. The actions a person performs in life determine the quality of life that person will experience in the next cycle of life they will experience.*
- *Ask the group what the Bible says determines the nature and quality of the "next life."*
 - ◇ *Romans 8:1–4 teaches that those who are "in Christ" are not condemned.*

Discuss the following paragraph's description of the "threefold" path. Ask group members to compare it with what they understand their own goals to be for practicing their religious teachings. If most are Christian, ask them to compare and contrast each of the steps on the

threefold path with what the Bible teaches about the Christian life.

The only way to escape this endless cycle (of rebirth) is to walk the threefold path of

- *works — careful observance of Hindu rites and ceremonies;*
- *knowledge — coming to the realization that we are not real, personal entities but only manifestations of Brahman, the one reality;*
- *devotion — ardent worship of one of the Hindu deities accompanied by loving relationships with family, superiors, co-workers, and friends.*

Summarize the discussion by asking, “What are some of the differences between Hindu ‘salvation’ and Christian ‘salvation’?”

(Listening Guide question 4)

The Buddhist View of Salvation

Read the first two paragraphs of this section from the lesson and ask the group to list the ways it says Hinduism and Buddhism are similar.

The ultimate goal of following Buddha’s “Four Noble Truths” (see Lesson 4) is to reach the state of nirvana. This state is often described as “a blowing out,” like what we do to the flame on a candle.

- *The root meaning of the word nirvana is “to blow out” and refers to the extinguishing of the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion. When wisdom has overcome these emotional and psychological impediments, the mind becomes free and one is no longer subject to rebirth. Whether nirvana is absolute cessation or an ineffable transcendental state has been a subject of debate among Buddhist philosophers. Buddha said, “One thing and only one thing do I teach, suffering and the cessation of suffering.” Buddhist thought does not teach that nirvana is a heavenly state, and it is not, as Hinduism teaches, the absorption of the soul (atman) into Brahman (absolute unity). The Buddha claimed that “nirvana is the ultimate happiness” and Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana Buddhists agree that anyone can attain nirvana if they follow the Buddha’s instructions.*

Ask the group members how their ultimate goal is like and unlike nirvana.

The Islamic View of Salvation

Muslims believe in a personal God, a bodily resurrection of the dead, individual judgment, and two destinies — heaven for some and hell for others.

Ask the group how this paragraph’s description of what Muslims believe agrees with and differs from their own beliefs.

- *As described here, they are parallel to Christian teaching.*

The following paragraph from Lesson 5 describes the Muslim view of what happens when a person dies. Discuss with the group how it agrees and/or disagrees with their own views. Bible

passages accompanying each claim may help in your discussion.

While the Qur'an itself says little about the intermediate state between death and resurrection, other Islamic literature goes into much detail.

- *The soul that leaves the body at death quickly returns to it.*
 ◇ *1 Thessalonians 4:13–18*
- *In the grave, an angel asks, “Who is your Lord, what is your religion, who is your prophet?”*
 ◇ *Luke 23:40–43*
- *If the answer is, “God, Islam, and Muhammad,” the person is given a window into heaven and can savor its delightful scent.*
 ◇ *Romans 10:8–10*
- *If the soul gives the wrong answer, it feels the hot winds of hell.*
 ◇ *2 Corinthians 5:10 ; Revelation 20:11–12*

Ask what Islam says a person must do to enter heaven.
(Listening Guide question 9)

Ask how that is similar to and how it is different from their understanding of what a person must do to enter heaven.

(Listening Guide question 10)

- *Refer to Romans 10:8–10 again for a biblical answer to the question (also Eph. 2:8–10).*

Review the Muslim beliefs about heaven and hell and compare/contrast it with group members' views.

Muslims also have varying views of heaven and hell.

- *Some see heaven as a place of sensual delights; others focus on the pleasure of being with God.*
- *Some see hell as a terrible place; others believe the descriptions in the Qur'an should be taken figuratively and that the punishment won't last forever.*

Ask group members how they describe heaven and hell.

(Listening Guide question 12)

- *The Bible describes heaven (John 14:1–3) and hell (2 Thess. 1:8–9). Numerous other references in Scripture refer to both as real.*

Discuss the following statement from Lesson 5 and ask students if they agree or disagree with this teaching from the Qur'an and why they do so.

The Qur'an does not see human nature as sinful. It teaches that people are basically good. Muslims believe that people sometimes sin because they are weak and forgetful, not because they are bad.

Ask the group if they think any parts or all of the statement from the Qur'an agrees or disagrees with the Bible's teaching.

- *Reference Genesis 3; 6:5; Romans 1:21–25; Romans 3:23*

Ask the group to consider as they view their own life and the lives of others if the evidence supports the Qur'an's view of human nature.

(Listening Guide question 13)

Their humans sins, therefore, do not displease God. He knows that because humans are mere creatures they will sin sometimes.

- *Reference Genesis 6:6; Romans 1:18*

But if he chooses to show favor to individuals, he will forgive them as they are. And if he chooses to withhold his favor, he will not forgive. Because sin is not the issue, there's no need to be redeemed and born again.

- *John 3:3–7; 16–18; Isaiah 59; Proverbs 28:13*

Discuss how these passages agree or disagree with what the three sentences from Lesson 5 quoted above, state about Islamic belief.

The following list of requirements for salvation from Lesson 5 is divided into two sections below. Ask the group what the difference is between the two lists.

To be saved, a Muslim must affirm

- *That God is one, view Muhammad as the greatest of all prophets, accept the Qur'an as inspired revelation*
 - ◊ *This list, if we change the names "Muhammad" and "Qur'an" is similar to essential Christian beliefs. They are not essential to salvation, but Christians do believe the first of the Ten Commandments; that Jesus is the single name by which we are saved; that the Bible is God's inspired revelation.*
- *[Muslims must also affirm] that God decrees everything that happens, recite the Islamic confession, heed the calls to prayer, keep the fasts, give alms, and make one pilgrimage to Mecca. Some Muslims also require belief in jihad (holy war).*
 - ◊ *This list, though corresponding in a few cases to less "essential" activities, not required for an orthodox belief in Christianity, does include some activities that are important to the Christian life: God's sovereignty, knowledge of Christian doctrine, prayer, celebration of certain important Christian traditions (baptism, communion); fasting; tithing and generous giving. A pilgrimage to a holy place such as Israel is not necessary.*

Note: The lesson correctly lists military jihad as required by some Muslim teachers. Some other Muslim teachers explain jihad more broadly:

- *The Arabic word "jihad," at its base, means struggling or striving. As Muhammad used the word it had a number of meanings and can refer to both internal and external efforts to live as a faithful Muslim. Military jihad is intended to be a last resort to protect the Muslim faith against others only if legal, diplomatic, or political means fail. In such cases, women, children, and invalids must never be harmed. Mohammad declared after a military encounter that "We have returned from the minor jihad to the major jihad." From armed confrontation with an enemy of Islam, they had returned to the more*

peaceful but equally difficult battle for self-control and spiritual growth.

This paragraph lists many activities a Muslim must perform to gain access to heaven.

Ideas for Discussion

- *Read Ephesians 2:8–9 and discuss which option the group prefers: a works-based theology or a grace-based theology.*
- *Ask if they think it would be easy or difficult for them to personally fulfill the Muslim requirements to enter heaven.*

Many Muslims can only say, “I hope it is God’s will to receive me into heaven,” because they don’t know if their efforts to uphold the Muslim requirements are sufficient to gain access to God’s favor.

Discuss the following with the group:
(*Listening Guide questions 15–18*)

Ideas for Discussion

- *How comfortable would you feel about dying if you were a Muslim?*
- *How comfortable do you feel now about your eternal destiny?*
- *Why do you feel as you do about your existence after you die?*
- *Do you feel it’s possible for anyone to feel confident about what happens to them after they die? Why or why not?*

The Judeo-Christian View of Salvation

For the Bible’s teaching about salvation ...

Read Isaiah 59:1–2; Romans 3:23; and Romans 6:23 and discuss the human dilemma — that because of sin we are separated from God.

Read John 3:16–17 and discuss God’s response to the human dilemma.

How the God of the Bible Sees Us

The God of the Bible is slow to ...

- *Humans are created in God’s image and therefore of great importance to him (Gen. 1:27).*
- *God loves us with His divine love (John 3:16).*
- *God has given us an innate sense of right and wrong (Rom. 2:14–15).*
- *God is patient with us when we violate His laws (Exod. 34:4–7).*

Read Isaiah 53:6 and discuss whether or not it accurately describes human nature.

Ideas for Discussion

- *How accurately does it describe the culture you live in?*
- *How accurately does it describe each of us as individuals?*
- *How accurately does it describe you as an individual?*

Read and discuss Jesus' statement in Mark 7:21–22.

Asks the group if they agree or disagree with this rather condemning description of humanity.

Ideas for Discussion

- *Discuss why people answered as they did.*
- *What evidence came to their mind?*
- *Ask why they think the Bible makes it so clear that God sees us as needy sinners.*

What the God of the Bible Cannot Do

Read Genesis 3:8–10 and Isaiah 59:2 and discuss what sin does to our relationship with God.

Read Romans 6:23 and discuss why God does not overlook sin in us but felt compelled to do something about our sinfulness.

Read Proverbs 3:11 and discuss why parents do not overlook sin and discipline their children.

Ask someone in the group to summarize why is it so important to be serious about sin.

What the God of the Bible Did

Ask someone in the group how God dealt with human sin.
(*Listening Guide question 27*)

Ideas for Discussion

- *Read and discuss Romans 1:1–4 as Paul's summary statement about God's response to our sin.*

Read 1 Peter 1:18–19 and Colossians 1:21–22 and ask the group what it cost God to purchase our salvation.

Ask the group how they would explain this fact to a child.

Exercise: Differences in Beliefs About Salvation

This activity is designed to help individuals see the specific differences in what each religion believes about salvation.

1. Divide your group into four groups: Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians.
2. Give each group five minutes to review the portion of the lesson that discusses their religion's view of salvation and how it defines
 - *The human's moral dilemma;*
 - *How their religion finds salvation from the human dilemma;*
 - *What God's responsibility is and what our responsibility is in saving us from this dilemma;*

and prepare for the exercise.

3. Ask each group to select or allow a volunteer to represent their group in the exercise.
4. Put two seats in front of the group, facing each other. A representative from one of the groups will sit in one of the seats and compare and contrast their approaches to salvation with the person in the other seat who represents another religious perspective.

Each should talk about how their religion defines

- *The human's moral dilemma;*
 - *How their religion finds salvation from the human dilemma;*
 - *What God's responsibility and what our responsibility is in saving us from this dilemma.*
5. In order to give insights into each religion's belief, you could use the following pairs for discussion.
 - *One Muslim and one Hindu*
 - *One Christian and one Buddhist*
 - *One Muslim and one Christian*
 - *One Hindu and one Buddhist*
 - *The lesson treated Judaism and Christianity as one religion. If you want, you can add an additional role-play by putting yourself in one seat as a Jew and another participant from the Christian (or other) group in the other seat and conduct a fifth dialog.*
 6. After each dialog, ask the group to interact with the role-play. How could the positions be elaborated on? What illustrations could have added to clarity? etc.

The two paragraphs: "The New Testament does not describe..." and "In the union of the Godhead ..." present the profound theology that Jesus, as God's own Son, is fully God and therefore God Himself died to pay the penalty for human sin. To present the Christian view of salvation, it is essential to clearly explain what these paragraphs are teaching. Take a few minutes to review them and write what they teach in your own words.

- *These paragraphs are responding to the idea that God the Father was guilty of "child abuse" by unfairly asking His Son to pay the price for our sins. But if we theologically consider the fact that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are both three and one it is impossible to say that the Son acted independently of the Father and Spirit when He died. This is a difficult truth to comprehend, but it*

is too important to ignore. Give the group a few minutes to process the concept that Jesus died as a member of the Godhead.

That God did not save us and leave us on our own to live the Christian life is a crucial biblical theme.

Read Romans 5:10; 8:26–28; 8:31–33 and Hebrews 7:26–28 and discuss how God continues to minister to those who choose to follow Him.

Describe what contribution you think Jesus' resurrection makes to the Christian teaching about salvation.

- *The God we serve is alive and active in our life day to day. We serve a living Savior!*

Although most Christians are familiar with John 3:16, many are not familiar with its context.

Ideas for Discussion

- *Read, or have a student read John 3:16–18. If you have a student read, select the Bible translation you are comfortable with. Some paraphrases may take you to places that sidetrack the conversation.*
- *Divide your group into smaller discussion groups of three or four and ask them to talk through each verse and state in their own words what the verse says.*
- *Have each group put the three verses together and devise a summarizing statement about what Jesus was teaching Nicodemus, and us, about His mission to our planet.*
- *Depending on the number of groups you have, if possible ask each group to read their summarizing statement to the other groups.*
- *Ask students to make sentence prayers of thanks to Jesus for coming to earth to save us from sin.*

Conclusion to the World Religions Course: Back to the Beginning

First-century Christians ... This paragraph in Lesson 5 reminds us that we live in a pluralistic world where many religions are practiced. Remind the group that Lesson 2 of this course was entitled, "The Melting Pot" and emphasized "Six Principles of Relationship"

- *Be Genuine*
- *Be Respectful*
- *Be Humble*
- *Be Fair*
- *Be Discerning*
- *Be Discreet*

Ask the group if they can remember what each point was telling us about how to function in our pluralistic world.

Read Acts 17:17 and discuss Paul's model for relating to people who follow other religions or who follow no clearly defined religious belief.

Read Acts 1:8 and 2 Timothy 2:24–25 and discuss the difference between being Jesus’ witnesses as he commanded in Acts 1:8 and in being a Christian who imposes his or her beliefs on others. (*Listening Guide questions 37, 38 & 39*)

Ideas for Discussion

- *What does Paul’s advice to Timothy suggest a Christian should do if someone wants to quarrel about religious beliefs?*
- *What can a Christian do instead of quarreling?*
- *Should Christians refuse to talk about their faith to those who don’t understand or agree with it? Why or why not?*

Course Wrap-Up Exercise

Since this is the final lesson in this course, you can review the whole course with the following exercise.

- *Divide the group into three smaller groups. Recall that Lesson 1 was a brief introduction. You may want to summarize that lesson for them to introduce the exercise.*
- *Assign each group one of the lessons, 1 through 3.*
- *Give the groups some time (15–20 minutes) to review the lesson and prepare a summary of what they believe are its most important points.*
- *After the groups have prepared, set up a “Fish Bowl” (one group in the middle and the other two groups gathered around them) and ask the group in the “Bowl” to go through the discussion they had as a way of teaching the other two groups what they concluded about their lesson. Repeat this exercise three times so each group has a chance to share.*

Application

If, after completing this lesson and this course, you have not committed to any religious belief system, which one do you find most believable? The course, while attempting to be fair to all the religions discussed, is written by Christians who obviously believe it is essential that everyone accept Jesus’ invitation to receive His gift of forgiveness. Before leaving this lesson, weigh what you have studied in the course and make that decision.

If you have accepted Christ as your Savior, consider carefully the statement, “Christians say they cannot comprehend such love but can only marvel at it and give themselves to Christ in loving obedience, worship, and service” (see the section, “What the God of the Bible Did”). Does that sentence describe your response to what God did for you through Jesus’ death and resurrection? If not, it’s important to follow the pattern of many Christians who make that commitment on a daily basis.

Reflection

It is important to promote this reflection time in each session of the course. Ask the members to think back over what they have just experienced and form at least one point they can add to their understanding of God's Word. These insights may or may not match what they expected at the beginning of the lesson. Have them reflect on those affirmations or changes.

Also emphasize that this part of the group session could be an important time for participants to minister to other members of the group. Not everyone "sees" the same emphases and something one person highlights may be an added insight to others in the group.

Close in Prayer

You may want to ask if anyone is dealing with something they would like prayer for. Depending on the size of your group, it would be meaningful to pray for each person by name.