Christianity & Other World Faiths

Week 1: January 14

Introduction to the Course

I. Points of Clarification


If you’ve had a course in world religions or you are even generally familiar with this huge global study, you are aware of the vast array of textbooks available. I chose these two for the following reasons. Huston Smith’s text is a hands-down classic, first published in 1955. No scholar has a greater love for the subject or a greater expertise. Although he was born on the mission field to Methodist parents, he has no evangelical interest in any of the world faiths. But he is extraordinarily skillful in being objective and in communicating the distinctive aspects of each faith and is especially interested in fairly presenting the theological contributions of each religious worldview (see p. 13). This is why I use him as a major source. Our objective is to respect and learn from primary sources, as they tell us about their faith. Smith, now deceased appears at times to be more Hindu than Christian! The artwork in his classic has been carefully selected and is helpful in envisioning the appeal of traditions he covers.

The text edited by the University of Lethbridge faculty does indeed reads like a textbook and isn’t nearly as lively or lyrical as Smith’s. But it has several features I like. It’s authored by Canadians, has sidebars that are helpful and includes a resource dvd. I almost required the big encyclopedic edition by James Beverley (see recommended volumes in the syllabus), which I personally will use during this course. But it’s loosely organized and he tries to cover too much. Both texts are college-level. I searched in vain to find a graduate-level textbook. Most masters’ courses specialize in far more detail than our survey allows. But unless you are a scholar in world religions (and I admittedly don’t qualify), these two along with other recommended material might stretch us just enough make our time spent worthwhile. There is no one to restrain you from exploring other innumerable sources except yourself. So, spend your valuable time carefully and try to maximize this course as a profitable learning experience.

Both texts are clearly written in the field of “religious studies”. None of the authors identify their own particular faith, if they have one. Their interest is discerning and presenting the basic elements found in each world religion. Thus, they are not interested in approaching our subject from a “confessional” point of view. They only wish to be as “objective” as possible. Some of us are likely in such an “evangelical overdrive” that it will be extremely difficult to shut “our evangelical eyes” to the subject matter and consider the material “value-free”. As an instructor who has never “checked his evangelical credentials at the door” that is a liability we
can manage. Whether in agreeing or disagreeing with what we learn, may we leave judgment in God’s hands.

2. World Religions in Relation to Christianity

As evangelicals we will need to build upon the material in the texts in order to find common points of interest. Throughout the course we will want to “camp” on questions and beliefs raised in our selected religions that could be used in sharing a Christian witness to a non-Christian “believer”. At the same time it will not be surprising if our own particular faith worldview is not challenged for improvement at certain points. I’m convinced that we can see things in other faiths that will make our faith even more Christian. I know this opinion might offend those who seriously believe there is nothing in non-Christian faiths which is true much less helpful to Christians or that what we need to do is take Christianity itself more seriously. On the other hand, I’ve not designed this course as a “study in comparative religions”. Other than the ultimate questions most religious worldviews hold in common, there is simply not enough common ground to “compare”. Usually we find more distinctions and diversity than we do points of agreement. We need to keep our feet to the fire and acknowledge that these faith traditions are not equal yet each IS different.

Lesslie Newbigin used to point out that some Christians see world religions as delusional or satanic having no merit for study. Other Christians he said see non-Christian religions as “stepping stones” toward Christianity, while some go the pluralist route and suggest God has many ways to “save”. He always insisted it’s best to reserve judgment (leave it to God), hold to the uniqueness of Christ and witness to non-Christians in His name.

I have not assigned the chapters on Christianity. We will deal with Christian truth claims during our work on the respective faiths and especially at the end of the course.

Caution: some Christians avoid any consideration of other faiths out of fear they may convert! There is risk of course as in the case of British philosopher John Hick, famous for his views on religious pluralism. He began as a fundamentalist evangelical (his description) but as he worked with internationals and a vast array of faith traditions, he forsook his roots and now thinks all are equally valid paths. My view is that, if anything, consideration of other faith traditions should affirm and strengthen a Christian worldview. But the reality is there is indeed some risk for those who happen to be immature or unsettled in their Christian faith. Some may feel it is illogical for God to condemn people who are not Christians because if these “other faiths” are not pleasing to Him, why did He allow them?

3. Why These Four Religions and Not Others?
Actually, there are five in our course when we remember our own filtre: an evangelical Christian worldview. But I chose four you will likely find in our own neighborhoods. Each is clearly worldwide. Hindus (nearly a billion) and Muslims (1.3 billion) are two of the fastest growing. Buddhism (though not numerically strong) is rooted in Hinduism and both are eastern religions but are found everywhere. Islam and Judaism like Christianity are monotheistic, and Christianity is rooted in Judaism. Buddhism and Hinduism are considered Eastern religions and Islam (though rooted in Asia) and Judaism (middle-east) are considered mainly western. As Robinson & Rodrigues (hereafter cited as R & R) note on p. 3, adherents of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism make up some 70% of the global population. So from sheer numbers alone it behooves us to consider them; though Judaism has only about 14 million worldwide, its proximity to Christianity and Islam make it worth our time as well.

4. The numbers.

Christians (Roman Catholics, (39 %) Protestants, evangelicals (29%) make up the largest percentage. According to the World Atlas, approximately one in eleven Canadians belong to one of the minority world religions in Canada. As of 2013, Hindus make up about 1% of Canada’s population with just over 17,000 in Calgary. Buddhists number around 300,000 overall with just over 22,000 in Calgary. Jews make up 1% of Canadians and have around 6,000 in Calgary (but constitute the fourth largest collection of Jews worldwide). Islam is the fastest growing and has the largest numbers of non-Christians, with over 56,000 in Calgary and 800,000 or 3.5% of Canadians. In 2013, Statistics Canada also noted that Canadians who “profess” no religious preference have risen from 16.5% in 2001 to 7.8 million (24%) today.

5. A Frank and Necessary Admission.

As Huston Smith is prone to say in his books and lectures, we can study a given faith tradition our entire lives, yet not fully comprehend the nature and validity it has to a given adherent. We simply cannot jump into someone else’s skin or worldview! A Muslim can no more fully understand Christianity than I can understand Islam as a devout Muslim does. As Smith reminds us, though we can never exhaust another's faith, if we go at our task in serious fashion, “we need not fail miserably” (p. 14). We may not learn everything but we can learn some key features of Islam and the others. Smith insists we realize that other believers deal with the basic problems which Christians do and that we guard our preconceptions which may distort. The best way to try to be fair is to listen to “another believer”. And we will do that but we will also need to study these worldviews by using non-adherent material. Whether in conversation with a non-Christian believer or whether in personal or class study of that particular religious worldview, we want to try to be as fair and objective as we possibly can be. But at the end of the day, I know I am an “outsider” to every faith tradition except Christianity. Personal commitment is indispensable for truly understanding a given religious worldview. Thus, I must guard my biases
while upholding my Christian convictions which I pray pass the bar of Holy Scripture. Smith says it well, “The surest way to the heart of a people is through their faith” (p. 12). I want to respect that when and as I stand on their “holy ground”.


I really want each of us to “own” this course. Advance preparation is a must! Read the assigned material in the texts or other assignments. Each week there will be a basic discussion question ("thread question") which I will identify in the material to which each class member is expected to offer his or her comments. **You are expected to extend your learning by discussing these questions with your ONLINE classmates.** Make notes of questions or comments you’d like to bring up in class. Feel free to email me suggestions or the availability of other resources you find helpful for our study.

To maximize learning in this course, the instructor encourages you to do the following:

1. Look over carefully the commentary material I provide each week on Edvance prior to your reading in the texts. I realize this entails “even more” reading on your part but hopefully I can alert you to things to watch for in the texts. I also include some material not available in the texts.

2. Read the texts assignments. There will be some overlap but the styles of the authors are different and you should gain much help from both sources.

3. By all means dialogue with your ONLINE classmates and your instructor regarding the thread question. You are welcome to bring up other questions and issues for discussion.

4. Keep the study guide for the final exam handy for each week's work. Make notes on the questions I’ve listed. It should greatly expedite your preparation for the final exam.

5. The site visits of a given faith are scheduled in the syllabus. As I say often, this is probably the best part of your learning experience in this course. The specific arrangements are your responsibility. Students outside a major city may find a bit of difficulty in finding a Hindu Temple (although I find an enormous one in rural North Carolina). I’ll do what I can by emailing you suggestions and advice when I have a final class roll. I strongly advise you to fit these into the class schedule and your personal schedule at the beginning of the semester. Then check periodically with your contact person at each site to confirm plans. If exceptions have to be made, I’ll work with you so you can get full credit.
6. Don’t hesitate to email me with any difficulties or any questions. You are also free to call me. I promise to do all I can to maximize personal learning in this course.

II. Basic Introductory Questions

Here are some other questions I feel are significant:

1. Why is it difficult to “define” a religion?

   (1) It is important to note that “ancient” religions were “ways of life”, “faith traditions” as many are today; there was no separation of sacred and secular – that is an Enlightenment construct.

   (2) Smith sees each of the world’s religions as “living traditions” with each to be taken seriously even if we’re incapable as non-adherents of fully understanding them. Each represents various ways of answering the “ultimate questions of life”. He insists we forego value judgments and look for the “best qualities or results”.

   (3) R & R point out many world faiths share commonalities in owning sacred texts, types of spiritual leaders, rituals, ethics, and special jargon. Yet they often show a diverse range due to cultures, linguistics, structures, beliefs and sub-groupings. Yet for all that, they admit it’s still difficult to get full clarity due to all the diversity.

2. Why do you think there are so many different kinds of faith traditions? Why so many world religions? What do you think is the proper disposition of Christians to another different kind of “believer”?

3. What do you think of the claim some make that God is at work in various ways in other faiths?

4. How do you respond to the possibility that we as Christians can mature more in our own faith tradition by studying other faiths? As examples, can Muslims teach us anything about proper reverence to God and respect for His name? Can Buddhists challenge Christians on self-discipline?

5. What do you make of the encounters and “input” of faiths and worldviews found in the Bible which are not imbedded in the Judaic-Christian faith? Some examples are: Melchizedek (Gen. 14, Hebrews); Zororastrian astrologers (wise men in Matthew), the Ninevites in Jonah; the Athenians who worshiped an unknown God in Acts 17; Cyrus (“God’s anointed”) in Isa. 45:1; God’s mercy to Hagar and Ishmael out of whom God promised a great nation. See also Acts 14:17 that “God has not left Himself without witness”; Naaman (Luke 4:18); centurion (Luke 7:9); Cornelius

6. Has there ever been an era more diverse, if not polytheistic than the Greco-Roman world of the first century? Likely not.

7. What do you think might be the eternal destiny of one who has a faith worldview but is not a Christian?

8. What about the “scandal of particularity” that God has restricted His full revelation to the Judeo-Christian tradition fulfilled only in Jesus Christ? Several centuries ago John Bunyan asked this question: “Could I think that so many ten thousands in so many Countreys and Kingdoms, should be without the knowledge of the right way to heaven?” It’s not new. Early church apologists dealt with it and we face it yet. See Gerald McDermott, God’s Rivals. 2007.

   (1) Most early notables like Cyprian and Augustine restricted salvation only to those in the church.

   (2) In the second millennium, various scenarios were viewed as possible ways non-Christians could be saved apart from the church, and surprisingly Catholics led the way in “changed attitudes”.

9. How concerned do you think Christians should be about developing what is often called a “Christian theology of religions”? 


   (2) McDermott notes (p. 23) that most of the Christian discussion in the 20th century about world religions revolves around the question of salvation. A famous “typology” on this was developed by Alan Page in 1983 (Christians and Religious Pluralism) and was dominant until a few years ago (for probably most evangelicals, it still is). The traditional format has three “categories”:

   -the exclusivist view, that only those who consciously repent of sin against God and knowingly accept Jesus Christ in his/her lifetime can expect God’s heaven;
   -the pluralist view, other world religions are diverse paths (from Christianity) which are equal approaches if pursued sincerely (as in John Hick’s quote from The Bhagavad-Gita “Howsoever men may approach me, even so do I accept them; for, on all sides, whatever path they may choose is mine”;
   -the inclusive view (a mediating one), that God holds individuals accountable for the “light” available and acted upon; there is a wide variety of views from Rahner’s “anonymous Christians”, to C.S. Lewis. This perspective takes in the reality of
infants who die before the so-called age of respondability, the mentally challenged, those who have never heard a word about Jesus. But it also sees the strong possibility of God choosing to apply the “merits” of Christ’s atoning sacrifice to those in their own faith tradition in some way for His reasons.

The most popular view among evangelicals is the exclusivistic one; but the most widely accepted view among mainline Christians is the inclusivistic perspective.

Two biblical/theological parameters need to be held in tension: First, what is most clear in the Christian Scriptures: John 3:16, 1 Jn 4:9; 1 Tim 2:4. Second, along with God’s mercy and desire to save all – salvation is only found in Jesus Christ, his atoning sacrifice for sin and triumphant resurrection. Key verses are Acts 4:12; John 14:6. Both pluralists and inclusivists hold to the first pole while exclusivist and moderate inclusivists hold to the second.

The often disputed question is whether God for reasons known to Him makes exceptions to these “climactic passages” in choosing sovereignly and omnisciently to apply the merits of Christ’s death to any who have not overtly, consciously in this lifetime professed Christ as Lord and Saviour. Another key question is to what extent he holds accountable those who cannot competently respond to whatever revelation He may have given.

(3) McDermott claims that Race’s typology “has collapsed” recently due to many complicating factors pointed out by Joseph DiNoia and Mark Heim. Exclusivism fails to take into account that all world religions (even Hinduism in some ways) are exclusivistic; they all have claims and patterns that lead to the ultimate. Inclusivism cannot work because there is simply too much diversity as to religious goals. Some faiths like Theravada Buddhism are not theistic. Pluralists try to squeeze all faiths into saying “they want the same thing”.

(4) Some theologians are now suggesting that God takes into account various religious efforts and goals and assesses some degree of salvation though it is not the “fullness” of Christian truth about God’s salvation in Christ. Thus, they see a way for non-Christians to “be saved”! This smacks of a “middle way” or at least Plan “Z”. But what about the human situation as sinner? Very little biblical support is cited by this approach. One may gain God-knowledge but what about saving knowledge that forms a personal relationship with Christ?

III. Instructor’s Take on a Christian Theology of Religions

You are certainly entitled to know what my convictional viewpoints are concerning salvation and non-Christian religions.

1. I readily admit that I am not omniscient, that is a characteristic that only a Trinitarian God has. I cannot look into someone’s soul or chart his or her future or
know without hesitation who is “in” and who is “out” of God’s fold. And I certainly do not feel qualified to give God suggestions on the salvation question.

2. I believe that it is possible God has given wisdom and spirituality to other faith adherents but I am convinced that ONLY Jesus the Christ and the Christian Scriptures contain and express God’s highest and final revelation.

3. I am also utterly convinced that Jesus Christ has provided the only acceptable atoning sacrifice for sin; there are no simple or complicated way or ways we could ever redeem ourselves.

4. I accept and respect the plurality of religious worldviews but do not consider them as equally worthy paths to salvation. I readily acknowledge that the culture in which one is born has much to do with shaping the religious worldview of anyone. Thus, I am a pluralist in terms of respecting the diversity of religious worldviews but I am NOT a *theological* pluralist who believes God accepts all sincere faiths.

5. I resist all labels except that of Christian. I hesitate to be a thoroughgoing exclusivist (though I believe Christ is the only way to salvation) who insists on a conscious, deliberate “decision” to accept Christ in this life as the major step because this may not always be possible. Thus, I am an exclusivist who knows he is *not* God.

6. As for those who have not heard or read of God’s revelation in Christ, I believe they are accountable to God for the revelatory light He has given them. Thus, I am an inclusivist who acknowledges God as the final and the omniscient judge and Jesus Christ as the indispensable, only Saviour. Some may find it ironic that I claim to hold to Christ’s uniqueness yet hold to God’s desire to save all. But that’s the tension I think we find in Scripture and we need to respect and honor that while seeking to be as faithful evangelical witnesses as we can be by God’s power.

The three typical viewpoints of pluralism, exclusivism and inclusivism are problematic. At various points they fail as neat categories though they may help pinpoint some of the most important issues.

IV. Summary Conclusions

Here is a summary for how to proceed in our course:

1. Do the best we can to understand and respect the beliefs, practices and traditions of each world faith we study. This means we must be willing to genuinely listen to their worldviews.
2. Though, as Smith says, since we are outsiders we simply cannot fully fathom and appreciate these faith worldviews as adherents do, we can “take them seriously”.

3. By learning why and how these faiths have developed their worldviews, we can hopefully find fruitful ways of engaging them in a witnessing encounter about Jesus Christ.

4. As we consider these four we will want to identify their differentness from Christianity and be mindful that we will find beliefs and practices totally unacceptable to the Christian worldview. At the same time, we will find points of mutual interest and should entertain the possibility that other “believers” can challenge us to be more exemplary Christians.

5. The instructor proposes that each of us engage this course prayerfully so that as the Holy Spirit chooses an opportunity for us to share Christ with a non-Christian believer (whether of these 4 or others), we will be ready and willing to do so.

6. The prayer and hope this instructor has for each in the campus and online classes is that we catch the challenge of a new adventure. Evangelicals are in a world peopled with believers of religious worldviews that are not Christian. It’s not really a “new day” for Christianity – New Testament (and many OT) saints faced diverse religious views as they faithfully proclaimed God’s truth in Christ. This has been true throughout the history of Christianity. May we follow their train.