



Exploring tough questions
facing youth today

MANTRAS, MENORAHS, AND MINARETS

Encountering Other Faiths



The Pastoral Center

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» OVERVIEW

When conversing online, the acronym IRL stands for “in real life.” The virtual world of social media, text chats, blogs, and more have the power to remove us from the real world. What we experience online can skew our perspective on what it means to be human. It can numb us, incite us, distract us, depress us, confuse us, and make us rude or impatient. Strangely, this supposedly “social” and “connected” technology can profoundly disconnect us from others.

Religious faith can also place us in a bubble, especially when it distances us from others. When we keep the prophetic message at a safe distance, obscured in theological language and abstractions, we are missing the whole point. And when we see our parish as an insider club that serves itself, we can forget the radically inclusive message entrusted to us: God’s love is for *everyone*, and God expects us to transform the *whole world* through that love.

Through the incarnation, God showed up in the real world to show us that our faith is not just about talking the talk, but also walking the walk. It can be risky. It can be confusing. It can hurt. But living out our faith can also bring us great purpose, peace, and joy.

This series connects the Bible with the tough questions that youth (and adults) encounter in their neighborhood, in school, among friends, and even online. This process will help you as a leader break open these issues in a fun and meaningful way, sparking conversation and the kind of life change Jesus invites us to embrace.

» THE ROLE OF PARENTS

As children enter middle school and high school, they become more independent, self-reliant, and, well, self-centered. This can bring parents to make assumptions that this is the time to step back, giving their child more space to form their identity. While there is truth to that at some level (adolescents definitely shouldn’t be smothered), this is a stage of life when parents should in fact *lean in*. The apparent confidence and bluster youth show on the outside can mask the insecurity and confusion on the inside. Youth need their parents to be involved more than ever.

» WHOLE FAMILY FORMATION

Parents are the primary teachers of their own children, and parishes are waking up to the fact that faith formation programs need to bring parents into the process if they hope to see faith passed on to the next generation. Recent studies give us more and more evidence that the role of parents is the most important factor in determining whether a child will embrace faith as they move toward adulthood. Research from the Center for the Applied Research on the Apostolate shows that parents who talk about their faith and show through their actions that their faith is important to them are more likely to have children who remain Catholic.

More about Whole Family Formation >>>

To learn more about how your parish can take a comprehensive whole family approach to faith formation, visit GrowingUpCatholic.com.



While whole family events with elementary-aged children are on the rise, the role of parents can be an afterthought in youth ministry. We have designed the sessions in this series to work with or without parents present, and we encourage you to offer them as parent-child events.

If you choose to involve parents, it is important to consider before each session how to best do so. Many of the activities in this series are high-energy, creative, or silly. Some parents may need some encouragement to get out of their heads and have fun with the group. A few activities involving physical contact would be inappropriate for parents and youth to participate together, and we have noted them as such.

There are a number of ways to approach discussions with parent participation. Unless you have a small group, you will likely want to break into smaller groups for conversation. Some youth may be self-conscious and unable to be completely honest and open in a group situation with a parent present. For this reason, you may choose in some cases to assign parents to different groups from their own children, or to have separate parent and child groups altogether. Be sure to cover expectations around confidentiality. It is inappropriate for a parent (or youth) to share with another parent what their child said in a small group.

Note that even if parents and their children do not share all conversations together in the session, they will still have a valuable shared experience and can have extended conversations about it later.

>> **THANK YOU**

The role you play in gathering, animating, praying with, and forming youth is a valuable one. Thank you for all you do to serve the church and its families!

Bible-based Explorations of Issues Facing Youth

MANTRAS, MENORAHS, AND MINARETS

Encountering Other Faiths

INTRODUCTION

“What is truth?” It’s an age-old question, that’s what it is. God is bigger than anything we can think about God. Therefore, we can learn from others’ thoughts and beliefs—and from their unfamiliar theologies. We can expand our truth-horizons!

Our Catholic tradition encourages us to engage in this kind of dialogue. At the Second Vatican Council, the bishops themselves expressed a desire to enter into conversation with the entire human family, including followers of other faiths (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 3, 92). In a separate document, the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, the Council Fathers urged us to enter the dialogue in order to “recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among” the followers of other religions (*Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, 2).

The Church’s attitude toward other religions is one of deep respect and reverence:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all people. (*Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, 2)

Being human comes with basic questions about the purpose and problems of living, and religion is the way humans have wrestled with the fundamental issues of life. So how do the basics of the Christian religion compare and contrast with other major religions? This encounter with other faiths will follow this basic outline:

Session 1 (The Religions): The “God Question” *encounters* revelation.

Session 2 (Hinduism): Karma *encounters* grace.

Session 3 (Buddhism): “Suffering escaped” *encounters* “suffering transformed.”

Session 4 (Judaism): Christianity *encounters* its roots.

Session 5 (Islam): Absolute certainty *encounters* a growing faith.

Preparation Alert

Make preliminary plans (or set up a committee) to:

- **Visit sites** of other religions and their worship; and/or
- **Invite** adherents of these faiths to give their personal testimonies to your group, or lead the group in a prayer experience from their tradition.





“[S]ome might ask: why does the Pope go to the Muslims and not just to Catholics? Why are there so many religions... [God] willed to permit this reality: there are so many religions; some are born of the culture, but always looking to heaven, looking at God. However, what God wills is fraternity among us in a special way... We must not be scared by the difference: God has permitted this... To serve hope, at a time like ours, means first of all to build bridges between the civilizations.”

Pope Francis
Visit to Morocco
April 3, 2019



In these sessions, do not come expecting to *understand* the religions, or to debate them. They cannot be fully explained or described in a short course like this. However, you can get a feel for them and their basic point of view. This will happen with even more impact and immediate relevance if you'll do three things. Make every effort to:

- (1) **Visit sites** of other religions and their worship; and/or
- (2) **Invite** adherents of these faiths to give their personal testimonies to your group. Prepare for such interactions by developing a set of questions in advance for each visit/visitor. For example:
 - *How did your religion begin? Is there one founder? What is his or her story?*
 - *Do you worship a god? What is your belief about God?*
 - *In your religion, what is considered the basic question/problem about life? How is a person "saved" from this problem?*
 - *How has knowledge of truth come to you/your religion? What is the nature of revelation?*
 - *What is your view of Jesus?*
 - *What rules must your adherents follow?*
 - *How does your religion view the concepts of love and grace?*
- (3) Ask leaders of other faith traditions to lead the group in an experience of a **ritual** or **prayer** central to that belief system.

You'll no doubt deal with other tough questions at some point during your course. Examples include: "Is Jesus really the only way?" and "Why should I commit to Jesus when other religions also claim to have truth?" and "Can I respect another person's beliefs and still invite them to become Catholic?"

Ultimately, such questions can only be answered by each individual truth-seeker over an entire lifetime. But you might offer these directions for discussion:

1. **Why Jesus?** When people have wholeheartedly committed to Christianity, they have discovered a **uniqueness** about Jesus compared to the gods of other religions. The most unique aspect is the claim of resurrection. (The exploits of Arjuna and Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* have a historical backdrop, but are not considered to have actually happened in space/time.) In gathering the evidence for it, such people also claim a personal experience: the indwelling presence of Jesus, being inspired by holy writings, warmed by fellowship, called and influenced by the Spirit. But all these claims must be wholeheartedly checked out by any individual seeker wanting to know the truth.
2. **Can I respect another person's beliefs and still invite them to convert to Christianity?** Remember three things:
 - *We are called to witness, but only God can convert.* Do you believe that God has called you and saved you? If so, you can let God do the calling of others, just as God has called you.
 - *Our witness is a confession of both personal knowledge and recognition of ignorance.* We may believe that reality is a certain way, but we must be willing to have our beliefs put to the test, as well as recognize aspects of truth in others' beliefs, too.
 - *We are all in the process of either moving closer or further from the truth, each moment.* C. S. Lewis put it this way: "There are people who are slowly ceasing to be Christians but who still call themselves by that name.... There are people in other religions who are being led by God's secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it." (*Mere Christianity*)

When we encounter other religions, our first duty is not to convert, but, as the bishops say, to “recognize, preserve, and promote the good things” —and there are many!—found in other religions.

One other thing: A course like this requires a bit more information-giving than most other topics for youth. That’s why there’s a handout sheet for every session of this unit. In addition, experiencing a ritual central to each of the religions, either during a visit to a worship site or during your sessions under the leadership of an appropriate faith leader, will help elicit questions and expand horizons.

You’ll want to dig even deeper into the religions before you face your group’s tough questions. Become informed by committing to a personal study program—work with the Internet, visit your local library, and have on hand at least one good text on each of the religions you’ll be studying. Read out of the appropriate text before each session. You’ll be better informed, feel more confident, and exude a deeper enthusiasm as you lead the group. Studying the religions is truly an exciting exploration!

Recommended books:

- Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1959). A classic on the philosophy of religion.
- Evans, C. Steven. *Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985).
- Fitzgerald, Michael and John Borelli. *Interfaith Dialogue: A Catholic View* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2006)). <https://pastoral.center/interfaith-dialogue>
- Kasper, Cardinal Walter. *Towards Unity: Ecumenical Dialogue 500 Years after the Reformation* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2017). <https://pastoral.center/towards-unity>
- Neill, Stephen. *Christian Faith and Other Faiths* (Downers Grove IL: Intervarsity Press, 1984). An Evangelical perspective on the religions.
- Shenk, David. *Christian, Muslim, Friend: Twelve Paths to Real Relationship*. <https://pastoral.center/christian-muslim-friend>
- Smith, Huston. *The Illustrated World’s Religions: A Guide to Our Wisdom Traditions* (San Francisco: HarperCollins). “...Considered to be the most eloquent and accessible introduction to the world’s religions available.” <https://pastoral.center/the-illustrated-worlds-religions>
- Thich Nhat Hanh. *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (Riverhead Books, 1995). “Drawing on many years of interfaith exchanges begun during his peace trips to America, Nhat Hanh...offers bridging insights into points where Buddhist and Christian practices meet. In so doing, he encourages Westerners to see the ‘jewels in their own tradition’ with fresh eyes.” Also by Thich Nhat Hanh: *The Miracle of Mindfulness*.
- More resources can be found at <https://pastoral.center/religion>.

Videos and websites:

- A “tour of religions” is found at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/>.
- Tabs on the website Beliefnet ([BeliefNet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com)) offer information and prayers from major religions.
- <http://ed.ted.com/lessons/the-five-major-world-religions-john-bellaimey>. This is an 11-minute TED Talk overview of each of the world’s five major religions. Summarizes the main points you are teaching, with the addition of maps, and ties the facts of each religion together very nicely.
- <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLVIONUaVP3zLdtRt6SebKQhevgGkZcPSd>. Religions of the World Series, narrated by Ben Kingsley, available on YouTube.
- <https://www.flocabulary.com/major-world-religions/>. Includes songs, video, challenge questions, and a teacher’s guide, but also requires signing up for a free trial in order to use the resources.



“...All of us of every faith tradition possess the possibility of pure light, is that not so? The question of who we are is very much open.”

His Holiness the Dalai Lama



Nostra Aetate

The full text of the document *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* can be found here:

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nos-tra-aetate_en.html



EXTENDER SESSION

Extender sessions suggest special activities related to the issue of the unit. They help accommodate the diversity of parish schedules. Since each unit is undated, participants may study units in their entirety and still participate in special events of the parish that get scheduled simultaneously with youth group time. Extender sessions can be used anytime, but the one for this unit best follows **Session 5**. Calculate now whether or not you will be using the extender session.



- Karen Armstrong's *A History of God* can be viewed as a full-length documentary at <http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/a-history-of-god/>. Based on her best-selling book, the video traces the evolution and interrelation of the various Christian, Jewish, and Islamic interpretations of the divine figure. Through balanced analysis of historic and holy texts and extensive use of ancient art and artifacts, it follows the long road to today's understanding of God and what the journey—and the destination—have to tell us about humanity and its never-ending search for meaning and comfort.



THE SESSION PLAN: The parts of the session guide

- » **Faith story.** The session is rooted in this Bible passage and compared with a basic story of another religious faith.
- » **Faith focus.** The comparison/contrast in a nutshell.
- » **Session goal.** The entire session is built around this goal. What changes—in knowledge, attitude, and/or action—do you desire in your group?
- » **Materials needed and advance preparation.** This is what you will need if the session is to go smoothly. You'll feel more at ease if you've taken care of these details before you meet your group.

» FROM LIFE TO BIBLE TO LIFE

The teaching plan is called *life-centered*. However, when we write each session, we always begin with the faith stories.

In every session we try to hit upon a tough question that youth might ask. Find out what questions on this issue are important for your group. Feel free to bring your own input and invite your group members to add their own experiences.

» TEACHING THE SESSION

The five step-by-step movements will carry you from *life to the faith stories and back to life*. Each session takes about 45 to 50 minutes. Using the handout sheet for the session, take note of any complementary activities and stories.

1. **Focus.** Intended to create a friendly climate within the group and to *draw attention* to the issue.
2. **Connect.** Invites participants to *express* their own life experience about the issue, through talking, drawing, role playing, and other activities. Also uses memory, reason, or imagination to get the group thinking about *why* they view the issue the way they do.
3. **Explore the Stories.** With a minimum of lecturing, dig into the faith stories and search for answers to questions raised in the first activities. The Insights section will help clarify.
4. **Apply.** What do the stories *mean* for contemporary life? This is the "aha!" moment when participants realize the faith story has wisdom *for their* lives.
5. **Respond.** Why do the faith stories *matter*? What will the group do about the issue in light of what they have learned from their own experiences set alongside the faith issues? How can we *live* faith rather than pass it off as a mere intellectual exercise?

» LOOK AHEAD

Here are reminders for what you need to do for the next session or two.

» INSIGHTS FROM HOLY WRITINGS

Here is a resource for Explore the Stories. Don't try to use all the material given. Take what you need to lead the session and answer questions your group may have. Let the Insights section inspire you to think and study more about the focus of the session.

» HANDOUT SHEETS

The writer has provided a handout sheet to complement each session. Make enough copies for the group in advance of the session. These sheets may include questions, stories, agree/disagree exercises, charts, pictures, and other materials to stimulate thinking and discussion.

Generally, no participant preparation is required unless the session plan calls for you to contact selected group members for specific tasks.

SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE

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»» SESSION 1

WHICH WAY TO GOD? »»

»» KEY VERSE

"For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." (Acts 17:23)

»» FAITH STORY

Acts 17:16-34

»» FAITH FOCUS

The apostle Paul went to Athens to "reason with" those he found in the local synagogue and in the marketplace. When certain philosophers questioned him about his teachings, Paul was ready with answers. In gaining a hearing, he started where his hearers were, referring to their worship of an unknown god. With his usual logical precision, Paul attempted to persuade them that the God they called "unknown" was in truth the Creator of all—the One who had already risen from the dead.

Some in the audience wanted to know more. For others, however, talk of a resurrection was too much. They sneered and turned away.

»» SESSION GOAL

Help participants identify some of the questions humans ask about ultimate meaning, so they can consider how to relate to people of other religions.

»» Materials needed and advance preparation

- In advance, write (on a chalkboard or newsprint) a basic outline to guide the group in creating a "perfect" religion (Focus, Option A).
- Copies of a quotation (Focus, Option B)
- Bibles
- Copies of the handout sheet for Session 1
- Large sheet of newsprint with a question mark drawn in the center (see Apply), markers and/or crayons, tape
- Gather editions of the religion section from your local newspaper, along with one or more local phone books (see Respond). Option: Access these via the Internet and social media connections.



TEACHING PLAN

1. FOCUS 10-12 minutes

»» **Option A: Create-a-religion.** When everyone has gathered, present this scenario:

Imagine: This group has suddenly been carried off by a band of aliens from outer space! You land on a faraway planet. You ask, "What do you want with us?" Comes the response: "We want a religion. We will not let you leave until you develop the perfect religion for us." As you look around, you realize that the inhabitants of this planet are human beings exactly like you! You must decide: What will be the perfect religion for these people?





“People expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition...

What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what is sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? ...What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?”

Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, 1.



Unveil, on the chalkboard or newsprint, a basic outline to guide thinking:

- What needs will this religion have to meet?
- What questions about life will it try to answer?
- Name of the religion:
- Key belief of this religion:
- Description of deity (if you choose to have one):
- Key benefits to worshipers (What are they? How do we get them?):
- Rules (if needed):
- How would people be able to tell if you were a member?

Let participants know that using humor is okay, but stress that they should try to make their religion “perfect” by *first determining what human needs it would have to meet and what questions it would have to answer*. They should try to make it very practical—a religion that would meet young peoples’ needs and questions, a faith they would want to join.

When the group has had a chance to work at this, gather everyone together and report results. Then discuss: *What needs does a religion have to meet? In your opinion, are these needs common to all humans? Explain.*

» **Option B:** Open with a simple quote-reaction exercise. Copy the James Fowler quote from the book *Stages of Faith*, so that everyone has a few moments to study it:

Faith is a universal human concern. ... Before we come to think of ourselves as Catholics, Protestants, Jews, or Muslims, we are already engaged with issues of faith. Whether we become non-believers, agnostics, or atheists, we are concerned with how to put our lives together and with what will make life worth living. Moreover, we look for something to love that loves us, something to value that gives us value, something to honor and respect that has the power to sustain our being.

Then ask:

- *What is Fowler trying to say? What does it mean? What does it mean for you and any questions you have about what “religion” is?*

2. CONNECT 5 minutes

Invite participants to define religion as it comes closest to their own *present understanding*: “Religion is...”. Ask them to give reasons for their definitions. After brief sharing, offer this suggestion (write it on the chalkboard or make a poster of it) as a basic definition that could be used throughout this course:

Religion is the expression of and response to that which people hold as being of unrestricted value for them.

Ask:

- *What is of unrestricted value for you? What is so true for you that it seems self-evident? What value surpasses all other values? What commands and receives your best time and energy?*
- *In light of our definition, is everyone religious? Explain.*

3. EXPLORE THE STORIES 12-15 minutes

Shift to this activity by saying: *In digging into religion, we are dealing with the deepest human needs and longings—for love, acceptance, security, and meaning in the face of suffering and death. It's also about trying to make sense of life's most profound questions. In the Bible, when the apostle Paul visited some worshipers, he encountered such longings and questions....*

Pass out Bibles and invite participants to turn to Acts 17 and follow along as you read aloud verses 16-34. Then ask:

- What do you think Paul meant when he said: "I see that in every way you are very religious"?
- What questions about life's needs and meaning were the worshipers apparently asking? What answers did Paul offer?
- How do these needs and questions compare to those people might express today?
- Describe, in your own words, what Paul was saying to these people.

Now distribute copies of the handout sheet and divide into three groups, one for each of the three "Big Questions." Explain that these are often the first questions many people ask when they start to think about Christianity and its relationship to other world religions. Say something like: *Dealing with these questions up front will help us set the stage to study specific religions.* Let participants know that in a moment they'll have a chance to raise other questions.

The task is simply to choose one or more of the entries under "Possible Insights" to link with their assigned Big Question. They are to discuss the question and be ready to share how the Insight entries might lead to a potential answer for them.

Leave this discussion time as open-ended as you wish. When groups report, supplement, if necessary, with your own explanations, drawing from the Insights section.

4. APPLY 10-12 minutes

Ask:

- How satisfying are your answers to such questions so far? What questions still remain in your mind?

Unroll a large piece of newsprint with the huge question mark drawn in the center, and invite participants to jot "More Questions We Want to Answer" on this paper. Give everyone a marker and begin brainstorming and writing, neatly enough so that the paper can be hung on a wall and left there for all five sessions of the unit. (You'll be able to check periodically at the end of future sessions—and/or in the Extender Session—to see if you've made any progress on answers.)

5. RESPOND 8 minutes

Access the religion section of your local newspaper (or the newspaper from the nearest large city), or bring in a copy. Work with participants to find services of other religions advertised. Also find Web pages of local congregations of Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, or Jewish faith communities, or use the yellow pages of your local phone book (Look under Religious Organizations and Synagogues, among others.)

Make preliminary plans for one or more field trips related to this study course. Perhaps all you will do is set up a committee to decide who will do what (get information, make contacts, report back to the group). Plan either to visit a service or ask for an on-site presentation.

Who has truth?

- "I don't know what to do with passages like, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to [God] but through me'... but I don't have to be the one to figure it out. That is God's job. I just know that I have to love my sisters and brothers of all beliefs (even if it is atheism). I believe that is Jesus' strongest teaching: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Not 'love your *Christian* neighbor as yourself.'"
- "There are elements in other religions that have a basis in truth, just not the whole picture (and I would even say we don't have the whole picture—just the major pieces of it)."
- "Sincerity is important when talking about religious beliefs, but should one try to persuade others? 'What is true and helpful for one person may not be true or helpful for another.'"

Quotes from youth



LOOK AHEAD

For next session, prepare “Key Hindu Concepts” slips (as described in Explore), and consider the option of doing a video or audio version of the interview with Rakesh.

Also, you’ll need a 3-foot (1-meter) length of clothesline rope or heavy string for each person.



“The pluralism and the diversity of religions... are willed by God in His wisdom... This divine wisdom is the source from which the right to freedom of belief and the freedom to be different derives.”

Pope Francis and Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, *A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, 4 February 2019



Note: If distance makes such a field trip impossible, plan instead a time to watch together a DVD or YouTube videos that focus on Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, or Judaism. (See Introduction.) For example, *Little Buddha* is a film from the early 1990s, starring Keanu Reeves. It chronicles the life of Siddhartha, the young prince who became known as the Buddha.

Now offer a closing statement: *In the sessions ahead, we’ll be looking at some of the world’s religions. We cannot hope to understand all about these religions, and many of our questions will go unanswered—for now. The key is to be open to learning and to making friends with people of other faiths, which is part of our Christian calling. Contrary to expectation, study of major world religions does not weaken commitment to Jesus. It can instead give us a new appreciation for his uniqueness.*



INSIGHTS FROM HOLY WRITINGS

» THE “GOD QUESTION” ENCOUNTERS REVELATION...

How shall we view other religions? In Acts 17, Paul encounters a religion in Athens and displays impressive tolerance toward it. On the other hand, he makes it clear that he offers revealed truth that fulfills and supersedes the wisdom these worshipers already have from their speculations and “their own poets.” Paul proclaims Christ as a unique incarnation of God—and the resurrection as proof of his claims.

In light of Paul’s approach, we must hold two natural tendencies in tension:

- We do wish to accept people who are different, respect other cultures, and give a full hearing to others’ sincerely held beliefs. And we welcome the good and the true we find in other religions. We refuse to caricature them when we attempt to explain them (while realizing that we will most surely convey unfortunate distortions).
- But no matter how much we study, who can be thoroughly objective about religion? We approach the question from our own various presuppositions and faith commitments.

Therefore, we *can* learn from others while continuing to affirm, with Paul, the uniqueness of Christ’s incarnation and resurrection. Richard Niebuhr proposed the concept of “confessing faith”—we recognize that our theologies *about* God are finite (having historical limitations); only God is absolute. Thus, we can hold firmly to our beliefs while confessing their incompleteness. This opens us to learn from, and dialogue with, other perspectives, where we find space for genuine, sincere witness.

Contrary to what might be expected, the study of the world religions rarely weakens commitment to Jesus. Rather, it can give us a new appreciation for his uniqueness. The religions come through as philosophies of life, with certain principles being applicable to the *practice* of the Christian faith: such as ego-relinquishment (taught by Jesus), love, or non-violence. However, the historical reality of Jesus and his teachings cuts through to a deeper foundation upon which we build our faith. Christians are not merely ethicists, with effective philosophies of life. They are indwelt, individually and corporately, by the dynamic life of Jesus.

» HIGHER, DEEPER, FARTHER

Some people studying this topic may well experience...

- **Increased interest in theological inquiry:** By comparing and contrasting one's beliefs with (sometimes radically) different worldviews, they may feel challenged to "bone up" on their own beliefs, and will work at formulating and explaining their own positions.
- **Deeper personal spiritual growth:** Some young people may be inspired by the commitment of religious adherents to such practices as contemplation of God's presence and love, ego-relinquishment, or peace-seeking. They can incorporate such practices as they have been taught in Christian scripture and tradition.
- **Greater effectiveness in reaching out:** Speaking with someone of another religion from a basis of knowledge about the other's beliefs can lay the foundation for a respectful discussion, as well as informed and compassionate service to neighbors.

Big ? Questions:



1. Isn't it unfair to judge one religion as right and the others as wrong?
2. Don't all religions teach basically the same thing?
3. If Jesus is the only way, what about those who have never had a chance to hear about him?

Instructions: Choose one or more possibilities under "Possible Insights," and mark its number next to your Big Question if it seems relevant. Be ready to share how the Insights you chose help you answer the question.

Possible Insights:

(Holy Writings, Statements, and Points to Ponder)

Check out these statements and questions. Which ones might help you in a search for answers?

1. What about Abraham? Moses? David? They didn't accept Christ, but did *he* accept *them*? So...must a person necessarily know *about* Christ in order to be part of the Life of God?
2. "Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For [God] says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who shows mercy" (Romans 9:14-16).
3. It's true that most religions *share* certain features: (1) belief in the transcendent, (2) a fellowship of believers, (3) a priesthood of some kind, (4) moral principles.
4. "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:16).
5. "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.... [Yet] their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world" (Psalm 19:1-4).
6. "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13).
7. "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world" (John 1:9).
8. "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse" (Romans 1:19-20).
9. God is surely more fair than we are! Or else our conception of God is unworthy of God's true nature.
10. Even a Christian cannot *earn* salvation through his or her religion.
11. "For God shows no partiality. All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all" (Romans 2:11-16).
12. All human knowledge—about anything—is partial and incomplete.
13. Does sincerely holding to a belief guarantee that it is true?
14. "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds" (Hebrews 1:1-2).