

AN INTRODUCTION TO STUDIES IN NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Why Study This Subject?

1. By emphasizing Biblical truths concerning Jesus we automatically bring ourselves in conflict with the world.
2. Christianity is not compatible with:
 - a. cults - "The Big Four"
 - b. non-Christian religions - Hinduism, Buddhism
 - c. secular religions - Atheism, Humanism
 - d. the occult - Astrology, Satanism, Witchcraft
3. Christians have been put on the defensive by these religions. We must present the truth to combat these false religions.

B. The Scope of Our Study.

1. It is beyond the scope of this study to go religion by religion and debunk them one by one. Instead we will present some basic characteristics that many of them have in common and contrast those to the Bible.
2. This study will be successful if we can learn a way to think rationally, logically and Biblically as we respond to the challenge of these false religions.

C. Our Attitude.

1. Our society allows freedom of speech and religion. Just as anyone has a choice to teach and follow their beliefs, we have the right to respond from the scriptures
2. 1 Pet. 3:15; Jude 3; 1 Thes. 5:21.
3. These scriptures allow us to answer such teachings as those of the Mormons, whose writings indicate that God can only be found through Joseph Smith and therefore the Christian world is ignorant of God.

D. What is Religion?

1. Most people are not only ignorant of the beliefs of their own religious affiliation; they are totally in the dark concerning the beliefs of others.
2. Just the diversity of religions in our own community shows the importance of having a handle on a variety of beliefs.
3. After we begin our study of the cults, we will contrast them against the basic tenets of Christianity. If we expand our study to secular and non-Christian religions we will continue this contrast.

E. How Can We Define Religion?

1. Religion is that aspect of our lives in which we attempt to live in harmony with the power or powers we believe to be controlling the universe.
2. Generally, a religious belief implies:
 - a. that man does not and cannot stand alone,
 - b. that man is dependent on forces outside his own control,
 - c. that man is not the center of the universe.
3. Even the secular ideologies with no belief in God or the supernatural, have their own set of beliefs. This then allows us to define these ideologies as religions.

F. Religion is Universal.

1. Every discovered civilization has shown some type of religious practice.
2. No group of animals, save man, has ever practiced a religion; thus religion is something that makes man unique in the animal kingdom.

G. Religion Meets Needs.

1. It gives a purpose for living and dying.
2. Through this purpose we can gain satisfaction.

H. How Are Religions Practiced?

1. Some offer animal sacrifices or mutilate their bodies. Some are baptized for the dead.
2. Some are lead by a priest, others by a minister or pastor, still others by bishops.

I. All Religions Cannot Be the Same.

1. Some teach a "universal" outlook, that is, all religious paths lead to the same destination - God.
2. The differences in the religions would indicate otherwise. How can the paths lead to the same destination when every step separates further from each other?
3. Judaism, Christianity and Islam believe that our personalities will exist in the after life. Hinduism and Buddhism believe our personalities will be obliterated in the after life. Secular religions say there is no after life.
4. Christianity believes in Jesus Christ as the Divine Savior who walked the earth as a man. Judaism and Islam reject Christ as the Savior. Many cults say Christ is not Divine.

II. WHAT IS A CULT?

A. Definition:

1. A perversion or distortion of Biblical Christianity or outright rejection of the teachings of the New Testament. Paul warned us this would happen in 2 Cor.11:13-15.
2. In general, a cult is a group of people who follow someone's interpretation of the Bible. This interpretation is usually characterized by major deviations from the NT with regards to the Christian faith, particularly Jesus Christ as God.

B. Why Do the Cults Prosper? - The cults are showing rapid growth, there are several reasons people join the cults:

1. They provide answers to questions such as: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?
2. The cults meet human needs.
 - a. All of us need to be loved, to feel needed, to believe our lives have direction and meaning.
 - b. If a person is having an identity crisis or emotional problems, the cults will give the unsuspecting a feeling of acceptance and direction.
 - c. The cults can fulfill the basic desire to know and serve God by telling their followers what to believe, how to behave, and what to think. The cults emphasize looking to the group or its leaders for emotional stability.
3. The cults make a favorable impression.
 - a. Wherever mainstream Christianity has failed to be a vital influence, the cults prosper.
 - b. We as Christians are to blame. Because the outsiders can see no difference between us and our way of life and the world, what can we offer them?
 - c. The church must carefully provide spiritual warmth and a true interpretation of God's Word. The cults prey on the ignorant and try to impress them with their pseudo-scholarship.
 - d. In most cults, the majority of the members have come from mainline denominations. The denominations answer this fact by blaming the cults for using brainwashing techniques. Brainwashing is not the issue; almost all cult techniques are used by most churches in one form or

another. The issue is theology. When we became Christians we were babes. Many of us still are. We must learn to feed ourselves, then we can begin to feed others.

III. The Characteristics of Cults

A. New Truth

1. Many cults teach that God has revealed something to them that He has told no one else. This truth usually supersedes or contradicts all previous revelations.
2. To cults such as the Unification Church and Mormonism, the Bible alone is insufficient or inadequate.
3. How do they test these "truths?" They can not. We however, can test our teachings as well as their teachings by the NT.

B. New Interpretations of Scriptures

1. Some cults do not offer a "new revelation" but believe only they hold the true key to the scriptures.
2. The cultist reinterprets the existing scriptures to meet their peculiar teachings, i.e. The World-Wide Church of God, the Jehovah's Witnesses.

C. A Non-Biblical Source of Authority

1. Some cults have specific writings that they claim supersede the Bible. The Mormons believe that the Bible has been changed and corrupted, therefore the need for the Book of Mormon, etc.
2. The Christian Scientists hold the writings of Mary Baker Eddy above the Bible.
3. The Unification Church says the Bible is incomplete without Rev. Moon's Divine Principle.
4. Others claim the Bible as their final authority but freely change it or supersede it with "prophecy" or interpretation of the cult leader.
5. A sure mark of a cult is that final authority on spiritual matters rests on something other than the plain teaching of the Holy Scriptures.

D. Another Jesus

1. 2 Cor. 11:4 warns about following a non-apostolic Jesus. The "cult Jesus" is always someone less than the Biblical God who became flesh, lived on earth and died for our sins.
2. The Jehovah's Witnesses teach Jesus was created, he was originally Michael the Archangel and is not and never was God.
3. To the Mormons, Jesus is not unique, but one of many "gods," the spirit brother of Lucifer.

E. Rejection of Orthodox Christianity

1. The cults argue, many times correctly, that mainstream Christianity has departed from the true faith.
2. Cult leaders reject much of Orthodox Christianity because of perceived arrogance and intolerance as well as dogmatism.
3. Joseph Smith invented Mormonism because he was "told" not to join any existing denomination.

F. Double-Talk

1. some cults say and teach one thing publicly, but privately believe something totally different.
2. Mormons will tell you they are a Christian sect, but their teachings concerning Jesus Christ do not allow them to be Christians in the NT sense.

G. Non-Biblical Teaching on the Nature of the Godhood.

1. Most cults deny the Biblical teaching of three personalities in one Godhood, as being either pagan or Satanic.
2. Two cults that hold this viewpoint are the Witnesses and The Way International.

H. Changing Theology

1. Most cults deny that their teachings are in a continual state of change, but history tells a different story.
2. Witnesses once taught that vaccinations are sinful. They later dropped this teaching.
3. The Mormon Church has condoned and prohibited polygamy.

I. Strong Leadership

1. Generally cults will have a central leader figure who is characterized as a messenger of God.
2. The ability of these leaders to exercise enormous influence over the group is easily seen in the Unification, The Way International, and The World-Wide Church of God.
3. This dependence on a human leader can lead to physical and spiritual tragedy as with Jim Jones and the People's Temple.

J. Salvation by Works

1. The cults do not leave room for God's grace.
2. While mainstream denominations teach faith at the expense of works (faith alone), the cults over emphasize the works of the individual in his own salvation.

K. False Prophecy

1. Many cult leaders have made predictions of the future, supposedly by the inspiration of God.
2. Herbert W. Armstrong predicted in 1967 that within four years (by 1973) that the world would see such drought, disease and famine that millions of lives would be lost.
3. The Jehovah's Witnesses have a well established pattern of predicting things that never happen. As example, their founder, Charles T. Russell, said in the late 1800's that the world would end in 1914.

IV. CONCLUSION

- A. Every group that possesses these characteristics cannot be labeled a cult. However, these are signs that should cause a Christian to be wary.
- B. The mark of a cult is how it treats Jesus Christ. All cults ultimately deny He is the Son of God, He is God and He is mankind's only hope of eternal salvation.
- C. 1 Jn. 4:1

[Outline adapted from McDowell and Stewart's *Handbook of Today's Religions*, chapters 1-3.]

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