

SIGNIFICANT OTHERS: UNDERSTANDING OUR NON-CHRISTIAN NEIGHBORS

A Study and Discussion Guide for Digging Deeper

by Monte Cox

For a fuller-length treatment of the topics covered in these videos, see Monte Cox's book by the same title, available at acupressbooks.com or wherever you buy books.

Preface: Us and Them

1. What dangers accompany “us versus them” thinking?
2. European explorers viewed other races as less than human, even calling them savages. What caused these views to change?
3. What do you think most inhibits you when it comes to making friends with non-Christians? The fear factor? The feeling that you don't know enough about “others”? Something else?
4. Why do you think this study is needed?
5. What parts of Scripture do you think will be most important to review as you begin this study?

Chapter 1. Does God Hear Their Prayers?

1. How do you think God hears all these prayers of non-Christians? Do they sound more like a symphony or like a junior high band? Is there a choice in-between?
2. What biblical examples other than Paul's message on Mars Hill offer insights into how we ought to interact with adherents of non-Christian faiths?
3. What are the challenges of imitating Jesus's inclusive demeanor toward others while also upholding his exclusive claims?
4. Is the “messenger mentality” more appealing to you than the “exclusive” position? If so, why?
5. How would you answer this question: “If I had been born in and had little or no access to the gospel, would I be lost?”

Chapter 2. Our Jewish Neighbors

1. How do the stories of the Goldbergs, Cohens, and Ari Kaplan connect with you? How do their spiritual journeys compare with those people you know from Jewish backgrounds?
2. What surprises you about the differences between Modern Judaism and “the religion of the Old Testament”?

3. How have the Holocaust and Zionism caused adherents of Modern Judaism to read Scripture in new ways?
4. Some Christians characterize Jewish practices, such as Sabbath keeping, kosher food laws, and other rituals, as legalistic. Which of these practices do you find admirable in some way, and why?
5. The earliest Christian assemblies took place in the synagogues, and the earliest believers drew on the patterns of the synagogue as they planned their assemblies. How is a Jewish synagogue service like a Christian assembly, and how are these assemblies different?

Chapter 3. Our Muslim Neighbors

1. In what ways do the stories of Rachel, Aisha, or Gustavo match with your own encounters with Muslims in North America?
2. What, if anything, surprises you about the connections between the Bible and Islam?
3. What do you think some non-Muslims find appealing about the Six Articles of Faith or Five Pillars of Islam?
4. Have you read passages from the Qur'an? How would you compare the composition and content of the Bible and the composition and content of the Qur'an? How are these books similar, and how are they different?
5. What is your response to the discussion about the limitations of the use of the word "God" in pluralistic North America to describe the Creator?
6. In what ways has this information changed your view of Muslims?

Chapter 4. Our Hindu Neighbors

1. What kinds of experiences have you had with people of Indian origin? Do they match the profiles of the Agarwals, Dr. Prasad, or Kris and Chloe?
2. Why do you think the concepts of reincarnation and karma have grown so popular in Western culture? How do the Western versions of these Hindu beliefs differ from the original Hindu ideas?
3. Are you surprised that the Bhagavad Gita is the second most translated book in the world, second only to the Bible? What do you think accounts for its appeal?
4. How would you respond to the claim that Hinduism is more "inclusive" than Christianity?

Chapter 5. Our Buddhist Neighbors

1. Have you met individuals that remind you of Amanda, Ben, or Hathi?
2. What did you learn about the story of Siddhartha that you did not know before?

3. How would you respond to each of the “Four Nobles Truths” from a Christian perspective?
4. How does the Zen approach to meditation and learning through koans contrast with a Christian approach to understanding and communion with God?
5. How can you relate the statement from a missionary in Thailand, “We don’t have to step on Buddha to lift up Christ,” to conversations with adherents of other religions about their spiritual heroes?
6. How might you explain to a Buddhist a Christian perspective on suffering?

Chapter 6. Our Sikh Neighbors

1. Do you know any Sikhs? If yes, do the brief accounts of individual Sikhs at the beginning of this segment match your impressions of the ones you know?
2. What features of the Sikh faith do you find noble or praiseworthy?
3. Compare Sikh conviction about their sacred text, the Guru Granth Sahib, with your own understanding of the Bible.
4. What reminders do the Sikh build into the fabric of their day? What can Christians learn from their use of ritual and rhythm in support of their faith?
5. What do think about the historical shift within Sikhism from pacifism to a more aggressive form of self-defense in the face of persecution? What is your response to that shift from a Christian point of view?

Chapter 7. Our Bahá’í Neighbors

1. Share with each other any encounters you may have had with members of the Bahá’í faith. In what ways do the profiles of Amir, Jessica, and Jim remind you of those encounters?
2. What do you think would be attractive about the Bahá’í faith to a spiritual seeker?
3. How should Christians respond to the Bahá’í definition of “Progressive Revelation”?
4. The Bahá’í are committed to diversity. Why? How do they understand this principle?
5. What is the Christian perspective on the “oneness” of God, religion, and humanity?
6. How would you imagine that the faithful adherents of religions described thus far in this study—Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs—would respond to the Bahá’í understanding of their religions?

Chapter 8. Our Jain Neighbors

1. Sam Harris believes Jainism to be “the most direct and undefiled expression of love and compassion the world has ever seen.” Now that you’ve watched this segment, what do you think led Harris to that conclusion?
2. How does the Jain understanding of karma differ from that of Hindus and Buddhists?
3. What is a Christian’s perspective on the three basic Jain principles of non-violence, non-absolutism, and non-possessiveness?
4. Given that all truth is God’s truth, what truths can we glean from the parable about the six blind men and the elephant and the story about the man who seeks shelter in a well when chased by an enraged elephant?
5. The Book of Psalms ends on this note: “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord” (150:6). After watching this segment, how do you hear that verse now?
6. Jains and Christians prioritize denial of self, but their reasons for doing so are very different. How should a person practice this important principle?

Chapter 9. Our Native American Neighbors

1. What major stereotypes about Native Americans did this chapter challenge?
2. Those who study comparative religions consider Native American religions to be a traditional religion. Why is this category helpful, and what are the dangers in grouping religions together under this kind of label?
3. How can those of us who are not Native American overcome the barriers that stand between many Native Americans and the gospel, partly as a consequence of centuries of oppression at the hand of some of our ancestors?
4. Discuss an appropriate Christian response to this statement: Native Americans and other traditional religious worldviews do not accept that secularism assumes, that there is great divide between “physical” and “spiritual” reality, between the visible and invisible worlds.
5. Do you believe that divination is real? Can mediums actually communicate with the dead? What is a biblical response to those kinds of spiritual phenomena?
6. What can we learn from the Recabites whose story is told in Jeremiah 35?

Chapter 10. Our Chinese Neighbors

1. How do the spiritual journeys of Yuxi, Canwen, and Howard connect (or not) with personal encounters you have had with people from China?
2. What, if anything, do you find true and admirable about the insights attributed to Lao-zi and Confucius?

3. Does “yin-yang” concept capture any truth we embrace as Christians?
4. How does the Taoist commitment to “action less actions” square with the biblical teaching to “be still and know that I am God”?
5. What are lessons Christians need to learn from the group orientation of non-Western cultures?
6. What are some ways that we can encourage and support the growing Christian movement in China?

Chapter 11. Our Shinto Neighbors

1. What surprises you most about religion in Japan as outlined in this segment?
2. What makes the polls about religious belief and practice in Japan so confusing to Westerners? How might that reaction be changing in the pluralistic environment of North American culture?
3. What, if anything, do you find admirable about Shintoism?
4. What do you think about the four broad categories of Shintoism?

Chapter 12. Bookends: What I Have Learned

1. How do you respond to Rabbi Gershon’s message about “memory and hope” and keys to resilience of our Jewish neighbors?
2. In addition to values and practices such as submission, meditation, and tradition, what other values stand out to you as truly valuable as you reflect on these non-Christian religions?
3. Cox makes the case for the uniqueness of the gospel with this statement: “The Christian faith is a story uniquely grounded in history and centered on the Incarnation. We proclaim the foolishness of the cross and the love on display there, embracing the hope of the resurrection and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.” What touches you most about the uniqueness of the gospel against the backdrop of the alternatives?
4. What have you seen in this segment that you think might help you in conversations with “nones” you know—the growing number of people who claim no religious affiliation?
5. In what ways do you feel more equipped to share your faith with others now that you have done this study?