

MATHEW P. JOHN

THE
MOSAIC
COURSE

UNDERSTANDING WORLD RELIGIONS
FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

STUDY & DISCUSSION GUIDE

MATHEW P. JOHN

THE
MOSAIC
COURSE

UNDERSTANDING WORLD RELIGIONS
FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

DAVID  COOK™

transforming lives together

© 2020 Mathew P. John. Published by David C Cook. All rights reserved.

CONTENTS

Introduction	13
Rediscovering Religion in a Multicultural Mosaic	23
Module 1: The Only Way to God	35
Module 2: Understanding Hinduism	45
Module 3: Understanding Buddhism	57
Module 4: Understanding Sikhism	69
Module 5: Understanding Islam	81
Module 6: Understanding Judaism	93
Module 7: What's So Good about the Good News?	105
Bonus Module: Jesus According to Atheism	115
Appendix: Jesus According to Other Religions	129
Q&A: Is Jesus the Only Way?	137
Notes	141

INTRODUCTION

The Mosaic Course is an educational platform that explores the foundational belief systems and practices of world religions from a Christian perspective.

The course package consists of *The Unknown God* (book), *The Mosaic Course* study guide (which you hold in your hands), and seven audiovisual modules available online at www.themosaiccourse.org.

Our learning outcome goals for this set of materials:

- You will understand the uniqueness and significance of the Christian faith in the

context of other religious traditions and worldview assumptions.

- You will discover redemptive revelations ingrained in major world religions.
- You will learn to communicate the gospel with your neighbors of other faiths in a culturally sensitive fashion.

The key objective of the Mosaic Course is to equip Christians to proclaim the singular and distinct perfection of Christ in a pluralistic society, while also paying due respect to people of other religious faiths and worldview assumptions.

The course functions as a personal enrichment program for individual Christians, a small group curriculum for congregations, and an introductory course in world religions for educational institutions.

HOW TO USE THE STUDY GUIDE

This Study Guide is a companion volume to *The Unknown God* book and the Mosaic Course audiovisual modules.

We recommend you follow these steps:

- Register for the course online at www.themosaiccourse.org.
- Watch the video lectures for each module.
- Review the Key Points in this Study Guide.
- Read the suggested chapters from the book, *The Unknown God*.
- Answer the Reflection Questions in this Study Guide.
- Complete the Exercises in this Study Guide.
- Take the online test.
- Apply for the Mosaic Certificate once you pass all the modules.

We strongly recommend that you join a **Mosaic Group** to discuss the reflection questions and practical exercises. In addition to what you find in this Study Guide, please visit our website for additional resources that will help you organize a Mosaic Group.

THE MOSAIC GROUP

A Mosaic Group is a small group community committed to meet on a periodic basis to study the Mosaic Course modules in a group setting. The purpose of the group is to enhance the learning experience through discussions, exercises, and supplementary reading materials.

STARTING A MOSAIC GROUP

STEP 1: All members should register for the Mosaic Course online at www.themosaiccourse.org.

STEP 2: Order a copy of 1) *The Unknown God* and 2) this Study Guide for each member of the group.

STEP 3: Identify leaders and helpers for the group and follow the guidelines suggested below in the section *Scheduling a Mosaic Group*.

NEED HELP?

You can post all your questions at the Mosaic Help Desk, and they will be answered in an upcoming Q&A Webinar.

You may also invite one of our speakers to do a **Mosaic Live** seminar at your location.

PROMOTING A MOSAIC GROUP

- Generally, people outside the church community are also interested in learning about world religions. Therefore, it is a good idea to advertise the group in public platforms (such as newspapers, local clubs, coffee shops, TV/radio stations, etc.).

- Customize the following graphic files available for download at our website for promotional purposes:

Mosaic Group Poster

Mosaic Group Flyer

Mosaic Group Power Point

Mosaic Group Social Media Post

Mosaic Group Video Trailers

Mosaic Group Bulletin Blurb

Mosaic Group Personal Invitation
Letter or Email

- It is ideal to launch the Mosaic Group with a Mosaic Live seminar. You may collaborate with other congregations in your neighborhood to maximize resources and logistics for the seminar.

SCHEDULING A MOSAIC GROUP

A group is more effective when it is smaller in size. It is best to limit the number of members to a maximum of twelve.

It is important for the leader to discern the type of people he or she should admit into the group. Ideally, the group should be affiliated with a church, school, or other institution.

As is often said, “Consistency is the key” to the success of a group. It is important for the attendees to be regular and on time to the meetings. Always remember to finish the group on time. If people express genuine interest to continue the discussions, the leader may choose to extend the time, but only after officially closing the group.

MEAL

It is a good idea to start the group with a meal. It creates an atmosphere conducive to friendly discussions, even if there are people from more than one faith present.

SCRIPTURE READING

Please remember that the suggested Scripture verses are meant only for reading, not necessarily for discussion during your meeting time.

Each chapter of the book *The Unknown God* opens with a passage from different religious texts. You may also choose to read these excerpts along with the Scripture verses.

PRAYER

Prayer should be brief and sensitive to people of other religious faiths, if any are present in the group.

WATCH

Ideally, the participants should preview each video at home. But it is also important for the group to review them together in the meeting.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Limit the discussions to the reflection questions listed in this Study Guide.

Since the video modules are kept short to respect meeting time duration, most questions can be fully answered only after reading the corresponding chapters in *The Unknown God*.

The discussions should *not* turn into a Q&A session where one person attempts to answer the questions raised by the others.

Instead of trying to answer a difficult question, the leader should note it and post it at the Mosaic Help Desk.

EXERCISE

Share your experiences as you work through the exercises suggested in this Study Guide.

INTERCESSORY PRAYER

Take time to pray for your neighbors of other faiths and other specific needs shared in the group.

©
Copyrighted Material

REDISCOVERING RELIGION IN A MULTICULTURAL MOSAIC

“How dare you say that Jesus is the only way to God? What an intolerant and insensitive claim to make in our pluralistic world!”

This is a criticism often leveled against Christians who dare to believe that their faith is somehow unique and worthy to be shared with others. In the multicultural society we

live in, most people believe all religions are equal, simply providing different paths to the same spiritual destination.

In such a context, many Christians find themselves wondering, “My neighbors of other religions are just as good as, if not better than, my fellow church members. Who am I to say that their faith is any less than mine? I would rather keep quiet and not risk offending others.”

Is there a way to affirm the biblical notion that Jesus is the only way to God without being branded as intolerant or arrogant? Is it possible to believe in the uniqueness and significance of Christian convictions while also paying due respect to people of other religious traditions and world-view assumptions? These are some of the crucial questions we are going to address in the Mosaic Course.

In the seven modules of the course, we will explore the foundational belief systems and practices of six major living religions of the world: Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

We will discover that the followers of the non-Christian religions possess a respectful, if not reverential, understanding of the same Christ the Christians worship as the Son of God. The realization of this fact will challenge us to revise our gospel communication by starting conversations with

“the Jesus they know” and then inviting them to see “the Jesus we know.”

DEBATES AND DIALOGUES

Our postmodern, pluralistic world is a marketplace of ideas. All religions are considered legitimate expressions of truth, and the term *spirituality* has become a cultural category that describes subjective experiences. Any attempt to proclaim the singular and distinct perfection of the gospel is immediately associated with negative stereotypes such as cultural imperialism, intolerance, and even bigotry.

Many Christians in conservative circles are familiar with the term *apologetics*, the defense of faith. The purpose of apologetics is to equip Christians “to make a defense to everyone who asks to give an account for the hope that is in [us]” (1 Peter 3:15). Apologetics operates by appealing to evidence and reason, articulating the authenticity of the Christian faith in public platforms.

An obvious problem with apologetics is its complexity. One needs to possess a considerable level of intellectual prowess and biblical knowledge to apply apologetic methods

in ordinary conversations. This is why many churches rely on professional apologists.

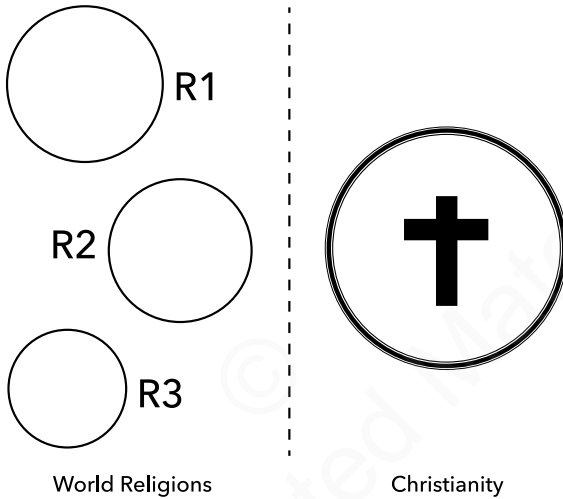


Figure 1. Apologetic Debates

Apologetics starts by drawing a line of demarcation between Christianity and other religions (R1, R2, R3, etc.), invariably creating a divide between us and “the other.” Apologetic debates, therefore, are more confrontational than invitational. They thrive on hostile denunciation and unsympathetic criticism of other faiths, making it practically impossible to build bridges.

An alternative approach to engaging world religions, predominantly popular in the progressive circles, is that of

interfaith dialogues. Christianity and other religions come together at a round table to listen to and learn from one another. Each of them overlaps with Christianity in different measures, and the dialogue will be focused primarily on these areas of intersection. Depending on the size of the overlap, certain religions can be better dialogue partners than others.

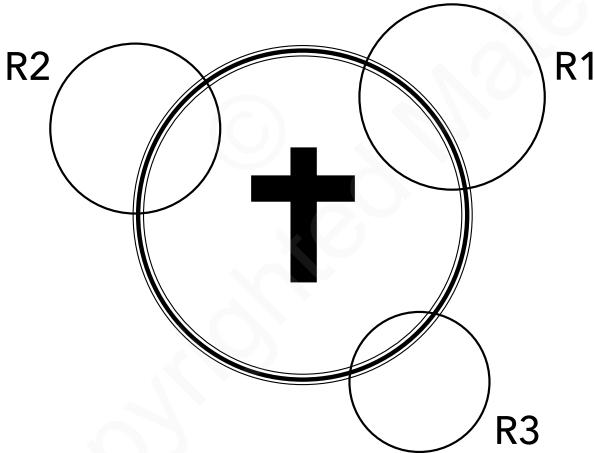


Figure 2. Interfaith Dialogues

A dialogue, by definition, is more conversational than confrontational. This is a step in the right direction. In order to facilitate the dialogue, however, we will have to steer clear from theological propositions that are central to each faith. Therefore, interfaith dialogues tend to focus

mostly on ethical and moral aspects of religion, with an intentional disregard for dogmas and doctrines.

Interfaith dialogues have enjoyed increased popularity in our postmodern world, but they often succumb to the demands of political correctness and lose any ability to communicate the gospel with conviction. “A religion which has given up claiming uniqueness, one might fairly say, is of no special interest,” says Jürgen Moltmann,¹ one of the most prominent theologians of our time.

If we believe that the gospel is to be preached across the world, we also have to believe that the message it contains is unique and decisive—perhaps even exclusive.

The Bible does not allow us to compromise the fact that the Christ-event was a decisive moment in history, which was crucial for the salvation of humankind. While it is commendable on our part to explore common ground with other religions and work with them on humanitarian concerns, we should never forget the fact that the true mandate of the church is to preach “Christ crucified” (1 Corinthians 1:23). The heart of the gospel is the cross of Christ. Any conversation that deliberately avoids this central truth is, in Jesus’ language, like salt that has lost its flavor (see Luke 14:34).

This brings us to the heart of our predicament: interfaith dialogues are preoccupied with the task of finding common

ground between different religions, focusing only on the superficial similarities they might share. Apologetic debates, on the other hand, obsess over philosophical discourses and turn into contentious and controversial arguments.

The Mosaic Course introduces a different approach to the conversation—a “redemptive method” that attempts to be both culturally sensitive and theologically sound at the same time.

A REDEMPTIVE APPROACH

The apostle Paul once addressed a pluralistic society at Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17:16–34). The worldview of his audience was a hodgepodge of ideas ranging from Stoicism, which opted for an escapist withdrawal from the world, to Epicureanism, which called for a hedonistic immersion into it. It was, in many ways, a microcosm of today’s global village.

Although the idols erected at every corner of the city provoked Paul’s spirit, he began his sermon not by condemning idolatry, but by affirming their zeal for God. Pointing to the altar of an idol marked *Agnostos Theos* (the unknown god), Paul said, “What you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:22–34). He was not preaching

a new religion. Instead, he was revealing the hidden God embedded in their own religious cult. The unknown god of the Athenians suddenly became a signpost that pointed to the God of the Bible.

What Paul uses here is a strategy we might call “reverse hermeneutics.” A typical sermon begins with a Scripture passage, exegetes it, and ends with its application in the culture. But Paul reverses this process at Mars Hill: he starts with the culture, identifies a redemptive element in it, and bridges the culture to the Scripture.

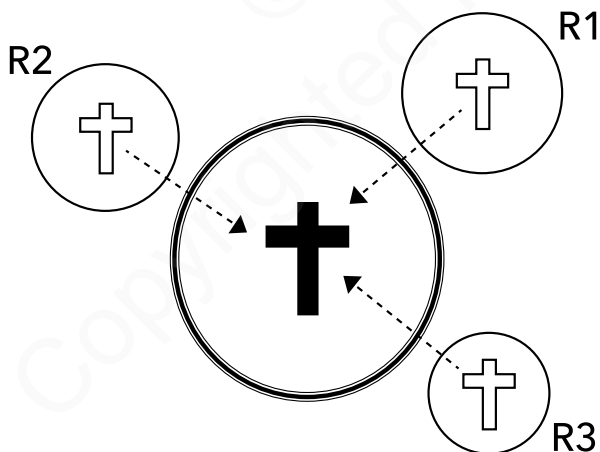


Figure 3. A Redemptive Approach

The Mosaic Course follows the same strategy. In it, we attempt to redeem the unknown god embedded deep

within the theological center of various religions. The multifaceted depictions of a “Christ figure” in religions R1, R2, and R3 become pathways that lead the people of those religions to its historical fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Bible.

The task of evangelism then becomes simple and straightforward. When we share the gospel with our neighbors of other faiths, we are not selling them a new religion—we are introducing them to a person who embodies the fullness of their own religious experiences and expectations.

In our journey through six major world religions in the Mosaic Course, we will encounter the silhouette of the unknown god emerging from the deep recesses of their sacred scriptures.

We will meet the *avatar* in the Hindu pantheon, an embodied god with a salvific mission. In the Buddhist universe, we will see the *bodhisattva*, an enlightened teacher who has vowed to rescue humanity from a suffering world. In Sikhism, we will witness God revealing Himself to the world through His Word. We will come face to face with the Jesus of Islam, the only human ever to enter the world without a father and the only prophet who is going to come back again to reestablish God’s domain on the earth.

We will explore the Jewish texts struggling to reconcile the conflicting portrayals of the Messiah as both triumphant king and suffering servant.

In the end, we will discover that God's redemptive plan for the world through Christ has been unfolding in every culture and in every religion since the beginning of time. This discovery will help us appreciate the wide spectrum of spiritual experiences we find in our multicultural mosaic without compromising the singular and distinct perfection of the gospel.