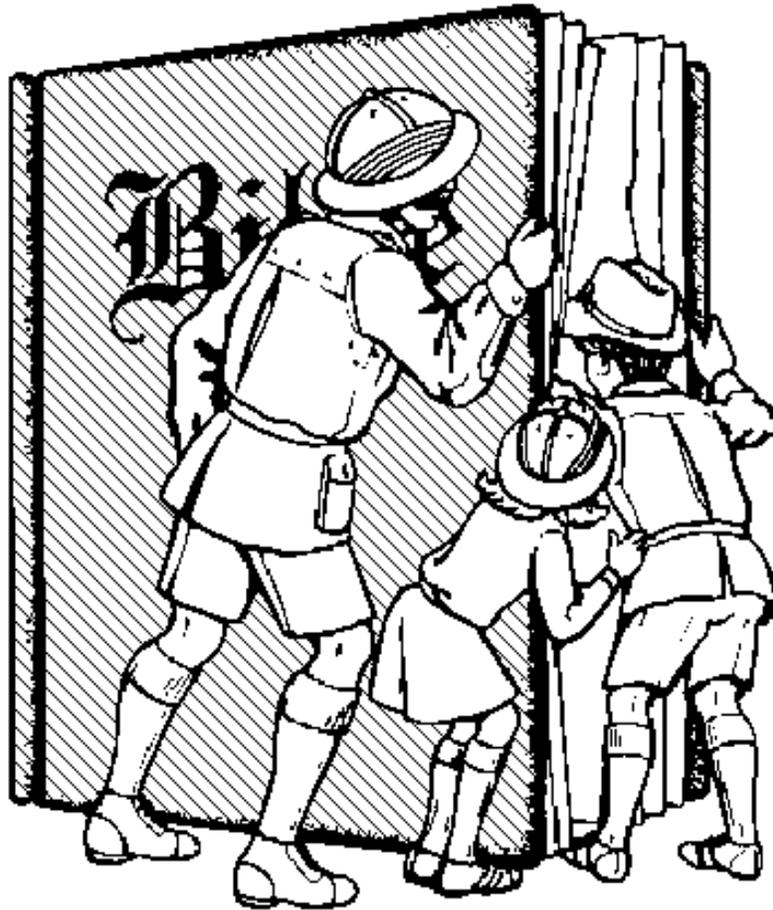


Fellowship Bible Church



Mid-Week Theology Class

Comparative Religions – Part I

“The Nature and Pursuit of Truth”

Winter 2008

Comparative Religions Part I - Tentative Syllabus

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Week 1: Introduction to the Book of Hebrews**Text Reading: Ecclesiastes 3:11; Genesis 4:26**

*“And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth,
“For God has appointed another seed for me instead of Abel, whom Cain killed.”
And as for Seth, to him also a son was born; and he named him Enosh.
Then men began to call on the name of the LORD.”
(Genesis 4:25-26)*

One morning you walk outside the front door of your house to find several hundred people all standing around looking up to the sky. Instinctively you cast your gaze in the same direction, but see nothing. Yet it seems apparent that so many people all gazing into the sky *must* see something, so you intensify your own search. Still nothing; at least nothing discernible to your eyes. You begin to ask individuals what it is that they see, and when you are able to get them to answer, you find that they do not all see the same thing. But *everyone seems to see something*; and you still see nothing. After a while, however, the power of suggestion kicks in and you begin to believe that you also see something; and you take your place among the masses gazing into the empty sky.

This is, of course, a metaphor. And it is figurative of how many modern scholars and skeptics view mankind’s devotion to religion. Instead of hundreds of people, there are billions – all gazing into a sky that appears blank and empty to the few skeptics who have not joined in the view. Religion, they say, is merely the collective power of suggestion. Perhaps millennia ago one man began to gaze into the sky, either deluding himself into believing that he actually saw something, or intentionally deceiving others into believing the same. Either way, the second person began looking, and then the third, and soon a critical mass was reached such that the power of collective suggestion was too overwhelming for individuals coming after the ‘charter gazers’ to resist. *Voila!* Religion. Now it does not matter any more what exactly each individual thinks he or she sees up in the sky; what is considered important is that everyone *thinks* there is

something there. In the meantime the skeptic, the agnostic, the atheist mockingly passes by this incredibly large but deluded crowd of humanity.

And this crowd is indeed large, one might say 'immense' without exaggeration. The vast majority of mankind throughout its history practiced some form of religion, some manner of a belief system at the head of which was a divine and transcendent Being. Even in the ultra-modern, post-modern 21st century only approximately 16% of people surveyed worldwide profess to be atheists, and fully half that number merely claim to be 'non-practicing theists.'¹ James Turner, in his book *Without God, Without Creed*, maintains quite convincingly that the phenomenon of unbelief was virtually unknown in Western society until around the middle of the 19th century. In the 20th century, seventy years of communist rule was unable to eradicate religious sentiments from the hearts of the Russian people, and the ongoing communist regime in China has proven impotent to remove ancestor worship, shamanism, and other forms of Eastern religion from the lives of the billion plus Chinese people. Can it be that so many people looking up in the sky truly see nothing? Can it be that they are all deceived? Can such universal behavior be explained merely by the power of suggestion?

The skeptic again answers 'Yes,' and points to the fact that all do not 'see' the same thing when they gaze upon the sky. Some see one God, others one God existing in Three Persons, others many gods, and some just see a monadic Soul into which they hope one day to be absorbed. Some see deity in their own future: as gods of other planets they see themselves taking their place in someone else's sky. Does not this diversity of vision prove the error of it all?

¹ Reported on www.adherents.com from data compiled and used in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.