

Is Comparative Religion Forbidden?

Righty Dividing God's Word

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I have another social media exchange to tell you about. This time, it occurred on Facebook in a post from a splinter group of Philadelphia Church of God (PCG) against PCG, against their Herbert W. Armstrong College, and a minister who teaches a Comparative Religion course at that college. The post read read (in part):

GROWING IDOLATRY IN THE PHILADELPHIA CHURCH OF GOOD

The course on COMPARATIVE RELIGION is being offered by ARMSTRONG COLLEGE as an online course REGARDLESS OF GOOD'S WARNING GIVEN IN Deuteronomy 12. . . .

Deuteronomy 12:29-30 (KJV) When the LOORD thy God shall cut off the nations from before thee, whither thou goest to possess them, and thou succeedest them, and dwellest in their land; take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and THAT THOU ENQUIRE NOT AFTER THEIR GOODS, SAYING, HOW DID THESE NATIONS SERVE THEIR GOODS?

After smacking my forehead in disbelief, I wrote in response:

If you condemn the PCG for this, you'll have to condemn HWA and the WCG too because there was a similar Comparative Religion course at Ambassador College, taught in my day by Gary Antion.

The reply was simply to quote Deuteronomy 12:29-30 from a couple of other translations—as if I didn't get it from the King James—and saying, “GOOD SAYS, ‘DO NOT INQUIRE.’” That was their whole response to me.

A little bit later, they also said—without any backing whatsoever—that Herbert Armstrong was probably innocent of any wrongdoing there at Ambassador College because he was so old and focused on doing his work. So they let him off the hook for that. But it was still wrong, because they said it was probably “the synagogue of Satan” (Revelation 3:9) that was in the Worldwide Church of God at the time—meaning Joseph

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Tkach and company—that sneaked the course into the Ambassador College curriculum.

I decided I'd better see how early Comparative Religion was taught at Ambassador College. I went to the Ambassador Alumni page on Facebook and posted there, asking if anyone knew when Comparative Religion was first offered at Ambassador College. I received various answers—probably about a half dozen of them—but from those who responded to me, it appears that Comparative Religion was taught at Ambassador College at least as early as the mid-1960s. One man said that he took it at Ambassador College, Pasadena, in 1968. He said the course was taught by Al Portune. Another person said that Dean Blackwell taught Comparative Religion in the '70s at Big Sandy. Although it may have been dropped in the later '70s, when they were reorganizing Ambassador College and moving everybody to Pasadena, it was soon offered again once they had gotten enough teachers and everything to teach the course. So, apparently, Herbert Armstrong had roughly twenty years or so to pass on it, and I am sure he did at some point say, "Yeah, we should have a Comparative Religion course." I don't know that, but he was the Pastor General for all those years.

Let's just, for a second, look at what this Herbert W. Armstrong College course teaches:

COURSE DESCRIPTION: COMPARATIVE RELIGION

Examines the origins, practices and teachings of major world religions including ancient Mesopotamian religions, tribalism, Buddhism, Shinto, Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. The course will also address various denominations of Christianity including Baptist, Christian Scientist, Jehovah's Witness, Seventh-Day Adventist and others.

That is the whole course description right there. Now, let's think this through. Whether it is a semester course or a two-semester course, that is a lot to cover—a lot of religions there. How much are students really learning about these religions? They are not going into the nitty-gritty by any means, because they have listed nine non-Christian religions and a handful of Christian denominations, and they did not even mention Catholicism, Greek Orthodox, Mormonism, Calvinism, Methodism, Pentecostalism, or several others in their course description! At best, this Comparative Religion course is a shallow overview of these religions, basically letting everybody know that they are out there, and little more. There is hardly anything that they can say in just several classes worth on a subject. I think for me, the hardest part would be keeping them separate! How do you keep Shinto separate from Buddhism and Taoism and Confucianism and Hinduism? To me, that is the hardest part.

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But better than the KJV, the *English Standard Version* (ESV) catches the sense of God's command:

Deuteronomy 12:30 (ESV) "Take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods?—*that I also may do the same.*'"

When you understand what God is saying here, He is forbidding the study of idolatrous practices for the purpose of *engaging in them oneself*. He is not forbidding gaining the knowledge of what those practices are.

Think about this. If you go into any country anywhere that does not keep Christianity, you will begin to learn about the practices of the people around you. You cannot help it. You will know that those things are going on.

What God is concerned about here is a *concerted effort* to learn about **and follow** the gods of the land to acknowledge them and to appease them through worship or sacrifice.

A little cultural background is important here: There was a general belief in the Middle East at the time that the gods ruled over specific areas of land. All who lived in an area had to at least acknowledge the lordship of that deity of that particular area, or that place. So, Canaan was ruled over by Baal, they thought. Babylon was ruled over by Bel or Marduk. Assyria was ruled over by their gods, and Egypt by their gods. They felt that those gods were in that land, and if you came to live in that land, you were expected to acknowledge that god by some form of worship—a sacrifice or something.

We see this in a few places in Scripture, such as when the captives from [Assyria] who became the Samaritans sought to learn the worship of Yahweh when they came in because they thought they had to appease the god of the land, who was the God of Israel (II Kings 17). When Naaman was healed of his leprosy, he took two donkey loads of soil from Israel back to Syria with him so that he could properly acknowledge the God who had healed him when he was at home (II Kings 5). It shows us that there this idea that when you came into a new land, you had to acknowledge the gods of the land, and our God was trying to disabuse the Israelites about doing anything like that when they came in and conquered Canaan. They did not have to do that. They did not have to go in, conquer the people, and then appease the gods of the land; they were supposed to worship Him, no matter what. He was refuting this erroneous belief and practice of

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forbidding them to have anything to do with the gods of the land.

Like I said, it is almost impossible to go into a new land that does not worship God and not find out about what they are doing. That is not the problem. It is when you inquire after them to observe and practice those things. Jesus certainly knew about the Jews' and the Romans' false practices. Paul made a point of comparing religions when he spoke to the Athenians in Acts 17. He even speaks about “considering the objects of your worship” (verse 23) and quotes a couple of their poets (verse 28)! Paul had some sort of idea of how they worshiped their gods.

What is being done here in this post that I responded to is called proof-texting—taking a verse out of its context and ignoring the historical and cultural background of the text. I certainly believe we are far better off studying God's Word and His way than studying false religions, but He certainly does not forbid it outright. This is just a caution that we need to be more perceptive and thorough in our understanding of what God says in His word, and rightly divide the word of truth, as Paul said to Timothy.