

## Christianity

22 indicative hours

The focus of this study is Christianity, one of the major religious traditions, as a living religious system.

### Outcomes

A student:

- P3 investigates religious traditions and belief systems
- P4 examines significant aspects of religious traditions
- P5 describes the influence of religious traditions in the life of adherents
- P6 selects and uses relevant information about religion from a variety of sources
- P7 undertakes effective research about religion, making appropriate use of time and resources
- P8 uses appropriate terminology related to religion and belief systems
- P9 effectively communicates information, ideas and issues using appropriate written, oral and graphic forms.

### Content

Students learn about:	Students learn to:
<p><b>Origins</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the historical and cultural context in which Christianity began</li> <li>• Jesus Christ</li> <li>• the development of early Christian communities</li> <li>• Christianity:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Anglicanism</li> <li>- Catholicism</li> <li>- Orthodoxy</li> <li>- Pentecostalism</li> <li>- Protestantism</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• outline the historical and cultural context in which Christianity began</li> <li>• examine the principal events of Jesus' life p109</li> <li>• explain why Jesus is the model for Christian life p114, p129-131</li> <li>• describe the early development of Christian communities after the death of Jesus 130-131, 133</li> <li>• outline the unique features of:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Anglicanism</li> <li>- Catholicism - p133-135</li> <li>- Orthodoxy p137-138</li> <li>- Pentecostalism</li> <li>- Protestantism p135-136</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

JDP p108-109  
 p122-123  
 p127, 129-13  


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 JDP p112-121  
  
~~PP 122-124~~  
 122-125  
  
 p132-138

<p><b>Principal Beliefs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ</li> <li>the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ</li> <li>the nature of God and the Trinity</li> <li>Revelation</li> <li>Salvation</li> </ul> <p><b>Sacred Texts and Writings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bible</li> </ul> <p><b>Core Ethical Teachings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the Ten Commandments</li> <li>New Testament ethics             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the Beatitudes</li> <li>Jesus' commandment of love</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>Personal Devotion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prayer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>outline the principal beliefs regarding the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ p115-116</li> <li>explain the importance of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for Christians p118-121, p128</li> <li>outline the beliefs about the nature of God and of the Trinity p126,127</li> <li>examine the Christian understanding of revelation p113, p116-118, p123</li> <li>describe the Christian understanding of salvation JD p114-115, p118 p126-128</li> <li>identify the importance of the Bible in Christianity p113 p110-111, 123-128 p120-121</li> <li>examine extracts from the Bible which demonstrate the principal beliefs of Christianity</li> <li>outline the principal ethical teachings in:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the Ten Commandments</li> <li>the Beatitudes</li> <li>Jesus' commandment of love p114, p129-131</li> </ul> </li> <li>describe the importance of ethical teachings in the life of adherents p129-</li> <li>describe the different types of personal prayer p128</li> </ul>
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## Good books and sites on Judaism

[torah.org](http://torah.org)

[judaism.about.com](http://judaism.about.com)

[jewishencyclopedia.com](http://jewishencyclopedia.com)

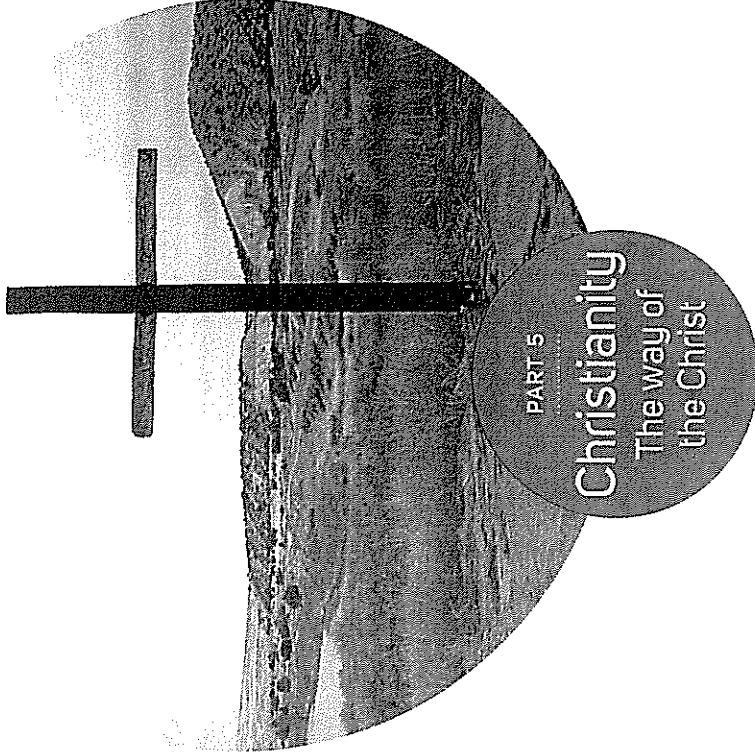
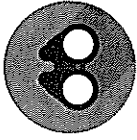
Neusner, J 1997, *The Way of the Torah: An Introduction to Judaism*, Wadsworth Publishing, Belmont (Ca).

Jacobs, L 1995, *The Jewish Religion: A Companion*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Grabbe, LL 1996, *An Introduction to First Century Judaism: Jewish Religion and History in the Second Temple Period*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh.

Smart, N & Hecht, R (eds) 2002, 'Judaism', in *Sacred Texts of the World: A Universal Anthology*, Crossroad, New York, pp. 45–89.

Smart, N 2003, *The World's Religions* (2nd edition), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 246–274.



### In a nutshell

Christianity could be described as the belief and practice of those who revere Jesus Christ as the one who taught how people ought to live, died for the sins of the world and rose again so that people might live with God (and one another) forever.

1. Worldwide Adherents of All Religions by Six Continental Areas, Mid 2013, *Britannica Book of the Year 2014*, p. 324.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. North American Jewish Databank 2012, '15 metropolitan areas (CMSAs) with largest core Jewish populations, 1/1/2012', *World Jewish Population 2012*, accessed 19 May 2014, <<http://www.jewishdatabank.org/studies/downloadFile.cfm?FileID=2941>>.
5. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011 census.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*

## JESUS AND THE SOURCES OF CHRISTIANITY

The word 'Christianity' tells you a couple of very important things about the topic of the next few chapters. Firstly, it lets you know that the faith of Christians has a lot to do with a person, Jesus Christ. Just how much it revolves around this man will soon become clear.

The other thing the word 'Christianity' tells you is that this faith is intimately related to ancient Judaism. The word 'Christ' is an important Jewish term. It is not a surname like 'Dickson' - Jesus' parents were not Mr and Mrs Christ. As I said in Chapter 13, 'Christ' means 'Anointed One' and is the title given by Jews to the king God will one day send to redeem Israel and rule all nations. By naming Jesus the 'Christ' and his followers 'Christians' (people of Christ), Christianity claims to fulfil the hopes of Judaism.

We begin by looking at the sources of our knowledge about Jesus.

### Non-Christian sources about Jesus

Christianity arrived on the scene at a time of great literary activity; philosophers were writing weighty tomes on the meaning of life, poets and playwrights were composing material to make people laugh and cry, emperors were crafting royal propaganda to ensure they were remembered, and historians were recording for posterity all that they could discover about their cultural heritage. The non-biblical writings of the first few centuries AD would fill many shelves in a modern library.

One lucky outcome of this flurry of literary activity is that a Palestinian teacher, named Yeshua, or Jesus, managed to get a mention in several Roman, Greek and Jewish writings of the time. Some of the references are neutral; others are downright antagonistic, like my personal favourite from Cornelius Tacitus (56-120 AD), ancient Rome's most famous historian:

Christians derived their name from a man called Christ, who, during the reign of Emperor Tiberius had been executed by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate. The deadly superstition, thus checked for the moment, broke out afresh not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but also in the City of Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world meet and become popular. (*Annals* 44.2-5)

Other first century writers who mention Jesus include the Greek historian Thallus, the Syrian writer Mara bar Serapion, and the Jewish aristocrat Flavius Josephus who mentions Jesus on two occasions. In the second century a number of interesting, mainly critical, statements about Jesus are found in the writings of (1) the satirist and lecturer Lucian of Samosata, (2) the Greek intellectual Celsus, and (3) some of the rabbis of the Jewish Talmud (in *Baraita Sanhedrin* and *Baraita Shabbat*).

All in all, these non-Christian sources provide only the following sketchy details about Jesus' life:

- The name 'Jesus'
- The place and time frame of Jesus' ministry
- The name of Jesus' mother, Mary
- The ambiguity of Jesus' conception/birth
- The name of one of Jesus' brothers, James
- Jesus' wide fame as a teacher
- Jesus' fame as a miracle worker/sorcerer
- The popular naming of Jesus as 'Messiah/Christ'
- The time of Jesus' execution—around the Jewish Passover festival (April)
- The manner of Jesus' execution (crucifixion)
- The Roman Governor responsible for the execution, Pontius Pilate
- The involvement of the Jewish leadership in Jesus' death
- The coincidence of an eclipse at the time of Jesus' death
- The report of Jesus' appearances to his followers after his death
- The flourishing of a movement that began to worship Jesus after his death

Obviously, these non-Christian references provide little more than an outline of Jesus' life. Nothing can be gained from these sources, for instance, about what Jesus stood for, or what he wanted from his followers. For these details

principals  
events  
of Jesus  
life

Christal context

we have to turn to another set of documents from the first century—those written by his followers.

### Christian sources about Jesus

It is generally acknowledged that our earliest and most reliable sources of information about Jesus come from those closest to the events. Hence, the Christian 'New Testament' (the counterpart to the 'Old Testament', or Jewish *Torah*) takes centre stage in modern research into Jesus.

The most important of these New Testament documents, for understanding the mission and message of Jesus, are the so-called 'Gospels'. The word 'gospel' means 'grand news', and these semi-biographical accounts of Jesus' life claim to tell the grandest news of all. We possess just four Gospels composed in the first century:

- 1 | *The Gospel of Mark*—probably written in the mid-60s AD by a man named Mark, a colleague of an original follower of Jesus called the Apostle Peter. 'Apostle' means *one sent out* by Christ to proclaim the gospel.
- 2 | *The Gospel of Luke*—probably written around 70 AD by Luke, a colleague of the Apostle Paul who, like Peter, claimed to have seen Jesus (resurrected) after his death. Most historians believe Luke's Gospel includes lengthy quotations from at least three much earlier sources.
- 3 | *The Gospel of Matthew*—probably written around 80 AD by followers of the Apostle Matthew, another original follower of Jesus. Traditional Christians (and a few scholars) would prefer to say that Matthew himself penned this Gospel. Matthew's Gospel, like Luke's, appears to rely heavily on prior sources.
- 4 | *The Gospel of John*—written sometime between 60–90 AD (there's lots of debate here) by one of two 'Johns'. Some argue it was written by the Apostle John, a contemporary and eyewitness of Jesus. Others (the majority) think it was composed by another 'John' who was a disciple of the Apostle John.

Another set of New Testament writings provides a further historical source for our knowledge about Jesus. The letters of Paul are a collection of correspondence from the Apostle Paul to various Christian groups around

the Mediterranean—in Corinth, Rome, and elsewhere. These letters provide the earliest historical sources about Jesus, being written between 48–64 AD. Passing references to Jesus in Paul's letters confirm that things like Jesus' descent from King David, his teaching about love, his 'Last Supper', his betrayal, death, resurrection and appearances were already widely known throughout the Mediterranean decades before the four Gospels were published.

In Chapter 7 we noted that the Buddhist scriptures were first written down 300–400 years after Siddhartha Gautama's death. In Chapter 15 we discussed the Jewish Mishnah compiled 150 years after the death of many of the rabbis quoted in the work. As I also pointed out in those chapters, such time gaps do not make these writings unreliable records of the sacred material. In contrast to modern times, ancient men and women preserved the sayings of important teachers by using centuries-old techniques of memorisation and verbal transmission. Only 10–20% of people could read, so writing things down was actually *not* the most effective means of passing on a teacher's wisdom. 'Oral tradition', as this process was called, was the preferred method for many in antiquity.

What was true for Buddhists, Jews, and (as we shall see) for Muslims, was equally true for the first Christians: oral tradition was regarded as the most trusted way to safeguard and pass on the sacred teachings. In the case of Christianity, this method was employed for a relatively brief period. The oral traditions about Jesus' life started to be written down within 20 years of the events themselves. We turn in the next chapter to explore some of these events in detail.

## THE LIFE OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

Jesus was born about 5 BC. I know that sounds odd: how could Jesus be born BC, before Christ? There is a simple explanation. The man who gave us the calendar distinction between BC and AD (*Anno Domini*, 'in the year of the Lord') was an Italian scholar of the sixth century named Dionysius Exiguus ('Denis the Little'). In proposing a new dating system, commencing with the birth of Jesus, Denis sifted through the available historical records to arrive at the most probable date for the first 'year of the Lord'. He missed by only a few years. Based on the historical information available today, however, modern scholars confidently place Jesus' birth between 6 and 4 BC.

### Carpenter and king

Comparatively little is known of Jesus' childhood. All we can say with confidence is that he grew up in the district of Galilee (northern Palestine) in a little town called Nazareth where, like most Jewish boys, he would have followed in the trade of his father, Joseph. This meant Jesus was a carpenter, making and fixing furniture, fences and other household items. By our standards he was poor. By ancient norms he was about average.

More important than Jesus' trade was his ancestry. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke, as well as one of Paul's letters, indicate that Jesus was a descendant of King David (1000 BC), the greatest of Israel's kings and the one to whom God had promised an eternal throne (discussed in Chapter 13). Not that having royal blood necessarily makes you special—my wife is a descendant of Robert the Bruce, first king of Scotland (1274–1329 AD), and it comes with no perks whatsoever. However, as people began to suggest that Jesus was the promised Messiah, this connection with the ancient royal family became vitally important.

### Preacher of the 'kingdom of God'

What Jesus did between his childhood and his adult career is completely unknown. That hasn't stopped some interesting speculation though. Recent

New Age writers have surmised that Jesus journeyed to Egypt to learn magic, or to India to learn wisdom. Historical scholars offer more boring proposals. They figure Jesus probably did what most Jewish boys of the time did—stayed 'put' and worked with the family. If Jesus' father died early—as many historians suspect—the 'staying put' theory provides the only plausible scenario. Staying at home to look after his mother (Mary) and the other members of his extended family (six that we know about) would have been his moral duty until adulthood. Sometime in 28 AD, though, around 33 years of age, Jesus emerged from Galilee in the north of Palestine as a teacher. It is unlikely Jesus had any formal education, apart from what he got at home and in the local synagogue, and yet very quickly he seems to have attracted a great deal of attention.

People today often associate Jesus with words of simple spiritual wisdom: 'Turn the other cheek', 'Do unto others what you would have them do unto you', and so on. It is true that Jesus had a lot to say about ethics and relationships but most of this was not new. Much of his moral teaching was simply a reworking of traditions found already in the Jewish Torah.

The truly dramatic thing about Jesus' teaching was his daring announcement that the long-awaited 'kingdom of God' had arrived, or at least come 'near':

Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God. 'The time has come', he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the gospel' (Mark 1.14–15)

It is difficult to convey just how explosive such a message would have been in first century Palestine. Declaring that 'the kingdom of God is near' was equivalent to saying that everything the Jews longed for was finding fulfilment in their midst. It meant that the everlasting throne promised to King David (1000 BC) was being realised, that judgement upon evil was close at hand, and that all nations would finally submit to the one true God.

For Jews of this period the phrase 'kingdom of God' evoked strong political aspirations: the promised eternal throne was hoped to be an earthly throne, God's judgement upon evil was thought to be aimed at Rome in particular, and the submission of the nations to God was expected to involve the submission of the nations to Israel as well. Jesus' idea of the 'kingdom', however, was anything but political. Let me explain.

revelation  
importance of bible

Jewish hope of Messiah

← Principal events →  
Cultural context

### The 'friend of sinners'

At the heart of Jesus' message about the kingdom was the insistence that it was open to everyone—even to those normally thought to be excluded from God's plans and deserving of his judgement.

Ancient Judaism regarded 'lepers' (those with a range of skin diseases) as 'unclean', that is, in a state of impurity that excluded them from the life of Israel. Jesus touched lepers (reportedly healing them) and personally declared them to be 'clean', that is, approved members of God's family.

Another group of 'outsiders' were the tax collectors. Tax collectors were widely criticised by their fellow Jews as traitors for raising revenue on behalf of the Romans and scoundrels for getting rich in the process. Nevertheless, Jesus regularly sought out these 'greedy Roman lovers' and offered them God's mercy.

In first century Palestine no-one was considered more impure and deserving of God's judgement than a prostitute. And yet, on at least one occasion that we know of, while dining at the home of a Pharisee (see Chapter 15 for details about the Pharisees), Jesus welcomed a prostitute to the table. The woman had heard Jesus was in town, and in her desperation to meet him she 'gategashed' the dinner party. Much to the displeasure of his religiously devout host, Jesus let this woman touch him as she wept at his feet: hopeful of God's mercy. Jesus shocked everyone at the party by accusing his host of self-righteousness and offering divine forgiveness to the woman:

Then Jesus said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven'. The other guests began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' Jesus said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace'. (Luk 7:48-50)

Perhaps not surprisingly, about this time, Jesus began to be slandered in public by conservative Jews as the 'friend of sinners', a tag Jesus may well have taken as a compliment.

It is a curious fact to remember that no person in the Bible spoke more about hell (the place of judgement) and about the forgiveness of sinners than did Jesus. He apparently viewed his mission as a rescue mission: an attempt to save people from a fate worse than death.

Jews as models

Salvation

### Forgiveness and the temple

Jesus' offer of forgiveness of sins was one of the most striking features of his ministry. On another occasion we are told that Jesus met a crippled man. Jesus reportedly healed him but also declared: 'My child, your sins are forgiven' (Mark 2:5). This was outrageous. 'Sins' are those things in human conduct that offend God, not Jesus. So how could Jesus go around forgiving sins? That was precisely the question the religious leaders wanted to ask: 'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?' (Mark 2:7).

Salvation

As I explained in Chapter 13, ancient Jews had highly developed rituals of forgiveness. These were conducted in the Jerusalem temple. The role of the priest in the process was merely to conduct the ceremonies and announce divine forgiveness to the worshippers. The priest did not actually forgive people's sins himself. That was God's business, according to Jewish theology. Jesus seemingly cut right across this centuries-old tradition by claiming that if you were connected with him—were a member of the kingdom he talked about—you would be cleansed from all your sins. This was as good as claiming yourself to be a substitute temple, an alternative locus of God's presence and mercy.

### Baffling deeds

The claim that Jesus performed unexplainable deeds is everywhere in our ancient sources—both Christian and non-Christian. Even the most critical specialists today, historians such as John Meier, John Dominic Crossan and Ed Parish Sanders (to name just three from the sceptical end of scholarship) concede that, historically speaking, it looks as though Jesus performed deeds which everyone (including opponents) believed to be 'miraculous'.

divinity of Jesus

The Gospels themselves cast Jesus not as a 'magician'—which is how the Jewish leadership of the day explained his abilities—but as the King of God's kingdom, the Messiah. It is in this context that we are to understand what one non-Christian source described as Jesus' 'baffling deeds' (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.65). According to the Gospels, Jesus possessed the very power of God to

restore sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, healing to lepers, strength to the paralysed, and numerous other blessings to the sick and dying.

The widespread belief in Jesus' powers partly explains his great popularity throughout Palestine—a popularity that culminated in some very dramatic events.

### Messiah comes to town

*revolution + divinity*

Toward the end of his three-year career as a preacher, healer and religious dissident, Jesus set his sights on Jerusalem, 100 kilometres south of his home district of Galilee. Jerusalem, of course, was the city King David had founded; it was the home of the ancient royal palace; and, most importantly, it was where the great temple stood.

When Jesus eventually went public, he didn't come out and declare, 'Friends, I am the long-awaited Son of David'. He chose to reveal his identity by acting out one of the most famous prophecies in the Old Testament (the Jewish Támik) about the coming of God's King. In the book of Zechariah (written around 500 years before), the prophet predicted that the Messiah would arrive in Jerusalem riding on a 'donkey':

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey ... He will proclaim peace to the nations.

His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Zechariah 9:9-10)

According to the Gospels, Jesus arranged to enter Jerusalem in April 30 AD, mounted—you guessed it—on a donkey. As he commenced his ride over the Mount of Olives and down into the ancient city, a crowd of pilgrims, aware of the significance of this act, began to shout in unison like fans at the football:

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! (Mark 11:9-10)

And what did God's newly proclaimed King do once he entered the holy city? He went into the temple courts, a structure about the size of Sydney's Stadium Australia, and began to denounce the temple priests.

← principal events →  
cultural context

The temple courtyard at this time was filled with worshippers. It was the week leading up to the Passover festival, so Jews from all over the Roman world were making their pilgrimage to the holy city to take part in this most sacred day of the Jewish calendar. They were there, as discussed in Chapter 13, to commemorate Israel's liberation from Egyptian slavery centuries before. A lamb would be sacrificed to recall the original Passover lamb whose blood was placed on the doorframes of Jewish homes. When God came in anger against the Egyptians that fateful night in the 13th century BC, he saw the blood of the lamb and preserved the Jewish families. His judgement fell upon Egypt but passed over the Jews.

*Jewish context*

When Jesus entered the temple courts all those years later the temple officials were conducting business as usual, part of which included selling sacrificial animals (lambs, doves, etc.) to the visiting pilgrims. A lot of money changed hands at Passover time, and not all of it was honest. Jesus was disgusted:

He began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. (Mark 11:15)

Jesus had criticised the religious leaders before. But this was taking dissent to a whole new level. Clearing out the temple courts was a dramatic symbolic public attack on the heart of Israel's leadership. Within days of this defining moment, Jesus would be dead.

### The Jewish Passover and the death of Jesus

Jesus managed to avoid arrest for most of the coming week. His days were spent speaking to large crowds of pilgrims in the temple courtyard, before slipping away at night to a friend's home a few kilometres east of Jerusalem.

The final night was different. It was the eve of the Passover and Jesus wanted to celebrate this special occasion with his colleagues in the holy city itself.

When Jesus sat down to celebrate the Passover meal of 30 AD, things would have proceeded in much the same way as they had for the 1200 years before—cooked lamb, traditional spices, wine, unleavened bread, prayers, songs, and



# revelation salvation

so on. But Jesus added one highly unusual element that evening. He took the bread and wine in his hands and gave them an intriguing new meaning:

Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body'. Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'. (Matthew 26:26-28)

Jesus took the traditional Passover themes of 'blood' and 'forgiveness' and related them to what is about to happen to him. Jesus' blood, just like that of the Passover lamb, would be poured out for the forgiveness of God's people. God's judgement would fall upon the 'lamb' (Jesus) so that it might pass over 'sinners'. This, according to Jesus, was his destiny. This was how the undeserving could be welcomed into his kingdom.

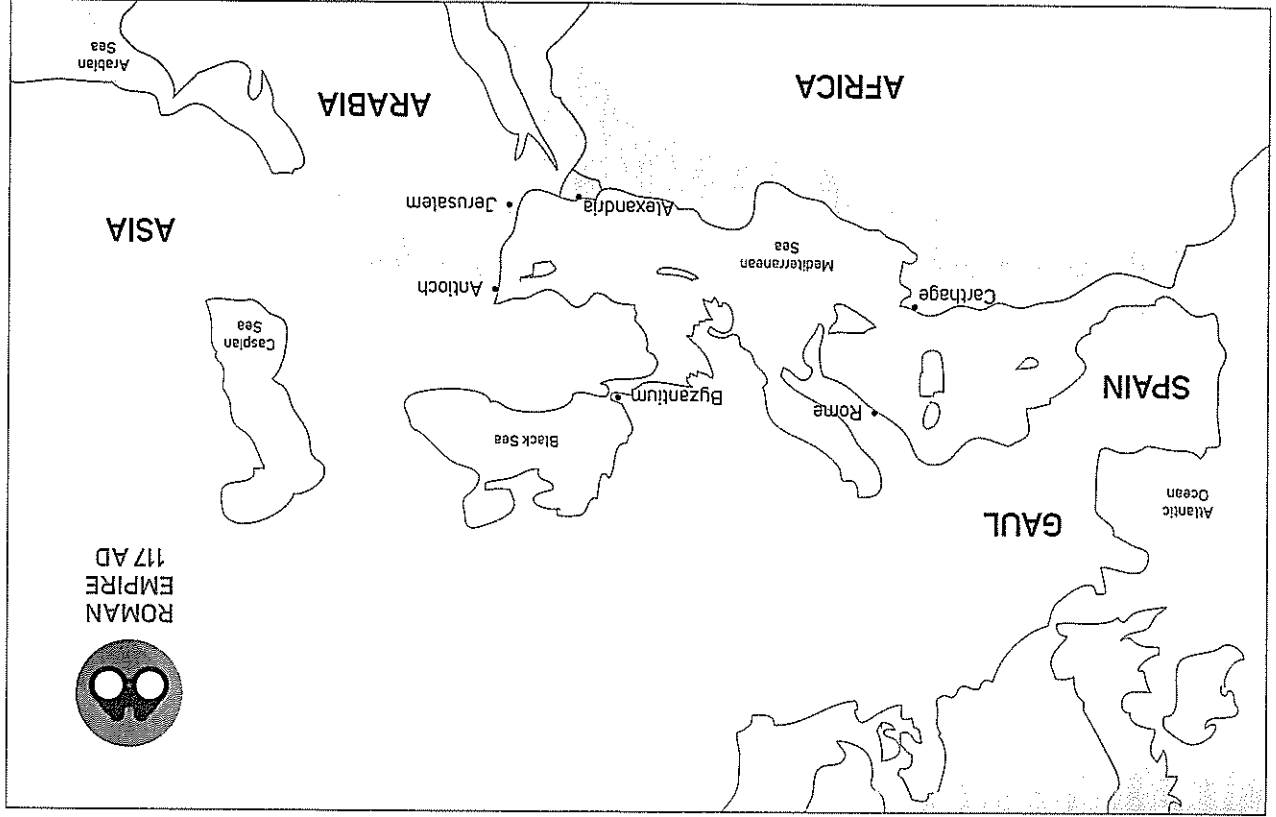
Within hours of this Last Supper, Jesus was arrested, put on trial and found guilty of 'blasphemy' and 'crimes against the temple'. However, at this time, Israel was an occupied territory. The Jewish leadership (mainly the priestly Sadducees) did not have the authority to administer the death penalty. That power lay with the Roman Prefect of the region, Governor Pontius Pilate, who saw Jesus' claim to be Messiah as a treasonous challenge to the authority of the Roman Emperor (Tiberius). In socio-political terms, it was the Romans who killed Jesus.

Political explanations of Jesus' death are just one way of looking at the event. Christians insist that the truest meaning of the event is found not in politics but in Jesus' own explanation of his death: 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'. According to the New Testament, Jesus died as a sacrifice for sins. He was the lamb for a worldwide 'Passover'.

## The resurrection of Christ

If the Gospels had left Jesus in a martyr's tomb, this would have been a perfectly respectable way to conclude a story about a great Jewish teacher. Religious martyrs were widely revered in first century Palestine. Contrary to

salvation



# Resurrection

Historians, it is intriguing that this detail is mentioned. Women were widely regarded in the first century as unreliable witnesses. And yet, without any apparent embarrassment, the Gospel writers concede that the first witnesses to the bizarre events following Jesus' death were all women.

Two things are agreed upon by most specialists in the field. Firstly, Jesus' tomb was empty some time after his crucifixion. Secondly, Jesus' followers experienced (what they believed to be) 'appearances' of their risen Messiah. Does this mean that historians can 'prove' Jesus rose from the dead? Some believe so; I personally do not. How people account for these twin facts (the empty tomb and the appearances) will depend largely on what they feel is possible in this world. If they reject the existence of a being able to influence the world (God), they will probably look for a natural explanation of the facts: Jesus recovered from his wounds, for example. If, on the other hand, one accepts the possibility of God's influence in the world, one may well accept the New Testament explanation. It is not my purpose in this book to engage in arguments for this conclusion.

For I handed on to you [Corinthians] as of first importance what I in turn had received [and here Paul quotes the account]: 'That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve'. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

There are at least six separate appearances of the resurrected Jesus mentioned here: (1) to Cephas (Aramaic for 'Peter'), (2) to the Twelve Apostles together, (3) to 500 believers at once, (4) to James (Jesus' blood relative), (5) to all of the apostles (that is, missionaries beyond the group of the Twelve) and, last of all, (6) to the writer of the letter himself, the Apostle Paul, who had been a persecutor of the Christians up to that moment.

There is another set of witnesses to the empty tomb which (for whatever reason) is not mentioned in this statement. It is one that almost certainly belonged to the earliest reports about the resurrection. According to all four Gospels, the first people to know about the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus were not the (male) apostles but a small group of named women, including Mary (Jesus' mother), Salome, Joanna and (another) Mary. For

↑  
= importance of Bible

## FROM CHRIST TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

I have emphasised throughout these chapters that what we call 'Christianity' was essentially a Jewish phenomenon. Jesus was a Jew, all of his first followers were Jews, and many Christians continued to attend their Jewish synagogues (as well as church) right throughout the first and second centuries. Only when the Pharisaic rabbis published an official curse on the Christians (around 100 AD; see Chapter 14) did Classical Judaism and Christianity really begin to part company.

### From Judaism to Christianity

One of the striking things about the first Christians is the way they tried to work out how the news about Jesus' life, death and resurrection (the 'gospel' message, as they called it) ought to be brought to Gentiles (non-Jews). After all, according to the ancient prophecies, the Messiah was meant to rule 'from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth' (Zechariah 9:10). Israel's Messiah was meant to be for every nation. These early followers of Jesus had some radical thinking to do.

The big issue here was 'circumcision'. The rite of circumcision had long been regarded as the key sign of belonging to God's family, Israel. So the question for the first Christians was: should Gentiles who want to follow Christ also be circumcised? Put another way, should Gentiles become fully fledged Jews in order to be real Christians? It may surprise you to know that many of the first Christians answered 'yes' to this question. This made 'conversion' to Christianity for male Greeks and Romans a very difficult process (if you know what I mean).

After vigorous debate between conservative Christians and more liberally minded ones, a decision was made (at a council in Jerusalem in 48 AD) that would have huge significance for the religious landscape of the world. It was determined that although 'circumcision' was the sign of membership in Israel, it was not necessarily the sign that you followed Israel's Messiah. Gentiles

could henceforth enjoy the benefits of Jesus' kingdom as Gentiles, without circumcision.

### The first world religion

The effect of this decision cannot be overstated. Suddenly, this small Jewish movement exploded throughout the Roman world. Preachers, such as the Apostles Peter and Paul (and hundreds of others), took this news to the farthest reaches of the empire. Wherever they went they established 'churches', small groups of believers who would gather together to pray, sing songs, learn more about Christ and eat meals in his honour. The word 'church' simply means gathering.

The message of the apostles was a 'hit'. By the early 50s AD churches were meeting in homes, halls and outdoor venues in some of the most thriving cities of the pagan world—Antioch in Syria, Ephesus in Turkey, Corinth in Greece and Rome in Italy. Within three centuries an estimated 30 million people would consider themselves Christian—that was half of the Roman world. Christianity was on its way to becoming history's first world religion. As Professors Ernst W Benz and Martin E Marty conclude in their *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry on Christianity:

The missions and expansion of Christianity are among the most unusual of historical occurrences. Other world religions, such as Buddhism and Islam, also have raised a claim to universal validity, but no world religion other than Christianity has succeeded in realising this claim through missionary expansion over the entire world.

### Letters to the churches

Many of the New Testament books—the books regarded by Christians as sacred—were simply letters sent by the first Christian leaders to the recently founded churches scattered throughout the Roman world. The book of 1 Corinthians, for example, is one of two letters in our possession written by the Apostle Paul to a group of new Christians meeting in Corinth. Some New Testament books were 'circulars', that is, letters intended for distribution among a number of Christian communities. One such book is James, a letter sent by

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importance of bible

a relative of Jesus, named James, to Christian groups scattered throughout the Mediterranean.

These early Christian leaders were greatly revered because of their contact with Jesus. As a result, their writings were preserved. Copies of their letters were also made, and these were passed on to other churches so they too could hear what the apostles had to say on such wide-ranging issues as sex, money, marriage, politics and suffering, as well as subjects like God, death and the future.

revelation

Over time, hundreds of copies of these letters were circulating throughout the Roman Empire, bringing a rich source of instruction and encouragement to the ever-growing Christian community. These letters, along with the four Gospels, make up what Christians call the New Testament.

### Whose New Testament?

Because of the popularity of the first century Christian literature (the Gospels and the letters), groups in the second and third centuries began to produce similar material and tried to pass them off as original apostolic writings. These include the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Acts of Paul*, the *Letter of Barnabas*, and many others. Eventually, churches all around the Mediterranean met in a series of councils, climaxing in the councils of Rome (382 AD) and Carthage, North Africa (397 AD). One purpose of these meetings was to determine which documents should be regarded as sacred and authoritative and which should be deemed otherwise.

The policy of these councils was highly conservative. Basically, they decided to embrace as Scripture only those documents that had long been recognised throughout the churches as penned by the first generation of Christian leaders, that is, by those whom Jesus appointed (Peter, Paul, James, etc.), or by their immediate colleagues (Mark, Luke, etc.). Thus, these councils culled rather than included, leaving us with just 27 books of the New Testament (the Gospels and the letters). The other writings (*Gospel of Thomas*, etc.) were published in separate collections and are all readily available in English translations today. They are of great historical interest for nerds like me because they tell us what

some later Christians taught. But they do not help us hear the 'voice' of the first century witnesses to Christianity. That voice, insisted the early church, could reliably be found only in the Gospels and letters of the New Testament.

Many thousands of ancient copies of the New Testament still exist today and are on display (inside sealed cabinets) in some of the great libraries of the world—the British Library in London, the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, the library of the University of Michigan in the United States, and so on. Modern translations of the New Testament are made from these ancient manuscripts.

early development of Christian communities

## MAJOR TEACHINGS OF CHRISTIANITY

The first century Gospels and letters make up the New Testament. The New Testament together with the Old Testament (the Jewish *Tanakh*) make up what Christians call the 'Bible' (from the Greek word *biblos* meaning 'book'). It remains now to unpack some of the major teachings of the Bible, as believed by mainstream Christians throughout the centuries. Then, in the following chapter, we can look at the distinctive teachings of the various 'brands' of Christianity.

### Trinity: one God in three persons

I said earlier that one of the most striking aspects of Jesus' ministry was his insistence that God's forgiveness could be received directly through him, without needing to go to God's official dwelling place, the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. In a first century Jewish context this was as good as claiming yourself to be a substitute temple, an alternative locus of God's presence and mercy. The scandalous nature of this claim is seen in the response of the Jewish leaders: 'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?' (Mark 2:7).

It is not an easy thought to ponder, but Jesus implied to his contemporaries that he personified the presence of God on earth. The one true God of Jewish history had entered into first century history in the person of the Messiah.

What Jesus implied, numerous New Testament writers make explicit: Jesus and God are in fact one. The man from Nazareth is not merely the Messiah of Israel; he is God in the flesh. The Gospel of John makes this point by describing Jesus as God's very 'Word' made 'flesh':

In the beginning was the Word (the one who would become Jesus), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... The Word became flesh (Jesus) and made his dwelling among us. (John 1:1, 14)

Here we have the beginning of the Christian doctrine of the 'Trinity'. The word 'trinity' means something like *three-ness*. It was coined by Christians of

the second and third centuries as a way of saying in a single word what the Bible teaches in many words.

According to the Bible, God has revealed himself as the Father, the Son (that's Jesus) and the Holy Spirit. Now, the Father and the Holy Spirit were already known to Jews through statements in their *Tanakh* (Old Testament). But it was never clear there whether the Holy Spirit was a distinct 'person' within God, or just a divine force.

The New Testament 'clarifies' this issue, describing the Holy Spirit as a fully divine person and yet distinct from God the Father. The first Christians then added to this picture by affirming Jesus also as fully God and yet distinct from both the Father and the Holy Spirit. The thought is captured well in the passage I just quoted from the Gospel of John: 'the Word (Jesus) was with God, and the Word was God'.

Without embarrassment, or any hint of contradiction, the Bible teaches that God is three persons sharing one divine nature. This does not mean that God simply appears in three modes, as H<sub>2</sub>O can appear as either liquid or steam or ice. Nor does it mean that God has three different parts, as a triangle has three sides. As difficult as it is to comprehend—and I still get a headache thinking about it for too long—the biblical doctrine of the Trinity, believed by Christians of all varieties, states that the one true God exists as three equal persons. I suspect the doctrine of the Trinity rivals the Buddhist doctrine of the Five Aggregates of Attachment (discussed in Chapter 8) for the Most Difficult-Religious-Concept award. ☺

### The 'kingdom come': Christianity and the future

I said earlier that a central theme in Jesus' own teaching was what he called the 'kingdom of God', that is, God's rule (his kingship, if you like) over all things. According to Jesus and the New Testament, God's kingdom is both present and future. It is present in the sense that God's appointed king, the Messiah, has arrived within history, offering his mercy and leadership to all who want them. It is future, however, in the sense that this kingdom will be witnessed fully only at the end of history. With this in mind, Jesus urged his

Jewish teaching

impetuous Bible

humanity-divinity of Jesus

Trinity

salvation

improvement Bible of

salvation

divinity humanity

Teas of

disciples to make the hope for the coming kingdom a part of their regular prayers. In the Lord's Prayer (or 'Our Father'), he taught his followers to say:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed [holy] be your name,

Your kingdom come, your will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven. (Luke 11:9-10)

Christians throughout the centuries have emphasised several aspects of this future kingdom. Firstly, Christians believe in a so-called 'Second Coming' of Jesus. In many ways, Jesus' appearance in first century Palestine was a foretaste of his ultimate appearance. There is great debate over the details of the Second Coming but all Christians agree that at Jesus' return human history will culminate and the kingdom of God will be fully known.

Secondly, according to Christians, God's future kingdom will begin with a day of judgement when God will weigh the conduct of every man and woman. In the Bible, this theme is presented not simply as a scare tactic designed to make us more religious but as a kind of pledge that God sees the injustices of history and will one day console the downtrodden faithful by righting the wrongs of the world. Christians know themselves to be part of the wrongs of the world but believe Jesus' death provides the means of escaping the judgment they would otherwise deserve.

The third and, perhaps, strangest aspect of the 'kingdom come', as believed by Christians of the last two millennia, has to do with the universe itself. Christianity does not envisage a kingdom of disembodied spirits floating upon heavenly clouds wearing halos and listening to harp music. That is the 'heaven' of Hollywood. The future kingdom taught by Jesus, and hoped for by all mainstream Christians, is a place in which human beings are resurrected and the creation itself is renewed. What Christianity promises to the faithful is nothing less than a 'new creation'. This is partly why the resurrection of Jesus is so important to Christianity. Christ's rising to life is believed to be God's pledge within history that he will raise us (and the creation) at the end of history. And so Christians add to their regular prayers, 'Our Father in Heaven ... your kingdom come'.

prayer

salvation

resurrection

prayer

ethical teachings

'Grace': salvation as a gift

This emphasis on the future shouldn't obscure the fact that Christianity claims also to be a faith of the present. One example of the present benefits of Christian faith is the New Testament theme of grace. The word 'grace' has almost fallen out of usage in modern English, except as a girl's name and perhaps as a way of describing the movement of a ballerina: 'she dances with such grace!'

In the New Testament, the word 'grace' refers to the unmerited gift of God's pardon. God's mercy can be experienced here and now not as a reward for religious and moral effort but as an act of God's favour, his grace.

Many biblical passages deal with the theme of grace. The word itself appears over 150 times in the New Testament (more often, in fact, than the word 'love'). The impetus for this emphasis on grace came from Jesus himself, who freely handed out God's mercy and gave up his life for the sins of the world.

In the history of Christianity there have been great debates about how exactly one receives God's grace, but all are agreed on this central point: membership in God's family (and in the future kingdom) is granted to believers not as a 'reimbursement' for hard work but as a gift of God's grace.

The love ethic: how Christians are to live

All Christians agree that believers are to respond to this grace by treating others with the kindness God has shown to us. In other words, Christianity calls on those who follow Christ to live by an ethic of love.

Jesus' command to 'love your neighbour' was not new. Jesus derived this teaching from his Jewish Torah, or Old Testament. What was unusual about Jesus' teaching was his definition of 'neighbour' to include everyone, even one's enemies:

You have heard [from the rabbis of the day] that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy'. But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. (Matthew 5:43-44)

cultural context

salvation

Jesus as model of Xn life

salvation

Jews command of love

↳ ethical teachings →

It is no exaggeration to say that the success of Christianity in the centuries immediately after Christ can be attributed in large part to the seriousness with which Christians took Jesus' command to love others in the way God had loved them. Huge daily food rations became commonplace in the early churches. Orphanages were opened, hospitals were established and visitation programs were implemented in the Roman prisons.

cultural context

It is commonly believed by historians that the Jews were the first in antiquity to implement a welfare system for the poor, abandoned and dispossessed. Christianity inherited this practice but made one significant change, inspired by Jesus' teaching: Christian welfare was open to believers and unbelievers alike. Anyone could come to the ancient church for assistance. And they came in their thousands, much to the consternation of Roman officials.

The impact of the Christian ethic of love was so great in the ancient world that the fourth century pagan Emperor Julian feared the Christians might take over the world through the 'stealth' of good deeds. He even wrote to his priests insisting that pagan temples set up a welfare system similar to that operating in the Christian churches. He offered government assistance to get it off the ground. In one letter written in 362 AD Julian wrote to the pagan high priest of Galatia (modern Turkey) complaining about the continued expansion of Christianity, which he calls 'atheism' because of its denial of the traditional pagan gods:

Why do we not realise that it is the Christians' compassion toward strangers, their care of the graves of the dead and the pretended piety of their lives that have done most to increase this atheism ... For it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg [because of Jewish welfare], and the impious Galileans [= Christians] support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us. (Letters 22. Works of the Emperor Julian vol. 3.

Loeb Classical Library 29)

As it turned out, Christianity did take over the Roman Empire, in large part through its ethic of love. Rodney Stark, professor of sociology and comparative religion at the University of Washington, writes:

Therefore, as I conclude this study, I find it necessary to confront what appears to me to be the ultimate factor in the rise of Christianity ... Christianity taught

that mercy is one of the primary virtues—that a merciful God requires humans to be merciful... This was revolutionary stuff. Indeed, it was the cultural basis for the revitalisation of the Roman world groaning under a host of miseries... (The Rise of Christianity, HarperCollins, 1997, p. 209ff)

Unfortunately, once 'in power', the Christian church ended up being party to some spectacular acts of hatred as well—collaboration in the European Crusades against the Muslims in the 11th century, the awful treatment of heretics in the Inquisitions of the 15th and 16th centuries, and the unforgivable silence at Hitler's treatment of the Jews in the 20th century, to name a few.

These deeds can hardly be explained, let alone excused. The only consolation for embarrassed Christians today is the knowledge that such behaviour is the antithesis of that practised by Christians in the centuries immediately after Christ, when Christianity experienced its greatest expansion. In that period—and at least in theory today—Christ's ethic of love permeated Christian communities.

I want to conclude this discussion of major Christian beliefs by talking about two of the 'rituals' that have been part of Christianity since the earliest times. Both derive from Jesus' Jewish heritage.

### Baptism: a ritual of cleansing

HSC level

The first ancient Christian ritual is called 'baptism', from the Greek word to dip. Historians are not entirely sure when baptism emerged but it seems clear that Jews had been practising the rite for at least a century before Christ.

The central idea in baptism is 'cleansing'. In its ancient Jewish form, it had to do with purifying yourself after some spiritually polluting activity, such as contact with Gentiles (non-Jews).

The first Christians inherited this Jewish ritual but changed it in one significant way. Baptism for Christians was a one-off event. When someone decided to follow Christ, taking hold of the grace he offered, that person was considered cleansed from all sin. The new believer (and his or her children) therefore took a kind of 'spiritual bath' designed to symbolise the removal of guilt: before God.

- Jesus as model  
- Jesus' commandment of love

early development of Xn community

HSC level ↓

In the third century some Christians began to question the practice of baptising children. That debate continues today, with some Protestant denominations (notably the Baptists) insisting that baptism should not be performed until a person fully understands the meaning of the ritual. Nevertheless, baptism remains a central rite for all brands of Christianity.

### The Lord's Supper: a ritual of connection with Christ

Another ritual going back to Judaism via Jesus is variously known as the Eucharist, Communion, or Lord's Supper. Whatever you call it, Christians of every variety have celebrated their connection with Christ in this special 'meal'.

The Lord's Supper goes back to Jesus' Last Supper when he gathered with his disciples to celebrate the Passover. During the course of the evening Jesus took bread, broke it and said, 'Take and eat; this is my body'. Then he took a cup of wine and passed it to his colleagues saying, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'. Jesus added the words, 'Do this in remembrance of me'.

How often the first Christians re-enacted this 'remembrance' meal is unclear—they may have done it every time they met (in church), or perhaps just once a year at Passover time. Whatever the case, this 'meal' has come to occupy an important place in the practice of Christians ever since. In this Lord's Supper, Christians remember Jesus, they connect with Jesus and they even feed on him. As they take the bread in their mouths, they realise afresh that Jesus' body was broken for them on the cross. As they sip the wine, they taste, as it were, Jesus' blood given for their sake. And so Christians are nourished spiritually.

While all Christians highly value the Lord's Supper, there is some difference of opinion over the exact nature of the ritual. This, along with some other points of disagreement among the major 'brands' of Christianity, is discussed in the next chapter.

unique features  
of catholicism

21

## THREE BRANDS OF CHRISTIANITY

I've focused above on important aspects of Christian belief and practice common to all mainstream versions of Christianity. In a brief and non-technical way I want now to explore the three major 'brands' of Christianity that exist today—the Roman Catholic church, the Protestant church and the Orthodox church.

### The Roman Catholic church

The term Roman Catholicism refers to a worldwide collection of churches that look to the Bishop of Rome, known as the Pope, as the divinely appointed head of Christianity. 'Catholic' comes from the Greek word for universal. Hence, the Roman Catholic church is the universal church that takes its lead from Rome.

Several features of faith and practice are particular to Roman Catholicism.

1 | The authority of the Pope. Firstly, as just mentioned, Roman Catholics regard the Bishop of Rome to be the true leader of the worldwide Christian movement. Theologically, this belief is based on Christ's words to the Apostle Peter: 'And I tell you that you are Peter (*petros* means 'rock'), and on this rock I will build my church' (Matthew 16:18). Peter later settled in Rome where he was probably executed by Emperor Nero (mid 60s AD). The 'bishop' (meaning *overseer*) who succeeded Peter in Rome inherited Peter's status as the 'rock' of the universal church.

Most churches from about 100–300 AD were quite happy to regard the Bishop of Rome, called the 'Pope' (from the Latin for *father*) as the figurehead of the rapidly growing Christian movement. But it was not until the fourth and fifth centuries that an official doctrine of the Pope's universal authority in all matters of faith and morality was stringently affirmed. Even then, it must be noted that churches in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire—Greece, Turkey, Syria, Palestine and Egypt—maintained a degree of independence from Rome. These churches preferred to think of the Pope as the 'elder brother' among

early developments  
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of  
Orthodoxy



## unique features of Catholicism

church leaders rather than as the 'father' of the whole church. These Eastern churches would come to be known as the Orthodox church—more about that in a moment.

2 | The mother of Jesus. A second striking feature of Roman Catholicism is the veneration of Jesus' human mother, Mary. The New Testament portrays Mary as a woman blessed and favoured by God. On this basis, Christian leaders between 150 and 350 AD began to write about Mary in increasingly reverential ways. By the fourth and fifth centuries Mary came to be referred to as 'Mother of God', a title of immense prestige. Many Roman Catholics pray to Mary. They ask her to approach Jesus for them and secure his favour on their behalf. They are quick to point out, however, that the veneration given to Mary is never to be thought of as comparable to the worship given to God—the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

3 | Jesus' substantial presence in the Lord's Supper. A third crucial element in Roman Catholicism has to do with the ritual of the Lord's Supper. In Roman Catholic tradition, Jesus is not simply remembered in the meal, he is literally fed upon in the bread and the wine. Using a complex philosophical idea known as 'transubstantiation' (change of substance) Roman Catholicism insists that the bread in this ritual really becomes Jesus' sacrificial body and that the wine really becomes Jesus' sacrificial blood. Hence, for Roman Catholics, the Lord's Supper has a sacrificial dimension. The priest in the communion service (called a Mass) re-enacts the offering of Christ on our behalf. He therefore secures God's grace for those taking part in the meal. It is fair to say that the Mass is the centre of Roman Catholic church life.

4 | A larger Old Testament. Fourthly, the Old Testament used by the Roman Catholic church is slightly larger than that used by the Protestant and Orthodox churches. The number of books in the Roman Catholic Old Testament was determined by an ancient Greek version of the Jewish Tanak (often called the Septuagint) which was widely used by the early church. This Greek version contained about half a dozen small documents not included in the Hebrew version of the Tanak. It was the Hebrew Tanak, not the Greek one, that became the authorised Scriptures of Judaism. The Protestant and Orthodox churches today follow the official Jewish list of (Old Testament) books, and call the

'additional' documents of the Roman Catholic Old Testament 'Apocrypha' (Greek for hidden away).

## The Protestant church

Protestantism, as the name suggests, was born as a protest movement against the perceived excesses and errors of the sixteenth century Roman Catholic church. Popes were seen to be living as virtual kings in not-so-virtual palaces. Church officials were often regarded as greedy and grossly immoral. Perhaps of most concern to these protesters was a practice known as 'indulgences'. The church taught that the faithful could avoid some of God's future punishments by making contributions (in the form of money or produce) to the ecclesiastical coffers.

In this context, numerous priests began to hold public debates and publish booklets about church abuses (the printing press had recently been invented). These priests called for reform, particularly in the matter of indulgences. The call was heard by thousands, first in Germany, then throughout Europe. The result was the so-called Protestant Reformation.

It must be remembered that, initially, all of the Reformers were devout Roman Catholics. The movement for reform was internal to the church—no-one was suggesting that a new church should be founded, only that the universal church should be transformed by God's truth. The most vocal man in the early Reformation was a German scholar and priest named Martin Luther. Luther demanded many changes to his beloved church, particularly to the doctrine of Indulgences. If salvation was by grace, argued Luther, how could (financial) acts of service to the church atone for our sins before God? The question was potent and it spread like wildfire throughout Europe.

Eventually, the major reformers were excommunicated from the church (by papal order) and so was born what is now an independent tradition of the Christian faith known collectively as the Protestant faith. It is made up of numerous independent denominations including Anglicans (or Church of England), Baptists, Presbyterians, Assemblies of God, Brethren and many more.

## Unique features of Protestantism

Several features characterise all Protestant churches and, not surprisingly, most of these are deliberate rejections of Roman Catholic tradition.

1 | Authority in the Protestant church. Protestant churches have no equivalent of the Pope. Although various forms of hierarchy exist in all Protestant denominations—Anglicans have 'Archbishops', for instance—none of these structures is viewed as infallible in matters of faith and morality.

For Protestants, the only authority viewed as infallible is the Bible itself. Hence, in Protestant churches the 'sermon'—a talk usually based on a Bible passage—has a central place in the church service.

2 | Emphasis on salvation by grace. Protestants strongly emphasise the doctrine of grace. While Roman Catholics, too, ultimately believe that salvation is God's unmerited gift to the faithful, Protestant churches underline this fact regularly and pointedly. They publish books about it, compose hymns about it, deliver sermons on it, and embed it in their 'liturgies' (forms of public worship).

Shortly after the Protestant Reformation the Roman Catholic church itself reformed the practice of indulgences (1562) bringing it closer into line with the New Testament teaching on grace. Protestants, however, insist that further reforms are needed if the Roman Catholic church is to reflect this doctrine correctly. The debate is complicated and will probably not be resolved any time soon.

3 | Jesus' spiritual presence in the Lord's Supper. All Protestant churches reject transubstantiation, the idea that the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper ritual actually become the body and blood of Jesus. Protestants emphasise the words of Jesus, 'Do this in remembrance of me', and insist that the meal is memorial rather than substantial. The person conducting the Communion service (an Anglican priest, a Baptist pastor, an Assemblies of God layperson, or whoever) does not re-enact Christ's sacrifice, or re-present Jesus to God. He or she merely leads the congregation in 'feeding' on Christ in a spiritual way.

## Unique features of Orthodoxy

### The Orthodox church

Unlike Protestantism, the Orthodox church did not break away from (or was not excommunicated from) the Roman Catholic church. In fact, one of the most important features of the Orthodox point of view is the belief that they stand in unbroken connection with the original apostles themselves. The word 'orthodox' means of correct opinion, and the churches of the Orthodox tradition literally view themselves as the preservers of the most pure and ancient form of Christianity.

I said earlier that the Bishop of Rome (the Pope) was widely regarded in the early church as the figurehead of the rapidly expanding Christian movement. This was based on the Roman church's connection with the Apostle Peter. Churches in the East, however (in Greece, Turkey, Egypt and elsewhere), did not believe the Pope's special status included infallible authority in matters of doctrine and morality. They too had once had apostles in their midst (the Apostle John had resided in Ephesus in Turkey).

Disputes between these two geographical giants of Christendom continued. In the fourth century, the churches of the East and West disagreed over the appropriate date for Easter, the most important Christian festival (celebrating Christ's death and resurrection). Over the next few centuries, they disputed over the use of religious icons in worship (frowned upon in the West), the marriage of priests (forbidden in the West), and a complex theological point about the Holy Spirit. This final dispute triggered what is often called the Great Schism, or separation, between Western and Eastern Christianity (1054 AD). The church of the West would be known as Roman Catholicism. The church of the East would be called Eastern Orthodoxy, made up of the Greek Orthodox, the Coptic (Egyptian Orthodox), Russian Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and so on.

So, what is distinctive about Eastern Orthodoxy?

1 | Authority in the Orthodox church. Firstly, the Orthodox church is governed not by a central pope but by individual bishops who have authority over their particular region or 'diocese'. The bishops of the various dioceses come together in councils, called 'synods', and collectively these form the true 'government'

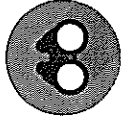
of the Orthodox church. The Archbishop of Constantinople (modern Istanbul, Turkey) is regarded as the honorary head of worldwide Orthodoxy and is called the Ecumenical Patriarch.

2 | Salvation as sharing in the nature of God. A second feature of the Orthodox church is its emphasis on 'deification', or the believer's sharing in the nature of God.

One New Testament passage declares that God 'has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:3). Philosophical reflection on this idea has led to the special Orthodox view of human salvation. Orthodox churches, like Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, believe of course that Christ died and rose again for our sins. However, particular emphasis is also given to the 'incarnation'—God becoming a man in Jesus. God became a human being, says the Orthodox church, so that human beings might 'participate in the divine nature'.

When the Orthodox talk about 'deification' (sharing in the divine nature) they are referring to the restoration of human nature back to its original, God-filled character. According to Orthodox theology, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they lost their true nature as people 'made in the image of God'. From that time on, men and women were less than truly human, less than what the Creator had intended them to be. This situation was reversed when God himself took on human nature—in Jesus Christ—and so renewed humanity's share in the original divine nature. All who now participate in the ministry of the church 'participate in the divine nature' made possible by Jesus.

3 | The use of images in worship. The third aspect of Orthodox faith I want to mention is the use of icons, or images, in the worship of God. As I just mentioned, Orthodox Christians place special emphasis on the incarnation (God becoming man). Icons are an extension of this idea. God revealed himself in the visible, tangible person of Jesus Christ. Religious paintings (of Christ, or Mary, or the apostles, and so on) continue this visible mode of engaging with God. The Orthodox will be quick to explain that they do not worship the images. They merely use them as 'windows' to the reality of God.



## CHRISTIANITY ON A PAGE

### The life of Jesus of Nazareth

- Born about 5 BC and raised as a carpenter in Galilee.
- Emerged in 28 AD as a famed healer, 'friend of sinners', and preacher of God's kingdom.
- Executed during the Passover festival of 30 AD for his claim to be the Messiah.
- Disciples discovered an empty tomb and witnessed Jesus raised from the dead.

### From Christ to Christianity

- The followers of Jesus abandoned circumcision as the sign for Gentiles of belonging to Christ.
- As the gospel was proclaimed far and wide, churches sprung up throughout the Roman Empire.
- Christian leaders composed the letters (to churches) and the Gospels (about Jesus) which would form the New Testament.

### Major teachings of Christianity

- Trinity: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit share in one divine nature.
- The 'kingdom come': when Jesus returns people will be resurrected and judged, and the creation will be renewed.
- Grace: God's unmerited gift of salvation.
- The love ethic: Christian life is to be characterised by love of all people, including one's enemies.
- Baptism: a spiritual 'bath' celebrating God's forgiveness of sins.
- The Lord's Supper: a 'meal' of bread and wine embodying Christ's body and blood given on the cross.

### Three brands of Christianity

- Roman Catholic church: the worldwide church that looks to the Pope, or Bishop of Rome, for final authority in matters of doctrine and morality.
- Protestant church: the worldwide church that sought to reform perceived abuses in the 16th century church and so split with Roman Catholicism.
- Orthodox church: the worldwide church that originated in the eastern Roman Empire and emphasises salvation as sharing in God's own nature.

unique features of orthodoxy

principal events

Cultural context

early work develop writings of Christians importance of Bible

## Facts and figures on Christianity today

- Christianity is the *largest* religion in the world today with over 2.3 billion followers.<sup>1</sup>
- Christians make up over 32% of the world's population.<sup>2</sup>
- Christianity is found in 232 countries.<sup>3</sup>
- There are currently over 1.2 billion Roman Catholics who comprise 16.9% of the world's population.<sup>4</sup>
- Over 399 million people say they are Christian but are not affiliated with any church.<sup>5</sup>
- There are currently over 526 million Protestants.<sup>6</sup>
- In Australia over 13.1 million people claim to be Christian, which is around 61% of the population.<sup>7</sup>
- Of the Christians living in Australia the top three places of birth are Australia, England and New Zealand.<sup>8</sup>
- The largest local Christian populations are found in Brisbane City (QLD), the Gold Coast (QLD) and Moreton Bay (QLD).<sup>9</sup>

## Famous Christians

- William Wilberforce (1759–1833)** | British politician who led the fight to end slavery in British colonies.
- JRR Tolkien (1892–1973)** | Author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.
- The Rev Martin Luther King Jnr (1929–1968)** | Leader of the movement to gain civil rights for African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s.
- Mother Teresa (1910–1997)** | The 'Saint of the Gutters', Mother Teresa founded an order of nuns called the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta, India dedicated to serving the poor. She worked for around 50 years serving the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.
- Bono** | Leader singer of the Irish rock band U2 and HIV/AIDS and poverty activist. Growing up in Ireland with a Protestant mother and a Catholic father, Bono has been up-front about his faith in Jesus Christ, while not associating himself directly with any specific denomination.

## Good books and sites on Christianity

- christianitytoday.com  
(leading Protestant website)
- vatican.va/phome\_en.htm  
(official English language website of the Roman Catholic church)
- oca.org  
(official site of the Orthodox Church in America with links to the worldwide Orthodox church and its beliefs)
- McGrath, AE 1997, *An Introduction to Christianity*, Blackwell, Oxford, p. 200.
- Frend, WHC 2003, *The Early Church: From the Beginnings to 461*. SCM Press, London.
- Bockmuehl, M 2001, *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Dickson, J 1999, *Simply Christianity: Beyond Religion*, Matthias Media, Sydney.
- Johnson, P 1976, *A History of Christianity*, Touchstone Books, New York.
- Stark, R 1997, *The Rise of Christianity*, HarperCollins, New York.
- Smart, N & Hecht, R (eds) 2002, 'Christianity', in *Sacred Texts of the World: A Universal Anthology*, Crossroad, New York, pp. 91–124.
- Smart, N 2003, *The World's Religions* (2nd ed), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 246–284, 326–347.

1. Worldwide Adherents of All Religions by Six Continental Areas, Mid 2013, *Britannica Book of the Year 2014*, p. 324.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011 census.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*