Chapter 4

4

Christian Traditions

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Chapter Overview

Simply stated, Christianity is the religious tradition centered on the teachings of a first-century itinerant Jewish teacher and reformer identified as Jesus of Nazareth. He is said to have preached a message of peace, love, salvation, and the coming Kingdom of God based upon an interpretation of Hebrew scripture, which would have been quite radical within the context of first-century Judaism, and posed a threat to the vested interests of the Second Temple religious elites. This preacher left no documents or records of his own teaching; nevertheless, his followers took up his message and in the centuries following Jesus’ death his persona gradually came to be characterized in increasingly divine terms—first as the Jewish messiah (foretold by the Hebrew prophets), then as the Son of God (in the Gospel of Mark), the preexisting Word of God (*logos*) (in the Gospel of John), and, centuries later, one indivisible third of the Triune deity known as the Trinity. Thus, this very obscure historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth, who would have been one of many preachers in Judea in the first century, has been transformed into the Christ (from the Greek “anointed” as a translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah”) of the Christian sacred story. Membership began to extend beyond the initial Jewish base, incorporating non-Jews (Gentiles), which necessitated a re-negotiation of Christian identity and practice, eventually resulting in a religious tradition set apart from its Jewish roots.

It was during these early centuries of proselytization and communal organization that the first creeds (concise statements summarizing important theological points) began to develop .These formulations were integral in building a universal Christian Church, united in belief and practice—an endeavour that would never come to fruition. From its earliest history the Christian tradition has been characterized by fragmentation and division into various competing denominations oriented toward a wide variety of theological and ritual differentiations, which have spurred considerable debate, often resulting in mutual recriminations and accusations of heresy. These clashes have brought about some of the most dramatic schisms in the history of Christianity, such as the split between the Latin and Greek Churches, finalized in the eleventh century, or Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.

Christianity’s 2000-year history has been marked by the interplay of various spiritual, political, and cultural forces. Beginning with the plight of a persecuted Jewish splinter group coping with the traumatic death of its leader, leading to a gradual transformation into a unique religious tradition within the Roman Empire, and an eventual coopting as the state religion of Rome, which subsequently set the stage for it to play a central role in the development of Western social, political, and spiritual life after the decline of the Empire itself. Throughout, the Christian tradition has undergone tremendous changes that have affected every aspect of its existence (from theology to social organization), as well as shattering the original Christian church into myriad competing (and, at times, seemingly incompatible) denominations. In retrospect the ascension of Christianity into a global religion can at times seem an almost inevitable outcome. Upon closer scholarly examination, however, we will discern how incredibly diverse the history of Christianity has been, and how a variety of different, alternative visions of Christianity have coursed just beneath the surface of the normative traditions which are most familiar to general audiences today.

In this chapter of your text, Fletcher provides a wide-ranging survey of the varieties of beliefs and practices that make up this astonishingly complex history. Fletcher begins with an introduction to the foundational elements of the Christian traditions (including the characterization of Jesus in the Gospels, the group’s separation from Judaism, and the development of notions of sainthood and asceticism), then we move on to explore the theological debates that helped to establish the parameters of the early faith. This leads to a consideration of the gradual divergence between the Western and Eastern churches which, in turn, presents us with an overview of medieval Christianity (including descriptions of the mystical, theological, historical, and practical developments that characterized this period).

Fletcher examines the importance of the Protestant Reformation, including brief sketches of the histories and beliefs of various specific denominations, as well as the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation as a response to these challenges, and the attempts of the different Christian groups to spread their message throughout the world as missionaries partnered with the violent colonial expansion of western political powers. The historical discussion concludes with an overview of the various ways that Christian groups have responded to modernity, leading up to the present day dichotomy between liberal, pluralistic, ecumenical Christianity and more evangelical/fundamentalist forms.

Throughout this historical survey, Fletcher details the roles women played within Christian communities in different historical periods. This gender analysis details the important leadership positions occupied by women in the early Church, the gradual marginalization of women as Christianity became a public religion in Rome, the subsequent restrictions and controls exercised upon nuns and religious women by male hierarchies, the avenue of religious legitimacy which mysticism offered some Christian women, and the increasing agitation in modern period for full clerical inclusion, which has won inroads with the ordination of women in some congregations.

Fletcher also pays special attention to the reversal of the direction of Christian missionary activity, based upon the decline of Christianity in the West and its growth in what she terms the “global south.” The chapter closes with a consideration of the tensions and challenges currently facing Christian communities dealing with the role of women in the clergy, the place of gays and lesbians in the church and their access to marriage, the continuing decline of membership, and the scandals and controversies of clerical abuses and corruption.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you are encouraged to

* differentiate between the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth, and the Christ figure of the Christian sacred story;
* recognize that the organization and theological framework of the Christian religious tradition is rooted more in the activities of the early Christian proselytizers, such as Saul (Paul), than in the ministry of Jesus;
* appreciate the pluralistic nature of Christianity and the wide range of ways to be Christian;
* understand the transformative effect of the Roman Emperor Constantine’s embrace of Christianity in fourth century;
* grasp how Christianity survived the collapse of the Roman Empire and how the Roman papacy worked to build alliances with the new European feudal powers;
* develop a critical understanding of the outcomes of the ecumenical councils of the fourth and fifth centuries, which sought to establish consensus positions on particular doctrines such as the nature of Christ, the composition of the Trinity, and the authority of different texts;
* analyze the first major schism in Christianity between the Western Latin Christians based out of Rome and the Eastern Greek Orthodox Christians based in Byzantine;
* examine the social, religious, political, and technological underpinnings of the Reformation movements of the sixteenth century;
* understand how Humanistic philosophy, rooted in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, led to a critical, rational engagement with Christian scripture and ritual, which laid the ground work for the modernization of Christian thought and demystification of its basic principles;
* examine how the climate of political and religious freedom that characterized the United States from the eighteenth century encouraged the growth of myriad different denominational communities (e.g., Pentecostal, Baptist, Methodist, etc.);
* appreciate how within global Christianity (often even within the same congregation), one will find a variety of different positions, both supporting and denouncing modern developments such as the ordination of women and gay clergy, the sanctification of non-traditional marriages, the separation of state and religion, attitudes toward war, the death penalty, etc. and that both sides of each debate will use scripture and tradition to support their respective arguments.

Key Terms

Apostlesthose who had seen the risen Christ and received his commission to continue his work (p. 172).

atonementChrist’s restoration of humanity to a right relationship with God, variously interpreted as divine victory over demonic power, satisfaction of divine justice, or demonstration of a moral example. (pp. 220-221)

baptism Sprinkling with or immersion in water; the ritual by which a person is initiated into membership in the Christian community. Baptism is considered a cleansing from sin. (pp. 182-183170–171)

bishop The supervising priest of an ecclesiastical district called a diocese. (pp. 173)

canon A standard; a scriptural canon is the list of books acknowledged as scripture; the list of acknowledged saints is likewise a canon. Canon law is the accumulated body of Church regulations and discipline. Clergy subject to the rule of a particular cathedral or congregation are also sometimes termed canons. (p. )

Christ From the Greek *Christos,* a translation of the Hebrew word for messiah, “anointed.” (p. 238)

creeds Brief formal statements of doctrinal belief, often recited in unison by congregations. (p. 238)

ecumenismThe movement for reunion or collaboration between previously separate branches of Christianity. (pp. 229-230)

Eucharist The ritual re-enactment of Jesus’ sacrifice of himself, patterned after his sharing of bread and wine as his body and blood with his disciples at the final Passover meal. Orthodox Christians term it the liturgy, Catholics the mass, and Protestants the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion. (p. 163)

GnosticismAn ancient movement that believed the material world to be the evil result of a fall from pure spiritual existence. Christian Gnostics viewed Jesus as the bearer of a secret, saving knowledge. (p. 179)

Gospel“Good news” (*evangelion* in Greek); the news of redemption that the Hebrew prophets had promised. The gospels are the accounts of Jesus’ life attributed to his disciples Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. (p. 164)

iconFrom the Greek for “image”; a distinctive Byzantine form of portraiture used to depict Jesus, Mary, and the saints. (pp. 189-190)

incarnationThe embodiment of the divine in human form. (p. 239)

logos“Word” in the sense of eternal divine intelligence and purpose. (p. 164)

massThe Roman Catholic name for the Eucharist. (p. 239)

mysticismA tradition cultivating an intensely felt spiritual union with the divine. (pp. 195-196)

New TestamentA collection of 27 books—accounts of Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, Epistles, and Revelation—determined to be authoritative for the early Christian Church. (p. 162, 164 )

Nicene Creed The statement of faith agreed on at the Council of Nicaea. (p. 177)

orthodoxy Literally, the “straight way,” meaning correct belief; in any church, the accepted doctrine. (p. 239)

parablesStories about everyday life told to illustrate a point. (p. 164)

patriarchsThe five bishops who together represent supreme authority in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. (p. 239)

St Paul The Jewish convert to Christianity who founded a number of Christian communities and wrote them letters of instruction and guidance. (p. 166)

Pauline Epistles Letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament, some of which were probably written by others. (p. 164, 166)

popeFrom *papa*, “father”; the bishop of Rome, supreme authority in the Roman Catholic tradition. (p. 173)

sacrament A ritual action seen as signifying divine grace. The most widely accepted sacraments are baptism and the Eucharist, although the Catholic Church also recognizes five others. (p. 169)

saints People recognized by the Church for their faith and virtue. Most saints are believed to have worked at least one miracle. (p.. 201)

scriptures The holy writings of Christianity, consisting of the Hebrew Bible and the “New Testament” accounts of Jesus’ life and the early years of the Christian community. (p. 240)

Synoptic Gospels The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, called “synoptic” (“seen together”) because of their many overlapping stories and themes. (p. )

Trinity The concept of God as having three “persons” or manifestations: father, son, and Holy Spirit. (p. 162)

Study Questions

See below for answers with page references.

1. What differentiates the Gospel of John from the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke?
2. What is the significance of the Nicene Creed?
3. What was the goal of medieval scholasticism?
4. What technological innovation was central to the success of the Reformation movements and why?
5. What critical method began to be applied to biblical scholarship in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? What has been its impact?

Reflection Questions

1. What influences—social, political, architectural, etc.—within your own environment are rooted in Christianity?
2. How do you think Christian mystics such as Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross might be received in modern society?
3. How have Christians pushed for changes in social welfare?
4. How has secularism changed the place of Christianity in Western public discourse?
5. How do you think the historical Jesus of Nazareth might react to the precepts and practices associated with Christian religious traditions?

Research Paper Topics

1. Describe the early foundation and organization of Christianity. Which figures played the most pivotal roles, and what means were used to instruct, unify, and encourage early Christian communities?
2. What faith commitments are central to the Christian religion? How have these articles of faith been interpreted differently throughout the history of Christianity?
3. Describe and analyze the processes by which Christianity was transformed from a private to a public religion? What effect did this transformation have with regard to the roles and place of women within Christian communities?
4. What issues were at stake in the power struggle between Western and Eastern Christianity? What were the historical repercussions of the schism between the two?
5. Describe and analyze the ways in which changes to Christian architecture can be related to the growth of Christian socio-political power.
6. From what early practices did Christian monasticism derive? What form of monasticism became normative within Christianity and what reasons might be attributed to its normalization?
7. What were some of the underlying motivations that fuelled the Christian crusades? Address both the institutional motives of the Church hierarchy, as well as the personal motives of the individual crusaders.
8. Describe and analyze the phenomenal growth in devotional activities oriented toward the Virgin Mary in the latter Middle Ages. Provide some potential explanation of this rise in popularity.
9. What was the significance of the development of humanism within the context of medieval Christianity? What subsequent events and movements within Christianity are based on a Humanist worldview? Support you assertions with references to individual figures and their respective works.
10. How has the role of women within Christian traditions changed in the modern period? Can the term “progression” be used in relation to the contemporary place of women in Christianity when compared to their historical roles?

Additional Resources

*The Bible and Interpretation*: A site dedicated to delivering the latest news, features, editorials, commentary, archaeological interpretation, and excavations relevant to the study of the Bible both for the public and for biblical scholars. [www.bibleinterp.com](http://www.bibleinterp.com)

*BBC Religions: Christianity*: An excellent site for beginning a historical and theological investigation. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/>

*Christianity Today*: A magazine that offers an insider perspective (Protestant perspective). <http://www.christianitytoday.com/>

The official Vatican website where you can actually read online original documents (Catholic perspective). <http://www.vatican.va/>

# Cross, F.L. and E.A. Livingstone, eds. 1997. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Study Questions: Answer Key

1. In contrast to the narrative accountings of the teachings and ministry of Jesus provided by the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John advances a detailed theological framework. In the Gospel of John, Jesus’ birth, life, and death are described in divine terms, and Jesus is proclaimed as the Messiah. Further, the Gospel of John develops a complex model of Jesus as the incarnation of the *logos* (the divine word). (p. 164, 166)
2. The Nicene Creed is the statement of belief pertaining to the nature of Christ, agreed to at the Council of Nicaea in 325 ce. The Creed affirms the belief that Jesus was both human and divine, and that he constitutes the second person of the Trinity, along with God and the Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed has both unified and divided Christians over the ensuing centuries, and its subject matter continues to be debated by theologians today. (p. 177)
3. The medieval school of Christian thought dubbed “scholasticism” was composed of Christian thinkers who sought to reconcile Greco-Roman philosophy with Christian theology. Their intellectual endeavours, and the conceptual methodology they developed to execute their task, laid the foundation for the model of university learning that has come to characterize Western academia. (pp. 194-195)
4. The invention of the printing press in the years preceding the Reformation was central to the ability of intellectual leaders such as Martin Luther both to disseminate their critical tracts, and to make accessible to the common people vernacular translations of Latin scriptures. Without the means to mass produce these documents, the influence of the Reformation movements would have been seriously limited. (p. 208)
5. The development of historical criticism and the concept of historicity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had a major impact on the way scholars engaged with Christian scripture. Approaching the Christian Bible as a historical document led to an interpretative reading situated within the cultural, political, and social circumstances of its production. In this light, the meaning of biblical passages are not treated as divinely revealed, or absolutely true, but rather as the creation of human beings working under specific historical pressures. The impact of this critique has led to a new understanding of the Bible as a historical resource that is helpful for understanding the ideals and events that were important to the early Christian communities. Commensurately, historical criticism has garnered a backlash from certain Christian groups, which take umbrage with the treatment of the Christian bible as a human artefact. These fundamentalist groups claim the scripture is of divine origin and often advocate a literalist interpretation of the text. (pp.219-222)