

What is Christianity?

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE INQUIRY

1. What are the various beliefs of the five major world religions?
2. How does geography play a role in the development and spread of religion?
3. What effect does religion have on economic, political, and social institutions?
4. What effect does religion have on art, language, and literature?

TERMS, PLACES, PEOPLE

Christianity

Jesus

salvation

messiah

disciples

Trinity

Introduction

“Of all the great religions, **Christianity** is the most widespread and has the largest number of adherents. The figure is probably inflated, but some estimates suggest almost one out of every three persons today as Christian, bringing the number into the neighborhood of 2.2 billion.” (Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions*)



Christianity was founded by **Jesus**, and “Christianity is referred to as a historical religion, meaning that it is not founded on just abstract principles, but on concrete events, actual historical happenings.” (Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions*) Who is Jesus and how did he become the central figure in the world’s largest religion? How do the teachings of one person become the basis for a religion that lasts for over two thousand years and spreads worldwide?

Judaism connection

To understand Christianity we need to understand the connection it has with Judaism. Christianity is rooted in Judaism; however, the two religions begin to take separate paths in the first century of the common era. Christianity focuses on an understanding of a New Covenant which is rooted in the writings of a number of Jesus’ followers. This collection of letters and records of the events of

Jesus’ life along with other writings came to be known as the New Testament, a part of the Christian Bible. Judaism places emphasis on the Mosaic Covenant, (the covenant made with Moses) as recorded in the Torah and discussed above, other

writings of ancient Judaism and the Talmud. The primary difference here is twofold: the purpose of Judaism is to carry out what it holds to be the only covenant or agreement between God and the Jewish people. Jews believe in an individual and collective relationship with God through prayers, tradition, rituals and actions. Christians believe that there is a path to **salvation** through the faith in a savior or **Messiah**.

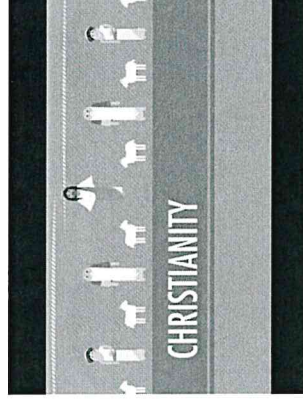
Origins/History

How did Christianity begin? As mentioned, Christianity has a deep connection with Judaism. The Old Testament of the Christian Bible is essentially recognized by Judaism as well. As you might expect, there are many things the two religions hold in common including monotheism. However, this monotheistic religion is based on the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, a small village in Palestine, later known as Jesus Christ.

Jesus (Life and Death)

According to the gospels, a part of the Christian New Testament, Jesus of Nazareth was born into a small Jewish family. His mother, Mary, was a young woman when he was born. Christians believe that his father is the Holy Spirit, making Jesus both fully human and fully divine. The celebration of Christmas in the Christian faith is the celebration of the birth of Jesus. Very little is known about Jesus’ early life. By piecing together accounts from the gospels and other historical records, Christians believe Jesus

Interactive 5.2 Christianity
- from Judaism to
Constantine



Learn more in this *Crash Course World History* video.

Did you know that one of the most well-known religious names is not really a name? Christ is actually a title. It comes from the Latin and Greek words which mean, anointed, a rough translation of the Hebrew word, Messiah.

was born around 4 CE in Bethlehem. Very little else is recorded in the gospels of his childhood; the only other parts of his life that are recorded is about three years of his adult life where he preached and eventually was executed by crucifixion.

According to the gospels, during his preaching, Jesus traveled around the region healing the sick, teaching in parables, short stories that use analogies to teach religious truths, and preaching sermons that taught what God wanted people to do. The focus of those teachings was to love God and love your neighbor as yourself, something often referred to today as the golden rule. Jesus' teachings focused on love and the need for forgiveness. This is still the central idea of the Christian belief today.

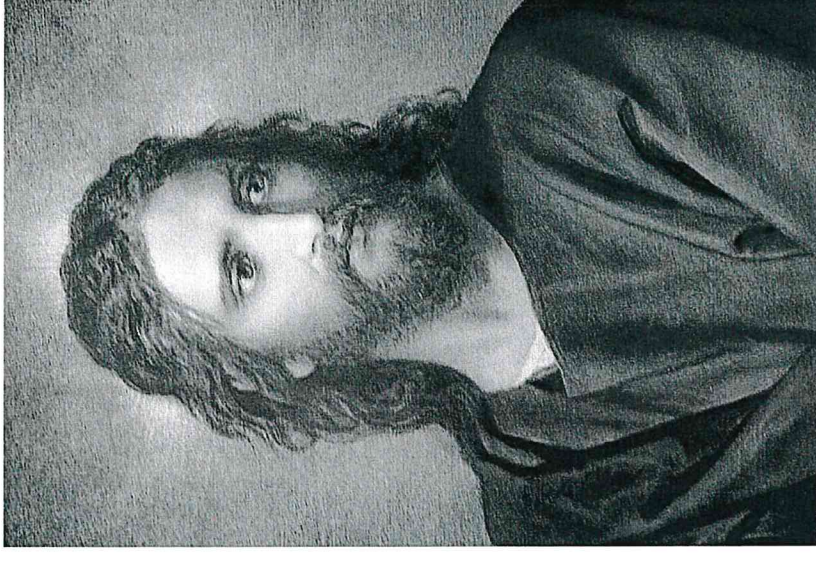
Jesus' teaching challenged the religious authorities of that region and time and, not surprisingly, made many enemies among the religious and political leaders. These powerful leaders believed that Jesus was looking to lead a revolution against the Roman Empire. Eventually, they would attempt to find a way to get rid of him and would use the authority of the Roman Empire to do it. Becoming convinced that Jesus and his growing following might be a threat to Roman control and stability in the region of Palestine, the Roman governor sentenced Jesus to death and

had him crucified, a common penalty of the time used to punish revolutionaries and criminals. To be crucified meant the punished would be nailed to a wooden cross and left to publicly die.

During his three year period of teaching and preaching, Jesus built up a very loyal following, led by his twelve **disciples**, or followers. Though Jesus' execution was meant to stop his following from growing, the opposite took place.

According to the Gospels, Jesus' rose from the dead three days after his execution. The gospels describe how Jesus appeared to many of his followers and eventually ascended into heaven with a promise of returning.

The Resurrection is considered the central event of Christianity and offers everyone the opportunity for eternal life or living forever



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_\(name\)#/media/File:Christ,_by_Heinrich_Hofmann.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_(name)#/media/File:Christ,_by_Heinrich_Hofmann.jpg)

after their own resurrection if they too become a follower of Jesus. Christians believe that the painful sacrifice of Jesus' life on the cross shows how much God loves his people and offers them forgiveness from what they have done wrong. The Resurrection is the sign of God's salvation offered to all people, a hope for eternal life.

Development of the Religion and the Spread of Christianity

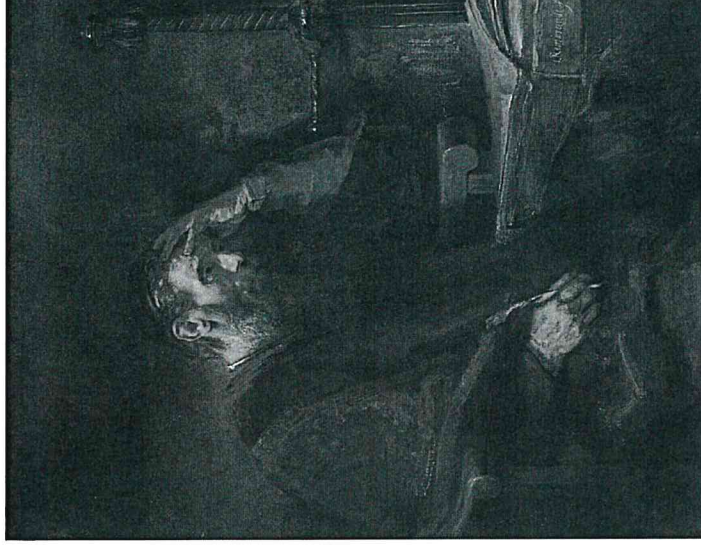
Early on, Christians were not popular with both the Jews and Romans and both attempted to stop the spread of the religion. The early religion was spread by many of Jesus' disciples, now often referred to as Apostles because of their role in spreading the teachings of Jesus and other followers. This was a very small, often persecuted group. Many Apostles and early believers were executed by the Romans. These early Christians often met in secret in small groups at individual homes.

The early religion wouldn't have gone far without the work a few key individuals in the history of the religion. Two people who were significant in the spread of Christianity were Paul and Constantine.

Paul

The spread of the Christian faith would not have made any lasting impact on the world were it not for the missionary work of Paul. Paul converted to Christianity and devoted his life to spreading the teachings of Jesus. Before his conversion, Paul was opposed to the Christian faith, helping to persecute Christians. According to the New Testament, Paul experienced a dramatic conversion while traveling to Damascus in present day Syria. After his conversion, he dedicated his life to teaching and preaching the message of Jesus.

Paul was an educated man who held a privileged position as a Roman citizen and spoke Greek, the common language used for writing in the Eastern portion of the Roman Empire. This made



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_the_Apostle#/media/File:Saint_Paul,_Rembrandt_van_Rijn_\(and_Workshop%3F\),c._1657.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_the_Apostle#/media/File:Saint_Paul,_Rembrandt_van_Rijn_(and_Workshop%3F),c._1657.jpg)

Paul an extremely effective missionary to the non-Jewish people sometimes referred to as Gentiles. Paul's journeys took him through much of the Roman empire. Paul stressed the need for people to believe in Jesus as the Son of God. It was his teaching which was essential for the development and success of the early church. Many of the letters he wrote to new churches throughout that portion of the Roman Empire are contained in the New Testament and considered by Christians to be sacred writings. If it were not for Paul's influence and teaching, Christianity might have remained nothing more than another Jewish sect limited to the small area around Palestine where Jesus lived and taught. But Paul was instrumental in spreading it through much of the Roman Empire.

Constantine

Paul established Christian churches all throughout the Roman Empire, but these churches remained small and often secretive due to the persecution of the early church by Roman emperors. Nero (54 CE - 68 CE) and Domitian (81 CE-96 CE) were examples of tyrannical Roman emperors who persecuted many Christians. For hundreds of years, under Roman rule, many Christian believers died for their faith. These people are often referred to as martyrs. Even under duress, Christianity grew. By 300 CE there were as many as 30 million Christians living in the Roman lands in Europe, North Africa, and western Asia. Then, in 312 CE, the emperor Constantine won a decisive victory over a rival in battle.

He credited the success to the "Christian God" and proclaimed himself a follower of the Christian faith. Christianity, the Roman Empire, and the world would be dramatically changed forever.

One year later, in 313 CE, Emperor Constantine announced the Edict of Milan. The edict, or order, gave all Christians the freedom to practice their religion openly. This opened the door for future emperors to accept the new faith and then, by 380 CE, Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire. Now



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Constantine_the_Great_Statue_in_York)

[File:Constantine the Great Statue in York, commissioned in 1998 and sculptured by Philip Jackson. Eboracum, York, England_\(764990680\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Constantine_the_Great_Statue_in_York)

instead of small secretive groups, Christianity grew rapidly throughout the Roman Empire and became one of the unifying factors of the Roman Empire.

Important Historical events

Throughout history there have been many events that have shaped the Christian faith to create the religion we know today.

As you might imagine, many different Christian groups see different ones as important, but two stand out with great significance in creating the different branches of Christianity we know today. Even though they occur much later, they help explain the major branches of Christianity today.

- **The Great Schism-** In 1054 differences between Eastern and Western Christianity culminated in an event where the two were unable to resolve their differences. The differences led to the split and the creating of the Orthodox church in the east and the Roman Catholic church in the west.
- **The Reformation-**Another conflict took place in 1517, when a German priest named Martin Luther called for a series of reforms in the Roman Catholic church. Those who followed the reforms became known as the Protestants. Other reformers followed Luther's lead. Today many different denominations exist under the Protestant branch of Christianity.

Central Teachings

Today, there are many different divisions and denominations (or religious groups) in Christianity. Although many different interpretations exist, most Christians accept a set of central beliefs about God and his relationship with humans. Christians are bound in their belief in the teachings of Jesus, found in the New Testament of the Christian Bible. The New Testament tells how Jesus brought a message of love, as displayed by his life and words.

Main Beliefs

First, most Christians believe that Jesus Christ was the son of God, fully human and fully divine. Christians also believe that Jesus died willingly for humanity, that God raised him from the dead, an event known as the Resurrection, and that this event saves or provides salvation from a spiritual death for those who believe in it. After the Resurrection, Christians believe that Jesus appeared to his disciples and then joined his father in heaven. Christians believe that they can look forward to their own resurrection and a life after death as well. After the end of this life, Christians believe each person will face judgement. God will then decide who should be saved from sin and evil and enjoy eternal life in heaven. This belief, that God will save people from sin and grant them an everlasting life, is known as salvation. Christians believe that salvation is a gift from God, that this gift is

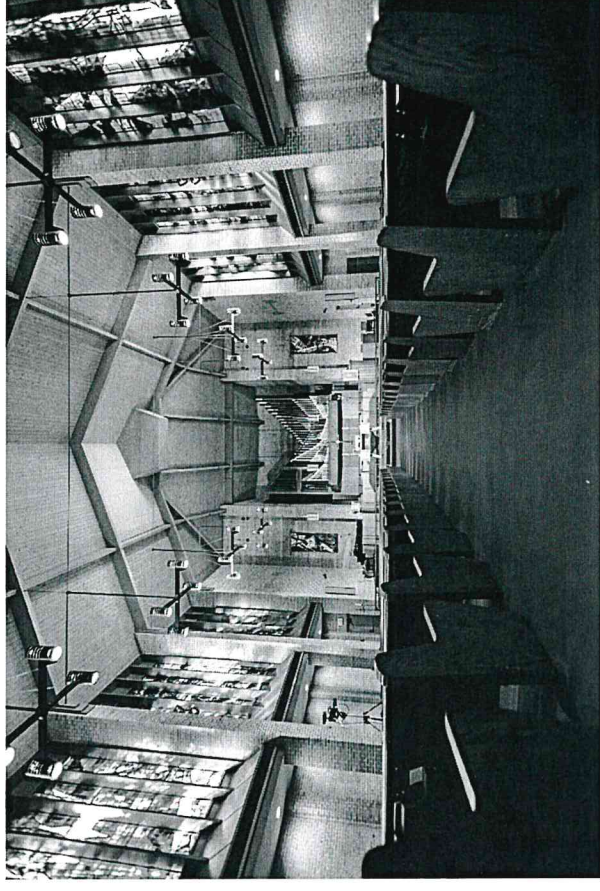
open to anyone who has faith in Jesus and asks God to forgive them.

Christianity is a monotheistic religion, though, as you can see in the above references to a Father and a Son, there is sometimes some confusion about this. Christians interpret the different references to God in their Bible as being three beings in one; the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This union of the three-in-one God is known as the **Trinity**.

Each part of the Trinity has a different role. God the Father is the creator of the universe and everything in the world reveals his power and love. The son is Jesus, the Son of God who Christians believe that he was both divine and human, living and dying like a human. The Holy Spirit is God's power at work in the world today.

Worship

The Christian place of worship is referred to as a church. For most Christians, going to church and worshiping with others is a big part of practicing their faith. Churches around the world vary in size - from simple homes to massive cathedrals. Some are highly decorated with stained glass and paintings while others are kept very plain as not to distract worshippers from focusing on God. Most churches hold their worship services on Sunday. This is because it is believed that Sunday is the day Jesus rose from the dead. Sunday services combine hymns and other music with



<https://pixabay.com/en/sanctuary-church-worship-519617/>

readings from the Bible and a teaching, or sermon, from the church leader. Spiritual leaders are called priests or ministers.

Wherever Christians live, sacred rituals called sacraments are part of the way they worship. The number of sacraments vary among different Christian groups or denominations, a term which means a specific religious groups, but all believe in the two sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. Both of these rituals can be celebrated differently depending on the denomination, but they remain the two most widely practiced sacraments.

Baptism involves the use of water to symbolize a new phase in a person's life. The sacrament marks a person's entry into the Christian faith. Churches differ on when they baptize their members. Some will baptize children when they are infants;

others wait until the person is old enough to choose to be baptized. Churches also differ on how they carry out this ritual. Some sprinkle water on the person's head; others immerse the person completely in water. Regardless of how it is performed, Christians see this as a central to their identity as a follower of Christianity.

Holy Communion is the also central to Christian worship. The New Testament tells that Jesus began this sacrament on the night before he was executed, an event known as the Last Supper. As he served the bread to his disciples, he said, "This is my body," then as he poured the wine, saying "This is my blood." He told them to practice this in remembrance of him. Most churches celebrate Holy Communion in some way. Generally, it involves sharing bread and wine or grape juice. Christian churches perform this sacrament differently and at different times depending on the denomination.

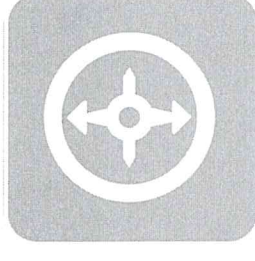
Holidays and Celebrations

The Christian year is marked by events in the life of Jesus and by events important to the faith. Christmas and Easter are by far the most widely celebrated holidays. There are many other important moments in the Christian year, but these vary once again based on the denomination. However, Christmas and Easter are held in common by most Christians, though the date of celebration may vary.

Christmas is the holiday that celebrates the birth of Jesus. The story of Jesus' birth is told in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. Christians celebrate by getting together with family and attending church services to sing songs and rejoice in the birth of Jesus. They strive to let the peace and goodwill shine during this holiday season.

Easter is the most important holiday in Christianity. This day celebrates the Resurrection of Jesus. Easter is celebrated in the springtime. Leading up to Easter, many observe a season called Lent. Lent is the 40 days leading up to Easter. This remembers the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness before he began preaching. During this time Jesus went without food, or fasted. In honor, many Christians observe Lent by giving up something that means a lot to them. The week prior to Easter marks the Holy week, starting with Palm Sunday and ending with Good Friday. Palm Sunday recalls the arrival of Jesus to Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish holiday of Passover. Good Friday marks the day that Jesus was crucified. This is a solemn day of remembrance. In contrast the following Sunday, Easter, is a day of celebration: death has been overcome once and for all.

Interactive 5.3 Christian Calendar



What are some of the important upcoming dates? See here on this website!