9. CHRISTIANITY

Chapter Overview

Introducing the Christian religion brings two major aspects of the study of religion into sharp focus for students. First, the historical development of a Western religion becomes apparent as one traces the distinct contrasts between the early Near Eastern beginnings of the faith through its movement into the Roman Empire, to Ireland, Scotland, Europe, and later America. Religion has been the fulcrum for many significant political and cultural changes. A history of Christianity offers many of the same highlights covered by a history of Western civilization. The second important insight that may be communicated in this unit is the importance of interpreting religious scripture, story, and art. Students who are familiar with the basic tradition and stories of Christianity can more easily understand the subtleties of various types of interpretation, from literal to metaphorical approaches. Western literature is full of references to Christian symbols. When covering Christianity, the teacher may be able to enrich student's appreciation for the timelessness and versatility of these finely aged similes and metaphors.

Learning About Christianity

The goals of the chapter are these:
To describe the origins and development of Christianity
To sketch out some of what is known about the founder of Christianity
To present the importance of the Bible for this religion, especially the Gospels
To present the central teachings of Jesus and Christianity in general
To describe contemporary expressions of Christianity and explore some current issues within it

Jesus of Nazareth, NOT a good man

British scholar C.S. Lewis once wrote about Jesus that he does not give us the option to call him a good man, for good men do not intentionally tell lies. Lewis felt there were only three options open to us regarding Jesus of Nazareth. He might have simply been a liar, claiming to be the Messiah, claiming that he and the father were one, allowing people to acknowledge him as Lord, when all along he knew he was a fraud.

A second possibility was that he was a lunatic. A man who was mentally unstable who had a god-complex. In his twisted mind he actually thought he was divine or the Christ of Israel. He was living out his delusions, which would ultimately cost him his life. The third option, according to this Oxford professor, is that Jesus really was the Lord of heaven. Jesus really is in fact the Messiah, the savior of the world, the only incarnation of almighty God. This is where the element of faith must ultimately cast the deciding vote.

Christians are generally thought to be those who follow the teachings of and about Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Greek form of 'Yeshua; Christ is Greek for "the Messiah" or the "anointed one." Jesus was a Jewish itinerant preacher who was born circa 4 to 7 BCE. He was executed by the Roman occupying authorities in Palestine, perhaps on Friday, 30-APR-7 CE (i.e. in the spring of the year 30). Many Christians regard him as the son of God. They further believe that he is God, the second person in the Trinity. The Trinity consists of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; three separate persons, all eternal, all omnipresent, who form a single, unified deity.

The followers of a formed the Jewish Christian movement, centered in Jerusalem, after his death. They regarded themselves as a reform movement within Judaism; they continued to sacrifice at the temple, circumcise their male children, sacrifice at the temple, and eat Kosher foods. From this tiny band of Jewish reformers was launched a world wide movement that today has the largest number of adherents of any religion in the world.
Christianity compared to the number of adherents of world religions

According to David Barrett et al, editors of the "World Christian Encyclopedia: A comparative survey of churches and religions - AD 30 to 2020," there are 19 major world religions which are subdivided into a total of 270 large religious groups, and many smaller ones. 34,000 separate Christian groups have been identified in the world. "Over half of them are independent churches that are not interested in linking with the big denominations." Most people in the world follow one of the religions listed in the table below. Included is the name of the religion, the approximate date of its origin, its main sacred or ethical texts (if any) and its estimated numerical strength (both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the world’s population.) The classifications other and spiritism have been omitted in this chart.

This data is based on census or public opinion data. A person is considered to be of a particular religion if they say that they are of that faith. Thus, about 88% of the adults in both the U.S. and Canada are Christians. Many individuals and religious groups have much more strict definitions for membership. Many conservative Christians believe that one has to be, born again, in order to be counted as a Christian. Using this definition, only about 35% of Americans would be counted as Christians. This difference in definitions between conservative Christians and the rest of the population causes much confusion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Date Founded</th>
<th>Sacred Text</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>% World</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christianity</td>
<td>30 CE</td>
<td>The Bible</td>
<td>2,015 million</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*No religion</td>
<td>No date</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>925 million</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>1,500 BCE</td>
<td>The Veda</td>
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<td>13%</td>
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<td>Buddhism</td>
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<td>The Tripitaka</td>
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<td>6%</td>
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<td>None</td>
<td>211 million</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chinese folk rel.</td>
<td>270 BCE</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>188 million</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Asian rel.</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>106 million</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribal Religions</td>
<td>Prehistory</td>
<td>Oral tradition</td>
<td>91 million</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikhism</td>
<td>1500 CE</td>
<td>Guru Granth Sahib</td>
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<td>&lt;1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Judaism</td>
<td>No consensus</td>
<td>Torah, Talmud</td>
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<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shamanists</td>
<td>Prehistory</td>
<td>Oral Tradition</td>
<td>12 million</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confucianism</td>
<td>520 BCE</td>
<td>Lun Yu</td>
<td>5 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bahai Faith</td>
<td>1863 CE</td>
<td>Most Holy Book</td>
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<td>&lt;1%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>570 BCE</td>
<td>Siddhanta,Pakrit</td>
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<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shinto</td>
<td>500 CE</td>
<td>Kojiki</td>
<td>3 million</td>
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</table>
The Christian Bible

Christianity's Bible consists of the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible), called Tanakh in Judaism, and the New Testament, which consists of twenty-seven individual texts. Four of the books of the New Testament are referred to as gospels--a specific literary genre. These four books each bear a name: the Gospel according to Matthew, the Gospel according to Mark, the Gospel according to Luke, the Gospel according to John. Each gospel is a theological interpretation of the life and teachings of Jesus. Contrary to popular belief, however, the gospels are not the oldest writings in the New Testament. Rather, the letters written by the Christian missionary Saul of Tarsus who is also referred to as the Apostle Paul, to various Christian churches in the decade of the fifties are the oldest extant writings. The gospels were probably composed between 70-95 C.E. Mark is estimated to be the first written work of its kind, followed chronologically by Matthew, Luke, and John. The Gospels bearing the names of Mark, Matthew, and Luke are called the synoptic gospels. Although each text relates the Jesus story in a distinct and different way there are substantial parallels among the three, both in terms of structure and content. It is commonly accepted that the authors of Matthew and Luke used the gospel according to Mark as a source. Furthermore, material appears in both Matthew and Luke that is peculiar to that gospel alone; consequently, it seems that the authors of these writings had access to unique material about Jesus that does not seem to have circulated widely.

It seems that each gospel author had a particular set of goals and motivations in telling the Jesus story, which helps account for the differences in approach and emphasis. The gospel according to Mark emphasizes that Jesus was the suffering Messiah (or Christ). Scholars believe that this first gospel was originally addressed to a Christian community, composed predominantly of Gentile converts, who were about to undergo persecution—or were already doing so—for their faith.

On the other hand, the gospel called Matthew stresses that Jesus was the promised Messiah of Israel and the final, decisive teacher of the Torah. That gospel probably addressed a Christian community composed of mainly Jewish converts who had real questions about how their Jewish heritage and the Torah now related to their new faith. The term that it might be fulfilled is found numerous times in Matthew's Gospel as he attempts to prove that Jesus is in fact the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming Messiah.

The gospel according to Luke portrays Jesus as the nonviolent savior who has a universal ethic to offer all people. No other gospel stresses the plight of the poor, the outcasts, and the powerless as much as this one. Moreover, this gospel highlights the roles of women in Jesus ministry to an extent not found in the other gospels. Scholars believe that his gospel was originally addressed to a Christian community composed of Hellenistic Gentile converts who possibly lacked an ethos of gratuitous giving and concern for the poor. It is also believed that Luke, who was a physician by profession, was the only Gentile author in the New Testament. He also wrote the Book of Acts, the History Book of the first century church.

The gospel called John proclaims Jesus to be the Word (Greek logos) made flesh. Johannine scholars still engage in debates over the precise meaning of calling Jesus the Word (logos); however, a general interpretation indicates that professing Jesus as the Word (logos) suggests that he was a divine being. He began with this declaration instead of the story of the manger in Bethlehem. John declared:

_In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son of God, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth._ John 1:1,14

It is also interesting to note that although the synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke,
focus primarily on Jesus’ ministry in the region of Galilee, John’s Gospel is focused primarily in the south, in Jerusalem and its neighboring communities.
The life and teachings of Jesus

Jesus of Nazareth wrote nothing during his own lifetime. In fact, no one wrote anything about him during his lifetime. How amazing that this religion that grew out of Judaism, and as the chart above indicates, has more followers than any religion in the world, has so very few believers in the land of its birth. Saul, a rabbi and Pharisee from Tarsus who was initially a persecutor of the followers of Jesus became his major advocate. He was the first Christian author and theologian and he wrote during the decades of the fifties. Intriguingly, Paul does not deal with Jesus life, he tells no stories about Jesus or stories coming from Jesus. Nonetheless, the chapter presents stories from the gospels, which have pivotal import for the living Christian faith.

The following schema follows the sequence of stories in the chapter. Students might find it interesting to see how many details they can fill in before reading this section of the chapter. It may prove equally interesting for them to then check how much of what they filled in was accurate.

Jesus birth:

What city? ______________________
What is the theological significance of that city? _____________________________
Which gospels have genealogies of Jesus’ family? ____________________________
Names of Jesus’ parents? ______________________

Preparation

What is the single story told about Jesus between the time of his birth and prior to his adult ministry?
In which gospel does one find this episode? ______________________
Who baptized Jesus of Nazareth? ______________________
Prior to his adult public ministry, Jesus went into a desert for how many days in order to prepare
for his mission? ______

Ministry

The first followers of Jesus are called? ______________________
Who were the first three followers of Jesus? ______________________
Jesus reportedly was a wonder-worker or one who performs miracles. What are some of the best
known miracles ascribed to him?
What was radical about the ethics Jesus taught?
What was a key, central, teaching of Jesus?
Jesus was known as a superb storyteller. What is the name for the particular kind of religious stories which are so closely associated with him?

Challenges to authority

Who was the ruler of Galilee, appointed by Rome, who had John the Baptizer beheaded?
Which prominent Jewish groups held Jesus in suspicion? ______________________

Crucifixion

Jesus was in what city when he was arrested? ______________________
Who was the high priest who interrogated Jesus? ______________________
Who was the Roman governor who oversaw Jesus political trial? ______________________
What was the name of the execution site where Jesus was crucified? ______________________
Who owned the tomb in which Jesus was buried? ______________________

Resurrection

What does resurrection mean? __________________________________________
Scholars have long pondered and studied the stories in the gospels, seeking out what actually happened. These labors have not been fruitless. Today, biblical scholars can agree on a number of virtually indisputable historical facts about the person Jesus of Nazareth. Among such facts are these:

* Jesus was Jewish
* Jesus spoke Aramaic of Galilee
* Jesus was baptized by John the baptizer
* Jesus engaged in an itinerant religious ministry
* Jesus called a number of special followers, known as disciples
* The central focus of Jesus’ life and teaching was his vision of the kingdom of God
* Jesus taught about God’s kingdom by using parables
* Jesus taught some version of the prayer that has come to be known as the “Our Father
* Jesus engaged in table fellowship with his special disciples
* Jesus’ ministry created controversy among devout followers of Judaism and the Roman authorities
* Jesus was eventually accused of sedition and condemned to death. Pontius Pilate was governor at that time.
* Jesus died by crucifixion.

Please note that these are facts that can be verified using methods of historical inquiry. It is quite apparent that the claims about Jesus that are the most fascinating and important for Christian believers do not fall within this category. It is one thing to say that Jesus spoke Aramaic. It is quite another to claim that he was the Christ, the Messiah. Consequently, it is often useful to clarify whether one is speaking about the historical Jesus, that which is historically verifiable about him, or the Christ of faith that which is religiously believed about him but cannot be historically verified or falsified. Many conservative believers declare him to be one and the same.

A major distinctive of Christianity is that Jesus is reported to have risen from the dead, thus launching the Christian movement. According to the Apostle Paul this is really the cornerstone of the Christian faith. He wrote to the church at Corinth:

And if Christ has not been raised from the dead, our preaching is useless as so is your faith. More than that, we are found to be false witnesses of God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. I Corinthians 15: 14, 15, 17, 19

A clarification and a question

Throughout the history of Christianity, Jesus has commonly been called the Christ. The English word Christ comes from the Greek word christos, which is a translation of the Hebrew title Messiah, meaning the anointed one. Quite frequently people speak and write about Jesus Christ. It would be good to point out to students that Christ is a theological title, a religious interpretation of who Jesus is and his significance—it is not Jesus last name even though it sounds that way to us.

Early on in the development of the Christian religion, the image of a fish came to symbolize religious faith in Jesus the Christ. It might be interesting to ask the class if anyone knows why this was so. The image of the fish as a symbol for Christian faith is intriguing. An early confessional expression about Jesus was this proclamation: Jesus Christ, God, Son, Savior. This declaration was originally in Greek. When one takes the first letter of each Greek word in this faith statement they spell ictus, which is also the Greek word for fish. During times of persecution in the Roman Empire when Christians would encounter each other, it is said they would draw in the sand half of the fish, and the other person would draw the second half, thus confirming this was a brother or sister of the faith.
A little church history

Christianity’s history is complex. The chapter gives an excellent account of the development of this religion; however, it may seem a bit overwhelming to students. A brief sequential summary of some of the landmark persons and events covered or mentioned by the chapter may help guide students through this material. The following summary is suggestive and the dates are approximate:

Jesus (BCE 27-33)
Paul writes letters to Christian communities (50-60)
Bureaucratic structures establishing (by end of the first century)
Gnosticism (second century C.E.)
Constantine emperor of the Roman Empire (306-337)
Christianity legalized (313, Constantine’s Edict of Milan)
Life of Augustine (354-430)
Canon of the New Testament finalized (367 C.E.)
Roman Empire divided into an eastern and western section (395 C.E.)
Early Christian monasticism (by the end of the fourth century C.E.)
Formal supervision of monastic life (by the fifth century C.E.)
Papacy begins wielding tremendous secular power (eighth century)
Church produces documents establishing the hierarchical authority of the papacy over the Church
Separation of the Western Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church,
The Great Schism (1054 C.E.)
Pope Gregory VII sets forth unprecedented claims for the papacy (late eleventh century)
Crusades (950-1350 C.E.)
Ecclesiastic court of the Inquisition established (1229 C.E.)
Protestant Reformation (sixteenth century)
Vatican I (1869-1870 C.E.)
Vatican II (1962-1965)

Some central beliefs in contemporary Christianity

* Jesus is the Incarnation of God, God became human, Jesus is the divine Son
* Jesus is the savior of the world
* Jesus suffering and death are a substitute sacrifice on behalf of all those who have faith in him
* Humanity has a sinful character
* Humans cannot save themselves
* Conversion demands a change in lifestyle, also known as repentance
* Through total faith in Christ believers hope to be sanctified and glorified in the next life
* Jesus was thoroughly human, and his life is a perfect model for human behavior
* Love is the human virtue most associated with Jesus

Sacred practices

Within Christianity, particular ritual actions are believed capable of transmitting the mystery of Christ to believers. These ritual actions are called sacraments. Among Christian denominations there are historic differences in the number of officially acknowledged sacraments. For example, within most Protestant expressions of Christianity two sacraments are recognized: the Lord’s Supper or Holy Eucharist, and, baptism. However, within Roman Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodox Churches seven sacraments are acknowledged: the Lord’s Supper or Holy Eucharist, Holy Communion, the Mass; the Divine Liturgy in Eastern Orthodoxy, baptism, confirmation, reconciliation, marriage, holy orders, the blessing of the sick.

Christianity also has what is called a liturgical year. The word liturgy means a ritual of public worship. A liturgical year is therefore a way of dividing the calendar year into religious
seasons and holy days, both of which are frequently celebrated with formal services of worship. **Advent** is a religious season joyously anticipating **Christmas**. Traditionally, advent lasts for forty days. Christmas is the holy day commemorating the birth of Jesus. Following Christmas is the celebration known as the **Epiphany**. Epiphany comes from the Greek word meaning manifestation or showing or disclosing. This holy day commemorates the recognition of Jesus spiritual kingship by the visit of the Magi bearing gifts. **Lent** is a religious season preceding the holy days of Good Friday and Easter. Lent is traditionally a forty-day period of preparation wherein Christians are called to rededicate their lives and to especially recall and live out the suffering-death of Jesus in their own lives. **Easter** is the highest of all holy days. It is the celebration of Christ's resurrection from the dead. Following Easter is the holy day known as **Pentecost**, which commemorates the event described in the biblical book called Acts wherein the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples of Jesus in a special way, empowering them to really begin their mission of teaching and preaching.

Given the great diversity within Christianity one can find other religious practices and holy days that are not part of all denominations, e.g., the chapter sections on the Transfiguration and the Assumption of Mary, contemplative prayer, devotions to Mary, and the veneration of saints and angels. However, those religious seasons and holy days mentioned above are commonly found throughout most of the Christian religion.

**Some contemporary trends**

Contemporary Christianity is as diverse as its history. This chapter section notes the following trends:

* In some quarters the Christian religion is gaining enthusiastic participation, in others, it is losing.
* Sixteen million Coptic Christians have their own pope.
* Roman Catholicism is in turmoil over several issues: liberals vs. conservatives, the conservative retrenchment of Pope John Paul II, a dwindling priesthood, widespread disregard of papal prohibitions against artificial birth control, abortion, artificial insemination, surrogate motherhood, genetic experimentation, divorce, homosexuality, and family planning. Also the allegation of sexual abuse of children by priests has become a national scandal, which has shaken the American Roman Catholic Church community.
* Traditional Protestant denominations in Europe and the United States are declining in membership.
* The number of women ministers in Protestantism is increasing.
* Gender-inclusive language is becoming more and more common in denominations.
* The Christian religion is broadening culturally.
* Theological diversity exists which includes liberation theology and creation centered Christianity.
* Liberation theology focuses on the mandate for the church to change society as well as save souls.
* Growing realization of the active roles of women in the earliest churches.
* A new appreciation for women role models in the Bible.
* The African American church in America continues to be a powerful force in the Black community. A cry for social justice can still be heard from the pulpits of many African American preachers.
* Ecumenism, which means a constructive outreach from different Christian denominations to each other in an attempt to further greater understanding and mutual appreciation among the diverse forms of Christianity while respecting each other's real differences.
* In the immediate aftermath of the September 11th 2001 attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, American's in large numbers sought spiritual comfort and direction.
Beliefs About God in America

- 95% believe in God (1997)
- 72% believe in God when described as the all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today. (2001)
- 10% believe that that God represents a state of higher consciousness. (2001)
- 7% believe that God is the total realization of personal human potential. (2001)
- 15% say God is no longer involved in their life. (1997)
- Almost nine out of ten people (87%) say the universe was originally created by God. (2000)
- 60% of all adults agree that the Bible is totally accurate in all of its teachings (44% agree strongly, 16% agree somewhat) (2001)
- Blacks are more likely than are whites to agree that the Bible is totally accurate in all of its teachings (75% to 58% respectively). (2001)
- 13% of born again Christians disagree that "the Bible is totally accurate in all of its teachings." (2001)
- While millions believe the Bible is accurate in its recording of information, a substantial number of adults do not believe that all of the information is relevant for today. One out of every five adults (18%) contend that one of the renowned portions of the Bible - the Ten Commandments - is not relevant for people living today. (1992)

(Barna Research Group Ltd. Of Ventura, California.)