

they are flexible in their interpretations of these words. Reconstructionist Jews do not believe in a personal God, for example, and neither do some Reform Jews, including rabbis. Conservative Judaism requires belief in God, but leaves the description of "God" quite open. Similarly, the Messiah is understood by many Jews to be a better time in the future, rather than a liberating king. And many do not believe literally in an apocalyptic World to Come, or even in a personal life after death.

Yet the core teaching of Judaism from ancient times to the present remains that the people of Israel were chosen by God to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." God established a covenant with Abraham and renewed it with Moses at Sinai, and the "people of Israel" – Jews – are bound by it today. As God's People, they have a special responsibility, and by carrying out this responsibility they make their lives holy and set an example for the rest of the world to follow.

Unit II Christianity

The History and Teachings of Christianity

Origins

What we now call Christianity was started by Jesus of Nazareth in the first century. From birth to death, he was a Jew and presented himself as a Jewish reformer. He did not call himself "Christ" – this is a title used later by his followers. "Christ" is the English form of *Christos*, the Greek translation of "messiah," meaning "one who is anointed (as king)." As we saw, the idea that a messiah would come to liberate Jews from foreign oppressors became important in the centuries before Jesus' birth. The Messiah, it was said, would be a Jewish king descended from King David.

What we know about Jesus' life comes mostly from what was written about him, decades after his death, in the *gospels*, from the Old English word for "good news." Biblical scholars (see Chapter 3) disagree about the exact dating of the gospels but generally agree that they were written at least forty years after the events they describe. Biblical scholars also generally agree that none of the Gospels was written by people who knew Jesus personally, even though two of the four gospels are attributed to the friends of Jesus whose names they bear: Matthew and John. Still, working with scripture and other historical documents, scholars believe they can discern some facts about Jesus' life and teachings.

Jesus grew up in the lower class in Nazareth, a town in Galilee in the northern part of Palestine (the name the Romans had given to the parts of the land of Canaan between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, now known as the state of Israel and the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza). When he was about thirty, Jesus began preaching about "the kingdom of God," "kingdom" here being a translation of the Greek word for "reign" or "rule." (Although Palestine was ruled by Rome at the time, the language of learning was still Greek. The gospels were therefore written in Greek.) The Kingdom or Reign of God would be a world in which people lived the way God has told them to live.



FIGURE 6.8 Statue of Jesus Christ the Redeemer above Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Mark Schwettmann/Shutterstock Images.

Like many preachers at the time, Jesus spoke of an “apocalypse,” a catastrophic ending to the world as we know it. He said that when this happens, God will judge everyone and then reward those who have followed his will, and punish those who have not. Many of Jesus’ followers thought that he was the Messiah, but he did not appear to be a kingly figure, much less a political liberator, as most people expected the Messiah to be. Jesus did not tell his followers to overthrow Roman rule, and even told them to pay their taxes to the Romans. His preaching was not about politics, but about morality. Nor did he speak as a theologian discussing doctrine or as a rabbi discussing details of the law. He preached in simple stories – called **parables** – about how people should live. When he said that people should love their neighbors, for example, and someone asked, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus did not define “neighbor,” but showed what he meant by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37).



PART II USING THE TOOLS: SURVEYING WORLD RELIGIONS



Samaritans Today

There are still Samaritans today. Many live near Mount Gerizim – known as Jabal Tur, in Arabic, located in the West Bank city of Nablus – which is biblical Shechem. Samaritans believe Mount Gerizim is where Abraham almost sacrificed his son. They therefore hold it sacred.

In that story a Jewish traveler is beaten by bandits and left for dead at the roadside. Two religious authorities pass by, one after the other, but neither stops to help the victim. Then a Samaritan comes by, nurses the man's wounds, takes him to an inn and instructs the innkeeper to take care of the man until he is well, and pays the man's bill.

The Samaritans – “people of Samaria” – claimed that they were descended from the tribes of Israel (see above). However, this claim was rejected by the Jews who returned to Jerusalem from Babylonian captivity, and the two communities had been bitter enemies ever since. So Jesus’ using a Samaritan as an example of highly moral behavior would have seemed strange to his Jewish audiences, who were used to dealing with morality exclusively within their own community. There have been numerous religious interpretations of the parable over the centuries, but scholars see in its emphasis on an inclusive moral community a major step in the development of what would become Christianity as distinct from Judaism.

Another significant distinction between the two traditions can be seen in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7. Believed by scholars to be a summary of major themes in Jesus’ overall teaching, it begins with eight “Beatitudes,” statements about how people are “blessed” when they do God’s will even though they suffer for it. He praises those who are gentle, who forgive others, and who are willing to be persecuted for the sake of justice. By following the will of God they embody the Kingdom of God.

While for many people at the time, being a good Jew was carefully following the 613 mitzvot, Jesus emphasizes what is called the “Great Commandment” from Leviticus 19:18: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your kinsfolk. Love your neighbor as yourself.” He skips hundreds of mitzvot, including those about purity, diet, and observing the Sabbath. Rejecting the biblical law of retaliation (“An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” – Exodus 21:23–25; Leviticus 24:19–21), Jesus says, “Do not resist an evildoer.” While the Hebrew Bible sanctioned retaliation (or vengeance), Jesus stresses love. He says, “You have heard it 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) This emphasis will comprise another distinction between the Judaic and Christian traditions.

As we shall see, some aspects of these teachings will be reinterpreted by later Christians as circumstances change, but certain aspects of Jesus’ teaching remain central to the Christian tradition throughout history, including his focus on love, as well as doing the will of God. As he put it when he gave an example of how to pray,



The Beatitudes, from the Sermon on the Mount

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:3–10 (NRSV)

Our Father in heaven, hallowed [holy, revered] be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our offenses, as we also have forgiven those who offend us. And do not lead us into temptation, but rescue us from evil. (Matthew 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4)

The important things in life, Jesus continues, are not material possessions, which can wear out or be lost. What is important is striving to carry out God's will. Like a good father, God knows that you need such things as food and clothing, and he will provide them if you do his will.

The Gospels present more than just what Jesus taught. They also describe what he did, such as miraculously healing blind and paralyzed people, and bringing dead people back to life. The writers of the Gospels said that they were including these miracles to show that Jesus spoke and acted with authority from God, and many people were attracted to his teachings as a result.

As Jesus attracted more and more followers, some of whom called him the Messiah and King of the Jews, the Roman rulers of Palestine became suspicious. They feared that he would lead a revolution. So Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea (the province where Jesus lived), tried Jesus and sentenced him to death by crucifixion. The Gospels say that three days after Jesus died he came back to life (was "resurrected"), spent 40 days among his followers, and then ascended ("went up") into heaven. His followers expected him to return soon – as Messiah. However, when this did not happen, different understandings of who Jesus was evolved, and an entire movement developed around his teachings.

The Development of Christian Doctrine

The most influential person after Jesus in the new movement was Paul of Tarsus ("last names" or surnames are a modern invention; in the olden days people were often identified by where they lived – such as Tarsus, in what is now Turkey), who lived from about 3 to



about 66 CE. He was a Pharisee who had adapted to the Greco-Roman world. Paul was the first to write anything that is now in the New Testament – his Letters or **Epistles**, which he used to spread the new movement beyond Palestine to Greece and Rome. The first Christians thought of themselves as Jews, and so required that non-Jewish men joining their group be circumcised. However, Paul says that this is a new movement and should include not only Jews but anyone else who is willing to follow Jesus' teachings. As more and more non-Jews joined, eventually Christians came to think of themselves as a separate tradition.

Paul never met Jesus and says very little about the details of Jesus' life. His epistles mention some aspects of Jesus' moral teaching. In his first letter to his followers in Corinth, for example, he writes about love so beautifully that it is among his most quoted passages:

If I speak in tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always preserves.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: Faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.
(I Corinthians 13:1–13)

Even U.S. President Barack Obama quoted from this passage in his inaugural speech. However, Paul's primary emphasis is on the cosmic significance of Jesus' life and death. He describes Jesus as redeeming human beings – that is, saving them – from their natural sinfulness, especially through his death and resurrection.

Over the first three centuries of the common era, as Christianity spread through much of the Middle East, Northeast Africa, and southern Europe, a number of opinions developed about the identity of Jesus and the meaning of his mission. It was common to refer to Jesus as "Son of God." "Son of God" is a standard phrase in the Hebrew Bible, meaning someone who follows God's will, as when Jesus tells his followers to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your father in heaven." (Matthew 5:44–45) Some Christian groups believed that Jesus was literally the "Son of God," and that he had no beginning in time as normal sons have. He was the Eternal Son of God.



Baptism

The Gospels of Matthew and Mark say that, at the beginning of his public life, Jesus was baptized by his cousin John in the River Jordan. As in many traditions, in Judaism the ritual of being immersed in water – **mikvah** – is a symbol of purification. It is required after coming into contact with substances that are considered impure. As we saw in Chapter 4, these typically include blood and other bodily fluids, as well as corpses. When a non-Jew wants to become a Jew, s/he must undergo this symbolic purification after living a life not protected from impurity by the following of Judaic law. It thus symbolizes a monumental change in status – for the better. Jesus' baptism became a symbol of a similar change in status; baptism indicates acceptance of Jesus' teachings. In Matthew 28:19, he commissioned his apostles to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."



FIGURE 6.9 Woman baptized in the Jordan River. Eddie Gerald/Alamy.

This teaching was based on the Gospel of John, which starts: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

There were other ideas about Jesus, as well. Some early Christian groups believed that Jesus was divine, but that he was not eternal because he had been created. Some said that he was the adopted son of God – created as a man but then made divine by God. These and many other ideas about Jesus circulated among early Christians in over fifty documents.





FIGURE 6.10 *In hoc signo vinces.*

They included the four gospels most Christians are familiar with (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), as well as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of the Ebionites, the Gospel of the Nazareans, and the Gospel According to the Hebrews. Early Christians also had the letters of Paul and James (another of Jesus' followers), which are now in the canonical (official) Bible. However, there were letters of other early Christian preachers, as well, such as Clement, Ignatius, Barnabas, and Polycarp. Known as the Apostolic Fathers, they did not know Jesus but they did know the original twelve **apostles** – Jesus' closest students and messengers – and so their 1st- and 2nd-century writings are considered authoritative. As well, besides the now canonical Apocalypse of John, early Christians had the Apocalypse of Jesus' great friend Peter. With input from so many diverse sources, it is not surprising that early Christian thought reflected multiple viewpoints. There was, in these early centuries, no orthodoxy in Christian thought.

The Institutionalization and Politicization of Christianity

This lack of orthodoxy would change with the development of Christianity as a political force. During the first three centuries of Christianity, several Roman rulers had ordered the persecution of Christians. In 64 the emperor Nero blamed the Christians for the fire that burned much of Rome, and he started killing Christians in the Roman Coliseum in horrible ways for public entertainment. He even devised a tunic impregnated with a flammable liquid, so that the Christian **martyr** (literally, a “witness” but more generally, someone who maintains commitment to a cause even in the face of death) would slowly burn to death to the delight of the crowd. The last major persecutions were in the early fourth century, with thousands of Christians killed.

However, in 312, the Emperor Constantine, whose mother was Christian, became interested in the movement. Constantine led a life full of warfare. He fought with other generals for leadership of the Roman Empire, and led battles against European tribes that did not want to be part of that empire. According to one story, before a major battle he had a vision of the Greek letters *chi* and *rho*, the first two letters of the Greek word for “Christ,” superimposed on one another. Under this were the words *In hoc signo vinces* – “in this sign you will conquer.”

Taking this vision as a divine message, Constantine had his troops paint these symbols on their shields, and they won the battle. After this he signed an edict that allowed Christians to practice their religion openly, instead of in hiding as they had done during the persecutions.

The Christian population of the Roman empire was, of course, extremely grateful to Constantine. And their allegiance to Constantine no doubt strengthened his political



The Expanded Nicene Creed

We believe (I believe) in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, and born of the Father before all ages. (God of God) light of light, true God of true God. Begotten not made, consubstantial to the Father, by whom all things were made. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven. And was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and of the Virgin Mary and was made man; was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, suffered and was buried; and the third day rose again according to the Scriptures. And ascended into heaven, sits at the right hand of the Father, and shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, of whose Kingdom there shall be no end. And (I believe) in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father (and the Son), who together with the Father and the Son is to be adored and glorified, who spoke by the Prophets. And one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. We confess (I confess) one baptism for the remission of sins. And we look for (I look for) the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

authority *vis à vis* rival claimants to power in Rome. However, Constantine found the disagreements among the various Christians in the empire to be troublesome. In 325, therefore, he organized a conference of bishops in Nicea (in today's Turkey), in order to get agreement among Christian authorities.

At the time, various Christian communities around the Mediterranean were led by **presbyters**, a Greek term that means "elder" and is often translated as "bishop." One of them, Arius of Alexandria (Egypt), said that Jesus had been created by God. However, at the Council of Nicea, that idea was voted down in favor of the view that Jesus, like God the Father, was uncreated. By the end of the conference, a majority of bishops had agreed on an official statement saying that Jesus was uncreated and was the same substance as the Father. The document also referred to the "Holy Spirit" – terminology found in Talmudic literature referring to God or to God's communication to prophets. The official statement became known as the **Nicene Creed**. At a later council in Constantinople in 381, it was expanded into the familiar creed that is now accepted by almost all sects of Christians.

Once this creed was official, Arius and his followers were branded heretics. "Arian" Christianity and other forms of Christianity continued, mainly in the Middle East, as minorities outside the official control of Rome.

At around the same time, Christian leaders rejected more than half of the gospels and epistles used by the various Christian communities. By the mid-300s they had determined an official list, a canon, of the 27 books that are now called the **New Testament**.





Christianity and Faith

Being a Jew means living in accordance with the laws of God. One becomes a *bar* or *bat mitzvah* ("son" or "daughter" of the law or "commandments"). Similarly, being a Muslim means living in accordance with Islamic law. In the case of Christianity, the identifying factor is having correct beliefs. This is, in fact, the core meaning of "orthodoxy," from the Greek words for "straight" and "teaching." The rite of passage into adulthood in Christianity is Confirmation – a ceremony in which one affirms one's "faith" or "belief in" the teachings of the Church. This is why Christianity is often called a "faith." While specific beliefs are central to both Jewish and Muslim identity, it is less common to refer to either Judaism or Islam as faiths.

Christianity, its basic literature and doctrines newly established, became the state religion of the Roman empire in 380. That meant that it was central to the government's legitimacy; its leaders approved of the government and acceptance of its official teachings became the measure of full membership in the Roman state. Those who did not accept official Christian teaching were not only excluded from the rights of citizenship; because they did not accept the state ideology, they were considered politically suspect – possibly traitors. This politicization of Christianity marked the beginning of anti-Jewish sentiment discussed above.

Two more councils of the Christian Church were held, to further define correct understandings of Christian doctrine, in 431, and 451. They declared that Jesus is fully God and fully human, one person with a divine nature and a human nature, and that he always was and always will be God. The Holy Spirit was declared to be equal to the Father and the Son. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit make up the **Trinity**, which comes from the Greek and Latin root *tri-*, meaning three. Yet the Trinity does not compromise the monotheism of Christianity. Christians believe in only one God – which has three "persons."

From these early councils to today, the issue of orthodoxy versus heresy has been important in most Christian groups. When members within a group had major differences in their beliefs, they usually split into different sects or churches. This splitting has led to today's 34,000 Christian sects.

Eastern and Western Christians

Once Christianity was the state religion of the Roman Empire, it had support from the government and its leaders had considerable political influence. In the 3rd century, the bishops of Jerusalem, Antioch in Syria, Alexandria in Egypt, and Rome were called patriarchs. In the 4th century, when Constantine moved the imperial capital to Byzantium, in today's Turkey, its bishop became the fifth patriarch. Starting in the 3rd century, the bishops of Rome argued that they were more than local patriarchs, since they had inherited their authority from Rome's first bishop, Peter, and Jesus had chosen Peter to lead his new church. So, they said, the Bishop of Rome was a super-bishop, the leader of all



MAP 6.2 Map of the Roman Empire – East and West.

Christians. The other four patriarchs disagreed, especially the patriarch of Byzantium, which Constantine had renamed after himself – Constantinople, “City of Constantine.” Eventually, the bishop of Rome would establish himself as the patriarch of the **Roman Catholic Church** and call himself the pope, from *papa* for father. He ruled over the Western or Latin Church with its headquarters in Rome. The bishop of Byzantium (Constantinople) would be the patriarch of the Byzantine Church, now called the Orthodox or Eastern Orthodox Church. The Orthodox Church is a group of self-governing regional churches, including Greek, Romanian, Bulgarian, and Russian. Various smaller churches, such as the Coptic Church in Egypt, have their own patriarchs.

THE WESTERN/ROMAN CHURCH Early on, the Roman Church started calling itself Catholic, that is, universal. Being in the western center of the Roman Empire gave the Bishop of Rome prestige and power. In the 400s the Roman Empire in Europe was disintegrating under the impact of invasions by Germanic tribes. As a result, the bishop of Rome became even more powerful, as he assumed some of the roles that kings and princes had had in the Empire. Through the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church was a central institution in Europe, and church law, developed from Roman Law, provided social stability. The officials of the church served as local clerks of the empire. In fact, the term “clerk” comes from the same root as “clergy,” the religious hierarchy.

In matters of doctrine, the western Roman churches and the eastern Byzantine churches agreed on most issues, but they emphasized different things. Starting with Augustine of

