

## CHRISTIANITY: BACKGROUND AND BASIC BELIEFS\

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*Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. / Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. / Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. / Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. / Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. / Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. / Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. / Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. / Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. / Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. (Matthew 5: 3-12, "The Sermon on the Mount")*

**Christianity** is a religion based around the life of **Jesus Christ** ("Jesus the messiah") who was born around 6 BCE to 0, and was executed by Roman authorities somewhere between 30 to 36 CE. According to Christian beliefs, he rose from the dead three days later. While the religion is about Jesus, some religious scholars argue that its founder (in the sense of distinguishing it as a new religious community that worshipped separately from other Jewish sects) is Saul of Tarsus (or **Paul the Apostle**, 5 to 67 CE). Paul's letters (or **epistles**) to early Christian communities are among the earliest distinctively "Christian" texts, and helped shape later beliefs and practices. Some basic facts about the history of the religion:

- **Early Christianity.** The Christian Bible is made of the **Old Testament** (the Jewish Tanakh) and the **New Testament**, which (along with Paul's letters) consists of four canonical **gospels** describing the life of Jesus, the "Acts of the Apostles," and a number of non-Pauline epistles. While dating the gospels is somewhat difficult (they probably weren't written by people who knew Jesus personally), most scholars think they were composed from around 70 CE (the destruction of the Second Temple) to 110 CE, just as Christianity began to separate from Rabbinic Judaism. In the early days, there were many other gospels and letters in circulation as well, and the New Testament wasn't completely finalized until after 350 CE (in the early days, it wasn't clear whether the Gospel of John would make the official "canon", and the Book of Revelations remained controversial throughout the process).
- **Christianity in the Roman Empire.** While Christianity was made illegal in the Roman empire (apparently because its adherents actively preached about the falsity of the Roman state religion--the "cult of the Emperor"-- and argued that following it was immoral), it slowly spread, and competed for adherents with both the various ethnic religions throughout the empire and various Hellenistic philosophies (such as Stoicism and Epicureanism). Active persecution stopped sometime around 250 CE, and in 313 BCE, Emperor **Constantine** (whose mother was a Christian) legalized it. In 380 CE, Trinitarian Christianity was named the official state religion, and heresy (and specifically **Arianism**, a Unitarian version of Christianity that denied the divinity of Jesus) was made punishable by death.
- **Splitting Up.** In 1054, the **East-West Schism** between the **Roman Catholic** and **Eastern Orthodox** church was initiated. In around 1270, Thomas Aquinas completed his *Summa Theologica*, which now forms the core of Catholic theology. In 1517, Martin Luther's "95 Theses" began the **Protestant Reformation**. Lutheran Protestantism was quickly followed by British Anglicanism (1534) and John Calvin's Reformed Protestantism (1536). Anabaptism (Amish, Mennonites, etc.) emerged around the same time. Most modern Protestant denominations are descended from one of these four main branches. Two recent (and rapidly growing) versions of Christianity founded in the U.S. are Mormonism (1830) and Jehovah's Witnesses (around 1870).

There are around two billion Christians worldwide, more than any other religion. While the religion was historically based in Europe, it has declined there, but has seen growth in the Americas, East Asia, and (especially) Sub-Saharan Africa. Around 50% of Christians are Roman Catholic, 37% Protestant, 12% Orthodox, and 1-2% Mormon or Jehovah's Witness.

## THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT AND OTHER SAYINGS OF JESUS

*"If anyone will piously and soberly consider the sermon which our Lord Jesus Christ spoke on the mount, as we read it in the Gospel according to Matthew, I think that he will find in it, so far as regards the highest morals, a perfect standard of the Christian life: and this we do not rashly venture to promise, but gather it from the very words of the Lord Himself. For the sermon itself is brought to a close in such a way, that it is clear there are in it all the precepts which go to mould the life. ... He*

*has sufficiently indicated, as I think, that these sayings which He uttered on the mount so perfectly guide the life of those who may be willing to live according to them, that they may justly be compared to one building upon a rock.” (Augustine of Hippo)*

While the New Testament is centered around the life of Jesus, Jesus himself doesn’t actually do that much of the talking. Perhaps his most significant speech is the **Sermon on the Mount** (Matthew 5-7). This speech has often been thought of as the “core” of Christian teachings, though different theologians and denominations have emphasized different aspects of it:

- **The Beatitudes (“Blessings”).** God will reward those are “poor in spirit”, those who mourn, the meek, those who want to be righteous, the merciful, the pure at heart, the peacemakers, and the unjustly persecuted. The people who act in this way are the “salt of the earth” or the “light of the world,” and give “glory to God.”
- **Affirmation of the Torah.** Jesus’s teaching is a fulfillment of or expansion on the Torah, and does not disagree with it.
- **The “Lord’s Prayer.”** People should pray as follows: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And do not subject us to the final test, but deliver us from the evil one.”
- **How to Love Correctly.** People should avoid not only violence and adultery, but anger and lust. They should love and pray for their enemies, and should not insult or “judge” them. People who do not do this may be sent to “Gehenna.” People must follow the law out of love, and not out of desire for things like money or for social status. People should do unto others as they would have done onto them (part of the **Great Commandment**). Divorce is forbidden, at least in certain contexts, as is making oaths.

Other historically important passages (all of which have been the subject of fierce debate) attributed to Jesus include:

- **Moral Duties to the Poor.** At one point, Jesus tells a young “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to (the) poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me...it will be hard for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven...Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19).
  - Many early Christians, medieval monks, and contemporary “social justice” Christians have argued this forbids private wealth in excess of what is needed. Others have argued this an unattainable moral ideal, and not a moral requirement.
- **The Coming Apocalypse.** At a number of points in the gospels, Jesus seems to suggest the end of world was at hand. Many early Christians took these to mean that Jesus would return within their lifetime, and the world would end. These beliefs were, in fact, one of the main ways that they distinguished themselves from other Jewish sects. The sense that early Christianity was an “end of the world” cult (and that its members could thus not be counted on to behave ethically) may have also been a factor in Rome outlawing it.
  - Throughout the last 2,000 years, various small Christian sects have predicted the apocalypse. Since Augustine, however, most theologians have argued that these passages should be interpreted more metaphorically.
- **Religious Exclusivism.** In the Gospel of John, Jesus says several things suggesting that *only* Christians will be saved. “For if you do not believe that I AM, you will die in your sins” (John 8:24). The same gospel also has Jesus saying a number of seemingly negative things about “the Jews.” Historically, these passages (together with other, more direct passages from the Pauline and non-Pauline epistles) have been used to justify anti-Semitism, and with efforts to forcibly convert non-Christians more generally.

## CENTRAL BELIEFS: THE NICENE CREED

One widely accepted “summary” of Christian beliefs is the **Nicene Creed**, which was adopted in 325, and revised in 381. It is as follows:

*I believe in one God,/ the Father almighty,/ maker of heaven and earth,/ of all things visible and invisible. // I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,/ the Only Begotten Son of God,/ born of the Father before all ages./ God from God, Light from Light,/ true God from true God,/ begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;/ through him all things were made./ For us men and for our salvation/ he came down from heaven,/ and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary,/ and became man./ For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,/ he suffered death and was buried,/ and rose again on the third day/ in accordance with the Scriptures./ He ascended into heaven/ and is seated at the right hand of the Father./ He will come again in glory/ to judge the living and the dead/ and his kingdom will have no end. // I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,/ who proceeds from the Father and the Son,/ who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified,/ who has spoken through the prophets. // I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church./ I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins/ and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead/ and the life of the world to come.*

Three distinctive parts of the creed include the Incarnation, the Atonement, and the Trinity:

- **The Incarnation.** In contrast to Arianism, the Nicene Creed says that Jesus was *fully* divine and thus, had all of God's attributes discussed previously, such as omnipotence, omniscience, eternity, etc. It also held that Jesus was *fully* human. So, for example, Jesus could experience fear, doubt, pain, and could "die" *in exactly the same way as normal humans*. This contrasted with **docectism**, which held that Jesus's physical body was something like an "illusion" or "avatar" created by God to communicate with humans. To some extent, Hindu and Islamic theology (when they discuss Jesus) talk about Jesus in this way.
- **Atonement and Salvation.** Christian theology (following an account proposed Augustine) holds that Jesus's death was necessary to atone for humanity's inherently sinful nature (the state of **original sin**), and that it would have been impossible for humans to lead good lives (or to attain eternal life) without being **baptized**. Within Christianity, this has led to long-standing debates about the ultimate fate of unbaptized infants, as well as non-Christians more generally.
- **Trinitarianism.** Christians hold that there are three "aspects" of God: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These are "distinct" enough to do things like love each other (the Father "loves" the Son), but are nevertheless "the same" on some deeper level. This has led some Islamic and Jewish theologians to argue that Christianity isn't "really" a form of monotheism.

As with other religions, not all Christians believe in all these tenets. For example, Christian Unitarians deny Trinitarianism, while Christian Universalists holds that everyone is saved. However, these are minority views.

## WHY CHRISTIANITY?

So, what separates Christianity from the other Abrahamic religions? A few things worth noting (the arguments here are based on those given by Huston Smith, in his survey of world religions—he has similar lists for other religions):

- **Faith Guarantees Eternal Life.** Most Christians hold that God's love will *guarantee* salvation so long as people are "open to it" by having the correct *beliefs* and *acting* on these beliefs ("faith" and "good works" may or may not be separate). This placed "ordinary people" on an equal (if not higher) spiritual level than the various "heroes" that characterize Greek, Roman, and (to some extent) Jewish worldviews. Moreover, it was not simply the Jews (or "humanity" in general) that God would save, but each individual person. Christian denominations are generally distinguished by the *doctrines* or *dogmas* that members are expected to hold.
- **Salvation as Open to All.** In some worldviews, becoming a truly good person (or "perfecting oneself") is *difficult*, and it requires a lifetime of dedicated practice, a supportive community, and considerable intellectual skill. Many people (through no fault of their own) may simply be incapable of doing it. Christianity, by contrast, holds that it is *impossible* for individuals to obtain perfection on their own, that salvation is *entirely* due to God, and that *anyone* can achieve it. For early Christians, this was a liberating feeling, since it meant that one was never too stupid, weak, or selfish to achieve salvation, so long as genuinely "wanted" it.
- **Egoism and Compassion.** Many philosophers and theologians have argued that much human suffering is due to humans' *egoism*, or tendency toward self-interested behavior. Christianity helps solve this by placing the "love your neighbor as yourself" principle at the *center* of its belief structure. If believers genuinely commit to following this principle, they will not only help their neighbors, but also themselves (since they will find their own lives more meaningful and worthwhile). While Judaism and Islam (and Hinduism and Buddhism) endorse this principle, the early Christian emphasis on charity helped distinguish them from rival religious sects.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

Answer the following questions using information from the handout and the reading.

1. Identify one or two historical events (besides the life of Jesus) that have impacted Christianity. How might Christianity have been different, if these events hadn't happened (or had happened differently)?
2. List THREE claims that Jesus made in either the "Sermon on the Mount" or elsewhere that you think are especially important or interesting. Now, explain WHY you find these claims interesting.
3. In your own words, explain Christian beliefs concerning the Incarnation, Atonement and Salvation, and Trinitarianism. In what ways might believing these things have practical effects on the lives of believers?
4. In your opinion, what particular aspects of Christianity do you think have enabled it to survive as a religion, and to attract so many adherents? Defend your answer (and make sure to consider potential objections).