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Theological Questions

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1 Introduction

1.1 What is Theology and What Do Theologians Do?

1.1.1 What is Theology?

One way to think about the word “theology” is through its etymology (where the word comes from). *Theos* (Θεος) is the Greek word for “god.” The ending “-logy” is often translated as “the study of,” but the Greek word *logoi* (λογοι) actually means, “words.” Thus etymology suggests that theology consists of **the words we use to talk about God**. Although the object of study is God, the words are human words which we struggle to understand, define, and use.

The classical definition of “theology” was offered by Anselm in the eleventh century. He called theology *fides quaerens intellectum*, **“faith seeking understanding.”**

Notice that “faith” comes first. Theology, unlike religious studies (below), takes belief as a starting point. Belief is not so much the result of theology, but the beginning of theology. For most of us, faith is not something that we were talked into through a series of propositions and arguments. Rather, faith usually grows inside of us without our awareness, through our families, culture, and ultimately God’s own action. Theology usually takes some sense of faith as a starting point and builds from there.

“Seeking” is the key verb for what we are doing when we “do theology.” It is a process that never truly ends, but always brings us closer to something worthwhile. The Latin word *quaerens* is related to “query,” and fits the “questioning” theme of this course. We are asking questions and seeking meaning. We are building on the history of meaning that others have found. It is an ongoing quest, not a closed body of knowledge to learn.

It might be possible to have a heartfelt or intuitive internal understanding, but theology is an intellectual kind of understanding, as indicated by the Latin word *intellectum*. Intellectual understanding occurs in the mind and can be expressed in words. It is possible to have faith without understanding; my great-grandmother



Figure 1: Anselm of Canterbury, 1033-1109

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was a woman of remarkable faith even without theological education. The study of theology will not make you a better Christian than my great-grandmother. It is, however, an essential part of a well-rounded intellectual education.

1.1.2 What is the difference between theology and religious studies?

Theology and Religious Studies are both important academic disciplines. It is possible to mix them, but basic differences remain. Secular public universities, such as the University of Texas, may include religious studies, but theology is mostly found in private universities.

Religious Studies aspires to neutrality in the study of religions, without favoring any one religion as more true or central than another. One can study the behavior of religious people and societies as a sociologist or anthropologist, without ever asking whether a god is responding to the prayers and rituals. One can study the literature of religious people without caring whether the Bible's claims about Jesus are more relevant than Shakespeare's claims about Hamlet. Religious studies takes religions as the object of study from without.

Theology studies a religious tradition from within. It can occur with awareness and consideration of other traditions, but it takes one faith tradition as a starting point. It should be fair, but it does not try to be neutral. It may build on historical knowledge of facts, but it seeks meaning beyond the scientific description of human behavior.

This course follows a path of questioning related to Christianity. Students in the class will learn more about the Christian tradition than they will about Islam or Buddhism. We do not aspire to cover equally every religion and way of thinking about God. However, the questions can be asked within any tradition, and the ability to think clearly and articulate ideas about God does not presume any one set of answers. A good grade will require knowledge of what others (mostly Jews and Christians) have thought; it will not require agreeing with them.

1.1.3 What is the difference between theology and catechesis?

Catechesis means "teaching." It usually means teaching the current set of answers to theological questions without too much concern for the history or diversity of thought on the issue. Catechesis is typical for teaching children the beliefs and practices of a faith tradition (especially if the child is not like me, always asking "why?"). Catechesis is also appropriate for adults who join a religion that they did not grow up with. More so than theology, catechesis is concerned with a single faith tradition, and only the present teaching.

This course aspires to accurately represent the current Catholic teaching on major theological questions, but it will also include other perspectives. If it is important to you to keep straight what the Catholic Church currently teaches and align your thinking with the official thinking, you should be sure to have on your shelf a copy of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (or a link to usccb.org).

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I think of catechesis as a snapshot of theology. Theology is an ongoing process. Many people over thousands of years have contributed to the tradition of teachings that make up the current teachings of the Catholic Church. Meanwhile, the process of theology continues to move forward, and in fifty years there will be a revised Catechism based on the work of theologians today. Theologians are aware of the past, articulate the present, and are ultimately responsible for building the future.

1.1.4 What do theologians do?

Many thinking, intellectual people of faith do theology, and also have other professions and titles. Someone whose main professional title is “theologian” probably spends most of the day teaching in a department of theology and writing books and articles that offer a deeper understanding of our past tradition, a better way of articulating our faith, or new ways of thinking about our faith. Like most professions, any one theologian has a basic knowledge of the field as a whole, and a specialization in a particular area.

1.1.5 What are the major areas of theology?

There is no universal set of categories and titles for the areas of theology, but almost all theology programs would distinguish at least three major areas.

Biblical theology seeks questions and meanings from the Bible. This includes the ideas of the ancient authors of the Bible, but it also includes the history of interpretation. Over the past 2000 years, Jews and Christians have sought and found meanings in the Bible beyond what the human authors could have imagined. That is okay, particularly because almost all Jews and Christians recognize a Bible (there are different Bibles) as revealed or divine in origin in some way. Just as God cannot be fully grasped (though we can always try to get closer), the Bible is an endless source of interpretation and meaning beyond what any human comprehended in the past. In the Catholic Church the primary emphasis is on understanding the divine meanings of the Bible as expressed by particular human beings in particular historical contexts. Advanced study of the Bible involves reading the Bible in its original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) and related ancient literature and history. At St. Mary’s the specialists in biblical theology are Drs. Hanneken, Ronis, and Gray.

The word “Bible” comes from Greek *ta biblia* (τα βιβλια), “the books.” Today Bibles are bound in one single big book, but it is really a book of books. For Jews the Bible has 22 books, but those same books can also be counted as 39. Christians call these books the Old Testament, and also count 27 books about Jesus as the New Testament. Some additional books are considered part of the Bible by some Christians but not others.

Moral theology focuses on how the Christian life should be lived through our moral choices. Moral theology builds on theory of sin, conscience, forgiveness, and

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reconciliation. Sometimes it involves firm teachings on specific moral issues, and sometimes complex ways of thinking about open-ended and ambiguous dilemmas. Two major sub-areas in moral theology are social justice and medical ethics. Social justice considers how a Christian should respond to injustices in the world, such as inequality (racism, sexism), and economic injustice (poverty, living-wage, social security). Medical ethics deals with the sanctity of life, particularly at its beginning (embryos and fetuses) and end (life support, euthanasia). At St. Mary's Dr. Ball focuses on social justice and Dr. Getz focuses on medical ethics.

Systematic theology focuses on articulating the traditional faith in light of new ideas in philosophy and culture. The term "systematic" refers to the idea that every individual belief should be consistent with every other belief, as part of a larger "system." The biblical writers and great theologians of the past never really considered or faced the specific challenges of modern science, globalization of war and commerce, democracy, feminism, genocide, and so forth. Systematic theology tries to find a consistent way of responding to these challenges through engagement with the existing traditions of Christianity. At St. Mary's the specialist in systematic theology is Dr. Buhrman.

Some theology departments use additional categories, such as the history of Christianity, liturgical studies, and spirituality.

1.1.6 What kinds of courses do theology majors take?

The major in theology at St. Mary's calls for ten theology courses distributed between the areas of Scripture and Thought and Practice. The course catalog gives descriptions more thorough than these brief summaries.

- Old Testament... survey of all or part of the writings of the Israelites and early Jews
- New Testament... survey of all or part of the writings of the first followers of Jesus of Nazareth
- Moral Theology... the theory and practice of doing the right thing. Abortion? Euthanasia? Is this just personal opinion? When is it not okay to just agree to disagree?
- Catholic Social Ethics... do religion and politics mix? Religion and work? Faith and citizenship? What does it mean to be a Christian other than Sunday morning?
- Health Care and Medical Ethics... does stem cell research save lives or take lives, or both? If my brain is dead and a machine is making my heart beat, am I alive?
- Christology... is Jesus God? Human? Both? Neither? What has he done for me lately?

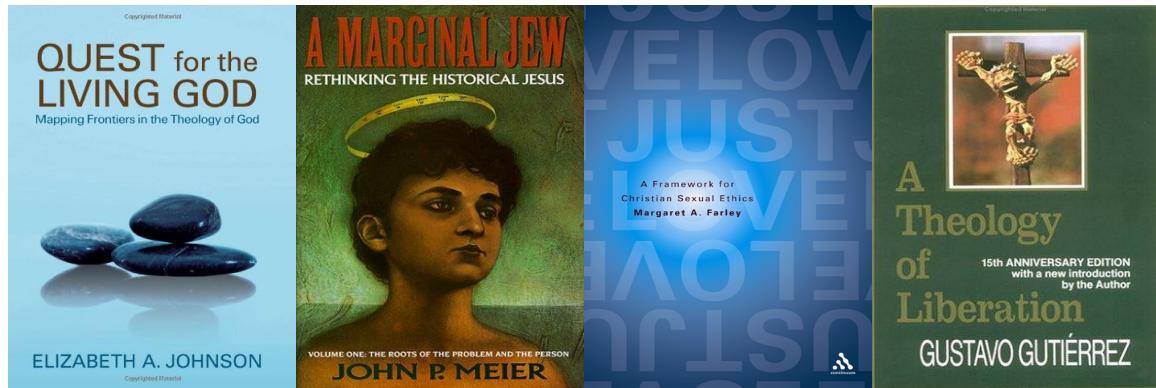
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- Ecclesiology... what is the Church? Do we need it?
- Sacraments... how do certain objects and actions in particular become encounters with the divine?
- Theology in the Southwest... how do regional language and culture, particularly those of the Southwest, shape experiences of faith?

1.1.7 What do theology majors get paid to do?

The theology major/minor can combine with other majors/minors in many interesting ways. Christianity is involved in a variety of endeavors besides Sunday morning worship, so theological training could come in handy in all sorts of areas such as non-profit/charity business leadership, healthcare, law and government, and media studies. The most direct areas of employment are teaching and parish work. A B.A. in Theology would be enough to teach in a catholic grade school or high school. It would also qualify one for jobs in youth or other parish ministry. One could continue study for the degree Master of Arts, which generally takes two years. In order to teach college level theology and write books one should plan on five years to pursue a Ph.D.

Books theologians read



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Sample job description for a professor of biblical theology

The Ecclesiastical Faculty of the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry seeks applications for a full-time, open-rank, tenure-track position in New Testament. Candidates should be prepared to teach courses appropriate for the Master of Divinity, as well as offerings for other theology and ministry students at the master's and doctoral levels concerning most or all of the following topics: Synoptic Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, John's Gospel and Johannine literature, the writings of Paul and the later Pauline writings, the Book of Revelation, and Christian Apocryphal Literature. Candidates must be committed to core Catholic teachings and approach their teaching and research in an interdisciplinary way, with sensitivity to pastoral needs and cultural diversity. Applicants should be able to demonstrate strong teaching and research ability, including the ability to contribute to the formation of Jesuits and other candidates approved for ordination studies, and of women and men for lay ecclesial ministries and for service rooted in faith. To be considered, applicants must hold an earned doctorate in New Testament.

2 WHAT QUESTIONS DID THE ISRAELITES ASK?

2 What questions did the Israelites ask?

2.1 Who are the Israelites?

The Israelites are an ancient civilization that had a lasting impact on the world because they **produced the books that became the Bible** for all Jews and Christians (who also have additional books). They live on through the Jewish people, and Christians and Muslims claim spiritual descent from them as the first recipients of God's revelation.

The word "Israel" refers to a person, a people, and a land. In the Bible, Abraham's grandson Jacob is also given the name "Israel." In general, the ending "-ites" means "sons of" or "descendants of," so the **Israelites are the people who claim descent from Israel the person**. As a people the Israelites can be called the people of Israel or simply Israel. The land or territory in which the Israelites lived is also called the **land of Israel** or simply Israel. (If you continue Old Testament studies you will also learn that Israel can refer to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, in contrast to the Southern Kingdom, Judah.) The land and people of Israel are linked, especially in the Jewish perspective, because God promised to form a special relationship with one nation and make them secure in their own land. Christians and Muslims recognize this special relationship but also believe that God later expanded God's promise to all ethnic groups and all territories.

For Jews, the connection between the Jewish people and the land of Israel was always special, but was interrupted for most of the past two thousand years. In the twentieth century Jews made an effort to restore a homeland for the Jewish people with its own territory and government. This culminated in the declaration of independence of the modern nation of Israel in 1948. This territory is also the home to Arab Muslims and Christians who identify as Palestinians. The struggle to achieve peace between Jews, Muslims, and Christians in this territory continues to be difficult. The term "**Israeli**" refers to a citizen of the modern state of Israel, while the term "**Israelite**" refers to the ancient civilization. Though separated by about 2500 years, they are connected through the Jewish people.

2.1.1 Where is the land of Israel?

The Israelites were never a large or powerful empire. Their economy was simple. We would hardly know they ever existed if not for the Bible. It is probably not a coincidence that they are geographically at the crossroads of the ancient civilizations of **Egypt**, **Mesopotamia** (Babylon, Assyria, Persia to the east), and the **Mediterranean** (Greece, Rome). Their ideas drew from many directions and spread in many directions, always by persuasion rather than force. The figure labeled Roman Empire shows the land of Israel in comparison with its ancient neighbors.

2.1 Who are the Israelites?



Figure 2: The Roman Empire. Source: Moody Bible Atlas in BibleWorks 9. Look for Babylon, Jerusalem, Red Sea, Nile River, Egypt, Athens, Rome.

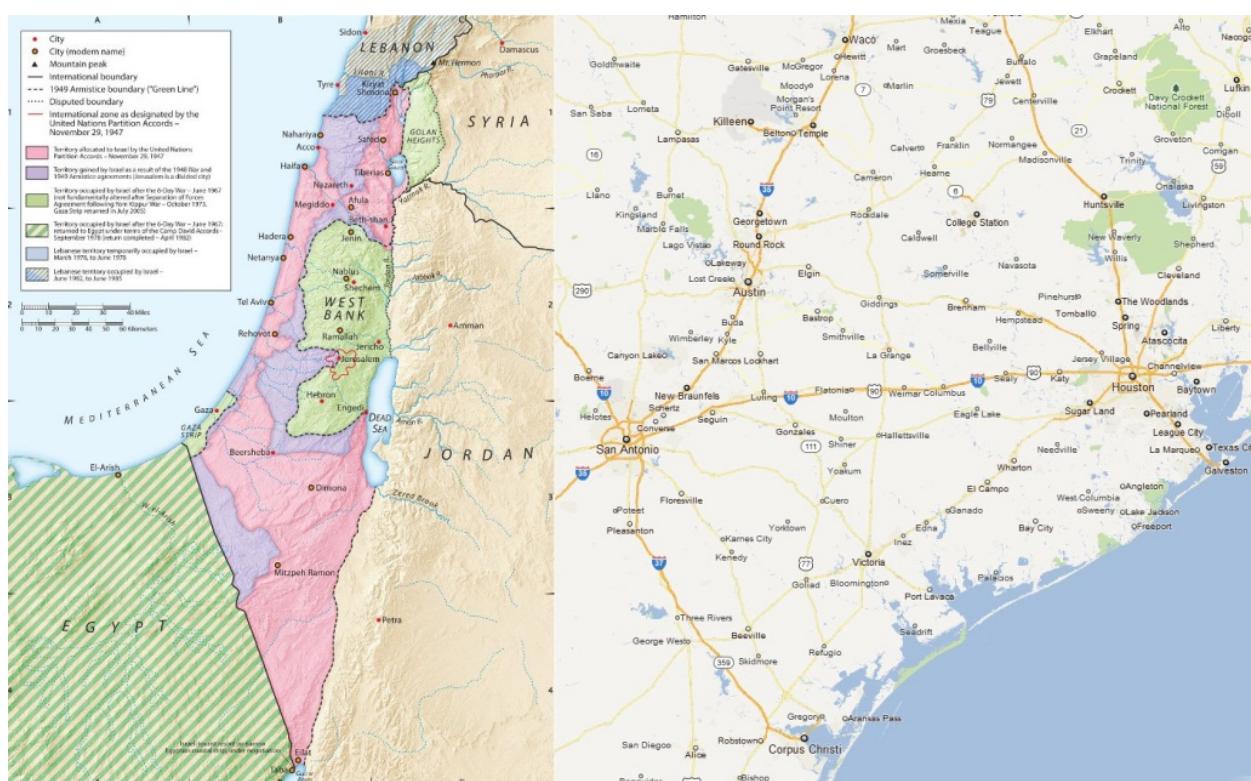


Figure 3: Israel and south Texas side by side. Look for Nazareth and Jerusalem.

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Figure 4: Israel at the time of Jesus. Look for Nazareth and Jerusalem. Source: Moody Bible Atlas in BibleWorks 9.

Just for perspective on how small the territory is, the maps of modern Israel and Texas in the figure labeled Israel and South Texas are on the same scale.

The figure labeled Israel at the time of Jesus shows the internal geography of Israel. **Jerusalem** is the most important city from the perspective of the authors of most of the Bible. Also look for the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan river, Nazareth, Bethlehem, and the Dead Sea.

2.1.2 When did ancient Israel exist as an independent nation?

BCE stands for Before Common Era.

BC stands for Before Christ.

CE means Common Era (the era shared by us)

AD means *Anno Domini*, Year of the Lord

Any year BCE is the same as that year BC, and similarly CE and AD. The difference is that one asserts a belief about the divinity of Jesus, and the other just states a year. Scholars who do not wish to presume a particular faith use the more neutral BCE and CE.

The Bible offers legends and myths that give the pre-history of the people of Israel. The following dates begin with the earliest external record of the Israelites. Some of them are estimated or rounded. The ancient nation of Israel existed from **1250 to 587 BCE**, but we are also considering the Judean and Jewish authors who produced the Hebrew Bible, the last book of which was written in 164 BCE.

- 1250 BCE - Earliest written record of the Israelites existing. A foreign king claimed to have eradicated them. Apparently he was exaggerating. The Bible indicates that at that time Israel was a **loose confederation of independent tribes**. They were not very united or strong, and mostly kept out of the way in the hills.
- 1000 BCE - David unites all twelve tribes and becomes king. This begins the **Monarchic period**.
- 930 BCE - United Monarchy splits into North and South.
- 720 BCE - North defeated by Assyria.
- 597 and 587 BCE - South defeated by Babylon. Begins **Babylonian Exile**. Independent monarchy ends and is never restored (not counting some local kings, like Herod, who reported to foreign kings).
- 538 BCE - Cyrus of Persia defeats the Babylonians and allows the people of Jerusalem who had been taken to Babylon to return (ends the Babylonian Exile). Begins the **Persian period**. It is better to use the term "Israelite" for the people in the period 1250-587, and use "**Judean**" in the Persian period. "Judean" is

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later shortened to “**Jew**.” Much of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament is written at this time, drawing on sources from the Monarchic period.

- 333 BCE – Alexander the Great conquers the entire region from Greece and Egypt to India. This begins the **Hellenistic Period**. The term “Hellenistic” basically means “Greek speaking.” Some books of the Bible were still being written and edited. The Jews confronted Greek philosophical ideas and other cultural perspectives.
- 63 BCE – The **Roman Empire** takes over the land of Israel. Of course Jewish history keeps going all the way up to today, but we’ll save the CE dates for future units.

The **Hebrew Bible** is basically the same as the **Old Testament**. The books common to Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic Bibles are written in Hebrew. The term “Old Testament” implies that there is a New Testament, which is true for Christians, but scholars again prefer the more neutral term “Hebrew Bible” when what they are saying about the biblical books written in Hebrew does not presume the truth of Christianity.

2.1.3 What happened to them?

Many ancient civilizations produced more art, literature, military strength, technological innovation, and intellectual innovation than Israel. Most of them were defeated or simply faded away with time, and ceased to exist. Israel survived as a people and a set of ideas because they managed to maintain their identity without a homeland where they were a majority, or a central governing body. The term **Diaspora** describes a people that has been dispersed from its original homeland, but maintains communal identity as small minorities spread over many places. In modern times, there are a number of examples of communities that are “from” a place that few or none of the members have ever been. The Jews seem to have been the first.

In 587 BCE the Temple and city of Jerusalem were destroyed and the leading citizens were taken into exile as captives. We call this the **Babylonian Exile**. They could have given up and assimilated to the culture that defeated them and now constituted the majority of people around them. Instead, they developed the idea that their God had not been defeated, but planned the exile for their own long-term good, and remained with them. They could maintain their beliefs and practices in their own homes and small communities, even though most people and all the people in charge had different beliefs and practices. The might of the victorious civilization did not amount to the correctness of their ideas and behaviors. This may seem obvious today, but it was a radical innovation that allowed a people to **transition from a nation to a religion**. Generally, we use the term “Israel” to refer to the phase when they existed as a politically sovereign nation, and the term “Judaism” to refer to a religion or people. The point is that it is the same people and the same tradition, transformed



Figure 5: Artist's rendering of ancient Babylon. When the captive Israelites were taken to Babylon they saw an awe-inspiring city, but they held on to their own identity and beliefs. Source: bible-history.com.

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but not broken. Across Jewish history there were many occasions similar to the Babylonian Exile in that the Jewish people developed a geographic and leadership center, but the center was lost or destroyed, and the people lived on.

The Jewish people claim descent from the Israelites **both biologically and spiritually**. Although it is theoretically possible to convert, the basic definition of a Jew today is someone born of a Jewish mother (paternity tends not to be as certain or inalienable as maternity). There are certain beliefs and practices that are expected, but beliefs and practices do not define being a Jew the way they generally do for other religions.

Christians also claim descent from Israel, but it is **spiritual and not biological**. It can be articulated in different ways, but the core Christian claim is that God once had a relationship with only one nation, and later made it possible for any and all nations to enter into a relationship with God, only now the condition was belief in God's son Jesus, rather than birth descended from Jacob.

Islam also recognizes the biblical Israelites as **part of salvation history**. The prophets of Israel are revered as true and holy prophets who taught the same core message of Islam. The seal of the prophets of Islam, Muhammad, is considered descended from Abraham, the same family as Israel. Israel had its own prophets, but the prophet Muhammad is for all nations.

2.1.4 How do we know about the Israelites?

Most of what we know about the Israelites we know from the Jewish **Bible**. Even if we do not assume that the Bible is revealed by God or that its claims are true, reason alone establishes that it is a record of the literature and ideas of an ancient civilization. It tells us what questions they asked, and what meanings they found in their quests. It tells us how they viewed history, some of which can be confirmed by external evidence. The Bible was edited and interpreted for a long time, but careful examination of it tells us much about the Israelites.

Most of what we know about the ancient context of the Bible we know from archaeology. **Archaeology** is the study of or discourse about ancient things. For the most part, it means digging up old objects (called artifacts). Dirt accumulates over time, so generally the further an archaeologist digs down the further back in time the artifacts come from. Being buried in dirt tends to preserve "hard" objects, although we are missing anything soft. We can read very ancient writings that were written on stone or clay, and under the right conditions fairly ancient writings on leather or papyrus. People would also write on wax tablets, but those do not last. We can see the outlines of their buildings, their pottery, their statues, their metal tools and weapons. We can learn about their lives and diets from their skeletons. Taken together, we can know many things about the ancient world by piecing together various hints from their literary and physical artifacts.



Figure 6: Archaeologist MiYoung Im digging away dirt around a horned altar in the ancient Philistine city of Gath. Source Aren Maeir, gath.wordpress.com.

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2.1.5 How did they know?

Many ancient civilizations are worthy of study, and I hope you have time to learn about them. The reason a Catholic university wants you to learn about the Israelites is because our tradition believes they were right. They had true insights into God, who we are as human beings, and what God expects us to do. Christians do not accept everything they said, but do consider the questions they asked and the points they made worthy of consideration. Why should we trust them?

Christians differ on the details, but to begin we can say that all Christians believe that the Israelites lived in a special relationship with God and received revelation from God. Some Christians imagine God dictating the entire Bible word for word to humans who passed it on without change. Catholic Christianity understands God's role in the production of the Bible as more complex, incorporating human language, expressions, literary devices, and other cultural assumptions. Catholicism teaches that the Bible is revelatory. **God is revealed through the Bible.** Sometimes revelation means prophecy in the sense of God speaking to humans. Other times, truths are made known to us through our own reason, our families and teachers, and the created world around us. The Israelites grappled with truth in the same basic set of ways that we do. The Bible did not just fall out of the sky and hit them on the head. They spent hundreds of years working on the ideas and articulation of the biblical books. The Catholic tradition holds that they did a particularly good job, with God's help. Their questions and insights have been passed down to us for our consideration. Catholicism considers the Bible a reliable guide for understanding the central points of God's desire for our salvation, but the human expression relies on ancient language, culture, historical and scientific assumptions that can be incomplete, flawed, or just plain wrong.



Figure 7: A biblical author imagined as merely copying the already-written words revealed by an angel. Catholicism today imagines humans as playing a greater role. Source: moleiro.com.

2.2 What kind of god do we have?

The Israelites were not the first to believe in a higher power. In fact, the denial of the existence of a higher power is not really found until modern times. Across human history a variety of conceptions of higher powers and spiritual realms have occurred. In the ancient Near East, which is the cultural neighborhood of the Israelites, the gods, by definition, had the following characteristics:

- **Immortal:** They do not die.
- **Spiritual:** The word “spirit” originally meant breath or wind. Breath is **invisible**, but its presence can be felt. Wind cannot be measured, but it is very powerful. Though they can take physical forms, gods mostly exist and travel outside the tangible physical realm.
- **Personal:** in the ancient Near East the gods had personalities and interactions. They sense, think, and communicate. They are more than vague forces.
- **Super-human:** They can be compared to humans, but are superior in every way, including strength, cleverness, knowledge, the ability to see or know things, and wisdom.

Although the existence of gods was not controversial in the ancient world, the Israelites were distinctive in their conception of what kind of god they have.

2.2.1 How did other ancient civilizations think about the gods?

The stories about the gods in the ancient Near East are full of **drama**. The gods are far from perfect. The gods are all more powerful than humans, but some are more powerful than others. They may resemble our comic-book superheroes more than the God Christians teach today. They are full of gossip, intrigue, rivalry, competition, and conflict. At early stages they were conceived of primarily as forces of nature, such as the sun and water. The conception of the gods developed into imagery of politicians. They have councils, roles, and designated authority, but politics can often be manipulated.

The gods also have personal relationships, including love and jealousy. They mate and have children. The gods may be immortal, but they are born and have levels of age and maturity. They have certain needs, and can be **bribed** or persuaded the way one might persuade a human (gifts of food, flattery, deals).

Capital “G” or lowercase “g”

In English it is conventional to capitalize God when referring to the one true God, and use lowercase when referring to any other god or gods. This judgment is only made with retrospect from a western perspective, but is not too controversial.

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So far you might be glad to not be worshiping such gods. One advantage of the ancient conception of the gods is that it was **tolerant and inclusive**. The ancients might say, “Your people worship a god other than the one(s) I worship? Fine, they’re both gods. We don’t all have to serve the same gods. It’s all good.” Some would even say that religious wars are impossible in such a system. I don’t think that is quite the case, but there is certainly some flexibility in the ability to add gods and imagine one gaining dominance while another “retires” and fades away. This is somewhat comparable to reverence for the saints in Catholicism. Many are deemed worthy or reverent, but it is not required that we all express devotion to the same (or any) saint.

Here is one more advanced point about the gods of the ancient Near East. The gods were powerful, but not all-powerful. They were subject to a still higher power of **fate**. Unlike the gods, fate is not personal and cannot be manipulated or changed. Like gravity, it is more like a law of the universe than a being or active agent.

Over time, not all at once, the Israelites would reject or seriously qualify everything in this section.

2.2.2 Our God is an ethical God

The Israelites conceived of their God as perfectly just. God behaves with **perfect justice**, and God **expects justice** of God’s people. Other gods had a sense of fairness and held the roles of judge or righter of wrongs. However, the Israelites pushed further with a God of perfect justice, which could not be manipulated.

For the LORD, your God, is the God of gods, the Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who has no favorites, accepts no bribes, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the resident alien, giving them food and clothing. So you too should love the resident alien, for that is what you were in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:17-19)



Figure 8: A team of gods make it rain (useful for farmers). Source: S. Beaulieu, after Wolkstein & Kramer 1983:94.

Citing the Bible by chapter and verse

Unlike other books, we do not use page numbers to cite the Bible (page numbers vary from edition to edition and translation to translation). We give the name of the book, then the chapter, then a colon, then verses. Thus, we read “Deuteronomy 10:17-19” as “the book of Deuteronomy, chapter ten, verses seventeen through nineteen.”

2.2 What kind of god do we have?

God could be counted on to act justly and act in defense of those who do not receive justice on earth. By extension, God expects people to act justly.

In all the communities which the LORD, your God, is giving you, you shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes to administer true justice for the people. You must not distort justice: you shall not show partiality; you shall not take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes even of the wise and twists the words even of the just. Justice, justice alone shall you pursue, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD, your God, is giving you. (Deuteronomy 16:18-20)

Of course other nations had concepts of justice and laws, but those principles were not theological principles; they were independent of the gods. The gods were subject to certain social rules and consequences (for the most part), just as humans are subject to certain rules and consequences (for the most part). Anyone in the ancient world would have agreed that murder, adultery, and theft are not okay. Other nations had laws and punishments for certain crimes, but those were practical consequences. The Israelites were the first to present ethical laws as absolute commandments by God.

You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal.
(Exodus 20:13-15)

Moreover, the Israelites kept emphasizing justice as the most important attribute of God and the most important thing God expects of humans. Justice was foundational and more important than other aspects of religion.

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

Whereas the other nations conceived of gods who were fickle and opportunistic, the Israelites asserted that their God was fundamentally an ethical God.

2.2.3 From the supreme god to the only God

All Jews, Christians, and Muslims are **monotheistic**. That is, we all assert that there is only one God. The oneness of God implies the unity of God, or even that all that truly is, is God. We have room for supernatural beings called angels, but they are clearly subordinate to God. On the one hand, this may be the most lasting insight into God that the Israelites had. On the other hand, this is a relatively late development

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in Israelite thought. Most of the Hebrew Bible does assume that other gods exist. Monotheism developed in stages.

The earliest stage is not very different from Israel's ancient neighbors. Other gods exist, but one God is superior to all of them, like a king.

Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders? (Exodus 15:11)

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment. (Psalm 82:1)

For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. (Psalm 95:3)

For I know that the LORD is great; our Lord is above all gods. (Psalm 135:5)

Some Jews and Christians will interpret these subordinate divine beings as angels, rather than gods. The early Israelites, however, called them gods. The idea that one God is king of all the other gods is not different from the idea that Marduk or Zeus is king of the gods. This early stage is still **Polytheism**, the belief in many gods.

You might think if one God is superior to other gods then only the superior god should be worshiped and served. In fact, many polytheists focused on other gods who more immediately pertained to their needs. It is actually a separate stage to assert that only one God should be worshipped. **Henothetism** refers to being devoted to only one God, while acknowledging that other gods exist. The Israelites developed the idea that other nations have their gods, but Israel has an exclusive contract with the God of Israel. The God of Israel will protect Israel, but in exchange Israel may not worship other gods.

The name of God

Like English, Hebrew has a word that can mean God or any old god or gods. The God of Israel also has a personal name, which appears in English Bibles as LORD in all capital letters.

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. (Exodus 20:2-3)

In this passage God is a "jealous" god. There are other gods to be jealous of. God demands to be ranked first. You can acknowledge the existence of other gods, you might even show them some respect, but you can't put them above LORD, the God of Israel. Another passage demands absolute exclusivity, but for the original audience did not deny that other gods exist.

O Israel, obey the LORD, our God, the LORD alone. (Deuteronomy 6:4)

2.2 What kind of god do we have?

This translation is how the original audience, the ancient Israelites, would have understood the verse. Jews today would translate it a bit differently, in light of monotheism.

Monotheism is the assertion that only one God exists. Other gods that humans assert to exist do not exist. They are imagined. They might be demons, but they are certainly not even in the general category of God. The same verse given above as an example of henotheism is translated by Jews today as a statement of monotheism.

From a Jewish or Christian perspective, an **idol** is a human-made object, often a statue of metal, stone, or wood, that is worshiped as if a god but is not God.

Hear, O Israel, the LORD, our God, the LORD is one. (Deuteronomy 6:4)

The absolute unity and oneness of God is an aspect of monotheism. Other, fairly late parts of the Hebrew Bible clearly assert monotheism.

Ah, all of them are nothing, their works are nought, their idols, empty wind!
(Isaiah 41:29)

Come and assemble, gather together, you fugitives from among the nations! They are without knowledge who bear wooden idols and pray to gods that cannot save. Come close and declare; let them take counsel together: Who announced this from the beginning, declared it from of old? Was it not I, the LORD, besides whom **there is no other God**? There is no just and saving God but me. (Isaiah 45:20-21)

For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens.
(Psalm 96:5)

Like many of the major ideas of the Israelites, the idea that there is only one God developed over time, through stages.

2.2.4 Creator of all that is

Many of Israel's ancient neighbors thought of natural forces (such as sun and storms) as gods, or directly controlled by gods. The Israelites emphasized that the **entire visible cosmos was created by God**. It is in fact creation, and is distinct from the creator. God is therefore responsible for and in control of everything. In Greek philosophical terms, God is the first cause, the unmoved mover.

You are the LORD, you alone; You made the heavens, the highest heavens and all their host, The earth and all that is upon it, the seas and all that is in them. To all of them you give life, the heavenly hosts bow down before you. (Nehemiah 9:6)

2 WHAT QUESTIONS DID THE ISRAELITES ASK?

It is true that Israel's neighbors had stories explaining how the earth came to exist as it does, and gods fashion things in a way comparable to creation. Israel's understanding of their God as the creator stands out. God is purposeful and deliberate about creating in an orderly way. God does not face challenges or opposition. Furthermore, human beings are created with no ulterior motive. God is above the world as its creator; God is not a personification of nature. God does not need creation; God is self-sufficient. The Israelites will later have to account for evil (next unit), but the premise is that God is both good and responsible for all that is.

2.2.5 Covenantal

If God does not need anything, and God does not need us, why do we exist? What kind of birthday present do you buy for someone who already has everything, literally? According to Israel's ancient neighbors, the gods were more powerful but not above bribery and influence. Israel's God is generally more transcendent (above us), but God can only be so transcendent without being distant. People want to interact with their God. They want to be heard and they want some assurance or control over their relationship with God.

The Israelites developed the idea of a **covenantal** God. God does not need us, but God freely chooses to enter into a binding contractual relationship with us. A covenant is basically a **contract**. God does make demands as part of the contract, but not because of some need. God promises that if we live our lives a certain way (characterized by justice, love of neighbor, and exclusive reverence for God), God will reward us. Similarly, if we do not uphold our end of the contract, God will punish us until we return to compliance. Can we sue God for breach of contract? No. The point is we won't have to. Does God need us? No. The point is that God chooses to make promises and to enter into binding relationships.

2.2.6 Transcends human metaphors

Israel's neighbors imagined the gods as super-human, but basically through the extension of human (and animal) characteristics. The gods are like a strong human only stronger, like a powerful king only more powerful, fast as a bird only faster. Early Israelites continued to picture God in human form, but they moved away from thinking of God as even comparable to humans. They continued to use metaphors, but they recognized that **metaphors for God are only metaphors**.

For I am God and not a man, the Holy One present among you. (Hosea 11:9)

God may be comparable to a father, protective mother, husband, warrior, king, or judge, but the comparisons are limited. God is not actually any of those. One implication is that God may be compared to a male human, but God is not male.

2.3 If there is only one God and that god is good, how does evil exist?

2.3 If there is only one God and that god is good, how does evil exist?

Israel's ancient neighbors had little trouble explaining why bad things happen. The cosmos is full of drama and conflict. A natural disaster, such as a flood, could be explained as a turf-war between Land and Sea (capitalized to indicate that they are divinized). Losing a battle might mean our god was outwitted or overpowered by the enemies' god. If something terrible happens to me personally, maybe my protector god was distracted or mad at me because I did not offer enough gifts (sacrifices) and flattery (praise). The Israelites, however, backed themselves into a corner by asserting that there is only one God in charge of everything, and that God is perfectly good.

Previously, for example with monotheism, we saw diversity in the Hebrew Bible as ideas developed over time. On this issue, we see diversity at the same time because different Israelites favored different ways of dealing with the same question. They came up with many ways of addressing the question of God's justice. Some fit one context better than another. Some are challenging to accept. You may not like all of them.

2.3.1 Terms: theodicy

First, let's cover the language theologians use to discuss this issue. The word "**theodicy**" refers to the question of God's justice in light of injustice/evil/suffering in the world. We have already seen the Greek word for god, *theos* (θεος). The second half of the word comes from the Greek for justice, *dikē* (δικη). The Israelites wish to maintain that God is just, but have different ways of defending that principle.

One classical way of formulating the problem is, "**If there is only one God who is perfectly good and powerful, why does evil exist?**" If God is all-powerful and chooses to let evil exist, then God is not perfectly good. If God wishes to defeat evil but cannot, then God is not all-powerful." If one wants to maintain that God is both omnipotent and benevolent then one has to explain why God would wish or allow evil to exist, or why God has not yet made it cease to exist.

Terms

Theodicy - God's justice

Omnipotent - all-powerful

Benevolent - wishing good

Another classical way of formulating the problem is, "**Why do the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper?**" If the cosmos is governed by a just judge, then everyone should get what one deserves. Yet, when I look around me it appears that there are bad people with more prosperity and happiness than me, and good people who are suffering through no fault of their own.

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One word we are not defining up front is “evil,” because the different answers seem to be focused on different conceptions of evil. Do we mean evil on the scale of 6.3 million Jews murdered just for being Jewish (the Holocaust)? Do we mean me not getting that promotion that I feel I deserved? A random flat tire on my way to a job interview? Do we mean the untimely death of my sister due to a freak accident? The timely death of my grandmother? All of these can be conceived of as evil, injustice, or suffering, at least at the time for the person involved.

2.3.2 Suffering is chastisement from God for sin

The first, and most fundamental, Israelite contribution to this question is that **God wills suffering for our own good, the way a parent punishes a child**. God does not want us to suffer just as God does not want us to sin, but if we do sin then God chastises us so that we will repent. Once we repent the suffering will cease. If you are suffering the first thing you should ask yourself is what have you done wrong to deserve it. Change that, and the problem will go away. The suffering is ultimately just (we deserve it), and has a good meaning (to tell us we are doing something wrong) and function (prompt us to change our ways).

Within this basic explanation there are many variations depending on whether this system applies to individuals or communities, and whether it works instantly or over multiple generations. For the book of **Deuteronomy**, which is primarily associated with this explanation of God’s justice, it works for **communities as a whole over the long course of history**. If a single individual is wicked in a just society then the society will punish that individual. Only if society as a whole is wicked does it become necessary for God to step in. The Israelites struggled with the exceptions. Are a few wicked spared because of a generally righteous society? Are a few righteous punished along with the wicked majority? At least in Deuteronomy, God punishes with broad punishments like famine, plague, and invasion. It seems inevitable that such community-wide punishments would not necessarily target individuals within that community to the exact degree of their personal guilt.

The Israelites also struggled with the timing of the chastisement. A parent generally punishes a child right away (or at least as soon as one finds out, which theoretically

Instant Karma

Deuteronomy is the opposite of the idea of Instant Karma, made famous by the John Lennon song. Instant Karma says that the cosmos will pay you back for the good or evil you put into it, and will do so instantly. If you do a bad thing in the morning a bad thing will happen to you later in the day. If you do a good thing, a good thing will happen to you sooner rather than later. The term comes from the Hindu concept of Karma, which describes a balance of good and evil coming back to you over more than one lifetime.

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should be immediately for God). However, Deuteronomy did not claim that the punishment immediately followed the sin, or that restoration immediately followed the repentance. These things moved slowly, and could take generations. On the one hand, this may be realistic. On the other hand, many Israelites did not think it fair that they should be punished for what their grandparents did, or that their repentance would not pay off until their grandchildren.

2.3.3 God prospers the righteous in the long run

The book of **Proverbs** builds on the perspective of Deuteronomy, but applies it to prosperity within a person's lifetime. Here the "suffering" is not on the scale of war and famine, but poverty or mere lack of success. The claim is that hard-working, **righteous people do prosper** in the long run, and lazy, wicked people fail. If there appear to be exceptions in the short term, one must look harder to see that everything eventually works out justly. Setbacks and challenges build character for the righteous, while success is hollow and fleeting for the wicked. Ultimately, there is no real injustice. Everyone gets what one deserves.

This perspective is controversial because it seems to suggest that the wealthy are wealthy because they deserve it, and the poor are poor because they deserve it. It is probably no coincidence that the book of Proverbs was written by some of the most privileged people in Israelite society.

2.3.4 God's plan is unknowable

Other parts of the Hebrew Bible, such as **Ecclesiastes and Job**, do not so much explain suffering in the world as challenge the human capacity to understand the explanation. The argument is that **God's justice cannot be understood by human beings**. God may have reasons for causing good or bad things to happen to someone that humans do not and cannot understand. Maybe the sinner deserved it. Maybe the suffering will lead to greater happiness. Maybe it is part of God's larger plan. We are not God, we do not know what God knows, and we are not as smart as God, so we cannot expect to understand or dictate what God should do. We should basically accept God's plan.

The logic is strong but for many it fails to satisfy the basic human desire for an explanation. It also emphasizes accepting what happens over taking responsibility for overcoming injustice.

2.3.5 Radical personal responsibility

Deuteronomy was content to say that as a general pattern, over the community as a whole and history as a whole, suffering is deserved and meaningful. It seems that in the time of Ezekiel, many saw themselves

The Serenity Prayer

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

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as exceptions who did not deserve to suffer but were suffering because of wicked neighbors or ancestors. **Ezekiel asserted that every individual gets exactly what that individual deserves.** He completely rejected even the possibility that a righteous person might suffer or a wicked person get away with it. In response to the then-recent Babylonian invasion, Ezekiel asserted that God sent angels to mark and protect the righteous while the wicked were left to be slaughtered by the Babylonian army.

This radical assertion of God's justice is nice in that we would like to believe in such perfect fairness, but it is hard to reconcile with the world around us. Ezekiel asserted God's perfect justice more boldly than ever. Ezekiel himself did not imagine an afterlife in which injustice in this life would be compensated with radical justice in the next life, but it seems to be inevitable given his claims.

2.3.6 Justice in the afterlife, not this life

Today, Judaism, Christianity and Islam all believe strongly in an afterlife. They all believe that an individual's **soul and/or resurrected body will be judged directly and perfectly by God at some point after death.** If a person was wicked and unpunished in the first life, punishment would be extra severe in the second life. If a person was righteous and persecuted in this life, the reward would be extreme in the second life. Remarkably, this idea developed fairly late. In the Hebrew Bible it is only found in the last chapter of the last book to be written, namely the book of **Daniel**, finished in 164 BCE.

This idea allows one to maintain God's perfect and personal justice, as asserted by Ezekiel, in light of the injustice that appears so rampant. Daniel was written during a period of persecution, when it would be impossible to deny that wicked things happen to good people. Here I don't mean just a flat tire, but being killed simply for the religion you practice.

2.3.7 God has enemies

Around the same time the idea developed that the evil which the righteous face in this life cannot be explained by chastisement, bad luck, or bad choices made by human enemies. The suffering seemed super-natural in its scope, power, and evilness. Even if there are no other gods, there are **evil angels** (or other cosmic forces) that are more powerful than humans, though less powerful than God. They are attacking God and God's people, and temporarily they are succeeding. They are doomed to failure, but in the present they are doing just fine. There will be a **judgment day** when everything is set right, but for now God is waiting until that predetermined day.

The general idea takes various forms, but it is most familiar in the idea of Satan, which developed more later. **Satan**, at least in later times, is imagined as one of God's angels who rebelled against God, was cast out of heaven, and spends his time plotting vengeance against God and God's people. Satan targets the righteous and

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helps the wicked. Quite the opposite of Deuteronomy, according to this model if you are suffering it is because you are especially righteous. This idea may sound like a return to polytheism in that there are super-human forces that battle and impact the human realm. The monotheistic stamp is the inevitability (though delayed) of perfect and radical intervention by an all-powerful and all-just God.

Chronologically, this solution goes more with the following unit on the early Jews and Christians. It is found especially in the **apocalyptic literature**, most of which was excluded from the Hebrew Bible.

2.3.8 Free will

One more concept was articulated later, under the influence of Greek philosophy, but is consistent with the Deuteronomistic view and its derivatives. The idea is that God did not create evil, but God did create free will and gave it to human beings. **Free will** gives us the power to choose. God wants us to choose good, but in order for there to be a choice there has to be an evil choice alongside the good choice. Evil happens because humans fail to choose the good. God could have eliminated the evil choices, but then it would be meaningless if, like robots, we follow the pre-determined script to do good. On a related point, some philosophers claim that evil has to exist because we could not know the good if there were not evil with which to contrast, much like “hot” is only understood in contrast to “cold.” Other ideas continued to develop over the centuries.

2.3.9 Exercise: match the passage to the view of theodicy

The ancient writers have a variety of ways of expressing their theological points. Try to match the passages below with the ideas outlined above.

A slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.

Whatever happens, it was designated long ago and it was known that it would happen; as for man, he cannot contend with what is stronger than he. Often, much talk means much futility. How does it benefit a man? Who can possibly know what is best for a man to do in life—the few days of his



Figure 9: Satan cast out of heaven. Illustration by the 19th century woodcut artist Gustave Doré. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

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fleeting life? For who can tell him what the future holds for him under the sun?

Some of those with insight shall stumble so that they may be tested, refined, and purified, until the end time which is still appointed to come. ... Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake; Some to everlasting life, others to reproach and everlasting disgrace. But those with insight shall shine brightly like the splendor of the firmament, And those who lead the many to justice shall be like the stars forever.

The word of the LORD came to me: What do you mean by quoting this proverb upon the soil of Israel, "Parents eat sour grapes and their children's teeth are blunted"? As I live—declares the Lord GOD—this proverb shall no longer be current among you in Israel. Consider, all lives are Mine; the life of the parent and the life of the child are both Mine. The person who sins, only he shall die. Thus, if a man is righteous and does what is just and right... if he has abstained from wrongdoing and executed true justice between man and man; if he has followed My laws and kept My rules and acted honestly—he is righteous. Such a man shall live—declares the Lord GOD.

When you have children and children's children, and have grown old in the land, should you then act corruptly by fashioning an idol in the form of anything, and by this evil done in his sight provoke the LORD, your God, I call heaven and earth this day to witness against you, that you shall all quickly perish from the land which you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You shall not live in it for any length of time but shall be utterly wiped out. The LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and there shall remain but a handful of you among the nations to which the LORD will drive you. ... Yet when you seek the LORD, your God, from there, you shall indeed find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul. In your distress, when all these things shall have come upon you, you shall finally return to the LORD, your God, and listen to his voice.

When the sons of men had multiplied, in those days, beautiful and comely daughters were born to them. And the watchers, the sons of heaven, saw them and desired them. And they said to one another, "Come let us choose for ourselves wives from the daughters of men, and let us beget children for ourselves." And Shemihazah, their chief, said to them, "I fear that you will not want to do this deed, and I alone shall be guilty of a great sin." And they all answered him and said, "Let us all swear an oath, and let us all bind one another with a curse, that none of us turn back from this counsel

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until we fulfill it and do this deed.” Then they all swore together and bound one another with a curse. And they were, all of them, two hundred, who descended in the days of Jared onto the peak of Mount Hermon. And they called the mountain “Hermon” because they swore and bound one another with a curse on it. ... These and all the others with them took for themselves wives from among them such as they chose. And they began to go in to them, and to defile themselves through them, and to teach them sorcery and charms, and to reveal to them the cutting of roots and plants.

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2.4 How should we live our lives?

The Israelites did not spend much time writing creeds or statements of theological belief. The emphasis was on practice—how one lives one’s life. The beliefs covered above are always presented with the implications for what one should do about it. For the Israelites, the question of “who is God?” led to “who are we, and what does God expect us to do?” Thus, we conclude our treatment of the theological questions of the Israelites with what for them was the most important part. It should be noted that different parts of the Hebrew Bible emphasize different priorities about which practices are most essential for the Israelites.

2.4.1 Exclusively Israelite, not Canaanite

The Israelites thought of themselves as **a people called to live in a special and exclusive relationship with God**. The part that most contrasts with their ancient neighbors is “exclusive.” Israel was expected to serve God alone, and conversely God’s best promises and blessings were only for Israel. It is typical for communities to build their internal identity and unity by establishing boundaries that define who they are not. If you think about it, many groups are most easily defined by what they are not or what they oppose. For the Israelites an exclusive relationship with God required strict boundaries.

For the Israelites, the most important thing was to not be Canaanite. The Israelites originated in Canaan so it was particularly difficult to create identity boundaries. Their language was the same, their architecture was the same. Some scholars believe the Israelites hated the economic injustice associated with the rich, elitist, abusive Canaanites. Some believe it was their sexual perversion that initiated the separation. Whether it was the original issue or not, the point most clearly emphasized in Israelite literature is that you **cannot worship both gods**. The God of Israel, LORD, cannot tolerate Israelites worshipping the god of the Canaanites, Ba’al, any more than a married person can tolerate infidelity from a spouse. In most of the ancient world it was pretty normal to celebrate a festival to one god one month and another festival to another god the next month. The Israelite prophets demanded exclusivity. The Israelites were not allowed to go to the festivals of other gods, especially Ba’al. This is the practical implication of what was stated above about henotheism and later monotheism.



Figure 10: The Canaanite god Ba’al

One of the controversial conclusions that many Israelites drew from the importance of not worshipping other gods is the prohibition of intermarriage. **Intermarriage** means marriage between members of different groups. Today it might make a difference whether we are talking about different religious groups, ethnic groups, or something else. In the ancient world those distinctions were not so clear, as religion was closely tied to ethnicity. The Israelites feared that if you marry a non-Israelite your spouse will eventually persuade you to worship the other god, which would offend the God of Israel. Note that the problem is not that someone else worships another god, it is only if an Israelite worships another god. The Israelites debated how strict this rule was, with some saying it is okay if the spouse converts, and others completely ruling out the possibility. Intermarriage remains controversial today. Most Jews today fear that intermarriage will lead to dilution of Jewish identity and children who do not completely identify with Jewish heritage. Catholicism does not oppose intermarriage but only endorses marriages that are committed to raising the children Catholic.

Later in the course we will talk more about pluralism and relativism. Pluralism is a good thing in that it brings awareness and tolerance of beliefs other than our own. However, Catholicism opposes relativism, which would say that any religion is as good as any other, and what is true for one person may not be true for another. At this point we will just say that the Israelites did not seek to wipe out all religions other than their own, but they did believe that within their own people it was necessary to make a choice between one god or the other, not both.

2.4.2 Pilgrimage festivals

The Israelites did believe that they could address God from anywhere in prayer. Some of the Psalms could have been sung at the dinner table, while working, or on a journey. If there was a system of prayer and devotion in the home, we don't know about it. The literature that was passed down is associated with the Temple in Jerusalem. **The Temple was by far the best place to address God** (praise, requests, thanks) and celebrate being God's people. Although local shrines existed early in Israel's history, the main teaching is that there is only one legitimate Temple, and that is the Temple in Jerusalem. If you did not live in Jerusalem, this meant a journey.

Given a particular need, an individual or family could travel to Jerusalem at any time. The main emphasis was on **pilgrimage festivals**, when the whole nation was supposed to gather in Jerusalem for a week at a time. These festivals were originally agricultural, celebrating the three major harvests in the early spring, late spring, and fall. The festivals would have been fun. The Israelites gathered from all over, saw extended family, sang, and danced. They brought offerings to God of meat, fruits, and vegetables. Fortunately, God only took a little and the people shared most of it. Sharing was an emphasis.

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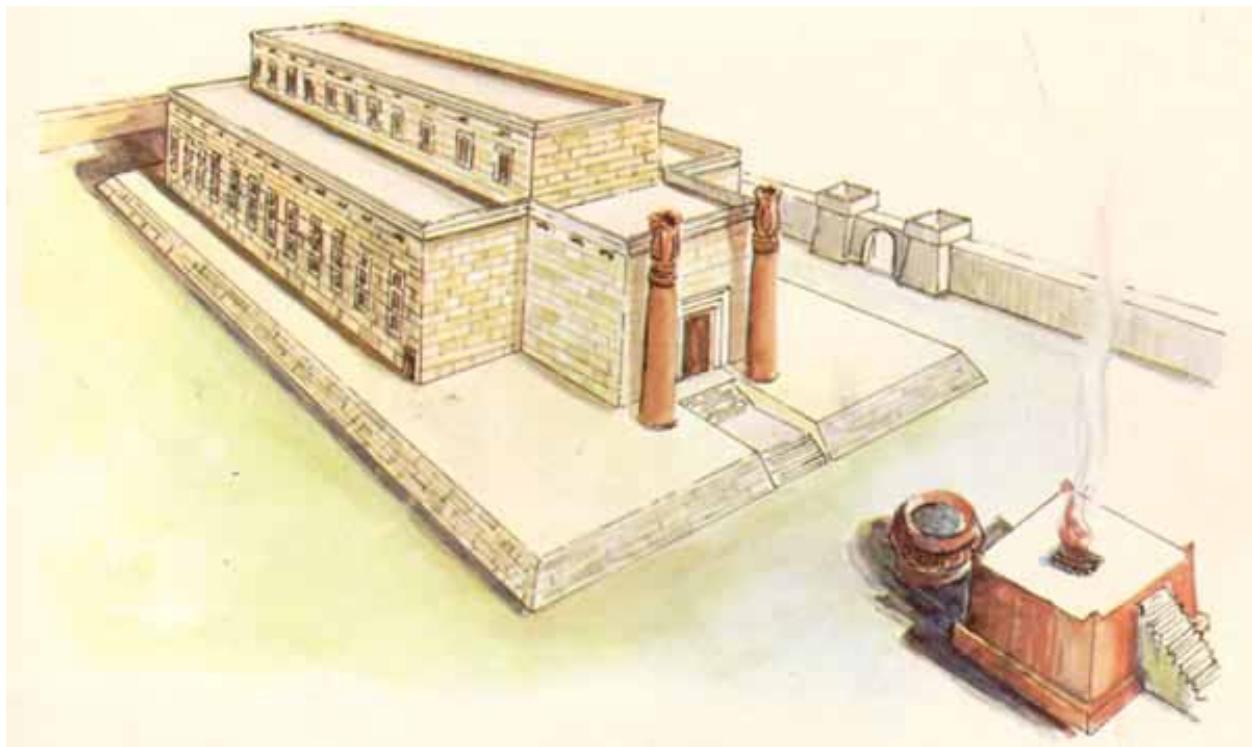


Figure 11: Illustration of the first temple in Jerusalem, 950-587 BCE

Today, Judaism celebrates the festivals in the home. Since 70 CE there has not been a Temple in Jerusalem at which to hold the festival. Catholicism has a concept of pilgrimage journeys to holy sites (often with more emphasis on the journey than the destination), but there is no requirement or a particular time or place to make a pilgrimage. The practice of pilgrimage continues most in Islam. The Arabic word *haj* is a variation on the Hebrew word for pilgrimage festival, *hag*. Muslims who are able are expected to journey to Mecca (the city in modern Saudi Arabia where Mohammed began to prophesy) at least once in their lifetimes.

2.4.3 Ethical practices

The Israelites conceived of their God as an ethical God who expected ethical behavior from God's people. The concept of an ethical God is enduring, but the specific standards of ethical behavior have changed over the millennia. Christians today are often disappointed when they read the Old Testament, particularly if they are expecting ethical guidance. In some cases the ideals seem impossible, and in other cases they seem barbaric by today's standards. The Hebrew Bible can also be surprising in the way it mixes together practical laws for an impartial judicial system, with ideals that could never be enforced, such as "love God with all your heart" and "love your neighbor as yourself."

The ideals for **economic justice** laid out in the Hebrew Bible may never have been

fully followed. It was forbidden to charge interest on loans to fellow Israelites or to deny loan requests. Debts were to be automatically cancelled every seven years. That kind of financial plan will not get you too far in the business school, but the Israelites proposed a super-natural financial system, one in which God guarantees prosperity, particularly for those who share their prosperity. The goal was clear, "There shall be no needy among you—since the LORD your God will bless you in the land." (Deuteronomy 15:4)

On several matters the Israelites were perhaps better than their ancient neighbors, but still hard to accept as ethical by our standards. It was a fundamentally **patriarchal** society. At least as far as the law was concerned, women were the property of the men who controlled them (father, then husband). Their rights were limited and could be overruled by men. They were excluded from religious authority and many of the major religious practices (at least the ones we know about from the Bible, perhaps they had others of their own). There are many double standards in which the expectations for women are different from those of men. In fact, the entire Bible is written from a fundamentally male perspective. There is much that is not acceptable today, but it is still possible for feminist Jews and Christians to read past these problems to find inspirational and positive messages for women. In particular, if we compare the biblical laws to the cultural context in which they were written, they are actually pretty progressive for their day, and seek to protect women. Compared to a society in which men can do whatever they want, the biblical restrictions on sexual relationships benefitted Israelite women.

Slavery is another issue on which the Bible's standards do not seem ethical today, but were an improvement at the time. Although slavery was allowed to exist, the restrictions on slavery and rights of slaves were so liberal that slavery resembled contracted labor more than slavery. The Bible also calls for capital punishment for many offenses. Even here, the Bible is still progressive compared to its neighbors in abolishing capital punishment for property crimes (you can't be executed for stealing).

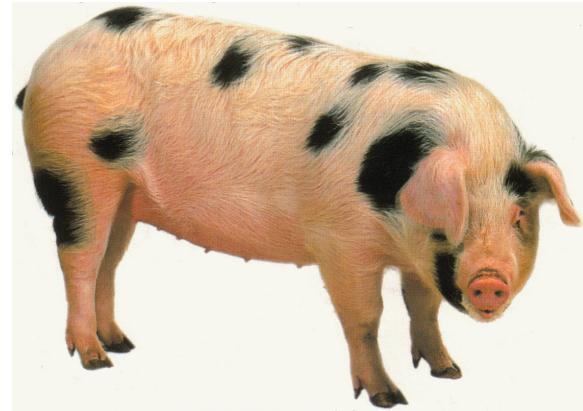
2.4.4 Purity and holiness

The Israelites were also expected to maintain high standards of purity. One area of purity governed **food**. The Israelites were only allowed to eat meat and drink milk from clean animals, such as sheep and cattle. The animals prohibited as unclean are listed without explanation. One pattern seems to be that predatory or scavenging animals such as vultures were prohibited. Bottom-feeders such as crab, lobster, and catfish were also excluded. There is considerable debate as to why pork was prohibited. Perhaps they intuited that pork spreads disease more easily than other meats. Perhaps it started as a local custom that differentiated them from their enemies. Perhaps they recognized that pigs eat the same food as humans, competing

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for the food supply, whereas other animals eat grass, which is useless to humans. Perhaps it was the smell. Today Jews and Muslims agree that pork must be avoided, whereas most Christians think bacon greatly improves a breakfast taco.

Humans could also be in a state of uncleanness. It was not necessarily a bad thing to be in a state of **ritual impurity**, but it meant that one could not touch sacred things (such as the Temple) until a cycle of time and washing was completed. One was considered impure if one touched a dead body, skin disease, semen, or menstrual blood. One theory proposes that the common theme is death: skin disease represents the decay of a dead body, menstrual blood indicates a failed reproductive cycle, and semen anywhere other than a womb means it missed its intended target. The implied ideal is many children. Again, however, these normal parts of life were not inherently bad, they just meant restriction on contact with sacred things.



The Israelites recognized another form of impurity which was a bad thing, but affected the land and Temple more than persons. **Moral impurity** is a kind of pollution created by sin, particularly idolatry, adultery, and murder. Unlike ritual impurity, it is not enough to keep the persons associated with moral impurity outside the Temple. Moral impurity pollutes the Temple from a distance. God is holy, and holiness is incompatible with impurity. If moral impurity pollutes the Temple, God will leave, which is bad because then God will not bless and protect the Israelites. The only way to remove moral impurity from the Temple and maintain the holiness of the Temple is to wash it with the holiest material available to them. For the Israelites, blood is holy. It is the life-force, the divine spark that makes us alive. Shedding human blood was completely prohibited. Shedding animal blood was okay only if the blood was given to God. The meat could be consumed by humans, but never the blood. The holy blood was sprinkled, poured, or scrubbed on the holy objects of the Temple to make them holy. Blood could also be sprinkled on humans to make them holy. Judaism does not practice animal sacrifice since the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.

Notice that the Israelites rejected the idea that God needs sacrifices for food (or bribery), but they found other reasons to incorporate **animal sacrifices** as part of their practices that maintained their identity and relationship with God. The blood of sacrificial animals was needed to maintain the holiness of the Temple. Food sacrifices were to be shared with others, especially the poor. The priests who worked in the Temple relied on a portion of the food offerings to feed themselves and their families.

3 What questions did the early Jews and Christians ask?

The previous chapter introduced what happened to the Israelites. The ancient nation of Israel responded to the Babylonian Exile and Persian domination by developing into more the religion of Judaism than the nation of Israel. They got used to not having a king, a nation, or an army, and many of them grew accustomed to living as minorities among a dominant foreign culture. In the Persian Period (538-333) they still had their capital city (Jerusalem) and its temple to serve as the intellectual and spiritual center of Jewish life, even for those who lived far away. Over the centuries, Greek and Roman rule would make it harder for the Jewish people to maintain their identity. They had to ask themselves what were the essential ideas and practices that made them who they were, while they adopted and adapted new ideas. Some of the challenges came from the force of foreign armies. Other challenges came without violence, in the stories and ideas carried by merchants and travelers. The external challenges multiplied with internal strife, as different Jews took different positions on how to respond to foreign culture. By the first century CE, there were many different kinds of Jews. External and internal conflicts brought about the end of the Second Temple (70 CE) and the end of Jewish life in Jerusalem (135 CE). Unlike the Babylonian Exile, which lasted only a few decades, this loss of a central capital was largely permanent. The Jews who adapted to these changes did so by carrying their ideas in writing across many small communities, often no bigger than could fit in a house. Two major movements survived. The ethnic Jews who organized around teachers and interpreters of Jewish law became what we call Rabbinic Judaism. The other major movement rejected ethnic origin and Jewish law as the markers of membership in God's people. For them God's people were defined by faith that Jesus of Nazareth is Lord and the fulfillment of the Jewish law. They came to be called Christians.

3.1 What changed with Hellenistic and Roman rule?

3.1.1 What were the major historical milestones?

- 333 BCE - Alexander the Great conquers the entire region from Greece and Egypt to India. This begins the **Hellenistic Period**. The term "Hellenistic" basically means "Greek speaking." Some books of the Bible were still being written and edited. The Jews confronted Greek philosophical ideas and other cultural perspectives.
- 167-164 BCE - The **Maccabean Revolt** was a bloody conflict over Jewish identity. On one side were Jews who wanted to maintain laws and customs separate from their Greek-speaking neighbors and rulers. On the other side were Jews (and Gentile allies) who sought to integrate more fully with Greek

3 WHAT QUESTIONS DID THE EARLY JEWS AND CHRISTIANS ASK?



Figure 12: Alexander the Great

culture by assimilation. The result was basically a victory for the separatists, although serious compromises were made.

- 63 BCE - The **Roman** Empire takes direct rule over the land of Israel. Technically they treated Judaism as a permitted religion, but the occupying forces skipped their sensitivity training. Their armies were brutal and effective. Jews who threatened revolt or even instability against Roman rule were introduced to the Roman sword and more painful deaths.
- About 7-5 BCE - **Birth of Jesus** of Nazareth. The western calendar was built on the idea that the year AD 1 is the year that Jesus was born. Modern chronology shows that if Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great it must have been several years earlier.
- About 30 CE - **Death of Jesus** of Nazareth by crucifixion
- 50s CE - Earliest preserved Christian letters written by **Paul** to the churches who accepted that Jesus is Lord
- 70 CE - **Destruction** of Jerusalem and its temple by the Roman army. All four Christian Gospels were written after 70.
- 135 CE - Another Jewish revolt is crushed and all Jews are banished from living in Jerusalem.
- 315 CE - After centuries of persecution, Christianity becomes the favored **religion of the Roman Empire**.

3.1 What changed with Hellenistic and Roman rule?

- 325 CE - Christian leaders meet at **Nicæa** to get their story straight. As a relatively underground movement, many conflicting ideas existed in various Christian communities. Now that Christianity was dominant, uniformity in message and governance was important. This will bring us to the following chapter, Christendom.

3.1.2 What happens when I die?

One of the many ideas that spread from Greece to Judaism was the idea that the true self is the soul, which is temporarily trapped in the body. **Dualism of body and soul** is most associated with the Greek philosopher Plato (429–347 BCE). A particularly negative view of the body, in contrast to the soul or spirit, developed among Plato's followers. The idea of the immortality of the soul fueled thought about the **afterlife** as a reward for virtue or punishment for vice in this life. This is a good time to outline some of the major views of the afterlife:

- The ancient Israelites thought of the underworld (Sheol) as a place where the dead **barely exist as shades**. They enjoy no real pleasures, but they are not tormented either. Death can be the result of sin, but once they are dead sinners are tormented no more than the righteous.
- Some Jews rejected a conscious afterlife of the individual, but did believe that one's **reputation** would live on after death if one lived a good life. This is reward after life in its own way. One need not believe in God or a conscious afterlife to want to be remembered well when one is gone.
- **Plato** advanced the notion that upon death the **soul** separates from the body and **is judged** by its inner virtue or vice, and rewarded or punished accordingly. This basic notion continued in much of Judaism and Christianity. The idea of perfect justice in the afterlife flourished in Judaism as a solution to the problem of theodicy. That is, even if justice is lacking in this life, this life is only a tiny speck in eternity, and eternity is perfectly just.
- Many Jews rejected Plato's negative view of the body. Me without a body is not really me. Especially for the martyrs who gave up their lives for God, God's reward would be nothing short of giving them their lives back in their physical bodies. The resulting belief is the **resurrection of the body**, the idea that our bodies will return to life.
- Some early Christians were caught between two conflicting views of the body. Drawing from their Jewish origins, Christians valued the idea of the resurrection of the body, starting with Jesus. As Christianity spread among Gentiles (non-Jews), the idea of bodies coming back to life like zombies sounded ridiculous and undesirable. **Paul's solution** was to say the resurrected body would be a

3 WHAT QUESTIONS DID THE EARLY JEWS AND CHRISTIANS ASK?

glorified body. It would be tangible, but would not have the aches, pain, lusts, and corruptibility of our present bodies. Christians believe Jesus was already resurrected and all Christians will be resurrected when Jesus returns in the future.



Figure 13: Whereas a zombie is the same body raised without a soul, Paul believes the soul will rise again in an incorruptible body.

Other ideas about the afterlife were not taken up in Judaism and Christianity, but should be mentioned here to round out the discussion.

- Epicureanism (the philosophy established by the Greek philosopher Epicurus) rejected the idea of an afterlife of any kind. Upon death one ceases to exist, so one is neither happy nor sad to be dead. One should make the most of this life and try to avoid worrying about death.
- Reincarnation is most fundamental in Hinduism and Buddhism, but shows up in western thought on occasion. Reincarnation says the same soul can go through many cycles of birth and death in different bodies. The soul has little or no memory of previous lives, but good and bad luck in this life can be explained by virtue or vice in previous lives, and future lives can reward or punish behavior in this life. The ultimate goal is to break the cycle of death and rebirth, and enter into spiritual union with the universe (Nirvana or Moksha).

3.1 What changed with Hellenistic and Roman rule?

Exercise: match the following quotations to the corresponding view of the afterlife.

At his death he will not take along anything, his glory will not go down after him. During his life his soul uttered blessings; "They will praise you, for you do well for yourself." But he will join the company of his fathers, never again to see the light. In his prime, man does not understand. He is like the beasts—they perish.

Death, I think, is actually nothing but the separation of two things from each other, the soul and the body... When a man who has lived a just and pious life comes to his end, he goes to the Isles of the Blessed, to make his abode in complete happiness, beyond the reach of evils, but when one who has lived in an unjust and godless way dies, he goes to the prison of payment and retribution, the one they call Tartarus.

The human body is a fleeting thing, but a virtuous name will never be annihilated. Have respect for your name, for it will stand by you more than thousands of precious treasures. The good things of life last a number of days, but a good name, for days without number.

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, others to reproach and everlasting disgrace.

So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown corruptible; it is raised incorruptible. It is sown dishonorable; it is raised glorious. It is sown weak; it is raised powerful. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.

3.1.3 Is religion worth dying for?

For the most part, Jews were challenged by Greek ideas under social pressure (peer pressure, the desire to fit in) and economic pressure (doing business with people who did things differently) rather than physical force. There were some exceptions, however, and Jews sometimes had to choose between preserving their way of life and their actual lives. Those who chose to die rather than compromise their values were considered **martyrs**. This became an issue under the reign of the foreign king Antiochus Epiphanes, and led to the Maccabean Revolt (167-164 BCE).

The Romans always demanded complete political submission to their military might, while tolerating the religious practices of Judaism. However, the line between religion and politics blurred with the idea that Roman emperors should be worshiped as gods. Refusal to worship the emperor looked (to the Romans) like political insubordination, and insistence on worship of the emperor looked (to Jews and Christians) like religious persecution. The Jews were often, not always, tolerated as an ancient religion and people who mostly kept to themselves. Christians, on the other hand, were seen

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Figure 14: Catherine of Alexandria survived a horrible torture device before being beheaded. Artist: Albrecht Dürer

3.1 What changed with Hellenistic and Roman rule?

as a new cult growing among Gentiles who formerly had worshiped the gods and emperors. They were persecuted more. There were several responses.

- Some Jewish communities were large enough to form armies and revolt against Roman rule. They believed God and the angels would help them defeat the Roman army. They were wrong. The Romans killed them and now they are dead.
- The Jews who survived tried to avoid confrontation but when necessary were willing to die rather than abandon what distinguished them as Jews. Other Jews looked up to them and became stronger in their commitment.
- The Jews who followed Jesus (Christians) were not numerous enough to pose a military challenge to the Romans. They believed that martyrs would have a special reward in the afterlife and would be resurrected when Jesus returns and defeats the Romans. They especially emphasized the non-finality of death and some even sought out martyrdom to prove their faith. Every horrible and painful death became a marketing campaign for the new movement that promised liberation from earthly power and fear of death.
- A significant number of Jews and Christians were willing to do or say whatever it took to save their lives, especially if it was just a one-time test. Their stories were not remembered. There was debate about whether they should be allowed to rejoin their communities after the persecution passed.

3.1.4 What are the non-negotiable markers of God's people? How do we balance holding firm against challenges and changing with the times?

We know some Jews wanted to join Greek culture and made little or no effort to hold onto their Jewish heritage. Three key items were widely accepted as essential markers of Jewish identity that could not be compromised. (Of course many other things that Jews valued were not controversial with the Greeks.)

- No worshiping Greek or Roman gods or kings. This is harder than it might sound because many public events and festivals (such as the Olympics) included prayer and sacrifice to gods.
- Males must be circumcised. Greeks tended to view the body as a work of art. Thus, circumcision was mutilation of the beautiful human form.
- No pork. This one biblical law became symbolic of the others.

Other elements were important to some Jews but not others. Examples include the authority and leadership of the high priest and the Hebrew language. Some Jews living in Greek-speaking cultural centers started to think of Moses (author of the Jewish law) as a philosopher like Plato.

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Another debate among Jews was whether non-Jews could join them. Many understood God's people Israel as the biological descendants of Jacob, so placed little or no interest in people of other ethnic groups joining their ethnic group. Others concluded that if there is only one God then that God should be worshiped by all nations. They imagined all nations should eventually join the Jews.

Christianity started as a Jewish movement. Jesus and his disciples were Jewish. As the message spread, many non-Jews wanted to join. Some early followers of Jesus thought that a non-Jew who wanted to follow Jesus had to become Jewish and keep the Jewish laws such as circumcision, dietary laws, and the sabbath. The view of Paul became the dominant view. **Paul said that God's people are all those who are unified in faith in Jesus as Lord.** Ethnicity and observance of the Jewish laws were not essential. Meanwhile, renouncing belief in Jesus as Lord or worshiping the Roman emperor as Lord was unacceptable.

Greek or Hebrew?

What are the implications of adopting the language of a dominant culture, as opposed to holding onto your internal traditional language?

3.2 What does God have planned for this world?

Especially in the second century BCE, a number of factors we have already considered led to a strong conviction that the world as we know it is not the world God wants, radically so. Namely:

- Three ideas combined to form a strong conclusion:
God is the sovereign creator of all that is.
 - + The world as God created it was very good.
 - + The world as I see it today is thoroughly messed up.
 - = The state of the world today is not tolerable in God's view.
- Biblical precedent supported the idea that God could and would radically recreate the world. First, God originally created the world out of chaos (a formless void) and put it into an order that was "very good." The current state of the world is chaos, so God will end this world and create a new heavens and a new earth. One could also look to the flood in primordial times. The claim is that the earth then was filled with wickedness, so God killed everyone with a flood except a small number of people (Noah and his family) that were kept safe in an ark. Similarly, God will destroy the earth again, and only a small sect of truly righteous people will be saved.
- As we discussed in connection with theodicy, thinkers such as Ezekiel took a radical view of God's justice, such that every individual gets exactly what is deserved. The more one expects God to reward God's people, the more one is disappointed when things don't work out as hoped. This leads to a cycle of frustration and more radical hopes.
- Although it has been emphasized that Judaism as it survived developed an identity that did not depend on political sovereignty, there were many people along the way that did act on the belief that God's people should be politically independent and even the rulers of the earth. That didn't work out for them in the end, but they produced some cool literature on the way.

Many Jews developed the expectation that God would intervene to end the world as we know it and usher in a radically different age of justice. There was great variety in the details of how they expected that to happen. This unit will focus on Daniel 7, which epitomizes Jewish apocalyptic eschatology and was tremendously influential on early Christianity.

3.2.1 Terms: eschatology and apocalypse

The term **eschatology** comes from the Greek *eschatoi* (εσχατοι) "last things" and *logoi* (λογοι) "words, discourse," so is the discourse or words we use to talk about the

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last things. The classical definition specifies four last things, namely death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Theologians today often speak of eschatology as our ultimate hope as Christians, as in where do we hope this world is going and what God will do for it. I will be happy if you remember that eschatology is the theological discourse about the **afterlife and the end of the world**. If you think about it, those two things are distinct, but both pertain to the goal or end of a life as we know it and the world as we know it.

The funny thing is what we say about the goal or end of the world or life says a great deal about how we view the present world and life. At the negative extreme, one might view the world as so thoroughly corrupt that when God does intervene God can do nothing for it except destroy it completely and start over. At the positive extreme, one might view the world as so good that the only thing that remains is for everyone to realize God's presence in the world as now only some do. Similarly, if this life is viewed as hopelessly unjust, then the focus is on escaping this life into an afterlife, in which the righteous will be radically rewarded (heaven), and the wicked radically punished (hell). The positive extreme is that we are already living in spiritual bliss. There are many degrees and combinations in between.

The term "apocalypse" is often misused to mean the end of the world or the catastrophic end of things. Apocalypse is actually a literary genre. A literary genre is a kind of literature, like sonnet, murder mystery, or vampire romance. The etymology of apocalypse is "uncovering of hidden things," or "revelation." **Literature in the genre "apocalypse" uncovers hidden things** about invisible agents (angels, demons) and places (heaven, hell), and historical patterns (day of judgment, end of the world). Along with parts of Daniel, the most famous apocalypse is the Apocalypse of John in the New Testament, also known as the Book of Revelation. In popular usage, the words "apocalypse" and "apocalyptic" are used to describe anything that is reminiscent of the Apocalypse of John. There are many apocalypses outside the Bible.

3.2.2 Messiahs

The word "messiah" comes from the Hebrew *mashiach* (מָשִׁיחַ) "**anointed one**." In Greek, the word is *christos* (χριστός), from which we get the word "Christ." (Christ is a title, not a name.) The concept of an anointed one has a long history, and we will return to some of the later reflections on what exactly it means to say that Jesus of Nazareth is the anointed one.

Anointing people with oil is a very ancient ritual for marking a significant change in legal status. If a slave became free he or she would be anointed with oil. If a priest was ordained he would be anointed with oil. The most relevant change in legal status is that the king would be anointed when he became king (or king designate). During the monarchic period, the anointed one was the king of Israel, the descendant of David.

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During this period the claim was made that God promised that David's descendants would rule as kings over Israel forever. There were even some bold claims about God's protection of the king, using metaphors of God adopting the king as a son. That was all fine and good as long as there was a son of David ruling as king over Israel. When the monarchic period ended in 587 (the Babylonian Exile), God's promise seemed to have been proven false. There were many responses. Some tried to restore the monarchy. Some tried to say the promise was conditional all along. Some tried to transfer the promise in some way. The interpretation most relevant here is that many held onto the hope that God would someday restore the monarchy of the son of David.

At first it was a relatively practical hope for an ordinary human king. As the cycle of hope and frustration continued the expectation became more radical. Many Jews came to expect that a supernatural king would usher in a new era of Jewish sovereignty and perfect justice. **This eschatological king is usually meant when the word is capitalized, "the Messiah."** The idea of the Messiah becomes tied to eschatology and the expectation of a kingdom of God. Although the idea of the Messiah becomes supernatural, the Messiah always remains human. Eschatological scenarios in which God or an angel acts directly are not appropriately called Messianic if there is no one human agent who takes a major role. As we shall see, Son of David, (adopted) Son of God, King of the Jews (or King of Kings), Anointed One, Messiah, and Christ are all essentially synonymous titles applied to Jesus of Nazareth.

3.2.3 Kingdom of God

With or without a human king at its head, many **Jews expected God and God's people to be their own kingdom.** The idea that survived the longest was the idea that the Jewish people can live their way of life under foreign rule and dominant cultures. For some, that was not good enough. They thought that God's people should be free of foreign rule, and perhaps themselves be the rulers of the world. They looked at the great empires of the world (the



Figure 15: The prophet Samuel uses an animal horn filled with olive oil to anoint David as legitimate King of Israel, as portrayed in an ancient synagogue.

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Persians, Medes, Seleucid Greeks, Romans) and thought their power was inversely proportionate to their virtue. Why would God allow that? Shouldn't the righteous people be the ones in charge? Surely God is getting around to defeating the current great empire and setting up the Jews in their place.

To be clear, the kingdom of God (or God's people) was originally meant very literally as an earthly, political kingdom. This was true before Jesus, and well into the early days of the followers of Jesus. Many early Christians expected Jesus to come back soon, overthrow the Romans, and establish a political kingdom. As that did not become the case, Christians began to reflect on Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom of God as something that can exist in their hearts, or in small communities of Christians sharing in a common life in the body of Christ. Some argue that the followers of Jesus came to understand the kingdom of God not as an alternative kingdom, but a critique of the very idea of domination in all aspects of life. Today most Christians will say that the kingdom of God is both already and not yet. It is already with us in the faith Jesus has given us, and remains not yet fulfilled until Jesus returns and makes manifest his victory over sin and death. To this we shall return. The term "realized eschatology" refers to the idea that the fundamental change (if not end exactly) in the world has already taken place.

3.2.4 Daniel 7

The Book of Daniel is probably the last book of the Hebrew Bible (this chapter is actually in Aramaic) to be completed in about 164 BCE (some books in the Jewish Greek Bible, which became the Catholic Old Testament are later). It is set in the sixth century BCE, during the time of the Babylonian Exile. Although most Jews recognize the decree of Cyrus the Persian in 538 as ending **The Babylonian Exile**, Daniel seems to suggest the Babylonian Exile didn't really end in the sense of properly restoring the kingdom of God. Daniel 7 uses the literary genre "apocalypse" to describe the revelation of the real pattern of history.

four great beasts represent four kingdoms: Babylonian, Persian, Median, and Greek. It was assumed that every kingdom had its own guardian angel (not necessarily a good angel). The beast could represent the angel that guides the kingdom or the kingdom itself.

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The original audience would have recognized the little horn as a reference to Antiochus Epiphanes, who ruled 175-164 BCE. He did not get along well with religious Jews.

The Ancient of Days is God. The “one like a son of man,” later shortened to “son of man” was richly interpreted and came to mean much more than what it originally meant. Originally this human-like figure contrasted with the beast-monsters. It was also an angel, only a good angel. In particular it was Michael, the guardian angel of Israel. Michael’s dominion over the other angels translates in earthly terms to Israel’s dominion over the other nations.

The Most High is God. God’s holy ones are primarily the angels. It can also refer to God’s holy humans, namely the priests in particular or God’s people in general.

In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, as Daniel lay in bed he had a dream, visions in his head. Then he wrote down the dream; the account began: ² In the vision I saw during the night, suddenly the four winds of heaven stirred up the great sea, ³ from which emerged four immense beasts, each different from the others. ⁴ The first was like a lion, but with eagle’s wings. While I watched, the wings were plucked; it was raised from the ground to stand on two feet like a human being, and given a human

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mind. ⁵ The second beast was like a bear; it was raised up on one side, and among the teeth in its mouth were three tusks. It was given the order, "Arise, devour much flesh." ⁶ After this I looked and saw another beast, like a leopard; on its back were four wings like those of a bird, and it had four heads. To this beast dominion was given. ⁷ After this, in the visions of the night I saw a fourth beast, terrifying, horrible, and of extraordinary strength; it had great iron teeth with which it devoured and crushed, and it trampled with its feet what was left. It differed from the beasts that preceded it. It had ten horns. ⁸ I was considering the ten horns it had, when suddenly another, a little horn, sprang out of their midst, and three of the previous horns were torn away to make room for it. This horn had eyes like human eyes, and a mouth that spoke arrogantly. ⁹ As I watched, Thrones were set up and the Ancient of Days took his throne. His clothing was white as snow, the hair on his head like pure wool; His throne was flames of fire, with wheels of burning fire. ¹⁰ A river of fire surged forth, flowing from where he sat; Thousands upon thousands were ministering to him, and myriads upon myriads stood before him. The court was convened, and the books were opened.

¹¹ I watched, then, from the first of the arrogant words which the horn spoke, until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown into the burning fire. ¹² As for the other beasts, their dominion was taken away, but they were granted a prolongation of life for a time and a season. ¹³ As the visions during the night continued, I saw coming with the clouds of heaven One like a son of man. When he reached the Ancient of Days and was presented before him, ¹⁴ He received dominion, splendor, and kingship; all nations, peoples and tongues will serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, his kingship, one that shall not be destroyed.

¹⁵ Because of this, my spirit was anguished and I, Daniel, was terrified by my visions. ¹⁶ I approached one of those present and asked him the truth of all this; in answer, he made known to me its meaning: ¹⁷ "These four great beasts stand for four kings which shall arise on the earth. ¹⁸ But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingship, to possess it forever and ever."

¹⁹ Then I wished to make certain about the fourth beast, so very terrible and different from the others, devouring and crushing with its iron teeth and bronze claws, and trampling with its feet what was left; ²⁰ and about the ten horns on its head, and the other one that sprang up, before which three horns fell; and about the horn with the eyes and the mouth that spoke

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arrogantly, which appeared greater than its fellows.²¹ For, as I watched, that horn made war against the holy ones and was victorious²² until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was pronounced in favor of the holy ones of the Most High, and the time arrived for the holy ones to possess the kingship.

²³ He answered me thus: “The fourth beast shall be a fourth kingdom on earth, different from all the others; The whole earth it shall devour, trample down and crush.²⁴ The ten horns shall be ten kings rising out of that kingdom; another shall rise up after them, Different from those before him, who shall lay low three kings.²⁵ He shall speak against the Most High and wear down the holy ones of the Most High, intending to change the feast days and the law. They shall be handed over to him for a time, two times, and half a time.²⁶ But when the court is convened, and his dominion is taken away to be abolished and completely destroyed,²⁷ Then the kingship and dominion and majesty of all the kingdoms under the heavens shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High, Whose kingship shall be an everlasting kingship, whom all dominions shall serve and obey.”

²⁸ This is the end of the report. I, Daniel, was greatly terrified by my thoughts, and my face became pale, but I kept the matter to myself. (Daniel 7)

Technically the phrase “kingdom of God” does not appear in this chapter, but the kingdom of the holy ones of God develops into the idea of the kingdom of God. The idea that God was about to create God’s own kingdom in contrast to the wicked empires of the day was tremendously influential. Some Jews used this to justify revolting against the Seleucids and Romans. The Jews who followed Jesus adapted the idea to an internal reality in addition to a prediction of the future.

A time, two times, and half a time is a cryptic way of saying three and a half years, the hardest period of conflict under Antiochus. The apocalypses love to use cryptic imagery so the audience feels smart when they decode it.

Notice that the titles “Son of God” and “Son of Man” are confusing and may appear to be reversed. The “Son of God” was originally a title of the human king, signifying that the king’s relationship to God was like that of an adopted son to a father. “Son of Man” originally meant a human but in this allegorical chapter starts to mean the opposite, an angel or cosmic being sent from heaven. Brace yourself for ongoing confusion because Christians will say Jesus is both a divine being sent from heaven as ruler of the kingdom of God (Son of Man) and a human descendant of King David (son of God).

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3.3 Who is Jesus of Nazareth?

During the Roman occupation of Palestine many Jews looked for and found charismatic leaders who might lead them to bringing about God's kingdom on earth. The most influential of those leaders is Jesus of Nazareth.

3.3.1 Scholarship on the historical Jesus

One of the major trends in modern (19th and 20th century) biblical scholarship is the effort to be objective. That is, scholars wanted to take the beliefs and opinions out of biblical interpretation, and excavate historical facts hidden in the text the way an archaeologist might excavate artifacts out of the ground, or even as a scientist might identify the structure of DNA. In the case of the New Testament, one of the major developments is the study of "**the historical Jesus.**" This means reconstructing the facts of the life of Jesus of Nazareth (and his followers) as objectively as possible, as one might write a historical study of Julius Caesar or Thomas Jefferson. In all cases, sources are biased, but critical historians read past the bias or correct for the bias to try to arrive at an objective truth, which generally means a truth that reasonable people can agree upon regardless of faith, opinion, or personal feelings.

For example, the statement "Jesus is God" is a faith claim. Certainly there are many rational people who are not Christian who would not accept that as a scientifically demonstrable historical fact. However, one could shift the perspective just a little and turn it into a **historical fact**. Thus, "Jesus' followers came to believe that he was God" is a provable fact, regardless of what one thinks about whether they were right. Proceeding in this way, one encounters questions such as "why did they think that?" "what did that mean to them?" "how did that belief change their lives?" and "how did that belief influence human history?" Similarly a claim such as "Jesus rose from the dead three days after he was killed," is a faith claim, but the development and influence of that belief is a historical fact.

In general, historians love external sources because they are presumed more neutral. In the case of the historical Jesus, we do not have accounts of Jesus by people who did not believe he was the Messiah (although we do have Roman records of certain details of his times). We do not have any documents that he wrote himself. Even the documents written by his followers were written long after the death of Jesus. The earliest letters were written in the 50s by Paul, but he never met Jesus and actually does not tell us much about him as a person. The earliest Gospel was written shortly after 70 CE, and it would be another 30 years before all four would be written. More importantly, a Gospel is not, and never was, the same thing as a biography. The early Gospel writers, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John were not trying to record historical facts, but tell a story which would lead its listeners to join them in belief that Jesus is in fact the Messiah (Christ) and Lord, which connoted divinity.

According to our sources Jesus is Christ. Historians of the historical Jesus do not necessarily accept or reject that claim, but they do set it aside and study the sources for information about the human being who started it all. **The name of the human being is “Jesus.”** The faith claim about him is “Christ.” The terms are used interchangeably by people who accept the Christian faith, but non-Christians and Christian scholars trying to be objective would distinguish the historical person and the system of beliefs that developed about him. One could say Jesus became Christ in the hearts and of minds of his followers (regardless of whether one believes he was Christ all along before they realized it).

The New Testament

The earliest writings about Jesus are in the New Testament. The New Testament consists of letters written by Paul and his students to various churches, other letters, four Gospels (Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John), a sequel to the Gospel of Luke about the Apostles, and a revelation in which John saw the true nature of the Roman Empire and God's sovereignty.

3.3.2 Controversy

The “historical Jesus” approach was understandably controversial. At first it might seem to imply that only that which is provable historically is true. Some responded by insisting that the truth of Christianity is a proposition that must be rejected or accepted without questioning. However, the Catholic tradition (as we shall see more later) insists that faith and reason go hand-in-hand. It is possible for faith to go beyond reason, but it is not possible for reason to contradict true faith (although it can clarify it or fix where it had not been so true). So Catholicism would not say that something is not true just because it cannot be scientifically proven. More importantly, things (such as legends or stories) can be true in ways deeper than historical accuracy.

Beyond research into the historical Jesus not being a threat, it can be very constructive for faith. Although in theology faith comes first and understanding comes second, it can be helpful to understand the origin of faith. Even if we think we know how the story ends, we can understand the story better if we reconstruct the process by which it came about for the followers of Jesus. By all accounts, faith is



Figure 16: This is not the most beautiful or popular image of Jesus of Nazareth. It is based on scientific data on how a Galilean at the time would have appeared. Portrayals of Jesus with a halo, blue eyes, and white skin are based on faith and cultural assumptions.

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not something that immediately struck everyone who saw Jesus. Even Jesus' closest friends took a while to figure it out and continued to make mistakes. To a large degree, the Christian faith came with retrospect, after Jesus was gone. The payoff of historical Jesus scholarship is that not only does it help us understand Jesus more accurately; it helps us understand faith as a process of development in a community of followers. Rather than faith being a set of propositions that we either accept (with promise of heaven) or reject (with threats of hell), faith becomes participation in the process by which the first followers of Jesus discovered faith.

3.3.3 What did Jesus do?

By the end of the story, the most significant things about Jesus are that he was God become human, he died for the forgiveness of sins, he was victorious over death, and will eventually judge all people, even if they are dead. At the beginning of the story, none of those things were clear to Jesus' followers. He is remembered differently by different people, but the core story is that he was a charismatic healer and miracle worker, an ethical teacher who taught a high standard for following God's law, and a prophet who prepared Jews living under the kingdom of Rome for the Kingdom of God. Some of Jesus' followers also came to believe that he fulfilled the unfulfilled promises of scripture, that he was Lord in some sense, and that he was the Messiah.

3.3.4 Charismatic healer

Jesus certainly raised attention not just with words, but miracles and actions. What may be surprising is that charismatic healers were somewhat common at the time, and indeed in many cultures. Scientists say that the power of the mind and persuasion can allow miraculous transformation. The Gospel writers say that in this case it shows that Jesus had the power of God known previously in God's agents such as Moses and Elijah.

After making the crossing, they came to land at Gennesaret and tied up there.⁵⁴ As they were leaving the boat, people immediately recognized him.⁵⁵ They scurried about the surrounding country and began to bring in the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.⁵⁶ Whatever villages or towns or countryside he entered, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and begged him that they might touch only the tassel on his cloak; and as many as touched it were healed. (Mark 6:53-56)

3.3.5 Ethical teacher

In Jesus' day all the cool religious Jews were arguing over the proper interpretation of the law that God gave to the Jewish people through Moses on Mount Sinai. Jesus of Nazareth seems to have been very annoyed with people who thought that if they followed this-that-and-the-other arcane legal procedure then they were holier and cooler than all the other losers. Jesus seemed to suggest that one could never run

out of room for improvement or be holier than God. Fortunately, he also emphasized the possibility of reconciliation with God in light of our inevitable shortcomings. The Sermon on the Mount (some say it was a plain) is a classic of ethical teaching. It's long, but worth it.

When he saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he had sat down, his disciples came to him. ² He began to teach them, saying: ³ Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land. ⁶ Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied. ⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. ⁸ Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God. ⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰ Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

¹³ You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden.

¹⁵ Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.

¹⁷ Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place. ¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

²¹ You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever says to his

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brother, ‘Raqa,’ will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ will be liable to fiery Gehenna.²³ Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you,²⁴ leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift.²⁵ Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court with him. Otherwise your opponent will hand you over to the judge, and the judge will hand you over to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison.²⁶ Amen, I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’²⁸ But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body thrown into Gehenna.³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body go into Gehenna.

³¹ It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife must give her a bill of divorce.’³² But I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ Again you have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘Do not take a false oath, but make good to the Lord all that you vow.’³⁴ But I say to you, do not swear at all; not by heaven, for it is God’s throne;³⁵ nor by the earth, for it is his footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.³⁶ Do not swear by your head, for you cannot make a single hair white or black.³⁷ Let your ‘Yes’ mean ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No’ mean ‘No.’ Anything more is from the evil one.

³⁸ You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’

³⁹ But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on (your) right cheek, turn the other one to him as well.⁴⁰ If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand him your cloak as well.⁴¹ Should anyone press you into service for one mile, go with him for two miles.⁴² Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow.

⁴³ You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’⁴⁴ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust.⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what recompense

will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? ⁴⁸ So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:1-48)

Before too long some Christians would understand faith in Jesus as replacing the demands of the Jewish law, or at least loosening up the details. In this passage that is certainly not the case.

3.3.6 Prophet of Kingdom of God

Jesus often taught about the soon-coming Kingdom of God (or Heaven). Jesus' ethical teachings were tied to the expectation that a higher standard would be required for inclusion in the new kingdom.

He said, "This is how it is with the kingdom of God; it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land ²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how. ²⁸ Of its own accord the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. ²⁹ And when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once, for the harvest has come."

³⁰ He said, "To what shall we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable can we use for it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. ³² But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade." (Mark 4:26-32)

3.3.7 Fulfillment of the scriptures, Messiah, Lord

Three ideas about Jesus apparently started in his lifetime, but it took a while to figure out all the implications and exactly what they mean. One could say we are still working on them. Various implications will show up in the following sections.

First is the idea that Jesus fulfills the scriptures. Many passages in the Bible were understood as predictions of future events. Jesus was seen as fulfilling those predictions. More importantly, Jesus came to be seen as fulfilling the larger promises of justice, a kingdom of God, and a son of David who would rule as king.

But all this has come to pass that the writings of the prophets may be fulfilled. (Matthew 26:56)

Second, If Jesus fulfills the promise that a son of David would always rule as king, that would make Jesus the Messiah. Of course there was disagreement about what that meant exactly. Those Jews who expected the Messiah expected the Messiah to defeat the Romans, which Jesus did not do. It seems the historical Jesus was not viewed by

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many as the Messiah during his lifetime. According to Mark, Jesus kept the fact that he was the Messiah a secret.

Now Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea Philippi. Along the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" ²⁸ They said in reply, "John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others one of the prophets." ²⁹ And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter said to him in reply, "You are the Messiah." ³⁰ Then he warned them not to tell anyone about him. (Mark 8:27-30)

Mark also suggests that Jesus let the secret out shortly before he was killed. Notice that Mark indicates Jesus claimed both roles, Messiah and Son of Man (quoting Daniel 7):

The high priest rose before the assembly and questioned Jesus, saying, "Have you no answer? What are these men testifying against you?" ⁶¹ But he was silent and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked him and said to him, "Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One?" ⁶² Then Jesus answered, "I am; and 'you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.'" (Mark 14:60-62)

The third and trickiest title of Jesus is "Lord." Although it is attested very early, the meaning is ambiguous. In English the word "Lord" is mostly used for God, medieval history, and British royalty. In Aramaic and Greek (like Spanish señor) the word can be used for any respected authority, from a crew chief at McDonald's to God. Consider the following passage. Clearly the lordship of Jesus is significant and the role of Jesus as Lord is essentially identical to what is said of Lord God in the Old Testament. On the other hand, the word "God" only appears in this passage as a separate being who acts upon Jesus.

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. ¹¹ For the scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, enriching all who call upon him. ¹³ For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Romans 10:9-13)

Eventually Christians will say that there are actually **three persons in one God**, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Such that Jesus is God and also God is God, and also God's spirit is God. God gets along with God and talks to God and raises God from the dead. God sends God's God to God's people in God. This is the **Trinity**. It is not supposed to make sense. It is supposed to blow your mind (the theological term

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is “mystery”). The New Testament never articulates the teaching of the Trinity. It seems several authors must have had something like it in mind, but it took a while to straighten out the whole thing, for example how Jesus can be God and sit at the right hand of God and be raised by God.

3.4 Why did Jesus die?

Jesus of Nazareth gained a number of followers and preached a message that challenged the sense of business-as-usual. The Jewish and/or Roman authorities were uncomfortable with revolutionary movements and ideas. He was publicly executed by the Romans in a rather gruesome way. Crucifixion killed slowly by pressing the weight of a hanging body against the lungs. Eventually the chest muscles no longer have the strength to draw breath and the victim suffocates surrounded by fresh air.

The gruesome death of Jesus shocked his followers. The Messiah was supposed to battle the Romans and win. It seems likely that the majority of his followers felt his death resolved the question of whether he was the Messiah. For some of those closest to Jesus there had to be some other explanation. Death could not be the end of what they were so sure was the start of something radically new. If there was some meaning behind the horrible death of Jesus, it was very confusing.

The sources we have report that the confusion was resolved by eye-witness testimony of the empty tomb and sightings of Jesus. It is possible to accept this proposition on faith and be done with it. Scholars today offer longer accounts of how the followers of Jesus came to find meaning in his death as necessary but not permanent. The two major answers are that Jesus suffered and died in order to transfer the sin of others to himself, and in order to defeat death.

3.4.1 Transfer sins

First a little background is necessary on the concept of sin at the time of Jesus. Economic metaphors were used for sin and suffering. When one does wrong one “owes” God, the way one might “owe” a quarter to a swear jar after using impolite language. Thus, sin is a debt. However, one cannot pay the debt with money, but only suffering, blood, or death. The idea is that we all have balance sheets in the sky. The more we sin, the more we owe suffering.

One idea was that the blood of an animal could substitute for the blood of the sinner. Thus one could **sacrifice an animal** to God to pay off the balance sheet. This idea is actually a tad complex, and not all Jews would have accepted this way of putting it. For some New Testament writers, though, Jesus was the perfect sacrifice who replaces the need for ordinary animal sacrifice. Thus John gives Jesus the title, “**Lamb of God** who takes away the sins of the world.” An ordinary son of a sheep might take away some sins, but the sacrifice of the son of God is much more effective. Personally, I don’t think this idea was dominant.

The idea which I do think is dominant does not have to do with animal sacrifice, but it is related in the sense of substitution. The idea was that the total balance sheet had to amount to zero, but that one could **pay other people’s debts**. Thus, Jesus had no sin-debts, but paid the ultimate suffering-price. With those extra credits he could pay

off the debts of his friends and followers. The theological term for suffering on behalf of others is **vicarious suffering**. It had been around in Judaism for quite a while.

As previously discussed, the followers of Jesus came to believe that he **fulfilled the scriptures**. That meant they could turn to scriptures for clues as to the meaning of his suffering and death. In the book of Isaiah (combined with Psalms and other sources) they found an explanation of the suffering of a person who did not deserve to suffer, but voluntarily suffered on behalf of others. This figure is called the **suffering servant**. The original audience understood the suffering servant as a metaphor for the Israelites who went into exile in Babylon. They appeared to have been defeated and to suffer the fate of horrible sinners. Contrary to appearances, they were actually advancing God's plan. Their suffering gave a fresh start (zero balance-sheet) to others, and gave God an opportunity to reveal Godself to all nations. The followers of Jesus interpreted this passage as providing the key to the meaning behind the death of Jesus and the greater good that would come out of it.



Figure 17: Jesus, the victorious lamb of God as painted on the ceiling of the Vatican embassy in Bulgaria.

Who would believe what we have heard?

To whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

² He grew up like a sapling before him, like a shoot from the parched earth;
He had no majestic bearing to catch our eye, no beauty to draw us to him.

³ He was spurned and avoided by men, a man of suffering, knowing pain,
Like one from whom you turn your face, spurned, and we held him in no esteem.

⁴ Yet it was our pain that he bore, our sufferings he endured.
We thought of him as stricken, struck down by God and afflicted,

⁵ But he was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity.
He bore the punishment that makes us whole, by his wounds we were healed.

⁶ We had all gone astray like sheep, all following our own way;
But the LORD laid upon him the guilt of us all.

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⁷ Though harshly treated, he submitted and did not open his mouth;
Like a lamb led to slaughter or a sheep silent before shearers, he did not
open his mouth.

⁸ Seized and condemned, he was taken away.
Who would have thought any more of his destiny?

For he was cut off from the land of the living, struck for the sins of his
people.

⁹ He was given a grave among the wicked, a burial place with evildoers,

Though he had done no wrong, nor was deceit found in his mouth.

¹⁰ But it was the LORD's will to crush him with pain.

By making his life as a reparation offering, he shall see his offspring,
shall lengthen his days, and the LORD's will shall be accomplished through
him.

¹¹ Because of his anguish he shall see the light;
because of his knowledge he shall be content;

My servant, the just one, shall justify the many, their iniquity he shall bear.

¹² Therefore I will give him his portion among the many, and he shall divide
the spoils with the mighty,

Because he surrendered himself to death, was counted among the trans-
gressors,

Bore the sins of many, and interceded for the transgressors. (Isaiah 53:1-
12)

This passage combined with others, such as Psalm 22 and Psalm 89, to help Jesus' followers figure out and articulate the meaning and resolution of his death. There is room for debate about certain details about the death of Jesus as to whether they were factual events that reminded the followers of the Psalms, or images taken from the Psalms to fill in the larger truth that Jesus' death and resurrection fulfills the Psalms. For example, Psalm 22 describes suffering as, "they divide my garments among them; for my clothing they cast lots." Did the Romans actually do this to Jesus, and the fact reminded Jesus' followers of the Psalms? Or did the followers provide this detail to communicate the greater truth that Jesus fulfills the Psalm, and in particular its promise of the victory of life over death? Of course theologians offer all sorts of complicated solutions. One good answer is that it could be both, but the **deeper truth about the victory of life over death** is far more important than the historicity of a detail. Gospel writers did not think of themselves as biography writers. Even if they had access to eye-witnesses to certain events, they were not trying to compile historical facts if they could not find some theological significance to them.

3.4.2 Necessary to die in order to battle death and resurrect

The other major way of explaining why Jesus died was that Jesus had to die in order to battle death, defeat it, and rise from the dead. Note there is a difference between escaping death and defeating death. Namely, by defeating death Jesus' resurrection is not a one-time event, but the beginning of a victory that everyone on Jesus' team can share in.

Below are a painting and a story that relate **what Jesus was doing in the underworld, the place of the dead, for those three days between his death and resurrection**. The basic outline of what happened is:

- The first human, Adam, could have lived forever had he not sinned. God intended eternal life for us from the beginning. (This is an interpretation, not the obvious meaning in Genesis.)
- God commanded Adam not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. The threat was “on the day you eat of it you shall surely die.” Adam ate the fruit anyway, and actually lived to be 930. One interpretation of the threat was, “on the day you eat of it you shall surely become mortal.”
- Adam signed a contract with Death. All Adam’s descendants would also sin, and they would all also die. Death thereby had a mandate over all sinners, which is everyone.
- Skip ahead thousands of years. Jesus of Nazareth is a human, but does not sin. Satan tries to catch Jesus in a sin, but fails.
- Satan loves to make people sin, and can’t resist a good opportunity to make people torture someone to death. Normally this is within Satan’s mandate because everyone is a sinner and everyone deserves death. Satan forgot to check the books before encouraging people to kill Jesus.
- Jesus died, and like all the dead, goes to the underworld. Once there, Jesus talks to Death and says, “you have no right to keep me here.” Death says, “Of course I do. I have a contract with the first human giving me power over all his children because they sin.” Jesus says, “Nope. Not me. You screwed up.” Death says, “Impossible. Everyone sins. Satan, come over here and tell this man about his sins.” Satan and Death argue about who screwed up.
- Not only is Jesus free to go, Jesus rips up the contract Adam had signed. Death violated the mandate, now the whole deal is off. It’s like Death served one minor a drink and lost its liquor license. Jesus’ victory over Death is absolute, and all on his team share his victory.

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- Jesus leaves, but only after tearing up the place. The gates of the underworld are smashed. Satan is bound. The dead (either all of them or the righteous) are rescued and rise with Jesus.



Figure 18: The Harrowing of Hell. Basilica of Santa Maria Novella, Florence, Italy. 14th century. In all representations Adam and Eve are the first in, first out.

The version below is an excerpt from the Gospel of Nicodemus. It is important to be able to read primary sources in theological literature. The preceding summary should help understand what is going on.

And while they were all so joyful, Satan the heir of darkness came and said to Hades, 'All devouring and insatiable one, listen to my words. There is one of the race of the Jews, Jesus by name, who calls himself the Son of God. But he is a man, and at our instigation the Jews crucified him. And now that he is dead, be prepared that we may secure him here. For I know that he is a man, and I heard him saying, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death." (Matt. 26:38) He caused me much trouble in the world above while he lived among mortals. For wherever he found my servants, he cast them out, and all those whom I had made to be crippled or blind or lame, leprous and the like, he healed with only a word, and many whom I had

made ready for burial he also made alive again with only a word.' Hades said, 'Is he so powerful that he does such things with only a word? And if he is of such power, are you able to withstand him? It seems to me that no one will be able to withstand such as he is. But if you say that you heard how he feared death, he said this to mock and laugh at you, wishing to seize you with a strong hand. And woe, woe to you for all eternity.' Satan answered, 'O all-devouring and insatiable Hades, did you fear so greatly when you heard about our common foe? I did not fear him, but worked upon the Jews, and they crucified him and gave him gall and vinegar to drink. Therefore prepare yourself to get him firmly into your power when he comes.'

Hades answered, 'O heir of darkness, son of perdition, devil, you have just told me that many whom you made ready for burial he made alive again with only a word. If then he freed others from the grave, how and with what power will he be held by us? A short time ago I devoured a certain dead man called Lazarus, and soon afterwards one of the living drew him up forcibly from my entrails with only a word. And I think it is the one of whom you speak. If, therefore, we receive him here, I fear lest we run the risk of losing the others also. For, behold, I see that all those whom I have devoured from the beginning of the world are disquieted. My belly is in pain. Lazarus who was snatched from me before seems to me no good sign. For not like a dead man, but like an eagle he flew away from me, so quickly did the earth cast him out. Therefore I adjure you by your gifts and mine, do not bring him here. For I believe that he comes here to raise all the dead. And I tell you this: By the darkness which surrounds us, if you bring him here, none of the dead will be left for me.'

While Satan and Hades were speaking thus to one another, a loud voice like thunder sounded, 'Lift up your gates, O rulers, and be lifted up, O everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in.' (Psalm 24:7) When Hades heard this, he said to Satan, 'Go out, if you can, and withstand him.' So Satan went out. Then Hades said to his demons, 'Secure strongly and firmly the gates of brass and the bars of iron, and hold my bolts, and stand upright and keep watch on everything. For if he comes in, woe will seize us. When the forefathers heard that, they all began to mock him, saying, 'O all-devouring and insatiable one, open, that the King of Glory may come in.' The prophet David said, 'Do you not know, blind one, that when I lived in the world, I prophesied that word: "Lift up your gates, O rulers"?' (Psalm 24:7) Isaiah said, 'I foresaw this by the Holy Spirit and wrote, "The dead shall arise, and those who are in the tombs shall be raised up, and those

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who are under the earth shall rejoice. (Isa. 26:19) O death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?" (1 Cor. 15:55) Again the voice sounded, 'Lift up the gates.' When Hades heard the voice the second time, he answered as if he did not know it and said, 'Who is this King of Glory?' The angels of the Lord said, 'The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.' (Psalm 24:8) And immediately at this answer the gates of brass were broken in pieces and the bars of iron were crushed and all the dead who were bound were loosed from their chains, and we with them. And the King of Glory entered as a man, and all the dark places of Hades were illuminated.

Hades at once cried out, 'We are defeated, woe to us. But who are you, who have such authority and power? And who are you, who without sin have come here, you who appear small and can do great things, who are humble and exalted, slave and master, soldier and king, and have authority over both the dead and the living? You were nailed to the cross, and laid in the sepulchre, and now you have become free and have destroyed all our power. Are you Jesus, of whom the chief ruler Satan said to us that through the cross and death you would inherit the whole world?' Then the King of Glory seized the chief ruler Satan by the head and handed him over to the angels, saying, 'Bind with irons his hands and his feet and his neck and his mouth.' Then he gave him to Hades and said, 'Take him and hold him fast until my second coming.'

And Hades took Satan and said to him, 'O Beelzebub, heir of fire and torment, enemy of the saints, through what necessity did you contrive that the King of Glory should be crucified, so that he should come here and strip us naked? Turn and see that not one dead man is left in me, but all that you gained through the tree of knowledge you have lost through the tree of the cross. All your joy is changed into sorrow. You wished to kill the King of Glory, but have killed yourself. For since I have received you to hold you fast, you shall learn by experience what evils I shall do to you. O arch-devil, the beginning of death, the root of sin, the end of all evil, what evil did you find in Jesus to procure his destruction? How did you dare to commit such great wickedness? How did you study to bring down such a man into this darkness, through whom you have been deprived of all who have died since the beginning?'

While Hades was thus speaking with Satan, the King of Glory stretched out his right hand, and took hold of our forefather Adam and raised him up. Then he turned to the rest and said, 'Come with me, all you who have died through the tree which this man touched. For behold, I raise you all up

again through the tree of the cross.' With that he sent them all out. And our forefather Adam was seen to be full of joy, and said, 'I give thanks to your majesty, O Lord, because you have brought me up from the lowest Hades.' Likewise all the prophets and the saints said, 'We give you thanks, O Christ, Saviour of the world, because you have brought up our life from destruction'. When they had said this, the Saviour blessed Adam with the sign of the cross on his forehead. And he did this also to the patriarchs and prophets and martyrs and forefathers, and he took them and sprang up out of Hades. And as he went the holy fathers sang praises, following him and saying, 'Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord. (Psalm 118:26) Alleluia. To him be the glory of all the saints.'

This version is somewhat distinctive in that it emphasizes that all the dead were rescued and Satan is left bound. Other Christians did not quite accept that death and sin are currently powerless. After all, we still experience both the same way we did before Jesus. Other versions suggest that Jesus had a symbolic victory in his own resurrection, and the absolute victory will happen in the future when Jesus returns.

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3.5 What will Jesus do in the future?

Many Americans today expect Jesus to return within their lifetimes. What we believe about when Jesus will return and what will happen when he returns has serious implications for how we live our lives. For example, if I believe Jesus will return soon and destroy the earth, it hardly matters whether I recycle my aluminum cans. If I believe Jesus will demand an accounting of what I did with my life, I better hope “teach theology” is a good answer, and that I do it well. Or if I expect the main issue will be whether I believed the right things, I better make sure I follow the right denomination. Even for those who do not believe that Jesus will return, expectations of the second coming are a significant part of American society and culture. One often hears references to the Second Coming, Judgment Day, the Rapture, the End of Time, the End of the World, and “the apocalypse.”

The followers of Jesus concluded that Jesus was the Messiah even though the Romans killed him. They concluded that his death was not the end of his significance. They concluded that he rose from the dead for the forgiveness of sin and victory of life. They also concluded that the resurrection was not the end of the story either. Jesus would return, and return soon, to do all the things the Messiah was expected to do, to bring about the full kingdom of God, and to vindicate his followers.

The first Christians thought that Jesus would return very soon, within their lifetimes. On the one hand, one might say they were wrong. On the other hand, one might say they were right to live their lives in a constant state of readiness. They also thought that the main significance of Jesus would come in the future, whereas the first coming was just a warning of the coming judgment. Over time, Christians found more and more significance to what Jesus had already done to make present the Kingdom of God (realized eschatology), even though in some senses the complete fulfillment remains for the future.

3.5.1 Come again in glory

While he lived on earth, Jesus did not actually do most of what the Son of Man and Messiah were supposed to do. Recall from Daniel 7 that the Son of Man was supposed to have the glory of God, perhaps even be God. When Jesus lived, however charismatic he may have been, he did not live a glorious life or die a glorious death. Those who saw him as Son of Man, or Son of Man designate, were able to look past appearances. The second coming of Jesus was expected to differ from the first coming primarily in that the glory of Jesus would be unmistakable to all.

For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father’s glory, and then he will repay everyone according to his conduct. ²⁸ Amen, I say to you,

there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. (Matthew 16:27-28)

When Jesus returns in glory the most obvious action expected is the defeat of the Roman Empire, seen as the opposite of the Kingdom of God. Part of the problem is that they were mean. They harshly occupied Judea, they killed Jesus, they persecuted the followers of Jesus. However, there was a deeper problem. If you saw the Roman Empire in its prime—its architecture, palaces, temples, army, pageantry, and wealth—the first word to come to mind might be “glorious.” Meanwhile, Jesus was far from glorious. The followers claimed to see past these appearances and know that the opposite was really the case. Jesus is the one properly deserving of power and glory, and Rome is a dirty disgusting excrement monster. When Jesus returns, all will see what the Christians now see.

This critique of the Roman Empire is a major theme of the book of Revelation. Some Christians read the book as a play-by-play prediction of future calamities and battles at the end of the world. The Catholic Church does not take the book literally as a prediction of events. Its insight is in its critique of false glory, false power, false empire, and false worship. Drawing from Daniel 7, Revelation acknowledges the appearances of the power of Rome, but contrasts it with the true and enduring power of God.

Then I saw a beast come out of the sea with ten horns and seven heads; on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads blasphemous name[s].² The beast I saw was like a leopard, but it had feet like a bear's, and its mouth was like the mouth of a lion. To it the dragon gave its own power and throne, along with great authority.³ I saw that one of its heads seemed to have been mortally wounded, but this mortal wound was healed. Fascinated, the whole world followed after the beast.⁴ They worshiped the dragon because it gave its authority to the beast; they also worshiped the beast and said, “Who can compare with the beast or who can fight against it?”

⁵ The beast was given a mouth uttering proud boasts and blasphemies, and it was given authority to act for forty-two months.⁶ It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling and those who dwell in heaven.⁷ It was also allowed to wage war against the holy ones and conquer them, and it was granted authority over every tribe, people, tongue, and nation.⁸ All the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, all whose names were not written from the foundation of the world in the book of life, which belongs to the Lamb who was slain.⁹ Whoever has ears ought to hear these words.¹⁰ Anyone destined for captivity goes into captivity. Anyone destined to be slain by the sword shall be slain by the

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sword. Such is the faithful endurance of the holy ones. (Revelation 13:1-10)

All sorts of nasty things happen to those who give in to the power of the Empire. In the end, Revelation promises a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem in which the righteous will enjoy the blessing they deserve.

3.5.2 Judge the living and the dead

Consistent with Daniel 7, the Son of God is expected to judge all nations. The following passage from Matthew suggests that the criterion for being judged is charitable treatment of fellow humans, particularly those most in need. Other passages emphasize other criteria for judgment. Some emphasize belief that Jesus is Lord is most important. Others emphasize enduring suffering for Christ. Some passages suggest that God already knew from the beginning of the world who would be saved and who would be condemned.

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne,³² and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.³³ He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.³⁴ Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me,³⁶ naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.'³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?³⁹ When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?'⁴⁰ And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.'⁴¹ Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart



Figure 19: Detail of Albrecht Dürer's woodcut of Revelation 13

from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³ a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.' ⁴⁴ Then they will answer and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?' ⁴⁵ He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.' ⁴⁶ And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." (Matthew 25:31-40)

Matthew 25 does not mention any dead people being judged, but other passages suggest the dead will be resurrected so that they can be judged.

Next I saw a large white throne and the one who was sitting on it. The earth and the sky fled from his presence and there was no place for them. ¹² I saw the dead, the great and the lowly, standing before the throne, and scrolls were opened. Then another scroll was opened, the book of life. The dead were judged according to their deeds, by what was written in the scrolls. ¹³ The sea gave up its dead; then Death and Hades gave up their dead. All the dead were judged according to their deeds. ¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were thrown into the pool of fire. (This pool of fire is the second death.) ¹⁵ Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the pool of fire. (Revelation 20:11-15)

3.5.3 The Resurrection of the Body and the Intermediate State

The earliest Christians expected Jesus to return soon, before they died. As time went on and followers of Jesus started dying of old age, the question came up of whether they would miss out on Jesus' glory and the Kingdom of God when he returns. Paul assured Christians that those who died believing in Christ would be resurrected with their bodies when Jesus returns. As we have seen, Paul balanced the Jewish idea of the resurrection of the body with the aristocratic Greek aversion to zombies by saying that the resurrected body would be incorruptible.

For several centuries it was assumed that Christians who died are just dead, waiting for the second coming of Jesus. Over time, people more and more were asking what happens to people between the time they die and the time Jesus raises them from the dead. This time is called the **intermediate state**. Eventually, the teaching that most stuck is the following:

- At death the soul separates from the body. The body is put in the ground.
- The soul goes before God immediately. If the soul is righteous the soul can be with God immediately (heaven). If the soul is wicked it is tormented immediately (hell). Torment could mean the absence of God.

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- Jumping ahead, the official Catholic Church will teach that souls that are basically okay but have some stain of sin on them need to be cleaned up before they are ready for God's presence. This cleansing or purgation is called **purgatory**. It can be unpleasant if one has many sins to wash or burn away, but it is not as unpleasant as hell, and it is not permanent. Protestants reject this idea as not stated in scripture.
- When Jesus does return in glory, all souls will return to their bodies and resurrect. The combined body + soul will be judged again. The outcome is the same, but the pleasure of union with God is more complete if it is experienced in body as well as soul. Similarly, hell with a body is even worse than hell without a body.

3.5.4 The Rapture

Some Christians believe that the end of the world will be a long scenario, beginning with the sudden rapture of all true believers. They will disappear to be with God, while everyone else is caught up in horrible catastrophes as God and Satan battle, destroying the earth in the process. This viewpoint has spread in Evangelical Christianity and American popular culture, particularly the "Left Behind" books and movies. This message has appeal because it promises immunity from suffering. The word rapture does not appear in the Bible. The Catholic tradition does not teach this belief. Although we can respect the beliefs of our fellow Christians, Catholic theologians would emphasize the following points.



Figure 20: This portrayal of the resurrection of the body conveys the idea that the living and the dead reunite in a physical manner (with a dated view of an ideal body). Christ's return and judgment are not included here.

- The New Testament does not promise that Christians will be immune from suffering. Rather, Christians can expect extra suffering if they remain true to the challenge of Christ. The New Testament promises meaning in suffering and a greater good in the long run.
- We should not assume that Jesus wants no more of this earth and its ecosystem than its destruction.
- If Jesus wants to battle the forces of evil Jesus can do so. Jesus does not expect us to start any nuclear wars to bring about the end of the world.

3.5 What will Jesus do in the future?

- Christians should not target the Jewish people for death or forced conversion as a means to bring about the end of the world.
- Jesus calls us to live our lives such that we can be ready to give an accounting at any moment. We should also be prepared for the future if that moment does not come. We have not wasted our time if that moment does not come in our lifetimes.

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3.6 How should God's people live their daily lives?

The early Jesus movement (the term Christianity too much implies an organized religion, which came later) can rightly be considered a **Jewish sect**. That is, they were a minority group within Judaism that rejected the legitimacy of the mainstream of Judaism, and its leaders in particular. We know about other Jewish sects from around the time of the early Jesus movement. Some of them are strikingly similar to the Jesus movement. The Jewish historian **Josephus**, writing for a Roman audience at the end of the first century CE, tells us about a Jewish group called the Essenes. The **Essenes** lived their daily lives in ways similar to what we know about the early Jesus movement from the letters of Paul and the sequel to the Gospel of Luke, the Acts of the Apostles. Josephus tells us the Essenes keep communal property, treat all members equally, do not own slaves, do not marry (with exceptions), reject bodily pleasures and passions, and embrace martyrdom. The Essenes seem to be the same basic movement that lived at **Qumran** and kept the library of the **Dead Sea Scrolls**. The early Jesus movement seems to resemble what we know of the Essenes and Qumran sectarians in all ways except the last point discussed here. Contrary to other Jewish sects, Paul argued that followers of Jesus are not necessarily required to keep the Law of Moses (the first five books of the Jewish Bible, or Torah, which other Jews interpret for laws of daily life).

3.6 How should God's people live their daily lives?

Qumran is the site of an ancient settlement in the harsh desert near the Dead Sea. Starting in 1948, the site was discovered along with eleven caves containing scrolls from over two thousand years ago. These scrolls are called the Dead Sea Scrolls. The site seems to have served as a monastery of sorts for a Jewish sect that separated from Jewish life as was dominant in Jerusalem. We call them the Qumran sect, or sects. The movement seems to have had different branches. They generally, but not perfectly, match the Essenes as described by Josephus. They kept very strict purity laws, so it was better to live in the desert to avoid contact with impure people.

The **Dead Sea Scrolls** can be classified into three categories according to the three general ways they are important to understanding Judaism at the time of Jesus. The first category consists of copies of books in the Jewish bible. These are by far the oldest copies of biblical books. In many ways they match the later copies and confirm that scribes did a very good job of copying the texts without modification. In many, sometimes subtle ways, these most ancient copies differ and better reflect the originals.

The second category consists of books that were left out of the Bible for one reason or another, but were very popular among Jews at the time of Christianity. If you ever felt like there is a big jump between the Old and New Testaments, some of these books fill in the gap and complete the transition. These books were treated the same as books that later became part of the Bible, indicating that the very concept of a canon, or a set Bible with certain books included and all other books excluded, developed later.

The third category consists of books that were written by and for this particular sect within Judaism. These books tell us about a minority at the time, not the mainstream Jewish beliefs. However, this minority is remarkably similar to another Jewish sect from that time that went on to become Christianity. There probably was no direct connection between this sect and Jesus himself, but some say John the Baptist (remembered by Christians as a forerunner of Jesus) would have encountered this sect, or that the message of Jesus particularly flourished in this sect. At the very least they are comparable phenomena.

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Figure 21: Hundreds of ancient manuscripts were found in the cave dug into the side of the cliff. Because the region is dry, remote, and desolate the Scrolls were undisturbed since the site was destroyed by the Romans around 70 CE.



Figure 22: Among the Dead Sea Scrolls are the most ancient copies of books of the Bible. Pictured here is the Book of Isaiah.

3.6 How should God's people live their daily lives?

3.6.1 Attitudes toward property



Figure 23: In the 1960s voluntary communes became popular in the United States. There were significant differences among the spiritual, political, economic, and social ideals that drove them. Few were eschatological. Source: PeterSimon.com

The Essenes, Qumran Sect, and Jesus movement all had an ideal of **communal property**. This ideal may not have been fully practiced by all. This may sound like communism, but there is a big difference between voluntary membership in an organization and government control of the means of production. For the Jewish sects, communal equality seems to have been motivated by charity, contempt for wealth, and rejection of earthly concerns.

The Essenes according to Josephus

These men are despisers of riches, and so very communicative as raises our admiration. Nor is there anyone to be found among them who has more than another; for it is a law among them, that those who come to them must let what they have be common to the whole order,—insomuch that among them all there is no appearance of poverty or excess of riches, but everyone's possessions are intermingled with everyone's possessions; and

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so there is, as it were, one patrimony among all the brethren. (Josephus, *The Jewish Wars* 2.122)

Josephus goes on to describe the rule of hospitality that traveling members are welcome by other communities of the sect wherever they go. Hence, they have no need to carry anything with them (or pay baggage fees).

The Community Rule of the Qumran Sect (*Yahad*)

The Qumran Sect had a long procedure for initiating new members. After one year the initiate would hand over his property, but it would be kept separate in case things didn't work out. After the second year the property was permanently mixed together.

If anyone of Israel volunteers for enrollment in the party of the *Yahad*... [After one year] they shall also take steps to **incorporate his property**, putting it under the authority of the Overseer together with that of the general membership, and keeping an account of it—but it shall not yet be disbursed along with that of the general membership. The initiate is not to touch the drink of the general membership prior to passing a second year among the men of the *Yahad*. When that second year has passed, the general membership shall review his case. If it be ordained for him to proceed to full membership in the *Yahad*, they shall enroll him at the appropriate rank among his brothers for discussion of the Law, jurisprudence, participation in pure meals and **admixture of property**. Thenceforth the *Yahad* may draw upon his counsel and judgement. (Qumran Cave 1 Community Rule, Column 6)

The Jesus Movement

The Jesus Movement held a similar ideal, but it was not difficult to join, and membership was not limited to those Jewish by birth. In a society with great disparity of wealth, for every one rich person you can convince to live simply you can provide economic security to ten desperately poor. This appeal is believed to have contributed to the spread of the Movement.

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. (Acts 2:44–46)

The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common. With great power the apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great favor was accorded them all. There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them,

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bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need. (Acts 4:32–35)

Share all things with your brother and do not say that anything is your own.
(Didache 4:8 [not in the New Testament but very early])

3.6.2 Attitudes toward social power

We have already seen the critique of the abuse of power in the Roman Empire. Several Jewish sects rejected all forms of social inequality, even in their own ranks. Certain roles were associated with leadership and responsibility, but these leaders were not to be marked by special privilege, wealth, or status.

Egalitarianism is the principle of social equality. In various contexts it can refer to equality across economic status, race, sex, or all of the above.

The Essenes and the Qumran sect rejected slavery. On this point the early followers of Jesus were not quite so progressive. Paul encouraged a Christian refugee slave to return to his master and obediently serve him. The Didache (early Christian instruction book) encouraged Christian slave owners to treat their slaves well, if they are Christian. The tolerance of slavery may have been driven by the expectation that the current world order was going to end soon anyway, or desire not to annoy the Roman authorities more than they were already. It can at least be said that Paul articulated a **principle of equality** of all followers of Jesus.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Paul's Letter to the Galatians 3:28)

Speaking of male and female, the early Jesus movement seems to have included women to a remarkable degree, at least compared to the standards of the day. It is clear that women were well represented as matrons, deaconesses, missionaries, and martyrs. Even some of the negative things said about women reveal that, whether Paul liked it or not, women were taking leadership roles in the movement. For example, for Paul to say, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man" (1 Timothy 2:12) implies that it had been happening. Similarly, Paul's instruction that female prophets should not lead church services implies that such had been the practice. It may be the case that the Jesus movement permitted women in more roles because they were small and desperate. As we shall see, the situation changes when Christianity becomes structured into a large official institution.

3.6.3 Attitudes toward sexuality

Monasticism is the pursuit of spiritual ideals and separation from matters of the flesh and the world. It implies a separation from ordinary life. Monks generally

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Figure 24: Paul and Thecla teaching together, 6th century painting.



Figure 25: St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai Desert

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live in seclusion from the rest of society, and solitary prayer is common within monastic communities. Monasticism was very popular in early Christianity, and had its forerunners in Judaism. Of all the physical desires and distractions of the world, monks most reject sex, marriage, and family.

Even among those who did not pursue the complete monastic separation, sexuality and marriage were typically viewed as distractions at best. Within this view of sexuality there are several variations. Some viewed complete abstinence as the only way to be saved. Some viewed abstinence as the ideal, but not a requirement. Some viewed sex as necessary for continuation of the species, but only for the continuation of species (that is, they rejected sex outside of fertile times or for enjoyment). Recall that for those who believed the order of nature would change very soon, planning for future generations was a waste of time.

Don't know that I will, but until I can find
me the girl who'll stay and won't play
games behind me, I'll be what I am, a
solitary man. —Neil Diamond

The Essenes according to Josephus

These Essenes reject pleasures as an evil, but esteem continence and the conquest over our passions, to be virtue. They neglect wedlock, but select other persons' children, while they are pliable, and fit for learning, and esteem them to be of their kindred, and form them according to their own manners. They do not absolutely deny the fitness of marriage, and the succession of mankind thereby continued; but they guard against the lascivious behavior of women, and are persuaded that none of them preserve their fidelity to one man.

Moreover, there is another order of Essenes, who agree with the rest as to their way of living, and customs, and laws, but differ from them in the point of marriage, as thinking that by not marrying they cut off the principal part of human life, which is the prospect of succession; nay rather, that if all men should be of the same opinion, the whole race of mankind would fail. However, they try their spouses for three years' probation; and if they find that they have their natural purgations thrice, as trials that they are likely to be fruitful, they then actually marry them. But they do not use to accompany with their wives when they are with child, as a demonstration that they do not marry out of regard to pleasure, but for the sake of posterity.

(Josephus, *The Jewish Wars* Book 2, sections 120-121 and 160-161)

The Community Rule of the Qumran Sect (Yahad)

Multiple rule books were found at Qumran. The Damascus Document seems to reflect a wider, more permissive set of rules that permits marriage within certain limits. The stricter Community Rule assumes that only men are welcome in the community. The

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logic seems to have focused on the requirement of constant purity. They thought of themselves as living with angels and preparing for war that would be led by angels. Sex was seen as defiling and repulsive to angels.

The Jesus Movement

Even before full organized monasticism, the early followers of Jesus expressed the ideal that marriage should be avoided, or those already married before following Jesus should avoid sex. Paul advises that sexuality within marriage is at least better than uncontrolled lust outside of marriage.

Now in regard to the matters about which you wrote: "It is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman," ² but because of cases of immorality every man should have his own wife, and every woman her own husband. ³ The husband should fulfill his duty toward his wife, and likewise the wife toward her husband. ⁴ A wife does not have authority over her own body, but rather her husband, and similarly a husband does not have authority over his own body, but rather his wife. ⁵ Do not deprive each other, except perhaps by mutual consent for a time, to be free for prayer, but then return to one another, so that Satan may not tempt you through your lack of self-control. ⁶ This I say by way of concession, however, not as a command. ⁷ Indeed, I wish everyone to be as I am, but each has a particular gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.

⁸ Now to the unmarried and to widows, I say: it is a good thing for them to remain as they are, as I do, ⁹ but if they cannot exercise self-control they should marry, for it is better to marry than to be on fire. (Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians 7:1-9)

John asserts that male virgins have a special status accompanying Jesus.

These are they who were not defiled with women; they are virgins and these are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. (Revelation 14:4)

3.6.4 Attitudes toward Gentiles and Jewish law

The historical Jesus was a Jew who followed Jewish law and interpreted how it should be lived in everyday life. He was more strict in some areas and less strict in others, but well within the range of debate among Jews at the time. Furthermore, there is some evidence that the ministry of Jesus was conceived (at least originally) as only for Jews, not Gentiles, "Jesus sent out these twelve after instructing them thus, 'Do not go into pagan territory or enter a Samaritan town. Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'" (Matthew 10:5-6). Soon enough this changed. In fact, the Jesus movement spread much faster among Gentiles than it did among Jews. Although the Essenes and Qumran sects seemed to have allowed Gentiles to convert, they did not promote it actively as the Jesus movement did.

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The question quickly arose whether Gentiles who became followers of Jesus had to observe Jewish laws, such as circumcision. It may have been most important to believe that Jesus is Lord, son of God, who died and rose from the dead. Even if less important, the laws which Jesus himself practiced and interpreted could still be important parts of how the followers of Jesus should live their lives. On the other hand, those laws were not an easy sell, and circumcision in particular can be rather uncomfortable, especially for adults. These details of practice came to be seen as impediments to the most important points of faith. In the end, Christianity rejected the Law of Moses as binding on Gentile followers of Jesus (Jewish followers of Jesus seem to have continued to practice the laws). We know about the debate from two sources. First is Paul's letter to the Galatians, which argues that the laws were only temporarily binding, like training wheels on a bicycle, until faith in Jesus came. Second is the Acts of the Apostles, which presents the laws as an unnecessary burden. Scholars believe the debate was nastier than the sources suggest.

² A person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ... ²³ Before faith came, we were held in custody under law, confined for the faith that was to be revealed. ²⁴ Consequently, the law was our disciplinarian for Christ, that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a disciplinarian. ²⁶ For through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus. (Paul's Letter to the Galatians 3:2, 23-26)

We shall see this passage again in a few weeks. In the 16th century the reformer Martin Luther applied Paul's arguments about the Jewish law to the Catholic sacraments. He argued that faith, not works, is required.

The Acts of the Apostles presents as a story how the Holy Spirit made known the change that Gentiles could be baptized too:

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these things, the holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the word. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter were astounded that the gift of the holy Spirit should have been poured out on the Gentiles also, ⁴⁶ for they could hear them speaking in tongues and glorifying God. Then Peter responded, ⁴⁷ "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people, who have received the holy Spirit even as we have?" ⁴⁸ He ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. (The Acts of the Apostles 10:44-48)

Later, the Spirit also makes known that Jewish laws such as circumcision are not required of Gentile followers of Jesus, but only the core laws against pagan sacrifice, some food laws, and unlawful marriage:

3 WHAT QUESTIONS DID THE EARLY JEWS AND CHRISTIANS ASK?

¹ Some who had come down from Judea were instructing the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved." ...

¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they.

²⁸ It is the decision of the holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities,²⁹ namely, to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meats of strangled animals, and from unlawful marriage. If you keep free of these, you will be doing what is right. Farewell. (Acts 15:1, 11, 28-29)

Note the claim is not that the historical Jesus taught these things, but that the Spirit continues to operate among the followers of Jesus and guides major decisions and reforms.

4 What questions did Christendom ask?

4.1 What changed when the Roman Empire went from persecuting to endorsing Christianity?

From the execution of Jesus by Roman officials up to Constantine in 315 CE, the Jesus movement had a tense relationship with Roman authority. The movement was at best tolerated and often persecuted. Christians refused to worship the emperor as a god, and parts of their message threatened the ruling powers that relied on the oppression of the weak. The Christian movement was small and sometimes literally underground. That all changed **in the fourth century, when Christianity became tolerated and then the official religion of the Roman Empire**. Some consider this to be a great moment in Christian history, the time when the Church triumphed. Measured by number of followers and power, this was the defining moment of the rise of Christianity. Others consider this the worst moment in Christian history. Christianity went from the subversive voice against imperial power to itself the imperial power. Certainly one could argue that the period of Christian domination (Christendom) was an improvement over the previous period of pagan Roman domination. One could also argue that Christianity adopted from the Roman government the very concepts of power that it had previously challenged.

As an underground minority, Christianity was largely a vague movement connecting many independent local churches. Certainly many Christians sought to promote their ideas about Jesus, not only to draw converts from paganism, but also to persuade other followers of Jesus to share their ideas. The Roman Empire provided the infrastructure for people from different churches to visit and correspond by letters. Some figures were more influential than others, and there were even movements within early Christianity. Nevertheless, relatively speaking, Christianity as an underground movement was characterized by diversity. The Christian community in one city might interpret scriptures in a way very different from another community, and they might even have different books that they considered fit for public proclamation (scripture). As Christianity became the official religion of the

Orthodoxy

Today the word “orthodoxy” can have different meanings in different contexts. Especially when capitalized, Orthodox Christianity (or specifically Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, etc.) refers to eastern Christians not in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church, and not Protestant. In Judaism, Orthodoxy is the strictest of the three major movements, besides Conservative and Reform. Not capitalized, some use “orthodox” to mean strict and strongly adhering to official teaching.

4 WHAT QUESTIONS DID CHRISTENDOM ASK?

Roman Empire, there was a perceived need to **standardize the religion** across the Empire. This created a new imperative to **define orthodoxy and suppress heresy**. The word “orthodoxy” (ορθόδοξος) means “straight beliefs.” The word “heresy” (αἵρεσις) originally meant “choice,” “opinion” or “school of thought.” In this period, having a personal opinion was a bad thing, and conforming to the teachings of Jesus and the chain of authority he commissioned was a good thing.

4.1.1 Dates

- 313 Constantine unites the Roman Empire and authorizes Christianity
- 325 Constantine convenes Council of Nicaea
- 410 Rome sacked by Visigoths
- 622 Rise of Islam
- 1054 Schism between western, Latin-speaking Christians centered in Rome and eastern, Greek-speaking Christians centered in Constantinople.
- 1095 First Crusade by Western Christians to reclaim Christian rule in Jerusalem from Islamic rulers

4.1.2 People

Constantine was a Roman general and emperor who converted to Christianity and initiated the Christianization of the Roman Empire. Scholars debate whether his conversion was rooted in a deep spiritual experience, a political calculation to capitalize on the strength of the growing Christian movement, or some of both. He commissioned the copying of the Bible, which for the first time forced the question of exactly what books in what versions are part of the Bible. He called the bishops of the Empire to come together at Nicaea to arrive at some agreement about the nature of Jesus in relationship to God the Father (next section). He also moved his capital to Byzantium, later named after him as Constantinople. This effectively divided the Roman Empire into east (with a capital in Constantinople, speaking Greek) and west (capital in Rome, speaking Latin). Christendom largely followed this divide, and in 1054 the Great Schism irreparably divided Eastern Orthodox Christianity from Roman Catholic Christianity.

4.1 What changed when the Roman Empire went from persecuting to endorsing Christianity?



Figure 26: Christianity on the other side of the Roman sword. 20th century sculpture of Constantine by Philip Jackson, York, England.

If this course were being taught in Greece we would focus on different major figures after Constantine. As it is, we are taking as a point of departure Christianity as it developed in western Europe and spread to San Antonio. Within western Christianity, the most influential thinker is **Augustine of Hippo**. Augustine was born in 354 and converted to Christianity in 387. He wrote many works which strongly influenced all western Christians, both Catholic and later Protestant. The study of concepts such as original sin, grace, free will, just war theory, and many more center on Augustine. His 22-book series called *The City of God responded to the fall of Rome* by defining Christendom as fundamentally a spiritual “city” that transcended Rome or any other human city. Augustine died in 430, leaving a cathedral and library in Hippo, the city where he served as bishop (see map below).

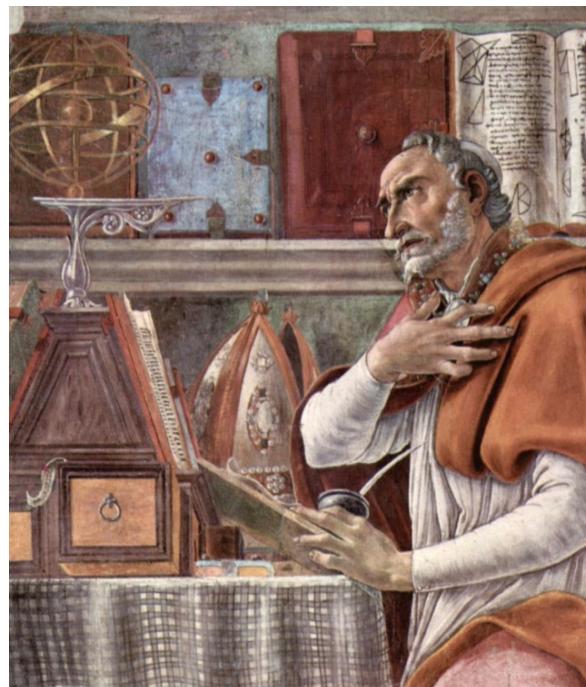


Figure 27: Augustine of Hippo painted by Botticelli. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

4 WHAT QUESTIONS DID CHRISTENDOM ASK?

If I can pick only one more name for you to recognize from Christian history from Constantine to the Protestant Reformation, it would have to be **Thomas Aquinas**. Thomas was born in the Italian town of Aquino in 1225, and died in 1274. In this period Christianity was confronted with masters of logic and philosophy from the Islamic world, which was pressing into Europe through Spain and Turkey. These Islamic thinkers also spread the ideas of Aristotle and other Greek philosophers. It was no longer acceptable to argue "We're right because God said so." Thomas used logical argument to prove that Christian faith was rational and consistent with the fundamental insights of non-Christian rational observers of the natural world, such as Aristotle.

One could say that Augustine and Aquinas were ahead of their times. One could also say that they created through their own influence the major trends that developed over the subsequent centuries. In the fifteenth century some of the Protestant Reformers thought of themselves as working out what Augustine had already anticipated. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the clash of faith and reason would be addressed in terms laid out by Aquinas. We will return to these issues later in the course.

4.1.3 Christology: What is the nature of Jesus?

Christianity is defined by belief in Christ, namely that Jesus of Nazareth is Christ. What was not uniformly defined as of the time of Constantine was exactly what was to be believed about Christ. **Christology is discourse about the nature of Christ.** As we have already seen, the early Jesus movement called Jesus "Lord" among other titles that could connote divine nature. But what exactly was the relationship between Jesus and God? Is Jesus God or human? How literally can we take the images of Father and Son? The following positions were all discussed around the time of the council of Nicaea.

- Jesus was partially God and partially human.

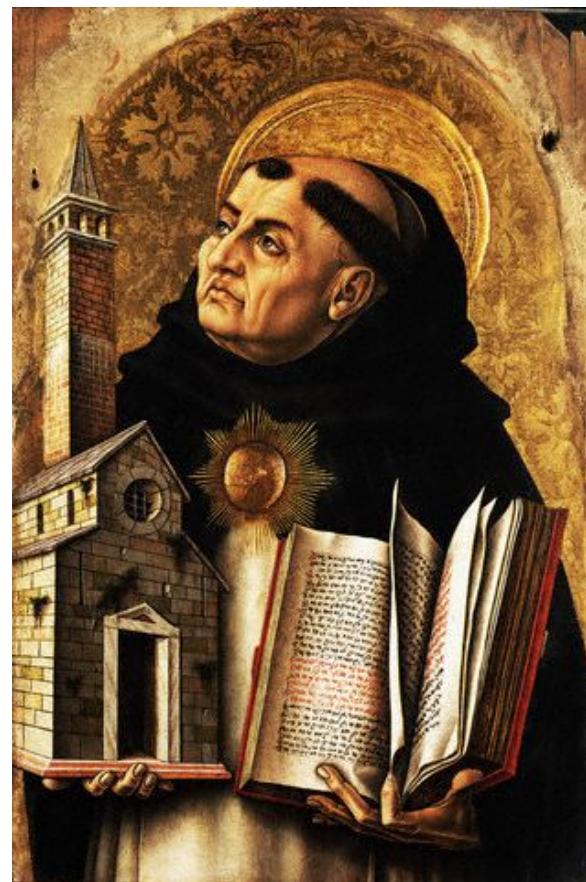


Figure 28: Thomas Aquinas: A scholar in service of the Church in the Middle Ages. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

4.1 What changed when the Roman Empire went from persecuting to endorsing Christianity?

- Jesus was a human being who was adopted by God or elevated to divine status.
- Jesus was God pretending to be a human being (Docetism).
- Jesus was a divine person and a human person occupying the same space.
- Jesus was **fully divine and fully human in one person**.

Only the last went on to be accepted in Christianity as it survived.

A related question was when Jesus came into being. Was there ever a time before Jesus existed? Again, several options were considered.

- Christ came into existence when Jesus was born in Palestine around the year 1 CE. Although the New Testament as we have it would rule out this position, before there was a New Testament some followed Jesus as a great teacher but not a being that existed prior to physical birth.
- Jesus was begotten by God as the firstborn son even before the world was created. As the language of father and son makes clear, there was a time when the Father existed and the Son did not. The Father and Son are extremely close in nature, but only God the Father is eternal and God the Son came along later (Arianism).
- Jesus is **eternally begotten** by God as the firstborn son of God. The metaphor of father and son should not be taken so literally as to mean the Son is derivative of or subordinate to the Father. There never was a time when the Father existed and the Son did not.

Again, only the last went on to be accepted in Christianity as it survived. The bishops at Nicaea recognized that concepts such as “fully divine and fully human” and “eternally begotten” are difficult to grasp in human terms. This did not bother them, however. They did not expect the nature of God to be fully graspable by humans, since humans are generally stupid in comparison with God. These irresolvable logical short-circuits were called “**mysteries**” and were designed to blow your mind more than to make sense.

Once one accepts that God the Father and God the Son are two persons in one eternal being, it is not hard to extend the same logic to the Holy Spirit. This is the idea of the **Trinity: the belief that God is truly one God and three persons in one God**. For Jews and Muslims, this is impossible and compromises the oneness of God. Even if it is not possible for humans to fully grasp, Christians assert that it is possible for God. One implication is that God is relational not only with us, God’s creatures, but within God’s own nature. God cannot be thought of as having a disagreement such that two persons would vote against the third person. However, it does suggest that the order of the cosmos, the way of God which we strive to imitate, is more collaborative than individualistic.

4 WHAT QUESTIONS DID CHRISTENDOM ASK?

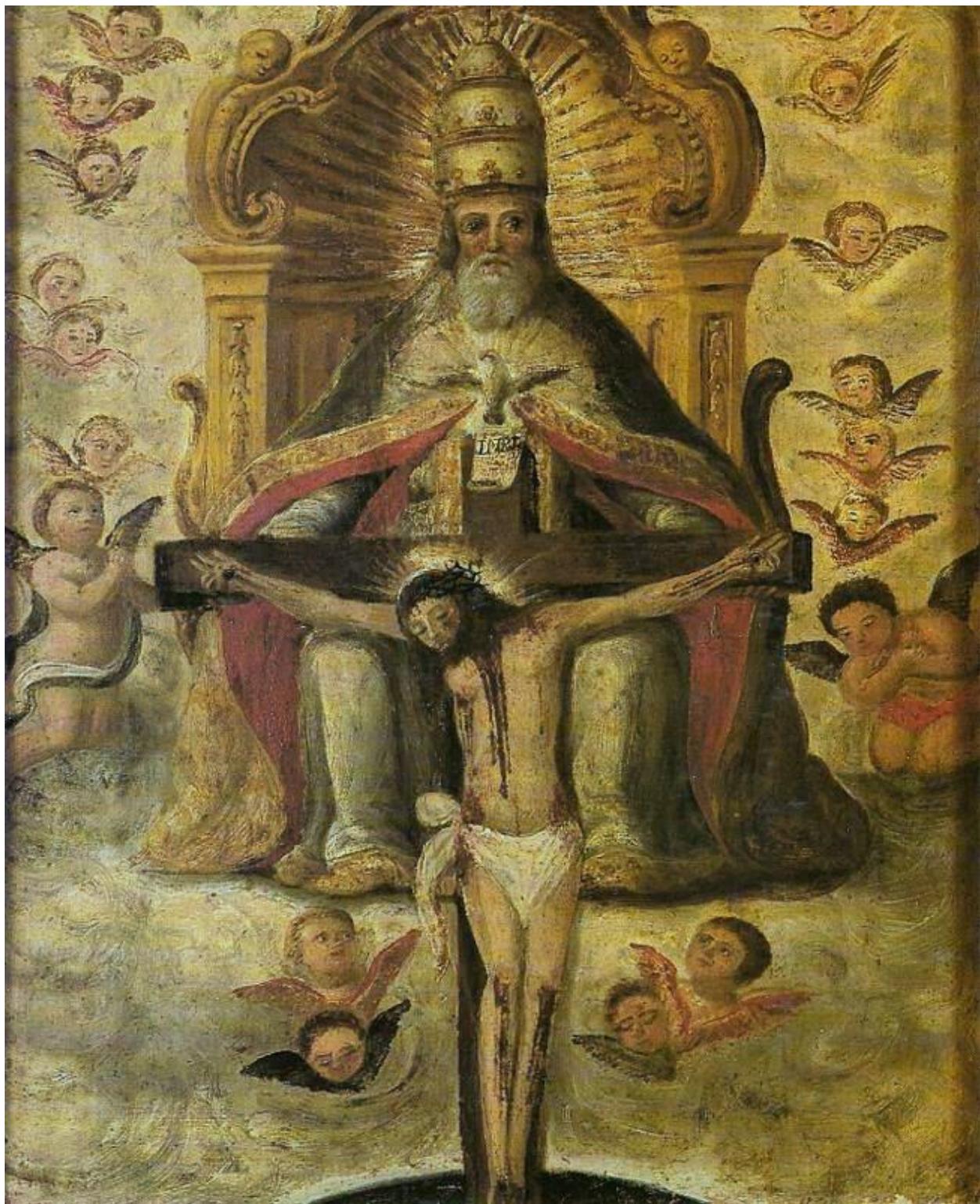


Figure 29: In older art the Trinity is often represented as an old man, a young man, and a dove. In more recent art one might see three identical connected figures. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

4.1 What changed when the Roman Empire went from persecuting to endorsing Christianity?

4.1.4 Documents: The Nicene Creed

Below is the creed (statement of belief) largely formulated by the council of Nicaea to articulate the three persons of God, the eternality of God the Son, and the full humanity of Jesus. Almost all Christians today accept this statement of belief according to some interpretation.

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.

4.1.5 Places

Know the following major Christian centers in the fourth century.

- Byzantium / Constantinople / Istanbul – capital of the Eastern Roman Empire named after Constantine in the fourth century. Conquered by the Muslim Ottoman Turks in 1453.
- Nicaea and Chalcedon – sites of major ecumenical councils (meeting of bishops to clarify teachings)
- Rome – lost political significance after sacked by Visigoths in 410 but continued to be the spiritual center of Western Christianity.
- Carthage and Hippo – most remembered as home of Augustine
- Antioch – most associated with the plain-sense interpretation of scripture
- Alexandria – most associated with allegorical interpretation of scripture.

4 WHAT QUESTIONS DID CHRISTENDOM ASK?



Figure 30: The Roman Empire around 300 CE. Look for Rome and Nicaea. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

4.2 What is the Church?

In different centuries Christians would offer different explanations of what it means to be a Christian. We have talked about beliefs and practices, and those are important. Especially in the period of Christendom between Constantine and the Reformation, the core or **what it means to be a Christian is to be a citizen of the Church**. The Church may be oriented toward Christ, but the average Christian is oriented toward the Church and experiences the Church more directly. Certainly there were practical concerns in organizing a Church that seeks to deliver (mediate) salvation from Christ to a large number of people. There were also theoretical, theological concerns. Theological **discourse about the nature of the Church is ecclesiology**, from the Greek *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία) (church, originally assembly or congregation).

4.2.1 Ideas to get out of our heads in order to understand this period

There are three ideas that do not apply to the period before the 16th century. You may have heard about them already, and we will talk about them more later. For now we should acknowledge them only to be clear that they are later developments.

First, starting with the Protestant Reformation we see the rise of **individualism** in general and in what it means to be a Christian in particular. Today you might hear people (Protestants or Catholics under the influence of Protestantism) say that what it means to be a Christian is to have a personal relationship with Jesus. With that starting point, belonging to a Church is not really necessary, or at most could be helpful as facilitator. In the earlier period citizenship in the Church is a collective relationship and a necessary component of being a Christian.

Another idea is found in Catholicism but not until the 20th century. Today Catholic theologians talk about the Church as the people of God, the collective hearts of the faithful. The implication here is that it implies that **all the baptized are equal members of the Church**. This includes the hierarchy (priests, bishops, pope) and laity (non-ordained Christians). This view often comes along with the argument that the Holy Spirit works through the Church in a bottom-up manner, rather than a top-down manner. That is, the collective faithful have a sense of the true faith by virtue of their baptism rather than the idea that the Holy Spirit acts only through the bishops, whom the laity should simply obey.

A related idea that does not apply in the middle ages is **democracy**. Ancient Greeks and Romans (among others) did have councils of elites that voted on things, but not until modernity do we get the notion that governments derive their legitimacy from the consent of the governed, and that the will of a majority of commoners is the highest authority. In the Middle Ages the only conceivable way of governing was through **hierarchy**, in both senses. Originally the word hierarchy meant “rule of priests.” Today the word is usually used to mean a chain of command with many

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localized rulers reporting to a higher ranking authority, who reports to a higher ranking authority, and so forth (usually visualized as a pyramid). In Catholicism the order of ranks is laity (including monks and nuns), deacon, priest, bishop, archbishop, cardinal, pope. In the army, for example, the “hierarchy” (in the second sense) is roughly sergeant, lieutenant, captain, major, colonel, general.

4.2.2 Citizenship in the Roman Empire and Medieval Europe

As Christianity became large and powerful it organized itself around the only power structure that it knew, namely the political hierarchy of the Roman Empire and medieval Europe. The Roman Empire had the emperor at the top and citizens at the bottom, with several ranks in between. Being a subject of the emperor did not mean having direct access to the emperor and following direct orders. Rather, **citizens were governed by local authorities who acted on behalf of higher ranking officials**, all the way up to the emperor. In our society it is conceivable (if not efficient) that you might write a letter to the president of the United States about a burned out street light, or to the president of the University about not enough recycling bins. In the Roman Empire you would not dream of such arrogance. For the most part, disobeying the local representative of the emperor was as bad as disobeying the emperor directly. The idea that the local ruler is part of a chain leading to the emperor was satisfying enough.

It was no large stretch to **apply the ideas about the Roman emperor to Christ**. After all, the Roman emperor was also considered a god and someone most people could not see or touch except in the form of a statue or coin. Having a personal relationship with Christ was no more plausible (or desirable, really) than having a personal relationship with the emperor. Having a place in a chain of representation was as much as one could hope for.

This is not to say that Christians adopted the power structure of the Roman Empire without adjustment. There were major innovations in thinking of the Church as the mystical body of Christ. Also, as the Roman Empire transformed and declined, theologians such as Augustine developed a more abstract notion of the Church that was not reducible to tangible, human agents. Christ, unlike an emperor, could not die (again) or be defeated.

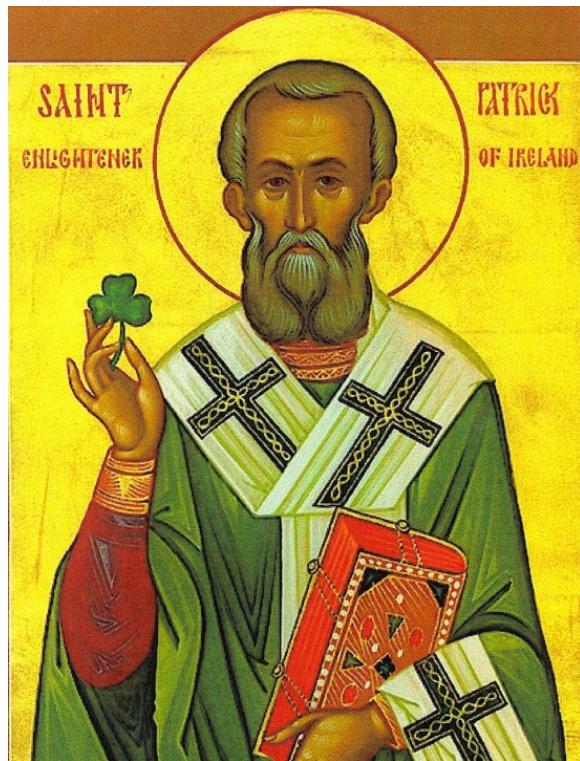


Figure 31: Patrick spread Christianity in Ireland and now is in heaven, so if you're Irish he might be able to put in a good word for you.

More so in the Middle Ages, one's place in society depended on a system of patronage. You could not count on getting what you wanted on the merits of the case alone; you needed connections. **You needed a patron or advocate who could bring your case to someone more powerful.** You might look for someone who was well connected above but sympathetic to you in particular. This way of thinking about making requests to higher authorities led people to think of approaching Christ through patrons living and dead. Perhaps in theory I could pray to Jesus directly, but the prayer of someone closer to Jesus might be better heard. Perhaps my grandmother (living or dead) is holier than I am, and has a better foundation to make requests. Even though I am a sinner, because she is my grandmother, she will go to bat for me. There were also different patron saints for different professions, places in life, and places in the world. Basically, if someone from your high school is now a powerful person in a corporation, government, or heaven, you might ask that person to help you out. Similarly, there was a cultural norm that women were more compassionate than men. The wife or daughter of my master might be more sympathetic to my situation and she could say something to my master. Along those lines, Mary, the Mother of God and Queen of Heaven, might be a good place to start when asking for compassion. This is not the whole story of how Catholic theology understands

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the communion of the saints. However, it is related to the historical origins of how Christians understood themselves in relationship to Christ through the Church based on analogy with their relationship to the king through administrators and patrons.

4.2.3 Mediator of salvation

Just as the emperor of Rome protected the citizens of Rome through many agents (generals, armies, governors), **Christ commissioned agents to act on Christ's behalf to save souls.** Christ saves Christians, but Christ saves Christians through the Church. Thus, one needs the Church. The belief was that Christ called many to follow him, but commissioned a few as leaders to act on his behalf in his absence. These leaders in turn commission successors, such that even today bishops can claim to have been made a bishop by someone who was made a bishop by someone who was made a bishop by... all the way back to Christ.

Take for example the Eucharist. Christ gathered his disciples and instructed them to break bread, which becomes his body. Variously conceived, eating this body of Christ meant participating in the Church, understood as the body of Christ, and participating in the resurrection of the body of Christ. One needs to eat the bread of life in order to have eternal life. In the earliest Jesus movement perhaps any gathering could perform this ritual with or without an agent appointed by Christ. **As the Church became institutionalized and structured, not just anyone could take the place of Christ in this ritual, only someone who was duly appointed** (no matter how long that chain of appointment may be). In a very real sense, the Church had a Monopoly on salvation. Even if the ultimate supplier was Christ, in practice it could only be obtained through official channels.

This is the core of what Martin Luther rejected in the 16th century, as we shall see in a few weeks. The Catholic Church did not accept all of Luther's points, but it did reform itself in response to some of his points. The above way of understanding the role of the Church as mediator of Christ's salvation is true of the **Catholic Church in the Middle Ages but not today.**

4.2.4 Magisterium

Catholic theologians in the 21st century will say that all the faithful are the Church, and the leaders are part of the Church. Nevertheless, many non-theologians still refer



Figure 32: Christ hands the keys of the Church to Peter.

to what “the Church” does or teaches when they mean what the Magisterium does or teaches. **The Magisterium is the teaching authority of the Catholic Church, namely the bishops in their role of clarifying and teaching proper beliefs and practices.** Although theologians today would not say that the Magisterium, the Vatican, or the Pope are “the Church” any more than I am, in the Middle Ages there was a tendency to view the Magisterium as being the real Church, acting on behalf of Christ, in contrast to the followers.

4.2.5 The Donatists’ Church of Saints and Augustine’s Universal Church of Sinners

Theologians such as Augustine had a very high ideal of the Church as the body of Christ and bride of Christ. However, they were not unaware of the frailty of the humans that made up the Church. There was never a generation in which there were no corrupt priests or bishops. There have been different views of what to do about it.

One of the early scandals in Christianity was bishops who compromised in the face of persecution. Christianity held the idea that faith is more sacred than life, and one should choose death (martyrdom) rather than renounce Christ or worship the emperor. Many lived up to that standard, but many others facing a horrible death gave in.

The question was what to do with those people once the persecution ended. **The Donatists argued that someone who sinned in such a way had permanently lost the Holy Spirit and could never again exercise leadership of the Church.** They thought the Church had no room for sinners, and they preferred a small Church with no tolerance for shortcomings.

Augustine rejected the high standards of the Donatists in favor of a larger Church that could include and work through sinners. Augustine recognized all human beings as fundamentally sinners. We may work very hard to sin as little as possible, but even the greatest of humans never quite live up to Christ’s level of perfection. Christ is perfect and the Church is perfect in a general sense even though the individual humans within the Church are not perfect. Since the Church is the body of Christ, Christ makes it possible for the Church to offer perfect worship to God, even though nobody else ever lives up to that. The idea is that **Christ uses the Church to carry out Christ’s work, but Christ also fills in for the shortcomings of individuals**

Capitalization

Church is always capitalized when it is part of a name of an organization, such as the Roman Catholic Church or the Presbyterian Church in America. Theologians generally capitalize Church when they mean the one abstract ideal of the body of Christ, as in *the Church*. It is lowercase when it refers to any old church or churches, unless it is a title. Thus, there are many Catholic churches in San Antonio, one of which is the church around the corner, the name of which is Holy Rosary Catholic Church.

4 WHAT QUESTIONS DID CHRISTENDOM ASK?

within the Church. For example, if a sacrament such as Baptism or Eucharist is presided over by a priest who was secretly unfit for the sacrament, the sacrament is still valid for the recipient of the sacrament. Augustine certainly did not condone corruption in the Church, but he did insist that the good that the Church does on behalf of Christ is not undone by a few bad bishops. Christ's love for the Church is such that Christ will never allow the Church to go completely off course, and Christ compensates for the small mistakes his beloved may make.

Whereas the Donatists preferred a small Church, from which it is easy to be excluded if one sins, Augustine preferred a large Church that included everyone who made some effort to follow Christ, even if the shortcomings were more pronounced than the successes. **This “big tent” approach to Christianity, in contrast to the Donatist approach, was called the universal Church.** The Greek word for universal is *katholikos* (καθολικός), **catholic**. Today, especially when capitalized, people use the term “Catholic” to refer to the Roman Catholic Church, as opposed to Eastern Orthodox or Protestant. Originally the catholic Church was the general, universal church of all the baptized, sinners or not. Although Catholicism does have a concept of excommunication for serious, unrepentant rejection of the core teachings of Christ through the Church, simply being a sinner does not make a baptized person any less Catholic.

4.3 What is our relationship to the Jewish scriptures and people?

4.3 What is our relationship to the Jewish scriptures and people?

We have been talking about how the Jesus movement and Christianity developed a changing relationship to the Roman Empire. At the same time, Christianity also came to define itself in terms of Judaism. At first, the Jesus movement was Jewish in every way, but Jesus' followers felt rejected and persecuted by the Jewish leadership as much as by the Roman Empire. In the first few centuries some Christians sought to break any relationship with Judaism. Christianity as it survived did in fact maintain a relationship with Judaism, but hardly a healthy relationship. Only in the past 50 years did Roman Catholic Christianity and other major denominations make significant progress in building a healthy relationship with Judaism.

It is normal for a community to define itself. It is normal for a community to define its borders by making clear what it is not, and passionately excluding the "other." There is always "us" and "them." The way Christendom defined "us" in contrast to the Jewish "them" is more complex than it may first appear. Today both communities remain grounded in firmly distinct identities, but we have learned that establishing a sense of self need not be at the expense of the other.

4.3.1 The Early Jesus Movement

Jesus was Jewish. He followed and interpreted Jewish law. All of his first disciples were Jewish. They considered Jesus to be the fulfillment of the Jewish scriptures. They continued to identify as Jews, keep the law, and go to the Temple as long as it stood (until 70 CE). Paul, for example, did not "convert" from Judaism to Christianity. The term "convert" is only applied to pagans who become Christian, and even then it was not clear whether they needed to follow Jewish law. I, for one, do not think there was a single issue that divided the Jesus movement from the rest of Judaism. Perhaps the biggest factor among many was that the Jesus movement actively spread among non-Jews. Certainly some of these non-Jews thought of themselves as converting to a form of Judaism, and perhaps that were already interested in converting to Judaism. Over time, and especially following the war between Rome and Judea (66–74 CE), these new followers of Jesus did not think of themselves as becoming Jews. The Jews were the "other."



Figure 33: This portrayal of Jesus as a modern Hasidic Jew may not accurately reflect first century Jewish practices, but it makes an accurate point that Jesus followed Jewish law. Illustration by Josie Jammet.

4 WHAT QUESTIONS DID CHRISTENDOM ASK?

Another major factor in the first century is that the followers of Jesus worked very hard to persuade people that Jesus was the Lord, the fulfillment of the Jewish scriptures, the king of the Jews, who died for their sins and would return in glory to judge. However, the problem was that if Jesus was the fulfillment of the Jewish scriptures, why did the Jewish scripture experts not recognize that? If Jesus was the king of the Jews, why did the Jewish leadership not recognize that? **The Jews who wrote the New Testament said some nasty things about these other Jews.** Since the Jewish leadership was perceived as representing “the Jews,” the New Testament refers to these blind and hypocritical Jews as “the Jews.” Of course the apostles were also Jews, but this unfortunate way of referring to a few Jews in the New Testament fueled discrimination against all Jews in later centuries.

The Jesus movement also faced a political dilemma. The Roman Empire tolerated ancient religions even if it did not like them, but new religions or cults did not have the same rights. This would have motivated members of the Jesus movement to claim to be part of or even the true part of the ancient Jewish religion, rather than to claim to be a new religion. We also know that for centuries many individuals, not the leaders of Rabbinic Judaism or Christianity, thought it was possible to be both. They thought it was fine to go to the Jewish place of worship one day and the Christian place of worship the next (especially if it was a festival). On the one hand, many bishops argued that one could not be both Jewish and Christian. On the other hand, the fact that they had to keep arguing it for centuries implies that people were doing otherwise.

The following three sub-sections describe three ways of thinking about the relationship of Christianity to Judaism and its scriptures that were eventually rejected by most Christians. However, they continue to appear in various forms.

4.3.2 Marcionism

Marcion was a second century bishop who could not reconcile the scriptures common to all Jews and Christians with the gospels and epistles about Jesus. He thought the God of the Jewish scriptures was incompatible with the God of the gospels and epistles. He thought the former was earthly and the latter heavenly. He thought the former was physical and the latter spiritual. He thought the former was legalistic and the latter replaced law and punishment with a principle of love. **Marcion concluded that Judaism and Christianity were different religions who serve different gods and should have completely different, non-overlapping scriptures.** He rejected all of the Jewish scriptures and edited the Gospel of Luke and letters of Paul to remove the “Judaizing” tendency of Christians who corrupted the true message of the new religion with the false teaching of compatibility with the old religion.

Two things are striking about the response to Marcion. First, **Christianity as it survived passionately rejected Marcion’s ideas.** They insisted that God the Son

4.3 What is our relationship to the Jewish scriptures and people?

and God the Father are one and the same God. They insisted that Jesus fulfills the Jewish scriptures. They embraced all the Jewish scriptures, even more than Rabbinic Judaism would (which explains why the Catholic Old Testament is longer than the Jewish Bible today). They insisted on the full equality of all scriptures, “old” and “new.” Marcion was perhaps the first heretic to be so passionately rejected.

The second, no less striking feature of the response to Marcion’s ideas is that despite the fervent rejection, **they keep popping up in popular Christianity**. One still hears Christians suggest, contrary to official teaching, that the Old Testament is inferior to the New Testament, or that the God of the Old Testament is different from the God of the New Testament.

4.3.3 Gnosticism

Gnosticism can be thought of as the extreme of opposition between flesh and spirit. It is true that parts of Judaism at the time of Jesus and the New Testament articulate the superiority of the spirit to the flesh. As we shall see, early monasticism developed on the premise that the promotion of spiritual growth requires suppression of fleshy desires. Gnosticism takes the opposition between spirit and flesh to the next level. For example, the Jewish scriptures (from the Israelites) imagine God as the creator of human bodies. But if God is spirit, why would God create its enemy, flesh? The Jewish scriptures portray God as the creator of the earth, but if the material world is a world of corruption and distraction cloaking the spiritual realm, why would the spiritual God create the earth at all?

The Gnostics concluded that within divinity there are ranks. **The lowest rank of divinity is the creator**, who created the earth, the human body, and the lowest, visible rank of heaven. That level of divinity rewards earthly good behavior with earthly pleasures. Humanity is similarly ranked. The lowest of humanity lives in the fleshy realm and worships the material creator. They are not evil, just not elite. **The higher God is purely spiritual**, and the higher humans reject the lower fleshy God, world, laws, and religion. **The elite humans have special knowledge of the invisible spiritual realm, which allows them to overcome the visible realm and achieve the highest spiritual realm of heaven.** The Greek word for knowledge is *gnosis* (γνῶσις), from which the Gnostics took their name. (Later in the course we will encounter the related but opposite term “agnostic” which means lack of knowledge, as in humans cannot know whether there is a God, anything about that God, or how to worship that God.)

The Gnostics believed Christ was not the son of the creator or the fulfillment of the creator’s scriptures. Rather, **the higher God sent Christ on a rescue mission** to infiltrate the physical realm and share with the elect few the secret knowledge necessary to escape into the invisible spiritual realm.

Christianity as it survived asserted that Christ is the Son of the creator God and

4 WHAT QUESTIONS DID CHRISTENDOM ASK?

indeed is the instrument of creation (Nicaea: through him all things were made). The one true God created all things both visible and invisible. As the Jewish scriptures say, all that God made is very good. The human body is indeed the image of God, and God became human flesh, proving the goodness (or potential goodness) of the human body.

Although full-blown Gnosticism died out, like Marcionism, traces of Gnostic-like attitudes pop up from time to time in Christian history. One errs in the direction of Gnosticism if one thinks of the Old Testament and Judaism as earthly and the New Testament and Christianity as spiritual (and therefore inherently superior). One errs in the direction of Gnosticism if one thinks of Jesus as rescuing us from Judaism or opposing the Old Testament. In a very different way, one errs in the direction of Gnosticism if one says, "I hate my body."

4.3.4 Supersession and deicide

As far as Marcion was concerned, Judaism was a completely different religion from Christianity. If he had his way Christians today would have no more concern for the Israelites or Judaism than we would have for the ancient history and religion of China. In rejecting Marcion, Christianity asserted itself as related to the Israelites and Judaism. Christianity asserted itself as the true Israel, in contrast to the fleshy, misguided Jews who departed from being God's people. In a sense Christianity navigated a path between the need to distinguish itself from Judaism, and the position of Marcion that Judaism is irrelevant to Christianity. One unfortunate consequence is to present Christians as the model followers of God and Judaism as the model rejecters of God, despite every opportunity. If Christians define themselves (or Jesus) as the opposite of Judaism, then attacking Judaism is the same as elevating Jesus and Christianity.

The term **supersessionism refers to the idea that Christianity replaces Judaism as God's people**. Judaism is that which is old, obsolete, no longer relevant, having been completely replaced by something new and better. The covenant that God once had with the Jewish people has been abrogated (cancelled), and now they have no God and God has no care for them, except for them to convert to Christianity.

Supersessionism has been rejected by the Roman Catholic Church, partic-



Figure 34: The movie series "The Matrix" has been compared to Gnosticism in that it asserts that the visible world hides a truer reality to which one can escape if one acquires the correct knowledge or way of seeing things. The character "Neo" is overtly Christ-like.

4.3 What is our relationship to the Jewish scriptures and people?

ularly with a document at Vatican II in 1965. Some Christians continue to hold this view in some form. The current Catholic position is that God does not break God's promises. God can offer something better through Christ, but that does not end the possibility of the Jewish people continuing to live under the terms of the existing contract. To be clear, Catholicism does not embrace relativism (the idea that any religion is as good as any other), but one can believe that one's own way is best without denying goodness or holiness in other ways.

Supersessionist theology also comes with an explanation of how it is that the covenant between God and the Jewish people has been cancelled. God broke the covenant with the Jewish people because they killed God's Son. The term "**deicide**" means "God murder" (compare homicide, fratricide, suicide, etc.). **The accusation is that all Jews in every time and place are responsible for killing Jesus and rejecting God.** The only way to repent of that sin is to convert to Christianity.

Today Catholicism teaches that Jesus died in order to take away the sin of the world, not because the Jews (or the Romans) killed him. Jesus accepted his death willingly. The individual Jews and Romans who did take part did not act on behalf of all Jews everywhere. Furthermore, human sin does not break God's covenants. In fact, God's covenant with the Jewish people accounts for sin and punishment, so sinning and being punished fulfills rather than destroys the covenant. Human sin can make God "angry" but unlike God's mercy, God's wrath does not extend to descendants indefinitely. **Nothing could force God to revoke God's promises or contracts.**

One of the earliest Christian articulations of supersession and deicide comes from the late second-century bishop **Melito of Sardis**. Melito's beautiful poetry contrasts with the nasty content of what he says about the Jews. It is worth being aware that in Sardis the Jewish community was far more established and powerful than the small, persecuted early Christian movement. Melito was trying to distinguish himself and his followers from the local synagogue which likely shared members with his own congregation. We know Melito was under attack from other Christians for being "too Jewish," an accusation which had some truth and led him to dramatically differentiate himself. The following excerpts come from Melito's homily for Easter, around the same time that the Jewish Passover festivities were going on. Presumably some were inclined to celebrate both festivals. The first excerpt describes supersessionism.



Figure 35: If you get your information from Mel Gibson you might think that every Jew's idea of a good time is killing some Jesus. Stop thinking that.

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³⁶ Without the model, no work of art arises. Is not that which is to come into existence seen through the model which typifies it? For this reason a pattern of that which is to be is made either out of wax, or out of clay, or out of wood, in order that by the smallness of the model, **destined to be destroyed**, might be seen that thing which is to arise from it-higher than it in size, and mightier than it in power, and more beautiful than it in appearance, and more elaborate than it in ornamentation.

³⁷ So whenever the thing arises for which the model was made, then that which carried the image of that future thing is **destroyed as no longer of use**, since it has transmitted its resemblance to that which is by nature true. Therefore, that which once was valuable, is **now without value** because that which is truly valuable has appeared.

³⁸ For each thing has its own time: there is a distinct time for the type, there is a distinct time for the material, and there is a distinct time for the truth. You construct the model. You want this, because you see in it the image of the future work. You procure the material for the model. You want this, on account of that which is going to arise because of it. You complete the work and cherish it alone, for only in it do you see both type and the truth.

³⁹ Therefore, if it was like this with models of perishable objects, so indeed will it also be with those of imperishable objects. If it was like this with earthly things, so indeed also will it be with heavenly things. For even the Lord's salvation and his truth were prefigured in the people, and the teaching of the gospel was proclaimed in advance by the law.

⁴⁰ The people, therefore, became the model for the church, and the law a parabolic sketch. But the gospel became the explanation of the law and its fulfillment, while the church became the storehouse of truth.

⁴¹ Therefore, the type had value prior to its realization, and the parable was wonderful prior to its interpretation. This is to say that **the people had value before the church came on the scene**, and the law was wonderful before the gospel was brought to light.

⁴² But when the church came on the scene, and the gospel was set forth, the type lost its value by surrendering its significance to the truth, and the law was fulfilled by surrendering its significance to the gospel. Just as the type lost its significance by surrendering its image to that which is true by nature, and as the parable lost its significance by being illumined through the interpretation,

⁴³ so indeed also the law was fulfilled when the gospel was brought to light, and the people **lost their significance** when the church came on

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the scene, and the type was destroyed when the Lord appeared. Therefore, those things which once had value are **today without value**, because the things which have true value have appeared. (Melito of Sardis, *Peri Pascha* 36-43)

The following excerpt comes from an elaborate accusation of deicide that begins as follows and concludes, **"You dashed the Lord to the ground; you, too, were dashed to the ground, and lie quite dead."**

⁷² This one was murdered. And where was he murdered? In the very center of Jerusalem! Why? Because he had healed their lame, and had cleansed their lepers, and had guided their blind with light, and had raised up their dead. For this reason he suffered. Somewhere it has been written in the law and prophets, "**They paid me back evil for good**, and my soul with barrenness" (Psalm 34:12), "plotting evil against me" (Psalm 34:4; 40:8), saying, "Let us bind this just man because he is troublesome to us" (Isaiah 3:10 LXX).

⁷³ Why, O Israel did you do this **strange injustice**? You dishonored the one who had honored you. You held in contempt the one who held you in esteem. You denied the one who publicly acknowledged you. You renounced the one who proclaimed you his own. **You killed the one who made you to live.** **Why did you do this, O Israel?** (Melito of Sardis, *Peri Pascha* 72-73)

4.4 How should religious life be practiced?

The institutionalization of Christianity created a hierarchy not only in principle, but in how Christianity was lived for the average Christian. For the bishops, as we have seen, life became very political. Often the general needs of the society fell under the job description of the bishop when there was not a civil authority to effectively govern. On the other end of society, the lowest commoners could expect no formal education or active involvement in the Church. When Christianity became the default religion rather than something actively promoted through persuasion, teaching the faith was sometimes neglected. Reverence for saints as patrons and role models, along with celebration of the Eucharist formed the backbone of living the faith for the common people. Two additional developments are characteristic of the practice of the faith in this period. Well beyond those who themselves practiced monasticism and mysticism, these developments impacted the daily lives and spirituality of many Christians.

4.4.1 Monasticism

We have already encountered monasticism in our discussion of the practices of early Judaism and Christianity. Under Christendom monasticism expanded in popularity and variety. The common threads of all forms of monasticism are **solitary living (variously conceived), celibacy, and poverty (variously conceived)**. Over the centuries the roles of monasteries expanded from radical isolation to relatively urban social service. At times the monasteries served as the “work force” of the bishops, but more often the monasteries balanced the political and practical side of the Church with a spiritual and contemplative side. Whether they were escaping from pagans or Christians, Christians often found a need to escape the pressures of economic and political society.

Monasticism means “**living alone**.” Typically that means that the community of monks lives apart from the rest of society, not that individual monks live apart from other monks (although that occurs also). More so in early Christianity, especially in Egypt, monks would go off into the desert. The word “**hermit**” comes from the **Greek word for desert**. Anthony is an example of a “desert father” who pursued closeness to God through distance from society. Tales such as those of Anthony, glorified with accounts of miracles, inspired more people to go out to the desert. More Christians admired this ideal even if they could not themselves follow it. If a desert was not handy, some Christians found caves or even lived on top of pillars to separate from the earth and reach to heaven. Ironically, some of these heroes of isolation developed cult followings as people went out to admire them or catch the overflow of their spirituality.

Over the centuries, many monasteries took on roles within society, replacing the primary role of escape from society. Even when they were not exactly remote,

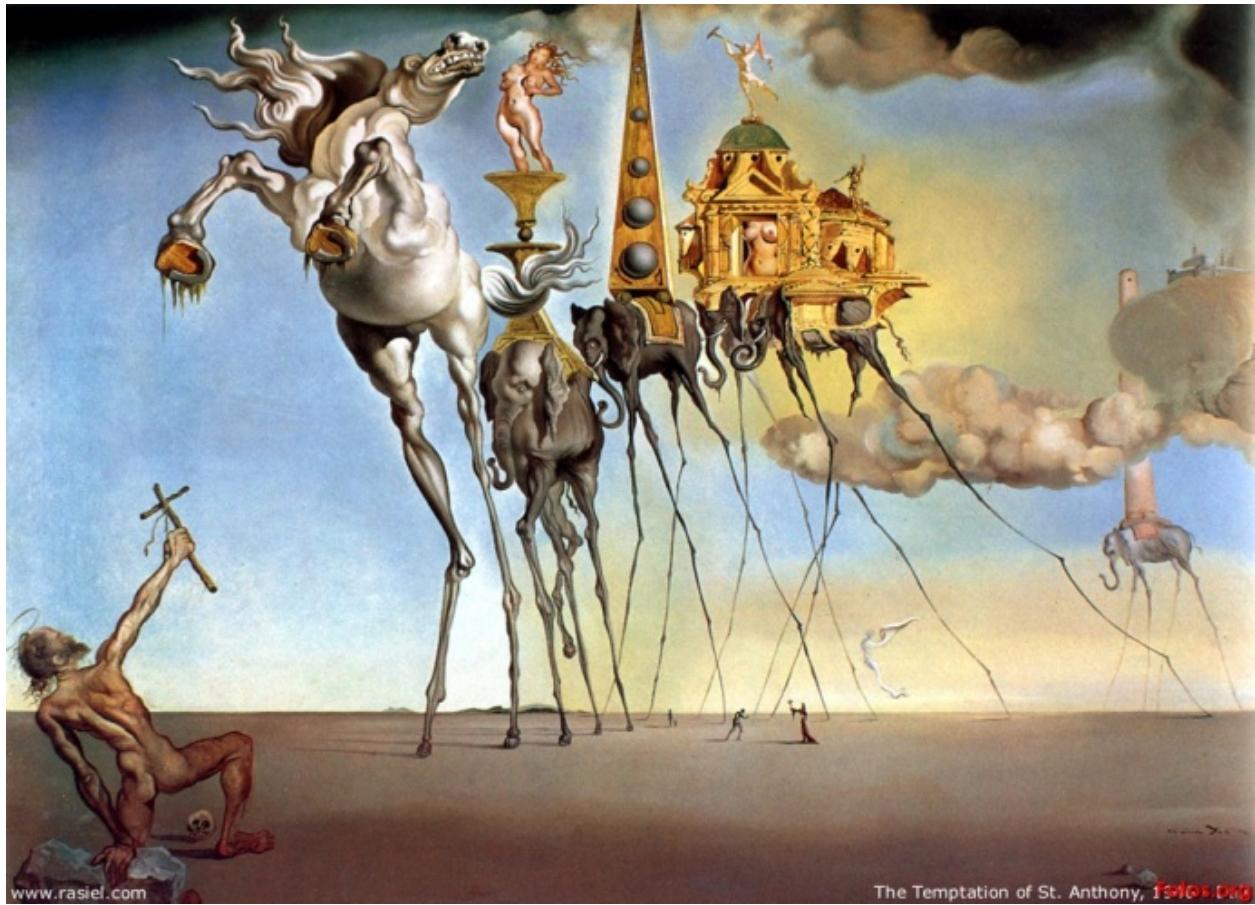


Figure 36: St. Anthony the Great (around 300 CE) went to the desert to escape the world and battle the internal temptations of women and wealth. Portrayed here by Salvador Dalí.

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Figure 37: Early monasteries like this one in Lebanon are in scenic but difficult to reach places.

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monasteries tended to be on the outskirts of town. They also held onto the original principle of **isolation by being walled communities**, and requiring the monks to **pray together seven times per day**, which seriously restricted activities in the outside world. There is continuity from monasticism to missionary activity, but it is helpful to use the word monasticism for communities that are significantly isolated from normal society and have a closed home base. Missionary outreach primarily immersed in general society is something different.

Perhaps the clearest and least flexible form of isolation from worldly desires and concerns is the separation from the opposite sex. **Celibacy refers to the unmarried state, conceived of as the same as abstinence from sexual intercourse.** Early on, the high value on abstinence may have been fueled by the belief that women or sex are inherently defiling, or that physical desire, sensuality, and lust are the opposite of spirituality. Even later, as sexuality found a respectable role within Christianity, there was still value placed on removal from the concerns of taking care of a family and devoting one's work fully to God or the Church.

In Catholicism today the priesthood remains celibate even if not monastic. There is room for informed people to debate about the "real" reason for this. The major arguments are: (a) continuity with the early Christian ideal of spirituality through overcoming physical sensuality; (b) the increased portability, flexibility, and full-time devotion of unmarried people to serving the needs of the Church; and (c) the economic implications of children claiming inheritance from priests when the Church wanted to hold onto that property.

The third common thread in all monasticism is poverty. In early monasticism this leaned in the direction of asceticism. **Asceticism is the practice of denying the needs of the body** in order to discipline oneself to be free of bodily desires, seen as distractions from spiritual pursuits. Early monks would regularly deprive themselves of food, sleep, and comfortable clothing or bedding. Over time, as monks took on more duties besides prayer and contemplation, it was recognized that monks do need their basic bodily needs met in order to be productive in their responsibilities. The ideal of poverty continued in that monks were not to have **personal property or indulgent comforts** beyond the basic necessities. Perhaps the head of a monastery (abbot) did need to worry about finances, but for most monks liberation from the problems that come with managing money was at the core of monastic life.

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Figure 38: Whereas a bishop could be expected to wear fancy, gold embroidered vestments and bling-class gold cross and rings, monks would dress and live as simply as possible.

Poverty was never a requirement for the bishops, who often came from wealthy families and may have thought of “dress to impress” as a core strategy for their leadership. The bishops were responsible for leading society in lawful and orderly ways, not escaping from it. Historically there has been conflict between monks and others who think the Church should be poor, and those who think that it is okay for the Church to hint at the glory of God through architecture, art, and well-dressed leaders. Certainly individuals can have their preferences, but it seems fair to acknowledge that both approaches have existed and can exist in the tradition. Different Christians can follow different spiritual courses, choosing poverty or not.

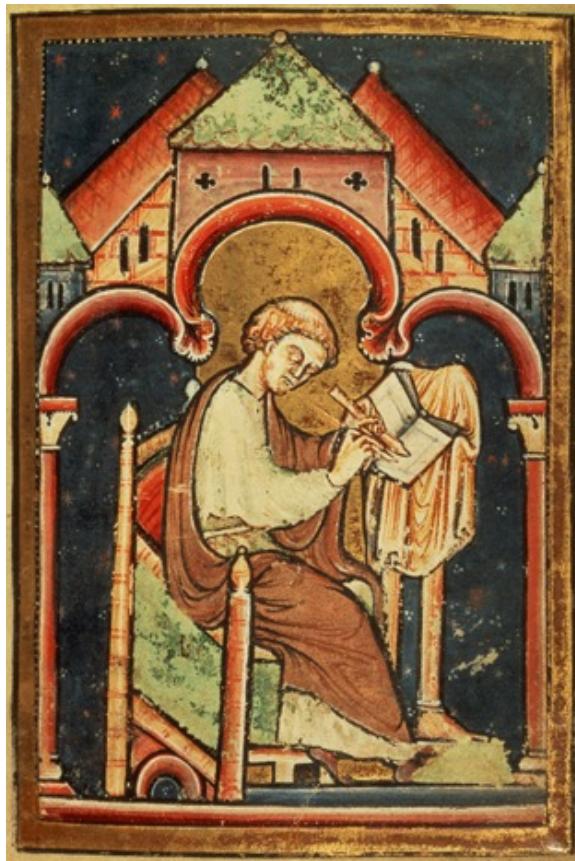


Figure 39: All texts were copied by hand.

Some monks were devoted to prayer and contemplation, but fairly early on the ideal of spirituality through **hard work** developed. Increasingly monasteries took on roles of service to society.

- Besides food for their own meals, monasteries often exported goods. Some famous liquors and wines were originally the product of monastic communities, perhaps capitalizing on the long-term stability of monastic communities (it takes decades to make some liquor).
- Monks were also responsible for hand copying scriptures, biblical and otherwise. Some monks went beyond copying writings, and produced commentaries and texts of their own.
- At the very least, monasteries would educate their own members, often from an extremely early age. In the days before universities, monasteries were the centers of learning. Eventually, parents would send their children to monasteries for education on a temporary basis. To this day, the religious communities that most survived are the ones devoted to education, since there is no better way to recruit new members.

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- Many monasteries served as hospitals. Along with education, healthcare continues to be a major social service to which many religious communities are dedicated.
- Monasteries also took on the roles of hospitality, particularly for pilgrims. To this day you can stay in monasteries when traveling in Israel.
- Monasteries could be a place of refuge for any person in need, not necessarily conditional on joining the order. Political refugees, prostitutes fleeing abuse, orphans, widows, single mothers, pretty much anyone could seek asylum in a monastery.

Starting especially in the 16th century, we see more non-monastic religious orders (such as the Jesuits and Marianists) that abandon the monastic ideals of isolation in order to go to the people to provide services, rather than waiting for them to come to the monasteries. In other ways, modern religious orders continue the roles formerly held by monasteries.

Finally, it should be noted that while the institutional episcopacy (bishops) was exclusively male, there were many **monasteries for women**. Most monasteries were under the jurisdiction of a male bishop who could give orders and collect profits. At least on a day-to-day basis, however, these women were independent and autonomous. Women were led by other women and took on many non-traditional roles. Certainly a modern feminist would point out that joining a monastery had strings attached, including abandoning marriage, sex, and children. A vow of obedience limits liberation even if the vow is to obey a woman. Nevertheless, because of monasteries women had at least one choice other than wife and mother. In some monasteries, women could go beyond literacy to advanced studies. Four women have been named Doctors of the Church, joining the rank of thirty-two men.



Figure 40: Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) persuaded Pope Gregory XI to reform the clergy and end the Avignon papacy, the Church scandal of the day.

4.4.2 Mysticism

In the Middle Ages the practice and documentation of mysticism reached a high point in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. The practices continue today, and had precedent in older practices. Even though women in the Middle Ages were formally excluded from positions of church leadership, many of the mystics from this period

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were women. Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) is one famous mystic and the first credited female composer of music. Below we will read an excerpt from the writings of Gertrude the Great (1256–1302).

Mysticism can be defined as “the exceptionally vivid intuition of one’s union with ultimate reality” (John Haught, *What is Religion?* 97). Outsiders and skeptics may tend to think of mysticism as other than reality or escape from reality. It is important to recognize that for the mystics, mystical union is more real than any ordinary object. It is not the absence of sensory perception, but the overwhelming of the senses. It contrasts with the mundane in degree of sensation, and in that others around the mystic do not experience what the mystic experiences.

Scholars describe five characteristics of mystical experience (William James, *The Variety of Religious Experience* 299–336).

1. **Love, often erotic.** Sexual sensuality comes bursting through in mystical writings. Mild forms include referring to Christ as groom or lover, described with actions of embracing or kissing. It is not uncommon for language of penetration and climax to be used, and the mystic sometimes experiences orgasm.
2. **Ineffable.** The mystic is frustrated trying to capture the experience in words, and yet often feels compelled to talk about the experience.
3. **Conscious.** Mystical union generally contrasts with dream visions in that the mystic has normal intellectual and rational faculties throughout the experience. The mystic experiences heightened clarity and intellectual understanding, even if the understanding cannot be captured in words.
4. **Fleeting.** The experience is intense but does not last a long time, particularly as seen by bystanders. The mystic is left exhausted but wanting more. Mystics may develop the ability to repeat the experience but not maintain it. Mystics who cannot repeat the experience suffer withdrawal, which is the origin of the phrase “The Dark Night of the Soul.”
5. **Passivity.** Although mystics develop the ability to open themselves to mystical experience, they never feel in control. The experience cannot be earned, immediately triggered, or planned. The experience washes over the mystic.

In religious mysticism the ultimate reality with which one feels united is generally God, but the same basic characteristics can apply to experiences of union with the universe, nature, humanity, or aliens.

Gertrude the Great was born in 1256 and grew up in a monastery from the age of five or six. When she was 25 years old she had her first mystical experience, described here in her own words.

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I was twenty-five when my conversion began. It was the Monday before the Feast of the Purification of Mary, your most chaste Mother. It was evening, during the joyful hour after compline [night prayers]. You, who are the true light that is clearer than any light and deeper than any depth, chose to enlighten my darkness. How sweetly and gently you began my conversion! You settled the anxiety and restlessness that had plagued me for more than a month...

At this time I was in the middle of our dormitory, bowing reverently to an older religious as our rule requires. When I raised my head, I saw you, my gracious love and redeemer. You were the most handsome and amiable young man of sixteen years. How you surpassed all others in beauty! You attracted my heart and eyes by the infinite light of your glory, which you kindly revealed only in proportion to the weakness of my nature. You stood before me, and with wonderful tenderness and love you said, "Your salvation is at hand! Why are you so consumed with grief? Do you have no one to console you that you are so overcome by sadness?"

I knew that I was physically standing in my place in choir as you spoke. This was the place where I offered by tepid prayers. Yet as I heard these words, "I will save and deliver you. Do not be afraid," I saw you put your right hand in mine, as if to ratify your promise. You spoke again. "You have been afflicted in ways similar to my enemies. Though you have sucked honey, it has been amid thorns. Now come back to me. I will receive you and inebriate you with an overflow of my heavenly delights."

My soul melted within me as you spoke these words. When I tried to come to you I beheld a great distance between you and myself. Between your outstretched right hand and my left hand, there was such a long hedge that I could see neither an end nor a beginning to it! The top of it appeared so full of thorns that I could find no way to come to you who are the only consolation of my soul. I then wept over my faults and crimes. The hedge that divided us stood for these crimes. You knew the sincere fervor with which I desired you, and my weakness as well. Most loving Father of the poor, "whose mercies are greater than all your works," you then took my hand and placed me instantly beside you without any difficulty! In looking at the precious hand you extended to me as a pledge of your promises, I recognized your radiant wounds through which you took away our transgressions (Col 2:14).

You enlightened and opened my mind by such illuminations. These revelations gave me the power to be inwardly detached from an inordinate love of literature and from all my vanities. Soon I counted as nothing those things

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that had formerly pleased me. Everything that was not you, O God of my heart, appeared vile to me. You alone gave pleasure to my soul...



Figure 41: Jesus showed Gertrude his heart and she showed him hers.

In this night I suddenly saw a delicate child before me. The child had just been born, but already it could be seen that it possessed the greatest gifts of perfection. I imagined that I received this previous child within my bosom with the tenderest affection. While I possessed him to me, it seemed that I was suddenly changed into the color of this divine infant. I say that knowing I am calling something a color which cannot be compared to anything visible.

At last I understood the meaning of those sweet, mysterious words: "God will be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28). My spirit was magnified by the presence of my spouse. By the rapture that I felt, I knew I had received my bridegroom. I heard the following with a desire that made them appear like a delicious beverage that satisfied the source of my thirst.

"As I am the image and presence of the divine substance of God, my father, so you shall be the image of my substance in humanity. Your glorified soul shall receive the indwelling of my divinity as the air receives the light of the sun's rays. You will be transformed by this so that you can attain the closest union with me."

Most noble balm of the divinity! Like an ocean of life, you empty yourself in eternal light and in eternal budding of life. You transform as you diffuse yourself until the end of time. O invincible strength of the hand of the most

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high God! You enable a weak vessel to receive such a precious liquor within itself when that vessel is only fit to be cast away in contempt. You did not abandon me when I wandered in the devious ways of sin, but kept joining me to yourself as far as my own misery would allow. O most divine goodness, what greater testimony can there be to the depth of your care! (Excerpt of Gertrude the Great in Shawn Madigan, ed., *Mystics, Visionaries, and Prophets*)

5 What questions did the protestant reformers ask?

The period of the Reformation, some would say reformations, began in 1517 when a monk named Martin Luther posted 95 theses challenging the Church's authority to sell indulgences (explained below). The plural "reformations" reflects the large number of people and movements that flourished within the general spirit of reevaluating beliefs based on individual conscience. Also in the sixteenth century the Council of Trent can be counted as a reformation in its own right, although not protestant. The term "protestant" began as a description of those who protested the 1529 council which prohibited Luther's 95 theses. There is no one protestant church. Today the term refers to all Christian churches that trace their heritage through Western Europe but reject the authority of the bishop of Rome (pope), which basically means all Christians other than Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. Just as there is no one protestant church, there is no one protestant set of beliefs. There are, however, some major re-evaluations of specific theological questions, and more importantly, new ways of asking theological questions. The following sections will go into specific theological questions. This first section will address the historical context of the period of the Reformation.

5.1 What changed with the Renaissance leading to the Reformation?

Martin Luther can certainly be counted as a man who changed history, but history had to be ready for the change. Many of his ideas did pop up in earlier centuries, but did not take off. For that matter, many of the changes associated with the Reformation went against Luther's own ideas. He can be credited as a deep thinker, a charismatic speaker, and a persuasive writer, but along with the theologian we should understand the historical context of the Reformation, starting with the Renaissance.

5.1.1 Renaissance

The word “renaissance” means rebirth, specifically the rebirth of the classical period. Renaissance thinkers thought of themselves as reviving the art, literature, philosophy, political thought, and general intellectual climate of the ancient Greeks and Romans. They called the period between the classical period and the Renaissance the “Middle Ages” reflecting their view of that time as standing in the middle of the original and reborn classical periods. They did not desire to live in the past, but carry forward the spirit of the classical period in new ways. The Renaissance is usually counted as beginning around 1300 in Italy, particularly with the poet Dante.

The Renaissance can be explained and characterized in different ways. My preferred explanation is that it resulted from the Crusades and Christian encounter with

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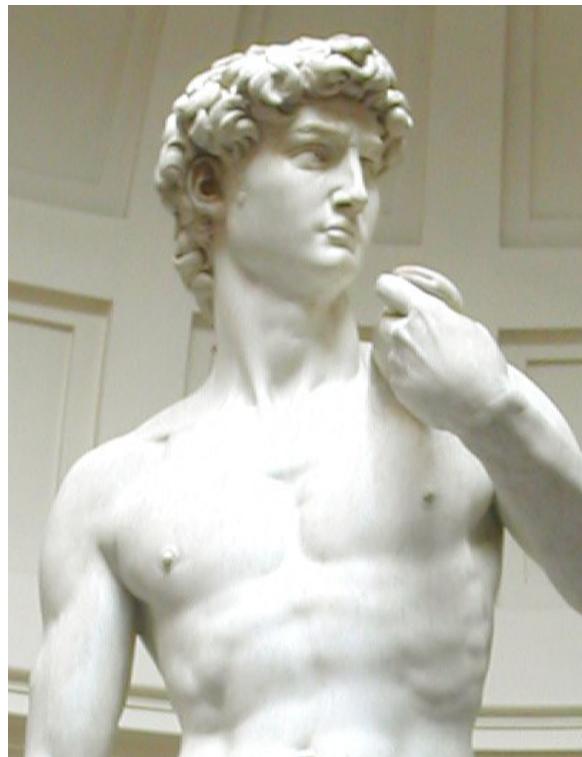


Figure 42: Renaissance art such as Michelangelo’s “David” (1504) continues the Greek and Roman style. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 43: Depth, movement, realism, and human focus characterize Renaissance art, such as the Last Supper by Leonardo DaVinci (1498).

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Figure 44: Work on St. Peter's Basilica in Rome began in 1506 and it is still the largest church in the world.

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Islam. Around the year 1000, few people in Europe ever traveled beyond their local area. Many were completely unaware of other ways of thinking or doing things. With the Crusades, many European males traveled to the Middle East to take Jerusalem from Muslim rule. On the way, they encountered other European Christians, Middle-Eastern Christians, and Muslims. These encounters have the effect of opening one's mind, which is why many universities encourage study abroad and require learning another language and culture. Christian Europe also encountered Islam in the conflict for control of Spain, and through Italian merchants and travelers. Islamic art, literature, architecture, philosophy, and science were particularly advanced. It is not that Christendom impersonated Islamdom in these regards, but it is the case that the encounter led Europe to think more about and glorify its own heritage from Greece and Rome. Encountering others has the general effect of giving perspective.

If there is a single word that characterizes the Renaissance in general it is **perspective**. Renaissance art has perspective in the sense of dimensionality, realism, and movement. In intellectual circles perspective means realizing that not every culture is the same, and one's own way of thinking is not the only way of thinking. In biblical studies, for example, it means recognizing that literature written in Hebrew may have idioms and manners of speech that must be understood in cultural context, not literally in translation. In the Middle Ages few would have seen any value in reading the Old Testament in Hebrew.

Another factor that fueled the Renaissance is the **increased flow of ideas, particularly in the newly invented universities**. Prior to the 12th century, one would be lucky to have one tutor, and that tutor was not to be questioned or doubted. Universities began as groups of teachers and students gathered together in one place, worked for common interests, and exchanged ideas. For the first time it was common for students to learn from different teachers, perhaps in direct dialogue. Scholars could engage with each other as equals. Fewer and fewer subjects were out of bounds for open conversation. By itself, it was not that strange for a Bible professor at a university, Martin Luther, to post 95 provocative statements for discussion. In fact, the points had already been discussed in other places. What was new was how quickly the ideas flowed beyond his immediate circle and gained a wide audience.

The **printing press** allowed Luther's ideas to spread cheaply to large numbers of people in many places. Hand copying documents on leather was extremely expensive and difficult, but printing many copies on paper (a related technology newly brought from China) was easy. As far as the flow of ideas is concerned, the invention of the printing press is right up there with the invention of writing itself and the Internet. The Internet is also worthy of comparison because in both cases some would doubt that the new ideas so easily multiplied are worthy of the honor.

While new ideas were flowing through Europe, **the papacy was slow to respond to the new religious and political reality**. Perhaps at one point the bishop of Rome

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(pope) filled a power vacuum and offered stability to Western Europe (through the Holy Roman Empire). As the king of France and German-speaking princes (it would be misleading to speak of Germany as a nation before the 19th century) became more powerful, the papacy faced opposition, and generally handled bad situations badly. In a theology class we will talk about the ideas of Martin Luther. In a political science class the emphasis would be on the princes (especially Frederick) who protected Martin Luther and stood up to Rome. Surely some of the princes sincerely understood and embraced Luther's ideas, but there was also money and politics at stake. Luther's first treatise encouraged the princes to stop paying taxes to Rome. Breaking with Rome would mean princes could confiscate church property. Some messages are very easy to hear.

Although the papacy was not quick to accept the intellectual openness of the Renaissance, it does get credit or blame (depending on how you look at it) for promoting Renaissance art and architecture. **Many of the masterpieces of Renaissance art and architecture, such as Michelangelo's ceiling of the Sistine chapel and St. Peter's Basilica, were commissioned by the popes.** The controversy comes in how expensive these projects were, and how the money was raised. Today major public works might be funded through taxes or government bonds. **Construction of St. Peter's Basilica was funded through the sale of indulgences.** Indulgences exploit the idea that Christ gives the apostles (and their successors the bishops) power to "loosen" sins in the afterlife (see Matthew 16:19 and John 20:23). Although the forgiveness of sins was a sacrament separate from the sale of indulgences, many were persuaded that they could achieve heaven more quickly and easily if they invested in indulgences. In addition to the inherent abusiveness of the practice, some local "salesmen" in the region of Martin Luther were particularly unscrupulous. It would be wrong to reduce the Reformation to one man or one issue, but this is the issue that set off Martin Luther and his 95 theses, which in turn set off the reformations of the 16th century.



Figure 45: The printing press

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Indulgences

Two verses from the Bible were used to justify the sale of indulgences.

I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 16:19)

Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained. (John 20:23)

One particular “salesman” of indulgences exploited concern for deceased loved ones with the pitch,

As soon as the gold in the casket rings, the rescued soul to heaven springs.

(Attributed to Johann Tetzel)

Those who contested Luther did not defend this crass way of turning salvation into a tradeable commodity. The debate quickly shifted to the deeper question of sources of authority.



Figure 46: In the 1935 Hasbro boardgame “Monopoly” a card could be bought and sold that would release players from “jail.” Indulgences have been called “Get out of purgatory free” cards, with “free” understood as without time or suffering, not as without cost.

5.1.2 People: Martin Luther, John Calvin, Henry VIII

Martin Luther was born in 1483 in a remote part of the Holy Roman Empire, what is today Germany. His father pushed him to study to be an attorney, but he kept a vow to become an Augustinian monk if he survived a storm. The writings of Augustine and Paul were particularly influential on him. As a monk he became obsessed to the point of depression about his salvation. He worried that he was not doing enough to earn his salvation. As we shall see, he eventually resolved this dilemma by concluding he did not have to *do* anything to earn his salvation. A superior thought

5.1 What changed with the Renaissance leading to the Reformation?

he might snap out of his depression if assigned to teach scripture at the University of Wittenberg. Consistent with the Renaissance, he studied scripture in the original Hebrew and Greek, and relied on reason to understand it. In 1510 he visited Rome, and witnessed disturbing things that would set him on a new course in life. While he was obsessing over his worthiness before God, the clergy he encountered in Rome, especially the highest officials, seemed concerned only with worldly power and glory. He encountered incompetence, frivolity, and luxury which offended his rural fear of God. This was certainly not the first time that the monastic and politically pragmatic sides of the Church confronted each other. What may have been more new is that here a biblical scholar encountered people who claimed the authority to declare the meaning of scripture, even though they did not answer his rational arguments, or even know Hebrew and Greek!

In 1517 Luther posted 95 theses that challenged the authority of the Church to sell indulgences. People disagree as to whether he intended to start a revolution, or only a conversation. According to plan or not, the theses were printed and spread across Europe. The scandal, and his refusal to recant, put him in direct conflict with Rome, but he benefitted from the protection of Frederick, the prince of his own region, and several others. With local protection he was able to write extensively, and his works were best sellers. In addition to the conflict with Rome, he struggled with division among those within the movement associated with him. He died of natural causes at the age of 62 in 1546. Although he is credited with starting the period of reformation, not all Protestants identify as Lutheran. Today, Lutherans, along with Anglicans (see Henry VIII below) are rather close to Catholicism in liturgy and practice. Others would go on to reform more radically.

John Calvin (1509-1564) went further than Luther and laid out the theological positions identified as Reformed or Calvinist. Presbyterians also developed from Calvin, and Puritans used his teachings to separate from Anglicanism (see Henry VIII below). Calvin is most associated with the doctrine



Figure 47: Martin Luther, 1483-1546

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of predestination, which teaches that God has long ago determined who will be saved (go to heaven) and who will not (go hell). We cannot know whether we are saved, and we certainly cannot affect our salvation in any way. As we shall see, this position is the opposite of Catholic teaching, well beyond Luther. Although Calvin completely separated morality from salvation, he and his followers emphasized a particularly strict standard of morality (variously defined).

Whereas Luther wrote in German, Calvin wrote in French and thrived in Geneva, Switzerland. Luther was a persuasive speaker and writer, but Calvin excelled at intricate intellectual arguments. Luther thought that any honest man could interpret scripture for himself once it was translated into German, without need of clergy. Calvin recognized the difficulty of interpreting the Bible in any language, and wrote extensive commentaries on the Bible. However, in the spirit of Luther, Calvin claimed only reason, not apostolic succession or ordained office, as the authority behind his interpretation of scripture.

One might wonder whether the spread of Luther's ideas among the German-speaking princes had more to do with theological ideals or politics. In England, it was all politics.

King Henry VIII of England (1491–1547, reigned 1509–1547) had no theological qualms with Rome, except that the Church of England should be loyal to no human higher than the king of England. The theme of national independence of churches runs deep, but the specific occasion for the separation was a dispute over whether Henry needed the permission of the pope to divorce and remarry. Organizational independence has led the Church of England, or Anglican Church, to make some different decisions over the centuries, but theologically and liturgically it can be difficult to tell the difference between Anglicans and Roman Catholics. Perhaps the most obvious differences are that Anglican priests can be women and can be married.

In the lands that England colonized, particularly North America and Africa, the churches that extend from the Anglican Church are called Episcopalian (literally "of the bishops"). Major denominations to separate from the Church of England include the Puritans, who worked under the influence of John Calvin and mostly went to North America, and the Methodists, founded by John Wesley (1703–1791).



Figure 48: John Calvin, 1509-1564

5.1 What changed with the Renaissance leading to the Reformation?

5.1.3 Council of Trent

Martin Luther wanted the Church to reform, not divide. Luther's rhetoric and theological claims made the division irreversible, but those who remained in communion with the bishop of Rome did reform at the Council of Trent (1545–1563). Theologically, the council did nothing to bridge the gap with Luther, but it did address corruption and lack of organization. Part of the problem had been that local bishops and priests were poorly trained and often distorted the tradition simply out of ignorance. Some things as fundamental as what books go in the Bible had never been officially clarified until Trent. Some of the teachings that Luther protested against were not actual Catholic teaching, at least not across Christendom, so those teachings needed to be clarified. On the points where the bishops were resolute that Luther was not right, they needed to articulate clearly what they thought was right. Trent reaffirmed the role of the bishops in teaching the faith, but shifted this from a right to a responsibility. Bishops were called to directly serve and build the faith of the baptized in their dioceses (districts). Priests were held to a higher standard of education. Trent also addressed abuses in local churches imposing obligations that interfered with the economic life of the people, particularly so many holy days and feast days (on which work was prohibited) that the crops could not be farmed.



Figure 49: King Henry VIII of England declared himself head of the Church of England

5.2 Whom do you trust with big decisions?

We all struggle with big decisions. The higher the stakes, the more important it is to make the right decision. In the case of salvation, the stakes could not be higher. Salvation is not just a life or death issue, it is an eternal life (heaven) or eternal death (hell) issue. Martin Luther came to a clear view of whom he could not trust. He was certain that the pope was not a model Christian, let alone a vehicle for the Holy Spirit to act in the world. Luther was certainly aware of Augustine's points against the Donatists that individuals in the Church do not need to be perfect, and Christ will ultimately steer the Church in the right direction even through flawed people. However, what Luther saw in Rome caused him to doubt the overall goodness of the Roman leadership.

Everyone agreed on the authority of scripture and the importance of using reason. The question was whether there was another authority to consider along with scripture. The Catholic Church says that tradition is also a factor. We will return to exactly what the Catholic Church has taught and teaches about what is meant by tradition, and how it relates to scripture. The part that most annoyed Luther was the idea that the bishops have authority passed down from Jesus through the apostles. That authority could not contradict scripture or reason, but it did give the bishops special authority to interpret scripture and make decisions that were not clearly decided by scripture. **Luther simply rejected the idea that bishops have more inherent authority than any rational Christian.**

Implicit in Luther's conclusion is a very profound point that many Americans may have trouble seeing any other way. It was not uncommon for people to use reason to argue about teachings. Luther was not a bishop arguing against another bishop, or an individual arguing against an individual. He was an individual arguing against an institution. Luther pioneered the argument that one man with his reason and his conscience (and Bible) has more authority than the pope, the president, a teacher, a commanding officer, *anyone*. As we shall discuss more later, the ideas of conscientious objection, "just following orders" is no excuse, and radical democracy flow from the same basic premise. We have reason to doubt that Luther imagined or wanted all the implications. What was clear to him was that he as a Bible scholar knew more about salvation than the institution of the Catholic Church. He was willing to accept rational arguments based on scripture, but he was not willing to respect office as an inherent authority.

5.2.1 Scripture alone

Luther spread the motto "scripture alone" (in Latin, *sola scriptura*), implicitly rejecting tradition as an authority alongside scripture. This does not mean that he or most protestants reject all tradition, just that it is not on the same level

of authority. For example, celebrating the birth of Jesus on December 25 is not in scripture, but most protestants keep this tradition anyway with the view that it doesn't really matter. Other protestants would go much further with this idea than Luther or Lutherans today. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, do not celebrate Christmas.

Luther believed that if individual Christians read the Bible for themselves they would understand it and arrive at the truth for themselves. **All he had to do was translate it into the common language (German in his case) and everyone could read it without need of some priest or bishop to tell them what it means.** Luther was not the first to have the idea to provide ordinary people with translations of the Bible. He was preceded by John Wycliffe in England and Jan Hus in Prague, but both of them were killed as heretics (1380 and 1415 respectively). In fact, it was not until 1965 that the Roman Catholic Church encouraged ordinary, uneducated people to read the Bible for themselves; even now it comes with a caution that individual Catholics should not be confident that they understand God's thoughts with every page they read. Thanks to the **printing press** and the protection of Prince Frederick, Luther's translation was not so easily repressed.

Luther believed that rational Christians would read the Bible and agree with him on what it means, unless the devil actively intervened to mislead them. Luther soon found that the devil was keeping quite busy, because many people read Luther's own translation and found meanings that Luther thought wrong. Luther did not intend to say that *any* individual's understanding of scripture is as good as any others, or that interpretation was not necessary, or that reason and education could not make one interpreter more authoritative than another, but he did get that ball rolling. We shall return to the history of views of the role of interpretation after considering more closely the Catholic view of tradition.

5.2.2 Scripture and Tradition

As already indicated, when Luther opposed the authority of the tradition he particularly had in mind the inherent authority of the bishops received from Christ through the apostles. That is part of what Catholicism means by tradition, but it is only part. There is no doubt that Catholics in various centuries misunderstood and abused the authority of tradition. The Council of Trent reaffirmed the teaching that scripture and tradition are both authorities, and it was never officially taught that tradition

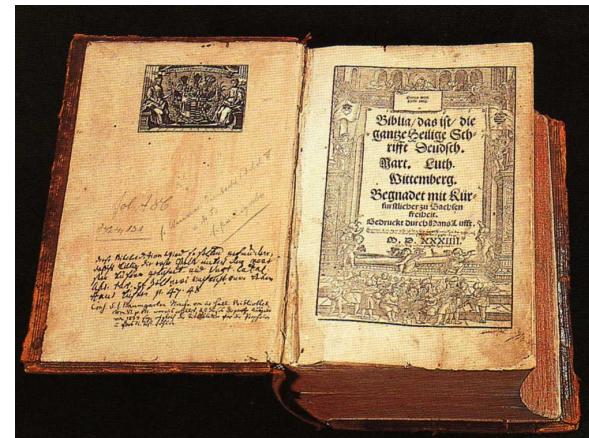


Figure 50: Luther's 1534 German translation of the Bible

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is more important than scripture, although some erred in that way. In 1965 the Second Vatican Council made clear that **tradition is not a separate authority apart from scripture**, and certainly not more important. They are inseparable. Scripture establishes the authority of the tradition, and the tradition established scripture. That is, the production of the Bible itself is something that happened over hundreds of years following Jesus, through many people guided by God but themselves imperfect humans.

The word tradition means that which is handed down. It includes, but is not limited to, the **gifts of the Holy Spirit passed down through the bishops. Non-bishops can and do also receive the Holy Spirit** directly or through sacraments besides ordination. Tradition also includes **documents and books** produced by great, inspired minds over the centuries. Faith can also be handed down from your **mother and grandmother**, along with other traditions. **The Christian faith as a whole is something handed down from the apostles**, and the community that they and others built over the centuries is itself the tradition. From a Catholic perspective, if we shot a Bible into space and a Martian read it with no other knowledge of Christian history, that Martian would not have a sufficient understanding of Christ and the Christian faith.

But why should we trust tradition as an authority? Tradition can be wrong. Practices such as slavery and the subordination of women were passed down for centuries, but that does not make them right. One argument is that the Holy Spirit works through the Church in the long-haul without guaranteeing perfection of any one individual along the way. One can also make secular arguments. One argument is that **as ideas are passed down, the best ideas endure and the bad ideas are filtered out**. If my mother taught me three things, two of which led to happiness and the third caused trouble, then when I teach my children I will keep the two good ones, remove the bad one, and perhaps add one I learned from my own experience. The tradition does not have to be perfect to be helpful more often than not, or a good default until evidence and argumentation suggest changing the tradition. (By the way, Luther himself probably would have



Figure 51: Source: saintandcynic.blogspot.com

5.2 Whom do you trust with big decisions?

been okay with that last way of putting it, but he saw the tradition as far from perfect and not open to reconsideration. Luther's followers took the rejection of tradition farther than he himself did.)

Another secular argument for tradition is what scientists call emergence. The classic story explaining emergence is a contest at a fair to guess the weight of a bull. The person who came closest got to keep the bull (which is a good thing if you are a farmer). After the contest, a curious mind collated all the entries and found that the average of all the guesses was almost exactly right, closer than any one of the guesses. **The idea of emergence is that the sum of many imperfect parts is more perfect than the most perfect among the parts.** One can think of the Catholic tradition as a community handed down that is more perfect as a whole than any one of its members. Let's consider a concrete example. If I read the Bible in my basement I may come up with crazy ideas about what it means. If I read the Bible in a study group of well-meaning Christians in my parish, they will naturally reinforce my good insights, and discourage my crazy ideas. It is not that they are smarter or more educated, just that good ideas resonate with the faithful more than bad ideas.

Tradition does not have to always be right to be a good starting point. Tradition is always growing, and **should always remain open to growth.** From a Catholic perspective, neither the Bible nor the way things have always been should be idolized such that they cannot be questioned. That is the role of theology, to question.

5.2.3 Modern biblical interpretation and the historical-critical method

Jesus and the apostles were themselves interpreters of scripture. Interpretation was nothing new with Luther, but he did raise the stakes. **If the Bible is the supreme authority for faith, then the person who decides what the Bible means has supreme authority.** Consider how much people contest over who gets to be president, and then consider that Luther made the Bible a higher authority. Who controls that authority, and how? As we shall see, Luther thought that every individual should have that authority for himself, but it soon became apparent that in the real world people do not simply read the Bible for themselves; they are influenced by interpreters who tell them what it means. At a Catholic university Bible scholars are part but only part of a theology department, along with systematic theologians and moral theologians. The theology department as a whole has less teaching authority in principle than the bishop. For many protestants, interpreting the Bible is theology; there are no other authorities for understanding faith or God. **Bible scholarship became very important**, very fast. The development of modern biblical interpretation started before Luther and much of it developed later, but *sola scriptura* (scripture alone) fueled the process.

Premodern biblical interpretation was relatively playful and creative, at least in as much as political decisions did not as heavily rely on interpreting scripture. **Modern**

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biblical interpretation is characterized by the effort to be objective. If there is no “pope” besides the biblical interpreter, the authority of the interpreter goes only as far as the interpreter’s ability to persuade others that the interpretation is correct. Modern interpreters tried to work like scientists, using purely rational methods to identify truths that could be shared by all rational observers. Interpreters tried to be neutral, either suppressing or ignoring how their personal experiences shaped their views of the Bible. If Bible interpreters are like scientists studying the biblical data, then nationality, skin color, or social location of the interpreter should play no role. Starting in the 1970s this perspective would be challenged, and postmodern interpretation will embrace the context and experience of the interpreter.

The most significant development of modern biblical interpretation is the historical-critical method (some would say methods). **The historical-critical method seeks to understand the intent of the original author in the author’s own historical context.** This means avoiding consideration of later interpretations and personal interpretations of what it means “to me.” For example, in the eighth century before Christ the prophet Isaiah said that a young woman (or virgin) will conceive and bear a son who shall be called Immanuel. Much later, Christians reading this immediately think of Jesus, but historical-critical interpreters would point out that it doesn’t say Jesus, and the author had a meaning in mind other than what would happen eight centuries later. The historical-critical method consists of many specific methods that allow the interpreter to understand the historical context of the author, and thereby understand what the author intended the text to mean. Some of these methods are complicated, but two basic ones are philology and archaeology. Philology entails detailed study of the vocabulary and grammar of ancient languages so we can better understand what they originally meant, eliminating the possibility of wrong or misleading translations. Archaeology entails digging up the texts, buildings, and everyday objects of the people who lived at the time so we can better understand how they lived and what the authors may have been referring to that we do not otherwise know about.

5.2.4 Fundamentalism

Over the centuries, biblical scholarship grew more and more complicated, and challenged more and more common beliefs about the Bible. In a sense, biblical scholarship became as elite and irrelevant as the politician bishops from whom Luther wrestled control of the Bible. One reaction, particularly in the United States, was to reject the need for interpretation. The fundamentalist movement began at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey early in the 20th century. In 1979, the term “fundamentalist” took on a negative connotation after it was applied to the Islamic fundamentalists in Iran who seized the American embassy and took the Americans

there as hostages. Today, not many people self-identify as fundamentalists, but the basic approach is going strong.

Fundamentalists sought to return to the Bible as the foundation of Christian faith. They rejected the need for archaeology, philology, and libraries full of complicated scholarship. **The Bible alone is sufficient.** Everything in it is absolutely true. Nothing outside of the Bible is necessary or affects the absolute truth of the simple sense of scripture as understood by any ordinary person. Luther himself said that the Bible interprets itself, but he meant that one can discern the meaning of one passage by considering other passages in the broader context of the Bible. This could mean detailed study of, for example, how a particular word is used in other parts of the Bible. Fundamentalists applied the phrase “the Bible interprets itself” to mean there is no need for interpretation beyond **accepting the truth of the literal meaning** of the text.

Although many mild fundamentalists would seek to reconcile the absolute truth of the Bible with science, for some there is no discussion; **if science challenges the truth of the Bible then science is wrong.** For example, if science says the formation and population of the earth took billions of years and the Bible says it took six days, then it took six days and science is wrong. If the Bible says there was a talking snake there was a talking snake. If the Bible says the entire earth was flooded and the only surviving species fit into one boat, then that fact is more true than anything scientists can say.

This is not the Catholic view. As we have already seen, the Catholic view is that the Bible is the word of God expressed in the words of men. God’s self-revelation is available to us through the Bible, but we have to use historical-critical interpretation to understand the expressions of divine inspiration in the contexts of the authors. The Bible is without flaw as a guide to salvation, but not as a history book or science book.



Figure 52: A fundamentalist “creation museum” in Kentucky presents Genesis as historical and scientific fact. It insists that the earth is less than six thousand years old and dinosaurs were on Noah’s ark.

5.3 What do I have to do to be saved?

As a young monk, Martin Luther was deeply worried about his worthiness to stand before God. He was well aware of his sinful nature, not in the sense of being a particularly terrible person, but in the universal sense of human imperfection. No matter how much he confessed and received sacramental forgiveness of sins, he was worried that his heart was not worthy. No matter how much he prayed he felt like he was not doing enough. Finally, he had a breakthrough in the recognition that he did not have to do anything for his salvation. Indeed, he could not save himself no matter how virtuous or pious he could ever be, no matter how many indulgences he might be able to afford. He cannot save himself, only Jesus can save him. Jesus knows we are sinners and does not expect us to be sinless. Jesus only expects faith. If we have faith, Jesus does the rest. **We do not earn our salvation, Jesus earned salvation for those who believe in him by dying on the cross.** Salvation here means the soul being with God for eternity in the afterlife (heaven), as opposed to the permanent and complete separation of the soul from God (hell).

Catholicism fundamentally agrees that Jesus saves us, we do not save ourselves. Catholicism and Luther also agree that faith is essential. **The debate is about the role of “works”** (defined below) in relationship to faith. **Luther was not opposed to works, but was opposed to thinking of them as an essential ingredient for salvation because that thinking could lead to the heresy that we earn our own salvation.** Catholicism says that works are essential, even though they can never be more significant than what Christ did for us. Our works do not earn our salvation, but they do open us to receiving grace (defined below), which leads to faith, which leads to salvation. Furthermore, it is impossible to have true faith that does not express itself in works, because our faith is in a God who calls us to action. **Therefore, according to Catholicism, works are essential, not because we can save ourselves, but because works lead to faith and faith leads to works.** As we shall see below, the role of faith can also be questioned.

One quick way of thinking about the issue is what kind of entrance exam heaven has.



**"I KNOW YOU HAVE BEEN VERY GOOD.
BUT ALL THAT ENTITLES YOU TO IS
IS A WALK."**

5.3 What do I have to do to be saved?

- Catholicism: On the whole, did you live a faithful life characterized by acts of piety, good deeds, and repentance for your bad deeds?
- Luther: Did you choose to accept Christ's gift of salvation?
- Calvin: You're not on the list. You never were. You never could have been. You never will be. Go away.
- American culture today: Were you a good person, regardless of what if any faith you may have had?

5.3.1 What do we mean by "faith"?

For the discussion at hand in the 16th century, **faith meant belief that Jesus is Lord (understood to mean God) who died and rose from the dead for the forgiveness of sins**. Luther did not challenge the importance of faith. Over the centuries, however, additional disputes about faith and salvation arose.

- In how much detail must the faith be accurate in order to be saved? For example, if I believe the right thing about Jesus being Lord but the wrong thing about the nature of the Trinity or the role of Mary, can I still go to heaven?
- Is faith binary (have it or don't have it) or a matter of degree (can have more or less)? That is, do the souls of the departed fall into two categories, saved or damned, or many categories? Do the basically-good get to go to heaven, but have a rougher time than the super-good? Catholicism tends to say that there are degrees. The most faithful may experience God's presence immediately after death, but the marginally good may be worthy of God only after a period of cleansing (purgatory).
- Is faith in Jesus the only legitimate kind of faith? Before the 20th century the answer would have been simply, "yes." That is, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Native Americans have no chance of salvation. There may have been some discussion about people who truly never even heard about Jesus. They may have been seen as better off than someone who deliberately rejected Jesus, but not at all on the same plane as believing Christians. Calvin in particular did not think of salvation as an entitlement that could only be taken away with cause, but rather as an exceptional gift that only a few could receive; the non-recipients had no right to complain.
- Where exactly does faith come from?

5.3.2 What do we mean by "works"?

In this discussion "works" means anything that an ordinary human can do, as opposed to what Jesus already did. When most Americans think of "works" they first think

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of “**good deeds**,” “ethical action,” or “moral behavior.” That is true but only part of the debate. The other part of “works” includes **pious deeds** in general, and particularly the sacraments. Luther was not opposed to doing works but he was opposed to thinking about works as necessary for salvation. He continued to think of good deeds as a proper response of a Christian grateful for God’s gifts. Others would go further than Luther himself with a negative view of works in the sense of devotions and sacraments. Today many protestants see devotions that go beyond practices explicitly commanded in scripture as distracting at best and idolatrous at worst. The next section will address how theology is lived and practiced, including Catholic and Lutheran views of devotions and sacraments.

5.3.3 What do we mean by “grace”?

One more term is key to understanding Luther’s thought on this issue and in general. Grace is a major concept in the writings of Paul and Augustine. The definition and concept of grace is common to all Christians. Luther differs from other Christians only in the heavy emphasis Luther places on this concept. To this day, one can often spot a Lutheran theologian by the frequency with which the word “grace” is used.

Among theologians, grace refers to God’s freely given, unmerited gifts, particularly the gift of God’s transforming presence. It will not be helpful here to think about grace in the sense of “elegant movement,” how one might describe ballet as graceful, the opposite of awkward. The word “gratuitous” is related, but usually has a negative connotation of unmerited in the sense of unwarranted or inappropriate. “Gratuity” today basically means a tip freely given, although if it is expected or earned that would be a difference from the theological definition. In modern Italian and Spanish “gratis” means free as in “free beer.” At any rate, among theologians there is emphasis that grace is something God gives us for no reason other than because God is cool that way. It is not because it is our birthday, not because we are cool, not because it is expected, not because God expects something in return. In fact, philosophers go crazy telling us there are no human analogies because even if we get satisfaction from giving we, unlike God, are getting something in return.

All would agree that we cannot earn grace, we cannot expect grace, we can only



be grateful when God gives it to us (indeed grateful can simply mean full of grace). Several questions about grace lead to different theological responses.

- Does God offer grace to all or only some? Catholicism tends to say God offers it to all but some accept it more than others. Calvin maintains that God gives it to some and not others for no discernible reason (not because some deserve it more than others).
- What effect does grace have on humans? Catholicism tends to say we can choose whether to accept it, and if we do accept it we come to faith and works. Luther tends to say we can choose whether to accept it, and if we do accept it we come to faith. Calvin tends to say we have no choice in the matter. If God gives it to us we have it, which means we have salvation.

From these different views of grace come different views of whether salvation comes from faith and works (Catholicism), faith alone (Luther), or neither (Calvin). All three positions are supported by at least several passages of scripture. This is less a matter of biblical interpretation and more a matter of argument based on reason (although it could be approached either way).

5.3.4 Salvation by faith and works

Catholicism recognizes that what Christ does for us in dying for our sins and what God does for us in offering us grace are far more awesome than any little thing losers like us could ever do. Nevertheless, grace is not the whole story of salvation. **First, we can do things to open ourselves to accepting God's grace.** The idea is that God's grace is like rain pouring down on us. We can open an umbrella and divert it away from us, or we can grab a bucket to gather as much as we can. Sin is like an umbrella. Devotional actions are like a bucket. The rain falls on saint and sinner alike, but the saint at prayer receives more grace than the gangster in Vegas. Sacraments in particular put us in a position to receive God's grace. It is not that we are demanding anything of God.

Second, Catholicism teaches that even though God's grace is freely given, God also makes demands on us for **ethical action**. The point is not that we can earn heaven the way a Boy Scout earns a merit badge by checking off all the right boxes for all the things we are supposed to do. The point is that it is inconceivable that one would have true faith and never practice that faith. **At least today, the argument is not so much that faith and works are two separate ingredients of equal importance—it would be acknowledged that faith is more important if only it were possible to separate them.**

5.3.5 Salvation by faith alone

5 WHAT QUESTIONS DID THE PROTESTANT REFORMERS ASK?

Luther was not opposed to doing good deeds, he just wanted everyone to be clear that those **deeds were not earning our salvation**. No number of good deeds can surpass what Christ has done for us. Salvation occurs when we hear the Gospel and believe. Faith and faith alone is our acceptance of the salvation provided by Christ. Any deeds that we may do out of gratitude for the grace that God has given us are thoroughly secondary, like saying “thank you” is an appropriate and minimal response to a huge gift.

Others have gone far beyond Luther with this principle. Some Christians today believe that salvation is simple and binary. Either you accept Jesus or you do not. If you do, you can be absolutely certain of eternal life with God no matter what else you may do or may have done.

5.3.6 Salvation by neither faith nor works

John **Calvin** was not opposed to faith or works; he was strongly in favor of both. However, he did not believe that a human could do anything to influence our fate in the afterlife. Faith is itself a gift from God, and **we do not have any choice** in accepting or rejecting it. Works are a good thing and should be done simply because God commands them, but that has nothing to do with salvation. No amount of good deeds will change God’s mind as to whether we should go to heaven or hell. Long before we were even born God has already determined who is going to heaven and who is going to hell. In fact, most of us are going to hell, but we shouldn’t complain because we never had a right to heaven in the first place. Just because Oprah gave some people a car doesn’t mean I can be mad because I did not get a car.

Calvin’s idea of predestination can be very difficult for people raised Catholic to understand, especially those of us who were given the theologically incorrect impression that we could earn our way into heaven. This is not the place to rehearse all the arguments, but suffice it to say Calvin was a man of intense reason and knowledge of scripture. He is not the first or the last (especially among philosophers) to follow the logic that if God is all-knowing and immutable then humans have no



Figure 53: If you do a heroic deed because you expect a medal, are you really a hero? Artist: Normal Rockwell

true free will. One Catholic response is to say that God knows we will sin the way a parent knows a child learning to walk will fall. It is not that a parent plans to push the child or wants the child to fall, it is just a reasonable expectation. However, the analogy is limited because God is more all-knowing than a parent. Another solution would be to leave it as a mystery, or conclude that God's ability to be all-knowing, immutable, and just is not constrained by my ability to understand God's all-knowingness, immutability, and justice.

5.3.7 Salvation by works alone

In the 16th century there were no theologians arguing that salvation can come through works alone. I doubt anyone then even entertained the possibility. However it seems to me the theologians of the next generation need to at least consider this perspective and respond intelligently. In **21st-century America**, most people would not even hesitate to imagine that Mahatma Gandhi could be and probably is in heaven if there is such a place. Many today would reject the idea that lack of faith in Christ could even be a factor compared to such good works that inspired so many more good works. Many would also accept that it follows that faith is completely unnecessary, or helpful only in as much as it leads to works. Though common today, this is a rather new idea that was certainly not addressed in the 16th century and in my mind has not been adequately addressed today. One might argue that theologians build from faith and therefore are not responsible for engaging with disbelief or rejection of faith. That seems dangerous to me. Only in the past 50 years has Catholicism started to build a healthy relationship with Judaism; and we still do not have a healthy relationship with secularism (the separation of religion from the public sphere) or atheism (the rejection of the existence of God). Theologians cannot treat non-believers the same way we treated Jews in the past.

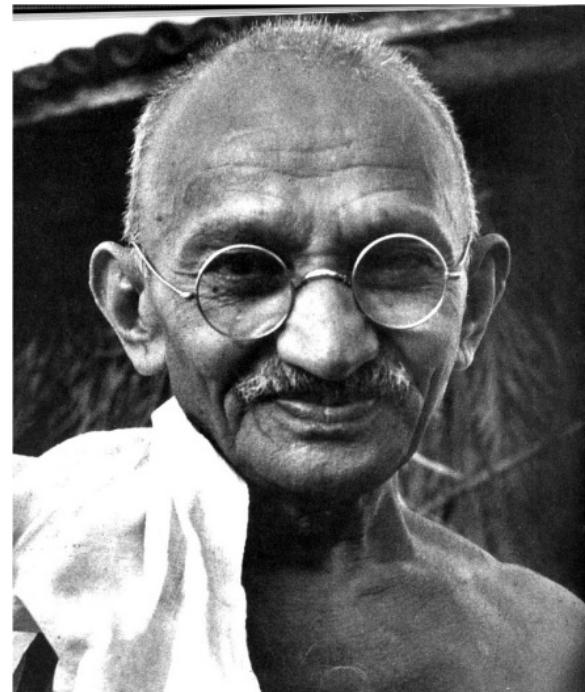


Figure 54: Gandhi. Burning in hell?

5.4 The practice of the Christian faith and individual conscience

The practice of the Christian faith changed with the Reformation. Again, the Reformation period is larger than one man. In many ways the ideas associated with the Reformation have older roots in Renaissance humanism. In other ways the ideas associated with the Reformation go well beyond anything Martin Luther said, did, or wanted. Among all protestant churches today, Lutherans are among the closest to Catholicism in practice. The period of reformation catalyzed by Martin Luther went on to challenge some of the most foundational assumptions of how Christianity should be practiced. There are some **basic patterns** that generally distinguish protestant practices. Except for Anglicans, protestant liturgies and places of worship are often more **simple and direct** than their Catholic counterparts. Protestant communities place more emphasis on individual and group Bible study, but generally have **fewer and simpler devotional practices**. Perhaps the most striking feature of protestant religious practice is that there is no such thing as protestant religious practice. Protestant churches are characterized by **denominationalism**. That is, **there are many small movements** that generally fall under the category of western Christian practice separated from Roman Catholicism. This is no accident. One of the most fundamental ideas associated with the Reformation is that each individual is accountable to his or her own conscience. Luther's conscience justified his separation from Rome, but the same principle could be extended to demand that every individual should form his or her own new kind of Christianity if the existing denominations did not seem adequate.

5.4.1 Anabaptists

We have already encountered the Council of Trent which clarified and standardized Catholic practice. We have already encountered Martin Luther, who placed all works as secondary to faith, and viewed scripture as the sole authority. *Sola scriptura* has the indirect effect of demoting (but for Luther, not necessarily eliminating) Christian practices not commanded in scripture. We have also encountered John Calvin, whose intellectual rigor led to moral rigor in the principle that God's laws should be followed even though there is nothing to be gained through them. We should add one more



Figure 55: An Anabaptist baptism

5.4 The practice of the Christian faith and individual conscience

general movement that took the practice of Christian faith in a new direction, the Anabaptists.

The **Anabaptists**, unlike Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans, and Catholics, **reject infant baptism**. Nicaea had determined that there should be only one baptism per person. After some debate, it was determined that it should take place as soon as possible so that if the child dies it will have the benefit in the afterlife of being a Christian. From this pre-Anabaptist perspective, the child is initiated into the community through Baptism and grows up in faith gradually. Baptism itself, thus, is more a commitment of the parents, godparents, and community to welcome and develop the child in the faith; it is not a choice of the person being baptized. **From the Anabaptist perspective, baptism is only legitimate when the person being baptized chooses to be baptized, and in particular chooses to accept and have a personal relationship with Jesus.** The word Anabaptist means re-baptizer. Outsiders see them as baptizing a second time, but from their own perspective what was done to the infant never counted as baptism in the first place. As we shall see, this focus on the individual conscience and personal choice is largely a logical extension of Lutheran ideals, although on this point Lutherans continue the tradition of infant baptism. Today, Mennonites, Amish, Quakers, and Baptists follow the Anabaptist tradition.

5.4.2 Devotions and sacraments

Even though the Council of Trent cut back on excessive feast days, Trent defended the importance of works as part of the larger plan of salvation. Many local customs and devotional practices remained, while the core seven sacraments were standardized for all Catholicism. Meanwhile, most protestants opposed some devotional practices entirely, and kept others as legitimate customs, but not essential to salvation. (As is often the case, Anglicans and the very early Reformation including Luther himself do not align perfectly with what would become distinctive protestant ideas.) Here are a couple of pious deeds and **devotions** that protestants would demote or reject, and are commonly found in Catholicism.

- Reverence for heroes of piety, including all official saints, some not-yet-official saints, deceased relatives, and Mary in particular
- The rosary (a series of prayers with emphasis on Mary)
- “Dear God if you save my family from the plague I will build a beautiful church in your honor”
- Elaborate statues and religious art
- Devotions that worked for Christian heroes of the past but are not described in scripture, such as the scapular (worn like a necklace over one’s heart and back)

5 WHAT QUESTIONS DID THE PROTESTANT REFORMERS ASK?

- Shrines, pilgrimages, holy objects (relics of the saints or the cross on which Jesus was crucified) and holy sites believed to be associated with miraculous healing

Some of the above examples thrive in Catholicism not so much because they are advocated by theoretical theologians, but because they are meaningful to the poor and illiterate. For centuries, illiteracy and poverty were an unavoidable fact for most Christians. One might say that Catholicism held onto the idea that the poor and illiterate can have a strong and simple faith (even to the point of appearing superstitious to an outsider), whereas Luther sought to raise the standard of literacy and theological sophistication.

The following were considered “**the seven sacraments**” in **Catholicism** at the time of Luther and today. If you ever take a course on sacraments you will learn that the history of some sacraments is very complicated, and these seven do not exhaust the concept of sacramentality. **Luther limited the definition of “sacrament” to two specifically commanded by Christ in scripture, Baptism and Eucharist.**

- **Baptism** – all agree that baptism (literal or symbolic immersion in water) is mandated by the New Testament. The major debate (after Luther) was whether parents could baptize infants, or if baptism had to be accompanied by a free, conscious choice (as an adult). The Anabaptists concluded that only adult baptism is legitimate.
- **Confirmation** – historically and theoretically **confirmation is linked to baptism**. It focuses on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, marked by anointing with oil. Catholicism, eastern Orthodoxy, and many Anglicans recognize it as a sacrament, Lutherans and most Protestants observe it as a custom but not a sacrament, and Anabaptists reject it entirely.
- **Eucharist** – along with baptism, Luther had no problem with the eucharist, which derives from Jesus’ command at the **Last Supper** to break bread in his memory. There was debate as to whether the bread becomes Jesus’ body really, symbolically, or in some other complicated way.
- **Reconciliation** – in Catholicism this sacrament involves confessing one’s sins before a priest and requesting **forgiveness** from Christ. Luther continued this practice himself, but did not count it as a sacrament established by scripture.



Figure 56: Rosary and scapular

5.4 The practice of the Christian faith and individual conscience



Figure 57: The Last Supper, Juan de Flandes

- **Matrimony** – Listening to many American Christians today you might think that **marriage** is the most sacred institution ever and the most important part of Christian life and teaching. In fact, this was the last of the seven sacraments to be recognized by Catholicism. Luther accepted the practice of matrimony, but did not recognize it as a sacrament instituted by Christ. The only link between Jesus and matrimony is that Jesus went to a wedding when he was young. The major discussion of matrimony in the New Testament is Paul discouraging it but permitting it as the lesser of the lust-based evils.
- **Holy Orders** – In Catholicism Holy Orders mark the special rights and responsibilities of the **priesthood**. Luther rejected this sacrament on multiple levels. Most importantly, he taught the priesthood of all believers, such that there is no formal separation of status after baptism. Today Lutherans have leaders called pastors, ministers, or reverend. Those leaders may be worthy of respect because of the talent and training that prepared the person for the role. Leading the community is an important role, a vocation, and a job, but it is not a formal sacramental status.
- **Anointing of the Sick** – This sacrament originally marked the transition from this life to the **next life**. Luther had no problem with praying with people in their last moments, but this did not meet his standard for a sacrament as a practice directly commanded by Christ.

5.4.3 The individual conscience

Perhaps the most significant development of the Reformation to extend beyond theology to political philosophy is the emphasis on the individual conscience. **On a theological level, Luther rejected the need for priest, church, or pope to mediate between the Christian and God.** Luther spoke of the **priesthood of all believers** in which everyone is equal and no person stands between any other person and God. Lutherans still have professional leaders of congregations, but they

5 WHAT QUESTIONS DID THE PROTESTANT REFORMERS ASK?



Figure 58: Before the 12th century marriage was a civil institution that could be blessed on the steps of a cathedral, but was not a sacrament and could not take place inside. Artist: Raphael

5.4 The practice of the Christian faith and individual conscience

are facilitators for individuals to come together and work on their own personal relationship with God. If everyone and no one is a priest, there is no role for a celibate priesthood. Although Catholicism came to think about the role of the Church more as communion than mediation, Catholicism continued to emphasize a collective perspective in which any one person is part of a community that collectively lives in relationship with God and others. Although there can be overlap, emphasis on “**individual**” and “**personal**” in theology remain hallmarks of protestant theology.

Beyond theology, Luther’s implication that **the individual conscience trumps all other authority** would go on to have tremendous political implications. Luther did not start an underground movement and build followers gradually. Luther did not argue that his view was actually more popular, though suppressed. He did not argue that his view was more consistent with the tradition than the pope’s view. He very much stood on his own two feet and insisted that he could only live by his own conscience, guided by reason and scripture. Even if he was the only one to think that way, **compromise against his own conscience was impossible**, and death would be a better alternative. The following quotation is attributed to Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms in 1521, when he stood accused of heresy and faced excommunication.

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, since **it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience**. May God help me. Amen.

The bravery sounds heroic today, especially to Americans, but think of the implications. What if the church I go to does not teach what my conscience says? Should I compromise? Take the good with the bad? Work for gradual change? Certainly all those things continue to exist among protestants, but the principle of the absolute authority of individual conscience dictates that it is better to **start your own church** than be part of a church that in any way goes against your conscience. And of course that is exactly what happened. Different denominations exploded across Europe. Some of those denominations followed conscience to positions that



Figure 59: Saturday Night Live character Father Guido Sarducci started a religion in which everyone is pope. You could join for \$19.95.

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clashed with European society, so they came or were sent to North America to pursue absolute religious freedom. In North America this principle continued to create more and more denominations when an individual thought he was more right than any existing denomination. We tend to use the word denomination for a faith system or community that spans more than one geographic area. In addition to the many protestant denominations, many American protestants belong to a stand-alone church that is not affiliated with any larger denomination, or do not identify with a church at all. Although each individual is bound by his own conscience, many protestant communities find practical advantages of forming into unions for things like education of ministers and social services, particularly charity and missionary work around the globe.

In Europe, the movement toward religious liberty was constrained by politics. Luther supported the German-speaking princes pursuing liberty from Rome, but not the peasants pursuing liberty from the princes. King Henry VIII made the Church of England independent from Rome, but sought unity within the Church of England. For those whose consciences led them away from the Church of England, **the New World provided seemingly unlimited opportunities to follow one's own conscience as far west as necessary**. The early colonies are full of religion-based political drama, but perhaps the biggest example is the westward journey of the Mormons until they found a place they could be left alone in Utah. In the New World, religious liberty and political liberty went hand in hand, and often went beyond religion. The principle of individual conscience has as many political implications as religious. **If your government goes against your conscience, you are duty-bound to disobey or leave**, which was easy 200 years ago. The American west was often associated with rugged individualism, self-reliance, and fierce independence. Throughout the country we take it for granted that “conscientious objection” is an excuse for not serving in the military, and that individuals have a right to civil disobedience if the majority passes a law that violates the conscience of the individual.

America is full of diversity, but compared to most of the world America in general stands out in being characterized by **individualism**, the focus on the rights and responsibilities of the individual over the collective common good. What remains



Figure 60: Small independent churches are common in the United States.
Photo: Kevin Bauman

5.4 The practice of the Christian faith and individual conscience

for debate is whether that is a good thing. Some would say individualism consists of greed, selfishness, and lack of compassion. Some would say a society of individuals pursuing their own interests in a free market is more prosperous all around than a society in which individuals lack that freedom or motivation. Some would say disregard for the common good undermines human dignity. Some would say a society of free individuals is the only true alternative to tyranny. How would you place the following statements on a scale from individualism to collectivism, and a scale from bad to good?

- United we stand, divided we fall.
- Live free or die.
- Think different.
- It's my body / land, I'll do what I want.
- I'm not responsible for killing those people, I was just following orders.
- I'm not responsible for the actions of my country, I wasn't even there.
- Greed is good.
- I shall never surrender nor retreat... I am determined to sustain myself as long as possible & die like a soldier who never forgets what is due his own honor & that of his country. Victory or Death. P. S. The Lord is on our side.
- Others?



Figure 61: Live free or die. Um, can we work out a compromise?

6 What questions did 20th century Christians ask?

From the year 1500 to the year 2000 the questions that people of faith ask changed dramatically. It is helpful to understand how the world changed in order to understand how theological questions changed. The first section of this unit will give context from church history, intellectual history, economic history, and political history. First, it is important to lay out the theology all this history is meant to contextualize. Theology, as we have seen, is faith seeking understanding. **In the year 1500, faith was assumed to be the most important part of life in Christendom.** The struggle was to find how faith should be understood, but however it was understood, or by whomever it was understood, its importance was unquestioned. **By the year 2000, a profoundly new question developed: Who cares?** What, if anything, does faith mean to me/us? What does faith have to say to family, politics, science, economics, and culture? How is faith relevant in the face of tyranny, war, exploitation of workers, globalization, environmental destruction, scientific discovery, and systematic oppression of women? How is faith relevant in the face of the new iPhone, the latest celebrity couple, the new blockbuster movie? Do I/we need faith at all? How do I/we balance the voice of faith with other voices?

6.1 The historical context of 20th century Christian theology

6.1.1 Church history

Church history is not the same as the history of theological questions, but it is important context. Just as Christians were struggling to understand the relevance of faith, the churches were struggling to find their own role and relevance. For the sake of convenience and in light of the mission of St. Mary's University, we will spend more time on the Catholic Church, but let it be noted that similar questions can be approached through other churches. The **Church of England** began with the principle that the King of England should be the earthly ruler of all things English, including the Church. However, before too long the authority and relevance of the monarchy was questioned, compartmentalized, and reduced. There are uncanny similarities in how the English monarchy and Roman papacy both went from unquestioned absolute authority to largely symbolic leadership with very limited direct power. The **smaller churches of America** may have never been powerful political institutions like the English monarchy or Roman papacy, but they also struggled to find their role in society. Is it the role of the Christian / Christian community to challenge slavery, defend slavery, or stay out of it? What does Christianity have to say to the slaves and oppressed former slaves? Wait for justice in the afterlife, or stand up for justice in this life? Should Christian teaching

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be enforced through civil law? Should the faith of the voter and the candidate be factors in elections, and if so, which faith issue is most important when voting?

The history of the papacy is not the same as the history of the Catholic Church, but it is a good central example of changing roles in the past 500 years. Priests and bishops all over the world would **struggle to maintain their authority, or at least relevance**. The institution of the Catholic Church, and the pope in particular, went from being the supreme authority in European religion and politics around the year 1500 to a celebrity who inspires with words but wields negligible political power in the year 2000. This was not a quick or easy transition. For a while the papacy had some success with responding to challenges in authority with increased exercise in authority. Although the Protestant Reformation brought England and some German-speaking provinces away from papal authority, in the regions that remained loyal to Rome the authority and institutionalization of the papacy strengthened, bolstered by tens of thousands of Jesuit priests who pledged absolute obedience to the pope. Meanwhile, the major colonial powers of Portugal and Spain remained loyal to Rome (not to say without tension) and served as vehicles for the spread of Roman Catholicism in the New World. When the English Empire later spread protestant Christianity, it would still not be accurate to say that Protestantism was the biggest factor in challenging papal authority. Rather the challenge to the authority of the pope and institutional church came largely from within.

For various reasons the authority of the **Roman Catholic Church was challenged less by protestant religious authority replacing Catholic religious authority, and more by non-religious authority replacing Catholic religious authority**. Protestant thought may be indirectly responsible for the changing tide, but the new

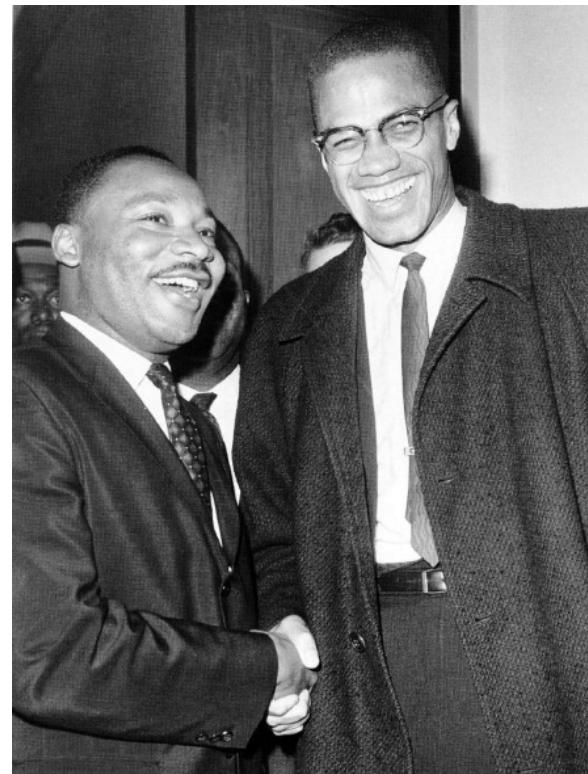


Figure 62: Whereas the Southern Baptist minister Martin Luther King, Jr. (left) saw Christianity as a source of strength in resisting injustice, Malcolm X (right) saw Christianity as part of a system of oppression from which African Americans should escape by turning to Islam. Time and again modern people will ask themselves whether a particular faith, or faith itself, is more part of the solution or more part of the problem.

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alternatives challenged protestant authority as much as Roman Catholic authority. In particular, as we shall see shortly, the rise of rationalism and the Enlightenment challenged traditional religious authority both protestant and Catholic (and Jewish). Some believe that the seemingly endless wars between protestant and Catholic regions left everyone involved thinking that neither religious system was worth dying for, much less a force for good in society. The more the pope or institutional church benefitted from a close relationship with political authority, the harsher the backlash when that political authority was overthrown, as in France and Spain.

As late as the 19th century, the major response to challenges to the authority of the papacy was to assert even more strongly the authority of the papacy. In particular, the **First Vatican Council (Vatican I, 1869-1870) defined the doctrine of papal infallibility**. This issue stands out in a period of struggle in which the dominant voice sought to strengthen the faith by strengthening the church by strengthening the papacy. It was precisely because the papacy was becoming weak on political and intellectual fronts that the response to strengthen it was so dramatic. The Catholic Church became even more hierarchical, more institutionalized, and more focused on unity through obedience. Meanwhile, the authority of the papacy became more and more symbolic. For example, the territory directly ruled by the pope went from most of Europe to what is today the smallest sovereign nation in the world. Vatican City's 110 acres is smaller than the 135 acres of the St. Mary's campus.

Papal infallibility is the teaching that the bishop of Rome (pope) may invoke the authority of the Holy Spirit to define doctrine on faith and morals. Such doctrine is thereby free from error in substance, but perhaps not expression.

In rough sketch, **the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) can be thought of as the mirror image, or pushing in the opposite direction, of the First Vatican Council**. If the First reacted against modernity, the Second embraced modernity. If the First promoted strength and security through unity, the Second recognized the dangers of concentrating authority in a few voices, particularly as seen in fascist Germany and Italy. Beyond the particular things it said, the Second Vatican Council was revolutionary in how it conducted itself. It was a time of free and open conversation among the bishops of the world, and many of the conversations included or accepted consideration from lay (non-ordained) Catholics and non-Catholics. Some of the slogans of the Council, such as "updating" and "opening a window" went far beyond the particular documents it produced, and caught the popular imagination (Catholic and non-Catholic) as a new direction for the Catholic Church, an embracing of free thinking and liberal thought. The 1960s were full of change all over the world, but the Catholic Church more than played its part. The lasting controversy about Vatican II is whether the Church should keep going in the new direction, or accept the specific reforms and go no further with the general spirit of reform. Indeed,

6.1 The historical context of 20th century Christian theology

some would like to reverse direction entirely and reform the reforms back the way they were.

The greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more efficaciously [effectively, efficiently] ... It is necessary first of all that the Church should never depart from the sacred patrimony [gift received from ancestors] of truth received from the Fathers. But at the same time she [the Church] must ever look into the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world, which have opened new avenues to the Catholic apostolate [mission]. ... The authentic doctrine should be studied and expounded through the **methods of research and the literary forms of modern thought**. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and **the way in which it is presented** is another. And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration with patience if necessary. (Excerpt from Pope John XXIII's opening address of Vatican II)

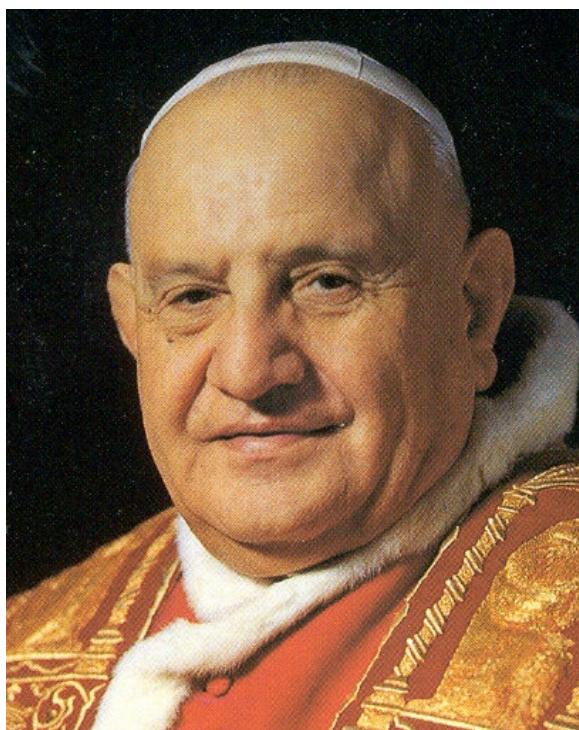


Figure 63: Pope John XXIII (the twenty-third)

Finally, the papacy of **John Paul II** (pope 1978–2005) marked many firsts for the papacy. Only one person in history served as pope for a longer time (his predecessor was pope for only 33 days). That gave him a long time to shape the church gradually. Of the 115 cardinals who voted on his replacement, all but three were appointed

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by John Paul II. That also means many Catholics today remember no pope before him and tend not to realize that things used to be different. Previously popes were not public figures and generally shied away from the media. John Paul II traveled far more than other popes, and frequently led huge masses in stadiums. Though himself frail for most of his papacy, he focused efforts on energizing the youth. No other pope is more easily compared to a rock star. I doubt if more Catholics ever felt more connected personally to the pope as a person, although previous generations certainly felt more committed to obeying the office of the papacy. In other periods the papacy was thought of as simply the bishop of Rome with little distinction over other bishops, or perhaps an administrative authority that did not impact most ordinary Catholics. John Paul II was a truly international pope who made unprecedented efforts to expand the presence of the papacy. The process was centuries in the making, but he more than any other one person marks the transition of the papacy from the chief administrator of the institution of the church to a spiritual celebrity who rules by persuasion rather than authority. This is not to say he had an easy time of being relevant. He did not reverse the trend that Catholics feel less and less compelled to agree with the teachings of the Church, but he did mark a new response in focusing efforts on inspiration and persuasion rather than institutional administration.

6.1.2 Intellectual history

At one point theological discourse was the same as intellectual discourse. Even as the earliest universities began to explore more subjects, they remained grounded in theology, given their roots in monasteries and cathedral schools. The oldest and most prestigious American universities, such as Harvard and Princeton, were originally seminaries for training ministers. Theology went from being the undisputed core of what it means to be educated to, well, disputed. At the very least, there were more voices competing for intellectual authority. Sometimes those other voices directly challenged faith.

The next section will consider the theological dimension of the relationship between faith and reason, and particularly faith and science. The historical context of the flourishing of these theological questions is the Enlightenment. **The Enlightenment is**



Figure 64: Pope John Paul II (the second)

6.1 The historical context of 20th century Christian theology

most associated with the 18th century and the American and French Revolutions. Among philosophers, leading examples include Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Hume. In politics, Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson are good examples. Although Catholicism and Luther were very committed to reason and its compatibility with faith and scripture, the Enlightenment dismissed the compulsion to reconcile faith and reason, in favor of the supremacy of reason. For Enlightenment thinkers, if the Bible contradicts reason then the Bible is wrong. If religion contradicts reason then religion is wrong. Not, "let's explore more deeply and reconsider faith and reason in light of each other," but rather simply, "wrong." **The absolute deference to reason associated with the Enlightenment is called rationalism.** Note that rationalism does not mean use of reason, but the absolute authority of reason (preferably that which can be scientifically studied) over all other authorities in pursuit of truth.

6.1.3 Economic history

Although technological innovations such as the codex and printing press have always impacted theology, the industrial revolution substantially changed societies and the way they think about faith. Industrialization is largely associated with the second half of the 19th century, and very much continued into the 20th century. **Industrialization is associated with large scale production, particularly iron and steel replacing wood tools, and factories replacing craftsmen.** Large factories contributed to urbanization (more people living in densely populated areas). Although trade had always been a vehicle for the exchange of theological ideas, **globalization and the global economy** raised new challenges to faith seeking understanding. One characteristic of globalization is that companies and chains of production span several countries. Before 1990 one could link a given car company to a particular country, and assume a car with that brand name was designed and built in that country. Today that is not the case. As we shall see in two sections, globalization changed the scale of morality. Perhaps once morality consisted largely of choosing the heavenly and spiritual over the worldly and fleshy. More so than ever with globalization, injustice

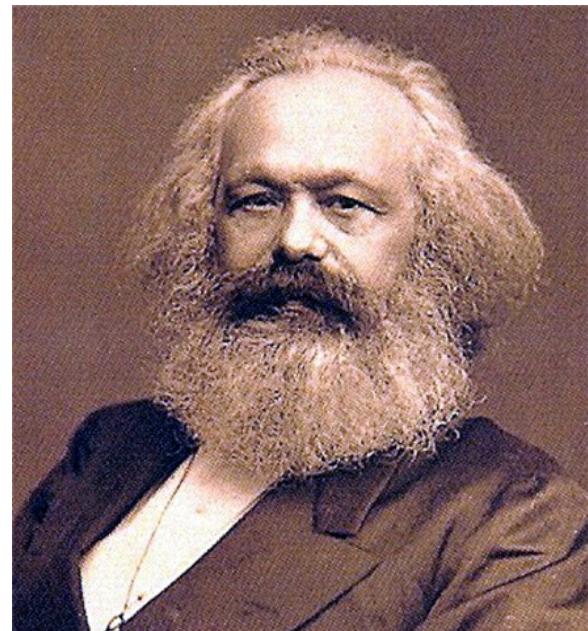


Figure 65: Karl Marx, 1818-1883

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takes the form of international structures that systematically keep entire populations in persistent, multi-generation cycles of poverty and indignity.

6.1.4 Political history

Around the same time that the Catholic Church started responding to injustices in new industrial economies, Karl Marx developed a more radical solution, **communism**. Marx called for the workers to revolt against the factory owners and take control of the means of production. For Marx, religion was not part of the solution to exploitation of workers, but part of the system of oppression that keeps the exploited fearful and docile in this life, in hope of a better afterlife. As communism spread in the 20th century (before contracting in 1989), communist governments often demanded absolute devotion to the state (or the common good in the form of the state) and prohibited devotion to religion. Especially when the church was associated with the old way of doing things, violent revolution often meant violence against religion: particularly the burning and confiscation of church property, systematic murder of priests, and rape of nuns.

But communism was not the only political force that threatened the existence of churches. **Nationalism** in all its forms challenged global or international understandings of "Church." Catholics in particular were accused of being loyal to a foreign pope rather than their own nations. Protestants and Jews were more subtly affected but were also faced with questions of whether they identify more strongly with the international community of all who share the faith, or with their individual nations. One way of articulating the competing identities is, "Am I a Jewish American or an American Jew?" The conflict between loyalty to nation and religion became particularly acute in fascism. **Although fascists tended to tolerate religion more than communists, that tolerance did not last if religion challenged the absolute authority of the leader.** Looking back, it is easy to wish the Catholic or other churches had done more to speak out against the Holocaust and less to protect their own property and existence. It should not be forgotten how much institutions and individuals stood to lose by inserting themselves into politics during the Second World War. Although few today would defend remaining silent during the Holocaust, if asked as a general question many Americans today might say that religion should not be involved in politics.



Figure 66: Pope Pius XI and Adolf Hitler sharing an awkward moment. What would you do in his situation?

6.1 The historical context of 20th century Christian theology

I hesitate to mention secularism in the same context as communism and fascism, which actively promoted violence against religious conscience. However, especially in Europe today, a case can be made that secularism challenges the relevance of Christian faith in ways comparable to the violent oppression of the past. **Secularism means separation, as in the separation of religion from civil matters such as government.** The word connotes different things to different people. You may think it is a good thing or a bad thing that the American government does not spend money to promote any one religion, such as requiring prayer in government-funded schools. You may wish churches played a greater role, or a lesser role, in running the country. You may or may not like it that Christmas specials—or today holiday specials—on television tend not to mention the birth of Jesus. Secularism does not mean oppression of religion, just separating it from the common sphere such that the truth of any one religion is not assumed of all citizens (or in business terms, all of the market). However, it should be noted that the situation is different in Europe. The United States has a secular government and a largely secular media (religious channels exist but are separated), but most citizens continue to be religious in their own way on their own time. In much of Europe the freedom *of* religion has more often meant freedom *from* religion. When one hears European religious leaders talking about secularism the connotation is often the elimination of the relevance of religion from society, not the separation of particular faiths from the common forum.

It may be interesting to note that **before Constantine all of Christianity was not only separated from governmental authority, but often directly at odds with it.** The early Christians lived with the threat of direct, violent persecution by the state. For centuries after Constantine, institutionalized Christianity was the state, or at least a dominant authority in society. Christianity was now on the other end of the sword, the more comfortable end. The Roman Empire became Christendom. Today, it would be difficult to point to a country and call it ruled by Christianity (which is not to say ruled by people who are also Christian). **Christendom is now past.** The first three centuries of Christianity demonstrate that domination is not necessary for the Christian faith, the task of faith seeking understanding, or finding relevance to society through example, teaching, and persuasion (but not force).

6.2 Faith and/or reason?

Reason was always central to Christian faith. What changed in modern times was that reason turned against faith. Theology is classically defined as *fides quaerens intellectum*, “faith seeking understanding,” or perhaps more literally, “faith questioning the intellect.” Faith was presumed first and the intellect brought secondarily. In the Enlightenment, the order was reversed. One can think of it as *intellectus quaerens fidem* “intellect questioning faith.” Let us examine more closely the role of reason in asking theological questions, going back to a quotation attributed to Luther that we have seen before:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear **reason** (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.

We have considered the authority of Scripture, and the various ways it can be used and understood. We have considered the individual conscience, and whether it alone is a higher authority than community. We have discussed the pope and the councils, or the larger sense of tradition that they represented. The authority Luther assumes that remains for us to discuss is reason. It may go unnoticed because people at the time were not arguing about reason, they were arguing about scripture and tradition, or implicitly individualism. **Luther assumed that reason is fundamentally compatible with scripture.** It may not be obvious in this quotation, but Luther also believed that there is one objective truth that is accessible to all through scripture and reason. He expected all rational beings to read scripture and agree on the same basic truth as he understood it. That did not

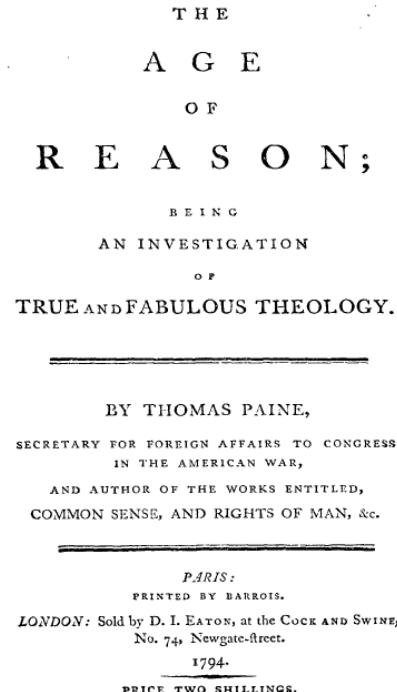


Figure 67: I hate to disappoint you, but when American founding father Thomas Paine wrote about “fabulous theology” he was not exploring gay culture. For him, “fabulous” meant “fable-like” or false, in contrast to the true theology which is based on reason. For him, reason was incompatible with miracles and left the Bible as nice human literature, but nothing more.

happen. Furthermore, he never imagined that reason would turn on scripture. Luther helped promote the idea that individuals should find truth for themselves through reading scripture as the sole authority and applying reason as the primary method. As people increasingly did that, however, they found that **reason conflicted with faith and scripture itself**. Luther thought that the pope and councils, unlike scripture, contradicted themselves and therefore could not be trusted. But soon people found that scripture contradicts itself. The same logic would imply that scripture cannot be trusted. When reason contradicts faith, who wins? How does one go about resolving the contradiction?

6.2.1 Faith and reason cannot contradict

The basic teaching about faith and reason in Catholicism and Lutheranism is clear enough; it is the application that can be difficult. **Catholicism teaches that faith and reason can never contradict.** There is one ultimate truth in the universe (God) and all paths to truth point in the same direction. If the paths appear to cross or contradict, then one is not being understood properly. Perhaps faith needs to be clarified, perhaps reason needs to be re-examined, but the conviction remains that there must be some solution. Different Christians, even different generations and individuals within Catholicism differ on exactly which one is favored. In a university classroom you can expect a bit more from the “reason” perspective, or perhaps more “faith” in a liturgical context. The way John Paul II put it, faith without reason is superstition. Reason without faith leads to relativism (the belief that there is no absolute truth, discussed below). Holding both together can be tricky.

6.2.2 Reason and biblical interpretation

We have already seen different approaches to biblical interpretation. We can reframe the different approaches here as different approaches to reconciling faith and reason. These three positions are not exhaustive, but they do give a map of the discussion.

- Fundamentalism gives the simple sense of scripture the sole authority and rejects “human reason” at least when it points in a different direction than scripture. **If reason contradicts scripture then reason is wrong.** Many are not quite so extreme but always look for a way to prove the Bible “true” or rational in the most literal sense possible, and go to great length to avoid admitting that the Bible contradicts itself, reason, or science.
- Catholicism teaches that scripture is the word of God expressed in the words of men. While God is one absolute truth, the human attempts to articulate God’s self-revelation can contradict each other, can be conditioned by the writer’s historical context, and can even be wrong in the details. The Bible is without flaw (inerrant) for what it is, a guide to salvation, but not without flaw as a

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history book or science book. **If reason contradicts scripture then scripture must have been trying to tell us something else, which is rational.**

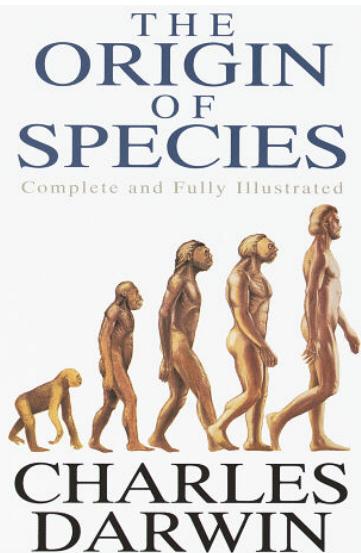
- Further along the scale in the direction of reason over faith, some believe that scripture is primarily a human achievement that is revelatory in the sense that it reveals something about ourselves, or inspired the way poets today can be called inspired. It may even be the word of God in the sense of being words about God. Reason has led many to believe that the Bible is fundamentally a human achievement. Note that so far we have not called it a bad thing to be a human achievement. Many Enlightenment humanists thought that calling the Bible the greatest human achievement was quite a compliment. Later, however, others would say that if the Bible is not the word of God then it must be a lie—a big, wicked lie. Either way, **if reason contradicts scripture then scripture is wrong.**

6.2.3 She blinded me with science

But reason goes well beyond rational inquiry into scripture. For many, science either disproves religion or makes it irrelevant (or as we shall see in a bit, replaces it with its own metaphysical mystery). For these people, the point is not that this doctrine or the other does or does not hold up to reason. The point is that science offers a reliable and sufficient explanation of the world, far more reliable and sufficient than religion could ever manage. Science has the further advantage of objectivity. Scientists may argue, but they are less likely to kill each other over their hypotheses than religious people are to kill each other over their beliefs.

Catholicism resists the conclusions that science makes religion irrelevant or that truly rational and open minded people necessarily reject faith. However, it is worth being clear that **Catholicism is not opposed to science.**

Indeed, Catholic universities and other institutions can be counted as leaders in scientific discovery. Some might argue otherwise from the case of Galileo Galilei, who ran into conflict with Church officials surrounding the idea that the earth orbits around the sun. However, the conflict was as much in how Galileo conducted himself as it was the idea itself. Then and now, there are diva scientists who convince themselves they are correct and resent the scientific process of peer review of evidence and argumentation. Perhaps too slowly for Galileo, the Church did review the evidence and eventually conclude that the earth does orbit around the sun.



Among Christians today, you will find an easier time getting into an argument about Darwin. Darwin recognized the impact of natural selection on faith, but unlike Galileo, proceeded in a sensitive manner, not least because of his love for his devout Christian wife. **Darwin established that the differentiation of species occurs over time by natural selection.** This contradicts the idea that God created every species that now exists at one time long ago when the heavens and earth were created. **Darwin's model of evolution implies that human beings are basically animals**, just more advanced monkeys, not the image of God and the sole possessors of souls. Let's boil the reactions to Darwin down to three general positions:

- **Darwin disproves religion.** Today Darwin's birthday, or "Darwin Day" is celebrated by many atheists as the main festival of the triumph of reason over faith.
- **Darwin is an agent of the Devil.** Evolution is "just a theory," in contrast to the established truth of the Bible. The biblical image that the world was created in six days less than six thousand years ago is every bit as legitimate scientifically, and should be taught in science class in public schools. In response to the constitutional prohibition of establishing religion in public institutions, proponents of this view renamed "creationism" as "intelligent design" and try to argue that evidence besides the Bible supports this view. The basic argument is that the world is so complex that no natural process could explain it. It must have been a super-intelligent, super-powerful creator God who made it that way. Science is hard; religion is easy; religion is true; science is false.
- The Catholic and many churches teach that **Darwin is absolutely correct, and his correctness only makes faith stronger** by leading us closer to understanding truth. Natural selection does not mean that there is no creator, only that God works through natural processes. Other than some awkward cautiousness, Catholicism never opposed Darwin. The only major note Catholicism would add is that human beings are special. At some point in the evolution of human beings we went from being animals to being capable of having a relationship with God—we caught some of the divine spark which can be thought of as a soul.

6.2.4 Secularism

But there is a more subtle way in which religion and science can be in tension, although Catholicism will say they should not be in tension. The unsubtle conflict is the idea that one disproves the other. **The subtle conflict is the idea that religion and science are totally different spheres of knowledge pertaining to totally different areas of truth which have nothing to do with each other.** We have already encountered secularism as a political theory of separation of religion from government. **Secularism can also occur within a person's life.** Religion is for

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Figure 68: Harvard zoologist Stephen Jay Gould (1941-2002) wrote enough popular works to be featured among the Harvard-centric snooty allusions of "The Simpsons." He maintained that religion and science are not in conflict because they have nothing to do with each other. Science should constrain itself to facts, not faith, and religion should constrain itself to beliefs that cannot be scientifically supported or refuted. Catholicism would not accept this way of isolating two essential and complementary ways of pursuing truth.

Sunday morning; science is for Monday through Friday; drunken debauchery is for Saturday. Or, more minimally, religion is for weddings and funerals, not the rest of life. Catholicism cautions against this kind of separation of faith life and non-faith life, in favor of an integrated, well-rounded life. It is not that Catholicism wants us all to quit our science or other jobs and dedicate ourselves only to religion. It is that Catholicism wants our faith to inform our science and our science to inform our faith. Scientific progress without faith messages such as the sanctity of human life is bad all around.

Somewhat related to secularism is relativism. **Relativism would say that there are no absolute truths.** What might be true for me may not be true for you. Everything is relative. No religion is better than another, no idea is truer than another, everything is individual perspective. Catholic teaching tends to use the word "relativism" pejoratively as a rejection of the absolute truth of God. However, relativism and absolutism define a scale on which most fall somewhere between the extremes. Catholicism does (for the most part) accept inculturation. **Inculturation would say that the absolute truths such as the love of Christ can be expressed differently in different cultures** in language and images that make sense to different people. Catholicism also generally accepts **pluralism, the idea that different religious traditions can co-exist with mutual respect** (even as individuals remain grounded in the principled belief that their own tradition is the best).



Figure 69: Mary and Jesus, inculturated in Thailand

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6.2.5 The New Age Movement

Another encounter between religion and science is associated with the 20th century, particularly the 1970s. To understand the New Age movement we should understand how science changed in the 20th century. For centuries, science was focused on objectivity and empiricism. Everything should be measured, quantified, and the simplest explanation of the available data should be accepted. However, the more we learned about science the more it became clear that science is far from simple, it is mind-blowing. Quantum mechanics, for example, challenged basic human perception that something cannot be in two places at once, or be both of two opposite things. The Enlightenment rejected the “mystery” or superstition of religion in favor of science, but science developed a component of wonder and mystery on its own. For some, this led them back to faith. For others, it **met the basic need for contemplation of the transcendent, and replaced the traditional mysteries** such as “fully God and fully human.” The New Age Movement is very mixed, but generally focuses on spirituality that is based on new science rather than old religious traditions. It draws from religions (especially eastern), but does not consider itself constrained by rigid teaching. It is often associated with crystals, the idea that reality is an illusion of the mind, and that we can take control of our lives by tapping into or channeling invisible forces that are larger than us, but not necessarily personal gods.

It need hardly be emphasized that Catholicism and other established religions do not feel that the Bible and traditions handed down for millennia can be easily replaced by crystals. However, there are many people and cases in which it is difficult or impossible to draw a clear line between Catholic spirituality and New Age spirituality. The term “New Age” is generally applied to the form that rejects the need for religion in order to be spiritual, but there is much gray area for people who include both but

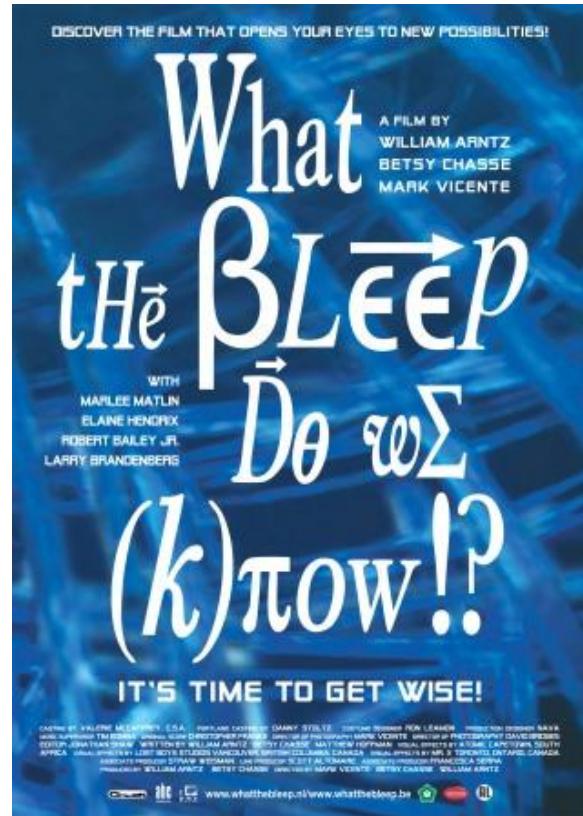


Figure 70: *What the Bleep Do We Know?* This 2004 semi-documentary presents a view of quantum physics and spirituality coming together to prove that reality is an illusion constructed by individual and group consciousness. The film weaves together established science with fringe spirituality.

lean one way or the other. There are also variations that would not call themselves New Age but would follow the basic pattern of **rejecting religion as a part of spirituality**. It does not seem uncommon to hear people in America say, “I’m spiritual but I’m not religious.”

6.2.6 Terms

Finally, we should define some terms that have proven helpful in the 20th century discussion of faith in light of reason.

- Atheism – the assertion that there is no god, generally including any kind of invisible spiritual realm or afterlife (literally, lack of gods)
- Agnosticism – the assertion that an individual or humans do not or cannot have knowledge about god(s), the truth of religious doctrine, or religion (literally, lack of knowledge)
- Deism – the idea that God created the laws of the universe but then left it alone to play itself out. God does not pay attention to human affairs let alone intervene. The image of God is as a clock maker who designs a clock to run on its own.
- Pantheism – the belief that everything is God and God is everything. Some Christian teachings can sound like this (Aquinas), but Christianity generally rejects pantheism in favor of a clear distinction between creator and creation.
- Cultural Christian – recognition of Christianity as part of one’s culture, particularly historically and in the broader society, without actually believing the supernatural truths traditionally taught by the faith.
- Post-Christian – recognition of Christianity as having a formative influence on a society’s or individual’s development, but also rejecting Christianity as a true or acceptable community or belief system with which to identify. I associate this term with feminist theologian Mary Daly who ultimately concluded that her views about the dignity of women were incompatible with those of the Catholic Church, such that she could no longer identify as Catholic or Christian, even though she felt very much formed by the Catholic tradition in other ways. I once explained this term to a French colleague who responded, “But of course this is everyone.”



Figure 71: This image combining Michelangelo's painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel of God creating Adam, and images of the cosmos from the Hubble telescope, might convey the Deist idea that God created the universe in a broad sense (perhaps knowable through science), but God did not fashion humans directly.

6.3 How is Christian faith relevant to the poor and oppressed today?

6.3 How is Christian faith relevant to the poor and oppressed today?

The faith of the Israelites, Jews, and Christians has always called for justice for the poor and oppressed. Several things changed in modern times. The nature of poverty changed. Industrialization and globalization dramatically increased the scale of economic structures. A corporation that neglected human dignity could cause far more damage than a medieval lord. Similarly, the scale of war changed. Global alliances allowed conflicts to engulf most of the world, as evidenced by two world wars and a global “cold” war in the 20th century. Meanwhile, long-range weapons made killing easier and more impersonal than ever. The stockpiling of nuclear weapons meant bad decisions could easily end human life on the entire planet (we were told cockroaches would probably survive). Modern times also saw changes in the awareness of injustice, including all forms of inequality. Last but not least, faith communities went from leaders in charity and social services to playing catch-up. Movements, political parties, and entire governments outpaced most churches as forces in society trying to improve peoples’ lives. People of faith committed to social justice could easily have decided to do both separately. They could work for justice in the secular domain and limit faith to the private beliefs and rituals of citizens. For that matter, they could work for justice only in local faith communities, ignoring the political and economic structures at the root of injustice. Christian individuals and communities addressed the dilemma in many different ways. Speaking for the Catholic Church, **Vatican II asserted that faith and justice should work together.** Citizens of all nations and all faiths must work together for universal recognition of human dignity.

6.3.1 Evangelization

In the United States today, the term “Evangelical,” especially when capitalized, connotes a conservative Christian committed to the (more or less literal) inerrancy of the Bible, a personal relationship with Jesus, and the responsibility to spread these views to others. This connotation leads some Christians today to avoid the term, but all Christians in principle agree that the function of a church community or individual Christian is to evangelize. **The word evangelize comes from the Greek *evangelízō* (εὐαγγελίζω), meaning to proclaim**

The followers of Jesus understood him as the fulfillment of the scripture in Isaiah, “The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me **to proclaim good news [literally: to evangelize]** to the poor, to embrace the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners...” (Isaiah 61:1)

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good news. Jesus began the work of proclaiming good news to the poor, and passed that responsibility to his followers. Christians differ on exactly what the good news is and how it should be proclaimed. **For many historically and still today, the good news is salvation in the next life**, with no emphasis on this life. Others, including the Catholic bishops at Vatican II, understand the **good news to include peace, justice, love, and dignity in this life**. The kingdom of God, or at least the preparation for it, is grounded in this world. The community of Christ's followers should imitate the justice and love which they expect to be perfected by Christ.

Even more controversial than the worldly or next-worldly emphasis of the good news is the **manner in which it is proclaimed**. If one takes as a point of departure that faith in Christ is the most basic or only requirement for salvation, then spreading the faith by *any* means necessary is justified. Conversion by force or manipulation is actually doing the person a favor. Even nicer, more charitable approaches can have conversion as the main objective. One might offer food as an incentive to come hear about the faith, or meet the basic need of hunger as foundation for attempting to meet spiritual needs, or one might "preach" only in the sense of modeling good behavior with the hope that the beneficiaries will be drawn to the faith on which good behavior is based. **All the concepts of proclamation thus far, from violent force to modeling virtue, have spreading faith as the ultimate objective.**

The alternative is to view service to those in need as an end in itself, not a means toward imposing one's faith on others. According to this view, all human beings have dignity as creatures of God, regardless of faith. Faith is neither the prerequisite of being treated as creatures of God, nor the ultimate goal of treating people as creatures of God. The good news to be proclaimed is life, liberty, and love, not religion. Faith is the reason to love and source of love for those proclaiming, it is not the thing being proclaimed. Vatican II opened the door for Catholic teaching in the second view, although the first view is still firmly established. Catholic charities and relief services do not discriminate on the basis of religion or mandate any religious "strings" attached to receiving aid.



Figure 72: The red cross on a white background was used as a symbol of the Crusades. Today, the red cross might symbolize charity to us, but it is problematic to wave our Christian flag while serving people of other faiths, particularly the descendants of people killed under that flag. One solution to is make red stars and crescents. The logo of Catholic Relief Services is not explicitly religious.

6.3 How is Christian faith relevant to the poor and oppressed today?

6.3.2 Justice for workers

If the good news is justice in this life and proclaiming justice in this life means working for justice, one place to start is economic injustice. Christian faith compelled many to work for the abolition of slavery. **Industrialization brought a new kind of economic injustice on a new scale, and it also brought competition for the role of proclaiming justice.** Economic injustice takes many forms, from heinous to subtle. Sweatshops, dangerous working conditions that regularly lead to maiming and death, and employers controlling all aspects of workers lives are still common today, though now moved mostly overseas. Discrimination, harassment, and pay disparity continue to exist even where laws exist against them. Work can be dehumanizing whether the factory owner is hiring a militia to fire upon workers, or the demands of work stand in the way of health and happiness.

Proclaiming economic justice is far from simple. It takes organization to confront structural injustices. Even though the Catholic and other churches had institutional organization in place for centuries, they were not the first responders. One might even argue that the Catholic Church responded to the worker movements more than to the injustices themselves. Worker movements and labor unions developed largely on secular foundations. However, **three major contributions can be associated with the Catholic Church.** First, whereas the worker movements originated from an “us vs. them” relationship with factory owners, the Catholic Church in principle included (or could have included) all sides. Church documents such as *Rerum Novarum* (“New Things,” 1891) proceeded with a more conciliatory approach, describing the mutual responsibilities of employer and employee, rather than single-sided lists of demands. **Second**, in the United States many of the tyrannized workers happened to be Catholic immigrants. Beyond the official documents, there were many priests and nuns who took seriously the obligation to care for the workers in the pews. Priests and nuns occasionally led meetings themselves, allowed parish halls to be used for meetings, or provided safe haven when organizing workers were violently attacked. More importantly, the strike (refusal to work until conditions are satisfied) was the most powerful tool of the workers, but it lasted only as long as workers could survive without income. Church communities often provided food and other basic services to workers on strike.

Third, you knew I had to get to the theological theory. There are plenty of political



Copyright: Oscar R. Castillo, Coachella, 1972

Figure 73: Faith in general and Catholic social teaching in particular played a major role in the work of Cesar Chavez.

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and economic theories that talk about forces such as supply and demand. Catholic theologians spent time asking about the nature and purpose of work. Is it a necessary evil? A duty before God? A grace offered by a godlike corporation? The result was the idea that workers have dignity and work is part of that dignity. For example, unemployment, underemployment, or bad employment can be psychologically damaging, placing pressures on family and society. **Fundamentally, work exists for the worker, not the worker for the work.** Dignity comes from God to human beings to the work. Work is good, particularly when it gives expression to the diverse gifts God gives people for the betterment of society. **Similarly, the economy is good in as much as it provides means to deliver necessities and joys of life to all people**, although it can be evil when it sucks life and happiness from many and delivers it to a few. Profit can be good, but it is not a sufficient good. Short-sighted greed for the self or the shareholders at the expense of the common good is a sin. Economic sin is not only for employers, it is also for consumers who fund economic injustice with their purchases, or even remain silent on issues of the rights and dignity of workers around the world.

6.3.3 Latin American Liberation Theology

In the second half of the 20th century, theologians in Central and South America went further with the question of how Christian faith is relevant to the poor, particularly those systematically oppressed by inescapable cycles of poverty and structures of injustice. They found Jewish scriptures that proclaim a God who liberates slaves by the nation-load, makes laws protecting orphans and widows, anoints people to declare liberty, and sends prophets to call people to justice. Then the New Testament just keeps repeating how the poor are blessed and will receive the kingdom of God, while the rich will have great difficulty. For them, **the good news did not just include the poor or have perks for the poor, it was primarily for the poor.** Liberation from poverty is central to the Christian message. Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez teaches that poverty is death; the Old Testament makes clear: “you are not to kill;” the New Testament makes clear: the plan of God is the victory of life over death.

Liberation theology is theologically controversial in the idea that Christ saves the poor primarily, and **others can be saved in the extent to which they have solidarity with the poor.** That is, even if one does not take literally Jesus' commandment to become poor as a prerequisite to following Jesus (Mark 10:21), one should at least be aware of poverty, be comfortable being with the poor, and do what one can for the poor. For some, this implies that Christ's salvation is directed at many but not all, or that Christ's salvation is mediated, or that something besides faith is necessary for salvation.

Remember back centuries ago when people killed each other over theological debates? Oh wait, I didn't mean centuries. I meant in my lifetime. On March 24,

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1980 Archbishop Óscar Romero was assassinated while saying mass. Later that year four churchwomen were tortured, raped and murdered by government forces. In 1989 U.S.-trained Salvadoran soldiers came to the campus of the University of Central America to execute all the theologians they could find. Six priests, along with their housekeeper and her daughter, were shot in the head at point-blank range. If you visit they will show you pictures. Don't bring the kids.

Among other things, those theologians proved that faith can still be relevant. Unfortunately for them, they were relevant to a time when the United States provided military and financial support to any government that was not communist in proportion to its opposition to communism. In El Salvador in the 1980s, there was only one issue. The propertied elite were fighting against communist guerilla fighters. **Advocacy for liberation for the poor sounded too much like communism**, or at least sympathy for communism. To be fair, most of the people who died in the "Cold" War were not theologians.

6.3.4 Women's Liberation

The term "liberation theology" started in Central America but quickly extended to asking how faith can be liberating to any oppressed group. **There are many theologies of liberation**, but the most significant in America is feminist theology. As we have seen before, women's liberation began outside theological circles, and only later did people of faith seek to put their **feminist and Christian values in dialogue**. The movement for women's liberation in America started in the 19th century working to extend to women the right to vote (ratified 1920). In the 1960s, political efforts focused on illegalizing blatant discrimination against women in the workplace, including the Equal Pay Act of 1963, Title IX prohibiting blatant discrimination in federally funded universities, and the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, which never passed. Today the women's movement is characterized by diversity. Rather than a monolithic movement focusing on one key issue or legislation, there is recognition that different women confront different injustices. Legislation will not solve concerns such as the portrayal of women and women's bodies in the media,



Figure 74: The assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero

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openness to women's contributions even when they are different from those of men, and the ways women treat each other.

As we have seen, the idea of the equality of women challenged traditional church structures defining communal leadership in general and ordination in particular as the domain of men. There were also (sometimes subtle) **problems in the ways historically male theologians represented women and presented ideals for what it means to be a good woman**. For example, it was not always clear that women even have souls. Scripture was written and traditionally interpreted from a male perspective. People of faith who sought from the Bible messages that are liberating for women today found some positive messages, but more that degrade women and their bodies. For example, in the book of Revelation those with Christ in heaven are all men who have not defiled themselves with women, while the only roles for women are virgin and whore. On several occasions cutting women into pieces is presented as a good thing or will of God. Moses teaches that a young girl who is raped must marry the rapist. Paul teaches that because of woman we all die, so women must be subordinated to men. Sirach says the birth of a daughter is a loss. For the most part, the degrading messages were an accidental consequence of the patriarchal cultural contexts of the authors, not the core message. If women had been included all along we might have avoided these problems. As it is there is a tremendous amount of work to do for people who respect women to rearticulate the faith in expressions that maintain the dignity of both halves of humanity, the image of God.

In the past few years, Pope Francis has taken steps to formally recognize some of the contributions that non-priests (including all women and most men) were already making to the Church. In 2021, he opened some roles in liturgical worship (lector and acolyte) and teaching the faith (catechist) to women on a permanent basis (previously it had been happening on a temporary basis). The significance of these changes is not so much in doing things differently, but in thinking about the Church differently. Whereas some, especially between Constantine and Vatican II, had thought of the Church primarily as the bishops and priests (then secondarily ordinary followers and



Figure 75: Is the problem that there aren't women prophets in the Bible, or there are and you never hear about them?

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assistants), Francis is visioning the Church as primarily the communion of all the baptized. With Constantine, thinking of the Church as communion shifted toward thinking of the Church as mediator. With Vatican II and Francis, we are seeing a reverse of that shift in emphasis.

6.4 How should Christians practice their faith in the 20th and 21st centuries?

We have seen how the relevance of Christian faith was challenged in modern times. Many responded to the challenge by thinking more deeply and broadly about the relevance of faith not only for the individual and community sharing the faith, but also for the entire world with all its diversity in faith. Much of the spirit of “opening a window” associated with Vatican II is widely appreciated and basically uncontroversial, even among those who ultimately conclude that faith is no longer relevant outside the privacy of an individual’s heart. The “open window” approach to the Church acting in the world outside has been most controversial on issues of morality. A few of the most discussed issues of morality in society will give a sample of a list that could go on. Before explaining natural law and discussing some major issues, it is worth thinking about the various levels of the scope of morality.

- On the least controversial level, **morality includes individual choices that persons make on their own behalf**. The consequences of a choice can be significant even if they affect no one but myself and my relationship with God. Although we have discussed how Catholicism tends to favor communalism over individualism, this area is an exception. Ultimately, the individual conscience is responsible for moral choice. Not having a choice or blindly obeying is not the same as making a moral choice. The Catholic Church can and does teach individuals about how to make moral choices and advise which choice to make, but it remains the responsibility of the individual conscience to make the choice.
- There is a middle level of **moral action for a collective institution**, but only the collective institution. Basically, this means the Catholic Church and its affiliated schools and hospitals must make moral choices for its own members. This can overlap with the next category in that many patients and students at Catholic hospitals and universities are not Catholic, but even these could fall under the broad category of voluntary participants. Thus, for example, a Catholic institution can elect not to integrate women and men in dormitories, can expel students for non-marital sex, can deny access to birth control for students and employees, and so forth. This is not saying that people outside the institution should be held to these moral choices.
- The most serious and most controversial level of moral choice is the level of **moral law that should be imposed on all human beings regardless of faith**, and indeed should not even be a choice. On some issues morality is not the responsibility of the individual to choose or the responsibility of a faith community to practice its own faith, but the responsibility of society to oppose

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intrinsic, absolute evil. In a sense, this is connected to the previously considered issues of social justice. The right to safe working conditions is not only for people of a certain faith, but something that people of faith should work for on behalf of all people of any or no faith. That probably isn't too controversial today (when communism is no longer feared). What is controversial today is the claim that the prohibitions against things such as abortion, stem cell research, and same sex unions are not teachings of a certain faith but universal law that should be made binding on all people.

6.4.1 Natural law: universal moral truths that are not the domain of one religion

Christian theologians use the term “natural law” to describe absolute moral laws that apply universally to all people in all times and places. They are not relative, cultural constructs. They are not revealed to one particular religion. They are universal. While something like “drive on the right side of the street” is culturally constructed and varies from culture to culture, or certain laws like “don’t eat pork” are known only because God revealed them on Mount Sinai, laws such as “don’t murder” don’t require a special reminder. All cultures adhere to this ideal.

The theological explanation of natural law is that when the creator created the universe, the pattern and core characteristics of the **creator were woven into the creation**. Even though creation may be broken by sin, certain core elements of an ethical God can be known through creation. Just as God created laws such as gravity and conservation of momentum, God also created laws such as “don’t kill.” Just as we all have mass which draws us into conformity with the law of gravity, we also have **consciences** that intuit that murder is bad without having to be told.

Part of the controversy about natural law is who gets to decide what is morally absolute. If one holds oneself to the standard that natural law is evident in what all societies agree upon automatically, then one encounters the problem that many or all societies historically have endorsed slavery and the subordination of women, but does that make them the will of God or the only way things can ever be? The most common example is “murder” but if one defines murder as unjustified killing then it is circular to argue that all societies understand unjustified killing as unjustified.

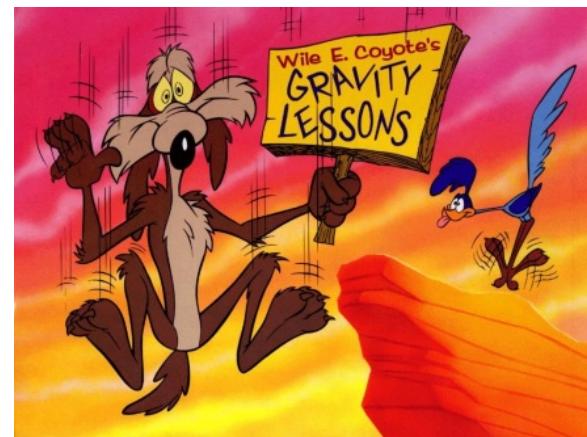


Figure 76: In one episode the coyote runs over a cliff but does not fall. The roadrunner hands him a book explaining gravity, then he falls.

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Certainly most societies consider some killing to be justified. The discussion usually gets complicated, and touches on core problems of epistemology (discourse about how we know truth). Typically if something can be established as necessary for the survival of any society it can be considered natural law.

6.4.2 What are the limits on the sanctity of life at its beginning?

Most would agree that a child that has been born has a right to life, and someone (society in general, the parents, the mother in particular) has a responsibility to sustain that life. **In theological terms, life is sacred, and human life in particular has sanctity because it is infused with the divine spirit.** Questions arise regarding when life begins or becomes sacred.

In Catholic theology, life begins at conception, but the sanctity of life begins even before conception, with the sanctity of sex. Going back to the Essenes before Christianity, one view of sex is that it is only acceptable as a means to **creating life**. The theological term here is “**procreative**.” For centuries this was the primary (if not only) value in sex. The other justification is “**unitive**,” namely that **sex brings married people together into fuller union**. Some Christians would add “pleasurable” to the list of what makes sex good or holy, but Catholicism has not yet done so. Lacking these goods, sex loses its sanctity. **Masturbation** is a sin because it is neither unitive nor procreative. Artificial birth control is a sin because it interferes in the procreative potential of sex, particularly where the sanctity of sex intersects with the sanctity of life. These issues are good examples of times when it makes a big difference how we define “the Church.” If the Church is the Catholic magisterium, then “the Church” is opposed to artificial birth control. If “the Church” is the community of all the faithful, then the dominant perspective is quite different. Birth control is the most common example cited for the “relevance gap” between the hierarchy and laity within the Catholic Church. That is, even Catholics with a strong respect for the teaching authority of the bishops feel less bound than ever to agree with individual teachings.

Even if the sex was not unitive (as, for example, rape), **as soon as it leads to conception then new life exists, and that life has all the rights of any other**



Figure 77: The Magisterium has consistently viewed birth control pills as a sinful choice.

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person. Many people of faith who are basically on board with the significance of the moment of conception would still make theological or practical arguments for the life of the mother taking precedent over the life of the embryo. For example, some would justify abortion if the life of the mother is in imminent danger and abortion could save her life. Some would also extend that to the psychological well-being of the mother. Again, theological questions can be answered differently by different Christians and different thinkers within Catholicism. The current teaching of the U.S. Catholic bishops is that it is not justified to terminate a pregnancy to save the life of the mother. If a human is alive, it is not permissible to intentionally kill one human in order to save another human. Doctors should try to save the lives of both mother and child without prioritizing one over the other.

Another implication of treating a human embryo as a life complete with all sanctity, dignity, and rights is opposition to **stem cell research**. Certainly if I did a study on a group of college students and most of them died in the process, no one would imagine that any benefits of my research could justify my methods. In the case of human embryo research the promise is that countless lives could be saved as entire diseases are eradicated. The current teaching of the Catholic magisterium is that taking the lives of embryos to save the lives of adults cannot be justified. There are many actions that have a good primary effect but a negative secondary effect (the principle of double-effect). Good intentions can mitigate but not replace responsibility for unintended consequences. These complexities are explored in Moral Theology courses and in the NBC TV series, "The Good Place."

You may have already heard all this so far. There is one core theological question at the center of the debate that I think is rarely asked with theological sophistification. Namely, **is protecting unborn life an individual moral responsibility or a social responsibility?** Implicit in slogans such as "Against abortion? Don't have one!" or "Keep your laws/beliefs out of my body" is the assumption that teaching about the sanctity of life cannot be imposed on citizens any more than belief that the Eucharist is the real presence of Christ. Implicit in accusations of "baby-killer," or "It's a child, not a choice" is the assumption that protection of the unborn is a social responsibility rather than an individual choice. It is not a teaching of the Catholic Church so much as a teaching of natural law. Just as faith leads some to work for the dignity of all human beings, for example sweatshop



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workers, regardless of faith, so too the responsibility to protect life is not internal to Catholic faith but an outside responsibility. The responsibility of a person of faith is not merely to avoid having an abortion, avoid providing an abortion, or persuade others not to have an abortion. The responsibility is to promote laws and political candidates that will enforce natural law for all citizens, regardless of faith.

An additional dilemma confronts voters of faith when **no one candidate supports all the social justice issues that faith dictates** should be extended to all persons. For example, teachings about the sanctity of unborn life, capital punishment, just war, and labor rights may all fit together in the voter's conception of human dignity, but voting usually requires picking one social justice issue as more important than another. Similarly, when church leaders have influence and money to contribute to political issues, they must choose which issues to emphasize most vocally. Some of the controversy is not so much about the beliefs taught by the bishops, but the choices to spend billions of dollars on one issue and neglect another.

6.4.3 What are the limits on the sanctity of life at its end?

The sanctity of life at its end also illustrates the distinction between teaching personal choices, making institutional choices through hospitals, and advocating laws providing for the well-being of all society. One end-of-life issue is euthanasia, which simply means "good death," as opposed to a slow horrible painful death. In this country physician-assisted suicide is illegal, but it is legal elsewhere in the world. The more common issue is artificial life support. On this point Catholic theologians aim to support preserving life but not drawing out a painful death. In practice it can be difficult to be certain whether there is any hope of recovery or sustainability of life, or if artificial life support is just extending pain.

Another issue is what to do when medical resources are limited or prohibitively expensive. During the 2020-2021 COVID-19 pandemic the demand for life-saving ventilators exceeded supply. Should the government intervene to make life-saving equipment available equitably, or should the market be free to decide if the wealthy and powerful should have greater access? At what point, if any, should a ventilator be taken away from someone still alive but with no hope of recovery so that the ventilator can save the life of someone else? The allocation of limited life-saving resources in emergency medical situations used to be called *triage*, although many medical professionals today prefer euphemisms. *Triage* is the French word for "sorting," and was used in battlefield hospitals during the First World War to prioritize limited medical resources. Those with life-threatening but treatable injuries were prioritized over those with no hope of survival or no danger of death. There are many situations in which **the word *triage* is used literally or figuratively for selective allocation of limited resources.**

The dignity of life also extends to state-sponsored killing generally, including

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capital punishment and **just war theory**. Catholic teaching opposes all capital punishment as it exists in the United States. Just war theory goes back to pre-Christian Rome and has developed in Christian thought. The bishops of the United States did oppose the Second Gulf War, although not in an efficacious way.

6.4.4 The 21st century

Even as familiar issues from the 20th century continue in the 21st century, new issues are already defining questions of faith in the 21st century. The **sexual abuse cover up scandal** most significantly came to the center of attention in the 21st century. In response to calls for **same-sex unions and marriage**, theologians are scrambling to articulate the relationship between the sacrament of matrimony and the civil laws defining the rights and responsibilities of marriage. There are many questions left unanswered, but that is the way it has always been. Just when the issues of the early Church seemed to have been resolved, new issues arose from new circumstances. Certain elements of the tradition are timeless, but some elements can change in response to the needs of a changing world. Some theological ideas simply sound different in the twenty-first century than they did in the seventeenth century. The changing context of the world allows theologians to see old ideas in fresh ways and to address new theological problems that the Essenes and Early Christians could not have even imagined. **There are problems in theology today that welcome and require work.** The current snapshot of teaching about theological questions (catechesis) will change, as it has always changed.

How will it change? What will Vatican III look like? It hasn't been scheduled; we don't know it will be called Vatican III; we do know that change will happen. Having come to the end of a semester of theology, which topics do you think would be most important if Vatican III is called in the next ten years? What ideas from the past do you think are most important? How do you think Christians should address the topics that you think are most important for the next ten years? In a certain sense these decisions will be made by the bishops, or perhaps some professional



Figure 78: I hope they keep the same venue from Vatican II. It has nice high ceilings and maybe even some room to squeeze in some women.

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theologians. In a more fundamental sense, the decision will be made by the tradition, and it is up to all the faithful to decide how the tradition will be handed down. Simply leaving the Church and not handing down the tradition at all is more practical a possibility than ever. For those who choose to be part of the solution, progress will come through actively asking theological questions. As always, that means receiving faith, questioning, understanding, and ultimately teaching that understanding of the faith to future generations.