

Christian Worldview Traditions

In-Depth Subject Knowledge Essay



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Christianity as a World Religion

Definition

We may define a Christian as anyone who commits themselves to following the person and teachings of the first century historical Jesus, who is often given the title of the 'Christ' (meaning God's anointed one). This definition however immediately invites controversy, because there are some who would insist that to be a Christian the person must also be baptised, others that they must believe in the Trinity, and others that no one is truly Christian until they have had a personal encounter with Jesus, and experienced their sins being forgiven. For the purposes of this article then, we will accept that anyone claiming to be a Christian is recognised as that. This keeps the field wide, allows us to be inclusive in our overview of the religion, and reminds us that there is a diversity of worldviews within Christianity.

A world religion

Like Judaism and Islam, Christianity is a monotheistic religion which derives from the middle east, and developed out of first century Judaism. It is sometimes referred to as Abrahamic (i.e. tracing its origins back to Abraham, an ancient Mesopotamian tribal leader from about 2000BC).

Today Christianity is the world's largest religion, with 2.4 billion adherents[1] in all continents of the world; that is, approx. one third of the world's population. About half of these affiliate to the Roman Catholic church, and the rest are roughly three quarters protestant and one third Coptic, Greek and Russian Orthodox.

Although modern Christianity has typically been considered as Western-European, its decline in Europe, alongside rapid growth in southern countries and Asia, means that by 2050 it will have a very different demographic from that of the nineteenth and twentieth century Church. By then, most Christians will be non-English speaking, and non-European in ethnicity.

[1] Center for the Study of Global Christianity (2018), 'Status of Global Christianity, 2018, in the Context of 1900–2050', *Center for the Study of Global Christianity*

Spread

For its first three centuries Christianity was often a persecuted sect of Judaism, but this changed rapidly in 322 CE when Constantine the Great became Roman emperor and established Christianity as the official state religion. From here onwards the religion has been in various ways linked with national and empire states, although Protestantism and the

enlightenment blurred the connections in many countries as the call for disestablishment and democracy took hold.

During the seventeenth to twentieth century European expansion into the New World, missionaries took Christianity, along with western culture, and whole native populations were baptised into the faith. Following independence in the twentieth century, many of these native Churches have now developed their own style and emphasis, often mixing with earlier local religions to form hybrid new sects or denominations of the Christian faith. Those that continued in the format given by the missionaries however have often retained the Victorian values of that time, while their 'mother' churches in the West have become more liberal in outlook. This has sometimes led to rifts between the two, particularly within the Anglican communion, and especially concerning the ordination of women and issues of gender and sexuality.

Beliefs and Teachings

The Nicene Creed

The core historical beliefs of Christianity are summed up in the Nicene Creed, which is recited by Christians of many denominations in their regular acts of worship. This Creed was drawn up in 325CE by the Council of Nicaea (a gathering of all bishops from across the world) as a statement of orthodoxy and as a defence against heresies. The Creed explicitly states the belief that God is Three-in-One, or Trinity, i.e. God the Creator and Father, Jesus as the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of God at work in the world, all of whom are both worshipped and acknowledged as separate persons of the one triune God. The Creed also affirms the unity of the Church, baptism and repentance for the remission of sins, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgement, and everlasting life.

Trinity

The Trinitarian formula (the idea that God is One but Three) is not explicitly stated in the New Testament, although inferences to this can be seen by Christians throughout both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. It has now become a distinguishing feature, marking Christianity out from other monotheistic religions such as Islam and Judaism, which reject the idea that God can be three.

Most denominations of the Christian religion adhere to belief in the Trinity, and Councils of Christian leaders have often required acknowledgement of it for admission. Those groups who do not acknowledge the idea of Trinity (e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Unitarians) are often considered sects for this reason.

God the Father

Like Judaism and Islam, Christian teaching states that God created the universe, and that God is all powerful (omnipotent), all knowing (omniscient), and everywhere (omnipresent). Having created the universe God is very keen to engage with it (God is immanent). God wishes to know and be known by creation. For this reason, God participates in history, sending prophets and even Jesus, God's 'Son'.

God the Son

The early followers of Jesus were convinced by their experience of him that he must be more than an ordinary human: his miracles, his message and the fact that he was resurrected from death, all convinced them that he must be God. As Jewish people however, they understood the idea of prophets, but could not accept that God could be limited in form to that of a human being. It probably took some time therefore to formulate a way of conceiving of Jesus as being both God and man, human and divine. In time however, they concluded that he had to be God if his death was to provide forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God (see Doctrinal disputes section); Jesus therefore had to be God.

The story of Jesus is told in the four Gospels of the New Testament, although there are also some references to him in Roman writings and other contemporary literature. The Greek title 'Christ' is given to acknowledge his role as God's 'Anointed One', a title taken from Jewish tradition. This was a Jewish term for the future Messiah, who would come to restore God's people and bring about peace on the earth.

God the Holy Spirit

In the Bible account of how the church started (Acts Ch.2), we read that the Apostles were "filled with the Holy Spirit" (older versions use 'Holy Ghost') and thus empowered to begin preaching and healing in the name of Jesus. This power, enabled them to perform miracles and do amazing things like Jesus, and so was clearly God at work through them. To talk about God without including reference to this power was therefore clearly insufficient: yes, God was the unknowable creator, but He was also very much present and living in the world as a spiritual power. Thus, God was also the Holy Spirit in a way that was not the same as being the almighty creator, or as Jesus, the amazing person who had lived among them.

Guidance for life

The sacred text of Christianity is the Bible. The Bible is divided into two sections, the Old and New Testaments. Testament means 'covenant' and so the Old and New Testaments are descriptions of the bond between God and humans, and an explanation of their place in the divine plan. There are 66 chapters (known as 'Books') in the Bible. 39 books in the Old Testament, and 27 in the New Testament.

The Old Testament comprises a 'history' of the relationship between God and the people of Israel from its inception at creation until the time just preceding the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. The Old Testament includes a variety of written styles, including historical narrative, poetry, legend, myth, laws, allegory and symbolism. They are contained in three main sections of the Old Testament – the Law, Prophets and Writings.

The New Testament contains the four Gospels which contain an outline of the life, teaching death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The New Testament also includes descriptions of the early church in Acts of the Apostles, and a series of letters or epistles by St Paul to the early church. These epistles relate to controversies and theological issues of the day, as well as referring to other related tracts and homilies, and ends with the Revelation of St John which is an exploration of eschatological issues.

The Bible commands a central place in the life of the Church and the individual Christian. It provides guidance and inspiration and is regarded as the 'Word of God'. For some Christian denominations, the bible is to be read and understood literally, for others, it is open to interpretation by spiritual leaders.

Passages from the Old and New Testaments will be read during worship as part of a lectionary of readings to ensure that all important parts in the Bible are considered over a period of time. It should be noted that in the UK the importance of the bible within the community can still be seen as witnesses who are Christian are required by law to swear an oath on the Bible during court proceedings.

The Bible is a theological work. It is Heilsgeschichte or 'salvation history' and the many authors and editors of the Bible moulded the text into a description of the way God has worked historically to bring about his plan for humankind. Accordingly, the text will contain complex as well as simple strands but, by unravelling the setting within which the text was written, as well as applying the text to present day situations, a fuller appreciation of the Bible may be gained.

Although the history of the development of the Bible is complex, with the many theological and interpretative stances of its authors and editors having to be considered, Christians nevertheless believe that the inspiration from, and guiding hand of, God enables the truth of the texts to become apparent.

Individual and social responsibility

Christians have always seen their social responsibilities as part of their faith. The Christian Social Movement of the 19th century founded by FD Maurice gave its support to improving the appalling conditions of working men of Victorian England. In the 21st century, there are still many unresolved problems, and Christians continue to find ways to play a central role in this.

Christianity has always had a strong commitment to alleviating social injustice. Jesus was concerned for the poor, sick and outcasts of society and St Paul, Jesus' theological interpreter, gives many instructions about how to respond to those in need.

In modern times, many Christians ranging from William Wilberforce (1759-1833 slavery), Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845 penal reform), William Booth (1829-1912 alcoholism & poverty), Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965 under-developed nations) through to Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968 civil rights), Fr. David Randall (1947-1996 HIV/Aids) and Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1931- apartheid activist) have felt inspired to respond to the Christian message of applying unconditional love to all humans.

The Church

Although the word Church is used of Christian buildings, in fact it really refers to the people, those who have committed themselves to following the Way of Jesus Christ. The word 'church' comes from the Greek ecclesia, meaning 'called out' or 'called forth'. In Greek culture citizens would be called out to assemble. The early church adopted this idea of being 'called' to assemble and do God's work. Thus a church is the people and the work they do rather than the physical building.

The Nicene Creed (above) states that the Church is catholic (i.e. one, undivided), Holy (i.e. not just an earthly institution), and Apostolic (i.e. it can trace its origins right back to the earliest followers of Jesus, and particularly to St Peter, who was given the 'keys of the Kingdom of Heaven'). Although individual churches have often referred to themselves as The Church, correctly speaking individual churches can only ever be 'denominations' or congregations, because the true Church is 'one', and arguably, it is 'hidden', since Jesus has said that awareness of the 'saved ones' would only become clear at the final judgement (Matthew 25).

Sin and salvation

The Nicene Creed states belief in 'one baptism for the remission of sins'. Although the exact understanding of this has been a major point of dispute between Christians, there is general agreement that repentance and baptism are two means whereby people can experience reconciliation with God and welcome into membership of the Church.

The term sin has several meanings, including disobeying God's commands, 'missing the mark', and, failing to live up to God's standards. St Augustine of Hippo (354-430) is attributed with having popularised the concept of original sin (that we have all inherited sinfulness, from even before birth, as a result of the sin of Adam & Eve), although the Orthodox Churches argue that this does not render us guilty or estranged from God at birth. In contrast, Catholics traditionally consider early baptism as imperative, in order to remove the scourge of this affliction.

Major issues of contention on this topic (particularly at the Reformation) concern whether only the Church has the power to grant absolution of sins, but also whether forgiveness is

subsequent entirely on expression of faith, or whether one should also follow ritual practices in order to experience full and lasting forgiveness. Furthermore, in light of God's omniscience, debates have also been prevalent about whether repentance (and thus salvation) is due to an individual's own concerns and actions, or whether God foreordains those who will be saved from sin and it is His 'calling' which subsequently leads them to be drawn to eternal life.

Heaven and hell

Although first century Judaism did not comment extensively on life beyond the grave (Pharisees believed in it, but Sadducees did not), New Testament teaching on this point is explicit. Indeed, Paul argues that if there is no resurrection, then Christian faith is worthless (1 Corinth. 15).

Medieval images of heaven and hell were quite graphic and literal, although contemporary Christians are as likely to see the Kingdom of Heaven in terms of a present lived reality rather than something to be aspired to at a future date. Indeed, Liberation Theology argues quite explicitly that Christians should strive for social and political change to bring about the Kingdom of God in the here and now. Likewise, many Christians might consider hell a psychological or social state rather than necessarily a literal place in the hereafter. However, many Christians today do still believe in a literal and future heaven and hell, and feel an urgent desire to ensure that their own destiny, and that of others, is appropriately secured while there is still time.

End of the age

The Nicene Creed also states that Jesus, "will come again, to judge the living and the dead...". This has been interpreted both literally and metaphorically by various groups of Christians. Taken literally, some denominations give significant focus to the 'second coming', and complex interpretations of apocryphal scriptures (e.g. Ezekiel and Revelations) have resulted in dates being set for this occurrence and speculations about contemporary events which offer evidence that it is nearly upon us. Debates have also been generated about a 'thousand-year reign of Christ', and whether this occurs before or after the 'rapture' (removal of those who are saved)- i.e. pre-millennialism or post-millennialism. Interpreted more poetically, the concept has been portrayed as a utopian ideal, to be worked for socially (e.g. through education, community care and social reform) or politically, through active engagement in civic society. Those influenced by Liberation theology have seen this as a source of inspiration to bring about the Kingdom of God in the here and now, and on the earth itself rather than in any other future world.

Religious Practice

Sunday worship

There are as many varieties of Christian worship practices as there are Christian denominations, although for most (except Seventh day Adventists) Sunday is their special day for gathering, and for most, the central act of worship will be the Eucharist (also known as Mass, Holy Communion, Lord's Supper, etc.). However many non-conformist churches, such as Methodist, Baptist and New Frontier churches, will give equal or even greater emphasis to singing worship songs and time spent in Bible reading and exposition.

Many denominations use a prayer book during worship, containing formal liturgy and additional prayers to provide structure and formality to congregational worship. The Church of England or Anglican Communion places a great deal of authority on the Book of Common Prayer, originally prepared by Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), and its succeeding editions.

Other holy days and celebrations

Festivals are a distinctive part of all religions and through its festivals Christianity is able to plot a calendar for the religious year. Many churches follow a lectionary based around the Christian year, using relevant scriptures for that period, and thus helping the community to grow in knowledge of the faith in a consistent manner. Over a period of time the lectionary ensures that all of the Bible is read and considered.

Festivals also hold a place in the public imagination of most cultures, and for Christian communities they help to bind the community – both participating Christians, and non-active Christians, including secularised post-Christians, families and individuals- all united into a community of common purpose. Although for many people in the UK these festivals have become extremely secularised, their continuation nevertheless indicates the deep and lasting impact of religion on our history.

Most Christian fasts and festivals are centred around the life of Jesus as portrayed in the gospels. The principle festivals are Christmas which is preceded by Advent, Easter which is preceded by Lent and Passion Week, and Whit Sunday or Pentecost, fifty days after Easter Sunday. Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus, Easter remembers the death and resurrection of Jesus, and Whitsun marks the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church.

Advent and Christmas

Advent, which means coming, is the period including the four Sundays leading up to Christmas, and is the beginning of the Christian year. During this time of Advent and Christmas Carol Services take place. The theme is God's incarnation as Jesus, the messenger of hope and salvation. Nativity plays based on the theme of Jesus' birth are performed in some primary schools and churches.

Christmas is a corruption of the term Christ's Mass and celebrates Jesus' birth. Most churches celebrate this festival on 25th December although Eastern Orthodox Christians prefer 7th January. Many Christians attend a midnight Mass or Christmas day service, and manger scenes are placed in the church to remind worshippers of Jesus' lowly birth. Christmas is a time for family gatherings and presents are exchanged in remembrance that God gave his son as a gift to the world. Cultural practices are woven together with religious beliefs. For example many children are told that their presents are brought by Santa Claus, or St Nicholas, the patron saint of children.

Lent, Easter and Whitsun

Lent reminds Christians of Jesus' temptations during his forty days in the wilderness at the start of his ministry. It begins on Ash Wednesday when Christians traditionally deny themselves luxuries. The day before Ash Wednesday, called Shrove Tuesday or Pancake Day, was traditionally the day when a feast of pancakes used up the luxuries in the house ready for a period of abstinence. During the last week of Lent, called Passion Week, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday are especially important days for Christian observance. Palm Sunday celebrates Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem with Palm crosses given out. Maundy Thursday remembers the institution of the Last Supper and in many churches people's feet are washed by the priest. Good Friday is the day upon which Jesus was crucified. Often there are long services, passion plays or processions. Easter Sunday marks the end of Lent and celebrates the empty tomb and Jesus' resurrection. This is probably the most important day of the year for practicing Christians. Whit Sunday comes 50 days after Easter and marks the time when the gift of the Holy Spirit came to the believers of the early church, known as Pentecost.

Mary and the Saints

In addition to the above, some churches will remember and celebrate the lives of past saints, and particularly that of the patronal saint where a church is named after one (e.g. St Mary's Church). On most days of the Church calendar one or more past saints can be remembered and celebrated.

Orthodox and Catholic churches give particular emphasis to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the saints, and their churches will be filled with images of them. In the Orthodox tradition, this emphasises that when in worship, they are surrounded by previous Christians down through the ages, as one big, continuing family of faith. Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians both believe that the saints join with, and help, in their prayers to God. Catholics and Orthodox also express great devotion towards relics of past saints (bones, hair, clothes, etc.), often setting these in special statues or caskets and making these into places of pilgrimage, and sites of special blessing.

Protestants have generally shown less interest in saints, emphasising instead that all Christians are called to live holy and dedicated lives. Some protestants, such as Oliver Cromwell, were so against the veneration of saints that they destroyed their relics and memorials, as an expression of iconoclasm.

Sacraments

Although not all Christian denominations practice the sacraments (defined as sacred acts which channel God's grace), most do officially recognise and mark key rites of passage in Christian growth and development, including birth, entering into adulthood, marriage, and death.

The Roman Catholic Church recognises seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, reconciliation, anointing of the sick, marriage and holy orders. These can be divided into three categories: sacraments of initiation, of healing, and of service. Traditionally, Catholics and Orthodox believe that these special graces are available only through the ministry of their particular Church, although there has been some growing acceptance of each other's ministry in recent years.

Protestant churches will generally recognise baptism and holy communion as special commands of Jesus, but do not accept that for instance, the bread and wine of communion become the actual body and blood of Jesus (transubstantiation) as Catholics and Orthodox do. Rather, they would interpret Jesus words ("This is my body... this is my blood") as metaphorical (giving spiritual nourishment), or as giving special spiritual blessings, but according to your faith rather than as a result of the actions of a priest.

Symbols of Faith

Religious symbolism permeates all aspects of the religious life. For Christians, symbolism is in use in devotional practice such as genuflection or 'crossing', in acts of worship in the liturgy, even in the architectural design of the building, the church, chapel or cathedral. Christian symbolism is apparent in the art of stained-glass windows, the poetry of hymns, and the music of an oratorio.

Today Christians often wear symbols as personal reminders or as public witness to their faith, or simply as an expression of their religious identity. Perhaps the most popular of such symbols today are the cross and the fish, sometimes seen as a cross neckless, a fish placed on the boot of the car, or a religious logo on a tee-shirt. Clergy will often wear distinctive clothing during church services, and may also wear a 'dog collar' for the rest of the week in order to indicate their special calling within the community.

The cross is the principal symbol by which Christianity is now recognised. It reflects the central belief in the sacrifice and death of Jesus of Nazareth. Over time, the form of the cross has been altered by different denominations to reflect their own traditions. However, it is likely that the earliest Christian symbol (dating from the 2nd century CE) was in fact, the fish, derived from the acrostic ICHTHUS in Greek, meaning 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour'.

Other symbols are visible through 'secular' literature. Tolkien's 'Lord of the Rings' and CS Lewis' 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' are explicit in their use of symbolism to convey the Christian message of salvation. Many other writers, such as Evelyn Waugh, use

implicit religious symbolism. This is a common pattern in much western art, music and literature.

The language of devotion, worship and theology often carries a meaning of a symbolic rather than a literal nature. This is most apparent for many Christians in the rich language of the Eucharist. A priest in the Anglican tradition says, 'Take eat, this is my body' and 'Drink ye all of this, for this is my blood'. This is clearly not meant in a literal sense but in a mystical way, affirming the life-changing nature of the Kingdom of God at work in the body of the church.

When a Christian bows before the cross, kneels in the pew for prayer, genuflects at the blessing, or holds up his/her hands to receive the blessing of the Holy Spirit, symbolic expressions of belief are being made. Thus, a direct relationship exists between beliefs, emotions and actions, indicating belief in an all-powerful God, but also recognition of His presence, and acknowledgement of His holiness and honour.

Symbols in art and architecture

In a time when literacy was limited, it was perhaps inevitable that symbolism in art and architecture would develop in order to convey the depth and meaning of religious ideas and stories. The writers of the Gospels themselves became symbolic characters represented in churches: St Luke as an ox, St Mark a lion, St Matthew a man, St John an eagle. Architecture of churches and cathedrals developed symbolic structure, such as the spire representing a finger pointing heavenward, the footprint of the cathedral based on the shape of the cross and the altar a place of sacrifice as well as a table for eating the Lord's meal. Even clothing worn by clergy, the materials used in making vestments and chalices, altar cloths and stained-glass windows are enhanced by the symbolic themes accorded them.

In medieval times, when Europe was more explicitly religious, most artists and craftsmen used symbolic representation in their works to express stories from the scriptures, or aspects of God and his creation. In time a whole language of symbols and colours developed to represent the deeper tenets of Christian faith. For instance, Mary the mother of Jesus was always dressed in blue to represent her honour as 'Queen of Heaven', and Jesus' robe was always coloured both red and blue, representing both his human and divine natures. Saints were given a halo, and individually recognised by the symbols attached to them (e.g. St Peter's keys, reminding us that he was the one to whom Jesus said, "I give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven").

For all Christians of all denominations, the artefacts and the architecture of their buildings will reflect their beliefs about the faith. Thus, where Quakers might choose simplicity in the surroundings in order to focus on the light of God within them, Anglicans or Catholics would maintain that the beauty and grandeur of a church or a cathedral has the ability to create a sense of wonder and awe. In this way, the architecture and design of a Church will often indicate the beliefs and theological emphases of that particular denomination.

Church of England (Anglican) and other church buildings

In England, because it is the officially recognised national church the Church of England, Anglican churches can be found in every single parish in the country. In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales there are also Anglican Churches; Church of Ireland, Church of Scotland, Church in Wales. Roman Catholic churches are fewer in number in the UK, but these also have traditional parish boundaries. Free churches do not have designated 'boundaries' in this sense, but are 'gathered churches', being built and established wherever there is need.

Many Anglican churches are shaped as a cross from an aerial perspective, with high spires and arches which reach up to heaven. Since the altar is symbolic of the death of Jesus, and the table for the central act of worship is found at the front of the church, so therefore the pews must face in that direction. Also, because praying on one's knees is important as a sign of respect, pews will have kneelers to make this more convenient.

The traditional plan for an Anglican church is the nave for the congregation, the chancel where the choir sits and the priest officiates, and the sanctuary, which contains the altar. Within the church are numerous artefacts and symbols that aid worship, devotions and ritual practices. The font, the altar, the crucifix or cross, candles, stained glass windows, pulpit and lectern, all have symbolic and practical uses.

A Chapel is a place of worship in the Christian tradition of non-conformist groups such as the Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church, and the Baptist Church. The word Chapel is also used for individual units within larger Anglican and Catholic churches. Most non-conformist chapels are less ornate but may have similar features and artefacts to a parish church; however, they often place much more emphasis on the pulpit and the preaching of God's Word. Today many churches meet in re-purposed buildings such as old cinemas and schools, or attempt to bring church to new groups, such as on beaches or town centre cafes. As noted, church is not about the building, but about the people and the work they do.

Because churches and chapels are 'sacred space', their main function is for offering prayer and worship to God; however, they are often also used for other purposes, including musical and public events, venues for voting, youth group events, children's playgroups, etc.

A Cathedral is the central church of a diocese and is the 'Seat' of the bishop. There are 42 Anglican dioceses in England, each having a cathedral in the main town or city of that diocese. Each diocese is then subdivided into parishes, each providing locally what the cathedral represents regionally.

Christian worship

Christian worship is generally 'congregational'. It developed out of Jewish worship practice which had been congregational for centuries. Alongside this, Jesus' saying in Matthew 18:20, ("For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.") suggests a pattern for corporate worship. Sunday is also the traditional day of gathered worship for Christians. This is in remembrance that Jesus rose from the dead on a Sunday. It is also likely

that Sunday took great importance in the early church in order to distinguish it from the Jewish practice of worship on the Sabbath (Friday evening/Saturday).

Traditional Anglican or Church of England practice is to have two or three services on a Sunday. These were Morning Prayer, Matins and Evensong. These services included prayers, hymns, readings from the Bible, Collects and a sermon. In recent years, Matins has often been replaced by a 'Eucharistic' form of service. In these services, the priest leads a form of worship based on the Last Supper that Jesus had with his disciples, often called holy communion, which Roman Catholics call Mass, the Orthodox call the Liturgy, and non-conformists call the Lord's Supper. Here, bread and wine is blessed and distributed, although usually only confirmed members of the church are allowed to receive this. These services normally start at about 10am on a Sunday and last about an hour in total.

Non-conformist services tend to be based on the 'Word' rather than on communion and so the place of the Bible and the preaching of the minister takes greater significance. Hymns, anthems and popular music are often more central but traditional practices like reading scripture also take place. Pentecostal churches particularly engage in a more emotive form of worship, bringing the holy spirit to the church congregation. People might feel forgiven, healed or uplifted by the experience.

Prayer

Central to all Christian worship is prayer. This is a core element of all congregational worship, but also an intrinsic part of everyday Christian living. Sometimes it has been referred to as the breath of Christian practice. Many of Jesus' teachings and parables are about prayer, and St Paul says in one of his letters, "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5). Jesus' injunction, "But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:6) confirms that private individual prayer is a required complement to congregational worship.

The Lord's Prayer (so called, because Jesus asked his disciples to pray this way) is one of many well-known liturgical prayers. Others include the Nunc Dimittis, the Jesus Prayer of the Orthodox Church, and the Prayer of St Francis.

Christian prayer has been described as of several types: prayers of praise and thanksgiving, prayers of confession and repentance, and prayers of request or pleading. Sometimes prayer is also wordless however, just sitting in God's presence. In this sense, Christian prayer might simply be thought of as communing with God, or living in the presence of God, and many Christians would make it their aim to live in this state all of the time.

Other church activities

Christians see themselves as a community of faith, dependent upon the support of each other. St Paul stressed this in many of his letters to early church communities: "The body is

not one member but many... If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it" (I Corinth. 12). Church members see themselves as the earthly embodiment of the 'Kingdom of God' and so try to live out the life, teaching, work, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The importance of a church building to the community as a whole is to provide a physical symbol of the presence of Christianity within that community. The parish church in any community provides a natural contact with the rites of passage, of baptism, marriage and death that many people who would not normally attend church for Sunday worship, still participate in. The church also provides opportunities not only for worship, but also opportunities to learn about the faith through Bible studies, and prayer and discussion groups. Church groups also meet for social occasions and mission activities that might take them out into the community. Such activities might provide support and facilities for disadvantaged groups like single mothers, older people and the unemployed. Churches increasingly manage and support food banks and other measures to alleviate poverty and disadvantage. The church can therefore be an important part of the social fabric of any community, and the Cathedral is often significant for regional confirmations, ordinations, and a range of civic events such as university graduations, Remembrance services, commemoration events, etc.

Baptism and confirmation

John Bunyan (1628-88) author of the allegorical 'Pilgrim's Progress' illustrates the Christian life as a journey, through which Pilgrim seeks the right path, and in the process discovers greater depths of Christian truth. Many Christians also see life in this way -as a pilgrimage- and believe that God guides and supports them on this journey, just as a parent looks after and cares for a growing child.

Christians mark times of transition within this journey with various celebrations or ceremonies of passing. The birth of a baby for instance is a time of great promise and thanks are given for the start of a new life. Some Christians mark this with Infant Baptism or christening, which brings the new baby into membership of the church and so starts that child on the path of faith. God parents (and the parents themselves) will promise to guide the child in the Christian faith. The Baptist Church and some other non-conformist denominations leave baptism until adolescence so that a person may decide for themselves whether to commit to the faith. Such churches may hold a Service of Thanksgiving at the time when the baby is born instead of a baptism.

Where a child has been baptised as a baby, this is usually followed when they are a young teenager by a service known as Confirmation. This is usually led by the bishop, and often held in a cathedral. Here, the child confirms the promises made for them as a child by their parents and God-parents, and the bishop asks God to send the Holy Spirit to guide them in their developing faith. At this point they are invited to participate fully in the Eucharist (Holy Communion), and from here-on they take full responsibility for their own Christian life and service.

Marriage

By the time a Christian is ready to marry, they will have been taught that marriage is the joining of two people in a faithful and loving covenant-relationship before God. The Christian marriage ceremony takes place in the sight of God and before friends and family, and is conducted by an ordained minister or priest. The couple make vows (binding obligations towards each other), rings are exchanged (a sign of the everlasting nature of the vows and the couple's relationship) and prayers are said for the couple and their life together. In England and Wales, all Anglican clergy are legally recognised as official registrars for wedding solemnizations within their own church buildings. This may not be the case for other churches and clergy.

Funerals

Although life ends in physical death for everyone, Christians believe that this is not the end, but that the spiritual body will continue on in some way, united with God and finding eternal peace with Him. Jesus' resurrection is the evidence and assurance of this. Traditionally Christians were always buried, but today they may be either cremated or buried, with a service conducted by a priest or minister. A funeral service is often held at the church itself, followed by another short service of committal at the graveside, or else at the crematorium. The funeral service gives thanks for the life of the departed one, and reinforces the message that God's love is stronger than death itself.

Pilgrimage

Christians believe that throughout their own life they are following in the footsteps of Jesus, since His life is the example by which they should live. Jesus' example included times of prayer and fasting, caring for the poor and sick, and living by the principles of God's Kingdom, here on earth. By committing themselves to the church and through following its practices, Christians demonstrate their willingness to follow this example, bearing witness to the faith within their family and the wider community.

However, there is also the concept of 'walking in the shoes' of the founder in a literal sense, and many Christians view the idea of going to Israel where Jesus lived, seeing the sights he saw, and feeling the history of the country where he grew up, taught, died and was raised from death, to be an educationally and spiritually uplifting experience. Participating in such a pilgrimage with other pilgrims, often helps a person to better understand their faith and helps them in their own spiritual journey.

Today, the main places of Christian pilgrimage include Jerusalem, Galilee and Bethlehem in the Holy Land, Rome in Italy, Lourdes in France, Santiago de Compostella in Spain, Knock in Ireland, and Walsingham and Canterbury in England. In the days before cars, planes and other comfortable transport, a person of faith would have to walk or go by horse, and

people who have done long pilgrimages to Santiago by foot, suggest that it is a wonderfully uplifting and spiritually worthwhile effort to walk the hundreds of kilometres necessary to gain the 'compostella' or certificate which confirms that the pilgrimage is completed.

Christians of some denominations, particularly Catholics, believe also that pilgrimages to historical places of interest, such as the Vatican in Italy in order to see the Pope, to be especially beneficial and a sign of devotion to the faith. Alongside this, Catholics also believe that God intervenes on behalf of his people through certain saints in order to be able not only to heal spiritual wounds that pilgrimage can cure, but also physical wounds and hurts. At Lourdes in France, for instance, many thousands of disabled people visit the grottos hoping to experience healing.

Monasteries and other Christian communities

Ever since the beginning of the Church, there have been some Christians who wished to devote themselves more fully to a life of prayer or service, away from the everyday distractions of life. In time, monastic orders were developed for such communities, examples of which are the Benedictines, Dominicans, Franciscans, and Jesuits. Christians devoting themselves to such a life take vows for life (usually of obedience, poverty and chastity) and are known as monks or nuns. Some of these communities are intentionally separated from society at large, while others offer services such as schools, care homes and spiritual retreats. Most of such orders are Roman Catholic or Orthodox; Protestants are less drawn to this form of community, although the Anglican Church does have some. In the twentieth century a number of Protestant or ecumenical Christian communities were established however, but usually without the above vows or life commitments, but which nevertheless had a clear intention of prayer and service. Examples of this are the Iona Community in Scotland and the Othona communities in Essex and Dorset.

Ethical guidelines

Christian values are based upon the life and teaching of Jesus, whose moral ethic is summed up in Mark 12 as, "Love God, and love your neighbour as yourself". An expansion of this is found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), which affirms that the blessed are those who are poor in spirit, the meek, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for doing what is right, etc.

In Luke's gospel Jesus says, "... Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you." (Luke 6:27-31).

Right and wrong for a Christian is therefore viewed through this attitude to people – self-giving love. In I Corinthians 13:4-8a St Paul defines this further, "Love is patient; love is kind;

love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” For a Christian, these words are the starting point for how to know what is right and wrong.

However, in practice, these principles may be interpreted in many different ways. It is therefore very difficult to generalise about Christians when defining their beliefs about particular social or moral issues. In seeking to apply the teachings of Jesus to everyday life, for some Christians the primary moral authority is their Church’s teaching; for others it is the Bible; for others individual conscience, or else a combination of all three. Christians who take a traditional or conservative social outlook might oppose abortion, homosexual relationships, sex outside marriage, and transition of gender, while Christians with a more liberal outlook might take a different view. Likewise, some Christians take pacifist views on war and violence (such as Quakers and some non-conformist traditions) while others take a view that wars may be just, based on Aquinas’ Just War Principles. Some conservative Christians believe that the death penalty is a justifiable form of punishment for a Christian community while others will disagree.

It is also important to note that not all Churches require their followers to adhere to an agreed statement of their Church’s moral theology, while others, like the Roman Catholic church, may maintain quite a strict view of how the followers should believe and live. Even then however, there are often dissenting voices, even within those traditions.

One should be very wary therefore in assuming to determine Christian attitudes to finances, sexuality, family and so on, since groups and individuals will interpret these differently according to their particular teachings and the religious contexts of their own individual lives.

Sources of authority

All Christians seek guidance and inspiration from three main sources: the Bible, the Holy Spirit (or inner light, conscience), and the Church. However, the weighting given to each of these will vary individually and denominationally.

The Bible as a guide

The Bible is pivotal to Christian faith -particularly the New Testament- because it contains the Gospel accounts of Jesus and letters of guidance written by the early Church. It therefore takes a central position in the church, both literally, often placed on a lectern at the front of the church, and metaphorically, by being a major focus within the community worship. In nearly all church services readings are taken from it, and sermons are prepared from these readings. Many Christians will also have Bibles in their homes and read portions from it on a daily basis.

The Bible however is a complex collection of written texts. It has sixty-six books (39 in the OT, and 27 in the NT), written over a period of thousands of years. The Old Testament consists of the five books of Moses, including accounts of creation and God's dealings with His 'chosen' people, stories and writings about the Hebrew kings and prophets, and various other wisdom writings, including the book of songs (Psalms), and Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, two books of wise sayings. The New Testament has four Gospels (about the life of Jesus), a history of the early church (Acts) and then a collection of letters to various churches, most of which are written by St Paul. The New Testament finishes with the book of the Revelations of St John, outlining a vision of the end of this world and the beginnings of a new heaven and earth.

Making sense of this collection is not easy- even for scholars, firstly, because it comes from a totally different era of time, but also because it requires translation from its original Hebrew and Greek. Subsequently there are libraries of books about what it says (commentaries) and about how to apply this to modern everyday life (hermeneutics). Some of these Biblical scholars are linguistic experts, some explore findings from history and archaeology to understand the context of the Bible world, and others offer theological insights, trying to piece together insights from across the Bible to make sense of what is the 'grand narrative' of these scriptures.

As a result, how Christians use and interpret the Bible today is varied. Some might read particular biblical passages as literal or historical truth, while others might take allegorical or symbolic meaning from the same verses. The account of creation in Genesis is a good example, with a literalist reading understanding the world to have been created in six days, and an allegorical or symbolic reading understanding creation as willed by God, but the mechanism adequately described by Big Bang and evolutionary theory.

Those who read the bible literally can also be called Fundamentalists, referring to a desire to hold on to the 'fundamentals' of faith. Fundamentalism, of which Creationism is a type, is a modern reaction to liberal and critical readings of the bible which developed from the 19th Century. In between the liberal and literal positions are a wide range, both traditionalist and progressive.

It was for these reasons, particularly before universal education, that the Church was reluctant to let ordinary Christians read the Bible for themselves, preferring instead that it be read and explained to congregations by trained and qualified clergy. This was one of the major tensions underlying the Reformation: protestants became convinced that the Roman Catholic church had strayed away from the true message and meaning of the Bible and they wished to restore things to what they felt Jesus and the apostles had originally believed and practiced. On the whole therefore, Protestants give much more emphasis to the Bible in their worship and in their rationale for their distinctiveness.

The Bible and science

Christians who hold a literalist interpretation of scripture will often find themselves in conflict with modern scientific thinking. Both religion and science are concerned in some way with how people can know what is real, what is true. Christianity makes certain claims about, for instance, the nature of God, and his 'miraculous' involvement in the world, and science makes other claims that either contradict the claims of Christianity or even deny that such things as God and miracles exist.

The controversy between science and Christianity began in earnest in the 19th century with significant discoveries in geology and then biology. Geologists began to establish that the world in which we live was many millions of years old and could not be just 5000 years old as suggested in the stories of Genesis. Charles Darwin then published his 'On the origin of species' which established that humans had evolved over millennia, and had not been placed intact into the Garden of Eden merely thousands of years previously. What these two discoveries established was that the claims made in the Bible, if taken literally, were in fact incorrect from a scientific point of view. People therefore asked, if these claims are incorrect, how much more of the Bible is incorrect – including the central claims of Christianity?

It has been the task of modern scientists and Christian thinkers to tackle this issue. Some fundamentalist Christians refuse to accept the findings of science, and although still a powerful body in some churches, they are often viewed as extreme by other Christians. Other, more moderate, Christians however, accept that scientific findings have demonstrated a need to re-interpret the Bible and that the claims made about the world and God are written in a language exclusive to religion. To interpret this language scientifically is therefore viewed as about as similar as trying to play football with a table tennis bat.

Religious belief (like new discoveries in science?) often requires a 'leap of faith' at some point in the thinking and perception of the believer. In the same way that an analysis of human emotions such as 'love' can only be fully appreciated through experience, so science can only lead so far in explaining the nature of faith. Although studies in the sociology and psychology of religion offer scientific explanations of man's need for religion (e.g. Weber, Marx, Freud, Jung), many still feel that a life lived according to faith makes more sense and is more meaningful than a life lived without it.

Albert Einstein, although sceptical about a personal God, said, "A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty – it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man". However, other eminent scientists are deeply religious and find the co-existence of faith and science as totally complimentary. It is entirely possible then, for a Christian scientist to say that the stories of creation in Genesis Chapters 1 and 2 are a true 'myth' about the relationship between God and humans, while still holding that the cosmos was created 14 billion years ago in a Big Bang.

Conflict between scientific discoveries and faith are often due to the conflict between contrasting world views upon which so much is invested. Some philosophers have coined the

term 'paradigm shift' to explain what happens when humans retain concepts of a by-gone age into the present and this results in an inevitable conflict. Empirical language, or the language of science, is descriptive and analytical. Religious texts are usually from another historical context and their language is often emotive and poetic. It is therefore important to understand the context within which language is used, and to apply appropriate rules that will help to maintain clarity of thinking. Christianity makes claims that suggest a reality beyond the empirical. Its beliefs about the human 'self' include both a body and a spirit or soul. Christianity also teaches about an after-life, an eschatology, and believers have faith and personal experience as evidence to support this. There are a huge variety of positions regarding science and Christian faith, both in their way sources of information about the world or descriptions of reality. The Faraday Institute is a UK-based research institute improving public understanding of the relationship of religious belief, including ethics, and the sciences.

Holy spirit as inner guide

All Christians emphasise the importance of conscience, although for groups like the Quakers this is of paramount importance. Pentecostals and Charismatic Christians also place great emphasis on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within believers, guiding and directing them in their daily lives to know and live out the will of God.

Church leaders and their influence

Leaders in the various churches are chosen either directly by their local congregation, or by the regional leadership through a selection committee. As priests or ministers they may be known as Father, Reverend, Vicar, Canon, etc., or in some non-conformist churches, simply by their everyday names. Most recognised leaders however will hold a considerable authority within their local parish or congregation, and quite often more generally within the surrounding community. In the case of priests of the Church of England, Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions they may wear distinctive clothing which indicates that they are professional clergy. Other church clergy will also often wear the clerical or 'dog' collar as a visible symbol of their position as Christian leaders.

In Britain, the authority of the Church of England is recognised through the legislative power it has. As the established Church in England and Wales, the Queen is its Head, and Bishops sit in the House of Lords and thus hold a key to legislative influence. Prayers are said each day in Parliament and there is a Parliamentary Chaplain. The Archbishop of Canterbury's London residence is opposite the Houses of Parliament in London and demonstrates the historic balance of power and authority between church and state. In recognising the authority of the Church, the state also has church dignitaries present on all state occasions. Even within the media, in spite of secularisation, popular television programmes such as Songs of Praise on Sunday, and the daily act of worship or Thought for the Day on national radio, are still popular with both those involved in church worship and those less committed.

The influence of the Pope as an international spokesman, and to a lesser extent the Archbishop of Canterbury and leaders of other Christian denominations, is still considerable, and many world leaders look to their church leaders for guidance on ethical, moral and spiritual, and sometimes political matters. Many priests and ministers are also significant influences for change within their local communities: their comparatively high education, experience of public speaking and willingness to express opinions on subjects with authority, means that they often become prominent spokesmen and women for their communities. A number of church leaders act as school governors, town councillors, and chairpersons for various local and national charities.

On a political level, politicians know the power, influence and authority Christian pressure groups can exert. In the USA, the 'Bible belt' of the southern states of America can, and often does, influence even the election of Presidents of the USA. In the UK, politicians tend to be much more sensitive about religious issues, often seeking balanced media coverage of any personal religious affiliations.

Saints and other moral exemplars

Commitment to Christian faith in Jesus entails responsibility to other people. Many stories in the gospels of Jesus show him assisting people who were under-privileged, sick, distressed or outcast, and the New Testament commands his followers to respond in the same way to such needs. The extent of Christian engagement in social action will vary though: some evangelical Christians might say that the Church's main task is to focus on people's spiritual welfare, while others argue that Jesus did good to all who were in need, regardless of the recipient's spiritual status.

Although all Christians aspire to live like Jesus, there are some whose lives show special spiritual maturity or influence. Christians such as Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa and Father Kolbe all provide positive examples of Christian dedication and commitment. Other examples include William Wilberforce (1759-1833 slavery), Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845 penal reform), William Booth (1829-1912 alcoholism & poverty), Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965 under-developed nations), Fr. David Randall (1947-1996 HIV/Aids) and Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1931- apartheid activist).

The term 'saints' is used in the New Testament to refer to all Christian believers; however there have been some Christians down through the ages who have set a particular example of faith, especially those who were martyred for refusing to deny their allegiance to Jesus. Such examples have been immortalised by the Church by giving them the title of 'saint', and often attributing to them special status as guides for travellers, or patrons of particular countries etc. Special procedures have been developed for identifying modern saints, and these include evidence of a particularly holy life, the attribution of miracles to them, etc. Many protestant denominations are reluctant to give such special status to past Christians, believing that such recognition detracts from a central focus on Jesus.

Christians and the environment

Until the 1967 thesis of Lynn White Jr (1907-1987), claiming that Christianity was to blame for our present ecological crisis, most Christian apologists and theologians had little to say about ecology. Since then however, much has been written on the topic, and Pope Francis published as his first encyclical the document 'Laudato Si', or 'Praise be to You', with the subtitle 'on care of our common home' in May 2015. This indicates that the topic is now taken more seriously, and Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) has been identified as the patron saint of ecology.

In the past, western Christians tended to use the Creation Stories of Genesis chapters 1 and 2 to highlight the unique position of humans as made in the image of God, and to use this as justification for humans to have 'dominion' over the resources of the natural world, including the animal kingdom. Today, that is usually understood as our special responsibility rather than as humankind's special privilege. As a result, attitudes to animal rights and the environment feature large in the writing and actions of most church leaders, although there are still some Christians who argue that it is the human soul/spirit that that should be the focus of attention, not the environment.

Diversity

Within Christianity there is huge diversity of belief and practice: perhaps it might be more accurate to speak of many 'Christianities' rather than of a singular 'Christianity'.

Individual spirituality

As in all religions, individual expressions of commitment and devotional piety vary; some Christians are totally devoted to their particular Christian path, spending every moment that they can to meet with other Christians, to read their Bible and pray, while for others, it is simply the religion they grew up in, and thus a mark of their identity or heritage, but little more. For some, the faith is something particularly experienced at an emotional level, while for others it is Christianity's beliefs and doctrines that make so much sense, and which provide moral direction and guidance in life. Sometimes these various differences of commitment-level and emphasis are denominational, but sometimes it just comes down to the particular beliefs or devotional piety of that individual. For some groups, their expression of Christian faith is so strictly adhered to that they choose not to mix with others who do not follow the same Christian path. Examples of this are the Amish and the Plymouth Brethren.

Denominations

David Barrett states that there are around thirty three thousand different Christian denominations worldwide[1], and in the UK these include the established Anglican communion of the Church of England, the Roman Catholic church, various Greek and Russian Orthodox churches, Baptists, Methodists, Quakers (also called the Society of

Friends), Salvation Army, Brethren, Pentecostal churches, and many others. The UK is also home to several groups who consider themselves Christian, but are not always accepted as such by the more mainstream denominations. The best known of these are the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints (otherwise known as Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, and Unitarians.

Today, there are a growing number of new churches which have no particular affiliation to any of the historical denominations, but which are independently run and organised, even though possibly in partnership with other similar churches in other towns or cities of the UK or abroad. These are often non-liturgical (i.e. they don't follow a printed order of service), they make significant use of modern musical instruments and computerised electronics, and they are often attractive to young people and university students. Such churches will often take names like, Alive, Hillsong, Vineyard, or Cornerstone, and they frequently meet in rented buildings rather than in their own purpose-built churches. In our major cities there are also a growing number of independent Pentecostal groups run by and for black or Asian Christian communities.

Differences between the various denominations may be based on their form and style of worship, aspects of their theology, or their administrative structure and organisational hierarchy. On the other hand, individual churches of the same denomination might also vary in some of these ways, and today, you will almost certainly find individual members of any given church who will have very different beliefs from the other members of the same church.

[1] Barrett and co-author Todd Johnson state there are 33,820 denominations; World Christian Trends AD30-AD2200 (2001) William Carey Library, California: p7

The Church of England

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This is particularly true of the Church of England and the Anglican communion, it's colonial offshoots across the Commonwealth and further afield. At its formation in the 1500s Henry VIII established a Catholic church, but of Britain alone, and separate from the authority of the Pope in Rome. Later, it took on a more Protestant theology, but retained the liturgy and form of the Catholic church.

In its modern form, individual parishes of the Church of England and Wales may still have an emphasis in one or other of these different directions: some are very Catholic, venerating Mary, using candles and incense, even using Catholic language and genuflections, and, to a

visitor at their services, seem almost identical to a Catholic church. Other Anglican churches are much more Protestant, maybe still following the general service order of the Church of England, but in every other respect reflecting more the theology and liturgical practice of many non-conformist churches. The worldwide Anglican communion is also divided on the ordination of women priests and issues of sexuality, with some groups, such as the Episcopal church of USA feeling that it needs to become more liberal in its theology and practice, while Anglican Christians in Africa and other southern countries retain a more conservative or traditionalist social outlook. Even within Britain itself, special provision has had to be made for those Anglicans who do not feel that they can accept ministry from women priests, with special arrangements being made to ensure that their individual spiritual provision is not compromised.

Doctrinal disputes

Historically the Church has always struggled to understand and define the person of Jesus. One key element of this is known as the Christological debate: In what sense was Jesus both God and man? Another debate has focussed on sin and free will: is humankind born sinful and only capable of salvation if God chooses to save him/her (pre-destination), or do we each have free will to choose or reject God's salvation (sometimes called Arminianism)? A third area of theological controversy concerns the purpose of Jesus' death (sometimes called Atonement Theory): was His death in order to 'pay the price' for sin? (i.e. to satisfy God's need for justice, having been sinned against), or was it simply the perfect example of the sacrifice we should all be willing to make in giving our life in service to God?

During the early centuries of the Church, these issues were hotly debated, and the issue of the Trinity was only settled when various Church Councils and Synods formulated an agreed doctrine (e.g. the Nicene Creed) and then rejected all of the other possibilities as heresies.

The Great Schism of East and Western churches

The split between the Orthodox churches in the east and the western Rome-based Catholic church, took place in 1054, when the Pope and eastern Patriarch of Constantinople each excommunicated the other group. Their differences were language based (Latin in the west, Greek in the east), as well as cultural, and theological, and had been building up for a long time after the former Roman empire disintegrated.

Catholic church and the Reformation

Although the church structures in the east have continued much as they were since 1054, the western Catholic church has experienced catastrophic divisions as a result of intellectual, cultural and theological developments from the sixteenth century onwards, now known as the Enlightenment and Reformation.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) is attributed with having begun the Reformation, when he posted his ninety five theses (challenges to Roman Catholic Church doctrine and practices) to the door of the local Wittenburg church in 1517. Others were also protesting against the Catholic church at the same time however, and the whole groundswell of reaction resulted in numerous Protestant churches coming into existence, including Baptists, Congregationalists, Quakers (Society of Friends), Lutherans, Swedenburgs, and others. Many of these churches experienced further divisions as a result of local religious revivals, resulting in splinter groups forming new movements, such as the Methodists (under the Wesleys), the Salvation Army (under William Booth), and, in USA, the Pentecostals, begun at the Asuza Street revival, Texas, in 1901.

For some of these new churches, particular practices were important (e.g. Baptists insisted on adults being baptised, not babies), whereas for others, such as Quakers and Congregationalists, the concern was to break free from the idea of clergy or other outside control, giving emphasis to democratic leadership rather than that provided by specially ordained 'outsiders'.

Ecumenical movement

Towards the end of the nineteenth century many Protestant Christians began to regret the conflict and divisions within the Church, and efforts were begun to try to re-unite churches and bring about unity between the various groups. Early efforts resulted in formation of the Evangelical Alliance (1846), an over-arching body to speak on behalf of evangelical churches, the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Alliance, 1844), and in 1910 a World Missionary Conference was established to recognise the various missionary activities of all of the different protestant churches across the world. In 1948 the World Council of Churches was established, bringing together the majority of protestant churches with the aim of speaking as a united group to the post-war world of that time.

Alongside, and in response to the above, some churches did actually decide to amalgamate, putting aside their former differences and combining resources. The first significant example of this was the Church of South India, established in 1947 from Anglican, Methodist, Congregationalist and Presbyterian churches. A similar amalgamation was established in the north of India in 1970. Here in the UK, Congregationalist and Presbyterian churches decided to unite into the United Reformed Church in 1972, and in the USA various other churches combined to create new alliances. The Catholic and Orthodox churches have been more reluctant to participate in such alliances, considering other denominations as offshoots of the true church, who now need to return back to their original fold. More recently (1st November 2003) the Anglican and Methodist churches agreed to fully accept each other, and, although not yet ready to fully amalgamate into a single church, nevertheless have made that one of the goals of their signed Covenant

Agreement.[1]

[1] Read the text of the Covenant here: <http://www.anglican-methodist.org.uk/full-text-of-the-covenant/>

Charismatic movement

In the late 1960s another movement began to sweep through churches across the world: the charismatic movement, so called because of the 'charisma' (gift, or special blessing) that individual Christians began to experience. This experience included miraculous gifts or manifestations of the Holy Spirit (speaking in tongues- glossolalia, prophecies, miraculous healings, etc), more informal forms of worship, and a greater emphasis on personal Bible study, and this resulted in a breaking down of some of the barriers between members of different denominations, because they realised that they were all undergoing the same spiritual experiences. Interestingly, this movement infiltrated all denominations, Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox included, helping to break down negative attitudes that had been entrenched for centuries. At the same time however, it also split some congregations: between those who were in support of the new experience, and those who opposed it. The charismatic movement has gone on to impact the church worldwide, and estimates are that today a quarter of all Christians worldwide might be classified as charismatic, or it's nearby corollary, Pentecostal.

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