

### # 3 Christianity

Christianity began as a persecuted variant of Judaism under the Roman Empire but eventually became one of the most powerful religious forces in the late ancient and medieval world, rivaled only by Islam. Many have interpreted its message and doctrines, and a desire to define the one "true" form of Christianity has remained one of the most notable features of the religion's long history.

The history of Christianity begins in the Roman province of Judaea in the time of the emperor Augustus. Judaea was home to a restive Jewish population within which several rival sects quarreled over the form Judaism should take and what kinds of behaviors, beliefs, and traditions defined true Judaism. Many prophets emerged and garnered Jewish followers who hoped for an enlightened leader to restore the people of Israel to a place of power and institute God's kingdom on Earth. Among the sect leaders who appeared in that period was a man from the town of Nazareth.

Jesus of Nazareth taught a reform and internalization of Judaic law that was inflected with a gentle and humane call to ethical and moral purity. For Jesus, the external forms of the law were less important than the crafting of a pure and God-loving inner self, the character of which was to be expressed in acts of kindness and devotion to other humans. Jesus taught that the present world was of little importance, and such things as the social esteem of one's contemporaries, material wealth, and sensual pleasures were to be shunned in favor of constant thought of the afterlife and above all, devotion to God.

Jesus' activities as a rabbi brought him into conflict with two powerful groups: conservative elements among his fellow Jews and the Roman imperial forces who occupied Judaea. For his fellow Jews, Jesus represented a challenge to the established social and religious order and seemed heterodox (or "heretical") in his teachings. For the Romans, who were always on the lookout for revolutionaries and troublemakers in Judaea, Jesus was a potential challenge to their authority and an agitation to the volatile Jewish population of the province. In A.D. 33, the Romans arrested and crucified Jesus as an enemy of the Roman state.

For Jesus' followers, that was not the end of the story. According to Christian belief, Jesus rose from the dead three days later and reappeared to some of his followers. He then ascended to heaven. Belief in Jesus as a teacher and as the son of God catalyzed his followers, and they remained a community after Jesus' crucifixion. Centered in Jerusalem and headed by Saint Peter and Saint James, the early movement eventually dispatched apostles to preach Jesus' message to the Jewish communities of the Roman world. Later, with the conversion of Saint Paul, Christianity was preached to non-Jews as well, in an attempt to convert and save as many of them as possible before the end of the world, which Jesus' followers believed was to come very soon.

The character of Christian beliefs in the first century of the movement are subject to intense debates among modern scholars and members of the clergy. Christian tradition says that the doctrines these apostles and those who came after them preached was roughly that Jesus was the son of God and came to Earth to redeem the sins of humanity through his persecution and death on a cross. It was through belief in Jesus as the son of God and redeemer of humanity's accumulated sins that individuals could attain the kingdom of God and avoid eternal damnation. Key to living a virtuous life was to love one's neighbors and practice kindness among fellow humans.

By the beginning of the third century, a normative hierarchy within the Christian church was developing, as was a clearly defined liturgy and a canon of holy texts called the New Testament. This specifically Christian body of holy texts was called "New" in opposition to certain older Jewish texts that Christians began to call the "Old Testament" but which they also accepted as holy. The church in that period was strongest in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, particularly in those towns situated along trade routes with considerable Jewish communities.

As a church hierarchy and a clearly defined body of texts emerged, so did specific and ordered religious doctrines that became the basis for boundaries that divided one Christian community from another. There had always been many ways of thinking and talking about Jesus, his time on Earth, and the implication of his teachings, but increasingly there were fewer and fewer acceptable ways of doing so within the Christian communities. Those whose beliefs were not in accord with the accepted interpretations of any one community were now labeled as outsiders and shunned.

In the second century, Christianity was increasingly persecuted by the Roman government, which interpreted Christian refusals to sacrifice to the Roman state gods acts of disloyalty and atheism. In fact, Christians, like Jews, are forbidden to worship any god other than their own. By the third and early fourth centuries, persecution had become an intermittent but highly traumatic fact of life for Christians within the Roman world. The Christians who bravely endured horrid tortures and death for their religion were called martyrs and were thought to go directly to heaven, where they were among God's favorites.

The period of large-scale persecution of Christians by the Roman government ended with the Emperor Constantine I in 306. Constantine converted to Christianity during the civil wars that made him master of the Roman world. After his advent as sole ruler, he began to patronize some Christian communities with imperial funds and ended lavish imperial patronage of pagan religion.

During the fourth century, Christianity underwent a series of crucial developments. First, the church now stood at the center of civic affairs. Its officials became crucial in organizing and governing the cities and provinces of the empire, through the indirect influence they wielded over imperial officials because of their spiritual authority and because of the esteem in which they were held by local congregations. At the same time, monasticism and asceticism became enormously popular and influenced the direction and character taken by Christian piety in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Armenian, Syrian, Persian, and Coptic (Egyptian) churches also began to flourish, all of them using local vernacular languages.

In the fifth and sixth centuries, the Germanic tribes who overran the collapsing Western Roman Empire converted to various forms of Christianity. In the previous centuries, Christianity and traditional Greco-Roman culture were fused. Now another cultural element was added, that of the Germanic rulers of the west. That process began with the conversion of the Franks, Visigoths, Vandals, and other Germans but came to fruition under the Carolingian Empire in the eighth and ninth centuries. Charlemagne was a prodigious patron of the Christian church and was named its protector by the bishop of Rome in the year 800. Under his rule, the religious institutions of the Carolingian world became centers of Christian culture, Latin literature, and selective preservation of the Roman past.

In the east, the patriarch of Constantinople remained a subject of the Byzantine emperor, who had become the effective head of the Eastern Orthodox Church. With the Muslim invasions, however, most of the great episcopal seats of the Byzantine Empire (the former Eastern Roman Empire) came under the control of Islam. The bishop of Rome, or as he would come to be called, the pope, now gained even more importance, as one of the few former archbishoprics not under Muslim control and because there was no one secular lord to dominate the church of the west as there was in the east.

The power of the pope and the papacy continued to grow as the Middle Ages began, but increasingly, the religious institutions of Western Europe—the monasteries, abbeys, and churches of Francia and the German kingdoms and principalities—were regarded by secular rulers as part of their own patrimony. Accordingly, secular lords took the initiative to invest the clergymen who would govern those institutions with the accouterments of office and the religious and spiritual power to wield them. In the 11th century, that practice became the focus of a campaign of reform aimed at consolidating the control of the pope over all of western Christendom. Eventually, this brought Pope Gregory VII into a protracted and highly destructive conflict with Holy Roman emperor Henry IV.

Another result of the reforms of the 11th century was a call to crusade issued by Pope Urban II in 1095. The aim of the Crusades seems to have been to redirect the aggressive energies of Europe's warrior nobility away from European society and into an army under the direction of the pope. The immediate goal Urban set before the crusaders was the capture of the Holy Land from the Muslims. During the course of the Crusades, however, it was frequently Greek Orthodox Christians who bore the brunt of the crusaders' ferocity. The savagery the crusaders displayed toward their Muslim enemies, particularly in the wake of such Christian victories as the Battle of Antioch and the 1099 siege of Jerusalem, was hardly in accord with Jesus' message of love and tolerance.

In Europe, the rise of towns during the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries was accompanied by a rise in literacy, in part because of the growth and spread of cathedral schools and universities. Within the institutional Catholic Church, this led to greater concern with central organization and clear articulation of Church dogma, while among lay people, it led to better first-hand access to the holy scriptures of Christianity. Many lay Christians began to interpret those texts for themselves, which led to readings of scripture that failed to accord with Church orthodoxy. The result was an increased concern among churchmen with the problem of heresy and the persecution of "heretical" sects.

Typically, those Christians who were now deemed heretics were not great sinners but were those who interpreted scripture literally. Their zealous piety led them to criticize the Church hierarchy, the wealth amassed by the hierarchy, and the various moral and ethical abuses and transgressions the clergy were widely known to commit. The 13th and 14th centuries saw brutal inquisitions and even crusades launched against such European "heretics" as the Cathari and Waldenses.

Increasingly disheartened by the institutional church's various corruptions and inability to provide satisfying answers to its members' spiritual questions, European Christians frequently looked outside of the Church for spiritual fulfillment. That tendency accelerated with the Black Death that devastated Europe in the mid-14th century. Popular disaffection with the Church grew with the effects of the Great Schism, during which there were at any one time two or three rival popes claiming leadership of western Christendom. Such extremist forms of piety as self-flagellation and excessive fasting attracted many Europeans, while others found solace in the mystical writings of such visionaries as Catherine of Siena.

At the end of the Middle Ages, Christianity in Europe was in many ways in a state of institutional and spiritual crisis. The resolution of that crisis would come in a variety of forms, known collectively as the Protestant and Catholic Reformations.

## Christianity Questions

1. Christianity began as a variant of which other major religion?
2. Where did Christianity begin?
3. Describe what conditions led to the development of Christianity. (hint- look in the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph of the article and summarize)
4. Describe the way Jesus of Nazareth taught Judaic law.
5. How did Jesus believe a person's character and religion should be expressed?
6. To fellow Jews, what did Jesus represent?
7. To Romans, what did Jesus and his teachings represent?
8. Once Jesus was arrested by the Romans, charged as an enemy of the state, and crucified, what do Christians believe happened next?
9. Christians believe Jesus was the son of \_\_\_\_\_.
10. Describe why the Romans persecuted Christians in the second century.
11. How did Emperor Constantine impact the Christian religion?
12. Describe one of the crucial developments that occurred in the Christian religion in the fourth century.
13. Describe Charlemagne's involvement in the Christian religion.
14. How did the power of the papacy increase after the Muslims invaded the Byzantine Empire in the fifth and sixth centuries?
15. Who called for a crusade in 1095?
16. What was the goal of the crusade?

17. In the 11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was a rise in literacy. What does this mean, and what helped create this increase in literacy?

18. Describe what happened during the Great Schism.

World History  
Monotheistic Religions Comparison Table

	Judaism	Christianity	Islam
Origins			
Sacred Texts			
Relationship to God			
Basic Beliefs			
Obligations of followers			