


Christianity

History and Region

Jesus was born over 2000 years ago in Bethlehem, now a Palestinian city in the central West Bank about 10 kilometres south of Jerusalem. Jesus was a Jew. His mother Mary was married to Joseph a carpenter from Nazareth where Jesus spent his childhood, youth and adulthood. Jesus' public ministry began in about his thirtieth year and lasted about three years concluding with his death and resurrection. Jesus is given the title 'Christ', meaning 'anointed one' or 'messiah' and his followers became known as Christians.

Christianity, over its two 2000 years has known persecution and triumph, oppression and brilliance in every sphere. Many different forms and traditions have developed a fact, which has sometimes led to conflict and dispute. The division of the 'Eastern' and 'Western' parts led to the Great Schism in 1054, giving rise to what are called the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches. The Reformation, which started in 1517, led to the split between Catholics and Protestants. Today the main denominations in Christianity are Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist and Evangelical churches. The Ecumenical Movement, which harks back to 1910, has led to a significant and remarkable reconciliation between the denominations.

Christianity is ranked the largest religion in the world today. In 2015 there were approximately 2.3 billion Christians around the world, nearly a third of the global population.

Sacred Texts

The Bible is the principal Christian text. It consists of two parts, the Old Testament which includes the sacred writings of the Jewish tradition, and the New Testament which contains the four Gospels that recount Jesus' life and teachings, as well as letters and other writings.

Beliefs and Teachings

Two principal teachings define Christianity. The doctrine of the Trinity states that there are three Persons in one God. Thus God is a communion of Persons. The First Person is named 'Father', from who all derives. The Second Person is "Light from Light, true God from true God"; the third Person is the Holy Spirit who sanctifies and inspires. The doctrine of the incarnation states that the Second Person was made flesh and is Jesus who lived and died and rose again for the salvation of all.

Christians follow the Ten Commandments handed down to Moses on Mt Sinai; but above all they wish to follow Jesus' teaching that love is the centre of all morality: loving God with all one's heart and strength, and loving one's neighbour as oneself.

Rituals and Practices

Christians, namely those who have placed their faith in Christ Jesus, constitute a world-wide community that is called 'the Church'. Ideally they gather each Sunday, the day of the Lord's resurrection, in a building called a church or elsewhere. Their most important ritual generally consists of prayers, sacred readings, hymns and the Communion Service or Eucharist where Christians share bread and wine in memory of the last supper which Jesus shared with his closest disciples before going to his sacrificial death and resurrection. For some Christians, the bread and wine represent, for other Christians they really become, the body and blood of Jesus. In this way they remember that Jesus died in order to redeem the world and to establish a new and everlasting covenant between God and humanity. They also look forward to the return of Jesus in an eternal Easter.

The major Christian ceremonies are called sacraments, for they reveal the full meaning of the Christ event. They are usually celebrated by a priest or minister. The two principal sacraments are, firstly, Baptism where the individual makes the profession of faith and is welcomed into the faith community; secondly and above all, the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper, which was briefly described above. The many liturgies of Christianity can include communal and silent prayer, scripture readings, music and the use of elements such as oil, water, and lighted candles etc.

For many Christians, marriage is a sacrament. They believe in monogamy, that is, marriage between one man and one woman. The marriage rite involves a commitment by the couple to loving and honouring each other in life-long fidelity. In more recent years, some Christian Churches have made provisions for the annulment of a marriage that has broken down and ended in civil divorce.

Funeral services may include formal liturgies that include prayers, words of comfort to those bereaved, possibly some hymns and a eulogy on the person's life. There may be further prayers at the cemetery or crematorium. The Christian funeral holds out the prospect of eternal life in the presence of God and the saints and angels.

Holy Days and Festivals

Advent: Advent is a period of preparation for Christmas. It begins on the fourth Sunday before 25th December and marks the beginning of the Christian liturgical year. Advent also anticipates the Second Coming of Jesus Christ amongst us at the end of time.

Christmas: Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, who is acclaimed by Christians as the Son of God, and saviour of all people.

Lent: Lent is the period of 40 days of preparation leading up to Easter. It is traditionally a time of increased fasting, prayer and generosity.

Holy Week: Holy week is the week leading up to Easter, starting with *Palm Sunday* which commemorates Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and in many churches includes the account of his suffering and crucifixion. *Maudry Thursday* commemorates the Lord's last supper with his disciples before setting out on his life-giving death. On *Good Friday* Christians relive the passion of this only Son of God. Holy Week reaches its high point at the Easter Vigil and on Easter Sunday.

Easter: Easter commemorates the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the most significant event of the Christian calendar. The Western and Orthodox churches calculate Easter according to the Gregorian or Julian calendars respectively, often resulting in the observance taking place on slightly different dates

Pentecost: Pentecost celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit in fullness upon the Apostles and other followers of Jesus seven weeks (50 days) after the Resurrection. Pentecost marks the beginning of the Church and the first preaching of the Gospel to all the earth.

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