

# Christianity in Brief

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## Introductory matters

Writing about Christianity for students in a culture that has deep historical connections with Christianity is a somewhat daunting task, because I know in advance that I cannot satisfy everyone. No matter how I present the basics, there will be those who see things differently, and feel strongly about it. Obviously, there will also be important things left out. And, since space must be severely limited, I cannot provide proper citations of the hundreds of relevant sources that would allow a reader to follow up on the account given here. In other words, these materials are like written versions of class lectures. I hope they will at least serve their purpose to provide a quick introduction to the Christian tradition that will help everyone to be working from the same basic background knowledge. Anyone who can make helpful suggestions for clarification or correction of detail should speak up and let me know what they are thinking.

Obviously, I need to write from the point of view of an *observer* of the Christian tradition, rather than as a *proponent* of it. I will, however, try to write sympathetically—even though that will put off students who have a serious allergy to Christianity. I am trying to do some of the moccasin-walking advocated by Smart.<sup>1</sup> So, with those explanations out of the way, let's get started.

## The Jewish background

Christianity is a collection of social-religious movements and ideas that trace back at least 2000 years to the followers of a Jewish itinerant preacher/teacher whose name is translated in English language Bibles as “Jesus”. (Christians often refer to Jesus as “Christ”, or “Jesus Christ”. However, “Christ” is a title, not a name. It means that Jesus is the one chosen by God to bring God in a special way to Jewish people, or to the whole world.) Although a few skeptical writers have argued that Jesus was a mythical figure who did not actually exist in the real world of human history, the vast majority of scholars treat him as a real person, as do almost all people who think of themselves as Christians. For traditional versions of Christianity, this matters quite a lot, since the actual death and actual resurrection of a real-life Jesus are seen as playing a crucial role in creating a possibility for the entire human race to get back into harmony with the holy God who created and sustains the continued existence of the entire universe. However, for a large number of people who consider themselves Christian, the only thing about Jesus that really matters is his teaching concerning the right way to live. For such people, I don't see that it matters much whether Jesus was a real flesh-and-blood person, or a fictional mythic figure, since his teachings could be respected in either

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<sup>1</sup>See Ninian Smart's “Worldviews” in this collection.

case as providing the key to living well. However, I will assume below that Jesus was a real person.

At the time of Jesus, the traditional homelands of the Jewish people (roughly where the present state of Israel is located) had been forced into the Roman Empire, but the Romans allowed the Jews to continue practicing their religion as long as it did not challenge Roman authority. It is not quite right to refer to Jewish religious ideas at that time by the name “Judaism”, since Judaism as we know it today<sup>2</sup> developed in later centuries, alongside Christianity. So, the scene into which Jesus came was the precursor to both Judaism and Christianity. Although they continued their religious rituals, and maintained their identity as a people, the Jews living under Roman domination were no doubt wondering how their God could allow this situation. It was central to their outlook to hold that they had a special relationship with the one God who created the entire universe and continued as its ruler. The faithful were looking for one of their own to emerge as a leader – a Messiah – to restore Jewish independence and vitality as a validation of their special covenant relationship with God. (The “covenant” or contract, was, in essence, that the Jews would be the people of God, bearing the light of God into the world, protected by God, and God would continue be their object of worship and obedience.)

The God of the Jews was conceived as a “personal” God. Frankly, I don’t like the phrase “personal God” because to the uninitiated it sounds like it refers to a divinity that belongs to some one person. In fact, the phrase “personal God” has a special, defined meaning in religious studies. It means “person-like God”. A personal God is a God that has characteristics something like human characteristics. For instance, a personal God might be described as just, or angry, or merciful, or sad, or loving – using adjectives that apply to humans. It is very common for ancient peoples all around the world to conceive of their gods as personal in this way, although there is variation with respect to exactly which person-like characteristics the gods might have. The Greeks, for example, thought of their gods as having sexual urges, while the Jews did not – at least so far as the record of the Hebrew Bible reveals. A personal divinity, however, could have in addition some characteristics that no human could have, such as the characteristics of being almighty, eternal, and completely self-sustaining. The Jewish personal God was conceived of like that, and the Christians adopted this Jewish conception of God.

### **Inject Jesus into this background**

Into this ancient Jewish scene of 2000 years ago, Jesus came, ***preaching a message of repentance for evil and injustice, close personal relationship with a forgiving and loving father God, purity of heart toward God (as opposed to simply following the letter of the Jewish law), rejection of religious and social pride, love or concern for the welfare of one’s neighbors, and the hope of a wonderful afterlife for the faithful.*** Or, at least this is what

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<sup>2</sup>Sometimes referred to as “Rabbinical Judaism”.

the New Testament reports about him.<sup>3</sup> It is important to keep the gist of his message in mind in order to detect how much the basic message may have been altered as Christianity developed over the centuries that followed.

I have to extract information about Jesus from the New Testament because that is the only information about him that is available now from sources that his leading followers later accepted as accurate. There are other writings about Jesus that date back to the same period and that give a different picture, but these were rejected by the leadership of the Jesus movement – the movement that became the Christian church in the three centuries following Jesus’ death. All these writings – both the rejected ones and the accepted ones that made their way into the New Testament – present religiously-motivated pictures of Jesus. They are not written as objective biographies; instead, they are written to provide a religious or theological interpretation of Jesus’ life and death, explaining Jesus’ significance for the world. The picture of Jesus I am presenting here is extracted from the New Testament, unless otherwise noted. But I am leaving out as much as possible the special religious commitments about Jesus found in the New Testament, and so it will appear to some that I am ripping the guts out of Jesus’ story. My motive, though, is to give a bit more objectivity to the telling of the story.

He had no special credentials, coming from an ordinary poor family, and apparently no formal education;<sup>4</sup> as far as we know he never wrote anything to promote his teachings, although one New Testament story about him implies that he did know how to read. (In particular, note that the New Testament was not written by Jesus but rather by his followers.) He greatly impressed a number of the people with whom he came in personal contact, and convinced them of the legitimacy of his approach to Jewish life and thought through his personal presence and the spiritual power of the message, and they became his followers to varying degrees.

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<sup>3</sup>The New Testament is the second large part of the Christian sacred book, the *Bible*. Christians divide the *Bible* into large parts, with the first, and larger, part being termed the “Old Testament”. The “Old Testament” is the Hebrew *Bible*, the sacred book of Judaism. Jews do not refer to this sacred book as “Old Testament”, since that Christian way of referring to the text was designed to indicate that it represents an older way of thinking that needs to be understood in the light of the new understanding that came with Jesus. The “New Testament” contains stories about Jesus, presumably based on eyewitness accounts, and it testifies to Jesus’ divinity, and to the value of believing in Jesus. In Judaism, the “New Testament” is not accepted as carrying any authority.

<sup>4</sup>The New Testament says almost nothing about Jesus’ childhood. It says nothing about his sex life, or whether he was married. It provides no physical descriptions of him, other than to say he was male.

## The Jesus Movement

Thus began a small Jesus movement, initially consisting almost entirely of ordinary Jews living in the central regions of Palestine. To them, by following Jesus they were committed to a reform and spiritual renewal movement within the Jewish way of life – perhaps they saw themselves as getting closer to their God. This movement certainly did not initially conceive of itself as the beginning of a separate religion, but did see itself as an alternative to the more established and respected ways of thinking within Jewish culture.

From the outset of his public teaching, there was controversy over what to make of Jesus. Apparently almost all the more well-respected and established religious leaders of the Jewish community found much of his message troubling and problematic, and they were ultimately successful in arranging for the Roman governor in Jerusalem (Pontius Pilate) to sentence him to death by crucifixion.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the critics saw Jesus as bad chiefly from a political standpoint (stirring up trouble, challenging established alliances, etc.) or perhaps from a religious standpoint (illegitimately claiming to speak for God, leading people away from the correct path, etc.), or maybe some of both. The New Testament gives the latter reasons; independent scholars suspect the former played a large role as well.

But even his admirers were not at all sure what to make of Jesus. It seems fairly clear that some of Jesus' closest associates came to believe that he had the potential to become the leader that would free the people from Roman governance and usher in a new glorious Jewish nation – that is, that he was the Messiah they believed they had been promised by God. Jesus' ultimate death at the hands of the Romans was a serious problem for those folks. Other members of the Jesus movement probably saw him simply as a welcome teacher, with ideas that uplifted or comforted them and made their Jewish faith come alive. This is the most likely explanation for whatever mass appeal he may have had initially. His primary appeal seemed to be to the common, uneducated, dirt-poor masses, for whom he exhibited great compassion and with whom he clearly identified. Probably his common followers saw him as being especially close to God, with the New Testament claiming that Jesus actually referred to the Creator of the Universe, the Mighty God of the Jewish people, as “Dad”, and inviting his followers to do the same, contrary to the strong tradition among Jews to see God in much more awesome and reverent terms.

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<sup>5</sup>This brutal form of execution was utilized fairly commonly by Pontius Pilate, we now know from independent historical records. He is thought to have crucified about 1,000 persons during his rule in Palestine. Crucifixion was used as a means of public execution, to make an example of rebels. Contrary to the impression some get from the New Testament, it would not have been difficult to convince Pilate to crucify someone if Pilate were convinced that the person was in any way a threat to his ability to keep order. If Pilate hesitated to crucify Jesus, it must have been because he was worried that executing Jesus publicly might cause some sort of public disorder. Pilate had only a small number of Roman soldiers under his command to use as a police force in Jerusalem; he would do whatever seemed most effective in keeping the city under control. It is not likely he was worried about whether Jesus was innocent or guilty.

### **Significance of Jesus – the winning view**

The story of Jesus' death immediately lands us in complexity. The version of the story that won out over rival accounts and was placed into the New Testament by decision of the dominant Christians over the following 300 years goes like this: Jesus died when crucified by the Romans, just as any executed human being would. His body was entombed, but on the third day after his burial his dead body miraculously became alive again in some sort of transformed state. (Please note that the story does not say his soul separated from his body and went to Heaven. Rather, the story is that his body rose from the dead. This is an important detail that seems to me to have been largely forgotten by Christians today who talk instead only about an immortal soul that leaves the body at death.) He then visited for a while with various ones of his followers singly and in groups, and he still lives on forever in a divine state, although his physical presence on the earth is gone. The reason, we are told, all this happened is that Jesus was not just a human being, but was also genuinely divine, having existed from eternity as God, and his resurrection shows the power of God over death, suffering, evil – a power ultimately available to the followers of Jesus as well, but only through their identification with Jesus (usually referred to as “believing in” Jesus). This forms the core of the teaching of the traditional mainstream Christianity regarding human “salvation” to this day. Less traditional, more modern, versions of Christianity treat the story not as actual history, but as metaphor or symbol of God's power to overcome evil in all our lives.

“Salvation” was thought of as being released from the grip of the power of evil and entering into a good relationship with God, a relationship that could last for all eternity. Various images are used in the New Testament to explain how Jesus' death and resurrection might accomplish salvation for people who identify with him, but one thing these conceptualizations all have in common is the theme that God is reaching out to people through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This idea became the hallmark of Christian theology – God as a forgiving parent/lord who reaches out through Jesus to reconcile with human beings.

### **Significance of Jesus – the gnostic view**

Other people who saw themselves as followers of Jesus told a different story about the significance of Jesus. According to the so-called “gnostics” in the Jesus movement, who seem to have emerged in the movement a few years later as it spread, Jesus was never really a genuine flesh-and-blood human being who could actually suffer and physically die. That was beneath him, for he was a kind of divine spirit-like being that merely *appeared* to people as though he were a physical thing. For example, one gnostic account of Jesus' life states that when he walked, he left no footprints in the dust. To the gnostics, the important thing about Jesus was that he was a divine manifestation who revealed the secret knowledge needed to escape from the limitations and suffering of human physical existence.

Jesus' public teaching as recorded in the writings that later would become the New Testament were just the tip of the iceberg, the part of the teaching that ignorant people who never got into the inner circle remembered. The real secrets to salvation were revealed by

Jesus to the inner circle, and these secrets could be passed on to those who were initiated into the mysteries of the gnostic Jesus cult. From this point of view, stories about Jesus' death have to be false (since he wasn't physical like us), but, more importantly salvation does not depend in any way on a dying or resurrected Jesus. Salvation depends on getting hold of the special spiritual knowledge Jesus had to impart. Once possessed with this special knowledge, one would be in tune with God and understand how to live free of the power of evil.

The gnostic picture of Jesus is not one that people after the year 400 heard very often, since it was rejected by the Christian community as being incorrect, at the time the New Testament was being put together. However, apparently there were sufficient adherents of the gnostic picture to make it a serious competitor in the first centuries of Christianity, and the gnostic writings were denied entry into the New Testament only after serious debate. As far as I can tell, the gnostic influence came primarily from non-Jews who joined the Jesus movement later.<sup>6</sup>

### **Significance of Jesus – Jesus the rabbi**

Additionally, there were Jewish people who heard Jesus, or heard of his teachings, and found him to be an especially impressive teacher with tremendous insight into the nature of God and human relationships. He was seen as a refreshing reformer, a purifying influence in Jewish thought. According to this outlook, the Jewish leadership that rejected his reforms had made a serious error. Good Jews will heed Jesus' call to repentance, renew their relationship with the God of the Jewish people, and work toward the purity of heart that Jesus recommended. Jesus was right up there with the best teachers and prophets that the Jewish nation had produced – maybe even better. Every Jew should respect him for his unique closeness to God, and strive to follow him in that regard as fully as possible. However, there is nothing in this picture of Jesus that says he is divine, or that his death is followed by a miraculous resurrection that forms part of a cosmic drama with implications for the whole human race.

This last view of Jesus – Jesus as reformist rabbi – was apparently quite popular within the original Jesus movement. This is not surprising, since it seems the most natural view of Jesus for a Jew to hold, if they were impressed by Jesus. It is certainly far, far less natural to believe that Jesus is not only “in tune” with God, but is actually divine. Members of the movement who held this view ultimately were forced out by those who held the dominant view found in the New Testament, to the effect that Jesus is truly divine. In some cases, this

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<sup>6</sup>There were several popular non-Christian gnostic religious cults in the eastern Mediterranean region among non-Jews. The general theme of these secret cults was that salvation from the evils of this world was to be achieved through the special spiritual insights available only to their members. This interpretation of Jesus would therefore emphasize not his human qualities of compassion, or his physical death and resurrection, but his divine knowledge—secrets to life that are revealed to the members of the cult.

conflict about whether to see Jesus as divine led to real persecution of those holding the minority view. It was the usual story: those holding the majority view saw the other view as dangerously undermining Christianity, and thus threatening people's salvation from the grip of evil.

This controversy highlights an important feature of Christianity – concern for having the “right” views. Christianity, far more than Judaism or Hinduism, has tended to focus considerable energy on trying to make sure that all its adherents have the same belief structure, as though having the right belief structure is essential to salvation. Perhaps that focus arose originally because of the above serious disputes about Jesus in the early days.

Versions of the above “Jesus is an especially godly man, but he is not actually divine” view remain quite popular today, although not officially endorsed by any major Christian church body. Here, I am referring to the extremely popular contemporary view of Jesus as a unique human being especially filled with the spirit of God who taught us much of value about God and life. Even though no major church organization officially endorses this view, a great many Western people who consider themselves Christian have, in effect, adopted it, especially in modern times. In its most watered-down form, it is the view that Jesus is a great ethical teacher, worth paying attention to (but one can ignore all the “nonsense” about his being God, or rising from the dead). More traditionally-minded Christians see this view of Jesus as weak, and totally insufficient as a basis for Christianity or salvation. But the Jesus-as-godly-man view has the advantage in today's more modern culture of not requiring the believer to accept any miracles or resurrections, and does not require an explanation for how a truly divine being can also be a real human being, as the dominant traditional view does.

### **The Jesus movement moves on**

No matter what their views of Jesus, however, the members of the Jesus movement all agree that not too long after Jesus' execution, Jesus was no longer around in the way he had been around before. (Maybe he was dead in the tomb. Maybe his spirit essence had floated away. Maybe he literally rose from the dead. Maybe....) Nevertheless, the most committed followers continued the movement, trying to convince their fellow Jews that Jesus provided an effective way to connect with God. They continued to meet with considerable hostility from the Jewish establishment. Probably the most significant early convert to the movement was a man from that establishment named Saul, who became known in the movement as Paul, and much later as St. Paul. He, more than anyone else, helped to interpret the meaning of Jesus' life for the growing community of Christians, and to spread the message beyond the Jewish community into the regions of contemporary Turkey, Greece, and Italy, by traveling about the whole region. Initially, his targeted recipients of the Jesus message were Jews living along the Mediterranean shores of what is now Turkey. However, it turned out that more non-Jews (so-called Gentiles) than Jews were receptive to Paul's preaching, and gradually he shifted his focus away from appealing primarily to Jewish audiences. The result was the formation of groups of Jesus people consisting primarily of Gentiles.

Paul wrote a number of letters to the congregations he helped establish, in which he addressed religious controversies, and explored the meaning of Jesus. In terms of detailed theory and explanation of Jesus' nature and mission, and in terms of application of the theory to life issues, they went well beyond anything Jesus himself is quoted as saying. These letters became widely circulated in the movement, became quite influential, and were widely accepted as a legitimate expression of the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. For that reason, the Christians decided to include several of these letters in the New Testament.

Paul's success in recruiting Gentiles led to a significant conceptual battle within the Jesus movement. The question at issue was whether Gentiles who wanted to affiliate with the movement needed to convert to the Jewish religion. That is, should the Jesus movement continue to think of itself as a faction within Jewish culture? The original Christian leaders such as Peter, centered in Jerusalem, were themselves all Jews, and had thought of themselves as continuing a reform within the Jewish tradition. They initially insisted that Gentile converts should think of themselves as becoming Jews, and therefore follow the traditional Jewish laws. This would impact the diets they would eat, and would require the males to be circumcised. But, more importantly, it would mean that Christianity would continue as a movement within Jewish culture – Christianity would become a way of being Jewish.

Paul led the fight for the opposite point of view – that Gentile converts needed to think of themselves only as followers of Jesus, not as followers of Jewish tradition. They therefore would not need to follow Jewish law (and so the males would not need to be circumcised, and they could eat pork). Paul's viewpoint ultimately won the day when the Jerusalem leadership was convinced. The result of this decision was enormous: Christianity established itself as a separate religion, breaking away from its Jewish roots. No longer tied to a tribe or nation, it became a **religion** in the modern sense. The Gentile Christians could maintain much of their own cultural ways that did not conflict with Christian ideals. This created the ground for a distinction between the religious and the secular aspects of their way of life and belief system.

### **The New Testament and the Bible**

That brings us to the vexed question of how the New Testament came to be written and assembled. Since this is a touchy issue for conservative Christians today, I will take some care here.

First, some background is needed. I have been referring all along to the "Jesus movement" rather than to the "Christian church", since initially there was no organized church – there were just Jesus' followers, some more influential and notorious than others in the various communities of Jesus people. Moreover, for the first decades after Jesus was no longer around, a great many of his followers expected him to return in some overt way that would embrace them all and validate their commitment to him. They expected the coming of the "Kingdom of God" that Jesus had talked about – whatever that may have meant to them. So, the idea of setting up a formal organization to carry on the preaching of the message does not seem to have been initially something that was given much thought. In fact, Paul even suggested that

getting married was a waste of time – one should spend one’s few remaining months before Jesus’ return in getting ready and helping others to see the light.

But as the months and years went by, and some of the first group of followers died, while new converts, many of them Gentile, were being added and the group was slowly growing, more concern for a longer-lasting movement began to emerge, along with greater interest in organization to sustain the Christian community. Along with this came an interest in preserving a written account of the Jesus story and the best thinking about the meaning of Jesus for humanity. After all, it was becoming clear that the original associates of Jesus might all die before Jesus returned, and there were various inconsistent and incomplete accounts of Jesus’ deeds and sayings circulating in various places. Stories about Jesus had circulated orally in the movement, and apparently gradually were committed, perhaps piecemeal, to writing by those members who were educated enough to write. Apparently, some of these written accounts began to circulate as well. Additionally, various Christians in various places were writing their own religious reflections on what Jesus meant, and some of these began to circulate. These were the beginnings of the New Testament, and debates about which writings captured the authentic spirit of Jesus’ teachings, and the real meaning of his life, were quite spirited, and sometimes very acrimonious.<sup>7</sup>

Since the Jesus movement was at first part of Jewish culture, it also *inherited* a sacred Scripture – that part of the Hebrew *Bible* that had been accepted by Jews as authoritative prior to Jesus’ time. Jews referred to this writing as “The Scriptures”. Or, for the more technically-minded, it was Torah (the first five books of the Bible) and *Nevi'im* (the Prophets, consisting of various distinct writings attributed to various prophets). This part of the *Bible* was agreed in the Jewish community to be authoritative by about 100 years before Jesus’ time, and the Jewish Christians simply continued to see it as authoritative.<sup>8</sup> But there was serious controversy in the Jewish community over some other materials known as the *Ketuvim* (the “Writings”) – especially over books like *Daniel* – because some of the *Ketuvim* implied that there is individual life after death, and this idea was viewed as an unacceptable innovation by the more conservative Jews (e.g., by the Sadducees, a small religious party comprised largely of priests). Ultimately, the more liberal Pharisees won out (partly due to the fact that a large percentage of the Sadducees were killed by the Romans in 70 CE when the Jews rebelled against the Roman occupation and the Romans came to Jerusalem and leveled the Temple) and the *Ketuvim* were included in the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures. This happened soon enough – about 100 CE<sup>9</sup> – that it occurred prior to the Christians’ own decisions about what

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<sup>7</sup>None of this debate appears in the New Testament. The evidence is found in other historical documents.

<sup>8</sup>Students familiar with Biblical language will recognize these two authoritative sections of Scripture as “the Law and the Prophets” in most translations of the Bible.

<sup>9</sup>A note about dating. Older works refer to the years before the estimated year of Jesus’ birth as “BC” years, where “BC” abbreviates “before Christ”. Such works also refer to years

writings about Jesus to consider sacred, and so the Christians essentially inherited the Ketuvim as part of the Jewish Scripture as well. All three parts of the Hebrew Scriptures – Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim – together form what the Christians call the “Old Testament”.<sup>10</sup>

However, recall that Jesus meant different things to different people. So, the emerging body of new writing about Jesus in the years after his death did not present a unified, consistent picture. There were debates within and among different Christian groups regarding what views of Jesus should be accepted. For example, should the gnostic gospel that claimed to be written by a twin brother of Jesus be included in the body of writings that the Christian communities should look to as a legitimate expression of Christian faith?

We have only sketchy information regarding what was going on among the Jesus people during this early time of sifting and sorting, of refining and perhaps even changing the belief structures of those who still identified with Jesus. We don't know how many people were Christians in the early days – perhaps only a few hundred, certainly no more than a few thousand. We don't know who finally compiled the various collections of Jesus stories that comprise the so-called “Four Gospels” in the New Testament (the biblical “books” titled Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), or exactly when they were written, although most estimate the dates to be somewhere around the year 60 to the year 100 – in other words, maybe 30 to 70 years after Jesus died. For the first 150 years or so, Christian writing, except for signed letters like Paul's, was generally done anonymously to indicate that the writing was not just the author's personal opinion. The individual author did not seek recognition as the author, but rather saw his writing as a way for God to speak to people (assuming the author was sincere).

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after Jesus' birth as “AD”, which abbreviates “anno domini”, Latin for “year of our Lord”. Since both of these ways of referring to dates presume the correctness of Christian traditional claims about Jesus' being the messiah, or divine, they are objectionable to those who do not accept these claims. To avoid this problem, scholars now typically use “BCE” in place of “BC”, where this abbreviates “before the common era”, and “CE” in place of “AD”, where this abbreviates “common era”. What is meant by “common era”? Basically, the era in which a common dating system is used across cultures. This new way of referring to dates also solves another problem with the old “BC” and “AD” system – namely, the problem that we now believe Jesus was not in fact born at the beginning of the year 1. In other words, the dating system we all use probably doesn't actually start with the year Jesus was really born.

<sup>10</sup>However, the writings that ended up in the New Testament had probably already been written before the Jews decided to include the Ketuvim. This is why, when the New Testament refers to “Scriptures”, it mentions only “the Torah and the Prophets”. This is exactly what one would have expected of a Jewish author at the time. Note an interesting implication: when the New Testament talks about “Scriptures” it is not talking about itself, since it had not yet been assembled. Nor is it talking about the whole Hebrew Bible.

We do know that the emerging leadership of the various Christian communities decided collaboratively over a long period of years on what writings to include in the list of accepted, authoritative writings for the Christian community as a whole. We do know they claimed to make their decisions based on the “Apostolic tradition” – that is, based on what they understood to be consistent with the view of Jesus originally passed on by those of his associates who were closest to him. It was on that basis that the gnostic writings were rejected (and the gnostic Christians alienated), as were many other writings. The resulting collection of accepted writings – the Four Gospels, some letters written by Paul, and a few other writings by others – became the New Testament. In some cases, there was not much debate about including the item on the accepted list, for those items had already become so popular and widely accepted that they were clear winners. Still, the process of refining the canon was slow; many writings had serious supporters as well as detractors. Finally, it was all settled during the 4<sup>th</sup> Century when the Christians, by now having become more of an organized set of churches, achieved leadership consensus on the matter. In other words, it took about 300 years to achieve the consensus. Over the following centuries, various Christian leaders have criticized the inclusion of a few of the items, but no changes have been made to the list of included writings.

### **The coming of the church and the creeds**

During this 300-year span, people who considered themselves Christians were gradually becoming more organized, choosing leaders and establishing groups, thus also creating divisions amongst themselves based on whose leadership was being accepted and whose rejected. In the later half of this span they were coming to grips with the question of which writings belong in the list of those with highest authority, the “canon” of the New Testament. We have seen how that discussion centered largely on the question of how to think of Jesus. No wonder then that at the same time, there were very serious questions within the same set of people regarding the best way to formulate in a clear, more theoretical way just who Jesus was. That is, at the same time that the emerging church was choosing its most sacred texts, it was choosing its view of Jesus. These choices obviously go hand in hand.

As noted above, the choices about what to think of Jesus had to do with whether or not he should be considered truly divine and also truly human. There were serious reasons for wanting to say he was genuinely divine: this seemed to make sense of the resurrection story and of the idea that his death and resurrection had some sort of saving power for other people. If Jesus were simply a human being, his resurrection would seem surprising, to say the least, and it would be unclear how his death could have the cosmic significance that the tradition had come to believe that it had. On the other hand, how could the God of the universe *die*? And how could an eternal God, Creator of the Universe, be truly tied to a specific human body? So, there were also serious reasons for denying that Jesus was genuinely divine. One way out – to say that Jesus is a demi-god, like many characters in the non-Christian mythologies of the day, but not the same god as the God of the Universe – seemed to be ruled out, since the Christians were convinced of the truth of the monotheism that they inherited

from Jewish religion. That is, there could be but one God. So, if Jesus is divine, he has to be identified with the one God. And that is hard. Really hard.

There were also serious reasons for wanting to say Jesus was genuinely human. A human can suffer and truly die. A human closely in touch with God could serve as an ideal model for what human life should be like, unlike a demi-god, unlike a divine being. Jesus ate and slept; he walked and talked like a real man. The Apostolic tradition was clear on these points. So he must have left footprints. Gnosticism is out! But how can a real human being be somehow identified as the one God? Again, this is really hard. Contemporary Christians who are familiar with hearing that Jesus was both divine and human often are not impressed with just how hard this is to accept. They haven't really thought about it! The early Christians thought about it. And thought about it. And then they thought about it some more.

These issues were tearing at the Christian community. They were convinced there had to be a right answer, but they could not agree on what it should be. They did not have a completely settled idea of what writings to accept as sacred and authoritative, but appeal to the writings that had already achieved considerable sway and popularity didn't answer these questions, for they saw that one could find passages in these writings to support various points of view. The Apostolic tradition needed clarifying, if answers were to be forthcoming. The dispute threatened to spill over into violence, and the emperor was concerned about the unity of the Roman empire which served as the setting for this drama, for by now there were enough Christians to make a political difference. (Some estimate about a quarter of the citizens of the empire were Christians by around the year 300.) Two large councils of leaders who had emerged in the growing church tried to deal with these issues, in 325 and 381, ultimately resulting in a brief statement of Christian doctrine known by the name "Nicene Creed" (after the name of the city where the first council was held, Nicaea). Roman Emperor Theodosius I in 380 declared this (unfinished) creed to be correct, and *ordered* people to believe it, in the hope that the unity of the Roman empire would be enhanced. (Can you imagine being ordered by the government to believe a particular statement of faith? He apparently did not try to enforce his order.) Later that year he himself was baptized as a Christian (I guess he was trying to follow his own orders) and ordered the creed to be finished up in 381. Apparently it was. (So you see here a growing connection between government and Christianity.) Unfortunately, his hope of thereby avoiding violence and disunity over these issues did not come to pass, but in the longer run the various Christian communities rallied around the Creed and it became the standard solution to the problem of how to think of Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>It may be hard to understand why people would become so exercised over this issue as to become violent. It hardly seems to be in the true spirit of Christianity to become so angry with other people who respect Jesus but have a different understanding of who he was. In my opinion the seriousness of the public debates about such matters arises because of the typical Christian emphasis, mentioned earlier, on "correct belief". That is, Christianity can sometimes seem to its adherents as primarily a matter of having correct beliefs, rather than as a matter of

The Nicene Creed holds that Jesus is both truly human and truly divine, that there is only one God, and Jesus is the unique son of that God. So, even though Jesus is the son of God, he is the same God as God his father. This remarkable formula for solving the problem of Jesus has, quite naturally, caused considerable consternation and puzzled looks. It sounds awfully much like trying to have your cake and eat it too. I doubt that very many real people actually have ever believed it, because I doubt they understand it well enough to be said to believe it. But they may well have believed that it is true, in the same way that people uneducated in contemporary physics may believe that the theory of quarks is true even though they don't understand the theory well enough to be said to really believe the theory. That is, they are told that it is true, and they trust the people who told them, so they say, "Yes, it's true." But they don't really know what they are saying. What the church as an organization accepts by means of official proclamation can often have very little relationship to what its members actually think.

This is not the place to argue about whether the description of Jesus presented in the Nicene Creed does actually make sense, or whether it is fundamentally as incoherent as it appears on the surface to be.

### **Christians believe...**

Christian people have thought lots of different things about Jesus and about life and about God. Christianity is not one set of beliefs captured in a creed. Nor is it one set of practices or institutions. But all the institutions, practices, and beliefs have some sort of derivation from the perceived life or teachings of Jesus. The discussion above about various early pictures of Jesus should indicate something of the range of beliefs involved. A similar variety of approaches to Jesus persists today among people who see themselves as Christian, and some of the same issues are very much still with us.

To mention just a few points of view that have become popular: Some people today see Jesus primarily as an insightful moral teacher or liberal political reformer. Some see him as a social activist who inspires us to care for the poor, the weak, the oppressed peoples of the world. One need not even believe in a God to hold such views of Jesus. Yet many people who have such views of Jesus see themselves as true Christians.

However, probably most Christians in the past and yet today are sincere monotheists, just as the early Christians mainly were, as far as I can tell. Some of the monotheists see Jesus as simply a man with an extraordinary degree of closeness to the one God, who thereby deserves our greatest attention when it comes to insight into God's nature and will. These folks may

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having a good relationship with God and other people. This was true in the early days, and is still true today, despite the fairly clear fact that such an attitude contradicts much of what Jesus is reported to have taught. Again, perhaps this happened originally because of the concern to make sense of Jesus. The controversies about that seemed so important because they were connected to ideas about how a person could enter into the "kingdom of God".

have some trouble explaining how they want to think about the import of the stories of Jesus' death and resurrection for us today. Perhaps they will want to take the resurrection story symbolically, but not as literally true of actual historical events. Others of the monotheists (including Christian fundamentalists and other conservatives) want to say Jesus is truly the unique son of God, just as the Creed says, and want to take the resurrection story to be quite literally true history, and tie it to human salvation from sin just as the Creed does.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century a number of other approaches to understanding Jesus have spread among Christian monotheists. These have tended to back away from the literal "Son of God" talk found in the Nicene Creed, and have substituted some other sort of talk, such as the claim that Jesus is a unique display of what it means for the spirit of God to live within a human being. The understanding of how this fits into a picture of human salvation often seems to me somewhat murky, but it generally has to do with understanding salvation as getting into a close relation with God and thereby finding meaning and direction for life.

Despite the best efforts of many Christian leaders and thinkers, however, as far as I can tell from talking with students, one of the very most popular versions of Christianity in the United States today bears only a marginal resemblance to the original tradition. It goes like this: There is one God who created the universe a long time ago and who has various expectations of people with regard to how they treat each other. Jesus and the Bible tell us about these expectations – things like the Ten Commandments and Jesus' command to love others. Everyone falls somewhat short of fulfilling these expectations, but mostly in rather minor ways. Except for the really bad people (like murderers) God is pretty forgiving, especially if a person tries sometimes to be good, and when people die, their immortal soul goes to be with God where it will be happy and look down on those of us who remain here.

I realize that the point of view I have just described will be derided by many committed and thoughtful traditional Christians as being so far from the original tradition and so weak that it should not count as genuine Christianity. But I have tried throughout this essay to characterize Christianity from the point of view of those who see themselves as Christians, rather than drawing lines in the sand and saying that Christianity must include this or that particular idea. So, I am here saying that the nontraditional point of view I just described still counts as Christian using my loose standards.

### **Christianity has changed over time**

By now it should be apparent that Christianity has developed over time into a collection of points of view that are rather different from one another and from the original worldviews held by early Christians. This is to be expected in a living religion. As times change and people consider the implications of their faith, the shape of the religion is bound to change to at least some extent.

The development of theories about the nature of Jesus—such as those found in the Nicene Creed—go well beyond anything found in the New Testament or in the thinking of the earliest members of the Jesus movement. Those who support the Creed would say the Creed develops

in philosophically sophisticated detail the best viewpoint that accommodates all the New Testament data and the Apostolic tradition. In other words, the developed and detailed view found in the Creed merely brings out in a sophisticated way the point of view that is *implicit* in the Apostolic tradition. (This would be the position of the Roman Catholic Church.) But there are others who don't care what the creeds say, or who think the creeds are seriously outmoded.

There are many other ways in which Christianity developed over time. One of the most famous and well-known ways connects with its entanglement in European political governance issues, and European views about cultural superiority over the rest of the world. That story is too long to tell here in a responsible way. I hope it may already be somewhat familiar to you. Suffice it to say that early Christianity was the religion primarily of ordinary folk and slaves, with no friends in high places. But after a few hundred years, Christianity had become the official religion of an Empire centered in Europe, and was used as the justification for all sorts of political decisions, wars, persecutions, and divisions in a way that would have seemed completely baffling and contrary to Christian principles to someone like the writers of the New Testament. The idea of a loving God who reaches out through Jesus to save lost humanity from the grip of evil seemed to have been largely displaced by more earthly concerns about power and social order.

Rather than going into that history here, in this course we will take a detailed look at how Christianity, society, and politics have become intertwined in the United States during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>. But to pursue this, we will use many other resources; so, this is the end of my brief discussion of Christianity. Obviously, there is much more that could be said about the institutional history of the church, about its varied practices and interpretations, about its variability over time. But this essay is intended only to be an introduction, stressing what Christianity has meant to individual people, especially in terms of their personal belief structures, as opposed to focusing on official documents and positions taken by churches. This should help you understand the reactions of individual Christians to various cultural changes such as the changes that took place in the US during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.