Christianity

major religion, stemming from the life, teachings, and death of Jesus of Nazareth (the Christ, or the Anointed One of God) in the 1st century ad. It has become the largest of the world’s religions. Geographically the most widely diffused of all faiths, it has a constituency of more than 2 billion believers. Its largest groups are the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox churches, and the Protestant churches; in addition to these churches there are several independent churches of Eastern Christianity as well as numerous sects throughout the world. See also Eastern Orthodoxy; Roman Catholicism; and Protestantism.

This article first considers the nature and development of the Christian religion, its ideas, and its institutions. This is followed by an examination of several intellectual manifestations of Christianity. Finally, the position of Christianity in the world, the relations among its divisions and denominations, its missionary outreach to other peoples, and its relations with other world religions are discussed. For supporting material on various topics, see biblical literature; doctrine and dogma; Jesus Christ; sacred; worship; prayer; creed; sacrament; religious dress; monasticism; and priesthood.

The church and its history

The essence and identity of Christianity

At the very least, Christianity is the faith tradition that focuses on the figure of Jesus Christ. In this context, faith refers both to the believers’ act of trust and to the content of their faith. As a tradition, Christianity is more than a system of religious belief. It also has generated a culture, a set of ideas and ways of life, practices, and artifacts that have been handed down from generation to generation since Jesus first became the object of faith. Christianity is thus both a living tradition of faith and the culture that the faith leaves behind. The agent of Christianity is the church, the community of people who make up the body of believers.

To say that Christianity “focuses” on Jesus Christ is to say that somehow it brings together its beliefs and practices and other traditions in reference to a historic figure. Few Christians, however, would be content to keep this reference merely historical. Although their faith tradition is historical—i.e., they believe that transactions with the divine do not occur in the realm of timeless ideas but among ordinary humans through the ages—the vast majority of Christians focus their faith in Jesus Christ as someone who is also a present reality. They may include many other references in their tradition and thus may speak of “God” and “human nature” or of “church” and “world,” but they would not be called Christian if they did not bring their attentions first and last to Jesus Christ.

While there is something simple about this focus on Jesus in the central figure, there is also something very complicated. That complexity is revealed by the thousands of separate churches, sects, and denominations that make up the modern Christian tradition. To project these separate bodies against the background of their development in the nations of the world is to suggest the bewildering variety. To picture people expressing their adherence to that tradition in their prayer life and church-building, in their quiet worship or their strenuous efforts to change the world, is to suggest even more of the variety.

Given such complexity, it is natural that throughout Christian history both those in the tradition and those surrounding it have made attempts at simplification. Two ways to do this have been to concentrate on the “essence” of the faith, and thus on the ideas that are integral to it, or to be concerned with the “identity” of the tradition, and thus on the boundaries of its historical experience.

Modern scholars have located the focus of this faith tradition in the context of monotheistic religions. Christianity addresses the historical figure of Jesus Christ against the background of, and while seeking to remain faithful to, the experience of one God. It has consistently rejected polytheism and atheism.

A second element of the faith tradition of Christianity, with rare exceptions, is a plan of salvation or redemption. That is to say, the believers in the church picture themselves as in a plight from which they need rescue. For whatever reason, they have been distanced from God and need to be saved. Christianity is based on a particular experience or scheme directed to the act of saving—that is, of bringing or “buying back,” which is part of what redemption means, these creatures of God to their source in God. The agent of that redemption is Jesus Christ.

It is possible that through the centuries the vast majority of believers have not used the term essence to describe the central focus of their faith. The term is itself of Greek origin and thus represents only one part of the tradition, one element in the terms that have gone into making up Christianity. Essence refers to those qualities that give something its identity and are at the centre of what makes that thing different from everything else. To Greek philosophers it meant something intrinsic to and inherent in a thing or category of things, which gave it its character and thus separated it from everything of different character. Thus Jesus Christ belongs to the essential character of Christianity and gives it identity in the same way that Buddha does for Buddhism.

If most people are not concerned with defining the essence of Christianity, in practice they must come to terms with what the word essence implies. Whether they are engaged in being saved or redeemed on the one hand, or thinking and speaking about that redemption, its agent, and its meaning on the other, they are concentrating on the essence of their experience. Those who have concentrated from within the faith tradition have also helped to give it its identity. It is not possible to speak of the essence of a historical tradition without referring to how its ideal qualities have been discussed through the ages. Yet one can take up the separate subjects of essence and identity in sequence, being always aware of how they interrelate.

Historical views of the essence

Early views

Jesus and the earliest members of the Christian faith tradition were Jews, and thus they stood in the faith tradition inherited by Hebrew people in Israel and the lands of the Diaspora. They were monotheists, devoted to the God of Israel. When they claimed that Jesus was divine, they had to do so in ways that would not challenge monotheism.

Insofar as they began to separate or be separated from Judaism, which did not accept Jesus as the Messiah, the earliest Christians expressed certain ideas about the one on whom their faith focused. As with other religious people, they became involved in a search for truth. God, in the very nature of things, was necessarily the final Truth. In a reference preserved in the Gospel According to John, however, Jesus refers to himself not only as “the way” and “the life” but also as “the Truth.” Roughly, this meant “all the reality there is” and was a reference to Jesus’ participation in the reality of the one God.

From the beginning there were Christians who may not have seen Jesus as the Truth, or as a unique participant in the reality of God. There have been “humanist” devotees of Jesus, modernist adapters of the truth about the Christ; but even in the act of adapting him to humanist concepts in their day they have contributed to the debate of the essence of Christianity and brought it back to the issues of monotheism and a way of salvation.
It has been suggested that the best way to preserve the essence of Christianity is to look at the earliest documents—the four Gospels and the letters that make up much of the New Testament—which contain the best account of what the earliest Christians remembered, taught, or believed about Jesus Christ. It is presumed that “the simple Jesus” and the “primitive faith” emerge from these documents as the core of the essence. This view has been challenged, however, by the view that the writings that make up the New Testament themselves reflect Jewish and Greek ways of thinking about Jesus and God. They are seen through the experience of different personalities, such as the apostle Paul or the nameless composers—traditionally identified as Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—of documents that came to be edited as the Gospels. Indeed, there are not only diverse ways of worship, of polity or governance of the Christian community, and of behaviour pictured or prescribed in the New Testament but also diverse theologies, or interpretations of the heart of the faith. Most believers see these diversities as complementing each other and leave to scholars the argument that the primate documents may compete with and even contradict each other. Yet there is a core of ideas that all New Testament scholars and believers would agree are central to ancient Christian beliefs. One British scholar, James G. Dunn, for example, says would all agree that “the risen Jesus is the Ascended Lord.” That is to say, there would have been no faith tradition and no scriptures had not the early believers thought that Jesus was “Risen,” raised from the dead, and, as “Ascended,” somehow above the ordinary plane of mortal and temporal experience. From that simple assertion early Christians could begin to complicate the search for essence.

An immediate question was how to combine the essential focus on Jesus with the essential monotheism. At various points in the New Testament and especially in the works of the Apologists, late 1st- and 2nd-century writers who sought to defend and explain the faith to members of Greco-Roman society, Jesus is identified as the “preexistent Logos.” That is, before there was a historical Jesus born of Mary and accessible to the sight and touch of Jews and others in his own day, there was a Logos—a principle of reason, an element of ordering, a “word”—that participated in the Godhead and thus existed, but which only preexisted as far as the “incarnate” Logos, the word that took on flesh and humanity (John 1:1–14), was concerned.

In searching for an essence of truth and the way of salvation, some primitive Jewish Christian groups, such as the Ebionites, and occasional theologians in later ages employed a metaphor of adoption. These theologians used as their source certain biblical passages (e.g., Acts 2:22). Much as an earthly parent might adopt a child, so the divine parent, the one Jesus called abba (Aramaic: “daddy,” or “father”), had adopted him and taken him into the heart of the nature of what it is to be God. There were countless variations of themes such as the preexistent Logos or the concept of adoption, but they provide some sense of the ways the early Apologists carried out their task of contributing to the definition of the essence of their Jesus-focused yet monotheistic faith.

While it is easier to point to diversity than to simplicity or clarity among those who early expressed faith, it must also be said that from the beginning the believers insisted that they were—or were intended to be, or were commanded and were striving to be—united in their devotion to the essence of their faith tradition. There could not have been many final truths, and there were not many legitimate ways of salvation. It was of the essence of their tradition to reject other gods and other ways, and most defining of essence and identity occurred as one set of Christians was concerned lest others might deviate from the essential faith and might, for example, be attracted to other gods or other ways.

While Jesus lived among his disciples and those who ignored or rejected him, to make him the focus of faith or denial presented one type of issue. After the “Risen Jesus” had become the “Ascended Lord” and was no longer a visible physical presence, those at the head of the tradition had a different problem. Jesus remained, a present reality to them, and when they gathered to worship they believed that he was “in the midst of them.” He was present in their minds and hearts, in the spoken word that testified to him, and also present in some form when they had their sacred meal and ingested bread and wine as his “body and blood.” They created a reality around this experience; if once Judaism was that reality, now Christianity resulted.

The search for the essence of Christianity led people in the Greek world to concentrate on ideas. The focus on Jesus narrowed to ideas, to “beliefs about” and not only “belief in,” and to doctrines. The essence began to be cognitive, referring to what was known, or substantive. As debates over the cognitive or substantive aspects of Jesus’ participation in God became both intense and refined, the pursuit of essences became almost a matter of competition in the minds of the Apologists and the formulators of doctrines in the 3rd through the 6th centuries. During this time Christians met in council to develop statements of faith, confessions, and creeds. The claimed essence was used in conflict and rivalry with others. Christian Apologists began to speak, both to the Jews and to the other members of the Greco-Roman world, in terms that unfavourably compared their religions to Christianity. The essence also came to be a way to define who had the best credentials and was most faithful. The claim that one had discerned the essence of Christianity could be used to rule out the faithless, the apostate, or the heretic. The believers in the essential truth and way of salvation saw themselves as insiders and others as outsiders. This concept became important after the Christian movement had triumphed in the Roman Empire, which became officially Christian by the late 4th century. To fail to grasp or to misconceive what was believed to be the essence of faith might mean exile, harassment, or even death.

In the early stages of the development of their faith, Christians did something rare if not unique in the history of religion: they adopted the entire scriptural canon of what they now saw to be another faith, Judaism, and embraced the Hebrew Scriptures, which they called the Old Testament. But while doing so, they also incorporated the insistent monotheism of Judaism as part of the essence of their truth and way of salvation, just as they incorporated the Hebrew Scriptures’ story as part of their own identity-giving narrative and experience.

This narrowing of focus on Jesus Christ as truth meant also a complementary sharpening of focus on the way of salvation. There is no purpose in saving someone who does not need salvation. Christianity therefore began to make, through its councils and creeds, theologians and scholars, some attempts at definitive descriptions of what it is to be human. Later some of these descriptions were called “original sin,” the idea that all humans inherited from Adam, the first-created human, a condition that made it impossible for them to be perfect or to please a personal God on their own. While Christians never agreed on a specific teaching on original sin, they did describe as the essence of Christianity the fact that something limited humans and led them to need redemption. Yet the concentration always returned to Jesus Christ as belonging more to the essence of Christianity than did any statements about the human condition.

The essence of Christianity eventually included statements about the reality to God. Christians inherited from the Jews a relatively intimate picture of a God who made their young and small universe, with its starry heavens, and then carried on discourse with humans, making covenants with them and rewarding or punishing them. But the Greek part of their tradition contributed the concept of a God who was greater than any ideas of God but who had to be addressed through ideas. Indeed, it was during this time that words such as essence, substance, and being—terms that did not belong to the Old or New Testament traditions—came to be wedded to biblical witness in the creeds. Christians used the vocabulary and repertory of options then available to them in speaking of the all-encompassing and the ineffable and grafted these onto the witness to God that was essential to their faith. Modern Christians, including many who reject the notion of creeds or any non-biblical language, are still left with the problems and intentions of the ancients: how to think of Jesus in such a way that they are devoted to him not in isolation, for that would be idolatry of a human—but in the context of the total divine reality.

It is impossible to chronicle the efforts at expressing essence without pointing to diversity within the unity. Yet the belief in final unity belongs to any claims of finding an essence. Thus it was both a typical and a decisive moment when in the 5th century Vincent of Lérins’s, a Gallo-Roman theologian, provided a formula according to which Christianity expressed a faith that “has been believed everywhere, always, and by all” (quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est). Even if not all Christians could agree on all formulations, it was widely held that there was some fundamental “thing” that had thus been believed.
For a thousand years, a period that began with what some historians called “Dark Ages” in the Christian West and that endured through both the Eastern and Western extensions of the Roman Empire, the essence of Christian faith was guarded differently than it had been in the first three centuries, before Christianity became official; throughout the Middle Ages itself the understanding of the essence evolved. In the 4th and 5th centuries, theologians including Ambrose, Augustine of Hippo, and Jerome laid the foundations for the development of Christian thought. By the 5th century, the bishop of Rome, the pope, as a result of conciliar decisions and unique events in Rome, had become the leading spokesman for the faith in Latin, or Western, Christendom. This position would assume greater institutional strength in later periods of the Middle Ages. In the Eastern churches, despite the claims of the patriarch of Constantinople, no single pontiff ruled over the bishops, but they saw themselves just as surely and energetically in command of the doctrines that made up the essence of Christianity.

The Western drama, especially after the year 1000, was more fateful for Christianity in the modern world. The pope and the bishops of Latin Christendom progressively determined the essence through doctrines and canons that enhanced the ancient grasp of faith. As they came to dominate in Europe, they sought to suppress contrary understandings of the essence of the faith. In the 14th and 15th centuries, Jews were confined to ghettos, segregated and self-segregated enclaves where they did not and could not share the full prerogatives of Christendom. When sects were defined as heretical—Waldenses, Cathari, and others—because of their repudiation of Roman Catholic concepts of Christian essence, they had to go into hiding or were pushed into enclaves beyond the reach of the custodians of official teaching. The essence of Christianity had become a set of doctrines and laws articulated and controlled by a hierarchy that saw those doctrines as a divine deposit of truth. Theologians might argue about the articulations with great subtlety and intensity, but in that millennium few would have chosen to engage in basic disagreement over the official teachings, all of which were seen to be corollaries of the basic faith in Jesus Christ as participating in the truth of God and providing the way of salvation.

Through these centuries there was also increasing differentiation between the official clergy, which administered the sacraments and oversaw the body of the faithful, and the laity. Most of what was debated centuries later about the essence of medieval Christianity came from the records of these authorities. As more is known about the faith of the ordinary believers, it becomes more evident in the records of social history that people offered countless variations on the essence of the faith. Many people used the church’s officially legitimated faith in the power of saints’ relics to develop patterns of dealing with God that, according to the Protestant Reformers, detracted from the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the only agent of salvation.

During this thousand years in both Western and Eastern Christianity, when the faith had a cultural monopoly, there was an outburst of creativity and a fashioning of a Christian culture that greatly enhanced and complicated any once-simple notions of an essence. Christianity was as much a cultural tradition as it was a faith tradition, an assertion that the leadership of the medieval church would not have regarded as diminishing or insulting. Christianity as a cultural tradition is perhaps most vividly revealed in the magnificent cathedrals and churches that were built in the Middle Ages and in the illuminated manuscripts of the period.

As Christian culture grew ever more complex, however, there arose a constant stream of individual reformers who tried to get back to what they thought was its original essence. Among these was St. Francis of Assisi, who in his personal style of devotion and simple way of life was often seen as capturing in his person and teachings more of the original essence of Jesus’ truth and way of salvation than did the ordained authorities in the church and empires. Unlike the Waldenses and members of other dissident groups, Francis accepted the authority of the ordained clergy and contributed to a reform and revival of the broader church.

In the late Middle Ages a number of dissenters emerged—such as Jan Hus in Bohemia, John Wycliffe in England, and Girolamo Savonarola in Florence—who challenged the teachings of the church in more radical ways than someone like St. Francis did. For all their differences, they were united in their critique of what they thought complicated the essence of Christianity. On biblical prophetic grounds they sought simplicity in the cognitive, moral, and devotional life of Christianity.

When the Protestant Reformation divided Western Christianity—as Eastern Christians, already separated since the 11th century, looked on—the 16th-century European world experienced a foretaste of the infinite Christian variety to come. The reforms that gave rise to the many Protestant bodies—Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterian, Reformed, Anabaptist, Quaker, and others—were themselves debates over the essence of Christianity. Taken together, they made it increasingly difficult for any one to claim a monopoly on the custodianship of that essence, try as they might. Each new sect offered a partial discernment of a different essence or way of speaking of it, even if the vast majority of Protestants agreed that the essence could be retrieved best, or, indeed uniquely, through recovery of the central message of the Holy Scriptures.

After the ferment of the Reformation, most of the dissenting groups, as they established themselves in various nations, found it necessary to engage in their own narrowing of focus, rendering of precise doctrines, and understanding of divine truth and the way of salvation. Within a century theologians at many Protestant universities were adopting systems that paralleled the old scholasticisms against which some reformers had railed. Those who had once thought that definition of doctrine failed to capture the essence of Christianity were now defining their concept of the essence in doctrinal terms, but were doing so for Lutherans, Reformed, Presbyterians, and even for more radical dissenters and resisters of creeds, such as the Anabaptists.

The belief of Vincent of Lérins that there is a faith that has been held by everyone, always, and everywhere, lived on through the proliferation of Protestant denominations and Roman Catholic movements and, in sophisticated ways, has helped animate the modern ecumenical movement. Thus some have spoken of that movement as a reunion of churches, an idea that carries an implication that they had once been “one,” and a further hint that one included an essence on which people agreed. Reunion, then, would mean a stripping away of accretions, a reducing of the number of arguments, and a refocusing on essentials.

Modern views

The modern church and world brought new difficulties to the quest for defining an essence of Christianity. Both as a result of Renaissance humanism, which glorified in human achievement and encouraged human autonomy, and of Reformation ideas that believers were responsible in conscience and reason for their faith, an autonomy in expressing faith developed. Some spoke of Protestantism as being devoted to the right of private judgment. Roman Catholics warned that believers who did not submit to church authority would issue as many concepts of essence as there were believers to make the claims.

In the 18th century the Western philosophical movement called the Enlightenment further obscured searches for the essence of Christianity. The Enlightenment proclaimed optimistic views of human reach and perfectibility that challenged formerly essential Christian views of human limits. The deity became a benevolent if impersonal force, not an agent that arranged a way of salvation to people in need of rescue. The Enlightenment also urged a view of human autonomy and of the use of reason in a search for truth. But, in the view of Enlightenment thinkers, reason did not need to be responsive to supernatural revelation, as contained in the Old and New Testaments. Indeed, reason questioned the integrity of those scriptures themselves through methods of historical and literary criticism. No longer should one rely on the word of priests who passed on notions of essential Christianity.

While many Westerners moved out of the orbit of faith as a result of the Enlightenment and the rise of criticism, many others—in Germany, France, England, Scotland, and, eventually, the Americas—remained Christians, people of faith if now of faith differently expressed. Some Christians, the Unitarians, rejected the ideals of both a preexistent Logos made incarnate in Christ and a Jesus adopted into godhead. Jesus was seen as the great teacher or exemplar. They thus also tested the boundaries of essential teaching about a way of salvation. And at the heart of Deist Christianity was a view of God that remained “mono-” in that it was devoted to a single principle, but as “deist” instead of “theist” it departed from the ancient picture of a personal God engaged in human affairs. These were blows to the integrity of Vincent of Lérins’s concept and more reasons for the orthodox to use Vincent’s concept to exclude Unitarians, Deists, and other innovators from the circle of Christianity.
In the 19th century philosophical and historical criticism inspired some Christians to renew the search for essences. For example, in the wake of the German Idealist philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, Hegelian scholars tried to rescue Christianity by viewing it as an unfolding of “absolute spirit.” They followed Christian history through a constant dialectic, a series of forces and counterforces producing new syntheses. A problem with the Hegelian approach arose as the historical Jesus came to be seen merely as one stage in the unfolding of absolute spirit; he was not a decisive agent of the way of salvation “once for all,” as the biblical Letter to the Hebrews had claimed him to be. Soon biblical scholars such as David Friedrich Strauss were speaking of the historical Jesus as a myth of a certain set of people in one moment of the dialectical unfolding. The Christian faith itself began to dissolve, and many Hegelians began to reject the God of the Christian faith along with the historical Jesus.

Another group of 19th-century theologians took the opposite course. In the spirit of the 18th-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant, these neo-Kantians spoke not of the noumenal world, the unseen realm of essences beyond the phenomenal, but of the phenomenal realm, the world of history in which things happened. Theologians in this school engaged in a century-long “quest for the historical Jesus,” in which they sought the simple essence of Christianity. Significantly, the greatest exemplar of this historical tradition, the German theologian Adolf von Harnack, wrote one of the best-known modern books on the essence of Christianity, Das Wesen des Christentums (1900; What Is Christianity?).

The call had come to purge Christianity of what Harnack called traces of “acute Hellenization,” the Greek ideas of essence, substance, and being that were introduced into the Christian tradition in its early history. The focus was shifted to the Fatherhood of God and the announcement of the Kingdom, as Jesus had proclaimed in the Gospels. While this approach matched the thirst for simplification in the minds of many of the Christian faithful, it also diminished the concept of God. The result was a form of Christian humanism that more traditional Christians regarded as a departure from the essence of Christianity. This view claimed to be based on the historical Jesus, but scholars could not agree on the details.

Throughout the modern period some thinkers took another route toward expressing the essence of Christianity. The notion that the theologians would never find the essence of Christianity grew among German Pietists, among the followers of John Wesley into Methodism, and in any number of Roman Catholic or Protestant devotional movements. Instead, according to these groups, the Christian essence was discernible in acts of piety, closeness to the fatherly heart of God as shown in the life of Jesus, and intimate communion with God on emotional or affective—not cognitive, rational, or substantial (i.e., doctrinal)—grounds. Although these pietisms have been immensely satisfying to millions of modern believers, they have been handicapped in the intellectual arena when pressed for the definitions people need in a world of choice.

Some modern Christians have shifted the topic from the essence of Christianity to its absoluteness among the religions. They have been moved by what the Germans called Religionswissenschaft, the study of world religions. In that school, the focus fell on the sacred, what the German theologian Rudolf Otto called “the idea of the Holy.” On those terms, as the German scholar Ernst Troeltsch showed, it was more difficult to speak of the “absoluteness” of Christianity and its truth; one had to speak of it on comparative terms. Yet some early 20th-century comparativists, such as the Swedish Lutheran archbishop Nathan Söderblom, applied their understanding of the study of religion to help animate the movement for Christian reunion.

The modern ecumenical movement is based upon the belief that the church has different cultural expressions that must be honoured and differing confessional or doctrinal traditions designed to express the essential faith. These traditions demand criticism, comparison, and perhaps revision, with some possible blending toward greater consensus in the future. At the same time, supporters of the movement have shown that, among Christians of good will, elaborations of what constitutes the essence of Christianity are as confusing as they are inevitable and necessary.

Despite this confusion, the ecumenical movement was an important development in the 20th century. It took institutional form in the World Council of Churches in 1948, which was composed of Protestant and Eastern Orthodox churches. The World Council emerged out of two organizations that offered distinct approaches to the essential concepts of the faith. One approach was devoted first to “Life and Work,” a view that the essentials of Christianity could be best found and expressed when people followed the way or did the works of Christ, since this constituted his essence. The other approach, concerned with “Faith and Order,” stressed the need for comparative study of doctrine, with critical devotion to the search for what was central. By no means did these groups cling any longer to the notion that when they found unity they would have found a simple essence of Christianity. Yet they believed that they could find compatible elements that would help to sustain them on the never-ending search for what was central to the faith tradition.

Some modern scholars—for example, the British theologian John Hick—viewing the chaos of languages dealing with the essentials of the faith and the complex of historical arguments, pose the understanding of the essence in the future. They speak of “eschatological verification,” referring to the end, the time beyond history, or the time of fulfillment. In that future, one might say, it will have become possible to assess the claims of faith. Theologians of these schools argue that such futurist notions motivate Christians and the scholars among them to clarify their language, refine their historical understandings, and focus their devotion and spirituality.

The question of Christian identity

These comments on the search for the essence of Christianity, the task of defining the core of the faith tradition, demonstrate that the question of Christian identity is at stake at all times. What the psychologist Erik Erikson said of the individual—that a sense of identity meant “the accrued confidence that one’s ability to maintain inner sameness and continuity . . . is matched by the sameness and continuity of one’s meaning for others”—can be translated to the concerns of the group. This means that Christians strive, in the midst of change, to have some “inner sameness and continuity” through the focus on Jesus Christ and the way of salvation. At the same time, Christians posit that this identity will be discoverable by and useful to those who are not part of the tradition: secularists, Buddhists, Communists, or other people who parallel or rival Christian claims about truth and salvation.

On these terms, writers of Christian history normally begin phenomenologically when discussing Christian identity; that is, they do not bring norms or standards by which they have determined the truth of this or that branch of Christianity or even of the faith tradition as a whole but identify everyone as Christian who call themselves Christian. Thus, from one point of view, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or the Mormons as they are commonly called, is, in the view of scholar Jan Shipp, “a new religious tradition.” The followers of the Book of Mormon incorporated the Old and New Testaments into their canon—just as the New Testament Christians incorporated the entire scripture of a previous tradition—and then supplied reinterpretations. As a new religious tradition, Mormonism would not be Christian. But because Mormons use Christian terminology and call themselves Christian, they might also belong to a discussion of Christianity. They may be perceived as departing from the essence of Christianity because other Christians regard their progressive doctrine of God as heretical. Yet Mormons in turn point to perfectionist views of humanity and progressive views of God among more conventionally accepted Christian groups. In areas where the Mormons want to be seen as “latter-day” restorers, basing their essential faith on scriptures not previously accessible to Christians, they would be ruled out of conventional Christian discussion and treatment. Yet they share much of Christian culture, focus their faith in Jesus, proclaim a way of salvation, and want to be included for other purposes, and thus fall into the context of a Christian identity at such times.

This phenomenological approach, one that accents historical and contemporary description and resists prescription, does not allow the historian to state the essence of Christianity as a simple guide for all discussion. It is necessary for the scholar to put his own truth claims in a kind of suspension and to record faithfully, sorting out large schools of coherence and pointing to major strains. It is not difficult to state that something was a majority view if the supporting data are present. For example, it is not
difficult to say what Roman Catholics at particular times have regarded as the essence of Christianity or what the various Orthodox and Protestant confessions regard as the true way of salvation. Someone using the phenomenological method, however, would stand back and refuse to be the arbiter when these confessional traditions disagree over truth.

Vincent of Lérins, then, speaks more for the hunger of the Christian heart or the dream of Christian union than for the researcher, who finds it more difficult to see a moment when everyone agreed on everything everywhere. Yet it remains safe to say that Christian identity begins and ends with a reference to Jesus in relation to God’s truth and a way of salvation. The rest is a corollary of this central claim, an infinite set of variations and elaborations that are of great importance to the separated Christians who hold to them in various times and places.

Martin E. Marty

The history of Christianity

The primitive church

The relation of the early church to late Judaism

Christianity began as a movement within Judaism at a period when the Jews had long been dominated culturally and politically by foreign powers and had found in their religion (rather than in their politics or cultural achievements) the linchpin of their community. From Amos (8th century bc) onward the religion of Israel was marked by tension between the concept of monotheism, with its universal ideal of salvation (for all nations), and the notion of God’s special choice of Israel. In the Hellenistic age (323 bc–3rd century ad), the dispersion of the Jews throughout the kingdoms of the eastern Mediterranean and the Roman Empire reinforced this universalistic tendency. But the attempts of foreign rulers, especially the Syrian king Antiochus IV Epiphanes (in 168–165 bc), to impose Greek culture in Palestine provoked zealous resistance on the part of many Jews, leading to the revolt of Judas Maccabeus against Antiochus. In Palestinian Judaism the predominant note was separation and exclusiveness. Jewish missionaries to other areas were strictly expected to impose the distinctive Jewish customs of circumcision, kosher food, and sabbaths and other festivals. Other Jews, however, were not so exclusive, welcoming Greek culture and accepting converts without requiring circumcision.

The relationship of the earliest Christian churches to Judaism turned principally on two questions: (1) the messianic role of Jesus of Nazareth and (2) the permanent validity of the Mosaic Law for all.

The Hebrew Scriptures viewed history as the stage of a providential drama eventually ending in a triumph of God over all present sources of frustration (e.g., foreign domination or the sins of Israel). God’s rule would be established by an anointed prince (the Messiah) of the line of David, king of Israel in the 10th century bc. The proper course of action leading to the consummation of the drama, however, was subject of some disagreement. Among the diverse groups were the aristocratic and conservative Sadducees, who accepted only the five books of Moses (the Pentateuch) and whose lives and political power were intimately associated with Temple worship, and the Pharisees, who accepted the force of oral tradition and were widely respected for their learning and piety. The Pharisees not only accepted biblical books outside the Pentateuch but also embraced doctrines—such as those on resurrection and the existence of angels—of recent acceptance in Judaism, many of which were derived from apocalyptic expectations that the consummation of history would be heralded by God’s intervention in the affairs of men in dramatic, cataclysmic terms. The Sanhedrin (central council) at Jerusalem was made up of both Pharisees and Sadducees. The Zealots were aggressive revolutionaries known for their violent opposition to Rome and its polytheism. Other groups were the Herodians, supporters of the client kingdom of the Herods (a dynasty that supported Rome) and abhorrent to the Zealots, and the Essenes, a quasi-monastic dissident group, probably including the sect that preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls. This latter sect did not participate in the Temple worship at Jerusalem and observed another religious calendar; from their desert retreat they awaited divine intervention and searched prophetic writings for signs indicating the consummation.

What relation the followers of Jesus had to some of these groups is not clear. In the canonical Gospels (those accepted as authentic by the church) the main targets of criticism are the scribes and Pharisees, whose attachment to the tradition of Judaism is presented as legalistic and pettifogging. The Sadducees and Herodians likewise receive an unfriendly portrait. The Essenes are never mentioned. Simon, one of Jesus’ 12 disciples, was or had once been a Zealot. Jesus probably stood close to the Pharisees.

Under the social and political conditions of the time, there could be no long future either for the Sadducees or for the Zealots: their attempts to make apocalyptic dreams effective led to the desolation of Judaea and the destruction of the Temple after the two major Jewish revolts against the Romans in 66–70 and 132–135. The choice for many Jews, who were barred from Jerusalem after 135, thus lay between the Pharisees and the emerging Christian movement. Pharisaism as enshrined in the Mishna (oral law) and the Talmud (commentary on and addition to the oral law) became normative Judaism. By looking to the Gentile (non-Jewish) world and carefully dissociating itself from the Zealot revolutionary causes and the Pharisees, Christianity made possible its ideal of a world religion, at the price of sacrificing Jewish particularity and exclusiveness. The fact that Christianity has never succeeded in gaining the allegiance of more than a small minority of Jews is more a mystery to theologians than to historians.

The relation of the early church to the career and intentions of Jesus

The prime sources for knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth are the four canonical Gospels in the New Testament. There are also a number of noncanonical sources, notably the apocryphal gospels, which contain stories about Jesus and sayings attributed to him. The Gospel of Thomas, preserved in a Coptic Gnostic library found about 1945 in Egypt, contains several such sayings, besides some independent versions of canonical sayings. At certain points the Gospel tradition finds independent confirmation in the letters of the apostle Paul. Although the allusions in non-Christian sources (the Jewish historian Josephus, the Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius, and Talmudic texts) are almost negligible, they refute the unsubstantiated notion that Jesus might never have existed.

The first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are closely related in form, structure, and content. Because they can be studied in parallel columns called a synopsis, they are known as the Synoptic Gospels. Mark was probably used by Matthew and Luke, who may also have used the Q Gospel (so-called from the German Quelle, “source”; Q is the hypothetical Gospel that is the origin of common material in later Gospels). John, differing in both pattern and content, appears richer in theological interpretation but may also preserve good historical information. The Gospels are not detached reports but were written to serve the religious needs of the early Christian communities. Legendary and apologetic (defensive) motifs, and the various preoccupations of the communities for which they were first produced, can readily be discerned as influences upon their narratives. Although many details of the Gospels remain the subject of disagreement and uncertainty, the scholarly consensus accepts the substance of the Gospel tradition as a truthful account.

The chronology of the life of Jesus is one of the matters of uncertainty. Matthew places the birth of Jesus at least two years before Herod the Great’s death late in 5 bc or early in 4 bc. Luke connects Jesus’ birth with a Roman census that, according to Josephus, occurred in ad 6–7 and caused a revolt against the governor Quirinius. Luke
could be right about the census and wrong about the governor. The crucifixion under Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judea (ad 26–36), was probably about the year 29–30, but again certainty is impossible.

Jesus’ encounter with John the Baptist, the ascetic in the Judaean Desert who preached repentance and baptism in view of God’s coming Kingdom, marked a decisive moment for his career. He recognized in John the forerunner of the kingdom that his own ministry proclaimed. The first preaching of Jesus, in his home region of Galilee, took the form of vivid parables and was accompanied by miraculous healings. The Synoptic writers describe a single climactic visit of Jesus to Jerusalem at the end of his career; but John may be right (implicitly supported by Luke 13:7) in representing his visits as more frequent and the period of ministry as lasting more than a single year. Jesus’ attitude to the observance of the law generated conflict with the Pharisees; he also aroused the fear and hostility of the ruling Jewish authorities. A triumphal entry to Jerusalem at Passover time (the period celebrating the Exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt in the 13th century bc) was the prelude to a final crisis. After a last supper with his disciples he was betrayed by one of them, Judas Iscariot. Arrest and trial followed, first before the Sanhedrin and then before Pilate, who condemned him to crucifixion. According to the Evangelists, Pilate condemned Jesus reluctantly, finding no fault in him. Their version of the condemnation was an attempt to keep Jesus from appearing guilty in Roman eyes, and it was a means for the early Christian community to find its way in the Roman world. In any event, Jesus was executed in a manner reserved for political or religious agitators. It was an universal Christian belief that three days after his death he was raised from the dead by divine power.

Jesus preached the imminent presence of God’s Kingdom, in some texts as future consummation, in others as already present. The words and acts of Jesus were believed to be the inauguration of a process that was to culminate in a final triumph of God. His disciples recognized him as the Messiah, the Anointed One, though there is no record of him using the word (except indirectly) in reference to himself. The titles Prophet and Rabbi also were applied to him. His own enigmatic self-designation was “Son of man,” sometimes in allusion to his suffering, sometimes to his future role as judge. This title is derived from the version of the Book of Daniel (7:13), where “one like a son of man,” contrasted with beast figures, represents the humiliated people of God, ascending to be vindicated by the divine Judge. In the developed Gospel tradition the theme of the transcendent judge seems to be most prominent.

Apocalyptic hope could easily merge into messianic zealotry. Moreover, Jesus’ teaching was critical of the established order and encouraged the poor and oppressed, even though it contained an implicit rejection of revolution. Violence was viewed as incompatible with the ethic of the Kingdom of God. Whatever contacts there may have been with the Zealot movement (as the narrative of feeding 5,000 people in the desert may hint), the Gospels assume the widest distance between Jesus’ understanding of his role and the Zealot revolution.

With this distance from revolutionary idealism goes a sombre estimate of human perfectibility. The gospel of repentance presupposes deep defilement in individuals and in society. The sufferings and pains of humanity under the power of evil spirits calls out for compassion and an urgent mission. All the acts of a disciple must express love and forgiveness, even to enemies, and also detachment from property and worldly wealth. To Jesus, the outcasts of society (prostitutes, the hated and oppressive tax agents, and others) were objects of special care, and censoriousness was no virtue. Though the state is regarded as a distant entity in certain respects, it yet has the right to require taxes and civic obligations: Caesar has rights that must be respected and are not incompatible with the fulfillment of God’s demands.

Some of the futurist sayings, if taken by themselves, raise the question whether Jesus intended to found a church. A negative answer emerges only if the authentic Jesus is assumed to have expected an immediate catastrophic intervention by God. There is no doubt that he gathered and intended to gather around him a community of followers. This community continued after his time, regarding itself as the specially called congregation of God’s people, possessing as covenant signs the rites of baptism and Eucharist (Lord’s Supper) with which Jesus was particularly associated—baptism because of his example, Eucharist because the Last Supper on the night before the crucifixion was marked as an anticipation of the messianic feast of the coming age.

A closely related question is whether Jesus intended his gospel to be addressed to Jews only or if the Gentiles were also to be included. In the Gospels Gentiles appear as isolated exceptions, and the choice of 12 Apostles has an evident symbolic relation to the 12 tribes of Israel. The fact that the extension of Christian preaching to the Gentiles was marked as an anticipation of the messianic feast of the coming age.

The Gentile mission and St. Paul

Saul, or Paul (as he was later called), was a Pharisee who persecuted the primitive church. Born at Tarsus (Asia Minor), he had come to Jerusalem as a student of the isolated exceptions, and the choice of 12 Apostles has an evident symbolic relation to the 12 tribes of Israel. The fact that the extension of Christian preaching to the Gentiles was marked as an anticipation of the messianic feast of the coming age.

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Owing to the preservation of some weighty letters, Paul is the only vivid figure of the apostolic age (1st century ad). Like his elder contemporary Philo of Alexandria, also a Hellenized Jew of the dispersion, he interpreted the Old Testament allegorically and affirmed the primacy of spirit over letter in a manner that was in line with Jesus’ freedom with regard to the sabbath. The crucifixion of Jesus he viewed as the supreme redemptive act and also as the means of expiation for the sin of mankind. Salvation is, in Paul’s thought, therefore, not found by a conscientious moralism but rather is a gift of grace, a doctrine in which Paul was anticipated by Philo. But Paul linked this doctrine with his theme that the Gospel represents liberation from the Mosaic Law. The latter thesis created difficulties at Jerusalem, where the Christian community was led by James, the brother of Jesus, and the circle of the intimate disciples of Jesus. James, martyred at Jerusalem in 62, was the primary authority for the Christian Jews, especially those made anxious by Paul; the canonical letter ascribed to James opposes the antinomian (anti-law) interpretations of the doctrine of justification by faith. A middle position seems to have been occupied by Peter. All the Gospels record a special commission of Jesus to Peter as the leader among the 12 Apostles. But Peter’s biography can only be dimly constructed; he died in Rome (according to early tradition) in Nero’s persecution (64) about the same time as Paul.

The supremacy of the Gentile mission within the church was ensured by the effects on Jewish Christianity of the fall of Jerusalem (70) and Hadrian’s exclusion of all Jews from the city (135). Jewish Christianity declined and became the faith of a very small group without links to either synagogue or Gentile church. Some bore the title Ebionites, “the poor” (compare Matthew 5:3), and did not accept the tradition that Jesus was born of a virgin.

In Paul’s theology, the human achievement of Jesus was important because his obedient fidelity to his vocation gave moral and redemptive value to his self-sacrifice. A different emphasis appears in The Gospel According to John, written (according to 2nd-century tradition) at Ephesus. John’s Gospel partly reflects local disputes, not only between the church and the Hellenized synagogue but also between various Christian groups, including Gnostic communities in Asia Minor. John’s special individuality lies in his view of the relation between the historical events of the tradition and the Christian community’s present experience of redemption. The history is treated symbolically to provide a vehicle for faith. Because it is less attached to the contingent events of a particular man’s life, John’s conception of the preexistent Logos becoming incarnate (made flesh) in Jesus made intelligible to the Hellenistic world the universal significance of Jesus. In antiquity, divine presence had to be understood as either inspiration or incarnation. If the Synoptic Gospels suggest inspiration, The Gospel According to John chooses incarnation. The tension between these two types
of Christology (doctrines of Christ) first became acute in the debate between the schools of Antioch and Alexandria in the late 4th century.

The contemporary social, religious, and intellectual world

Many Palestinian Jews appreciated the benefits of Roman rule in guaranteeing peace and order. The Roman government tolerated regional and local religious groups and found it convenient to control Palestine through client kings like the Herods. The demand that divine honours be paid not only to the traditional Roman or similar gods but also to the emperors was not extended to Judea except under the emperor Caligula (reigned 37–41), whose early death prevented desecration of Jerusalem’s holy sites and social unrest. It was enough that the Jews dedicated temple sacrifices and synagogues in the emperor’s honour. The privileges of Roman citizenship were possessed by some Jewish families, including that of the apostle Paul.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul affirmed the providential role of government in restraining evil. Christians did not need to be disaffected from the empire, though the deification of the emperor was offensive to them. Moreover, although as an agency of social welfare the church offered much to the downtrodden elements in society, the Christians did not at any stage represent a social and political threat. After the example of their master, the Christians encouraged humility and patience before wicked men. Even the institution of slavery was not the subject of fundamental Christian criticism before the 4th century. The church, however, was not lost in pious mysticism. It provided for far more than the cultic (liturgical) needs of its members. Inheriting a Jewish moral ideal, its activities included food for the poor, orphans, and foundlings; care for prisoners; and a community funeral service.

Christianity also inherited from Judaism a strong sense of being holy, separate from idolatry and pagan eroticism. As polytheism permeated ancient society, a moral rigorism severely limited Christian participation in some trades and professions. At baptism a Christian was expected to renounce his occupation if that implicated him in public or private compromise with polytheism, superstition, dishonesty, or vice. There was disagreement about military service, however. The majority held that a soldier, if converted and baptized, was not required to leave the army, but there was hesitation about whether an already baptized Christian might properly enlist. Strict Christians also thought poorly of the teaching profession because it involved instructing the young in literature replete with pagan ideals and what was viewed as indecency. Acting and dancing were similarly suspect occupations, and any involvement in magic was completely forbidden.

The Christian ethic therefore demanded some detachment from society, which in some cases made for economic difficulties. The structure of ancient society was dominated not by class but by the relationship of patron and client. A slave or freedman depended for his livelihood and prospects upon his patron, and a man’s power in society was reflected in the extent of his dependents and supporters. In antiquity a strong patron was indispensable if one was negotiating with police or tax authorities or law courts or if one had ambitions in the imperial service. The authority of the father of the family was considerable. Often, Christianity penetrated the social strata first through women and children, especially in the upper classes. But once the householder was a Christian, his dependents tended to follow. The Christian community itself was close-knit. Third-century evidence portrays Christians banking their money with fellow believers; and widely separated groups helped one another with trade and mutual assistance.

Women in ancient society—Greek, Roman, or Jewish—had a domestic, not a public, role; feminine subordination was self-evident. To Paul, however, Christian faith transcends barriers to make all free and equal (Galatians 3:28). Of all ancient writers Paul was the most powerful spokesman for equality. Nevertheless, just as he refused to harbour a runaway slave, so he opposed any practice that would identify the church with social radicalism (a principal pagan charge against it). Paul did not avoid self-contradiction (1 Corinthians 11:5, 14:34–35). His opposition to a public liturgical role for women decided subsequent Catholic tradition in the East and West. Yet in the Greek churches (though not often in the Latin) women were ordained as deacons—in the 4th century by prayer and imposition of hands with the same rite as male deacons—and had a special responsibility at women’s baptism. Widows and orphans were the neediest in antiquity, and the church provided them substantial relief. It also encouraged vows of virginity, and by ad 400 women from wealthy or politically powerful families acquired prominence as superiors of religious communities. It seemed natural to elect as abbess a woman whose family connections might bring benefactions.

The religious environment of the Gentile mission was a tolerant, syncretistic blend of many cults and myths. Paganism was concerned with success; the gods were believed to give victory in war, good harvests, success in love and marriage, and sons and daughters. Defeat, famine, civil disorder, and infertiltiy were recognized as signs of cultic pollution and disfavour. People looked to religion for help in mastering the forces of nature rather than to achieve moral improvement. Individual gods cared either for specific human needs or for specific places and groups. The transcendent God of biblical religion was, therefore, very different from the numerous gods of limited power and local significance. In Asia Minor Paul and his coworker Barnabas were taken to be gods in mortal form because of their miracles. To offer sacrifice either for specific human needs or for specific places and groups. The transcendent God of biblical religion was, therefore, very different from the numerous gods of limited power and local significance.

The problem of jurisdictional authority

In the first Christian generation, authority in the church lay either in the kinsmen of Jesus or in those whom he had commissioned as Apostles and missionaries. The Jerusalem church under James, the brother of Jesus, was the mother church. Paul admitted that if they had refused to grant recognition to his Gentile converts he would have laboured in vain. If there was an attempt to establish a hereditary family overlordship in the church, it did not succeed. Among the Gentile congregations, the Apostles sent by Jesus enjoyed supreme authority. As long as the Apostles lived, there existed a living authoritative voice to which appeal could be made. But once they all had died, there was an acute question regarding the locus of authority. The earliest documents of the 3rd and 4th Christian generations are mainly concerned with this
called Catholic Letters (i.e., James, I and II Peter, I, II, and III John, and Jude), which were among the last of the literature to be accepted as part of the canonical New Testament. In a sense, the authority of these books was enhanced by the fact that they were not subject to the same level of criticism as the Synoptic Gospels.

The Church Fathers, especially in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, played a crucial role in developing the canon of the New Testament. The apostolic letters were valued for their authority and were considered the voices of the apostles themselves. Clement of Rome's letters, written about 96 CE, were among the first to address the authority of the apostolic letters. Clement emphasized the importance of tradition and the succession of leadership in the church.

The problem of scriptural authority

After the initial problems regarding the continuity and authority of the church, the earliest Christians claimed for themselves special responsibilities to lead the church. About ad 165, memorials were erected at Rome to the Apostles Peter and Paul (traditionally considered the first bishop of Rome and of Rome to Peter in a necropolis on the Vatican Hill and to Paul on the road to Ostia. The construction reflects a sense of being guardians of an apostolic tradition, a self-consciousness expressed in another form when, about 190, Bishop Victor of Rome threatened with excommunication Christians in Asia Minor who, following local custom, observed Easter on the day of the Jewish Passover rather than (as at Rome) on the Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox. Stephen of Rome (250) is the first known pope to base claims to authority on Jesus' commission to Peter (Matthew 16:18–19).

From the beginning, Christians in Rome claimed for themselves special responsibilities to lead the church. About ad 165, memorials were erected at Rome to the Apostles Peter and Paul (traditionally considered the first bishop of Rome and of Rome to Peter in a necropolis on the Vatican Hill and to Paul on the road to Ostia. The construction reflects a sense of being guardians of an apostolic tradition, a self-consciousness expressed in another form when, about 190, Bishop Victor of Rome threatened with excommunication Christians in Asia Minor who, following local custom, observed Easter on the day of the Jewish Passover rather than (as at Rome) on the Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox. Stephen of Rome (250) is the first known pope to base claims to authority on Jesus' commission to Peter (Matthew 16:18–19).

The growth of the New Testament is more complex and controversial. The earliest Christians used oral tradition to pass on the story of Jesus' acts and words, often told in the context of preaching and teaching. As the first generation passed away, however, the need for a more permanent and lasting tradition of the life of Jesus became apparent. Mark first conceived the plan of composing a connected narrative, probably in the decade before—or at some time near—ad 70, when the Temple was destroyed by the Romans. The Gospels that traditionally were thought to have been written by Matthew and Luke borrowed from Mark and were compiled in the generation after his Gospel. Toward the end of the first century, and reflecting the persecutions of the emperor Domitian, The Gospel According to John was written. Nevertheless, even after the Gospels were in common circulation, oral tradition was still current; it may even have been preferred. The Gospels themselves, which were probably intended for pastoral uses, did not immediately assume the status of scripture. Well into the 3rd century, new Gospels were being compiled, such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Judas, which were not incorporated into the canonical New Testament. The Synoptic Gospels seem to have been used by the Apologist Justin Martyr at Rome about ad 150 in the form of an early harmony (or synthesis of the Gospels); to this, Justin's Syrian pupil Tatian added The Gospel According to John to make his Diatessaron (according to the four), a harmony of all four Gospels so successful that in Mesopotamia (Tatian's homeland) it virtually ousted the separate Gospels for 250 years. And in the late 2nd century, Irenaeus accepted as the standard version of the Christian scriptures the four Gospels and several other texts that would become part of the canonical New Testament.

On a second level of authority stood the apostolic letters, especially those of Paul. The first of the letters appeared about ad 50, and well before ad 90 the main body of his correspondence was circulating as a corpus (body of writings). Paul's letters were the earliest texts of the Christian Scriptures. In addition to them, there are the seven so-called Catholic Letters (i.e., James, I and II Peter, I, II, and III John, and Jude), which were among the last of the literature to be accepted as part of the canonical New Testament.

Paul's antitheses of law and grace, justice and goodness, and the letter and the spirit were extended further than Paul intended by the radical semi-Gnostic heretic Marcion.
of Pontus (c. 140–150), who taught that the Old Testament came from the inferior vengeful Jewish God of justice and that the New Testament told of the kindly universal Father. As the current texts of Gospels and letters presupposed some divine revelation through the Old Testament, Marcion concluded that they had been corrupted and interpolated by Judaeans. Marcion therefore established a fixed canon of an edited version of Luke’s Gospel and some of the Pauline Letters (ex purgated), and no Old Testament at all.

The orthodox reaction (by such theologians as Justin, Irenaeus, and Tertullian in the 2nd century) was to insist on the Gospel as the fulfillment of prophecy and on creation as the ground of redemption. Reasons were found for accepting the four already current Gospels, the full corpus of Pauline Letters, Acts of the Apostles, John’s Revelation (Apocalypse), and the Catholic Letters. On the authorship of the Letter to the Hebrews there were doubts: Rome rejected it as non-Pauline and Alexandria accepted it as Pauline. The list once established was a criterion (the meaning of “canon”) for the authentic Gospel of the new covenant and soon (by transference from the old) became entitled the New Testament. (The Greek word diathēkē means both covenant and testament.) The formation of the canon meant that special revelation ended with the death of the Apostles and that no authority could be attached to the apocryphal gospels, acts, and apocalypses proliferating in the 2nd century.

The problem of theological authority

Third, a check was found in the creed, an authoritative profession of the faith. At baptism, after renouncing “the devil and his pomps,” initiates declared their faith in response to three questions of the form:

Do you believe in God the Father almighty? Do you believe in Jesus Christ his Son our Lord. . . ? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit in the church and in the Resurrection?

In time, these interrogations became the basis of declaratory creeds, adapted for use by clergy who felt themselves required to reassure colleagues who were not especially confident of their orthodoxy. The so-called Apostles’ Creed, a direct descendant of the baptismal interrogation used at Rome by ad 200, is similar to the creed used in Rome in the 3rd and 4th centuries. Each church (or region) might have its own variant form, but all had the threefold structure.

The internal coherence given by creed, canon, and hierarchy was necessary both in the defense of orthodox Christianity against Gnostic theosophical speculations and also in confronting pagan society. The strong coherence of the scattered congregations was remarkable to pagan observers.

Early heretical movements

Gnosticism, from the Greek gnōstikos (one who has gnōsis, or “secret knowledge”), was an important movement in the early Christian centuries—especially the 2nd—that offered an alternative to emerging orthodox Christian teaching. Gnostics taught that the world was created by a demiurge or satanic power—which they often associated with the God of the Old Testament—and that there is total opposition between this world and God. Redemption was viewed as liberation from the chaos of a creation derived from either incompetent or malevolent powers, a world in which the elect are alien prisoners. The method of salvation was to discover the Kingdom of God within one’s elect soul and to learn how to pass the hostile powers barring the soul’s ascent to bliss. The Gnostics held a Docetist Christology, in which Jesus only appeared to assume the flesh. Although not assuming material form according to the Gnostics, Jesus, nonetheless, was the redeemer sent by God to reveal His special gnōsis. Irenaeus and other Christian theologians, as well as the 3rd-century Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus, dismissed Gnosticism as a pretentious but dangerous nonsense.

Along with Irenaeus and others, the writers of the later New Testament books seem to have opposed early Gnosticism. The supporters of what would become orthodox Christianity stressed the need to adhere to tradition, which was attested by the churches of apostolic foundation. A more hazardous reply was to appeal to ecstatic prophecy. About ad 172 a quasi-pentecostal movement in Phrygia was led by Montanus with two prophetesses, Prisca and Maximilla, reasserting the imminence of the end of the world. He taught that there was an age of the Father (Old Testament), an age of the Son (New Testament), and an age of the Spirit (heralded by the prophet Montanus). Montanism won its chief convert in Tertullian. Its claim to supplement the New Testament was generally rejected, and the age of prophecy was held to have ended in the time of the apostles.

Relations between Christianity and the Roman government and the Hellenistic culture

Church-state relations

The Christians were not respectful toward ancestral pagan customs, and their preaching of a new king sounded like revolution. The opposition of the Jews to them led to breaches of the peace. Thus the Christians could very well be unpopular, and they often were. Paul’s success at Ephesus provoked a riot to defend the cult of the goddess Artemis. In ad 64 a fire destroyed much of Rome; the emperor Nero, in order to escape blame, killed a “vast multitude” of Christians as scapegoats. For the first time, Rome was conscious that Christians were distinct from Jews. But there probably was no formal senatorial enactment proscribing Christianity at this time. Nero’s persecution, which was local and short, was condemned by Tacitus as an expression of the emperor’s cruelty rather than as a service to the public good. Soon thereafter, however, the profession of Christianity was defined as a capital crime—though of a special kind, because one gained pardon by apostasy (rejection of a faith once confessed) demonstrated by offering sacrifice to the pagan gods or to the emperor. Popular gossip soon accused the Christians of secret vices, such as eating murdered infants (due to the secrecy surrounding the Lord’s Supper and the use of the words body and blood) and sexual promiscuity (due to the practice of Christians calling each other “brother” or “sister” while living as husband and wife).

Early persecutions were sporadic, caused by local conditions and dependent on the attitude of the governor. The fundamental cause of persecution was the Christians’ conscientious rejection of the gods whose favour was believed to have brought success to the empire. But distrust was increased by Christian detachment and reluctance to serve in the imperial service and in the army. At any time in the 2nd or 3rd centuries, Christians could find themselves the object of unpleasant attention. Violence against them could be precipitated by a bad harvest, a barbarian attack, or a public festival of the emperor cult. Yet, there were also long periods of peace, and the stability provided by the empire and its network of roads and communications may have facilitated Christianity’s growth. The ambivalence of official policy is perhaps best revealed in the exchange between Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia, and the emperor Trajan in 111. Pliny executed Christians who were brought before him and who refused to worship the emperor and Roman gods but then sought the emperor’s advice on how to treat Christians in his province. Trajan responded that Christians legitimately brought before Pliny should be punished but that the governor should not seek out Christians for persecution. The Christians should be left alone as long as they did not stir up trouble.

Organized, empire-wide persecutions occurred, however, at moments of extreme crisis and as a response to the growth of the faith. During the 3rd century, economic collapse, political chaos, military revolt, and barbarian invasion nearly destroyed the empire. Christians were blamed for the desperate situation because they denied the gods who were thought to protect Rome, thereby bringing down their wrath. To regain divine protection, the emperors introduced the systematic persecution of Christians throughout the empire. The emperor Decius (reigned 249–251) issued an edict requiring all citizens to offer sacrifice to the emperor and to obtain from commissioners a certificate witnessing to the act. Many of these certificates have survived. The requirement created an issue of conscience, especially because certificates could be bought.
The great bishop-theologian Cyprian of Carthage was martyred during the next great wave of persecutions (257–259), which were aimed at eradicating the leaders of the church. The persecuting emperor Valerian, however, became a Persian prisoner of war, and his son Gallienus issued an edict of toleration restoring confiscated churches and cemeteries.

Beginning in February 303, the church faced the worst of all persecutions under the co-emperors Diocletian and Galerius. The reasons for this persecution are uncertain, but they have been ascribed, among other things, to the influence of Galerius, a fanatic follower of the traditional Roman religion; Diocletian's own devotion to traditional religion and his desire to use Roman religion to restore complete unity in the empire; and the fear of an alienation of rebellious armies from emperor worship. After Diocletian's retirement, Galerius continued the persecutions until 311, when he was stricken by a painful disease, described in exquisite detail by the church historian Eusebius, who believed it was an act of revenge by the Christian God. Galerius died shortly after ending the persecutions. The situation of the early church improved further the following year, when the emperor Constantine, prior to a battle against a rival emperor, experienced a vision of the cross in the heavens with the legend “In this sign, conquer.” Constantine’s victory led to his eventual conversion to Christianity. In 313, the joint emperors Constantine and Licinius issued the Edict of Milan, a manifesto of toleration, which, among other things, granted Christians full legal rights.

The persecutions had two lasting consequences. Although the blood of the martyrs, as contemporaries declared, had helped the church to grow, schism eventually arose with those who had yielded to imperial pressure. Groups such as the Donatists in North Africa, for example, refused to recognize as Christians those who had sacrificed to the emperor or turned over holy books during the persecutions.

Christianity and classical culture

The attitude of the earliest Christians toward paganism and the imperial government was complicated by their close association with Greco-Roman literary and artistic culture: it was difficult to attack the former without seeming to criticize the latter. Nevertheless, the Christian opinion of other religions (except Judaism) was generally very negative. All forms of paganism—the Oriental mystery (salutational) religions of Isis, Attis, Adonis, and Mithra, as well as the traditional Greco-Roman polytheisms and the cult of the emperor—were regarded as the worship of evil spirits. Like the Jews, the Christians (unless Gnostic) were opposed to syncretism. With the exception of the notion of baptism as a rebirth, Christians generally and significantly avoided the characteristic vocabularies of the mystery religions.

Many Christians also rejected the literary traditions of the classical world, denouncing the immoral and unethical behaviour of the deities and heroes of ancient myth and literature. Reflecting this position, Tertullian once asked, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Despite this hostility, many Christians recognized the value of ancient letters. St. Paul could quote such pagan poets as Aratus, Menander, and Epimenides. Clement of Rome cited the dramatists Sophocles and Euripides. Educated Christians shared this literary tradition with educated pagans. The defenders of Christianity against pagan attack (especially Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria in the 2nd century) welcomed classical philosophy and literature; they wished only to reject all polytheistic myth and cult and all metaphysical and ethical doctrines irreconcilable with Christian belief (e.g., Stoic materialism and Platonic doctrines of the transmigration of souls and the eternity of the world). Clement of Alexandria, the second known head of the catechetical school at Alexandria, possessed a wide erudition in the main classics and knew the works of Plato and Homer intimately. His successor at Alexandria, Origen, showed less interest in literary and aesthetic matters but was a greater scholar and thinker; he first applied the methods of Alexandrian philology to the text of the Bible. Augustine held that although classical literature contained superstitious imaginings, it included references to moral truths and learning that could be used in the service of God. The great church father compared classical literature to the gold of the Egyptians, which God permitted the Hebrews to use on their journey to the Promised Land even though it had once been used in pagan religious practice.

The Apologists

The Christian Apologists of the 2nd century were a group of writers who sought to defend the faith against Jewish and Greco-Roman critics. They refuted a variety of scandalous rumours, including allegations of cannibalism and promiscuity. By and large, they sought both to make Christianity intelligible to members of Greco-Roman culture: it was difficult to attack the former without seeming to criticize the latter. Nevertheless, the Christian opinion of other religions (except Judaism) was generally very negative. All forms of paganism—the Oriental mystery (salutational) religions of Isis, Attis, Adonis, and Mithra, as well as the traditional Greco-Roman polytheisms and the cult of the emperor—were regarded as the worship of evil spirits. Like the Jews, the Christians (unless Gnostic) were opposed to syncretism. With the exception of the notion of baptism as a rebirth, Christians generally and significantly avoided the characteristic vocabularies of the mystery religions.

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The early liturgy, the calendar, and the arts

Paul’s letters mention worship on the first day of the week. In John’s Apocalypse, Sunday is called “the Lord’s day.” The weekly commemoration of the Resurrection replaced for Christians the synagogue meetings on Saturdays; the practice of circumcision was dropped, and initiation was by baptism; and continuing membership in the church was signified by weekly participation in the Eucharist. Baptism in water in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was preceded by instruction (catechesis) and fasting. Persons about to be baptized renounced evil and, as they made the declaration of faith, were dipped in water; they then received by anointing and by the laying on of hands (confirmation) the gift of the Holy Spirit and incorporation within the body of Christ. Only the baptized were allowed to be admitted to the Eucharist, when the words of Jesus at the Last Supper were recalled; the Holy Spirit was invoked upon the people of God making the offering, and the consecrated bread and wine were distributed to the faithful. Accounts of these rites are given in the works of Justin (c. 150) and especially in the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus of Rome (c. 220).

Before the 4th century, worship was in private houses. A house church of ad 232 has been excavated at Doura-Europus on the Euphrates. Whereas pagan temples were intended as the residence of the god, churches were designed for the community. The rectangular basilica with an apse (semicircular projection to house the altar), which had been used for Roman judicial buildings, was found especially suitable. The Doura-Europus church has Gospel scenes on the walls. But many Old Testament heroes also appear in the earliest Christian art; Jewish models probably were followed. The artists also adapted conventional pagan forms (good shepherd; praying persons with hands uplifted). Fishing scenes, doves, and lyres also were popular. In themselves neutral, they carried special meaning to the Christians. The words of several pre-Constantinian hymns survive (e.g., “Shepherd of tender youth,” by Clement of Alexandria), but only one with musical notation (Oxyrhynchus papyrus 1786 of the 3rd century).

The earliest Christians wrote to convert or to edify, not to please. Their literature was not produced with aesthetic intentions. Nevertheless, the pulpit offered scope for oratory (as in Melito of Sardis’s Homily on the Pascha, c. 170). Desire for romance and adventure was satisfied by apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, recounting their travels, with continence replacing love. Justin and Irenaeus did not write for high style but simply to convey information. Apologists hoping for well-educated readers, however, could not be indifferent to literary tastes. By ad 200 the most graceful living writer of Greek literature was Clement of Alexandria, the liveliest writer of Latin, Tertullian. Wholly different in temperament (Clement urbane and allusive, Tertullian vigorous and vulgar), both men wrote distinguished prose with regard to form and rhetorical convention.
By the 3rd century the Bible needed explanation. Origen of Alexandria set out to provide commentaries and undertook for the Old Testament a collation of the various Greek versions with the original Hebrew. Many of his sermons and commentaries were translated into Latin between 385 and 400 by Tyrannius Rufinus and Jerome; their learning and passionate mystical aspiration shaped Western medieval exegesis (critical interpretive methods).

The alliance between church and empire

Constantine the Great, declared emperor at York, Britain (306), converted to Christianity, convened the Council of Arles (314), became sole emperor (324), virtually presided over the ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325), founded the city of Constantinople (330), and died in 337. In the 4th century he was regarded as the great revolutionary, especially in religion. He did not make Christianity the religion of the empire, but he granted important concessions to the church and its bishops, and his conversion encouraged other Roman citizens to become Christian. His foundation of Constantinople (conceived to be the new Rome) as a Christian city untainted by pagan religion profoundly affected the future political and ecclesiastical structure of the empire and the church. Relations with old Rome, whether in matters of church or of state, were not to be cordial.

Constantine completely altered the relationship between the church and the imperial government, thereby beginning a process that eventually made Christianity the official religion of the empire. Many new converts were won, including those who converted only with the hope of advancing their careers. The church was also faced by a new form of governmental interference when Constantine presided at the Council of Nicaea, which addressed the Arian controversy (a debate between Arius and Athanasius and their followers over the nature of the Son of God); the council provided the definition of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son that is still accepted by most Christians today. Although Nicaea spoke against Arianism, which maintained that the Son is a created being and not equal to God the Father, Constantine in later life leaned toward it, and his successor, Constantius II, was openly Arian. Despite this turmoil, and the outright hostility toward Christianity of the emperor Julian the Apostate (reigned 361–363), the church survived, and the adherents of the traditional Roman religion relapsed into passive resistance. The quietly mounting pressure against paganism in the 4th century culminated in the decrees of Emperor Theodosius I (reigned 379–395), who made Catholic Christianity the official religion of the empire and who closed many pagan temples. By the end of the 4th century, therefore, Christianity had been transformed from a persecuted sect to the dominant faith of the empire, in the process becoming intertwined with the imperial government.

The link between church and state was expressed in the civil dignity and insignia granted to bishops, who also began to be entrusted with ambassadorial roles. Constantine himself appointed bishops, and he and his successors convened councils of bishops to address important matters of the faith. By 400 the patriarch of Constantinople (to his avowed embarrassment) enjoyed precedence at court before all civil officials. The emperors issued a number of rulings that afforded greater privilege and responsibility to the bishops, enhancing their position in both church and society. The close relations between the empire and the church in the 4th century were reflected in the writings of Ambrose (bishop of Milan, 374–397), who used “Roman” and “Christian” almost as synonyms. After Theodosius ordered the massacre of the citizens of Thessalonica, however, Ambrose demanded that the emperor undergo penance, thereby enforcing upon Theodosius submission to the church as its son, not its master.

A new movement took shape in the late 3rd and 4th centuries that was a response to both the tragedy of the final persecutions and to the triumph of Constantine’s conversion. Monasticism began in the Egyptian desert in the 3rd century in response to contemporary social conditions, but it had scriptural roots and reflected the attraction of the ascetic life that has been part of the Christian and philosophial traditions. The first of the Christian monks was St. Anthony (251–356), Communal, or cenobitic, monasticism was first organized by St. Pachomius (c. 290–346), who also composed the first monastic rule. Basil, bishop of Caesarea Cappadociae (370–379), rejected the hermetic ideal, insisting on communities with a rule safeguarding the bishop’s authority and with concrete acts of service to perform (e.g., hospital work and teaching).

Monasticism quickly spread to the West, where it was decisively shaped by John Cassian of Marseille (c. 360–435) and Benedict of Nursia (c. 480–c. 547), recognized as the father of Western monasticism. Benedict’s Rule, which eventually became predominant, was noted for its humanity and its balance of prayer and work. Because the manual work of monks often consisted of the copying of manuscripts, the monasteries became a great centre of cultural life for centuries. Benedict’s contemporary Cassiodorus (c. 490–c. 585) had the works of classical authors copied (e.g., Cicero and Quintilian) as well as Bibles and the works of the early Church Fathers.

The church was significantly slow to undertake missionary work beyond the frontiers of the empire. The Goth Ulfilas converted the Goths to Arian Christianity (c. 340–350) and translated the Bible from Greek to Gothic—omitting, as unsuitable, warlike passages of the Old Testament. The Goths passed their Arian faith on to other Germanic tribes, such as the Vandals. (Sometime between 496 and 508 the Franks, under their great king Clovis, became the first of the Germanic peoples to convert to Catholic Christianity; they were soon followed by the Visigoths.) In the 5th century the Western provinces were overrun by Goths, Vandals, and Huns, and the imperial succession was ended when a German leader, Odoacer, decided to rule without an emperor (476). The position of the papacy was enhanced by the decline of state power, and this prepared the way for the popes’ temporal sovereignty over parts of Italy (which they retained from the 7th to the 19th century).

Theological controversies of the 4th and 5th centuries

Western controversies

Until about 250, most Western Christian leaders (e.g., Irenaeus and Hippolytus) spoke Greek, not Latin. The main Latin theology came primarily from such figures as Tertullian and Cyprian (bishops of Carthage, 248–258) rather than from any figure in Rome. Tertullian wrote Against Praxaeus, in which he discussed the doctrines of the Trinity and the person of Christ. But in 251 Novatian’s schism at Rome diverted interest away from speculative theology to juridical questions about the membership of the church and the validity of sacraments. Differences of opinion over similar issues in the 4th century led to a schism between Rome and the churches of North Africa. The Donatist controversy, which raised questions about the validity of the sacraments, dominated all North African church life. Cyprian and the Donatists said that the validity of the sacraments depended on the worthiness of the minister; Rome and North African Christians in communion with Rome said that it did not, because the sacraments received their validity from Christ, not man. Much of the great theologian Augustine’s energies as bishop of Hippo (from 396 to 430) went into trying to settle the Donatist issue, in which he finally despairs of rational argument and reluctantly came to justify the use of limited coercion.

The other major controversy of the Western Church was a more confused issue, namely, whether faith is acquired through divine grace or human freedom. In response to his perception of the teachings of the British monk Pelagius, Augustine ascribed all credit to God. Pelagius, however, protested that Augustine was destroying human responsibility and denying the capacity of humans to do what God commands. Augustine, in turn, responded in a series of treatises against Pelagius and his disciple Julian of Eclanum. Pelagianism was later condemned at the Councils of Carthage (416), Milevis (416), and Ephesus (431) and by two bishops of Rome, Innocent I in 416 and Honorius I in 418.

Eastern controversies

In the Greek East, the 4th century was dominated by the controversy over the position of Arius, an Alexandrian presbyter (c. 250–336), that the incarnate Lord—who was born, wept, suffered, and died—could not be one with the transcendent first cause of creation—who is beyond all suffering. The Council of Nicaea (325) condemned
Arianism and affirmed the Son of God to be identical in essence with the Father. Because this formula included no safeguard against Monarchianism, a long controversy followed, especially after Constantine’s death (337). Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria (reigned 328–373), fought zealously against Arianism in the East and owed much to Rome’s support, which only added to the tensions between East and West. These tensions survived the settlement of the Arian dispute in 381, when the Council of Constantinople (381) proclaimed Catholic Christianity the official religion of the empire, thus eliminating Arianism in the East, but also asserted Constantinople, as the new Rome, to be the second see of Christendom. This assertion was unwelcome to Alexandria, traditionally the second city of the empire, and to Rome, because it implied that the dignity of a bishop depended on the secular standing of his city. Rivalry between Alexandria and Constantinople led to the fall of John Chrysostom, patriarch of Constantinople (reigned 398–404), when he appeared to support Egyptian monks who admired the controversial theology of Origen. It became a major feature of the emerging Christological debate (the controversy over the nature of Christ).

The Christological controversy stemmed from the rival doctrines of Apollinaris of Laodicea (flourished 360–380) and Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350–428), representatives of the rival schools of Alexandria and Antioch, respectively. At the Council of Ephesus (431), led by Cyril, patriarch of Alexandria (reigned 412–444), an extreme Antiochene Christology—taught by Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople—was condemned for condemning that the man Jesus is an independent person beside the divine Word and that therefore Mary, the mother of Jesus, may not properly be called mother of God (Greek theotokos, or “God-bearer”). Cyril’s formula was “one nature of the Word incarnate.” A reaction led by Pope Leo I (reigned 440–461) against this one-nature (Monophysite) doctrine culminated in the Council of Chalcedon (451), which affirmed Christ to be two natures in one person (hypothesis). Thus, the Council of Chalcedon alienated Monophysite believers in Egypt and Syria.

During the next 250 years the Byzantine emperors and patriarchs desperately sought to reconcile the Monophysites. Three successive attempts failed: (1) under the emperor Zeno (482) the Henotikon (union formula) offended Rome by suggesting that Monophysite criticism of Chalcedon might be justified; (2) under the emperor Justinian the Chalcedonian definition was glossed by condemning the “Three Chapters,” which includes the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret, and Ibas, all strong critics of Cyril of Alexandria’s theology and of Monophysism; the Syrian Monophysite Jacob Baradacenus reacted to this by creating a rival Monophysite episcopate and permanent schism; (3) under the emperor Heraclius (reigned 610–641) the Chalcedonians invited the Monophysites to reunite under the formula that Christ had two natures but only one will (Monothelitism), but this reconciled almost no Monophysites and created divisions among the Chalcedonians themselves. Chalcedon’s “two natures” continues to be rejected by the Armenian Apostolic Church, Coptic Orthodox Church, Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch (Syrian Jacobites).

### Liturgy and the arts after Constantine

#### New forms of worship

Along with these developments in higher theology, various forms of religious devotion emerged. One of the more important was the “cult of the saints,” the public veneration of saints and its related shrines and rituals. Shrines were erected in honour of local holy men and women and those who had suffered for the faith. The saints were recognized as the special representatives of God and were thought to be vehicles for his miraculous power. The shrines became the focus of religious pilgrimage, and the relics of the saints were highly valued.

The veneration of martyrs and the growth of pilgrimages stimulated liturgical elaboration. Great centres (Jerusalem and Rome, in particular) became models for others, which encouraged regional standardization and cross-fertilization. Though the pattern of the eucharistic liturgy was settled by the 4th century, there were many variant forms, especially of the central prayer called by the Greeks anaphora (“offering”) and by the Latins canon (“prescribed form”). Liturgical prayers of Basil of Caesarea became widely influential in the East. Later, liturgies were ascribed to local saints: Jerusalem’s to St. James, Alexandria’s to St. Mark, and Constantinople’s to John Chrysostom. The spirit of Greek liturgies encouraged rich and imaginative prose. Latin style was restrained, with epigrammatic antitheses; and the Roman Church changed from Greek to Latin about ad 370. The Canon of the Latin mass as used in the 6th century was already close to the form it has since retained.

Music also became elaborate, with antiphonal psalm chanting. Some reaction came from those who believed that the music was obscuring the words. Both Athanasius of Alexandria and Augustine defended music on the condition that the sense of the words remained primary in importance. The Latin theologians Ambrose of Milan, Prudentius, and Venantius Fortunatus provided Latin hymns of distinction. The ascription of the Roman chants (Gregorian) to Pope Gregory I the Great was first made in the 9th century. In the Greek East in the time of Justinian, Romanos Melodos created the kontakion, a long poetic homily.

The development of church architecture was stimulated by Constantine’s great buildings at Jerusalem and Rome, and his example as a church-builder was emulated by his successors, most notably by Justinian in the 6th century. The exteriors of these churches remained simple, but inside they were richly ornamented with marble and mosaic, the decoration being arranged on a coherent plan to represent the angels and saints in heaven with whom the church on earth was joining for worship. An enormous number of churches built in and after the 4th century have been excavated. The outstanding buildings that survive largely intact, Hagia Sophia at Constantinople (now Istanbul) and San Vitale at Ravenna in Italy, belong to the age of Justinian.

The veneration of saints led to the production of a specific category of literature known as hagiography, which told the story of a saint’s life. Hagiography was not a biography in the modern sense but was a work of religious devotion that portrayed the saint as a model of Christian virtue. If available, authentic tradition would be used, but hagiographers also drew from a stock of conventional tales about earlier saints that were generally intended to convey a moral lesson. Saints’ lives also contained accounts of the miracles performed by the saints in their lifetimes and at their shrines after their deaths. The lives of saints belong to the poetry of the Middle Ages but are important to the historian as documents of social and religious history.

#### Historical and polemical writing

The first church historian was Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in the 4th century, who collected records up to the reign of Constantine. He wrote four historical works, including a life of Constantine and the Ecclesiastical History, his most important contribution. His history was translated and continued in Latin by Tyrannius Rufinus of Aquileia. The history of the church from Constantine to about 430 was edited by three Greek historians: Socrates Scholasticus, Sozomen, and Theodoret (whose works were adapted for the Latin world by Cassiodorus). Ecclesiastical history from 431 to 594 was chronicled by Evagrius Scholasticus. The consequences of Chalcedon as interpreted by Monophysite historians were recorded by Timothy Aelurus, Zacharias Scholasticus, and John of Nikiu.

The monastic movement produced its own special literature, especially the classic Life of St. Antony by Athanasius, the collections of sayings of the Desert Fathers, John Climacus’s Heavenly Ladder, and John Moschus’s Spiritual Meadow. Along with these works, monastic rules—most notably the Rule of the Master (an anonymous monastic rule that influenced Benedict of Nursia), the rules of Basil, and the Rule of Benedict—are unique contributions to the tradition of Christian literature that offer insight into religious beliefs and practices.

The Arian and Christological controversies produced important polemical writers—Athanasius, the three Cappadocian Fathers (Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa), Cyril of Alexandria, and Theodoret. After 500, Monophysite theology had eminent figures—Severus of Antioch and the Alexandrian grammarian John...
Philoponus, who was also a commentator on Aristotle. But much theology was non-polemical—e.g., catechesis and biblical commentaries. In the 6th century, “chains”
catenae) began to be produced in which the reader was given a summary of the exegesis of a succession of commentators on each verse.

In the West, Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose of Milan, and, above all, the incomparable scholar Jerome (translator of the standard Latin Bible, or Vulgate) gave Latin theology
confidence. The greatest of the ancient Western theologians, and one of the most important in all of Christian history, was Augustine. Author of sermons, letters, polemical
texts, and other works, he adapted Platonic thought to Christian ideas and created a theological system of lasting power. His most influential works include Confessions,
an autobiography and confession of faith, and his The City of God, a monumental work of apology, theology, and Christian philosophy of history. Finally, in the 6th
century, Gregory I built upon the legacy of Augustine and the other 4th-century fathers. Gregory’s works of moral theology, pastoral care, and hagiography greatly
influenced medieval spirituality.

**Political relations between East and West**

The old tensions between East and West were sharpened by the quarrels about Chalcedon. In Rome every concession made by Constantinople toward the Monophysites
increased the distrust. Justinian’s condemnation of the Three Chapters (Fifth Council, Constantinople, 553) was forced on a reluctant West, parts of which had been
brought back under imperial control by Justinian’s conquests. From the time of Pope Gregory I the papacy—encouraged by the successful mission to the Anglo-Saxons—
was looking as much to the Western kingdoms as to Byzantium.

The growing division between East and West was reinforced by developments outside the church itself. In the 7th century the Eastern Empire fought for its life, first
against the Persians and then the Arabs, and the Balkans were occupied by the Slavs. The rise of Islam had an especially profound impact on the church and East-West
relations. The Arab military conquest broke upon the Byzantine Empire in 634, just as it was exhausted after defeating Persia. The will to resist was wholly absent.
Moreover, the provinces initially overrun, Syria (636) and Egypt (641), were already alienated from the Byzantine government that was persecuting Monophysites in those
areas. In 678 and again in 718, the Arabs were at the walls of Constantinople. The Monophysite Copts in Egypt and Syrian Jacobites (followers of Jacob Baradaeus) soon
found that they enjoyed greater toleration under Muslim Arabs than under Chalcedonian Byzantines. Christian territory from the Holy Land to Spain was conquered by the
forces of Islam, and many of the inhabitants of this region eventually converted to the new faith.

The subemergence of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem under Muslim rule left the patriarch of Constantinople with enhanced authority, which altered the internal
dynamic of the Christian community. The attempts of the Byzantine emperors to force the papacy to accept the Monothelite (one-will) compromise produced a martyr
pope, Martin (reigned 649–655); the story of his tortures did nothing to make Rome love the Byzantines. When the Monothelite heresy was finally rejected at the Sixth
Council (Constantinople, 680–681), the imprudent pope Honorius (reigned 625–638), who had supported Monothelitism, was expressly condemned, which distressed
Roman defenders of papal prerogatives. Greek hostility to the West became explicit in the canons of a council held at Constantinople (Quinisext, 692) that claimed to have
eccumenical status but was not recognized in Rome.

The divisions between East and West were heightened by developments in both the Latin and the Greek churches. In 726, the emperor Leo III the Isaurian, after his
successful defense against the Islamic advance, introduced a policy of iconoclasm (destruction of images) to the Byzantine church that was continued and expanded by his
son Constantine V. For much of the rest of the century, the empire was absorbed in the Iconoclastic Controversy, which became a struggle not only to keep icons,
a traditional focus of religious veneration, but also to combat the subjection of the church to the will of the emperor. The greatest champion of icons was John of Damascus,
an Arab monk in Muslim Palestine, who was the author of an encyclopaedic compendium of logic and theology. Within the empire, Theodore Studites, abbot of the
Studium (monastery) near Constantinople, vigorously attacked iconoclasm; he also led a revival of monasticism and stressed the importance of copying manuscripts. His
ideas passed to the monastic houses that began to appear on Mount Athos from 963 onward.

The imperial attack on images was severely criticized in the West. Yet, after the Greek iconoclasts were condemned at the Seventh Ecumenical Council (Nicaea, 787), the
bishops of the Frankish king Charlemagne, who were not invited to Nicaea and learned of its decrees from a faulty translation, censured the decision at the synod of
Frankfurt in Germany (794). Icons were differently evaluated in the Western churches, where holy pictures were viewed as devotional aids, not—as was the case in the
East—virtually sacramental media of salvation. The bishops of the Frankish church also added to the creed the Filioque (Latin: “and from the Son”) clause, which stated
that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son. The insertion was originally rejected at Rome and Constantinople; it would, however, be adopted at Rome by the
11th century.

The hostility between the iconoclast emperors and the popes encouraged the 8th-century popes to seek a protector. This was provided by the rise of Charles Martel (mayor of
the palace 715–741) and the Carolingian Franks. The Frankish kings guarded Western Church interests, and the papal–Frankish alliance reached its climax in the papal
conquest of Constantinople as the first emperor at Rome on Christmas Day, 800—laying the foundation for the Holy Roman Empire, which lasted until 1806.
Charlemagne exercised immense authority over the Western Church, and the revival of church life produced controversies about predestination (Gottschalk, John Scotus
Erigena, Hincmar of Reims) and the Eucharist (Paschasius Radbertus, Ratramnus, Rabanus Maurus). The Christological controversy was revived over the Adoptionist
teachings of Felix of Urgel and Eilipandus of Toledo, a dispute as to whether Christ was adopted to be Son of God.

Although Carolingian fortunes waned later in the 9th century, the Carolingians continued to assert their right to protect the church and papacy. In the 10th century,
however, the Ottonian dynasty in Germany established a new imperial line and became the preeminent power in Latin Europe. The Ottos, accustomed to the tradition in
which great landowners built and owned the churches on their estates as private property, treated Rome and all important sees in this spirit. Bishops were appointed on
royal nomination and forbidden to appeal to Rome.

**Literature and art of the “Dark Ages”**

The Monothelite and iconoclastic controversies produced herculean theological endeavours: the criticism of Monothelitism by the monk Maximus the Confessor
(580–662) was based upon subtle and very careful considerations of the implications of Chalcedon. The great opponents of iconoclasm, John of Damascus and Theodore
Studites, also composed hymns and other theological treatises. Greek mystical theology had an outstanding representative in Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022),
who was also a commentator on Aristotle. But much theology was non-polemical—e.g., catechesis and biblical commentaries. In the 6th century, “chains”
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catenae) began to be produced in which the reader was given a summary of the exegesis of a succession of commentators on each verse.

Iconoclasm was not an anti-intellectual, anti-art movement. The iconoclasts everywhere replaced figures with the cross or with exquisite patterns. The ending of
iconoclasm in 843 (the restoration of orthodoxy), however, liberated the artists adept in mosaic and fresco to portray figures once again, spurring a new revival of
decoration. Music also became more elaborate; the kontakion was replaced by the kanon, a cycle of nine odes, each of six to nine stanzas and with a different melody. The
kanon gave more scope to the musicians by providing greater variety. Byzantine hymns were classified according to their mode, and the mode changed each week.
Besides John of Damascus and Theodore Studites, the great hymn writers of this period were Cosmas of Jerusalem and Joseph of Studium.

The so-called Dark Ages in the West produced virtually no sculpture or painting—with the notable exception of illuminated manuscripts, of which marvelous specimens
were made (e.g., the Book of Kells and the Lindisfarne Gospels). The Irish and Anglo-Saxon monks did not construct noble buildings but knew how to write and to illustrate a book. In the age of Charlemagne exquisite calligraphy was continued (e.g., the Utrecht Psalter), as was the composition of illuminated manuscripts (e.g. the Coronation Gospels and the Codex aureus). Manuscripts during the Carolingian period were often bound with covers of intricate ivory and metalwork of superb finesse. Great buildings, notably the palace complex at Aachen, also began to emerge, partly based on Byzantine models, such as the churches at Ravenna. The Ottonian renaissance in Germany encouraged even more confidently the erection of church buildings, producing such masterpieces as the surviving cathedrals at Hildesheim and Spires and setting out a characteristically German style of architecture; it also continued the Carolingian tradition of manuscript illumination.

The barbarian kingdoms soon produced their own Christian literature: Gregory of Tours wrote the history of the Franks, Isidore of Sevilla that of the Visigoths, and Cassiodorus that of the Ostrogoths. Isidore, utilizing his vast reading, compiled encyclopaedias on everything from liturgical ceremonies to the natural sciences. The outstanding figure of this incipient “nationalist” movement was the English monk Bede, whose Ecclesiastical History of the English People was completed in 731 and whose exegetical works came to stand beside Augustine and Gregory I as indispensable for the medieval student. Carolingian authors compiled a broad range of literary works, including sermons, biblical commentaries, works on the liturgy and canon law, and theological treatises on the Eucharist, predestination, and other topics.

**Missions and monasticism**

The Arian barbarians soon became Catholics, including, by 700, even the Lombards in northern Italy. There remained immense areas of Europe, however, to which the Gospel had not yet been brought. Gregory I evangelized the Anglo-Saxons, who in turn sent missionaries to northwestern Europe—Willfrid and Willibrord to what is now The Netherlands, and Boniface to Hesse, Thuringia, and Bavaria. In consequence of Boniface’s work in Germany in the 8th century, a mission to Scandinavia was initiated by Ansgar (801–865), and the mission reached Iceland by 996. In the 10th century the mission from Germany moved eastward to Bohemia, to the Magyars, and (from 966) to the Poles. By 1050 most of Europe was under Christian influence with the exception of Muslim Spain.

In the Byzantine sphere, early missions went to the Hunnish tribesmen north of the Caucasus. The Nestorians, entrenched in Persia, carried the Gospel to the Turkmen and across Central Asia to China. In the 9th century the mission to the Slavs began with the work of Cyril and Methodius, who created a Slavonic alphabet and translated the Bible into the Slavonic language. Although their labours in Moravia were undermined by Frankish clergy, it was their achievement that made possible the faith and medieval culture of both Russia and Serbia.

The Benedictine Rule—initiated by Benedict of Nursia—succeeded in the West because of its simplicity and restraint; more formidable alternatives were available in the 6th century. By 800, abbeys existed throughout western Europe, and the observance of Benedict’s Rule was fostered by Charlemagne and, especially, his son Louis the Pious. These houses, such as Bede’s monastery at Jarrow (England) or the foundations of Columban (c. 543–615) at Luxeuil (France) and Bobbio (Italy), which followed Columban’s Rule and not Benedict’s, became centres of study and made possible the Carolingian renaissance of learning. In this renaissance the 8th-century English scholar Alcuin, an heir to the tradition of Bede, and his monastery at Tours occupy the chief place. Around monasteries and cathedrals, schools were created to teach acceptable Latin, to write careful manuscripts, and to study not only the Bible and writings of the Church Fathers but also science. Scribes developed the beautiful script that was known as Carolingian minuscule. Although the Carolingian renaissance was short-lived, it laid the foundation for later cultural and intellectual growth.

Monasticism in 9th-century Byzantium was centred upon the Studites, who came to be a faction against the court. A remoter and otherworldly asceticism developed with the foundation of monasteries on Mount Athos (Greece) from 963 onward. A distinctive feature of Athonite monasticism was that nothing female was to be allowed on the peninsula.

**The Photian schism and the great East–West schism**

**The Photian schism**

The end of iconoclasm (843) left a legacy of faction. Ignatius, patriarch of Constantinople intermittently from 847 to 877, was exiled by the government in 858 and replaced by Photius, a scholarly layman who was head of the imperial chancery—he was elected patriarch and ordained within six days. Ignatius’ supporters dissuaded Pope Nicholas I (reigned 858–867) from recognizing Photius. Nicholas was angered by Byzantine missions among the Bulgars, whom he regarded as belonging to his sphere. When Nicholas wrote to the Bulgars attacking Greek practices, Photius replied by accusing the West of heretically altering the creed in saying that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and from the Son (Filioque). He declared Pope Nicholas deposed (867), but his position was not strong enough for such imprudence.

A new emperor, Basil the Macedonian, reinstated Ignatius; and in 869 Nicholas’ successor, Adrian II (reigned 867–872), condemned Photius and sent legates to Constantinople to extinct submission to papal jurisdiction from the Greeks. The Greeks resented the papal demands, and when Ignatius died in 877 Photius quietly became patriarch again. Rome (at that moment needing Byzantine military support against Muslims in Sicily and southern Italy) reluctantly agreed to recognize Photius, but on the condition of an apology and of the withdrawal of Greek missions to the Bulgars. Photius acknowledged Rome as the first see of Christendom, discreetly said nothing explicitly against the Filioque clause, and agreed to the provision that the Bulgars could be put under Roman jurisdiction providing that Greek missions were allowed to continue.

The main issue in the Photian schism was whether Rome possessed monarchical power of jurisdiction over all churches (as Nicholas and Adrian held), or whether Rome was the senior of five semi-independent patriarchates (as Photius and the Greeks thought) and therefore could not canonically interfere with the internal affairs of another patriarchate.

**The great East-West schism**

The mutual distrust shown in the time of Photius erupted again in the middle of the 11th century after papal enforcement of Latin customs upon Greeks in southern Italy. The patriarch of Constantinople, Michael Cerularius, closed Latin churches in Constantinople as a reprisal. Cardinal Humbert came from Italy to protest, was accorded an icy reception, and left a bull of excommunication (July 16, 1054) on the altar of the great church of Hagia Sophia. The bull anathematized (condemned) Michael Cerularius, the Greek doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the marriage of Greek priests, and the Greek use of leavened bread for the Eucharist.

At the time, the breach was treated as a minor storm in which both sides had behaved with some arrogance. As Greeks and Latins became more estranged, however, people looked back on the events of 1054 as the moment of the final breach between East and West. (Not until December 7, 1965, were the mutual excommunications of 1054 abolished, by Pope Paul VI and the ecumenical patriarch Athenagoras I.)

Henry Chadwick

**From the schism to the Reformation**
A major factor in the consolidation and expansion of Christianity in the West was the growth in the prestige and power of the bishop of Rome. Pope Leo I the Great made the primacy of the Roman bishop explicit both in theory and in practice and must be counted as one of the most important figures in the history of the centralization of authority in the church. The next such figure was Gregory I the Great, whose work shaped the worship, the thought, and the structure of the church as well as its temporal wealth and power. Although some of Gregory’s successors advocated papal primacy, it was the popes of the 11th century and thereafter who sought to exploit claims of papal authority over the church hierarchy and over all Christians.

Even while still a part of the universal church, Byzantine Christianity became increasingly isolated from the West by difference of language, culture, politics, and religion and followed its own course in shaping its identity. The Eastern churches never had so centralized a polity as did the church in the West but developed the principle of the administrative independence or “autocephaly” of each national church. During the centuries when Western culture was striving to domesticate the German tribes, Constantinople, probably the most civilized city in Christendom, blended classical and Christian elements with a refinement that expressed itself in philosophy, the arts, statcraft, jurisprudence, and scholarship. A thinker such as Michael Psellus in the 11th century, who worked in several of these fields, epitomizes this synthesis. It was from Byzantine rather than from Roman missionaries that Christianity came to most of the Slavic tribes, including some who eventually sided with Rome rather than Constantinople; Byzantium was also the victim of Muslim aggressions throughout the period known in the West as the Middle Ages. Following the pattern established by the emperors Constantine and Justinian, the relation between church and state in the Byzantine empire coordinated the two in such a way as to sometimes subject the life and even the teaching of the church to the decisions of the temporal ruler—the phenomenon often, though imprecisely, termed caesaropapism.

All these differences between the Eastern and Western parts of the church, both the religious differences and those that were largely cultural or political, came together to cause the schism between the two. The break in 1054 was followed by further evidences of alienation—in the 13th century, in the sack of Constantinople by Western Christians in 1204 and the establishment of the Latin patriarchate there; and in the 15th century, after the failure of the union of Florence and after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453.

Papacy and empire

Conflict with the East was both a cause and an effect of the distinctive development of Western Christianity during the Middle Ages. If popes Leo I and Gregory I may be styled the architects of the medieval papacy, popes Gregory VII (reigned 1073–85) and Innocent III (reigned 1198–1216) should be called its master builders. Gregory VII reformed both the church and the papacy from within, establishing the canonical and moral authority of the papal office when it was threatened by corruption and attack; in the pontificate of Innocent III the papal claims to universality reached their zenith at all levels of the life of the church. Significantly, both these popes were obliged to defend the papacy against the Holy Roman emperor and other temporal rulers. The battle between the church and the empire is a persistent theme in the history of medieval Christianity. Both the involvement of the church in secular affairs and the participation of temporal rulers in the Crusades can be read as variations on this theme. Preoccupied as they usually are with the history of the church as an institution and with the life and thought of the leaders of the church, the documentary sources of knowledge about medieval Christianity make it difficult for the social historian to discern “the religion of the common man” during this period. Both the “age of faith” depicted by neo-Gothic Romanticism and the “Dark Ages” depicted by secularist and Protestant polemics are gross oversimplifications of history. Faith there was during the Middle Ages, and intellectual darkness and superstition too; but only that historical judgment of medieval Christianity is valid that discerns how subtly faith and superstition can be blended in human piety and thought.

Medieval thought

No product of medieval Christianity has been more influential in the centuries since the Middle Ages than medieval thought, particularly the philosophy and theology of Scholasticism, whose outstanding exponent was Thomas Aquinas (1224/25–1274). Scholastic theology was an effort to harmonize the doctrinal traditions inherited from the Fathers of the early church with the intellectual achievements of classical antiquity—in other words, to create a synthesis of faith and reason. Because many of the early Fathers both in the East and in the West had developed their theologies under the influence of Neoplatonism, the recovery of Aristotle—first through the influence of Aristotelian philosophers and theologians among the Muslims, and eventually, with help from Byzantium, through translation and study of the authentic texts of Aristotle himself—caused a profound transformation in the methodology and substance of medieval thought. Because it combined fidelity to Scripture and tradition with a positive, though critical, attitude toward the “natural” mind, Scholasticism is a landmark both in the history of Christianity and in the history of Western culture and a symbol of the Christianization of society and culture.

Reformation

Initially the Protestant Reformers maintained the hope that they could accomplish the reformation of the doctrine and life of the church from within, but this proved impossible because of the insufficiency of the church, the polemic of the Protestant movements, or the political and cultural situation—or because of all of these factors. The several parties of the Reformation may be conveniently classified according to the extent of their protest against medieval theology, piety, and polity. The Anglican Reformers, as well as Martin Luther and his movement, were, in general, the most conservative in their treatment of the Roman Catholic tradition; John Calvin and his followers were less conservative; the Anabaptists and related groups were least conservative of all. Despite their deep differences, almost all the various Reformation movements were characterized by an emphasis upon the Bible, as distinguished from the church or its tradition, as the authority in religion; by an insistence upon the sovereignty of free grace in the forgiveness of sins; by a stress upon faith alone, without works, as the preconditions of acceptance with God; and by the demand that the laity assume a more significant place in both the worship and the life of the church.

The Reformation envisaged neither schism within the church nor the dissolution of the Christian culture that had developed for more than a millennium. But when the Reformation was over, both the church and the culture had been radically transformed. In part this transformation was the effect of the Reformation; in part it was the cause of the Reformation. The voyages of discovery, the beginnings of a capitalist economy, the rise of modern nationalism, the dawn of the scientific age, the culture of the Renaissance—all these factors, and others besides, helped to break up the “medieval synthesis.” Among these factors, however, the Reformation was one of the most important and, certainly for the history of Christianity, the most significant. For the consequences of the Reformation, not in intention but in fact, were a divided Christendom and a secularized West. Roman Catholicism, no less than Protestantism, has developed historically in the modern world as an effort to adapt historic forms to the implications of these consequences. Established Christianity, as it had been known in the West since the 4th century, ended after the Reformation, though not everywhere at once.

Christianity from the 16th to the 20th century

Paradoxically, the end of “established Christianity” in the old sense resulted in the most rapid and most widespread expansion in the history of Christianity. The Christianization of the Americas and the evangelization of Asia, Africa, and Australasia time gave geographic substance to the Christian title “ecumenical.” Growth in areas and in numbers, however, need not be equivalent to growth in influence. Despite its continuing strength throughout the modern period, Christianity retreated on many fronts and lost much of its prestige and authority both politically and intellectually.
During the formative period of modern Western history, roughly from the beginning of the 16th to the middle of the 18th century, Christianity participated in many of the movements of cultural and political expansion. The explorers of the New World were followed closely by missionaries—that is, when the two were not in fact identical. Protestant and Roman Catholic clergymen were prominent in politics, letters, and science. Although the rationalism of the Enlightenment alienated many people from the Christian faith, especially among the intellectuals of the 17th and 18th centuries, those who were alienated often kept a loyalty to the figure of Jesus or to the teachings of the Bible even when they broke with traditional forms of Christian doctrine and life. Citing the theological conflicts of the Reformation and the political conflicts that followed upon these as evidence of the dangers of religious intolerance, representatives of the Enlightenment gradually introduced disestablishment, toleration, and religious liberty into most Western countries; in this movement they were joined by Christian individuals and groups that advocated religious freedom not out of indigence to dogmatic truth but out of a concern for the free decision of personal faith.

The state of Christian faith and life within the churches during the 17th and 18th centuries both reflected and resisted the spirit of the time. Even though the Protestant Reformation had absorbed some of the reform energy within Roman Catholicism, the theology and morals underwent serious revision in the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation. Fighting off the attempts by various countries to establish national Catholic churches, the papacy sought to learn from the history of its encounter with the Reformation and to avoid the mistakes that had been made then. Protestantism in turn discovered that separation from Rome did not necessarily inoculate it against many of the trends that it had denounced in Roman Catholicism. Orthodox theology of the 17th century both in Lutheranism and in the Reformed churches displayed many features of medieval Scholasticism, despite the attacks of the Reformers upon the latter. Partly as a compensation for the overemphasis of orthodoxy upon doctrine at the expense of morals, Pietism summoned Protestant believers to greater seriousness of personal faith and practical living.

In alliance with the spirit of the Enlightenment, the so-called “democratic” revolutions of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries aided this process of undermining Christianity. Roman Catholicism in France, Eastern Orthodoxy in Russia, and Protestantism in former European colonies in Africa and Asia were identified—by their enemies if not also by themselves—as part of the ancien régime and were nearly swept away with it. As the discoveries of science proceeded, they clashed with old and cherished notions about the doctrine of creation, many of which were passionately supported by various leaders of organized Christianity. The age of the revolutions—political, economic, technological, intellectual—was an age of crisis for Christianity. The critical methods of modern scholarship, despite their frequent attacks upon traditional Christian ideas, helped to produce editions of the chief documents of the Christian faith—the Bible and the writings of the Fathers and Reformers—and to arouse an unprecedented interest in the history of the church. The 19th century was called the great century in the history of Christian missions, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. By the very force of their attacks upon Christianity, the critics of the church helped to arouse within the church new apologists for the faith, who creatively reinterpreted it in relation to the new philosophy and science of the modern period. The 20th century saw additional challenges to the Christian cause in the form of totalitarianism, of resurgent world religions, and of indifference. Both the relation of church and state and the missionary program of the churches thus demanded reconsideration. But the 20th century also saw renewed efforts to heal the schisms within Christendom. The ecumenical movement began within Protestantism and Anglicanism, eventually included some of the Eastern Orthodox churches, and, especially since the second Vatican Council (1962–65), has engaged the sympathetic attention of Roman Catholicism as well.

Contemporary Christianity

By the late 20th century Christianity had become the most widely disseminated religion on earth. Virtually no nation remained unaffected by the activities of Christian missionaries, although in many countries Christians are only a small fraction of the total population. Most of the countries of Asia and of Africa have Christian minorities, some of which, as in India and even in China, number several million members. Massive increases in the size of such churches challenged the traditional dominance of Western Christianity. Each major division of Christianity—Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism—is treated in a separate article where its history, tenets, and practices receive a fuller exposition than this article can give them and where a bibliography on the denominations of the division is supplied. The purpose here is to provide an overview of the principal divisions and thus to set the articles about the individual traditions into their proper context.

Roman Catholicism

The Roman Catholics in the world outnumber all other Christians combined. They are organized in an intricate system that spans the structure of the church from the local parish to the papacy. Under the central authority of the papacy, the church is divided into dioceses, whose bishops act in the name and by the authority of the pope but retain administrative freedom within their individual jurisdictions. Similarly, the parish priest stands as the executor of papal and diocesan directives. Alongside the diocesan organization and interacting with it is a chain of orders, congregations, and societies; all of them are, of course, subject to the pope, but they are not directly responsible to the bishop as are the local parishes. It would, however, be a mistake to interpret the polity of the Roman Catholic Church in so purely an organizational manner as this. For Roman Catholic polity rests upon a mandate that is traced to the action of Jesus Christ himself, when he invested Peter and, through Peter, his successors with the power of the keys in the church. Christ is the invisible head of his church, and by his authority the pope is the visible head.

This interpretation of the origin and authority of the church determines both the attitude of Roman Catholicism to the rest of Christendom and its relation to the social order. Believing itself to be the true church of Jesus Christ on earth, it cannot deal with other Christian traditions as equals without betraying its very identity. This does not mean, however, that anyone outside the visible fellowship of the Roman Catholic Church cannot be saved; nor does it preclude the presence of “vestiges of the church” in the other Christian bodies. At the second Vatican Council the Roman Catholic Church strongly affirmed its ties with its “separated brethren” both in Eastern Orthodoxy and in the several Protestant churches. As the true church of Christ on earth, the Roman Catholic Church also believes itself responsible for the proclamation of the will of God to organized society and to the state. This church asserts its fundamental obligation, as the “light of the world” to which the revelation of God has been entrusted, to address the meaning of that revelation and of the moral law to the nations, and to work for a social and political order in which both revelation and the moral law can function.

The understanding that Roman Catholicism has of itself, its interpretation of the proper relation between the church and the state, and its attitude toward other Christian traditions are all based upon Roman Catholic doctrine. In great measure this doctrine is identical with that confessed by orthodox Christians of every label and consists of the Bible, the dogmatic heritage of the ancient church as laid down in the historic creeds and in the decrees of the ecumenical councils, and the theological work of the great doctors of the faith in the East and West. If, therefore, the presentation of the other Christian traditions in this article compares them with Roman Catholicism, this comparison has a descriptive rather than a normative function; for, to a considerable degree, Protestantism and Eastern Orthodoxy have often defined themselves in relation to Roman Catholicism. In addition, most Christians past and present do have a shared body of beliefs about God, Christ, and the way of salvation.

Roman Catholic doctrine is more than this shared body of beliefs, as is the doctrine of each of the Christian groups. It is necessary here to mention only the three distinctive Roman Catholic doctrines that achieved definitive formulation during the 19th and 20th centuries: the infallibility of the pope, the immaculate conception, and bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary. On most other major issues of Christian doctrine, Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy are largely in agreement, while Protestantism differs from both Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism on several issues. For example, Roman Catholic theology defines and numbers the sacraments differently from Orthodoxy theology; but, over against Protestantism, Roman Catholic doctrine insists, as does Eastern Orthodoxy, upon the centrality of the seven sacraments—baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, extreme unction, penance, matrimony, and holy orders—as channels of divine grace.
The Eastern churches

Separated from the West, the Orthodox churches of the East have developed their own way for half of Christian history. Each national church is autonomous. The “ecumenical patriarch” of Constantinople is not the Eastern pope but merely the first in honour among equals in jurisdiction. Eastern Orthodoxy interprets the primacy of Peter and therefore that of the pope similarly, denying the right of the pope to speak and act for the entire church by himself, without a church council and without his episcopal colleagues. Because of this polity Eastern Orthodoxy has identified itself more intimately with national cultures and with national regimes than has Roman Catholicism. Therefore the history of church–state relations in the East has been very different from the Western development, because the church in the East has sometimes tended toward the extreme of becoming a mere instrument of national policy while the church in the West has sometimes tended toward the extreme of attempting to dominate the state. The history of ecumenical relations between Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism during the 20th century was also different from the history of Protestant–Roman Catholic relations. While keeping alive their prayer for an eventual healing of the schism with the Latin Church, some of the Orthodox churches have established communion with Anglicanism and with the Old Catholic Church and have participated in the conferences and organizations of the World Council of Churches.

Protestantism

Formulating a definition of Protestantism that would include all its varieties has long been the despair of Protestant historians and theologians, for there is greater diversity within Protestantism than there is between some forms of Protestantism and some non-Protestant Christianity. For example, a high-church Anglican or Lutheran has more in common with an Orthodox theologian than with a Baptist theologian. Amid this diversity, however, it is possible to define Protestantism formally as non-Roman Western Christianity and to divide most of Protestantism into four major confessions or confessional families—Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, and Free Church.

Lutheranism

The largest of these non-Roman Catholic denominations in the West is the Lutheran Church. The Lutheran churches in Germany, in Scandinavian countries, and in the Americas are distinct from one another in polity, but almost all of them are related through various national and international councils, of which the Lutheran World Federation is the most comprehensive. Doctrinally, Lutheranism sets forth its distinctive position in the Book of Concord, especially in the Augsburg Confession. A long tradition of theological scholarship has been responsible for the development of this position into many and varied doctrinal systems. Martin Luther moved conservatively in this reform of the Roman Catholic liturgy, and the Lutheran Church, though it has altered many of his liturgical forms, has remained a liturgically traditional church. Most of the Lutheran churches of the world have participated in the ecumenical movement and are members of the World Council of Churches, but Lutheranism has not moved very often across its denominational boundaries to establish full communion with other bodies. The prominence of Lutheran mission societies in the history of missions during the 18th and 19th centuries gave an international character to the Lutheran Church; so did the development of strong Lutheran churches in North America, where the traditionally German and Scandinavian membership of the church was gradually replaced by a more cosmopolitan constituency.

Anglicanism

The Anglican Communion encompasses not only the established Church of England but also various national Anglican churches throughout the world. Like Lutheranism, Anglicanism has striven to retain the Roman Catholic tradition of liturgy and piety; after the middle of the 19th century the Oxford movement argued the essential Catholic character of Anglicanism in the restoration of ancient liturgical usage and doctrinal belief. Although the Catholic revival also served to rehabilitate the authority of tradition in Anglican theology generally, great variety continued to characterize the theologians of the Anglican Communion. Anglicanism is set off from most other non-Roman Catholic churches within the West by its retention of and its insistence upon the apostolic succession of ordaining bishops. The Anglican claim to this apostolic succession, despite its repudiation by Pope Leo XIII in 1896, has largely determined the role of the Church of England in the discussions among the churches. Anglicanism has often taken the lead in inaugurating such discussions, but in such statements as the Lambeth Quadrilateral it has demanded the presence of the historic episcopate as a prerequisite to the establishment of full communion. During the 19th and 20th centuries many leaders of Anglican thought were engaged in finding new avenues of communication with industrial society and with the modern intellectual. The strength of Anglicanism in the New World and in the younger churches of Asia and Africa confronted this communion with the problem of deciding its relation to new forms of Christian life in these new cultures. As its centuries-old reliance upon the establishment in England was compelled to rethresh, Anglicanism discovered new ways of exerting its influence and of expressing its message.

Presbyterian and Reformed Churches

Protestant bodies that owe their origins to the reformatory work of John Calvin and his associates in various parts of Europe are often termed Reformed, particularly in Germany, France, and Switzerland. In Britain and in the United States they have usually taken their name from their distinctive polity and have been called Presbyterian. They are distinguished from both Lutheranism and Anglicanism by the thoroughness of their separation from Roman Catholic patterns of liturgy, piety, and even doctrine. Reformed theology has tended to emphasize the sole authority of the Bible with more rigour than has characterized the practice of Anglican or Lutheran thought, and it has looked with deeper suspicion upon the symbolic and sacramental traditions of the Catholic centuries. Perhaps because of its stress upon biblical authority, Reformed Protestantism has sometimes tended to produce a separation of churches along the lines of divergent doctrine or polity, by contrast with the inclusive or even littitudinarian churchmanship of the more traditionalistic Protestant communions. This understanding of the authority of the Bible has also led Reformed Protestantism to its characteristic interpretation of the relation between church and state, sometimes labeled theocratic, according to which those charged with the proclamation of the revealed will of God in the Scriptures (i.e., the ministers) are to address this will also to civil magistrates; Puritanism in England and America gave classic expression to this view. As the church is “reformed according to the Word of God,” so the lives of the individuals in the church are to conform to the Word of God; hence the Reformed tradition has assigned great prominence to the cultivation of moral uprightness among its members. During the 20th century most of the Reformed churches of the world took an active part in the ecumenical movement.

Other Protestant churches
Christian doctrine

The nature and functions of doctrine

Indirectly or directly, Jesus and his Apostles left their principal—though perhaps not their only—records in the writings of the New Testament, the canonical texts that form the second part of the Christian Bible, which also includes the Hebrew Scriptures, or (in the Christian view) the Old Testament. The basic meaning of the term doctrine is “teaching.” Christian doctrine, accordingly, is the attempt to state in intellectually responsible terms the message of the gospel and the content of the faith it elicits. The doctrine, therefore, encompasses both the substance of what is taught and the act of setting that substance forth. While a certain reticence is appropriate in the face of the transcendent mystery of God, Christians hold that God has revealed himself sufficiently to allow and require truthful speech about him and his ways. Thus, Christian talk of God claims to be a response to the divine initiative, not simply a record of humanly generated experience. As Hilary of Poitiers wrote in the mid-4th century in his On the Trinity (IV.4), “God is to be believed when he speaks of himself, and whatever he grants us to think concerning himself is to be followed.”

From the first, church teaching has occurred in several contexts and for several purposes: it happens when the gospel is newly preached to people who have not heard it before (evangelism), when those who accept the message are instructed in preparation for baptism (catechesis), when the believing and baptized communities gather for worship (liturgy), and when application is sought to daily life (ethics). Teaching may be specially required for the sake of clarification and consolidation, as when distortions threaten within (aversion of heresy), when the faith is under attack from outside (apologetics), when linguistic or epistemological shifts over time hinder intelligibility or change the terms of reference (restate ment), or when geographical expansion prompts a more local expression (inculturation). The teaching may vary in the weight of the authority it claims and is granted, ranging from the most solemn definitions of supervisory bodies (dogma) through a broadly prevalent but internally somewhat differentiated “common mind” (consensus) to the works of individual thinkers (theology).

The most stable and widely recognized teaching is that preserved in the ancient creeds—the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed—that are transmitted in the worship of the churches and expounded in their confessions (symbolics). The agreed doctrine may sometimes have been achieved only through a period of maturing reflection and debate, and the continuation of these processes within the established communities is not excluded (development). In the course of history, however, differences concerning accepted teaching sometimes became so serious that communities divided over them (schism). The divided communities may continue their conversation in tones that range from the persuasive to the polemical (controversy). In the 20th century, determined efforts on the part of several Christian communions were made to overcome the doctrinal differences between them with the aim of restoring ecclesiastical unity (ecumenism).

Thus, there are many aspects to the question of Christian doctrine, and in what follows they will be treated in the sequence just outlined: the permanent basis, the perennial functions, the levels of authority, the stable pattern, and the institutional vicissitudes.

Scripture and tradition: the apostolic witness

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul summarized the gospel he himself had received and then preached to them, in which they now stood for their salvation: “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures [that is, the Old Testament], and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve” (15:1–8). The speeches in the Acts of the Apostles are the basis of the following synthesis, by the biblical scholar C.H. Dodd, of the early apostolic preaching, or kerygma (from the Greek term for a herald’s proclamation). In Dodd’s synthesis, the story of Jesus is located a little more fully in God’s history with Israel and with the entire human race:

The Kingdom of God had made its appearance with the coming of the Messiah; His works of power and His ‘new teaching with authority’ had provided evidence of the presence of God among men; His death ‘according to the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God’ had marked the end of the old order, and his resurrection and exaltation had definitely inaugurated the new age, characterized, as the prophets had foretold, by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the people of God. It remained only for the new order to be consummated by the return of Christ in glory to judge the quick and the dead and to save His own from the wrath to come.

Moreover, according to Dodd, “the kerygma always closes with an appeal for repentance, the offer of forgiveness and of the Holy Spirit, and the promise of ‘salvation,’ that is, of ‘the life of the Age to come,’ to those who enter the elect community.”

Embedded in the New Testament also are certain short formulas used by believers to confess their faith (homologein): “Jesus is Lord” (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3), “Jesus is the Son of God” (1 John 4:15), and Peter’s “You are the Christ” (Mark 8:29) and Thomas’s “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28). Confessions of faith were
sometimes sung when the Christians assembled for worship (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16); Paul seems to use quotations from such hymns in arguments in his letters to the Philippians (2:5–11) and Colossians (1:15–20). The earthly worship of the church is probably the immediate source for the heavenly songs of the Apocalypse (Revelation 4:8–11; 5:9–10, 13–14; 7:9–12; 11:16–18; 19:1–8).

The fullest apostolic record of the teachings of Jesus is found in narrative form in the Gospels, where his life and sayings are set amid faithful conclusions about who he was and what he will still accomplish. Although a degree of diversity in presentation and emphasis is found in the four canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) as a result of the material available to the authors (the Evangelists), the interests of their audience, and the authors' own interpretations, the overwhelming perception of the church through the centuries has been that the four canonical Gospels are mutually complementary rather than contradictory. Turning from the traditional understanding, modern scholarship for a time maximized the differences among the Gospels, but this was followed by the recovered sense of a complex unity as in fact characteristic of the Scriptures in their entirety (an important record in this regard is the 1993 report of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, _The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church_).

The most discursive reflections of the apostolic faith are found in the New Testament epistles, where salvation is at stake in the matter of right belief and right practice. Thus, in the Letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul first shows how worshipping creatures rather than the Creator leads to destruction. He then expounds the redemptive work of God in Christ and shows how those who believe are renewed by the Holy Spirit for life as God means it to be. In the First Letter of John, faith in the Incarnation—that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh”—is bound up with God’s love for humankind and humankind’s love for God, as well as with human beings’ love for each other, in all of which eternal life consists.

By the late 2nd century there was widespread agreement among the local churches about which writings were to be reckoned apostolic by virtue of their origin and content, but it was not until the 4th century that the list became settled into what is now known as the “New Testament.” This canonical list has remained virtually invariable even since, being drawn on for regular positive teaching and appealed to whenever controversies have arisen. The writings that form it are believed by Christians to have been divinely inspired, whether the mode of inspiration was that of dictation or of a more complex mediation through the human writers’ minds, experiences, and churchly location.

About 400 St. Augustine wrote the highly influential _De doctrina christiana_ (On Christian Doctrine), which provides practical guidance for interpreting the faith. The work consists largely of rules for the reading and teaching of Scripture, both Old Testament and New. Augustine emphasized that familiarity with the text, sound philology, and an understanding of the relation between signs and things are all needed, and he demonstrated how different literary genres and figures are to be recognized. _De doctrina christiana_ also showed how difficult passages can be illuminated by clearer ones and how basic axioms, themselves internal to the Scriptures—such as love of God and love of neighbour—should guide the reading of the whole.

In medieval terms, sacred doctrine (sacra doctrina) is to be read as directly as possible from the sacred page (sacra pagina). Moreover, it is a commonplace—from Thomas à Kempis (_The Imitation of Christ_, I, 5) in the 15th century through John Calvin (Institutes 1.7.1–5) in the 16th century to the 1992 Catechism of the Catholic Church (§111)—that Scripture must be read in the same (Holy) Spirit as that in which it was written. In other words, the reading of Scripture, whether corporate or individual, is properly done prayerfully by people who have pure hearts and live holy lives. It is such use that permits Scripture to function authoritatively in Christian teaching.

While the New Testament, which sets the terms also for the reading of the Hebrew Scriptures as the promissory and prophetic Old Testament, is consistently held to be the primary witness to the apostolic preaching and a permanent statement of “the faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), there are other possible legacies from the Apostles. Thus Basil of Caesarea, a 4th-century Church Father and bishop, claimed that certain practices and expressions not mentioned in the New Testament—such as facing East for prayer, the renunciation of Satan before baptism, the threefold immersion, the words for invoking the Spirit over the bread and cup—are nevertheless of apostolic origin. In the 16th century, when the Protestant reformers sought to bring the Western church back from what they perceived as departures from Scripture, the Council of Trent responded with the declaration that equal respect was to be shown to “the truth and discipline contained in the written books and (Latin et) in the unwritten traditions handed down to us, which the Apostles received from the mouth of Christ himself or by the dictation of the Holy Spirit.” As some scholars have argued, the et seemingly left open the question whether oral and practical traditions may add substantially to what is known from the Apostles through the Scriptures or are rather to be viewed as parallel modes for transmitting the same content.

**Evangelism: the first teaching about the God of Jesus Christ**

When the gospel is preached to people for the first time, the hearers usually have some idea of “the divine” in their minds. This idea provides an initial point of contact for the evangelist. According to the Acts of the Apostles, Paul, in addressing the Athenians, noted that their altars included one “to an unknown god.” Whether that designated a supreme deity or simply one who might have been left out, Paul took the opportunity to teach them about “the God who made the world and everything in it, the Lord of heaven and earth.” The Greek poets Epimenides and Aratus, he said, had hinted at such a God, “in whom we live and move and have our being” (Epimenides), for “we are indeed his offspring” (Aratus). As such, Paul confirmed, “He is not far from each of us.” The crucial point, however, is that God now “commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead.” In this way Paul appealed to what he could in his hearers’ conceptions but brought radical news concerning the will and actions of God in history. The responses of his audience are reported as ranging from scorn through mild curiosity to belief.

Christian evangelists must often decide which name of the divine they will employ among those used by their hearers. Jesuit missionaries to China in the 16th and 17th centuries could use tian (simply “heaven,” a Confucian usage), shangdi (“lord of heaven”), and tianzhu or tiandi (“lord of heaven”). Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) favoured using all three interchangeably. He rejected other terms—e.g., taiji (“supreme ultimate”) and li (“principle”—from Neo-Confucian philosophy. In Vietnam, Alexandre de Rhodes (1591–1660) rejected the terms but and phat because they were used for the Buddha, whom he regarded as an idol. Instead he chose the vernacular compound Duc Chua Troi Dat (“noble ruler of heaven and earth”), thus coming close to Acts 17:24 and Luke 10:21. Some missionaries to East Asia resorted to transliterating the Latin Deus (“God”), which had either the advantage or the disadvantage of being an empty container waiting to be filled.

A modern missionary to India, Lesslie Newbiggin (1909–98), recounted how, in preaching to villagers in the south, he would tell stories about Jesus that could not be told about the Hindu gods Shiva, Vishnu, or Ganesha, until gradually their conceptions of the Divine would be changed. Newbiggin saw a radical contrast between the nature of God implied in “the higher Hinduism”—when atman and brahman are identified and the material world is considered an illusion (maya)—and in the Bible—when the universal Creator is presented as one who personally engages with humankind in concrete history.

Christian theological opinions may vary concerning the degree to which an existing idea of the divine needs to be “completed” and the degree to which it needs to be “corrected” through the teaching of the God of Jesus Christ. Features of the previous religion that are affirmed may then be viewed as having constituted a “preparation for the gospel” (praeparatio evangelica), while elements that are rejected as incompatible with Christianity will at least have served as a negative point of contrast. Ultimately, Christians expect that the Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit—will be recognized as the sole true God.

**Catechesis: instructing candidates for baptism**
By the 3rd century at the latest, it was normal for two to three years to elapse before an initial inquirer into the gospel might eventually be admitted to the church by baptism. During this period, the catechumens received instruction in faith and morals and their manner of life was observed. As the time for their baptism drew closer, they were enrolled as “applicants” (competentes), “chosen” (electi), or “destined for illumination” (photizomenoi). There is considerable evidence from the 4th and 5th centuries that those preparing for baptism underwent intensive preparation during the final weeks of their catechumenate. This final period usually coincided with the season that became known as Lent, and baptism was administered on Easter. Toward the end of the period of instruction, a dual ceremony took place, in which the words of the creed were orally “handed over” to the candidates (the traditio symboli; “hand over the Creed”) and then, a day or two before Easter, “given back” (the reddito symboli; “give back the Creed”). Thus the candidates had to learn the creed—which the bishop expounded to them—and then be able to repeat it.

As the rite is described in an early church order—which most 20th-century scholarship identified with the treatise Apostolic Tradition (c. 215) by Hippolytus of Rome—the baptism itself took the form of a threefold immersion in water. At each immersion the candidates replied “I believe” to the questions put by the minister: “Do you believe in God the Father almighty? Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose the third day alive from the dead, and ascended into the heavens, and sits at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit and the holy church and the resurrection of the flesh?” Following baptism, the new believers participated in the sacrament of the Eucharist for the first time.

In the days immediately after Easter, the bishop would give more detailed teaching to the neophytes on the meaning and effect of the sacraments they had just received. Lectures attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem and to Ambrose of Milan are still extant. In other places—such as Antioch, where John Chrysostom taught—these “mystagogical catecheses” were delivered before the initiatory rites were undertaken.

As infant baptism gradually became the preponderant practice, verbal instruction around baptism fell out of use, although some of the old ceremonies of the catechumenate continued to be administered in compressed form. Instead, children were taught the faith when they reached the age of reason. In the medieval West, this instruction came to be associated with confirmation, that part of the initiation process which remained for the bishop to do. The parish priest was expected to teach the local children at least the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the Hail Mary, the sacraments, the Ten Commandments, and the Seven Beatitudes or some other lessons on the vices and virtues. In the 16th century, Protestant reformers adapted this practice by providing official printed catechisms for use with children, each more or less marked with the doctrinal emphasis brought by the particular reformer. After the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church produced the Catechismus ad Parochos (1566), intended for parish priests rather than immediately for their wards. Simpler, shorter catechisms were also composed locally.

Modern educational theory disdained rote learning, especially in the form of cut-and-dried questions and answers, and the genre of the catechism became unpopular. Many churches in the West, however, have sought to retrieve the loss of informed faith that has occurred over several generations. In the second half of the 20th century, “adult catechisms” of various literary types were produced for study by individuals or groups; and some churches have tried to introduce a kind of remedial catechumenate on more ancient models.

**Liturgy: the school and feast of faith**

Christians gather regularly for worship, particularly on Sundays and on the great annual festivals. In these assemblies, their faith is directed to God in praise and prayer; it is also exposed to God for strengthening, deepening, and enriching. In the living encounter with God, the content and verbal formulations of faith are shaped, while in turn the tried and accepted teaching of the community provides the basis for each new celebration.

Worship contributed to the evolution of doctrine from the earliest days of Christianity. In the first decade of the 2nd century, the Roman investigator Pliny reports that the Christians meet “on a fixed day” and “recite a hymn to Christ as to a god.” The experienced presence of the risen and exalted Christ as living Lord is reflected even earlier in such New Testament texts as Matthew 18:20 (gathering “in his name” for prayer), Matthew 28:16–20 (Christ’s accomplishment of his Apostles in teaching and baptizing), 1 Corinthians 16:22 (the invocation Maranatha as “The Lord has come” or “Our Lord, come”), Philippians 2:9–11 (the bowing of the knee to Jesus and the confession from the tongue that he is Lord), and Revelation 1:4–18 (John’s vision, when he was “in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day,” of Christ standing among seven golden lamp stands and holding seven stars). The practice of worshipping Christ as the Lord, as early Christian and non-Christian sources indicate, was an important part of early Christian ritual, which played a central role in establishing the doctrine of his divine status. In the fierce debates of the 4th century, Athanasius maintained that the church’s worship of Christ established that he is fully God, for otherwise Christians would commit an unthinkable idolatry.

Influence also traveled in the other direction. From the beginning of the faith, doctrine contributed to the development of patterns of worship and has continued to do so. Theological reflection on Christ’s sovereignty in the present most likely led to belief also in his preexistence as the agent of the Father’s creative work from the very beginning. This belief then found expression in the hymns or other liturgical forms that are echoed at several places in the New Testament: 1 Corinthians 8:6; Colossians 1:15–20; and Hebrews 1:1–2, for example.

Church authorities have been keen to ensure that the language used in worship is doctrinally orthodox. The Apostolic Tradition, an early church order, sets out a sample prayer for a newly ordained bishop to use at the Eucharist, saying that it is not necessary that he use exactly these words, “only let his prayer be correct and orthodox.” A similar concern led some North African councils around the year 400 to discourage new compositions. In the Middle Ages, the great metropolitan bishoprics—and even, in the case of Carthage, the imperial court—sought to standardize liturgical forms in their areas. The advent of printing made this easier, and the Protestant reformers issued books for the purpose, either laying down verbally the entire content of the service (as in the Church of England’s Book of Common Prayer) or publishing “directories” that set out in some detail the principles according to which the minister should conduct the service (as sometimes in the Reformed or Presbyterian case). Following the Council of Trent, the Roman see produced a series of books that regulated the words and gestures of the rites down to the last detail (Breviary, 1568; Missal, 1570; Pontifical, 1596; and Ritual, 1614). Less bookish churches have relied more on individual ministers, assuming the fundamental doctrinal soundness of the ministers or their recurrent inspiration by the truth of God or both.

Wherever sermons are preached to the congregation, a special responsibility rests on the preacher to build the local community up in the Christian faith. The theological assumption is that the entire liturgy is both a school and the feast of faith: in the same act, believers both learn and celebrate the transgenerational faith of the Church into which they grow. This assumption was the motivation of the liturgical revisions and renewals attempted in many Western churches in the second half of the 20th century. An outstanding example is provided by Eucharistic Prayer IV in the Roman Missal of 1969–70, which has been borrowed and adapted by several other churches. Here the words and the ritual actions allow a reappropriation of the entire story of salvation:

Father in heaven, it is right that we should give you thanks and glory: you are God, living and true. Through all eternity you live in unapproachable light. Source of our being, you have created all things, to fill your creatures with every blessing and lead all men to the joyful vision of your light. Countless hosts of angels stand before you to do your will; they look upon your splendor and praise you night and day. United with them, and in the name of every creature under heaven, we too praise your glory as we say: Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest. Father, we acknowledge your greatness: all your actions show your wisdom and love. You formed man in your own likeness and set him over the whole world to serve you, his creator, and to rule over all creatures. Even when he disobeyed you and lost your friendship, you did not abandon him...
to the power of death, but helped all men to seek and find you. Again and again you offered a covenant to man, and through the prophets taught him to hope for salvation. Father, you so loved the world that in the fullness of time you sent your only Son to be our Savior. He was conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary, a man like us in all things but sin. To the poor he proclaimed the good news of salvation, to prisoners, freedom, and to those in sorrow, joy. In fulfillment of your will he gave himself up to death; but by rising from the dead, he destroyed death and restored life. And that we might live no longer for ourselves but for him, he sent the Holy Spirit from you, Father, as his first gift to those who believe, to complete his work on earth and bring us the fullness of grace. Father, may this Holy Spirit sanctify these offerings. Let them become the body and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord as we celebrate the great mystery which he left us as an everlasting covenant. He always loved those who were his own in the world. When the time came for him to be glorified by you, his heavenly Father, he showed the depth of his love. While they were at supper, he took bread, said the blessing, broke the bread, and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take this, all of you, and eat it: this is my body which will be given up for you. In the same way, he took the cup, filled with wine. He gave you thanks, and giving the cup to his disciples, said: Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all men, so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me. Let us proclaim the mystery of faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Father, we now celebrate this memorial of our redemption. We recall Christ’s death, his descent among the dead, his resurrection, and his ascension to your right hand; and, looking forward to his coming in glory, we offer you his body and blood, the acceptable sacrifice which brings salvation to the whole world. Lord, look upon this sacrifice which you have given to your Church; and by your Holy Spirit, gather all who share this one bread and one cup into the one body of Christ, a living sacrifice of praise. Lord, remember those for whom we offer this sacrifice, especially N. our Pope, N. our bishop, and bishops and clergy everywhere. Remember those who take part in this offering, those here present and all your people, and all those who seek you with a sincere heart. Remember those who have died in the peace of Christ and all the dead whose faith is known to you alone. Father, in your mercy grant also to us, your children, to enter into our heavenly inheritance in the company of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, and your apostles and saints. Then, in your kingdom, freed from the corruption of sin and death, we shall sing your glory with every creature through Christ our Lord, through whom you give us everything that is good. Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, almighty Father, for ever and ever. Amen.

So comprehensive was this prayer that the Catholic bishops of France made it the basis for a short popular catechism, Il est grand, le mystère de la foi: prière et foi de l’église catholique (1978; “It Is Great, The Mystery of the Faith: The Prayer and Faith of the Catholic Church”).

Hymns have been significant vehicles of the Christian faith from the earliest days. They have been sung particularly in the daily offices of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, and they have figured prominently in the Sunday worship of many Protestant churches, especially the Lutheran and Methodist. Congregational singing is appropriate to the “body” character of Christianity, in both the physical and the social senses of the word, as it permits the members of the Body of Christ to engage “with one heart and one voice” in the worship of God (Romans 15:5–6).

Ethics: obeying the truth

Christians acknowledge not only a duty to announce the gospel, profess the faith, and worship God but also to live their entire lives according to God’s will. Being God’s people means following God’s law, which means walking in the way of truth (Psalm 25:4–6; Romans 8:14) and obeying it (Romans 2:8; Galatians 5:7; 1 Peter 2:22; 3 John 3–4). The dual commandment holds good: to love God and to love neighbour (Matthew 22:37–39). To “dwell in love” is to dwell in God, who is both truth and love (1 John).

Historically, Christian ethical teaching has had two biblical foci: the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17; Deuteronomy 5:6–21) and the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). The emphasis on one or the other has varied across time and space. The Decalogue, as the Ten Commandments are sometimes called, remains valid for Christians, although the divine basis grounding the covenant between God and his elect people has been broadened, according to Christian belief, by the redemptive work of Jesus Christ—a move reflected in the shifting of the chief weekly “holy day” from the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8–11; Deuteronomy 6:12–15) to Sunday, the day of the Lord’s Resurrection, when the Christian community gathers to celebrate the new covenant in his blood and the beginning of the new creation. The “second table” of the Law—honouring parents, and rejecting murder, adultery, theft, false witness, and coveting—has been held by Christians to apply universally, the core of a “natural law” extending beyond the community that has received God’s “special revelation.” In this regard, it functions at least to preserve society against the worst ravages of sin until the preaching of the gospel attains its full range and final goal.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus radicalized the Law by, for instance, making anger murderous and lust adulterous (Matthew 5:21–22, 27–28) and calling for his disciples to be “perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). In the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1–12), the blessings Jesus offered in the Sermon on the Mount, he declared that the qualities and powers of the impending Kingdom of God were available among his followers in such a way that they would bear a distinctive witness to God before the world (Matthew 5:14–16). Christians have believed that taking the “hard way” (Matthew 7:13–14) is possible by virtue of the divine gift of the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:9–13; cf. Matthew 7:7–12).

In the epistles of Paul, the indicatives of gospel and faith serve to ground the imperatives of attitude and behaviour. Following his exposition of God’s saving actions in Christ in the first 11 chapters of the Letter to the Romans, Paul asserts, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. Do not be conformed to this world [or age] but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good, and acceptable, and perfect” (Romans 12:1–2).

Christian ethical teaching and practice are intrinsic to the community of the faithful and its life. In the early centuries, certain occupations were considered incompatible with becoming a Christian. According to the Apostolic Tradition, brothel-keepers, prostitutes, sculptors, painters, keepers of idols, actors, charioeters, gladiators, soldiers, magicians, astrologers, and diviners could not become Christians. Moral instruction was provided throughout the catechumenate, and many patristic homilies reveal the ethical teaching and exhortation practiced by the preachers in the liturgical assemblies. Medieval catechesis included the Decalogue, the Beatitudes, and the lists of virtues and vices. The administration of sacramental penance on a regular basis served the formation of individual character and conduct.

Much material became codified in ecclesiastical regulations known as canon law. Whereas the earliest Christians could exercise little or no influence on civil rulers, the “conversion of the Empire” under the 4th-century emperors Constantine and Theodosius permitted bishops their say in the personal and political affairs of emperors and in the wider life of society. In Christendom, legal systems claimed foundations in Christian teaching.

Modernity brought a decline in the direct institutional role of the churches in society, but the rise of democracy encouraged church leaders to assume an advisory capacity in the shaping of public policy, seeking to guide not only the members of their own ecclesiastical communities but also the whole body politic. On the Roman Catholic part, this has occurred at the global level through the so-called “social encyclicals” of popes from Leo XIII (Rerum novarum, 1891; “Of New Things”) through John XXIII (Pacem in terris, 1962; “Peace on Earth”), Paul VI (Populorum progressio, 1968; “Progress of the Peoples”), and John Paul II (Laborem exercens, 1981; “Through Work” and Centesimus annus, 1991; “The 100th Year”). Protestant denominations have typically made pronouncements and initiated programs through their national or international assemblies and agencies. The World Council of Churches, a fellowship of Christian churches founded in 1948, has formulated what were sometimes called “middle axioms” (e.g., the notion of a “responsible society” or “justice, peace and the preservation of creation”), which were intended as common ground on which Christians and secular bodies could meet for thought and action.

A theological problem resides in the passage from the story of salvation in its broadest terms (the message of the gospel and the content of the faith, concisely and
comprehensively formulated) to its enactment in particular questions and instances. For example, it is sometimes held that certain acts are simply contrary to God’s will and purpose for humankind and therefore always morally wrong; yet there is also a view that circumstances can so greatly affect cases that the good may be differently served in different situations. The difficulties that accompany the move from general principle to concrete discipline are illustrated in the report of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, Life in Christ: Morals, Communion and the Church (1994). It is there claimed that “Anglicans and Roman Catholics derive from the Scriptures and Tradition the same controlling vision of the nature and destiny of humanity and share the same fundamental moral values.” Disagreements on such matters as “abortion and the exercise of homosexual relations” are relegated to the level of “practical and pastoral judgment,” with no account offered of intermediate processes that might allow material differences to develop. Here are not only ecclesiastical but civilizational issues that the next generation may choose to revisit in the light of the moral teaching proposed to church and world in the encyclical letters of John Paul II, Veritatis splendor (1993; “The Splendour of Truth”) and Evangelium vitae (1995; “The Gospel of Life”).

Aversion of heresy: the establishment of orthodoxy

Already in apostolic times, distortions of belief threatened the Christian community from within. The Apostle Paul needed to correct those who misunderstood the preaching of Christ’s Resurrection and the general resurrection to come (1 Corinthians 15). The First Letter of John combats those who denied the reality of the Incarnation—“that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (4:3). Bishop Ignatius of Antioch denounced the same “docetic” tendency—that Jesus only “seemed” (dokein) to be human—when he found heretics abstaining from the Eucharist “because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ which suffered for our sins and which the Father raised” (Letter to the Smyrnaeans 7:1).

Alternative understandings of Christian teaching continued to develop throughout early church history. Marcion, considered the arch-heretic of the 2nd century, rejected the Old Testament as the work of a god inferior to the God of Jesus and accepted from the nascent New Testament only those portions that he took to be uninfected by Judaism. Bishop Irenaeus of Lyon, in Against Heresies, ranked Marcion with the “gnostics” because at least one facet of Marcion’s error was his depreciation of the material creation. The gnostics invented complex cosmogonies in order to remove the true God from responsibility for the evils of matter, release from which was the content of human salvation. The goodness of the material creation was affirmed for Irenaeus by the reality of Christ’s Incarnation, the sacramental practices of the church (bread and wine made from wheat and grapes), and the Christian hope in the resurrection of the body.

More-subtle threats than the docetic to the humanity of Christ came from the view that the divine Logos—the “Word” or the principle of God active in the creation and the continuous structuring of the cosmos—had taken the place of the human mind or will in Jesus. Apollinaris, whose teaching denied the existence of a rational human soul in Christ, was condemned by the first Council of Constantineople in 381, and monothelitism, which held that Christ had only one will (the divine and not the human), was condemned by the third Council of Constantineople in 680–681. The orthodox teaching was that the Son is a divine person from all eternity who, in the Incarnation, took human nature completely upon himself. Only so could humankind have been saved, for—according to the dictum of Gregory of Nazianzen in the late 4th century—“what had not been assumed would not have been healed” (Epistle 101).

In the other direction, faith in Christ’s divinity was affirmed in the face of early views that made of Jesus a man “adopted” by God, whether at his Resurrection or at his baptism or even already at his conception—views that respectively pressed into service Romans 1:3–4, Matthew 3:16–17, and Luke 1:31–35. It was to exclude such views even in the subtler form they took with Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople—whose emphasis on the full humanity of Christ’s human nature seemingly divided him into two persons, one human and the other divine—that the Council of Ephesus in 431 insisted on the propriety of the popular title “God-bearer” (Theotokos) for Mary.

Even the New Testament’s affirmations of Christ’s preexistence had not sufficed to persuade some of his fully divine status (John 1:1–3; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Colossians 1:15–17). The greatest challenge to the teaching of Christ’s full divinity was that of Arius (early 4th century), who held that the Son, though superior to all other creatures, was in fact God’s first creature.Rejecting that view, the first Council of Nicaea in 325 declared that the Son of the Father—“(true) God from (true) God”—was himself “begotten, not made” and the agent of all God’s creation. This echoed the statement in the Gospel of John (1:3) about the divine Logos, that “without him was not anything made that was made.”

The New Testament writers and the Fathers of the Church had no compunction about identifying false teaching as such. Persistence in it brought expulsion from communion. Many modern scholars have shown more sympathy with so-called heretics, suggesting at least that the controversy inspired by their dissent may have played a useful part in allowing the church to develop and formulate its doctrine. Christians abiding by historical orthodoxy, however, might argue instead that the authentic instinct of faith has never deviated in such fundamental and central matters as the divine status of Christ and the reality of his humanity.

Heresies have survived or reemerged in the course of history: Arianism continued among the Teutonic tribes until the 7th century and in 18th-century England; “ adoptionism” reappeared in Spain and France in the 8th and 9th centuries; and antimaterial dualism was revived among the Bulgarian Bogomils in the 10th century and among the Cathars of France and Italy in the 12th.Keen-eyed readers of theological literature can spot contemporary equivalents to most or all of the positions and tendencies mentioned already at the beginning of the 3rd century by Tertullian of Carthage in his treatise On the Prescription of Heretics.

Apologetics: defending the faith

The First Letter of Peter tells its addressees that they must “always be prepared to make a defense (apologia) to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you” (3:15). The defense of the faith has been required of Christians when they faced persecution, but “apologetics” have also been undertaken in the face of intellectual attacks.

In the 2nd century, several Christian writers—Aristides, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Theophilus, Athenagoras, Tertullian—defended Christianity against the popular and political charges brought against it by non-Christians. It was denounced as an unregistered and “secret” cult and was suspected of immorality (human flesh and blood were consumed at its love feasts) and disloyalty (Christians refused to participate in the civic religion). The Apologists also responded both to the Jews who claimed the Old Testament scriptures as their own and rejected the Christian interpretation of them as fulfilled in Jesus Christ and to the more philosophical criticisms addressed to the doctrine of the Incarnation.

These early apologetics came to a climax in the eight books of Against Celsus, a treatise written by Origen around 246–248 to answer the still troublesome work of a Platonist and critic of Christianity dating from about 70 years earlier and claiming to speak “the word of truth” (alêthês logos). Celsus was quite well informed about the

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of evil demons by expiation, since it is they who bring about plagues, or famines, or stormy seas, or anything similar.” Origen insisted that his work was not written for convinced Christians but “either for those entirely without experience of faith in Christ, or for those whom the apostle calls ‘weak in faith’.”

At the beginning of the 5th century, Augustine began his work City of God as an answer to pagan complaints that the sack of Rome—supposedly “the eternal city”—by Alaric and his Goths in 410 was due to the abandonment of the old gods in favour of Christianity. Augustine showed the inconsistency of the critics in failing to blame the civic gods for previous setbacks in failling to give credit for the divine benefits bestowed on Christian emperors. He asserted that the true God is the ruler of all nations, bestowing both success and calamity for his own purposes. Augustine developed an entire philosophy of history, which helped shape for a thousand years the Christian understanding of church and state. His vision embraced two “cities,” the city of God and an earthly city, existing side by side through the course of history: “Two loves have created two cities: love of self, to the contempt of the earthly city; love of God, to the contempt of self, the heavenly” (XIV:28). The institutions of the earthly city are not without their divine rationale, for they ensure a relative justice amid the fallen condition of humankind. Yet the happiness the earthly city allows is only temporary, and its society is conflict. Only the peace and eternity of the divine city match the Supreme Good. Nor is the pilgrim church quite to be equated with the city of God, for the latter already contains the angels and the saints, while the former will have tares mixed in with the wheat until the final judgment. Yet in the centuries of Christendom, Augustine’s treatise was used to ground the doctrine of the superiority of the papacy over the empire and as the foundation for secular political theory and practice. In a world more pluralistically conceived, it has remained possible to draw on Augustine for Christian teaching on political ethics and human destiny more generally.

When, partly as a result of the European “Wars of Religion” in the 16th and 17th centuries, doubt took over from faith as a methodological principle in philosophy and the natural sciences, some tried a new apologetic tack. This approach is represented by the “Christian Deist,” Matthew Tindal, who wrote Christianity as Old as the Creation, or the Gospel as a Republication of the Religion of Nature (1730). After a century’s critique of the notion of divine revelation in the name of “Enlightenment,” Immanuel Kant thought that Christianity could and should be fitted into “religion within the limits of reason alone,” as the title of a treatise he published in 1793 suggested.

As the 18th century passed into the 19th, a different style of apologetic was conducted by the Berlin preacher Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). Belonging to a family of Reformed ministers and educated at Pietist institutions, Schleiermacher tapped into emergent Romanticism in his On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers (1799). Refusing to identify religion with metaphysics or morals, Schleiermacher located its essence in intuition (Anschauung) and feeling (Gefühl), the “sense and taste for the infinite” (Sinn und Geschmack fürs Unendliche). The founder of Christianity, Schleiermacher noted in his On Religion, was remarkable as the best mediator yet of a clear consciousness of the divine being. Schleiermacher continued this apologetic theme in his comprehensive account of Christian doctrine, The Christian Faith (1821–22; 1831). In his wake, Protestant systematic theology in the 19th and 20th centuries generally sought to operate within the “plausibility structures” of “modernity.” Sometimes it got no further than apologetically oriented considerations of method.

Among Roman Catholic writers, John Henry Newman’s An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent (1870) offered a major intellectual justification of the act of faith during what he viewed as a revolutionary, seismic period in the world of ideas. Modern Catholic scholars have made contemporary apologetics a component in the subdiscipline of “fundamental theology.”

Restatement: respecting language and knowledge

Restatement of doctrine has been required whenever Christianity crossed a linguistic boundary. The extension from the largely Hebraic and Aramaic world of Jesus and his Apostles into the Hellenistic world had already occurred by the time of the New Testament writings, and Greek became the language of the texts that constitute the permanent basis of Christian doctrine. That was the beginning of what the German theologian Adolf von Harnack called the “Hellenization of Christianity,” whose relation to “the historical Jesus”—the putative peasant from Nazareth—has been viewed as problematic by many modern scholars. The New Testament itself was later translated into Latin as the faith spread westward.

In some cases, however, a restatement may become necessary even within a single linguistic area. Thus, the Council of Nicaea in 325 commanded the nonscriptural term homousios (“of one substance”) in order to safeguard the essential relation of the Son to the Father that had been denied by Arius. During the 4th century the vocabulary in which Christian belief in the Holy Trinity was stated was gradually stabilized and refined. A similar process took place in the formulation of Christological belief by the Council of Chalcedon (451), which defined Christ as “one person, acknowledged in two natures, unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably.”

Restatements internal to a linguistic tradition may go hand in glove with shifts in philosophical conceptions of knowledge (epistemology). A prime example is Thomas Aquinas’s participation in the rediscovery of Aristotelian categories (e.g., substance, quantity, quality, and relation), even though he exceeded and transformed them in the service of theological, ethical, and sacramental teachings that in turn shaped doctrinal conceptions and formulations in the Catholic church of the West.

Although not always distinguishing between scientific knowledge and the wider philosophical claims sometimes made by particular scientists, many modern theologians have felt a need to restate the gospel and the faith in ways that do not infringe on the knowledge brought by the natural sciences (the very rise of which may have been fostered by the Christian doctrine of creation as both regular and contingent). A prominent attempt to restate the gospel and faith in this way was the program of “demythologization” proposed by the German biblical scholar and Lutheran theologian Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976). Bultmann proposed to restate the message of and about Jesus in terms of the existentialist philosophy of Martin Heidegger: the word of the Cross summoned people to authentic existence by liberating them from the past and opening up to them a new future. In response to Bultmann’s radical program, more traditional theologians argued that the Incarnation and the Resurrection cannot be fitted into any other world view than that of which they are the cornerstone.

In the 1960s, some theologians attempted to state “the secular meaning of the gospel” (the title of a book by P.M. Van Buren) by removing the last traces of transcendence from their accounts, leaving no room for communication or interaction between God and humankind (“revelation,” “grace,” “prayer”) and no expectation of any destiny beyond this world. By the late 20th century, theologians had found hope in the explanatory inadequacy at the scientific level of a sheerly physicalist theory of efficient causality. The door was opened, at least slightly, to the notion of personal purpose, which can point by analogy from the level of human affairs to a view of God and the world that matches more easily the biblical story. This notion can also provide a framework for integrating—as most academic theologians have done—some kind of evolutionary theory into the elucidation of Christian doctrine concerning creation.

Inculturation: respecting places and peoples

As the gospel has spread into new regions of the world, there has proven to be need and opportunity for fresh conceptions and formulations of the faith. The process of inculturation begins when missionaries first arrive in a region in which Christianity does not exist and the instruction of converts (catechesis) takes place. Gradually, after perhaps experiencing more strongly an initial rupture with their previous culture, those who enter the Christian faith start to give it a more local expression.

Soteriology, the theological study of salvation, has often lent itself to inculturation. An early medieval example is found in the Saxon poem the Heliand, in which the gospel story is told with Christ as the warrior chieftain leading his companions into battle against Satan, the enemy of mankind. Anselm of Canterbury (1033/34–1109), in Cur Deus homo (“Why God Became Man”), presented the atoning work of Christ as the satisfaction of God’s offended honour so that sinful men and women might be
Dogma: the most authoritative teaching

Jesus “taught with authority” (Matthew 7:29), and the risen Lord gave his Apostles a share in his authority when he commissioned them to make disciples from all the nations by teaching what he had commanded them (Matthew 28:18–20). The apostolic church trusted that Christ had made provision for Christians to be kept by the Holy Spirit in the truth of the gospel (John 14–16). The Apostle Paul charged Timothy to preserve the deposit of the faith among other appointed teachers (1 and 2 Timothy). By the 2nd century, bishops were regarded as the special guardians of apostolic teaching, and the practice grew of bishops meeting in council at various geographical levels to determine teaching as needed.

The very first ecclesiastical council, according to tradition, took place when, as narrated in Acts 15, the Apostles and elders met in Jerusalem to determine the conditions under which Gentiles were to be admitted to the church. They concluded that “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity” (Acts 15:28). The decisions of the Council of Jerusalem were termed dogmata (Acts 16:4).

Dogma became the traditional term for truths believed to be indispensable to the Christian faith. The question of what precisely counts as dogma is bound up with questions of pronouncement and reception. The most widely recognized source of dogmatic formulations is the ecumenical or general councils of the church, but Christian communities vary in the number of councils they recognize as ecumenical. The so-called Oriental Orthodox churches—the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East, the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, the Malankara Syrian [Indian] Orthodox Church, and the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church—count only three such councils (Nicaea in 325, Constantinople in 381, and Ephesus in 431). The Byzantine or Eastern Orthodox churches also accept the decisions of the councils of Chalcedon (451), Constantinople II (553), Constantinople III (680–681), and Nicaea II (787). The Roman Catholic Church recognizes 21 such councils, the most recent of which are Trent (1545–63), Vatican I (1869–70), and Vatican II (1962–65). Most Protestant churches from the 16th century rely on the first four councils (Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon). Not all councils claiming to be ecumenical have been recognized as such, and not all decisions taken by ecumenical councils are dogmatic in nature.

Conciliar decrees most generally accepted as dogma concern the identity of the Holy Trinity and of Jesus Christ as second person of the Trinity incarnate. The crucial councils of the 4th and 5th centuries clarified and reaffirmed—in the face of what were judged inadequate or deviant understandings—the core content of the confession “Jesus is Lord” and the names “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” in which Christians were baptized. It is significant that the dogmatic affirmations of Nicaea and Constantinople took the form of precisions to extant creeds. Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, the principal advocate and defender of Nicaea, insisted that salvation was at stake if the three persons confessed and invoked at baptism were not fully divine, for only God can save (First Letter to Serapion). Bishop Basil of Caesarea, in his treatise On the Holy Spirit, defended the same view and then deployed theological arguments to show that the three persons of the Trinity properly received equal praise and adoration in the church’s liturgy. The Council of Constantinople (381) could expand the creedal formulation to declare belief in the Holy Spirit, the “Lord and Life-giver,…who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified.” Historically, what bishops declare in council, they teach in their churches. They expect to find adhesion from the faithful, since what they teach is “the faith once delivered to the saints,” clarified and consolidated according to circumstances.

Since the First Vatican Council in 1869–70, the Roman Catholic Church has recognized in the office of the bishop of Rome a special charism, or spiritual gift, that allows him, under certain conditions, infallibly to define the Christian faith and morals in statements that are “irreformable” of themselves. The purpose of this charism is to provide the faithful the certainty of being taught the saving truth. The two dogmas that Catholics consider covered by this papal gift are those of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, promulgated by Pius IX in 1854, and Mary’s assumption, body and soul, into heaven, promulgated by Pius XII in 1950.

Protestant churches have not claimed to hold general councils or to promulgate dogmas. Perhaps the closest attempt at the latter was the Lutheran Book of Concord, produced in Germany in 1580. Protestant churches have usually viewed their synods or assemblies as competent to “interpret” doctrine under the supreme norm of Scripture and with the guidelines provided by the earlier creeds and confessions that come from the general tradition of the “church universal” or their particular tradition. Since the 20th century, many Protestant synods have included not only pastors but also laypeople in their membership.

Consensus: patterns of agreement

Short of dogma, considerable authority accrues to broad patterns of stating and practicing the Christian faith that have maintained themselves over time and space. They appear comprehensive and coherent, even though minor shades of difference are not excluded from their expression.

The Eastern Orthodox churches detect a “common mind of the fathers” (consensus patrum), which allows for some variety of contribution and emphasis among the Fathers. The most respected synthesis is that of John of Damascus (c. 675–749), whose defense of icon veneration also anticipated the decision of the seventh ecumenical council (Nicaea II, 787). In his “Exposition of the Orthodox Faith,” the Damascene first treats God, who is by nature incomprehensible. His existence and unity, however, can be inferred from the contingency and order of the created universe. He has, moreover, revealed himself adequately for our good in those things to which the Law, the Prophets, the Apostles, and the Evangelists bear testimony; humankind can thereby know that God is Trinity, though not the precise manner of the “mutual indwelling” (perichôresis) of the three hypostases. After his discussion of God, John treats creation, noting that the angels were created first and that the devil “was the first to depart from good and become evil.” Concerning the wider material creation, he offers a theological perspective on astronomy, meteorology, geography, and zoology. Although human beings, John argues, were made “in God’s image” (i.e., with mind and free will) and “after God’s likeness” (i.e., to go forward in the path of goodness), they fell by pride and became slaves of passions and appetites; yet God continued to care for them. In the economy of salvation, John goes on, God has sought to win humankind back; God became human and acted from within in the person of the incarnate Son. Finally, he explains that since Christ was without sin, death could not hold him. Through faith and baptism humans are in him restored to communion with God, set upon the way of virtue, and renewed in a life that, nourished by the Eucharist, will be crowned by participation in the divine glory. John’s work has remained influential in the Eastern church and was known to Peter Lombard (1100–60) and Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) in the medieval West.

Peter Lombard, master at the cathedral school of Notre Dame and archbishop of Paris, was author of the Four Books of Sentences. This seminal work treats God the Holy Trinity; creation, humankind, and sin; the Incarnation of the Word and the redemption of humanity; faith, hope, love, and the other virtues; the seven sacraments (baptism,
confession, Eucharist, penance, unction of the sick and dying, ordination, marriage); and the last things (death, judgment, heaven, and hell). The Scriptures and the Fathers—notably Augustine, who is quoted more than 1,000 times—are its principal sources. Peter is not as rigorous as his own teacher, Peter Abelard, in discerning the apparent contradictions in his authorities, for which a dialectical resolution is to be sought (Sic et non; “Yes and No”). Lombard’s “opinions” tend to harmonize with the chosen “sentences” of the Fathers. The Sentences, whose orthodoxy was established by the Lateran Council of 1215, became the standard theological textbook in the medieval West and the subject of many commentaries. It thus helped to shape a nuanced consensus there too, from which disputes and disuations were not absent.

Of perhaps more delayed but certainly longer-lasting effect was the Summa theologicae of Thomas Aquinas. Called Doctor Communis (“Common Doctor”) and Doctor Angelicus (“Angelic Doctor”), Aquinas was canonized by Pope John XXII in 1323 and declared a “Doctor of the Church” by Pius V in 1567. In 1879, Leo XIII enjoined the study of Aquinas on all Catholic theological students. A Neo-Thomist revival marked Roman Catholic theology at least until 1960, and the Angelic Doctor was again commended in Pope John Paul II’s encyclical letter Fides et ratio (1998; “Faith and Reason”).

The Summa theologicae begins with the questions regarding human knowledge of God—what may be known by reason and what depends on faith, and the status of language used to refer to God. The first part of the Summa goes on to deal substantively with the Trinity, creation, and human nature. The second and longest part is modeled on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics and finds that much in Aristotle is congenial to Christian moral thinking. The third part—which was left unfinished—is concerned with the dogmatic topics of the Incarnation and the sacraments. Each major question is treated in several articles, which themselves begin with a subquestion, to which a plausible first answer is indicated (Videtur quod, “it seems that”). A different position is briefly stated (Sed contra, “But on the other hand”), usually in the name of a scriptural or patristic authority. Finally, Aquinas develops his own opinion (Respondeo dicendum, “I respond that”), which is basically the second position (though it may integrate valid elements from the first answer) together with replies to remaining objections.

In Protestantism, the nearest approach to a broad consensus may be found in the respective traditions that stay within the vectors set by their chief reformers and their confessions and catechisms in the 16th century—so that at least a family resemblance remains among Lutherans or the Reformed. The individualism, however, that has characterized modernity—and to which Protestantism itself has contributed—makes it harder to speak of an authoritative “common mind” in the Protestant communities at large. The difficulty is compounded insofar as Protestant theologians have tended to be more accommodating than Orthodox or Catholics to fast-moving shifts in the general culture. Nevertheless, Luther and, to a lesser degree, Calvin and Wesley are recurrently appealed to in various ways as doctrinal mentors in their respective traditions.

**Theology: loving God with the mind**

Even though some Christians hold governing positions which give them official responsibilities for doctrine and others work in theology as a professional vocation, all the faithful engage, with varying degrees of competence, in theological and doctrinal work. When carried out within the discipline of the historic and contemporary community of faith, this is not a private or individualistic exercise; rather, believers make a responsible personal appropriation of the gospel and apply it to their lives and circumstances. This active learning places them not simply among the taught but within the teaching church, serving their fellow members, edifying the entire body, and bearing witness to people outside.

In the early church, the outstanding theologians were almost always pastoral bishops. In the Middle Ages, however, an increasing professionalization of the theological schools took place, even as the rising universities remained under episcopal oversight. Modernity brought a gradual secularization to the academy, so that scholars in theology became assimilated to colleagues in other faculties and adopted their procedures. Theologians often found themselves working at a distance both from ecclesiastical authorities and from the spiritual life of their local congregations (even though many of them maintained a personal piety). Theology itself was divided into subdisciplines; the most serious divisions were probably that between scripture and systematics, and that between scripture and systematics, on the one hand, and “practical theology” on the other. On all sides and from all directions, it appeared difficult to bring a faithful intellectual contribution to bear in a coordinated way on performing the perennial tasks of Christian doctrine.

Nevertheless, the 20th century also produced figures who, by virtue of the volume, range, cohesiveness, and conceptual power of their classically configured theological work, may be accorded an honoured place in doctrinal history. They include Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–88) and Karl Rahner (1904–84) among Catholics, Karl Barth (1886–1968) and Wolfhart Pannenback (born 1928) among Protestants, and Georges Florovsky (1893–1979) among Orthodox. Also of note is Lesslie Newbiggin (1909–98), a bishop of the Church of South India, missionary for the Church of Scotland, apologist, and teacher reminiscent of patristic times.

**Symbolics: creeds and confessions**

In the various communities that claim to be part of historic Christianity, the concise and comprehensive statement of Christian doctrine that is most widely recognized is the Nicene Creed. In 1982 the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches recognized that the Apostles’ Creed was the baptismal symbol (creed) used throughout the West but took the Nicene Creed as the “theological and methodological tool” to “identify the fundamentals of the apostolic faith which should be explored.” The commission recognized that the Nicene Creed has been universally accepted as containing the essential teachings of the faith and that the faith stated by the creed is shared by some “non-creedal churches” that are wary of “fixed” or “imposed” forms. The creed “thus serves to indicate whether the faith as set forth in modern situations is the same faith as the one the Church confessed through the centuries.” It might also have been said, in reverse, that the creed summarizes the faith from which Christians start in preaching the gospel today.

Confessing the One Faith (1991), the document that the Faith and Order Commission placed before the member churches, works through each section and clause of the creed. The creed’s phraseology is elucidated in terms of “its biblical witness” and, where necessary, in terms of the 4th-century controversies that prompted the introduction of certain technical formulations. The creed’s affirmations are then explicated in the face of contemporary “challenges,” which include the problem that the original language and philosophy in which the creeds were formulated are no longer those of the present day, the issue of the affirmation and appreciation of old and new traditions.

In response to atheism and secularism, the Faith and Order document, which is much indebted in this section to Wolfhart Pannenback, proclaims that “the world of finite things and the secular social system both lack ultimate meaning and purpose without a transcendent reality as their basis.” The commission further asserts that the proper response to some Asian and African religious beliefs, which find the Christian doctrine of God too abstract and divorced from everyday life, is not to be found in pantheism but rather in “the concreteness of the One God… in the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” as this occurs in “the history of salvation,” which is the basis for faith in the eternal Trinity. Moreover, the doctrine of the Trinity offers a consistent monotheism because it incorporates the principle of plurality and diversity within the unity of God.

Regarding “the Father almighty,” Confessing the One Faith argues that it is necessary to speak of the Father together with the Son in order to prevent the emergence of either a trivial or a sentimental view of divine fatherhood or of a view of the Father’s power as arbitrary. The term Father is to be retained because it is the name by which Jesus as the incarnate Son addressed him and because it defines the relationships within the Trinity as well as those between God and humankind. As an image, the divine fatherhood designates also the providential care and compassion of God, which may also contain motherly aspects. In relation to humankind, “God embraces, fulfills and
Development: the maturation of understanding

It took some 350 years to get from the apostolic age to the doctrinal formulations of the Nicene Creed. The question thus arises whether a process of development was taking place. If so, what kinds of development were they? What was their significance, both for the substantive issues affected and for the way in which the formative period is viewed by subsequent generations of Christians? And is a principle of development allowed or established that may then be applied to other issues and at other times?

As the 2nd century turned into the 3rd, both Irenaeus, in Against Heresies, and Tertullian, in On the Prescription of Heretics, in reference to the variability, innovations, and secretiveness of the teaching of the so-called gnostics, pointed to the constant and public teaching given throughout the church, notably in the apostolic sees, and most particularly in Rome, where the church was founded by Peter and Paul. In setting out the “rule of faith,” Irenaeus combines a recital of the mighty acts of God in creation and history with the threefold structure of the divine Name in which baptism is administered (Matthew 28:19, and the baptismal profession found in the Apostolic Tradition).

The rule of faith outlined by Irenaeus and Tertullian remains the formal pattern of the Nicene Creed. However, the evolution of doctrine between their time and the 4th-century councils of Nicaea and Constantinople is suggested by the insertions that the two councils made in the older texts concerning the essential being of the Son (“God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father”) and of the Holy Spirit (“the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified”). These steps were taken in order to safeguard the established soteriological understandings and liturgical practices against rather blatant distortions of the apostolic message, and as a result of the exploration of previously unposed or unsettled questions and the intellectual and spiritual energy of successive generations in applying the inherited faith within their cultural circumstances.

This was the kind of process that John Henry Newman called “the development of an idea.” As noted in his Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine, a “great idea” takes a “longer time and deeper thought for [its] full elucidation,” but this process of “germination and maturation” will be a “development” only if “the assemblage of aspects, which constitute its ultimate shape, really belongs to the idea from which they start.” “Young birds do not grow into fishes,” said Newman in that work.

Newman also thought that such a development would continue, and he left the Anglican church for the Roman Catholic Church in 1845 because he judged that the latter best embodied such a development. It would in fact be developmental grounds that provided a theological justification for the doctrines of Mary’s Immaculate Conception (defined in 1854) and heavenly assumption (defined in 1950). The declaration of these teachings was held to make explicit things that were implicit in the apostolic witness but had required centuries of devotional practice and speculative reasoning to be brought out. Newman also considered that an infallible teaching office lay in the origins and logic of a developmental Christianity—indeed with a Roman focus, although he questioned the “opportunity” of its dogmatization in 1869–70, which in substance attributed that function to the pope without a general council.

The Eastern Orthodox churches also accept a development of doctrine beyond Nicaea I and Constantinople I, embracing not only the Council of Ephesus in 431 (as do the Oriental Orthodox churches) but also the Councils of Chalcedon, Constantinople II and III, and Nicaea II. The later councils are viewed as having clarified and explicated, but not altered, the teachings of the earlier councils. Thus, Nicaea II, for instance, in deciding for the veneration of icons, was being true to the dogmas of the one person and two natures of Christ. The Eastern churches also hold to the infallibility of the church, thanks to its divine foundation and guidance by the Son and the Spirit and the pastoral oversight of its bishops in faithful succession. They do not, however, judge that the conditions have been met for the meeting of an ecumenical council after Nicaea II and the reception of its teaching by the whole body of the faithful. This has not stopped certain “doctrinal developments” from being widely regarded as legitimate and commendable. An example is the reception of the teaching of Gregory Palamas (14th century), who identified the “uncreated light” manifested at the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor with the “divine energies” by which Christian believers are savagely “defied” (an inner transformation mystically uniting God and the individual).

The Protestant reformers in the 16th century attempted to undo what they regarded as false developments (“corruptions,” in Newman’s terminology) in the Western church. They wished to go back—not so much historically as theologically—to Scripture, especially in matters of applied soteriology (though in matters of Christology and the Trinity they remained under the guidance of the councils of the 4th and 5th centuries). Modern progressive Protestants sometimes try to reclaim the notion of development to justify certain recent shifts that others would regard as deviations or degeneration.

Schism: division over substantial matters

Believing that divine truth and human salvation are at stake, Christians take the formulation of doctrine with the utmost seriousness. Ecclesiology, in which the church itself is the topic of study, is integral to the process, for it addresses the nature, identity, and location of “the church” as the body that receives the revelation, transmits the message, and incorporates believers into its community. When differences arise among Christians on substantial matters, they may fall into division for the sake, as each side sees it, of truth and salvation. As long as parties to the conflict remain within hailing distance of each other, they continue the controversy and hope nevertheless to achieve reconciliation in the truth, for it belongs to salvation that Christ’s disciples should live together in unity.

Schisms have occurred for a variety of reasons. First, certain decisions made by general councils have not been accepted by all sides in dispute at the time. Institutionally, the longest-lasting divisions of this kind have been between those churches which rejected the Christological decisions of Ephesus in 431 (denounced as Nestorians by their opponents but self-designated the Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East) or of Chalcedon in 451 (denounced as monophysites by their opponents but referring to themselves as a communion of “non-Chalcedonian” or “Oriental Orthodox” churches) and those churches that abide by Ephesus and Chalcedon, namely the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches.

Second, Christians have divided as a result of the breakdown of apparent consensus. This happened between the Byzantine East and the Roman West in the early Middle Ages. While linguistic, political, and cultural factors certainly played a part, irreducibly doctrinal matters were also involved. The West was uneasy with the Eastern understanding of the decisions of Chalcedon concerning the natures of Christ. The Carolingian Council of Frankfurt (794) feared that the “Eastern” Council of Nicaea II had sanctioned the veneration of images beyond due limits. The gravest matter, however, concerned the insertion of the word Filioque into the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed, whereby the Western churches had come to confess that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father “and from the Son.” The word was introduced—probably as an anti-Arian move—by the regional Council of Toledo in 589 and later spread throughout the Frankish empire; Rome adopted it only in 1014. The Orthodox East objected formally to the unilateral alteration of the creed and materially to a teaching that seemed to them to fuse the Father and the Son into a single principle. In 1054 the bishops of Rome and Constantinople engaged in a mutual excommunication because of theological differences and the refusal of Constantinople to accept Roman claims of primacy. The excommunications, which effectively divided the East and the West, were “erased from memory and the midst of the Church” by Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I of Constantinople in 1965, but their two churches are not yet in ecclesiastical communion.

Third, what Jeffrey Burton Russell, the noted historian of the medieval church, calls “dissent” from “order” in the medieval West generally occurred less on the
intellectual plane than as an attempt at moral and institutional reform. Nevertheless, what were labeled with the rather elastic term “heresies” sometimes had doctrinal import. Reforming movements often arose in monastic or lay circles, perhaps against a background of apocalyptic impatience with the present world, and they could be domesticated by “the authorities,” so that even popes could espouse reform. Few long-lasting schisms took place along these lines (though the Waldenses and the Hussites have survived as separate bodies). On the doctrinal level, the greatest potential for disruption resided in the reformers’ claims of new inspiration by the Holy Spirit, which was sometimes mediated through new interpretations of Scripture. The role of the Holy Spirit was elevated by Joachim of Fiore (c. 1130/35–1201/02) to a re-periodization of the history of salvation, in which the impending “age of the Spirit” would follow on those of the Father and the Son.

Whether positively or negatively, some have interpreted the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century as the last of the medieval reform movements. The Protestant reformers were concerned with matters of doctrine and viewed the condition and practices of contemporary Christendom as the disfiguring outcrop of distorted understandings of God, humankind, and salvation. Liturgical features of the mass (connected above all with its sacrificial character), the intercession and relics of the saints, purgatory and indulgences—all appeared to require the reaffirmation of Christ alone (against the mediation of church or saints), grace alone (against merit), faith alone (against works, though not as the fruit of faith), and Scripture alone (as norma normans; “the norm that norms,” or “ultimate standard”) over any subordinate standards in tradition. The response of the “papal church” was neither quick enough nor far-reaching enough for the reformers, who therefore each carried out their confessional, liturgical, catechetical, and institutional programs in their respective territorial areas. Although various families of Protestant churches formed themselves (Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican), they usually were not in full ecclesiastical communion with each other; the separating factors were chiefly differences over the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper and over the pastoral and governmental structures of the church.

The emergence of new issues is yet another circumstance that may cause division among Christians. Heavy debate has attended the relation between the Christian doctrine of creation and the cosmological and evolutionary theories of the natural sciences. Although no major ecclesiastical schisms have taken place directly over these questions, shifts in worldview fostered by the rise of the sciences may underlie some of the doctrinal tensions in modern Christianity.

At the beginning of the 21st century, it seemed that three issues in particular might cause division. First, the ordination of women to the presbyterate and then to the episcopate in the last quarter of the 20th century resulted in an “impairment of communion” within and among the provinces of Anglicanism, and it further complicated the relationships between Protestant churches on the one hand and Catholic and Orthodox on the other. Second, the question of the acceptability or not of homosexual practices is agitating many Western churches and disturbing relationships within their global ecclesiastical families. Third, a study text of the World Council of Churches’ Faith and Order Commission, The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement (1998), signals that “some churches” are asking whether it is necessarily “church-dividing” to “confess Christ only as one mediator among others.” Certainly, the relation between Christ—scripturally and traditionally preached by Christians as the unique and universal Saviour—and the religions into which most of humankind is grouped is an important issue.

Controversy: fighting over the faith

Controversies have always preceded schisms but have not necessarily resulted in them. After a division, the contesting parties seek to consolidate their respective positions, both among their supporters and against their opponents, so that doctrine takes on an apologetic character even between Christians and acquires—on the assumption that attack is the best form of defense—a polemical edge. As a result, the teaching of each community sometimes suffers through the exaggeration of certain features and the neglect of others.

One controversy that led to schism is the debate between East and West concerning the Spirit’s procession. The Eastern churches have long suspected that the West’s error resides in giving an “Augustinian” priority to an undifferentiated divine essence that in fact renders the distinct persons nonessential to the Godhead. The West, meanwhile, has suspected that the East, by holding to the Father (alone) as “the fount of deity,” may never have overcome the “Arian” subordination of the other two persons of the Godhead.

The other main issue between East and West has concerned the status of Rome. Although the East has recognized that Rome enjoyed a certain “primacy of honour” among the other patriarchal sees of the first millennium (Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem), it considers hypertrophic the development by which Rome dogmatized its own claim to universal jurisdiction and an infallible teaching authority.

In the 16th century, Luther’s pugnacity on behalf of his rediscovered gospel expressed itself in combative writings aimed at various targets. The most decisive of those aimed at Rome was the treatise On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church (1520), which attacked the current sacramental system and left Christ himself as the sole sacrament in the scriptural sense (cf. 1 Timothy 3:16) and baptism and the Lord’s Supper as his “sacramental signs.” Luther also attacked the “enthusiasts” among the would-be reformers; at the colloquy of Marburg (1529), rejecting the teachings of Huldrych Zwingli, he proclaimed the existence of the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper with a literal est (“This is my body”). Luther approved the relatively conciliatory Confession of Augsburg (1530), but the Schmalkaldic Articles of 1537 turned fiercely against Rome, which responded at the Council of Trent (1545–63), where it asserted the validity of traditional Catholic teachings in areas of conflict—salvation, sacraments, ecclesiology—and anathematized any who should hold positions that it perceived to exist in Protestantism.

The confessional documents of the Reformation churches typically combined a reaffirmation of the Trinitarian and Christological doctrines of the ancient councils and creeds with a new statement of scriptural soteriology against the current understanding and practice of the Roman Church. They also treated questions of authority, government, and discipline. In sacramental doctrine, the Reformation confessions not only state disagreement with Rome but also reveal certain differences among the various Reformation churches.

Interconfessional polemics became built into standard works of theological instruction. A perduring example was Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion (final edition 1559). From the Catholic side, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet displayed what he saw as the inconsistencies of Protestantism in his History of the Variations of the Protestant Churches (1688).

Nevertheless, the European “Wars of Religion” of the 16th and 17th centuries resulted, if only by reaction and at a geographically variable pace, in the growth of civil tolerance. An admixture of other cultural factors led to a certain moderation of confessional claims at the intellectual level also; exemplary in this regard would be the German philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81). Eventually, the divided churches realized that the task of evangelization, in relation both to domestic secularization and to the global mission, called them to a mutual reconciliation that lay in the nature of the gospel.

An instance of emergent ecumenism, which developed into a broad movement in the 20th century, is found in John Wesley’s Letter to a Roman Catholic (1749) and his sermon Catholic Spirit (1750). Not only on the basis of the universal Creator and Redeemer common to all humanity but also on the grounds of a shared Christian faith (which he set forth as an expansion upon the Nicene Creed), Wesley invited Catholics and Protestants to join in a “union in affection” in which they might “help each other on in whatever we are agreed leads to the Kingdom,” even if differences in “opinions,” “modes of worship,” and church government prevent “an entire external union.”

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Ecumenism: speaking the truth in love

By the 20th century the ecumenical movement had become perhaps the single most prominent feature of contemporary Christian history. Doctrinal conversations were held at the multilateral level under the heading of Faith and Order and at the bilateral level between particular pairs among the global confessional families or communions. They often started as what might be called “comparative symbolics”—the matching of existing confessional statements—but they then moved into a concentration on the dogmatic topic in hand.

Although the ecumenical patriarchy of Constantinople, which holds honorary primacy within Eastern Orthodoxy, took a significant first step by its proposal of a “league of churches” in 1920, the ecumenical movement was largely Protestant in its origins. The Roman see suspected “religious indifferentism” (as indicated in Pius XI’s encyclical of 1928, Mortalium animos [“On Religious Unity”]) and was hesitant to join the movement. But pioneering efforts in “spiritual ecumenism,” followed by mid-century convergences at the scholarly level, prepared for the official entrance of the Roman Catholic Church on the ecumenical scene with the holding of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II; 1966–65). When, after some 50 years as the principal carrier of the ecumenical banner, the World Council of Churches suffered some decline, Pope John Paul II in his encyclical Ut unum sint (1995; “That They May Be One”) reaffirmed the “irrevocable commitment” of the Catholic church to the ecumenical cause of Christian unity for the sake of obedience to Christ’s will and the truth and spread of the gospel: “that they may be one, that the world may believe” (John 17:17–23), and “all for the glory of the Father,” as John Paul noted, summarizing the meaning of the gospel passage.

The ecumenical spirit even spread to relations between Catholic and Orthodox churches on one side and the Oriental Orthodox churches on the other. Some of the Oriental Orthodox churches, most notably the Armenian Apostolic Church, had been founding members of the World Council of Churches in 1948. Beginning in the mid-20th century, the Eastern Orthodox churches and the Roman Catholic Church each undertook independent efforts at dialogue to mend the ancient rift that followed the Council of Chalcedon. The Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox churches reached theological agreement that they shared the same Christological faith despite terminological differences over “one nature” or “two natures.” Somewhat similarly, the Roman see reached agreement with the Oriental Orthodox churches that the ancient conflict over perceived differences in Christology had been largely a “verbal” matter, and the two parties even approved mutual sacramental ministry in cases of pastoral emergency. Since 1970 the Vatican and the leaders of four of the six Oriental Orthodox churches (Armenian Apostolic, Syriac Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, and Malankara Syrian [Indian]) have issued joint declarations about a shared Christian vision, and the Catholic church has held joint meetings with all six churches every January since 2004. Individual Oriental Orthodox churches have engaged in occasional dialogues with the Assyrian Church of the East and with various Protestant bodies.

Despite such overtures, however, there remain traditionalists on each side who reject ecumenism.

The Filioque dispute between East and West, which originated in the 8th century, seemed on the way to resolution through theological work associated with the Faith and Order Commission study, Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ (1981): mutually acceptable understandings were approached through formulations such as “the Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son” or “from the Father of the Son.” The Catholic and Orthodox churches began a bilateral dialogue after Vatican II over a broader range of dogmatic topics, although it was recognized that each of the two churches would have to modify its claim to constitute the one Church of Christ if they were to be reunited.

The Faith and Order Commission study that attracted the greatest degree of participation from the widest range of churches was Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (1982), whose initial reception was remarkably positive. On the touchstone question of the Eucharist, the study affirmed the “real, living, and active presence” of Christ but hardly settled the centuries-old controversies over the manner of that presence in relation to the bread and wine.

On All Saints’ Eve, 1999, the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification was signed in Augsburg, Germany, by representatives of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation. By declaring that the mutual condemnations of the 16th century did not apply to the teaching on justification as now stated together (with tolerable nuances of detail on either side), Lutherans and Catholics proclaimed what may have been the key issue of the Reformation settled, even if other doctrinal and institutional matters needed to be resolved before full reconciliation could take place.

In multilateral terms, Pope John Paul II, in the encyclical Ut unum sint, noted the considerable ecumenical progress made in the second half of the 20th century on doctrinal questions and then listed five topics that required further study: (1) “the relationship between Sacred Scripture, as the highest authority in matters of faith, and Sacred Tradition, as indispensable to the interpretation of the Word of God,” (2) “the Eucharist, as the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, an offering of praise to the Father, the sacrificial memorial and Real Presence of Christ, and the sanctifying outpouring of the Holy Spirit,” (3) “ordination, as a sacrament, to the threefold ministry of the episcopate, presbyterate and diaconate,” (4) “the Magisterium of the Church, entrusted to the Pope and the Bishops in communion with him, understood as a responsibility and an authority exercised in the name of Christ for teaching and safeguarding the faith,” and (5) “the Virgin Mary, as Mother of God and Icon of the Church, the spiritual Mother who intercedes for Christ’s disciples and for all humanity.” John Paul II invited “the leaders of other churches and their theologians” to engage with him “in a patient and fraternal dialogue” on the claims of the primatial Roman see to a universal ministry of unity. He felt his own responsibility “in acknowledging the ecumenical aspirations of the majority of the Christian Communities and in heeding the request made of me to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation.”

The challenge facing the established churches in remaining committed to their traditional mission while responding to changing circumstances may become further evident in the 21st century with the global burgeoning of Pentecostal and charismatic churches that have had little to do with existing institutions but display many features of historical Christianity. (See below Ecumenism.

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God the Father

On the basis of their religious experiences, the mystics of Christianity of all eras have concurred in the belief that one can make no assertions about God, because God is beyond all concepts and images. Inasmuch as human beings are gifted with reason, however, the religious experience of transcendence demands historical clarification. Thus, in Christian theology two tendencies stand in constant tension with each other. On the one hand, there is the tendency to systematize the idea of God as far as possible. On the other, there is the tendency to eliminate the accumulated collection of current conceptions of God and to return to the understanding of his utter transcendence. Theologians, by and large, have had to acknowledge the limits of human reason and language to address the “character” of God, who is beyond normal human experience but who impinges on it. But because of the divine–human contact, it became necessary and possible for them to make some assertions about the experience, the disclosure, and the character of God.

All great epochs of the history of Christianity are defined by new forms of the experience of God and of Christ. Rudolf Otto, an early 20th-century German theologian, attempted to describe to some extent the basic ways of experiencing the transcendence of the “holy.” He called these the experience of the “numinous” (the spiritual dimension), the utterly ineffable, the holy, and the overwhelming. The “holy” is manifested in a double form: as the mysterium tremendum (“mystery that repels”), in which the dreadful, fearful, and overwhelming aspect of the numinous appears, and as the mysterium fascinosum (“mystery that attracts”), by which humans are irresistibly drawn to the glory, beauty, adorable quality, and the blessing, redeeming, and salvation-bringing power of transcendence. All of these features are present in the
Christian concepts of God as explicated in the ever new experiences of the charismatic leaders.

Characteristic features of the Christian concept of God

Within the Christian perception and experience of God, characteristic features stand out: (1) the personality of God, (2) God as the Creator, (3) God as the Lord of history, and (4) God as Judge. (1) God, as person, is the “I am who I am” designated in Exodus 3:14. The personal consciousness of human beings awakens in the encounter with God understood as a person: “The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Exodus 33:11). (2) God is also viewed as the Creator of heaven and earth. The believer thus maintains, on the one hand, acknowledgement of divine omnipotence as the creative power of God, which also operates in the preservation of the world, and, on the other hand, trusts in the world, which—despite all its contradictions—is understood as one world created by God according to definite laws and principles and according to an inner plan. The decisive aspect of creation, however, is that God fashioned human beings according to the divine image and made the creation subject to them. This special position of humans in the creation, which makes them coworkers of God in the preservation and consummation of the creation, brings a decisively new characteristic into the understanding of God. (3) This new characteristic is God as the Lord of history, which is the main feature of the Old Testament understanding of God: God selects a special people and contracts a special covenant with them. Through the Law (Torah) the divine agent binds this “people of God” in a special way. God sets before them a definite goal of salvation—the establishment of a divine dominion—and through the prophets admonishes the people by proclamations of salvation and calamity whenever they are unfaithful to the covenant and promise. (4) This God of history also is the God of judgment. The Israelite belief that the disclosure of God comes through the history of divinely led people leads, with an inner logic, to the proclamation of God as the Lord of world history and as the Judge of the world.

The specific concept of God as Father

What is decisively new in the Christian, New Testament faith in God lies in the fact that this faith is so closely bound up with the person, teaching, and work of Jesus Christ that it is difficult to draw boundaries between theology (doctrines of God) and Christology (doctrines of Christ). The special relationship of Jesus to God is expressed through his designation of God as Father. In prayers Jesus used the Aramaic word abba ("father") for God, which is otherwise unusual in religious discourse in Judaism; it was usually employed by children for their earthly father. This father–son relationship became a prototype for the relationship of Christians to God. Appeal to the sonship of God played a crucial role in the development of Jesus’ messianic self-understanding. According to the account of Jesus’ baptism, Jesus understood his sonship when a voice from heaven said: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” In The Gospel According to John, this sonship constitutes the basis for the self-consciousness of Jesus: “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30).

The belief in the oneness of the Father and the Son

Faith in the Son also brought about a oneness with the Father. The Son became the mediator of the glory of the Father to those who believe in him. In Jesus’ high priestly prayer (in John, chapter 17) he says: “The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one.” In the Lord’s Prayer Jesus taught his disciples to address God as “our Father.”

The Father-God of Jesus after Jesus’ death and Resurrection becomes—for his disciples—the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (e.g., 2 Corinthians 1:3), who revealed his love through the sacrifice of his Son who was sent into the world. Faithful Christians can thus become the children of God, as noted in Revelation 21:7: “I will be his God and he shall be my son.” For Christians, therefore, faith in God is not a doctrine to be detached from the person of Jesus Christ.

Medieval theologians often spoke of a “Beatific Vision,” a blessed vision of God. In the history of Christian mysticism, this visionary experience of the transpersonal “Godhead” behind the personal “God” (as in the works of the medieval German mystic Meister Eckhart)—also called an experience of the “trans-deity,” the “divine ground,” “groundlessness,” the “abyss,” and the divine “nothingness”—constantly breaks through and is renewed. Occasionally, this experience of transpersonal divine transcendence has directed itself against the development of a piety that has banalized the personal idea of God so much so that the glory and holiness of God has been trivialized. The attempt of the 20th-century theologian Paul Tillich to reduce the Christian idea of God to the impersonal concept of “the Ground of Being,” or “Being Itself,” pointed toward an understanding of the pre-personal depths of the transcendence of Godhood.

Nevertheless, in the Christian understanding of Christ as being one with the Father, there is a possibility that faith in God will be absorbed in a “monochristism”—i.e., that the figure of the Son in the life of faith will overshadow the figure of the Father and thus cause it to disappear and that the figure of the Creator and Sustainer of the world will recede behind the figure of the Redeemer. Thus, the primacy of Christology and of the doctrine of justification in Reformation theology led to a depreciation of the creation doctrine and a Christian cosmology. This depreciation accelerated the estrangement between theology and the sciences during the period of the Enlightenment. This was subsequently distorted into a form of materialism. On the other hand, some 20th-century dialectical theologians, among them Karl Barth, in opposing materialism and humanism sometimes evoked a monochristic character that strongly accentuated the centrality of Christ at the expense of some cultural ties.

The revelatory character of God

The God of the Bible is the God who presses toward revelation. The creation of the world is viewed as an expression of God’s will toward self-revelation, for even the pagans “knew God.” In Paul’s so-called Areopagus speech in Athens, he said of God: “Yet he is not far from each one of us, for ‘in him we live and move and have our being,’” in allusion to the words of the pagan writer Aratus: “For we are indeed his offspring” (Acts 17:27–28). This was the beginning of a knowledge of God that has survived as one strand of theory throughout history and as the Judge of the world.

The God of history and as the Judge of the world.

Hellenistic thinkers had already been attracted by the emphasis in later Judaism on monotheism and transcendence. This tendency was sketched out earlier in Plato and later Stoicism, but it came to its mature development in Neoplatonism in the 3rd century ad. In the 1st century Philo of Alexandria interpreted the Hebrew Bible’s concept of God in terms of the Logos idea of Greek philosophy, but this Hellenization led to a tension that was to dominate the entire further history of Christian piety, as well as the Western history of ideas. The Greeks traced the idea of God to a “first cause” that stood behind all other causes and effects. Theologians under their influence used this understanding to contribute to a doctrine of God as “first cause” in Christian theology.

God as Creator, Sustainer, and Judge
The biblical understanding of God, however, was based on the idea of the freedom of the Creator, Sustainer, and Judge and included the concept that God could suspend the natural order or break the causal chain through miracles. This led theologians to two specific problems: (1) the attempt to prove the existence of God, and (2) the attempt to justify God in view of both the apparent shortcomings of the creation and the existence of evil in history (i.e., the problem of theodicy). Both attempts have occupied the intellectual efforts of Western theologians and have inspired the highest of intellectual achievements. These attempts, however, often presumed that human reason could define the transcendent. Although theologians creatively addressed the issue, it was often simple Christian piety that served to guard the notion of transcendence, while concentrating on the historical revelation of God in the more accessible instrument of God’s self-disclosure in Jesus Christ.

Efforts to explain the ways of God to humans, particularly in respect to the problem of the existence of evil, are called theodicy. This form of justification of God has addressed profound human impulses and has relied upon strenuous exercises of human reason, but it has also led to no finally satisfying conclusions. The problem, which was already posed by St. Augustine of Hippo and treated in detail by Thomas Aquinas, became of pressing importance in Europe in the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48) and its aftermath. At that time Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who did more than anyone to develop the concept of theodicy, endeavoured to defend the Christian notion of God against the obvious atheistic consequences that were evoked by the critical thinkers of his time. The result of such theological efforts, however, was either to declare God himself as the originator of evil, to excuse evil as a consequence of divine “permission,” or instead—as with G.W.F. Hegel—to understand world history as the justification of God (“the true theodicy, the justification of God in history”). These answers did not always satisfy the Christian experience of faith. Many writers influenced by the Christian tradition have reacted against such justifications, most notably the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky in his treatment of the suffering of children in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879–80).

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant set the terms for much modern reflection on God’s existence when he challenged the grounds of most previous efforts to prove it. Kant contended that it was finally impossible for the human intellect to achieve insights into the realm of the transcendent. Even as he was arguing this, modern science was shifting from grounds that presumed the nature of God and God’s universe to autonomous views of nature that were grounded only in experiment, skepticism, and research. During the 19th century philosophers in Kantian and scientific traditions desired of the attempt to prove the existence of God.

During the same period some Western intellectuals turned against the very idea of God. One strand of Hegelian thinkers, typified by the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, attempted to unmask the idea of religion as illusion. To Feuerbach, faith was an ideology designed to help humans delude themselves. The idea of dialectical materialism, in which the concept of “spirit” was dropped by thinkers such as Karl Marx, developed in this tradition. It also characterized religion as “bad faith” or “the opiate of the people,” designed to seduce them from efforts to build a good society through the hope of rewards in a life to come.

At the same time, at first chiefly in Britain, scientific thinkers in the tradition of Charles Darwin hypothesized that evolutionary processes denied all biblical concepts of divine creation. Some dialectical materialists incorporated Darwinian theories in a frontal attack on the Christian worldview. Some Christians contended that this was a perversion of evolution, since certain Christian teachings on divine creation, such as creatio continua (“continuing creation”), were both biblical and compatible with evolutionary theory. At the turn of the 20th century, some thinkers in both Britain and the United States optimistically reworked their doctrine of God in congruence with evolutionary thought.

**The view that God is not solitary**

The leaders of an 18th-century movement called Deism saw God as impersonal and unempathic—a principle of order and agent of responsibility not personal or addressable as the Christian God had been. Deism contributed to some intellectualizations of the idea of God, approaches that had sometimes appeared in the more sterile forms of medieval Scholasticism. God appeared to have been withdrawn from creation, which was pictured as a world machine; this God, at best, observed its running but never intervened.

According to the original Christian understanding of God of the early church, the Middle Ages, and the Reformation, God neither is solitary nor wishes to be alone. Instead, God is encircled with a boundless realm of angels, created in the divine image. They surround God in freely expressed love and devotion. They appear in a graduated, individuated hierarchy. These ranks of angels offer God their praise, and they appear active in the universe as messengers and executors of the divine will. From the beginning God appears as the ruler and centre in this divinely fashioned realm, and the first created of this realm are the angels. The church of the angels is the upper church; the earthly church joins with them in the “cherubic hymn,” the Trisagion (“Holy, Holy, Holy”), at the epiphany of the Lord and with the angelic choirs surrounding him in the Eucharist. The earthly church is thus viewed as a participant—co-liturgist—in the angelic liturgy. Because the angels are created as free spiritual beings in accordance with the image of God, the first fall takes place in their midst—the first misuse of freedom was in the rebellion of the highest prince of the angels, Lucifer (“Light-Bearer”), against God.

According to the view of Christian thinkers from the early Fathers to the reformers of the 16th century, humans are only the second-created. The creation of human beings serves to refill the kingdom of God with new spiritual creatures who are capable of offering to God the free love that the rebellious angels have refused to continue. In the realm of the first-created creatures, there already commences the problem of evil, which appears immediately in freedom or the misuse of freedom.

**Modern views of God**

If 18th- and 19th-century rationalism and scientific attacks on the idea of God were often called “the first Enlightenment” or “the first illumination,” in the 20th century a set of trends appeared that represented, to a broader public, a “second illumination.” This included a rescue of the idea of God, even if it was not always compatible with previous Christian interpretations. Some notable scientists of the 20th century, such as Albert Einstein, Max Planck, Max Born, and others, allowed—on occasion, and against the testimony of the majority of their colleagues—for an idea of God or religion in their concepts of life, the universe, and human beings.

An influential rethinking of the concept of God was spurred by the Anglo-American mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, who developed a speculative metaphysical framework for his scientific study. For Whitehead, creativity is the first metaphysical principle. God was the first creature to emerge from it, and God’s own process of continually emerging into reality serves as the “divine lure” that guides and sustains everything else in creation. Some notable thinkers—such as the American philosopher and logician Charles Hartshorne, the American theologians Bernard M. Loomer and David Ray Griffin, and the Australian biologist Charles Birch—found such a “process philosophy” (a term coined after Whitehead’s death) amenable to their own worldviews and professional projects. Variations on what came to be called “process theism” promoted a vision according to which God was omnipresent and transcendent while also being immanent in such a way as to be intricately related to and bound up with creation.

When the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche prophesied what he called “the death of God,” many Christian thinkers agreed that a certain set of culturally conditioned and dogmatic concepts of God were inaccessible, implausible, and dying out. Some of these apologists argued that such a “death of God” was salutary, because it made room for a “God beyond the gods” of argument, or a “greater God.” Thomas J.J. Altizer became one of the most outspoken proponents of the so-called “Death of God Theology” in the mid-20th century. The French Jesuit thinker Pierre Teilhard de Chardin for a time attracted a large following as he set out to graft the theory of evolution onto “greater God” proclamations.
Satan and the origin of evil

In the Bible, especially the New Testament, Satan (the Devil) comes to appear as the representative of evil. Enlightenment thinkers endeavoured to push the figure of the Devil out of Christian consciousness as being a product of the fantasy of the Middle Ages. It is precisely in this figure, however, that some aspects of the ways God deals with evil are especially evident. The Devil first appears as an independent figure alongside God in the Hebrew Scriptures. There evil is still brought into a direct relationship with God. Even evil, insofar as it has power and life, is effected by God: “I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe, I am the Lord, who do all these things” (Isaiah 45:7).

In the Book of Job, Satan appears as the partner of God, who on behalf of God puts the righteous one to the test. Only in postbiblical Judaism does the Devil become the adversary of God, the prince of angels, who, created by God and placed at the head of the angelic hosts, entices some of the angels into revolt against God. In punishment for his rebellion, he is cast from heaven together with his mutinous entourage, which were transformed into demons. As ruler over the fallen angels, he continues the struggle against the kingdom of God by seeking to seduce humans into sin, by trying to disrupt God’s plan for salvation, and by appearing before God as a slanderer and accuser of saints, so as to reduce the number of those chosen for the kingdom of God.

Thus, Satan is a creature of God, who has his being and essence from God; he is the partner of God in the drama of the history of salvation; and he is the rival of God, who fights against God’s plan of salvation. Through the influence of the dualistic thinking of Zoroastrian religion during the Babylonian Exile (586–538 bc) in Persia, Satan took on features of a countergod in late Judaism. In the writings of the Qumrûn sects (who preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls), Belial, the “angel of darkness” and the “spirit of wickedness,” appears as the adversary of the “prince of luminaries” and the “spirit of truth.” The conclusion of the history of salvation is the eschatological battle of the prince of luminaries against Belial, which ends with judgment upon him, his angels, and people subject to him and ushers in the cessation of “worry, groaning, and wickedness” and the beginning of the rule of “truth.”

In the New Testament the features of an anti-godly power are clearly prominent in the figures of the Devil, Satan, Belial, and Beelzebub—the “enemy.” He is the accuser, the evil one, the tempter, the old snake, the great dragon, the prince of this world, and the god of this world, who seeks to hinder the establishment of God’s dominion through the life and suffering of Jesus Christ. Satan offers to give to Christ the riches of this world if Christ will acknowledge him as supreme lord. Thus, he is the real antagonist of the Messiah–Son of Man, Christ, who is sent by God into the world to destroy the works of Satan.

He is lacking, however, the possibility of incarnation: he is left to rob others in order to procure for himself the appearance of personality and corporeality. As opposed to philantropia, the love of humankind of Christ, who presents himself as an expiatory sacrifice for the sins of humankind out of love for it, Satan appears among early church teachers, such as Basil of Caesarea in the 4th century, as the misanthropos, the hater of humanity; vis-à-vis the bringer of heavenly beauty, he is the hater of beauty, the misokalos. With gnosticism (a loose movement of groups that postulated a transcendent god and a lesser, creator god), dualistic features also penetrated the Christian sphere of intuitive vision. In the Letter of Barnabas (early 2nd century), Satan appeared as “the Black One”; according to the 2nd-century apologist Athenagoras, he is “the one entrusted with the administration of matter and its forms of appearance,” “the spirit hovering above matter.” Under the influence of gnosticism and Manichaeism (a syncretistic religion founded by Mani, a 3rd-century Persian prophet), there also followed—based on their dualistic aspects—the demonization of the entirety of the sexual. This appears as the special temptational sphere of the Devil; in sexual activity, the role of the instrument of diabolic enticement devolves upon woman. Dualistic tendencies remained a permanent undercurrent in the church and determined, to a great extent, the understanding of sin and redemption. Satan remained the prototype of sin as the rebel who does not come to terms with fulfilling his godlikeness in love to his original image and Creator but instead desires equality with God and places love of self over love of God.

Among the early Church Fathers, the idea of Satan as the antagonist of Christ led to a mythical interpretation of the incarnation and disguise in the “form of a servant.” Through this disguise the Son of God makes his heavenly origin unrecognizable to Satan. In some medieval depictions Christ appears as the “bait” cast before Satan, after which Satan grasps because he believes Christ to be an ordinary human being subject to his power. In the Middle Ages a further feature was added: the understanding of the Devil as the “ape of God,” who attempts to imitate God through spurious, malicious creations that he interpolates for, or opposes to, the divine creations.

In the Christian historical consciousness the figure of Satan plays an important role, not least of all through the influence of the Revelation to John. The history of salvation is understood as the history of the struggle between God and the demonic antagonist, who with constantly new means tries to thwart God’s plan of salvation. The idea of the “stratagems of Satan,” as developed by a 16th-century fortress engineer, Giacomo Aconcio, had its roots here. This altercation constitutes the religious background of the drama of world history. Characteristic here is the impetus of acceleration already indicated in Revelation: blow and counterblow in the struggle taking place between God and Satan follow in ever shorter intervals, for the Devil “knows that his time is short” (Revelation 12:12), and his power in heaven has already been laid low. On earth the possibility of his efficacy is likewise limited by the return of the Lord. Hence, his attacks upon the elect of the kingdom so increase in the last times that God is moved to curtail the days of the final affliction, for “if those days had not been shortened, no human being would be saved” (Matthew 24:22). Many of these features were retained in the philosophy of religion of German idealism as well as in Russian philosophy of religion. According to the 20th-century Russian philosopher Nikolay Berdyaev, like the Germans Friedrich Schelling and Franz von Baader before him, the Devil has no true personality and no genuine reality and, instead, is filled with an insatiable “hunger for reality,” which he can attain by stealing reality from the people of whom he takes possession.

Since the Enlightenment, Christian theologians who found the mythical pictures of Satan to be irrelevant, distorting, or confusing in Christian thought and experience have set out to demythologize this figure. Apologists such as the British literary figure C.S. Lewis and the Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov, however, have written cautionary words against this trend. They conceive that it would represent the Devil’s most cunning attempt at self-camouflage to be demythologized and that camouflage would be a certain new proof of his existence.

God the Son

Dogmatic teachings about the figure of Jesus Christ go back to the faith experiences of the early church, whose faithful recognized the incarnate and resurrected Son of God in the person of Jesus. The disciples’ testimony served as confirmation for them that Jesus really is the exalted Lord and Son of God, who sits at the right hand of the Father and will return in glory to consummate the kingdom.

Different interpretations of the person of Jesus

Since the beginning of the church, different interpretations of the person of Jesus have existed alongside one another. The Gospel According to Mark, for example, understands Jesus as the man upon whom the Holy Spirit descends at the baptism in the Jordan River and about whom the voice of God declares from the heavens, “You are my beloved son” (Mark 1:11). The teaching in Mark’s Gospel provided the foundation for one of two early schools of thought concerning the person of Christ. Approaches to Christology, the doctrine of Christ, that derive from the theological school of Antioch have followed one line of interpretation: they proceed from the humanity of Jesus and view his divinity in his consciousness of God, founded in the divine mission that was imposed upon him by God through the infusion of the Holy Spirit.
Another view, adopted by the school of Alexandria, is expressed by the Gospel According to John, which regards the figure of Jesus Christ as the divine Logos ("Word") become flesh. There, the divinity of the person of Jesus is understood not as the endowment of the man Jesus with a divine power but rather as the result of the descent of the divine Logos—a preexistent heavenly being—into the world. According to that school, the Logos took on a human body of flesh so as to be realized in history. Thus, it was that the struggle to understand the figure of Jesus Christ created a rivalry between the theologies of Antioch and Alexandria. Both schools had a wide sphere of influence, not only among the contemporary clergy but also among the monks and the laity.

The Christological controversies

As in the area of the doctrine of the Trinity, the general development of Christology has been characterized by a plurality of views and formulations. Solutions intermedial between the positions of Antioch and Alexandria were constantly proposed. Two particular solutions became so controversial as to be deemed heretical. During the 5th century the position subsequently referred to by the mainstream of Christianity as Nestorianism, associated with Nestorius and placing strong emphasis upon the human aspects of Jesus Christ at the expense of his divine aspects, arose from the Antiochene school. The position known as monophysitism, associated with the monk Eutyches (and, according to some detractors, with Cyril of Alexandria) and placing strong emphasis upon the divine nature of Christ at the apparent expense of his humanity, emerged from the Alexandrian school. After the reign of Constantine, the Roman emperor who effectively made Christianity the religion of the empire, the great ecumenical synods occupied themselves essentially with the task of creating uniform formulations binding upon the entire imperial church. The Council of Chalcedon (451) finally settled the dispute between Antioch and Alexandria by drawing from each, declaring:

We all unanimously teach...one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, perfect in deity and perfect in humanity...in two natures, without being mixed, transmuted, divided, or separated. The distinction between the natures is not by any means done away with through the union, but rather the identity of each nature is preserved and concurrs into one person and being.

The Christological statement composed at Chalcedon did not resolve the dispute to everyone’s satisfaction, as certain eastern, “non-Chalcedonian,” churches felt that the council’s statement about the “identity of each nature” had strayed too close to the purported dyophysitism of Nestorius and therefore too far from what they perceived to have been the miaphysite Christology of Cyril.

Even the Christological formulas, however, do not claim to offer a rational conceptual clarification. Instead, they emphasize clearly three contentions in the mystery of the sonship of God. First, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is completely God, that in reality “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” in him (Colossians 2:9). Second, Jesus Christ is completely human. Third, those two “natures” do not exist beside another in an unconnected way but, rather, are joined in him in a personal unity. Once again, the Neoplatonic metaphysics of substance offered the categories so as to settle conceptually those various theological concerns. Thus, the idea of the unity of substance (homousia) of the divine Logos with God the Father assured the complete divinity of Jesus Christ, and the mystery of the person of Jesus Christ could be grasped in a complex but decisive formula: two natures in one person. The concept of person, taken from Roman law, served to join the fully divine and fully human natures of Christ into an individual unity.

Christology, however, is not the product of abstract logical operations but instead originates in the liturgical and charismatic sphere wherein Christians engage in prayer, meditation, and asceticism. Not being derived primarily from abstract teaching, it rather changes within the liturgy in new forms and in countless hymns of worship—as in the words of the Easter liturgy:

The king of the heavens appeared on earth out of kindness to man and it was with men that he associated. For he took his flesh from a pure virgin and he came forth from her, in that he accepted it. One is the Son, two-fold in essence, but not in person. Therefore in announcing him as in truth perfect God and perfect man, we confess Christ our God.

Messianic views

Faith in Jesus Christ is related in the closest way to faith in the Kingdom of God, the coming of which he proclaimed and introduced. Christian eschatological expectations, for their part, were joined with the messianic promises, which underwent a decisive transformation and differentiation in late Judaism, especially in the two centuries just before the appearance of Jesus. Two basic types can be distinguished as influencing the messianic self-understanding of Jesus as well as the faith of his disciples.

The traditional Jewish view of the fulfillment of the history of salvation was guided by the idea that at the end of history the messiah will come from the house of David and establish the Kingdom of God—an earthly kingdom in which the Anointed of the Lord will gather the tribes of the chosen people and from Jerusalem will establish a world kingdom of peace. Accordingly, the expectation of the Kingdom had an explicitly inner-worldly character. The expectation of an earthly messiah as the founder of a world kingdom became the strongest impulse for political revolutions, primarily against Hellenistic and Roman domination. The period preceding the appearance of Jesus was filled with uprisings in which new messianic personalities appeared and claimed for themselves and their struggles for liberation the miraculous powers of the Kingdom of God. Especially in Galilee, guerrilla groups were formed in which hope for a better future blazed all the more fiercely because the present was so unpromising.

Jesus disappointed the political expectations of those popular circles; he did not let himself be made a political messiah. Conversely, it was his opponents who used the political misinterpretation of his person to destroy him. Jesus was condemned and executed by the Roman authorities as a Jewish rioter who rebelled against Roman sovereignty. The inscription on the cross, “Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews,” cited the motif of political insurrection of a Jewish messianic king against the Roman government as the official reason for his condemnation and execution.

Alongside worldly or political messianism there was a second form of eschatological expectation. Its supporters were the pious groups in the country, the Essenes and the Qumran community on the Dead Sea. Their yearning was directed not toward an earthly messiah but toward a heavenly one, who would bring not an earthly but a heavenly Kingdom. Those pious ones wanted to know nothing of sword and struggle, uprising and rebellion. They believed that the wondrous power of God alone would create the new time. The birth of a new eon would be preceded by intense trials and tribulations and a frightful judgment upon the godless, the pagan peoples, and Satan with his demonic powers. The messiah would come not as an earthly king from the house of David but as a heavenly figure, as the Son of God, a heavenly being, who would descend into the world of the Evil One and there gather his own to lead them back into the realm of light. He would take up dominion of the world and, after overcoming all earthly and supernatural demonic powers, lay the entire cosmos at the feet of God.

A second new feature, anticipation of the Resurrection, was coupled with this transcending of the old expectation. According to traditional Jewish eschatological expectation, the beneficiaries of the divine development of the world would be only the members of the last generation of humanity who were fortunate enough to experience the arrival of the messiah upon earth; all earlier generations would be consumed with the longing for fulfillment but would die without experiencing it. The ancient Israelite religion that gave birth to Judaism knew no hope of resurrection, and the concept of the resurrection of the dead first appears in the Bible in the eschatological anticipation of the later chapters (composed c. 2nd century BCE) of the Book of Daniel. In connection with the transcending of the expectation of the...
Kingdom of God, however, even anticipations of resurrection voiced earlier by Zoroastrianism were achieved: the Kingdom of God was to include within itself in the state of resurrection all the faithful of every generation of humanity. Even the faithful of the earlier generations would find in resurrection the realization of their faith. In the new eon the Messiah would rule over the resurrected faithful of all times and all peoples. A characteristic breaking free of the eschatological expectation was thereby presented. It no longer referred exclusively to the Jews alone; with its transcendence a universalistic feature entered into it.

Jesus—in contrast to John the Baptist (a preacher of repentance who pointed to the coming bringer of the Kingdom)—knew himself to be the one who brought fulfillment of the Kingdom itself, because the wondrous powers of the Kingdom of God were already at work in him. He proclaimed the good news that the long-promised Kingdom was already dawning, that the consummation was here. That is what was new: the promised Kingdom, which was supraworldly and of the coming new eon, had already reached from beyond into this world in order to redeem it. This charismatic reality brought believers together in a new community.

Jesus did not simply transfer to himself the promise of the heavenly Son of man, as it was articulated in the apocryphal First Book of Enoch. Instead, he gave that expectation of the Son of man an entirely new interpretation. Pious Jewish circles, such as the Enoch community and other pietist groups, expected in the coming Son of man a figure of light from on high, a heavenly conquering hero, with all the marks of divine power and glory. Jesus, however, linked expectations of the Son of man with the figure of the suffering servant of God (as in chapter 53 of the Book of Isaiah). He would return in glory as the consummator of the Kingdom.

The doctrine of the Virgin Mary and holy Wisdom

The dogma of the Virgin Mary as both the “mother of God” and the “bearer of God” is connected in the closest way with the dogma of the incarnation of the divine Logos. The theoretical formulation of doctrine did not bring the veneration of the mother of God along in its train. Instead, the doctrine only reflected the unusually great role that this veneration already had taken on at an early date in the liturgy and in the church piety of orthodox faithful.

The expansion of the veneration of the Virgin Mary as the bearer of God (Theotokos) and the formation of the corresponding dogma constitute one of the most-astonishing occurrences in the history of the early church. The New Testament offers only scanty points of departure for that development. Although she has a prominent place in the narratives of the Nativity and the Passion of Christ, Mary completely recedes behind the figure of Jesus, who stands in the centre of all four Gospels. From the Gospels themselves it can be recognized that Jesus’ development into the preacher of the Kingdom of God took place in sharp opposition to his family, who were so little convinced of his mission that they held him to be insane (Mark 3:21); in a later passage Jesus refuses to recognize them (Mark 3:31). Accordingly, all the Gospels stress the fact that Jesus separated himself from his family. Even the Gospel According to John still preserved traces of Jesus’ tense relationship with his mother. Mary appears twice without being called by name the mother of Jesus, and Jesus himself regularly withholds from her the designation of mother.

Nevertheless, with the conception of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, a tendency developed early in the church to grant to the mother of the Son of God a special place within the church. That development was sketched quite hesitantly in the New Testament. Only the Gospels of Matthew and Luke mention the virgin birth. On those scanty presuppositions the later veneration of the mother of God of Mary was developed. The view of the virgin birth entered into the Apostle’s Creed and became one of the strongest religious impulses in the development of the dogma, liturgy, and ecclesiastical piety of the early church.

Veneration of the mother of God received its impetus when the Christian Church became the imperial church. Despite the lack of detail concerning Mary in the Gospels, cultic veneration of the divine virgin and mother found within the Christian Church a new possibility of expression in the worship of Mary as the virgin mother of God, in whom was achieved the mysterious union of the divine Logos with human nature. The spontaneous impulse of popular piety, which pushed in this direction, moved far in advance of the practice and doctrine of the church. In Egypt Mary was, at an early point, already worshipped under the title of Theotokos—an expression that Origen used in the 3rd century. The Council of Ephesus (431) raised that designation to a dogmatic standard. To the latter the second Council of Constantinople (553) added the title “eternal Virgin.”

The doctrine of the heavenly Wisdom (Sophia) represents an Eastern Church particularity. In late Judaism, speculations about the heavenly Wisdom—a figure beside God—occurred. The spontaneous impulse of popular piety, which pushed in this direction, moved far in advance of the practice and doctrine of the church. In Egypt Mary was, at an early point, already worshipped under the title of Theotokos—an expression that Origen used in the 3rd century. The Council of Ephesus (431) raised that designation to a dogmatic standard. To the latter the second Council of Constantinople (553) added the title “eternal Virgin.”

Contradictory aspects of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is one of the most elusive and difficult themes in Christian theology, because it refers to one of the three persons in the Godhead but does not evoke concrete images the way “Father” or “Creator” and “Son” or “Redeemer” do. A characteristic view of the Holy Spirit is sketched in The Gospel According to John: the outpouring of the Holy Spirit takes place only after the Ascension of Christ; it is the beginning of a new time of salvation, in which the Holy Spirit is sent as the Paraclete (Counsellor) to the church remaining behind in this world. The phenomena described in John, which are celebrated in the church at Pentecost, are understood as the fulfillment of this promise. With this event (Pentecost), the church entered into the period of the Holy Spirit.

The essence of the expression of the Holy Spirit is free spontaneity. The Spirit blows like the wind, “where it wills,” but where it blows it establishes a firm norm by virtue of its divine authority. The spirit of prophecy and the spirit of knowledge (gnōsis) are not subject to the will of the prophet; revelation of the Spirit in the prophetic word or in the word of knowledge becomes Holy Scripture, which as “divinely breathed” “cannot be broken” and lays claim to a lasting validity for the church.

The Spirit, which is expressed in the various officeholders of the church, likewise founds the authority of ecclesiastical offices. The laying on of hands, as a sign of the transference of the Holy Spirit from one person to another, is a characteristic ritual that visibly represents and guarantees the continuity of the working of the Spirit in the officeholders chosen by the Apostles. It is, in other words, the sacramental sign of the succession of the full power of spiritual authority of bishops and priests. The Holy Spirit also creates the sacraments and guarantees the constancy of their action in the church. All the expressions of church life—doctrine, office, polity, sacraments, power to loosen and to bind, and prayer—are understood as endowed by the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit, however, is also the revolutionizing, freshly creating principle in church history. All the reformational movements in church history, which broke with old institutions, have appealed to the authority of the Holy Spirit. Opposition to the church—through appeal to the Holy Spirit—became noticeable for the first time in Montanism, in the mid-2nd century. Montanus, a Phrygian prophet and charismatic leader, understood himself and the prophetic movement sustained by him as the fulfillment of the promise of the coming of the Paraclete. In the 13th century a spiritualistic countermovement against the institutional church gained attention anew in
Joachim of Fiore, who understood the history of salvation in terms of a continuing self-realization of the divine Trinity in the three times of salvation: (1) the time of the Father, (2) the time of the Son, and (3) the time of the Holy Spirit. He promised the speedy beginning of the period of the Holy Spirit, in which the institutional papal church, with its sacraments and its revelation hardened in the letter of scripture, would be replaced by a community of charismatic figures, filled with the Spirit, and by the time of “spiritual knowledge.” This promise became the spiritual stimulus of a series of revolutionary movements within the medieval church—e.g., the reform movement of the radical Franciscan spirituals. Their effects extended to the Hussite reform movement led by Jan Hus in 15th-century Bohemia and to the 16th-century radical reformer, Thomas Müntzer, who substantiated his revolution against the princes and clerical hierarchies with a new outpouring of the Spirit. Quakerism represents the most radical mode of rejection—carried out in the name of the freedom of the Holy Spirit—of all institutional forms, which are regarded as shackles and prisons of the Holy Spirit. In the 20th century a revival of charismatic forms of Christianity, called Pentecostalism and the charismatic movement, centred on the recovery of the experience of the Holy Spirit and necessitated some fresh theological inquiry about the subject.

**Conflict between order and charismatic freedom**

As the uncontrollable principle of life in the church, the Holy Spirit considerably upset Christian congregations from the very outset. Paul struggled to restrict the anarchist elements, which are connected with the appearance of free charismata (spiritual phenomena), and, over against these, to achieve a firm order in the church. Paul at times attempted to control and even repress charismatic activities, which he seemed to regard as irrational or prerational and thus potentially disruptive of fellowship. Among these were glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, a form of unexpressed speech. Paul preferred rational discourse in sermons. He also felt that spontaneity threatened the focus of worship, even though he himself claimed to possess this gift in extraordinary measure and the Apostles spoke in tongues at Pentecost. This tendency led to an emphasis on ecclesiastical offices with their limited authority vis-à-vis the uncontrollable appearance of free charismatic figures.

The conflict between church leadership resident in the locality and the appearance of free charismatic figures in the form of itinerant preachers forms the main motif of the oldest efforts to establish church order. This difficulty became evident in the Didachē, the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles (early 2nd century). The authority of the Holy Spirit, in whose name the free charismatic figures claim to speak, does not allow its instructions and prophecies to be criticized in terms of contents; its evaluation had to be made dependent upon purely ethical qualifications. This tension ended, in practical terms, with the exclusion of the free charismatic figures from the leadership of the church. The charismatic continuation of the revelation, in the form of new scriptures of revelation, was also checked. In the long historical process during which the Christian biblical canon took shape, Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, in his 39th Easter letter (367), selected the number of writings—of apostolic origin—that he considered “canonical.” Revelation in the form of Holy Scriptures binding for the Christian faith was thereby considered definitively concluded and, therefore, could no longer be changed, abridged, or supplemented.

The church creeds reflect little of these struggles and suppress the revolutionary principle of the Holy Spirit. Neither the so-called Apostles’ Creed nor the Nicene Creed goes beyond establishment of faith in the Holy Spirit and its participation in the incarnation. In the Nicene Creed, however, the Holy Spirit is also described as the life-creating power—i.e., the power both of creation and of rebirth—and is identified as having already spoken through the prophets.

The emergence of Trinitarian speculations in early church theology led to great difficulties in the article about the “person” of the Holy Spirit. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit appeared more as power than as person, though there was distinctive personal representation in the form of the dove at Jesus’ baptism. But it was difficult to incorporate this graphic or symbolic representation into dogmatic theology. Nevertheless, the idea of the complete essence (homoousia) of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son was achieved through the writings of Athanasius. This was in opposition to all earlier attempts to subordinate the Holy Spirit to the Son and to the Father and to interpret the Spirit—similarly to anti-Trinitarian Christology—as a prince of the angels. According to Athanasius, the Holy Spirit alone guarantees the complete redemption of humanity: “through participation in the Holy Spirit we partake of the divine nature.” In his work De Trinitate (“On the Trinity”), Augustine undertook to render the essence of the Trinity understandable in terms of the Trinitarian structure of the human person: the Holy Spirit appears as the Spirit of love, which joins Father and Son and draws people into this communion of love. In Eastern Orthodox thought, however, the Holy Spirit and the Son both proceed from the Father. In the West, the divine Trinity is determined more by the idea of the inner Trinitarian life in God; thus, the notion was carried through that the Holy Spirit goes forth from the Father and from the Son. Despite all the efforts of speculative theology, a graphic conception of the person of the Holy Spirit was not developed even later in the consciousness of the church.

**The operations of the Holy Spirit**

For the Christian faith, the Holy Spirit is clearly recognizable in charismatic figures (the saints), in whom the gifts of grace (charisma) of the Holy Spirit are expressed in different forms: reformers and other charismatic figures. The prophet, for instance, belongs to these charismatic types. The history of the church knows a continuous series of prophetic types, beginning with New Testament prophets, such as Agabus (in Acts 11:28), and continuing with the 12th-century monk Bernard of Clairvaux and such reformers as Luther and Calvin. Christoph Kotter and Nicolaus Drabicius—prophets of the Thirty Years’ War period—were highly praised by the 17th-century Moravian bishop John Amos Comenius. Other prophets have existed in Pietism, Puritanism, and the Free churches.

Prophetic women are especially numerous. In church history they begin with Anna (in Luke 2:36) and the prophetic daughters of the apostle Philip. Others are: Hildegard of Bingen, Bridget of Sweden, Joan of Arc, and the prophetic women of the Reformation period. In the modern world numbers of pioneers in the “holiness” and Pentecostal traditions, such as Aimee Semple McPherson, were women, and women’s gifts of prophecy have sometimes been cherished among Pentecostalists when they were overlooked or disdained by much of the rest of Christianity.

A further type of charismatic person is the healer, who functioned in the early church as an exorcist but who also emerged as a charismatic type in healing personalities of more recent church history (e.g., Vincent de Paul in the 17th century). Equally significant is the curer-of-souls type, who exercises the gift of “distinguishing between spirits” in daily association with people. This gift is believed to have been possessed by many of the great saints of all times. In the 19th century it stands out in Johann Christoph Blumhardt, in Protestantism, and in Jean-Baptiste Vianney, the curé of Ars, in Roman Catholicism.

The “holy fool” type conceals a radical Christianity under the mask of foolishness and holds the truth of the gospel, in the disguise of folly, before the eyes of highly placed personalities: the worldly and the princes of the church who do not brook unmasked truth. This type, which frequently appeared in the Byzantine Church, has been represented especially in Western Christianity by Philip Neri, the founder of the religious order known as the Oratorians, in the 16th century. In the 19th century a revival of charismatic forms of Christianity, called Pentecostalism and the charismatic movement, centred on the recovery of the experience of the Holy Spirit and necessitated some fresh theological inquiry about the subject.
The Holy Spirit that “blows where it wills” has often been recognized as the impulsion behind an enlargement of roles for women in the church. However limited these have been, they have long been upon those that Christians inherited from Judaism. Portions had screened women in a special left-hand section of the synagogue. While the pace of innovation was irregular, in the ecstatic worship services of the Christian congregations women tended to participate in speaking in tongues, hymns, prayer calls, or even prophecies. Evidently, this innovation was held admissible on the basis of the authority of the Holy Spirit: “Do not quench the Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 5:19). Inasmuch as the appearance of charismatic women upset traditional concepts, however, Paul reverted to the synagogal principle and inhibited the speaking role of women: “the women should keep silence in the churches.”(1 Corinthians 14:34).

Because expressions of free charisma were increasingly suppressed in the institutional churches, the emergence of Pentecostal movements outside the institutional churches and partly in open opposition to them arose. This movement led to the founding of various Pentecostal Free churches at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th; it is represented through numerous independent Pentecostal groups, such as the Church of God and the Assemblies of God. At first scorned by the established churches, the Pentecostal movement has grown to a world movement with strong missionary activity not only in Africa and South America but also Europe. In the United States, a strong influence of the Pentecostal movement—which has returned high esteem to the proto-Christian charismata of speaking in tongues, healing, and exorcism—is noticeable even in the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican churches. This has occurred especially in liturgy and church music but also in preaching style and the return to faith healing.

The Holy Trinity

The basis for the doctrine of the Trinity

The central Christian affirmations about God are condensed and focused in the classic doctrine of the Trinity, which has its ultimate foundation in the special religious experience of the Christians in the first communities. This basis of experience is older than the doctrine of the Trinity. It consisted of the fact that God came to meet Christians in a threefold figure: (1) as Creator, Lord of the history of salvation, Father, and Judge, as revealed in the Old Testament; (2) as the Lord who, in the figure of Jesus Christ, lived among human beings and was present in their midst as the “Resurrected One”; and (3) as the Holy Spirit, whom they experienced as the power of the new life, the miraculous potency of the Kingdom of God. The question as to how to reconcile the encounter with God in this threefold figure with faith in the oneness of God, which was the Jews’ and Christians’ characteristic mark of distinction from paganism, agitated the piety of ancient Christendom in the deepest way. In the course of history, it also provided the strongest impetus for a speculative theology, which inspired Western metaphysics for many centuries. In the first two centuries of the Christian era, however, a series of different answers to this question developed.

The diversity in interpretation of the Trinity was conditioned especially through the understanding of the figure of Jesus Christ. According to the theology of The Gospel According to John, the divinity of Jesus Christ constituted the departure point for understanding his person and efficacy. The Gospel According to Mark, however, did not proceed from a theology of incarnation but instead understood the baptism of Jesus Christ as the adoption of the man Jesus Christ into the Sonship of God, accomplished through the descent of the Holy Spirit. The situation became further aggravated by the conceptions of the special personal character of the manifestation of God developed by way of the historical figure of Jesus Christ; the Holy Spirit was viewed not as a personal figure but rather as a power and appeared graphically only in the form of the dove and thus receded, to a large extent, in the Trinitarian speculation.

Introduction of Neoplatonic themes

The Johannine literature in the Bible provides the first traces of the concept of Christ as the Logos, the “word” or “principle” that issues from eternity. Under the influence of subsequent Neoplatonic philosophy, this tradition became central in speculative theology. There was interest in the relationship of the “oneness” of God to the “triplicity” of divine manifestations. This question was answered through the Neoplatonic metaphysics of being. The transcendent God, who is beyond all being, all rationality, and all conceptuality, is divested of divine transcendence. In a first act of becoming self-conscious the Logos recognizes itself as the divine mind (Greek: nous), or divine world reason, which was characterized by the Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus as the “Son” who goes forth from the Father. The next step by which the transcendent God becomes self-conscious consists in the appearance in the divine nous of the divine world, the idea of the world in its individual forms as the content of the divine consciousness. In Neoplatonic philosophy both the nous and the idea of the world are designated the hypostases of the transcendent God. Christian theology took the Neoplatonic metaphysics of substance as well as its doctrine of hypostases as the departure point for interpreting the relationship of the “Father” to the “Son.” This process stands in direct relationship with a speculative interpretation of Christology in connection with Neoplatonic Logos speculation.

In transferring the Neoplatonic hypostases doctrine to the Christian interpretation of the Trinity there existed the danger that the different manifestations of God—as known by the Christian experience of faith: Father, Son, Holy Spirit—would be transformed into a hierarchy of gods graduated among themselves and thus into a polytheism. Though this danger was consciously avoided and, proceeding from a Logos Christology, the complete sameness of essence of the three manifestations of God was emphasized, there arose the danger of a relapse into a triplicity of equally ranked gods, which would displace the idea of the oneness of God.

Attempts to define the Trinity

By the 3rd century it was already apparent that all attempts to systematize the mystery of the divine Trinity with the theories of Neoplatonic hypostases metaphysics were unsatisfying and led to a series of new conflicts. The high point of these conflicts was the so-called Arian controversy. In his interpretation of the idea of God, Arius sought to maintain a formal understanding of the oneness of God. In defense of that oneness, he was obliged to dispute the sameness of essence of the Son and the Holy Spirit with God the Father, as stressed by other theologians of his day. From the outset, the controversy between both parties took place upon the common basis of the Neoplatonic concept of substance, which was foreign to the New Testament itself. It is no wonder that the continuation of the dispute on the basis of the metaphysics of substance likewise led to concepts that have no foundation in the New Testament—such as the question of the sameness of essence (homoousia) or similarity of essence (homoiouisia) of the divine persons.

The basic concern of Arius was and remained disputing the oneness of essence of the Son and the Holy Spirit with God the Father, in order to preserve the oneness of God. The Son, thus, became a “second God, under God the Father”—i.e., he is a divine figure begotten by God. The Son is not himself God, a creature that was willed by God, made like God by divine grace, and sent as a mediator between God and humankind. Arius’s teaching was intended to defend the idea of the oneness of the Christian concept of God against all reproaches that Christianity introduces a new, more sublime form of polytheism.

This attempt to save the oneness of God led, however, to an awkward consequence. For Jesus Christ, as the divine Logos become human, moves thereby to the side of the creatures—i.e., to the side of the created world that needs redemption. How, then, should such a Christ, himself a part of the creation, be able to achieve the redemption of the world? On the whole, the Christian Church rejected, as an unhappy attack upon the reality of redemption, such a formal attempt at saving the oneness of God as was undertaken by Arius.

Arius’s main rival was St. Athanasius of Alexandria, for whom the point of departure was not a philosophical-speculative principle but rather the reality of redemption, the
certainty of salvation. The redemption of humanity from sin and death is only then guaranteed if Christ is total God and total human being, if the complete essence of God penetrates human nature right into the deepest layer of its carnal corporeality. Only if God in the full meaning of divine essence became human in Jesus Christ is deification of man in terms of overcoming sin and death guaranteed as the resurrection of the flesh. The Athanasian view was accepted at the Council of Nicaea (325) and became orthodox Christian doctrine.

St. Augustine, of decisive importance for the development of the Trinitarian doctrine in Western theology and metaphysics, coupled the doctrine of the Trinity with anthropology. Proceeding from the idea that humans are created by God according to the divine image, he attempted to explain the mystery of the Trinity by uncovering traces of the Trinity in the human personality. He went from analysis of the Trinitarian structure of the simple act of cognition to ascertainment of the Trinitarian structure both of human self-consciousness and of the act of religious contemplation in which people recognize themselves as the image of God.

A second model of Trinitarian doctrine—suspected of heresy from the outset—which had effects not only in theology but also in the social metaphysics of the West as well, emanated from Joachim of Fiore. He understood the course of the history of salvation as the successive realization of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in three consecutive periods. This interpretation of the Trinity became effective as a “theology of revolution,” inasmuch as it was regarded as the theological justification of the endeavour to accelerate the arrival of the third state of the Holy Spirit through revolutionary initiative.

The final dogmatic formulation of the Trinitarian doctrine in the so-called Athanasian Creed (c. 500), una substantia—tres personae (“one substance—three persons”), reached back to the formulation of Tertullian. In practical terms it meant a compromise in that it held fast to both basic ideas of Christian revelation—the oneness of God and divine self-revelation in the figures of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—without rationalizing the mystery itself. In the final analysis the point of view thereby remained definitive that the fundamental assumptions of the reality of salvation and redemption are to be retained and not sacrificed to the concern of a rational monotheism.

Characteristically, in all periods of the later history of Christianity, anti-Trinitarian currents emerged when a rationalistic philosophy questioned the role of the Trinity in the history of salvation. The ideas of Arius were revived by many critics, including the so-called anti-Trinitarians of the Italian Renaissance and the humanists of the 16th century. Researchers into the life of Jesus in the 18th century, such as Hermann Reimarus and Carl Bahrdt, who portrayed Jesus as the agent of a secret enlightenment order that had set itself the goal of spreading the religion of reason in the world, were at the same time anti-Trinitarians and pioneers of the radical rationalistic criticism of dogma. The Kantian critique of the God of Providence contributed further to a devaluation of Trinitarian doctrine. In German idealism, Hegel, in the framework of his attempt to raise Christian dogma into the sphere of the conceptual, took the Trinitarian doctrine as the basis for his system of philosophy and, above all, for his interpretation of history as the absolute spirit’s becoming self-conscious. In subsequent theological work, at least in the accusations of some of its critics, the school of dialectical theology in Europe and the United States tended to reduce the doctrine of the Trinity and supplant it with a monochristism—the teaching that the figure of the Son in the life of faith will overshadow the figure of the Father and thus cause it to disappear and that the figure of the Creator and Sustainer of the world will recede behind the figure of the Redeemer.

In a brief but well-publicized episode in the mid-1960s in the United States, a number of celebrated Protestant theologians engaged in cultural criticism observed or announced “the death of God.” The theology of the death of God downplayed any notion of divine transcendence and invested its whole claim to be Christian in its accent on Jesus of Nazareth. Christian dogma was reinterpreted and reduced to norms of human sociality and freedom. Before long, however, the majority of theologians confronted this small school with the demands of classic Christian dogma, which insisted on confronting divine transcendence in any assertions about Jesus Christ.

The transcendence of God has been rediscovered by science and sociology; theology in the closing decades of the 20th century endeavoured to overcome the purely anthropological interpretation of religion and once more to discover anew its transcendent ground. Theology has consequently been confronted with the problem of Trinity in a new form, which, in view of the Christian experience of God as an experience of the presence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, cannot be eliminated.

**Anthropology**

**What it is to be human**

The starting point for the Christian understanding of what it is to be human is the recognition that humans are created in the image of God. This idea views God and humans joined with one another through a mysterious connection. God is thought of as incomprehensible and beyond substance; yet God desired to reflect the divine image in one set of creatures and chose humans for this. Man as the image of God belongs, therefore, to the self-revelation of God in quite a decisive way. God, being reflected in the human creature, makes this being a partner in the realization of the divine self; there is constant interaction. Humans find fulfillment in God, the divine prototype, but God also first comes to the fulfillment of the divine essence in relation, in this case, with the human.

**The human as a creature**

The idea that human beings were created according to the image of God was already being interpreted in a twofold direction in the early church. For one thing, humans, like all other creatures of the universe, are the creation of God, and as creatures human beings stand in a relationship of utter dependency on God. They have nothing from themselves but owe everything, even their being, exclusively to the will of the divine Creator; they are joined with all other fellow creatures through a relationship of solidarity. The idea of the solidarity of all creatures was eventually eclipsed by the idea of the special position of humans and their special commission of dominion. The idea of solidarity with all creatures has been expressed and practiced by but few charismatic personalities in the history of Western piety, such as by Francis of Assisi in his “Canticle of the Sun”: “Praised be Thou, my Lord, with all Thy creatures, especially with our sister sun.”

The second aspect of the idea of the human being as a creature operated very much more emphatically: the superiority of humans over all other creatures. God placed humans in a special relationship to the divine. God created them in the divine image, thereby assigning to humans a special commission vis-à-vis all other creatures.

**The human as the image of God**

Influenced by Plato’s philosophy, Christian theologians identified the image of God in human beings only in their intellectual capability and faculty of perception and not in their body. In his work De Trinitate, Augustine attempted to ascertain traces of divine Trinity in the human intellect. Christian mysticism confronted this dualistic view of humans, interpreting humans in their mind-body entirety as being in the image of God. The image of God is stamped all the way into the sphere of human corporeality. The idea of human creation according to the image of God is already based upon the intention of the Incarnation, the self-representation of God in corporeality. Even according to their somatic (bodily) condition, humans are the universal form of being, in whom the powers and creative principles of the whole universe are combined in a personal unity of spirit, soul, and body.

The Christian understanding of evil is also linked with the idea of human creation according to the image of God. Evil cannot, in the Christian view, be derived from the
dualistic assumption of the contrasts of spirit and body, reason and matter. According to the Christian understanding, the triumph of evil is not identical with the victory of matter, the “flesh,” over the spirit. Nevertheless, a dualistic interpretation has been advocated, because for many centuries the Christian understanding of sin, even among many of the church’s teachers, was influenced by the philosophical assumptions of Neoplatonic dualism. Moreover, in Augustine there are still the aftereffects of Manichaeism, which ultimately viewed the main motive force of sin in “concupiscence”—i.e., the sex drive.

The only genuine departure point for the Christian view of evil is the idea of freedom, which is based in the concept of the human being as the image of God. The human is person because God is person. It is apparent in Christian claims that the concept of the human as “being-as-person” is the real seal of that human as “being-as-the-image-of-God,” and therein lies the true nobility that distinguishes human beings from all other creatures. If the Christian faith is differentiated from other religions through the fact that for the Christian God is person, then this faith takes effect in the thereby resulting consequence that the human being, too, is person.

God at the same time entered into a great risk in creating the human as person. The real sign of God as personal being is freedom. When God created humans according to his image, he also gave over to them this mark of nobility—i.e., freedom. This alone constitutes the presupposition of love. Only through this freedom can the human being as partner of God offer free love to God; only in this freedom can God’s love be answered through free love in return. Love in its fulfilled form, according to the Christian understanding, is possible only between persons; conversely, the person can be realized only in the complete love to another person. Humans can use this freedom to offer God, their Creator, their freely given love.

Yet, in the gift of freedom itself there also lay enclosed the possibility for humans to decide against God and to raise themselves to the goal of divine love. The event that is portrayed in the story of the Fall (Genesis, chapter 3) is essentially the trying out of freedom, the free decision of humans against God. This rebellion consists of the fact that humans improperly use their God-given freedom to set themselves against God and even to wish to be “like God.”

**Human redemption**

This special interpretation of sin likewise renders understandable the specifically Christian understanding of human redemption, namely, the view of Jesus Christ as the historical figure of the Redeemer—i.e., the specifically Christian view of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.

The Christian understanding of the incarnation is based upon an idea that is found in the simple saying of The Gospel According to John: “The Word became flesh” (chapter 1, verse 14). In Christianity, it is not a transcendent, divine being that takes on the appearance of an earthly corporeality, so as to be manifested through this semblance of a body; instead, God himself as human, as member of a definite people, a definite family, at a certain time—“suffered under Pontius Pilate”—enters into the corporeality, carnality, and materiality of the history of mankind. In the midst of history God creates the beginning of a thorough transformation of humans that in like manner embraces all spheres of human being—matter, soul, and mind. Incarnation so constituted did not have the character of veiling God in a human form, which would enable the divine being to reveal a new teaching with human words. The incarnation is not the special instance of a cyclic descent of God always occurring afresh in constantly new veils. Instead, it is the unique intervention of God in the history of the human world. Therein God took the figure of a single historical person into the divine being, suffered through the historical conditions of being, and overcame in this person, Jesus Christ, the root of human corruption—the misuse of freedom. God thereby established the dawn of a transformed, renewed, exalted form of human being and opened a realm in which love to God and to neighbour can be tranquilly fulfilled.

**The problem of suffering**

The starting point for the Christian understanding of suffering is the messianic self-understanding of Jesus himself. A temptation to power and self-exaltation lay in the late Jewish promise of the coming of the Messiah—Son of man. The Gospel According to Matthew described the temptation of Jesus by Satan in the wilderness as a temptation to worldly power. Jesus himself deeply disappointed his disciples’ notions aiming at power and exaltation, in that he taught them, in accordance with Isaiah, chapter 53: “The Son of man will suffer many things.” In Jesus’ announcements of suffering the Christian understanding of suffering is clearly expressed: suffering is not the final aim and end in itself in the realization of human destiny; it is the gateway to resurrection, to rebirth, to new creation. This idea receives its clarification from the Christian understanding of sin. Sin as the misuse of human freedom has led humans into total opposition against God. Turning to God can therefore take place only when the results of this rebellion are overcome in all levels of human being, all the way to physical corporeality.

In the early church the sign of the cross was not considered a glorification of suffering but a “sign of victory” (tropaion) in the sense of the ancient triumphal sign that was set up at the place where the victorious turning point of the battle took place. The cross was likewise considered the “dread of the demons,” since as a victory sign it struck terror into the hitherto ruling demonic powers of the world. An ancient church hymn of the cross spoke of the “cross of the beauty of the Kingdom of God.” The emperor Constantine, following his vision of a cross in the heavens, fastened to the standards of the imperial legions the cross, which was considered the victory sign for the community of Christians hitherto persecuted by the Roman Empire, and elevated it to a token of military triumph over the legions of his pagan foes that were assembled under the sign of the old gods.

In the Christian understanding, suffering also does not appear—as in Buddhism—as suffering simply under the general conditions of human existence in this world; it is instead coupled with the specifically Christian idea of the imitation of Christ. Individual Christians are called to follow the example of Christ; incorporation into the body of Christ is granted to those who are ready to carry out within themselves Christ’s destiny of suffering, death, and resurrection. The early church’s characterization of the Christian was that of Christophoros—“bearer of Christ.” Suffering was an unalterable principle in the great drama of freedom, which was identical with the drama of redemption.

**The resurrection of the body**

Just as clear is the significance that lies in the Christian understanding of the resurrection. A dualistic understanding of what it is to be human, which assumes an essential difference between the spiritual and the material-bodily sides of human existence, necessarily leads to the idea of the immortality of the soul. The Christian hope, however, does not aim at the immortality of the soul but at the resurrection of the body. Corporeality is not a quality that is foreign to the spiritual. Everything spiritual presses toward corporealization; its eternal figure is a corporeal figure. This hope was expressed by Vladimir Solovyov:

> What help would the highest and greatest moral victory be for man, if the enemy, “death,” which lurks in the ultimate depth of man’s physical, somatic, material sphere, were not overcome?

The goal of redemption is not separation of the spirit from the body; it is rather the new human in the entirety of body, soul, and mind. It is appropriate to say that Christianity has contended for a “holistic” view of the human. The Christian image of the human being has an essentially corporeal aspect that is based in the idea of the incarnation and finds its most palpable expression in the idea of the resurrection.

**Progressive human perfection**
For a long time Christian anthropology maintained that the human was a complete being, placed in a finished world like a methodically provided-for tenant in a prefabricated, newly built residence ready for occupation. Redemption was understood just as statically: salvation appeared in the teachings of church dogma as restitution and restoration of the lost divine image and often in fact more a patching up of fragments through ecclesiastical remedies than as a real new creation.

Although their view is not uncontroversial, some theologians have found in the New Testament a progression of salvation in history. Indeed, there is a progress of both the individual human being and of mankind as a whole, what might be thought of under some terms and conditions as a potential for the progressive perfection of the human being. This characteristic stands out in the proclamation of Jesus when he promises his disciples: “Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.” (Matthew 13:43). In The Gospel According to John, Jesus promises his disciples an increase of their divine powers that is to exceed even the spiritual powers at work in himself (John 14:12). Similar expectations are also expressed in the First Letter of John: “Beloved…it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (3:2).

The idea of the Christian “superman,” which was expressed by Montanus, is a result of this view. In connection with the breakthrough of the idea of evolution through Darwin in the areas of biology, zoology, and anthropology, the tendency asserted itself—above all in 19th-century American theology—of interpreting the Christian history of salvation in terms of the evolution and expectation of future human perfection in the form of reaching even higher charismatic levels and ever higher means of spiritual knowledge and communication.

The “new man”: The human being in the light of Christ

Probably no idea and no sentiment in the early church dominated the Christian feeling for life so thoroughly and comprehensively as the consciousness of the newness of the life into which persons viewed themselves transposed through participation in the life and body of Christ. The newness of the Christian message of salvation not only filled the hearts of the faithful but was also striking to the non-Christian milieu. The new humans experience the newness of life as the life of Christ that is beginning to mature in themselves, as the overwhelming experience of a new state already now commencing. In the New Testament statements about the new man, it was not a settled, complete new condition that was being spoken of, into which people are transposed through grace, but rather the beginning of a coming new state, the consummation of which will first take place in the future. The new human is one who is engaged in the process of renewal; new life is a principle of growth of the Christian maturing toward “perfect manhood in Christ.” The new situation of human beings, for their part, works anew as fermenting “leaven” within old humankind, as “fresh dough,” and contributes to transforming the old form of humanity through its fermentation into the state of the Kingdom of God.

The “reborn human”

“Rebirth” has often been identified with a definite, temporally datable form of “conversion,” especially in the pietistic and revival type of Christianity. In the history of Christian piety a line of prominent personalities, most notably Paul and Augustine, experienced their rebirth in the form of a temporarily datable and also locally ascertainable conversion event. There is no single type of experience, however, that completes the mysterious event characterized with the expression rebirth. The mode of experience of rebirth itself is as manifold as the individuality of the person concerned. The different forms of rebirth experience are distinguished not only according to whether the event sets in suddenly with overwhelming surprise, as when one is “born again” or “sees the light,” or as the result of a slow process, a “growing,” a “maturating,” and an “evolution.” They are also distinguished according to the psychic capability predominant at the time that thereby takes charge (will, intellect), the endowment at hand, and the personal type of religious experience. With the voluntaristic type, rebirth is expressed in a new alignment of the will, in the liberation of new capabilities and powers that were hitherto undeveloped in the person concerned. With the intellectual type, it leads to an activation of the capabilities for understanding, to the breakthrough of a “vision.” With others it leads to the discovery of an unexpected beauty in the order of nature or to the discovery of the mysterious meaning of history. With still others it leads to a new vision of the moral life and its orders, to a selfless realization of love of neighbour. In the experience of Christian rebirth, the hitherto existing old condition of humanity is not simply eliminated so far as the given personality structure is concerned—a structure dependent upon heredity, education, and earlier life experiences. Instead, each person affected perceives his life in Christ at any given time as “newness of life.”

Human liberation

The condition of “fallen” humanity is frequently characterized in the New Testament as “slavery.” It is the slavery of human willfulness that wants to have and enjoy all things for itself: the slavery of alienated love, which is no longer turned toward God but toward one’s own self and the things of this world and which also degrades one’s fellows into the means for egoism and exploitation. The servitude of people fallen away from God is much more oppressive than mere slavery of the senses and of greed for life. It is the enslavement not only of their “flesh” but also of all levels of their being, even the “most spiritual.”

In his commentary on the Letter of Paul to the Romans, Luther observed: “The entire man who is not reborn is flesh, even in his spirit; the entire man who is reborn is spirit, even when he eats and sleeps.” Only from this perspective do Martin Luther’s words about the “Freedom of a Christian Man”—the title of a work written in 1520—receive their true meaning. The freedom that Christians receive is the freedom that Christ, spoken of by Paul as the new Adam, gained for them. The freedom of Christians is the freedom reattained in Christ, in which the possibility of the misuse of freedom is addressed and overcome.

In the early centuries of the church special significance fell to the evangelical schema of liberation—and to the corresponding schema of ransom—in a society that, in its social structure, was constructed entirely upon the system of slavery. On the one hand, wide strata of the population lived in the permanent state of slavery; on the other hand, on the basis of the prevailing usage of war, even the free population could face the danger of passing into possession of the victor as a slave in case of a conquest. The schema of liberation could therefore count upon a spontaneous understanding.

Freedom alone also makes a perfect community possible. Such a community embraces God and the neighbour, in whom the image of God confronts human beings in the flesh. Community is fulfilled in the free service of love. Luther articulated the paradox of Christian freedom, which includes both love and service: “A Christian man is a free lord of all things and subordinate to no one. A Christian man is a submissive servant of all things and subject to everyone.” Christian freedom is thus to be understood neither purely individually nor purely collectively. The motives of the personal and the social are indivisibly joined by the idea that each person is an image of God for himself alone, but in Christ he also recognizes the image of God in the neighbour and with the neighbour is a member in the one body of Christ. Here the evolutive principle of the idea of freedom is not to be mistaken; in it, for example, lay the spiritual impetus to the social and racial emancipation of slaves, as it was demanded by the great Christian champions of human rights in the 18th and 19th centuries, and through great efforts, pursued and achieved.

Joy in human existence

Friedrich Nietzsche summarized his critique of the Christians of his time in the words of Zarathushtra (Zoroaster): “They would have to sing better songs to me that I might believe in their Redeemer: his disciples would have to look more redeemed!” The critique is to the point. In the New Testament testimonials, joy appears as the characteristic mark of distinction of the Christian. It is the spontaneous result of being filled with the Holy Spirit and is among the main fruits of the Holy Spirit. Joy was the basic mood of congregational gatherings and was often expressed in an exuberant jubilation. It had its origin in the recognition that the dominion of evil had been
broken through the power of Christ; that death, devil, and demons no longer possessed any claim upon believers; and that the forces of forgiveness, reconciliation, resurrection, and transfiguration were effective in humankind. This principle of the joy of the Christian is most strongly alive in the liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

The roots of a specifically Christian sense of humour also lie within this joy. Its peculiarity consists of the fact that in the midst of the conflicts of life the Christian is capable of regarding all sufferings and afflictions from the perspective of overcoming them in the future or from the perspective of victory over them already achieved in Christ. At one extreme the humour of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard is too dialectical and too bitter to exhaust the entire fullness of the Christian joy. More of it is found in the “hallelujah” of black spirituals.

The charismatic believer

In the New Testament the Christian is depicted as the person who is filled with the powers of the Holy Spirit. The view of the gifts of the Spirit stands in a direct relationship with the understanding of the human as the image of God. For the believing Christian of the original period of the church, the Holy Spirit was the spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is already now made manifest in his body, the community of the faithful, as the miraculous principle of life of the new eon. Throughout the centuries the Holy Spirit has remained the ferment of church history—all great reformations and the founding of new churches and sects have occurred as the result of new charismatic breakthroughs.

Christian perfection

The demand for perfection is frequently repeated in the New Testament and has played a significant role in the history of the faith. In The Gospel According to Matthew, Jesus says to his disciples: “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48). Although this demand may exceed the measure of reasonableness for humans, it is meant literally and is repeated in other parts of the New Testament. The meaning of this claim is recognizable only from the understanding of the human as the image of God and from the apprehension of Christ as the “new Adam.” The perfection of believers is the perfection with which they reflect the image of God. This image has been disfigured through willful alienation from the original, but in Christ believers can recover the perfection of the image of God.

The idea of the deification of man, which captures the Greek notion of “partaking” of the divine character, also points in the direction of perfection. Post-Reformation theology, out of anxiety about “mysticism,” struck this concept almost entirely from its vocabulary. In the first one and a half millennia of the Christian church, however, the idea of deification—of partaking in God’s being—was a central concept of Christian anthropology. Athanasius created the fundamental formula for the theology of deification: “God became man in order that we become God.” In the teachings of the early church these words became the basis of theological anthropology. Only the idea of perfection makes understandable a final enhancement of the Christian image of the human—the intensification from “child of God” to “friend of God.” This appears as the highest form of communion reached between God and human beings.

Fellow humans as the present Christ

For the Christian, the fellow human is the present Christ himself; in the eye of Christian faith, Christ is present in everyone, even in the most debased, a belief that constitutes the basis of Christian ethics. According to Matthew (chapter 25, verses 40 and 45), the Judge of the world says to the redeemed: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me,” and to the damned: “As you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.” Tertullian cites another saying of the Lord: “If you have seen your brother, you have seen your Lord.” In other humans, Christians see, under the wrapping of misery, degeneration, and suffering, the image of the present Lord, who became human, who suffered, died, and was resurrected in order to lead all humanity back into the Kingdom of God.

In the self-understanding of the Christian community two tendencies have battled with one another from the beginning of church history. They lead to completely different consequences in the basic orientation of Christians toward fellow Christians and fellow human beings.

One attitude concerns the governing idea of election. God chooses some out of the human race, which exists in opposition to all that is divine, and includes the elect in his Kingdom. This idea underlines the aristocratic character of the Kingdom of God; it consists of an elite of elect. In the Revelation to John, the 144,000 “…who have not defiled themselves with women” (Revelation 14:4) constituted those chosen for entry into the Kingdom of God. For Augustine and his theological successors up to Calvin, the community of the elect is numerically restricted; their number corresponds to the number of fallen angels, who must be replaced through the matching number of redeemed men and women so that the Kingdom of God would be restored numerically. The church is here understood as a selection of a few out of the masses of perdition who constitute the jetsons of the history of salvation. This orientation, it has been argued, conceals a grave endangering of the consciousness of community, for self-righteousness, which is the root of self-love and thereby the death of love of neighbour, easily enters as a result of the consciousness of exclusive election.

The other attitude proceeds from the opposite idea that the goal of the salvation inaugurated through Jesus Christ is the redemption of all humanity. According to this view, God’s love of humans (philanthrópia), as the drama of divine self-surrender for human salvation shows, is greater than the righteousness that crave the eternal damnation of the guilty. Since the time of Origen, this second attitude has been found not only among the great mystics of the Eastern Church but among some mystics of Western Christianity. The teaching of universal reconciliation (apokatastasis pantón) has struck against opposition in all Christian confessions. This is connected with the fact that such a universalistic view easily leads to a disposition that regards redemption as a kind of natural process that no one can evade. Such an orientation can lead to a weakening or loss of a consciousness of moral responsibility before God and neighbour; it contains the temptation to spiritual security and moral indolence.

The church

The Christian view of the church was influenced by the Old Testament concept of the qahal, the elected people of God of the end-time, and by the expectation of the coming of the messiah in Judaism. The Greek secular word ekklesia, the term used for the church, means an assembly of people coming together for a meeting.

In Christianity the concept of the church received a new meaning through its relationship to Jesus Christ as the messianic inaugurator of the kingdom of God: (1) with Christ the elected community of the end-time has appeared; (2) the church is the eschatological gift of the Holy Spirit, which already flows through the life of the church (Acts 2:33); (3) the community of the end-time consists of those who believe in Jesus Christ, as the idea of the elected covenant people (i.e., the Jews) is transferred to the “new Israel”; (4) the church forms the body of its Lord; and (5) the church consists of “living stones,” from which its house is “built” (1 Peter 2:5).

Jesus himself created no firm organization for his community; the expectation of the immediate imminence of the kingdom of God provided no occasion for this. Nevertheless, the selection of the Twelve Apostles and the special position of individual apostles within this circle pointed to the beginnings of a structuralization of his community. After the community was constituted anew because of the impressions made by the appearances of the resurrected Christ, the trend toward structuralization continued.
The unity of the church, which was dispersed geographically, was understood from the viewpoint of the Diaspora (the dispersion of the Jews outside Palestine after the Babylonian Captivity). In the Letter of James, the scattered churches of the new Israel are identified as “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (1:1). The Didachē, or the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles (2nd century), viewed the church in terms of the bread of the Eucharist, whose wheat grains “are gathered from the mountains.” The idea of the preexistent divine Logos became the concept of the preexistence of the church, which included the view that the world was created for the sake of the church. The earthly church is thus the representative of the heavenly church.

**Normative defenses in the early church**

Establishment of norms for the church was necessary because diverse interpretations of the Christian message were conceived under the influence of the religions of late antiquity, especially gnosticism—a syncretistic religious dualistic belief system that incorporated Christian motifs. In gnostic interpretations, mixed Christian and pagan ideas appealed to divine inspiration or claimed to be revelations of Christ. The church erected three defenses against the prophetic and visionary efficacy of pneumatic (spiritual) figures as well as against pagan syncretism: (1) the New Testament canon, (2) the apostolic “rules of faith,” or “creeds,” and (3) the apostolic succession of bishops. The common basis of these three defenses is the idea of “apostolicity.”

The early church never forgot that it had created and fixed the canon of the New Testament, primarily in response to the threat of gnostic writings. This is one of the primary distinctions between the Orthodox Church and the Reformation churches, which view the Scriptures as the final norm and rule for the church and church teaching. The Orthodox Church, like the Roman Catholic Church, teaches that the Christian church existed prior to the formation of the canon of Scripture—that it is indeed the source and origin of the Scripture itself. Thus, tradition plays a significant role alongside the Holy Scriptures in the Orthodox and Roman churches.

The apostolic rule of faith—i.e., the creed—issued from the apostolic tradition of the church as a second, shorter form of its solidification, at first oral and then written. It also served as a defense against gnosticism and syncretistic heretical interpretations of the Christian faith.

The third defense that the church used against the gnostics and syncretistic and charismatic movements within the church was the office of bishop, which became legitimized through the concept of apostolic succession. The mandate for missions, the defense against prophecy, the polemics with gnosticism and other alternative versions of Christianity, the persecution of the church, and, not least of all, management of church discipline allowed the monarchical episcopacy to emerge in the early centuries. The bishop, as leader of the eucharistic worship service, as teacher, and as curer of souls, became the chief shepherd of the church and was considered its representative.

**Evolution of the episcopal office**

The evolution of the episcopal office followed a different development in the East and in the West. The Orthodox Church accepts the monarchical episcopacy insofar as it involves the entire church, both the visible earthly and the invisible heavenly churches bound together inseparably. The monarchical principle in the Orthodox Church, however, is based on democratic principles that are grounded in the polity of the early church. Just as all Apostles without exception were of equal authority and none of them held a paramount position over against the others, so too their successors, the bishops, are of equal authority without exception.

Thus, the politics of the Eastern Orthodox churches have a decidedly synodal character. The ecumenical council, an assembly of the bishops of the whole church, constitutes the highest authority of Orthodox synodal polity. The bishops gathered at an ecumenical council resolve all questions of faith as well as of worship and canon law according to the principle of majority rule. Not only the priesthood but also the laity have been able to participate in Orthodox synods. Election to ecclesiastical offices (i.e., pastor, bishop, or patriarch) involves participation by both clergy and laity. The individual polities of modern Orthodox churches (e.g., Greek or Russian) are distinguished according to the amount of state participation in the settlement of ecclesiastical questions.

Orthodoxy was divided into various old and new types of churches. Some of these were “patriarchal,” which meant that they were directly responsible to a patriarch. Others were “autocephalous” (Greek: autokephalos, “self-headed”), which has come to mean in the modern world that as national churches they are in communion with Constantinople but are responsible for authority to their own national synods. This division, and the fact that Orthodoxy has so often been the victim of revolutionary change and political onslaught, have served as a hindrance against any new ecumenical council, even though many Orthodox have asked for one.

In the Roman Catholic Church the papacy evolved out of the monarchical episcopate. The city of Rome occupied a special position in the early church because, as the capital of the Roman Empire, it contained a numerically significant Christian community already in the 1st century. A leading role devolved upon the bishop of Rome in questions of discipline, doctrine, and ecclesiastical and worship order. This occurred in the Latin provinces of the church in the West (Italy, Gaul, Spain, Africa), whose organization followed the provincial organization of the Roman Empire. After the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the late 5th century, the status of the Roman bishop increased. The theological underpinning of this special position was emphasized by Petrine theology, which saw in the words of Jesus, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18), a spiritual-legal instituting of the papacy by Jesus Christ himself; in the Greek Church of the East (e.g., Origen) and also for Augustine in the West, however, these words were referred to St. Peter’s confession of faith. Since the time of popes Gelasius I (reigned 492–496), Symmachus (reigned 498–514), and Gregory I (reigned 590–604), these words have served as the foundation for the claim of papal primacy over the entire Christian church.

**Authority and dissent**

Christianity, from its beginning, has tended toward an intolerance that was rooted in the understanding of itself as revelation of the divine truth that became human in Jesus Christ himself. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). To be a Christian is to “follow the truth” (3 John); the Christian proclamation is “the way of truth” (2 Peter 2:2). Those who do not acknowledge the truth are enemies “of the cross of Christ” (Philippians 3:18) who have “exchanged the truth about God for a lie” (Romans 1:25) and made themselves the advocates and confederates of the “adversary, the devil,” who “prowl around like a roaring lion” (1 Peter 5:8). Thus, one cannot make a deal with the Devil and his party—and in this lies the basis for parochialism in Christianity.

Christianity developed an intolerant attitude toward Judaism early in its history, especially after the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in ad 70. This prejudice was rooted in the competition for religious converts and for possession of the Hebrew Scripture and its legacy. In order to proclaim itself as the “new Israel,” Christianity had to repudiate the claims of Israel’s traditional children. From the time of the composition of the Gospels, therefore, Jews were identified as the killers of Christ. Subsequent Christian theologians developed an elaborate picture of the Jews as the enemy of the faith, though some argued that the Jews must survive until the end of time as witness to the truth of Christian revelation. Such hostile and irrational views laid the foundation for centuries of anti-Semitism among Christians. Not until the 20th century was the negative depiction of the Jews in official teachings overturned in some churches.

Early Christianity, especially following the conversion of the emperor Constantine I, aimed at the elimination of paganism—the destruction of its institutions, temples, tradition, and the order of life based upon it. After Christianity’s victory over Greco-Roman religions, it left only the ruins of paganism still remaining. Christian missions of later centuries constantly aimed at the destruction of indigenous religions, including their cultic places and traditions (as in missions to the Anglo-Saxons, Germans, and Slavs). This objective was not realized in mission areas in which Christian political powers did not succeed in conquests—e.g., China and Japan—but in Indian Goa, for
example, the temples and customs of all indigenous religions were eliminated by the Portuguese conquerors.

The attitude of intolerance was further reinforced when Islam confronted Christianity from the 7th century on. Islam understood itself as the conclusion and fulfillment of the Old and New Testament revelation. Christianity, however, understood Islam either as a new heresy (Muhammad, it was believed, was taught by a heretical or apostate monk) or eschatologically as the religion of the “false prophets” or of the Antichrist. The aggression of Christianity against Islam—on the Iberian Peninsula, in Palestine, and in the entire eastern Mediterranean area during the Crusades—was carried out under this fundamental attitude. Intolerance of indigenous religions was also manifested in Roman Catholic missions in the New World; in the Western Hemisphere, these missions resulted in the wholesale destruction of Native American cults and cultic places.

When the Reformation churches asserted the exclusive claim of possessing the Christian truth, they tried to carry it out with the help of the political and military power at their disposal. In the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, Christian dogmatism developed into an internal fratricidal struggle in which each side sought to annihilate the other party in the name of truth. The fact that such attempts did not succeed led to new reflections upon the justification of claims to exclusive possession of absolute truth.

The intolerance of the Reformation territorial churches found its counterpart in the intolerance of the revolutionary groups of the Reformation period, such as that of the German radical reformer Thomas Müntzer, which wanted to force the coming of the kingdom of God through the dominion of the “elect” over the “godless.” Some see the ideology and techniques of many modern political revolutions and authoritarian regimes as either a legacy or a mimicking of old Christian patterns and methods.

Although calls for tolerance had been made earlier in church history, among the first to speak up consistently for tolerance were the Baptists and Spiritualists of the Reformation period. Their defense of tolerance contributed especially to the recognition of the evident contradiction between the theological self-conception of Christianity as a religion of love of God and neighbour and the inhumanity practiced by the churches in the persecution of dissenters. This recognition even provoked criticism of the Christian truths of faith themselves.

The Roman Catholic Church in the past consistently opposed the development of religious toleration and as late as the 20th century in some countries ensured that legal restrictions against Protestant minorities were established. With Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), however, the church adopted a much more accommodating stance, which has been appropriate both to the ecumenical situation of Christendom since the late 20th century and to the personal character of Christian faith.

Organization

In the early church, discipline concerned four areas in which there arose violations of the demand for holiness: (1) the relationship to the pagan social milieu and the forms of life and culture connected with it (e.g., idolatry, the emperor’s cult, the theatre, and the circus); (2) the relationship of the sexes within the Christian community (e.g., rejection of polygamy, prostitution, pederasty, sodomy, and obscene literature and art); (3) other offenses against the community, especially murder and property crimes of all kinds; and (4) the relationship to teachers of false doctrine, false prophets, and heretics.

Employment of church discipline at an early date led at first to the simple distinction between “mortal” and “not mortal” sins (1 John 5:15 ff.)—i.e., between sins that through their gravity resulted in loss of eternal life and those that did not. In earliest Christianity, the relapse of a baptized Christian into paganism (i.e., apostasy) was believed to be the most serious offense. In the Letter to the Hebrews one who is baptized irrevocably forfeits salvation through a relapse into grievous sin. The difficulties in substantiating the theory and practice of a second repentance were solved by Pope Calixtus (reigned 217?–222). This question was especially important in Rome because of the great number of offenses against the idea of holiness. Calixtus granted bishops the right to decide about definitive exclusion from the congregation or readmission as well as the right to evaluate church punishments. Although it did not occur without fierce opposition (e.g., Montanism), the concentration of penitential discipline in the bishops’ hands probably contributed more to the strengthening of episcopal power and to the achievement of the monarchical episcopate in the church than any other single factor.

Attainment of the church’s demand of holiness was made more difficult in the large cities, especially in reference to sexual purity. The period of persecution by the emperors and the demand that subjects of the empire sacrifice before the altars of the emperor’s images brought countless new instances of apostasy. The so-called Lapsi (Lapsedones), who had performed sacrifices before the emperor’s image but, after persecution, moved back into the churches again, became a serious problem for the church, sometimes causing schisms (e.g., the Donatists).

The execution of church discipline by the clergy was subordinated to the regulations of canon law provided for priests. A genuine practice of church discipline was maintained in the monasteries in connection with the public confession of guilt, which was made by every monk before the entire assembly in the weekly gatherings of the chapter. A strong revival of church discipline among the laity also resulted from the church discipline pursued within monasticism.

On the whole, the casuistic regulation of church discipline led to its externalization and devaluation. The medieval sects, therefore, always stressed in their critique of the worldly church the lack of spiritual discipline and endeavored to realize a voluntary church discipline in terms of a renewed radical demand of holiness based on early Christianity. The radical sects that emerged in the Reformation reproached the territorial churches by claiming that they had restricted themselves to a renovation of doctrine and not to a renewal of the Christian life and a restoration of the “communion of saints.” Different groups of Anabaptists (e.g., Swiss Brethren, Mennonites, and Hutterites), especially, attempted to realize the ideal of the purity and holiness of the church through the reintroduction of a strict church discipline.

The Reformed churches in particular endeavored to make church discipline a valid concern of the community. In Geneva, church discipline was expressed, at the instigation of John Calvin, in the establishment of special overseers, who were assigned to watch over the moral behaviour of church members. Calvin’s reforms in Geneva also led to the creation of such social arrangements as ecclesiastically controlled inns and taverns, in which not only the consumption of food and drink but even the topics of conversation were subject to stern regulation. The cooperation of ecclesiastical discipline and state legislation found its characteristic expression in the United States in the Prohibition amendment to the Constitution. Its introduction came most strongly from congregational churches, above all those characterized by evangelical, fundamentalist, or Pentecostal outlooks. They united forces with more moderate or liberal churches that were experienced in trying to affect the social order through legislation. Together they battled against the misuse of alcohol as part of their ideal to extend Christian norms and influence to the whole of society.

In the early 21st century, church discipline, in the original spiritual sense of voluntary self-control, is practiced only in smaller communities of evangelical Christians, in which the ideal of holiness of the community is still maintained and in which the mutual, personal bond of the congregational members in the spirit of Christian fellowship still allows a meaningful realization of a church discipline. It is also practiced in churches in developing nations where the practice of church discipline still appears as a vitally necessary centre of the credible self-representation of the Christian community. Characteristically, therefore, these churches’ main criticism of the old institutional churches has been directed against the cessation of church discipline among their members.
The Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches are organized around the office of the bishop. As the development of the episcopacy has been covered above (under Evolution of the episcopal office), this section will examine the organization of the Reformation churches.

Occupying a special position among these churches is the episcopal polity of the Anglican Communion. Despite the embittered opposition of Puritan and independent groups in England during the 16th and 17th centuries, this polity has maintained the theory and practice of the episcopal office of apostolic succession. The Low Church tradition of the Anglican Communion views the episcopal office as a form of ecclesiastical polity that has been tested through the centuries and is therefore commendable for pragmatic reasons. The Broad Church tradition, however, emphatically adheres to the traditional worth of the episcopal office without allowing the faithful to be excessively dependent upon its acknowledgement. The High Church tradition, on the other hand, values episcopal polity as an essential element of the Christian church that belongs to the church’s statements of faith. The episcopal branch of the Methodist Church has also retained the bishop’s office in the sense of the Low Church and Broad Church view.

In the Reformation churches an episcopal tradition has been maintained in the Swedish state church (Lutheran), whose Reformation was introduced through a resolution of the imperial Diet of Västerås in 1527, with the cooperation of the Swedish bishops. In the German Evangelical (Lutheran and Reformed) territories, the bishops’ line of apostolic succession was ruptured by the Reformation. As imperial princes, the Roman Catholic German bishops of the 16th century were rulers of their territories; they did not join the Reformation in order to avoid renouncing the exercise of their sovereign (temporal) rights as demanded by Luther’s Reformation. On the basis of a legal construction originally intended as a right of emergency, the Evangelical rulers functioned as the bishops of their territorial churches but only in questions concerning external church order. This development was promoted through the older conception of the divine right of kings and princes, which was especially operative in Germanic lands.

In matters of church polity, controversial tendencies that began in the Reformation remained as divisive forces within the ecumenical movement in the 20th century. For Luther and Lutheranism, the polity of the church has no divine-legal characteristics; it is of subordinate significance for the essence of the church, falls under human ordinances, and is therefore alterable. In Calvinism, on the other hand (e.g., in the Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541 and in Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion [1536]), the Holy Scriptures appear as a codex from which the polity of the congregation can be inferred or derived as a divine law. Thus, on the basis of its spiritual-legal character, church polity would be a component of the essence of the church itself. Both tendencies stand in a constant inner tension with one another in the main branches of the Reformation and within the individual confessions as well.

Even in Lutheranism, however, there has been a demand for a stronger emphasis upon the independent episcopal character of the superintendent’s or president’s office. Paradoxically, in the Lutheran Church, which came forth with the demand of the universal priesthood of believers, there arose the development of ecclesiastical authorities but not the development of self-contained congregational polities. When a merger of three Lutheran bodies produced a new Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1888, it established the bishop as leader of the synodal jurisdictions. In Lutheranism these bishops replaced presidents. Bishops were regarded there, as in Methodism, as part of the well-being—but not the being or essence—of the church. Reformed churches developed more or less self-contained congregational polities because the Reformed church congregation granted greater participation in the life of the congregation to the laity as presbyters and elders.

Presbyterian polity appeals to the model of the original church. The polity of the Scottish Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian churches of North America is primarily based upon this appeal, which was also found among many English Puritan groups and other spiritual descendants of John Calvin. It proceeds from the basic view that the absolute power of Christ in his church postulates the equality of rights of all members and can find expression only in a single office, that of the presbyter.

Congregationalism stresses the autonomous right of the individual congregation to order its own life in the areas of teaching, worship, polity, and administration. This demand had been raised and practiced by the medieval sects and led to differentiated polities and congregational orders among the Hussites and the Bohemian Brethren. Congregationalism was advanced during the Reformation period by the most diverse parties in a renewed way not only by “Enthusiasts” (or, in German, Schwärmer) and Anabaptists, who claimed the right to shape their congregational life according to the model of the original church, but also by individual representatives of Reformation sovereigns, such as Franz Lambert (François Lambert d’Avignon), whose resolutions at the Homberg Synod of 1526 were not carried out because of a veto by Luther. The beginnings of modern Congregationalism, however, probably lie among the English refugee communities on the European mainland, in which the principle of the established church was replaced by the concept of a covenant sealed between God or Jesus Christ and the individual or the individual congregation.

The basic concepts of Congregationalism are: the understanding of the congregation as the “holy people” under Jesus Christ; the spiritual priesthood, kingship, and prophethood of every believer and the exchange of spiritual experiences between them, as well as the introduction of a strict church discipline exercised by the congregation itself; the equal rank of all clergy; the freedom of proclamation of the gospel from every episcopal or official permission; and performance of the sacraments according to the institution of Jesus. By virtue of the freedom of self-determination fundamentally granted every congregation, no dogmatic or constitutional union but rather only county union of the Congregationalist churches developed in England. North America, however, became the classic land of Congregationalism as a result of the great Puritan immigration to New England, beginning with the Pilgrims on the Mayflower (1620). In the 20th century, acknowledgement of the full authority of the individual congregation ran through almost all Protestant denominations in the United States and was even found among the Lutherans.

Numerous other forms of congregational polity have arisen in the history of Christendom, such as the association idea in the Society of Friends. Even Pentecostal communities have not been able to maintain themselves in a state of unrestrained and constant charismatic impulses but instead have had to develop a legally regulated polity. This was what happened in the early church, which likewise was compelled to restrain the freedom of charisma in a system of rules and laws. Pentecostal communities either have been constituted in the area of a biblical fundamentalism theologically and on the basis of a congregationalist church polity constitutionally or they have ritualized the outpouring of the Spirit itself. Thus, the characteristic dialectic of the Holy Spirit is confirmed: the Spirit creates law and the Spirit breaks law even in the most recent manifestations of its working.

Liturgy

The central focus of the liturgy of the early church was the Eucharist, which was interpreted as a fellowship meal with the resurrected Christ. Most expressions of Judaism at the time of Christ were dominated by an intense expectation, appropriated by the early Christian church, of the kingdom of God, which would be inaugurated by the Messiah—Son of Man. At the centre of Jesus’ preaching on the kingdom of God is the promise that the blessed would “eat bread” with the exalted Messiah—Son of Man (Luke 13:29). The Lord himself would serve the community of the kingdom at the messianic meal (Luke 22:37 ff.), which bears the features of a wedding banquet. The basic mood in the community gathered about him is thus one of nuptial joy over the inauguration of the promised end-time. The supper that Jesus celebrated with his disciples “on the night when he was betrayed” (1 Corinthians 11:23) inaugurated the heavenly meal that will be continued in the kingdom of God, as Jesus indicated when
he declared “I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.” (Matthew 26:29)

The death of Jesus at first bewildered his community in the face of his promise, but the appearances of the risen Christ confirmed their expectations about the messianic kingdom. These appearances influenced the expectations about the messianic meal and the continuation of fellowship with the Son of Man in the meal. Faith in the Resurrection and an expectation of the continuation of the fellowship meal with the exalted Son of Man are two basic elements of the Eucharist that have been a part of the liturgy from the beginnings of the church. In meeting the risen Christ in the eucharistic meal the community sees all the glowing expectations of salvation confirmed.

The Christian community experiences a continuation of the appearances of the Resurrected One in the eucharistic meal. Thus, many liturgical forms developed, all of which served to enhance the meal’s mystery. In the liturgical creations of the 1st to the 6th century, diversity rather than uniformity was a commanding feature of the development of worship forms. This diversity is preserved in the Clementine liturgy (Antioch), the Liturgy of St. James of the church of Jerusalem, the liturgy of St. Mark in Egypt, the Roman mass, and others. The eucharistic mystery developed from a simple form, as depicted in the 2nd-century Didache, to the fully developed liturgies of the 5th and 6th centuries in both the East and the West.

In the 6th century two types of liturgies were fixed by canon law in the Eastern Orthodox Church: the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom (originally the liturgy of Constantinople) and the Liturgy of St. Basil (originally the liturgy of the Cappadocian monasteries). The Liturgy of St. Basil, however, is celebrated only 10 times during the year, whereas the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom is celebrated most other times. In addition to these liturgies is the so-called Liturgy of the Preconsecrated Offerings, attributed to Pope Gregory the Great. In this liturgy no consecration of the eucharistic offering occurs—because the eucharistic offerings used have been consecrated on the previous Sunday—and it is celebrated on weekday mornings during Lent as well as from Monday to Wednesday during Holy Week.

The period of liturgical improvisation apparently was concluded earlier in the Latin West than in the East. The liturgy of the ancient Latin church is textually available only since the 6th century. Though the Gallic liturgies are essentially closer to the Eastern liturgies, the liturgy of Rome followed a special development. From the middle of the 4th century, the Roman mass was celebrated in Latin rather than in Greek, which had been the earlier practice. The fixing of the Roman mass by canon law is congruent with the historical impulse of the Roman Catholic Church to follow the ancient Roman pattern of rendering sacred observance in legal forms and with stipulated regularities.

**New liturgical forms and antiliturgical attitudes**

In the 16th century new liturgical forms emerged in association with the Protestant Reformation. Luther in Germany restricted himself to revising the Roman Catholic liturgy of the mass and translating it into German, whereas Huldrych Zwingli in Switzerland attempted to create a completely new liturgy based solely on his reading of the New Testament. The Free churches also showed a strong liturgical productivity; in the Harnhut Brethren (Moravian) community, Graf (count) von Zinzendorf ushered in the singing worship services. Methodism, influenced by the spiritual songs and melodies of the Moravian church, also produced new liturgical impulses, especially through its creation of new hymns and songs and its joyousness in singing.

Churches that arose in the 19th and 20th centuries have been especially productive in liturgical reform. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose members are commonly called Mormons, developed not only a new type of church song but also a new style of church music in the context of their liturgical creation (e.g., “sealing”). The Baptist churches of African Americans, whose spirituals are the most impressive sign of a free and spontaneous liturgy, introduced a charismatic mood in their liturgical innovations. The Pentecostal churches of the 20th century quite consciously attempted to protect themselves against liturgical formalism. The often spontaneously improvised liturgy of the Pentecostal tent missions was transformed into patterns that became familiar to a wider audience through televised evangelism.

Though definite and obligatory liturgies have been established as normative, the forms of the liturgy continue to develop and change. The impulse toward variations in worship services was especially noticeable in the latter part of the 20th century. In the Eastern Orthodox liturgy, in the Roman Catholic mass and breviary, and in Anglican and Lutheran liturgies, there are both fixed and changing sections. The fixed parts represent the basic structure of the worship service concerned, and the alternating parts emphasize the individual character of a particular service for a certain day or period of the church year. The changing parts consist of special Old and New Testament readings that are appropriate for a particular church festival, as well as of special prayers and particular hymns.

The eucharistic liturgy consists of two parts: the Liturgy of the Catechumens and the Liturgy of the Faithful. This basic structure goes back to a time in which the church was a missionary church that grew for the most part through conversion of adults who were first introduced to the Christian mysteries as catechumens. They received permission to take part in the first part of the worship service (which was instructional) but had to leave the service before the eucharistic mystery was celebrated. The first part of the Orthodox worship service still ends with a threefold exclamation, reminiscent of pre-Christian, Hellenistic mystery formulas: “You catechumens, go forth! None of the catechumens (may remain here)!"

The eucharistic liturgy of the Orthodox Church is a kind of mystery drama in which the advent of the Lord is mystically consummated and the entire history of salvation—the Incarnation, death, and Resurrection of Christ the Logos, up to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit—is recapitulated. The Orthodox Church also attaches the greatest value to the fact that the transformation of the elements in bread and wine takes place during the eucharistic mystery. This is not the same as the Roman Catholic dogma of transsubstantiation, which teaches that the substance of the bread and wine is changed into the body and blood of Christ though the properties of the elements remain the same, when the priest consecrates the bread and wine. According to some Orthodox authorities, the Orthodox view is similar to the Lutheran doctrine of the real presence. The essential and central happening in the Orthodox liturgy, however, is the descent of the resurrected Lord himself, who enters the community as “the King of the universe, borne along invisibly above bears by the angelic hosts.” The transformation of the elements is, therefore, the immediate emanation of this personal presence. Thus, the Orthodox Church does not preserve and display the consecrated host after and outside the eucharistic liturgy, as in the Roman Catholic Church, because the consecrated offerings are mystically apprehended and actualized only during the eucharistic meal.

In the Roman Catholic mass the sacrificial character of the Eucharist is strongly emphasized, but it is less so in the Orthodox liturgy because in the Orthodox liturgy the Eucharist is not only a representation of the Crucifixion sacrifice (as in the Roman mass) but also of the entire history of salvation, in which the entire congregation, priest and laity, participates. Thus, the Orthodox Church has also held fast to the original form of Holy Communion in both kinds and preserves the liturgical gestures of the early church. The Orthodox worshippers pray while standing (because they stand throughout the service), with arms hanging down, crossing themselves at the beginning and ending of the prayer.

The prayerful gesture of folded hands among Protestant churches derives from an old Germanic tradition of holding the sword hand with the left hand, which symbolizes one’s giving himself over to the protection of God because he is now defenseless. The prayerful gesture of hands pressed flat against one another with the fingertips pointed upward—the symbol of the flame—is practiced among Roman Catholics. Other liturgical gestures found in many Christian churches are crossing oneself, genuflecting, beating oneself on the chest, and kneeling during prayer or when receiving the eucharistic elements. Among some Holiness or Pentecostal churches, spontaneous handclapping and rhythmic movements of the body have been stylized gestures in the worship services. These gestures are often familiar features of worship in churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Liturgical dancing, widely spread in pagan cults, was not practiced in the early church, but in the latter part of the 20th century liturgical dances were reintroduced in some churches in a limited fashion. Among the many other gestures of devotion and veneration practiced in the liturgically
oriented churches such as the Roman Catholic Church, the High Church Anglican churches, and the Orthodox Church are kissing the altar, the Gospel, the cross, and the holy icons.

Liturgical vestments have developed in a variety of fashions, some of which have become very ornate. The liturgical vestments all have symbolic meaning (see church year: liturgical colours). In the Orthodox Church the liturgical vestments symbolize the wedding garments that enable the liturgists to share in the heavenly wedding feast, the Eucharist. The épitrachilion, which is worn around the neck and corresponds to the Roman stole, represents the flowing downward of the Holy Spirit (see religious dress).

**Church tradition**

Christianity has exhibited a characteristic tension toward tradition from its very beginnings. This tension, which is grounded in its essence, has been continued throughout its entire history. It began with rejecting the pious traditions of piety of the Hebrew Scriptures and synagogue practices. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus set forth his message as a renunciation of the Old Testament tradition of the Law. Yet he created a new tradition, a “new law,” that has been carried on in the church. The dogmatic controversies of the Reformation period give the impression that the tradition of the church has to do primarily, if not exclusively, with ecclesiastical doctrinal tradition. Tradition, however, includes all areas of life of the Christian community and its piety, not just the teachings but also the forms of worship service, bodily gestures of prayer and the liturgy, oral and written tradition and the characteristic process of transition of the oral into written tradition, a new church tradition of rules for eating and fasting, and other aspects of the Christian life.

The break with the tradition of Judaism was not total. The Scriptures were adopted from Jewish tradition, but their interpretation was based upon the concepts of salvation that emerged around the figure of Jesus Christ. The book of Psalms, including its musical form, was taken over in Christian worship as the foundation of the liturgy. The new revelation became tradition in the oral transmission of the words (logia) of the Lord and the reports (kerygma) concerning the events of his life that were important for the early church’s faith in him; his baptism, the story of his Passion, his Resurrection, and his Ascension. The celebration of the Lord’s Supper as anticipation of the heavenly meal with the Messiah—Son of Man in the coming kingdom of God, even to the point of preserving in the liturgy the Aramaic exclamation maranatha (“O Lord, Come”) and its Greek parallel erche kyrie (“Come, Lord!”) as the supplicant calling for the Parousia (Second Coming)—all this became tradition.

Of special significance is the unique tradition of the oral transmission of teachings developed in Judaism. According to rabbinic doctrine, orally transmitted tradition coexisted on an equal basis with the written Law. Both text and tradition were believed to have been entrusted to Moses on Mount Sinai. The doctrinal contents of the tradition were initially passed on orally and memorized by the students. Because of the possibilities of error in a purely oral transmission, however, the extensive and growing body of tradition was, by necessity, fixed in written form. The rabbinic tradition of the Pharisees (a Jewish sect that sanctioned the reinterpretation of the Mosaic Law) was established in the Mishna (commentaries) and later in the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmud (compendiums of commentaries upon the Torah and lore). Because the essence of tradition is never concluded—i.e., by its very nature is never completely fixed in writing—the learned discussion of tradition by necessity continued in constant exegetical debate with the Holy Scriptures. The written record of tradition, however, never claimed to be equal to the Holy Scriptures in Judaism. A similar process of written fixation also occurred among the sectarians of the community at Qumran, which in its Manual of Discipline and in the Damascus Document recorded its interpretation of the Law, developed first orally in the tradition.

In the Christian church a tradition proceeding from Jesus himself was formed. The oral transmission of the tradition was written down between the end of the 1st and the first half of the 2nd century in the form of various gospels, histories of the Apostles, letters, sermonic literature, and apocalypses. Among Christian gnostics the tradition also included what was believed to be secret communications of the risen Christ to his disciples.

A new element, however, inhered in the Christian in relation to the Jewish tradition. For Jewish piety, revelation encompassed two forms of divine expression: the Law and the Prophets. This revelation is considered concluded with the last Prophets, and its actualization further ensues through interpretation. In the Christian church the tradition is joined not only to the teachings of Jesus and the story of his life as prophet and teacher but also to the central event of the history of salvation, which his life, Passion, death, and Resurrection represent—namely, to the resurrected Christ who is henceforth present as the living Lord of the church and guides and increases it through his Holy Spirit. This led to the literary form of church tradition—the Holy Scripture. As the “New Testament,” it takes its place next to the Holy Scripture of Judaism, henceforth reinterpreted as the “Old Testament.” The tradition of the church itself thereby entered into the characteristic Christian tension between spirit and letter. The spirit creates tradition but also breaks tradition as soon as the latter is solidified into an external written form and thus impedes charismatic life.

Throughout church history, however, the core of this field of tension has been formed by the transmission of the Christ event—the kerygma—itself. On the one hand, the kerygma is the bearer and starting point for tradition; on the other hand, it molds the impetus for ever-new impulses toward charismatic, fresh interpretations and, under certain circumstances, suggests or even enforces elimination of accumulated traditions. Decisive in this respect is the self-understanding of the church. According to the self-understanding of the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox churches, the church, as the institution of Jesus Christ, is the bearer of the oral and the written tradition and the creator of the New Testament canon. The church’s selection of canonical writings presupposes a dogmatic distinction between “ecclesiastical” teachings—which, in the opinion of its responsible leaders, are “apostolic”—and “heretical” teachings. It thereby already presupposes a far-reaching intellectualization of the tradition and its identification with “doctrine.” The oral tradition thus became formalized in fixed creedal formulas.

Accordingly, in the history of the Christian church a specific, characteristic dialectic has been evidenced between periods of excessive growth and formalistic hardening of tradition that hindered and smothered the charismatic life of the church and periods of a reduction of tradition that follow new reformational movements. The latter occurred, in part, within the church itself, such as in the reforms of Cluny, the Franciscans, and the Dominicans; they also took on the form of revolutionary movements. The Reformation of the 16th century broke with the institution of monasticism, the liturgical and sacramental tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, and certain elements of doctrinal tradition. Luther, however, was more conservative in his attitude toward the Roman Catholic Church than were Zwingli and Calvin. The Anabaptists and other Enthusiasts (Schwärmer) went even further, demanding and practicing a revolutionary break with the entire Roman Catholic tradition. The churches that arose from the Reformation, however, soon created their own traditions, which emerged from the confessional writings and doctrines of the reformers. The rejection of the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church had practical as well as dogmatic effects—e.g., the eating of sausage on fast days in Zürich at the start of Zwingli’s reformation or the provocative marriages of monks and nuns.

In the 19th century, a period of progressive political developments as well as anti-Catholic movements such as the Kulturkampf, the Roman Catholic Church sought to safeguard its tradition—threatened on all sides—through an emphatic program of “antimodernism.” It endeavored to protect tradition both by law and through theology (e.g., in returning to neo-Thomism). The representatives of this development were the popes from Pius IX (reigned 1846–78) to Pius XII (reigned 1939–58). With Pope John XXIII (reigned 1958–63), a dismantling (aggiornamento) of antimodernism and a more critical attitude toward “tradition” set in; this extended to traditional dogmatic views as well as to the liturgy and church structure. The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) guided this development into moderate channels. On the other hand, an opposite development took place in the Soviet Union and the eastern European countries. In these nations the remains of the Eastern Orthodox churches, which survived extermination campaigns of the Leninist and Stalinist eras from the 1920s to the 1950s, preserved themselves in a political environment hostile to the church precisely through a retreat to their church tradition and religious functioning in the realm of the liturgy. From the late 1980s Orthodox churches experienced greater religious
freedom and new growth, as the openly hostile governments in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe dissolved with the fall of communism. In the World Council of Churches, Eastern Orthodoxy in the latter part of the 20th century viewed its task as the bearer of Christian tradition against the predominant social-ethical tendencies of certain Protestant member churches that disregarded or de-emphasized the tradition of the church in a wave of antihistorical sentiment.

The sacraments

The interpretation and number of the sacraments vary among the Christian churches of the world. The number of sacraments also varied in the early church, sometimes including as many as 10 or 12. In his Book of Sentences (1148–51), Peter Lombard asserted that there were seven sacraments, a position adopted by contemporary theologians. At the Council of Trent (1545–63), the Roman Catholic Church formally fixed the number of sacraments at seven: baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, penance, holy orders, marriage, and anointing of the sick. The theology of the Eastern Orthodox churches also fixed the number of sacraments at seven. The classical Protestant churches (i.e., Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed) have accepted only two sacraments, baptism and the Eucharist, though Luther allowed that penance was a valid part of sacramental theology.

The New Testament mentions a series of “holy acts” that are not, strictly speaking, sacraments. Though the Roman Catholic Church recognizes a difference between such “holy acts,” which are called sacramentals, and sacraments, Eastern Orthodoxy does not, in principle, make such strict distinctions. Baptism and the Eucharist, therefore, have been established as sacraments of the church, but foot washing, which replaces the Lord’s Supper in The Gospel According to John, was not maintained as a sacrament. It is still practiced on special occasions, such as on Holy Thursday (the Thursday preceding Easter Sunday) in the Roman Catholic Church and as a rite prior to the observance of the Lord’s Supper, as in the Church of the Brethren. The “holy acts” of the Eastern Orthodox churches are symbolically connected to its most important mysteries. Hence, baptism consists of a triple immersion that is connected with a triple renunciation of Satan that the candidates say and act out symbolically prior to the immersions. Candidates first face west, which is the symbolic direction of the Antichrist, spit three times to symbolize their renunciation of Satan, and then face east, the symbolic direction of Christ, the sun of righteousness. Immediately following baptism, chrismation (anointing with consecrated oil) takes place, and the baptized believers receive the “seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Scriptural traditions

The most important creation of church tradition is that of the Holy Scriptures themselves and, secondarily, their exegesis (critical interpretations and explanations). Exegesis first appeared in Christian circles among gnostics and the church catechists (teachers)—e.g., in the Christian school systems, such as in Alexandria and Antioch. Gnostics and other groups that were regarded by mainstream Christians as heretics could not claim the unbroken apostolic tradition maintained by the orthodox Christian churches. They therefore had an interest in claiming the tradition to justify their own movements. Exegesis was directly related to the development of a normative scriptural canon in the orthodox churches. Eventually it contributed to the emergence of the catechetical schools.

The first representatives of early church exegesis were not the bishops but rather the “teachers” (didaskaloi) of the catechetical schools, modeled after the Hellenistic philosophers’ schools in which interpretive and philological principles had been developed according to the traditions of the founders of the respective schools. The allegorical interpretation of Greek classical philosophical and poetic texts, which was prevalent at the Library and Museum (the school) of Alexandria, for example, directly influenced the exegetical method of the Christian catechetical school there. Basing his principles on the methods of Philo of Alexandria and Clement of Alexandria, his teacher, and others, Origen—the Christian catechetical school’s most significant representative—created the foundation for the type of Christian exegesis (i.e., the typological- allegorical method) that lasted from the patristic period and the Middle Ages until the time of Luther in the 16th century. Origen based his exegesis upon comprehensive textual-critical work that was common to current Hellenistic practices, such as collecting Hebrew texts and Greek parallel translations of the Old Testament. His main concern, however, was that of ascertaining the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures, the trans-historical divine truth that is hidden in the records of the history of salvation. He thus developed a system containing four types of interpretation: literal, moral, typological, and allegorical. The fourfold sense of Scripture would come to dominate medieval exegesis, though the allegorical understanding of Scripture was the most common form of interpretation.

During the Reformation, under the leadership of Luther, the literal meaning of the Scriptures usurped the preeminence of the allegorical view. The literal interpretation of Scripture had its beginnings in the early church in school of Antioch. In contrast to the Platonic tradition of the school of Alexandria, the school of Antioch was guided by Aristotelian philosophy. In place of allegorizing, which was consciously rejected, Antiochene exegesis was occupied with textual criticism. Both traditions often were included together in the so-called glosses of the Latin Middle Ages, such as in the Glossa ordinaria (“Ordinary Glosses”), edited by Anselm of Laon (died 1117), and the Postillae—the first biblical commentary to be printed (1471–72)—of Nicholas of Lyra (c. 1270–1349).

According to his own statement, Luther’s inspiration came about through reflection on the Scriptures—legendo et docendo (“by perusing and teaching”)—in connection with his lectures on the Bible at the university of Wittenberg in Germany. He used the preliminary work of humanist philologists for the restoration of the Old and New Testament text (e.g., Erasmus’s 1516 edition of the Greek New Testament in the lectures on the Letter of Paul to the Romans). Luther replaced the traditional schema of the fourfold meaning of the Scripture with a spiritual interpretation of the letter—i.e., one based on Christ. Inasmuch as the letter, which speaks historically of the work of Christ, at the same time always means this work as the salvation event that has happened “for us,” it always contains the spiritual meaning in itself. In debates with the Spiritualists and Enthusiasts, who made use of the allegorical-tropological (figurative) method, Luther appealed ever more strongly to the unequivocal “clarity” of the letter of the Scriptures, which contains the “clarity” of the “subject” expressed by it. His exegesis is thus also a dogmatic one. The struggle between historical and tropological exegesis was emphasized in the debate between Luther and Zwingli over the understanding of the Lord’s Supper.

During the early 18th century, biblical interpretation free of dogmatic interest was achieved among theologians accused of heresy by orthodox colleagues of their confession, such as among the Dutch Arminians (e.g., Hugo Grotius and Johann Jakob Wettstein). Interest in the history of the Old and New Testament period was growing; ancient Middle Eastern history, biblical geography and archaeology, and the history of the religions of Hellenism were included in the interpretation of the Scriptures. Historical criticism of the Bible, which was independent of the moral and edifying evaluation of the Holy Scriptures, emerged under the influence of the Enlightenment and remained an important approach in Bible studies in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Veneration of places, objects, and people

In addition to the tradition of the Holy Scriptures and its interpretation, traditions centring on holy places also developed. The veneration of holy places is the oldest expression of Christian popular piety. From Judaism Christianity adopted the idea and practice of venerating holy places. In post-exilic Judaism (i.e., after the 5th century bc), Jerusalem was the sanctuary and the centre of the Jews in Palestine and the destination of the pilgrimages of Jews of the Diaspora. After the destruction in ad 70 of Jerusalem, which had become the holy city for the early church, it remained for Christians—as the site of the suffering and Resurrection of Jesus Christ and as the place of his return in glory—a holy city and a goal of pilgrimages. Early bishops such as Melito of Sardis and Alexander of Jerusalem and theologians, including Origen, made pilgrimages to Jerusalem. When Christianity became the state church in the 4th century, pilgrimages to the holy places in Palestine became increasingly popular.

The journey of the empress mother Helena to the Holy Land before ad 330 stimulated the growth of the “cult” (in the sense of a general system of religious belief and
practice) of relics through the alleged discovery of the holy cross. Her son, the emperor Constantine, built the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (335) and the Church of the Nativity over the Grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Shrines commemorating numerous other places identified in the Old and New Testaments soon followed.

The cult of martyrs and saints led to the establishment of shrines outside Palestine that became pilgrimage sites. The idea that the martyrs are present at the places of their martyrdom (e.g., Peter’s tomb at the Vatican) secured a prominent position for holy places connected with the cult of saints and martyrs. The cult of the martyrs was developed especially in the Roman catacombs, and it contributed to the formation of the Petrine doctrine and the teaching of the primacy of the Roman bishop. After the 4th century it spread further and created an abundance of new holy places in the West, including Santiago de Compostela in Spain, the site of the tomb of the apostle St. James and one of the great pilgrimage centres of Christendom; Trier in Germany, with the tomb of the apostle Matthias, which exerted a special power of attraction through the relic of the holy robe; and Marburg in Germany, with the shrine of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, a 13th-century princess known for her devotion to the poor. In the Middle Ages, holy places became places of grace, the visitation of which was considered a work of penance.

The original historical consciousness of the Christian Church is also alive in the cult of relics, which began as a result of veneration of a martyr at his or her tomb, over which later was erected an altar of the church built to honour the saint. From the 4th century on in the East, and later also in the West, the remains of the martyrs were distributed in order that as many as possible could share in their miraculous power. Fragments of relics, in which the saint is believed to be present, were sewn into a silken cloth (antimension), a practice still used in some churches, and the Eucharist could be celebrated only upon an altar that was covered with such an antimension. In times of persecution the Eucharist could be celebrated upon any table, as long as it was covered with the antimension and consecrated through the presence of the martyr. In the Latin Church relics are enclosed in a cavity (sepulcrum) in the altar top. During the deconsecration of a church, the relic is again removed from the sepulcrum.

In the late Middle Ages the character of the pilgrimage, just like the veneration of relics, suffered degeneration in connection with the degeneration of the sacrament of penance because of the abuse of the indulgence. Luther’s critique of the indulgence began with a criticism of the display of the elector of Saxony Frederick III the Wise’s imposing collection of relics in the Schlosskirche (Castle Church) of Wittenberg on All Saints’ Day (1516). In response to the attacks of Luther, the Council of Trent declared that

the holy bodies of the holy martyrs and others living with Christ, whose bodies were living members of Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit, and will be by him raised to eternal life and glorified, are to be venerated by the faithful, since by them God bestows many benefits upon men.

In order to avoid the development of a holy place at his grave and a reliquary and saintly cult around his person, Calvin arranged by will that his body be buried at an unknown spot. The erection of the giant monument to the reformer at the supposed place of his burial shows the futility of his effort and the strength of the Christian consciousness of tradition.

**Monasticism**

The origins of and inspiration for monasticism, an institution based on the Christian ideal of perfection, have traditionally been traced to the first apostolic community in Jerusalem—which is described in the Acts of the Apostles—and to Jesus’ sojourn in the wilderness. In the early church, monasticism was based on the identification of perfection with world-denying asceticism and on the view that the perfect Christian life would be centred on maximum love of God and neighbour.

Monasticism emerged in the late 3rd century and had become an established institution in the Christian church by the 4th century. The first Christian monks, who had developed an enthusiasm for asceticism, appeared in Egypt and Syria. Notably including St. Anthony, the founder of Christian monasticism, they appeared as solitary figures who, out of a desire for further and more advanced isolation, established themselves in tombs, in abandoned or half-deteriorated human settlements, in caves, and, finally, in the wilderness of the desert to do battle against the desires of the flesh and the wiles of the devil. Soon there were great numbers of desert anchorites, living solitary lives of devotion to God and coming together for weekly prayer services. The pious lifestyle of these earliest holy men attracted numerous imitators and admirers.

Certain writings that captured the spirit of monasticism were essential for the development of this way of life in the church. Athanasius of Alexandria, the 4th century’s most significant bishop spiritually and in terms of ecclesiastical politics, wrote the Life of St. Antony, which described the eremitic (hermit) life in the desert and the awesome struggle of ascetics with demons as the model of the life of Christian perfection. The Life had a profound impact on its many readers and was one of the first great testimonials praising the emerging monastic tradition.

A former Roman soldier of the 4th century, Pachomius, created the first cenobitic, or communal, monastery. He united the monks under one roof and one abbot (father, or leader). In 323 he founded the first true monastic cloister in Tabennisi, north of Thebes, in Egypt, and joined together houses of 30 to 40 monks, each with its own superior. Pachomius also created a monastic rule, though it served more as a regulation of external monastic life than as spiritual guidance. During the remainder of the 4th century, monasticism soon developed in areas outside Egypt. Athanasius brought the monastic rule of Pachomius to the West during his banishment (340–346) to Trier, Germany—as a result of his opposition to the imperially sanctioned doctrines of Arianism. Mar Awgin, a Syrian monk, introduced the monastic rule in Mesopotamia, and Jerome established a monastic cloister in Bethlehem.

Basil the Great, one of the three Cappadocian Fathers of the 4th century, definitively shaped monastic community life in the Byzantine Church. His ascetic writings furnished the theological and instructional foundation for the “common life” (cenobitism) of monks. He was the creator of a monastic rule that, through constant variations and modifications, became authoritative for later Orthodox monasticism. The Rule of Basil has preserved the Orthodox combination of asceticism and mysticism into the 21st century.

Western monasticism, which has been shaped by the rule of Benedict of Nursia, has been characterized by two distinct developments. The first consists of its clericalization. In modern Roman Catholic cloisters, monks are, except for the serving brothers (fratres), ordained priests and are thereby drawn in a direct way into the ecclesiastical tasks of the Roman Church. Originally, however, monks were laymen. Pachomius had explicitly forbidden monks to become priests on the ground that “it is good not to covet power and glory.” Basil the Great, however, by means of a special vow and a special ceremony, enabled monks to cease being just laymen and to attain a position between clergy and laity. Even in the 21st century, monks of the Orthodox Church are, for the most part, from the laity; only a few fathers (abbes) of each cloister are ordained priests (hieronomachoi), who are thus allowed to administer the sacraments.

The second special development in Roman Catholicism consists of the functional characteristics of its many orders. The individual orders aid the church in its various areas of activity—e.g., missions, education, care for the sick and needy, and combating heresy. Developing a wide-ranging diversification in its structure and sociological interests, Roman Catholic monasticism has extended all the way from the knightly orders to orders of mendicant friars, and it has included orders of decided feudal and aristocratic characteristics alongside orders of purely bourgeois characteristics. To the degree that special missionary, pedagogical, scholarly-theological, and ecclesiastically political tasks of the orders increased in the West, the character of ancient monasticism—originally focused completely on prayer, meditation, and contemplation—receded more and more in importance. Few monastic orders—the Benedictines and the Carmelites are notable exceptions—still attempt to preserve the ancient character and purposes of monasticism in Roman Catholicism.
The saintly life

The term saint was originally a self-designation of all Christians. “The saints,” according to the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians (1:31), are “sanctified through the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and through the Spirit of our God.” Saints were also understood as Christians who endeavoured to fulfill the binding demand of holiness in obedience to God and in love of their neighbours (2 Corinthians 7:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:3) or as charismatic figures in whom the gifts of the Holy Spirit operated according to their personal and temporal circumstances. Because of certain views on being “called to holiness,” members of many sects have designated themselves as “the saints”—from Oliver Cromwell’s “saints” in 17th-century England to the Mormon “latter-day saints” from the 19th to the 21st century.

The general meaning of saint was transformed during the period of the persecutions of Christians in the Roman Empire. The martyr, the witness in blood to Christ and follower in his suffering, became the prototypical saint. Veneration of the saints began because of a belief that martyrs were received directly into heaven after their martyrdoms and that their intercession with God was especially effective—in the Revelation to John the martyrs occupy a special position in heaven, immediately under the altar of God (Revelation 6:9). The veneration of confessors (i.e., those who had not denied their belief in Christ but had not been martyred), bishops, popes, early Church Fathers, and ascetics who had led a godlike life was established soon after cessation of the persecutions.

In the Greek church the saints were regarded as charismatic figures in whom the prototype of Christ is reflected in multifarious images. Veneration of the saints in the Orthodox churches was thus based more upon the idea that the saints provided instructional examples of the Christian life of sanctification. In the West, however, cultic veneration of the saints, the concept of patron saints, and the view that saints are helpers for those in need became predominant. During the 12th and 13th centuries, the veneration of saints came under the control of the papacy, which established a process of canonization strictly defined by canon law. The saints thus dominated the church calendar, which notes the names of the ecclesiastically recognized saints of each day of the year. They are venerated on a particular day in the prayer of intercession, and references are made to their deeds, sufferings, and miracles in the liturgy.

Under Pope Paul VI, the Roman Catholic Church attempted to reduce the significance of the veneration of saints—and thereby emphasize the idea of their historical exemplariness—by deleting some legendary figures from the calendar of saints, most notably St. Christopher. The deletion, however, has had little influence on popular piety. Pope John Paul II, fully respectful of the directions of the Second Vatican Council, nonetheless paid renewed respect to some of the pre-council forms of devotion which the reformers had tended to displace. His respect for the traditional veneration of saints was further demonstrated by the fact that he performed far more canonizations than had any previous pope.

In the early church the veneration of saints at first was restricted to celebrations at their tombs, but the cult of saintly relics soon spread the devotion to particular saints to many areas. The Martyrdom of Polycarp, for example, called the remains of the bishop Polycarp of Smyrna, martyred in 155, “more precious than costly stones and more excellent than gold.” A belief in the need of special protection by saints is the basis of the system of patron saints. Saints became patrons of cities, regions, vocational groups, or classes, and most Roman Catholic churches have a saint as their patron, whose presence in the church is represented by a particular relic. Saints also won a special significance as patrons of names: in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches a Christian generally received the name of the saint on whose holiday (day of death) he is baptized. The believer was thus joined for life with the patron of his name through the name and the name day, which, as the day of rebirth (i.e., baptism), is of much greater significance than the natural birthday.

Although the Reformation did not in theory deny the significance of the saints as historical witnesses to the power and grace of God, it did eliminate their veneration and remove their images and relics from churches and homes. Luther’s view that all believers are saints contributed to this development. At the same time, the experience of martyrdom in the persecutions of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation encouraged the development of a new saintly ideal in the radical Protestant sects. In the 20th century, the Swedish archbishop Nathan Söderblom’s attempt to develop a new understanding of the notion of the saint led to a rediscovery of saints in the Protestant realm. In modern Roman Catholicism, emphasis is increasingly being placed upon the charismatic aspects of the saints and their significance as models of a spiritual, holy Christian life.

Art and iconography

Christian art constitutes an essential element of the religion. Until the 17th century the history of Western art was largely identical with the history of Western ecclesiastical and religious art. During the early history of the Christian Church, however, there was very little Christian art, and the church generally resisted it with all its might. Clement of Alexandria, for example, criticized religious (pagan) art for encouraging people to worship that which is created rather than the Creator. There was also little need for Christian art, because monumental churches had yet to be built and there were few wealthy patrons to commission it. By the late 2nd century an incipient pictorial art had appeared in the Christian Church, and by the mid-3rd century art inspired by pagan models as well as Christian themes began to be produced. Pictures began to be used in the churches when Christianity was legalized and supported by the Roman emperor Constantine in the early 4th century, and they soon struck roots in Christian popular religiosity.

A number of factors explain the slow development of Christian art in the early centuries of the church. Christianity received from its Jewish origins a prohibition against the use of images to depict the sacred or holy, including humans, who were created in “the image of God.” The early church was also deeply involved in a struggle against paganism—which, to the Christian observer, was idolatry in that its many gods were represented in various pictorial and statuary forms. In early Christian missionary preaching, the Old Testament attacks upon pagan veneration of images were transferred directly to pagan image veneration of the first three centuries ad. The struggle against images was conducted as a battle against “idols” with all the intensity of faith in the oneness and exclusiveness of the imageless biblical God. The abhorrence of images was strengthened further by the emperor’s cult, which Christians so despised. Christians were compelled to venerate the imperial images by offering sacrifices to them; refusal to make sacrifice was the chief cause of martyrdom. Characteristically, then, the church’s reaction to its public recognition was expressed in the riotous destruction of pagan divine images.

In spite of these very strong religious and emotional restraints, the church developed a form of art peculiar to its needs. From late antiquity to the time of the Counter-Reformation, Western art was essentially the art of the church; both lay and secular patrons commissioned works of art that illustrated important Christian themes and stood as testimony to their own faith. Assuming many forms, Christian art could be found in private homes, churches, and public spaces. Churches, themselves artistic triumphs, were adorned with a broad range of art, including statuary, paintings, and stained glass. Another important form was illumination; illuminated manuscripts were prized possessions and often displayed on high holy days. The attitude reflected in these practices was expressed in the famous dictum of Pope Gregory I, that art is the book of the illiterate; art was thus conceived as having a didactic function.

The starting point for the development of Christian pictorial art lies in the basic teaching of the Christian revelation itself—namely, the incarnation, the point at which the Christian proclamation is differentiated from Judaism. The incarnation of the Son of Man, the Messiah, in the form of a human being—who was created in the “image of God”—granted theological approval of a sort to the use of images that symbolized Christian truths. Clement of Alexandria, at one point, called God “the Great Artist,” who formed humans according to the image of the Logos, the archetypal light of light. The great theological struggles over the use of images within the church, particularly in the Byzantine Empire, during the period of the so-called Iconoclastic Controversy in the 8th and 9th centuries indicate how a new understanding of images emerged on the basis of Christian doctrine. This new understanding was developed into a theology of icons that still prevails in the Eastern Orthodox Church in the 21st
The great significance of images of the saints for the Orthodox faithful is primarily expressed in the cultic veneration of the images within the worship service. Second, it is expressed in the dogmatic fixation of the figures, gestures, and colours in Eastern Church iconic art. In the West, the creative achievement of the individual artist is admired, but Orthodox painting dispenses with the predominance of the individual painter’s freely creative imagination. Throughout the centuries the Eastern Church has been content with reproducing certain types of holy images, and only seldom does an individual artist play a predominant role within the history of Orthodox Church painting. Most Orthodox ecclesiastical artists have remained anonymous. Icon painting is viewed as a holy skill that is practiced in cloisters in which definite schools of painting have developed. In the schools, traditional principles prevail so much that different artist-monks generally perform only certain functions in the production of a single icon. Style motifs—e.g., composition, impartation of colour, hair and beard fashions, and gestures of the figures—are fixed in painting books that contain the canons of the different monastic schools of icon painters.

The significance of the image of the saint in the theology, piety, and liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church can be judged historically from the fact that the struggle over holy images within Orthodox Church history brought about a movement whose scope and meaning can be compared only with the Reformation of Luther and Calvin. In the 7th century a tendency hostile to images and fostered by both theological and political figures gained ground within the Byzantine Church and upset Orthodox Christendom to its very depths; known as the Iconoclastic Controversy, it was supported by some reform-minded emperors. Although opponents of icons had all the political means of power at their disposal, they were not able to succeed in overthrowing the use of icons. The conclusion of this struggle with the victory of the supporters of the use of icons is celebrated in the entire Orthodox Church on the first Sunday of Lent as the Feast of Orthodoxy.

Orthodox icon painting is not to be separated from its ecclesiastical and liturgical function. The painting of the image is, in fact, a liturgical act in which the artist-monks prepare themselves by fasting, doing penance, and consecrating the materials necessary for the painting. Before the finished icon is used, it likewise is consecrated. Not viewed as a human work, an icon (according to 8th- and 9th-century literature) was understood instead as a manifestation of a heavenly archetype. A golden background is used on icons to indicate a heavenly perspective. The icon is always painted two-dimensionally because it is viewed as a window through which worshipers can view the heavenly archetype from their earthly position. A figure in the three-dimensionality of the plastic arts, such as sculpture, would thus be an abandonment of the character of epiphany (appearance).

Ideas of the iconic liturgy dominate the manuals of the Orthodox icon painters. The model of the Christ figure for icon painters was found in an apocryphal writing of the early church—the Letter of Lentulus, supposedly written by a certain Lentulus, who was named consul in the 12th year of the emperor Tiberius. As the superior of Pontius Pilate, the procurator of Judaea, he by chance was staying in Palestine at the time of the trial of Jesus. In an official report to the emperor about the trial of Jesus, Lentulus included an official warrant for Jesus with a description of the Christ. This apocryphal description furnished the basic model for the Byzantine Christ type.

The Trinity also may not be represented, except from those forms in which, according to the view of Orthodox church doctrine, the Trinity showed itself in the divine Word of the Old and New Testaments. Early church theology interpreted an Old Testament passage (Genesis 18:1 ff.) as an appearance of the divine Trinity—namely, the visit of the three men with the patriarch Abraham at Mamre in Palestine. Also included in icons of the Trinity are the appearance of the three divine persons—symbolized as a hand, a man, and a dove—at the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:16 ff.) and the Pentecostal scene, in which the Lord, ascended to heaven, sits at the right hand of God and the Comforter (the Holy Spirit) is sent down to the Apostles in the form of fiery tongues (Acts 2). Another Trinitarian iconic scene is the Transfiguration of Jesus at Mount Tabor (Matthew 17:2).

Icons of Mary were probably first created because of the development of Marian doctrines in the 3rd and 4th centuries. The lack of New Testament descriptions of Mary was compensated by numerous legends of Mary that concerned themselves especially with wondrous appearances of miraculous icons of the mother of God. In Russian and many other Orthodox churches, including the monasteries at Mount Athos, such miraculous mother of God icons, “not made by hands,” have been placed where the appearances of the mother of God took place.

The consecration liturgy of the icons of saints expresses the fact that the saints themselves, for their part, are viewed as likenesses of Christ. In them, the image of God has been renewed again through the working of salvation of the incarnate Son of God.

Theology of icons

The foes of images explicitly deny that the New Testament, in relation to the Old Testament, contains any new attitude toward images. Their basic theological outlook is that the divine is beyond all earthly form in its transcendence and spirituality; representation in earthly substances and forms of the divine already indicate its profanation. The relationship to God, who is Spirit, can only be a purely spiritual one; the worship of the individual as well as the community can happen only “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). Similarly, the divine archetype can also be realized only spiritually and morally in life. The religious path of the action of God upon humans is not the path of external influence upon the senses but rather that of spiritual action upon the mind and the will. Such an effect does not come about through the art of painting. Opponents of icons thus claim that the only way to reach an understanding of the truth is by studying the writings of the Old and New Testaments, which are filled with the Spirit of God.

The decisive contrast between the iconodules (image lovers) and the iconoclasts (image destroyers) is found in their understanding of Christology. The iconodules based their theology upon the view of Athanasius—who reflected Alexandrian Christology—that Christ, the God become human, is the visible, earthly, and corporeal icon of the heavenly Father, created by God himself. The iconoclasts, on the other hand, explain, in terms of ancient Antiochene Christology, that the image conflicts with the ecclesiastical dogma of the Person of the Redeemer. It is unseemly, according to their views, to desire to portray a personality such as Christ, who is himself divine, because that would mean pulling the divine down into the materialistic realm.

The history of iconoclasm began in the early church with an emphatic (and, from the viewpoint of lovers of Greek and Roman culture, catastrophic) iconoclastic movement that led to the annihilation of nearly all of the sacred art of the pagan religions of the Roman Empire. In Western Christendom, an iconoclastic attitude was again expressed in various medieval lay movements and sects. Iconoclasm underwent a revolutionary outbreak in the 16th-century Reformation in Germany, France, and England. Despite the different historical types of iconoclasm, a surprising uniformity in regard to their affective structure and theological argumentation exists. The Iconoclastic Controversy of the 8th and 9th centuries also became a point of contention in the Western Church. To be sure, the latter had recognized the seventh ecumenical council at Nicaea (787), in which iconoclasm was condemned. Nevertheless, an entirely different situation existed in the West. The Frankish–Germanic Church was a young church in which images were much more infrequent than in the old Byzantine Church, in which holy icons had accumulated over the centuries. In the West there was still no Christian pictorial art as highly developed as in the East. Also, Christianity there did not have to struggle against a highly developed pagan pictorial art. Donar, a Germanic god, reputedly whispered in a holy oak, and Boniface merely had to fell the Donar oak in order to demonstrate the superiority of Christ over the pagan god. Among the Germanic tribes in the West, there was no guild of sculptors or goldsmiths, as in Ephesus (Acts 19:24 ff.), who would have been able to protest in the name of their gods against the Christian iconoclasts.

The Western viewpoint is revealed most clearly in the formulations of the synodal decisions on the question of images, as they were promulgated in the Frankish kingdom
in the Libri Carolini, a theological treatise composed primarily by Theodulf of Orléans at Charlemagne’s request. In this work it is emphasized that images have only a representative character. Thus, they are understood not as an appearance of the saint but only as a visualization of the holy persons for the support of recollecting spiritual meanings that have been expounded intellectually through sermons. Hence, this led to an essentially instructional and aesthetic concept of images. The Western Church also viewed images as the Holy Scriptures’ substitute for the illiterate—i.e., for the overwhelming majority of church people in this period. Images thus became the Bible for the laity. Pope Adrian I, who encouraged Western recognition of the iconodulic Council of Nicaea, also referred to the perspicuity of the icons. This idea of perspicuity—i.e., the appeal to one’s imagination to picture the biblical persons and events to oneself—enabled him to recognize the Greek high esteem for the image without completely accepting the complicating theological foundation for icon veneration. The ideas articulated in the Libri Carolini remained decisive for the Western tradition.

According to Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest medieval theologians of the West, images in the church serve a threefold purpose: (1) for the instruction of the uneducated in place of books; (2) for illustrating and remembering the mystery of the incarnation; and (3) for awakening the passion of devotion, which is kindled more effectively on the basis of viewing than through hearing.

The Western theology of icons, the omnipotence of the two-dimensionality of church art also was abandoned. Alongside church pictorial painting, ecclesiastical plastic arts developed; even painting in the three-dimensional form was introduced through the means of perspective. Art, furthermore, became embedded in the entire life of personal religiosity. The holy image became the devotional image; the worshipper placed himself before an image and became engrossed in his meditation of the mysteries of the Christian revelation. As devotional images, the images became the focal points for contemplation and mystical representation. Conversely, the mystical vision itself worked its way back again into pictorial art, in that what was beheld in the vision was reproduced in church art. The burden of ecclesiastical tradition, which weighs heavily upon Byzantine art, has been gradually abolished in the Western Church. In the Eastern Church the art form is just as fixed as ecclesiastical dogma; nothing may be changed in the heavenly prototypes. This idea plays little or no role in the West. There, religious art adjusts itself at any given time to the total religious disposition of the church, to the general religious mental posture, and also to religious needs. Religious art in the West also has been shaped by the imaginative fantasy of the individual artist. Thus, from the outset, a much more individual church art developed in the West. Thus, it became possible to dissociate sacred history from its dogmatic milieu and to transpose it from the past into the actual present, thereby allowing for an adaptable development of ecclesiastical art.

Eschatology

The “last things” were the first things, in terms of urgency, for the faithful of the early church. The central content of their faith and their hope was the coming Kingdom of God. They believed that the promises of the Old Testament about the coming bringer of salvation had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, but that the fulfillment was not yet complete. Thus, they awaited Christ’s Second Coming, which they believed was imminent.

Expectations of the Kingdom of God in early Christianity

In early Christianity’s expectation of the Kingdom of God, two types were inherited from Judaism. The first was the expectation of a messianic Kingdom in this world, with its centre in Jerusalem, which was to be established by an earthly messiah from the house of David. The second expectation was that of a heavenly Kingdom, which was to be inaugurated by the heavenly messiah, Son of man, and in which the “elect” of the Kingdom from all times would share in the state of the resurrection.

The two types of eschatological expectation did not remain neatly separated in the early church but rather intersected in manifold ways. Under the influence of the persecutions, a combination of the end-time expectations was established. In Paul’s letters and in the Revelation to John, the notion emerged that faithful Christians will first reign together with their returning Lord for some time in this world. Those Christians who are still alive at his return will take part in the reign without dying (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Christians who have already died will rise again and, as resurrected ones, share in the Kingdom upon Earth. Only after completion of this first act of the events of the end time will there then follow the general resurrection of all the dead and the Last Judgment, in which the elect will participate as co-judges (1 Corinthians 6:2).

In the Revelation to John this expectation is condensed into the concept of the 1,000-year (millennial) kingdom. The dragon (Satan) is to be chained up and thrown into the abyss, where he will remain for 1,000 years. In John’s vision, Christians, the first resurrected, “came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (Revelation 20:4). Only later does the resurrection of all the dead take place, as well as the general judgment, creation of the new heaven and the new Earth, and the descent of the new Jerusalem. According to the Revelation to John, this 1,000-year Kingdom is composed of the saints and martyrs and all who stood the test in times of persecution; it is a Kingdom of the privileged elect.

This promise has exerted revolutionary effects in the course of church history. In the early church the expectation of the millennium was viewed as a social and political utopia, a state in which the chosen Christians would rule and judge with their Lord in this world. Such chiliastic (or millennial) expectations provided the impetus for ecclesiastical, political, and social reformations and revolutions in the course of church history. The establishment of a 1,000-year kingdom in which the elect, with Christ, will reign has fascinated religious expectations as well as political and social imagination far more than the second part of the eschatological expectation, the “Last Judgment.”

The delay of the Parousia resulted in a weakening of the imminent expectation in the early church. In this process of “de-eschatologizing,” the institutional church increasingly replaced the expected Kingdom of God. The formation of the church as a hierarchical institution is directly connected with the declining of the imminent expectation. The theology of St. Augustine constitutes the conclusion of this development in the West. He de-emphasized the original imminent expectation by declaring that the Kingdom of God has already begun in this world with the institution of the church, which is the historical representative of the Kingdom of God on Earth. The first resurrection, according to Augustine, occurs constantly within the church in the sacrament of baptism, through which the faithful are introduced into the Kingdom of God. The expectation of the coming Kingdom of God, the resurrection of the faithful, and the Last Judgment have become a doctrine of the “last things” because the gifts of salvation of the coming Kingdom of God are interpreted as being already present in the sacraments of the church.

Expectations of the Kingdom of God in the medieval and Reformation periods

Despite Augustine’s teachings to the contrary, the original imminent expectation has spontaneously and constantly reemerged in the history of Christianity. It was a powerful undercurrent throughout much of the Middle Ages, shaping numerous movements in that period. Charlemagne and his advisors may have been motivated by eschatological concerns, including those associated with the legend of the “Last Emperor,” to accept imperial coronation on Christmas Day, 800. Indeed, several medieval rulers, including Otto III, were inspired by the legend in which the Last Emperor struggles against the Antichrist in preparation for the Second Coming. About the year 1000, eschatological expectations influenced the Peace of God movement (a social and religious reform movement that emerged in southern and central France), and numerous apparent signs and miracles suggested the imminence of Christ’s return. The knights of the First Crusade (1095–99), especially those involved in massacres of Jews in Germany, were most likely influenced by apocalyptic expectations. Joachim of Fiore developed a millennialist theology and philosophy of history that influenced the Spiritual Franciscans in the 13th century. In the 14th century peasant revolts in France and England were shaped by eschatological as well as economic concerns, and the Taborites, extremist followers of Jan Hus, sought to bring about the Kingdom of God by force. In the medieval church new outbreaks of an imminent expectation also occurred in connection with great historical catastrophes, such as epidemics of the plague, Islamic invasions, schisms, and wars.
Martin Luther’s Reformation also was sustained by an imminent expectation. For the Reformers, the starting point for their eschatological interpretation of contemporary history was that the “internal Antichrist,” the pope, had established himself in the temple at the Holy Place and that through persecution by the “external Antichrist,” the Turk, the church had entered into the travails of the end time. The Reformation churches, however, soon became institutional territorial churches, which in turn repressed the end-time expectation, and thus doctrine of the “last things” largely became an appendix to dogmatics.

Although heightened apocalyptic fervour was quickly drained from the movements of the magisterial reformers (who received support from the civil powers or magistrates and who stressed the authority of teachers [Latin: magister]), the so-called radical reformers were often intensely eschatological, and some even advocated violence to usher in the Second Coming. Thomas Müntzer, inspired as much by the apocalyptic books of the Bible as by Luther, identified the poor as God’s special elect who were charged with overthrowing their earthly rulers to bring about God’s kingdom. His preaching was one of the inspirations of the German Peasants’ War of 1524–25. The sect led by Jan of Leiden at Munster was also radically and violently apocalyptic, and many Anabaptist groups expressed an imminent eschatology. In England, several groups were apocalyptic, even millenarian, in nature. The Fifth Monarchy Men believed that the fifth monarchy (i.e., the reign of Christ)—to follow the biblical Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek, and Roman kingdoms—was at hand. Independents, Diggers, and other groups expressed belief in the imminent Second Coming, but many of them were suppressed by Oliver Cromwell.

**Expectations of the Kingdom of God in the post-Reformation period**

In the post-Reformation period, the imminent expectation appeared in individual groups on the margin of the institutional Reformation churches; such groups generally made the imminent expectation itself the object of their sect formation. This has been the result of the fact that, since the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church has been virtually immune to eschatological movements. The Lutheran Church has been less immune; a series of eschatological groups whose activity in the church was determined by their expectation of the imminent return of Christ appeared in Pietism. Among the congregational and evangelical churches of England and America, the formation of new eschatological groups has been a frequent occurrence, especially during revival movements, including that of William Miller, who laid the foundation for the Adventist church in the 19th century. Such groups shared significantly in the renewal and expansion of Christianity in domestic and foreign missions. Indeed, by late in the 20th century much of the Christian missionary outreach had passed into the hands of millennial-minded groups.

The role of imminent expectation in missions and emigrations

The great missionary activities of Christian history in most cases have been based upon a reawakened imminent expectation, which creates a characteristic tension. The tension between the universal mission of the church and the hitherto omitted missionary duties, as well as the idea that the colossal task must be accomplished in the shortest time possible, renders comprehensible the astonishing physical and spiritual achievements of the great Christian missionaries. After the inundation of Christian areas of Africa and Asia by Islam, Franciscan missionaries in the 13th and 14th centuries, enduring incredible hardships, went by land and by sea to India, China, and Mongolia to preach the gospel. In a similar way, the missionary movement of the 18th and 19th centuries also proceeded from such eschatological groups within Protestantism.

The expectation of the Kingdom of God, in the form of the imminent expectation, plays a strong role in emigration movements. Great masses of European Christians again and again set out for Palestine with a sense of finding there the land of their salvation and being present when Christ returns there to establish his Kingdom. Mass pilgrimages to Jerusalem took place in 1033 and again in 1064–65, and the Crusades can be seen as a form of pilgrimage whose participants held eschatological concerns. The peasants of the so-called “People’s Crusade” and the knights of the First Crusade were clearly motivated by apocalyptic anxieties, and Count Emicho of Flonheim, who led the massacres of the Jews in Germany, may have seen himself in the role of the Last Emperor. The eschatological strain of the Crusades can also be noted in the Crusade sermons of St. Bernard de Clairvaux in 1147, who kindled enthusiasm to liberate Jerusalem with reference to the pressing terminal dates of the end time.

A great number of the attempts undertaken to found radical Christian communities in North America may be viewed as anticipations of the coming Jerusalem. The emigration movement toward America was influenced by beliefs in eschatologically fixed dates (e.g., Columbus). Puritans who traveled to America in the 17th century and Quakers, Baptists, and Methodists in the 18th century believed that America was the “wilderness” promised in the Revelation to John. William Penn gave the name Philadelphia to the capital of the woodland areas ceded to him (1681) because he took up the idea of establishing the true church of the end time, represented by the Philadelphia community of the Revelation to John. The same influence holds true for the emigration of German revivalists of the 18th and early 19th centuries to Russia and Palestine.

The “Friends of the Temple”—Swabians who went with Christoph Hoffmann to Palestine in 1866—and the Swabians, Franks, Hessians, and Bavarians, who after the Napoleonic Wars followed the call of Tsar Alexander I to Bessarabia, were all dominated by the idea of living in the end time and preparing themselves for the coming Kingdom of God. In Tsar Alexander I they saw the “eagle...as it flew in midheaven” (Revelation 8:13), which prepared the “recovery spot” for them in the East upon which Christ will descend.

As had occurred earlier in Christian history, eschatological expectations in the modern age sometimes turned violent. The intensely apocalyptic ideas of David Koresh, for example, led him and other Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, to a tragic end.

**Eschatological expectations and secularization**

In the eyes of some theologians, the very process of secularization, which progressively rules out transcendent explanations of natural and historical conditions, has been a working out of a form of eschatological expectation. Of course, the substance is quite different in the cases where people work in expectation of the Kingdom of God and in the other cases where they become “futurologists.” But the impulse to prepare oneself for such futures has analogues and origins, it is contended, in old Christian ideas of penance and preparation for the coming Kingdom.

In the Gospels the attitude toward the coming Kingdom of God led, over and beyond the expectation of nullifying sin and death, to certain worldly conclusions of an organizational kind. The disciples of Jesus knew that there will be “first ones” in the Kingdom of Heaven; they pressed for the administrative posts in the coming Kingdom. The expectation of the Kingdom of Heaven was that the “internal Antichrist,” the pope, had established himself in the temple at the Holy Place and that through persecution by the “external Antichrist,” the Turk, the church had entered into the travails of the end time. The Reformation churches, however, soon became institutional territorial churches, which in turn repressed the end-time expectation, and thus doctrine of the “last things” largely became an appendix to dogmatics.

Despite this warning, the imminent expectation of the coming Kingdom of God awakened concrete, substantial ideas that led ever closer to social utopias. With the 18th-century German Lutheran mystic and Pietist F.C. Oetinger, the end-time expectation generated definite social and political demands—e.g., dissolution of the state, abolition of property, and elimination of class differences. Some of the aspects of the end-time expectation of Pietism were revived in the French Revolution’s political and social programs. The transition from the end-time expectation to the social utopia, however, had already been achieved in writings from the 16th and early 17th centuries—e.g., the English humanist and saint Sir Thomas More’s ...de optimo reipublicae statu deque nova Insula Utopia (1516; “On the Highest State of a Republic and on the New Island Utopia”), the German theologian Johann Valentin Andrea’s Reipublicae Christianopolitanae Descriptio (1619; “A Description of the Christian Republic”), the English philosopher Sir Francis Bacon’s New Atlantis (1627), and the English bishop Francis Godwin’s Man in the Moone (1638). It is also found in early socialism of the 19th century—e.g., the French social reformer Henri de Saint-Simon’s Nouveau Christianisme (1825; “The New Christianity”) and the French Socialist...
Étienne Cabet’s Voyage en Icarie (1840; “Voyage to Icaria”).

What distinguishes the Christian social utopia from the earlier kind of eschatology is the stronger emphasis upon social responsibility for the preparation of the Kingdom of God and a considerable preponderance of various techniques in the establishment of the utopian society. (In general, the end-time expectation has also inspired technical fantasy and science fiction.) Also characteristic is the basic attitude that people themselves must prepare the future perfect society in a formative and organizing manner and that “hoping” and “awaiting” are replaced by human initiative. A graduated transition from a social utopia still consciously Christian to a purely Socialist one can be observed in the writings and activities of the French Socialists Charles Fourier, Saint-Simon, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the English Socialist Robert Owen, and the German Socialist Wilhelm Weitling. Secularized remnants of a glowing Christian end-time expectation are still found even in the Marxist view of the social utopia.

Modern planning and projection of alternative futures is a secularization of the end-time expectations previously envisioned in Christian terms. The future is thus manipulated through planning (i.e., “horizontal eschatology”) in place of eschatological “hoping” and “waiting” fulfillment. “Horizontal eschatology” is thus taken out of the sphere of the unexpected and numinous (spiritual); it is made the subject not only of a detailed prognosis based upon statistics but also of a detailed programming undertaken on the basis of this prognosis. An eschatological remainder is found only in an ideological image of man, upon which programming and planning are based.

Concepts of life after death

The Christian end-time expectation is directed not only at the future of the church but also at the future of the individual believer. It includes definite conceptions of the personal continuance of life after death. Many baptized early Christians were convinced they would not die at all but would still experience the advent of Christ in their lifetimes and would go directly into the Kingdom of God without death. Others were convinced they would go through the air to meet Christ returning upon the clouds of the sky: “Then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:17). In the early imminent expectation, the period between death and the coming of the Kingdom still constituted no object of concern. An expectation that one enters into bliss or perdition immediately after death is also found in the words of Jesus on the cross: “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).

In the Nicene Creed the life of the Christian is characterized as “eternal life.” In the Gospels and in the apostolic letters, “eternal” is first of all a temporal designation: in contrast to life in this world, eternal life has a deathless duration. In its essence, however, it is life according to God’s kind of eternity—i.e., perfect, sharing in his glory and bliss (Romans 2:7, 10). “Eternal life” in the Christian sense is thus not identical with “immortality of the soul”; rather, it is only to be understood in connection with the expectation of the resurrection. “Continuance” is neutral vis-à-vis the opposition of salvation and disaster, but the raising from the dead leads to judgment, and its decision can also mean eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46). The antithesis to eternal life is not earthly life but eternal death.

Eternal life is personal life, and precisely therein is fulfilled the essence of humanity created according to the image of God. Within eternal life there are differences. In the present life there are variations in talent, duty, responsibility, and breadth and height of life, just as there are also distinctions in “wages” according to the measure of the occupation, the sacrifice of suffering, and the trial (1 Corinthians 3:8). Correspondingly, the resurrected are also distinguished in eternal life according to their “glory”:

There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. So it is with the resurrection of the dead (1 Corinthians 15:41–42).

This expectation has had a great influence upon the Christian conception of marriage and friendship. The idea of a continuation of marriage and friendship after death has contributed very much to the deepening of the view of marriage, as is shown by the strong influence of the 17th–18th-century Swedish mystic, philosopher, and scientist Emanuel Swedenborg’s ideas upon the romantic philosophy of religion and its interpretation of marriage and friendship in the thought of the German scholars Friedrich Schelling and Friedrich Schleiermacher. The Western concept of personality was thus deepened through the Christian view of its eternal value.

The delay of the imminent expectation brought about the question of the fate of the dead person in the period between the death of the individual Christian and the resurrection. Two basic views were developed. One view is that of an individual judgment, which takes place immediately after death and brings the individual to an interim state, from which he enters into the realm of bliss or that of perdition. The idea of an individual judgment, however, cannot be readily harmonized with the concept of the general Last Judgment on the day of the general resurrection of the dead. It anticipates the decision of the general judgment and thus deprives of its significance the notion of the Last Judgment. A second view, therefore, also prevailed: the sleep of the soul—i.e., the soul of the dead person enters into a sleeping state that continues until the Last Judgment, which will occur after the general resurrection. At the Last Judgment the resurrected will be assigned either to eternal life or eternal damnation. This conception, accepted in many churches, contains many discrepancies, especially the abandonment of the fundamental idea of the continuity of personal life.

Both views contain an inhuman consequence. The first leaves to people no further opportunity to improve the mistakes of their lives and to expiate their guilt. The second preserves the personality in an intermediate state for an indefinite period so as to later punish it for sins or reward it for good deeds from a time prior to entrance into the sleep of the soul. The belief in purgatory (an interim state in which a correction of a dead person’s evil condition is still possible) of the Roman Catholic Church gives the deceased opportunities for repentance and penance to ameliorate their situation.

The presupposition of the doctrine of purgatory is that there is a special judgment for each individual at once after death. Hence, the logical conclusion is that purgatory ceases with the Last Judgment. The stay in purgatory can be shortened through intercession, alms, indulgences, and benefits of the sacrifice of the mass. The Eastern Orthodox Church has no doctrine of purgatory but does practice an intercession for the dead. It assumes that, on the basis of the connection between the church of the living and that of the dead, an exertion of influence upon the fate of the dead through intercession is possible before the time of the Last Judgment.

The doctrine of the sleep of the soul, on the other hand, contains many consequences that question the fundamental idea of the Christian view of the personality of the imago Dei (“image of God”). The beginnings of a further development of the Christian view of life after death, as are found in Swedenborg, have never been recognized positively by the church. For this reason, since the period of Romanticism and idealism, ideas of the transmigration of souls and reincarnation, taken over from Hinduism and Buddhism, have gained a footing in Christian views of the end-time expectation. Some important impulses toward a new understanding of the view of life after death are found in Christian theosophy, such as the idea of a further development of the human personality upon other celestial bodies after death.

For the most part, the churches of the early part of the 21st century have long neglected teachings about the entire area of the last things. The idea of the Last Judgment has often become incomprehensible to the modern world. At the most, people apparently are still open to the concept of judgment of the guilt and innocence of the individual. The idea decisive for the early church’s expectation of the Judgment, however, was that the Last Judgment will be a public one. This corresponds to the fundamental Christian idea that human beings—both the living and the dead—are bound together in an indissoluble communion; it presupposes the conception of the church as the body of Christ. All of humanity is as one person. Humans sin with one another, and their evil is connected together in the “realm of sin” in a manifold way, unrecognizable in the individual. The judgment upon each person, therefore, concerns all. Judgment upon the individual is thus at the same time judgment upon the whole, and vice versa. The judgment is also public in regard to the positive side—the praise and reward of God for that which is done rightly and practiced in the common life, often without knowing it.

Ernst Wilhelm Benz Martin E. Marty
Aspects of the Christian religion

Christian philosophy

It has been debated whether there is anything that is properly called Christian philosophy. Christianity is not a system of ideas but a religion, a way of salvation. But as a religion becomes a distinguishable strand of human history, it absorbs philosophical assumptions from its environment and generates new philosophical constructions and arguments both in the formation of doctrines and in their defense against philosophical objections. Moreover, philosophical criticism from both within and without the Christian community has influenced the development of its beliefs.

History of the interactions of philosophy and theology

Influence of Greek philosophy

As the Christian movement expanded beyond its original Jewish nucleus into the Greco-Roman world, it had to understand, explain, and defend itself in terms that were intelligible in an intellectual milieu largely structured by Greek philosophical thought. By the 2nd century AD several competing streams of Greek and Roman philosophy—Middle Platonism, Neoplatonism, Epicureanism, Stoicism—had merged into a common worldview that was basically Neoplatonic, though enriched by the ethical outlook of the Stoics. This constituted the broad intellectual background for most educated people throughout the Roman Empire, functioning in a way comparable to the pervasive contemporary Western secular view of the universe as an autonomous system within which everything can in principle be understood scientifically.

Neoplatonist themes that provided intellectual material for Christian and non-Christian thinkers alike in the early centuries of the Common Era included a hierarchical conception of the universe, with the spiritual on a higher level than the physical; the eternal reality of such values as goodness, truth, and beauty and of the various universals that give specific form to matter; and the tendency of everything to return to its origin in the divine reality. The Christian Apologists, Christian writers of the 2nd century who provided a defense of the faith against prevailing Greco-Roman culture, were at home in this thought-world, and many of them used its ideas and assumptions both in propagating the Gospel and in defending it as a coherent and intellectually tenable system of belief. They accepted the prevailing Neoplatonic worldview and presented Christianity as its fulfillment, correcting and completing rather than replacing it. Philosophy, they thought, was to the Greeks what the Law was to the Jews—a preparation for the Gospel; and several Apologists agreed with the Jewish writer Philo that Greek philosophy must have received much of its wisdom from Moses. Tertullian (c. 155/160–after 220)—who once asked, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”—and Tatian (c. 120–173), on the other hand, rejected pagan learning and philosophy as inimical to the Gospel, and the question has been intermittently discussed by theologians ever since whether the Gospel completes and fulfills the findings of human reason or whether reason is itself so distorted by sin as to be incapable of leading toward the truth.

Greek philosophy, then, provided the organizing principles by which the central Christian doctrines were formulated. It is possible to distinguish between, on the one hand, first-order religious expressions, directly reflecting primary religious experience, and, on the other, the interpretations of these in philosophically formulated doctrines whose articulation both contributes to and is reciprocally conditioned by a comprehensive belief-system. Thus the primitive Christian confession of faith, “Jesus is Lord,” expressed the Disciples’ perception of Jesus as the one through whom God was transformingly present to them and to whom their lives were accordingly oriented in complete trust and commitment. The interpretive process whereby the original experience developed a comprehensive doctrinal superstructure began with the application to Jesus of the two distinctively Jewish concepts of ousia (nature or essence) and hypostasis (entity, used as virtually equivalent to prosopon, person). (In Latin these terms became substantia and persona.) Christ was said to have two natures, one of which was of the same nature (homoousios) as the Father, whereas the other was of the same nature as humanity; and the Trinity was said to consist of one ousia in three hypostases. The Platonic origin of this conceptuality is clear in the explanation of the Cappadocian Fathers that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share the same divine ousia in the way Peter, James, and John shared the same humanity.

Emergence of official doctrine

During the first several generations of Christian history there was great variety and experimentation in Christian thinking. But as the faith was legally recognized under Constantine in 313 and then became the sole official religion of the Roman Empire under Theodosius, its doctrines had to be formalized throughout the church. This pressure for uniformity provoked intense debates. The orthodox versions of the doctrine of Christ and the Trinity were finally established at the great ecumenical councils (principally Nicea in 325; Constantinople in 381; and Chalcedon in 451). The key ideas of these Christological and Trinitarian debates and their conclusions were based upon the Greek concepts of ousia (nature or essence) and hypostasis (entity, used as virtually equivalent to prosopon, person). (In Latin these terms became substantia and persona.) Christ was said to have two natures, one of which was of the same nature (homoousios) as the Father, whereas the other was of the same nature as humanity; and the Trinity was said to consist of one ousia in three hypostases. The Platonic origin of this conceptuality is clear in the explanation of the Cappadocian Fathers that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share the same divine ousia in the way Peter, James, and John shared the same humanity.

The influence of Neoplatonism on Christian thought also appears in the response of the greatest of the early Christian thinkers, St. Augustine (354–430), to the perennially challenging question of how it is that evil exists in a world created by an all-good and all-powerful God. Augustine’s answer (which, as refined by later thinkers, remained the standard Christian answer until modern times) includes both theological aspects (the ideas of the fall of angels and then of humans, of the redemption of some by the cross of Christ, and of the ultimate disposal of souls in eternities of bliss and torment) and philosophical aspects. The basic philosophical theme, drawn directly from Neoplatonism, is one that the American philosopher Arthur Lovejoy, in The Great Chain of Being (1936), called the principle of plenitude. This is the idea that the best possible universe does not consist only of the highest kind of creature, the archangels, but contains a maximum richness of variety of modes of being, thus realizing every possible kind of existence from the highest to the lowest. The result is a hierarchy of degrees both of being and of goodness, for the identity of being and goodness was another fundamental idea Augustine inherited from Neoplatonism and in particular from Plotinus (205–270). God, as absolute being and goodness, stands at the summit, with the great chain of being descending through the many forms of spiritual, animal, and plant life down to lifeless matter. Each embodies being and is therefore good on its own level; and together they constitute a universe whose rich variety is beautiful in the sight of God. Evil occurs only when creatures at any level forfeit the distinctive goodness with which the Creator had endowed them. Evil is thus negative or privative, a lack of proper good rather than anything having substance in its own right. This, too, was a theme that had been taken over from Neoplatonism by a number of earlier Christian writers. And if evil is not an entity, or substance, it follows that it was not a part of God’s original creation. It consists instead in the going wrong of something that is in itself good, though also mutable. Augustine locates the origin of this going-wrong in the sinful misuse of freedom by some of the angels and then by the first humans. His theodicy is thus a blend of Neoplatonic and biblical themes and shows clearly the immense influence of Neoplatonism upon Christian thought during its early formative period.

Augustine and Christian thinkers in general departed from Neoplatonism at one crucial point. Neoplatonism maintained that the world was continuous in being with the ultimate divine reality, the One. The One, in its limitless plenitude of being, overflows into the surrounding void, and the descending and attenuating degrees of being constitute the many-leveled universe. In contrast to this emanationist conception Augustine held that the universe is a created realm, brought into existence by God out of nothing (ex nihilo). It has no independent power of being, or aseity, but is contingent, absolutely dependent upon the creative divine power. Further, Augustine emphasized
that God did not create the universe out of preexistent matter or chaos, but that “out of nothing” simply means “not out of anything” (De natura boni). This understanding
of creation, entailing the universe’s total emptiness of independent self-existence and yet its ultimate goodness as the free expression of God’s creative love, is perhaps the
most distinctly Christian contribution to metaphysical thought. It goes beyond the earlier Hebraic understanding in making explicit the ex nihilo character of creation in contrast to
the emanationism of the Neoplatonic thought-world. This basic Christian idea entails the value of creaturely life and of the material world itself, its dependence
upon God, and the meaningfulness of the whole temporal process as fulfilling an ultimate divine purpose.

Modern Christian treatments of the idea of creation ex nihilo have detached it from a literal use of the Genesis creation myth. The idea of the total dependence of the
universe upon God does not preclude the development of the universe in its present phase from the “big bang” onward, including the evolution of the forms of life on
Earth. Although creation ex nihilo (a term apparently first introduced into Christian discourse by Irenaeus in the 2nd century) remains the general Christian conception of
the relation between God and the physical universe, some 20th-century Christian thinkers substituted the view (derived from Alfred North Whitehead and developed by
Charles Hartshorne) that God, instead of being its transcendent Creator, is an aspect of the universe itself, being either the inherent creativity in virtue of which it is a
living process or a deity of finite power who seeks to lure the world into ever more valuable forms.

**Aristotle and Aquinas**

Although Neoplatonism was the major philosophical influence on Christian thought in its early period and has never ceased to be an important element within it,
Aristotelianism also shaped Christian teachings. At first known for his works on logic, Aristotle gained fuller appreciation in the 12th and 13th centuries when his works
on physics, metaphysics, and ethics became available in Latin, translated either from the Greek or from Arabic sources. Aristotle’s thought had a profound impact on
generations of medieval scholars and was crucial for the greatest of the medieval Christian thinkers, St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–74). One of Aristotle’s ideas that
particularly influenced Thomas was that knowledge is not innate but is gained from the reports of the senses and from logical inference from self-evident truths. (Thomas,
however, in distinction from Aristotle, added divinely revealed propositions to self-evident truths in forming his basis for inference.) Thomas also adopted Aristotle’s
conception of metaphysics as the science of being. His doctrine of analogy, according to which statements about God are true analogically rather than univocally, was
likewise inspired by Aristotle, as were his distinctions between act and potency, essence and existence, substance and accidents, and the active and passive intellect and his
view of the soul as the “form” of the body.

Thomas Aquinas’s system, however, was by no means simply Aristotle Christianized. He did not hesitate to differ from “the Philosopher,” as he called him, when the
Christian tradition required this; for whereas Aristotle had been concerned to understand how the world functions, Thomas was also concerned, more fundamentally, to
explain why it exists.

With the gradual breakdown of the medieval worldview, the nature of the philosophical enterprise began to change. The French thinker René Descartes (1596–1650) is
generally regarded as the father of modern philosophy, and in the new movements of thought that began with him philosophy became less a matter of building and
defending comprehensive metaphysical systems, or imagined pictures of the universe, and more a critical probing of presuppositions, categories of thought, and modes of
reasoning, as well as an inquiry into what it is to know, how knowledge and belief are arrived at in different areas of life, how well various kinds of beliefs are grounded,
and how thought is related to language.

There has long ceased to be a generally accepted philosophical framework, comparable with Neoplatonism, in terms of which Christianity can appropriately be expressed
and defended. There is instead a plurality of philosophical perspectives and methods—analytic, phenomenological, idealist, pragmatist, and existentialist. Thus modern
Christianity, having inherited a body of doctrines developed in the framework of ancient worldviews that are now virtually defunct, lacks any philosophy of comparable
status in terms of which to rethink its beliefs.

In this situation some theologians turned to existentialism, which is not so much a philosophical system as a hard-to-define point of view and style of thinking. Indeed, the
earlier existentialists, such as the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55), vehemently rejected the idea of a metaphysical system—in particular, for 19th-
century existentialists, the Hegelian system—though some later ones, such as the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), developed their own systems.
Existentialists are identified by the appearance in their writings of one or more of a number of loosely related themes. These include the significance of the concrete
individual in contrast to abstractions and general principles; a stress upon human freedom and choice and the centrality of decision, and hence a view of religion as
ultimate commitment; a preference for paradox rather than rational explanation; and the highlighting of certain special modes of experience that cut across ordinary
consciousness, particularly a generalized anxiety or dread and the haunting awareness of mortality. Existentialists have been both atheists (e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche and
Jean-Paul Sartre) and Christians (e.g., Kierkegaard, the Protestant Rudolf Bultmann, and the Roman Catholic Gabriel Marcel). It would be difficult to identify any
doctrines that are common to all these thinkers. Existentialist themes have also been incorporated into systematic Christian theologies (e.g., by John Macquarrie).

**Other influences**

Others have sought to construct theologies in the mold of 19th-century German idealism (e.g., Paul Tillich); some, as process theologians, in that of the early 20th-century
British mathematician and metaphysician Alfred North Whitehead (e.g., Charles Hartshorne on the doctrine of God, John Cobb on Christology); some, the liberation
theologians, in highly pragmatic and political terms (e.g., Juan Luis Segundo, Gustavo Gutiérrez); and some, as feminist theologians, in terms of the self-consciousness
of women and the awareness of a distorting patriarchal influence on all past forms of Christian thought (e.g., Rosemary Ruether, Elizabeth Fiorenza).
Most theologians, however, have continued to accept the traditional structure of Christian beliefs. The more liberal among them have sought to detach these from the older traditions and
reformulate them so as to connect with modern consciousness (e.g., Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack, Karl Rahner, Gordon Kaufman); while the more conservative have sought to defend the traditional formulations within an increasingly alien intellectual environment (e.g., B.B. Warfield, Charles Hodge, Karl Barth, Cornelis Berkwouer).

Of the factors forming the intellectual environment of Christian thought in the modern period, perhaps the most powerful have been the physical and human sciences. The
former have compelled the rethinking of certain Christian doctrines, as astronomy undermined the assumption of the centrality of the Earth in the universe, as geologic
evidence concerning its age rendered implausible the biblical chronology, and as biology located humanity within the larger evolution of the forms of life on Earth. The
human sciences of anthropology, psychology, sociology, and history have suggested possible naturalistic explanations of religion itself based, for example, upon the
projection of desire for a cosmic father figure, the need for socially cohesive symbols, or the power of royal and priestly classes. Such naturalistic interpretations of
religion, together with the ever-widening scientific understanding of the physical universe, have prompted some Christian philosophers to think of the religious ambiguity
of the universe as a totality that can, from the human standpoint within it, be interpreted in both naturalistic and religious ways, thus providing scope for the exercise of
faith as a free response to the mystery of existence.

**Faith and reason**

Different conceptions of faith cohere with different views of its relation to reason or rationality. The classic medieval understanding of faith, set forth by Thomas Aquinas,
saw it as the belief in revealed truths on the authority of God as their ultimate source and guarantor. Thus, though the ultimate object of faith is God, its immediate object is the body of propositions articulating the basic Christian dogmas. Such faith is to be distinguished from knowledge. Whereas the propositions that are the objects of scientia, or knowledge, compel belief by their self-evidence or their demonstrability from self-evident premises, the propositions accepted by faith do not thus compel assent but require a voluntary act of trusting acceptance. As unforced belief, faith is "an act of the intellect assenting to the truth at the command of the will" (Summa theologicae, II/II, Q. 4, art. 5), and it is because this is a free and responsible act that faith is one of the virtues. It follows that one cannot have knowledge and faith at the same time in relation to the same proposition; faith can only arise in the absence of knowledge. Faith also differs from mere opinion, which is inherently changeable. Opinions are not matters of absolute commitment but allow in principle for the possibility of doubt and change. Faith, as the wholehearted acceptance of revealed truth, excludes doubt.

In the wider context of his philosophy, Aquinas held that human reason, without supernatural aid, can establish the existence of God and the immortality of the soul; for those who cannot or do not engage in such strenuous intellectual activity, however, these matters are also revealed and can be known by faith. Faith, though, extends beyond the findings of reason in accepting further truths such as the triune nature of God and the divinity of Christ. Aquinas thus supported the general (though not universal) Christian view that revelation supplements, rather than cancels or replaces, the findings of sound philosophy.

From a skeptical point of view, which does not acknowledge divine revelation, this Thomist conception amounts to faith—belief that is without evidence or that is stronger than the evidence warrants, the gap being filled by the believer’s own will to believe. As such it attracts the charge that belief upon insufficient evidence is always irrational.

In response to this kind of attack the French philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623–62) proposed a voluntarist defense of faith as a rational wager. Pascal assumed, in disagreement with Thomas Aquinas but in agreement with much modern thinking, that divine existence can neither be proved nor disproved. He reasoned, therefore, that if one decides to believe in God and to act on this basis, one gains eternal life if right but loses little if wrong, whereas if one decides not to believe, one gains little if right but may lose eternal life if wrong, concluding that the rational course is to believe. The argument has been criticized theoretically for presupposing an unacceptable image of God as rewarding such calculating worship and also on the philosophical ground that it is too permissive in that it could justify belief in the claims, however fantastic, of any person or group who threatened nonbelievers with damnation or other dangerous consequences.

The American philosopher William James (1842–1910) refined this approach by limiting it, among matters that cannot be proved, to belief-options that one has some real inclination or desire to accept, carry momentous implications, and are such that a failure to choose constitutes a negative choice. Theistic belief is for many people such an option, and James claimed that they have the right to make the positive decision to believe and to proceed in their lives on that basis. Either choice involves unavoidable risks: on the one hand the risk of being importantly deluded and on the other the risk of missing a limitlessly valuable truth. In this situation each individual is entitled to decide which risk to run. This argument has also been criticized as being too permissive and as constituting in effect a license for wishful believing, but its basic principle can perhaps be validly used in the context of basing beliefs upon one’s religious experience.

The element of risk in faith as a free cognitive choice was emphasized, to the exclusion of all else, by Kierkegaard in his idea of the leap of faith. He believed that without risk there is no faith, and that the greater the risk the greater the faith. Faith is thus a passionate commitment, not based upon reason but inwardly necessitated, to that which can be grasped in no other way.

The epistemological character of faith as assent to propositions, basic to the Thomist account, is less pronounced in the conceptions of Pascal and James in that these accept not a system of doctrines but only the thought of God as existing, which itself has conceptual and implicitly propositional content. Kierkegaard’s self-constituting leap of faith likewise only implicitly involves conceptual and propositional thought, as does the account of faith based upon Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of seeing-as (Philosophical Investigations, 1953). Wittgenstein pointed to the epistemological significance of puzzle pictures, such as the ambiguous “duck-rabbit” that can be seen either as a duck’s head facing one way or a rabbit’s head facing another way. The enlarged concept of experiencing-as (developed by the British philosopher John Hick) refers to the way in which an object, event, or situation is experienced as having a particular character or meaning such that to experience it in this manner involves being in a dispositional state to behave in relation to the object or event, or within the situation, in ways that are appropriate to its having that particular character. All conscious experience is in this sense experiencing-as. The application of this idea to religion suggests that the total environment is religiously ambiguous, capable of being experienced in both religious and naturalistic ways. Religious faith is the element of uncompelled interpretation within the distinctively religious ways of experiencing—for them, experiencing the world or events in history or in one’s own life as mediating the presence and activity of God. In ancient Hebrew history, for example, events that are described by secular historians as the effects of political and economic forces were experienced by the prophets as occasions in which God was saving or punishing, rewarding or testing, the Israelites. In such cases, religious experiencing-as does not replace secular experiencing-as but supervenes upon it, revealing a further order of meaning in the events of the world. And the often unconscious cognitive choice whereby someone experiences religiously constitutes, on this view, faith in its most epistemologically basic sense.

For these voluntarist, existentialist, and experiential conceptions of faith the place of reason in religion, although important, is secondary. Reason cannot directly establish the truth of religious propositions, but it can defend the propriety of trusting one’s deeper intuitions or one’s religious experience and basing one’s beliefs and life upon them. These schools of thought assume that the philosophical arguments for and against the existence of God are inconclusive, and that the universe is capable of being consistently thought of and experienced in both religious and naturalistic ways. This assumption, however, runs counter to the long tradition of natural theology.

**Christian philosophy as natural theology**

Natural theology is generally characterized as the attempt to establish religious truths by rational argument and without reliance upon alleged revelations. It has focused traditionally on the topics of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul.

**Arguments for the existence of God**

**The design (or teleological) argument**

St. Paul, and many others in the Greco-Roman world, believed that the existence of God is evident from the appearances of nature: “Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Romans 1:20). The most popular, because the most accessible, of the theistic arguments is that which infers a divine designer from perceived evidence of design in nature. The argument, propounded by medieval Christian thinkers, was developed in great detail in 17th- and 18th-century Europe by writers such as Robert Boyle, John Ray, Samuel Clarke, and William Derham and at the beginning of the 19th century by William Paley. They asked: Is not the eye as manifestly designed for seeing, and the ear for hearing, as a pen for writing or a clock for telling the time; and does not such design imply a designer? The belief that the universe is a coherent and efficiently functioning system likewise, in this view, indicates a divine intelligence behind it.

The argument from design was criticized by the Scottish philosopher David Hume in his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (1779). Hume conceded that the world...
contributes a more or less smoothly functioning system; indeed, he points out, it could not exist otherwise. He suggests, however, that this may have come about as a result of the chance permutations of particles falling into a temporary or permanent self-sustaining order, which thus has the appearance of design. A century later the idea of order without design was rendered more plausible by Charles Darwin's discovery that the adaptations of the forms of life are a result of the natural selection of inherited characteristics having positive, and the elimination of those having negative, survival value within a changing environment. Hume also pointed out that, even if one could infer an intelligent designer of the world, one would not thereby be entitled to claim that such a designer is the infinitely good and powerful Creator who is the object of Christian faith. For the world is apparently imperfect, containing many inbuilt occasions of pain and suffering, and one cannot legitimately infer a greater perfection in the cause than is observed in the effect.

In the 20th century, however, the design argument was reformulated in more comprehensive ways, particularly by the British philosophers Frederick R. Tennant (Philosophical Theology, 1928–30) and Richard Swinburne (using Thomas Bayes's probability theorem in The Existence of God, 1979), taking account not only of the order and functioning of nature but also of the “fit” between human intelligence and the universe, whereby humans can understand its workings, as well as human aesthetic, moral, and religious experience. There were also attempts to show that the evolution of the universe, from the “big bang” of 13.8 billion years ago to the present state that includes conscious life, required the conjunction of so many individually improbable factors as to be inexplicable except as the result of a deliberate coordinating control. If, for example, the initial heat of the expanding universe, or its total mass, or the strength of the force of gravity, or the mass of neutrinos, or the strength of the strong nuclear force, had been different by a small margin, there would have been no galaxies, no stars, no planets, and hence no life. Surely, it was argued, all this must be the work of God creating the conditions for human existence.

These probability arguments were, however, strongly criticized. A basic consideration relevant to them all is that there is by definition only one universe, and it is difficult to see how its existence, either with or without God, can be assessed as having a specific degree of probability in any objective sense. It can of course be said that any form in which the universe might be is statistically enormously improbable, as it is only one of a virtual infinity of possible forms. But its actual form is no more improbable, in this sense, than innumerable others. It is only the fact that humans are part of it that makes it seem so special, requiring a transcendent explanation. Debate about the design argument continued through the late 20th and early 21st centuries, particularly in the United States (see also intelligent design).

The cosmological argument

Aquinas gave the first-cause argument and the argument from contingency—both forms of cosmological reasoning—a central place for many centuries in the Christian enterprise of natural theology. (Similar arguments also appeared in parallel strands of Islamic philosophy.) Thomas’s formulations (Summa theologicae, I, Q. 2, art. 3) were refined in modern neo-Thomist discussions and remained topics of Christian philosophical reflection during the 20th century.

The first-cause argument begins with the assumption that there is change in the world. Change is always the effect of some cause or causes. Each cause is itself the effect of a further cause or set of causes; this chain moves in a series that either never ends or is completed by a first cause, which must be of a radically different nature in that it is not itself caused. Such a first cause is an important aspect, though not the entirety, of what Christianity means by God.

Although taking a different route, the argument from contingency follows the same basic movement of thought from the nature of the world to its ultimate ground. It starts with the premise that everything in the world is contingent for its existence upon other factors. Its presence is thus not self-explanatory but can only be understood by reference beyond itself to prior or wider circumstances that have brought it about. These other circumstances are also contingent, pointing beyond themselves for the ground of their intelligibility. If this explanatory regress is unending, explanation is perpetually postponed and nothing is finally explained. The existence of anything and everything thus remains ultimately unintelligible. But rational beings are committed to the search for intelligibility and cannot rest content until it is found. The universe can only finally be intelligible as the creation of an ontologically necessary being who is eternal and whose existence is not contingent upon anything else. This is also part of what Christianity has meant by God.

Criticism of these arguments points to the possibility that there is no first cause because the universe had no beginning, having existed throughout time, and is itself the necessary being that has existed eternally and without dependence upon anything else. Proponents of the cosmological argument reply that the existence of such a universe, as a procession of contingent events without beginning, would still be ultimately unintelligible. On the other hand, a personal consciousness and will, constituting a self-existing Creator of the universe, would be intrinsically intelligible; for human beings have experience in themselves of intelligence and free will as creative. Critics respond that insofar as the argument is sound it leaves one with the choice between believing that the universe is ultimately intelligible, because created by a self-existing personal will, or accepting that it is finally unintelligible, simply the ultimate given brute fact. The cosmological argument does not, however, compel one to choose the first alternative; logically, the second remains equally possible.

The ontological argument

The ontological argument, which proceeds not from the world to its Creator but from the idea of God to the reality of God, was first clearly formulated by St. Anselm (1033/34–1109) in his Proslogion (1077–78). Anselm began with the concept of God as that than which nothing greater can be conceived (aliquid quo nihil majus cogitari possit). To think of such a being as existing only in thought and not also in reality involves a contradiction. For an X that lacks real existence is not that than which no greater can be conceived. A yet greater being would be X + the further attribute of existence. Thus the unsurpassably perfect being must exist—otherwise it would not be unsurpassably perfect.

This argument has intrigued philosophers ever since. After some discussion in the 13th century it was reformulated by Descartes in his Meditations (1641). Descartes made explicit the assumption, implicit in Anselm’s reasoning, that existence is an attribute that a given X can have or fail to have. It follows from this—together with the assumption that existence is an attribute that is better to have than to lack—that God, as unsurpassably perfect, cannot lack the attribute of existence.

It was the assumption that existence is a predicate that has, in the view of most subsequent philosophers, proved fatal to the argument. The criticism was first made by Descartes’s contemporary Pierre Gassendi and later and more prominently by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) in his Critique of Pure Reason (1781). Bertrand Russell and others in the 20th century further clarified this objection. According to Russell, to say that something with stated properties—whether it be a triangle, defined as a three-sided plane figure, or God, defined as an unsurpassably perfect being—exists is not to attribute to it a further property, namely existence, but to assert that the concept is instantiated—that there actually are instances of that concept. But whether or not a given concept is instantiated is a question of fact. It cannot be determined a priori but only by whatever is the appropriate method for discovering a fact of that kind. This need for observation cannot be circumvented by writing into the definition of the concept (“an existing three-sided plane figure,” “an existing unsurpassably perfect being”), for the need arises again as the question of whether this enlarged concept is instantiated.

In the 20th century several Christian philosophers (notably Charles Hartshorne, Norman Malcolm, and Alvin Plantinga) asserted the validity of a second form of Anselm’s argument. This hinges upon “necessary existence,” a property with even higher value than “existence.” A being that necessarily exists cannot coherently be thought not to exist. And so God, as the unsurpassably perfect being, must have necessary existence—and therefore must exist. This argument, however, has been criticized as failing to observe the distinction between logical and ontological, or factual, necessity. Logically necessary existence, it is said, is an incoherent idea, for logical necessity applies to
the relations between concepts, not to their instantiation. God’s necessity, then, must be an ontologically, or factually, rather than a logically, necessary existence: God exists as the ultimate fact, without beginning or end and without depending upon anything else for existence. But whether this concept of an ontologically necessary being is instantiated cannot be determined a priori. It cannot be validly inferred from the idea of an eternal and independent being that there actually is such a being.

Moral arguments

Moral theistic argument belongs primarily to the modern world and perhaps reflects the modern lack of confidence in metaphysical constructions. Kant, having rejected the cosmological, ontological, and design proofs, argued in the Critique of Practical Reason (1788) that the existence of God, though not directly provable, is a necessary postulate of the moral life. To take seriously the awareness of a categorical imperative to act rightly is to commit oneself to work for an ideal state of affairs in which perfect goodness and happiness coincide. But as this universal appportioning of happiness to virtue is beyond human power, a divine agent capable of bringing it about must be assumed.

Other Christian thinkers, particularly during the 19th and early 20th centuries, argued that to accept the absolute demands of ethical obligation is to presuppose a morally structured universe, which implies a personal God whose commands are reflected in the human conscience. It cannot be proved that this is such a universe, but it is inevitably assumed in acknowledging the claims of morality.

Attempts to trace ethical obligation to a transcendent divine source have been criticized on the grounds that it is possible to account for morality without going beyond the human realm. It has been argued that the exigencies of communal life require agreed codes of behaviour, which become internalized in the process of socialization as moral laws; and the natural affection that develops among humans produces the more occasional sense of a call to heroic self-sacrifice on behalf of others.

Arguments from religious experience and miracles

Religious experience is used in Christian apologetics in two ways—in the argument from religious experiences to God as their cause and in the claim that it is (in the absence of contrary indications) as reasonable to trust religious as it is to trust nonreligious experience in forming beliefs about the total environment. (The first use is considered here; for the second, see below Contemporary discussions.)

The argument maintains that special episodes, such as seeing visions of Christ or Mary or hearing the voice of God, as well as the more pervasive experience of “living in God’s presence” or of “absolute dependence upon a higher power,” constitute evidence of God as their source. Although such experiences may be accepted as having occurred, their cause, as critics have noted, might be purely natural. To establish that the experiences are real, as experiences, is not to establish that they are caused by an infinite, omnipotent, omniscient, divine being. As Thomas Hobbes succinctly put it, when someone says that God has spoken to him in a dream, this “is no more than to say he dreamed that God spake to him” (Leviathan, Pt. III, ch. 32).

The analogous argument, from miracles to God as their cause, is more complex and involves two sets of problems. The argument may assert that the children of Israel were miraculously rescued from Egypt or Jesus was miraculously raised from the dead and therefore that God must exist as the agent of these miracles. The first problem concerns the reports. Whereas in the case of private religious experiences the skeptic (to whom the argument is addressed) may well be willing to grant that such experiences occurred, in the case of public miracles the skeptic will require adequate evidence for the described event; and this is not forthcoming for the classic miracle stories referring to alleged extraordinary events of many centuries ago. There are, however, well-evidenced contemporary and recent accounts of “miraculous” healings and other remarkable happenings. On the assumption that some of these, and also some of the classic miracle stories, are historically accurate, the second problem arises. How can it be established that these events were caused by divine intervention rather than by the operation of natural phenomena?

Once again, strict proof seems to be lacking. These arguments, however, display aspects of the explanatory power of the idea of God. Divine activity is not the only possible way of understanding the character of the universe, its contingent existence, the unconditional claims of morality, or the occurrence of religious experiences and “miracles.” Nevertheless, the concept of deity offers a possible, satisfying answer to the fundamental questions to which these various factors point. These questions may thus be said to open the door to rationalistic belief—while still leaving the nonbeliever waiting for a positive impetus to go through that door. The work of some contemporary Christian philosophers can be characterized as a search for such a positive impetus.

The immortality of the soul

Human beings seem always to have had some notion of a shadowy double that survives the death of the body. But the idea of the soul as a mental entity, with intellectual and moral qualities, interacting with a physical organism but capable of continuing after its dissolution, derives in Western thought from Plato and entered into Judaism during approximately the last century before the Common Era and thence into Christianity. In Jewish and Christian thinking it has existed in tension with the idea of the resurrection of the person conceived as an indissoluble psychophysical unity. Christian thought gradually settled into a pattern that required both of these apparently divergent ideas. At death the soul is separated from the body and exists in a conscious or unconscious disembodied state. But on the future Day of Judgment souls will be re-embodied (whether in their former but now transfigured earthly bodies or in new resurrection bodies) and will live eternally in the heavenly kingdom.

Within this framework, philosophical discussion has centred mainly on the idea of the immaterial soul and its capacity to survive the death of the body. Plato, in the Phaedo, argued that the soul is inherently indestructible. To destroy something, including the body, is to disintegrate it into its constituent elements; but the soul, as a mental entity, is not composed of parts and is thus an indissoluble unity. Although Aquinas’s concept of the soul, as the “form” of the body, was derived from Aristotle rather than Plato, Aquinas too argued for its indestructibility (Summa theologica, I, Q. 76, art. 6). The French philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882–1973), a modern Thomist, summarized the conclusion as follows: “A spiritual soul cannot be corrupted, since it possesses no matter; it cannot be disintegrated, since it has no substantial parts; it cannot lose its individual unity, since it is self-subsisting, nor its internal energy since it contains within itself all the sources of its energies” (The Range of Reason, 1952). But though it is possible to define the soul in such a way that it is incorruptible, indissoluble, and self-subsisting, critics have asked whether there is any good reason to think that souls as thus defined exist. If, on the other hand, the soul means the conscious mind or personality—something whose immortality would be of

Much modern philosophical analysis of the concept of mind is inhospitable to the idea of immortality, for it equates mental life with the functioning of the physical brain (see mind, philosophy of). Impressed by evidence of the dependence of mind on brain, some Christian thinkers have been willing to accept the view—corresponding to the ancient Hebrew understanding—of the human being as an indissoluble psychophysical unity, but these thinkers have still maintained a belief in immortality, not as the mind surviving the body, but as a divine resurrection or re-creation of the living body-mind totality. Such resurrection persons would presumably be located in a space different from that which they now inhabit and would presumably undergo a development from the condition of a dying person to that of a viable inhabitant of the resurrection world. But all theories in this area have their own difficulties, and alternative theories emerged.

Kant offered a different kind of argument for immortality—as a postulate of the moral life. The claim of the moral law demands that human beings become perfect. This is
something that can never be finally achieved but only asymptotically approached, and such an unending approach requires the unending existence of the soul. This argument also is open to criticism. Are humans indeed subject to a strict obligation to attain moral perfection? Might not their obligation, as finite creatures, be to do the best they can? But this does not seem to entail immortality.

It should be noted that the debate concerning arguments about the immortality of the soul and the existence of God has been as much among Christian philosophers as between them and non-Christian thinkers. It is by no means the case that Christian thinkers have all regarded the project of natural theology as viable. There have indeed been, and are, many who hold that divine existence can be definitively proved or shown to be objectively probable. But many others not only hold that the attempted proofs all require premises that a disbeliever is under no rational obligation to accept but also question the evidentialist assumption that the only route to rational theistic belief is by inference from previously accepted evidence-stating premises.

### 20th-century discussions

Discussion among Christian philosophers during the 20th century was predominantly epistemological. Among Roman Catholic thinkers it included the work of Bernard Lonergan in Insight (1957), which has stimulated considerable discussion. Lonergan argued that the act of understanding, or insight, is pivotal for the apprehension of reality, and that it implies in the long run that the universe is itself due to the fiat of an “unrestricted act of understanding,” which is God. Other Roman Catholic thinkers refined and extended the Thomistic approach, particularly the idea of analogical predication in statements about God. Others, in common with non-Catholic philosophers, have discussed the traditional divine attributes—omniscience, omnipotence, eternity, immutability, personality, goodness. The concept of a finite deity developing through time was also proposed (e.g., by Charles Hartshorne) to meet objections to some of these concepts: If God is immutable, how can God be aware of successive events in time? If God has absolute self-existence, how can God respond with sympathy to the pains of creaturely life? Others defended the traditional attributes as logically coherent, both individually and in their relationship to one another, and as allowing for divine awareness of the created universe, God’s activity in history, and divine sympathy with human suffering.

#### Influence of logical positivism

Perhaps the largest body of work, however, was generated in dialogue with the linguistic turn of philosophy in the English-speaking world, concentrating on the analysis of language in its various uses. The logical positivist movement originated in the 1920s with the Vienna Circle. Although mainly concerned with the philosophy of science, it posed by implication a major challenge to the logical meaningfulness of religious language. The positivist position, in its developed form, was that a statement has factual meaning only if it is capable in principle of being verified or falsified, or at least in some degree confirmed or disconfirmed, within human experience; otherwise it is meaningless, or cognitively vacuous. In the years immediately after World War II this account of factual meaning was applied (e.g., by Antony Flew) to theological statements, raising such questions as: What observable difference does it make whether it is true or false that “God loves us”? Whatever tragedies occur, do not the faithful still maintain their belief, adding perhaps that the divine love is beyond human comprehension? But if it is not possible to conceive of circumstances in which “God loves us” would have to be judged false, is not the statement factually empty, or meaningless?

This challenge evoked three kinds of response. Some Christian philosophers declared it to be a nonchallenge, on the ground that the positivists never succeeded in finding a precise formulation of the verification criterion that was fully satisfactory even to themselves. Others held that this does not block the central thrust of the positivist challenge. Does it really make no difference within actual or possible human experience whether or not God exists and loves us; and if so, is not the significance of the belief thereby fatally damaged? Among those who felt it necessary to face this challenge, one group granted that theological statements lack factual meaning and suggested that their proper use lies elsewhere, as expressing a way of looking at the world (e.g., Richard M. Hare) or a moral point of view and commitment (e.g., R.B. Braithwaite). The other group claimed that theism is ultimately open to experiential confirmation. The theory of eschatological verification (developed by John Hick) holds that the belief in future postmortem experiences will be verified if true (though not falsified if false), and that in a divinely governed universe such experiences will take forms confirming theistic faith. Thus although the believer and the disbeliever do not have different expectations about the course of earthly history, they do expect the total course of the universe to be radically different.

In the late 20th century, under the stimulus of Wittgenstein’s posthumously published works, attention was directed to the multiple legitimate uses of language in the various language games developed within different human activities and forms of life; and it was suggested that religious belief has its own autonomous validity, not subject to verificationist or scientific or other extraneous criteria. Statements about God and eternal life do not make true-or-false factual claims but express, in religious language, a distinctive attitude to life and way of engaging in it. This suggestion formed part of the broader non-realist interpretation of religion, which held that religious beliefs do not refer to putative transcendent realities but are instead expressive of human ideals, desires, hopes, attitudes, and intentions. Such thinking goes back to the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (The Essence of Christianity, 1841) in the 19th century. It was promoted in the early 20th century by George Santayana, John Dewey, and J.H. Randall, Jr., and later by Christian writers such as D.Z. Phillips and Don Cupitt. According to them, true Christianity consists in the inner purity of an unself-centred attitude to life and does not involve belief in the objective reality of God or a life after death. This view, however, was criticized on the grounds that to deny the transcendent reference of religious language empties it of any substantial meaning.

#### Evidentialist approach

In addition to this and other work concerning religious language there was a renewal of fundamental discussion of Christian, and more broadly religious, epistemology. The natural theology tradition held that, in order to be rational, religious belief must be supported by adequate evidences or arguments. It was assumed that God’s existence must be validly inferred from generally acceptable premises. This evidentialist principle was questioned, however, not only by such earlier thinkers as Pascal and William James but also by a number of Christian philosophers of the second half of the 20th century. Evidentialist thinking was foundationalist in granting that there are some beliefs that can be reasonably held directly and not by inference from other evidence-stating beliefs. Thomas Aquinas, for example, recognized self-evident truths and the reports of the senses as basic in the sense that they do not need support from other beliefs. They thus provide the foundations on which a belief structure can properly be built. Belief in the existence of God was not regarded as basic or foundational in this way but was thought to require adequate evidence or arguments. It was argued by Alvin Plantinga that the range of properly basic beliefs is wider than classic foundationalism recognized. It can include not only beliefs about the past and the existence of other persons but also belief in the reality of God. Such beliefs can be basic (i.e., not inferred), and they are properly basic if held in appropriate circumstances. Thus, the belief that “There is a tree before me” is properly basic for one who is having the experience of seeing a tree; and the belief that “God exists” is properly basic for one who experiences God’s judgment, forgiveness, love, claim, providential care, or some other mode of divine presence.

Discussion of this proposal centred upon the criteria for proper basicity: In what circumstances is it appropriate, and in what circumstances not, to hold the basic belief in God or the basic beliefs of other religions or of the naturalistic worldviews?

A related contemporary development, pursued by William Alston and others, is the claim that religious experience constitutes an entirely proper basis for religious beliefs. The claim is not that one can validly infer God as the cause of theistic religious experience, but that one who participates in such experience is entitled to trust it as a ground for belief. It was argued that human beings all normally operate with a “principle of credulity” whereby they take what seems to be so as indeed so, unless they
have some positive reason to doubt it. Accordingly, one who has the experience of living in the presence of God can properly proceed in both thought and life on the basis that God is real. Such belief inevitably involves epistemic risk—the risk of error versus the risk of missing the truth. But perhaps the right to believe that was defended by William James applies in this situation.

The discussion focused on the analogies between religious experience and sensory experience in relation to which the principle of credulity is virtually universally accepted. It is uncontroversially proper to hold beliefs reflecting sense experience, but what of beliefs reflecting religious experience? Whereas all human beings hold the former and could not survive without doing so, the latter type of belief seems to be optional. Although beliefs regarding physical objects can be empirically confirmed or denied, religious beliefs cannot. Acknowledging these differences, some Christian philosophers argued that they are to be expected, given the difference between the human relationship to the world and to God. It is necessary to human existence as physical organisms that consciousness of the material environment should be forced upon human beings. On the other hand, it is necessary for existence as relatively autonomous and responsible beings that consciousness of God should not be forced upon them, for to be compulsorily aware of God’s universal presence as limitless goodness and power, making a total claim upon human life, would deprive them of creaturely freedom. Humans are accordingly set at an epistemic distance from God that is overcome only by faith, which can be identified with the voluntary interpretive element within the experience of God’s presence.

The central Christian doctrine of the divinity of Christ was another topic of discussion in the later 20th century. Philosophical questions concerning this topic were debated in the 3rd to 5th centuries, as noted above, in terms of the key notion of ousia/substansia. The concept of substance, however, although confidently used throughout the medieval period, was widely questioned by modern thinkers and found little place in distinctively 20th-century streams of philosophy. Consequently, there was a variety of attempts, in which theology and philosophy mingled inextricably, to find an interpretation that would be intelligible to the modern mind. Instead of the basically static notion of substance—Jesus qua human being of human substance and qua divine of God’s substance—many have preferred the more dynamic idea of divine action. From this point of view Jesus was divine in the sense that God was acting redemptively through him; or, instead of a homo-ousion, identity of substance, between Jesus and the heavenly Father, there was a homo-agapion, an identity of divine loving. Others, however, criticized such alternatives to the older substance language, often on the ground that, whereas “being of the same substance as” is an all-or-nothing concept, divine activity in and through a human life is capable of degrees, so that the divinity of Christ may in principle be de-absolutized.

The problems of religious pluralism were increasingly seen as requiring the attention of Christian philosophers. One reason arises from the kind of apologetic described above, hinging upon the reasonableness of basing beliefs upon religious experience. There is considerable variety within the Christian tradition itself, and in the world as a whole. Muslim forms of religious experience give rise to and justify Islamic beliefs. Jewish forms of experience to Jewish beliefs. Hindu to Hindu beliefs, Buddhists to Buddhist beliefs, and so on. These different belief systems include mutually incompatible doctrines. Thus the experiential solution to the problem of justifying Christian beliefs gave rise to a new problem constituted by the conflicting truth-claims of the different religious traditions.

The other reason the great world faiths provided new issues for Christian philosophy was that some of their belief systems challenge long-standing Christian assumptions. Whereas Judaism and Islam raise theological questions, the most challenging philosophical issues are raised by Buddhism. The belief in God as the personal ultimate is challenged by the idea of the nonpersonal dharma-kaya. The idea of the immortal soul is challenged by the anatta (“no soul”) doctrine, with its claim that

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The cognitive status of mystical knowing and its clash with the mystics’ claims about the ineffability of their experiences have also been topics of interest for modern students of mysticism. Among the most important investigations of mystical knowing are those of the Belgian Jesuit Joseph Maréchal and the French philosophers Henri Bergson and Jacques Maritain.

The relation between mysticism and morality has been a topic of scholarly debate since the time of William James, but certain questions have concerned Christian mystics for centuries. Does mystical experience always confirm traditional religious ideas about right and wrong, or is mysticism independent of moral issues? Although the problems regarding mysticism are fairly easy to identify, their solutions seem far off.

The role of mysticism in Christianity has been variously evaluated by modern theologians. Many Protestant thinkers, from Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack through Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, have denied mysticism an integral role in Christianity, claiming that mystical union was an import from Greek thought that is incompatible with saving faith in the Gospel word. Other Protestant theologians, such as Ernst Troeltsch in The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches (trans. 1931) and Albert Schweitzer in The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle (trans. 1931), were more sympathetic. Anglican thinkers, especially William R. Inge, Evelyn Underhill, and Kenneth E. Kirk, championed the importance of mysticism in Christian History. Orthodox Christianity has given mysticism so central a role in Christian life that all theology in the Christian East by definition is mystical theology, as the Russian emigre thinker Vladimir Lossky showed in The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church (trans. 1957).

The most extensive theological discussions of mysticism in Christianity have been found in modern Roman Catholicism. In the first half of the 20th century Neoscholastic authors—invoking the authority of Thomas Aquinas and the Spanish mystics Teresa de Avila and John of the Cross—debated whether mystical contemplation was the goal of all Christians or a special grace offered only to a few. The discrimination of the various forms of prayer and the distinction between acquired contemplation, for

Christian mysticism

Mysticism is the sense of some form of contact with the divine or transcendent, often understood in Christian tradition as involving union with God. Mysticism played an important role in the history of Christian religion and emerged as a living influence in modern times.

Scholars have studied mysticism from many perspectives, including the psychological, comparativist, philosophical, and theological. Hermeneutical and deconstructionist philosophies in the 20th century brought increasing attention to the mystical text. Among the theoretical questions that have been much debated are issues such as whether mysticism constitutes the core or essence of personal religion or whether it is better viewed as one element interacting with others in the formation of concrete religions. Those who emphasize a strong distinction between mystical experience and subsequent interpretation generally seek out a common core of all mysticism; others insist that experience and interpretation cannot be so easily sundered and that mysticism is in most cases tied to a specific religion and contingent upon its teachings. Both those who search for the common core, such as the British philosopher Walter T. Stace, and those who emphasize the differences among forms of mysticism, such as the British historian of religion Robert C. Zaehner, have employed typologies of mysticism, often based on the contrast between introvertive and extrovertive mysticism developed by the comparativist Rudolf Otto.

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which the believer could strive with the help of grace, and infused contemplation, which was a pure and unmerited gift, framed much of this discussion. Other Roman Catholic theologians, such as Cuthbert Butler in Western Mysticism (1922) and Anselm Stolz in Theologie der Mystik (1936), broke with Neoscholasticism to consider the wider scriptural and patristic tradition. In the second half of the century Roman Catholic theologians including Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar addressed key theological issues in mysticism, such as the relation of mystical experience to the universal offer of grace and the status of non-Christian mysticism, and Pope John Paul II, whose devotion to the Virgin Mary was mystical, expressed profound admiration for the works of John of the Cross.

**History of Christian mysticism**

**Early church**

Although the essence of mysticism is the sense of contact with the transcendent, mysticism in the history of Christianity should not be understood merely in terms of special ecstatic experiences but as part of a religious process lived out within the Christian community. From this perspective mysticism played a vital part in the early church. Early Christianity was a religion of the spirit that expressed itself in the heightening and enlargement of human consciousness. It is clear from the Synoptic Gospels (e.g., Matthew 11:25–27) that Jesus was thought to have enjoyed a sense of special contact with God. In the primitive church an active part was played by prophets, who were believed to be recipients of a revelation coming directly from the Holy Spirit.

The mystical aspect of early Christianity finds its fullest expression, however, in the letters of Paul and The Gospel According to John. For Paul and John, mystical experience and aspiration are always for union with Christ. It was Paul’s supreme desire to know Christ and to be united with him. The recurring phrase, “in Christ,” implies personal union, a participation in Christ’s death and Resurrection. The Christ with whom Paul is united is not the man Jesus who is known “after the flesh.” He has been exalted and glorified, so that he is one with the Spirit.

Christ-mysticism appears again in The Gospel According to John, particularly in the farewell discourse (chapters 14–16), where Jesus speaks of his impending death and of his return in the Spirit to unite himself with his followers. In the prayer of Jesus in chapter 17 there is a vision of an interpenetrating union of souls in which all who are one with Christ share his perfect union with the Father.

In the early Christian centuries the mystical trend found expression not only in the traditions of Pauline and Johannine Christianity (as in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch and Irenaeus of Lyon) but also in the Gnostics (early Christian heretics who viewed matter as evil and the spirit as good). Scholars still debate the origins of Gnosticism, but most Gnostics thought of themselves as followers of Christ, albeit a Christ who was pure spirit. The religion of Valentinus, who was excommunicated in about ad 150, is a notable example of the mysticism of the Gnostics. He believed that human beings are alienated from God because of their spiritual ignorance; Christ brings them into the gnosia (esoteric revelatory knowledge) that is union with God. Valentinus held that all human beings come from God and that all will in the end return to God. Other Gnostic groups held that there were three types of people—“spiritual,” “psychic,” and “material”—and that only the first two can be saved. The Pistis Sophia (3rd century) is preoccupied with the question of who finally will be saved. Those who are saved must renounce the world completely and follow the pure ethic of love and compassion so that they can be identified with Jesus and become rays of the divine Light.

**Eastern Christianity**

The classic forms of Eastern Christian mysticism appeared toward the end of the 2nd century, when the mysticism of the early church began to be expressed in categories of thought explicitly dependent on the Greek philosophical tradition of Plato and his followers. This intermingling of primitive Christian themes with Greek speculative thought has been variously judged by later Christians, but contemporaries had no difficulty in seeing it as proof of the new religion’s ability to adapt and transform all that was good in the world. The philosophical emphasis on the unknowability of God found an echo in many biblical texts, affirming that the God of Abraham and the Father of Jesus could never be fully known. The understanding of the role of the preexistent Logos, or Word, of The Gospel According to John in the creation and restoration of the universe was clarified by locating the Platonic conception of Ideas in the Logos. Greek emphasis on the vision or contemplation (theoria) of God as the goal of human blessedness found a scriptural warrant in the sixth Beatitude: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). The notion of deification (theosis) fit with the New Testament emphasis on becoming sons of God and texts such as 2 Peter 1:4, which talked about sharing in the divine nature. These adaptations later provided an entry for the language of union with God, especially after the notion of union became more explicit in Neoplatonism, the last great pagan form of philosophical mysticism. Many of these themes are already present in germ in the works of Clement of Alexandria, written in about 200. They are richly developed in the thought of Origen, the greatest Christian writer of the pre-Constantinian period and the earliest major speculative mystic in Christian history.

Origen’s mystical theology, which made the union of God and man in Christ the pattern for the union of Christ and the believer, required a social matrix in which it could take on life as formative and expressive of Christian ideals. This was the achievement of early Christian monasticism, the movement into the desert that began to transform ideals of Christian perfection at the beginning of the 4th century. The combination of the religious experience of the desert Christians and the generally Origenist theology that helped shape their views created the first great strand of Christian mysticism, one that remains central to the East and that was to dominate in the West until the end of the 12th century. Though not all Eastern Christian mystical texts were deeply imbued with Platonism, all were marked by the monastic experience.

The first great mystical writer of the desert was Evagrius Ponticus (346–399), whose works were influenced by Origen. His writings show a clear distinction between the ascetic, or “practical,” life and the contemplative, or “theoretical,” life, a distinction that was to become classic in Christian history. His disciple, John Cassian, conveyed Evagrian mysticism to the monks of western Europe, especially in the exposition of the “degrees of prayer” in his Collations of the Fathers, or Conferences. Gregory of Nyssa, the younger brother of St. Basil the Great, sketched out a model for progress in the mystical path in his Life of Moses and, following the example of Origen, devoted a number of homilies to a mystical interpretation of the Song of Solomon, showing how the book speaks both of Christ’s love for the church and of the love between the soul and the Divine Bridegroom.

Perhaps the most influential of all Eastern Christian mystics is Pseudo-Dionysius, who was probably a Syrian monk of the 5th or 6th century and who wrote in the name of Dionysius the Areopagite, Paul’s convert at Athens. In the chief works of Pseudo-Dionysius, Mystical Theology and On the Divine Names, the main emphasis was on the ineffability of God (“the Divine Dark”) and hence on the “apophatic” or “negative” approach to God. Through a gradual process of ascension from material things to spiritual realities and an eventual stripping away of all created beings in “unknowing,” the soul arrives at “union with Him who transcends all being and all knowledge” (Mystical Theology, chapter 1). The writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius also popularized the threefold division of the mystical life into purgative, illuminative, and unitive stages. Later Eastern mystical theologians, especially Maximus the Confessor in the 7th century, adopted much of this thought but imbued it with greater Christological emphasis, showing that union with God is possible only through the action of the God-man.

Eastern mystics distinguish between the essence of God and divine attributes, which they regard as energies that penetrate the universe. Creation is a process of emanation, whereby the divine Being is “transported outside of Himself…to dwell within the heart of all things…” (Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, On the Divine Names, iv. 13). The divinization of humanity is fundamental to Eastern mysticism.
Divinization comes through contemplative prayer, and especially through the method of Hesychasm (from hesychia, “stillsness”), which was adopted widely by the Eastern monks. The method consisted in the concentration of the mind on the divine Presence, induced by the repetition of the “Jesus-prayer” (later formalized as “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner”). This culminated in the ecstatic vision of the divine Light and was held to divinize the soul through the divine energy implicit in the name of Jesus. Although much of this program appears in the writings of Symeon the New Theologian (c. 949–1022), a monk of Constantinople, it reached its most developed form in the works of Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), who defended the Hesychast tradition against its opponents. This rich form of Christian mysticism found a new center in the Slavic lands after the conquest of the Greek East by the Turks. It experienced a flowering in Russia, beginning with the Philokalia, an anthology of ascetical and mystical texts first published in 1782, and continuing to the Revolution of 1917. Eastern Christian mysticism is best known in the West through translations of the anonymous 19th-century Russian text The Way of the Pilgrim, but noted Russian mystics, such as Seraphim of Sarov (1759–1833) and John of Kronstadt (1829–1909), also became known in the West during the 20th century. Among mystics native to Russia, the Dukhobors, who originated in the 18th century among the peasants, resembled the Quakers in their indifference to outer forms and their insistence on the final authority of the Inner Light. They were severely persecuted and migrated to Canada early in the 20th century.

In the Eastern as in the Western Church mystical religion was at times declared heretical. The earliest of the mystics to be denounced as heretics were the Messalians (Syria for “praying people”) of the 4th century. They were accused of neglecting the sacraments for ceaseless prayer and of teaching a materialistic vision of God. Later mystics, both orthodox and suspect, have been accused of Messalianism.

Sidney Spencer Bernard J. McGinn

Western Catholic Christianity

The founder of Latin Christian mysticism is Augustine, bishop of Hippo (354–430). In his Confessions Augustine mentions two experiences of “touching” or “attaining” God. Later, in the Literal Commentary on Genesis, he introduced a triple classification of visions—corporeal, spiritual (i.e., imaginative), and intellectual—that influenced later mystics for centuries. Although he was influenced by Neoplatonist philosophers such as Plotinus, Augustine did not speak of personal union with God in this life. His teaching, like that of the Eastern Fathers, emphasized the ecclesial context of Christian mysticism and the role of Christ as mediator in attaining deification, or the restoration of the image of the Trinity in the depths of the soul. The basic elements of Augustine’s teaching on the vision of God, the relation of the active and contemplative lives, and the sacramental dimension of Christian mysticism were summarized by Pope Gregory I the Great in the 6th century and conveyed to the medieval West by many monastic authors.

Two factors were important in the development of this classic Augustinian form of Western mysticism. The first was the translation of the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and other Eastern mystics by the 9th-century thinker Johannes Scotus Eriugena. In combining the Eastern and Western mystical traditions, Eriugena created the earliest version of a highly speculative negative mysticism that was later often revived. The other new moment began in the 12th century when new forms of religious life burst on the scene, especially among monks and those priests who endeavoured to live like monks (the canons). The major schools of 12th-century mysticism were inspired by new trends in monastic piety, especially those introduced by Anselm of Canterbury, but they developed these in a systematic fashion unknown to previous centuries. The great figures of the era, especially Bernard of Clairvaux among the Cistercians and Richard of Saint-Victor among the canons, have remained the supreme teachers of mystical theology in Catholic Christianity, along with the Spanish mystics of the 16th century. Cistercian and Victorine authors made two significant contributions to the development of Catholic mysticism: first, a detailed study of the stages of the ascent of the soul to God on the basis of a profound understanding of the human being as the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26) and, second, a new emphasis on the role of love as the power that unites the soul to God. Building on both Origen and Augustine, Bernard and his contemporaries made affective, or marital, union with God in oneness of spirit (1 Corinthians 6:17) a central theme in Western mysticism, though along with Gregory the Great they insisted that “love itself is a form of knowing,” that is, of vision or contemplation of God.

The great mystics of the 12th century contributed to an important expansion of mysticism in the following century. For the first time mysticism passed beyond the confines of the monastic life, male writers, and the Latin language. This major shift is evident not only in the life of Francis of Assisi, who emphasized the practical following of Jesus and came to be identified with him in a new form of Christ-mysticism, manifested in his reception of the stigmata, or wounds of the crucified Christ, but also in the remarkable proliferation of new forms of religious life and mystical writing in the vernacular on the part of women. Although female mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen and Elizabeth of Schönau were an important influence on mysticism and spirituality in the 12th century, the 13th century witnessed a flowering of interest in mysticism among women, evident in the Flemish Hadewijch of Brabant, the German Mechthild von Magdeburg, the French Marguerite Porete, and the Italians Clare of Assisi and Angela da Foligno.

Among the important themes of the new mysticism of the 13th century was a form of Dionysian theology in which the stage of divine darkness surpassing all understanding was given a strong affective emphasis, as well as the emergence of an understanding of union with God that insisted upon a union of indistinction in which God and the soul become one without any medium. The first of these tendencies is evident in the writings of Bonaventure, the supreme master of Franciscan mysticism; the second is present in some of the women mystics, but its greatest proponent was the Dominican Meister Eckhart.

Eckhart taught that “God’s ground and the soul’s ground is one ground,” and the way to the realization of the soul’s identity with God lay less in the customary practices of the religious life than in a new state of awareness achieved through radical detachment from all created things and a breakthrough to the God beyond God. Though Eckhart’s thought remained Hesychast in its emphasis on the necessity for the “birth of Son in the soul,” his expression of the identity between the soul that had undergone this birth and the Son of God seemed heretical to many. Without denying the importance of the basic structures of the Christian religion, and while insisting that his radical preaching to the laity was capable of an orthodox interpretation, Eckhart and the new mystics of the 13th century were a real challenge to traditional Western ideas of mysticism. Their teaching seemed to imply an autotheism in which the soul became identical with God, and many feared that this might lead to a disregard of the structures and sacraments of the church as the means to salvation and even to an antinomianism that would view the mystical as exempt from the moral law. In 1329, therefore, Pope John XXII condemned 28 of Eckhart’s propositions as heretical or open to evil interpretation. Eckhart, however, seems to have retracted these errors before his death in 1327 or 1328.

Even before Eckhart’s posthumous condemnation, the church struck out against the mystics. The Council of Vienne condemned their errors in 1311, shortly after Marguerite Porete was burned as a heretic for continuing to disseminate her book, The Mirror of Simple Souls. Marguerite’s work was a highly popular treatise and handbook that described the seven stages of the ascent to God and maintained that the soul could achieve union with God while still on earth. The council associated these views with the Beguines, groups of religious women who did not live in cloister or follow a recognized rule of life. The council also denounced the Beghards, a group of heretical mystics who were the male counterparts of the Beguines and were often associated with them, for their antimonic and libertine views. In the centuries that followed, some mystics were condemned and others executed, though evidence for a widespread “mystical heresy” is lacking.

The great mystical writers of the late Middle Ages, however, took pains to prove their orthodoxy. Eckhart’s followers among the Rhineland mystics, especially Heinrich Suso and Johann Tauler, defended his memory but qualified his daring language. Texts such as the anonymous Theologia Germanica of the late 14th century, which
reflects the ideas of the loose groups of mystics who called themselves the Friends of God, conveyed this German mysticism to the Reformers. The rich mystical literature that developed in the Low Countries reached its culmination in writings of Jan van Ruysbroeck (1293–1381). In Italy two remarkable women, Catherine of Siena in the 14th century and Catherine of Genoa in the 15th, made important contributions to the theory and practice of mysticism. The 14th century also was the “Golden Age” of English mysticism, as conveyed in the writings of the hermit Richard Rolle; the canon Walter Hilton, who wrote The Scale (or Ladder) of Perfection; the anonymous author of The Cloud of Unknowing; and his contemporary, the visionary recluse Julian of Norwich, whose Revelations of Divine Love is unsurpassed in English mystical literature. Julian’s meditations on the inner meaning of her revelations of the crucified Christ express the mystical solidarity of all humanity in the Redeemer, who is conceived of as a nurturing mother.

In the 16th century the centre of Roman Catholic mysticism shifted to Spain, the great Roman Catholic power at the time of the Reformation. Important mystics came both from the traditional religious orders, such as Francis de Osuna among the Franciscans, Luis de León among the Augustinians, and Luis de Granada among the Dominicans, and from the new orders, as with Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. The two pillars of Spanish mysticism, however, were Teresa of Avila (1515–82) and her friend John of the Cross (1542–91), both members of the reform movement in the Carmelite order. Teresa’s Life is one of the richest and most convincing accounts of visionary and unitive experiences in Christian mystical literature; her subsequent synthesis of the seven stages on the mystical path, The Interior Castle, has been used for centuries as a basic handbook. John of the Cross was perhaps the most profound and systematic of all Roman Catholic mystical thinkers. His four major works, The Dark Night of the Soul, The Ascent of Mount Carmel, The Spiritual Canticle, and The Living Flame of Love, constitute a full theological treatment of the active and passive purifications of the sense and the spirit, the role of illumination, and the unification of the soul with God in spiritual marriage.

In the 17th century France took the lead with figures such as Francis of Sales, Pierre de Bérulle, Brother Lawrence (the author of The Practice of the Presence of God), and Marie Guyard. At this time concentration on the personal experience of the mystic as the source for “mystical theology” (as against the common scriptural faith and sacramental life of the church) led to the creation of mysticism as a category and the description of its adherents as mystics. At the same time, the rise of the Quietist controversy brought about renewed conflict over mysticism. A Spaniard resident in Rome, Miguel de Molinos, author of the popular Spiritual Guide (1675), was condemned for his doctrine of the “One Act,” that is, the teaching that the will, once fixed on God in contemplative prayer, cannot lose its union with the divine. In France Mme Guyon and her adviser, François Fénelon, archbishop of Cambrai, were also condemned for Quietist tendencies emphasizing the role of pure love to the detriment of ecclesiastical practice. These debates cast a pall over the role of mysticism in Roman Catholicism into the 20th century, though important mystics continued to be found, most notably Thomas Merton and Pope John Paul II.

Bernard J. McGinn

Protestant Christianity

The chief representatives of Protestant mysticism are the continental “Spirituals,” among whom Sebastian Franck (c. 1499–c. 1542), Valentin Weigel (1533–88), and Jakob Böhme (1575–1624) are especially noteworthy. Among traditional Lutherans Johann Arndt (1555–1621) in his Four Books on True Christianity took up many of the themes of medieval mysticism in the context of Reformation theology and prepared the way for the spiritual revival known as Pietism, within which mystics such as Count von Zinzendorf flourished. The important mystics in England included the Cambridge Platontists (a group of Anglican divines), the Quakers, and William Law (1686–1761). In Holland a mystical group known as Collegiants, similar to the Quakers, broke away from the Remonstrant (Calvinist) Church. Other groups of mystics were the Schwenckfeldians, founded by Kaspar Schwenckfeld, and the Family of Love, founded in Holland by Hendrik Niclaes in about 1540. He later made two trips to England, where his group had its largest following and survived into the 17th century. The religion of the Ranters and other radical Puritans in 17th-century England also had mystical aspects.

Protestant mysticism emphasized the divine element in humanity, which was called the “spark” or “ground” of the soul, the “divine image” or “holy self,” the “Inner Light,” or the “Christ within.” This was one of the essential elements of Rhineland mysticism and shows the connection between medieval and Reformation mysticism. For Böhme and the Spirituals, essential reality lies in the ideal world, which Böhme described as “the uncreated Heaven.” Böhme adopted the Gnostic belief that the physical world arose from a primeval fall, renewed with the Fall of Adam. His teaching was the main formative influence on the developed outlook of William Law and William Blake (1757–1827).

For Protestant as well as for Roman Catholic mystics, sin is the assertion of the self in its separation from God. The divine life is embodied in “the true holy self that lies within the other” (Böhme, First Epistle). When that self is manifested, there is a birth of God (or of Christ) in the soul. Protestant mystics rejected the Lutheran and Calvinist doctrine of the total corruption of human nature. William Law remarked, “The eternal Word of God lies hid in thee, as a spark of the divine nature” (The Spirit of Prayer, I.2). “The eternal Word of God” is the inner Christ, incarnate whenever people rise into union with God. The Spirituals also viewed Christ as the ideal humanity born in God from all eternity. This conception received its greatest emphasis from Schwenckfeld, who, unlike Protestant mystics generally, taught that humans as created beings are totally corrupt; salvation means deliverance from the creaturely nature and union with the heavenly Christ.

Protestant mystics explicitly recognize that the divine Light or Spark is a universal principle. Hans Denck in the early 16th century spoke of the witness of the Spirit in “heathens and Jews.” Sebastian Franck, like the Cambridge Platontists, found divine revelation in the work of the sages of Greece and Rome. George Fox cited the conscience of the Native Americans as proof of the universality of the Inner Light. William Law described non-Christian saints as “apostles of a Christ within.” Protestant mystics stated plainly that, for the mystic, supreme authority lies of necessity not in the written word of Scripture but in the Word of God in the self. Fox said, “I saw, in that Light and Spirit that was before the Scriptures were given forth” (Journal, chapter 2). It was especially on this ground that the mystics came into conflict with the established church, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant.

The Ranters provide a good example of the conflict between mysticism and established religion. They held, with Fox and Hendrik Niclaes, that perfection is possible in this life. Puritan leaders under the Commonwealth denounced them for their “blasphemous and execrable opinions,” and there was, no doubt, an antinomian tendency among them that rejected the principle of moral law. Some rejected the very notion of sin and believed in the universal restoration of all things in God.

Stages of Christian mysticism

Christian mystics have described the stages of the return of the soul to God in a variety of ways. According to the Belgian Jesuit Joseph Maréchal, Christian mysticism includes three broadly defined stages: (1) the gradual integration of the ego under the mastery of the idea of a personal God and according to a program of prayer and asceticism, (2) a transcendental revelation of God to the soul experienced as ecstatic contact or union, frequently with a suspension of the faculties, and (3) “a kind of readjustment of the soul’s faculties” by which it regains contact with creatures “under the immediate and perceptible influence of God present and acting in the soul” (Maréchal, Studies in the Psychology of the Mystics). This final stage, which almost all of the greatest Christian mystics have insisted upon, belies the usual claim that mysticism is a selfish flight from the world and an avoidance of moral responsibility.
The mystics agree on the necessity of dying to the false self dominated by forgetfulness of God. To attain the goal, the soul must be purified of all those feelings, desires, and attitudes that separate it from God. This dying to the self implies the “dark night of the soul” in which God gradually and sometimes painfully purifies the soul to ready it for the divine manifestation.

Christian mystics have always taken Christ, especially the crucified Christ, as the model for this process. According to the Theologia Germanica, “Christ’s human nature was so utterly bereft of self, and apart from all creatures, as no man’s ever was, and was nothing but a ‘house and habitation of God’” (chapter 15). Following Christ involves a dying to self, a giving up of oneself wholly to God, so that one may be possessed by divine Love. Such detachment and purification were frequently expressed in extreme terms that imply the renunciation of all human ties. Paradoxically, those who insist upon the most absolute detachment also emphasize that purifying the self is more a matter of internal attitude than of flight from the world and external penance. In the words of William Law: “The one true way of dying to self wants no cells, monasteries or pilgrimages. It is the way of patience, humility and resignation to God” (The Spirit of Love, Part 1).

The practice of meditation and contemplative prayer, leading to ecstasy, is typical of Christian and other varieties of theistic mysticism. This usually involves a process of introversion in which all images and memories of outer things must be set aside so that the inner eye may be opened and readied for the appearance of God. Introversion leads to ecstasy in which “the mind is ravished into the abyss of divine Light” (Richard of Saint-Victor, The Four Grades of Violent Love). Illumination may express itself in actual radiance. Symeon the New Theologian speaks of himself as a young man who saw “a brilliant divine Radiance” filling the room. Many Christian mystics experienced unusual and extraordinary psychic phenomena—visions, locutions, and other altered states of consciousness. The majority of mystics, however, have insisted that such phenomena are secondary to the true essence of mysticism and can even be dangerous. “We must never rely on them or accept them,” as John of the Cross said in The Ascent of Mount Carmel, 2.11.

The union with God

Christian mystics claim that the soul may be lifted into a union with God so close and so complete that it is merged in the being of God and loses the sense of any separate existence. Jan van Ruysbroeck wrote that in the experience of union “we can nevermore find any distinction between ourselves and God” (The Sparkling Stone, chapter 10); and Eckhart speaks of the birth of the Son in the soul in which God “makes me his only-begotten Son without any difference” (German Sermons, 6). These expressions of a unity of indistinction have seemed dangerous to many, but Eckhart and Ruysbroeck insisted that, properly understood, they were quite orthodox. Bernard of Clairvaux, who insisted that in becoming one spirit with God the human “substance remains though under another form” (On Loving God, chapter 10), and John of the Cross, who wrote “the soul seems to be God rather than a soul, and is indeed God by participation” (The Ascent of Mount Carmel ii, 5:7), express the more traditional view of loving union.

The readjustment

The goal of the mystic is not simply a transient ecstasy; it is a permanent state of being in which the person’s nature is transformed or defiled. This state is frequently spoken of as a spiritual marriage involving God and the soul. This unitive life has two main aspects. First, while the consciousness of self and the world remains, that consciousness is accompanied by a continuous sense of union with God, as Teresa of Ávila clearly shows in discussing the seventh mansion in The Interior Castle. Brother Lawrence wrote that while he was at work in his kitchen he possessed God “in as great tranquillity as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament” (The Practice of the Presence of God, chapter 4). Second, the spiritual marriage is a theopathic state: the soul is felt to be in all things the organ or instrument of God. In the unitive life Mme Guyon says that the soul “no longer lives or works of herself, but God lives, acts and works in her.” In this state the mystic is able to engage in manifold activities without losing the grace of union. In the words of Ignatius of Loyola, the mystic is “contemplative in action.”

Forms of Christian mysticism

The many forms that Christian mysticism has taken during the last two millennia can be divided into three broad types. These types, however, should not be seen as mutually exclusive, since some mystics make use of all of them.

Christ-mysticism

The earliest form of Christian mysticism was the Christ-mysticism of Paul and John. Although Christian mysticism in its traditional expression has centred on the desire for union with God, Christ-mysticism has always been present in the church. The Eastern Church emphasized the divine Light that appeared to the disciples at the Transfiguration, and mystics sought to identify with this light of Christ in his divine glory. Symeon says of a certain mystic that “he possessed Christ wholly. . . . He was in fact entirely Christ.” As a result of the influence of Augustine, in the Catholic West it is in and through the one Christ, the union of Head and body that is the church, that humans come to experience God. For Augustine the mystical life is Christ “transforming us into himself” (Homily on Psalm, 32:2.2). During the Middle Ages some of the most profound expressions of Christ-mysticism were voiced by women mystics, such as Catherine of Siena and Julian of Norwich. Luis de León spoke of the theopathic life in terms of Christ-mysticism: “The very Spirit of Christ comes and is united with the soul—nay, is infused throughout its being, as though he were soul of its soul indeed.”

The Protestant attempt to return to primitive Christianity has led to strong affirmations of Christ-mysticism. The early Quaker George Keith wrote that Christ is born spiritually in humanity when “his life and spirit are united unto the soul.” The chief representative of Christ-mysticism among the early Protestants, Kaspar Schwenckfeld, held that Christ was from all eternity the God-man, and as such he possessed a body of spiritual flesh in which he lived on Earth and which he now possesses in heaven. In his exalted life Christ unites himself inwardly with human souls and imparts to them his own divinity.

Trinitarian mysticism

Pure God-mysticism is rare in Christianity, though not unknown, as Catherine of Genoa shows. Christ as God incarnate is the Word, the second Person of the Trinity, and Christ-mysticism has, from an early era, exhibited a strong Trinitarian dimension, though this has been understood in different ways. What ties the diverse forms of Trinitarian mysticism together is the insistence that through Christ the Christian comes to partake of the inner life of the Trinity. The mysticism of Origen, for example, emphasizes the marriage of the Word and the soul within the union of Christ and the church but holds out the promise that through this action souls will be made capable of receiving the Father (First Principles, 3.6.9). The mystical thought of Augustine and his medieval followers, such as Richard of Saint-Victor, William of Saint-Thierry, and Bonaventure, is deeply Trinitarian. Meister Eckhart taught that the soul’s indistinction from God meant that it was to be identified with the inner life of the Trinity—that is, with the Father giving birth to the Son, the Son being born, and the Holy Spirit proceeding from both. A similar teaching is found in Ruysbroec. John of the Cross wrote of mystical union that “it would not be a true and total transformation if the soul were not transformed into the three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity” (Spiritual Canticle, stanza 39.3). Such strong Trinitarian emphasis is rarer, but not absent from Protestant mysticism.
The most daring forms of Christian mysticism have emphasized the absolute unknowability of God. They suggest that true contact with the transcendent involves going beyond all that we speak of as God—even the Trinity—to an inner “God beyond God,” a divine Darkness or Desert in which all distinction is lost. This form of “mystical atheism” has seemed suspicious to established religion; its adherents have usually tried to calm the suspicions of the orthodox by an insistence on the necessity, though incompleteness, of the affirmative ways to God. One of the earliest and most important exponents of this teaching was the Pseudo-Dionysius, who distinguished “the super-essential Godhead” from all positive terms ascribed to God, even the Trinity (The Divine Names, chapter 13). In the West this tradition emerged later; it is first found in Eriugena in the 9th century and is especially evident in the Rhineland school in the 13th and 14th centuries. According to Eckhart, even being and goodness are “garments” or “veils” under which God is hidden. In inviting his hearers to “break through” to the hidden Godhead, he exclaimed, “Let us pray to God that we may be free of ‘God,’ and that we may apprehend and rejoice in that everlasting truth in which the highest angel and the fly and the soul are equal” (German Sermons, 52). The notion of the hidden Godhead was renewed in the teaching of Jakob Böhme, who spoke of it as the Ungrund—“the great Mystery,” “the Abyss,” “the eternal Stillness.” He stressed the fact of divine becoming (in a nontemporal sense): God is eternally the dark mystery of which nothing can be said but ever puts on the nature of light, love, and goodness wherein the divine is revealed to human beings.

**Significance of Christian mysticism**

The study of Christian mysticism reveals both the unity of mysticism as an aspect of religion and the diversity of expression that it has received in the history of Christian faith. The mystic claims contact with an order of reality transcending the world of the senses and the ordinary forms of discursive intellectual knowing. Christian mystics affirm that this contact is with God the Trinity and can take place only through the mediation of Christ and the church. The claim is all the more significant in that Eastern Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, and Protestants are here in agreement.

Without suggesting that all mysticism is everywhere one and the same, it can be said that the Christian mystics take their stand with the mystics of other traditions in pointing to “the Beyond that is within.” If Christianity is to embark upon truly cooperative relations with other religions, it must be deeply imbued with the insight and experience of the mystics. Even if it is to attempt to plumb the depths of its own history, it cannot neglect its mystical dimensions.

**Christian myth and legend**

Myths and legends number among the most creative and abundant contributions of Christianity to the history of human culture. They have inspired artists, dramatists, clerics, and others to contemplate the wondrous effects of Christian salvation on the cosmos and its inhabitants. They conjoin diverse cultural horizons and fuse them creatively with the religious histories that exist prior to and alongside the orthodox Christian world. Even for the less pious and the nonbelievers, the distinctive visions of reality presented in Christian legend or myth and the symbolic actions based upon them have helped to form the fundamentals of Western civilization. Pilgrimage to the shrines of the saints, for example, touches economic and political life, military history, visual and musical arts, popular devotion, and the exchange of scientific information. Moreover, the content of the myths and legends themselves has contributed directly to theories about religion, society, politics, art, astronomy, economics, music, and history.

Myths narrate the sacred events that unfolded in the first time, the epoch of creative beginnings. In that primordial period supernatural beings brought reality into existence. In that sense, myth relates only those things that have really occurred—that is, those realities that have revealed themselves completely. These realities become the foundation of the world, society, and human destiny. The intervention of sacred and supernatural beings accounts for the conditions of the world and humanity today. Myth describes the acts and beings whose appearance shaped material existence in all its concrete specificity.

Legends are episodic continuations of mythic narratives; they describe the effects of primordial events on an imagined history that is as fabulous as the primordial mysteries that brought that history into being. Legends describe history in fantastic terms in order to clarify the significance of the powers that underlie it. The repetitiveness and redundancy of legends demonstrate that many different legends spring from the same mythic sources—that is, from the same primordial events and creative powers. But variants of legend are reminders that myths and their outcomes are historically conditioned and questioned. Christian legend contends with the question of what the Christian mystery means in the here and now. Because of their local frame of reference, legends vary incessantly, and widely different accounts emerge from diverse locales and periods. Favourite legendary themes are the struggles and miraculous adventures of heroes in the faith, accounts that edify the faith and bolster the courage of the listener.

**Characteristics of Christian myth and legend**

An appreciation of the positive role of myth and legend in culture has been long in coming. Christian theology, taking its lead from Greek philosophy, at first denigrated the value of myth. In constructing the canon and in choosing authoritative interpretations of it, the early Christians suppressed or excluded myth and legend in favour of philosophy, history, and law. The opinion expressed in the First Letter of Paul to Timothy echoes the prevalent Hellenistic view of myth: “Have nothing to do with godless and silly myths” (1 Timothy 4:7). In spite of that, a number of important mythical themes remain central to the New Testament—e.g., Christ as the second Adam (Romans 5:12–14), the heavenly spheres (2 Corinthians 12:2–4), and the celestial battle between angels and demons.

The Apologists, such as St. Clement of Alexandria, used myth and legend as allegories to make Christian concepts intelligible to Greek converts. But Clement (e.g., in his Protreptikos ["Exhortation"]) and other Church Fathers roundly condemned the belief that Greek myths might be autonomous sources of truth. In spite of its ambiguous use of mythic symbols and themes, the history of Christian doctrine, from its origins to the present day, testifies to the systematic excision of legendary and mythical elements from Christian orthodoxy. Even folk practices, based on legend, were policing and suppressed. In 692, for example, the Quinisext Council (also known as the Trullan Synod), an episcopal council convoked by the Byzantine emperor Justinian II, prohibited baking bread in the form of the Virgin Mary’s placenta, as was the custom on the afterbirth day (that is, the day after Christ’s birth).

A second cause for the delay in evaluating the positive contributions of myth and legend to religious life is the theories of religion that have flourished since the time of the European Enlightenment. These theories treated myths as projections of the prerational childhood of the human race (projections surpassed by the mature rationalism of the Enlightenment). More intimate knowledge of mythic traditions in Africa, India, Oceania, and the Americas, however, has disclosed the important role myth plays in culture and highlighted the coherence and sophisticated order of myth.

**History of Christian myth and legend**

Lawrence E. Sullivan
The early church

Hellenistic Judaism had already interpreted many Gentile motifs and set them within a biblical context. From Jewish sources Christians adopted and adapted some mythical themes: the creation of the world, the end of the paraisdal condition and the fall of humankind, the assumption of human form by a god, the saved savior, the cataclysm at the end of time, and the final judgment. Christians reframed these motifs within their new images of history and their doctrines concerning the nature of God, sin, and redemption. As it spread beyond Palestine and the Hellenistic world, Christianity continued to develop mythical themes important to the religious consciousness of converted peoples.

The ages of the world

By the time the New Testament was written, Jewish apocalyptic writings (symbolic or cryptographic literature portraying God's dramatic intervention in history and catastrophic dramas at the end of a cosmic epoch) had already produced theories of history that reworked Indo-Iranian notions about the ages of the world, influencing Christian views of time, history, and human destiny. The prophet Zarathustra (Zoroaster; c. 628 BCE–c. 551) and his followers in Iran taught that there were four ages of the world; each age was a different phase in the struggle between two kinds of powers—light and darkness, goodness and evil, spirit and matter, infinity and finitude, health and sickness, time and eternity. The forces of good and evil battled for the allegiance and the souls of human beings. In the last days a promised saviour (Saoshyant) would pronounce final judgment and announce the coming of a new world without end in which truth, immortality, and righteousness would have everlasting reign.

Drawing on Jewish apocalyptic literature (exemplified in the Book of Daniel), early Christian apocalypticism (exemplified in the Book of Revelation) elaborated the theme of the ages of the world as a series of historical periods in which good struggles against evil: (1) from the creation of the world and of humanity to the Fall into sin and out of Eden; (2) from the Fall to the first coming of Christ; (3) from the first to the second advent of Christ, which includes the 1,000-year reign of Christ and his saints and the Last Judgment; and (4) the creation of a new heaven and a new earth in which those who have chosen the good (i.e., Christ) will live in eternity. Within this framework of the mythical history of the ages of the world, Christian apocalyptic re-envisioned a number of themes important to Jewish apocalypticism: the Son of man and the great tribulation prior to the judgment of the world; the battle between Christ and the Antichrist, a false messiah or “great liar” who denies that Jesus is the Christ and who pitches the world into moral confusion and physical chaos; and the ultimate defeat over Satan, who appears as a dragon but who no longer deceives the nations of the world.

The theme of the ages of the world has had a long and fruitful life in Christian thought and undergirds many Western concepts of progress toward a better state of existence or of decline toward extinction. Montanus, a heretical Christian prophet of the early 2nd century, claimed that history progressed from an age of the Father to an age of the Son to an age of the Holy Spirit, of whom Montanus was the manifestation. Such apocalyptic myths underlie not only the religious theories of a multistage history, as propagated by Joachim of Fiore, Martin Luther, the early Jesuits, Christopher Columbus (in his Book of Prophecies), and Giambattista Vico, but also the more secular philosophies of history developed by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Henri de Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, G.W.F. Hegel, Friedrich Schelling, and Karl Marx.

Messianic secrets and the mysteries of salvation

New Testament references to the “mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (for example, Matthew 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10) and to the mysteries of salvation were an important source for the growth of myth and legend. Things hidden from the beginning of the world would blossom in the signs of the new messianic age and would be proclaimed to the whole world. Through myth and legend Christians transmitted and explored the wonders revealed in Christ and the secrets of his salvation.

Esoteric traditions, especially those based on apocalypses and apocrypha (such as the Apocalypse of Peter, Gospel of Thomas, Secret Gospel of Mark, and Gospel of Philip) preserve some legends and myths found in the early Christian centres of Edessa, Alexandria, and Asia Minor. The First Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus (known also as the Arabic Infancy Gospel), for example, recounts that, one day, Jesus and his playmates were playing on a rooftop and one fell down and died. The other playmates ran away, leaving Jesus accused of pushing the dead boy. Jesus, however, went to the dead boy and asked, “Zeinunus, Zeinunus, who threw you down from the housetop?” The dead boy answered that Jesus had not done it and named another (I Infancy 19:4–11). This and similar narratives describe the “hidden life” of Jesus in the 30 years before his public ministry began. Other legends appear in the Acts of the Martyrs, various histories, and the Acts of Paul and Thecla, which narrates the story of a friend of Paul who was thrown to the lions—one of which defended her in a manner similar to that of the lion in the story of Androcles. Once orthodoxy had been established, these mythic themes appeared clumsy and, in retrospect, heterodox or even heretical.

Groups of gnostics and heretics, who based their ideas on alternative interpretations of the economy of salvation, developed exotic Christian myths, legends, and practices. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries, dualists believed that the world of matter created by an evil god (identified as the god of the Book of Genesis) and the realm of the spirit created by a good god (revealed in the New Testament) were irreconcilably pitted against one another. The gnostic sects—among them the Valentinians, Basilidians, Ophites, and Simonians—developed a variety of myths. Among them were those of Valentinus, who lived in Rome and Alexandria in the mid-2nd century. Valentinian myths describe how the pleroma (spiritual realm) that existed in the beginning was disrupted by a Fall. The Creator God of Genesis, aborted from the primordial world, became a Demiurge and created the material universe. He deliberately created two kinds of human being, the hylics and the psychics, and animated them with his breath. Unknown to the Demiurge, however, certain remnants of pleromic wisdom contained in his breath lodged as spiritual particles in matter and produced a third group of beings called pneumatics. The God of Genesis then sought to prevent gnostics from discovering their past origins, present powers, and future destinies. Gnostics (the pneumatics) contain within themselves divine sparks expelled from the pleroma. Christ was sent from the pleroma to teach gnostics the saving knowledge (gnosis) of their true identities and was crucified when the Demiurge of Genesis discovered that Christ (the male partner of the feminine Holy Spirit) was in Jesus. After Christ returned to the pleroma, the Holy Spirit descended.

The Ophites (from the Greek word ophis, “serpent”) offered a new interpretation of the Fall of Genesis. According to the Ophite view, the serpent of the Garden of Eden was the Demiurge, the pleroma, the Holy Spirit descended. The theme of the ages of the world had a long and fruitful life in Christian thought and undergirds many Western concepts of progress toward a better state of existence or of decline toward extinction. Montanus, a heretical Christian prophet of the early 2nd century, claimed that history progressed from an age of the Father to an age of the Son to an age of the Holy Spirit, of whom Montanus was the manifestation. Such apocalyptic myths underlie not only the religious theories of a multistage history, as propagated by Joachim of Fiore, Martin Luther, the early Jesuits, Christopher Columbus (in his Book of Prophecies), and Giambattista Vico, but also the more secular philosophies of history developed by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Henri de Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, G.W.F. Hegel, Friedrich Schelling, and Karl Marx.

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Linwood Fredericksen Lawrence E. Sullivan

The Magi and the Child of Wondrous Light

The legend of the Magi, who were mentioned in The Gospel According to Matthew, was embellished in apocryphal books and Christian folklore. The Opus imperfectum in Matthaeum relates that 12 Magi-Kings lived near the Mountain of Victories, which they climbed every year in the hope of finding the messiah in a cave on the mountaintop. Each year they entered the cave and prayed for three days, waiting for the promised star to appear. Adam had revealed this location and the secret promises to his son Seth. Seth transmitted the mysteries to his sons, who passed the information from generation to generation. Eventually the Magi, sons of kings, entered the cave...
to find a star of unspeakable brightness, glowing more than many suns together. The star and its bright light led to, or became, the Holy Child, the son of the Light, who redeems the world.

Relics and saints

The cult (system of religious beliefs and rituals) of the saints emerged in the 3rd century and gained momentum from the 4th to the 6th century. The bones of martyrs were believed to provide evidence of God’s power at work in the world, producing miracles and spectacles of the effectivesness of faith. The martyrs had imitated Christ even unto death, and the remains of their holy bodies were thought to be points of contact between earth and heaven. On the model of Christ’s Incarnation, the bones of martyred saints embodied God’s salvific power and thus became the centre of active cults. Relics were installed in basilicas or in special churches called martyria. The tombs of martyrs, on the margins of cities and towns, attracted pilgrims and processions. Legends described the prodigious virtues of martyrs and saints, as well as the dreams or visions that revealed the resting places of still more powerful relics. Each discovery (inventio) promised new and effective signs of divine redemption.

Returning from distant places, especially Rome, pilgrims brought relics to their home churches. Thus, during the 8th century, bones and other relics were moved from southern Europe to the north and west.

Of all relic discoveries, the most impressive was that of the True Cross (the cross upon which Jesus was crucified, found in September 335 or in 326, according to other accounts). The discovery of the cross (inventio crucis) was one of the more popular legends of the Middle Ages. The basic elements of the tradition had been established by the late 4th century and were associated with a pilgrimage that St. Helena, mother of the emperor Constantine, made to Jerusalem in the 320s. According to the legend, Helena, prompted by a dream, located the place where the cross lay buried and had the wood unearthed. Helena, the tale continues, realized that what she had found was the True Cross when a sick woman she had lie on it was healed. The power of the cross, the history of the wood, and the story of its discovery became legendary.

Through the symbolism of the cross, early Christian imagery perpetuated, and at the same time transformed, the myths of the World Tree. The sacred drama of Christ’s birth, death, and Resurrection participates in the rejuvenating rhythms of the fecund cosmos. Early Christians identified the cross of Christ as the World Tree, which stood at the centre of cosmic space and stretched from earth to heaven. The cross was fashioned of wood from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which grew in the Garden of Eden. Below the tree lies Adam’s buried skull, baptized in Christ’s blood. The bloody cross-tree gives forth the oil, wheat, grapes, and herbs used to prepare the materials administered in the sacraments that revitalize a fallen world. The Italian Renaissance painter Piero della Francesca later depicted the myth of the True Cross in his frescoes in Arezzo, Italy. They portray the death of Adam, fallen at the foot of the tree that provides wood for the crucifix on which Jesus is slain. The wood of the cross, however, becomes the instrument of salvation and the holiest matter in Christendom, and the cross itself became the focus of tales of fantastic historical episodes.

Helena was responsible for another great discovery when she found Christ’s tomb, the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which also became a highlight of Christian legend. Like the body of the Saviour, the tomb is a “holy of holies.” Its discovery was tantamount to the Resurrection, for its reemergence into the light of day was seen as a restoration of life where before only darkness reigned. The cross and the tomb were woven together in legend. The desire to regain possession of the True Cross and the Holy Sepulchre was the source of inspiration for the Christian knights of the Crusades.

Lawrence E. Sullivan

The Middle Ages

Christian myth and legend were adapted to new traditions as the faith expanded beyond its original cultural milieu of the Mediterranean into northern Europe. New saints and martyrs emerged during the process of expansion, and their miracles and other pious deeds were recorded in hagiographic works. As before, the saints and their relics were known for their miraculous cures, but they also performed miracles associated with new social conditions, such as releasing petitioners from prison. Moreover, a new hagiographic genre appeared that described the practice of furta sacra ("holy theft"). These accounts, most famously that of St. Nicholas, detail the practice of stealing saints’ relics—removing relics from one shrine and placing them in a new one. The narratives describe the miracles that occurred in the process, including the saint’s unwillingness to move and the inability of the holy thief to move the relics.

Medieval scholars and theologians compiled not only new lives of the saints but new lives of the ultimate enemy of the saints, the Antichrist. Drawing from the Scriptures and ancient traditions, the legend of the Antichrist took shape in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. In the 10th century Adso of Montier-en-Der collected these traditions in his popular and influential Epistola ad Gerbergam regimen de or et tempore Antichristi ("Letter to Queen Gerberga on the Place and Time of Antichrist"), a mirror image in the negative of the lives of Jesus and the saints. Adso’s treatise became the standard account of the life of the Antichrist.

A related legend was that of the “Last Emperor.” The myth began to form as early as the 4th century, and in the 7th century the legend was shaped further in the Syriac work of the Pseudo-Methodius, who wrote in response to the expansion of Islam into Christian territories. Translated into Greek and Latin, Pseudo-Methodius provided the basis for further reworking of the legend in the 10th and 11th centuries by writers in the Latin West. The legend itself describes the deeds of the last emperor of the world, who will arise in great anger to fight against the enemies of the faith. He will establish peace before fighting and defeating the armies of Gog and Magog. He will then go to Jerusalem, where he will offer up his crown to Christ, who will bear it and the emperor’s spirit up to heaven. After the ascent of the emperor’s spirit to heaven, the Antichrist will appear in Jerusalem, and the final battle between good and evil will be fought.

EB Editors

Bogomil and Cathar heretics developed a number of myths that circulated in both eastern and western Europe. The stories usually stressed the role of Satan as co-creator of the world, as the creator of the human race, or as a being whose fall is responsible for the evil that exists in the world. They also taught that Jesus entered the Virgin Mary’s body through her ear and only appeared to be born of her.

A number of Christian myths, legends, and works of art were aimed at awakening religious capacities, turning the viewer or listener against repulsive forms of evil, and hastening the effects of the salvation achieved in Christ. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the bestiaries, fables, and cosmic dramas sculpted into Romanesque cathedrals. Christ, the glorious king, and his saintly cohorts confront armies of monsters and demons. Together the two sides show forth the full spectrum of the imaginary world of Christian legend and myth of the day.

Christian legends and myths were also woven into various literary creations: the late medieval chansons de geste yielded to the epic tales, lyric poetry, and songs that conducted audiences into an enchanted symbolic world that paralleled their mundane one. Such are the enigmatic poems of the courtly love tradition of the 12th century and the literature patronized by Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughter, Marie, countess of Champagne. Similarly, the troubadours of 12th-century Provence creatively refashioned, in Christian terms, the inspirations they received from the Arabic poetry of Spain and the influences of Celtic and Oriental themes in circulation at the time.

These tendencies toward the fantastic in Christian expression reached their literary peak in the works of Dante (1265–1321), whose Divine Comedy depicts the terrifying and attractive visions of Paradise, Purgatory, and Hell in such a way as to quicken the ultimate powers of the imagination and thereby draw the reader toward the effective

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images of the mystery of their own salvation.

In the place of Charlemagne, a favourite hero of the old chansons de geste, the legendary cycles of the 12th century spawned a new generation of romantic heroes—King Arthur and the knights of his Round Table. Marie, countess of Champagne, sponsored Chrétien de Troyes, the poet who composed five long romances that became the mythic foundation for chivalry. These cycles interweave Christian, Muslim, and Celtic elements into a singular cosmic vision. Suffering ordeals during their adventures, the knights of the Arthurian cycle (Arthur, the Fisher King, Perceval, and Lancelot) journey through the Wasteland on their heroic quests for the Holy Grail and for the cure that will revitalize king and cosmos. Wolfram von Eschenbach offers the most coherent mythology of the Grail in his Parzival, a refinement of Christian legends that draws on the worlds visited by the crusaders and by Italian merchants—Syria, Persia, India, and China. At the conclusion of many of these cycles, the Holy Grail, often in the image of the chalice of salvation in Christ, is transported to a fabulous mythical location in the Orient.

The 12th century also witnessed the rise of a new mythology of Christian history. Joachim of Fiore (1130/35–1201/02) was an abbot of the Calabrian monastery of Fiore and was well-known in the Christian world of his day. On the vigil of Easter and on Pentecost Sunday, God infused him with special knowledge, which enabled him to decode history as a series of divine signs. According to Joachim, universal history has three stages, each age (status) corresponding to a person of the Holy Trinity. The first age, presided over by God the Father, was ruled by married men and propelled by their labour. Jesus Christ presided over the age of the New Testament, an epoch ruled by the clergy and driven forward by the power of science and discipline. The two testamental periods featured the two kinds of people chosen in each, the Jews and the Gentiles. Joachim fashioned the faithful of his day with a prediction that the second age, the age of the New Testament presided over by Jesus Christ, would end in 1260. Then would dawn a new epoch, the third age, presided over by the Holy Spirit, guided by monks and fueled by their contemplation. It was to be an epoch of total love, joy, and freedom. But three and one-half years of cataclysm ruled by the Antichrist would precede entrance to this bliss.

Joachim promised that God’s mysterious saving power would burst fully into history in the immediate future and would change forever the fundamental structures of the cosmos as well as the social and ecclesiastical world. Joachim’s new vision of history generated critiques of the 13th-century church and society and was adopted by the Spiritual Franciscans and the violent heretic Fra Dolcino. His doctrine of the Trinity was condemned at the fourth Lateran Council in 1215. In 1255 Pope Alexander IV suppressed a collection of his written works, and in 1263 the regional Council of Arles condemned many of Joachim’s most stirring ideas. His notions of an impending third epoch, in which history would come to complete fulfillment, lived on.

Renaissance magic and science

Christian legend and myth also found fertile ground in the practices of alchemy. Through the perfection of metals the alchemists sought their own perfection and, indeed, the salvation of all matter. The alchemist sought to dissolve and then fuse his own physical matter and spirit with the prime matter of the universe. These efforts at the reduction into prime matter were thought to make possible the re-creation of individual and cosmos as a single, pure element. Even the philosopher’s stone or elixir was reinterpreted so that Christ appeared as the perfect matter produced by the alchemical process—that is, Christ was the stone of all wisdom and knowledge. In the alchemist’s spiritual forge, the Stone reemerged from the Matrix, the crucible containing the so-called Bath of Mary, whose amniotic fluids dissolved all impurities. This dissolution prepared one for rebirth as a perfect being. All matter was redeemed by immersion in the fluids of the womb where Jesus assumed the flesh. Mystical union with Christ’s death and physical regression to that same uterus where God became matter empowered the Christian alchemist to effect a new fusion of redeemed realities, freed of all impure dross. The alchemical tradition was secretly continued by a number of scientists, including the foremost pioneers of modern physics and chemistry: Robert Fludd, Robert Boyle, and Sir Isaac Newton.

Legends also found their place in the growing science of astronomy. In the Middle Ages it was learned that conjunctions of planets occur every 20 years on a minor scale and every 960 years on a major scale. This theory, described in the Liber magnarum coniunctionum, was advocated by Albumazar (787–886), a disciple of al-Kindi (801–870), a Muslim philosopher who assimilated Greek philosophy to Islam. Roger Bacon used this theory to work out the chronology of great personalities in history and to unify the spirit of the alchemist’s spiritual forge, the Stone reemerged from the Matrix, the crucible containing the so-called Bath of Mary, whose amniotic fluids dissolved all impurities. This dissolution prepared one for rebirth as a perfect being. All matter was redeemed by immersion in the fluids of the womb where Jesus assumed the flesh. Mystical union with Christ’s death and physical regression to that same uterus where God became matter empowered the Christian alchemist to effect a new fusion of redeemed realities, freed of all impure dross. The alchemical tradition was secretly continued by a number of scientists, including the foremost pioneers of modern physics and chemistry: Robert Fludd, Robert Boyle, and Sir Isaac Newton.

Rosicrucian announcements of the imminent coming of a new world also propagated the theory that great celestial conjunctions appeared at the births of prophets and saviours. Kepler’s scientific achievements confirmed the hopes of the Rosicrucians and became a foundation for the new secret order reputedly founded by Christian Rosenkreuz. The editors of Rosicrucian publications dated the death of their founder to 1484 and fixed the time of the discovery of his tomb as 1604 in order to coordinate the events with the last two great conjunctions of stars.

Christian practice in the modern world

The 20th century continued to generate important Christian myths and legend-based practices, including pilgrimages made on Marian feast days to holy wells and fairy rings outside the Irish town of Sneem and devotions at the tomb of Christ in Japan, where, according to local legend, Christ ended the long life of missionary travels he began after his mock death in Jerusalem. These acts and the explanations that accompany them detail the impact of Christian salvation on reality in modern times. In all the cultures where Christianity has been propagated, myth and legend express the fulfillment of the religious desires and hopes that constituted the religious traditions before contact with Christian revelation. The following examples suggest their variety and vitality.

The healing of sickness is, as it was in the time of the New Testament, a sign of the coming of the kingdom of Christ in its fullness. In Africa, for example, many so-called Independent Churches have reinterpreted disease and rites of cure along Christian lines. In Douala, Cameroon, during the 1980s, two healing prophets named Mallah and Marie-Lumière divided their disciples, whom they called the “sick ones of the Father,” into groups named for the important categories of illness described in the Gospels: the Blind, the Halt, the Lame, the Deaf, the Epileptic, the Dumb, and the Paralyzed. The disciples evidenced none of these physical symptoms, but they were asked to identify deep within themselves with the affliction described in the Gospel, so that salvation might touch them in their inner being. By becoming sick, they could be healed and thus join the elect. In lengthy sermons the healing prophets reimagined traditional African religious imagery and refashioned it in the light of Christian belief. The experience of their peculiar mystical disorders afforded a basis for social regrouping and for rethinking the past and present.

The Christian expression of sacred music and trance is often grounded in legend or myth. In Brazil, for example, Macumba, Candomblé, and other Afro-Brazilian cults have roots sunk deep into the religions of African slaves transplanted to the New World. Afro-Brazilian rites often centre on possession by a supernatural being, called an orixá. The innumerable orixás are ranked in hierarchies modeled on the pantheons of the Yoruba people of West Africa, among others. In Brazil (and in much of Afro-American religious life of the Americas), each orixá is identified with a specific Christian saint. In the Umbanda cult of Brazil, altars hold small plaster images of the Christian saints associated with the orixás. Each one of the priests presides over a domain of human activity or over a disease, social group, geographic area, or craft. For example, Omolú, the god of smallpox, is identified with St. Lazarus, whose body, in Christian legend, is pockmarked with sores and who heals diseases of the skin. Oxossi, the Yoruba god of hunting, is associated with the bellicose St. George or St. Michael, the slayers of dragons and demons. Yansan, who ate the “magic” of her husband and
now spits up lightning, is associated with St. Barbara, whose father was struck by lightning when he tried to force her to give up her Christian faith. In the worship site each oríxá has its own stone, which is peculiarly shaped, coloured, or textured; arranged in a distinctive position on the altar; and identified as the cross of Christ. A single saint may be identified with several oríxás or vice versa. Regions vary the saintly identifications, and some designations shift over time. Each oríxá has its own musical rhythms and sounds. When called by drums, dance, and music, the supernatural being may take over the possessed medium, reveal valued information, and carry out effective symbolic acts on behalf of the community.

European communities in the 20th century remained fascinated with the rigorous asceticism of St. Anthony of Egypt, who repulsed the assaults of wild beasts, reptiles, and demons and remained steadfast in the faith. He is considered the patron of domestic animals, and in many parts of Italy, the drama of the feast of St. Anthony, historically associated with the winter solstice, rivals any other feast day of the Christian calendar. To celebrate his feast, the people of Fara Filiorum Petri, a town in the Abruzzi region of Italy, ignite enormous bonfires on the night of January 16. Each of the 12 outlying hamlets brings into the main town’s square a bundle (farchia) of long poles. Set on end, the bundles are lashed together to form a single tall mass, an act that commemorates the historical union of the mountain settlements as one bonded community. Then the bundles of farchie, 15 or more feet high, are set ablaze. The fire is believed to cleanse the community and hold at bay the evil forces of sickness and death. As the fire dies down, young men jump through the purifying flames. Spectators carry remnants of the blessed fire back to their homes, spreading the ashes in their stalls and on their fields.

The birth of Christ was still a focus in the 20th century for traditional legends and myths that had developed outside ecclesiastical institutions. In rural Romania, for instance, on Christmas Eve groups of young carolers would (colindatori) proceed from house to house in the village, singing and collecting gifts of food. Often these carolers impersonated the saints, especially Saints John, Peter, George, and Nicholas. The words of their songs (colinde) described legendary heroes who carry the sun and wear the moon on their clothes. They live in paradisi worlds and subdue monstrous animals in order to leave the world free from harm and ready to renew itself in the fertile acts of spring.

The symbolic reenactments of legend often experiment with alternative social orders and criticize or reverse existing divisions of labour and prestige. In Sicilian American communities of Texas, Louisiana, California, and elsewhere, the female head of the household dedicates and displays an altar to St. Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus, and thus fulfills a promise made in a moment of need. She prepares fruit, hard-boiled eggs, cakes, filled pastries, pies, and special breads and uses them to decorate a series of tiers stretching from floor to ceiling. She also arranges on this festival altar the figures of saints, the Virgin Mary, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The construction of this panorama takes nine days, a period that constitutes a ritual novena of prayer and devout action. Representatives who act in the accompanying ceremony play the roles of the Holy Family and other saints important to the altar display. Re-creating the Holy Family’s search for room in a Bethlehem inn on the night of the Nativity, the ritual drama builds toward the moment when the altar-giver opens her home to Joseph and Mary. As Mother Mary prepares to give birth to Jesus, the hostess readies her home, heart, and community so that they may become fit dwelling places for the sacred being. The presiding women play the roles of Magi-Kings bearing gifts of food and hospitality to the Holy Family and their entourage, which includes most of the neighbouring community. A single family can host from 500 to 1,000 people in the feast that terminates the celebration.

Sometimes the new Christian mythologies function as counter-theologies or theologies of resistance to the impositions of Christian culture. They criticize the Christian missionary enterprise even while they embrace aspects of the new religion. They create new human beings and redeem them from the darkness into which they have fallen. In the end, Wanadi, the god incarnate who comes to save humankind, is crucified by mythical monsters called Fañurus (from the Spanish españoles: “Spaniards”), at the instigation of an evil being called Padre (from the Spanish padre: “father” or “priest”). To all appearances, Wanadi was slain by the Fañurus, but, in fact, he cut his own insides out and allowed his inner spirit (akato) to dance free of his dead, cast-off body. Before his spirit ascends into heaven, Wanadi gathers his 12 disciples together and promises to return in a new and glorious body to destroy the evil world and create a new earth.

Unlike the orthodox canon of Christian scripture, which was inscribed and closed in the first centuries, Christian myth and legend have arisen anew throughout all of Christian history. It offers a record of the spread of Christianity—through the Mediterranean, eastern and western Europe, Asia, Africa, Oceania, and the Americas—and highlights the diversity of cultures brought into contact with the Christian message of salvation. The diverse religious hopes, heroes, and rites of these cultures continue to shape reinterpretations of the life of Christ and his saintly followers.

Legend and myth constitute a record of critical reflection on Christian reality in all its dimensions—social, political, economic, doctrinal, and scriptural. No social class or geographic region can lay exclusive claim to Christian myth and legend; they fill the stanzas of royally sponsored poets, the visions of utopian philosophers, and the folklore of rural populations. Indeed, many ideas widely held about the workings of salvation (especially regarding the saints, angels, the devil, and the powers of nature) find their origin in legendary episodes rather than biblical text. Through myth and legend, communities across the globe have absorbed into their rich religious histories the message of Christian salvation and, through the same fabulous means, they have evaluated the impact of Christian temporal power on their world.

Lawrence E. Sullivan

The Christian community and the world

The relationships of Christianity

Historical views

From the perspectives of history and sociology, the Christian community has been related to the world in diverse and even paradoxical ways. This is reflected not only in changes in this relationship over time but also in simultaneously expressed alternatives ranging from withdrawal from and rejection of the world to theocratic triumphalism. For example, early Christians so consistently rejected imperial deities that they were known as atheists, while later Christians so embraced European monarchies that they were known as reactionary theists. Franciscans, especially the Spiritual Franciscans, proclaimed that true Christians should divest themselves of money at the same time that the Catholic church erected magnificent churches and the clergy dressed in elaborate finery. Another classic example of this paradoxical relationship is provided by the monks, who withdrew from the world but also preserved and transmitted Classical culture and learning to medieval Europe. In the modern period some Christian communities regard secularization as a fall from true Christianity; others view it as a legitimate consequence of a desacralization of the world initiated by Christ.

The Christian community has always been part of the world in which it exists. It has served the typical religious function of legitimating social systems and values and of creating structures of meaning, plausibility, and compensation for society as it faces loss and death. The Christian community has sometimes exercised this religious function in collusion with tribalistic nationalisms (e.g., the “German Christians” and Nazism) by disregarding traditional church tenets. When the Christian community has
held to its teachings, however, it has opposed such social systems and values. Given the inherent fragility of human culture and society, religion in general and the Christian community in particular frequently are conservative forces.

However, the Christian community has not always been a conservative force. Twentieth-century black theology and Latin American liberation theology shared the conviction that God takes the side of the oppressed against the world’s injustices. From the perspective of theology or faith, the criticism of the world of which the Christian community itself is a part is the exercise of its commitment to Jesus Christ. For the Christian community, the death and Resurrection of Jesus call into question all structures, systems, and values of the world that claim ultimacy.

The relationship of the Christian community to the world may be seen differently depending upon one’s historical, sociological, and theological perspectives because the Christian community is both a creation in the world and an influence upon it. This complexity led the American theologian H. Richard Niebuhr to comment in Christ and Culture (1956) that, “the many-sided debate about the relations of Christianity and civilization…is as confused as it is many-sided.”

**Church, sect, and mystical movement**

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, German scholar Ernst Troeltsch sought to impose a meaningful pattern on this confusion by organizing the complex relationships of the Christian community to the world into three types of religious social organization: church, sect, and mystical movement. He described the church as a conservative institution that affirms the world and mediates salvation through clergy and sacraments. It is also characterized by inclusivity and continuity, signified by its adherence to baptism and historical creeds, doctrines, liturgies, and forms of organization. The objective-institutional character of the church increases as it relinquishes its commitment to eschatological perfection in order to create the corpus Christianum, the Christian commonwealth or society. This development stimulates opposition from those who understand the Gospel in terms of personal commitment and detachment from the world. The opposition develops into sects, which are comparatively small groups that strive for unmediated salvation and that are related indifferently or antagonistically to the world. The exclusivity and historical discontinuity of the sect is signified by its adherence to believers’ baptism and efforts to imitate what it believes is the New Testament community. Mystical movements are the expression of a radical religious individualism that strives to interiorize and live out the personal example of Jesus. They are not interested in creating a community but strive toward universal tolerance, a fellowship of spiritual religion beyond creeds and dogmas. The Methodist church exemplifies the dynamic of these types. The Methodist movement began as a sectarian protest against the worldliness of the Church of England, and its success stimulated it to become a church, which in turn spawned various sectarian protests, including charismatic communities.

Niebuhr further developed Troeltsch’s efforts by distinguishing five repetitive types of the Christian community’s relations to the world. Niebuhr’s types are: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture. The first two are expressions of opposition to and endorsement of the world, while the last three share a concern to mediate in distinctive ways the opposition between the first two.

Opposition to the world is exemplified by Tertullian’s question, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” This sharp opposition to the world was expressed in the biblical disjunction between the children of God and the children of the world and between “the light” and “the darkness” (1 John 2:15, 4:4–5; Revelation), and it has continued to find personal exponents, such as Leo Tolstoy, and communal expressions, such as the Hutterites.

Endorsement of the world emerged in the 4th century with the imperial legal recognition of Christianity by the Roman emperor Constantine I. Although frequently associated with the medieval efforts to construct a Christian commonwealth, this type is present wherever national, social, political, and economic programs are “baptized” as Christian. Thus, its historical expressions may be as diverse as the Jeffersonian United States and Hitlerian Germany.

The other three types that Niebuhr proposed are variations on the theme of mediation between rejection and uncritical endorsement of the world. The “Christ above culture” type recognizes continuity between the world and faith. This was probably best expressed by St. Thomas Aquinas’s conviction that grace or the supernatural does not destroy nature but completes it. The “Christ and culture in paradox” type views the Christian community’s relationship to the world in terms of a permanent and dynamic tension in which the kingdom of God is not of this world and yet is to be proclaimed in it. A well-known expression of this position is Martin Luther’s law–gospel dialectic, distinguishing how the Christian community is to live in the world as both sinful and righteous at the same time. The conviction that the world may be transformed and regenerated by Christianity (“Christ the transformer of culture”) has been attributed to expressions that have theocratic tendencies, such as those of St. Augustine and John Calvin.

Efforts by scholars such as Troeltsch and Niebuhr to provide typical patterns of Christian relations to the world enable appreciation of the multiformity of these relationships without being overwhelmed by historical data. These models relieve the illusion that the Christian community has ever been monolithic, homogeneous, or static. This “many-sidedness” may be seen in the Christian community’s relationships to the state, society, education, the arts, social welfare, and family and personal life.

Carter H. Lindberg

**Church and state**

The relationship of Christians and Christian institutions to forms of the political order has shown an extraordinary diversity throughout church history. There have been, for example, theocratically founded monarchies, democracies, and communist communities. In various periods, however, political revolution, based on theological foundations, has also belonged to this diversity.

In certain eras of church history the desire to establish the kingdom of God stimulated political and social strivings. The political power of the Christian proclamation of the coming sovereignty of God resided in its promise of both the establishment of a kingdom of peace and the execution of judgment.

The church, like the state, has been exposed to the temptation of power, which resulted in the transformation of the church into an ecclesiastical state. This took place in the development of the Papal States and, to a lesser degree, in several theocratic churches, as well as in Calvin’s ecclesiastical state in Geneva in the 16th century. At times, too, the secular state declared itself Christian and the executor of the spiritual, political, and social commission of the church; it understood itself to be the representative of the kingdom of God. This development took place in both the Byzantine and Carolingian empires as well as in the medieval Holy Roman Empire.

The struggle between the church, understanding itself as state, and the state, understanding itself as representative of the church, not only dominated the Middle Ages but also continued into the Reformation period. The wars of religion in the era of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation discredited in the eyes of many the theological and metaphysical rationales for a Christian state. The Anabaptists in the 16th century and some Puritans in the 17th century contributed to this skepticism by advocating religious liberty and rejecting the involvement of the state in religious matters. The Enlightenment idea of grounding the relationship between church and state on natural law, as advanced by Friedrich Schleiermacher among others, led to the advocacy of the legal separation of church and state.
The church and the Roman Empire

The attitude of the first generations of Christians toward the existing political order was determined by the imminent expectation of the kingdom of God, whose miraculous power had begun to be visibly realized in the figure of Jesus Christ. The importance of the political order was, thus, negligible, as Jesus himself asserted when he said, “My kingship is not of this world.” Orientation toward the coming kingdom of peace placed Christians in tension with the state, which made demands upon them that were in direct conflict with their faith.

This contrast was developed most pointedly in the rejection of the emperor cult and of certain state offices—above all, that of judge—to which the power over life and death was professionally entrusted. Although opposition to fundamental orderings of the ruling state was not based upon any conscious revolutionary program, contemporaries blamed the expansion of the Christian church in the Roman Empire for an internal weakening of the empire on the basis of this conscious avoidance of many aspects of public life, including military service.

Despite the early Christian longing for the coming kingdom of God, even the Christians of the early generations acknowledged the pagan state as the bearer of order in the world. Two contrary views thus faced one another within the Christian communities. On the one hand, under the influence of Pauline missions, was the idea that the “ruling body”—i.e., the existing political order of the Roman Empire—was “from God…for your good” (Romans 13:1–4) and that Christians should be “subject to the governing authorities.” Another similar idea held by Paul (in 2 Thessalonians) was that the Roman state, through its legal order, “restrains” the downfall of the world that the Antichrist is attempting to bring about. On the other hand, and existing at the same time, was the apocalyptic identification of the imperial city of Rome with the great whore of Babylon (Revelation 17:3–7). The first attitude, formulated by St. Paul, was decisive in the development of a Christian political consciousness. The second was noticeable especially in the history of radical Christianity and in radical Christian pacifism, which rejects cooperation as much in military service as in public judgeship.

The church and the Byzantine, or Eastern, Empire

In the 4th century the emperor Constantine granted himself, as “bishop of foreign affairs,” certain rights to church leadership. These rights concerned not only the “outward” activity of the church but also encroached upon the inner life of the church—as was shown by the role of the emperor in summoning and leading imperial councils to formulate fundamental Christian doctrine and to ratify their decisions.

In the Byzantine Empire the secular ruler was called “priest and emperor” and exercised authority as head of the church. Although never ordained, the emperor held jurisdiction over ecclesiastical affairs. The belief that his authority came directly from God was symbolically expressed in the ceremony of both crowning and anointing him. This tradition was continued in the Russian realms, where the tsardom claimed a growing authority for itself even in the area of the church.

The church and Western states

In the political vacuum that arose in the West because of the invasion by the German tribes, the Roman church was the single institution that preserved in its episcopal dioceses the Roman provincial arrangement. In its administration of justice the church largely depended upon the old imperial law and—in a period of legal and administrative chaos—was viewed as the only guarantor of order. The Roman popes, most notably St. Gregory I the Great (reigned 590–604), assumed many of the duties of the decadent imperial bureaucracy. Gregory negotiated with the Lombard kings of Italy, oversaw public welfare, and was the soldiers’ paymaster. His administrative skill helped lay the foundation for the Papal States, which emerged in the 8th century. Supporting papal claims and responsibilities was the so-called Petrine theory—the idea that the pope was the representative of Christ and the successor of St. Peter.

Although he considered himself part of a Christian commonwealth headed by the emperor in Constantinople, Gregory sought to improve the religious life of the peoples of the West. Under him the church in Spain, Gaul, and northern Italy was strengthened, and England was converted to Roman Christianity. Later popes forged an alliance with the rulers of the Frankish (Germanic) kingdom in the 8th century and succeeded in winning them as protectors of the Papal States when the Byzantine emperor was no longer able to protect Rome. The relationship created a new area of tension, as religious and secular leaders sought to define the exact nature of the relationship between them. From at least the time of Pope Gelasius I (reigned 492–496), two powers, or swords, were recognized as having been established by God to rule. Carolingian rulers maintained that, as holders of one of the swords, they had special rights and duties to protect the church. Indeed, the emperor Charlemagne claimed for himself the right to appoint the bishops of his empire, who were thus increasingly involved in political affairs.

Emperors in the 10th century, building on Carolingian precedent, continued to involve themselves in church affairs. As a result, bishops in the empire were sometimes also the reigning princes of their dioceses, and they were occasionally guilty of being more interested in the political than in the spiritual affairs of their dominions.

These conflicting perspectives were the cause of a series of struggles between popes and secular rulers that began in the 11th century, when lay and religious leaders sought to reform society and the church. Already in the 10th century, monastic reform movements centred at Cluny, Gorze, and elsewhere had attempted to improve the religious life of the monasteries and established a new understanding of ecclesiastical liberty. In the 11th century, reformers such as St. Peter Damian and Humbert of Silva Candida provided new definitions of the sins of clerical marriage and simony. These intellectual developments, along with new decrees governing papal elections, led to the virtual elimination of secular interference in episcopal and papal succession. The staunchest supporter of these reforms, Pope Gregory VII, ultimately banned the practice of the lay investiture of bishops and challenged the traditions of sacral kingship. Gregory’s assertion of papal authority, however, was opposed by the German ruler Henry IV. Their conflict eventually burst into the great Investiture Controversy, which became a struggle for supremacy between the church and the monarchy. The resolution of the controversy left the emperor in a weakened state and increased the influence of the secular and ecclesiastical princes.

Although the empire was reconstituted in the 12th century on the basis of Roman law and the understanding of the empire as a distinct sacred institution (sacrum imperium), it broke down during the 13th century as the result of a new struggle between the emperors and several successive popes. The church, however, faced a new challenge in the rise of the European nation-states. Papal ideology had been shaped by the struggle with the emperors and thus was not suited to deal effectively with kings of nation-states. This first became clearly evident in the conflict between Pope Boniface VIII and King Philip IV of France over matters of ecclesiastical independence and jurisdiction over ecclesiastical affairs. The belief that his authority came directly from God was symbolically expressed in the ceremony of both crowning and anointing him. This tradition was continued in the Russian realms, where the tsardom claimed a growing authority for itself even in the area of the church.

Secular control of the church increased during the Great Schism (1378–1417), and in some parts of Europe it continued even after the schism ended. The schism was partly the result of growing demands for the papacy’s return to Rome. Pope Urban VI settled in Rome and alienated a number of cardinals, who returned to Avignon and elected a rival pope, Clement VII. Popes and antipopes reigning simultaneously excommunicated each other, thus demeaning the papacy. The schism spread great...
uncertainty throughout Europe about the validity of the consecration of bishops and the sacraments as administered by the priests they ordained. It was perpetuated in part by European politics, as rival rulers supported either the pope in Rome or the pope in Avignon to assert ever greater authority over the church in their realms. The schism contributed to the rise of the 15th-century conciliar movement, which posited the supreme authority of ecumenical councils in the church.

Although the relationship between the temporal and spiritual powers continued to be a matter of concern in the 16th and 17th centuries, the changes brought by the Reformation and the growth of state power recast the nature of the debate. Under King Henry VIII of England a revolutionary dissociation of the English church from papal supremacy took place. In the German territories the reigning princes became, in effect, the legal guardians of the Protestant churches—a movement already in the process of consolidation in the late Middle Ages. The development in the Catholic nation-states, such as Spain, Portugal, and France, occurred in a similar way.

The ideas of the freedom and equality of Christians and their representation in a communion of saints by virtue of voluntary membership had been disseminated in various medieval sects such as the Cathari, Waldenses, Hussites, and the Bohemian Brethren and were reinforced during the Reformation by groups such as the Hutterites, Mennonites, and Schwenkfelders. These groups also denounced involvement with the state in certain respects, such as through military service and the holding of state offices; some of these groups attempted to structure their own form of common life in Christian, communist communities. Many of their political ideas—at first bloody suppressed by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation states and churches—were later prominent in the Dutch wars of independence and in the English Revolution.

In the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48) confessional antitheses were intermingled with politics, and the credibility of the feuding ecclesiastical parties was thereby called into question. Subsequently, from the 17th century on, the tendency toward a new, natural-law conception of the relationship between state and church began to develop. Henceforth, in the Protestant countries, state sovereignty was increasingly emphasized vis-à-vis the churches. The state established the right to regulate educational and marriage concerns as well as all administrative affairs of the church. A similar development also occurred in Roman Catholic areas. In the second half of the 18th century Febronianism demanded a replacement of papal centralism with a national church episcopal system; in Austria a state-church concept was established under Josephinism (after Joseph II [reigned 1765–90]) through the dismantling of numerous ecclesiastical privileges. The Eastern Orthodox Church also was drawn into this development under Peter the Great.

Separation of church and state

The separation of church and state was one of the legacies of the American and French revolutions at the end of the 18th century. It was achieved as a result of ideas arising from opposition to the English episcopal system and the English throne as well as from the ideals of the Enlightenment. It was implemented in France because of the social-revolutionary criticism of the wealthy ecclesiastical hierarchy but also because of the desire to guarantee the freedom of the church. The French state took over education and other functions of a civic nature that had been traditionally exercised by the church.

Beginning in the late 18th century, two fundamental attitudes developed in matters related to the separation of church and state. The first, as implied in the Constitution of the United States, was supported by a tendency to leave to the church, set free from state supervision, a maximum freedom in the realization of its spiritual, moral, and educational tasks. In the United States, for example, a comprehensive church school and educational system has been created by the churches on the basis of this freedom, and numerous colleges and universities have been founded by churches. The separation of church and state by the French Revolution and later in the Soviet Union and the countries under the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence was based upon an opposite tendency. The attempt was not only to restrict the public role of the church but also to work toward its gradual disappearance. The church was to be replaced with a secular ideology.

In contrast to this, the attitude of National Socialism in Germany under Hitler was contradictory. On the one hand, Nazi ideology allowed no public role for the church and its teaching. On the other hand, Hitler was concerned not to trigger an outright confrontation with the church. The concordat concluded in 1933 between Germany and the Roman Catholic Church illustrates this policy of official neutrality.

In Germany state-church traditions had been largely eliminated in 1918 with the establishment of the Weimar Republic; the abolition of the monarchical system of government also deprived the territorial churches of their supreme Protestant episcopal heads. The Weimar Constitution sanctioned the separation of church and state. State-church traditions were maintained in various forms in Germany, not only during the Weimar Republic but also during the Hitler regime and afterward in the Federal Republic of Germany. Thus, through state agreements, definite special rights, primarily in the areas of taxes and education, were granted to both the Roman Catholic Church and the Evangelical (Lutheran-Reformed) churches of the individual states.

Even in the United States, however, the old state-church system, overcome during the American Revolution, still produces aftereffects in the form of tax privileges of the church (exemption from most taxation), the exemption of the clergy from military service, and the financial furtherance of confessional school and educational systems through the state. These privileges have been questioned and even attacked by certain segments of the American public.

Church and state in Eastern and Western theology

The two main forms of the relationship between church and state that have been predominant and decisive through the centuries and in which the structural difference between the Roman Catholic Church and Oriental Orthodoxy becomes most evident can best be explained by comparing the views of two great theologians: Eusebius of Caesarea and St. Augustine.

The views of Eusebius of Caesarea

Eusebius (c. 260–339), the bishop of Caesarea, was a historian and exegete who formed the Orthodox understanding of the relationship between church and state. He saw the empire and the imperial church as sharing a close bond with each other; in the centre of the Christian empire stood the figure of the Christian emperor rather than that of the spiritual head of the church.

In Eusebian political theology, the Christian emperor appears as God’s representative on earth in whom God himself “lets shine forth the image of his absolute power.” He is the “Godloved, three times blessed” servant of the highest ruler, who, “armed with divine armor cleans the world from the horde of the godless, the strong-voiced heralds of undecieving fear of God,” the rays of which “penetrate the world.” Through the possession of these characteristics the Christian emperor is the archetype not only of justice but also of the love of humankind. When it is said about Constantine I that “God himself has chosen him to be the lord and leader so that no man can praise himself to have raised him up,” the rule of the Orthodox emperor has been based on the immediate grace of God.

To a certain extent this understanding of the emperor was the Christian reinterpretation of the ancient Roman view of the emperor as the representative of god or the gods. Some of Eusebius’s remarks echo the cult of the Unconquered Sun, Sol Invictus, who was represented by the emperor according to pagan understanding. The emperor—in this respect he also played the role of the pontifex maximus (high priest) in the state cult—took the central position within the church as well. He summoned the synods of bishops, “as though he had been appointed bishop by God,” presided over the synods, and granted judicial power for the empire to their decisions. He was the protector of the church who stood up for the preservation of unity and truth of the Christian faith and who fought not only as a warrior but also as an intercessor, as a second Moses.
during the battle against God’s enemies, “holy and purely praying to God, sending his prayers up to him.” The Christian emperor entered not only the political but also the sacred succession of the divinely appointed Roman emperor. Next to such a figure, an independent leadership of the church could hardly develop.

Orthodox theologians have understood the coexistence of the Christian emperor and the head of the Christian church as symphonia, or “harmony.” The church recognized the powers of the emperor as protector of the church and preserver of the unity of the faith and asserted its own authority over the spiritual domain of preserving Orthodox doctrine and order in the church. The emperor, on the other hand, was subject to the church’s spiritual leadership as far as he was a son of the church.

The special position of the emperor and the function of the Byzantine patriarch as the spiritual head of the church were defined in the 9th century in the Epanagoge, the judicial ruling establishing this relationship of church and state. The church-judicial affirmation of this relationship in the 6th and 7th centuries made the development of a judicial independence of the Byzantine patriarch in the style of the Roman papacy impossible from the beginning.

The Epanagoge, however, did not completely subject the patriarch to the supervision of the emperor but rather directed him expressly “to support the truth and to undertake the defense of the holy teachings without fear of the emperor.” Therefore, the tension between the imperial reign that misused its absolutism against the spiritual freedom of the church and a church that claimed its spiritual freedom against an absolutist emperor or tsar was characteristic of Byzantine and Slavic political history but not the same as the political tension between the imperial power and the papacy that occurred in the West, especially during the period from 1050 to 1300.

The views of Augustine

St. Augustine’s The City of God attempted to answer questions arising from the most painful event of his day: the sack of the city of Rome by the Visigoths in 410. Augustine responded to the shock and dismay his contemporaries experienced with the collapse of their world by delivering a literary demolition of paganism. From Augustine’s perspective the “splendid vices” of the pagans had led inexorably to the fall of an idolatrous world. In sharp contrast to this “earthly city,” epitomized by Rome but everywhere energized by the same human desires for praise and glory, Augustine projected the “most glorious city” of praise and thanks to God, the heavenly Jerusalem. However, Augustine did not simply identify the state with the earthly city and the church with the city of God. He perceived that the state existed not simply in opposition to God but as a divine instrument for the welfare of mankind. The civitas dei (“city of God”) and the civitas terrena (“earthly city”) finally correspond neither to church and state nor to heaven and earth. They are rather two opposed societies with antagonistic orders of value that intersect both state and church and in each case show the radical incompatibility of the love of God with the values of worldly society.

Later developments

The historical development of the church in the Latin West took a different course from that of the Byzantine imperial church. In the West a new power gradually emerged—the Roman church, the church of the bishop of Rome. This church assumed many of the administrative, political, and social welfare functions of the ancient Roman state in the West following the invasion of the Germans.

It was in this context that the judicial pretense of the “Gift of the emperor Constantine”—the Donation of Constantine—became possible, to which the later development of the papacy was connected. The Donation is the account of Constantine’s purported conferring upon Pope Sylvester I (reigned 314–335) of the primacy of the West, including the imperial symbols of rulership. The pope returned the crown to Constantine, who in gratitude moved the capital to Byzantium (Constantinople). The Donation thereby explained and legitimated a number of important political developments and papal claims, including the transfer of the capital to Byzantium, the displacement of old Rome by the new Rome of the church, papal secular authority, and the papacy’s separation from allegiance to the Byzantine empire and association with the rising power of the Latin West. The Donation, which was based on traditions dating to the 5th century, was compiled in the mid-8th century and is associated with the political transformation that took place in Italy at that time.

This was the point from which the developments in the East and in the West led in two different directions. The growing independence of the West was markedly illustrated by the Donation of Pippin (Pippin, father of Charlemagne, was anointed king of the Franks by Pope Stephen III in 754), which laid the foundation of the Papal States as independent of any temporal power and gave the pope the Byzantine exarchate of Ravenna.

The idea of the church as a state also appeared in a democratic form and in strict contrast to its absolutist Roman model in some Reformation church and sect developments and in Free churches of the post-Reformation period. The sects of the Reformation period renewed the old idea of the Christian congregation as God’s people, wandering on this earth—a people connected with God, like Israel, through a special covenant. This idea of God’s people and the special covenant of God with a certain chosen group caused the influx of theocratic ideas, which were expressed in forms of theocratic communities similar to states and led to formations similar to an ecclesiastical state. Such tendencies were exhibited among various Reformation groups (e.g., the Münster prophets), Puritans in Massachusetts, and groups of the American western frontier. One of the rare exceptions to early modern theocratic theology was Luther’s sharp distinction of political and ecclesial responsibilities by his dialectic of law and gospel. He commented that it is not necessary that an emperor be a Christian to rule, only that he possess reason.

The most recent attempt to form a church-state by a sect that understood itself as the chosen people distinguished by God through a special new revelation was undertaken by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or Mormons as they are commonly known. Based on the prophetic direction of their leaders, they attempted to found a federal sanction of the church leadership as the governmental heads of the proposed state. Utah eventually became a federal state of the United States.

Church and society

The development of Christianity’s influence on the character of society since the Reformation has been twofold. In the realm of state churches and territorial churches, Christianity contributed to the preservation of the status quo of society. In England the Anglican church remained an ally of the throne, as did the Protestant churches of the German states. In Russia the Orthodox church continued to support a social order founded upon the monarchy, and even the monarch carried out a leading function within the church as protector.

Though the impulses for transformation of the social order according to the spirit of the Christian ethic came more strongly from the Free churches, state and territorial churches made positive contributions in improving the status quo. In 17th- and 18th-century Germany, Lutheran clergy, such as August Francke (1663–1727), were active in establishing poorhouses, orphanages, schools, and hospitals. In England, Anglican clerics, such as Frederick Denison Maurice and Charles Kingsley in the 19th century, began a Christian social movement during the Industrial Revolution that brought Christian influence to the conditions of life and work in industry. Johann Hinrich Wichern proclaimed, “There is a Christian Socialism,” at the Kirchentag Church Convention in Wittenberg [Germany] in 1848, the year of the publication of the Communist Manifesto and a wave of revolutions across Europe, and created the “Inner Mission” in order to address “works of saving love” to all suffering spiritual and
physical distress. The diaconal movements of the Inner Mission were concerned with social issues, prison reform, and care of the mentally ill.

The Anglo-Saxon Free churches made great efforts to bring the social atmosphere and living conditions into line with a Christian understanding of human life. Methodists and Baptists addressed their message mainly to those segments of society that were neglected by the established church. They recognized that the distress of the newly formed working class, a consequence of industrialization, could not be removed by the traditional charitable means used by the state churches. In Germany, in particular, the spiritual leaders of the so-called revival movement, such as Friedrich Wilhelm Krummacher (1796–1868), denied the right of self-organization to the workers by claiming that all earthly social injustices would receive compensation in heaven, which caused Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to separate themselves completely from the church and its purely charitable attempts at a settlement of social conflicts and to declare religion with its promise of a better beyond as the “opiate of the people.” This reproof, however, was as little in keeping with the social-ethical activities of the Inner Mission and of Methodists and Baptists as it was with the selfless courage of the Quakers, who fought against social demoralization, against the catastrophic situation in the prisons, against war, and, most of all, against slavery.

The problem of slavery and persecution

Christian approaches to slavery have passed through many controversial phases. St. Paul recommended to Philemon that he accept back his runaway slave Onesimus “no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother...both in the flesh and in the Lord” (Philemon, verse 16); the passage does not reject slavery but stresses that masters must treat their slaves humanely. Although the biblical writings made no direct attack upon the ancient world’s institution of slavery, its proleptic abolition in community with Christ—“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28)—has been a judgment upon the world’s and the Christian community’s failure to overcome slavery and all forms of oppression. Most scholars assume that the eschatological assumptions of the apostolic community—that the return of Jesus and thus the end of time were imminent—rendered social issues secondary. As it became evident that Jesus’ return was not imminent and as the early church made its place in the world, the Church Fathers began to address social issues, and they identified slavery as the just punishment for sin. However, they also emphasized the need to treat slaves justly and maintained that Christians could not be enslaved. Medieval society made slow progress in the abolition of slavery, but by the year 1000 slavery had essentially disappeared in much of western Europe, and by about 1100 it had been replaced by servility. One of the special tasks of the orders of knighthood was the liberation of Christian slaves who had fallen captive to the Muslims, and special knightly orders were even founded for the ransom of Christian slaves.

With the discovery of the New World, the institution of slavery grew to proportions greater than had been previously conceived. The widespread conviction of the Spanish conquerors of the New World that its inhabitants were not fully human, and therefore could be enslaved, added to the problem. The importation of African slaves to North America was supported by various Christian churches, including the Anglican, which predominated in Virginia and other British colonies. Into the 18th century, African slaves were described as bearing the mark of Cain, and other scriptural passages were used to support slavery. When some churches began to champion abolition in the 19th century, churches in the American South continued to find support for the institution in the Bible.

The attempt of missionaries, such as Bartolomé de Las Casas in 16th-century Mexico, to counter the inhuman system of slavery in the colonial economic systems finally introduced the great basic debate concerning the question of human rights. A decisive part in the elaboration of the general principles of human rights was taken by the Spanish and Portuguese theologians of the 16th and 17th centuries, especially Francisco de Vitoria. In the 18th century Puritan leaders continued the struggle against slavery as an institution. In German Pietism, Nikolaus Ludwig, Graf (count) von Zinzendorf, who became acquainted with slavery on the island of St. Croix in the Virgin Islands, used his influence on the king of Denmark for the human rights of the slaves. The Methodist and Baptist churches advocated abolition of slavery in the United States in the decisive years preceding the foundation of the New England Anti-Slavery Society in Boston in 1832 by William Lloyd Garrison. In England and in the Netherlands, the Free churches were very active in the struggle against slavery, which was directed mainly against the participation of Christian trade and shipping companies in the profitable slave trade. The abolition of slavery did not end racial discrimination, of course. Martin Luther King, Jr., Baptist pastor and Nobel laureate, led the struggle for civil rights in the United States until his assassination in 1968.

Christian churches have engaged in similar struggles on behalf of other exploited or persecuted groups. In Germany in the 1930s some Christians fought against the Nazis’ violent anti-Semitism and their attempts to euthanize the mentally ill and others they considered “unfit to live.” For his leadership in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, the Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1984. He later served as head of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, which investigated allegations of human rights abuses during the apartheid era. And Pope John Paul II used his enormous influence among Catholics and throughout the world to promote respect for human dignity and to deter the use of violence.

Theological and humanitarian motivations

Decisive impulses for achieving social change based on Christian ethics have been and are initiated by men and women in the grasp of a deep personal Christian experience of faith, for whom the message of the coming kingdom of God forms the foundation for faithful affirmation of social responsibility in the present world. Revival movements have viewed the Christian message as the call to work for the reorganization of society in the sense of a kingdom of God ethic. Under the leadership of an American Baptist theologian, Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918), the Social Gospel movement spread in the United States. A corresponding movement was started with the Christian social conferences by German Protestant theologians, such as Martin Paul Rade (1857–1940) of Marburg. The basic idea of the Social Gospel—i.e., the emphasis on the social-ethical tasks of the church—gained widespread influence within the ecumenical movement and especially affected Christian world missions. In many respects modern economic and other forms of aid to developing countries—including significant ecumenical contributions from the World Council of Churches, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, and the Roman Catholic Church—replaced the Social Gospel.

Christians have sometimes argued that these developments reduce the Christian message to a purely secular social program that is absorbed by political programs. Other Christians, however, have maintained that faithful responsibility in and to the world requires political, economic, and social assistance to oppressed peoples with the goal of their liberation to a full human life.

Church and education

Intellectualism versus anti-intellectualism

In contrast to Tertullian’s anti-intellectual attitude, a positive approach to intellectual activities has also made itself heard from the beginning of the Christian church. It was perhaps best expressed in the 11th century by St. Anselm of Canterbury in the formula fides quaerens intellectum (“faith seeking understanding”). But well before Anselm, Christians maintained that because people have been endowed with reason, they have an urge to express their experience of faith intellectually, to translate the contents of faith into concepts, and to formulate beliefs in a systematic understanding of the correlation between God, humankind, and creation. This desire was exemplified by St. Justin Martyr, a professional philosopher and Christian apologist of the 2nd century who saw Christian revelation as the fulfillment, not the elimination, of philosophical understanding. Even before Justin Martyr, the author of The Gospel According to John set the point of departure for the intellectual history of salvation with his use of the term Logos to open the first chapter of the Gospel. The light of the Logos (the Greek word means “word” or “reason,” in the sense of divine or
universal reason permeating the intelligible world) had made itself manifest in a number of sparks and seeds in human history even before its incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ.

These contrasting opinions have stood in permanent tension with one another. In medieval thought the elevation of Christian belief to the status of scientific universal knowledge was dominant. Theology, called the queen of the sciences, became the instructor of the different disciplines, organized according to the traditional classification of trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic) and quadrivium (music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy) and incorporated into the system of education as “servants of theology.” This system of education became part of the structure of the universities that were founded in the 13th century.

With the Reformation there was widespread concern for education because the reformers desired everyone to be able to read the Bible. Luther also argued that it was necessary for society that its youth be educated. He held that it was the duty of civil authorities to compel their subjects to keep their children in school so “that there will always be preachers, jurists, pastors, writers, physicians, schoolmasters, and the like, for we cannot do without them.” This stress on education was made evident by the founding of many colleges in North America in the 17th and 18th centuries by Protestants and by members the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, a Roman Catholic missionary and educational order.

Open conflict between science and theology occurred only when the traditional biblical view of the world was seriously questioned, as in the case of the Italian astronomer Galileo (1633). The principles of Galileo’s scientific research, however, were themselves the result of a Christian idea of science and truth. The biblical faith in God as Creator and incarnate Redeemer is an explicit affirmation of the goodness, reality, and contingency of the created world—assumptions underlying scientific work. Possible tendencies concerning education and science have always been dominant in the history of Christianity, even though the opposite attitude arose occasionally during certain periods. Thus, the German astronomer Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) spoke of celebrating God in science. In the 20th century, Pope John Paul II maintained that he saw no contradiction between the findings of modern science and biblical accounts of the Creation; he also declared the condemnation of Galileo to be an error and encouraged the scientific search for truth.

The attitude that had been hostile toward intellectual endeavours was heard less frequently after the Christian church became the church of the Roman Empire. But the relationship between science and theology was attacked when the understanding of truth that had been developed within theology was turned critically against the dogma of the church itself. This occurred, for instance, after the natural sciences and theology had turned away from total dependence upon tradition and directed their attention toward experience—observation and experiment. A number of fundamental dogmatic principles and concepts were thus questioned and eventually abandoned. The struggle concerning the theory of evolution has been a conspicuous modern symptom of this trend.

The estrangement of theology and natural science in the modern period was a complex development related to confessional controversies and wars in the 16th and 17th centuries and philosophical perspectives in the 18th and 19th centuries. The epistemological foundation of faith was radically challenged by the Scottish philosopher David Hume. Building upon Hume’s work, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant advocated freedom from any heteronomous authority, such as the church and dogmas, that could not be established by reason alone. Scholars withdrew from the decisions of church authorities and were willing to subject themselves only to critical reason and experience. The rationalism of the Enlightenment appeared to be the answer of science to the claim of true faith that had been made by the churches.

Forms of Christian education

The Christian church created the bases of the Western system of education. From its beginning the Christian community faced external and internal challenges to its faith, which it met by developing and utilizing intellectual and educational resources. The response to the external challenge of rival religions and philosophical perspectives is termed apologetics—i.e., the intellectual defense of the faith. Apologetic theologians from St. Justin Martyr in the 2nd century to Paul Tillich in the 20th promoted critical dialogue between the Christian community, the educated world, and other religions. This exchange was further encouraged by the Second Vatican Council, Pope John Paul II, and the ecumenical movement. The internal challenges to the Christian community were met not only by formulating the faith in creeds and dogmas but also by passing this faith on to the next generations through education.

By the 8th and 9th centuries, cathedral schools were established to provide basic education in Latin grammar and Christian doctrine to the clergy, and by the 11th century these schools emerged as centres of higher learning. The school at the court of Charlemagne (which was conducted by clergy), the medieval schools of the religious orders, cathedrals, monasteries, convents, and churches, the flourishing schools of the Brethren of the Common Life, and the Roman Catholic school systems that came into existence during the Counter-Reformation under the leadership of the Jesuits and other new teaching orders contributed much to the civilization of the West. Equally important were the schools started by the German reformers Luther, Philipp Melanchthon, Johann Bugenhagen, John and August Hermann Francke, and the Moravian reformers John Amos Comenius and the Graf von Zinzendorf. The church was responsible for overseeing schools even after the Reformation. Only in the 18th century did the school system start to separate itself from its Christian roots and fall more and more under state control.

With the separation of church and state, both institutions have entered into tensely manifold relationships. In some countries the state has taken over the school system and does not allow private church schools except in a few special cases. Other countries (e.g., France) maintain school systems basically free of religion and leave the religious instruction to the private undertakings of the different churches. In the American Revolution the concept of the separation of state and church was intended to free the church from all patronization by the state and to make possible a maximum of free activity, particularly in the area of education. The Soviet Union used its schools particularly for an anti-religious education based upon the state philosophy of dialectical materialism, practicing the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of anti-religious propaganda in schools, though the churches were forbidden to give any education outside their worship services.

A second issue that results from the separation of church and state is the question of state subsidies to private church schools. These are claimed in those countries in which the church schools in many places take over part of the functions of the state schools (e.g., in the United States). After the ideological positivism and the materialism of the 19th century faded away in many areas, it was realized that religious life had an important role in the cultural development of the West and the New World and that the exclusion of religious instruction from the curricula of the schools indicated a lack of balance in education. In the 20th century, religion was adopted as a subject among the humanities. State universities in the United States, Canada, and Australia, which did not have theological faculties because of the separation of church and state, founded departments of religion of an interdenominational nature and included non-Christians as academic teachers of religion.

Another development in the history of Christian education was the founding of universities. The origins of the university can be traced to the 12th century, and by the 13th century the medieval university had reached its mature form. Universities were founded during the rest of the Middle Ages throughout Europe and spread from there to other continents after the 16th century. The earliest universities emerged as associations of masters or students (the Latin universitas means “guild” or “union”) that were dedicated to the pursuit of higher learning. The universities, which superseded the cathedral schools as centres of advanced study, came to have a number of shared traits: the teaching methods of lecture and disputatio, the extended communal living in colleges, the periodically changing leadership of an elected dean, the inner structure according to faculties or “nations,” and the European recognition of academic degrees. Universities provided instruction in the liberal arts and advanced study, in the disciplines of law, medicine, and, most importantly, theology. Many of the great theologians of the era, notably St. Thomas Aquinas, were associated with the universities.

The advent of humanism and the Reformation, as well as the reforms initiated by some university faculty, created a new situation for all systems of education, especially
the universities. Humanists demanded plans to provide designated places for free research in academies that were princely or private institutions and, as such, not controlled by the church. On the other hand, Protestant states and principalities founded new universities, such as Marburg in 1527, Königsberg in 1544, and Jena in 1558. As a counteraction, the Jesuits took over the leadership in the older universities that had remained Roman Catholic or else founded new ones in Europe and overseas.

In areas of missionary work, Christian education has had a twofold task. First, its function was to lay an educational foundation for evangelization of non-Christian peoples by forming a system of education for all levels from grammar school to university. Second, its function was to take care of the education of European settlers. To a large extent the European colonial powers had left the formation of an educational system in their colonies or dominions to the churches. In the Spanish colonial regions in America, Roman Catholic universities were founded very early (e.g., Santo Domingo in 1538, Mexico and Lima in 1551, Guatemala in 1562, and Bogotá in 1573). In China, Jesuit missionaries acted mainly as agents of European education and culture (e.g., astronomy, mathematics, and technology) in their positions as civil servants of the court.

Since the 18th century, the activities of competing Christian denominations in mission areas led to an intensification of the Christian system of education in Asia and Africa. Even where the African and Asian states have their own system of schools and universities, Christian educational institutions have performed a significant function (St. Xavier University in Mumbai and Sophia University in Tokyo are Jesuit foundations; Doshisha University in Kyoto is a Japanese Presbyterian foundation).

In North America, Christian education took a different course. From the beginning, the churches took over the creation of general educational institutions, and various denominations did pioneer work in the field of education. In the English colonies that later became the United States, the denominations founded theological colleges for the purpose of educating their ministers and established universities dealing with all major disciplines, including theology, often emphasizing a denominational slant. Harvard University was founded in 1636 and Yale University in 1701 as Congregational establishments, and the College of William and Mary was established in 1693 as an Anglican institution. They were followed during the 19th century by other Protestant universities (e.g., Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas) and colleges (e.g., Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois) and by Roman Catholic universities (e.g., the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana) and colleges (e.g., Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts). In addition, many private universities were based upon a Christian idea of education according to the wishes of their founders.

Christian education has been undertaken in a variety of forms. The system of Sunday schools is nearly universal in all denominations. Confirmation instruction is more specialized, serving different tasks, such as preparation of the children for confirmation, their conscious acknowledgment of the Christian ethic, of the Christian confessions, of the meaning of the sacraments, and of the special forms of congregational life.

Ernst Wilhelm Benz Carter H. Lindberg

Church and social welfare

Curing and caring for the sick

Healing the sick

The Christian church has responded to the matter of human illness both by caring for and healing the sick and by expressing concern for them. The practice of healing has retreated into the background in modern times, but healing played a decisive role in the success of the early church and was important in missionary apologetics. In the Gospels, Jesus appears as a healer of body and soul. The title “Christ the Physician” was the most popular name for the Lord in missionary preaching of the first centuries. Even the Apostles are characterized as healers. The Apologists of the 2nd to 4th century used numerous miraculous healings as arguments for the visible presence of the Holy Spirit in the church. The Fathers of the first centuries interpreted the entire sphere of charismatic life from the basic concepts that Christ is the physician, the church the hospital, the sacraments the medication, and orthodox theology the medicine chest against heresy. St. Ignatius of Antioch called the Eucharist the “medication that produces immortality.” Healing within the church began to retreat only in connection with the transformation of the church into a state church under Constantine I and with the replacement of free charismatics by ecclesiastical officials.

The early basis for healing was generally a demonological interpretation of sickness: healing was often carried out as an exorcism—that is, a ceremonial liturgical adjuration of the demon that was supposed to cause the illness and its expulsion from the sick person. The development of exorcism is characteristic in that the office of the exorcist eventually became one of the lower levels of ordination, which led to the priesthood. During the Enlightenment in the 18th century, the practice of exorcisms within the Roman Catholic Church was suppressed.

In the Protestant churches, exorcism never completely vanished; in Pietistic circles exorcists such as Johann Christoph Blumhardt the Elder (1805–80) have appeared. With the motto “Jesus is Conquerer,” Blumhardt transformed his healing centre at Bad Boll, in Germany, into an influential resource for international missionary work. His son, Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt (1842–1919), continued his father’s work and in sympathy with working-class needs entered politics as a member of the Württemberg Diet. Since the latter part of the 19th century, different groups of the Pentecostal and charismatic movements have revived the use of exorcistic rituals with great emphasis and—pointing to the power of the Holy Spirit—they claim the charisma of healing as one of the spiritual gifts granted the believing Christian. After the basic connection between healing of the body and healing of the soul and the psychogenic origin of many illnesses were acknowledged theologically and medically, different older churches, such as the Protestant Episcopal Church and even the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, re instituted healing services.

In terms of spiritual healing, one church has stood out in this respect. Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910), the founder of Christian Science, referred particularly to healing through the Spirit as her special mission. Based on her experience of a successful healing from a serious illness by Phineas Quimby, a pupil of the German hypnotist Franz Mesmer, she wrote Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures and founded the Church of Christ, Scientist. According to the instructions of its founder, Christian Science today carries out a practice of “spiritual healing” throughout the world.

Care for the sick

In The Gospel According to Matthew, Jesus says to his Apostles, when the Son of Man comes in majesty to render final judgment on all of humankind, he will say to the chosen ones at his right hand, “I was sick and you took care of me,” and to the condemned at his left hand, “I was…sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” When the condemned ask the Lord when they saw him sick and did not visit him, they will receive the answer, “Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”

In the early church, the care of the sick was carried out by the deacons and widows under the leadership of the bishop. This service was not limited to members of the Christian congregation but was directed toward the larger community, particularly in times of pestilence and plague. Eusebius noted in his Ecclesiastical History that while the heathen fled the plague at Alexandria, “most of our brother-Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty” in caring for and frequently dying with the victims.

Beginning in the 4th century, the monasteries created a new institution, the hospital, and continued to care for the sick throughout the Middle Ages. The growing number

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to is a Japanese Presbyterian foundation.)
of pilgrims to the Holy Land and the necessity of care of their numerous sick, who had fallen victim to the unfamiliar conditions of climate and life, led to knightly hospital orders, the most important of which was the Hospitalers of St. John of Jerusalem (later called the Knights of Malta), founded in the 11th century. The service for the sick, which was carried out by the knights alongside their military service for the protection of the pilgrims, was not elaborate.

In connection with the orders of mendicant friars, especially the Franciscans, civil hospital orders were formed. Even the hospital in Marburg, which was founded by St. Elizabeth of Hungary (1207–31) on the territory of the knights of the Teutonic Order, was influenced by the spirit of St. Francis. Other hospitals were founded as autonomous institutions under the leadership or supervision of a bishop. The centralization of the different existing institutions became necessary with the growth of cities and was most frequently undertaken by city councils. The laity began to take over, but the spiritual and pastoral care of the patients remained a major concern.

In Protestant lands during the Reformation, medieval nursing institutions were adapted to new conditions. The church institutions in the different territories of the Reformation stressed the duty of caring for the sick and gave suggestions for its adequate realization. The office of the deacon was supplemented by that of the deaconess. The Counter-Reformation brought a new impulse for caring for the sick in the Roman Catholic Church, insofar as special orders for nursing service were founded—e.g., the Daughters of Charity, a non-enclosed congregation of women devoted to the care of the sick and the poor, founded by St. Vincent de Paul, a notable charismatic healer. A great number of new orders came into existence and spread the spirit and institutions of ecclesiastical nursing care throughout the world as part of Roman Catholic world missions.

The Free churches led in the care of the sick in Protestant countries. Methodists, Baptists, and Quakers all had a great share in this development, founding numerous hospitals throughout the world and supplying them with willing male and female helpers. German Lutheranism was influenced by these developments. In 1823 Amalie Sieveking developed a sisterhood analogous to the Daughters of Charity and was active in caring for the cholera victims of the great Hamburg epidemic of 1831. She was an inspiration to Theodor Fliedner, who founded the first Protestant hospital in Kaiserswerth in 1836 and created at the same time the female diaconate, an order of nurses that soon found worldwide membership and recognition. Florence Nightingale received training at Kaiserswerth, which was an important model for modern nursing schools.

Church hospitals and ecclesiastical nursing care maintained a leading role in the 20th century, although along with the general political and social development of the 19th century the city or communal hospital was founded and overtook the church hospital.

The most impressive example of the universal spread of care for the sick was the founding of the Red Cross by the Swiss humanitarian Henri Dunant. The religious influence of Dunant’s pious parental home in Geneva and the shocking impression he received on the battlefield of Solferino in June 1859 led him to work out suggestions that—after difficult negotiations with representatives of numerous states—led to the conclusion of the “Geneva convention regarding the care and treatment in wartime of the wounded military personnel.” In the 20th century the activity of the Red Cross embraced not only the victims of military actions but also peace activity, which includes aid for the sick, for the handicapped, for the elderly and children, and for the victims of all types of disasters everywhere in the world.

Care for widows and orphans

The Christian congregation has traditionally cared for the poor, the sick, widows, and orphans. The Letter of James says: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction.” Widows formed a special group in the congregations and were asked to help with nursing care and other service obligations as long as they did not need help and care themselves.

The church had founded orphanages during the 4th century, and the monasteries took over this task during the Middle Ages. They also fought against the practice of abandoning unwanted children and established foundling hospitals. In this area, as in others, a secularization of church institutions took place in connection with the spreading autonomy of the cities. In Protestant churches the establishment of orphanages was furthersystematically. In Holland almost every congregation had its own orphanage, which was sustained through the gifts of the members.

Following the wars of religion of the 17th century, the orphanages were reorganized pedagogically, notably by August Hermann Francke, who connected the orphanage in Glaucha, Germany, which he had founded, with a modern system of secondary schools. Francke’s orphanage became a model that was frequently imitated in England and also in North America. Another innovator was the Alsatian Lutheran pastor Johann Friedrich Oberlin (1740–1826), an exemplary proponent of comprehensive Christian caring and curing for the whole person and community. Responsible for a remote and barren area in the Vosges Mountains, Oberlin transformed the impoverished villages into prosperous communities. He led in establishing schools, roads, bridges, banks, stores, agricultural societies (with the introduction of potato cultivation), and industries. His nursery schools were imitated in many areas through “Oberlin Societies.” These efforts provided a significant contribution to the development of modern welfare, which in the 20th century was mainly the responsibility of state, communal, or humanitarian organizations but was still characterized strongly by its Christian roots.

Ernst Wilhelm Benz Carter H. Lindberg

Property, poverty, and the poor

The Christian community’s response to the questions of property, poverty, and the poor may be sketched in terms of four major perspectives, which have historically overlapped and sometimes coexisted in mutuality or contradiction. The first perspective, both chronologically and in continuing popularity, is personal charity. This was the predominant form of the church’s relationship to the poor from the 1st to the 16th century. The second perspective supplements the remedial work of personal charity by efforts for preventive welfare through structural changes in society. This concern to remove causes of poverty was clearly expressed in the Reformation but was soon submerged in the profound sociopolitical and economic changes of the time. The third perspective is a retreat into the charity models of the earlier Christian community. Because of the overwhelming effects of the process of secularization and the human misery caused by industrialization, the key to social welfare was expressed in the Pietist maxim that social change depended upon the conversion of individuals. The fourth perspective, present in churches of the modern period, envisions systemic social change to facilitate redistribution of the world’s wealth. Personal charity is not neglected, but the primary goal is to change the unjust structures of world society.

St. Augustine’s doctrine of charity became the heart of Christian thought and practice. Augustine portrayed the Christian pilgrimage toward the heavenly city by analogy to a traveler’s journey home. The city of God, humankind’s true home, is characterized by the love of God even to the contempt of self, whereas the earthly city is characterized by the love of self even to the contempt of God. It is the goal—not the journey—that is important. The world and its goods may be used for the journey, but if they are enjoyed, they direct the traveler away from God to the earth. This imagery incorporates into Christian theology the great themes of pilgrimage, renunciation, alienation, and asceticism; the biblical and early Christian suspicion of riches receives systematic theological articulation. Pride and covetousness are the major vices, humility and almsgiving are the major virtues, and poverty is endorsed as the favoured status for the Christian life.

This view did not, however, lead to a rejection of property and its importance for society. Although St. Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 330–c. 389) linked private property to the Fall, he understood that the abolition of private property would not cure sin. Property and wealth should be shared, not relinquished. Yet the paradox of 2 Corinthians 6:10...
remained: How could a Christian be poor yet make many rich, have nothing yet possess everything? The answers given were communal property, charity to the needy, avoidance of avarice, and concentration upon heavenly treasure. The solutions of institutionalizing poverty in priesthood and monasticism, while rationalizing poverty as poverty of the spirit and material wealth as God’s provision for ministry, formed the basis for medieval care of the poor.

The most influential medieval thinker on the problem of property was St. Thomas Aquinas, who saw community of goods as rooted in natural law because it makes no distinction of possessions. The natural law of common use protects every person’s access to earthly goods and requires responsibility by everyone to provide for the needs of others. Private property, on the other hand, is rooted in positive law through human reason. Reason leads to the conclusion that the common good is served if everyone has disposition of their own property because there is more incentive to work, goods are more carefully used, and peace is better preserved when all are satisfied with what they have. Private property exists to serve the common good; thus, superfluous property is to be distributed as alms to the needy.

The other major effort to deal with property and poverty at this time was through rational direction and administration. As cities developed into political corporations, a new element entered welfare work: an organizing citizenry. Through their town councils, citizens claimed the authority to administer the ecclesiastical welfare work of hospitals and poor relief. The process was accelerated by the reformers, whose theology undercut the medieval idealization of poverty. According to the reformers, righteousness before God was by faith alone, and salvation was perceived as the foundation of life rather than its goal. Thus, the Reformation community found it difficult to rationalize the plight of the poor as a peculiar form of blessedness, and no salvific value either in being poor or in giving alms could be identified. When the reformers turned to poor relief and social welfare, their new theological perspectives led them to raise questions of social justice and social structures. This was codified in Protestant church legislation in the “common chest,” which spread throughout Europe from its origin in Wittenberg. The common chest—funded by church endowments, offerings, and taxes—was the community’s financial resource for providing support to the poor, orphans, the aged, the unemployed, and the underemployed through subsidies, low-interest loans, and gifts.

In the 16th and 17th centuries Christian leaders, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, served the poor while ignoring the root causes of poverty. In the 18th and 19th centuries, however, the social institutions of Pietism, the Inner Mission, and European revival movements inspired social concern for the masses of people pauperized and proletarianized by industrialism. The Methodists in England undertook adult education, schooling, reform of prisons, abolition of slavery, and aid to alcoholics. Famous missions arose in Basel, London, and Paris. The Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA; 1844), Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA; 1855), and Salvation Army (1865) were only some of the numerous charitable institutions and organizations created to alleviate modern ills. In 1848 Johann Wichern, founder of the Inner Mission, proclaimed that “love no less than faith is the church’s indispensable mark.”

Yet this Christian social concern hardly was aware of and rarely attempted to expose the origins of the social ills it strove to remedy. Wichern himself was aware that poverty is social, not natural, but his orientation, like that of others, was toward renewing society through evangelization. This attitude—that society is changed by changing the hearts of individuals—is still prevalent.

In the second half of the 20th century, however, the Christian community, especially in its ecumenical organizations, began to analyze the social problems of property and poverty from the standpoint of justice and the perspectives of the poor and oppressed. In 1970 the World Council of Churches (WCC) established the Commission for the Churches’ Participation in Development (CCPD). Initially involved in development programs and the provision of technical services, the CCPD focus shifted to the psychological and political character of the symbiosis of development and underdevelopment. This focus was endorsed at the 1975 WCC Assembly at Nairobi, Kenya, as “a liberating process aimed at justice, self-reliance and economic growth.” Other church bodies, such as the Lutheran World Federation and the World Communion of Reformed Churches, shared this perspective. There was also the sense that the biblical themes of justice and liberation entail the creation of social structures to enhance human life, economic structures for the just distribution of goods, and political structures to promote participation and minimize dependence. This attitude is well reflected in liberation theology, which was popular in segments of the Roman Catholic Church from the 1970s to the 1990s. Seeking to apply the faith by aiding the poor and oppressed, primarily in developing countries, advocates of liberation theology established local “base camps” to study the Bible and to address the economic needs and political interests of poor communities.

Pastoral care

Pastoral care has always been of special importance in the Christian community. The biographies of the great charismatic ministers, beginning with the Fathers of the Eastern Church and the Western Church, testify to surprising variations of this pastoral care. The principal interest of pastoral care—whether exercised by clergy or lay—is the personal welfare of persons who are hurt, troubled, alienated, or confused within. The historical expressions of pastoral care have focused on the predominant—but not exclusive—expressions of ultimate concern characteristic of the period in question. St. Ignatius, for example, addressed the terror of death when he termed the sacrament “the medicine of immortality.” Luther responded to the conscience tortured by guilt and uncertainty by proclaiming the free forgiveness of sin by grace alone, apart from human accomplishment. The modern Christian community has utilized the insights of psychology and psychiatry in developing pastoral counseling and therapy responsive to modern anxieties. Fundamentally, however, pastoral care has always attempted to respond to the totality of human needs in every age in consonance with the words of Jesus Christ: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (Matthew 25:35–36).

One of the most important contributions to pastoral care after the New Testament was by Pope Gregory I the Great. His Pastoral Care, written after he became bishop of Rome in 590, was so influential that it became customary to present it to new bishops upon their ordination. This textbook of the medieval episcopate emphasized the role of the pastor as shepherd of souls.

The medieval institutionalization of pastoral care in the sacrament of penance led to certain deficits in practice: the exclusion of the laity by emphasis upon the central role of the priest and the distortion of its original spiritual purposes of prayer, repentance, and forgiveness of sins by the introduction of paid indulgences. The indulgence abuse sparked the Reformation critique of the sacrament of penance. This in turn led to the reformers’ emphasis upon lay as well as clerical responsibility for pastoral care as expressed in their teaching of “the priesthood of all believers.” The Reformation insistence upon justification by grace alone shifted the burden of proof for salvation from human accomplishment to divine promise. By “letting God be God,” the reformers claimed that persons were free to be human. This shift of theological focus, from an otherworldly achievement to a this-worldly trust in God, facilitated a renewed holistic awareness of human needs.

Carter H. Lindberg

Church and minorities

The tendency to develop an identifiable Christian culture is apparent even when Christians live in an environment that has been shaped and is characterized by a non-Christian religion. This is the case with most Christian churches in Asia and Africa.

In some countries, Christian minorities have had to struggle for their existence and recognition, at times in the face of persecution. In some cases, however, the situation of Christian minorities is ideally suited to demonstrate to outsiders the peculiar style of life of a Christian culture. This is particularly advantageous for the church within a
A special problem presents itself through the coexistence of racially different Christian cultures in racially mixed states. The influence of the Christian black churches, especially of Baptist denominations, has been thoroughly imprinted upon the culture of North American blacks. The churches themselves were founded through the missionary work of white Baptist churches but became independent or were established as autonomous churches within the framework of the Baptist denomination. A similar situation exists in South Africa, where white congregations and separate black congregations were established within the white mission churches.

The Christian church has always urged the overcoming of racism, even though it has generally compromised with prevailing societal values. In the early church, racism was unknown; the Jewish synagogues allowed black proselytes. The first Jewish proselyte mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles was a governmental administrator from Ethiopia, who was baptized by St. Philip the Apostle. Likewise, the early congregations in Alexandria included many black Africans. Among the evangelizing churches, the Portuguese Catholic mission in principle did not recognize differences between races—whatever was baptized became a “human being” and became a member not only of the Christian congregation but also of the Christian society and was allowed to marry another Christian of any race. In contrast to this practice, the Catholic mission of the Spaniards introduced the separation of races under the term casticismo (purity of the Castilian heritage) in the American mission regions and sometimes restricted marriage between Castilian Spanish immigrants and native Christians. Like the Portuguese in Africa and Brazil, the French Catholic mission in Canada and in the regions around the Great Lakes in North America did not prohibit marriage of whites with Indians but tolerated and even encouraged it during the 17th and 18th centuries.

Consequently, the Christian churches both led and thwarted endeavours for racial integration. An ideologically and politically founded racial theory was introduced into black churches in the United States in the second half of the 20th century. The demand for a black theology with a black Christ in its centre has been made and, just as much as a theologically and ideologically founded racial theory on the part of whites, aggravated the specifically Christian task of racial integration within the church.

The promise of late 20th-century liberation theologies such as black theology and feminist theology is that of expanding awareness of the history and praxis of Christianity beyond the history of doctrines, the ideas of the elite, and the institutions that convey these ideas. Such reflection—which arises out of lived situations—reveals roles of the poor, the oppressed, and women that have too often been ignored and suppressed. These new orientations serve the church and the world not only by recalling hitherto unnoticed aspects of the past but also by strengthening peoples’ awareness of their own causes.

Church and family

The Christian understanding of sexuality, marriage, and family has been strongly influenced by the Old Testament view of marriage as an institution primarily concerned with the establishment of a family, rather than sustaining the individual happiness of the marriage partners. In spite of this, a transformation occurred from the early days of Christianity. This transformation is evident in the New Testament departure from the Hellenistic understanding of love. The classical understanding of love, expressed in the Platonic concept of eros, was opposed in the Christian community by the biblical understanding of love, agape. Although erotic love has frequently been understood primarily as sexual desire and passion, its classical religious and philosophical meaning was the idealistic desire to acquire the highest spiritual and intellectual good. The early Christian perception of eros as the most sublime form of egocentricity and self-assertion, the drive to acquire the divine itself, is reflected in the fact that the Greek New Testament does not use the word erōs but rather the relatively rare word agapē. Agapē was translated into Latin as caritas and thus appears in English as charity and love. The Christian concept of love understood human mutuality and reciprocity within the context of God’s self-giving love, which creates value in the person loved. “We love, because he first loved us. If any one says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also” (1 John 4:19–21). Love is presented as the greatest of the virtues (1 Corinthians 13:13) as well as a commandment. The Christian community understood faith active in love primarily in terms of voluntary obedience rather than emotion and applied this understanding to every aspect of life, including sexuality, marriage, and family.

The tendency to spiritualize and individualize marriage

Christianity has contributed to a spiritualization of marriage and family life, to a deepening of the relations between marriage partners and between parents and children. During the first decades of the church, congregational meetings took place in the homes of Christian families. The family, indeed, became the archetype of the church. Paul called the members of his congregation in Ephesus “members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19). In the early church, children were included in this fellowship. They were baptized when their parents were baptized, took part in the worship life of the congregation, and received Holy Communion with their parents. The Eastern Orthodox Church still practices as part of the eucharistic rite Jesus’ teaching, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them.”

In the early church the Christian foundation of marriage—in the participation of Christians in the body of Christ—postulated a generous interpretation of the fellowship between a Christian and a pagan marriage partner: the pagan one is saved with the Christian one “for the unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is consecrated through her husband”; even the children from such a marriage in which at least one partner belongs to the body of Christ “are holy” (1 Corinthians 7:14). If the pagan partner, however, does not want to sustain the marriage relationship with a Christian partner under any circumstances, the Christian partner should grant the spouse a divorce.

Jesus himself based his parables of the kingdom of God on the idea of love between a bride and groom and frequently used parables that describe the messianic meal as a wedding feast. In Revelation the glorious finale of salvation history is depicted as the wedding of the Lamb with the bride, as the beginning of the meal of the chosen ones with the Messiah—Son of Man (Revelation 19:9: “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb”). The wedding character of the eucharistic meal is also expressed in the liturgy of the early church. It is deepened through the specifically Christian belief that understands the word of the creation story in Genesis “and they become one flesh” indicative of the oneness of Christ, the head, with the congregation as his body. With this in mind the Christian demand of monogamy becomes understandable.

Christianity did not bring revolutionary social change to the position of women, but it made possible a new position in the family and congregation. In the ancient Mediterranean world, women were often held in low esteem, and this was the basis for divorce practices that put women practically at men’s complete disposal. By preaching to women and prohibiting divorce, Jesus himself did away with this low estimation of women. The decisive turning point came in connection with the understanding of Christ and of the Holy Spirit. In fulfillment of the prophecy in Joel 2:28—according to Peter in his sermon on Pentecost (Acts 2:17)—the Holy Spirit was poured out over the female disciples of Jesus, as well.

This created a complete change in the position of women in the congregation: in the synagogue the women were inactive participants in the worship service and sat veiled on the women’s side, usually separated from the rest by an opaque lattice. In the Christian congregation, however, women appeared as members with full rights, who used their charismatic gifts within the congregation. In the letters of Paul, women are mentioned as Christians of full value. Paul addresses Priscilla (Priscilla) in Romans 16:3 as his fellow worker. The four daughters of Philip were active as prophets in the congregation. Pagan criticism of the church, such as Porphry (c. 234–c. 305), maintained that the church was ruled by women. During the periods of Christian persecution, women as well as men showed great courage in their suffering. The fact that they were
honoured as martyrs demonstrates their well-known active roles in the congregations.

The attitude toward women in the early church, however, was ambivalent at best. Paul, on the one hand, included women in his instruction, “Do not quench the Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 5:19), but, on the other hand, carried over the rule of the synagogue into the Christian congregation that “women should keep silence in the churches” (1 Corinthians 14:34). Although women were respected for their piety and could hold the office of deaconess, they were excluded from the priesthood. In the early 21st century the Roman Catholic Church still refused to ordain women as priests.

The tendency toward asceticism

The proponents of an ascetic theology demanded exclusiveness of devotion by faithful Christians to Christ and deduced from it the demand of celibacy. This is found in arguments for the monastic life and in the Roman Catholic view of the priesthood. The radical-ascetic interpretation stands in constant tension with the positive understanding of Christian marriage. This tension has led to seemingly unsolvable conflicts and to numerous compromises in the history of Christianity.

In the light of the beginning kingdom of God, marriage was understood as an order of the passing eon, which would not exist in the approaching new age. The risen ones will “neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Mark 12:25). Similarly, Paul understood marriage in the light of the coming kingdom of God: “The appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none…for the form of this world is passing away” (1 Corinthians 7:29–31). In view of the proximity of the kingdom of God, it was considered not worthwhile to marry, and marriage was seen to involve unnecessary troubles: “I want you to be free from anxieties” (1 Corinthians 7:32). Therefore, the unmarried, the widowers, and widows “do better” if they do not marry, if they remain single. But according to this point of view marriage was recommended to those who “cannot exercise self-control…for it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion” (1 Corinthians 7:9). With the waning of the eschatological expectation that formed the original context for the Pauline views on marriage, his writings were interpreted ascetically. While these texts have been used alone in the course of church history, they do not stand alone in the New Testament, which also portrays marriage feasts as joyous occasions and sexual intercourse between spouses as good and holy (Ephesians 5:25–33).

By the 3rd century various gnostic groups and the Manicheans (members of an Iranian dualistic religion) had come to reject sex. At the council of Elvira, in 300–303 or 309, the first decrees establishing clerical celibacy were pronounced, and in the 3rd and 4th centuries prominent Christians such as Saints Anthony, Ambrose, and Jerome adopted chastity. The celibate lifestyle came to be regarded as a purer and more spiritual way of life. Gradually, celibacy came to be expected not only of ascetics and monks but also for all members of the clergy, as a function of their office.

The Reformation rejected clerical celibacy because it contravened the divine order of marriage and the family and denied the goodness of sexuality. Luther viewed marriage as not merely the legitimation of sexual fulfillment but as, above all, the context for creating a new awareness of human community through the mutuality and companionship of spouses and family. The demand that priests observe celibacy was not fully accepted in the East. The early church, and following it the Eastern Orthodox Church, decided on a compromise at the Council of Nicaea (325): the lower clergy, including the archimandrite, would be allowed to enter marriage before receiving the higher degrees of ordination, and celibacy would be demanded of the higher clergy—i.e., bishops. This solution saved the Eastern Orthodox from a permanent fight for the demand of celibacy for all clergy, but it resulted in a grave separation of the clergy into a white (celibate) and a black (married) clergy, which led to severe disagreements in times of crisis within Orthodoxy.

The early Christian community’s attitude to birth control was formed partly in reaction against sexual exploitation and infanticide and partly against the gnostic denigration of the material world and consequent hostility to procreation. In upholding its faith in the goodness of creation, sexuality, marriage, and family, the early church was also influenced by the prevalent Stoic philosophy, which emphasized procreation as the rational purpose in marriage.

In the 20th century the question of birth control entered a new phase with the invention and mass distribution of mechanical contraceptive devices on the one hand and through the appearance of a new attitude toward sexual questions on the other. The various Christian churches responded to this development in different ways. With a few exceptions—e.g., the Mormons—the Protestant churches accepted birth control in terms of a Christian social ethic. In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church, in the encyclical of Pius XI Casti Connubii (1930, “On Christian Marriage”) and in the encyclical of Paul VI Humanae Vitae (1968, “On Human Life”), completely rejected any kind of contraception, a position confirmed by Paul’s successors as pope in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Modern economic and population concerns in connection with improved medical care and social and technological progress have once again confronted the Christian community with the issue of contraception.

Church and the individual

Love as the basis for Christian ethics

The main commandment of the Christian ethic was derived from the Old Testament: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18), but Jesus filled this commandment with a new, twofold meaning. First, he closely connected the commandment “love your neighbour” with the commandment to love God. In the dispute with the scribes described in Matthew 22, he quoted Deuteronomy 6:5, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” He spoke of the commandment of love for neighbour, however, as being equal to it. With that he lifted it to the same level as the highest and greatest commandment, the commandment to love God. In The Gospel According to Luke, both commandments have grown together into one single pronouncement with the addition: “Do this, and you will live.” Second, the commandment received a new content in view of God and in view of the neighbour through the relationship of the believer with Christ. Love of God and love of the neighbour is possible because the Son proclaims the Gospel of the Father and brings to it reality and credibility through his life, death, and Resurrection. Based on this connection of the Christian commandment of love with the understanding of Christ’s person and work, the demand of love for the neighbour appears as a new commandment: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (John 13:34). The love for each other is supposed to characterize the disciples: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

This is based on an understanding and treatment of human beings as created in the image of God. Furthermore, the ethic does not deal with humanity in an abstract sense but with the actual neighbour. The Christian ethic understands the individual always as a neighbour in Christ.

The new element of the Christian ethic is the founding of the individual ethic in a corporate ethic, in the understanding of the fellowship of Christians as the body of Christ. The individual believer is not understood as a separate individual who has found a new spiritual and moral relationship with God but as a “living stone” (1 Peter 2:4), as a living cell in the body of Christ in which the powers of the kingdom of God are already working.

Christian love leads to the peculiar exchange of gifts and suffering, of exaltation and humiliations, of defeat and victory; the individual is able through personal sacrifice and suffering to contribute to the development of the whole. All forms of ecclesiastical, political, and social communities of Christianity are founded on this basic idea of the fellowship of believers as the body of Christ. It also has influenced numerous secularized forms of Christian society, even among those that have forgotten or denied their Christian origins.
From the beginning, the commandment contains a certain tension concerning the answer to the question: Does it refer only to fellow Christians or to “all”? The practice of love of neighbour within the inner circle of the disciples was a conspicuous characteristic of the young church. In Christian congregations and, above all, in small fellowships and sects throughout the centuries, love of the neighbour was highly developed in terms of personal pastoral care, social welfare, and help in all situations of life.

The Christian commandment of love, however, has never been limited to fellow Christians. On the contrary, the Christian ethic crossed all social and religious barriers and saw a neighbour in every suffering human being. Characteristically, Jesus himself explicated his understanding of the commandment of love in the parable of the Good Samaritan, who followed the commandment of love and helped a person in need whom a priest and a Levite had chosen to ignore (Luke 10:29–37). A demand in the Letter of James, that the “royal law” of neighbourly love has to be fulfilled without “partiality” (James 2:9), points to its universal validity.

The universalism of the Christian command to love is most strongly expressed in its demand to love one’s enemies. Jesus himself emphasized this with these words: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:44–45). According to this understanding, love of the enemy is the immediate emission of God’s love, which includes God’s friends and God’s enemies.

**Freedom and responsibility**

The Reformation revitalized a personal sense of Christian responsibility by anchoring it in the free forgiveness of sins. Luther summarized this in “The Freedom of a Christian Man” (1520): “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” The second sentence expressed the theme of Christian vocation developed by Luther and Calvin, which they applied to all Christians and to everyday responsibility for the neighbour and for the world. The reformers emphasized that Christian service is not limited to a narrow religious sphere of life but extends to the everyday relationships of family, marriage, work, and politics.

Later Protestantism under the influence of Pietism and Romanticism restricted the social and communal orientation of the reformers to a more individualistic orientation. This met, however, with an energetic counterattack from the circles of the Free churches (e.g., Baptists and Methodists) who supported the social task of Christian ethic (mainly through the Social Gospel of the American theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, who attempted to change social institutions and bring about a kingdom of God), which spread through the whole church, penetrating the area of Christian mission. Love rooted in faith played an important role in the 20th century in the struggle between Christianity and ideologies such as fascism, communism, and jingoistic nationalisms.

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**Christian missions**

In the early 21st century about one-third of the world’s people claimed the Christian faith. Christians thus constituted the world’s largest religious community and embraced remarkable diversity, with churches in every nation. Christianity’s demographic and dynamic centre had shifted from its Western base to Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific region, where more than half the world’s Christians lived. This trend steadily accelerated as the church declined in Europe. The global extent of Christianity represented a new phenomenon in the history of religions. This was the fruit of mission.

**Biblical foundations**

The word mission (Latin: missio), as a translation of the Greek apostolē, “a sending,” appears only once in the English New Testament (Galatians 2:8). An apostle (apostolos) is one commissioned and sent to fulfill a special purpose. The roots of mission, Christians have believed, lie in God’s active outreach to humanity in history—as a call to those able to fulfill the divine purpose, among them Abraham, Moses, Jonah, and St. Paul the Apostle. The New Testament designated Jesus as God’s apostle (Hebrews 3:1). Jesus’ prayer in The Gospel According to John includes the words “As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world…. [I pray also] for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one…so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (John 17:18, 20–21). Moreover, the “Great Commission” of Jesus declares: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, establishing critical institutions for the early Christian movement. The major thrust of the early church-mission sprang from the conviction that Christians and congregations were fulfilling a mission and ministry begun in Jesus Christ. Baptism provided induction into the vibrant company of “God’s own people” (1 Peter 2:9–10), which many in the empire gradually accepted.

Several factors brought growth to the faith. From the beginning laypeople—both men and women—conducted the largest part of mission. Congregations grew in homes used as churches. Although the house was owned by the husband, the wife was its mistress, and women throughout the empire opened their homes to newly forming churches. Most evangelization occurred in the daily routine as men and women shared their faith with others. Christianity’s monotheism, morality, assurance of eternal life with God, and ancient Scriptures attracted many to the faith.

Christian missions daily encountered members of other religions—gnosticism and the mystery and philosophical cults. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries external and internal pressures drove the young church to strengthen itself through creating a structured ministry, formulating beliefs in creeds, and producing a canon of Scripture. That process established critical institutions for the early Christian movement. The major thrust of the early church-mission sprang from the conviction that Christians and congregations were fulfilling a mission and ministry begun in Jesus Christ. Baptism provided induction into the vibrant company of “God’s own people” (1 Peter 2:9–10), which many in the empire gradually accepted.

Rome, however, declared Christianity an illegal religion, in part because Christians refused to engage in emperor worship, and persecutions ensued. In the persecutions so
many Christians bore witness (Greek: martyria) that the word martyr quickly evolved into its current meaning. Christian faith—not least that of young women such as Saints Blandina, Cecilia, Perpetua, and Felicity—made an impact, and many who beheld that witness became Christian. In 313 when the new emperor, Constantine I, declared the persecutions ended, Christians probably constituted 10 percent of the empire’s population.

By 315 many who saw advantage in belonging to Constantine’s new faith poured into the churches. The result was striking: small congregations of convinced Christians serving God’s outreach in the world became large churches with many nominal members whose instruction and needs had to be met. As multitudes entered the churches, the need for outreach to others was much reduced, and most churches shifted from an outward thrust to an inward focus upon themselves. Mission and service became the province of priests, deacons, and, increasingly, monks.

At the same time, mission beyond the frontiers of the empire continued. Ultilllas (c. 311–c. 382), Arian bishop and apostle to the Goths, translated the Bible into their tongue. St. Martin of Tours (c. 316–397) served in Gaul, and Patrick (c. 389–c. 461) laboured in Ireland. In Malabar, South India, a church of ancient tradition, demonstrably present since the 3rd century, held the apostle St. Thomas to be its founder. St. Frumentius (died c. 380) from Tyre evangelized in Ethiopia and became the first patriarch of its church. In the 5th century Nestorians pushed into Central Asia and began a mission that eventually reached the capital of China.

In its first 500 years Christianity achieved remarkable missionary and theological acculturation. Through the first four ecumenical councils (325–451), and in the Nicene Creed (on the Trinity) and Definition of Chalcedon (on Christology), the church had stated its faith with meaning for the Greek and Latin worlds.

By the close of the period St. Jerome’s Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, had appeared, and Christianity had become the official religion of the empire. The first great transition of the Christian mission—from Judaic Palestine to the Mediterranean world—had ended.

Second transition, to ad 1500

Rome’s urban and literate world quickly disappeared under the barbarians’ westward onslaught. These conquerors established themselves as the new ruling elite. However, they recognized in missionary monks the bearers of a new faith and preservers of a higher civilization. The mission thrust of these monks contrasted sharply with that of the tiny persecuted church in the first three centuries. Then, except for the conversions of the city-state of Edessa, in ad 200, and Armenia, declared a Christian nation in ad 300, people joined the new faith individually. In this second transition whole peoples followed their sovereigns into the new faith.

Christianity expanded in the Byzantine Empire as well as in the remnants of the Western Empire, but it experienced a widening breach, and a split of the Eastern and Western churches occurred in 1054. Yet the major result of this 1,000-year mission was the creation of European civilization. Its emergence marked the second great transition of the faith.

Western mission

The medieval mission began with the baptism of Clovis I, king of the Franks, and his soldiers, traditionally dated to 496 though it may have occurred as late as 508. The first Germanic king to be baptized by a Catholic bishop rather than an Arian one (through the influence of St. Clotilda, Clovis’s Catholic wife, according to St. Gregory of Tours), he helped to turn the tide against the Arians.

Irish Celtic Christianity differed from that on the Continent. It was organized into communual groups under an abbot and nurtured intense missionary conviction and outreach. It did not recognize Rome’s authority. The abbot Columba (c. 521–597) built a monastery on Iona, off Scotland’s western coast, as a base for mission to Scotland and northern England. From it Aidan (died 651) traveled to Lindisfarne, off England’s northern coast, where he and a successor, Cuthbert (634/635–687), helped evangelize Northumbria. Moving southward, the Celtic monks might have evangelized all of Britain, but midway they met Roman missionaries. Other Celtic peregrini, or “wanderers,” evangelized on the Continent.

Papal mission

Pope Gregory the Great (reigned 590–604), who possessed the mind of both a statesman and a theologian, greatly magnified papal spiritual power and temporal involvement. In 596 he sent St. Augustine of Canterbury and some 40 monks on a mission to England—the first papally sponsored mission. Augustine’s missionaries reached England’s southern coast in 597. King Aethelberht of Kent and his wife, Bertha, a Christian, enabled them to make their base at Canterbury. Within the year the king and 10,000 subjects had received baptism. Roman missionaries moving northward met the Celts, and at the Synod of Whitby in 664 the Celts accepted Roman jurisdiction and religious practices, including the method of determining the date of Easter each year.

Inspired by Irish missionary enthusiasm, the English Christians evangelized northern Europe. Outstanding in this effort were St. Willibrord (658?–739), “Apostle to the Frisians” (Friesland, Holland, and Belgium), and Wynfrid, renamed St. Boniface (c. 675–754), one of the greatest of all Roman missionaries. In central and southern Germany Boniface established Benedictine monasteries for evangelization. With full papal trust and Carolingian support he strengthened and reformed the Frankish church.

Boniface also saw the need for women in mission. From England he recruited Lioba (died 782) and entrusted her with developing Benedictine monasteries for women. Despite her outstanding and unique achievements, the movement ended with her death, and Roman Catholic women reentered mission service only in the 19th century.

In the 8th and 9th centuries, Carolingian rulers mixed military conquest and missionary activity, establishing the faith in pagan territories as they expanded the boundaries of their empire. Charlemagne imposed Christianity and his political authority over numerous peoples, including the Avars and Saxons. His son, Louis the Pious, sent a mission to the Danes in 826, and later emperors built upon this precedent.

In 955 the Holy Roman emperor Otto I defeated the Magyars and brought them to Christian faith. Later, Hungary’s first king, Stephen (reigned 1000–38), made the country a Christian land. From the Holy Roman Empire, Catholic outreach into Bohemia took root under King Wenceslas I (c. 907–929), with evangelization complete by about ad 1000. In Poland, Mieszko I, under the influence of his wife, accepted baptism in 966 or 967. His reign saw the beginning of the evangelization of the country, which continued under his able son, Boleslaw.

Early attempts at evangelization in Denmark and Sweden were made by a German monk, Ansgar (801–865). Canute I (died 1035), Danish king of England, of Denmark, and of Norway, was probably raised as a Christian and determined that Denmark should become a Christian country. The archbishop of Canterbury consecrated bishops for him, and he saw his goal realized before he died. Olaf I Tryggvason (reigned 995–c. 1000) was baptized by a Christian hermit, returned to Norway and was accepted as king, and sought to make his realm Christian—a task completed by King Olaf II Haraldsson (reigned 1016–30), later St. Olaf. Olaf I also presented Christianity to a receptive Iceland. Leif Eriksson took the faith to Greenland’s Viking settlers, who quickly accepted it. After several efforts Sweden became Christian during the reign of
Sverker (c. 1130–56). Sweden’s Eric IX controlled Finland and in 1155 required the Finns to be baptized, but only in 1291, with the appointment of Magnus, the first Finnish bishop, was evangelization completed.

**Eastern and Nestorian missions**

The gradual disappearance of Roman political authority from the Western Empire strengthened the temporal power of the bishop of Rome. In the Byzantine Empire the patriarch of Constantinople remained under the political control of the Christian emperor. Cultural, political, philosophical, and theological differences strained relations between the two cities, and in 1054 the papal legate and the patriarch of Constantinople excommunicated each other.

One reflection of growing difficulties lay in counterclaims to pursue mission in and hold the allegiance of border areas between the two jurisdictions. Rostislav of Great Moravia sought help from the emperor, who (presumably through the patriarch) in about 862 sent two brothers, Constantine (later called Cyril; c. 827–869) and Methodius (c. 825–884), from Constantinople to Moravia. They provided Scriptures and liturgy in the mother tongue of each people evangelized and trained others in their methods. This missionary competition was repeated in Bulgaria when its khan, Boris I, sought to convert to Christianity. Receiving missionaries from both Rome and Constantinople, Boris ultimately accepted the jurisdiction of the patriarch in Constantinople for the church in Bulgaria.

Constantinople’s greatest mission outreach was to areas that later became Russia. In the 10th century the Scandinavian Rus controlled the areas around Kiev. Undoubtedly influenced by his Christian grandmother Olga and by a proposed marriage alliance with the Byzantine imperial family, Vladimir I (c. 956–1015) of Kiev, from among several options, chose the Byzantine rite. Baptized in 988, he led the Kievan to Christianity. His son Yaroslav encouraged translations and built monasteries.

From 1240, and for the next 200 years, the Mongol Golden Horde was suzerain over Russia but generally allowed freedom to the church. For Russians the church proved to be the one means through which they could express national unity. They moved the metropolitanate from Kiev to Moscow, and their church became and remained the largest of the Orthodox bodies, protector and leader for the others. When Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, Moscow became “the third Rome” and accepted for itself the mystique, dynamism, and messianic destiny of the first Rome—a reality essential to understanding Russian Orthodoxy and nationalism.

East of the Euphrates River, Nestorians and Jacobites maintained headquarters in Persia for eastern outreach. The more numerous Nestorians developed a far-flung mission network throughout Central Asia. The Persian bishop A-lo-pen reached China’s capital, Ch’ang-an (modern Xi’an), in 635 and founded monasteries to spread the Christian faith. By the end of the Tang dynasty (618–907), however, the Nestorian community had disappeared.

In 1289 the pope—responding to a request made 20 years earlier by Kublai Khan that 100 Christian scholars be brought by the Polo brothers to China—sent one Franciscan, Giovanni da Montecorvino (1247–1328). He reached Dadu (modern Beijing) in 1294 and launched a small but successful mission. In 1342 Giovanni dei Marignoli arrived with 32 other missionaries, but their work flourished for less than 25 years because the succeeding Ming dynasty excluded foreigners. Twice Christianity had entered and disappeared from China.

**The rise of Islam**

Between Muhammad’s death in 632 and the defeat of Muslim forces at Poitiers by Charles Martel’s Franks in 732, Arab Muslims had taken the Middle East and Egypt, then swept across North Africa, turned northward through Spain, and ventured briefly into southwestern France. Within a century Islam had taken control of more than half of Christendom.

The Iberian reconquest, which began as a traditional war of conquest, became a crusade against Islam and fused an Iberian Catholicism that Spain and Portugal later transplanted around the globe. In the early 21st century its members represented nearly half the world’s Roman Catholics. The Crusades (1095–1396) produced among many Christians an adversarial approach to those of other faiths. Ramon Llull (c. 1235–1316) pursued a different way. He studied Arabic and sought through dialogue and reason the conversion of Muslims and Jews.

As a result of the second great transition the faith of the Mediterranean world had become that of all Europe and had largely created its civilization. Christendom had lost half of its territory to Islam, but Europe had become the new centre of the Christian faith.

**Third transition, to ad 1950**

By 1500 Europe was bursting with new energy and achievement, and from it Christianity spread worldwide. Iberian monks in the 16th century spanned the globe, and 300 years later Protestant missionaries did the same.

**Roman Catholic mission, 1500–1950**

In the 15th century European nations began a process of exploration and colonization that brought them more fully into contact with the rest of the world and facilitated the spread of Christianity. Motivated in part by Christian zeal, Portugal’s Prince Henry the Navigator (1394–1460) launched exploratory voyages along the western coast of Africa. Papal grants in 1454 and 1456 gave Henry all lands, power over the missionary bishops therein, and trading rights south of the Tropic of Cancer. In 1494, following Columbus’s successful voyages for Spain, the pope granted Spain all territory west of 47° W longitude (eastern Brazil). Under royal patronage (patronato real, or padroado), monarchs of both nations accepted responsibility for evangelizing the newly found peoples. Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, and, from 1542, Jesuits staffed the resulting missions. Finally, by 1600, other great powers, including France and the Protestant countries of England, Holland, and Denmark, began to establish and evangelize overseas empires.

When the Europeans arrived in the Americas, the native population south of the Rio Grande numbered some 35 million but in North America there were at most 1.2 million people. The great majority of European males entering Latin America were unmarried and quickly produced a mestizo, or mixed, population. European settlers, who expected to instruct the indigenous population in the faith and protect them, instead enslaved or cruelly exploited them. Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566) championed their cause but, ironically, favoured increasing the already growing number of African slaves.

Despite its weaknesses, the Roman Catholic mission gained vast numbers for the faith as Franciscans and Dominicans traveled widely and built mission churches. Although limits were placed on the ordination of Native Americans and much evangelization appeared to be an integral part of military conquest, the indigenous and mestizo populations of Mexico and South America, who intermingled traditional and Christian beliefs, thought of themselves as Roman Catholics. The best known example of such missionary success is that of St. Juan Diego (1474–1548), an Aztec convert whose visions of the Virgin Mary (Our Lady of Guadalupe) contributed to the conversion of Mexico.

Evangelization in French North America followed a somewhat different course. In 1534 Jacques Cartier claimed New France (Canada) for his homeland. A century later
French missionaries began to enter the territory. In their work these missionaries sought to reshape Indian life as little as possible.

Some of the most productive missions, however, appeared in Asia, chiefly through the work of the Jesuits. Under a papal commission the Jesuit missionary St. Francis Xavier (1506–52) reached Goa in 1542. He established Christian communities in India, built a college in Goa for training priests, began a prospering mission in Japan, and died off the coast of China while hoping to enter that land. Despite his death, there were about 300,000 Christians in Japan by 1600. Christianity was afterward proscribed in Japan, many Christians were martyred, and the Japanese sealed themselves off from the West.

China also was closed to foreigners, but the Italian Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) arrived in 1582 and eventually reached the capital. His efforts brought success, and other Jesuits followed. An edict of toleration was proclaimed in 1602. Ricci’s conviction that the honouring of ancestors and Confucius was a social rite that could be accommodated within the church produced the Chinese Rites Controversy (1634–1742). It brought bitter opposition from Dominicans and Franciscans. Attempts at papal intervention at the beginning of the 18th century angered the emperor. The Chinese forced missionaries to leave the country and persecuted Christians. Yet by 1800 some 250,000 remained, and since the 16th century the church has been continuously present in China.

In India Jesuits were welcomed to the court during the reign of the Mughal emperor Akbar (1556–1605). The noted Jesuit Roberto de Nobili (1577–1656) sought points of agreement between Hinduism and Christianity as a means of evangelization, but this caused difficulty with the church. The missionaries also worked among India’s existing Christian communities. In 1599 the Roman Catholic Church brought the South Indian Christians (Nestorians) into its fold, but in 1653 about 40 percent of the Syrian, or Thomas, Christians revolted and linked themselves with the Jacobites. Nevertheless, the Roman Catholics retained a solid base of Christians on which to build.

To provide knowledgeable oversight and to coordinate policy, in 1622 Pope Gregory XV established the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda Fide). It provided a library for research and a school for training priests and missionaries, assigned territories, and directed ecclesiastical matters overseas. The Foreign Missionary Society of Paris (1663), directed exclusively toward outreach to non-Christian peoples, sought to produce rapidly an indigenous secular clergy (i.e., one not bound to a religious order), and focused its efforts on Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand.

With the suppression of the Jesuits (1773–1814) and the decline of Spanish and Portuguese influence, Roman Catholic missions found themselves at low ebb, but French and other European missionaries steadily took up the slack. Between 1800 and 1950 new vigour paralleled that seen in Protestantism and brought new orders—such as the Society of the Divine Word (1875) and the Catholic Foreign Missionary Society of North America (1911) of Maryknoll fathers and sisters—and voluntary societies to promote and support missions. The missionary force remained overwhelmingly European.

Protestant missions, 1500–1950

Early Protestant missions

Protestant missions emerged well after Martin Luther launched the Reformation in 1517; Protestants began to expand overseas through migration, notably to North America. European colonization of North America aroused interest in Native Americans, and the Virginia and Massachusetts charters enjoined their conversion. The mission of John Eliot (1604–90) to the Pequot Iroquois and that of the Thomas Mayhew family encouraged the formation of supporting societies in Britain. Individual Anglicans formed the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK, 1698) and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG; 1701), whose chaplains were also to spread the Gospel among non-Christians. The Dutch East India Company trained ministers in Leiden to serve their employees in Indonesia and Ceylon (Sri Lanka), but they were also encouraged to catechize and baptize local people.

The German Lutheran Pietists were the first Protestant group to launch church-supported continuing missions from the Continent. Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705) and August Hermann Francke (1663–1727) at the University of Halle trained Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg (1683–1719) and Heinrich Plütschau (1678–1747). From 1706 they served the Danish mission of King Frederick IV at Tranquebar, in South India. Also trained at Halle, Nikolaus Ludwig, Count von Zinzendorf (1700–60), received Moravian refugees at his Herrnhut estate and in 1732 molded them into a missionary church. Their small, self-supporting communities spread from Greenland to South Africa.

William Carey’s Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens (1792) became the “charter” for Protestant missions and produced the Baptist Missionary Society. In 1793 Carey went to India. His first letter to an England stirred by the Evangelical Revival resulted in the formation of the London Missionary Society (1795). The Scottish Missionary Society (1796) and the Netherlands Missionary Society (1797) soon appeared. Anglican evangelicals organized the Church Missionary Society (1799), and many others followed. Like the SPCK and SPG, they were founded not by churches but as autonomous societies supported chiefly by denominational constituencies. Similarly, in Europe these organizations were usually created geographically—such as the Basel (1815), Berlin (1824), and Leipzig (1836) societies.

With separation of church and state in the United States, American churches made plain that mission was the responsibility of each Christian. Most denominations developed their own boards or societies. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (1810) was the first, and the pattern of denominational societies spread. These missions centred on the new immigrants and those following the westward-moving frontier until 1890, but from that time they turned their attention to areas abroad. In 20th-century “overseas” missions, English-speaking participants represented from 80 to 89 percent, and North Americans about 67 percent, of all Protestant missionaries.

Women have not only provided the major support for mission in the modern era but also early recognized the need to found their own societies and send their own missionaries. In much of the world, because of local customs, women missionaries could perform services for other women and for children, especially in medicine and education, that men could not undertake. Their greatest impact was in the production of vast corps of able and educated women, especially in Asia, who played major roles in the professions and in church leadership.

Missions to Asia

In the early 19th century in India, William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and William Ward—the Serampore trio—worked just north of Calcutta (now Kolkata). Their fundamental approach included translating the Scriptures, establishing a college to educate an Indian ministry, printing Christian literature, promoting social reform, and recruiting missionaries for new areas as soon as translations into that area’s language were ready. These efforts were followed by those of Alexander Duff (1806–78), who established the pattern for an entire educational system, including colleges, in India. By the 1860s education for women had advanced and nurses’ training had begun; the vast majority of Indian nurses also have been Christian. The education of women physicians began at the turn of the century. The Vellore Medical College is a monument to the missionary physician Ida Scudder (1870–1959).

Missionaries also returned to China and other parts of East Asia in the 19th century. Following the Opium Wars of 1842–44 and 1858–60, China was opened to Westerners. Although there had been a Roman Catholic presence in China since the 16th-century Jesuit mission, the arrival of Christianity in the 19th century had a
profound impact on Chinese culture and history. The Taiping Rebellion (1850–64), which nearly toppled the Qing, or Manchu, dynasty and took an estimated 20 million lives, was led by Hong Xiuquan, who was influenced by Christian teachings and thought that he was Jesus’ younger brother. The Boxer Rebellion of 1899–1900 brought death to thousands of Chinese Christians and several hundred missionaries. Yet Protestant schools, colleges, and hospitals offered educational opportunities and attracted Chinese youth to the Christian faith. With the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911/12, Sun Yat-sen, a Christian favouring parliamentary government, became the provisional president. The Christian influence in China, particularly in education, was significant. In 1949, when the People’s Republic of China was formed, Christians represented only 1 percent of the Chinese population, but they exercised an influence out of all proportion to their size.

Christianity’s fortunes in the second half of the 20th century were mixed. The Chinese government expelled all missionaries in 1950–51, confiscated churches, and brought pressure on Christians. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) no churches or other religious bodies could operate. Christians continued to exist in China, but they suffered grievously. From 1976, as the government allowed some churches to open, Christians reemerged throughout the country. Roman Catholic and Protestant churches were filled, and in varied ways “silent” house-churches testified that the underground church had been dynamically growing. In the early 21st century the church in China, despite persecution and lingering tensions between the Vatican and the Chinese government, is considerably larger and stronger than it was in 1949.

Koreans baptized as Roman Catholics in China returned in 1784 but remained underground when their faith was soon proscribed. St. Kim Dae-gôn was the first Korean Catholic priest, ordained in Shanghai in 1845. A handful of American Presbyterians and Methodists entered Korea in 1884, and the faith they planted flourished through the 20th century, despite Korea’s long wartime devastation. Unlike other Asian countries, Korea did not experience Christianity’s arrival with Western imperialism but rather saw that faith as reinforcing Korean nationalism against Japanese imperialism from 1910 to 1945. Christian evangelization in Korea enabled the church to grow in less than a century to about one-third of the country’s population. Evangelistic and self-supporting Korean churches were known throughout Asia for their effective promotion of Bible study. Helen Kim, a Korean graduate of Ewha College, built that institution into the world’s largest women’s university, and Sun Myung Moon founded the Unification Church, which teaches a unique Christian theology.

Missionaries also evangelized regions throughout Southeast Asia and the Pacific. The first missions to Vietnam were undertaken in the 16th and 17th centuries by Dominicans and Jesuits from Portugal and France. A more permanent presence, which led to French military intervention, was established in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the early 21st century some 9 percent of the population of Vietnam was Christian.

Dutch chaplains established churches in Indonesia in the 17th century. In the mid-19th century the German Rhenish Missionary Society enabled the Batak Church of Sumatra to grow in size and strength and to provide leadership for the nation. Other strong churches developed in various parts of the predominantly Muslim country. The vast Pacific Ocean, with tiny, scattered island kingdoms among the Polynesian, Micronesian, and Melanesian peoples, early attracted missionaries. Most of them were laypeople of deep Christian faith. It was the effort of the Christian islanders, however, that achieved virtually total evangelization of the Pacific.

Although Christianity had existed in Ethiopia since the 4th century, much of Africa remained a mission field into the 20th century. Protestant missionaries were working in most of the West and Central African colonial nations in the 19th century, but in some parts of East Africa mission began only in the 20th century. After Ghana gained freedom in 1957, many former colonies were granted independence. Cataclysmic change appeared everywhere: in building new nations; rapid shifts from a rural to an urban population; coping with the massive problem, especially in cities, of some 2,500 languages; and developing literacy. Amid all this, Christianity grew with increasing rapidity. By the early 21st century more than half of the sub-Saharan African population was Christian. African independent, or indigenous nonwhite, churches proliferated, and several of the largest ones joined the World Council of Churches.

In the 19th century Evangelical churches were begun in Latin America by Protestant missionaries who were largely from the United States but also in some instances from Britain and Germany. Most of these churches have remained small. The exception was the explosion of Pentecostalism throughout the region, with heaviest concentration in Brazil, Chile, and Mexico. Evangelicals also have gained members in Central America.

Protestants discovered the need for cooperation and unity. As tiny minorities in lands of other religions, new Christians and missionaries together saw that denominational separatism hindered evangelization. Four streams led to the cooperation and unity reflected in the World Missionary Conference (WMC) held in Edinburgh in 1910. First, missionary “field” conferences affirmed comity (separation of spheres of work), cooperation in Bible translation and missionary councils, and shared sponsorship in major enterprises such as hospitals and colleges. A second stream involved missionary conferences in England and the United States from 1854 to 1900. A third force flowed through the missionary concern of the international student Christian and missionary movements. The fourth stream arose in the West from continuing interdenominational conferences of mission leaders to face common concerns and forge common policies. Among others, these included the Continental European Missions Conference (1866) and the Foreign Missions Conference of North America (1893).

The Edinburgh conference was unique—a landmark and watershed for all that was to follow. Largely Western in membership, but with 17 Asian delegates, it created a Continuation Committee that in 1921 became the International Missionary Council (IMC). The IMC consisted of a worldwide network of Christian councils and the Western cooperative agencies. In 1961 the IMC became the Division of World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches (WCC). In 1971 the Division underwent further restructuring but maintained its relationship with the WCC and in the late 20th and 21st century sponsored a series of ecumenical conferences on world mission.

Orthodox and nondenominational missions

Virtuality the entire outreach of the Russian Orthodox mission extended to the peoples of the vast Russian Empire across Asia. Its outstanding missionaries included the linguist and translator Nicholas Ilminsky (died 1891) and St. Innocent Veniaminov (1797–1879), who in 1823 went as its first missionary to the Aleutian Islands. Veniaminov eventually became Metropolitan Innocent of Moscow, and in 1870 he founded the Russian Orthodox Missionary Society. The Russian Orthodox Church opened a mission to Japan in 1854 and in 1941 turned over all church property to its members.

For some decades the church appointed missionaries to its highest posts. St. Tikhon (1865–1925), who in 1917 became the first patriarch in two centuries, and Sergius (Stragorodsky; 1867–1944), who followed him in that post, had both served missions abroad. Following the 1917 Revolution, Russian missions came to an end, and after the fall of communism in Russia in 1991 the country itself became the focus of missionaries from various Christian churches.
The translation of the Holy Scriptures has constituted a basic part of mission. During the Middle Ages few could read the Latin Bible, and vernacular versions of the Bible were produced in the 20th century by Roman Catholic and Protestant scholars. Translations into other European languages were first made in the 16th and 17th centuries, and in the 19th century Holy Scripture was translated into various African and Asian languages.

Nondenominational faith missions viewed J. Hudson Taylor’s China Inland Mission (1865; after 1965 called the Overseas Missionary Fellowship) as the great prototype. Missions such as these often sought to work in areas unoccupied by other missionaries, guaranteed no salaries, and left financial support in God’s hands, but most bodies made their financial needs known to a wide constituency. Their chief aim has been to proclaim the Gospel and eschew the provision of social services. These societies joined together in the Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association (IFMA; 1917). Since the 1960s they have cooperated with the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association (EFMA; 1945), the missionary arm of the National Association of Evangelicals (1943), and, at the international level, with the World Evangelical Fellowship (1952). Membership in the Association grew most rapidly in the 1950s, and by the 1980s, despite slower growth, numbered 38 member organizations. Since the 1960s IFMA has worked on a variety of projects with the Evangelical Fellowship of Mission Agencies, and in the late 20th century it addressed a variety of social issues, including an educational program concerned with AIDS, as part of its mission.

Fourth transition, from 1950

During the third transition, Christianity had spread worldwide from a base in Europe. As a result of the fourth transition, more Christians lived in Asia, the Pacific Islands, Africa, and Latin America than in the old Christendom, part of a long-term, continuing shift in Christianity’s numerical and vivifying centre. The growing churches brought new life and dynamism to the faith, along with new teachings and concerns.

The growth of the world Christian community kept pace with the 20th-century population explosion, and in the fastest-growing areas the growth rate in numbers of Christians was almost three times greater than the general population increase. The majority of the world’s Christians lived in non-Western nations: a universal Christian church had come into being.

In this transition two issues were especially prominent. First, the church found itself engaged with those of traditional or new religions and those for whom ideologies had become religions. In that setting the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox and Protestants in the World Council of Churches affirmed evangelization to be essential but also engaged in dialogue with other religions to promote better understanding between the different faiths. This effort brought with it much dissent and tension.

Second, “Third World theologies” often provoked angry debate. The underlying questions concerned the identification of what was essentially Christian in Western Christianity and theology and whether Western church structures and theologies were universally normative. But the most basic question asked how Christians of all races could manifest unity.

Another force was the worldwide growth in the number of Pentecostals and charismatics. They formed new churches, appeared in traditional churches, and found outlet in many nonwhite indigenous bodies. Pentecostals and charismatics were most heavily concentrated in Latin America and Africa but also experienced growth in Asia and in the West. They forced theological reflection—perhaps best developed by Roman Catholics—on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and on authority within the church.

The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) was the most important ecclesiological and missiological event for Roman Catholics since the 16th century. Theologically it set itself within the dynamics of the faith’s fourth transition. The council’s Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity (Ad Gentes) built theologically on the council’s foundational document, the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church” (Lumen Gentium; “Light of the Nations”), which insisted upon evangelization but presented a larger understanding of God’s grace for those outside the church, and urged missionaries to pursue dialogue.

After Vatican II the situation changed, as the very definition of missionary activity was transformed and the duties of all Christians to undertake evangelical work was emphasized. The new evangelism emphasized the importance of bearing witness to Christ, which includes efforts to spread the Gospel and to promote the church’s teachings on human dignity. The former missionary churches were placed more and more in the hands of local peoples, and the bishops in regional councils took over leadership of evangelization formerly held by missionary orders. In the decades following Vatican II, the church’s mission was conducted with greater sensitivity toward other cultures, and church leaders emphasized interreligious dialogue. In 1986 Pope John Paul II invited world religious leaders to Assisi to pray for peace, and he subsequently prayed at a synagogue and a mosque. The pope offered further guidance on missions in his encyclical Redemptoris missio (December 7, 1990; “The Mission of Christ the Redeemer”), renewing the church’s commitment to mission and calling for the evangelization of lapsed Christians and non-Christians alike.

Scripture translations

The translation of the Holy Scriptures has constituted a basic part of mission. During the Middle Ages few could read the Latin Bible, and vernacular versions of the Bible, in part or whole, appeared at times throughout the period. The most important of these was the so-called Wycliff Bible, an English translation compiled in 1382. Within 80 years of the invention of printing in the West, however, Reformation leaders such as Luther and Calvin focused on the Word of God. Their cardinal principle remained that each should be able to read the Bible in his own tongue. The printing press greatly aided Protestantism, and Roman Catholicism used it effectively as well.

Translations of the Bible became more numerous and widespread beginning in the 16th century. One of the earliest and most important was Luther’s German translation. The first official Roman Catholic translation of the Bible, the Douai-Rheims Bible, appeared in two stages: in 1582 the New Testament was published, and in 1609–10 the Old Testament appeared. In 1611 the most influential English Bible, the King James Version, was published at the commission of James I. Modern English translations were produced in the 20th century by Roman Catholic and Protestant scholars. Translations into other European languages were first made in the 16th and 17th centuries, and in the 19th century Holy Scripture was translated into various African and Asian languages.

In the 20th century printed Christian Scriptures became available in the mother tongues of almost 99 percent of the world’s people. That unprecedented accomplishment marks one of the greatest achievements in the history of written communications. Bibles were available in nearly 325 languages, complete New Testaments in nearly 700 languages, and some portion of the Scriptures in 1,800 other languages. The translation effort, most of which occurred during the past 200 years, in many cases reduced a language to writing for the first time. The effort involved the production of grammars and dictionaries of these languages as well as scriptural translations, and an additional benefit has been the written preservation of the cultural heritage by native speakers of the language.

Bible societies, including the United Bible Societies (1946), have coordinated and aided the translation work of missionaries in this task for almost 200 years. Wycliffe Bible Translators (1936) concentrated its work among the language groups having the smallest numbers of speakers. From 1968, Roman Catholics and the United Bible Societies have coordinated their efforts and cooperated in translation and production wherever possible.

William Richey Hogg

Ecumenism

The word ecumenism comes from a family of Classical Greek words: oikos, meaning a “house,” “family,” “people,” or “nation”; oikoumenē, “the whole inhabited world”; and oikoumenikos, “open to or participating in the whole world.” Like many biblical words, these were invested with Christian meaning. The oikoumenē describes the place of God’s reconciling mission (Matthew 24:14); the unity of the Roman Empire (Luke 2:1) and of the kingdoms of the earth (Luke 4:5); and the world destined to be
renewed by Christ (Hebrews 2:5). The vision of one church serving God in the world came to reflect a central teaching of the early Christian faith.

In later centuries the word ecumenical was used to denote church councils (e.g., Nicaea, Chalcedon) whose decisions represented the universal church, in contrast to other councils that enjoyed only regional or limited reception. The honorary title of ecumenical patriarch was given to the Greek Orthodox patriarch of Constantinople in the 6th century because his see was located in the capital of the oikoumenē and his leadership was accepted as primus inter pares (first among equals) in the faith and mission of the whole church. The Apostles’, the Nicene, and the Athanasian creeds are called ecumenical because they witness to the faith of all Christians. Since the 19th century the term ecumenism has denoted the movement of the renewal, unity, and mission of Christians and churches of different traditions “so that the world may believe.”

Ecumenism is a vision, a movement, a theology, and a mode of action. It represents the universality of the people of God and affects the way Christians think about their faith, the church, and the world. Ecumenism is a long process that draws Christians together, uniting their life and mission and bringing the Body of Christ and the human community closer to the fulfillment of God’s purposes. Those involved in ecumenism participate in ideas, activities, and institutions that express a spiritual reality of shared love in the church and the human community. Ecumenism is characterized by the work of officially organized ecumenical bodies, the confessing and witnessing of Christians in local places, and the spirituality and actions of those who live together in love and prophetic proclamation. Far more than a program or an organization, ecumenism is, according to the British ecumenist Oliver S. Tomkins, “something that happens to the soul of Christians.”

Any unity worthy of this vision cannot be identified with political or spiritual coercion, strategies of dominance or superiority, calls for “a return to the mother church,” or expectations of monolithic uniformity or a super-church. The weapons of faith are not those of force or intolerance; neither can divisions be overcome nor authentic unity manifested by syncretism, a least-common-denominator theology, or a casual friendliness. Ecumenism accepts the diversity of God’s people, given in creation and redemption, and strives to bring these confessional, cultural, national, and racial differences into one fully committed fellowship.

Ultimately the purpose of ecumenism is to glorify the triune God and to help the one missionary church to witness effectively and faithfully among all peoples and nations. In the second half of the 20th century Christians confessed new dimensions of this vocation, especially in relation to what divides the churches. Progress was made on historical theological issues that have divided Christians through the centuries—baptism, the Eucharist, and ministry. But equally divisive among Christians are the divisions of the human family: racism, poverty, sexism, war, injustice, and differing ideologies. These issues are part of the agenda of ecumenism and bring a particular context, dynamic spirit, and urgency to the pursuit of Christian unity as well as of justice and peace. The church’s unity becomes essential for the renewal and unity of the human family. Through its unity the church becomes a sign, the first fruits of the promised unity and peace among God’s peoples and the nations.

The biblical perspective

The unity of the church and of all creation is a dominant motif in the Bible. This witness begins in the Old Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures, not the New Testament. As attested in the Bible, God established a covenant with the Hebrew people and gathered the disparate tribes into one religious nation, Israel, taking steps to overcome the alienation between God and humans and to reconcile God’s people. The tradition of ancient Judaism, therefore, was based on the reality of the one people of God. Their unity was an expression of their monotheistic faith, the oneness of God (Yahweh). According to Genesis, God created the world as one cosmos, an ordered unity determined by one single will in which all creatures are responsive to the purposes of the Creator. Yahweh chose Israel from all the nations of the world and entered into covenant with its people. Whenever men and women sinned and alienated themselves from God and from one another, God acted to bring about their reconciliation. Israel’s mission was to preserve the faithfulness and unity of all God’s people and to prepare them for the realization of the Kingdom of God.

The vision of unity is central to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the teachings of his Apostles. Those who confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour are brought together in a new community: the church. The New Testament writers assumed that to be “in Christ” is to belong to one fellowship (Greek: koinōnia). Jesus clearly gave the mandate when at the Last Supper he offered his high-priestly intercession, praying that the disciples and all those who believe in him “may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee…so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (John 17:21). This unity was demonstrated in the miracle of Pentecost (Acts 2) and other actions that established the primitive church—e.g., the epoch-making Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), which negotiated conflicts between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

The early church nevertheless had many tensions and conflicts that called for ecumenical proclamations and pleas from the Evangelists and Apostles. Tensions arose between Jewish Christian churches and Gentile Christian churches, between Paul and the enthusiasts. Peter and Paul disagreed strongly over whether Gentiles had to fulfill Jewish requirements in order to be welcome at the Lord’s Supper (Eucharist). As revealed in the New Testament, the young church clearly faced the challenge of theological aberrations: Colossians refutes Gnosticism; the Johannine Epistles warn against Docetism; 2 Peter and Revelation attack false prophets.

Diversity, however, did not create schism nor allow a break in fellowship. There were no denominations or divided communities, as were to develop later in the church’s history. Division among Christians is a denial of Christ, an unthinkable distortion of the reality of the church. Amid their diversity and conflicts the early Christians remained of “one accord,” visibly sharing the one Eucharist, accepting the ministries of the whole church, reaching out beyond their local situation in faith and witness with a sense of the universal community that held all Christians together. As Paul taught the Ephesians, God’s ultimate will and plan is “to unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth” (chapter 1, verse 10).

The history of ecumenism

While unity is given in Christ, two diametric forces appear in the history of the church. One is the tendency toward sectarianism and division; the other is the conviction toward catholicity and unity. Ecumenism represents the struggle between them. Some of the schisms were theological conflicts foreshadowed in the apostolic church; others were internal quarrels related to liturgical differences, power politics between different patriarchates or church centres, problems of discipline and piety, or social and cultural conflicts. Nevertheless, according to the American historian John T. McNeill, “the history of the Christian Church from the first century to the 20th might be written in terms of its struggle to realize ecumenical unity.”

Early controversies

A long and continuing trail of broken relations among Christians began in the 2nd century when the Gnostics presented a serious doctrinal error and broke fellowship. Quartodecimism, a dispute over the date of Easter, pitted Christians from Asia Minor against those from Rome. Montanism—which taught a radical enthusiasm, the imminent Second Coming of Christ, and a severe perfection, including abstinence from marriage—split the church. The Novatians broke fellowship with Christians who offered sacrifices to pagan gods during the persecutions of the Roman emperor Decius in ad 250. In the early 4th century the Donatists, Christians in North Africa who prided themselves as the church of the martyrs, refused to share communion with those who had lapsed (i.e., who had denied the faith under threat of death during the great persecutions of Diocletian and Galerius). They remained a powerful force in Africa into the 5th century and survived into the 7th despite opposition from church and state. This schism—like many since—reflected regional, national, cultural, and economic differences between the poor, rural North African Christians and the sophisticated, urban Romans.

In each century leaders and churches sought to reconcile these divisions and to manifest the visible unity of Christ’s church. But in the 5th century a severe break in the
unity of the church took place. The public issues were doctrinal consensus and heresy, yet in the midst of doctrinal controversy alienation was prompted by political, cultural, philosophical, and linguistic differences. Tensions increased as the church began to define the relationship between God the Father and God the Son and later the relation between the divine and human elements in the nature and person of Jesus Christ. The first four ecumenical councils—at Nicaea (ad 325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451)—defined the consensus to be taught and believed, articulating this faith in the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian Definition, which stated that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, true man, and true God, one person in “two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.” Some groups deviated doctrinally from the consensus developed in the councils. The Nestorians taught that there are two distinct persons in the incarnate Christ and two natures conjoined as one. Monophysites taught that there is one single nature, primarily divine. Several churches refused to accept the doctrinal and disciplinary decisions of Ephesus and Chalcedon and formed their own communities. These pre-Chalcedonian or non-Chalcedonian churches, including the Oriental Orthodox churches, became great missionary churches and spread to Africa and throughout Central, South, and East Asia.

The schism of 1054

The greatest schism in church history occurred between the church of Constantinople and the church of Rome. While 1054 is the symbolic date of the separation, the agonizing division was six centuries in the making and the result of several different issues. The Eastern church sharply disagreed when the Western church introduced into the Nicene Creed the doctrine that the Holy Spirit proceeds not from the Father alone—as earlier Church Fathers taught—but from the Father and the Son (Latin: Filioque). When the Roman Empire was divided into two zones, Latin-speaking Rome began to claim superiority over Greek-speaking Constantinople; disputes arose over church boundaries and control (for example, in Illyricum and Bulgaria). Rivalry developed in Slavic regions between Latin missionaries from the West and Byzantine missionaries from the East, who considered this territory to be Orthodox. Disputes over authority became even more heated in the 11th century as Rome asserted its primacy over all churches. Lesser matters related to worship and church discipline—for example, married clergy (Orthodox) versus celibacy (Roman Catholic) and rules of fasting and tonsure—strained ecclesial relations. The tensions became a schism in 1054, when the uncompromising patriarch of Constantinople, Michael Cerularius, and the uncompromising envoys of Pope Leo IX excommunicated each other. No act of separation was at this time considered final by either side. Total alienation came a century and a half later, as a result of the Crusades, when Christian knights made military campaigns to save Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the Muslims. In 1204 the Fourth Crusade was diverted to attack and capture Constantinople brutally. Thousands of Orthodox Christians were murdered; churches and icons were desecrated and undying hostility developed between East and West.

Even so, certain leaders and theologians on both sides tried to heal the breach and reunite East and West. In 1274, at the second Council of Lyon, agreement was reached between the two churches over several key issues—Orthodox acceptance of papal primacy and the acceptance of the Nicene Creed with the Filioque clause. But the agreements were only a rushed action conditioned by political intrigue. As a result, reunion on these terms was fiercely rejected by the clergy and laity in Constantinople and other Orthodox provinces. A second attempt at reunion came at the Council of Ferrara-Florence that met in Italy in 1438 and 1439. A formula of union was approved by both delegations, but later it was rejected by rank-and-file Orthodox Christians.

The Reformation

The next dramatic church division took place during the Reformation in the West in the 16th century. Like other schisms, this one does not yield to simple analysis or explanation. The Reformation was a mixture of theology, ecclesiology, politics, and nationalism, all of which led to breaks in fellowship and created institutional alienation between Christians throughout Western Christendom. In one sense it was a separation, especially a reaction against the rigid juridical structures of medieval Roman Catholicism and its claim to universal truth and jurisdiction. In another sense, however, the Reformation was an evangelical and ecumenical renewal of the church as the Body of Christ, an attempt to return to the apostolic and patriarchic sources in order, according to Calvin, “to recover the face of the ancient Catholic Church.” All the Continental reformers sought to preserve and reclaim the unity of the church.

Once the separation between the Roman Catholic and new Protestant churches was complete, people on both sides tried to restore unity. Roman Catholics such as Georg Witzel and George Cassander developed proposals for unity, which all parties rejected. Martin Bucer, celebrated promoter of church unity among the 16th-century leaders, brought Martin Luther and his colleague Philipp Melanchthon into dialogue with the Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli at Marburg, Germany, in 1529. In 1541 John Calvin (who never ceased to view the church in its catholicity), Bucer, and Melanchthon met with Cardinal Gasparo Contarini and other Roman Catholics at Ratisbon (now Regensburg, Germany) to reconcile their differences on justification by faith, the Lord’s Supper, and the papacy. Another attempt was made in 1559, when Melanchthon and Patriarch Joasaph II of Constantinople corresponded, with the intention of using the Augsburg Confession as the basis of dialogue between Lutheran and Orthodox Christians. On the eve of the French wars of religions (1561), Roman Catholics and Protestants conferred without success in the Colloquy of Poissy. It would seem that the ecumenical projects of theologians and princes in 16th-century Europe failed unequivocally, but they kept alive the vision and the hope.

Ecumenism in the 17th and 18th centuries

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries storms of contention and division continued to plague the churches of Europe. During these two centuries there was an eclipse of official, church-to-church attempts at unity. Instead, ecumenical witness was made by individuals who courageously spoke and acted against all odds to propose Christian unity.

In England, John Dury, a Scots Presbyterian and (later) an Anglican minister, “a peacemaker without partiality,” traveled more extensively than any other ecumenist before the 19th century. He negotiated for church unity in his own country and in Sweden, Holland, France, Switzerland, and Germany. Richard Baxter, a Presbyterian Puritan, developed proposals for union, including his Worcestershire Association, a local ecumenical venture uniting Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Anglicans.

Efforts were undertaken in Germany and central Europe as well. The German Lutheran George Calixtus called for a united church between Lutherans and Reformed based on the “simplified dogmas,” such as the Apostles’ Creed and the agreements of the church in the first five centuries. Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf applied his Moravian piety to the practical ways that unity might come to Christians of all persuasions. The philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz worked tirelessly for union between Protestants and Roman Catholics, writing an apologia interpreting Roman Catholic doctrines for Protestants. John Amos Comenius, a Czech Brethren educator and advocate of union, produced a plan of union for Protestants based upon the adoption of a scriptural basis for all doctrine and polity and the integration of all human culture.

Orthodox Christians also participated in the search for union. Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow and the Russian Orthodox theologian Aleksey S. Khomyakov expressed enthusiasm for ecumenism. Cyril Lukaris, Orthodox patriarch of Alexandria and later of Constantinople, took initiatives to reconcile a divided Christendom. People throughout Europe held tenaciously to the dream of ecumenism, although no attempt at union was successful.

19th-century efforts

A worldwide movement of evangelical fervour and renewal, noted for its emphasis on personal conversion and missionary expansion, stirred new impulses for Christian
unity in the 19th century. The rise of missionary societies and volunteer movements in Germany, Great Britain, The Netherlands, and the United States expressed a zeal that fed the need for church unity. Enduring the harmful results of Christian divisions in different countries, Protestant missionaries in India, Japan, China, Africa, Latin America, and the United States began to cooperate.

In 1804 the British and Foreign Bible Society, an interdenominational Protestant organization, came into existence to translate the Scriptures into the world’s vernaculars and distribute the translations throughout the world. This was followed, 40 years later, by the founding of two important Christian organizations in England: the Young Men’s Christian Association (1844) and the Young Women’s Christian Association (1855). Their international bodies, the World Alliance of YMCA's and the World YWCA, were established in 1855 and 1894, respectively. The Evangelical Alliance, possibly the most significant agent of Christian unity in the 19th century, held a unique place among the volunteer associations of the age. Founded in London in 1846 (the American section was established in 1867), the alliance sought to draw individual Christians into fellowship and cooperation in prayer for unity, Christian education, the struggle for human rights, and mission.

Also pivotal in the 19th century were advocates for the visible unity of the church. In the United States, where the most articulate 19th-century unity movements were heard, the witness to the unity and union was led by three traditions. The Lutherans Samuel Simon Schmucker and Philip Schaff pleaded for “catholic union on apostolic principles.” Among Episcopalian, the visionaries for unity included Thomas Hubbard Vail, William Augustus Muhlenberg, and William Reed Huntington, who proposed the historic “Quadrilateral” of the Scriptures, the creeds, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and episcopacy as the keystone of unity. Thomas Campbell and his son, Alexander, and Barton Warren Stone, members of the church of the Disciples of Christ, taught that “the Church of Christ on earth is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one.” Ecumenism was enflamed in the hearts of 19th-century Christians and in the next century shaped the churches as never before.

Ecumenism since the start of the 20th century

The 20th century experienced a flowering of ecumenism. Four different strands—the international Christian movement, cooperation in world mission, Life and Work, and Faith and Order—developed in the early decades and, though distinctive in their emphases, later converged to form one ecumenical movement.

The modern ecumenical era began with a worldwide movement of Christian students, who formed national movements in Great Britain, the United States, Germany, Scandinavia, and Asia. In 1895 the World Student Christian Federation, the vision of American Methodist John R. Mott, was established “to lead students to accept the Christian faith” and to pioneer in Christian unity. The World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh (1910) inaugurated another aspect of ecumenism by dramatizing the necessity of unity and international cooperation in fulfilling the world mission of the church. In 1921 the International Missionary Council (IMC) emerged, bringing together missionary agencies of the West and of the new Christian councils in Asia, Africa, and Latin America for joint consultation, planning, and theological reflection. The Life and Work movement was pledged to practical Christianity and common action by focusing the Christian conscience on international relations and social, industrial, and economic problems. Nathan Söderblom, Lutheran archbishop of Uppsala, inspired world conferences on Life and Work at Stockholm (1925) and Oxford (1917). The Faith and Order movement, which originated in the United States, confronted the doctrinal divisions and sought to overcome them. Charles H. Brent, an Episcopal missionary bishop in the Philippines, was chiefly responsible for this movement, although Peter Ainslie, of the Disciples of Christ, shared the same vision and gave significant leadership. World conferences on Faith and Order at Lausanne (Switzerland; 1925), Edinburgh (1937), Lund (Sweden; 1952), and Montreal (1963) guided the process of theological consensus building among Protestants, Orthodox, and Roman Catholics, which led to approval by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches of the historic convergence text Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (1982).

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is a privileged instrument of the ecumenical movement. Constituted at Amsterdam in 1948, the conciliar body includes more than 300 churches—Protestant, Anglican, and Orthodox—which “confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Its general secretaries have been among the architects of modern ecumenism: Willem Adolph Visser ’t Hooft (The Netherlands), Eugene Carson Blake (United States), Philip Potter (Dominica), Emilio Castro (Uruguay), Konrad Raiser (Germany), and Samuel Kobia (Kenya). The witness and programs of the WCC include faith and order, mission and evangelism, refugee and relief work, interfaith dialogue, justice and peace, theological education, and solidarity with women and the poor. What distinguishes the WCC constituency is the forceful involvement of Orthodox churches and churches from the developing world. Through their active presence the WCC, and the wider ecumenical movement, has become a genuinely international community.

Roman Catholic ecumenism received definitions and momentum at the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II; 1962–65), under the ministries of Popes John XXIII and Paul VI, and through the ecumenical diplomacy of Augustin Cardinal Bea, the first president of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. The church gave the ecumenical movement new hope and language in the “Decree on Ecumenism” (1964), one of the classic ecumenical teaching documents. Another result of Vatican II was the establishment of a wide variety of international theological dialogues, commonly known as bilateral conversations. These included Roman Catholic bilateral with Lutherans (1965), Orthodox (1967), Anglicans (1967), Methodists (1967), Reformed (1970), and the Disciples of Christ (1977). Topics identified for reconciling discussions include baptism, the Eucharist, episcopacy and papacy, authority in the church, and mixed marriage.

Critical to modern ecumenism is the birth of united churches, which have reconciled formerly divided churches in a given place. In Asia and Africa the first united churches were organized in China (1927), Thailand (1934), Japan (1941), and the Philippines (1944). The most heralded examples of this ecumenism are the United Church of Canada (1925), the Church of South India (1947), and the Church of North India (1970). Statistics of other united churches are revealing. Between 1948 and 1965, 23 churches were formed. In the period from 1965 to 1970, unions involving two or more churches occurred in the West Indies (in Jamaica and Grand Cayman), Ecuador, Zambia, Zaïre (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), Pakistan, Madagascar, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Belgium. Strategic union conversations were undertaken in the United States by the nine-church Consultation on Church Union (1960) and by such uniting churches as the United Church of Christ (1957), the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (1983), and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (1988).

Spiritual disciplines play a key role in ecumenism, a movement steeped in prayer for unity. During the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, celebrated every year (January 18–25), Christians from many traditions engage in prayer, Bible study, worship, and fellowship in anticipation of the unity that Christ wills.

Paul A. Crow

Christianity and world religions

The global spread of Christianity through the activity of European and American churches in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries brought it into contact with all other existing religions. Meanwhile, since the beginning of the 19th century, the close connection between Christian world missions and political, economic, technical, and cultural expansion was, at the same time, loosened.

After World War II the former mission churches were transformed into independent churches in the newly autonomous Asian and African states. The concern for a responsible cooperation of the members of Christian minority churches and its non-Christian fellow citizens became the more urgent with a renaissance of the Asian higher religions in numerous Asian states.
Missionaries of Asian world religions moved into Europe, the Americas, and Australia. Numerous Vedanta centres were established to introduce Hindu teachings within the framework of the Ramakrishna and Vivekananda missions. In 1965 the Hare Krishna movement was founded in the United States, attracting followers to its version of Vaishnavism, one of the main branches of Hinduism. Followers of South Asian Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism, particularly that of Japan (largely Pure Land, Nichiren [especially Soka Gakkai], and Zen) and Tibet, founded temples (some of which are called “churches”), meditation centres, community centres, and other spiritual retreats. This influence penetrated Europe and North America on several fronts, whether in the form of a spontaneously received flow of religious ideas and methods of meditation through literature and philosophy, through developments in psychology and psychotherapy, or through institutions within which individuals can develop a personal practice of meditation and participate in the life of the sangha (community). As a result, Christianity in the latter part of the 20th century found itself forced into a factual discussion with non-Christian religions.

There has also been a general transformation of religious consciousness in the West since the middle of the 19th century. Until about 1900, knowledge of non-Christian world religions was still the privilege of a few specialists. During the 20th century, however, a wide range of people studied translations of source materials from the non-Christian religions. The dissemination of the religious art of India and East Asia through touring exhibitions and the prominence of the Dalai Lama as a political and religious figure have created a new attitude toward the other religions in the broad public of Europe and North America. In recognition of this fact, numerous Christian institutions for the study of non-Christian religions were founded: e.g., in Bangalore, India; in Yangon, Myanmar (Rangoon, Burma); in Bangkok, Thailand; in Kyōto, Japan; and in Hong Kong, China.

The readiness of encounter or even cooperation of Christianity with non-Christian religions is a phenomenon of modern times. Until the 18th century, Christians showed little inclination to engage in a serious study of other religions. Even though contacts with Islam had existed since its founding, the first translation of the Qurʾān (the Islamic scriptures) was issued only in 1141 in Toledo by Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny. Four hundred years later, in 1542/43, Theodor Bibliander, a theologian and successor of the Swiss reformer Zwingli, edited the translation of the Qurʾān by Peter the Venerable. He was subsequently arrested, and he and his publisher could be freed only through the intervention of Luther.

Christian exposure to Asian religions also was delayed. Although the name Buddha is mentioned for the first time in Christian literature—and there only once—by Clement of Alexandria about ad 200, it did not appear again for some 1,300 years. Pali, the language of the Buddhist canon, remained unknown in the West until the early 19th century, when the modern Western study of Buddhism began.

The reasons for such reticence toward contact with foreign religions were twofold: (1) The ancient church was significantly influenced by the Jewish attitude toward contemporary pagan religions. Like Judaism, it viewed the pagan gods as “nothings” next to the true God; they were offsprings of human error that were considered to be identical with the wooden, stone, or bronze images that were made by humans. (2) Besides this, there was the tendency to identify the pagan gods as evil demonic forces engaged in combat with the true God. The conclusion of the history of salvation, according to the Christian understanding, was to be a final struggle between Christ and his church on one side and Antichrist and his minions on the other, culminating with the victory of Christ.

Controlling Christian attitudes

The history of religion, however, continued even after Christ. During the 3rd and 4th centuries a new world religion appeared in the form of Manichaeanism, which asserted itself as a superior form of Christianity with a new universal claim of validity. The Christian church never acknowledged the claims of Manichaeanism but considered the religion a Christian heresy and opposed it as such.

Christianity faced greater challenges when it encountered Islam and the religions of East Asia. When Islam was founded in the 7th century, it considered the revelations of the Prophet Muhammad to be superior to those of the Old and New Testaments. Christianity also fought Islam as a Christian heresy and saw it as the fulfillment of the eschatological prophecies of the Apocalypse concerning the coming of the “false prophet” (Revelation to John). The religious and political competition between Christianity and Islam led to the Crusades, which influenced the self-consciousness of Western Christianity in the Middle Ages and later centuries. In China and Japan, however, missionaries saw themselves forced into an argument with indigenous religions that could be carried on only with intellectual weapons. The old Logos theory prevailed in a new form founded on natural law, particularly among the Jesuit theologians who worked at the Chinese emperor’s court in Beijing. The Jesuits also sought to adapt indigenous religious traditions to Christian rituals but were forbidden from doing so by the pope during the Chinese Rites Controversy.

Philosophical and cultural developments during the Enlightenment brought changes in the understanding of Christianity and other world religions. During the Enlightenment the existence of the plurality of world religions was recognized by the educated in Europe, partly—as in the case of the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz—in immediate connection with the theories of natural law of the Jesuit missionaries in China. Only in the philosophy of the Enlightenment was the demand of tolerance, which thus far in Christian Europe had been applied solely to the followers of another Christian denomination, extended to include the followers of different religions.

Some missionaries of the late 18th and 19th centuries, however, ignored this knowledge or consciously fought against it. Simple lay Christianity of revivalist congregations demanded that a missionary denounce all pagan “idolatry.” The spiritual and intellectual argument with non-Christian world religions simply did not exist for this simplified theology, and in this view a real encounter of Christianity with world religions did not, on the whole, occur in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Ernst Wilhelm Benz John Hick

Contemporary views

The 20th century experienced an explosion of publicly available information concerning the wider religious life of humanity, as a result of which the older Western assumption of the manifest superiority of Christianity ceased to be plausible for many Christians. Early 20th-century thinkers such as Rudolf Otto, who saw religion throughout the world as a response to the Holy, and Ernst Troeltsch, who showed that, socioculturally, Christianity is one of a number of comparable traditions, opened up new ways of regarding the other major religions.

During the 20th century most Christians adopted one of three main points of view. According to exclusivism, there is salvation only for Christians. This theology underlay much of the history outlined above, expressed both in the Roman Catholic dogma extra ecclesiam nulla salus (“outside the church no salvation”) and in the assumption of the 18th- and 19th-century Protestant missionary movements. The exclusivist outlook was eroded within advanced Roman Catholic thinking in the decades leading up to the Second Vatican Council and was finally abandoned in the council’s pronouncements. Pope John Paul II’s outreach to the world’s religions may be seen as the practical application of the decisions of Vatican II. Within Protestant Christianity there is no comparable central authority, but most Protestant theologians, except within the extreme fundamentalist constituencies, have also moved away from the exclusivist position.

Since the mid-20th century many Roman Catholics and Protestants have moved toward inclusivism—the view that, although salvation is by definition Christian, brought about by the atoning work of Christ, it is nevertheless available in principle to all human beings, whether Christian or not. The Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner

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expressed the inclusivist view by saying that good and devout people of other faiths may, even without knowing it, be regarded as "anonymous Christians." Others have expressed in different ways the thought that non-Christians also are included within the universal scope of Christ’s salvific work and their religions fulfilled in Christianity.

The third position, which appealed to a number of individual theologians, was pluralism. According to this view, the great world faiths, including Christianity, are valid spheres of a salvation that takes characteristically different forms within each—though consisting in each case in the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to a new orientation toward the Divine Reality. The other religions are not secondary contexts of Christian redemption but independent paths of salvation. The pluralist position is controversial in Christian theology, because it affects the ways in which the doctrines of the person of Christ, atonement, and the Trinity are formulated.

Christians engage in dialogue with the other major religions through the World Council of Churches’ organization on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies and through the Vatican’s Secretariat for Non-Christians, as well as through a variety of extra-ecclesiastical associations, such as the World Congress of Faiths. There is a National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States, and practically every state has its own similar state-level organization. A multitude of interreligious encounters have taken place throughout the world, many initiated by Christian and others by non-Christian individuals and groups.

John Hick EB Editors

Additional Reading

General works
History of the Christian church
Christian doctrine
Christian doctrine
Christian philosophy
Mysticism
Myth and legend
The relationships of Christianity
Christian missions
Ecumenism
Christianity and world religions

Cite

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, s.v. "Christianity," accessed February 2, 2018,