

Christianity

Christianity, the world's largest religion, has had a dominant influence on Western culture and today thrives in the so-called "Global South." It is also a tradition with many, many branches. Our class attempts to make sense of its founder, Jesus of Nazareth, the movement that grew from his ministry, and the influence of this religion on our modern world.

Life of Jesus



- Jesus is completely **Jewish.** He lives amidst Jewish belief (monotheism) and stories (about Moses and Abraham), follows Jewish law and ritual (with the temple as central), and knows Jewish hopes for a messiah, the restoring of the twelve tribes, and political independence.
- His life has many elements common amongst religious founders: a **miraculous birth**, a sage who recognizes the child's destiny when just an infant, and a "confounding of the elders" story.
- Early in Luke's gospel, Jesus goes to Jerusalem, to the temple at Passover and goes missing for three days. This foreshadows the end of Luke's gospel when Jesus again goes to Jerusalem, to the temple, at Passover and goes missing for three days.
- Jesus teaches a **radical overturning of hierarchy** ("the last shall be first"; "blessed are the poor") and iconic imagery reflects this (born in a humble manger; the cross as symbolizing victory not defeat; washing the disciples' feet).
- Jesus is a gifted teacher, an **ethical idealist**, who calls people to love their enemies and to forgive radically. His parables (e.g. the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son) often have universal appeal.
- Jesus speaks to the **marginalized**, most notably emphasized in Luke's gospel. This is central to many Christian groups such as the Salvation Army.
- Jesus is a miracle worker including performing **exorcisms** (that were not part of Jewish tradition (but still done today by Catholics and Pentecostals)





Jesus was born in humility and went on to model humility through acts like washing the feet of his disciples.



Jesus' death is interpreted through the practice of temple sacrifices. He becomes the lamb of God, sacrificed for the sins of everyone.

- Jesus' death comes to define the faith and is interpreted through the lens of temple sacrifice so that his death **atones** for the sins of all. His resurrection is a **victory** over death, spiritualizing the messianic hopes as not earthly victory, but a cosmic one.

Birth of the Church

- The "Great Commission" (Matthew 28:19-20) calling followers to **convert everyone** is arguably a milestone in religious history. This call spreads Christianity widely but also sometimes fostered injustices.
- Miracle at Pentecost inspires modern **Pentecostalism** and its "speaking in tongues." This is the fastest growing religious movement of the last century.
  - The working of the Holy Spirit also points to the Christian **trinity** – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit



This powerful image is not quite Biblical as the manager scene and shepherds from Luke's gospel are mingled with the star and wise men from Matthew's gospel.

- Movement shifts (metaphorically) from Jerusalem to Rome
  - Jesus was very Jewish (dietary laws, praying garments, connection to the temple) but **Christianity will become a gentile tradition**
    - Movement never really accepted by Jews. Tiny Jewish Christian movement loses Peter and James to martyrdom and never really recovers.
    - Paul and others spread it throughout Roman empire
    - Christians retain YHWH and Jewish Bible but **dispense with Jewish laws**
    - Tension leads to **anti-Jewish passages in the Gospels** that really give birth to antisemitism (e.g. Matthew 27:25)



- Early movement based in house churches. Bishops emerge to lead cities. Eventually certain bishops come to oversee regions.
  - Pope is bishop of Rome and claims **"apostolic succession"** meaning authority and teachings have passed in an unbroken line since Jesus' time
- Orthodox Christians teach apostolic succession as well
- Protestants lack this and instead draw authority from the **Bible alone**

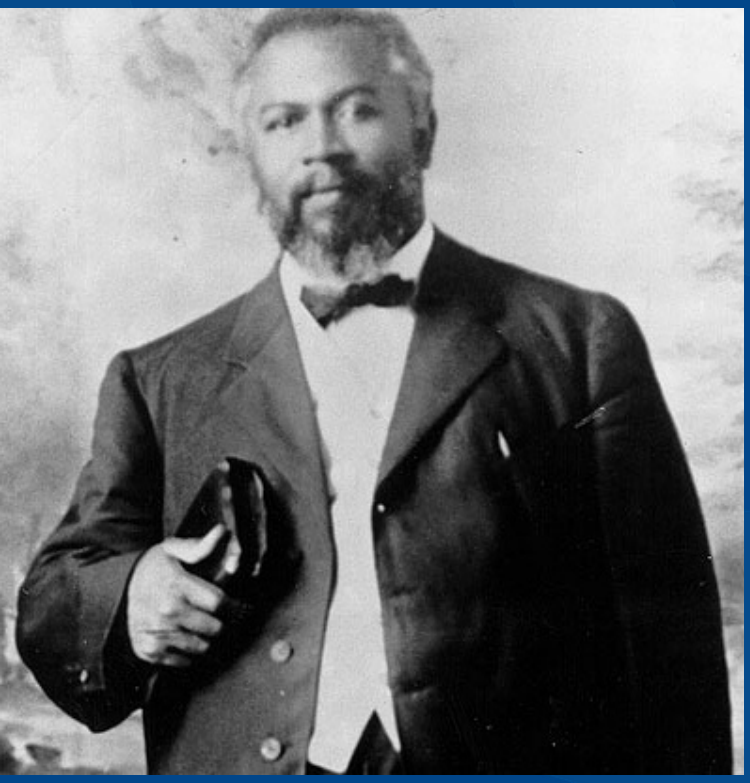
A pope's authority is partly from "apostolic succession" – that he exists in a continuous chain of transmission that goes back to Jesus.

Birth of the Church



Christianity may be the first religion to make converting everyone a religious calling.

- During early years, the first Christian writings appear. Paul's letters are first, then the Gospels.
  - **Mark**: emphasizes Jesus as the **suffering** servant of God. A dark gospel, foreshadowing suffering of Jesus and his followers. Has idea of "messianic secret" where Jesus insists others keep his identity secret.
  - **Luke**: the social gospel. Emphasizes a Jesus who is here for the **poor and marginalized**. Source of many favourite parables like the Good Samaritan.
  - **Matthew**: Jesus as the **new Moses**. A Jewish gospel written to convince Jews that this man executed as a criminal was enormously powerful and important.
  - **John**: Jesus as the **Cosmic Christ**. Jesus speaks of himself with seven famous "I am" sayings that parallel seven miracles ("I am" seems to imitate YHWH saying "I am who I am"). Very different from the other gospels as it has no parables and even a different account of Jesus' death (not connected to temple incident with the money changers).



Pentecostalism was born in 1905 by the ministry of William J Seymour. The movement includes "speaking in tongues" where some are given a non-human speech by the Holy Spirit.

- Luke and Matthew both have **virgin birth stories** not in the other two gospels, nor cited by Paul.
- **Luke's** has Jesus born in a manger due to a census. The family is from Nazareth and only in Bethlehem due to the census. Lowly shepherds attend the birth. The story emphasizes Jesus is here for the poor.
- **Matthew's** has Jesus born in a house and visited by foreign dignitaries with kingly gifts. Family is forced from Bethlehem to avoid a slaughter of all infant Jews. They escape to exile in Egypt and go to Nazareth years later. The story has echoes of Moses.
- The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew) and the Sermon on the Plain (Luke) also show the different emphasis on Jesus as Moses versus Jesus for the oppressed and marginalized.

Church Ascendant



- Occasional Roman persecution leads to oppression and **martyrdom** narratives that employ the stories heroically
- **Conversion of Constantine** turns Christianity into a state church
  - Ends persecution
  - State finances church construction
  - Church moves towards canonizing 27 books as the **New Testament**
  - Push to settle orthodoxy. Oriental Orthodox churches (e.g. Ethiopian Orthodox, **Coptics**, etc.) break off over disagreements.



- Martyrdom ends but **monastic asceticism** takes off
  - Allows a new kind of martyrdom – the sacrifice of the flesh
  - Monastic orders launch reform movements
  - Builds on the Church's **exalting of lifelong virginity**
    - Lifelong celibacy was not valued by Jews nor Greeks/Romans
    - Jesus does not call for it though family is not a key category for him
    - Appears very early, showing up in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians
    - Emphasize **Mary's virginity**. By second century, teaching is that she remained a virgin her whole life.
      - Mary is central to Catholics and the Orthodox but not to Protestants
    - Leads to **celibate priesthood** for Catholics. In Orthodoxy, bishops are celibate but priests may marry before ordination



Monastics reflect the church's early valuing of lifelong celibacy. Monastic movements have often led reforms of the church.

- By late 4th Century, the Emperor Theodosius is closing pagan temples, dismissing their priests and persecuting non-Christian religiosity
- **Islam** greatly reduces Christianity in the Middle East and North Africa after the 7th century
- In 1054, the Roman Catholic Church splits from the **Eastern Orthodox Church**
  - Orthodoxy has a symbolic head but each national church has autonomy
  - Famed for **icons**, two-dimensional, not-too-lifelike images (thus avoiding idolatry)
  - Very traditional. Use traditional languages, no musical instruments in worship.

Protestant Reformation



Martin Luther

- **Luther** changes Western history
  - Succeeds via skilled use of the printing press and due to protection from a local prince
  - Discerns that **faith is what saves**, not good works. Ends up redefining vocation away from religious life to an ordinary life lived well.
  - Protestants question papal authority, sacraments, role of Mary and saints, monasticism, clerical celibacy and much more



Servetus is perhaps the first Unitarian, suggesting Jesus is a prophet, but not God. A radical reformer, he was executed for heresy by John Calvin.

- Reformation has enormous **unintended side effects**
  - **Democratic impulse**: Reformers teach the "priesthood of all believers," translate scriptures into vernacular languages and, in some cases, have congregants elect and fire ministers.
  - **Constitutionalism**: Luther replaces Pope not with himself but with a text (i.e. Bible). Calvin suggests the same principle should apply to civil government with office holders subject to rules. His disciples right key texts in the development of Western constitutionalism.
  - **Secularism**: by stripping the sacred from time (feast days), objects (relics) and locations (pilgrimage sites), the Reformation leads to the "**disenchantment** of the world".
    - Result is ordinary time, ordinary space --- i.e. a secular world

Protestant Reformation

- **Radical Reformation**
  - More radical groups include **Mennonites** and **Unitarians**
- **Counter-Reformation**
  - Catholic church cleans up corruptions but rejects all Protestant doctrinal innovations.
- **Evangelicalism**
  - Born in the same century and geographies as liberalism, this movement incorporates individualism, populism, and one's **personal experience** as central to Christian faith.
    - Ministers are **populists**, sometimes not especially trained or educated
    - Audience's **emotional response** is key
    - **Entrepreneurial** movement; bucks authority; spawns innovations
    - "Born Again" emphasizes person's individual experience as demonstrating religious truth (that they are saved)

- **Growing Individualism**
  - Questioning pope
  - Electing ministers
  - Reading Bible yourself
    - Reading is interior
  - Quakers (1647)
    - Prioritize an inner light even somewhat over scriptural authority
  - Boosted further by founding of USA
    - Evangelicalism emphasizes the individual's experience (born again)



Benny Hinn heals people on TV and performs miracles, demonstrating evangelicalism's innovativeness. Some Christians mock him; others follow him.

- **Modern challenges**
  - Biblical criticism, science (especially evolution), feminism and pluralism all challenge traditional doctrines starting in late 19th C.
    - Leads to liberal vs fundamentalism spectrum in Christianity.
    - Secularization greatly weakens Christianity in the "West".
- **Global Reach**
  - 20th C witnesses massive spread of Christianity into **Africa and Asia**
  - Pentecostalism is the most effective evangelizing movement
    - Also wins over many Catholics in Latin America

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Quote & Story

“I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.”

Martin Luther King Jr

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

26 “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

27 He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’[a]; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’[b]”

28 “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

30 In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. **31** A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. **32** So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. **33** But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. **34** He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. **35** The next day he took out two denarii[c] and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

36 “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

37 The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”
Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

(Luke 10:25-37)