



A Brief Introduction to Christianity

Christianity is the world's largest religious tradition with around **2.4 billion followers**, around 30% of the world's population in 2020. It is based on the life and teachings of **Jesus of Nazareth** who lived in the Middle East over 2000 years ago. Stories of his life and teachings are collected in the New Testament section of the tradition's holy text, the Bible. Christianity teaches that sin entered the world through Adam and Eve, and that, to save the world from sin, God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to redeem the world, through the sacrificial atonement of his death. Christians believe that Jesus is the incarnation of God, who was crucified and who rose again from the dead, appearing to his disciples on various occasions, before ascending to back to Heaven. However, they vary significantly on other beliefs and practices. For this reason, it is more useful to think of Christianity as a family of traditions.

The common Christian symbols, depicted above, include the cross, representing Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, and the fish (Ichthus or Ichthys in Greek) which represents the phrase 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour'.

Early History and Context

Christianity has its origins in **Judaism**. Jesus and his followers were Jewish and whilst some of Jesus's teachings challenged the received wisdom and practices of the Jewish tradition, the early Christians, especially those based in Jerusalem, continued to worship in synagogues. They emerged as a Jewish

Patrons

sect, later separating themselves from Judaism. The establishment of Christianity as a distinct religious movement happened gradually after Jesus's death.

Jesus was born around 4-6 BCE. He was put to death by crucifixion when he was about 33. Stories of his life and teachings were recorded only after his death and the Gospels (see Bible section below) are generally understood not to be a biographical record but rather a focus on events in Jesus's life that reveal him as the Son of God. Such events include his birth in Bethlehem; his baptism by John the Baptist; a period of travelling and teaching (including performing various miracles, healing the sick and proclaiming the imminent arrival of God's Kingdom, as well as gathering together Twelve Disciples, later called Apostles); and the events leading up to his **passion** (the events leading up to his death) and **crucifixion**. Following his death, the description of Jesus's **resurrection** (his physical appearance to his disciples) and **ascension** into Heaven are key elements in Christian belief. After the resurrection, the disciples proclaimed Jesus as the Anointed One (called the **Messiah** in the Jewish tradition and the **Christ** in Greek) and launched a public ministry on the Jewish festival of **Pentecost**, when the **Holy Spirit** descended upon those gathered. This marks the birth of the Church – the community of those who believed the Christian message. The Church began to spread beyond Jerusalem and it was then that the followers were first called Christians.

During the first few centuries after Jesus's death, Christianity existed as one of many religions in the Roman Empire, and followers frequently faced **persecution**. In the early fourth century, however, it gained the support of the Roman Emperor Constantine, and later that century, under Emperor Theodosius I, it became the official state religion of the Empire.

As the religion spread throughout the Empire and beyond, different teachings and movements began to arise. **Seven Ecumenical Councils** were held during the fourth to eighth centuries in order to define the authentic teachings of the Church and to quash perceived heresies. The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed were both agreed upon in the fourth century. These are Trinitarian in structure and are ritually recited during worship in many churches to this day.

However, differences between Christians in the Eastern Empire (with a seat of power in Constantinople and a primary language of Greek) and the Western Empire (with its seat of power in Rome and a primary language of Latin), intensified over the next few centuries leading, in 1054, to a major split between Eastern and Western Christianity. Later significant developments in Christian history include the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century and the 'Great Awakening' in America in the eighteenth century (more information on different traditions within Christianity will be given below). Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant remain the major traditions within Christianity.

In the European colonial period (from the sixteenth to early twentieth centuries), Christianity was partly tied to 'Empire' (including the Russian, Spanish and British Empires), and spread to Asia, Africa and the Americas through the (often interlinked) processes of trade, colonialism and missionary activity. Christianity remains particularly strong and vibrant in some of these former mission fields and, since the late twentieth century, there has been a trend for missionaries to travel from these areas back to Europe and North America, in a process which has been called 'reverse mission' by some academics.

The Bible

Christians believe the Bible to be divinely inspired – the **Word of God**. Christians believe the Bible to be authoritative but what is meant by this varies, as do views of the inerrancy of scripture. ‘Fundamentalist’ (a movement originating in American Protestant Evangelicalism in the early twentieth century, partly in reaction against progressive scientific theories such as evolution) interpretations affirm the Bible as both an accurate historical record and a scientific textbook (sometimes referred to as ‘literalism’). At the other end of the spectrum are more metaphorical/contextual interpretations, recognising that the Bible has important insights for contemporary life, whilst situating it in its historical, social and political context.

The Christian Bible is not a single book but rather a collection of writings of different genres including stories, poetry, letters and prophecies. It is divided into two main sections: the **Old Testament** (which is shared with the Jewish tradition) and the **New Testament**. The **New Testament** consists of 27 books written by various authors in the first and second centuries CE. These books are divided into three sections: the four **Gospels** (the ‘good news’ according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) which cover the life and teachings of Jesus; followed by the **Acts of the Apostles**; and then the Letters or **Epistles** which were written by the early church leaders to provide guidance to the first Christian communities. Separate to these three sections and closing the Bible is the **Book of Revelation**.

The decision as to what would be included in the New Testament was finalised during two synods held in the fourth century in a process which saw some Christian writings excluded. The excluded writings are sometimes described by scholars as **non-canonical texts**. The Roman Catholic Church accepts the **Apocrypha** - books written between the Old and New Testament periods, in Greek rather than Hebrew, and which are seldom used in other traditions.

There are numerous different translations of the Bible, and different traditions tend to favour some over others. The Church of England traditionally used the King James Bible, also known as the Authorised Version, or KJV, completed in 1611, but it now uses more modern translations. Some Protestant groups use the New International Version (NIV, first published in the 1970s). The Catholic Church has a range of translations such as the Jerusalem Bible and its revisions. Many Eastern Orthodox Churches in English speaking countries utilise the Revised Standard Version (RSV) or the New King James Version (NKJV) of the New Testament. The official Old Testament text for the Orthodox Church is the Septuagint.

Beliefs

There are a number of core beliefs shared by the Christian traditions, and more which vary according to denomination. Shared beliefs are around the person of Jesus Christ and his role in humanity’s salvation and around the Bible as the Word of God.

Christology. Christianity is a **monotheistic** faith – followers believe in one God – and the majority of Christian traditions teach that the one God is known in three persons: the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit. This doctrine, known as the **Trinity**, is implicit in the **Nicene Creed**, a widely accepted Christian statement of faith. However, some groups are non-Trinitarian asserting that the doctrine of the Trinity compromises the oneness of God. These include **Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Christadelphians, Unitarians** and **Oneness Pentecostals**.

Christians believe that Jesus is the Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew Bible, come to Earth to fulfil God's law and to teach love of God and love of your neighbour. They believe that Jesus is God incarnate - that he was simultaneously fully human and fully divine. Christians believe that he was born of **Mary** and was conceived by the **Holy Spirit**. The Holy Spirit is believed to be God's continual presence on Earth, and this is particularly emphasised in the Pentecostal traditions.

Soteriology - Salvation through Jesus Christ. It is taught that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of humankind and brought **atonement** - reconciliation with God – as humanity had been separated from God through sin (beginning with Adam and Eve's Fall in the Garden of Eden). Whilst Christians agree that Jesus is the saviour of humankind, there are different understandings as to what is needed for salvation – whether salvation is gained solely through faith, or whether works (deeds and acts of devotion) are also required.

Most Christians believe in **life after death**, although the exact nature of these beliefs varies between traditions and individuals. Christians believe that through Jesus's death and resurrection, they too can be resurrected to a new life after the death of their physical body. While many Christians accept the Bible's teaching that there is a heaven and a hell, others are uncertain, and prefer to rely on God's love and justice. Some believe that eventually all men and women will experience eternal life in heaven, and Roman Catholics hold that people who have died may need to undergo purification in **Purgatory** before they can enter Heaven.

Eschatology. Christians also believe, whether metaphorically or literally, in the '**end-times**', in the **return of Jesus** and the establishment of the **Kingdom of God** on earth. These beliefs are termed **millennialism** and are often a peripheral rather than a central focus of Christian belief in the main traditions. In some nineteenth century sects and new religious movements, however, millennialism is a major focus of the group. Millennial Christian groups include **Jehovah's Witnesses, The Twelve Tribes, the Brethren** and the **World Mission Society Church of God**.

Practices

Worship

Christian worship includes both individual and collective practices. Individual practices include **prayer, Bible study** and, in some traditions, **fasting**. Some Christians regularly attend **church services**, whilst many, including in the UK, attend on a more ad hoc basis, perhaps on important dates such as Easter or Christmas, or for personal events such as weddings and funerals. The majority of traditions hold church services on **Sunday** which is considered to be the **Sabbath day** (although not **by Seventh-day Adventist** groups – see below). Church services, across denominations, include worship through prayer, song, the reading of scripture, and a homily or sermon by the priest/preacher. Services may include the celebration of the **Eucharist** (see below). The majority of Christian groups hold additional services and events throughout the week, including mid-week Bible study, prayer groups of different kinds, discussion groups, women's groups, men's groups, youth groups and more. Some Christian groups own their places of worship, whilst others, including newer movements such as Evangelical Churches and African Initiated Churches rent public spaces, including schools, community halls, cinemas and rooms in other churches for services. Some meetings, within these newer traditions, take place in private homes.

Sacraments

Many Christian traditions perform a number of 'sacraments' or 'sacred rites'. (**The Salvation Army** and the **Society of Friends** or '**Quakers**' are examples of groups that do not see the sacraments as essential practice and Pentecostal Churches practise the sacraments but use the alternative term '**ordinances**'). The Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches both recognise seven sacraments, whilst the Protestant Churches recognise two primary sacraments (baptism and the Eucharist) and a number of 'lesser' sacraments.

The majority of traditions practise some form of **baptism** as constituting **membership** of their particular church, although the specific practices vary. The Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican churches all practise **baptism of infants**, whilst churches from the Anabaptist tradition, as well as newer churches within Pentecostal, Charismatic and Evangelical traditions, only practise **adult baptism**, sometimes known as 'believers' baptism'. For some, undergoing adult baptism is considered part of the experience of being '**born again**' into the Christian faith. Some churches baptise by pouring water over the head (usually for infant baptism, for example, the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches) whilst others practice '**baptism by immersion**' in which the individual is submerged under water (usually for adults, for example, Anabaptist churches).

The majority of Christian groups celebrate the **Eucharist** in some form. This rite is also known as **Holy Communion** or the **Lord's Supper** and it repeats the words and actions that Jesus is believed to have used at the last meal with his disciples before the Crucifixion. For most traditions, the rite is one of remembrance and celebration of Jesus's sacrifice on the cross. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that when the priest repeats Jesus's words from the Last Supper, the consecrated bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Jesus, although there is no change in their outward appearance (**transubstantiation**). The Eastern Orthodox Church also accepts that the bread and wine of the Eucharist is transformed mysteriously through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Other sacraments recognised in Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism include:

Confirmation (in which the believer makes a commitment to God, receives the gifts of the Holy Spirit and may be anointed with oil, also called **chrismation**)

Reconciliation (with God, through confession of sins and absolution, which may include prayer and/or making the sign of the cross, also called **confession** or **penance**)

Anointing of the sick (often with oil, also called **Holy Unction**)

Marriage (the joining of a man and a woman in **Holy Matrimony** in most traditions)

Ordination (laying on of hands and anointing with oil for those who choose to join the priesthood, also called ministry or **Holy Orders**).

The rites of passage of birth, marriage and death are thus marked in many Christian groups. In the UK context, many so-called 'nominal' or 'cultural' Christians use the churches (the Anglican Church in particular), for these services without having any other commitment to the church.

Festivals

In many Christian liturgical calendars there are six seasons (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Pentecost) together with numerous festivals, holy days and saints' days. Some of the holy days (such as Christmas) are celebrated on a fixed date every year (although Western and Eastern Orthodox dates of Christmas differ), whilst others (such as Easter) vary according to the lunar

calendar. Very few Christian groups and individuals celebrate every holy day - the saints' days are more likely to be celebrated by Catholic and Orthodox Christians than by Protestants, for instance. Some dates, such as Christmas and Easter, have a near universal significance amongst Christians, and are also public holidays in the UK. **Jehovah's Witnesses** are one movement who do not celebrate Christmas and Easter since they regard them as 'pagan' in origin.

Lifestyle

There is **no single lifestyle** which would identify one as a Christian. Christian lifestyles vary hugely by tradition, by geography and culture, and by community, family and even individual preferences. Some of the Christian traditions, including Eastern Orthodox, Catholic and Anglican, have dietary requirements at particular times of the year, such as Lent, which members may or may not follow, or for their monastic orders. Some groups within the wider Protestant tradition forbid or discourage smoking or alcohol consumption. Some groups encourage modest dress.

There is similar variation on the issues of **sex, marriage and family relations**. Many Christian groups, from across traditions and from old to new movements, are officially conservative when it comes to issues of sex and marriage, advocating no sex outside marriage. They may also advocate traditional gender roles within the family, but how this is expressed in individual members' lives varies widely however. Whilst artificial means of contraception are prohibited in the Roman Catholic Church, compliance varies from country to country and even from family to family, with many Catholics seeing contraception as a matter of individual conscience. Catholics who procure an abortion may be excommunicated from the Church.

In general, new Christian movements within the Pentecostal and Evangelical denominations tend to be more conservative in the area of family and sexual relations. Two movements gaining in popularity in the USA include the '**abstinence movement**', in which teenagers make a pledge of sexual abstinence until marriage, often donning a 'chastity ring'; and the '**quiverfull movement**' in which married couples reject birth control, accepting however many children God bestows on them, in a missionary effort to raise the next generation of Christians.

Some new Christian groups, however, have had very relaxed attitudes to sexuality and marriage, such as **The Family International's** past practice of **sexual sharing**. A minority of Christian groups suggest a path of **celibacy** for some lay members.

Responses to **LGBT+** identities vary widely across traditions, with people within the same tradition taking differing views. Some traditions officially accept and welcome same sex couples, whilst others take more conservative positions (see also Contemporary Issues section below).

Some Christians choose to send their children to **schools** run by their particular Christian tradition or church. The main traditions in the UK (Church of England, Roman Catholic and Orthodox) each have associated schools. In England in 2020, around a third of all state-maintained schools are faith schools, with the majority of these being Christian schools – roughly two-thirds Church of England and one-third Roman Catholic. These schools are often popular with the wider population, as well as with Christians, as they are perceived as offering a higher standard of education. Similarly, over a third of all independent schools in the UK are faith based with the majority of these having a 'Christian ethos'. Some of these are schools established by nineteenth-century sects and new Christian movements in

the UK. A few Christian groups and families choose to home-school their children: some use the American programme, Accelerated Christian Education.

Denominations within Christianity

From the first century there have been disputes among Christians and some individuals or communities have left or have been expelled from communion with the Church. Frequently synods and councils aiming to maintain the unity of the Church around agreed creeds did not succeed in reconciling different factions but reinforced division. The most significant division occurred in the eleventh century when the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches separated from one another (known as the 'Great Schism' of 1054). The sixteenth century saw the Protestant Reformation and the subsequent establishment of numerous Protestant denominations including Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Adventist traditions. Anglicans regard themselves as 'catholic and reformed', having retained some of the former Roman Catholic organisational structure and liturgy. The twentieth century saw the rise of Pentecostalism which simultaneously created new denominations and was a movement of renewal or revivalism within existing traditions.

Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church understands itself as the Church established directly by Jesus - the Apostles Peter and Paul travelled to Rome and established it as an important centre of Christianity. However, with the fall of the Western Roman Empire towards the end of the fifth century, the Church increasingly came to play a political and social role in the West and the bishop of Rome began to be referred to as the Pope. Eastern Christians looked to the bishop in Constantinople. Tensions between Eastern and Western Christians centred on the primacy of the Pope and the wording of the Nicene Creed.

The Catholic Church remains distinguishable by the office of **Papacy**: the Pope is the visible head of the Church and is believed to have an unbroken line of succession from Saint Peter. The Pope is believed to be **infallible** when he speaks 'ex cathedra' - when defining a doctrine for the whole Church. There have not been many such statements. One example is Pope Pius XII's declaration, in 1950, concerning the assumption of Mary into Heaven. The Pope is the bishop of Rome and in the hierarchical leadership structure of the Church, all bishops, priests, and deacons must be male, and bishops and priests are required to be celibate.

The **Second Vatican Council** (also called Vatican II, which met between 1962 and 1965) introduced a number of liberalising changes to the Church including a move from conducting the Mass in Latin to vernacular languages, the priest facing the congregation, and increasing engagement with ecumenical movements.

Eastern Catholic Churches (sometimes called Oriental Catholic Churches or, in the past, Uniates) are churches which used to be Oriental Churches but came into communion with the Roman Catholic Church due to particular political and cultural circumstances. The Churches come under the Pope's jurisdiction, but follow Eastern liturgical practices.

Half the global Christian population is Roman Catholic, accounting for around 1.2 billion people worldwide with particular concentrations in Brazil, Mexico and the Philippines, followed by the USA and parts of Southern and Eastern Europe. There are around six million Catholics in England, Wales

and Scotland (around 25 per cent of the UK's Christians), with weekly Mass attendance at just over one million.

New religious movements from within the Catholic tradition can largely be categorised into two groups: those which are accepted by the Catholic Church and those which are not. New movements which are accepted by the Church include **Opus Dei** and the **Neo-Catechumenate Way** (both founded in Spain), the **Focolare** and **Communion and Liberation** (both founded in Italy).

New Catholic movements outside the Church might recognise different popes, such as the **Palmarian Catholic Church** in Spain; or refuse to acknowledge the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, such as the **Society of St. Pius X (SSPX)**, with headquarters in Switzerland.

There also exist a number of Marian devotion groups worldwide, some of which are accepted by the Church, such as the shrines at **Lourdes** and **Fatima**; others have a more ambiguous position, such as the shrine at **Medjugorje**, which is under examination by a Church Commission.

Orthodox Churches

As one of the reasons for the split with the Roman Church was that Eastern Christians did not recognise the Pope's claimed jurisdiction over the entire Church, Eastern Orthodoxy does not constitute a single church with a single leader. Whilst the **Patriarch of Constantinople** is the nominal head of the churches, he is in reality considered the first among equals and has no authority over churches other than his own (the **Church of Constantinople**), although he has the unique authority to call pan-Orthodox synods. Instead, Eastern Orthodoxy is described as a communion of churches, including autocephalous churches (each of which is led by an autonomous head bishop called a Patriarch, Archbishop or Metropolitan depending on the church) and autonomous churches (whose head bishop is appointed by a Patriarch). Autocephalous churches include the **Russian Orthodox Church** (the largest Eastern Orthodox Church) and the **Greek Orthodox Church**; autonomous churches include the **Church of Finland** and the **Church of Sinai**.

Each of the churches has distinctive features based on culture and/or geographical location, for instance the language in which rites are conducted, but they share a theology and broad practice (indeed Orthodox translates from Greek as 'right belief'). Distinctive features include the importance of icons, particularly of Mary (with the Greek title **Theotokos**, meaning 'bearer of God'); the use of a Greek translation of the Old Testament (called the **Septuagint**) rather than the Hebrew; and the use of the **Gregorian Calendar** as opposed to the Julian calendar for certain festival dates.

There are around 260 million Eastern Orthodox Christians worldwide with concentrations in Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria. There are also around 60 million **non-Chalcedonian** (sometimes called **Oriental**) Orthodox Christians worldwide with concentrations in Ethiopia and Egypt. These churches, including the **Coptic Orthodox Church**, **Ethiopian Orthodox Church**, and **Armenian Apostolic Church**, recognise the authority of the first three ecumenical councils, not the fourth (defined at Chalcedon in 451 CE) and subsequent councils. The Council of Chalcedon had agreed that Christ has two natures, divine and human, whilst non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches believe that Christ has one indivisible nature. The Orthodox Churches together constitute around 12% of the world's Christian population.

Protestant Churches

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was the second major split in the Christian world. Its origins are often traced to **Martin Luther** pinning a set of theses on the door of a chapel in Germany in 1517 (whether this actually happened is a matter of some debate), although there had been calls for reform of the Catholic Church for at least two hundred years prior to this. Criticisms of the Catholic Church largely focused on the corruption of its priests - the willingness of some to sell indulgences, to take financial bribes for services performed, and to subvert their vows of celibacy and poverty. The distinguishing beliefs of the Protestant Reformation, derived from Luther, include 'the priesthood of all believers' (equality of believers, each with access to God and so not in need of mediation by a priest – although, despite this, most Protestant denominations still have an ordained clergy); belief in the Bible as the ultimate authority in matters of faith (*sola scriptura* or 'by scripture alone'); and justification 'by faith alone' (*sola fide*).

Luther's teachings took hold in Germany, Scandinavia and Switzerland, where they were taken up by Ulrich Zwingli and then by John Calvin, whose *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), was the first systematic presentation of the Protestant faith and became the bedrock of the **Reformed Church**. The Reformed Church became predominant in Switzerland and the Netherlands and gained followers in a number of other European countries including France and Hungary.

The **Presbyterian Churches** grew out of the Reformed tradition - specifically with the transplantation of Calvinist theology into England and Scotland, and then into Northern Ireland, where it remains the largest Church. The term 'Presbyterian' refers to the form of Church government in which authority is shared by clergy and laypeople (elders). The **Church of Scotland** is presbyterian in structure with over 330,000 members in 2020.

Today the majority of Protestants live outside of Europe; the USA has the highest number of Protestants, followed by Nigeria, China and Brazil. There were approximately 801 million Protestants worldwide in 2011, around 37% of the world's Christian population. Over time, numerous different Protestant groups have become denominations in their own right, and some of these are mentioned below.

The Anglican Church

The origins of the Anglican Church, which includes the **Church of England**, and which is defined as those Churches which accept the Archbishop of Canterbury's authority, can be traced to Henry VIII's split with Rome. This split was driven not only by the teachings of the Protestant Reformation which were sweeping Europe at this time, but by Henry VIII's desire to divorce his wife, Catherine of Aragon, an act which the Pope refused to sanction. In 1534, Henry VIII forced Parliament to pass a law recognising him, rather than the Pope, as the supreme head of the Church in England. Henry VIII's daughter, Elizabeth I (who came to the throne in 1558), was influential in formulating the Anglican tradition's identity as **both catholic and reformed**: catholic in apostolic succession and claims to continuity with the early and medieval Church, reformed in its theology and liturgical practice. Elizabeth authorised a new edition of the **Book of Common Prayer** which remains an official liturgical book of the Church, although alternatives in modern English have been introduced in more recent years including the Alternative Service Book (1980) and Common Worship (2000).

The Church of England remains the **established Church in England**: the **Monarch is the supreme head** and **26 bishops sit in the House of Lords**. These 'Lords Spiritual' are the most senior bishops in England and they open the House with daily prayers as well as participating in the business of the House. The Church of England is divided into two provinces, Canterbury and York, each led by an Archbishop. The provinces are divided into 43 dioceses led by bishops, which are further split into parishes, each of which has a vicar (sometimes called a rector and, occasionally, priest is the preferred term). The Church is described as 'episcopally-led' (by its bishops) and 'synodically-governed' (its practices are decided by the General Synod). The General Synod meets at least twice a year and is divided into three houses: bishops, clergy and laity, with elected clergy and lay members serving a five-year term.

The Church of England is the most visible Christian presence in the UK. However, regular church attendance is only around 1 million people attending Sunday services. The Church is also active outside of the UK: **The Anglican Communion**, the worldwide fellowship of Anglican Churches, is active in over 165 countries and represents 85 million people. Hence there are many more Anglicans outside of England than within. **The Church in Wales** and the **Scottish Episcopal Church** are the non-established Anglican Churches in Wales and Scotland respectively, with the **Church of Ireland** being the Anglican Church across both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The Anglican Church in the USA is called **The Episcopal Church**.

Baptist Churches

Historians often trace the **Baptist** movement back to the early seventeenth century as a **Separatist** or **non-Conformist** movement, in contrast with the Church of England (although Baptists trace their tradition to the early Christian church). Baptists believe that Christ, not the monarch, is the head of the Church; that the Church should be governed by all believers, not by a hierarchy of bishops; and that the Bible, not Church doctrine or tradition, should guide faith and practice. Baptists are opposed to the baptism of infants and practice adult or 'believer' baptism by immersion.

There are some 40 million Baptists worldwide. In the USA, it is the largest Protestant denomination, with the Southern Baptist Convention representing 15 million people. In the UK, **The Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB)** was established in 1891 and **The Baptist World Alliance** in 1905 and, whilst Baptist churches are independent, the majority choose to affiliate to one of these wider networks. There are over 2,000 BUGB churches in England and Wales with over 140,000 members.

Other denominations which derive from the same Separatist or non-Conformist movement include the **Mennonites**, the **Hutterites**, the **Bruderhof**, the **Amish** and the **Quakers** (The Society of Friends).

The Methodist Church

The Methodist Movement was established in the eighteenth century by an Anglican Priest, **John Wesley** (1703-1791). Whilst Wesley critiqued some of the rules and authority of the Anglican Church, he did not seek to establish a separate Church – this happened shortly after his death. He rather sought to establish a **revival movement** through 'field preaching', taking his message throughout the UK and later establishing yearly conferences. Wesley's main message was of God's love – that no-one is beyond God's love and that we can be made perfect in love of God. The Methodist Church has been active in social reform and Methodists were influential in establishing the first trade unions, as well as the Labour Party, in the UK. In 2018, there were 60 million committed members and a further 20

million adherents worldwide. There were 180,000 committed members in Great Britain, making it Britain's fourth largest Christian denomination.

The Salvation Army is an offshoot of Methodism, established by a former Methodist Minister, William Booth, and his wife, Catherine, in 1865.

Seventh-day Adventist Church

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a Protestant, millennial movement, the origins of which can be traced to the activity of an American Baptist preacher, **William Miller** (1782-1849). Based on his interpretation of the Bible, the Millerites set a date for the return of Christ on 22nd October 1844. When Christ failed to return (the 'Great Disappointment'), Miller's followers split into various groups. The most prominent group was that led by **Ellen G. White** (1827-1915) who is considered the founder and prophet of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. White argued that Miller's prophecy had not been wrong – rather Jesus had entered the heavenly sanctuary on this date and now ministers from there. Jesus's return is still expected to be imminent, but dates are no longer set. Over time, White also introduced the observance of the Saturday Sabbath and encouraged a vegetarian diet. The Church maintains a focus on health and has been active in establishing hospitals worldwide. The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists is the worldwide organisation to which individual churches affiliate and, in 2018, there were over 88,000 churches with over 21 million members worldwide.

Numerous nineteenth century sects and new religious movements trace their origins to the Seventh-day Adventists. These include **Jehovah's Witnesses**, the **Branch Davidians**, the **Worldwide Church of God** and its numerous offshoots, and the **World Mission Society Church of God**.

Evangelical Churches

Evangelical Christianity emerged concurrently with the eighteenth century religious revival within the Protestant tradition which gave birth to Methodism. The term 'evangel' refers to the Gospel (the 'Good News') and at the most basic level refers to one who spreads the Gospel. Evangelicals can be found within all Christian traditions (the **Alpha Course**, initiated by **Holy Trinity Brompton**, is one of the Anglican Church's primary Evangelical activities) and Evangelicalism can also be considered a tradition in its own right. Many nondenominational churches, including the majority of American 'megachurches', are Evangelical in outlook. **The Evangelical Alliance** in the UK, founded in 1846, is one of the oldest Evangelical networks in the world and it was instrumental in founding the **World Evangelical Alliance** in the 1950s. The Evangelical Alliance claims to represent the UK's two million Evangelicals, with the World Alliance representing more than 600 million Evangelicals.

In general, Evangelicals share a number of key beliefs about:

- **The Bible** as the direct and inerrant word of God and hence the ultimate authority and guide for living.
- **Christ** died for our sins and salvation is for anyone who accepts Jesus Christ into their lives and turns away from a life of sin. Christians should be '**born again**' as adults and can and should have a **personal relationship with Christ**.
- **Social Activism**: Christians should live a life of example and should work towards the transformation of society for the better, which is tied to the mission of spreading the Gospel. Sometimes it is believed that spreading the Gospel in and of itself will lead to transformation, but many Evangelicals are also involved in charitable work.

It is the emphasis on spreading the Gospel that makes Evangelicals a particularly visible Christian presence in the UK and elsewhere as members publicly express their faith and encourage others to do the same. Some new Evangelical groups in the UK distribute literature in the streets, organise rallies and festivals, and offer drop-in centres where one can access numerous different social services as well as learn about Christianity. Some Evangelical groups in the UK, such as the **International Churches of Christ** in the 1990s, were considered by the media and some mainstream churches to have an undue focus on making converts, particularly amongst university students, and on maintaining a strict discipling system.

Evangelicalism is a particularly strong current of Christianity in America where it has historic links to the Christian fundamentalist movement of 1910. It gained prominence with the 'televangelists' of the 1950s-1980s, such as **Billy Graham, Oral Roberts** and **Jim Bakker**, some of whom later became notorious for financial or sexual misdemeanours. Evangelical Christians, who tend to be politically conservative, have some political influence in the USA through lobbying campaigns on various issues including abortion, gay marriage and immigration. White Evangelicals constitute a large proportion of Donald Trump's supporters (President of the USA, 2017-2021).

Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches

Pentecostalism began as a revival movement within the Protestant tradition, specifically within the Holiness churches of Methodism, in the USA in the 1900s. The name is derived from the **festival of Pentecost**, when the **Holy Spirit** is said to have descended upon Jesus's disciples, and Pentecostalism is characterised by the conviction that every believer has a direct relationship with God and access to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, which include **speaking in tongues (glossolalia), prophecy** and **healing**. It is a restorationist movement, seeking a return to the lives of the early Christians.

Pentecostalism can be characterised as an **experiential religion** and worship services are often highly energetic, with singing, dancing, speaking in tongues and member's testimonies. Pentecostal churches are likely to practise **tithing** in which members dedicate 10% of their income to the church and some Pentecostal churches hold '**prosperity theology**' beliefs (sometimes known as the health and wealth gospel). Prosperity theology is the belief that faith, material donations and positive confessions increase one's material wealth and physical well-being. Examples of prosperity theology churches include **The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God** in Brazil and the UK; the **Word of Life** in Sweden; and **Kenneth Copeland Ministries** in the USA.

Scholars have noted 'three waves' in the development of Pentecostalism, which characterise the different types of Pentecostal denominations and churches. The initial development of Pentecostalism, associated with the **Asuza Street Revival** in an African-American Church in Los Angeles in 1906, marks the first wave. Within two decades, this form of Pentecostalism had spread across the world and had given rise to new denominations including **The Assemblies of God, The Church of God in Christ** and the **Elim Pentecostal Churches**, all of which are active in the UK. Some of the largest churches in the world have links to the Assemblies of God. These include **Hillsong** church founded in Australia but also active in the UK, and **Yoido Full Gospel Church** in South Korea which is said to have a congregation of between half and one million.

The second wave, known as the '**Charismatic Renewal**', occurred in the 1960s and onwards and involved Pentecostal experiences being incorporated within the major traditions of Protestantism, Catholicism and Orthodoxy. The '**Toronto Blessing**' (which occurred at the Airport Vineyard Church in Toronto in 1994) is perhaps the best-known example of this phenomenon. The revival spread and was active in the London based Anglican Church, **Holy Trinity Brompton**, during the 1990s.

The third wave, occurring in the 1970s and onwards, was driven by Pentecostals who did not want to identify with any particular denomination, and as a result, the greatest diversity of churches is found within this wave. Third-wave Pentecostal and Charismatic churches range from small congregations and house churches, which may or may not be affiliated to a wider networking body, such as **Ichthus** or **Newfrontiers** in the UK, to huge megachurches. This wave has a **large overlap with Evangelical churches** and many churches are both Evangelical and Pentecostal or Charismatic.

In 2020, Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians make up around 30% of the world Christian population, with numbers anywhere between 250 and 500 million. The largest numbers are found in the Americas and Sub-Saharan Africa. In Brazil, Pentecostals account for 72% of the country's Protestants. There are over 700 different Pentecostal denominations worldwide.

African Initiated Churches

In 2020, 50% of the African population is Christian. Sub-Saharan Africa is home to 500 million Christians, almost a quarter of the world population of Christians (24%), with Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo and Ethiopia having the highest numbers. All forms of Christianity can be found in Africa, but the Protestant traditions are in the majority at 57%. These include Pentecostal, Charismatic, Evangelical and African Initiated Churches. It must be noted that the term 'African Initiated Churches' (sometimes 'African Independent Churches', AICs) is one coined by academics for categorisation purposes; it is unlikely that the term would be used as a self-description by a church. An early definition of AICs is "a church that has been founded in Africa, by Africans, and primarily for Africans" (Turner: 1979). This inevitably includes a vast range of diverse churches, from all denominations, with perhaps the only shared characteristic being a dialogue with traditional African cultures – some AICs incorporate aspects of these cultures, others are vehemently opposed to them.

Professor Allan Anderson has categorised AICs into three broad types:

- 1) '**African Churches**' which model themselves on the European mission churches from which they have seceded.
- 2) '**Prophet-Healing**', '**Spiritual Churches**' or '**African Pentecostal Churches**'. These churches have their roots in Western Pentecostalism but also have significant differences such as: healing through the use of prophets and/or symbolic objects; strict prohibitions on alcohol, tobacco and pork; and special dress codes, often white robes or military style uniforms depending on the church. Such churches include the **Kimbanguist Church**, the **Zion Christian Church** and the **Aladura** ('Praying People') churches. The latter are sometimes called 'White Garment' churches and include the **Church of the Lord (Aladura)**, **Eternal Sacred Order of the Cherubim and Seraphim**, and the **Celestial Church of Christ**, all of which are active in the UK.
- 3) '**Newer Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches**' are of more recent origin than the 'African Pentecostal Churches' (emerging from the late 1970s) and are more influenced by North American neo-Pentecostal developments such as prosperity theology. These churches often prohibit the distinctive elements of the 'African Pentecostal Churches' listed above and are

more often led by young, charismatic, well-educated Africans. They are generally socially conservative in outlook and theologically have a focus on spiritual power, miracles and healing. Such churches include the **Deeper Life Bible Church**, **Christ Embassy International** (which includes the **Believers' LoveWorld Campus Ministry**), **Redeemed Christian Church of God**, **Lighthouse Chapel International**, **Synagogue Church of All Nations**, **Royalhouse Chapel International** and **David Oyedepo Ministries** (which includes **Winners Chapel International**), all of which are active in the UK.

Other churches have been founded by African pastors in the UK and so, whilst they do not fit the AIC definition, they share some AIC characteristics. One such church is **Kingsway International Christian Centre**, based in Kent, which claims to be the fastest growing church in Western Europe.

The Ecumenical Movement

The ecumenical movement grew out of the Protestant denominations' desire to co-operate rather than compete in the mission field, stressing the universality of the Christian faith and the unity of churches. The movement has its origin in the World Missionary Conference, held in Edinburgh in 1910, which was followed by several denominational councils, culminating in the formation of the **World Council of Churches (WCC)** in Amsterdam in 1948. In 2019, there were 350 member denominations of the WCC. Initially, neither the Orthodox Churches nor the Roman Catholic Church affiliated, on the claim that they represent the One True Church but, in 2019, numerous local Orthodox Churches are members whilst the Roman Catholic Church is involved in consultations as a non-member. WCC denominations are involved in shared humanitarian projects and initiatives such as The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (held in January).

Christianity in the UK

Whilst Christianity remains the **largest religion in the UK** (59.3% of the population of England and Wales in 2011) and the Church of England remains the established Church, the number of people expressing a Christian identity and attending church services has dropped over time. Church attendance figures have always been lower than the number of people self-identifying as Christian, however, as the latter is tied up with ethnic, cultural and moral values; the high number of people identifying as Christian in the 2001 Census (71.7%) has been explained by some academics partly as an expression of a national identity. 11% of the population attended church regularly in 1980, 8% in 2000, and 6.3% in 2005. A 2011 survey estimated there to be 340 Christian denominations in the UK (Field 2011).

The 'normative (Anglican) Christian culture' of Britain has been in decline since the 1960s onwards, partly due to a changing moral outlook (brought about by the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s and 1970s) and to increasing cultural and religious pluralism (brought about by immigration and changes in media and communications technology). However, this decline has been accompanied by increased activity in particular traditions of Christianity, namely the socially conservative forms of Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism. Hence particularly visible forms of Christianity in the UK today are those brought by migrant communities such as African Initiated Churches and Pentecostal Churches from around the world, as well as Evangelical organisations concerned with preserving a vision of England's Christian heritage.

Contemporary Issues

Some of the most pressing issues in worldwide Christianity today include the **status of women and of LGBT+ members**. Whilst the Roman Catholic Church has rejected the ordination of women into the priesthood and condemns homosexual behaviour, the Anglican Church has ordained both female and LGBT+ clergy.

The first female clergy were ordained in Anglican churches in the USA, Hong Kong and Japan in the 1960s and in the Church of England in 1994. In 2015, the first female bishops were ordained in the Church of England. The first female bishop appointed was Libby Lane, whilst Rachel Treweek, was the first female diocesan bishop and Lord Spiritual, sitting in the House of Lords. In 2019, the first black female bishop, Rose Hudson-Wilkin, was appointed. Dame Sarah Mullally, the Bishop of London, is the Anglican Church's most senior female bishop in 2020. Women clergy have been ordained as bishops elsewhere in the Anglican Communion. Katharine Jefferts Schori was the first female Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church in the USA, a position she held between 2006 and 2015. Gene Robinson, the first bishop in an openly gay relationship, was appointed in 2003 in the USA. He retired in 2013. Whilst some gay Church of England clergy members are in civil partnerships, they are not permitted to enter same-sex marriages, and they are supposed to remain celibate. Neither is the Church of England permitted to conduct same-sex marriages (which became legal in March 2014) nor to bless such unions.

Such issues have led to the rise of international conservative organisations such as the **Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans**, which was initiated by a number of Anglican leaders in 2008, from the UK, USA, Australia and Africa. UK based organisations opposed to female and/or LGBT+ leadership include **AMIE (Anglican Mission in England), Reform and Forward in Faith**. In general, African churches within numerous traditions tend to take a more socially conservative stance and African church leaders have been involved in campaigns against homosexuality, both in Africa (where homosexuality is illegal in many countries) and abroad – sometimes with financial input from American Evangelical churches. Christian organisations offering '**gay conversion therapy**' which seek to 'cure' people of homosexuality (such as **Exodus International**, which closed in 2013), have aroused considerable controversy.

The biggest scandal to hit the Roman Catholic Church in recent years has been the uncovering of **child abuse** cases in various countries. These cases range from the sexual abuse of children by individual priests to what some have termed the 'endemic' physical and sexual abuse of children in Catholic schools and other institutional settings in Ireland and America. Cases have been brought against individual priests as well as against the Church hierarchy for failing to deal with the issue and for not taking cases to the legal authorities. Whilst other organisations, including the Anglican Church and Jehovah's Witnesses, have also been accused of dealing with child abuse internally, no other church has seen so many cases or paid out so much money in lawsuits.

Whilst Christianity is the majority religion in many countries worldwide, in some countries Christians face persecution as members of a minority religion. **Open Doors**, a non-denominational Christian organisation based in the USA which seeks to support persecuted Christians worldwide, creates an annual list of the countries where Christians face the greatest persecution. In 2020, as in previous years, North Korea - where the practice of Christianity is illegal - was top of the list, followed by Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya and Pakistan.

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HOW INFORM CAN HELP

- o By providing reliable, up-to-date information about minority religions
- o By putting you in touch with a nation-wide network of experts with specialist knowledge concerning minority religions
- o By putting you in touch with people who can give counselling, legal advice - or just lend a sympathetic ear.
- o By putting you in touch with former-members or families who have personal experience with a particular group.

New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction (London: HMSO, revised 1995) has been written by Professor Eileen Barker to provide practical suggestions as well as general background information. It can be brought second hand from retailers including amazon.co.uk and abebooks.co.uk

Every care is taken to provide as accurate and balanced an account as possible, but we welcome corrections and comments.

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