

An Introduction to Christian Theology

Thoughtful, constructive interreligious dialogue depends not only upon the openness of the dialogue partners to diverse perspectives, but also upon a reliable foundation of correct information about the various beliefs being discussed. For those who desire a basic understanding of the tenets of Christian faith, this paper offers a brief history of Christianity and summarizes the central Christian beliefs in God, Jesus Christ, the Trinity, the Bible and authority, sin and reconciliation, sacraments, spiritual practices, and ethical living.

INTRODUCTION

This paper provides a primer on the basics of Christian theology as it is understood in the American context. It explains the major beliefs or doctrines that are generally accepted by all Christians while also highlighting the theological diversity of the Christian churches. In other words, although all Christians adhere to the doctrines discussed here, various groups of Christians often interpret these doctrines differently. These disagreements usually have historical roots; thus, Christianity's historical development is inseparable from its doctrinal development. For this reason, the paper gives an overview of Christianity's historical development before moving into a discussion of the major Christian beliefs.

As would be the case with any religious tradition, the complexity of Christian theology and history cannot be explained fully in a brief paper. Many nuances of Christian theology and history tend to

remain in the background of how Christianity is perceived and practiced in the United States; frequently, these details may not even be familiar to American Christians themselves. Nevertheless, some knowledge of these particulars is essential to ground an accurate understanding of Christianity.

This paper thus provides an important complement to the other papers in the Boisi Center series. In particular, since religious beliefs and religious practices always inform one another, reading this paper together with the paper on Religious Practice in the United States is recommended. The paper begins with a brief historical outline of the beginnings and major divisions of Christianity. It then summarizes the Christian beliefs in God, Jesus Christ, the Trinity, the Bible and authority, sin and reconciliation, sacraments, spiritual practices, and ethical living.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY

The history of Christianity unfolds organically through time. It is commonly understood to begin with Jesus, who was born two thousand years ago. However, because Jesus was Jewish, some date Christianity's roots much further back, to the beginnings of Judaism. To illustrate the vast sweep of historical development, this section proceeds in four parts. First, it addresses the roots of Christianity in the first through the third centuries C.E. ("Common Era," dating from the time of Jesus' birth); second, it describes Christianity's development through the Middle Ages; third, it explores the Protestant Reformations in the 1600s and their continuing influence today; fourth, focusing on the United States, it summarizes several aspects of American Protestantism.

The Beginnings of Christianity (1-300 C.E.)

Christianity began as a movement within Judaism during the first century C.E. At this time, the Jewish rabbi now known as Jesus of Nazareth undertook a public teaching ministry in which he preached about the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God. As reported in the Christian Scriptures (commonly known among Christians as the New Testament), Jesus assembled a core group of twelve Jewish disciples, along with many other followers. Together they ministered to the poor and outcast in present-day Israel and Palestine. Around the year 33 C.E., Jesus was arrested and executed by the Roman governor. However, Jesus' followers claimed that he rose from the dead; they came to believe that he was the Son of God and that his death and

resurrection saved them from their sins. As their conviction grew, they named Jesus the "Christ"—meaning Messiah or Anointed One—according to the prophecies of the Jewish Bible, the Hebrew Scriptures (commonly known among Christians as the Old Testament). This is the origin of the name "Jesus Christ" and led to Jesus' followers being called "Christians."

After Jesus' death, "Christians" became identified as a particular sect within Judaism. These Jews believed that Jesus was the Messiah foretold in their Hebrew Scriptures, whose coming they had long anticipated. However, as time went on, the majority of Jews did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, and their differences with "Christian" Jews increased. Further, many non-Jewish people did come to believe in Jesus. In this way, "Christianity" gradually became a religious movement distinct from Judaism, as it is practiced today.

Over several generations, Christians compiled their collective memories of Jesus' teachings and sayings in various documents. Best known among these today are the four narratives of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that now appear in the Christian Scriptures, the "Gospels" of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. During these early years, many letters were also circulated among Christian communities about their belief in Jesus as the Messiah and the way Christians should live and worship. The letters of the apostle Paul and a few other authors were eventually included in the Christian Scriptures along with the four Gospels. Christians debated for centuries over which

documents to include in their scriptures; the first known list of the twenty-seven documents now accepted as the Christian Scriptures did not appear until the year 367 CE, and it may have taken even longer before Christians universally accepted this list.

Further Development (300-1500 C.E.)

Since their religious practices were distinguished from Judaism only gradually, Christians of the first and second centuries worshipped in small pockets throughout the Middle and Near East, and their religious practices differed from town to town. Moreover, Christianity was often outlawed under Roman law; many believers were persecuted and executed for professing their faith. In the year 313 C.E., the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and legalized it, virtually ending the persecutions. Noticing that Christians disagreed with one another on many important points, such as the relationship of Jesus to God, and that these debates were causing unrest and confusion in his empire, Constantine called Christian leaders (bishops) from across the empire to a council at Nicaea in 325 C.E. This first major council of the Christian churches clarified key points of theology, including the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus (see discussion below). The primary written contribution of this council was the Nicene Creed. More debates followed in the succeeding years, and the second great council, held in Constantinople in 381 C.E., expanded this creed into a longer statement of faith that members of many Christian churches still recite. (For the full text of the creed, see Appendix.)

Although lively debates over key theological points continued, Christianity underwent further

unification in the fourth century under the reign of Emperor Theodosius and through the theology of Bishop Augustine of Hippo (b. 356-d. 430). Almost seventy years after Constantine legalized Christianity, Theodosius established the Christian faith as the official religion of the Roman Empire. From then on, Christianity spread rapidly. Some converted to Christianity to advance in Roman society or out of fear of Roman authorities, but many converted willingly. These conversions catapulted Christianity forward as a leading religion of the Roman Empire, which then encompassed most of Europe and North Africa.

Shortly after Theodosius' decree, Augustine became bishop of Hippo in North Africa. An adult convert to Christianity, Augustine came to be one of the most influential theologians in the history of the Christian church. At this time, basic Christian beliefs were still contested, so Augustine articulated much of his theology in response to competing interpretations of the faith and to non-Christian faiths of the fourth and fifth centuries. Through these conflicts, Augustine provided significant explorations of the Trinity and human sinfulness, as well as the relationship between church and state. Augustine's numerous writings greatly influenced Christian thought from the fifth century to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century and beyond.

Despite his powerful influence, Augustine did not end the disputes within Christianity. At the church councils, which continued to take place every 50-100 years, questions about Jesus' humanity and divinity—that is, his identity as the Son of God—proved an ongoing source of controversy. As Christians from different areas of the world drew on the philosophical traditions of

their cultures to reflect upon these questions, the most marked differences arose between Christian leaders of the Latin West and those of the Greek East. In the year 1054 C.E., these disagreements culminated in the “Great Schism” that divided Christianity into two major strands, Western and Eastern. Today, Eastern Christianity includes the Orthodox churches, while Western Christianity includes the Catholic and Protestant churches. Because the Orthodox Church in America accounts for only about one percent of Christians in the United States, this primer considers only Western Christianity from this point on.

Western Christianity flourished during the High Middle Ages of eleventh- to thirteenth-century Europe. Christianity inspired exquisite art, music, and architecture. As the first universities were established, Christian theology became highly systematized, most notably in the works of Thomas Aquinas (b. 1225-d. 1274). The leader of the Western Christian church, the pope, was a major figure in European politics. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, the papacy lost some of its moral authority due to widespread corruption in the church, and many Christians began to question the power of Rome.

The Emergence of Protestant Christianity (1500 C.E.-Present)

These questions eventually led to another major split within the Christian church in the early sixteenth century. What is now known as Protestant Christianity first began to emerge in present-day Germany, where Christians protested (hence the name “Protestant”) corruption in the Christian church.

The key figure of the German protest was a Christian monk, Martin Luther (1483-1543). In 1517 Luther wrote ninety-five theses criticizing various corruptions in the church, most notably its practice of selling “indulgences.” In their original form, indulgences were gifts offered to the church by repentant sinners to show their gratitude to God for the forgiveness of their sins. By the early 1500s, the practice had become corrupted, and it appeared that the Christian church was selling forgiveness rather than merely accepting gifts from the faithful. Luther criticized this practice for de-emphasizing repentance and making Christians think they could buy God’s forgiveness. Instead, Luther preached that salvation is a gift from God that comes through faith alone upon repentance for sin. Luther also objected to the hierarchical structure of the Christian church, arguing that any Christian could interpret the Bible and serve as a minister as well as any other; this idea is now known as the “priesthood of all believers.” His efforts at reform, however, met with resistance, and in 1522 Christian authorities condemned his theological claims. Luther continued his attempts at reform, and his followers eventually formed a new Christian group distinct from the original Western or “Catholic” church. These Christians became known as “Lutherans” and remained most numerous in Germany. Today, in the United States, Lutherans are one of the larger Protestant denominations, numbering about five million.

Other reformations closely followed Luther’s. The most successful included the Calvinist, English, and radical reformations; these movements eventually resulted in several new churches. (As a result of these and subsequent divisions, the various Christian churches are distinguished by differences in theology and worship practices and

are now known as “denominations.”) The Calvinists took their name from the French lawyer and theologian John Calvin (1509-1564), who fled the Catholic city of Paris to avoid persecution for his religious ideas. He eventually settled in the thoroughly Protestant city of Geneva. While several of Calvin’s ideas paralleled Luther’s, Calvin advocated a closer relationship between church and state than Luther. (For more on the relationship between church and state in the U.S., see the paper on Separation of Church and State.) Calvin’s ideas influenced many Western Europeans, including an English group known as the Puritans. The Puritans immigrated across the Atlantic in the late seventeenth century; as a result, the United States has a strong Reformed-Calvinist tradition. Several present-day American Protestant groups, including Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and the Reformed Church in America, have Calvinist roots.

The English Reformation began in 1529 with King Henry VIII’s decision to annul his marriage in defiance of the pope’s orders. To justify his annulment in religious terms, Henry established the English or “Anglican” church, making himself the titular head. This church eventually adopted a blend of Catholic and Protestant ideas; the Thirty-Nine Articles, written in the latter years of the sixteenth century, summarize the principles of Anglican theology. In the United States today, the Episcopalian church has Anglican roots.

The Anabaptists, whose movement is called the “Radical Reformation,” separated themselves more definitively from the Roman faith than the Lutherans or Calvinists. Anabaptists rejected some traditional worship practices that Lutherans and Calvinists continued. Most notably,

Anabaptists refused to baptize infants, instead deferring baptism until people were old enough to request it. In the United States today, Quakers and Mennonites trace their origins to Anabaptists. Most have adopted a modern lifestyle, but small numbers within these denominations live in isolated communities, witnessing to their faith by dressing simply and preserving traditional ways of living. One well-known example is the Amish community in Pennsylvania. In the United States today, groups who trace their beginnings to the Radical Reformation are much smaller in comparison to other Christian denominations.

These four groups—Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans, and Anabaptists—represent the original manifestations of Protestant Christianity as distinct from Catholic Christianity. In response to the Protestant reformations, the Catholic church adopted some minor reforms and reaffirmed certain teachings, most notably at the Council of Trent (1545-1563); this response became known as the “Counter-Reformation.” Structurally, however, the Catholic church has continued until the present time in much the same form as it had in the Middle Ages; Roman Catholic churches in the United States are part of the worldwide Roman Catholic Church.

Protestant denominations continued to multiply in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Drawing on and further adapting Reformation ideas, additional groups such as Wesleyans, which includes Methodists and some Pentecostals, Restorationists, namely the Churches of Christ and Disciples of Christ, and Baptists organized in England and the United States. Baptists are now the largest Protestant denominational group in the United States, with about forty-seven million people claiming membership in American,

Southern, or independent Baptist churches. (For a discussion of the status in the United States of religions other than Christianity, see the paper on Religious Pluralism in the United States.)

Contemporary Protestant Christianity in the United States

In the contemporary United States, Christians and their beliefs are often described as “evangelical,” “fundamentalist,” “liberal,” or “conservative,” or some combination of these terms. Each term is controversial and freighted with subtext. This section begins to unpack these descriptions.

Evangelical Christianity

American Protestantism is often associated with a movement known as *evangelicalism*. The meaning of the term “evangelical” is commonly used to describe Protestant churches that stress evangelization, or converting non-Christians to faith in Jesus. As a general rule, evangelicals stress three core beliefs: Christianity requires conversion or “rebirth” through a personal spiritual encounter with Jesus Christ; Christians must witness their faith to or “evangelize” Christians and non-Christians alike; the Bible is directly inspired by God. Many other Christians, such as Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Catholics, also share these three beliefs; thus, evangelicals can be members of almost any denomination. However, some denominations, such as Baptists and Wesleyans, are more evangelical than others, such as Catholics and Lutherans. One major distinction is that the less evangelical denominations tend to emphasize formal doctrine as similar in importance to the three core

beliefs, while the more evangelical denominations do not.

Fundamentalist Christianity

Another term sometimes used to describe certain Christians—and people of other faiths, including Muslims—is *fundamentalist*. This term refers to people who maintain a literalist interpretation of their religious faith. Within American Christianity, fundamentalist Protestants share the evangelical emphasis on Jesus Christ but shun participation in American politics and culture. Also, they often insist upon a literal interpretation of the Bible, whereas other Christians understand some parts of the Bible to be symbolic or metaphorical. Not all Christian evangelicals are fundamentalists, but all Christian fundamentalists are evangelicals insofar as they embrace the three foundational beliefs described above. In the United States today, Christian fundamentalists constitute a small but vocal minority of the Christian population.

Liberal and Conservative Christianity

Various Christian denominations are also sometimes characterized as *liberal* or *conservative*. Some denominations even contain both liberal and conservative groups. Generally speaking, liberal Christians accept historical and scientific information that calls into question the literal truth of some biblical stories, while conservatives are typically less convinced that such knowledge is relevant to faith. For example, liberals typically acknowledge the theory of evolution as a credible explanation of life’s origins, while conservatives adhere to a literal interpretation of the biblical account of creation. In contrast to conservatives, liberals also tend to display more openness toward

cultural attitudes about social problems and hold a more positive view of human nature.

American Christianity contains many denominations that can be grouped according to evangelical, fundamentalist, liberal, and

conservative tendencies. Clearly, the distinctions go far beyond the simple division between Catholic and Protestant. Nevertheless, basic similarities in theology and practice remain; the next section explains these.

BASIC CONCEPTS IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Given this brief history of Christianity, one can imagine the difficulty of summarizing the basics of Christian theology. Yet Catholics and Protestants are all Christians, and they do share some basic and vital similarities in their religious beliefs and practices. They worship a monotheistic God, manifested in Trinitarian form; they believe that all humans are sinners, saved from their sin by the grace of God through Jesus; they profess that the Bible is God's word; they regard worship and prayer as important; they share sacramental practices; and they attempt to lead ethical lives. The following summaries of each of these points offer an introductory but by no means exhaustive description of these core beliefs.

God

Christians believe in a God who is omnipresent. This God is understood as both immanent, or present within the world, and transcendent, having an existence far beyond the world and beyond human imagination and experience. Christians believe that individual persons and groups can enjoy a personal relationship with God, but that God always remains a mystery beyond human understanding. Catholics and Protestants share this view of God, although Catholics often stress God's immanence more than Protestants.

This is evident particularly through their understanding of the sacraments, as will be explained in a later section.

What does it mean to understand God as both in and beyond the world? On the one hand, God is beyond direct human experience and comprehension. Christians, not unlike Muslims, stand in awe of the majesty and dominion of God over the earth. Christians proclaim that just as the human eye cannot look directly into the sun, so human beings cannot comprehend the full magnificence of God. On the other hand, the Bible is filled with earthly analogies for God, such as a parent, a shepherd, a woman searching for a lost coin, a king, and even a mother hen. So Christians also believe God loves humanity like a shepherd tending a flock or a parent caring for children. The challenge for Christians is to maintain a balanced view of God as both in and outside of the world—to remember that although they believe God cares for them tenderly as a mother, God also remains a mystery beyond their comprehension. Thus, Christians commonly feel reverence, love, and trust towards God: they recognize God's wondrous majesty, yet they are also grateful for God's merciful and intimate concern for them and the entire world.

Christian perceptions of God come primarily from the scriptures. The Hebrew Scriptures represent God as Lord of all, the one true deity of the cosmos. The Christian Scriptures continue to emphasize the monotheism of the Hebrew Scriptures, describing God as underived and unsurpassable. In the Gospels, for example, Jesus teaches only according to God's authority. Christians emphasize God's reign over all that is. In doing so, they believe they are faithful to the scriptures (both Hebrew and Christian) and to Jesus' teachings. Indeed, according to Christian tradition, sin is defined as turning away from God.

Alluding to Jesus, however, raises questions about the Christian claim to monotheism. Christians are distinguished from other monotheists by their belief in Jesus as the divine son of God. Non-Christians correctly ask: if Christians believe that Jesus is the son of God and worship him as God, how can they claim to be monotheists? The answer, for Christians, is found in the doctrine of the Trinity. To understand the Trinity, it is best first to consider the Christian belief in Jesus as human and divine, because the earliest Christians' understanding of Jesus was what prompted the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Jesus Christ

Christians' beliefs about Jesus are based in scripture and other historical artifacts and documents. Since few of these other documents contain information about Jesus, most knowledge comes from the Christian Scriptures. As noted, the four Gospels tell the story of Jesus' life and ministry, while the rest of the Christian Scriptures includes letters written by the apostle Paul and others from the first generations of

Christianity. These documents describe the early communities' faith in the message of Jesus' ministry and how they spread this message.

The Christian Scriptures report that there was no consensus about who Jesus was during his human lifetime, even among those who knew him. Although, even during his ministry, his disciples are sometimes portrayed as believing he was the Messiah and the son of God, other people thought he was a prophet or simply a great teacher. In a gradual process that began during Jesus' ministry and continued for many years after his death and resurrection, his followers came to believe that he was the son of God. The gradual development of this belief is evident in the Christian Scriptures and other historical documents that describe the worship practices of early Christian communities. As noted, the earliest Christians were Jews who continued to believe in their monotheistic God. These Christians remembered and struggled to understand Jesus' promise, recorded in the Gospels, that he would continue to be with them even when they could no longer see him, and that he would send his spirit to them as well. Gradually, through much prayer, worship, and discussion, Christians came to believe that God was now with them in three distinct ways: the "Father" or God of the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus the Son, and the Spirit.

Centuries passed before Christians officially decided that they could believe that Jesus was divine without sacrificing their belief in one God. How could this be? At the great councils of Nicaea, Chalcedon, and beyond, Christians determined that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. They argued that only God could save humans, but only a human should pay the debt owed to God for

sin. Thus, they came to believe that Jesus experienced the fullness of human existence—including birth, life, and death—yet was also divine. Christians respect Jesus’ mother Mary as the “Mother of God” because she gave birth to God’s own son. Christians believe that God became human in Jesus to provide access to God’s grace, and Christians view Jesus as the ideal human being, the full revelation of God’s plan for humanity. Because of their faith in Jesus, Christians believe that God is with them, loves them and saves them from sin and death, and will raise them to eternal life. In the end, Jesus’ simultaneous divinity and humanity is a mystery that Christians confess in faith, although they cannot fully explain it.

Christians also believe that Jesus brings God’s forgiveness of sin to humanity. Christians call this “salvation” or “atonement.” “Salvation” means that sin is taken away and people are reconciled with God. While all Christians believe that Jesus accomplished this, no consensus has been reached among Christians about how exactly he did so, as the scriptures describe it in various ways. For example, the word “atonement” usually refers specifically to the belief that it was Jesus’ death on the cross that accomplished the taking away of sins; the cross thus symbolizes both human guilt and God’s mercy. However, some Christians object to “atonement theology” on the grounds that it portrays God as a cruel and irresponsible parent, condemning a child to a horrible death. These Christians prefer to emphasize Jesus’ teaching and healing ministry as reconciling people with God and consider Jesus’ death a tragedy perpetrated by sinful people, not intended by God. Despite these differences, all Christians believe that through Jesus, God saves them from sin and promises them eternal life.

The Trinity

While the above subsection explains how the early Christians’ experience and memories of Jesus led them to believe that God was present with them in three ways, the doctrine of the Trinity remains one of the most difficult points of Christian theology to explain. Again, according to this doctrine, God is one being who is revealed to human beings in three ways: Father, Son (Jesus), and Spirit. In light of this assertion, Christian monotheism is easily challenged. If the God of the Hebrew Scriptures is God, and Jesus is God, and the Spirit is God, how can Christians claim to believe in one God and not three?

In light of their encounters with Jesus, the early Christians—who maintained their Jewish monotheistic roots—came to believe that the trinitarian nature of God was compatible with monotheism. They remembered, as recorded in the Christian Scriptures, that Jesus had a unique relationship with God, whom he called his father; that Jesus had promised to be with them even after he was no longer visible to them; and that Jesus had said he would also send his Spirit to them. Christians believed the Spirit did come to them at Pentecost, an event chronicled in the Christian Scriptures. As time went on, Christians also began to notice that several passages in their scriptures could be interpreted as describing distinctions within God. For example, the Gospels instruct Christians to be baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” In this way, over several centuries, the doctrine of the Trinity slowly took shape. As noted above, it was first officially formulated in the creed of the Council of Nicaea in 325 and developed further at Constantinople in 381.

Of course, the councils did not end debate over the Trinity. Given that the idea is difficult to comprehend, Christians have explained it with varying degrees of success. At times it has degenerated into a belief in God as three distinct divine beings or as one God revealed in different ways at different times. Such conceptions of the Trinity have given rise to charges of polytheism. In general, Christian theologians have succeeded better at saying what the Trinity is not than at explaining what it is. Briefly, however, the three persons can be described as follows: God the “Father” is the creator of all that is; God the “Son” is Jesus, who became human and came to earth; God the “Spirit” is the wisdom of God whom Jesus sent to be with humans after he left the earth. Theologians and mystics have understood these three persons of the Trinity to have various names. The most commonly used are Father, Son, and Spirit; others include Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, and Mother, Daughter, and Wisdom.

In sum, the Christian view of the Trinity is that the one eternal God is manifest in three ways. Christians believe that God has one nature, and that nature is to be relational; thus, the three divine “persons” are believed not only to exist in Christians’ experiences of God but also to correspond to real distinctions within God. How exactly this works remains a mystery. A common way to understand the Trinity is by analogy. For example, consider the several roles a single woman may occupy. She may be a daughter, a wife, and a mother. In each of these roles, she functions differently in relationship to the people around her. She remains one woman, yet at the same time, real differences in her own personhood correspond to her various roles. Similarly, for Christians, the one eternal God is three persons sharing one divine nature.

The Bible and Church Authority

Catholics and Protestants alike view the Bible as the revealed word of God and the primary authority for Christian life and worship. All Christians respect the ability of individual persons to read and interpret the Bible for themselves, but they do so in various ways. On the one hand, Protestant churches tend to follow a central principle of the sixteenth-century Reformations in assigning absolute authority to individual Christians to interpret the Bible for themselves. On the other hand, the Catholic church emphasizes that individual Christians who are reading the Bible should also consider the long tradition of church interpretation of scripture. When considering Catholic and Protestant interpretation of the Bible, further exploration of each one’s notion of *church* is needed. This section gives a general account of the theology behind the different Christian churches. (For a description of the varieties of religious worship and expression among Christians, see the paper on Religious Practice.)

Generally speaking, Protestants view *church* as a group of Christian believers who come together to worship God and support each other in their efforts to live a Christian life. Scripture serves as the final spiritual authority of the church; it is interpreted individually by each member as well as collectively by the group. According to Luther’s principle of the priesthood of all believers, any individual may be called forth by the community to serve as its spiritual leader or pastor. The pastor is not assumed to have a special understanding of the Bible compared to the other church members. Since they understand *church* as a particular community of believers, Protestants—especially evangelical Protestants—tend to read and

interpret the Bible as relevant to their current situation with less attention to how it has been interpreted in the past.

Some Protestant churches, such as Lutherans, Methodists, and especially Episcopalians, proceed formally in training and assigning their leaders. In the Episcopal church, which as noted is theologically a blend of Catholic and Protestant principles, leaders succeed one another in a formal fashion similar to that of the Catholic church. This “apostolic succession” is connected theologically back to Peter, one of Jesus’ closest followers who is now considered the first bishop of Rome (i.e., the pope). In these Protestant churches, as in the more evangelical churches, the emphasis in scriptural interpretation is usually on its present meaning, not on a tradition of past interpretation. However, they do have a long history of scholarly biblical interpretation. A difference is that when major disagreements over scriptural interpretation arise, these denominations will call general meetings to discuss them, whereas less highly organized evangelical churches are more likely simply to split and form new churches along these lines.

In contrast to most Protestants, Catholics define *church* as a much larger community. For Catholics, church includes not only the believers in a particular faith community, but also all Catholics around the world and even all believers who have died and whose souls are believed to be with God. The Catholic church has a very formal training or “ordination” process for its leaders; its leadership consists of a hierarchical structure of priests, who lead individual parishes, and bishops, who lead all the parishes in a given region (for example, all the Catholic parishes in eastern Massachusetts are headed by one bishop). Bishops, not the members

of the individual parishes, decide who will serve as priest for each parish. The bishop of Rome is known as the pope, and he serves as the symbolic head of the worldwide Catholic church. As the “first among equals,” the pope is considered to be the successor of Peter. Catholics do not worship the pope—only God is worshiped—but they do hold the office of the papacy in very high esteem because it symbolizes the unity of the worldwide Catholic church.

As noted, like Protestants, Catholics believe that any Christian can read and interpret the Bible. However, in accordance with the Catholic understanding of the church as a community that includes all believers, even those who have died, contemporary interpretations of scripture take into account past interpretations. The Catholic tradition of successive church leadership dates back to before most people were literate, when only priests and bishops could actually read and had to interpret the Bible for the people. Often these interpretations were written down and have been preserved as the collective wisdom of the church. Because official church leaders and those trained in church history and theology have a broad knowledge of this historical tradition of scriptural interpretation, their opinions also carry weight with individual Catholics as they read the scriptures. Thus, the Catholic church has a long tradition of scriptural interpretation.

In the end, however, the Catholic church emphasizes the final authority of the individual conscience. It teaches that individual Catholics who sincerely pray and study the scriptures should follow their consciences regarding spiritual matters, even if they disagree with church leaders and even if—as sometimes happens in extreme circumstances—this leads to their

excommunication from the church. This option of legitimate disagreement with church leaders is called “dissent.” Depending on the issue and on who is dissenting, church leaders treat dissent as more or less of a problem. For example, many Catholics disagree with the church’s official position on the issue of birth control, and this has not been considered serious enough to merit punishment. However, a few American bishops have attempted to discipline prominent Catholic politicians who deviate from the church’s strict anti-abortion stance. The tradition of dissent shows that although Catholics place more weight than Protestants on church tradition as an important part of scriptural interpretation, all Christians ultimately rely on the Bible and their consciences as the final spiritual authority in living the Christian life.

Traditional Catholic teachings derive from and are interdependent with scripture. Catholics regard the sacred writings of the Bible as the inspired word of God, written by humans who were guided by the Holy Spirit. For Catholics, the Bible is not free from human error, yet it nevertheless constitutes the record of God’s revelation and design for the world. Catholic tradition helps distinguish the divine elements from the human elements in the Bible. For instance, Catholics (and most Protestants) now interpret the biblical justification of slavery as a function of a past historical era, and they are certain that slavery is contrary to God’s will. In this way, tradition provides guidance for Catholics.

In sum, both Protestants and Catholics believe that the church is composed of humans gathered together to confess their faith in Jesus and worship God. All Christians agree that the Bible is the primary authority for Christian life. Most

Protestants profess “the priesthood of all believers” and stress contemporary interpretation of the Bible, while Catholics and some Protestants also respect the long tradition of scriptural interpretation, including the teaching ability of church leaders and theologians. The authority and legitimacy of a Protestant church or leader often correlates only to adherence to the Bible, while for Catholics, tradition is an important part of both biblical interpretation and the appointing of church leaders.

While all Christians understand the Bible as the authority for Christian life, they differ over the question of the Bible’s “inerrancy.” Representing the far ends of the spectrum are Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants. Catholics believe the Bible was inspired by God but composed by various people over many centuries, so they view inconsistencies and contradictions as a result of human fallibility or cultural change. For Catholics, the challenge is to determine which passages are directly relevant and which must be reinterpreted. Fundamentalist Protestants believe that God’s inspiration of the scriptures means that everything recorded in them is literally true and free from error, or “inerrant”; they consider the Bible to be directly applicable to contemporary life. Evangelical, conservative, and liberal Protestants fall between these two extremes. Evangelical and conservative Protestants typically understand the Bible as inspired by God, with any apparent errors representing mysteries that humans must struggle to understand; liberal Protestants tend to see inconsistencies as due to human error and cultural change.

Sin and Reconciliation

In accordance with their reading of the Bible, Christians believe that human beings were originally created in the image of God, meaning that they were completely good. However, people used their free will to turn away from God, following their own desires rather than God's will. This gave rise to a universal human tendency toward evil that Christians call "original sin"; individual sinful acts are believed to be rooted in this condition. Despite their sinfulness, Christians believe humans are still the image of God; Catholics hold a more optimistic view than Protestants about the extent to which the image remains present. Although humans retain a tremendous capacity for good, the tendency towards sin often outweighs the impulse towards good. This leads to a universal human need for salvation from sin and reconciliation with God.

Christians understand reconciliation with God as something accomplished by Jesus and accepted by the Christian in faith. As noted in the section on Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection reveal God's love and mercy. And as the Reformations stressed, forgiveness of sins (also called justification) also comes from God as a gift; it has nothing to do with human achievements. Catholics and Protestants share this view of justification as a free gift offered through Jesus and accepted in faith. While all Christians also agree that faith should lead to living a Christian life, or performing "good works," they sometimes disagree about the relationship of faith and works. In particular, Catholics and evangelical Protestants have emphasized the need to grow in faith by doing good works, while other Christians such as Lutherans have stressed the distinction between faith and works. However, recent documents such

as the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," which was published by the Lutheran and Catholic churches, show that this particular difference is being resolved.

Sacraments

In Christian worship, sacraments are ritual practices that are believed to bring people into tangible union with God. Sacraments are understood as visible signs of God's grace. When a sacrament is performed, prayers are said and elements such as water, wine, bread, and oil may be used. Protestants usually celebrate two sacraments, while Catholics, in accordance with their greater emphasis on God's immanence, celebrate seven. Almost all Christians observe the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. For Catholics, the other five are confession, confirmation, matrimony, holy orders, and anointing of the sick. Thus, sacraments often mark important epochs in a Christian's life. This section describes the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist.

Baptism celebrates a person's entrance into the Christian family. In some denominations, such as Catholicism and Lutheranism, people are baptized as infants; in others, baptism is performed when the person requests it. According to the Christian Scriptures, the tradition of baptism began with Jesus, who, following a Jewish custom, was baptized with water at the start of his ministry. Since then, Christians have been baptized to symbolize their new identity as God's children as they commence lives as Christians. At a baptism, the person being baptized—or, if an infant, the person's parents—affirms his or her belief in the Trinitarian God. Water is then sprinkled on the person's head, or the person may

be fully immersed in water, to symbolize the washing away of sin. The baptized person enters the Christian life as a new creature, freed from original sin. This freedom is not experienced fully in earthly life; Christians do not claim that they no longer sin after baptism. Rather, they are confident that God forgives their sins, and with faith in their reconciliation with God through Jesus, they try to perform only good works. When they fail, they remember God's forgiveness as symbolized at their baptism and try to do better.

The *Eucharist*, usually known among Protestants as the Lord's Supper or communion, is the second sacrament Christians celebrate regularly. In Catholic churches the Eucharist is celebrated daily, while Protestant churches may only celebrate it every week or once a month. The Eucharist is usually celebrated within the context of a worship service; it reenacts the final meal Jesus ate with his followers before his death. The Christian Scriptures report that at this meal, which was a Jewish Passover feast, Jesus broke bread and raised a cup of wine. He declared that the bread and wine were his body and blood, given to his followers for the forgiveness of sin, and he instructed the disciples to eat and drink in this manner in memory of him. Accordingly, in Christian worship, the minister (pastor or priest) takes bread and wine, repeats the words Jesus spoke, and invites all believers to consume the bread and wine in remembrance of Jesus.

Christians have long debated about whether the Eucharistic bread and wine only *symbolize* Jesus'

body and blood or actually *become* Jesus' body and blood. In particular, the sixteenth-century Reformers had diverse understandings of the Eucharist. Luther taught the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist but declined to speculate about exactly what this meant. Anglicans held that Christ was present in the bread and wine "in a heavenly sense," while Calvin maintained that the sacrament served simply to remind believers of Jesus' death. Meanwhile, Catholics retained the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation, the idea that the bread and wine are transformed into Jesus' body and blood. Today, while both Protestants and Catholics observe the Eucharist, most Protestant churches teach that the bread and wine somehow *symbolize* Jesus' presence; the Catholic church, here interpreting the Bible more literally, still teaches that the bread and wine mysteriously *become* the body and blood of Christ.

In addition to baptism and Eucharist, the other five sacraments celebrated in the Catholic church are reconciliation (confession and forgiveness of sins), confirmation (the adult decision to remain part of the church), marriage, holy orders or "ordination," and anointing of the sick. These sacraments mark major milestones in the life of faith. Many Protestants also mark these milestones and even use similar terms to describe them, but they do not consider these events to be "sacraments." This practice dates back to Luther, who emphasized the individual's direct relationship with God over the role of church leaders.

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES: WORSHIP AND PRAYER

Communal worship—informal or formal services during which Christians gather to offer praise and thanksgiving to God—is central to all Christian denominations. Communal worship may occur throughout the week, but Catholics and Protestants usually attend services on Sunday mornings. The style of these services differs greatly among the denominations.

The Catholic Mass is a liturgical celebration that includes songs of praise, formal prayers, readings from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, a talk by the priest interpreting the scriptures called the “sermon” or “homily,” the recitation of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, and the sacrament of Eucharist. The Mass is often described as “high church” because of the strict organization of the liturgy, the formal prayers, and the ceremonial robes worn by the priest.

Protestant worship ranges from “high church” to “low church” forms. Lutheran and Episcopal services are quite similar to the Catholic Mass, while evangelical worship often consists more simply of singing, a scripture reading, and a

sermon. Christian worship services usually last between sixty and ninety minutes but may be longer or shorter. (For more on Christian worship practices, see the paper on Religious Practice in the United States.)

Because Christians believe in a personal God who listens to individuals, and because Jesus instructs his followers to pray in the Christian Scriptures, Christians pray to sustain their relationship with God. Prayer takes many forms, including the ritualized prayers of worship services, personal prayer, group prayer, and even Bible study. Prayers may be silent or spoken aloud; contemplative, nonverbal forms of prayer are also practiced. Intercessory prayer, asking others to pray on one’s behalf, is also common. For Catholics, as noted, the church includes all believers, even those who have died; therefore, Catholics sometimes ask saints, including Mary, the mother of God, to “intercede” with God on their behalf. Among all Christians, the Lord’s Prayer or “Our Father,” which Jesus teaches his disciples to pray in the Gospels, is the most-recited prayer. (For the text of the Lord’s Prayer, see the Appendix.)

ETHICAL CHRISTIAN LIVING

How do these fundamentals of Christian theology transfer into action in the lives of Christians? The answer is complex, for the multiple expressions of Christian faith give rise to various understandings of the ethical Christian life. In general, however,

Jesus teaches in the Gospels that Christians are to love God and to love their neighbors as themselves, whether the neighbor be friend or enemy. Christians do not always succeed in following this command; however, it is manifested in the

Christian ideals of vocation, justice, and missionary activity.

Vocation

Like everyone else, Christians must work to earn a living, and most do not have jobs in churches. Yet vocation refers to the idea that people serve God through their everyday work. How does the ordinary labor of Christians relate to their spiritual lives? Put simply, Christians believe that any work that serves the neighbor and the community—the “common good”—also serves God. Virtually any labor can become an extension of Christian faith. The work of doctors, lawyers, and politicians has no greater spiritual value than that of carpenters, trash collectors, and cab drivers; what matters is their faithful exercise for the benefit of others. This idea extends to Christians’ personal lives as well; Christians have an obligation to serve relatives and friends charitably and responsibly. Of course, Christians do not always remember to conceive of their work in this fashion and sometimes adopt the idea that certain kinds of work are inherently more valuable. But the Christian idea of vocation is that any good work, done well, serves God.

Christians also use the word “vocation” to refer to the work for which a person seems particularly well suited, due to their abilities. Vocations are not always easily determined nor are they always easy. Many people spend much of their lives trying to identify their talents and how best to use them. Moreover, like anyone else, Christians do not always enjoy their work; sometimes, for reasons beyond their immediate control—lack of education, skill level, or physical ailments—they are engaged in unsatisfying jobs. The Christian understanding of vocation does not excuse

insufficient income or satisfaction; when injustice prevents a person from undertaking her or his proper vocation, that injustice should be resisted. Again, however, from the Christian perspective, the complexities and burdens of work notwithstanding, any work that serves the neighbor and the common good can also serve God.

Justice

The command to love one’s neighbor also captures the primary ethical position of Christians. As noted, this ideal, which Christians strive for but often fail to reach, comes from a scriptural command of Jesus. The Gospels record Jesus’ own love for his neighbors and his concern for justice: Jesus cares for the poor, the sick, and the outcasts of society, and he speaks out against the political, social, and economic circumstances that worsen their plight. Christians today are called to imitate Jesus, working to transform the world through love and advocacy for justice, as they themselves have been transformed by the love and forgiveness of God.

Christians recognize that their efforts to emulate Jesus will always fall short, but this does not excuse them from striving to obey this ethical imperative as well as they can in the circumstances in which they find themselves. For example, Christians should respect the dignity of every human being by trying never to exploit persons, groups, or nations as means to an end. And when conflict arises—whether it is an argument between two people or the possibility of international war—Christians should always exhaust all nonviolent options of reconciliation. Because Christians, like all people, are not perfect, they do not always live up to this “love principle”

and they are not always just in their actions and attitudes. Nevertheless, they are obligated to try.

Missionary Activity

The Christian life is also distinguished by *missionary activity*, also known as evangelism. In the Gospels, Jesus commands his followers to spread the good news about God to the whole world. Christians believe this task is ongoing. The task of spreading the Gospel intertwines with the Christian understanding of vocation and justice. Exercising one's vocation and working toward justice model the Christian faith for non-Christians, and as such they constitute a form of indirect evangelism. However, "evangelism" is usually associated with direct efforts to tell non-Christians about Jesus in the hope of converting them to the Christian faith. Because Christians believe that Jesus is the way to reconciliation with

God and eternal life, they are eager to share their faith with everyone. At its best, Christian evangelism is an act of love—the ultimate obedience to the command to love one's neighbor.

Christian evangelism often causes controversy. Non-believers and adherents of other faiths—and even some Christians themselves—tend to perceive evangelism as self-righteous and arrogant, often with good reason. Christian missionary activity has even become associated with Western imperialism, also with good reason. As a result, there is no consensus about the most appropriate and respectful way to introduce non-Christians to Christianity. Yet the Christian desire to spread the faith is not unique. Most of the major religious traditions of the world have attempted to increase their ranks through various forms of missionary activity.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this paper has been to familiarize the reader with the historical development of Christianity and the basic theological tenets of this religion. Further exploration of these concepts is encouraged. In today's world, an

important challenge for all people of faith is to learn about religions different from their own. Meeting that challenge may be the surest path to peaceful coexistence among people of different faiths.

APPENDIX

The Lord's Prayer ("Our Father"):

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 C.E.):

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, light from light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;

he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son], who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

In order to provide an accessible introduction to religion in the United States, this paper has been produced without footnotes and with few direct quotations from secondary literature. It nevertheless reflects the influence of a wide range of scholarly arguments. This annotated bibliography presents a complete list of the texts to which this paper refers, as well as a number of other resources with further

information about the topics discussed. Comments following each citation indicate the nature of the text and, where applicable, the extent of the paper's reliance upon it.

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