

The Essentials of Christianity

Beginnings:

Because of Christianity's dominance among Western populations over the past two thousand years, its calendar remains the one in common use. Thus year one of the Common Era (1 CE) is understood as the year that **Jesus**, a Jewish man from the town of Nazareth, was born. After three years of teaching and healing beginning when he was 30, Jesus was condemned by both the Jewish and Roman leadership of the time on charges of blasphemy and rebellion. He was **crucified** in the year 33 CE or thereabouts. His Jewish followers believed Jesus to have been **raised from the dead** three days later,



and identified him as the **Messiah**, meaning God's anointed one (Christos, in the Greek of the time), sent to restore God's people to a right relationship with God. He came to be understood as the fullness of God in human form, and was eventually designated as God's Son. The earliest writings of his followers present differing views and accounts; he left no writings himself. The difficult separation of these followers from Judaism occupied much of the first century CE; eventually they called themselves **Christians** and their growth ended up being strongest among non-Jews rather than Jews.

Central teachings and practices:

- It was believed that Jesus had promised that God's spirit would remain after Jesus left mortality; thus the paradox of the **Trinity**: one God, but in three persons - God the Father or Creator, God the Son or Redeemer, and God the Holy Spirit or Sanctifier (often imaged as a dove, as above).
- Four accounts of Jesus' life, known as **gospels**, have been included in what became the Christian Bible (the Hebrew Bible, called the Old Testament, and the newer writings of Jesus' followers, the New Testament), along with other writings by some of the earliest leaders.
- The first few centuries of Christian history were marked by severe disputes over correct theology and language regarding the Trinity and especially the person of

Jesus Christ. Eventually a series of **creeds** (statements of belief) came to be regarded as definitive: the Apostles Creed, used as a confession of faith at baptism services in the first centuries; the Nicene Creed, adopted at a council of bishops in Nicaea in 325; and the Athanasian Creed, which came into use in the sixth century. Each sought to clarify the doctrine of the Trinity.

- From the beginning, theological disputes and regional differences in worship and governance led to multiple Christianities. In all of these forms, the two central acts of worship have always been **baptism**, the ceremony of initiation, and the **eucharist**, which commemorates the death and resurrection of Jesus through reenacting the Last Supper, his meal with friends the night before he died.

The main branches of Christianity:

- Those claiming membership in a form of the Christian Church make up about a third of the world's population (32 billion), and about 70% of the US population (about 205 million).
- 12% are **Orthodox** (less than 1% of the US population), meaning they belong to the Eastern tradition that has been centered in Constantinople (Istanbul today). The schism with the western Church was solidified in the 11th century with the refusal of these churches to recognize the bishop of Rome as the final authority. This branch includes the Greek, Russian, and Antiochian Orthodox, among others.
- About 50% are **Roman Catholic** or belong to a number of smaller Eastern churches that accept the bishop of Rome, the pope, as the final authority (21% of the US population).
- 37% are **Protestant**, broadly defined (46% of the US population): churches created in the Protestant Reformation in 16th-century Europe (Lutherans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Methodists); the Anglican churches (Episcopalians, in the US); and independent churches (nondenominational churches in the US, China, and sub-Saharan Africa, for example). There is no central "Protestant" authority.
- The final 1% (3% of the US population) are Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others that may or may not identify themselves as part of the wider Christian Church.
- Unitarian Universalism is the combination of two movements that grew in 19th century British and American Christianity; most adherents today do not identify as Christian, but many do; total world population is about 800,000.