Introduction to Christianity

Christianity includes the following divisions:

1. Roman Catholicism
2. Eastern Orthodoxy
3. Protestantism

Christianity is said to be a historical religion based on actual, historical events surrounding the life of a Jewish carpenter who was born in a stable, lived until the age of 33 and who was baptized. According to some historians, Jesus is referred to as the most influential historical figure in Western civilization. Jesus taught that G-ds greatest attribute was compassion and the social barriers distinguishing common people at the time was an affront to this principle. In his life, Jesus fulfilled acts of goodness and he manifested “divine goodness.” Jesus’ followers believed that he was G-d in human form—but not until after his death and resurrection. Following the crucifixion it is believed that his followers were convinced that death did not prevent him from rising – and that beginning with Easter Sunday he revealed himself to the people.

Jesus was now revered as G-d and could be known and experienced by anyone anywhere. Although the human form of Christ departed from the physical world he would continue to reveal himself to humanity through the Church. The word Christ is actually a description, deriving from the Greek word “Christos” which means “the anointed one.” The Doctrine of the Incarnation declares that in Christ G-d assumed a human body—it affirms that Christ was G-d Man; being both G-d and man. For Christians Jesus was G-d incarnate.

He advocated to see things differently and was encouraged that people of the time would change and become compassionate. Jesus taught to resist evil behavior by any means and to love our enemies. His ministry reached out to sinners and the marginalized—and he was known to challenge religious authorities; he preached tolerance love and faith. Jesus was known to define himself as the Messiah and as a result—he made enemies in his time. He emphasized G-ds overwhelming love of humanity and the need for people to accept that love; to let it transform our lives and let it transmit to others. Jesus declared that the kingdom of G-d was within man—and that the most noble and worthy mission for humanity was to love all; to have compassion for the sick and poor— to repent for our sins and seek salvation for our soul. Jesus himself experienced G-d as infinite love. For Jesus, G-d loves human beings absolutely; without evaluating their human worth. Remember that Christianity is a linear faith—meaning that followers are socially obligated to perfect humanity through performing kind deeds for humanity. Jesus lived a life of humility and absolute self-giving. Followers of Christianity believe that good will ultimately overcome evil.

Roman Catholicism

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The Church is seen as the teaching authority and G-d appeared to humanity in the person of Jesus Christ to teach humanity the way to salvation. Eventually this formed the concept of papal infallibility and understanding of the pope as the head of the Church. The pope is considered infallible in faith and morals—and does not suggest that he possesses the answer to every complex or difficult question. The Roman Catholic Church is structured as an authoritative hierarchy—with the Pope being the head of the Roman Catholic Church—and who lives in Rome at the Vatican. Cardinals are appointed by the pope and they constitute the advisory board of the Church. At the passing of a pope, the College of Cardinal elects his successor.

It is understood that the apostles of Jesus established the early Christian Church, and in 313 the Roman Catholic Church was officially recognized by the Roman Emperor Constantine. In 380 it became the official religion of the Roman Empire. In terms of population, Roman Catholics represent the largest group among Christians; with over one billion followers worldwide living in Central and Southern Europe, Latin America and Ireland.

In 1054 the Eastern Orthodox Church separated itself from the Roman Catholic Church. This schism emerged because the Eastern Orthodox Church’s refusal to confirm the primacy of the Pope. The other schism surfaced in the sixteenth century with the Protestant Reformation.

Beliefs and Practices

The basic beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church can be summarized in the Nicene Creed:

*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, one in Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us men and our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became a man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered, died, and was buried. On the third day he rose again in fulfillment of 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. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He 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.*

There are other basic Christian doctrines that Roman Catholics honor, including the Trinity of G-d: with the trinity consisting of G-d, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Further, Roman Catholicism is anchored in faith “what moves us to believe is not the fact that revealed truths appear as true and intelligible in the light of our natural reason; we believe because of the authority of G-d himself who reveals them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived.”

According to Roman Catholicism the concept of original sin means that human beings are inherently sinful--- thus man needs to be saved. Original sin derives from the story of Adam and Eve in the Old Testament Book of Genesis. Jesus Christ died on the cross atoning for our sins—thus assuring Roman Catholics an eternal life with G-d in heaven. Salvation is gained through G-d’s grace--- and the sacraments are a vehicle for sustaining grace. The seven Sacraments are: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Marriage.

Protestantism

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Approximately two-thirds of Christians are considered Protestants and the Protestant faith separated itself from the Catholic Church in Europe in the 16th century. Reportedly, the Protestants objected to the practice of seeking a pathway to G-d through the Pope – declaring that each human being was responsible for creating his/her own relationship with G-d without passage through the Pope and the Catholic Church. Eventually the Protestants created denominations within Protestantism which included Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and the United Church of Christ.

Protestants believe that each individual, and not the Church is the significant element in religious life. The European Protestants reinforced this belief—acknowledging that no single Church or entity is necessarily the entity everyone needs to attend and worship. Interestingly, one can consider this understanding to be the precursor to the separation of Church and state.

Common Elements in Protestantism

In all of the Protestant denominations the one prevailing idea that has influenced American culture is the value of self-improvement. Given that human beings sin, one may seek forgiveness from G-d. Further, the Protestant Work Ethic began to be deeply imbedded into American culture with its focus on achieving prosperity through self-discipline and hard work. In part, America owes the birth of the Industrial revolution to hard working Americans. Protestants considered all forms of work performed by Americans as worthy and holy. Protestants expect their followers to be humanitarian by donating money to charitable organizations and sustaining the poor and disenfranchised.

Denominations of Protestantism

The common thread across the Protestant denominations is respect for individual experience and group autonomy. Thus, the expression “the priesthood of all believers” honors this credo which asserts that all people, the farmer, factory worker and lay public have equal access to G-d.

The Methodist Church was founded by the English cleric John Wesley and this faith emphasizes repentance and individual faith, in addition to holding followers responsible for improving society. Methodism is one of the largest Protestant denominations in America.

Baptists are the largest Protestant denomination in America—and as a faith it places much emphasis on New Testament passages that direct attention on the importance on being “born again” and they treat Jesus as Savior.

The Major Christian Holidays

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The following represents a brief description of Christian rituals and celebrations; reviewing what the holiday means and how it is observed.

Lent

The season of Lent offers one the opportunity to repent and fast—serving as spiritual welcoming of Easter. The first day of Lent is observed on Ash Wednesday—marked as the seventh Wednesday before Easter. Christians ritually smudge ashes on their forehead to remind humanity of our mortality and acknowledgment of dust to dust.

Palm Sunday

Palm Sunday marks the last Sunday before Easter where Christians reflect on the suffering Jesus experienced.

Good Friday

The death of Jesus is remembered on the Friday before Easter. One may observe this day by fasting or other penitential practices such as meditating on the stations of the cross.

Easter

The most important holiday for Christians is Easter—where one celebrates the resurrection of Jesus following his crucifixion; and asserting one’s rebirth by his/her connection with the risen Christ.

Christmas

Christmas is celebrated on December 25th, before Epiphany and it represents the birth of Christ. Christians exchange gifts during this holiday—and the observance of Christmas did not begin until about the 4th century C.E.

Christmas is also celebrated as a secular as well as religious holiday. As a religious holiday, Christians practice generosity, gratitude and kindness during this time.

Epiphany

Epiphany is celebrated on January 6th and it symbolizes the Wise Men visiting the newborn Jesus—and this story is in the Gospel of Matthew. Epiphany has also been described as an encounter between a gentile and Jesus.