

With over two billion followers, the monotheistic Abrahamic tradition of Christianity is currently the largest of the world's religions. Though apparently declining in Europe and the United States, Christianity in the past few decades has seen major growth in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia. **Charismatic** modes of Christianity (that is, those that emphasize the “gifts of the Spirit”) arising largely from the global south, then, are exploding, even as mainline denominations that have been dominant in the West are dimming.

Such shifting dynamics in Christianity, with some communities gaining power and flourishing while others wane and perhaps disappear, are not new. In fact, among Christians a broad diversity of beliefs and practices is and has been the norm. From the hope and fear of the early Jesus movement, through desert fathers, gnostics, mystics, empire formation, reformations, reactions to the rise of science and Darwinism to today's global religion, the history of Christianity has such rich complexity that rather than speaking of a singular monolithic whole we might more accurately speak of the many *Christianities*.

Although differing wildly in construal, one constant, however, spans the diverse Christianities and sets them apart from all other traditions, namely, the central relation to the Jewish rabbi named Jesus (Hebrew *Yeshua*) who was deemed by his followers to be the chosen or “anointed” one (Hebrew *Messiah* or Greek *Christos*). Executed by the Romans in the early first century of the common era in Jerusalem as a political criminal and reviled by some of his fellow Israelites as a religious heretic, Jesus one way or another marks *the* way that all Christians follow, however differently.

### **Compiling the Sacred Stories: Canon Formation of Christian Scriptures**

The story that founds and grounds a Christian's world is that of salvation through Jesus Christ. We find the most influential retellings of this story in what are known as the four **gospels**, from the Greek for “good news.” Jesus himself wrote no texts, but as a Jew whose earliest followers all considered themselves Jewish as well, the Torah and stories of the Hebrew Bible defined his world. The gospel narratives of his life, teachings, death, and resurrection, then, were likely composed about two generations after Jesus, roughly between 60 and 100 CE. These stories, together with the acts of the **apostles** (Greek for messengers), many epistles (letters), and

the apocalyptic book of Revelation, form the grouping of texts that Christians call the **New Testament**.

After a contentious process lasting into the fourth century, this New Testament alongside the Hebrew scriptures, which Christians began calling the **Old Testament**, came to constitute the Christian canon (a collection of texts deemed sacred and authoritative). The term canon derives from the Greek word for a plumb line, a rope with a weight attached used for such tasks as measuring the vertical straightness of walls. And by declaring theirs the *New* in contrast to the *Old* covenant with the Israelites, early Christians were clearly trying to erect straight walls between themselves and Judaism, albeit a caricatured version of Judaism constructed for Christians' purposes. As we will see, such in-group/out-group polemics of defining **orthodoxy**, which in Greek literally means "straight teaching," over and against **heresy** shaped much of Christian history from the earliest centuries to today. Thus a very important thing to remember as one is introduced to the variety of Christianities is that what Christians call the gospel comes to us through messiness and multiplicity.

Though the early church that became regnant decided ultimately on four gospels from among the multitude of such collections of sayings and stories proliferating among communities of Christians during the first few centuries of the Common Era (CE), they nevertheless did not harmonize them simply into one story. And though the four canonical narratives differ from each other, sometimes significantly, the church even more significantly decided to retain that diversity. Thus even orthodox positions affirm that the one gospel, or the "good news" of salvation through Jesus, must be understood according to at least the four different ways of the authors of pious memory if not historical fact—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Moreover, the very word **Bible**, which Christians and Jews share for referring to their respective compilations as a whole, comes from the Greek, *ta biblia*, meaning "the books"—not one book but many books. Being more library than book, then, the Bible preserves plurality and diversity in its very name.

### **Basic Myths and Rituals: The Bondage to Liberation and Death to Life Practices of Baptism and the Eucharist**

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life," Jesus is portrayed as saying in *The Gospel According to John* (14:6). For the ancient Israelites, the way led from the creation of Adam out east of Eden after eating the fruit, to surviving the flood with Noah, showing hospitality and

willingness to sacrifice with Abraham, fleeing slavery in Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea with Moses, and down from Sinai to follow the law revealed from on high. For Jews, this story speaks of God's love for them as the chosen people. Christians share this same story, but for them the way leads from bondage to liberation and from death to life in Jesus Christ.

The rituals that perform this story, reinforcing and making it real for individuals in Christian communities, are primarily **baptism** and the **Eucharist**. They are considered **sacraments**—symbols that reveal the sacred, or outward and visible signs of the gift of God's inward and spiritual grace. Baptism (from Greek for "washing") is the one-time ritual initiating believers into the community of the faithful and involves washing with water, while the Eucharist (from Greek for "thanksgiving") is a regular communal meal that involves eating bread and drinking wine.

## Baptism

Believers deem baptism to free them from the shackles of **sin** (failing to follow God's will). Like the Israelites fled from bondage to freedom through the waters of the Red Sea, so Christians pass from sinfulness into new life in Christ through the waters of baptism. The ritual evokes not only the waters of Exodus, but also of Genesis at the beginning of creation when the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters (Genesis 1:2) and after the flood when God established the covenant with Noah and all living creatures that never again would waters destroy the world (Genesis 9:11). In addition to creation, salvation, and liberation, Christians associate the waters used in performing the ritual of baptism with the maternal fluids of the birth process from which we all come. The overarching symbolism of the ritual is thus at once mortal and natal—signifying death to a former life captive to sin and rebirth into the new life free with Jesus. For Christians, Jesus reveals and effects the forgiveness of sins, and baptism is the initiatory ritual for this reconciliation, restoring our relations with ourselves, with each other, with creation, and especially with God to their rightful goodness.

Embracing the "good news" of salvation through baptism into the community of Christians, though, oftentimes requires also accepting the prior bad news of sinfulness. Those who share the story of salvation through Jesus are known as **evangelists**, from the Greek for "messenger of good news," and their methods frequently involve first convincing people that they are sinners in need of salvation. As the apostle Paul wrote: "all have sinned and fall short of

the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) later developed this Pauline theology into the doctrine of Original Sin, which was to be incredibly influential, especially in the West. Tracing the roots of sin back to “the Fall” of Adam and Eve disobeying God’s command to not eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Augustine argues that their acting on the desire to “be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5) means that all who come after suffer from the consequences of that original sin. Humans, then, are totally corrupt and incapable of obeying the will of God. This mode of Christianity deems us powerless to save ourselves and thus in desperate need of a higher power to liberate us from the bondage of sin.

First convincing people of sin, however, does not seem to be how Jesus himself predominantly effected conversions. The gospels portray Jesus attracting followers more through the power of his charisma than through the conviction of their sin. Jesus calls and they come. He preaches good news to the poor and comfort to the afflicted. He teaches forgiveness of wrongs and love of enemies. And people listen. He opens the ears of the deaf, restores sight to the blind, makes the lame walk, cleanses the lepers, feeds the hungry, calms the storm, and raises the dead. And people follow. Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God among and within you, governed by the rule of love. And his followers drop everything, leave their families, and form new communities based on his inclusive and egalitarian values: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45).

Even Paul, from whose theology the process of evangelization through conviction of sin predominantly comes, did not first have a sense of sin before experiencing salvation. Prior to his conversion, his name was Saul and he considered himself a powerful figure among the Pharisees, a prominent group among the many varieties of Judaism in the first century distinguished in part by their belief in personal immortality. When on his way to Damascus to persecute some of those early egalitarian communities of Christians, Saul was proud of his righteousness. As *The Acts of the Apostles* tells the story, into that dark prideful state a beam of blinding light broke— “suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’” (Acts 9:3-5). So prior to a sense of sin, Saul experienced Jesus as a mystical power in the form of blinding light energy identified with

and as the persecuted, and then became Paul, who did more than perhaps any other person to catapult Christianity toward becoming what we now think of as a world religion.

All four gospels tell the story of Jesus' own baptism for repentance and the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22, and John 1:32-34). For instance, *The Gospel According to Mark*, perhaps the earliest of the canonical gospels, records Jesus being baptized by John in the river Jordan, and just as Jesus was coming up from full immersion in the water, "he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased'" (Mark 1:10-11). Much as the dove dropping the olive branch in Noah's hands symbolizes salvation through the promise of dry land, so the Holy Spirit descending like a dove on Jesus shows salvation through the promise of new life in the Spirit.

In addition to that allusion to having survived the flood in the past, the gospel stories of Jesus' baptism contain some of the seeds of the future doctrine of the Trinity. Though the word appears nowhere in the Bible, the Trinity nevertheless conveys a concept central to most varieties of Christianity, namely that Father, Son, and Spirit are all God—three persons, one substance (see below). With another story involving water, *The Gospel According to John* even portrays Jesus teaching the woman at the well that following him as Messiah means worshipping God not in any one particular place—either mountain or temple—but anywhere and everywhere because "true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" since "God is spirit" (John 4:21-24). And with what will be formalized as the Trinitarian invocation spoken at most Christian baptisms, *The Gospel According to Matthew* reports Jesus as commanding Christians to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Inhaling upon coming up from the waters of baptism, then, breathes in the Holy Spirit and begins the new life in Christ. Thus, in emulation of Jesus and in obedience to his command, Christians seek to be baptized and to baptize others, spreading the good news of salvation through the power of the Spirit.

After his baptism, Jesus embarked on his public ministry. Mark's gospel actually begins with Jesus' baptism, lacking the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke that fuel the well known Christmas stories—conceived of the Jewish unwed teenage virgin Mary, and born in Bethlehem in the modest manger as Joseph and the animals looked on because there was no room at the inn, with the star and the wise men heralding his coming as king. Only Luke tells of his time between

birth and baptism, recounting his circumcision and his preteen exploits of being twelve years old and separating from his parents to sit in dialogue with the temple teachers in Jerusalem, dazzling all with his answers. Following his baptism at approximately thirty years old, Jesus began his time of preaching, teaching, and healing, usually thought to last about three years until the period leading up to his crucifixion, the time referred to as the **Passion**, from the Greek for “suffering.”

## Eucharist

“I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer,” *The Gospel According to Luke* describes Jesus as saying to his disciples on his last night with them (Luke 22:15). Christians commemorate this last supper through the regularly repeated ritual of the Eucharist that reenacts this dinner of Jesus and his closest disciples, which itself was a reenactment remembering the Passover and the Israelites’ liberation from bondage in Egypt. As the Israelites were saved through the sacrificial blood of a lamb placed on their doorposts when the Lord passed over Egypt striking down every firstborn—both human and nonhuman animals (Exodus 11-12)—so Christians are saved through the blood of Christ placed in their bodies. Much as the older Mosaic covenant was consecrated with blood (Exodus 24:8), so too Christians mark their new covenant with this regular drinking of wine as a sign of Christ’s blood which was shed for all.

“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?” Paul asks in his first letter to the Corinthians, which was written earlier than the canonical gospels, probably between 30-60 CE. “The bread that we break,” he continues, “is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?” (I Cor 10:16). The gospels record Jesus eating with tax collectors, sex workers, and sinners. He rejects his own family in favor of a new community formed around radical inclusiveness, especially of the marginalized in the society, and all centered on sharing communal meals. Jesus’ inclusive actions and community organizing would have been considered transgressive, and thus would have put him and all of his followers at odds with the dominant social, political, and religious forces of his time. Ultimately, these oppressive forces culminated in his crucifixion.

Christians listen to this tale of a horrific death at the hands of oppressive powers and yet hear the story of an even more powerful liberating force transforming death into life. Thus, on the third day of Jesus being dead, his followers report finding his tomb empty. Notably, the

tradition remembers a preeminent role for Mary Magdalene in knowing the resurrected Christ. All of the canonical gospels give her special mention in regard to reporting the empty tomb, and *The Gospel According to John* records her as the first to see the risen Christ. Mary Magdalene playing such a pivotal role rests uneasily alongside the transition within a few centuries to a male-dominated priestly class based on the authority of Peter, especially given her retention in the later recorded memory of men who probably would have preferred to have told a story more conducive to shoring up their patriarchal power.

If even the history told by the male “winners” mentions such a powerful role for a woman, we can surmise that early Christian communities likely must have included even more women who were later marginalized or completely effaced from the canonical Christian retellings, but Mary Magdalene’s importance was too well known to exclude (although she was later slandered as being one of the sex workers with whom Jesus most assuredly associated). The gospels agree, however, that many of Jesus’ followers saw him after his crucifixion and experienced his transformative presence. Faith in Jesus as a living force seems key to Christians’ core beliefs and practices.

Christians, then, seek to follow the way of Jesus through communal activities that move from bondage to liberation and from death to life.

### **Sins and Salvations: The Rise of the Church Fathers and Decline of Women and Gnostic Christians through Discourses of Orthodoxy and Heresy**

Oftentimes the story of early Christian history is told as one of Jesus fulfilling ancient Israelite prophecies and perfecting the Jewish religion such that the Christian church was founded on Peter, then promoted by Paul and passed down through the Patriarchs in its pure form to today, with that proper form decided according to whatever denomination declares authentic inheritance of this right religion. In this traditional story, the Jews refused to walk the path to which Jesus pointed (thus Christianity supposedly “supersedes” or takes the place of Judaism), and further along the way many groups got it wrong in one way or another and also split off down crooked paths. Not only is this story not historically accurate, but also it is socially quite dangerous, supporting all manner of “I’m right, you’re wrong” mentalities and violent actions. The truth is far messier than such supposedly clear supersession, succession, or schism. The way even of orthodoxy was never straight.

The traditional Christian story of its origins requires a pure form of the Jewish religion traceable back through Moses to Adam, but prior to the many Christianities there were also only ever Judaisms. The diversity of ancient Israelite religions can be seen even in the canonical gospels with the divides among Pharisees and Saducees (the latter group distinguished in part by not believing in life after death). John the Baptist may represent the Essenes, an ascetic group who sought spiritual rigor in the desert, while Judas, who perhaps betrayed Jesus in order to push him toward becoming a militaristic Messiah, may well have been one of the Zealots, a group desiring to die and perhaps kill rather than live under any rule but God's. Not to mention the Samaritans and esoteric mystics.<sup>1</sup> Jewish life of Jesus' time and before was thus also marked by multiplicity.

Moreover, the Judaism that we find in the New Testament is not so much an indication of Jewish piety as it was practiced then, now, or ever, as it is a reflection of what the Church Fathers were defining themselves against. It is their straw man, as it were, a caricature created to aid their own processes of identity construction, telling us not so much anything about Judaism as about what early Christians did not want to be. For example, the entire Pauline polemic of law vs. spirit represents a fundamental mischaracterization of basic Jewish piety. The idea of Jewish faith primarily involving slavish and dead adherence to law is a Christian fiction, projecting their fears of what idolatrous religiosity looks like so as to mirror back to them the image of what they loathe potentially in themselves—it is a reflection of their rejections.

In Jewish faith, the law is not burdensome but graceful—"graciously teach me your law," pleads the Psalmist, ". . . . Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long" (Psalm 119:29, 97). Jews believe the law was given by God out of God's great love for humans, saving us through showing us the way to live righteously. "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul," sings the Psalmist; "the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple" (Psalm 19:7). Thus, when thinking of dynamics of the earliest Christianities, one must never cease remembering not only that Jesus and his earliest followers were all Jewish, but also that the Judaism described by the Christian Testament is a *usable* Judaism, serving the polemical purposes of nascent Christian communities rather than describing genuine dynamics of the time.<sup>2</sup> Such good historical moves go a long way toward countering the anti-Semitism encountered in Christian texts and theologies. Thus, though it may be accurate to say that Christians are the ones who seek to live by the Spirit adhering to a radical love without limits, it is inaccurate to say that



Jews desire something radically different. Christians are just the ones who seek to live in love by following the way of Jesus.

Even salvation itself, though, has been conceived variously throughout Christian history. The salvation effected by Jesus may function through a sacrifice paid either to God to appease his wrath or to the Devil as a ransom. The cross also has been seen as a hook to catch the Devil and transform the dynamics of heaven and hell because the Devil wrongly tried to eat the bait of Jesus, who in the guise of a worm was really the sinless cosmic redeemer. Or the emphasis may fall on dueling elements of God—justice and love. Justice demands punishment for disobedience, whereas Love desires forgiveness. Jesus, as God, effects a reconciliation of these opposing elements by mediating both in his person, a substitution taking the punishment upon himself to fulfill the demands of justice while simultaneously embodying and revealing impossible love—forgiving the unforgiveable.

Salvation has also been seen to work through showing God’s complete identification with our suffering. Jesus’ lament on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mat 27:46, Mar 15:34), is thus the revelation of the God forsaken God, with the way of salvation lying through accepting our condition which God shares with us and letting go of our unhealthy attachment to our own will and to getting our own way as if God is a cosmic vending machine, dispensing answers to our prayers if we’re worthy or ask rightly. Heaven is then identical to Earth, only we suffer because we fail to realize it.

We may also see the opposite, where Christ is affirmed as not truly suffering because of his divinity, and through participation in his body and blood through baptism and the Eucharist we are saved through an almost alchemical process of transformation, his divine power mixing with our flesh. The hereafter toward which we are transforming is then completely different and unimaginably more and other than the here and now. Lastly, many communities of Christians believe salvation occurs because Jesus is a moral exemplar—whether a divine emissary come to show the way without whom we would never have had access to such moral heights, or simply an extraordinary human actualizing the potential we all share to live righteously in ongoing reconciliation with ourselves, each other, and God.

Sin, the problem for which salvation is the solution, has also been conceived diversely in Christian history—from Original Sin where even babies are born into a depraved state inherited from the Fall, through disobeying God’s will along any manner of lists of wrongdoings, or

idolatrously worshipping self or wealth or anything in place of God, to simply failing to be who you are meant to be. More than doing or not doing any specific action, sin may also be interpreted as a lack of awareness of the love that surrounds and pervades us at all times. Such a mode of Christianity sees Jesus as teaching that strict avoidance of any specific lists of pernicious acts that came before or follow after (like those found in Leviticus or I Corinthians) is to be subordinated to awareness of and action from love:

“Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” *The Gospel According to Mark 12:28-31* (compare Matthew 22:34-40, Luke 10:25-28, and Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21)

Thus, knowing and embodying radical love that knows no bounds is the “Great Commandment,” and sin would be doing anything else.

Sin as ignorance may have played a far greater role in the beliefs and practices of many of the early followers of Jesus than has been traditionally acknowledged. Many of the so-called **Gnostic** Christians (*gnosis* is Greek for “knowledge”), whose histories have been marginalized or erased, seem to have focused on salvation as knowing secret truths or gaining wisdom passing understanding. *The Gospel of Mary Magdala*, for instance, in addition to upholding the tradition of Mary as the first apostle, portrays Jesus as a teacher of special knowledge—whether set apart because the knowledge should not be shared with outsiders or because it could not due to it being participatory and incomprehensible we do not know. We do know that “Gnosticism” is a term recently invented by scholars to describe certain movements of the early centuries of the common era, usually ones associated with some sort of dualism, such as a transcendent God vs. a demiurgical (from Greek for “artist” or “craftsman”) creator God, a heavenly immaterial reality vs. an earthly material one, and/or an intellectual and spiritual human form vs. a physical and bodily one.

“Yet,” as Karen King argues, “. . . the variety of phenomena classified as ‘Gnostic’ simply will not support a single, monolithic definition, and in fact *none of the primary materials fits the standard typological definition.*”<sup>3</sup> The likely reality is that like the Church Fathers, certain “Gnostics” claimed Christ as savior, practiced rituals like baptisms and festal meals, and adhered

to pious ethical codes. The problem may well have oftentimes thus been similarity rather than difference: these heretical “Gnostic” Christians were so close in so many ways to the “Orthodox” Christians as to threaten the Fathers’ normative authority.

So, those early bishops struggling to gain power and avoid persecution in the early centuries sought to define themselves as the norm, lay claim to an original and correct tradition (of their own construction), and then proceed to define all others in terms of deviation, deterioration, or complication of that projected original purity, thereby solidifying their power. Whether made in the first or the twenty-first century, claims to return to some original and pure Christianity should be seen for what they are—polemical processes of identity construction over and against others. Such is the discourse of orthodoxy and heresy.

The stories that founded and grounded many early Christians’ worlds have been lost, and those worlds with them. We can reconstruct them to a degree, but the main things we can know with certainty are the multiplicity and messiness—thus we know for sure that we do not know all the myriad ways in which Jesus functioned as messiah and savior for many during those early centuries. The most accurate historical narrative we have now is that as the power of male bishops waxed, the status of women and other Christians who did not acknowledge their authority waned.

In time, Christianity grew from a small marginal movement to the religion of the Roman Emperor himself.

### **From Nicaea to Chalcedon: The Trinitarian and Christological Controversies**

Dismayed by the many disagreements among rival groups, the Emperor Constantine in 325 CE called for a council that met in Nicaea, in present-day Turkey, to clear up divisions and define Christian beliefs. From this meeting came the **Nicene Creed** formalizing the doctrine of the Trinity—God as three persons (*hypostases*), one substance (*ousia*). With God affirmed as Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the issue of Jesus’ humanity in relation to his divinity still needed to be decided. By the middle of the next century, Christians further affirmed, in 451 at the Council of Chalcedon, a district of present-day Istanbul, the **Chalcedonian Definition** of Jesus as having two natures—truly human and truly God.

The word creed comes from the Latin *credo* for “I believe,” yet has the sense not solely of intellectual assent but also of giving one’s heart to and staking one’s life upon. The creeds

were not so much constructed from scratch as developed after the fact—specifically in the wake of revelation and salvation. Reflecting on their salvation history, Christians struggled to define in words the truths of the way to which they had already committed their lives. This process was famously phrased by Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) as “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*), but earlier Augustine had expressed as “*Crede, ut intelligas*”—“Believe in order that you may understand.” More than “seeing is believing,” for Christians believing is seeing—once one experiences the transformative power of Christ and commits one’s life to God so revealed, then, the tradition affirms, further understanding flows and may find expression in words, which the Church formulates into creeds.

The Nicene Creed was calibrated largely to avoid two extremes that the fathers deemed heretical. On one side were types of modalism, which assert Father, Son, and Spirit as mere non-eternal modes of a more transcendent God, while on the other was Arianism, which held Son and Spirit to be lesser creatures created by the Father. Arius (250-336) even promoted his ideas by setting them to the tune of a popular sea chanty with the phrase “there was a time when the Son was not.” Affirming their beliefs, Christians repeat the words of 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,  
of one Being with the Father.  
Through him all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven:  
by the power of the Holy Spirit

he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,  
and was made man.  
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.]<sup>4</sup>  
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped 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.<sup>5</sup>

Such formulations of the creed are recited in worship services across the world today, but the original also included a statement of all that Christians deemed heretical: “And those that say ‘There was when he was not,’ and, ‘Before he was begotten he was not,’ and that, ‘He came into being from what-is-not,’ or those that allege, that the son of God is ‘Of another substance or essence,’ or ‘created,’ or ‘changeable,’ or ‘alterable,’ these the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.”<sup>6</sup>

The Church fathers thus affirmed that there is “not one iota of difference,” as the saying goes, meaning that the three persons of the Trinity are of the same substance, *homoousious* in Greek, rather than merely of like substance, *homoiousious*. The homoousian principle thus entails that the persons of the Trinity cannot and should not be experientially distinguished—perception of a benevolent presence above is not the Father alone, nor is a sense of a friend walking beside you just Jesus, or a warm fuzzy feeling the Spirit acting solo. Rather, any such

spiritual sense of one must entail all of the others as well. Otherwise one easily lapses into thinking of three Gods, precisely what the creeds were written to avoid. For Christians, trinitarianism is definitely not polytheism.

The Nicene formulation of the Trinity affirming God as Three-in-One and the Chalcedonian definition of **Christology** (study of the two natures of Christ) affirming Jesus as both human and divine seem composed in part to direct Christians toward an ever-deepening mystery. The Christian creedal response to the human condition, then, deems three mysteries—without, within, and beyond—to all be one and the same mystery. Indeed, the sacraments or “mysteries” of the faith may have been in part designed to deepen participation in such paradoxes.

For instance, Gregory of Nyssa (335-395), one of the people foremost responsible for solidifying Nicene orthodoxy, believed that the biblical command to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—without specifying what that name actually is—was meant to convey that the divine is ultimately unnamable and incomprehensible, and that humans created in the image of such a mysterious God must also be at heart unfathomable. Christian praxis, then, may have been formulated to aid believers in relinquishing grasping knowledge of self and God, in favor of participation in ever deepening and ascending mystery, fueled by ever increasing love. Thus, in *The Life of Moses*, Gregory writes: “This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more.”<sup>7</sup>

### **From Constantine to Luther and Martin Luther King: Power from on High vs. the Preferential Option for the Poor**

Consider what the architecture of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome teaches us about basic Christian beliefs and practices. First, it is enormous, able to accommodate tens of thousands of worshippers. Second, it is imposingly tall, with high, vaulted ceilings towering hundreds of feet above those thousands of worshippers. Third, it is stunningly beautiful, with art evoking the depths of human emotion. From these three features we can discern that some core values of Christian worship are community, majesty, and wonder. In terms of the transfer of power or energy of Jesus’ charisma, then, the architecture of many Christian churches tells us that Christians deem it to flow from among, above, and within.

In *Christianity: A Very Short Introduction*, Linda Woodhead provides a very helpful typology of various forms of Christianity: Church, Biblical, and **Mystical**.<sup>8</sup> With all bearing traits of the others, these ideal types should not be considered as clearly distinct, but as helpful models to discern differing emphases. Church Christianity emphasizes community and tradition, especially the hierarchical authority of the priests and bishops (and thus can be largely aligned with **Roman Catholicism** and **Eastern Orthodoxy**). Biblical Christianity emphasizes the Bible, especially the ability of individual believers to interpret it themselves (and thus can be associated most closely with **Protestant** traditions). Mystical Christianity emphasizes the spiritual union of Christ with the human soul, especially through an inner sense of presence or wonder that passes understanding (and today is manifest most evidently in Charismatic and Pentecostal churches). Though with differing emphases, each type recognizes three main sources of Christian authority: the community of believers, the canonical scriptures, and the individual's inner sense of Christ.

In the broad sweep of Christian history, then, we see how these differing authorities clash in regard to the functioning of power—whether it flows from on high or arises from within. Christianity after Constantine clearly focused on power from on high, with the hierarchy of the church governing the interpretation of scripture and dispensation of the sacraments. After Martin Luther, however, the Reformations (in the plural because the Catholic “Counter-Reformation” also sought an end to indulgences and return to scriptural adherence, prayer, and personal piety, and thus rather than a counter to the Protestant Reformation, should be more appropriately termed the Catholic Reformation) meant power flowed increasingly among the community of believers in modes that arose from bottom up, with individuals as key.

A mystical sense of personal empowerment through Jesus Christ, however, often sat at odds with both Church and Biblical Christianity. For instance, Sojourner Truth, the nineteenth century ex-slave, abolitionist and women's rights activist who recognized her power as flowing from “When I found Jesus!”, argued for radical reinterpretations of the stories of Adam and Eve and the incarnation that neither Constantine nor Martin Luther would likely have countenanced. In her famous speech, “Ain't I a Woman?”, Truth upends the architecture of authority, attributing power to the oppressed. Turning the tables on the Adams of the world, Truth says of Eve: “If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back , and get it right side up again!”<sup>9</sup>

Truth even overturns the traditional meaning of the incarnation, moving the power from a male body to a woman's. "That little man in black there," she says referring to the clergyman who resisted her remarks, "he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman!" Yet, Truth counters: "Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him." Called by a religious vision and given her new name directly from God, Sojourner Truth offers embodied testimony to a mystical force that empowers the powerless.

Such affirmations proclaim what the liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez called God's "preferential option for the poor," meaning that the God revealed by Jesus, who deeply identified with the outcast of society and was thus executed as a political criminal and religious heretic, seems to constantly side with the poor and oppressed. In his speech, "Where Do We Go from Here?", Martin Luther King, Jr., argued in consonance with Sojourner Truth that radical retellings of the basic stories and rituals of Christianity are necessary, specifically he retold the story of Nicodemus to show that it is not just individuals that need to be born again through baptism, but whole nations:

And if you will let me be a preacher just a little bit. (*Speak*) One day [*applause*], one night, a juror came to Jesus (*Yes sir*) and he wanted to know what he could do to be saved. (*Yeah*) Jesus didn't get bogged down on the kind of isolated approach of what you shouldn't do. Jesus didn't say, "Now Nicodemus, you must stop lying." (*Oh yeah*) He didn't say, "Nicodemus, now you must not commit adultery." He didn't say, "Now Nicodemus, you must stop cheating if you are doing that." He didn't say, "Nicodemus, you must stop drinking liquor if you are doing that excessively." He said something altogether different, because Jesus realized something basic (*Yes*): that if a man will lie, he will steal. (*Yes*) And if a man will steal, he will kill. (*Yes*) So instead of just getting bogged down on one thing, Jesus looked at him and said, "Nicodemus, you must be born again." [*applause*]

In other words, "Your whole structure (*Yes*) must be changed." [*applause*] A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years will "thingify" them and make them things. (*Speak*) And therefore, they will exploit them and poor people generally economically. (*Yes*) And a nation that will exploit economically will have to have foreign investments



and everything else, and it will have to use its military might to protect them. All of these problems are tied together. (Yes) [applause]

What I'm saying today is that we must go from this convention and say, "America, you must be born again!" [applause] (Oh yes)<sup>10</sup>

When considering where Christianity may go in the future, then, we see that as a global religion today it faces intersectional dynamics of a diverse and plural world that extend through differences of race, class, and gender to encompass complex interrelations with other religions, nonhuman animals, and our fragile environment. Any Christianity to come must account for these new conditions if it is to further its message and activities that seek to move from bondage to liberation and from death to life.

## Glossary

apostles	followers of Jesus commissioned to spread the Christian message
baptism	ritual of initiation into the Christian community that involves washing with water
Bible	collection of Christian sacred texts as a whole, encompassing both Old and New Testaments
Chalcedonian Definition	statement of faith formulated in 451 CE affirming that Jesus in one person has two natures—truly human and truly God, “unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably”
charismatics	Christians who emphasize the “gifts of the Spirit,” such as <i>glossolalia</i> or “speaking in tongues,” a mode of atypical vocalizing involving “sighs too deep for words” (see Romans 8:26 and Acts 2:3-4). Also referred to as Pentecostals.
Christ	“anointed one”
Christology	study of how the two natures of Jesus Christ—God and human—relate
disciples	earliest students or followers of Jesus, often refers to the twelve named in the Christian scriptures: Simon (Peter), Andrew, James

	(son of Zebedee), John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James (son of Alphaeus), Thaddaeus, Simon, and Judas
Eastern Orthodoxy	Christian churches that separated from the Western (Roman Catholic) church in the eleventh century
Eucharist	regular ritual reenacting the last supper of Jesus and his disciples that involves eating bread and wine symbolizing Jesus' body and blood. Also called Mass or Communion.
evangelist	from Greek for "messenger of good news," one who spreads the Christian message
gnostics	Jewish and Christian communities of the first centuries CE who emphasized direct knowing ( <i>gnōsis</i> )
gospel	"good news"
heresy	beliefs of those who refuse to submit to traditional authority and instead follow their own paths
<i>homoousios</i>	doctrine stating that the persons of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) are of the <i>same</i> substance, and not merely of <i>like</i> substance
mystical	Coming from the Greek <i>muo</i> , meaning "to close," as in to close one's eyes, <i>mystikos</i> in earliest usage appears to gesture to the hidden rituals of initiation into ancient cultic practice, and came in Christian parlance to refer to the hidden meaning of scripture and participation in the liturgy that could yield perception into the hidden depths of the cosmos as centered in Christ, but more broadly and recently refers to an emphasis on communion, connection, or identity between human nature and the divine
New Testament	Christian sacred texts written and compiled by his followers in the generations after Jesus
Nicene Creed	Doctrinal statement formulated at a council that met in Nicaea in 325 CE that declares the basics of the Christian orthodox faith, especially the idea of the Trinity
Old Testatment	Christian term for the Hebrew Bible

orthodoxy	an ideological system, especially religious—usually the one in authority—believed to be “straight” ( <i>orthos</i> ), in other words correct
Passion	from Greek for “suffering,” refers to the events of the short period of time leading up to Jesus’ death
Protestant	Christian churches that split from Roman Catholicism during the Reformation of the sixteenth century
Roman Catholic	Christian churches following hierarchical leadership under the Pope, the Bishop of Rome
sacraments	rituals that reveal the sacred (e.g. baptism and the Eucharist)
sin	act or state of failing to follow God’s will
Trinity	doctrine of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as all one God (technically three <i>hypostases</i> , or persons, and one <i>ousia</i> , or substance)

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<sup>1</sup> For more, see *Judaism: A Very Short Introduction*, by Norman Solomon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 22-23.

<sup>2</sup> For more, see Karen L. King, “Factions, Variety, Diversity, Multiplicity: Representing Early Christian Differences for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23 (2011), 216-237.

<sup>3</sup> Karen King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 226 (emphasis in original).

<sup>4</sup> This phrase, known as the *filioque* (from the Latin for “and the son”), was added by Western churches in the sixth century, contributed to the East-West Schism of 1054, and continues to hinder efforts at rapprochement today.

<sup>5</sup> As printed in the *Episcopal Book of Common Prayer* and the *Lutheran Book of Worship*.

<sup>6</sup> *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., edited by Henry Bettenson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 25.

<sup>7</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 116.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Woodhead, *Christianity: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Sojourner Truth, “Modern History Sourcebook: ‘Ain’t I a Woman?’, December 1851,” accessed August 10, 2013, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp>.

<sup>10</sup> Website of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute at Stanford University, [http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/where\\_do\\_we\\_go\\_from\\_here\\_delivered\\_at\\_the\\_11th\\_annual\\_sclc\\_convention/](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/where_do_we_go_from_here_delivered_at_the_11th_annual_sclc_convention/)