

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



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.)

beliefs, while the more evangelical denominations do not.

Fundamentalist Christianity

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

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

Christian perceptions of God come primarily from

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

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

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 Episcopalian 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.

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

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.



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

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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-23.2(h.9(f)19()23.3(3(r)8.Y306.5(ae)-8(h.9(

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.

Books and Articles

Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*, 5 volumes. Christian Classics, 1981.

Augustine. *Confessions*^S

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