

Lecture 1

Christian Origins

I. General Background: Where does Christianity come from?

A. Historical information

1. interpretive problems
 - a) revelation and faith
 - b) culture and history—our approach
 - (1) limitations of sources
 - (2) purpose—not dispassionate sources
2. What can we learn from existing documents?

B. A new religion in the first century world, evolving from:

1. Judaism
2. Roman society and culture
3. Mediterranean Religions

C. Christianity in first four centuries

1. Many variations—no “Christianity”
2. Winners become “**orthodox**” right believers, losers become “**heterodox**” multiple view or “heretics”; shifting nature
3. trimming the bush story

II. Christianity begins as a reform movement within Judaism

A. First 100 years, “Jesus Movement” Jewish sub-group

1. Keeping Jewish law and customs but adding new traditions of new teacher, Jesus

B. Christianity’s Jewish elements

1. **Monotheism**

- a) Only one God
- b) God is intimately involved with humanity
 - (1) God acts within history

2. Use of **Hebrew scriptures** (Old Testament)
 - a) Text-based religion
 - b) moral basis (Ten Commandments) not rest of Jewish law
 - c) reinterpretation of Hebrew scriptures based on new experiences
 - d) Jewish tradition of teachers (**rabbi**)
 - e) miracle workers—Jesus understood as both
3. Jesus as Messiah
 - a) Jewish understanding of messiah (H. moshiach, the “anointed one”) different from Christian understanding
 - b) earthly, human king to bring universal peace and righteous rule, anointed with oil
 - (1) Charismatic political and military leader
 - (2) Monotheism precludes supernatural nature
 - (3) Not accomplished by a dead Gallilean
 - c) Greek word for Messiah, “Christus” or the “anointed one”
4. Christianizing certain rituals
 - a) Passover becoming Last Supper
 - b) Circumcision becoming baptism
5. “Chosen People” phenomena
 - a) individual groups seeing themselves as special, ordained by God, different from others
 - b) arrogance of the Chosen
 - (1) held to high standards to which they can be called if they don’t live up to stated standards

II. Greco-Roman Philosophy and Society

- A. During first century movement away from Judaism and Palestine
 1. Paul, the apostle—transition character (died c. 62 CE)
 - a) Jew and Roman citizen from Syria
 - (1) Not one of 12 disciples

(2) Persecutes; then Christ “reveals” on road to Damacus in southern Syria

(3) Bilingual (Aramaic/Heb/Greek) and bi-cultural (Hebrew/Hellenistic Greek)

(4) Religious doggerel—“Roses are Reddish . . .”

(5) Introduction of non-Jewish concepts

b) Missionary throughout Roman world

(1) Message is universal, not local as pre-diaspora Judaism

(2) Christian messages to non-Jewish, Greek and Roman world

(3) Schooled in Greek ideas and literary styles

(4) Concern with metaphysical questions--nature of God, who is the Christ, what is reality all about?

(5) Moving following of Jesus out of Jerusalem

c) Breaking with Jewish law such as circumcision

2. Production of the “New” Testament

a) Paul’s letters: (Greek **Epistles**) 50 – 60 AD

(1) Written *before* the Gospels

(2) His early letters: 1 Thessalonians; Galatians; 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon; Romans

(3) some letters ascribed to Paul not written by Paul according to scholars

b) **Gospels**— word from Middle English godspell, or “good news”—trans. from Greek *euangelion* “good news” (Evangelist, evangelical)

(1) Mathew, Mark, and Luke written 70-90 CE

(2) Gospel of John, 80 –100 CE

(a) After the Fall of Jerusalem and destruction of Temple

(b) Gospel of John especially influenced by Greek philosophical traditions

- (c) Jesus as the “logos” reason, rationale
- (3) Four gospels fixed by end of 2nd century
- c) fluidity of the “**canon**”
 - (1) Gnostic, “secret stories of Jesus”
 - (2) not fixed in Latin-speaking countries until end of the 4th c.
- 3. Greek for Messiah, “Christus” the “anointed one”
 - a) New philosophical “school”—Greeks: Christ as great philosopher with new insight into world
 - b) New ritual pattern—Romans—Christ as semi-divine, worshipped like gods and emperor
 - c) Introduction of Greek philosophical contents into writings, both canonical and non-canonical
- B. Adoption of Roman society (not Jewish) as organizational model
 - 1. Layers of authority
 - a) Early church images: “ceasar,” emperor, king, kingdom
 - b) Jesus as King but not of this world
 - c) Low position of women and slaves (in spite of early involvement and support)
 - 2. **State church** supported by earthly rulers

III. Mediterranean Religions

- A. Mythological structures from Egypt and ancient Near East
 - 1. Mediterranean area multiple religions and exchange, esp. Rome
 - 2. Christians adapting images and stories from what is around it—openness to non-Christian world;
 - a) Style if not content, meaning if not content
 - b) Conflicts over “authenticity”
 - 3. Gods (rather than monotheism) and semi-Gods (Hercules)
 - a) Importance of rites less philosophy
 - 4. Isis—ideal mother, fertility

- a) Worshiped around Mediterranean world
 - (1) Friend of poor, slaves, down trodden
 - (2) Popular in Italy during early Christian era
 - (3) 380 AD destroy all pagan temples
 - b) Restored body of Osiris her brother-husband with her magic
 - (1) Sorrow for dead husband, shown with dead husband across lap
 - (2) Osiris dying and rising again, like the Nile
 - (3) Eternal life, resurrection
 - c) Horus born in papyrus swamp, dangers after his birth
- B. Ecstatic religions, prophecy, healing
1. Eleusian mysteries—in Greece, secret rites commemorating Demeter search and finding her daughter Persephone, who had to stay in underworld with Hades part of the year, thus giving winter
 - a) Growth/death cycle of fertility
 - b) Men, women, slaves
 - c) Very popular century before Christ
 2. continual “revelation” which breaks through authority, traditions, hierarchy
 3. anti-institutional trend (like purity/impurity problem)
 4. Powerful role of women (unlike in Judaism or Roman structures)

IV. Early Christianity

- A. Issues that shaped the first three hundred years:
1. Survival
 - a) Periodic persecutions by Roman government because Christians are threats to Roman state until 313
 - b) Christians are “a-theistic” because they do not worship the emperor, they eat their god
 - c) Christians disrupt social order—male, female; slave, master; infanticide

2. Council model
 - a) First ecumenical Council, 325 Nicaea (in Turkey); bishops from around Mediterranean, maybe 300
 - b) Who is the Christ?
 - c) What is the nature of the community?
 - d) Which texts should we use?
 - e) Who is in power around here?
 - f) Who is orthodox (“pure” “true”) and who is heterodox (“impure” “false”) and who determines? Group leaders
 - g) Nicene Creed
3. Many versions—internal division, not centralized
 - a) Losers don’t always go away--heterodoxy
4. Christianity is basis for political system
 - a) Establishment of state religion of Roman Empire
 - b) Disintegration of Roman unity and competition for throne
 - c) When **Constantine** becomes emperor 324 lets Christians worship in peace
 - (1) Uses Christianity as way to unify empire against pagans (who side with rival Licinius)
 - (2) Moves Roman capitol from Rome to **Byzantium** (Constantinople)
 - (3) Back and forth between pagan and Christian
5. Eliminating certain attitudes until “catholic” (universal)

V. Conclusion

Apostle’s Creed: Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians
 first written 7th century
 Influenced by creed approved by Council of Nicaea (325)

Core Christian Beliefs (**articulated in creeds like Apostle's Creed, words not found in New Testament but concepts solidified by fourth century**)

Monotheism: all knowing, all powerful, involved in human history, not like us, not able to be fully known and understood by us

Incarnation: Christ as true God and true Human, in time and space; like us; supernatural imbues the natural

Trinity: One God in three persons: Father, Son, Holy Spirit (variety of understandings)

Atonement: Something was not right and the sacrifice of Christ was able to reset things, to reconcile divine and human; individuals do wrong but life can be made right; resurrection as Christ's triumph over death and thus possibility of eternal life for all

Linear Time: beginning and end

Church: community of faith: not merely individual, group, leaders