

Christian Origins

I. General Background: Where does Christianity come from?

A. Introduction

1. Common beliefs of Christians throughout world and following lectures narrowing and narrowing—from what most people would agree ending with smaller community of Christians.
 - a) From general to more specific
 - b) History of Christianity development of various ideas and rituals
2. interpretive problems
 - a) Religious people: supernatural revelation and faith
 - b) our approach: culture and history
 - (1) working with available sources
 - (2) What can we learn from existing documents?

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

1. Judaism
2. Greco-Roman philosophy and society
3. Mediterranean Religions
4. Three streams into one river

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 Damascus 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) Message is universal
 - (1) Paul as missionary throughout Roman world
 - (2) End of local “Jewish Christianity”
 - (3) Christian message delivered in language that could make sense in non-Jewish, Greek and Roman world
 - (4) Paul schooled in Greek ideas and literary styles
 - (5) Concern with metaphysical questions--nature of God, who is the Christ, what is reality all about?
 - 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**—authoritative set of writings accepted as Holy Scripture
 - (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) Christ as great philosopher with new insight into world
 - (1) Christianity as new philosophical “school”
 - b) Introduction of Greek philosophical contents into writings, both canonical and non-canonical
- B. Adoption of Roman society (not Jewish) as organizational model
- 1. New ritual pattern
 - a) Christ as semi-divine, worshipped like gods and emperor
 - 2. 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)
 - 3. **State church** supported by earthly rulers by 4th century
 - a) When **Constantine** becomes emperor 324 lets Christians worship in peace
 - b) Christianity is basis for political system
 - c) Establishment of state religion of Roman Empire

III. Mediterranean Religions

- A. Christianity more than ethics, theology, statecraft
- B. 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) Influence on art
- C. Isis—ideal mother, fertility
 - 1. Worshipped around Mediterranean world
 - a) Friend of poor, slaves, down trodden
 - b) Popular in Italy during early Christian era
 - c) 380 AD destroy all pagan temples
 - 2. Restored body of Osiris her brother-husband with her magic
 - a) Sorrow for dead husband, shown with dead husband across lap
 - b) Osiris dying and rising again, like the Nile
 - (1) Eternal life, resurrection
- D. Ecstatic religions, prophecy, healing
 - 1. Christianity more than ethics or rational explanation in theology
 - 2. Eleusian mysteries—in Greece, secret rites commemorating Demeter search and finding her daughter Persephone
 - a) Growth/death cycle of fertility
 - b) Humans becoming gods
 - c) Men, women, slaves
 - d) Very popular century before Christ
 - 3. continual “revelation” which breaks through authority, traditions, hierarchy
 - 4. anti-institutional trend (like purity/impurity problem)
 - 5. Powerful role of women (unlike in Judaism or Roman structures)

IV. Conclusion

- A. Evolving Christian beliefs and rituals

1. Many versions—internal division, not centralized
 - (1) Losers don't always go away--heterodoxy
2. Big questions:

Who is the Christ? What is the nature of the community? Which texts should we use? Who is in power around here? Who is orthodox (“pure” “true”) and who is heterodox (“impure” “false”) and who determines? Group leaders
3. Resolved by **Councils**: Groups of bishops coming to meet
 - a) First ecumenical Council, 325 Nicaea (in Turkey); bishops from around Mediterranean, maybe 300 attended
 - b) Documents stating decisions with “orthodox” abide by (even if voted against and unhappy) others: “heterodox”
4. Nicene Creed: Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians

Core Christian Beliefs

(articulated in creeds like “Apostle’s Creed” words not found in New Testament but concepts from Nicea and modified in fourth century)

- I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
the Maker of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:
 - Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,
born of the virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
 - He descended into hell.
 - The third day He arose again from the dead;
 - He ascended into heaven,
and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
 - I believe in the Holy Ghost;
the holy catholic church;
the communion of saints;
the forgiveness of sins;
the resurrection of the body;
and the life everlasting.
- Amen.

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