

ALISTER E. McGRATH

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

AN INTRODUCTION



WILEY-BLACKWELL

"This is a wonderful introduction to the history of Christianity. It pays the most attention to the rise and spread of the Christian faith in the ancient near east and the medieval and modern west. But it also tells the story of this faith's rapid shift to the global south and far east during the past 100 years – and does so with the kind of clear and compelling English prose that will be recognized as vintage McGrath by experts in the field. I strongly recommend it, and look forward to using it frequently with students and other readers."

—*Douglas A. Sweeney, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School*

"As Christianity expands around the globe, this intelligent introduction introduces key figures, ideas, and developments in Christian history, balancing illuminating generalizations with engaging detailed examples. The mutual interactions of churches and cultures are highlighted, and theological developments are clearly articulated. McGrath succeeds in whetting the reader's appetite for further study."

—*Anne T. Thayer, Lancaster Theological Seminary*

"It is difficult to write a comprehensive text on Christian history in this day and age. There are deeply rutted roads in scholarship that lead the conventional historian to focus on the twilight of Christianity in the west and the inevitability of secularization. These developments, while all too true, distort both the present vitality of Christian faith and its future. McGrath avoids these pitfalls. While firmly rooted in the essentials of the Christian story, he also has a clear sense of the new paths Christian faith is taking in global evangelical outreach."

—*Walter Sundberg, Luther Seminary*

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Brief Contents

List of Maps and Illustrations	xiii
How to Use This Book	xv
1. The Early Church, 100–500	1
2. The Middle Ages and Renaissance, c. 500–c. 1500	71
3. Competing Visions of Reform, c. 1500–c. 1650	150
4. The Modern Age, c. 1650–1914	214
5. The Twentieth Century, 1914 to the Present	285
Where Next?	349
A Glossary of Christian Terms	351
Index	361

Full Contents

List of Maps and Illustrations	xiii
How to Use This Book	xv
1. The Early Church, 100–500	1
1.1. Setting the Context: The Origins of Christianity	2
1.1.1. The Crucible: The History of Israel	2
1.1.2. A Wider Context: The Pagan Quest for Wisdom	4
1.1.3. The Turning Point: Jesus of Nazareth	6
1.1.4. The Early Spread of Christianity	7
1.1.5. The Apostolic Age	10
1.1.6. Women in Apostolic Christianity	11
1.1.7. Christianity and Judaism: A Complex Relationship	14
1.2. Early Christianity and the Roman Empire	16
1.2.1. The Roman Empire, c. 100	17
1.2.2. Christianity and the Imperial Cult	19
1.2.3. Christianity and Judaism: Marcion of Sinope	20
1.2.4. Christianity and Pagan Culture: Justin Martyr	22
1.2.5. Early Christian Worship and Life	23
1.3. Early Christianity and the Hellenistic World	26
1.3.1. The Greek-Speaking World, c. 200	26
1.3.2. The Challenge of Gnosticism: Irenaeus of Lyons	28
1.3.3. The Challenge of Platonism: Clement of Alexandria and Origen	29
1.3.4. Christianity and the Cities: Alexandria and Antioch	31
1.3.5. Monasticism: A Reaction against the Cities	33
1.3.6. The Cult of Thecla: Women and the Churches	35
1.4. The Imperial Religion: The Conversion of Constantine	37
1.4.1. Roman Persecution of Christianity	38
1.4.2. The First Christian Emperor: Constantine	40

1.4.3.	The Christianization of the Roman Empire	43
1.4.4.	The Imperialization of Christianity	44
1.4.5.	Augustine of Hippo: The Two Cities	46
1.4.6.	The Decline of the Western Empire	48
1.4.7.	The “New Rome”: Byzantium and the Eastern Empire	49
1.5.	Orthodoxy and Heresy: Patterns in Early Christian Thought	52
1.5.1.	The Boundaries of Faith: A Growing Issue	52
1.5.2.	The Canon of the New Testament	54
1.5.3.	Arianism: The Debate over the Identity of Jesus of Nazareth	55
1.5.4.	Trinitarianism: A Debate about the Nature of God	58
1.5.5.	Donatism: A Debate over the Nature of the Church	60
1.5.6.	Pelagianism: A Debate over Grace and Human Achievement	61
1.5.7.	Innovation: A Debate over the Role of Tradition	63
1.5.8.	The Origins and Development of Creeds	64
1.5.9.	The Council of Chalcedon, 451	66
2.	The Middle Ages and Renaissance, c. 500–c. 1500	71
2.1.	Setting the Context: The Background to the High Middle Ages	72
2.1.1.	Western Christianity after the Fall of Rome	73
2.1.2.	The Rise of Celtic Christianity	75
2.1.3.	The Seventh Century: Islam and Arab Expansion	77
2.1.4.	The Age of Charlemagne	78
2.1.5.	The Rise of the Monastic and Cathedral Schools	80
2.1.6.	Byzantine Christianity: Monophysitism and Iconoclasm	81
2.1.7.	Ninth-Century Debates: The Real Presence and Predestination	82
2.1.8.	Orthodox Missions to Eastern Europe: Bulgaria and Russia	83
2.1.9.	The Tenth Century: Institutional Decline and Decay	85
2.1.10.	The “Great Schism” between East and West (1054)	87
2.2.	The Dawn of the High Middle Ages	88
2.2.1.	The Eleventh Century: The Gregorian Reforms	89
2.2.2.	The Cultural Renaissance of the Twelfth Century	91
2.2.3.	The Codification of Theology and Canon Law	92
2.2.4.	The Rise of the University: The Paris and Oxford Schools	94
2.2.5.	The Crusades: Spain and the Middle East	96
2.2.6.	Secular and Religious Power: Innocent III	98
2.2.7.	Franciscans and Dominicans: The Rise of the Mendicant Orders	100
2.2.8.	Women Mystics and Female Religious Orders	102
2.3.	Medieval Religious Thought: The Scholastic Achievement	104
2.3.1.	Cathedrals of the Mind: The Rise of Scholasticism	105
2.3.2.	The Handmaid of Theology: The Rediscovery of Aristotle	107
2.3.3.	A Reasonable Faith: Thomas Aquinas	108
2.3.4.	Medieval Proofs for the Existence of God	109
2.3.5.	The Consolidation of the Church’s Sacramental System	111
2.3.6.	Medieval Biblical Interpretation	113

2.3.7.	A Byzantine Critique of Scholasticism: Hesychasm	115
2.3.8.	The Medieval Worldview: Dante's <i>Divine Comedy</i>	116
2.4.	The Later Middle Ages	118
2.4.1.	The Avignon Papacy and the Great Schism	119
2.4.2.	The Rise of Conciliarism	121
2.4.3.	Eastern Europe: The Rise of Russia as a Christian Nation	123
2.4.4.	Heresy: Waldensians, Hussites, and Wycliffites	125
2.4.5.	The Modern Devotion: The Brethren of the Common Life	126
2.4.6.	Popular Religion: The Cult of the Saints	128
2.4.7.	The Rise of the Ottoman Empire: The Fall of Constantinople (1453)	131
2.5.	The Renaissance: Cultural Renewal and Christian Expansion	132
2.5.1.	A New Technology: The Religious Importance of Printing	133
2.5.2.	The Origins of the Italian Renaissance	134
2.5.3.	The Nature of Humanism	136
2.5.4.	Erasmus of Rotterdam	138
2.5.5.	The Renaissance and Religious Renewal	140
2.5.6.	Christian Arts in the Middle Ages and Renaissance	143
2.5.7.	Christian Expansion: Portuguese and Spanish Voyages of Discovery	145
3.	Competing Visions of Reform, c. 1500–c. 1650	150
3.1.	Setting the Context: The Background to the Reformation	151
3.1.1.	The Pressure for Reform of the Church	151
3.1.2.	The Changing Social Order of the Early Sixteenth Century	154
3.1.3.	The Reformation and the Cities of Europe	155
3.1.4.	A Crisis of Authority within the Church	156
3.1.5.	The Origins of a Term: Protestantism	158
3.2.	Protestantism: An Overview of a Movement	159
3.2.1.	A Return to the Bible	159
3.2.2.	The Doctrine of Justification by Faith	162
3.2.3.	Democratization: The “Priesthood of All Believers” and the Use of the Vernacular	163
3.2.4.	The Rejection of Papal Authority	165
3.2.5.	Two Sacraments – and Reception in Both Kinds	168
3.2.6.	A New Work Ethic and the Development of Capitalism	169
3.3.	The Mainstream Reformation: Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin	170
3.3.1.	Martin Luther: A Brief History	170
3.3.2.	Luther's Reformation at Wittenberg	173
3.3.3.	Huldrych Zwingli: A Brief History	175
3.3.4.	Zwingli's Reformation at Zurich	177
3.3.5.	John Calvin: A Brief History	179
3.3.6.	Calvin's Reformation at Geneva	181
3.4.	Reformations across Europe: The Bigger Picture	183
3.4.1.	The Radical Reformation	184
3.4.2.	The English Reformation: Henry VIII	186

3.4.3.	The English Reformation: Edward VI to Elizabeth I	189
3.4.4.	The Catholic Reformation: The Life of the Church	191
3.4.5.	The Catholic Reformation: The Thought of the Church	193
3.4.6.	Women and the Reformation	195
3.5.	The Post-Reformation Era	197
3.5.1.	Confessionalism: The Second Reformation	197
3.5.2.	Puritanism in England and North America	199
3.5.3.	The King James Bible (1611)	201
3.5.4.	Christianity and the Arts	203
3.5.5.	Christianity and the Sciences	206
3.5.6.	The Wars of Religion	209
4.	The Modern Age, c. 1650–1914	214
4.1.	The Age of Reason: The Enlightenment	215
4.1.1.	The Rise of Indifference towards Religion	215
4.1.2.	The Enlightenment and Christianity	217
4.1.3.	Christian Beliefs in the “Age of Reason”	220
4.1.4.	Pietism and Revival in Germany and England	222
4.1.5.	America: The “Great Awakening”	224
4.1.6.	The Suppression of the Jesuits, 1759–73	226
4.1.7.	The American Revolution of 1776	228
4.1.8.	The French Revolution of 1789	230
4.1.9.	England: William Wilberforce and the Abolition of Slavery	232
4.2.	An Age of Revolution: The Long Nineteenth Century in Europe	235
4.2.1.	The Napoleonic Wars and the Congress of Vienna	235
4.2.2.	Orthodox Resurgence: The Greek War of Independence	238
4.2.3.	Atheism and an Ideology of Revolution: Feuerbach and Marx	239
4.2.4.	Human Origins: Darwin’s <i>Origin of Species</i> (1859)	242
4.2.5.	The Victorian Crisis of Faith	245
4.2.6.	The Risorgimento: Italian Reunification and the Pope	246
4.2.7.	The First Vatican Council: Papal Infallibility	248
4.2.8.	German Culture Wars: Bismarck and Catholicism	250
4.2.9.	Theological Revisionism: The Challenge of Modernism	252
4.3.	The Long Nineteenth Century in America	254
4.3.1.	Church and State: The Wall of Separation	255
4.3.2.	The Second Great Awakening and American Revivalism	257
4.3.3.	European Immigration and Religious Diversification	259
4.3.4.	The Emergence of the “Bible Belt”	261
4.3.5.	The Civil War: Slavery and Suffering	262
4.3.6.	Pentecostalism: The American Origins of a Global Faith	265
4.4.	An Age of Mission	267
4.4.1.	The Origins of Protestant Missions	268
4.4.2.	Missions and Colonialism: The Case of Anglicanism	270
4.4.3.	Christian Missions to Asia	273
4.4.4.	Christian Missions to Africa	276

4.4.5.	Christian Missions to Native Americans	278
4.4.6.	The Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, 1910	280
5.	The Twentieth Century, 1914 to the Present	285
5.1.	Setting the Context: Post-War Turbulence	285
5.1.1.	The Armenian Genocide of 1915	287
5.1.2.	The Russian Revolution of 1917	288
5.1.3.	Post-War Disillusionment: The Theology of Crisis	290
5.1.4.	America: The Fundamentalist Controversy	292
5.1.5.	Mexico: The Cristero War	295
5.1.6.	The Psychological Critique of Religion: Sigmund Freud	296
5.1.7.	The German Church Crisis of the 1930s	299
5.1.8.	The Spanish Civil War (1936–9)	302
5.2.	Shifts in Western Christianity since the Second World War	303
5.2.1.	The New World Order: Christianity and the Cold War	304
5.2.2.	The World Council of Churches: The New Ecumenism	305
5.2.3.	Billy Graham and the “New Evangelicalism”	308
5.2.4.	The 1960s: The Origins of a Post-Christian Europe	310
5.2.5.	The Second Vatican Council: Reform and Revitalization	312
5.2.6.	Reconnecting with Culture: The Rise of Apologetics	315
5.3.	The Sixties and Beyond: Western Christianity in an Age of Transition	318
5.3.1.	Christianity and the American Civil Rights Movement	318
5.3.2.	The Rise of the American “Religious Right”	319
5.3.3.	The Erosion of Denominationalism in the United States	321
5.3.4.	Faith Renewed: John Paul II and the Collapse of the Soviet Union	324
5.3.5.	Challenging the Establishment: Feminism and Liberation Theology	326
5.3.6.	Responding to Cultural Change: New Forms of Churches	329
5.3.7.	The Equality Agenda: The Protestant Debate over Women’s Ordination	331
5.4.	The Shift from the West: The New Christianity	334
5.4.1.	The Middle East: The Decline of Arab Christianity	335
5.4.2.	Korea: The Surprising Transformation of a Nation	336
5.4.3.	China: The Resurgence of Christianity in the Middle Kingdom	338
5.4.4.	The Rise of Post-Colonial Christianity: African Initiated Churches	340
5.4.5.	The Rise of Pentecostalism in Latin America	342
5.4.6.	Virtual Christianity: The Internet and New Patterns of Faith	344
	Where Next?	349
	A Glossary of Christian Terms	351
	Index	361

Maps and Illustrations

Maps

1.1	Paul's first missionary journey	5
1.2	The Roman Empire under Trajan, c. 117	17

Illustrations

1.1	<i>The Martyrdom of St. Peter</i> , Florence, by P. Brancacci and F. Lippi	8
1.2	Detail of Plato and Aristotle, from <i>The School of Athens</i> , by Raphael	23
1.3	The third-century Catacombs of Calixtus	25
1.4	The Benedictine monastery at Montecassino (or "Monte Cassino"), Italy	34
1.5	Ruins of the historic north African city of Carthage	36
1.6	Constantine I, the Great	41
1.7	The great eastern city of Constantinople	51
2.1	Coronation of the emperor Charlemagne	79
2.2	The Benedictine Abbey of Cluny	86
2.3	The teaching of philosophy at the medieval University of Paris, from the fourteenth-century French manuscript <i>Great Chronicles of France</i>	96
2.4	<i>St. Francis of Assisi Preaching to the Birds</i> , predella painting from <i>The Stigmatization of St. Francis</i> , by Giotto di Bondone	101
2.5	Thomas Aquinas	106
2.6	An illuminated medieval biblical manuscript, showing the construction of the temple of Jerusalem	114
2.7	The medieval papal palace of Avignon	120
2.8	The icon of the Trinity by Andrei Rublev	124
2.9	Erasmus of Rotterdam	139
2.10	Monument to the Discoveries, Lisbon, Portugal	146

3.1	Portrait of Leo X	152
3.2	An early modern printer's workshop	161
3.3	Title page of William Tyndale's New Testament	166
3.4	Martin Luther	172
3.5	Portrait of John Calvin	181
3.6	Henry VIII	187
3.7	Ignatius of Loyola	193
3.8	Johann Kepler	209
3.9	Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre	210
4.1	Jonathan Edwards	226
4.2	William Wilberforce	234
4.3	Napoleon Bonaparte	236
4.4	Karl Marx	241
4.5	Charles Robert Darwin	244
4.6	Otto Von Bismarck	251
4.7	View of federal soldiers relaxing by the guns of an unidentified captured fort, Atlanta, Georgia, 1864	264
4.8	World Missionary Conference, Assembly Hall, New College, University of Edinburgh, 1910	281
5.1	A convoy of horses and wagons pass by the ruins of St. Martin's Church and the Cloth Hall of Ypres during the Great War	286
5.2	Vladimir Ilyich Lenin addressing the crowd in Red Square, Moscow	289
5.3	Karl Barth	292
5.4	Sigmund Freud	297
5.5	American evangelist Dr. Billy Graham addressing the congregation at Earl's Court, London, June 1966	309
5.6	A session of the Second Vatican Council at St. Peter's Basilica, Rome	313
5.7	C. S. Lewis	317
5.8	Pope John Paul II among a crowd of people, Vatican City, Rome, June 1, 1979	325
5.9	Crowd leaving Yoido Full Gospel Church, Seoul, Korea, after Sunday services	338

How to Use This Book

This book is designed to be an accessible, interesting, and reliable introduction to two thousand years of Christian history. It has been written on the assumption that you know little about the history of Christianity, and aims to make studying it as easy as possible. Every technical term and key theological debate is introduced and explained. You should be able to use this book on your own, without needing any help, although it will work best when used as part of a taught course.

It's not easy to provide a survey of two thousand years of Christian history in such a short book. A lot of thought has been given about how to pack as much useful information as possible into so small a space, and break it down into manageable sections. You will get the most out of this book by bearing five key points in mind:

1. This book is about Christian history, not just church history.
2. The material has been broken down into historical periods which link up with many college and university courses.
3. The principle of "selective attention" has been used to manage the amount of historical material presented.
4. The text is grounded in the best recent scholarly literature, which often corrects older literature on points of detail, and occasionally forces us to see things in quite different ways.
5. This book is deliberately designed as an introduction, and does not aim to be comprehensive or detailed.

Each of these points needs a little more explanation.

First, this book is about *Christian* history. It's not another history of the *church*, which tend to be preoccupied with the institutional history of denominations. This book is about the development of Christianity, and its impact on culture. We'll make sure that we cover all the key themes in church history, but will go beyond these, considering such matters as the interaction of Christianity with the arts, literature, and science. We will consider both

the importance of the Second Vatican Council for the shaping of Catholicism in the late twentieth century, and the importance of C. S. Lewis for more personal approaches to Christianity in the same period.

Second, we need to remember that all division of history into “ages” or “eras” is a little arbitrary. The great Cambridge historian George Macauley Trevelyan (1876–1962) made this point well two generations ago.

Unlike dates, periods are not facts. They are retrospective conceptions that we form about past events, useful to focus discussion, but very often leading historical thought astray.

Trevelyan’s point is well taken. Furthermore, there is a healthy debate over the points of detail of any attempt to divide history into periods. For example, just when did the Middle Ages begin? Or end? Does it really matter?

Nevertheless, we still need to try and organize the material into workable blocks or sections, rather than rambling aimlessly through the centuries. In practice, there is widespread agreement over the broad division of the history of Christianity for teaching purposes. If you’re using this book alongside a taught course, you ought to be able to work out how to get the most from it very easily. This work divides the history of Christianity into five broad sections, corresponding to courses taught at many colleges, seminaries, and universities.

1. The period of the early church, sometimes still referred to as the “patristic period,” during which the Christian faith began to gain a significant following throughout the Mediterranean world.
2. The “Middle Ages,” a period of Christian history in western Europe which witnessed significant cultural and intellectual development. The movement generally known as the “Renaissance” is included in this period.
3. The age of Reformation in western Europe, which witnessed the birth of Protestantism, and the consolidation of Catholicism, eventually leading to the Wars of Religion.
4. The Modern Age. This chapter looks at the development of Christianity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although the scope of our discussion is global, we focus particularly on developments in western Europe and North America, culminating in the outbreak of the Great War of 1914–18.
5. The Twentieth Century. This final chapter looks at the dramatic changes in the shape of global Christianity in the century following the end of the Great War, including discussion of important developments in Africa, South America, and Asia.

Third, you need to appreciate that this work is based on the principle of *selective attention*. It recognizes that it is impossible to do justice to everything that happened in two thousand years of history. It sets out to try and see beyond a mass of historical detail, and identify broader historical patterns. As a result, this work tries to help you track some of the sig-

nificant changes in Christian history, illustrating these wherever possible with interesting examples or important episodes.

The work thus aims to be *representative* in its coverage, rather than *comprehensive*, allowing you to build on the basic structure it provides. Each of its 160 sections is roughly the same length (about 1000 words), designed to be read in ten minutes, and assimilated in twenty.

The object is to help you work out what is really going on, rather than bombarding you with facts. This means that you will get to hear about all the landmarks of Christian history – the major figures and events that everyone (rightly) talks about. And while we'll explore a few interesting byways off the main tourist routes, the main object of this textbook is to hit the high points and make sure you've seen what everyone expects you to have seen. Once you've got a good idea of what's on the map, you can explore things further in your own time.

Fourth, this book is based on the best recent literature, most of it published within the last two decades. This research often forces correction of material found in older textbooks – sometimes over points of detail, and sometimes over larger issues. Some of the global assertions that were common in older works – such as the “decline of late medieval religion” – have been discarded or radically modified by recent research. This book brings you up to speed, aiming to give you a reliable overview of the present state of scholarship.

Fifth, and finally: this book is an *introduction*. It's a sketch map of a fascinating landscape. It's like a tourist guide to a strange country or a new city. It can't tell you everything about the place – but it will help you find your way around, make sense of what you see and hear, and (hopefully) make you want to explore more on your own. There are lots of excellent more advanced studies that will be well within your reach, once you've worked your way through this textbook.

You will get the most out of this book by reading it right the way through in the order in which it is written. Yet each chapter has been designed to stand on its own. This means that you will be able to start your reading anywhere. Each chapter opens by setting the context for the material it contains. It gives you the background material you need to make sense of what follows. Sometimes, you'll need to go back to an earlier chapter, to refresh your memory over exactly who someone like Augustine of Hippo was (as you'll discover, he's an early church writer who is important for the religious history of the Middle Ages and the Reformation period). And we'll explain terms that you need to know and use – like “patristic.”

That's all you need to know to get the most out of this book. We're ready to start.

Alister E. McGrath
King's College London
July 2012

Source of Quotation

p. xvi: G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History: A Survey of Six Centuries from Chaucer to Queen Victoria*. London: Longman, 1944, 92.

For Further Reading

The following are recommended as excellent overall accounts of the development of Christian history. Those with marked with one asterisk (*) are especially recommended as interesting and up-to-date accounts of Christian history. Those marked with two asterisks (**) focus particularly on the development of Christian thought.

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The Early Church, 100–500

At some point around the year 60, the Roman authorities began to realize there was some kind of new secret society in the heart of their city, which was rapidly gaining recruits. The reports that filtered back spoke of a sect based on some mysterious and dark figure called “Chrestus” or “Christus,” whose origins lay in one of the more obscure and backward parts of the Roman Empire. But who was he? And what was this new religion all about? Was it something they should be worried about, or could they safely ignore it?

It soon became clear that this new religious movement might have the potential to cause real trouble. The great fire which swept through Rome during the reign of the Emperor Nero in 64 was conveniently blamed on this new religious group. Nobody liked them much, and they were an obvious scapegoat for the failings of the Roman authorities to deal with the fire and its aftermath. The Roman historian Tacitus (56–117) gave a full account of this event just over fifty years later. He identified this new religious group as “the Christians,” a group who took their name from someone called “Christus,” who had been executed by Pontius Pilate back in the reign of Tiberius. This “pernicious superstition” had found its way to Rome, where it was gaining a large following.

As a result, Nero pinned the guilt (and inflicted highly refined tortures) on a class hated for their abominations, called “Christians” by the people. Christus, from whom they derived their name, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus. Yet this pernicious superstition, though checked for the moment, broke out again not only in Judaea, the primary source of the evil, but even in Rome, where everything that is repulsive and shameful from every part of the world converges and becomes popular. Accordingly, all who pleaded guilty were arrested. Their information led to the conviction of an immense multitude, not so much for the crime of setting the city on fire, as for hating humanity.

Yet, muddled and confused though the official Roman accounts of this movement may be, they were clear that they centered on the shadowy figure of “Christus.” It was not regarded as being of any permanent significance, being seen as little more than a passing minor irritation. At worst, it posed a threat to the cult of emperor worship. Yet less than three hundred years later, this new religious movement had become the official religion of the Roman Empire. So how did this happen? In this chapter, we shall tell the story of the emergence of this new religion during its first five hundred years, and track its growth from a fringe movement on the margins of imperial society to the dominant religion of the Roman Empire.

1.1. Setting the Context: The Origins of Christianity

Christianity began as a reform movement within the context of Judaism (1.1.7), which gradually clarified its identity as it grew, and began to take definite shape in the world of the first-century Roman Empire. There are no historical grounds for believing that the term “Christian” originated from Jesus of Nazareth himself. Early Christians tended to refer to each other as “disciples” or “saints,” as the letters of the New Testament make clear. Yet others used alternative names to refer to this new movement. The New Testament suggests that the term “Christians” (Greek: *Christianoi*) was first used by outsiders to refer to the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. “It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians’” (Acts 17:26). It was a term imposed upon them, not chosen by them. Yet it seems to have caught on.

However, we must be careful not to assume that the use of the single term “Christian” implies that this new religious movement was uniform and well-organized. As we shall see, the early history of Christianity suggests that it was quite diverse, without well-defined authority structures or carefully formulated sets of beliefs (1.1.4). These began to crystallize during the first few centuries of Christian history. This first chapter sets out to explain how this process took place, and explore some of its results. It focuses on the highly significant period between the death of the last apostle (c. 100) and the Council of Chalcedon (451).

The first major era of Christian history (c. 100–451), during which Christianity began to expand rapidly throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond, is sometimes called the “patristic period.” The unusual term “patristic” comes from the Greek word *patēr* (“father”), referring to the “fathers of the church,” such as Athanasius of Alexandria or Augustine of Hippo.

It is difficult to make sense of the historical development of Christianity without a good grasp of this formative period, particularly its great theological debates. Yet it is also impossible to understand the development of Christianity without knowing something about its historical origins. We shall therefore begin our discussion of early Christianity by reflecting on its emergence within Judaism, and its rapid transformation into a faith which refused to recognize ethnic or social boundaries.

1.1.1. The Crucible: The History of Israel

From its outset, Christianity saw itself as continuous with Judaism. Christians were clear that the God that they followed and worshipped was the same God worshipped by the

Israelite patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The New Testament sees the great hope of the coming of a “messiah” to the people of Israel as having been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth (1.1.3). Indeed, the New Testament use of the title “Christ” is an explicit reference to this belief. (The Hebrew term “Messiah” literally means “the anointed One,” an idea translated by the Greek term *Christos*.) Although most western readers assume that “Jesus Christ” is a name similar to “John Smith,” it is really a statement of identity: “Jesus who is the Christ.”

The continuity between Judaism and Christianity is obvious at many points. Judaism placed particular emphasis on the Law (Hebrew: *Torah*), through which the will of God was made known in the form of commands, and the Prophets, who made known the will of God in certain definite historical situations. The New Testament gospels report that Jesus of Nazareth emphasized that he had “not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfil them” (Matthew 5:17). The same point is made by Paul in his New Testament letters. Jesus is “the goal of the Law” (Romans 10:4, using the Greek word *telos*, which means “end” or “objective”). Paul also stresses the continuity between the faith of Abraham and that of Christians (Romans 4:1–25). The Letter to the Hebrews points out both the continuity of the relationship between Moses and Jesus (Hebrews 3:1–6), and between Christians and the great figures of faith of ancient Israel (Hebrews 11:1–12:2).

Throughout the New Testament, the same theme recurs: Christianity is continuous with Judaism, and brings to completion what Judaism was pointing towards. This has several major consequences, of which the following are the most important. First, both Christians and Jews regard more or less the same collection of writings – known by Jews as “Law, Prophets, and Writings” and by Christians as “the Old Testament” – as having religious authority. Although there have always been more radical thinkers within Christianity – such as the second-century writer Marcion of Sinope (1.2.3) – who argued for the removal of any historical or theological link with Judaism, the majority opinion has always been that it is important to affirm and value the link between the Christian church and Israel. A body of writings which Jews regard as complete in itself is seen by Christians as pointing forward to something which will bring it to completion. Although Christians and Jews both regard the same set of texts as important, they use different names to refer to them, and interpret them in different ways.

Second, New Testament writers often laid emphasis on the manner in which Old Testament prophecies were understood to be fulfilled or realized in the life and death of Jesus Christ. By doing this, they drew attention to two important beliefs – that Christianity is continuous with Judaism, and that Christianity brings Judaism to its true fulfillment. This is particularly important for some early Christian writings – such as Paul’s letters and the gospel of Matthew – which often seem to have a particular concern to explore the importance of Christianity for Jews. For example, at twelve points the gospel of Matthew notes how events in the life of Jesus can be seen as fulfilling Old Testament prophecy.

Yet the continuity between Christianity and Judaism also helps us understand some of the conflicts in early Christian history, especially in the region of Palestine. The New Testament suggests that at least some Christians initially continued to worship in Jewish synagogues, before controversy made this problematic. The letters of Paul help us understand at least some of those controversies. Two questions were of particular importance, and were keenly debated in the first century.

First, should Christian converts be required to be circumcised? Those who emphasized the continuity between Christianity and Judaism believed they should be. Yet the view which ultimately prevailed was that Christians were no longer subject to the cultic laws of Judaism – such as the requirement to be circumcised, or observe strict food laws.

Second, were non-Jewish converts to Christianity to be treated as Jews? (The Jewish term “Gentile,” meaning “someone who is not a Jew,” was widely used in this discussion, and is often encountered in the New Testament references to this issue.) Again, those who emphasized the continuity between Judaism and Christianity argued that Gentile believers should be treated as Jews. For this reason, they demanded the circumcision of male Gentile converts. Yet the majority view was quite different: to be a Christian was not about reinforcing a Jewish ethnic or cultural identity, but about entering a new way of living and thinking that was open to everyone. By the late first century, Christians largely saw themselves as a new religious movement, originating within Judaism, but not limited by its cultic and ethnic traditions. We shall consider this point in more detail later (1.1.7).

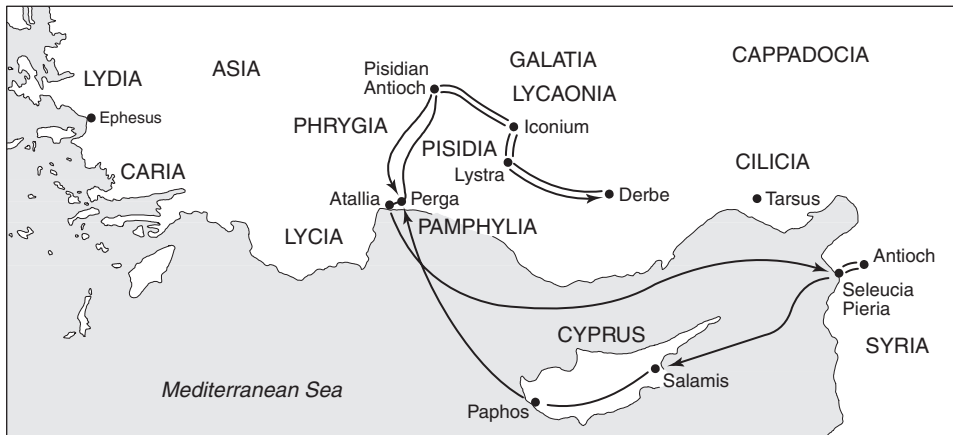
Yet despite Christianity having its origins within Judaism, which was viewed as a “legal religion” (Latin: *religio licita*) by the Roman authorities, early Christian communities were not considered to be entitled to imperial legal protection. These communities thus lived under the shadow of possible persecution, forcing them to maintain a low public profile. They had no access to power or social influence, and were often the object of oppression by the secular authorities.

One of the factors that helped crystallize a growing sense of religious identity within the churches was the rapid growth of Christianity outside Palestine, as it gained a growing following within the Greek-speaking world of the eastern Mediterranean. We shall explore this further in the following section.

1.1.2. A Wider Context: The Pagan Quest for Wisdom

Although its historical origins lay within Palestine, Christianity rapidly gained a following in the Greek-speaking world, especially within the cities of the Roman Empire. The missionary journeys of Paul of Tarsus, described in the New Testament, are of importance here. Paul was a Jewish religious leader who converted to Christianity, changing his name from “Saul” to “Paul.” His missionary expeditions took him to many cities and regions throughout the northeastern Mediterranean area – including Europe. As Christianity began to gain a foothold on the European mainland, the question of how it was to be preached in a non-Jewish context began to become of increasing importance.

Early Christian preaching to Jewish audiences, especially in Palestine, tended to focus on demonstrating that Jesus of Nazareth represented the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel. Peter’s sermon to Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 2) follows this pattern. Peter here argues that Jesus represents the culmination of Israel’s destiny. God has declared him to be both “Lord and Christ” – highly significant terms, which Peter’s Jewish audience would have understood and appreciated. But what were Christians to do when preaching to Greek audiences, who knew nothing of the Old Testament, and had no connection with the history of Israel?



Map 1.1 Paul's first missionary journey

An approach that came to be particularly significant in the early Christian world can be found in Paul's sermon, preached at the Areopagus in the Greek city of Athens at an unknown date, possibly around 55. Paul here makes no reference to the ideas and hopes of Judaism. Instead, he presents Jesus of Nazareth as someone who revealed a god who the Athenians knew about, but had yet to encounter definitively. "What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23). Paul declared that the god who was made known through Jesus of Nazareth was the same god who had created the world and humanity – the god in whom, as the Athenian poet Aratus declared, "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

Where early Christian preaching to Jewish audiences presented Jesus as the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel, Paul presented the Christian faith as the fulfillment of the deepest longings of the human heart and the most profound intuitions of human reason. This was easily adapted to make use of some of the core themes of classic Greek philosophy, such as the idea of the "word" (Greek: *logos*) – the fundamental rational principle of the universe, according to popular Platonic philosophy of the first century (1.3.3). This theme is developed in the opening chapter of the gospel of John, which presents Jesus of Nazareth as the "word" by which the universe was originally created, and which entered into the world to illuminate and redeem it. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory" (John 1:14).

This was not necessarily seen as displacing Christianity's historical and theological roots in Judaism. Rather, it was seen as a way of setting out the universal appeal of the Christian faith, which was held to transcend all ethnic, racial, and cultural barriers. The universal validity of the Christian gospel was held to imply that it could be proclaimed in ways that would resonate with every human culture. As we shall see, this approach to the appeal of Christianity would be of immense significance throughout its history, especially in missionary contexts.

Yet we have already assumed too much knowledge about the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth. We need to consider this central figure of the Christian faith in more detail.

1.1.3. The Turning Point: Jesus of Nazareth

Christianity is an historical religion, which came into being in response to a specific set of events – above all, the history of Jesus of Nazareth. Although a full treatment of Jesus of Nazareth lies beyond the scope of this short work, it is nevertheless important to appreciate something of its fundamental themes, especially as they are taken up and developed within Christian history.

Traditionally, the life of Jesus of Nazareth is dated to the opening of the Christian era, with his death being located at some point around 30–3. Yet virtually nothing is known of Jesus of Nazareth from sources outside the New Testament. The New Testament itself provides two groups of quite distinct sources of information about Jesus: the four gospels, and the letters. Although the parallels are not exact, there are clear similarities between the gospels and the classical “lives” written by leading Roman historians of the age – such as Suetonius’s *Lives of the Caesars*, or Lucian’s *Life of Demorax*.

The gospels mingle historical recollection with theological reflection, reflecting both on the identity and the significance of Jesus of Nazareth. The four gospels have their own distinct identities and concerns. For example, the gospel of Matthew seems especially concerned with establishing the significance of Jesus for a Jewish readership, where the gospel of Luke seems more concerned with explaining his importance to a Greek-speaking community. Establishing the identity of Jesus is just as important as recording what he said and did. The gospel writers can be thought of as trying to locate Jesus of Nazareth on a map, so that his relationship with humanity, history, and God can be understood and appreciated. This leads them to focus on three particular themes.

1. What Jesus taught, particularly the celebrated “parables of the Kingdom.” The teaching of Jesus was seen as important in helping believers to live out an authentic Christian life, which was a central theme of Christian discipleship – most notably, in relation to cultivating attitudes of humility towards others and obedience towards God.
2. What Jesus did – especially his ministry of healing, which was seen as important in establishing his identity, but also in shaping the values of the Christian community itself. For example, most medieval monasteries established hospitals, as a means of continuing Christ’s ministry in this respect.
3. What was said about Jesus by those who witnessed his teaching and actions. The gospel of Luke, for example, records Simeon’s declaration that the infant Jesus was the “consolation of Israel,” as well as the Roman centurion’s assertion that Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against him. These can be seen as constituting public recognition of the identity of Jesus.

The letters of the New Testament – sometimes still referred to as “epistles” (Greek: *epistolē*, “a letter”) – are addressed to individuals and churches, and often focus on issues of conduct

and belief. These letters are important in helping us make sense of the emerging understandings of the significance of Jesus of Nazareth within the Christian community. The example of Jesus is regularly invoked to emphasize the importance of imitating his attitudes – for example, treating others better than yourself (Philippians 2). Although the letters make virtually no direct reference to the teachings of Jesus, certain patterns of behavior are clearly regarded as being grounded in those teachings – such as humility, or a willingness to accept suffering.

The letters also emphasize the importance of certain patterns of behavior – such as repeating the actions of the Last Supper, using bread and wine as a way of recalling and celebrating the death and resurrection of Christ. The sacraments of both baptism and the eucharist are clearly anticipated in the New Testament, and are traced back to the ministry of Jesus himself.

Yet perhaps more importantly, the letters also reveal the understandings of the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth which were becoming characteristic of Christian communities. The most important of these themes are:

1. Jesus of Nazareth is understood to be the means by which the invisible God can be known and seen. Jesus is the “image of the invisible God” (Greek: *eikōn*; Colossians 1:15), or the “exact representation” (Greek: *charaktēr*) of God (Hebrews 1:3).
2. Jesus is the one who makes salvation possible, and whose life reflects the themes characteristic of redeemed human existence. The use of the term “savior” (Greek: *sōtēr*) is highly significant in this respect.
3. The core Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is seen as a vindication of his innocence, a confirmation of his divine identity, and the grounds of hope for believers. Through faith, believers are understood to be united with Christ, sharing in his sufferings at present, while also sharing in the hope of his resurrection.

Each of these themes would be further developed as the Christian community reflected on their significance, and relevance for the life and thought of believers. The letters of Paul were of particular importance in setting out both the beliefs of Christianity and shaping its early social and cultural attitudes. We shall consider how early Christian thinkers developed these ideas later in this chapter.

1.1.4. The Early Spread of Christianity

The historical evidence suggests that Christianity spread very rapidly during the first and early second centuries. This naturally raises two questions. First, what were the mechanisms by which the movement spread? And second, what was it about the movement that proved attractive to people at the time? Unlike early Islam, Christianity was not spread by force; if anything, force was used against it by the imperial authorities. Since Christianity was not recognized as a legal religious movement until the fourth century, converts clearly believed there was something about the new religion that made it worth risking penalization or persecution. But what?



Figure 1.1 Rome was seen as especially important by early Christians, as it was believed that both the apostles Peter and Paul were martyred there. *The Martyrdom of St. Peter*, by P. Brancacci and F. Lippi. Church of St. Mary of Carmine, Florence. Photo: akg-images/De Agostini Picture Library

Earlier historians suggested that one of the primary mechanisms for the spread of Christianity was public preaching, noting the importance of Paul’s missionary journeys, described in the Acts of the Apostles. Yet there are relatively few historical accounts of the public preaching of the Christian faith, probably reflecting the fact that these would have been suppressed by the imperial authorities. Paul’s speech at Athens is a rare example of such public preaching; his preferred method was preaching in synagogues to Jewish audiences.

More recently, historians have noted the importance of networks in spreading the Christian faith. These loose organizations, often based around professions or specific localities, avoided meeting in public. Interested outsiders would be invited along to what were essentially secret meetings, often by Christians whose social or professional connections brought them into contact with such people. Early Christian gatherings or assemblies (Greek: *ekklēsia*) usually took place in private households, creating a strong sense of belonging and identity, given further weight by “sacred oaths” (Latin: *sacramenta*) of loyalty.

There is considerable evidence for the importance of commerce and trade in spreading Christianity, with itinerant preachers and teachers attending house churches in cities in which they had business. At this early stage, there was no centralized religious authority, no standard model of community organization at the local level, and no dedicated church

buildings or cathedrals. It was only after the conversion of the emperor Constantine that bishops from throughout the Christian movement would be able to meet together, and begin to resolve debates over Christian beliefs and provide official statements of faith.

So what was the appeal of Christianity? Why did so many convert to Christianity, despite the dangers this entailed? It is clear that this appeal was multi-layered, and not easy to characterize. At the social level, Christianity offered a new sense of identity and status. The growing realization of the importance of networks in spreading Christianity throughout the Roman Empire clearly points to the importance of a sense of belonging – of achieving significance and meaning. Roman society was strongly hierarchical; Christianity, in contrast, minimized the importance of socially constructed values. The Pauline letters, for example, declare that “in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free” (Galatians 3:28). Christian communities developed a value system that enabled those who would otherwise be at the base of the social hierarchy to develop an elevated sense of personal worth and value. The appeal of early Christianity to women (1.3.6), slaves, and other socially marginalized groups clearly reflects this perception.

Yet this emphasis on the importance of all members of the community of faith was supplemented by practical support. Early Christian communities seem to have regarded social outreach and support as being integral to their identity, raising funds to allow them to care for the poor, sick, and needy. A good example of this was the church’s care for widows, a social group which tended to be treated as insignificant in Roman society. Contemporary documents suggest that the Roman churches supported large numbers of widows, many of whom otherwise would have been without any perceived social value or personal means of survival.

Contemporary accounts suggest that many were drawn to consider the ideas of Christianity through the impact that it had upon their lives. It is no accident that the early church used medical models and imagery when referring both to Christian bishops and rites. The first-century bishop Ignatius of Antioch, for example, famously described the eucharistic bread and wine as the “medicine of immortality.” This vision of Christianity as a religion and community of healing resonated strongly with many, particularly at times of uncertainty and instability.

The theme of resurrection played an important role in early Christian outreach, not least in encouraging an attitude of contempt towards death. Accounts of the martyrdoms of early Christian leaders frequently emphasize their lack of fear of death, and the impact this had on pagan audiences. This remarkable absence of fear in the face of death – widely noted by cultural commentators of the age – was not due to any Stoic notion of indifference, but to the firm belief in immortality that was characteristic of Christianity.

Finally, we must give due weight to the powerful ideology that was implicit within the early Christian proclamation. Early Christian apologists emphasized the ability of their faith to make sense of the deep moral structure of the universe. It enabled them to cope with the enigmas of evil and suffering, by offering a fundamental reassurance that justice would ultimately triumph over deceit and oppression. Christianity proclaimed a wise and righteous governor of the universe, to be contrasted with the moral decadence of secular imperial institutions of power. Christianity offered an alternative vision of reality, which seemed to many to be preferable to what they experienced around them.

The appeal of Christianity to the world of late antiquity was thus complex and multileveled, capable of connecting with multiple aspects of the culture of this age.

1.1.5. The Apostolic Age

The first major period in Christian history is generally known as the “apostolic age.” The term “apostle” derives from the Greek verb *apostelein*, “to send,” and is often used to designate those commissioned by Jesus of Nazareth to continue and extend his ministry. Traditionally, this is defined in terms of the period during which the apostles were still alive, thus ensuring historical continuity between the church and the original community of faith which gathered around Jesus of Nazareth. We know frustratingly little about this period, even though it is clearly of immense historical importance. However, we can begin to sketch some of its aspects, providing an important transition to the better-understood history of the early church.

As we noted earlier, at the heart of the Christian movement lay a series of reports and interpretations of the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth. His significance was presented in terms of both his identity and his function, using a rich range of Christological titles and images of salvation, often drawn from the Jewish roots of Christianity. Initially, Christian groups appear to have been established in leading urban centers, such as Jerusalem, by individuals who had personally known Jesus of Nazareth, or who were familiar with his immediate circle.

Other Christian communities were established by others with more complex associations with the Jerusalem church, most notably Paul of Tarsus. According to the New Testament itself, Paul was responsible for establishing Christian churches in many parts of the Mediterranean world. At first Christianity would almost certainly have been seen simply as one more sect or group within a Judaism that was already accustomed to considerable diversity in religious expression. As recent historical studies of this period have made clear, Judaism was far from being monolithic at this time.

These Christian communities were scattered throughout the Roman Empire, each facing its own distinctive local challenges and opportunities. This raises two significant historical questions, neither of which can be answered with any degree of certainty. First, how did these individual Christian communities maintain their identity with regard to their local cultural context? It is clear, for example, that early Christian worship served to emphasize the distinctiveness of Christian communities, helping to forge a sense of shared identity over and against society in general.

Second, how did these individual communities understand themselves as relating to a larger universal community, increasingly referred to as “the church” in the later writings of the New Testament? There is evidence that these communities maintained contact with each other through correspondence and traveling teachers who visited clusters of churches, and especially through the sharing of foundational documents, some (but not all) of which were later incorporated into the canon of the New Testament.

It is widely thought that these concerns underlie some of the themes explored in the Pastoral Epistles – three later New Testament letters (1 Timothy; 2 Timothy; Titus), possibly dating from the final decades of the first century, which show a particular concern for the