

Rethinking Religion

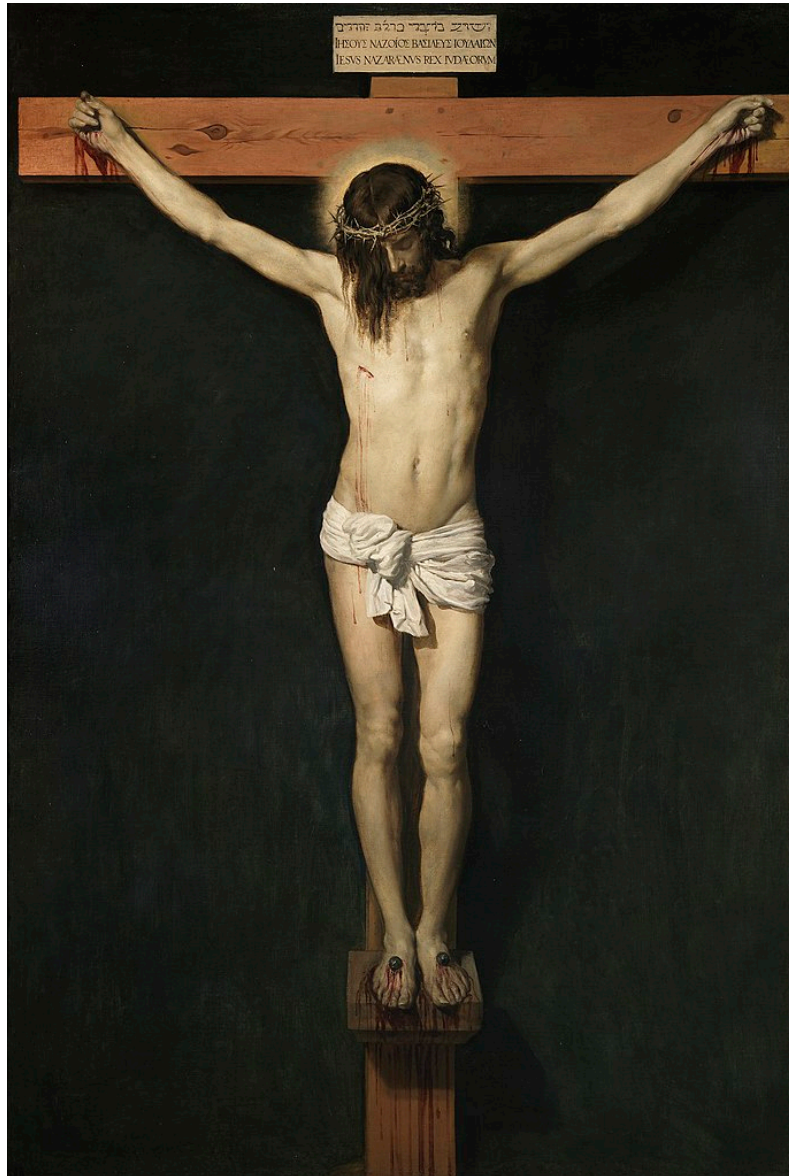


Christianity

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Rethinking Religion: Christianity



Christ on the Cross (Velázquez 1632)

[Museo Del Prado](#)

Christianity

1. Life of Jesus Christ

The consensus view of scholars who specialise in the origins of Christianity, is that a historical preacher, on whom the Christian figure 'Jesus Christ' is based, most probably did exist. The date of his birth is of course forever associated with the start (year zero) of the world's most widely used calendar era. Hence the current year AD 2025 (or 2025 CE) signifies that Jesus was born 2,025 years ago.

According to the Bible, Jesus was born to a young woman called Mary, who miraculously conceived him without a human father. Little else is recorded of Jesus's life until as a grown man, at the age of about 30, he began his ministry (i.e. preaching and teaching in service to God). The major milestones in Jesus's life are:

- **Baptism** by John the Baptist in the river Jordan. John was a prophet who, so it is told, was infamously beheaded on the whim of Salome (daughter of Herod Antipas).
- **Recruiting** his followers. Jesus recruited his first disciples, Simon and Peter, besides the Sea of Galilee, saying "follow me, and I will make you fishers of men". He would go on to recruit many more, but chose [Twelve Apostles](#) in particular to be his companions and preach on his behalf.
- **Preaching** whilst travelling around (Roman) Judea, especially Galilee, and performing various miracles, for example: curing the sick (blind, lepers, deaf mute), raising a man called Lazarus from the dead, turning water into wine (at a wedding celebration), walking on water, feeding of the five thousand.¹
- **Sermon on the Mount** when Jesus preaches to a crowd of people, setting out key moral teachings such as the Beatitudes (or blessings)² and the Lord's Prayer.³

Even if, historically, the Sermon on the Mount never took place, who has not heard the words, "*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth*", "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God*", "*turn the other cheek*" or "*You cannot serve God and mammon*"? Who has not heard the admonition to "*love your enemies (...) for if ye love them that love you, what reward have ye*"? In fact, no Biblical text is more widely known or quoted than the Sermon on the Mount and arguably, the sermon reflects the essence of the Christian faith (Vaught, 2001).



Figure 1. Sermon on the Mount (Carl Bloch)

¹ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feeding_the_multitude).

² Beatitudes appear in gospels of Matthew and Luke, with some important differences between them.

³ "Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come..."

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- **Transfiguration**, when Jesus shines radiantly in front of three of his apostles, which is interpreted as signifying that Jesus is the Son of God.
- **Passion**. Final journey to Jerusalem and final week of his life.
- **Last Supper**, the final meal shared by Jesus with his 12 apostles. The scene has been painted by many artists, but most famously by Leonardo da Vinci.⁴



Figure 2. The Last Supper

- **Arrest and trial**. Jesus is betrayed by Judas, one of his apostles. He is tried before the Jewish judiciary (Sanhedrin) and accused of treason for claiming to be King of the Jews. He is brought before Pontius Pilate who “washes his hands” of any responsibility and hands over Jesus to be crucified by Roman soldiers.
- **Crucifixion**. Jesus is gruesomely crucified on a cross with nails through his hands and feet. According to the Gospels, two thieves were also crucified at the same, but bound with ropes not nailed. The cross would later become the iconic symbol of Christianity.
- **Burial**. Jesus’ body is laid inside a tomb, carved out of the rock of the mountainside.

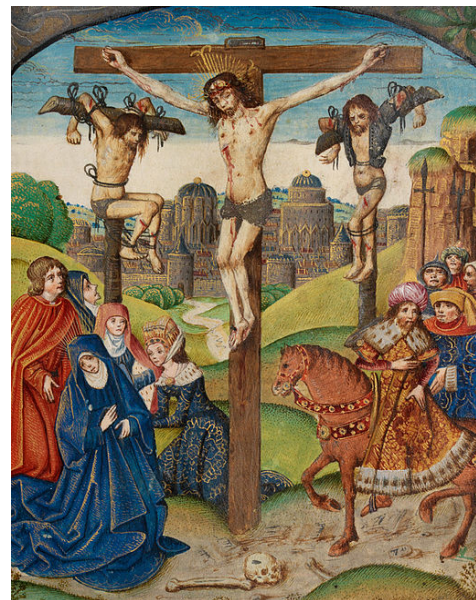


Figure 3. Christ on the Cross⁵

⁴ See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Supper_\(Leonardo\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Supper_(Leonardo))

⁵ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crucifixion_of_Jesus

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- **Resurrection.** On the third day after his death, Jesus is resurrected to life (by God) and, a few days later, appears briefly before his disciples.
- **Ascension.** Jesus ascends bodily into heaven.⁶

Jesus left no written records of his teachings. His life became known to the world through the Gospels, written decades after his death. The Gospels are one of the famous parts of the Bible.

⁶ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ascension_of_Jesus

2. Bible

The Bible is one of the most well-known books in the world, and historically one of the most influential and important books ever published. The lengthy book, some 700,000 words long⁷, is in fact two separate books (bound together) known as the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT). The NT divides naturally into two main sections. In the first section, are the four canonical Gospels, which recount the life and death of Jesus Christ. The Gospels were written many decades after his death, probably between AD 66 and 110. They are attributed to four authors, the apostles Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, although these names were a later (2nd century) addition, the real authors being unknown (Reddish, 1997). In the second section of the NT are the Acts of the Apostles and a series of Letters or Epistles written by various Christian leaders (particularly St. Paul) to provide guidance for the earliest church communities. The books within this section of the NT were written by Christians in the first century AD between 50-90 AD.

In contrast to the NT, the OT recounts the ancient history of the Israelites in Canaan and neighbouring lands (e.g. Moab) in the southern Levant, and who were variously ruled over by the Persian, Babylonian, Assyrian and Egyptian empires. In particular, it includes the story of the Israelites' famous exodus from (oppression in) Egypt, their returning to the land of Canaan (the 'Holy Land'), their defeat and exile in Babylon, the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem⁸ etc. The OT was written at different times between about 1200 and 165 BC, but the history may go back to 1500 BC or even earlier.⁹ As the OT was written 'before Christ' ("BC"), it follows logically that it does not say anything about Jesus with the exception of a few brief (and dubious) prophecies that a Messiah will one day appear.¹⁰

The use of the terms 'Old' and 'New' by Christians implies that the NT had in some way extended or superseded the OT, but this reflects the bias of Christianity. From the Jewish perspective there is no 'Old Testament', but only the Hebrew scripture or the *Tanakh*. Importantly, the *Tanakh* is guided by an oral and written *Torah* or teaching. Whether or not Christians are correct to claim the OT as its own, is an interesting question, but throughout history they have done so. For example, Articles VI and VII of *The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of 1571* state quite explicitly that the canonical books of the OT and NT "*containeth all things necessary to salvation*" and "*The Old Testament is not contrary to the New: for both on the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to Mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and Man*".

Selected passages from the Bible, both OT and NT, known as the lectionary, are used for readings during Christian worship, for study or other theological uses. The passages are chosen in a systematic fashion to cover as much of the Bible as possible, which are spread over a three-year cycle. Given that the OT is so much longer than the NT, inevitably that a smaller proportion of the material is utilised. Some verses are omitted.

⁷ The total number of words varies according to Bible version.

⁸ The First or Solomon's Temple was built in 957 BCE and destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. The Second Temple was completed in 515 BCE and fell to the Roman Siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE.

⁹ For brief historical summary, see: <https://www.historyfiles.co.uk/KingListsMiddEast/CanaanMoab.htm>

¹⁰ E.g.: "*Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called Emmanuel*" (Isaiah 7:14)

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Typically, there are two versions of the lectionary, one for Sundays, Principal Feasts, Holy Days and Festivals, and the other for weekdays.¹¹

Importantly, there is not one universal Bible, but several different Bibles as adopted by different Christian denominations or branches. The principal versions are shown in Table 1, but there are numerous others.¹² The Eastern Orthodox version arose from the Great Schism of 1054, which concerned a major theological disagreement over [papal primacy](#), but including other ecclesiastical differences as well. The Protestant version of the Western Bible arose during the Protestant Reformation in 16th century (to reform the Catholic Church). The Catholic bible does not include the Apocrypha.

Despite important differences of interpretation and opinion, Christians in the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist and Pentecostal churches share a common faith – the “Great Tradition” of Christian teaching – in so far as they stand within their own Christian denominational heritages (Olson, 2002). At the periphery of Christianity there are a host of movements claiming to be Christian, such as the Mormons or the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints. So, as Smart (1977) remarks, Christianity is by no means as simple as it might sometimes seem.

Judaism			Tanakh			Tanakh (Hebrew) Septuagint (Greek)
			Torah	Nevi'im	Ketuvim	
Christianity	Western	Catholic	Old Testament			New Testament Vulgate (Latin) Douai-Rheims (English)
		Protestant	Old Testament			New Testament Lutheran (German) KJV (English)
	Eastern Orthodox		Old Testament			New Testament EOB (Greek)

Table 1. Different versions of the Bible

As illustrated diagrammatically in Table 1, there is also an important physical difference between the OT and NT, in that the OT is 3-4 times longer than the NT; this difference is often overlooked. Arguably the NT, and particularly the Gospels, has wielded an influence far out of proportion to its modest size. The OT consists of some 39 distinct chapters or books, beginning with Genesis (“*In the beginning God created heaven, and earth...*”) and ending with the prophecies of the twelve lesser or minor prophets, and lastly two chapters of Machabees being the history of the people at the time of Judas Machabeus. The shorter NT consists of some 27 chapters or books, starting with the four Gospels and ending with the Apocalypse.

It should be noted that the Quran, the central religious text of Islam, makes numerous references to people and events found in the Bible. In particular, Jesus is acknowledged to have been a great prophet, but is not regarded as divine. The Quran mentions the “people of the Book” where most often it is referring to the Jews, but by extension to the Christians as well (Pelikan, *ibid*, p.136).

¹¹ See e.g. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revised_Common_Lectionary

¹² See e.g. Bible Gateway <https://www.biblegateway.com/>

3. Christian Doctrine

3.1 Creeds

The most stable and widely recognised teaching is that preserved in the ancient creeds – the Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed. The Apostles’ Creed is a statement of faith used in the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and many Protestant churches (but not officially recognised in the Eastern Orthodox churches). A modern English version (as used in the Roman Catholic church) is the following:

*I [We] believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.
I [We] believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
I [We] believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.
Amen.*

The Nicene Creed is a similar statement of faith to the Apostles’ Creed, but is the only ecumenical one because it is accepted as authoritative by the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Protestant *and* Eastern Orthodox churches. The belief in the Holy Trinity – God the Father, God the Son (Jesus Christ) and God the Holy Spirit (or Holy Ghost) existing in three co-equal, co-eternal, consubstantial divine persons – is expressed in the [Athanasian Creed](#), and is incorporated into the Book of Common Prayer.

That Jesus was God’s son is of course at the heart of the Christian faith.¹³ However, the exact nature of Jesus was very controversial in the early centuries of the church resulting in heterodox doctrines such as Arianism¹⁴, Docetism¹⁵, Adoptionism¹⁶ to name a few. Supposedly these “Christological heresies” were silenced at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and the ‘Chalcedonian Definition’¹⁷, but the Protestant Reformation reignited the debates and theologians continued them into the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries “and will almost certainly continue until Christ returns” (Olson, 2016, p.239).

Regarding the birth of Jesus, it is believed he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born from the Virgin Mary. Mary’s fate was announced to her by the angel Gabriel, a celebratory event known as the Annunciation.¹⁸ As recounted in the Gospels, Joseph and the pregnant Mary are required (because of a census) to travel from their home in Nazareth to the town of Bethlehem. While there, Mary gives birth to Jesus in a stable, an event known as the Nativity and celebrated at Christmas.

¹³ <https://www.churchofengland.org/our-faith/what-we-believe>

¹⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arianism>

¹⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Docetism>

¹⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adoptionism>

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chalcedonian_Definition

¹⁸ In other words, Jesus was conceived without sexual intercourse taking place and he did not have a human father. Mary was betrothed to a man called Joseph whom she would later marry.

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According to the Church of England, “belief in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is at the heart of our faith. Christians believe that Jesus is God’s Son. Jesus reveals to us that God is our Father, and that God is available to us through the Holy Spirit”.¹⁹ In particular such doctrine is to be found in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal.

Many scholars and theologians have written about, and influenced the development of Christianity, notably [Origen](#) (c. 185–253 AD) who is regarded as one of the fathers of the Church, and [St. Augustine of Hippo](#) (354–430 AD). Origen placed the divine origin and authority of the scriptures in the preface of his *On First Principles*, which is considered to be the first truly systematic treatment of Christian belief by a Christian thinker (Olson, 2016). Around 400 AD St. Augustine wrote the highly influential *De doctrina christiana* (On Christian Doctrine), which provides practical guidance for interpreting the faith. According to Dawson (1957), the Latin Fathers – Saints Augustine, Ambrose, Leo and Gregory – were in a real sense the fathers of Western culture.

As for the name of this religion, it was the martyred [Ignatius of Antioch](#) who, writing a century before Origen, was the first to give it the name that would endure – *Christianismós* (Greek *χριστιανισμός*), or as we know it, ‘Christianity’ (Crafer, 1919).²⁰ Moreover, Ignatius is regarded as an important living link between the Apostles and the Fathers of the early Church.

3.2 Sin

The concept of sin or sinful conduct is an important and defining characteristic of Christianity. Who has not heard of the “seven deadly sins” (pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed, and sloth)? Who has not heard the expressions, “*he that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her*” (John 8:7) and “*for the wages of sin is death*” (Romans 6:23), but also the exhortations to resist temptation and prayers that God “*deliver us from evil*” (Matthew 6:13)?

The fact that humans are sinners, underlies the doctrine of seeking ‘salvation’ through (belief in) Jesus Christ. Christians believe that Jesus died on the cross as a sacrifice to achieve atonement or propitiation (1 John 4:10) for humanity’s sins, and hence brought about a reconciliation between God and humankind. The corollary of committing sin is that Christians also believe in the forgiveness of sins, as stated in the Apostles’ Creed (see above).

Sin is not, of course, a concept that is unique to Christianity. Other religions such as Islam or Buddhism, also have moral teachings and punishments for transgression of expected ethical, ‘right’ behaviour. However, Christianity is the only religion that holds a belief in ‘[original sin](#)’ and the practise of confessing one’s sins to receive absolution.²¹ According to the dogma and practice of the church, only ordained Christian priests may grant absolution to the penitent. Another central doctrinal belief is that Christ was born without sin.²² The implication of that is that his human mother, the Virgin Mary, must also have been conceived without sin, hence the [Immaculate Conception](#).

¹⁹ <https://www.churchofengland.org/our-faith/what-we-believe>

²⁰ The feast day of Saint Ignatius just happens to be [17th October](#)!

²¹ See [Sacrament of Penance](#).

²² See Article XV in the *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of 1571* (BCP of the Anglican Church in North America)

3.3 Suffering

Christianity has never been able to provide a satisfactory explanation of suffering in the world. If God is good, beneficent and all loving, how could it be allowed? Theologians might answer that God, having created the universe, let life evolve as it may without further intervention or interference in human affairs. Although that might be true of conflicts and wars of humanity's own making, there is also terrible suffering in the world caused by disease and natural disasters. In 2015 Stephen Fry, a well-known humanist and atheist, was interviewed on Ireland's RTÉ One television programme, *The Meaning of Life*. The show's host, Gay Byrne, asked Fry, "Suppose it's all true, and you walk up to the Pearly Gates and you are confronted by God. What would Stephen Fry say to Him, Her or It?". Fry's answer was revealing and one with which I completely agree.²³

In 2016 the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, in an interview with TV and radio presenter Jeremy Vine, acknowledged that the question, "how can there be a God when there is so much suffering in the world?" was *the* question, but had to admit that "*I haven't got a nice neat answer*".²⁴ It is of course a question that has been asked many times before (see Figure 4).

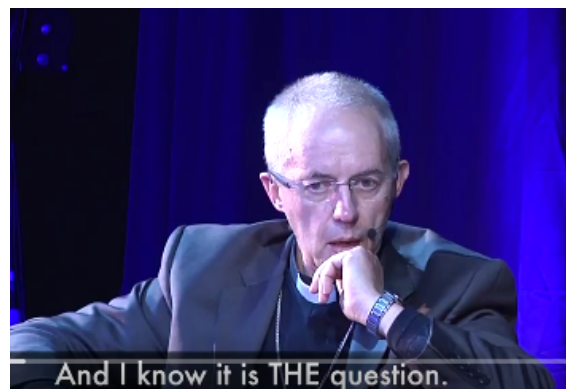


Figure 4. Justin Welby ponders suffering

3.4 Miracles

Miracles are found in all the major world religions, but Christianity is the one that has put the most stress on their occurrence (Wood, 2000). By miracle is meant an unusual, startling or extraordinary event that finds no reasonable explanation in human abilities or any other known forces in the world and, given the religious context, is seen as the result of a special act of God (Meier, 1994). Numerous miracles are recounted in the Bible. In the OT, for example, Moses famously parts the waters of the Red Sea so the Israelites could escape from Egypt, and many other miracles are attributed to the prophets [Elijah](#) and [Elisha](#). In the NT, Jesus miraculously cures the sick, and famously feeds a multitude of 5,000 people from a basket of five loaves and two fishes.

Miracles are a long-standing and deeply rooted aspect of the Catholic faith, from those worked by the medieval saints to those still recognised today that lead to beatification and canonisation. Our Lady of Lourdes and Mother Teresa are well-known examples of saints in the modern era. In contrast to Catholicism, ever since the Protestant Reformation, Protestants have denied that any miracles have occurred since those of Jesus's apostles (recorded in the Book of Acts).

²³ Why create a world with suffering? Why create a world where children might develop cancer of the bone or go blind because of an insect? Such a God is a sadistic monster with whom I would want nothing to do!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-suvkwNYSQo>

²⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/archbishopofcanterbury/videos/vb.164961400224681/1111125678941577/>

4. History and Spread of Christianity

Christianity began in the Roman province of Judea following the death of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem. From there, first led by the Apostles, it spread throughout the Roman Empire and beyond into today's Western Europe. As shown in Figure 6, from Palestine it spread north and west into Asia Minor (major part of modern-day Turkey), across to Greece and Macedonia, to Rome itself and then into Gaul (most of modern-day France) and Britain.

The most influential Apostle after Peter was Paul, who undertook several missionary expeditions between 45 and 58 AD. As recounted in the Bible, Paul was a Pharisee and spent much of the first half of his life persecuting the nascent Christian movement. Then, on his way to Damascus, he had a vision that famously changed his life, in which God revealed his Son to him (Galatians 1:16). Paul states that he saw the Lord (1 Corinthians 9:1), though Acts claims that near Damascus he saw a blinding bright light. Following this revelation, over the next 20 years or so, Paul travelled and preached extensively. He established several churches in Asia Minor and at least three in Europe, including the church at Corinth, Greece.

The groundwork for Christianity to officially replace the Roman state religion was laid during the reign of the Emperor Constantine I (also known as [Constantine the Great](#)), and the process was completed by the Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius in 380 AD. Despite Christians having suffered much persecution over the previous centuries, the Christian faith was made mandatory for all citizens of the Empire, and Christianity became the official state religion.

In the early centuries in the history of the Church, North Africa was for a time the heart of world Christianity. The Councils of bishops in Hippo (modern day Annaba, Algeria) and Carthage affirmed the canonical books in 393 and 397 (Olson, 2016, p.92). However, with the emergence of Islam in the 7th century, 200 years later Christianity in North Africa was more or less gone, the church almost wiped out.²⁵ Curiously, one region of Africa did survive the expansion of Islam, which was [Ethiopia](#).



Because it was isolated from the rest of the Christian world, Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity developed its own distinctive character and forms of practice. For example, the figure of Mary is honoured as the Holy Mother of God, the Mother Church, and Our Lady Mary the Intercessor, and in particular credited with performing numerous miracles. The spectacular manuscript *The Miracles of Mary* (Berzock, 2002) testifies to the reverence in which she was held (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Image of Mary (from 17th century Ethiopian manuscript

²⁵ <https://anglican.ink/2022/07/29/archbishop-of-canterburys-keynote-address-to-the-2022-lambeth-conference/>

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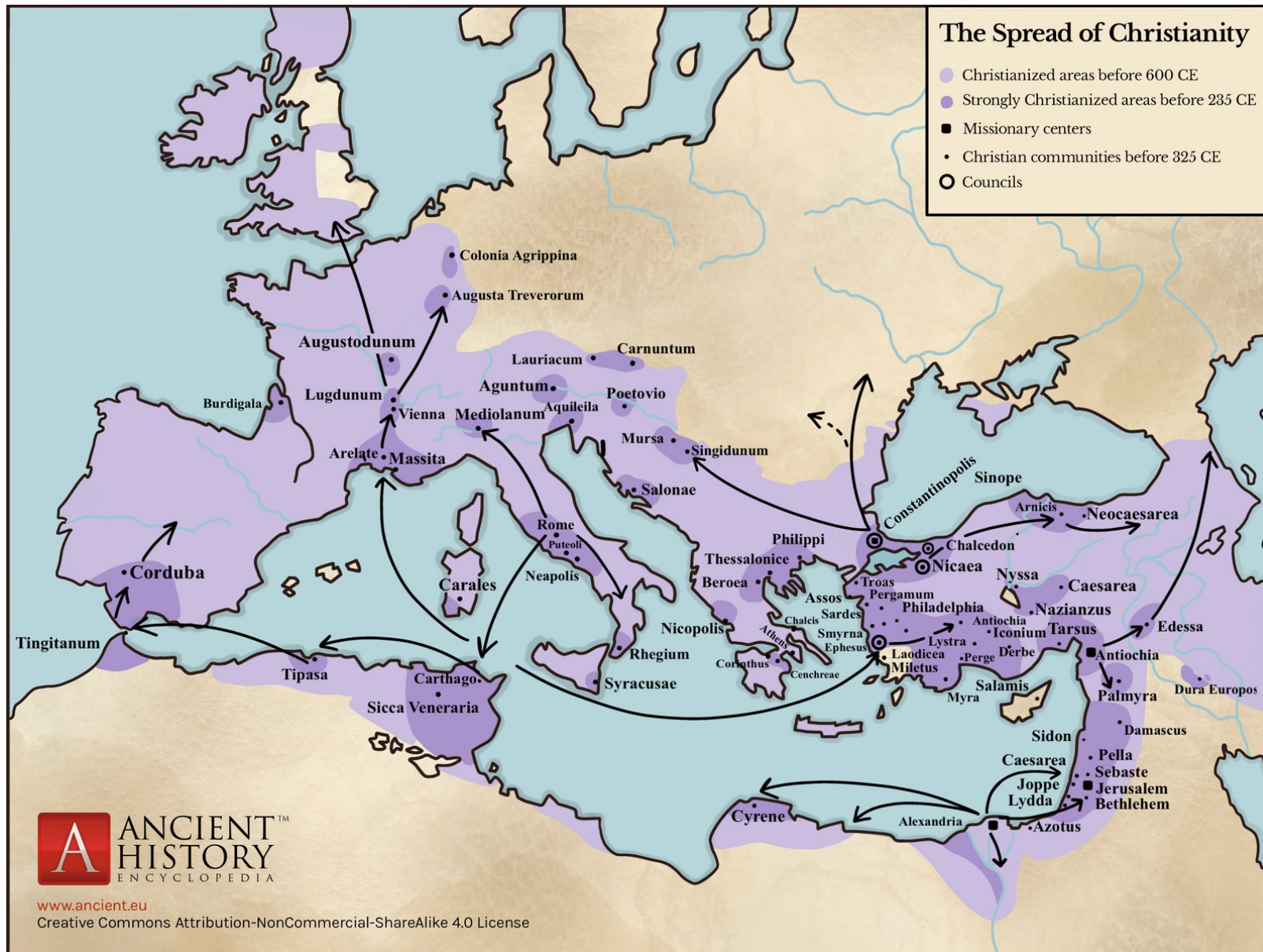


Figure 6. The historical spread of Christianity

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The expansion of Christianity in the Middle East and beyond was abruptly stopped by the emergence of Islam in the 7th century. In the 12th to late 13th centuries various religious wars – the notorious Crusades – were fought in the Middle East intended to recover the Holy Land, and in particular Jerusalem, from Islamic rule.²⁶ Although Christian crusaders could claim some victories, in the end the Muslim world prevailed. Christianity did eventually expand across most of the world due to various missionary activities. During the so-called “Age of Discovery” (15th–17th centuries), the Catholic Church inaugurated major missionary efforts to spread Christianity in the New World and to convert the Native Americans and other indigenous people (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. Spread of Christianity across the world

In the Americas and other colonies in Asia and Africa, most missions were run by religious orders such as the Augustinians, Franciscans, Jesuits and Dominicans. The missionary efforts were a major part of the colonialist invasions of the European powers such as Spain, France and Portugal. Although there were some earlier small-scale efforts, the major missionary activities to Africa from Europe and North America came in the last quarter of the 19th century, during the European scramble for African territories (Latourette, 1943).

²⁶ See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crusades>

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Today, Christianity remains the world's largest religious group with some 2.4 billion followers. However, distribution of Christians in the continents of the world is not only different, but dramatically changing. According to the latest surveys, Africa is home to the most Christians (667 million), followed by Latin America (612 million), then Europe (565 million). As shown in Figure 8 the number of Christians in Europe is predicted to decline whilst the number in Africa will increase (Hackett and McClendon, 2017). Similarly, if recent trends continue, Christians could make up less than half of the U.S. population within a few decades.²⁷

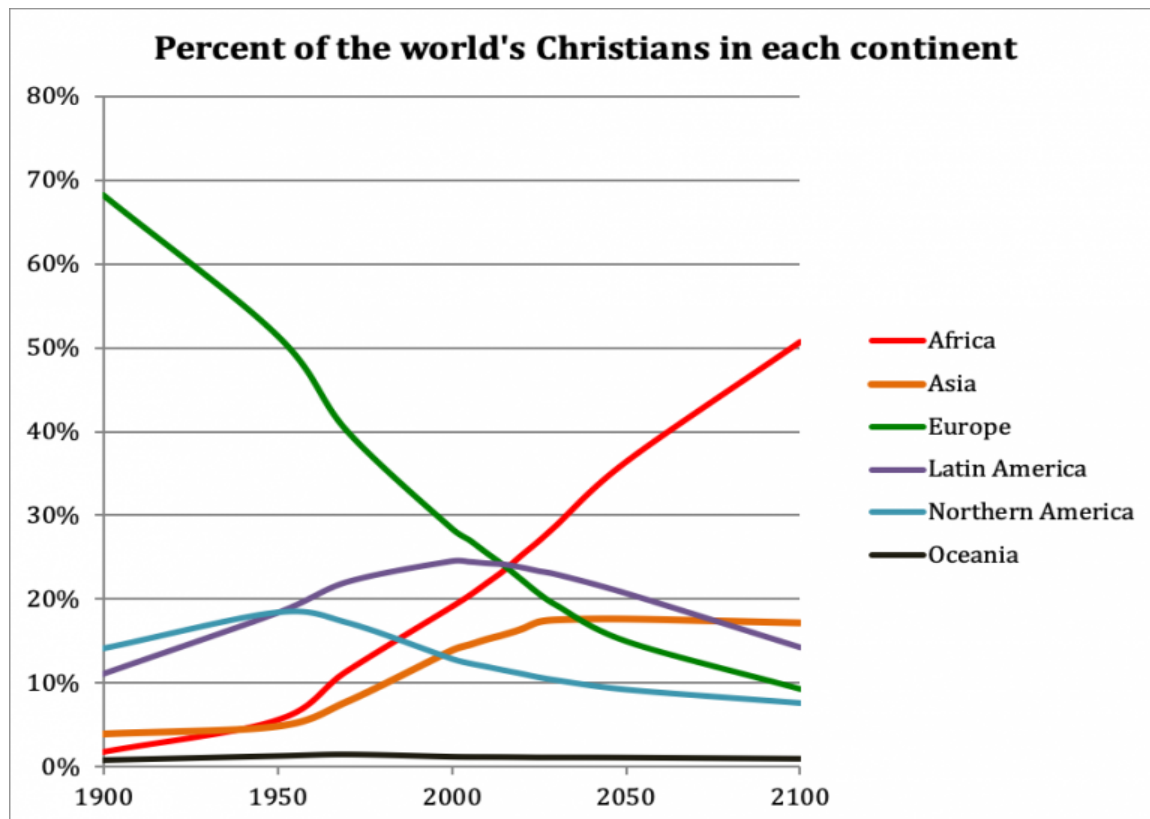


Figure 8. Percentage of world's Christians in each continent.

As for the presence of Christianity in the Middle East, as Smart (1977) remarked, Christianity has come to share with Buddhism the oddity of having a minor presence in its birthplace, though highly influential elsewhere in the world. According to some writers, Christianity is undergoing such a significant decline in recent years that is in danger of vanishing altogether (Di Giovanni, 2021). Current estimates of the number of Christians in Israel is 177,000 of which there are: 12,500, East Jerusalem; 35,000, West Bank; and ~2,000 in Gaza. According to Di Giovanni (2021) *“fewer than 1,100 Christians remain Gaza, and that number is decreasing rapidly, down from 4,500 in 2014”*.

²⁷ See <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>

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It is well recognised that Christianity in the UK is declining, including Church attendance. Results from the 2021 census show that only 46.2% of the population identified themselves as Christians, compared with 59.3% in 2011 census, a 13-percentage point drop in a decade.²⁸ (In the 2001 census the figure was 71.7%.²⁹) A recent study declared that the Church of England faces potential “extinction” in Britain within 40 years.^{30,31} Similarly, “a mass exodus from Christianity is underway in America”.³²

²⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/nov/29/census-2021-in-charts-christianity-now-minority-religion-in-england-and-wales>

²⁹ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/uk/03/census_2001/html/religion.stm

³⁰ <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/27-may3-june/news/uk/church-of-england-r-number-suggests-bleak-future-says-mathematician>

³¹ [Religious ‘infection’ rate reveals dying churches](#)

³² <https://www.grid.news/story/politics/2022/12/17/a-mass-exodus-from-christianity-is-underway-in-america-heres-why/>

5. Discussion

I was born and brought up in a Christian country, Britain, where I have lived my whole life, and was educated at religious (Catholic) schools. Consequently, my views about Christianity have inevitably been influenced by my own personal experiences and prejudices.

At the outset I have to say that what little Christian faith I absorbed while growing up, I quickly rejected as soon as I started thinking for myself as a young teenager, if not still a boy. I recall one Sunday morning, in my early teens, I plucked up courage to tell my father that I no longer wanted to join him and the rest of family at weekly mass. Except for the occasional wedding, baptism or funeral, I have never gone back. But looking at Christianity again, in more depth, was I too hasty to reject it so absolutely? Did I perhaps miss something? Let's discuss...

5.1 About God and the Bible

One of the key doctrinal beliefs of Christianity is in an all-powerful (omnipotent) God who created the universe and everything in it. As it says in Genesis, *"In the beginning God created heaven, and earth"*. Over the next six days, God then created light, the earth and the seas, all plants and animals, and of course us, man and woman. This belief is codified in Article I of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, which states, *"There is but one living God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible"*. Article I then declares, *"And in unity of this Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost"*, which is known as the Holy Trinity. So, who or what exactly is this God?



Figure 9. Depictions of God the Father³³

As a young boy growing up and attending mass at Church, reciting the Lord's Prayer (*"Our Father who art in heaven..."*) easily evoked an image of an old, grey-haired man in the clouds, as shown in numerous paintings and other illustrations (see Figure 9). But strictly speaking, because *"no man hath seen God at any time"* (1 John 4:12), God's physical or other attributes were unknown. Indeed, in most children's books, God (as opposed to Jesus) is actually invisible. The closest he gets to a bodily appearance is a hand poking through the clouds to point an accusatory finger banishing Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden (see Figure 10).³⁴

³³ See [Cima da Conegliano](#) and [Johann Michael Rottmayr](#).

³⁴ Throughout the scriptures God is always masculine.

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Very occasionally God has been shown as a fully grown man, for example in the Bible Studies book by the famous children's book writer, Enid Blyton (1949).



To the extent that God's nature is described in the Bible, he appears mysteriously as "*light and in him there is no darkness*" (1 John 1:3), or "*charity*" (1 John 4:16) or "*a consuming fire*" (Hebrews 12:29), or "*a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush*" (Exodus 3:2).³⁵

Figure 10. God banishes Adam and Eve from Eden (Tutu, 2010)

However, that being said, a closer inspection of the OT reveals that the real God of the Bible was far from being bodiless and was in fact "startlingly corporeal (...) a human-shaped deity, who walked and talked and wept and laughed. A god who ate and slept and felt and breathed (...) a supersized, muscle-bound, good-looking god, with supra-human powers, earthly passions, and a penchant for the fantastic and the monstrous" (Stavarakopoulou, 2021).³⁶ But that ancient God has been theorised away and replaced by the lifeless, abstract deity that is worshipped by Christians (and Jews) today. According to historian Pelikan (2005) there is an "appalling ignorance" of the Bible, which "seems to have become epidemic in our time" (p.228). If people read what the Bible actually says, it "would lead them to find most of what it says even more strange than the world of the synagogue and church" (Pelikan, *ibid*, p.229).

Given my atheistic outlook, whether or not this God is a corporeal or incorporeal deity has been somewhat academic. There were various aspects of God, in whatever form, in the OT that struck me as particularly absurd. For example, why, if this God loved everyone according to the Old Testament, did he have a 'chosen people'?³⁷ As I would later read, "...only the Jews had dared entertain such a novel, such a blasphemous conceit" (Holland 2019, p.54). Why help this chosen people (the Israelites) to fight and kill other people who supposedly God loved too? Why, having created us with the ability to think and reason critically, would God then condemn its creation for using that very intelligence (e.g. to doubt the existence of something in the face of no evidence)? Why would this God, creator of the *universe*, create humans in the first place? Why would this God want some sort of *personal* relationship with its creation from whom it remains mysteriously hidden, and who know absolutely nothing about it? Why would this God need to be worshipped and loved by its insignificant creation? Why so absurdly needy? Moreover, why having created us, would God also create a 'hell' to torture some of its creation *for all eternity* because they were in some way disappointing? Who but a sadistic monster would do such a thing? To echo the words of Stephen Fry (see above), if such a God existed, I would want nothing to do with him.

³⁵ The famous 'burning bush' incident when God instructs Moses to lead the Israelites out of their captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land in Canaan.

³⁶ Prof Stavarakopoulou presents a brilliant, forensic analysis of the Biblical texts. As I read her book, I lost count of the number of times I had to pause and check the text in my own Bible – did it *really* say that? OMG, it did!

³⁷ I believe Judaism's rationale is that they were chosen for their special role because God simply devised that way as the means to spread the Word. Not a very satisfactory explanation in my view!

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I hasten to add, that denying the existence of Christianity's God is not to deny that, from a cosmological or ontological perspective, "there is almost certainly more here than we have words for, or can expect ever to understand using reason alone" (McGilchrist, 2021). But that is a subject for another chapter...

Leaving aside these awkward questions about God, one of the reasons for the historical success of Christianity has undoubtedly been the power of the Biblical stories, which still capture the imagination. Even if God appears to be inconsistently taking sides, Exodus sends a clear anti-imperialist message that God is on the side of the oppressed. God helps free the people enslaved by the country's cruel ruler who is duly punished with ten plagues, ha-ha! Another famous story (in Genesis) is Noah's Ark, which is featured in collections of Bible stories for children (Blyton, 1949; Pieńkowski, 2010; Tutu, *ibid*). Both stories have been made into a blockbuster Hollywood films³⁸, not forgetting that a full-size replica of Noah's Ark has been built in Kentucky USA, as extraordinary as it is utterly preposterous.³⁹

But Noah's Ark serves as a salutary example about how stories in the Bible are retold and sentimentalised. God behaves like a genocidal maniac – "*I will rain upon the earth forty days and forty nights; and I will destroy every substance that I have made, from the face of the earth*" (Genesis 7:4) – but this act is overlooked to dwell instead on cute animals entering the ark two-by-two. Similarly, children's books are full of stories of human dramas such as the baby Moses in a basket, hidden in the bulrushes; Joseph and his multi-coloured coat, betrayed by his jealous brothers; Jonah swallowed by the giant fish (Jonas, 2:1); the fight between David and Goliath; love and betrayal between Samson and Delilah (Judges, 16:1), and so on.

In contrast to these dramas, the Bible also contains many other stories that show a God who is easily angered, cruel and sadistic. For example, God tests Abraham's faith by commanding him to kill his son Isaac (which he prevents Abraham doing only at the last moment). Lot's wife is turned into a pillar of salt for looking behind her at Sodom and Gomorrah (in the process of being destroyed by God with brimstone and fire). A man called Oza (or [Uzzah](#)) is struck down dead by God, who was indignant that Oza had touched the ark of the Covenant (i.e. wooden chest containing the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments) even though Oza had done so to prevent the ark from falling off a cart (2 Samuel, 6:6-7). Lastly, God forbids Moses to enter the Promised Land because he had struck a rock with his staff (instead of speaking to it) to bring forth water.

³⁸ See [Exodus: Gods and Kings](#) and [Noah](#).

³⁹ See [Ark Encounter](#).

As if these stories were not evidence enough of a deity full of deranged, petty-minded malevolence, a recurrent theme in the OT is God repeatedly rescuing the Israelites from some sort of oppression only to betray them to their enemies when they displease him. The Israelites enslaved by the Egyptian pharaoh and then led to freedom by Moses is the most well-known story, but there are many more. For example, the Israelites are at one time oppressed by the Assyrians. *“There was great weeping and lamentation (...) they cried to God saying we have sinned (...) have thou mercy on us”* (Judith, 7:18-20). Luckily, a widow called Judith, with God’s assistance, comes to the aid of the Israelites. She uses her beauty and charms, which God had cunningly increased *“so that she appeared to all men’s eyes incomparably lovely”* (Judith, 10:4)⁴⁰ to get close to the Assyrian general Holofernes. Then, while he slept she chopped off his head with two strikes of his own sword (Judith, 13:8-10). The assassination is graphically illustrated in a painting by Caravaggio.⁴¹ Judith and her maid slip away from the camp with Holofernes’ head in a sack, which she then holds aloft to display to her people when back in the city (Judith, 13:19).

In another Biblical story told in Judges, the Israelites *“did evil in the sight of the Lord”* who being angered delivered them into the hands of the King of Mesopotamia, Chusan Rasathaim (Judges, 3:6-8).⁴² The Israelites cried to the Lord and God saved them by sending Othniel to overthrow the king.

But soon after, *“the children of Israel did evil again”* (Judges, 3:12) and God strengthens Eglon, King of Moab, who overthrows Israel. The Israelites cry for help (again) and God obligingly provides another saviour, this time known as Aod (or Ehod, Ayoth). Aod, *“who used the left hand as well as the right”* (Judges, 3:21) sneakily arranges to see Eglon alone and stabs him to death (see Figure 11). Arguably, God had in fact stabbed Eglon in the back.



Figure 11. King Eglon is stabbed to death by Ayoth (Aod)¹

⁴⁰ Is this the first instance in recorded history of a facelift or beauty treatment being given by a deity?

⁴¹ See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judith_Beheading_Holofernes_\(Caravaggio\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judith_Beheading_Holofernes_(Caravaggio))

⁴² Apparently, the Israelites had been worshipping Baalim and [Astaroth](#) – naughty!

Predictably, after Aod dies, *“the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord”*. Predictably, God delivers them up into the hands of another enemy, this time Jaban, King of Chanaan. As before, the Israelites whine for help and this time God sends a prophetess called Debbora who urges Barac to do battle with Jaban. Barac defeats Jaban’s army and pursues the fleeing Sisara (Sisera), Jaban’s general. But before Barac catches him, the sleeping Sisara is killed by a woman called Jael (Jahel) by hammering a nail *“through his brain fast into the ground”* (Judges, 4:21) – nice! (see Figure 12). And so the absurd, vengeful cycle is tediously repeated.



Figure 12. Sisera is hammered to death by Jael (by Lambert Lombard, 1530-35)

As should be glaringly obvious from the above, that the image of God (the Father) that exists in the OT could not be more different from the person known as Jesus Christ who appears in the NT, and light years from today’s nebulous “God is love” mantra that the Church proclaims. But what can we say about this Jesus?

5.2 About Jesus

Most scholars of Christianity agree that a preacher known as ‘Jesus Christ’ probably did exist, which I’m happy to accept.⁴³ The belief that Jesus was God’s son is at the heart of the Christian faith, but as stated earlier (3.1) whether or not Jesus was God incarnate (‘in the flesh’) has been a subject of debate throughout the history of Christianity. But putting aside the question of the exact nature of Jesus Christ, what I wanted to know when I was a young boy (who knew nothing about any alternative Christological creeds) was why this Jesus person appeared in the first place, and why at that time and place? Why appear at an arbitrary date (in human history) in an arbitrary part of the world and begin a mission with a small arbitrary group of followers to spread a message about a “kingdom of heaven” supposedly intended for all humankind across the world?⁴⁴ It made no sense to me then and still doesn’t.

⁴³ Interestingly, it has been argued that the well-recognised, dubious elements in the story of Christ’s life (e.g. born in Bethlehem when family home was in Nazareth; crucified when supposedly a Messiah) can be better explained by accepting that Christ *did* in fact exist (see <https://historyforatheists.com/2017/05/did-jesus-exist-the-jesus-myth-theory-again/>).

⁴⁴ It has been estimated that the world’s population in 1 AD was 300 million!

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As for the birth of Jesus, the story of which features in many children's school Nativity plays at Christmas (including mine), was he really born in a stable in Bethlehem 100 miles from his parent's home in Nazareth? More to the point, why was he born at all? After his resurrection, Jesus "ascends" into heaven so, logically, he could have descended to Earth starting his ministry straightaway as a grown man. Besides, after being born, according to the Gospels, Jesus does precisely nothing until he was 30 years of age!

With regard to miracles, the first point to make about Jesus is that most if not all his miracles were a repeat or an echo of earlier miracles attributed to the OT prophets. For example, Jesus feeds the multitude from a basket of loaves and fishes, but Elisha had similarly helped feed a hundred men with loaves "and had some left over" (2 Kings 4:42-44); Elisha also helped a widow who had only a small jar of olive oil to fill numerous empty jars from it (2 Kings 4:1-7); and perhaps most famously of all, Moses oversaw the Israelites fed with quails and "manna from heaven" when starving in the wilderness (Exodus 16:1-36). Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, but Elijah performed the same miracle for the widow at Zarephath whose son had died (1 Kings 17:17-24). Jesus healed the sick, but so too had the OT prophets.⁴⁵ Arguably, the miracles of Jesus, far from serving as proof of his divinity, instead emphasise his life as merely another Biblical prophet albeit one with unique message.

Much has been written about miracles and the arguments for and against their authenticity.⁴⁶ Personally, I've never believed in miracles, even as a young boy reading Bible stories and then learning about transubstantiation. As stated earlier, miracles are an important part of the Catholic faith. Coincidentally, and extraordinarily, a church in my hometown recently (2020) became part of a new parish that has been established in honour of a beatified teenager called Carlo Acutis.⁴⁷ So, it seems that belief in miracles is still very prevalent. As Woodward (2000) says, miracles are best understood through stories that make sense only within larger narratives from which they come, which is perhaps all that needs to be said here.

As for events surrounding his crucifixion, they raise many more questions. If Jesus (God) planned at the outset to be crucified, which his [Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane](#) implies, then his infamous betrayal by Judas leading to his arrest and trial must have been a charade, and cynical exploitation of poor Judas (who commits suicide soon after). The fact that Jesus does not defend himself at his trial, also implies that he willed his own death. On the other hand, if Jesus didn't plan to be crucified, but instead intended to continue preaching for years or decades to come (like Buddha), then his mission on Earth was a spectacular failure.

According to Christian dogma, "Christ died for us" (Romans, 5:9) and "died for our sins" (Corinthians, 15:3), but what does this actually mean? Theologically, it has been explained that Jesus sacrificed his life as an act of atonement so as to reconcile humanity (us) with God. The problem with this explanation is that humanity needs to know about and believe in this God, to have a common understanding of 'sin', to know precisely what Jesus did and, of course, to understand his death as a sacrifice as opposed to being executed as a common criminal along with two thieves. Does this sound like a divine plan?

⁴⁵ See also https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/history/miraclesofjesus_1.shtml

⁴⁶ See also <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/miracles/>

⁴⁷ <https://www.carloacutis.co.uk/> The tomb of Carlo can even be viewed online via a webcam. Apparently, the well-preserved face of Carlo raised questions about his 'incorruptibility', but it turns out Carlo's body is a normal cadaver, but with silicone reconstruction of his face, i.e. not a miraculous preservation!

Unfortunately for Christianity, after his resurrection Jesus disappears with only a brief reappearance to a few apostles to whom he promises to return again one day in the future. There is no declaration by his apostles, the Jews (Sanhedrin), Herod or anybody else, about Jesus's purpose in dying. Christianity only becomes known through the Gospels written decades later and other writings from 2nd–3rd centuries onwards (3.1). The implication is, of course, that the 'Christ died for us' explanation is in fact a later rationalisation by Christ's followers of how their Messiah ended up humiliatingly dead. It also highlights a contradiction at the heart of Christianity, namely that if Christ's death was part of the divine plan, why should the Jews have been blamed for his death? Unbelievably, Jewish collective culpability wasn't officially repudiated until the Vatican's [Nostra aetate](#) promulgated in 1965.⁴⁸

Despite his exhortation to love one another including one's enemies, Jesus also made some strange pronouncements about his purpose on Earth and the requirements to become one of his disciples. For example, *"I am come to cast fire on the earth (...) Think ye, that I come to give peace on earth? I tell you, no: but separation (...) The father shall be divided against the son and the son against his father; the mother against the daughter and the daughter against her mother..."* (Luke, 12:49-53). And then later, *"If any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yea his own life also, he cannot be my disciple"* (Luke 14:26). Now, even if one excuses such passages as Jesus' attempts to shake people out of their lethargy, it's hard not to interpret them as the ravings of a fanatical cult leader demanding absolute loyalty and rejection of all family ties (as still happens with some cults even today).

The last point to make about Jesus is that he didn't appear on Earth to start or proclaim the new religion or faith of Christianity. Jesus was born a Jew (and duly circumcised according to the scriptures), and his ministry was to tell people to be moral, law-abiding citizens, as Jews – *"render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's"* (Mark, 12:17). Judaism, of course, carried on after Jesus's death, and after Christianity became a fully-fledged religion a few centuries later. (Leaving aside the terrible persecution it has experienced, Judaism has continued largely uninterrupted to the present day.)

5.3 About the Judeo-Christian tradition

Broadly speaking, the term 'Judeo-Christian' denotes the values and traditions that are shared by the two respective religions, which are said by some to underlie the culture of Western civilisation. Self-evidently, the term implies it has ancient historical roots, but in fact it appears to be largely a 20th century creation, more specifically from 1930s America and then becoming more widespread during World War II. In those years, American democracy, with its respect for freedom and dignity of the individual, was often contrasted with Nazi despotism. Later, during the early years of the Cold War, the Judeo-Christian tradition became enshrined in the fight against "godless Communism" (Silk, 1984).

More recently, the term is typically used (by Christians) to draw a line between imagined Christian values and liberal "political correctness" or a perceived threat of Muslim immigration. In the US in 2017, President Trump declared, *"We are stopping cold the attacks on Judeo-Christian values (...) They don't use the word "Christmas" because it's not politically correct (...) Well, guess what? We're saying "Merry Christmas" again"* (White House, 2017).

⁴⁸ In 2011, Pope Benedict XVI declared that the death of Jesus was the fault of the [Temple aristocracy](#) only.

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In the UK, the Reform UK party declared (in its manifesto) that it “*will stand up for British culture, identity and values*”, and its leader (Farage) has said that “Judeo-Christian values” were at the root of “everything” in Britain.⁴⁹ But is the term accurate? If the two religions share a mutual tradition, how can it be, as Cohen (1969) asked, that Judaism has remained not only independent of, but unassimilated by the doctrinal vision and historical pressure of Christianity? Trump’s above remark is revealing of the historical biases of Christianity because, of course, Jews do not celebrate Christmas!

Whilst the two religions share some of the same holy scriptures (see section 2), for Judaism there has only ever been the Hebrew *Tanakh* (their “OT”) and the NT has had no role to play in Jewish values and tradition. From their very beginnings the Judaic and Christian worlds scarcely intersected and there is not now and there has never been a meaningful dialogue between them (Neusner, 1991). In sum, the conception of a Judeo-Christian tradition is in fact a myth.

As the historian Tom Holland put it, when referring to the West, what is really meant “...is to live in a society still utterly saturated by Christian concepts assumptions (...) no less true for Jews or Muslims than it is for Catholics or Protestants” (Holland, 2019, p.xxv).

5.4 Christianity – pros and cons

5.4.1 Christianity – the pros

Despite all the unanswered questions and, in my view, the unappealing contents of much of the Bible, the religion of Christianity historically flourished and spread across the world. The number of Christians has nearly quadrupled in the last 100 or so years, from about 600 million in 1910 to more than 2 billion in 2010, although as a percentage of the world’s population it remains the roughly same (~32%).⁵⁰ But big demographic changes are happening in the distribution of Christians (see Figure 7), brought about by the growth of Islam and the increasing number of people who identify as non-religious (e.g. Bullivant, 2022).

But leaving aside the changes that Christianity is undergoing at the present time, how did it come to have so many followers? As the historian Tom Holland (2019) put it, “how was it that a cult inspired by the execution of an obscure criminal in a long-vanished empire came to exercise such a transformative and enduring influence on the world?” (Holland, 2019, p.xxiv). A number of distinct reasons can be identified for the historical success of Christianity:

⁴⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/feb/18/nigel-farage-calls-for-reindustrialisation-of-britain-and-higher-birthrates>

⁵⁰ See <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>

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1. Christianity is an evangelical religion, from the first Apostles (e.g. Peter and Paul) to the many missionaries who over the centuries that followed converted people to Christianity around the world. Nowadays, within the established Church, evangelism is more low-key although at the recent (2022) Anglican Lambeth Conference the assembled bishops issued a special Call for Mission and Evangelism “to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom” (Lambeth Conference, 2022). Addressing the conference, Archbishop Stephen Cottrell was very explicit in urging the delegates to “*share with others what you have received. Bishops, evangelism is our core business too*”.⁵¹ Interestingly, outside the Church mainstream, there are various evangelical initiatives such as Alpha, which runs courses in over 100 countries.⁵² This type of evangelism is not, however, the same as the more strident, politically assertive Christian evangelists in the USA today.⁵³
2. Christianity introduced radical ways of thinking about the relationships between individuals and the relationship of people to God. The cultures of the ancient world were brutally stratified, which readily divided people according to race, class, status and gender. Thus, Saint Paul’s proclamation to people in the Roman empire was nothing short of revolutionary in this regard: “*For you are all the children of God (...) There is neither Jew nor Greek, bond [slave] nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (Galatians 3:26-28). Such thinking was also a direct challenge to Judaism. The Jews claimed to be God’s chosen people, but Christ said, no, all are chosen – all are equal before God, equally beloved of God, and all are equally redeemed by Christ. This idea of equality had revolutionary implications that could overturn empires and civilisations – as it did.
3. Christianity introduced or rather crystallised a concept of morality that humans have a natural sense of right and wrong. Logically, if the Greeks or other non-Christians innately possessed such a ‘natural law’, but it hadn’t been given by the God of Christianity, then they must already have it. The Apostle Paul was alluding to the Stoic concept of conscience (*syneidesis*). Paul would fuse it with existing Mosaic Law to develop, through his Letters, “a conception of law that would come to suffuse an entire civilisation” (Holland 2019, p.78). It’s interesting to note that Paul (or Saul of Tarsus, as he was) thought he was following his conscience and serving God when he was *persecuting* Christians. Saul’s conversion taught him that conscience is fallible – one can sincerely follow one’s conscience and yet be completely wrong, *in God’s view* (Cook, 2004).

The crucial event for the Christian appropriation of conscience was St. Jerome’s choice of the Latin word *conscientia* for the Greek word *syneidesis*, in his late 4th century translation of the NT from Greek into Latin. The two terms are not, however, entirely equivalent. Thus, by choosing *syneidesis*, Jerome combined or fused two ethical perspectives: the individual looking privately inward at itself – “*...the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness to them...*” (Romans, 2:14-15) – but at the same time also looking outwardly to public opinion and shared values (Strohm, 2011).⁵⁴

⁵¹ <https://anglican.ink/2022/07/30/archbishop-stephen-cottrells-talk-at-the-2022-lambeth-conference-plenary-on-mission-and-evangelism/>

⁵² See <https://alpha.org.uk/about>

⁵³ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evangelicalism_in_the_United_States

⁵⁴ See also <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/conscience-medieval/> - “conscience (*syneidesis*) is not the ultimate source of right and wrong. Rather, the foundation of right and wrong is the objective moral law, which is both “written on [men’s] hearts” and borne witness to by conscience”.

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4. Christianity introduced the historical character of Jesus Christ, of course, but a person so unusual that “no one quite like him had ever before been portrayed in literature” (Holland, 2019, p.86). The standards of virtue he preached – to love one’s enemy, to abandon all one’s worldly goods – were as novel as they were shocking. He shunned the wealthy and aristocracy, he mingled with children, the poor, the unrighteous and was a friend to adulterers and other ‘sinners’ whom he called to penance and forgave them. He preached through simple, human-relatable stories and parables and the people “were astonished at his doctrine, for his speech was with power” (Luke, 4:32).
5. Jesus appeared not as a conquering warrior, but as a humble man who would end up being crucified – “the prototype of martyrs” (Smart, 1977) and “as a victim the Messiah had come” (Holland 2019, p.85). In fact, the concept of victim would come to permeate Western culture. “The entire ideological perspective of contemporary culture is, in fact, built on a victimological principle, i.e. on the centrality of victims in all our ethical concerns: the victims of the Shoah, the victims of capitalism, the victims of social injustice, of war, of political persecution, of ecological disasters...” (Girard 2008, p.11).
6. As stated earlier (2), the Bible is one of the most well-known, widely published books in the world. The numerous stories in the Bible still capture the imagination, which speaks of their powerful messaging. One only has to look at the books available for children to see Christianity’s enduring appeal (although many stories are taken from the OT) even if the language of the Bible is often “foreign” (Pelikan, 2005, p.230).⁵⁵
7. Last, but by no means least, Christianity has had an enormous influence on shaping Western culture. As the historian Tom Holland remarked, even if affiliation to Christianity in the UK is falling, our culture is still very much Christian and “we’re goldfish swimming in Christian waters”. When the Beatles sang ‘all you need is love’, it wasn’t based on a close reading of scripture – they took it for granted (Holland, 2019, p.477). Similarly, Dawkins’ fondness for the tolerant Anglican tradition and the peel of Church bells.⁵⁶

Holland’s 2019 book *Dominion* is undoubtedly a *tour de force* about the development of Christianity and its transformative effects on Western culture and society. However, another historian, Christopher Dawson, pioneered the subject 65 years earlier (Dawson, 1957).⁵⁷ According to Dawson (*ibid*) the beginnings of Western culture are to be found in the new spiritual community that arose from the ruins of the Roman Empire owing to the conversion of the Northern barbarians to the Christian faith. What distinguishes Western culture from other world civilisations is its missionary character – its transmission from one people to another in a continuous series of spiritual movements. In particular, it was through monasticism and the disciplined, tireless labour of the monks which turned the tide of barbarism in Western Europe (e.g. [St. Boniface](#), [St. Columba](#), [Alcuin](#)). If one accepts this analysis, it is further evidence why the term ‘Judeo-Christian’ culture (see 5.3) is in fact a misnomer.

⁵⁵ Pelikan gives the example of “The Lord is my shepherd”, an agricultural idiom that most urban dwellers, young or old, find incomprehensible, especially if the said shepherd “is sentimentalised into a figure that no ancient shepherd and no sheep whether ancient or modern would be able to recognise” (Pelikan, *ibid*, p.230).

⁵⁶ See e.g. <https://www.spectator.com.au/2013/09/interview-richard-dawkins-on-what-hed-miss-if-christianity-vanished/>

⁵⁷ Surprisingly, curiously, Dawson isn’t included in Holland’s bibliography of 400 references!

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What is particularly fascinating about the Christian roots of Western culture is that, even if the dogma and doctrines of Christianity are largely nonsensical, it was a deceptively simple *idea* that ‘all are equal before God’ and the quest for individual perfection or salvation, that proved so powerful. As Dawson (1957) remarks, “lawless feudal nobles, who cared nothing for morality or law, recognised [in the monks] the presence of something stronger than brute force – a numinous supernatural power they dared not ignore” (p.126). Moreover, it would be through the Church, and particularly the monks, that ancient cultural traditions and writings of Latin classical authors would be preserved.

5.4.2 Christianity – the cons

Despite having the most followers of any religion in the world, and despite its undeniable merits (see above), it is evident that Christianity has had many failures in its long history. Today, in parts of the Western world, it appears to be in crisis. Examples:

1. Historically, the many schisms have led to the creation of numerous Christian denominations. Various ecumenical groups and initiatives have tried to (re)unite Christianity, but with no apparent success. The Roman Catholic Church is not even a member of the World Council of Churches, which is hardly a good sign.⁵⁸ Arguably, the fact that [ecumenism](#) even exists is a failure in itself.
2. In the 20th and 21st centuries, the Church has lost much of its moral authority and the deference it was once shown. In recent decades it has also lost respect because of the numerous revelations of the abuse of children under the Church’s care, which have occurred across the world from Ireland to Canada to Australia. In the UK, the Church’s failure to prevent such abuse, in accordance with its own safeguarding policies, led to the resignation of the Archbishop of Canterbury.⁵⁹
3. Historically, the Church has aggressively struggled against dissent and heresy both from within its own ranks – even Origen was not immune from (posthumous) criticism⁶⁰ – and from non-Christians. The infamous Crusades begun in the late 11th century against Muslims in the Middle East are well-known, but Christians at home who disagreed with the Church’s teachings were considered heretics too and could be physically punished or killed including [burnt at the stake](#). The Church was a powerful force in medieval England. As well as Christian dissenters, those of other faiths were also treated harshly. For example, Jews were expelled from England by Edward I in 1290, and have remained a focus for popular hatred and vilification. The Catholic Church also established a series of Inquisitions (e.g. Episcopal, Papal) in response to movements considered apostate or heretical to Roman Catholicism.⁶¹ The notorious Spanish Inquisition of the late 15th century was a different phenomenon under the control of the Spanish monarchy using local clergy.⁶²

⁵⁸ <https://www.oikoumene.org/what-we-do/church-and-ecumenical-relations/joint-working-group-with-the-roman-catholic-church>

⁵⁹ <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/news/news-and-statements/john-smyth-review-personal-statement-archbishop-canterbury>

⁶⁰ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Origenist_crises

⁶¹ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medieval_Inquisition

⁶² See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Inquisition

4. More recently, the Church has struggled to come to terms with changes in society's attitudes to homosexuality and same-sex marriages. In 2021 the Vatican Office of the Catholic Church declared in its Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) that it was "impossible" for God to "bless sin".⁶³ Similarly, the Anglican Church although supposedly more liberal, at its Lambeth Conference ended up reaffirming the Church's long-held position that gay marriage was wrong, and that same-sex relationships defied scripture.

In fact, so divisive do the issues still remain that archbishops from Nigeria, Rwanda and Uganda boycotted the conference.⁶⁴ Given that Archbishop Justin Welby had previously declared that homophobia is "unacceptable",⁶⁵ his so-called pragmatic, compromise statement strikes me as unacceptable and hypocritical. Either "God is love" as proclaimed or he's not. Not surprisingly, the Church's conservative attitudes towards sexual ethics and gender, and its hypocrisy, are high in the list of reasons that young people give for rejecting the Christian faith (Mountford, 2022).

5. As mentioned above (see **Error! Reference source not found.**), Christianity is in serious decline in many parts of the world. This decline was noted in a report the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life (CORAB, 2015) and is regularly reported in the news (e.g. Burgess and Watts, 2023). In the UK, according to Justin Welby, the problem is the "radical autonomy" that has become dominant in the modern world. There are, he suggests, fewer shared experiences. "*People don't know the narratives and the stories of the Christian faith — the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Lost Sheep*" (Thomson and Sylvester, 2022). It's not clear exactly what Welby means by "radical autonomy", but if it means people are too independent in their thinking and behaviour, well that's the modern world and the Church needs to adapt and make itself more appealing.

5.5 Christianity – the future

In recent years, in response to declining numbers of active Christians, the Church has tried various projects to attract new worshippers. Unfortunately, these initiatives such as 'Church Planting', 'Fresh Expressions' and 'Messy Churches' (CofE, 2019; 2021), appear to have met with only limited success. Figures presented to the General Synod in 2021 show that over £240 million was given out between 2017 and 2020 as part of its "renewal and reform" programme.⁶⁶ In 2022 the Church announced its latest plan to pump a massive £3.6bn into its 12,500 parishes over the next nine years focusing on "mission activity" among young people and disadvantaged communities.⁶⁷

Will the latest plans work? Whilst social action projects and social outreach work sound good, I am doubtful they will have much impact on attracting people, particularly the young, to becoming disciples. Supporting food banks is all well and good, but the CofE's failure, at its recent Lambeth conference, to accept gay sex and marriage, is not a good sign of progress. On the other hand, Welby's recent condemnation of the Government's Rwanda (deportation) policy is a move in the right direction. Contrary to the oft-heard call to "stay out of politics", in my view the Church should be more political. As Welby remarked "*Everyone is political.*"

⁶³ See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-56402096>

⁶⁴ See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-62441729>

⁶⁵ See <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/mar/06/justin-welby-condemns-nigerian-archbishop-henry-ndukuba-gay-virus-comments>

⁶⁶ See <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/church-of-england-spends-millions-but-fails-to-convert-cash-into-congregations-vns8cmcds>

⁶⁷ See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/11/church-of-england-to-pump-36bn-into-parishes-and-fund-more-social-action>

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People like Boris Johnson know that perfectly well (. . .) every single person or institution or group lives within a political context, every decision we make is a political decision. You have to [stand up and be counted], everyone does”.⁶⁸ So, if Christianity is to endure, what could, or should it do? Here are four suggestions:

1. **Place less emphasis on “making disciples”** who must adhere to all the dogmas and doctrines, and more emphasis on gaining support for the core messages of love and tolerance. This is the opposite of Bishop Cottrell’s recent plea, but is not a proposal to water down what it means to have faith, but instead a recognition that some beliefs matter more than others. As Olson (2002) put it, “preserving unity while allowing diversity”.⁶⁹ It’s also a recognition that one can accept the truth of Christ’s lessons about morality without accepting that he was the ‘Son of God’. Reflecting on my own relationship with Christianity while growing up, I think I was instantly put off the religion by its (in my view) nonsensical beliefs. To me, it was “axiomatically obvious” (Gaisman, 2018) that to be a Christian would be impossible. Consequently, I spent little time looking into the deeper merits of Jesus’ actual words.
2. **Place more emphasis on the teachings of Jesus.** What Justin Welby calls the Christian narrative (e.g. parables of the *Good Samaritan*, *the Prodigal Son*, *the Lost Sheep*) is far too narrow and should be broadened to show what made Jesus teachings so special, unusual and profound. Why exactly were people “*astonished at his doctrine, for his speech was with power*”?⁷⁰ As well as the beatitudes, the Gospels are full of words of wisdom that could, or should, still resonate or strike a chord: “*for what doth it profit a man, if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his own soul?*” (Matthew, 16:26), “*judge not, and you shall not be judged*”, “*...he that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone*” (John , 8:7), and so on.

As McGilchrist remarks in his visionary *The Matter With Things*, as a teenager he dismissed Christianity’s tenets as incomprehensible and possibly nonsensical, but “with living I have come to see them as intuitive insights, *misrepresented to me* [italics added] as if they were something to evaluate like a chemistry experiment (McGilchrist, 2021, p. 1268).

Also, to echo the words of historian Tom Holland, the Church needs to wake up and counteract the fact that “*so many in the modern Church (...) have managed to make history’s most influential way of explaining humanity’s relationship to the cosmos quite so drippy, uninspiring & boring.*”⁷¹

⁶⁸ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-suggestion-that-i-as-archbishop-should-not-be-political-is-a-nonsense-9z38p5m6p>

⁶⁹ Olson (2002) distinguishes three categories of true Christian beliefs: dogmas, doctrines and opinions (ibid, pp.44-45).

⁷⁰ See also Matthew 7:28-29 for another version.

⁷¹ https://twitter.com/holland_tom/status/1414118049595133953

3. **Promote Christianity's contributions to Western culture.** As noted above (1.5.3) Christianity has historically had an enormous foundational influence on the development of Western culture. From small monastic beginnings, Christianity changed the face of medieval Europe. The legacy of those centuries remains with us in the great cathedrals, Gregorian chant and numerous works of art, literature and music (e.g. Jackson, 2022; Fogg, 2021). It still inspires beautiful songs even today.⁷² Does the Church really celebrate these historic or contemporary contributions well enough? It seems not. Also, the Church needs to counteract one prevalent criticism of Christianity today that its cultural traditions from Easter to Christmas have merely been stolen from earlier 'pagan' practices and celebrations. I don't believe there's any evidence to support this, and in fact the opposite is probably true.⁷³
4. **Differentiate Christianity from Judaism.** Although Christianity has been and currently remains inextricably bound to Judaism through the Old Testament (the Hebrew *Tanakh*), the link serves little theological purpose. Even the term Judeo-Christian tradition or culture is itself a myth (see 5.3). Therefore, Christianity should distinguish itself more clearly and explicitly from Judaism. It is possibly a radical idea, but this might mean separating or severing the NT from the OT. Ultimately Christianity cannot have it both ways. If it wants to claim the OT as its roots, containing stories of creation, including the Israelites' endless (and tedious) battles with its neighbouring tribes or nations, etc., then it must own *all* the stories in the OT (including the absurd and the horrible stuff). If on the other hand it wants to proclaim Christianity's uniqueness, it must explain (and proclaim) how it differs from Judaism. As a corollary of that, children's books should focus on the teachings of Jesus, not stories about Abraham, Moses, Joseph and his multi-coloured coat and other OT characters.

In the early centuries after Christ's death, Christianity rejected many of the distinctive cultural practices of Judaism (e.g. circumcision, dietary laws, etc.), but the biggest distinctive factor was that Christianity promoted itself as a universal religion for all. As stated above, the Jews claimed to be God's chosen people, but Christ said, no, all are chosen.

Actually, the above idea is not that radical, as it was first proposed by Marcion of Pontus or Sinope, in the second century!^{74, 75} In contrast to other leaders of the nascent Christian Church, Marcion declared that Christianity was in complete discontinuity with Judaism and entirely opposed to the scriptures of Judaism. Moreover, the teachings of Jesus were incompatible with the actions of Yahweh, the ancient and belligerent god of the Israelites as described in the Hebrew Bible. But, quite evidently, Marcion's views did not prevail, and ultimately, he would be excommunicated from the church in 144 as a heretic.

⁷² For example, Joni Mitchell's song called [Love](#), which is based on the literal words in Corinthians (13:1-13)

⁷³ See <https://historyforatheists.com/2022/04/easter-pagan/>

⁷⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcion-of-Pontus>

⁷⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcion_of_Sinope

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The situation in which the Christian religion, politically detached from Judaism, found itself in the time of Hadrian was the most critical in all its history. Marcion saw himself being called to liberate Christianity from this crisis of its dependence on late Judaism and to bring "simplification, unification, and clarity of what bore the Christian label" (Harnack, 1924). More recently, Slenczka (2013) has asserted that Christians can no longer claim that they are spoken to in the Old Testament, and the text should therefore be relegated to the status of apocrypha, enlightening but not part of the Protestant canon. Apparently, Slenczka provoked a public outcry in Germany, but received little attention in the English-speaking world (Yeller, 2023).

Historically, the Jews were first-hand witnesses to Jesus Christ, but rejected him as the Messiah. For centuries the Church has blamed Jews for the death of Jesus. Although relationships between the two religions are of course more cordial and friendlier, the fact remains that Judaism is not just a different world religion, but a *negation* of Christianity. Therefore, if Christianity wants more disciples (or supporters), at least in the West, it perhaps needs to be bolder in standing up for Christianity and its unique contributions that makes it distinct from Judaism.

6. Conclusions

1. Today, Christianity remains the world's largest religion or religious grouping, with some 2.4 billion followers. However, the number and distribution of Christians is changing fast with the number of Christians in Europe predicted to decline in the coming decades whilst the number in Africa to increase.
2. Christianity has come to share with Buddhism the oddity of having a minor presence in its birthplace, though being highly influential elsewhere in the world. According to some writers, Christianity is undergoing such a significant decline in the Middle East that it is in danger of soon vanishing altogether.
3. Despite numerous publications about the Bible, including abundant books for children, knowledge of the true contents of the Bible seems poor. The ancient God of the Bible was a fearsome warrior, but that God has been theorised away and replaced by an abstract and lifeless deity that is worshipped by Christians (and Jews) today. That ancient God is also the complete opposite of the humble, 'God incarnate', man that is Jesus Christ.
4. Historically, the character of Jesus Christ was unlike anyone who had ever lived. But his life, death and claimed resurrection raise many unanswered, paradoxical questions. Why bother with a human birth? Why appear for so short a time (unlike Buddha)? Why, if the divine plan was to die sacrificially for humanity's sins, allow the Jews to be blamed collectively for the next 2,000 years?
5. Christianity has committed some appalling acts of war, cruelty and persecution in its long history. Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century, the hostility (of Christians) to Jews has persisted. In addition, the shameful abuse of children and young adults, supposedly in its care, must be added to the charge sheet. To make matters worse, even when the Church was aware of such abuse, it has often failed in its safeguarding duties.
6. Despite its evident moral failings, Christianity introduced radical ways of thinking about the relationships between individuals and the relationship of people to God. The Jews claimed to be God's chosen people, but Christ said, no, all are chosen, all are equal before God. This idea of equality would have revolutionary implications. Christianity also introduced the person of Jesus Christ, someone so unusual that no-one like him had been seen before. He preached through simple, human-relatable stories and parables and the people "*were astonished at his doctrine, for his speech was with power*" (Luke, 4:32).
7. Christianity has undoubtedly had an enormous influence on shaping Western culture and values. The historian Tom Holland's book *Dominion* has awakened much interest in the subject, which had been badly neglected or at least under-appreciated. As Holland has remarked, even if followers of Christianity are in decline, people in the West are still "goldfish swimming in Christian waters". As a corollary of that statement, the oft-heard conception of a 'Judeo-Christian' tradition is in a myth; there has never been a meaningful dialogue between the Judaic and Christian worlds.

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8. In response to the Church's declining number of followers, the Church (in the UK) has initiated a variety of projects and programmes, including spending a lot of money. But in my view the Church is missing the reasons for its declining popularity. I propose four strategies that might rekindle interest in Christianity:
 - a) To place *less* emphasis on "making disciples"; allow more diversity of support.
 - b) To place *more* emphasis on the teachings of Jesus.
 - c) To promote and celebrate Christianity's historical contributions to Western culture.
 - d) To more clearly differentiate Christianity from Judaism; consider severing the Biblical links.
9. To sum up my personal reflections about Christianity, my aversion to, and disinterest in its dogma and doctrines remains the same as it was when I was a boy. However, I have a greater respect for and interest in the influential words of the historical person known as Jesus Christ.

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