

**TEACHER'S NOTES**
**RELIGION**
**FAST FACTS**
**CHRISTIANITY**
**PEOPLE**

At its origin, Christianity appeared to be a reforming Jewish sect, but the early Christians quickly expanded beyond Judaism and accepted non-Jews (Gentiles) into their membership. The Roman Empire provided the infrastructure to enable the young religion to expand into Europe and parts of Asia and North Africa, eventually developing its key 'headquarters bases' in Rome and Constantinople. In the fourth century of the Christian era the Empire itself officially became Christian.

Long-simmering divisions led to a major split between eastern (Orthodox) and western (Catholic) Christianity in the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE. The other great division, the 16<sup>th</sup> century **Reformation**, initiated by Martin Luther, resulted in a relatively monolithic but politically diverse Roman Catholic dominance of southern Europe and a more northerly Protestantism, within which many sub-divisions have continued to appear. All three main branches of Christianity took the opportunity to expand westwards towards the New World and especially from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries towards the east and the south, particularly through missionary expansion into the developing world. It was the clash of those different forms of Christianity in the "mission fields" that gave initial impetus to the 20<sup>th</sup> century movement for Christian unity, **the ecumenical movement**. Relationships between the different branches of Christianity remain, at times and in certain places, difficult, even antagonistic, but elsewhere new understanding and trust have brought about inter-church co-operation and renewal, and even some minor reuniting of traditions.

The cross symbol is sometimes shown with the figure of Christ present (the crucifix) and sometimes without, emphasising the resurrection of Jesus from death. Many churches are designed in the shape of a cross (cruciform).

**BELIEFS**

Jesus' followers gave him the title **Christ**, which means Messiah or "the anointed one". Most Christian traditions teach that the one God is expressed in three "persons" – the Father, the Son (Jesus) and the Holy Spirit, a doctrine known as **The Holy Trinity**.

The ancient creeds of the Church – the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed – are still used by many Christians as statements of their belief. Some denominations also express their beliefs in catechisms or in statements which emerged from the time following the Reformation (such as the 39 Articles or the Westminster Confession).

Most Christians celebrate their faith together by joint worship and especially at **communion** services (sometimes called the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper). This act recalls Jesus sharing bread and wine with his disciples on the night before his crucifixion, when he said: "Do this in remembrance of me". Despite the centrality of communion in the worship of most traditions, Christians have some quite different beliefs about the meaning and significance of the communion. These differences stem from the attempt to interpret what Jesus meant when he said of the bread "this is my body" and of the wine "this is my blood". Catholics and Orthodox

take these words most literally (especially in the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation), while many Protestants emphasise the communion as a symbolic memorial.

All Christians affirm the centrality of the life and teaching of Jesus, but while most traditions emphasise the death and resurrection of Jesus as the means of achieving salvation, some give as much or more weight to the example of Jesus and his message of love and service to others.

## **COMMUNITIES**

One of the major divisions among Protestant Christians is over the issue of baptism (which signifies entry into the Christian faith) and whether it should be administered to infants or only to adult believers who have made a personal confession of their faith.

Some Protestant Christians term themselves as **Evangelicals**, emphasising the importance of personal commitment to Christ and generally taking a more conservative or literal approach to the interpretation of scripture. Evangelicals can be found in all the major Protestant denominations, and some denominations (such as Pentecostals, the Brethren and others) are entirely evangelical in their outlook.

**The Ecumenical Movement** began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and encourages Christians to work together and seek unity. Ecumenical activities may include prayer, shared worship, joint discussion and study, joint social action and co-operation in charitable activities. In some places there are local or national councils of churches or inter-church clergy fellowships.

**Christianity in Ireland** was established in the 5<sup>th</sup> century of the Christian era. The most numerous tradition today is Catholic and the largest Protestant denominations are the Presbyterian Church and the Church of Ireland (Anglican). There are only a few Orthodox Christians in Ireland. Traditional antagonisms and conflicts between Catholics and Protestants owe as much or more to national, political and cultural identity as to theology. Despite the negative image there have been some striking examples of reconciliation, renewal and healing between Catholic and Protestant Christians in Northern Ireland.

## **PLACES OF WORSHIP**

Christians use different terms for the places of worship in their various traditions – church is the most common, but other terms include: cathedral (usually a large building, the most important church in a region or diocese); chapel (sometimes a smaller church); Meeting House (an older Protestant term, but still used by Quakers); Gospel Hall (used by some evangelical Christians).

In many churches the focal point is the communion table (or altar in some traditions), emphasising the centrality of the **communion** in faith and worship. Some Protestant traditions focus as much or more on the pulpit, emphasising the importance of preaching the Word of God.

Christian worship in some traditions is visually rich, sacramental, full of symbol and ritual, while in other traditions simplicity, extempore prayer or silence may be emphasised. Some Christians still use unaccompanied plainchant, many sing traditional and often ancient hymns, some sing contemporary songs complete with guitars, drums and movement, others sing only the Psalms of David, while others do not sing at all.

Leadership in worship in most Christian traditions is conducted by ordained clergy. In Catholic,

Orthodox and some Protestant traditions the term priest is used, though many Protestants speak simply of a minister or pastor. In some Protestant denominations leadership is provided entirely by lay people.

## **FESTIVALS**

The sombre period leading up to Easter includes **Holy Week** (recalling Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem, his Last Supper with his followers and his arrest) and **Good Friday** (the trial and crucifixion of Jesus). Special meditative services are held in many churches.

Other Christian festivals include:

- Pentecost – recalling the time when the first Christians received the Holy Spirit
- Harvest – celebrating the Creation and expressing thanks for the provision of food
- Palm Sunday – marking the entry of Jesus to Jerusalem before his crucifixion.

Other special times for Christians are:

- Lent – traditionally a time of penitence and fasting recalling Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness before he commenced his ministry
- Advent – the period of preparation before Christmas, traditionally a time of reflection.

Many Christians, especially in the Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican traditions, celebrate Saints' Days – occasions to remember some of the special characters of Christian history, from biblical times to the recent past. Some of these are times for quiet reflection in worship, while others are the focus of secular, cultural as well as religious celebration (such as St. Patrick's Day in Ireland or the United States).

## **SCRIPTURES**

Reading the Bible forms a significant part of the worship of all Christian traditions, and many Christian hymns are based on scripture passages. The Old Testament Psalms are also sung in many Christian churches (as well as in Jewish worship). Many Christians also read the Bible in their private devotions or in study groups.

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, the ancient language of the Jews, but the first Christians chose to write the New Testament in Greek because at that time it was the international language of the eastern Mediterranean region. The Roman Church translated the whole Bible into Latin and this was the standard for western European Christians for many centuries. Since the time of the Reformation, however, most Christians now have the Bible in their own vernacular language.

Most Christians give emphasis to the centrality of the Bible – Old and New Testaments – believing it to be the inspired word of God and the primary source of authority for faith and practice. However, some give significant weight also to tradition and the corporate teaching of the Church. Approaches to the Bible range from the very literal to a much more critical engagement with the texts, and some more radical thinkers have challenged many traditional theological tenets.