



Christianity

Faith Guide

A short introduction to Christianity, its origins and population in the UK

A Short Introduction to Christianity

Origins of Christianity

Christianity has its roots in the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth within the context of the Jewish community.

As it developed and spread, it increasingly included those of a non-Jewish background and suffered persecution under a number of Roman Emperors, until the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, after which it became adopted as the official religion of the Empire.

From the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onwards, Christianity developed missionary movements which, at their peak in the nineteenth century, led to Christian Churches being established throughout the world.

This, in turn, laid the basis for the modern ecumenical movement towards the unity of global Christianity in which the global profile of Christianity has shifted to Africa and Latin America.

Central Aspects of Christianity

Creation and Salvation

Christianity affirms that the creative intention of God is for a world characterised by peace and unity, and that the purpose of human life is to glorify and enjoy God and the creation.

However, Christianity also teaches the human beings and the world in which they live have gone fundamentally wrong. Without the intervention of the divine, Christianity sees human beings as being locked into a state of sin which is characterised by self-centredness.

Through the life and teaching of Jesus, Christians believe that the possibility of forgiveness and renewal of life has been opened up to human beings and to the creation as a whole.

Responding in faith to the grace of God is seen as the means of overcoming sin and achieving the wholeness of salvation, by means of the operation of the Holy Spirit of Jesus within the lives of believers.

The qualities of faith, hope and love are seen as of eternal value, and Christianity teaches that the fruits of the operation of the Spirit are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, self-control.

The Person of Jesus

Christians believe that the nature of the divine has been revealed most clearly through the life, death, resurrection and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth whom they believe to be the promised Messiah of Jewish expectation.

Jesus offered hope to the marginalised and called upon people to repent of their sins and receive God's forgiveness, warning against the dangers of religious self-righteousness.

Through Jesus, Christians see the nature of the divine as being characterised by "agape" or self-giving love.

Christians affirm the incarnation of one God in the person of Jesus, but also that God's activity is not restricted to the person of Jesus, a conviction which is expressed in the apparently paradoxical belief that the one God is a Trinitarian God, experienced as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all things, often referred to in terms of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Scriptures, Creeds and Tradition

The Christian scriptures, known collectively as the Bible, are central to Christian belief and practice.

Some believe them to be the literal words of God whilst others see them as human writings informed by the Spirit of God.

The creeds, the most important of which are the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed, include summaries of orthodox beliefs which were formulated in the early years of Christianity.

For Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican Christians, the teachings of the early Church Fathers are seen as another important source of authority.

The Church

The Church is the community of Christian believers, formed by those who look to God's grace for their acceptance by God and one another. The Church is understood as having four distinctive marks which characterise it. It is:

1. one, in terms of the basic unity of all who confess Jesus as Lord
2. holy, in terms of its belonging to the Lord and its living accordingly
3. Catholic, in terms of its universal inclusivity of people of all kinds
4. Apostolic, in terms of the continuity of its inheritance from the first disciples

Baptism marks entry into the Christian Church. Among Anglican, Roman Catholic, Reformed, and Orthodox Christians, Baptism is usually offered to babies or infants. Among Baptists, Pentecostals and others, baptism is seen as being appropriate only for those who can personally confess a Christian faith.

In those traditions which baptise babies and infants, the rite of confirmation is seen as an opportunity personally to affirm an infant baptism, although some Churches administer instead what they describe as "reception into membership".

Mission and Discipleship

Christians have a commitment to spread the message of Christianity. They understand this to be commanded by Jesus and Good News to announce. For some Christians, this commitment is expressed in terms of organised forms of mission activity.

The teaching of Jesus, in his Sermon on the Mount, is central to the form of discipleship to which Christians are called, which involves them in trying to follow the example and pattern of Jesus in their own lives.

Christianity has a strong tradition of social concern. Service to the hungry, the sick and the imprisoned is seen as being the authentic expression of Christian commitment and believing.

Diversity within Christianity

Many beliefs and practices are shared by all Christians. However, there are also distinct teachings and organisational forms for various Christian traditions, the largest of which are the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Pentecostal traditions.

Following Christianity's adoption as the official religion of the Roman Empire, the Empire began increasingly to become separated into Eastern and Western parts which was also mirrored in the development of differences between the Churches of the East and West.

A formal division opened up in 1054 leading to the development of the Western Catholic and Eastern Orthodox forms of Christianity.

With the Protestant Reformation, Western Christendom diversified further into national Churches closely aligned with local rulers and Free Churches which sought an independent congregational life separate from the structures of the state.

Catholic

The Catholic Church includes around half of all Christians in the world and sees itself as directly inheriting an apostolic line of succession from the earliest Christian leaders. It is led by the Pope.

Orthodox

The Orthodox Churches of Christianity see themselves as being in continuity with the undivided Church before its separation into Eastern and Western traditions.

Orthodox Churches are independently governed, each with their own leaders who are bound together by their recognition of an Ecumenical Patriarch, the Patriarch of Constantinople.

Protestants

Protestant Churches vary considerably, and especially concerning forms of Church organisation and government. They emphasise the supremacy of scriptural authority and of faith in Jesus. They include the following denominational forms:

1. Baptist
2. Brethren
3. Congregationalist
4. Lutheran

5. Methodist
6. Moravian
7. Presbyterian or Reformed
8. Salvationist

Churches of the Anglican traditions see themselves as both Reformed and Catholic. They are autonomous Churches which look for international leadership to the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Pentecostal

The Pentecostal tradition emerged within the broader Protestant tradition and additionally emphasises the possibility of contemporary sharing the spiritual gifts and experience of the earliest Christians.

Restorationist and House Church Movements have more recently emerged seeking what they believe to be more biblical forms of Church life.

In a number of parts of the world, but especially in Africa, indigenous forms of Christianity have developed and which are seen by many as more authentically incultivated expressions of the Christian faith than the traditions imparted by missionaries.

Christian Origins

Christianity has been a major part of the history of the UK, and has had a substantial influence upon law, culture and public life in general. It takes different main forms in the various parts of the UK.

In England, the Church of England (see A Short Introduction to Christianity) has had the most widespread presence. In Scotland, the Presbyterian Church of Scotland has functioned as a ‘national Church’. In Wales, the Free Churches predominate, while in Northern Ireland, the Roman Catholic Church is the largest single Church.

The Church of England has a particular relationship with the state as an ‘established Church’. This, for example, means some of its senior Bishops sit in the House of Lords, the second Chamber of Parliament. The Church of Scotland also has a special position in Scotland.

At the same time, the Christian community in the UK has become very diverse with a range of other traditions, including, particularly: the Orthodox Churches and Churches with a majority of African-Caribbean people among their membership and leadership.

Most Churches are members of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. There is also Churches Together in England; Action of Churches Together in Scotland; and The Irish Council of Churches.

Most of the Churches have their own directories. There is also Christian Research, which produces a range of resources giving an overview of the diversity of Christian organisations in the UK.



Christians in the UK

Christian Populations

Global	c.2,260,440,000
UK	37,583,962
England	31,479,876
Wales	1,763,299
Scotland	2,850,199
Northern Ireland	1,490,588

As a proportion of the population in local authority areas, the 2011 Census shows that, in England, the greatest concentration of respondents identifying themselves as Christians is to be found in:

	% of Population	Total Numbers
Knowsley	80.9%	117,991
Copeland	78.9%	55,687
St. Helens	78.8%	138,172
Ribble Valley	78.1%	44,627
Wigan	77.8%	247,223

Christian Organisations

There are a very large number of Christian Churches and organisations operating at UK, national, regional and local levels.

These include the following ‘Recorded’ (Church of England and Church in Wales) and ‘Certified’ (all other Christian Trinitarian, Non-Trinitarian and ‘Other Christian’) places of worship in England and Wales:

	England	Wales
Anglican	14,959	1,414
Roman Catholic	3,386	237
Methodist	6,545	445
Congregationalist	573	782
Baptist	2,453	808
United Reformed Church	1,489	115
Calvinistic Methodist	60	1,084
Brethren	881	61
Salvation Army	813	74
Unitarian	152	24
Society of Friends	353	11
Jehovah's Witness	849	78
Other Christian Bodies	5,941	528
All Denominations	23,495	4,247

Acknowledgement of Sources

UK Christian population data is sourced from the [Office for National Statistics' Table QS210EW](#) (Census 2011: Religion [Detailed], Local Authorities in England & Wales, Crown Copyright 2012), the [Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency's Table QS218NI](#) (Census 2011: Religion – Full Detail), and the [National Records of Scotland's Table AT_001_2011](#) (Census 2011: Religion [Detailed], Crown Copyright 2013). Crown copyright material is reproduced with the permission of the Controller of HMSO.

Estimates for the global Christian population are taken from Todd M. Johnson and Brian J. Grim (eds.), [World Religion Database](#) (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed January 2012).

Data on the number of Christian places of worship in England & Wales is taken from ‘Marriages in England & Wales (Provisional), 2012 Release’ (Office for National Statistics, Crown Copyright 2014) and reproduced here under the terms of the Open Government Licence.

Further information on a range of national and regional Christian organisations in the UK is included in P. Weller (ed.), *Religions in the UK: A Directory, 2007-10* (Derby: Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby, 2007). The section on ‘A Short Introduction to Christianity’ summarises and abstracts from the same publication’s chapter on ‘Introducing Christians in the UK’ (pp. 127-168), which was developed with input from a range of consultants (pp. 329-338).

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