



Linda Woodhead

CHRISTIANITY

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

Christianity: A Very Short Introduction

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Introduction

Christianity has a vast reservoir of resources for shaping life and death. Like most religions it is more capacious and flexible than a philosophical system, and works not only with abstract concepts but with vivid stories, striking images, resonant symbols, and life-shaping rituals. It appeals to heart and senses as well as mind, and offers a range of prompts and provocations for guiding and shaping the lives of individuals and societies. There are nevertheless limits to what can count as Christian, for in opening up some possibilities for life and thought it rules out others.

The first two chapters of this book introduce the basic Christian repertoire. They set out some key themes of Christian life and thought, and indicate the foundational resources with which Christians work. Since Christianity is shaped around a person, Jesus Christ, Chapter 1 outlines the range of ways in which he has been interpreted, and the crucial role these interpretations play in setting the boundaries of Christian thought. The second chapter continues this introductory work, hovering high over Christianity in order to pick out the signs, stories, symbols, and rituals that serve as the basic building blocks of the religion, and offering some preliminary glimpses of their unfolding over 2,000 years of Christian history.

The picture that emerges is of a religion with its origins in an

explosion of spiritual energy. This energy – harnessed, focused, and channelled by Jesus Christ – empowered his followers to think, feel, and desire in new ways. In the first centuries of Christian history it gave rise to a wide range of different spiritual groups, ideas, and practices – to many different ‘Christianities’. They fall along a spectrum, and this spectrum defines the range of subsequent Christian possibility.

At one end of the spectrum, we have forms of Christianity shaped by reverence for higher power. They focus on a God who infinitely transcends the world and human beings and rules over them. Such Christianity sees the good life – the holy life – as involving sacrifice of one’s own (sinful) thoughts, choices, and desires in order to live up to the higher life that God requires. At the other end of the spectrum, we have something different: forms of Christianity that place less emphasis upon God’s rule *over* human beings, and more emphasis upon the divine *in* the human. Rather than worship a God who remains high above human life, they focus upon the possibility of the divine coming into being in human life. As such, they place their emphasis not on power from above but power from below; not on power from outside but power from within. Interpretations of Jesus differ accordingly: for a Christianity of higher power, he is a transcendent being who must be obeyed; whereas for a Christianity of inner power, he is a spiritual being who can inspire, in-Spirit, and divinize human life.

Chapters 3 and 4 trace the ways in which these different tendencies within Christianity played out historically down to the dawn of the modern period. Chapter 3 looks at the two most important historical manifestations of a Christianity of higher power: Church Christianity and Biblical Christianity. Chapter 4 considers the development of more inward-looking forms of Christianity, and discusses Mystical Christianity. Together these chapters suggest that an orientation towards higher power became the dominant mode of Christianity from the 4th century onwards, and that it sought to constrain or co-opt more mystical tendencies.

In due course this preference for hierarchical power – in politics as well as religion – would lead to some serious clashes between Christianity and Western modernity. Chapter 5, which tells the story of Christianity in the modern West, considers these confrontations but shows how liberal versions of Christianity proved compatible with an ‘enlightened’ modernity that ascribed high value to human dignity and the free exercise of human reason. The more serious clash came after the 1960s, when growing emphasis on the authority and importance of the (affective, experiential) inner life of each unique individual proved much harder for Church and Biblical Christianity to digest. As individuals became more inclined to pay attention to inner life and well being, so they became less willing to conform to the ‘higher authority’ of God, reason, church, or anything else. The result, in most Western countries, has been a gradual decline in Christian belief and a very severe fall in churchgoing in the last quarter of the 20th century.

Outside the West, however, Christianity has experienced much greater success in recent times, as we see in Chapter 6. In much of the southern hemisphere churches have experienced rapid growth since the 1970s, and it is this that has allowed Christianity to retain its status as the world’s largest religion, reaching an estimated two billion adherents in 2000. In many parts of the South, ‘charismatic’ forms of Christianity are flourishing. They combine the clear directives of higher power (the Bible) with the inner empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

The book closes with a chapter that expands on a theme that has been implicit throughout: the roles of women and men in Christianity and the place of the male and the female. It explores the paradox of a religion that has always attracted large numbers of women, but seems to have reserved highest power – on earth and in heaven – for men and the masculine. What we find is that Christianity maintains a fine balance between endorsing male privilege on the one hand, and exalting the female and feminine virtues on the other.

Terms and categories

It is conventional to analyse Christianity in terms of a set of categories generated by the religion itself: 'early Church', 'Protestant', 'Nestorian', 'heretical', and so on. My own study of Christianity over many years, which has involved face-to-face research amongst Christians as well as textual research, has led me to favour a different set of analytical categories (including those of Church, Biblical and Mystical Christianity). Since this is an introductory book, I have tried to strike a balance between introducing my own terms and categories and employing more conventional ones. The intention is to offer the reader a fresh perspective on Christianity, whilst indicating how this relates to approaches with which he or she may already be familiar and which may be encountered elsewhere.

Christianity Warts and all

There is a tendency in some treatments of Christianity to look only at the positive: the religion's growth, achievements, beliefs, rituals, great men, cultural contributions. Such topics are often treated in isolation from their wider social and material contexts. This book takes a less idealistic approach. It acknowledges that Christianity, like all religions, has to do with ('sacred') power, and it looks at the ways in which such power has been understood, embodied, and exercised – as well as how it has interacted with secular power.

Power in itself is neither good nor bad, merely the force that gets things done. What is interesting, and a focus of the pages that follow, is the range of ways in which it may be understood and activated: as a dominating force that compels its objects, for example, or as a love that 'moves' and is 'moved' in a very different fashion. Since different forms of Christianity have aligned themselves around these different tendencies, this volume considers the full internal diversity of Christianity, and the frequently

antagonistic relations between its different strands. It also pays attention to the decline as well as the growth of Christianity, discussing not only its rise to become the world's largest religion, but the serious difficulties it currently faces in the West. The intention throughout is not to pass judgement, but to present a realistic portrait.

Chapter 1

Jesus: the God-man

At first sight the figure of Jesus Christ might seem to serve as a focus of unity for the Christian faith. Whatever else they might disagree about, Christians are at least united in believing that Jesus has a unique significance. Look more closely, however, and it becomes apparent that this focus of unity can also be a cause of division. Though Christians agree that Jesus is significant, they may interpret his significance differently. Despite the strenuous attempts that have continually been made to contain him within a single interpretative framework, he always threatens to break free.

Some of this elusiveness may be traced back to Jesus himself. When he talked he often spoke in riddles and parables, and when asked who he was, he replied: 'who do you say I am?'. He laid down few clear rules, left no systematic body of teaching, and founded no school to pass on his wisdom. The mystery is also a function of the sources on which we have to rely. We cannot consult the books Jesus wrote because he wrote no books, and we cannot turn to contemporary accounts of his life and works for there are no such accounts. We have only interpretations, and interpretations of interpretations. Our most important sources of information are already embroiled in the debate about his significance, and already take sides. What is more, where Jesus is concerned the parameters of interpretation are particularly broad. It is hard enough to give a reliable account of the life of any individual; biographers make a

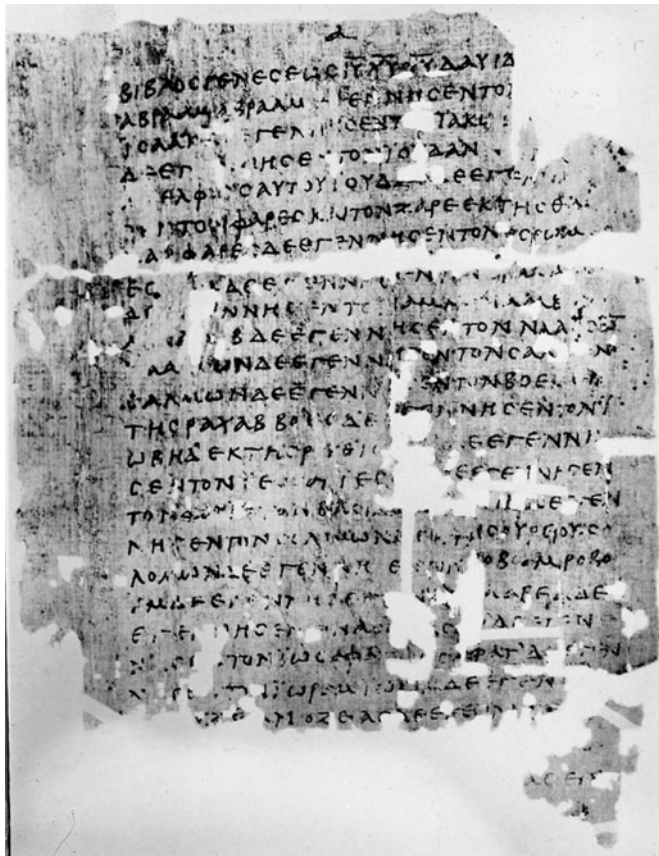
living out of the fact that there can never be a single, definitive interpretation. But when considering Jesus, the difficulty is multiplied, for the issue is not simply ‘what sort of a man are we dealing with?’ but ‘are we dealing with man or God?’. This chapter will review the answers that were given to this question in the first centuries after Jesus’ death, answers that would prove enormously influential for subsequent Christian thought and life.

The gospel truth

The earliest and most important sources of written information about Jesus are gospels. The genre is peculiar to early Christianity, and its name gives a clue to its intention, for ‘gospel’ translates the Greek word *euangelion* meaning ‘good news’. This word was rarely used in pre-Christian times, except in Roman political propaganda, usually with reference to an emperor. To the extent that they aim to propagate a particular, exalted view of the person they describe, Christian gospels are also propaganda. They tell their readers (or hearers) that Jesus was something special, and they expect them to respond accordingly. No neutral stance is possible in relation to a gospel. Depending on your response, its message will turn out either to be good news for you – or bad.

Jesus: the God-man

There were many gospels and many different accounts of Jesus – just as there were many types of early Christian community that produced them. Today only a few of these gospels survive. The most familiar are those of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John because by the 4th century they had been gathered together, deemed authoritative (‘canonical’) and included in the ‘New Testament’. The latter (written in Greek) was bound together with the ‘Old Testament’ (the scriptures of the Jewish people written in Hebrew but appropriated by Christianity in an expanded Greek version) to form the Christian Bible. This was just one step in the long historical process whereby one version of Christianity came to establish itself as the authoritative, ‘catholic’ (universal) form of ‘church’, and to win out over its rivals. Once this happened, it was possible to draw a



1. Gospels were first circulated as 'codexes', small books made from papyrus. Many early Christian communities probably possessed only a single codex, perhaps a gospel or a 'harmony' of several gospels. It would be many centuries before churches possessed a complete New Testament or Bible. This early fragment from Matthew's Gospel probably dates from early in the 3rd century CE.

distinction between canonical gospels and 'apocryphal' ones, and to downgrade the importance of the latter. But in the earliest centuries after Jesus' death it was possible for any Christian group to produce its own gospel, thereby securing its particular understanding of Jesus and the life he inspired. A few of these apocryphal gospels have survived, including the very early Gospel of Thomas, which is considered briefly in this chapter. They serve to remind us that the Jesus depicted in the New Testament gospels was not the only Jesus who was remembered and revered in early Christian circles.

Possible dating of the earliest written sources on which our knowledge of Jesus depends

(birth of Jesus c. 4 BCE, death of Jesus c. 30 CE)

30–60 CE

Paul's letters (Epistles)

A sayings source, 'Q', now lost, but used by Luke and Matthew

A miracles source now lost, but used by Mark and John

Earliest layer of the Gospel of Thomas

60–80 CE

The Gospel of Mark

Additional material in the Gospel of Thomas

80–120 CE

The Gospel of Matthew (c. 90)

The Gospel of Luke (c. 90)

The Gospel of John (c. 100–110)

120–150 CE

The Book of Acts

Other New Testament Epistles including the Pastoral Epistles and Catholic Epistles

Jesus: the God-man

The authorized version

For now, however, let us confine our attention to the authorized version of Christian truth, the version that was propagated by the winning side, became canonical, and has informed the views of a majority of Christian believers ever since. It is here that we find the most influential answers to the question of who Jesus really was, and here that we encounter the Jesus who has inspired more lives and worked more miracles than the elusive 'historical Jesus' who historians struggle endlessly to recreate.

The canonical gospels combine stories about Jesus with records of his teaching. Despite important variations between them, they share a common narrative thread and a common purpose. The narrative falls roughly into two halves. The first establishes Jesus as a teacher and miracle worker in Galilee (the northern province of Israel). Though baptized by John the Baptist, he launches an independent career and wins his own followers. Jesus works amongst his people, the Jews, and acknowledges their God and scriptures. He offers an interpretation of the Jewish faith that is critical towards the religious elite but favourable to those who are destitute, humble, of no account. The second part of the narrative shifts to Jerusalem in Judea (the southern part of Israel), where Jesus' provocative ministry alarms the governing authorities (the Romans, supported by Jewish leaders) and leads to his arrest, trial, and execution. He is crucified as a criminal and buried in a tomb. When some of his followers visit the grave three days later, they find it empty. Miraculous appearances by Jesus convince his followers that God has raised him from the dead. The Book of Acts (written by the author of Luke's gospel) continues the story in the New Testament, recounting how Jesus, having ascended into heaven, pours out his Spirit on his followers at Pentecost and brings into being the Christian community.

The common narrative thread reflects the gospels' common purpose: to persuade that Jesus was no mere mortal, that he was

uniquely favoured by God, that he has transcended the limitations of normal human life, and that those who dedicate their lives to him may share in the eternal life he now enjoys. To press the message home the gospels marshal the most convincing evidence they can find. It falls into four main categories: teaching, miracles, resurrection, and fulfilled prophecy.

Teaching

Jesus' teaching testifies to his immersion in the religion and culture of the Jewish people. The followers of an exclusivistic monotheism, their identity was based on the belief that God (Yahweh) had called them out of all the nations, made them His chosen people, granted them the land of Israel for their exclusive possession, and given them the Law (Torah) by which to live. Successive foreign occupations of Israel were often interpreted as punishment for failure to observe the Law. In Jesus' day, with Israel under Roman occupation, a wide range of Jewish teachers, groups, and movements attempted to make sense of this latest episode in the stormy history of God's chosen people.

Jesus: the God-man

Jesus taught that far from abandoning His people, God's reign (*basileia*, usually translated 'kingdom') was imminent. Speaking almost exclusively to fellow Jews, he told them to be watchful of the signs of the times and to ready themselves for the new Godly society that was being prepared. Readiness consists in living as if God's will and law were already in force – by observing the spirit rather than the letter of the law, its essence rather than its every detail. And the essence of God's law, according to Jesus, is love without limits. God is calling His people to love as he loves: perfectly and without limitation. Those who do so join the family of God, whose ties and loyalties surpass those of any natural form of human association, including the biological family.

Although addressed to the individual and calling for a personal change of heart, Jesus' message envisages a universal society bound together by divine love. Replacing limited human ties of affection

based on kinship, ethnic identity, and self-interest with the unlimited love of God, it is an egalitarian kingdom of love without limits. Jesus likens it to a family in which all are brothers and sisters of one another and children of the one Father ('Abba', Jesus' preferred name for God). When God's reign begins on earth it will be those who are sufficiently humble to accept their need for divine love and forgiveness who will find that they belong to this order of things, whereas the proud, self-righteous, and unjust will be exposed as citizens of an alternative order. Thus the first will be last, and the last will be first.

Extracts from Jesus' teaching: Matthew 5 and Luke 14

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends his rain on the just and on the unjust.

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.

Miracles

Since Jesus' teaching points away from his person towards the kingdom of love that he proclaims, it leaves the question of his status open. The gospels record a few sayings in which Jesus makes explicit reference to his own unique significance (though there is extensive debate amongst scholars about their authenticity). Some of these sayings suggest that Jesus is ordained by God to inaugurate the divine rule on earth. Others have Jesus openly declare that he is the 'Son of God'. John's gospel goes furthest by including long

discourses in which Jesus reflects on his divine status (the 'I am . . .' discourses). In other gospel passages it is other people who announce Jesus' unique status – as Peter does when Jesus is transfigured, and the centurion when he witnesses Jesus' death.

More important than words in establishing Jesus' extraordinary status are miracles. The gospel narratives are full of accounts of Jesus' miraculous deeds. They linger lovingly over the detail, and they lay great emphasis on the way in which witnesses react with awe and wonder. Some of the miracles involve human healing, while others demonstrate Jesus' control over natural events – stilling the storm, walking on water, feeding five thousand. Since the Jewish people believed that God alone had ultimate control over the world, the clear implication was that God was at work in Jesus. Even those who are not convinced by Jesus' miracles admit that some supernatural power must be at work – if not God, then Beelzebub the devil.

Jesus: the God-man

Resurrection

The greatest miracle of all is the resurrection, and it is no surprise that three of the four gospels make it their climax (Mark's gospel was quickly amended to ensure that it too ended with stories of the risen Christ). Just as Jews believed that only God could work real miracles, so they believed that only God could raise a human being from the dead. There was also widespread belief that God would only do this at the end of time; the first resurrection would inaugurate a more general resurrection as history was brought to its close. Thus Jesus' resurrection would signal to those who believed in it that God's power was at work in this man in a special way. It would confirm that Jesus had a unique role in the divine plan for the world, and that through his work the long reign of suffering and oppression was about to come to an end.

Fulfilled prophecy

Jesus' resurrection gained its meaning by being interpreted in the context of Jewish prophecy and expectation. Since the same was

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