

# Christianity at a Glance

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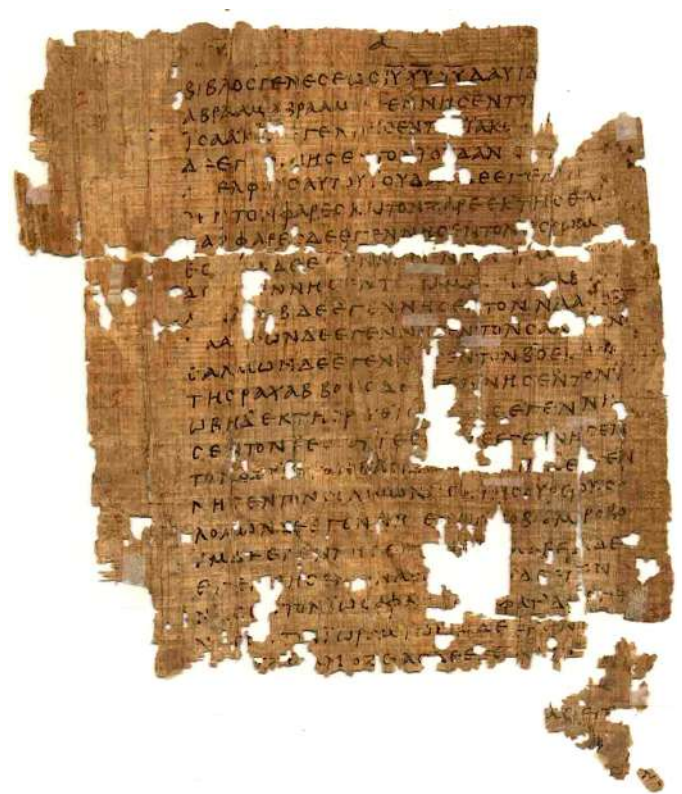
Christianity is a religion that emerged from Judaism. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, at a time when Judaism was divided into several groups, Jesus, a Jewish [preacher](#), taught an original way of putting Jewish Law into practice. His teaching emphasized the need to change one's life to enter the [Kingdom of God](#), which would be established at the end of time. Jesus shocked some people of his day because he reached out to marginalized people and disregarded certain religious practices related to purity. He was condemned to death and crucified.

Jesus' disciples proclaimed that he had resurrected three days later. Some Jews recognized him as the [Messiah](#) who had been promised to them. This is why the first Christians retained the Hebrew Bible, which became the Old Testament, and added to it the New Testament recounting Jesus' preaching (the four [Gospels](#)), and the beginnings of the Christian communities ([Acts of the Apostles](#), [Epistles](#), [Revelation](#)).

Some disciples decided not to limit this message to the Jewish community alone. Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire and even beyond it. Christian communities were very diverse, but they shared elements common to all Christians: the belief that God became human in Jesus, that Jesus is the Son of God and the savior of humanity, the Lord's Prayer, the rites of [baptism](#) and the sharing of bread and wine, and the celebration of Sunday. This diversity explains the debates that arose very early concerning Jesus as the "*Son of God*" and his message.

After legalizing Christianity in 313 (the Edict of Milan), the Roman emperor Constantine convened an [ecumenical council](#) so that Church leaders could organize themselves and resolve their disagreements. The ecumenical councils succeeded in creating a majority Church, but [dissenting](#) communities remained, while others rejected the formulas that were adopted. This is how the Eastern Christians separated from this majority Church.

The Middle Ages saw the widening of a longstanding divide between the two centers of [Christendom](#): Rome (the Latin Church) and Constantinople (the Byzantine/Orthodox Church). Differences in religious practices and disagreements over the role of the Pope (head



Egyptian papyrus from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century containing the beginning of the Greek text of the Gospel of Matthew (Penn Museum, Philadelphia, Papyrus [E2746](#), found at Oxyrhynchus).

of the Latin Church) gave rise to numerous controversies. This separation was gradual, and there is no official date marking the break. By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, following the capture of Constantinople by the Crusaders, the two Churches ceased to consider themselves part of the same Christendom. At the same time, Christianity continued to spread throughout the rest of Europe.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, debates surrounding [salvation](#) gave rise to the Reformation. The reformers shared the idea that the Bible should be the sole source of faith and that salvation is a gift from God. In contrast, the Catholic Church reaffirmed the importance of [tradition](#) and good deeds. The diversity among the reformers led to the creation of numerous Churches, but their commitment to the shared principles means that they can be grouped under the term Protestantism. Lutheran Churches, Reformed (Calvinist) Churches, and the Anglican Church were initially the most important, but other movements also developed that emphasized the

believer's individual experience: a return to God and an affirmation of the central role of faith in one's life. Some of these movements gave rise to the Evangelical Churches.

Christianity has also profoundly shaped European culture. By inheriting Roman law and Greek thought, it provided an intellectual, moral, and spiritual framework for societies influenced by Christianity, even after secularization. Artistically, it inspired many masterpieces in architecture (churches, basilicas, and cathedrals), painting, sculpture, music and literature. It influenced numerous intellectual movements, from Scholasticism to social Christianity. It also shaped the organization of time through the calendar, particularly through festivals that mark the year and that have retained their significance even though their religious dimension has diminished.

Today, Christianity is the world's largest religion in terms of number of believers, with approximately 2.4 billion followers. Europe remains an important center, although the number of believers there is steadily declining. In numerical terms, it has been surpassed by the Americas, where Christianity became established in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and by Africa, where Christianity has been present since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century (Egypt, Ethiopia and the Maghreb) but has expanded south of the Sahara since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## Glossary

**Acts of the Apostles:** A book of the New Testament recounting the actions of the earliest Christian communities. The apostles are the people directly “sent” (from the Greek *apostellō*) by Jesus to transmit his message, according to these early Christian communities.

**Baptism:** From the Greek *baptismos* (immersion). A sacrament through which a person enters the Church, since one is not Christian by birth. It is also a rite of purification from original sin, which is why the Church emphasized that it should take place shortly after birth. Traditionally, the baptized person is immersed in water three times. Today, in most Churches, water is poured three times over the baptized person's forehead.

**Christendom:** An area in which Christianity has structured religious, social, cultural, and political life.

**Ecumenical Council:** A council is a meeting of Church dignitaries to deliberate on questions of doctrine or organization. A council may be local (also called a synod) or universal, in which case it is described as ecumenical.

**Dissident:** A person who departs from the generally accepted opinion and is often marginalized for that reason.

**Epistles:** From the Latin *epistula* (letter). A collection of letters attributed to the disciples of Jesus containing advice and exhortations addressed to particular communities.

**Gospel:** from Old English *Godspell* (God's message), maybe an alteration of *goodspell* (good news), which translate the Greek *euangelion* (good news), meaning the “good news” of salvation proclaimed by Jesus. It is also an account of the life and words of Jesus as transmitted by the earliest Christian communities (the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John).

**Kingdom of God:** The kingdom established by God at the end of time to receive those who have been saved.

**Messiah:** From the Hebrew *mashia* (anointed) translated into Greek as *christos*, from which the name *Christ* derives. The savior promised by God.

**Preacher:** A person who proclaims a religious message.

**Revelation:** Called *apokalypsis* (revelation, hence apocalypse) in the original Greek, the final book of the New Testament, composed of several visions / revelations recounting the victory of Good over Evil. It is often interpreted as an announcement of the end of the world.

**Salvation** (in Christianity): Liberation from evil and sin. After the resurrection of the dead, those who are saved will live eternally in the Kingdom of God.

**Tradition** (in Christianity): Refers to what, in each generation, is added to the message of Jesus to better understand and apply it.

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