

# BBC Religion Packet: Christianity

## Christianity at a glance

Christianity is the most popular religion in the world with over 2 billion adherents. 42 million Britons see themselves as nominally Christian, and there are 6 million who are actively practising.

- Christians believe that **Jesus** was the Messiah promised in the **Old Testament**.
- Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.
- Christians believe that God sent his Son to earth to save humanity from the consequences of its **sins**.
- One of the most important concepts in Christianity is that of Jesus giving his life on the Cross (the **Crucifixion**) and rising from the dead on the third day (the Resurrection).
- Christians believe that there is only one God, but that there are **three elements to this one God**:
  - God the Father
  - God the Son
  - The Holy Spirit
- Christians worship in churches.
- Their spiritual leaders are called priests or ministers.
- The Christian holy book is the **Bible**, and consists of the Old and New Testaments.
- Christian **holy days** such as **Easter** and **Christmas** are important milestones in the Western secular calendar



## God

Christians believe that there is only one God, whom they call Father as Jesus Christ taught them.

## Jesus

Christians recognise **Jesus** as the Son of God who was sent to save mankind from death and sin.

Jesus Christ taught that he was Son of God. His teachings can be summarised, briefly as the love of God and love of one's neighbour.

Jesus said that he had come to fulfil God's law rather than teach it.

## Justification by faith

Christians believe in justification by faith - that through their belief in Jesus as the Son of God, and in his death and resurrection, they can have a right relationship with God whose forgiveness was made once and for all through the death of Jesus Christ.

## The Trinity

Christians believe in the **Trinity** - that is, in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Some confuse this and think that Christians believe in three separate gods, which they don't.

Christians believe that God took human form as Jesus Christ and that God is present today through the work of the Holy Spirit and evident in the actions of believers.

## Life after death

Christians believe that there is a life after earthly death.

While the actual nature of this life is not known, Christians believe that many spiritual experiences in this life help to give them some idea of what eternal life will be like.

## The Saints

These days, the word **saint** is most commonly used to refer to a Christian who has lived a particularly good and holy life on earth, and with whom miracles are claimed to have been associated after their death.

The formal title of Saint is conferred by the **Roman Catholic** and **Orthodox** Churches through a process called *canonisation*.

Members of these Churches also believe that Saints created in this way can intercede with God on behalf of people who are alive today. This is not accepted by most Protestants.

In the **Bible**, however, the word saint is used as a description of anyone who is a committed believer, particularly by **St. Paul** in the New Testament (e.g. Ephesians 1.1. and 1.15).

## The Christian year

The Church year is divided up by various festivals and seasons. Some, like Christmas Day, happen on the same date every year, while others move around within a range of dates. The main festival that moves is Easter, and since many other festivals have their dates fixed in relation to Easter, they move with it.

## Christian annual festivals

- **Annunciation**, 25 March
- The Easter period, in Spring (dates vary):
  - **Lent**
  - **Holy Week**
  - **Easter**
- **Ascension Day** (40 days after Easter)
- **Pentecost** (7th Sunday after Easter)
- The Christmas period, late November to early January
  - Advent, the period leading up to Christmas: begins on the Sunday closest to 30 November
  - Christmas Eve, 24 December
  - **Christmas Day**, 25 December
  - **Epiphany**, early January



Some denominations of Christianity also celebrate **Saints' days**, which happen on fixed dates every year.

## Christian worship

Christian worship involves praising God in music and speech, readings from scripture, prayers of various sorts, a sermon, and various holy ceremonies (often called sacraments) such as the Eucharist.

While worship is often thought of only as services in which Christians come together in a group, individual Christians can worship God on their own, and in any place.

Christian worship grew out of Jewish worship.

Jesus Christ was a religious Jew who attended the synagogue and celebrated Jewish festivals, and his disciples were familiar with Jewish ritual and tradition.

The first obvious divergence from Judaism was making Sunday the holy day instead of Saturday. By doing this the day of Christian worship is the same as the day that Jesus rose from the dead.

Jesus's promise to stay with his followers, fulfilled in the sending of the Holy Spirit, illuminated the development of Christian worship from early times.



## God is present

So Christians regard worship as something that they don't only do for God, but that God, through Jesus's example and the presence of the Holy Spirit is also at work in.

## The Eucharist and the Word

Church services on a Sunday divide into two general types: Eucharistic services and services of the Word.

Both types of service will include hymns, readings and prayers.

The Eucharistic service will be focussed on the act of Holy Communion.

The service of the Word does not include this rite, but instead features a much longer sermon, in which the preacher will speak at length to expound a biblical text and bring out its relevance to those present.

## Style

Different churches, even within the same denomination, will use very different styles of worship. Some will be elaborate, with a choir singing difficult music, others will hand the music over to the congregation, who sing simpler hymns or worship songs.

Some churches leave much of the action to the minister, while others encourage great congregational participation.

(Of course all churches encourage the full participation of the congregation in praising God with heart, mind, and soul, but some churches give the congregation more physical participation.)

## The Cross



Paradoxically a symbol of suffering and defeat but also of triumph and salvation, the cross is the universal Christian symbol, acknowledged by all denominations as the single visual identifier of their faith.

While **Good Friday** marks the **Passion of Christ** and his **crucifixion**, **Roman Catholic** and **Eastern Orthodox** Christians also reflect on the cross as a symbol of salvation with the feast of The Triumph of the Cross on **14th September**.

Here Michael Symmons Roberts discusses the cross as ubiquitous symbol.

### The ubiquitous cross

Take a pen and place the nib at the top of a piece of paper, in the middle, where the title might go. Draw a vertical line down to the foot of the page. Then draw a horizontal line about two-thirds of the way up the vertical, from edge to edge of the paper. This simple geometric shape is one of the most powerful symbols in the world.

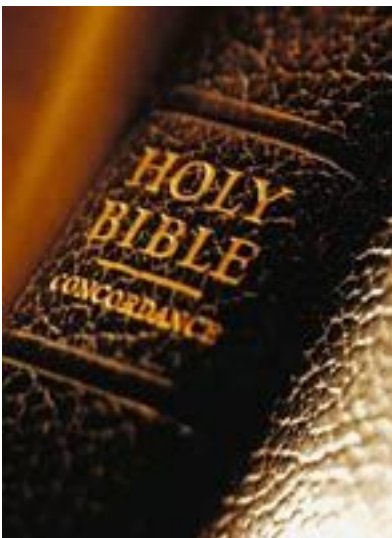


You can't get away from it. It's everywhere. Not just in churches and cathedrals, but in homes, in movies, paintings and music videos. And of course, we wear it too, as earrings, as a necklace, stitched or studded onto leather and denim.

The cross on which Jesus was executed 2000 years ago has been a symbol for his followers from very early on. At first, they were scared to display it publicly in case they were persecuted or mocked. But after the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in the 4th Century, crucifixion was abolished as a punishment, and the cross was promoted as a symbol of the Son of God.

## The Bible

The Bible is not just one book, but an entire library, with stories, songs, poetry, letters and history, as well as literature that might more obviously qualify as 'religious'.



The Christian Bible has two sections, the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is the original Hebrew Bible, the sacred scriptures of the Jewish faith, written at different times between about 1200 and 165 BC. The New Testament books were written by Christians in the first century AD.

### The Old Testament

#### The Law

The Hebrew Bible has 39 books, written over a long period of time, and is the literary archive of the ancient nation of Israel. It was traditionally arranged in three sections. The **first five books**, Genesis to Deuteronomy. They are not 'law' in a modern Western sense: Genesis is a book of stories, with nothing remotely like rules and regulations, and though the other four do contain community laws they also have many narratives. The Hebrew word for Law ('Torah') means 'guidance' or 'instruction', and that could include stories offering everyday examples of how people were meant to live as well as legal requirements.

These books were later called the 'Pentateuch', and tradition attributed them to **Moses**. Some parts undoubtedly date from that period, but as things changed old laws were updated and new ones produced, and this was the work of later editors over several centuries.

#### The Prophets

The Prophets is the largest section of the Hebrew Bible, and has two parts ('former prophets' and 'latter prophets'). The books of 'latter prophets' preserve sayings and stories of religious and political activists ('prophets') who served as the spiritual conscience of the nation throughout its history, reminding people of the social values that would reflect the character of God. Some books are substantial (**Isaiah**, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), others are much shorter (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi). Sometimes, the prophets could be

mime artists and dramatists, accompanying their actions by short spoken messages, often delivered in poetic form. These were the sound bites of their day, which made it easy for others to remember them and then write them down.

The 'former prophets' consist of **Joshua**, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings. They are history books, but what makes them also 'prophets' is that they not only record information, they interpret it, explaining its significance in relation to other events in the history of Israel, and of the wider world of their day.

## The Writings

These include Psalms (songs, prayers and liturgies for worship), Proverbs (sayings of homespun wisdom), Job (a drama that explores the nature of suffering), plus the 'five scrolls' ('Megiloth') which were grouped together because each had associations with a particular religious festival: Ruth (the Jewish Feast of Weeks, also called **Shavuot**), Song of Solomon (**Passover**), Ecclesiastes (**Tabernacles**), Lamentations (**Destruction of Jerusalem**), and Esther (**Purim**). This section also includes the last books of the Hebrew Bible to be written: Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1-2 Chronicles (all history books), and Daniel (visions of a better world).

## The New Testament

The New Testament has 27 books, written between about 50 and 100 AD, and falling naturally into two sections: the Gospels, which tell the story of **Jesus** (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John); and the Letters (or epistles) - written by various Christian leaders to provide guidance for the earliest church communities.

### The Letters

Letters were the natural way for itinerant church leaders to communicate with their converts, and the earliest ones were written before the Gospels. With some exceptions (Romans, Hebrews), they were not meant to be formal presentations of Christian belief, but offered advice to people who were working out how to express their commitment to Jesus in ways that would be relevant to the many different cultural contexts in which they found themselves throughout the Roman empire. Reading them can be like listening to one half of a conversation, as the writers give answers to questions sent to them either verbally or in writing. **Paul** was the most prolific writer of such letters, though he was not the only one.

### The Gospels

The **Gospels** were written to present the life and teachings of Jesus in ways that would be appropriate to different readerships, and for that reason are not all the same. They were not intended to be biographies of Jesus, but selective accounts that would demonstrate his significance for different cultures.

The first three are effectively different editions of the same materials, and for that reason are known as the 'synoptic gospels'. The writer of Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles, which tells the story of how Christianity spread from being a small group of Jewish believers in the time of Jesus to becoming a worldwide faith in less than a generation.

The New Testament concludes with the book of **Revelation**, which begins with a series of letters to seven churches in the area of Asia Minor (modern Turkey), but then offers a visionary presentation of the meaning of all things, from creation to the end of the world.