

Christianity

Christianity began in approximately 33 AD (usually called 'CE' / Common Era by RE teachers and many others). It was started by the followers of Jesus. At the centre of Christianity is the belief that Jesus is the Son of God, God come down to earth. The basic beliefs of a Christian can be summed up in the creeds. The two main creeds in Christianity are the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed.

The Trinity: God, three in one

Christianity is a monotheistic religion which teaches that God is one, known in three persons or in three ways of being. These are God the Father and creator, Jesus the incarnate son of God, God made flesh, and the Holy Spirit, God working in the world and in human hearts and minds. Almost all Christians believe the Trinity is one God working in three different ways, understood as three 'persons' of the Trinity, who exist in mutual love.

Jesus Christ

The Bible tells that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Palestine to a woman called Mary, who the Bible says was a virgin. He was an observant Jewish person for his whole life (not a Christian, of course!). The Bible also tells of the visitors at his birth: angels, shepherds and wise men. He grew up in Nazareth and at the age of about 30 became a preacher, healer and teacher. He was baptised by his cousin John the Baptist and the Bible tells of his temptation by Satan, the devil, in the wilderness. Jesus recruited a group of followers called the disciples – meaning 'followers'. The Bible describes Jesus telling parables and performing healings and other miracles. He taught that the greatest commandment was to 'love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength'. The second greatest commandment was to 'love your neighbour as yourself'. In his early thirties Jesus was crucified by the Roman rulers in Israel: he had many enemies because of his controversial identification with the poor, outcast or unaccepted in his society and the claim that he intended the overthrowing of the ways of the 'scribes and Pharisees' who were leadership groups within the Judaism of his time. Christians believe that three days later he was resurrected.

The Bible tells of many resurrection appearances of Jesus, alive again after he died and before he went to be with his Father in Heaven. Christians believe that because of the love of God, shown when Jesus died, their sins can be forgiven. Belief and trust in Jesus as the Son of God will bring the faithful to Heaven when they die, thanks to divine grace.

The Bible

The Christian holy book, or Bible, contains within it many writings or books, 66 books are recognised by all Christians (some 'apocryphal' books are included by Catholics and some Orthodox Christians), some running to many chapters, others just a page long. A wide range of genres of writing make up the Bible.

It is divided into the Old Testament (perhaps in RE better called the 'First Testament' or the 'Jewish Bible', to acknowledge Christianity's Jewish roots) – made up of the Jewish scriptures, writings before the time of Jesus, and the New Testament – writings which are concerned with the life of Jesus and his disciples and apostles.

The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew and consists of 39 books. The books include laws, prophecy, psalms, poetry, history and stories. There are 27 books in the New Testament, originally written in Greek. These books contain history, prophecy, gospels and letters.

Pretty much all Christians consider the Bible a source of wise teaching and authority but there are different views on how and whether it tells literal truth, spiritual truth or is to be read as an exploration of meaning.

Worship

The Apostles' Creed: a widely shared and historic statement of belief for Christians

'I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son,
our Lord.

He was conceived by the power of the
Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin
Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died and was buried. He
descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again.

He ascended to heaven, and is seated
at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again to judge the living
and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
The holy catholic church,
The communion of saints,
The forgiveness of sins,
The resurrection of the body,
And the life everlasting.
Amen.'

Christians see themselves as a body of believers, the worldwide 'Church of Christ'. It is the community rather than the building they meet in which is of principal importance. Christians meet regularly on a Sunday (because it is the day Jesus returned from the grave), but during the week in many churches there are many other informal prayer meetings and groups that get together to study the Bible or discuss how best to live a Christian life or provide services to the community.

Most Christian churches celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus by sharing bread and wine. This has many different names such as Communion, the Lord's Supper, Eucharist or Mass. Many services also include praying, praising of God through music and singing, listening to the Bible and learning about its meaning and application.

Praying and reading the Bible are not activities confined to Sundays. Many Christians pray and read the Bible every day. The prayers they offer individually and in communal worship include praise of God, confession, thanksgiving and asking for help and guidance from God.

Denominations

The Christian Church is made up of many and varied churches – it's divided into many different groups commonly known as denominations. There are some different beliefs and ways of worshipping between the denominations but they all hold some central beliefs. These are a – centrally - belief in the Trinity and the resurrection, that Christians should live their lives in ways that show a love of God, and that when they die they will go to be with God.

The denominations can be organised into three groups:

- The Orthodox Churches ('Eastern', including Russian, Greek and Coptic Orthodox Churches);
- The Roman Catholic Church (led by the Pope, based at Vatican City);
- The Protestant Churches (these include Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, the United Reformed Church, Pentecostals, the Salvation Army, the Society of Friends, many African-origin Christian communities and many others.
- Some 'new church' communities don't wish to be seen as a denomination).

Festivals

The most important festivals for most Christians are Christmas, Easter and Pentecost.

At Christmas, Christians commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ. The period beginning four Sundays before Christmas, and leading up to Christmas, is called Advent, which means 'coming'. Easter is the time when Christians remember the death and resurrection of Jesus. The 40 days leading up to this are called Lent, when Christians spend time praying and considering the importance of the events at Easter. Holy Week includes Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday (when the Last Supper is commemorated), Good Friday, marking the crucifixion of Jesus, and Easter Sunday where the joy of the resurrection is celebrated. Pentecost is the festival that recalls the time when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples after Jesus had finally ascended into Heaven (see the Acts of the Apostles, chapters 1-2 for the key account of these events).

In the UK

Christianity has been the major religious tradition and community in the UK for perhaps 1500 years, since its arrival with Romans and Celts. Churches, often ancient, can be found in every community. The history and story of Christianity in the UK is important in children's education, and the moral force and spirituality of Christianity continue important in Britain. The Church of England has an 'established' relationship with the state – for example, its Bishops have seats in the House of Lords, and every person lives in a 'parish' and can call upon the services of a Church of England priest if they wish it. The Anglican communion also encompasses the Church in Wales and the Scottish Episcopalians. 59% of British people identified themselves in the 2011 Census as Christians, though only about one tenth of that number are active members of churches, attending once a month or more. Although the churches have become less influential in the last half a century, Christians still represent the largest religious community in the UK by a long way. There are an estimated 50 000+ Christian congregations – not all have their own building - in the UK, a large number of these – tens of thousands - have begun in the last fifty years.

Christianity: Some 'Dos and Don'ts'

'Dos'

- ☐ Do teach the Christian belief about God as trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, including to primary aged pupils. It is acknowledged to be mysterious, but is at the heart of Christian understandings of God.
- ☐ Do try to present the Christian belief that Jesus was both fully God and fully human. He was not 'half man and half God', or God disguised as a human, or some kind of superman.
- ☐ Do be aware that the term 'Holy Spirit' is the current Christian way of describing the third person of the Trinity. The older term 'Holy Ghost' is infrequent and suggests unhelpful or trivial connections with ghosts.
- ☐ Do help pupils understand that Christianity takes a wide variety of different forms e.g. Catholic, Orthodox, Church of England, Pentecostal, Baptist and also radical, liberal, Evangelical, conservative – and many more. Don't give the impression that all Christians have identical beliefs or practices. They don't.
- ☐ Do organise visits to churches which involve some members of the congregation being present. Visiting an empty building can reinforce the impression some pupils have that churches are a monument to a faith which is no longer relevant to anyone, a kind of museum. Plan visits to more than one church, to teach about the wide diversity of Christian 'forms' in the UK.
- ☐ Do be careful when exploring the Eucharist and talking about the bread and wine as the 'body and blood of Christ'. Pupils have been known to react in negative or derisory ways e.g. expressing disgust at the idea. Early Christians were accused of cannibalism. A stress on symbolism and meanings is good.
- ☐ Do teach global Christianity and Christian diversity. The religion is very diverse, and found in over 200 different nations, with the large scale growth of Christian faith in the global south for the last half century.
- ☐ Do be aware that Christians differ widely in their understanding of the 'bread and wine'. For example, while Catholics refer to the 'real presence' of Christ in the bread and wine of the Mass, using the term 'transubstantiation' others speak of them as symbols used in memory of Jesus' death.

'Don'ts'

- ☐ Don't make any assumptions about who is or is not a Christian. Never say 'we' for Christians, and 'them' for 'other' faiths! Avoid inappropriate phrases like 'our God' or 'we believe' when talking about Christianity. Instead use distancing devices such as 'some Christians believe...'
- ☐ Don't represent Jesus in Christian belief as being merely a good man, a wise teacher or a prophet. For Christians, Jesus is God incarnate represented by titles like 'the Son of God', 'the Christ', 'the Messiah'.
- ☐ Don't edit out stories of Jesus' life and actions from the study children do: too much RE repeats the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son but never deals with, for example, stories of controversy in which he was involved, so Jesus appears to be boring and bland. Tell the whole story: include parables, miracles, controversies.
- ☐ Don't avoid difficulties of definitions. For example, the edge of the definition of Christians for some includes restorationist movements like the Jehovah's Witnesses or Latter-day Saints (Mormons), who don't accept the idea of God in Trinity. Share this complex issue with pupils.
- ☐ Don't liken Christian belief in the Crucifixion to beliefs in human sacrifices made to placate a bloodthirsty God. Although described as a sacrifice, the Crucifixion has to be understood in the light of the Christian belief that Jesus is both fully God and fully human; in some sense God himself dies on the Cross to show divine love.
- ☐ Don't neglect the Resurrection as part of the Easter story. However difficult it may seem, the Resurrection and the Crucifixion are inextricably linked and one should not be taught without the other.
- ☐ Don't suggest that Christians worship Mary or the saints. In some denominations, prayers are made to Mary or the saints as intermediaries.
- ☐ Don't use Bible stories as the basis of a topic when their relevance is tenuous e.g. Noah's Ark isn't really relevant to a theme on water, or even animals. It's a story about God's care for the earth, judgement and promise, and about human morality.
- ☐ Don't use archaic language from the King James Bible when plain language is more comprehensible. Why say 'love thy neighbour'? It presumes the language of Christianity is old fashioned. Use simple child friendly Bible version – there are many to choose from.
- ☐ Don't normalise the practice of one denomination (often this happens with Anglicanism in the UK). The Baptists, Methodists and Pentecostals are all similarly large groups globally. Catholics are the largest group, well over half of world Christians.