



Keith Ward

# Christianity

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# **Christianity**

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# **Christianity**

## **A Beginner's Guide**

Keith Ward



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# 1

## Introduction

A number of introductions to Christianity exist, and I have tried to think what I could say that would be an original contribution to the list. On the one hand, I want what I write to be reasonably descriptive of what actually exists, yet not just to be a factual summary. On the other hand, I want to present something of how I view Christianity, yet not just to offer a personal theological system. So in the end, I have decided to introduce Christianity by selecting some major elements of Christian belief and practice, and outlining in each case three different major types of interpretation which are held by reasonably large groups of Christians. In this way, one can not only get a clear idea of the diversity of the Christian world, but also of the connecting strands which enable one to identify all these very different views as Christian. Overall, what I hope a reader should get is a fair presentation of the spread of beliefs in the modern Christian world.

I am not suggesting that there are only three interpretations of each element. A threefold division is just one way of grouping types of interpretation, but of course any individual could hold views which combine different parts of different interpretations. I do myself, though I hope that from the text alone it will not be possible to infer exactly what my own beliefs are, though my general sympathies may be fairly clear.

I have tried to give as dispassionate an account of these matters as I can. Nevertheless, this is an 'insider's view' of Christian faith. I am a committed member of the Christian community, and I can hardly be expected to disguise that fact. However, this book is not meant to persuade people of the truth of Christian beliefs. I am not trying to legislate what people should believe, but some people



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may find that considering the various views helps them to see their own beliefs, whatever they are, in a wider context, and be aware of alternative possibilities they may have overlooked.

Christianity is the largest religion in the world, with almost two thousand million adherents. It began as a small Jewish sect in the Roman Empire, but by the fourth century it had become the official religion of the Empire. It later split, like the Empire, into the Eastern Byzantine Churches, centred on Constantinople, and the Latin Western Church, centred on Rome. It was introduced into Latin America in the sixteenth century by the Spanish, and in succeeding centuries to Asia and Africa and throughout the worldwide British Empire. Today there are Christians in every country in the world. Most European countries are 'officially' Christian. In North and South America, Russia, Australia and central and southern Africa, the majority religion is Christian. Only in a geographical belt running from North Africa through Arabia and India to China, South East Asia and Japan, have Christians failed to establish a dominant position. There, they co-exist with varying degrees of friendship or mutual suspicion with adherents of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and other Indian- or Asian-based faiths.

Like all religions, Christianity in the developed world exists in a largely secular context, though the anti-religious invective of State Communism in Russia and China has now virtually collapsed. Christianity naturally looks very different in the differing cultures in which it exists. The Roman Catholic Church is by far the largest, with over a thousand million members. Though it has a very centralised government in the Vatican, in Rome, it is in practice very diverse. There are very traditional Catholics, who wish to see a hierarchical, politically conservative church, with a carefully defined dogmatic faith, to be accepted on the authority of the Pope. There are very radical Catholics, who ally themselves with those who fight for liberation from perceived political and economic oppression in Latin America, and who may take the

view that the Vatican is a long way away and in a different culture. There are Catholics who oppose the alleged rationalism and humanism of the secular world, as enemies of faith, and there are Catholics who embrace the European Enlightenment as liberating faith from outmoded forms of thought. So, while it is possible to say what the official attitude of the Vatican is, it is much more difficult to make any accurate generalisations about what Catholics throughout the world actually believe.

The *World Christian Encyclopedia* estimates that there are about 373 million Protestants in the world. They belong to a number of different denominations (Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist and so forth), but generally accept non-hierarchical and decentralised forms of church government, and stress personal faith in Jesus Christ more than membership of a particular institutional church. In this century many of these denominations have united into larger confederations, like the Church of South India, formed in 1947 by a union of Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian churches. Some, however, insist on the right to form independent congregations of disciples of Christ, though they may cultivate friendly relations with other churches. Protestants are very active in missionary work throughout the world, and churches are expanding rapidly in Africa and Latin America. The World Council of Churches, formed in 1948, is a general co-ordinating body to which most Protestant churches are affiliated.

There are about 170 million Eastern Orthodox Christians, who historically originated in the Eastern (Byzantine) Roman Empire, and have always retained a loyalty to the sort of Greek theology current in the first centuries of Christian expansion. They are organised as national churches, under their own bishops, and acknowledging allegiance to the Patriarch of Constantinople. They do not acknowledge the authority of the Roman Pope, as Catholics understand it, though they usually grant him a primacy of honour. Orthodox Christians have a very distinctive form of worship, which is usually very traditional, and a high regard for

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the monastic life. They are found mostly in the Greek-influenced countries of Eastern Europe and in Russia, though their emphasis on mystical theology and on the beauty of the liturgy has led to a modest growth in other parts of the world.

There are many other Christians, like the worldwide Anglican communion of national Episcopal churches, the non-Orthodox 'Church of the East', and many indigenous churches, which do not fit neatly into this categorisation. The world of Christianity is a large, plural and ever-changing one, and even these denominations should not be assumed to be final in their present form. In an increasingly interdependent world, where global communication is instant and travel is easy, churches cannot remain isolated in local cultural enclaves. One major challenge all churches face in the third Christian millennium is how the very diverse cultures of the world can be both validated and transformed by Christianity, and how Christianity should be transformed by its embrace of or relationship to these cultures.

It is no longer true that Christianity is European or Western, even though historically it has been associated with European expansion and colonialisation. How will the cultures of Africa and Latin America change Christian perceptions, as the cultures of ancient Greece and of Renaissance Europe changed them in the past? How can Christianity relate in a positive and mutually enhancing way to those ancient cultures which have mostly resisted its influence, the cultures of Arabia, India, China, Japan and South East Asia?

Christianity, which is now completely international, is still greatly influenced by its European past. But it is in Europe that faith seems weakest, and in the developing world that it is at its most vital. So Christianity may look for its future to the non-Western world, and the new insights it can bring to complement old traditions. It is unlikely that the whole world will become completely Christian, though Christians will be able to give an international dimension to social action wherever they exist.

Christians have the opportunity to use their influence for greater human flourishing and world justice, as members of a major global organisation which is overtly dedicated to striving for a community of justice and peace, and for care for the oppressed. To do this effectively, the churches have to work out how best to overcome the distrust they have sometimes had for one another, and learn how best to serve God's world in love. And they have to learn to relate positively and helpfully to those who do not adhere to the same beliefs, but who have a commitment to social justice, and who may be able to offer complementary insights into the nature and purposes of God.

One challenge to modern Christianity is to become a truly global but non-imperialist faith, in constructive dialogue both with other sorts of Christians, and with those of other world views. Another is to re-orient itself to the scientific revolution which has transformed the world since the sixteenth century. Like people in general, Christians may take many attitudes to modern scientific advances – perhaps welcoming the amazing advances in medical care, while fearing the equally amazing advances in developing weapons of destruction and techniques of genetic manipulation. Changes in economics and technology have freed women from economic dependency and an imposed vocation of child-bearing, so that new questions of achieving true human equality, in the light of the obvious male dominance of past centuries, need to be faced. Similarly, new scientific awareness of the fragility of our planetary eco-system and of the interdependency of all things in that system, necessitates fresh ethical thinking on how to sustain the earth as a habitation for living beings.

Traditional faiths did not have to face these questions in this form. Yet Christianity, in common with many other faiths, has a commitment to human justice, to reconciliation with and compassion for friends and enemies alike, and to caring for the earth as God's creation and gift to humanity. In this rapidly changing world, the churches will have to change too, to think out a new

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vision of God's creation in the vastly expanded cosmic context of modern science, and in view of the quite new human ability to change the earth itself. The Christian tradition has two thousand years of reflection and prayer to help it in this task. But it could be that it is as yet only at the beginning of learning to fulfil its true vocation of helping to transform the earth to become a place where the spirit of love can bring many different sorts of human communities to a mutually enriching fulfilment.

This is a personal view of the main challenges facing Christianity in the modern world, though it aims to be based on a reasonably impartial view of the Christian churches as they actually exist. These churches, however, may sometimes be so far apart in beliefs and practices that they may seem like different religions. There are nevertheless central beliefs that unite them. One is a basic belief that the universe has been created by an immensely wise and powerful being. The universe thus has a purpose for its existence, it is not just an accident. This purpose has been made known on the planet earth in and through the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, and the purpose can ultimately be achieved by human beings who follow that life and teaching.

Beyond these basic beliefs, there is a huge variety of other beliefs and practices, some of them seemingly in sharp conflict with others. In the following pages I will try to outline some of the major Christian schools of thought.

# 2

## Creation

All Christians believe that God created the universe. This is probably the most important of all Christian beliefs, because almost everything else will depend on how people understand the nature of God as creator. Even on the subject of creation there are different views, but almost all Christians believe that the universe is not self-existent, but has been intentionally brought into being (created) by a being beyond it, which *is* self-existent. Most scientists today think that the universe is between 10 and 20 thousand million years old, and that it has expanded from a primeval dot of virtually infinite density and mass to its present complex state, consisting of millions of galaxies, themselves containing millions of stars, and millions of planets. On most scientific accounts, the universe will go on expanding and cooling at the same time, until it runs out of heat and comes to a frozen stand-still. Or it may collapse in on itself again, and all things will end in an inescapable blaze of intense cosmic radiation. Whatever exactly happens, it seems clear that this physical universe will one day, a very long time in the future, cease to exist in anything like its present form. The universe, in other words, has a beginning and an end, at both of which nothing much happens. All the interesting things happen in the middle of its history.

Another thing most scientists agree about is that the universe is not chaotic. On the contrary, it seems to work in accordance with fairly simple principles which are elegant and beautiful, mathematically speaking. It is an extremely complex, mathematically elegant totality. Moreover, by the working of the laws of physics it has produced out of itself beings which are able to understand their own nature. In human beings – and maybe in countless other forms of

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conscious life on other planets, unknown to us – the universe becomes self-conscious. Almost inconceivably complex bundles of atoms and molecules generate the amazing capacity to know and marvel at their own nature, and even to change it. The universe is not only beautiful; it is capable of knowing that it is, of admiring that beauty, and of creating new forms of beauty out of itself.

So the universe grows from an elementally simple state, where there is no knowledge, no complexity, no freedom and no creativity. It becomes conscious, at least in the most complex physical states known to us, human brains, and produces beings who are creative and free, who understand, communicate, love and create. Eventually it dies, probably returning to a frozen immobility where time itself ceases to have meaning, since there will be no change by which to measure it.

Perhaps that is all there is – an amazing, awe-inspiring story, which has no further explanation. But most people feel that the story suggests something else – such beauty, complexity, intelligibility and consciousness of value suggest a master consciousness which has brought it into being precisely because of the value it expresses. A cosmic mind could indeed produce such a universe, which realises sorts of values which could otherwise not exist at all. The creator could enjoy those values, and could also have the purpose of creating other personal agents who could enjoy them as well. Thus this vast cosmos could very easily be seen as being the purposive product of an immensely wise and powerful mind. That mind is the creator, causing the universe to exist for the sake of its beauty and value. On this view, the scientific story is one that fits very well with the Christian belief in creation.

### **First view: Six-day creation**

Despite the majesty and persuasiveness of the scientific story, some Christians feel committed to a fairly literal interpretation of the

Bible, according to which (in Genesis chapter 1) the creator brings humans into being in a six-day process, beginning with the creation of light, then atmosphere, then the life-bearing earth, sun, moon and stars, birds and fish, and finally animals and human beings. Any such literal account does have problems with many of the claims made by contemporary science. It also seems in tension with another creation account given in Genesis chapter 2, where things appear to happen in a different order (humans exist before the animals, for example). And it concentrates on the planet earth as the centre of the universe, relegating the stars to a subordinate position. So it is a difficult view to maintain today. Nevertheless the account can be defended with some subtlety (for instance, by confining the account to events seen from the perspective of the earth, or by interpreting 'days' as long periods of time), and it needs to be assessed on its merits. Its central point is that the universe has a creator, who brings it into being by a gradual temporal process (the six 'days'). The process culminates in beings who are capable of conscious relationship to the creator, and whose task it is to care for and shape the earth and its other living forms. Despite the fact that it conflicts seriously with most scientific accounts, the core of the literalist view is that there is a creator with a purpose which is gradually worked out in the universe, and in which humans have an important role to play. That, I think, is the important spiritual teaching of the Biblical creation stories. Whether or not they are to be interpreted literally will largely depend on how one judges the available evidence from the natural sciences.

## **Second view: Timeless creation**

Most Christians accept that contemporary science gives an accurate history of the universe. The two Genesis stories are then not taken literally, but are seen as poetic accounts with a spiritual teaching of the dependence of all things on God. As a matter of



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fact, the best known Christian theologians have always stressed that the important point of the stories is not the literal account of what happened when the universe began. The stories present in the form of a narrative a teaching which is really about the present relationship of human beings, and of the whole universe in which they exist, to God.

St Augustine put this very clearly, in his classic work, 'The City of God', written in a Roman province of North Africa in the early fifth century. He pointed out that if God is really the creator of the whole universe, then God is the creator of space and time, as well as of everything in space-time. But then Augustine poses the question: if God creates time, what was God doing before he created time? The catch is that, if God created time itself, there cannot have been anything before time, and so God cannot have been doing anything at all!

This may sound like a trick – as though we have been trapped into agreeing that God could not have existed before the universe, or could not have thought about what he was doing before he did it. But it actually makes a very profound point, which Augustine brings out very clearly. What it shows, says Augustine, is that God is not in time at all. God, as the creator of time, is beyond the limitations of time. God exists 'eternally' – that is, not in time as we understand it at all. It is from that timeless eternity that God creates the whole space-time universe.

Thus Augustine forces us to think of the creation in a more sophisticated way. It is not that first of all God was alone and wondered what to do. Then, at a certain time, he decided to create a universe, so that the creation is the beginning of the universe – which is what a literal interpretation of the Genesis stories may lead us to think. What we have to try to grasp is that the creation is a relation between eternity and time, between the eternal God and the whole spatio-temporal universe. We might say that the whole of time issues from the eternity of God in one intelligent and purposeful act. The creation is not the beginning of the

universe. It is the dependence of the whole universe, from beginning to end, and at every point in the middle, on one intelligent, eternal and self-existent being. God.

The temporal form of the Genesis stories might hide that fact from us, making us think that the creation was just God getting the universe going, and then, perhaps, having a rest. What we have to see is that every moment of time is dependent on the eternal God, who is beyond every time (not 'before' or 'after' time!).

Once we see this, we can also see that it does not matter exactly what happened in the first few days of the existence of the universe. It does not matter if the universe never had a beginning at all. Scientists do think that the universe began, at the moment of the 'Big Bang'. But the Christian doctrine of creation is not concerned with whether the universe began or not. It just wants to say that, whether time began or whether it has always existed, it depends for its existence on an eternal being, a being beyond the limitations of time. That being is God, and we understand something very important about God when we realise that God is eternal.

One of the important things we realise is that God is quite beyond our imaginations. We can only imagine things that exist in time. So, when we try to imagine God, we naturally imagine him as thinking, deciding and acting in time. The Bible often speaks of God in this way – even as 'walking in the Garden of Eden' (Genesis 3:8), or changing his mind from time to time. We do not want to say that these things are totally false. But once we really grasp the doctrine of creation, we see that they can only be pictures to help us to think of God, but they do not really tell us what God is like. Such pictures may be revealed by God, to help us to relate ourselves to God in an appropriate way. But things go badly wrong when we think God is literally like those pictures, however helpful they might be. For the eternal God is wholly beyond our imaginations, infinitely bigger and more mysterious than we can ever think.

That is partly why the Bible forbids making any images of God (Exodus 20:4), and why the 'Holy of Holies', the innermost secret

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sanctuary of the Jewish Temple, had no image of God in it. God is beyond all the limitations of our thoughts, and we must never try to reduce God to something that we can see or feel. So a very important part of the Christian doctrine of creation is that it insists on a very radical distinction between God and the whole of the universe. The universe begins and ends. It changes and develops. It could easily have been very different, as far as we can see. But it could not exist at all if it did not depend on a very different reality, the eternal reality of God. God does not begin or end, but exists eternally. God does not grow or decay, but is one and unchanging. God is, in a way we cannot fully understand, self-existent – does not depend on anything else for existence, but is, as the medieval philosopher Boethius put it, ‘the unlimited ocean of being’.

It is quite inadequate, therefore, to think of God as finite, or as being a person who is something like a human person. God is the ultimate self-existent mystery of being, and the whole universe exists just because God brings it into existence by one intelligent and intentional act. All pictures of God, even those in the Bible, must only be aids to our imagination, since God is radically different from anything we can imagine. At this point, some Christians may feel a little uneasy. Have we not a true picture of God in the person of Jesus, after all? Do Christians not say that Jesus is God? So God must be imaginable, at least in the form of Jesus.

I will be saying more about this when we come to think about the doctrine of the Incarnation in chapter 6, about the way in which God is known in Jesus. But for the moment it may be helpful to hold a picture in our minds. Think of the whole universe, from beginning to end, from the Big Bang to the Big Freeze, as produced in one act by the eternal God. That is basically Augustine’s picture of creation. All the things in the universe are finite, and naturally you cannot squeeze the infinite God into a finite universe. So God will always be infinitely greater than the universe, and radically different from it. Yet at the same time, the

universe will in a way express what God is, in something like the way in which a painting might express something of the personality of the painter. Some paintings might be better expressions of that personality than others. So, in the universe, some parts of it may express the nature of God better than others. It might be possible for a particular part of the universe to express the nature of God, in a way suitable for finite beings to understand, in a uniquely clear or adequate way. Christians would say that the person of Jesus expresses the nature of God in such a uniquely adequate way.

So a Christian would want to say that Jesus gives an adequate picture of the nature of God. But that means that this is the best picture which humans can understand. This is what God is like, insofar as God is expressed in time. The Christian claim is that the eternal God can express himself in time – again, just as a painter might express himself in a particular painting. But God will also remain far beyond time, just as the painter will remain distinct from his painting.

Now of course the analogy of the painter is not adequate to what Christians want to say about Jesus. For Jesus is a living, active person, not just a painting. In some way, this living person is a true image in time of a God who is beyond time. He is the temporal expression of an eternal God. Perhaps what it comes down to is this: Christians would say that there can be finite images of the eternal God, and Jesus is the perfect image of God. But we still must never confuse the image, the temporal expression, with the eternal reality, as if we were reducing the eternal into time, without remainder. There is a true expression of God in time, and so a true image. But it is still an image, and not the total reality of God.

The important thing, then, is to realise that all images, even Jesus, must be treated as images of the eternal God, not as reductions of God to some finite thing. Reducing God to any finite thing would be idolatry. But seeing a finite thing as an image of God, or a medium through which one can see God, or a vehicle