**Definition:** Christianity from Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary

(14c) 1 : the religion derived from Jesus Christ, based on the Bible as sacred scripture, and professed by Eastern, Roman Catholic, and Protestant bodies

2 : conformity to the Christian religion

3 : the practice of Christianity

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**Summary Article:** Christianity

From The Brill Dictionary of Religion

**Geographical Breadth and Organization**

1. Together with Judaism and Islam, Christianity belongs to the scriptural religions (Monotheism), whose common origin is in the Near East. With a membership of almost one-third of the world population, it is the most widespread of individual religions. Its greatest dynamism within contemporary culture is in South, Central, and North America. There are Christian majorities in many lands of sub-Saharan Africa, on the western rim of the Pacific between Australia and the Philippines, and, in a shrinking active membership, in broad regions of Europe. On the Asian continent, including the region of its rise, Christianity finds itself constituted by small minorities at most.

In its expansion, Christianity was the forerunner of today's awareness of a worldwide network of humanity ('globalization'). Here it did not primarily follow the expansion of modernity; the historical connection is rather the other way around, and Christianity was mainly a European religion during only a small part of its history.

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Egyptian Christians of a Coptic Orthodox community have gathered in Cologne for the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. In a community hall placed at their disposal by an Evangelical community, a picture-screen (iconostasis, here mobile), which belongs to the liturgical accoutrements of most Orthodox churches, assures a correct liturgical framework even in the diaspora. Orthodox churches typically have no pews: here the core organizational element of the Christianity of all confessions and denominations symbolically gathers at the icon screen, as a group of faithful and their priest create a community by way of the cultic act. (Hubert Mohr)

Structure

2. Christianity arose as a movement of renewal within Judaism. But it divided from the latter in disseminating its teaching apart from the Jewish people (Mission) and without continuing to observe the Jewish order of life and worship (halakha). Its early departure from a strict regime of life and living makes Christianity fundamentally flexible when it comes to its adoption by new cultures, and thereby its integration, more or less, into other ways of living – something only Buddhism also out of the other major religions can manage. This factor is one of the two most important premises of the division of Christianity into various, mutually bounded, subgroups. The other is its framework as an organized church, under the leadership of a hierarchy of priests, bishops, and a number of ‘patriarchs’ (highest
This framework is partially determined by geographical division and the membership of various peoples, and partially by a diversity of doctrine. These two aspects are not clearly distinguishable, since the passage of Christianity into particular cultures and languages has repeatedly entailed apparent or actual differences in teaching.

In the lands of the Eastern Mediterranean and in the church regions to which those lands dispatched missionaries, popular membership has become the most important criterion of the organizational division of the churches, although here as well powerful dogmatic confrontations have occurred. The latter have occasioned the rise of a multiplicity of independent national churches, which designate themselves as Orthodox Churches. The greatest expansion of an interconnected ecclesiastical organization across different cultures in the first millennium was that of Persian Christianity (‘Apostolic Eastern Church’), with its mission to India, Central Asia, and China.

In Western Europe, Christianity was so closely bound up with Latin culture that an organizationally unified church could arise there too, embracing many peoples, and unified under the papacy (the office of leadership of the Patriarch of Rome). This church calls itself the Catholic (‘all-embracing’) Church (Catholicism). Catholicism split into organizationally divided churches, along heavily marked lines of dogma or confession, beginning with the Reformation and the rise of Protestantism. On these grounds, starting in Europe, Western church membership has expressed itself in the concept of confession, in the sense of a profession of faith.

Despite its division into various church communities, Christianity maintains a consciousness of oneness in a world Church (Ecumenical Movement). This was made concrete in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as Western European Christianity made contact with Central and Eastern Asian Christianity. However, as Christianity in the Near East was pushed more and more to the margins of society, and came to be practically extinguished in Central and Eastern Asia in the fifteenth century, the impression arose in Europe that Christianity had been reduced to a European religion. An effort to afford relief and to produce a world Church once more was one of the decisive motives of European colonialism in its inception. From this time onwards, the effort to adapt Christianity to foreign cultures, more than its spread within European cultures, frequently became an underlying priority, and the European contradictions among the particular confessions were exported to other continents. In the churches thus founded, confessional boundaries are often felt today as an element of foreign, European culture. As a reaction, especially in Africa, independent churches are springing up that define themselves once more in terms of popular cultures, rather than under the concept of ‘confessions.’

**Doctrine**

3. For its teaching, Christianity appeals to Jesus, who appeared around the year 30 in Galilee as a Jewish preacher and miraculous healer, and after a short period of activity, on the occasion of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the festival of the Jewish Passover, was arrested, and executed by crucifixion at the hands of the Roman imperial power. His death was interpreted in terms of a contemporary Jewish model according to which the death of a just person can benefit others and cancel their sins. In Christian conviction, Jesus rose from the dead, just as, at the end of the present world, all women and men will rise. As a point of departure from the Jewish concept of the Messiah (Gk., Christós, ‘anointed one’), Jesus is interpreted as a figure who will play a decisive role at the final judgment upon all human beings. This is bound up with the conceptualization, originally produced in the confrontation with the Roman cult of the Emperor, that the risen Jesus is also presently at work in the
world, and that therefore the one destroyed in terms of human measures is finally mightier than the political power that executed him and that persecuted his followers.

Resurrection

**Doctrine of the Trinity**

Between Christianity and Islam, the most important point of contention is whether Christian notions about Jesus are still reconcilable with monotheism. On the basis of the New Testament (Bible), Christianity teaches that Christ has proceeded from God, and that thus all of the power and glory ascribed to him, far from supplementing that of God, actually comes from it. With the means of expression adopted from Greek philosophy, there arose from these beginnings the teaching of the one God in three Persons (*doctrine of the Trinity*, ‘triple-ness’), and of the one person of Jesus having both a divine and a human ‘nature.’

From the awareness of being bound to a power that has been suppressed, and yet has been victorious, Christianity draws considerable social and political power of expression. This develops in two directions: movements have repeatedly arisen indicting injustice and demanding the liberation of the oppressed (*Liberation Theology*). On the other hand, Christianity itself has often aligned with political power to the point that political rulers have been stylized as participants in the presently active might of Jesus Christ himself.

**Religion as Lived—Worship**

b) In its aspect as a life experience, the religion of Christianity takes shape in Sunday celebrations, in festivals of annual and life cycles, and in the conduct of daily living.

*Sunday* is celebrated weekly as the day of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Christian communities gather in the churches for divine service. A priest or minister leads the service. (In the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches, these leaders may only be men, while in many Protestant Churches they may be women.) Elements of divine services are songs, prayers, readings from the Bible, sermons, and the Lord’s Supper. In addition, traditional elements of the Sunday observance by Christians are the wearing of festal garments (frequently with a special emphasis in white or black as symbols of life, death, and resurrection), a festive meal, repose from work, and time spent together as a family.

**Christian Feasts**

The course of the calendar year is determined in its content by *feasts* or festivals, which recall the events surrounding the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But traditions and usages of the principal feasts are also supplemented by celebrations of the change of seasons: Christmas as the feast of winter and Easter as the feast of spring. A four weeks’ preparation in December (Advent) leads to Christmas as the feast of the birth of Jesus, followed by the festival of the New Year and of Epiphany (Gr., ‘apparition’), which in the West has been associated with the visit of the ‘Three Holy Kings’ to the infant Jesus. A seven weeks’ time of fasting prepares for several successive feast days in March or April: *Holy Thursday* (commemoration of the institution of the Last Supper or Eucharist), *Good Friday* (commemoration of the death of Jesus), and *Easter* (celebration of Jesus’s resurrection). Forty days after Easter, on a Thursday, the *Ascension* of the risen Jesus into heaven is celebrated, and ten days after that, on a Sunday, *Pentecost* (Gr., ‘fiftieth’), the feast of the Holy Spirit. Other feasts of the course of the year are dependent on region and confession. For example, in the Catholic and

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Orthodox Churches, events from the life of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Feasts of the Saints (Veneration of the Saints), play an important role.

In the life cycle, Baptism has developed into a first festival, to be celebrated shortly after birth. Originally, and simultaneously, it symbolizes reception into the Christian community of faith and is also performed when persons enter Christianity later on in life (Conversion). In cases of infant baptism, conscious acceptance of the Christian faith is later symbolized through Confirmation (sometimes connected with a first sharing in the Lord’s Supper), which at the same time fulfills the function of a rite of passage to the age of ‘youth.’ Marriage or matrimony is celebrated in Christianity with a divine service or church wedding, at which the spouses promise each other lifelong fidelity. Accordingly, the official Christian churches do not recognize divorce; if divorce nevertheless takes place, there is no corresponding religious rite. Dying is accompanied, before death where possible, by ritual and humane attentions. Burial in a cemetery, presided over by a priest, is generally preceded by a divine service. In many churches, the memory of the dead is also observed at precise intervals after their death.

By way of its ethics, Christianity permeates daily life. The Christian image of the human being is that of someone incapable on his or her own of being able entirely to meet the demands of right living. Only in the events of salvation (Salvation) of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a person delivered from an exclusive self-centeredness. Confession—to which Christian denominations attach varying degrees of importance—helps, by offering the possibility of forgiveness of sins, to overcome the tension between the ideal and the real in one’s life.

4. The most recent development of Christianity is frequently described as the de-Christianization of societies hitherto marked by Christianity. This applies principally to Europe only, however; in North America, the corresponding phenomenon is somewhat different. Against a global horizon, this means that Christianity’s center of gravity is quickly shifting to the cultures of the ‘Third World’—that it is becoming more powerfully the religion of the oppressed once more. In a context of European development, it is disputed whether it is a matter of a religious collapse of Christianity, or rather of a process generated by Christianity and therefore still to be viewed as itself a form and type of Christianity (Secularization). Ever since the Reformation, Protestant Christianity has withdrawn much of its attention from the liturgical form, in the strict sense, of religion and turned to areas of everyday life and work. It is possible to interpret secularization as a prolongation of this movement, through which liturgical religion is losing its power to shape daily life. In several European countries, to be sure, the majority of the population still belongs to Christianity and participates in the traditional rites of the life cycle, but only a small minority attends Sunday divine services.

The meaning of Sunday is shifting—in common with the rest of every-day life and work—to becoming a day that is free of work, frequently prolonged into a ‘weekend,’ and framed as ‘free time’ for recreation and sports. It may be more decisive for the development of Christianity that European societies have not become irreligious through the partial retreat of official ecclesial Christianity from the area of the religious, but that the religious dimension of life is increasingly assuming form, alongside the churches, in the New Age movement and in forms of spirituality borrowed from other religions, without thereby renouncing all elements of Western Christianity.

Africa II, Augustine, Catholicism, Central America, Christmas, Cross/Crucifixion, Europe I and II, Francis of Assisi, Gnosticism, Jerusalem, Jesuits, Luther, North America, Pilgrimage, Priest/Priestess, Protestantism, Rome, Salvation Army, Santiago de Compostela, Sin, South America

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