Principal beliefs

Christianity has over the years organised its beliefs into a systematic theology, drawing from the sacred writings and traditions of the Church. Any Christian bookshop will have books on theology where the major Christian beliefs are laid out in a way that is easy to understand. The following are some of Christianity's major beliefs.

INVESTIGATE

There are many internet sites on Jesus Christ and Christianity. Students must exercise caution when accessing some of these sites. A Google search for 'Jesus Christ' will show over 50 million links and about 70 million for 'Christianity'. Access the Cambridge Studies of Religion website, which has as a good starting point an English site containing a considerable amount of information. It is also a good example of ecumenism. Explore the site and note features such as the story of Jesus' life, the sayings of Jesus, the e-lite, and the impact of Jesus on the lives of people through history and today.

JESUS AS HUMAN AND DIVINE

As Christianity moved through the Roman Empire in the centuries after Jesus' death, explanation had to be given of his relationship to God. There were a number of different points of view. At this time most people could understand that a man could become a god – Roman emperors sometimes turned into gods after death. But it was more difficult explaining how and why a god had made himself into a man.

Paul of Samosata became Bishop of Antioch in 260. His belief was in the co-equality but difference of God and Jesus. God had remained the Logos or Word and Jesus had put that into flesh. After Paul came Arius, who suggested that Jesus was created by God to put God's plans into action on Earth. He believed Jesus was not eternal. Therefore the Arius view considers Jesus less god-like than God. Athanasius (296–373 CE), who was also from Alexandria, suggested that Jesus was both of the same nature as God and fully human.

The Roman Emperor Constantine was becoming increasingly interested in Christianity and wanted to see the dispute resolved. He summoned the Council of Nicea. This saw further development of the Doctrine of the Trinity and the position of Athanasius was adopted as the correct teaching of the Church. Jesus is fully human and fully divine. The ideas of Arius, however, lingered in the East and North Africa for many centuries.

In the New Testament there are clear statements about both Jesus' divinity and his humanity. Many passages in the Gospels and New Testament speak of Jesus' humanity. But Jesus is also described in terms that suggest he is divine. Some of these passages include:

- 'I am' (a translation of YAHWEH, the Hebrew name for God) – John 6:35, 8:12
- In Matthew 2:2, 14:33 he is worshipped
- In Matthew 1:21 he is spoken of as the saviour
- In John 11 he is able to raise the dead
- In John 5:17-23 he is spoken of as the equal of God
- Acts 10:36 calls him 'Lord of all'
- In Matthew 25:31-46 we read of him as the judge on the final day of the world.

DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS

The resurrection of Jesus consisted of him dying in human form on the cross, and three days later rising from the dead to live forever. The death and resurrection of Jesus has many meanings for Christians. The resurrection proves to believers that there is life after death. Jesus' conquering of death shows his mythical power to bring all his followers to life after death.

Scriptures concerning the resurrection of Jesus

Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead died no more; death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God.

ROMANS 6:9

Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.

JOHN 11:25

Who by him do believe in God, that raised him up from the dead, and gave him glory; that your faith and hope might be in God.

1 PETER 1:21

But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you.

ROMANS 8:11

Council of Nicea
- the first council of the Christian Church also produced the Nicene Creed, the Christian statement of faith
THE NATURE OF GOD
AND THE TRINITY

The creeds (statements of faith) of Christianity developed early on, as part of ritual and worship, or simply to sum up the beliefs of the religion. Their language makes strong connections between God and Jesus. The central creed in the Western Church is the Apostles' Creed, which may or may not have been used by the apostles of Jesus, but cites their authority. In 325 CE this creed was expanded and developed at the Council of Nicaea and it is now called the Nicene Creed. It is used in Catholic and Orthodox Anglican rituals.

We believe in one God,
the Father, the almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eterally begotten of the Father,
God from God, light from light,
true God from true God,
begotten not made,
of one being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven;
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the scriptures;
he ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge
the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshipped
and glorified.
He has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for
the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

CONSIDER

God is generally referred to as ‘he’, not because God is male, but rather because God is personal. There is no gender-neutral personal pronoun in English, so the closest would be ‘it’, which is impersonal. It should be noted that the Hebrew word for ‘spirit’ is feminine in its construction, and some anthropomorphistic terms used for God suggest feminine qualities, such as in Proverbs 8 to 9 (God as wisdom), Isaiah 49:14, 15, and Psalm 131:2. God is often referred to as ‘Father’ in the Bible and Jesus was a man, but this does not suggest an exclusive masculinity, nor does it suggest androgyny.
(Note — this can link with ‘Feminist theology’ in the HSC course.)

Traditionally the Trinity has been expressed in terms that state God is one, but three persons make up the Godhead. It is considered a Christian mystery.

REVELATION

A revelation is the disclosure of something which could not have been revealed without the will of God. The main Christian revelation is that which God revealed through Jesus, which later took the form of the Gospels. One can distinguish between general and special revelation. General revelation comes to Christians through the work of God; they see evident in creation, and in their conscience. Special revelation is the understanding that God provided of himself through Jesus and the sacred writings of Christianity.

SALVATION

Another significant meaning behind Jesus’ death is that it was a ritual sacrifice. The Testaments make it clear that Jesus knew what was coming. It was his fate to die. In Judaism, ritually killing animals is a way of cleansing a person, or even the whole Jewish nation, of impurities they may have by not following God’s law.

Salvation in Christianity can mean three different things:
- deliverance from sin
- being resurrected to an afterlife
- being healed through the power of the divine and united with God.
The Catholic rites of reconciliation concern the first of these forms of salvation, and offer individuals the opportunity to repent, and therefore be saved, from punishment for their sins. Secondly, the Christian belief in Christ's resurrection, as discussed previously, is central to the belief that after death resurrection to heaven is possible for those who are 'forgiven'. The third aspect of salvation occurs even today. For example, the water obtained from the Church of Our Lady of Lourdes is believed to have healing properties for Christians.

Just as Jesus was able to have life after death, his sacrifice promises the same salvation for Christians. In the New Testament, salvation has a past aspect (forgiveness of sins), a present aspect (living as a 'saved' person) and a future aspect (looking forward to a life in heaven). Salvation is as much a present reality as a future deliverance.

**EXERCISE 6.4**

1. Write down three of the technical terms used in this chapter and your own definition of those terms.
2. Explain the Christian view of the human and the divine aspects of Jesus.

**ACTIVITY 6.4**

1. Compare differing views of Christians about whether Jesus is believed to be both fully divine and fully human.
2. Clarify as best as you can your response to the question – 'What is the Trinity?'
3. 'For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord' (Romans 6: 23). Discuss what this may mean to Christians.
Sacred texts and writings

The Bible is the sacred text for Christians.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SACRED WRITINGS AND STORIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>OLD TESTAMENT</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Written in Hebrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Thirty nine books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Law, history, poetry and prophecy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sacred text for Christians is known as the Bible. The word ‘bible’ comes from the Greek term *biblia*, which means ‘books’. The Bible is made up of several major sections and is a closed canon: that is, it is considered complete; no new books can be added to it.

**THE BIBLE**

The Christian Bible is made up of several texts, some clearly Christian, others borrowed from the Jewish religious tradition. More than two-thirds of the present Bible is comprised of the Jewish scripture, the Hebrew Bible. This includes the five books of the Torah. These are believed by Jews and Christians alike to have been written by Moses, containing the Ten Commandments and miracles performed by God to protect the Jewish people. The writings that follow in the Old Testament have been composed at various stages of Jewish history. These writings are explained in more detail in the Jewish preliminary studies section of this book.

The New Testament constitutes the last third of the Bible. It begins with four gospels by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Matthew, Mark and Luke are the *synoptic Gospels* and concentrate on the last three years of Jesus’ life. John is considered to have been written much later than the first three. It reflects the book of Genesis, the first book of Jewish scripture that tells of the creation of the world. In John, all who have lived will be judged at the end of the world by Jesus.

The Acts of the Apostles follow the Gospel of John, but are unrelated in style and content. They record events that occurred to Jesus’ followers after his death and provide interesting hints about the early life of the community. This is discussed in more detail in the chapter on HSC Christianity, later in this book, as are the letters of St Paul. The Acts of the Apostles are a historical record of the spread of the early Church and a companion volume to the Gospel of Luke. The Epistles, or letters, follow. Many of these were written by Paul or other early followers of Jesus. The final book is the Revelation of St John, or the Apocalypse. This is a difficult book to understand, rich in imagery and symbolism, and has led to many different interpretations of the end of the world.

The Catholic and Orthodox versions of the Bible also include twelve books called the Apocrypha. These books are not accepted by Protestants, but are valuable in filling in understanding of historical events and developing religious ideas. Up to the 1960s, the Catholic Church used a translation of the Bible, made by St Jerome (347-420 CE) into Latin, called the Vulgate.

**Importance of the Bible**

Christianity is the only religion that reads from the New Testament. This shows how Jesus is the fulfilment of the Hebrew Bible. The New Testament retains a strong focus on the last three years of the life of Jesus. It demonstrates to believers that he was not only a religious revolutionary, which included political dimensions, but also the incarnation of God on Earth. Many Christian beliefs are introduced, or developed, in the Bible. Christians use the Bible in their own spiritual development, for their devotional lives and their understanding of God. The Bible also has a role in guiding Christian beliefs and in the practices of Christians, such as personal prayer and liturgical worship.

**EXERCISE 6.5**

1. Discuss what the term ‘closed canon’ means.
2. Describe the sacred writings of Christianity, with particular reference to the variants of Christianity.
3. Describe why the Bible is important to Christians.

**ACTIVITY 6.5**

1. Construct a table detailing the books of the Bible, so that you understand them better – include dates and authors.
2. Write a paragraph on why the Bible emphasises the final years of Jesus’ life.
3. Account for the following statement from the book: Christians use the Bible in their own spiritual development, for their devotional lives and their understanding of God.
Core ethical teachings

The core ethical teachings of Christianity come from a range of sources, including the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Gospels or New Testament. Some churches, such as the Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox, also draw their ethical teachings from the statements of Church Councils, the Pope and the Bishops of the Church.

All Christians also stress the importance of an individual's conscience in developing ethics.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

These are the most important of the laws dictated by God to the Jewish prophet Moses. They are referred to twice in the Hebrew Bible, in Exodus 20: 2–14 and Deuteronomy 5: 6–18. The first two commandments are concerned with how to worship.

- The first commandment says that one must worship the Lord who delivers the commandments.
- The second forbids the worshipping of a carved image.
- The third is concerned with the ethics of keeping a contract. One must not use the name of God to falsely promise to do something one does not do.
- The fourth returns to the theme of worship and demands that the Sabbath, or the holy day of the week, be set aside.
- The fifth demands that respect be shown by children for their parents.
- The sixth is the ethical injunction not to murder.
- The seventh demands that men and women keep to their marriage vows by not committing adultery, or having sex outside of marriage.
- The eighth forbids stealing, again an ethical concern.
- The ninth is also ethical, saying that one must not lie when speaking of another.
- The tenth demands that one not desire one's neighbour's house or those things owned by others and looks at motives as well as actions.

THE BEATITUDES

One of Jesus' most famous sermons, the Sermon on the Mount, is presented in Matthew 5: 3–12. Jesus states that certain people will be blessed with happiness (in Latin, beatitudo means 'happiness'). This list of people who are blessed is called the Beatitudes and is considered a summary of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew Chapters 5–7). Some of these Beatitudes also appear in Luke, but with different emphases. The Beatitudes are:

- Those who are poor in spirit shall be given the kingdom of heaven
- The patient shall inherit the land
- Those who are mourning shall be comforted
- Those who hunger and thirst for holiness shall be fulfilled
- Those who are merciful shall be rewarded with mercy
- Those who are pure of heart shall see God
- Those who are peacemakers shall be called the children of God
- Those who suffer persecution shall be given the kingdom of heaven.

These sentiments reflect others in Hebrew scripture which offer hope and comfort to those who have little. Moreover, they suggest that if one is guided by mercy, driven to be pure and works for peace, then one will attain both happiness in this life and the chance to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Many Christians believe that references to the Beatitudes include the whole Sermon on the Mount, which includes the Golden Rule (Matthew 7: 12).
THE COMMANDMENT OF LOVE

In Matthew 22: 37–40 Jesus says,

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart and thy whole soul and thy whole mind.
This is the greatest of the commandments, and the first.
And the second, like, is this,
Thy shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

The Greek word Jesus uses for 'love' is agape which can mean an unconditional, self-sacrificing love. Jesus' command to love is also contained in the passages:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you, you should love one another.

JHN 15: 34

I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

JHN 15: 17

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friend.

JHN 15: 13

Jesus' own life and ministry were motivated by love.

As well as these general rules for peaceful community living, Jesus' Beatitudes suggest that one needs meekness, patience and mercy to turn around the problems of the world. These ideals are not satisfying in themselves, but lead on towards the kingdom of heaven.

This could also refer to a perfect state or kingdom on Earth that Jesus, as a political and religious agitator, was trying to create.

Developing from the Beatitudes is Jesus' declaration that unselfish love is the ultimate way to connect with God and the ultimate purpose for each person on Earth. In the uncertain and politically challenging times in which he lived, Jesus' call for universal love was bold, brave and exciting; some would even argue it was overly optimistic.

EXERCISE 6.6

1 Write out the Ten Commandments and explain what they mean.

2 List the Beatitudes (Matthew 5: 1–12) and explain what they mean.

3 What does Jesus say about love?

ACTIVITY 6.6

1 'Christians don't have to take notice of the Ten Commandments because they are Jewish laws.' Discuss this statement.

2 There are two accounts of the Beatitudes, Matthew 5: 1–12 and Luke 6: 20–26. Construct a table listing the similar statements and note how they are different. Discuss why that might be the case.

3 Debate the following statement from St Augustine (354–430 CE): 'Love and do what you will.'
Personal devotion

Personal devotion for Christians revolves around prayer. A prayer can be a request, an offering of praise or an attempt to communicate with entities beyond the world. In the Christian perspective this can include God, Jesus, his mother Mary, the saints and the angels.

Prayer is encouraged in the Bible, where there are many examples. It is also considered a normal human response in times of need. Prayer is essentially communication with God. Rather than a particular form of prayer, of which there are many, it is the attitude of heart and mind that is important.

Different types of prayer

Jesus taught the most significant prayer in Christianity, the Lord’s Prayer. This praises God and asks for the remission of sin and hopes that the one praying will be delivered from evil. The Pater Noster (Our Father) as it was said in the Catholic Church in the Latin Language until the 1960s can be found in Matthew 6: 9–13.

Pater noster, qui es in caelis: sanctificetur Nomen Tuum; adventat Regnum Tuum; fiat voluntas Tua, sicut in caelo, et in terra. Panem nostrum cotidiamum da nobis hodie; et dimitte nobis debita nostra, Sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris; et ne nos inducas in tentationem; sed libera nos a Malo.

Our Father, which art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy Name Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, in Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; But deliver us from evil. (Some churches insert here ‘For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever.’ You will find this in early editions of the Church of England’s Book of Common Prayer.) Amen.

Prayers can be said using a written form or extemporary form. Extemporaneous prayers are those that are said ‘off the cuff’, without being written down or memorised. They are prayers from the heart. Prayers can be accompanied by Bible reading, as is usual in Protestant traditions, or by using aids such as rosary beads or icons. Prayers may be spoken or silent. Prayer may be in the form of meditation, contemplative prayer or simply a prayer from the heart or mind.

Prayer can include love and devotion to God, thanks for God’s care or specific answers to prayer. Confession of sin is a common feature, as are requests for things to be done. Prayer for others is called intercession, and makes up part of the formal liturgical worship of many Christian churches.
Rosary beads

It could be said that prayer radiates from the one who prays in a series of categories. In the first instance one can pray for oneself alone, for one's own health and safety. Often when a Christian takes on something new, or makes a significant change in their daily routine, a prayer is said. Some will pray before starting a journey or a task, or before a meal. Prayer can signal a change and help the one who prays to accommodate this change. It can be argued that prayer thus serves a psychological function as a personal ritual.

From prayer regarding the self, one can also pray for family, one's community or the world. In prayer, hopes for improvement and betterment can be addressed. Prayers for world peace are often said.

1 Describe the different types of Christian prayer.
2 What forms do prayers take?
3 Why might the Lord's Prayer be a model prayer?

1 Write a paragraph about why Christians pray.
2 Debate or discuss the following topic: 'Written prayers are better than extemporary prayer.'
3 Speak to the sky is an Australian song from the 1970s by Rick Springfield. Why is prayer more than that?
   Speak to the sky whenever things go wrong
   And you know you're not talking to the air ...