



Christianity's Family Tree

There are more than 20,000 denominations within Christianity, most of them extending from the Protestant branch of the tree. Here are the religion's three major parts and 10 prominent offshoots of Protestantism.

Christian philosophy now pervasive in the weave of world culture. "One thing Christianity did right was popularize Hebrew teachings—every human being is created in God's image, all things are created equal," says Elaine Pagels, professor of religion at Princeton University and author of *The Gnostic Gospels*. "That conviction shaped America. The Declaration of Independence claims equality is self-evident, but it's not self-evident and never was—look at the slaves in biblical times. Also, before Christianity, physicians provided care to those who could pay. Christianity's conviction was that caring for the sick and dying was a service to Christ. I don't think we'd have hospitals or hospices without that notion."

"There would have been no civil rights movement had it not been at its heart a movement of Christian aspiration and conscience," says Harvard's Peter Gomes. "Nor would there have been a movement in South Africa."

"It is undeniable that the world is a more just and merciful place because of the teachings of Jesus," says Thomas Cahill, author of *How the Irish Saved Civilization* and *The Gifts of the Jews*, hastening to add that, all too often, Christianity's officialdom isn't concerned with in-the-field Christianity, and individuals who call themselves Christian don't recognize when Christ walks among them. "Many Christians, especially higher clergy, are concerned only with the strength of

Christianity as an institution—something Jesus showed no interest in. They show little concern for the success of the Gospel of peace and love."

He continues: "Christianity comes in two different packages, official and real. Official Christianity is doing pretty well, with a head count that is several hundred million more than its nearest competitors, Islam and Buddhism. But there is the question of what the content of Christianity is, and whether Christians truly subscribe to this content—Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, comfort the afflicted. Here, the results are much more spotty."

Karen Armstrong, a former nun as well as the author of *A History of God*, agrees. If we ask how Christianity is doing today in terms of Saint Paul's ultimate virtue, love, the answer is, Armstrong says, "Not very well. Western Christianity has been the most intolerant religion toward other faiths. Some Christians, if they got to Heaven and found everybody there, would be miserable: Heaven wouldn't be Heaven if you couldn't peer over the celestial parapets and see other people roasting below. It's a very unpopular virtue, love,

and I think this is because the ideal is so difficult. How do you love Hitler? It's one of those paradoxes wherein religious life is meant to give you, by the shock of it, a flash of insight."

Hitler. The Holocaust. As we stand on the brink of Christianity's third millennium, we have this convenient recent example of what many have called evil incarnate. How was the Holocaust possible in a godly world? Is Hitler to be forgiven his sins? Are we supposed to love such a man? Was Christianity, with anti-Jewish incidents plaguing its history, somehow complicit?

"We still haven't come to terms with the Holocaust," says Armstrong. "The Holocaust knocks over a lot of simplistic views about a benevolent God. And when you look at the Holocaust, you see the dangers of the absence of God. You see a life in which all sacredness is lost. Look at Auschwitz: It uncannily reproduced the imagery of Hell that haunted Europe for centuries. The stinking air, the jeering, the emaciated bodies—it could have been painted by Bosch. Hell is theologically defined as the absence of the sacred, an absolute loss of holiness. That was the Holocaust—a secular phenomenon, perhaps, but something religion was powerless to stop."

"I don't think we have begun to absorb what the Holocaust should mean for faith. And for humanity. We haven't begun. Look at Kosovo."

So we stand on the brink of a new millennium with a world that includes holy wars in Eastern Europe and Mother Teresa's missions; popes embracing patriarchs and Palestinians; Christianity reestablishing itself in Russia and charging into Africa even as it shrinks in Western Europe; Pentecostals shouting hosanna; Christian values silently, anonymously stealing into cultures and individual consciences.

After 2,000 years it seems clear that Christianity is not going away. For in the end, as in the beginning, there is the short but dramatic life of Jesus of Nazareth, and the powerful message He left behind. Not the Word so much—the letter of any law—but the idea behind the Word. There are the teachings and the radical notions. There is the challenge. He encourages aspiration. He encourages Man to do better, to be charitable, to forgive. He talks of faith, hope and love.

Institutions rise and some of them fall, sects drift from the core or toward it, seekers pursue the literal truth or spiritual fulfillment—all in answer to a man who called out 2,000 years ago. All in answer to the challenge of Jesus. ●

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