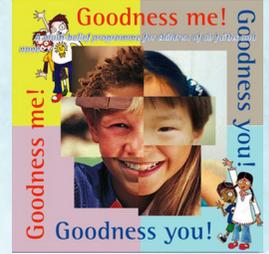


CHRISTIANITY

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People adhere to religious traditions in different ways. Not all Christians will adhere to all of the practices mentioned in this material. If there is a child in your class that follows this religious tradition it is important that the child's parents or guardians are the primary source of information about that child's beliefs and practices.

INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIANITY

This history of Christianity is focussed on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, a teacher and healer of first-century Palestine who Christians believe is the son of God. Christianity is currently the religion with the most followers in the world. It has dominated western culture for centuries and remains the majority religion of Europe and the Americas and Oceania.

The primary source of information about the life of Jesus are the Gospels: four books written by different authors 30-100 years after Jesus' death. The Gospels eventually became the first four books of the New Testament.



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JESUS

The traditional story of Jesus tells of his birth in a stable in Bethlehem in the Holy Land, to a young virgin called Mary who had become pregnant with the son of God through the action of the Holy Spirit. His birth is believed by Christians to be the fulfilment of prophecies in the Jewish Old Testament, which claimed that a Messiah would deliver the Jewish people from captivity.

After the story of his birth, little is known about Jesus until he began his ministry at the age of about 30. He then spent three years teaching, healing and working miracles. He taught using parables; stories relating to aspects of everyday life which had divine messages for those who would hear it. He had twelve disciples whom he called to follow him and help him in his work.

Jesus stated publicly that he spoke with the authority of God. This claim angered the religious authorities in Palestine and they handed Jesus over to the Roman authorities as a revolutionary and a blasphemer. He was tried for heresy, condemned and put to death by means of crucifixion. On the third day following his execution, some of his women followers discovered that the tomb, into which his body had been placed, was empty.

Jesus then appeared to them, alive, several times after his death. His followers realised that God had raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus was seen by many of his disciples and followers over the next few days before, according to the Gospel accounts, he was taken up into heaven.

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Paul, who traditionally opposed the Christian church, is converted following a personal experience with God. Based on his new beliefs, he establishes churches throughout the Roman Empire and beyond.

These new Christian churches are persecuted and declared illegal under Emperors such as Nero, Domitian and Diocletian. Many people die for the faith and are declared martyrs.

A Roman soldier, Constantine, wins a battle over a rival to become Emperor of the Roman Empire, and attributes his win to the Christian God and makes Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

The Council of Nicea (325AD) formulates and codifies the faith. Ideas are debated, formulated and discussed. The Nicene Creed (the affirmation of belief in God, Christ and the Church) is developed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD.

After the fall of Rome in 476AD, Eastern and Western Christians split after differences in belief arise (known as The Great Schism). The Eastern Orthodox Church does not recognise the authority of the Western Roman papacy.

THE BIBLE

The sacred text of Christianity is the Bible, which consists of the Old Testament (roughly equivalent to the Jewish Bible) and the New Testament. The New Testament contains 27 books: four gospels (narratives of Jesus' life), one account of the apostles' ministry after Jesus' death, letters from church leaders (the earliest of which predate the Gospels), and an apocalyptic work (the book of Revelations).

Nearly all Christians regard the Bible as divinely inspired and authoritative, but views differ as to the nature and extent of its authority. Some hold it to be completely without error in all matters it addresses, while others stress its accuracy only in religious matters and allow for errors or limitations in other areas due to its human authorship.

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BRANCHES OF CHRISTIANITY

Christianity has divided into three major branches over the centuries.

Roman Catholicism represents the continuation of the historical organised church as it developed in Western Europe, and is headed by the Pope. Distinctive beliefs of Catholics include the doctrines of transubstantiation and purgatory, and distinctive practices include devotion to the saints and Mary and use of the rosary.

Eastern Orthodoxy (which includes the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches and several others) is the continuation of the historical organised church as it developed in Eastern Europe. It differs from Catholicism in its refusal of allegiance to the Pope, its emphasis on the use of icons in worship, and the date it celebrates Easter. Other cultural, political, and religious differences exist as well.

Protestantism arose in the 16th century during the Reformation, which took place mainly in Germany, Switzerland, and Britain. Protestants do not acknowledge the authority of the Pope and reject many traditions and beliefs of the Catholic Church:

- Mary plays a different role for Catholics than for most Protestants. Though Protestants may hold Mary in high regard, they do not hold her in the same regard as Catholics. They typically do not pray to Mary or make her a focal point of artwork or iconography in the same way Roman Catholics do.
- Roman Catholics believe that a person's actions play a significant role in one's standing with God because actions are external expressions

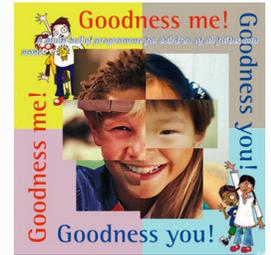
of one's inner faith. For Catholics, good deeds can achieve penance for sins or limit one's time in purgatory after death.

- Protestants believe that justification by grace through faith is the only way for a person to enjoy a righteous standing before God. In this view, good works are done out of gratitude and are seen as a result of faith, but alone can earn no merit with God. Catholics believe this as well but continue to emphasise works as demonstrations of faith.
- Roman Catholics embrace mystery, hierarchy, rituals, liturgy, structure, and more symbolic actions in worship. Protestants, on the other hand, developed worship services that are less elaborate and the primary focus is God's word in Scripture. For Catholics, the focus of the Mass is the Eucharist or Holy Communion. For Protestants, the central moment of worship comes with the sermon (when the minister stands to preach from the Bible).
- The sign of the cross: Roman Catholics bless themselves by making the sign of the cross. Most Protestant denominations do not make the sign of the cross.

Protestants emphasise the importance of reading the Bible and hold to the doctrine of salvation by faith alone. Protestantism encompasses numerous denominational groups, including Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians (or Anglicanism), Presbyterians, Pentecostals and Evangelicals.

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PRACTICES OF CHRISTIANITY

Christian practices vary by denomination, but common elements include a Sunday worship service, private and communal prayer, study and reading of the Scriptures, and participation in rites such as baptism and communion.

Distinctive Catholic practices include recognition of seven sacraments, Sunday mass, devotion to the Virgin Mary and the saints, and veneration of relics and places associated with holy figures.

Eastern Orthodoxy holds many practices in common with Catholicism, but is especially distinguished by the central role of icons: ornate images of Christ and the saints believed to provide a connection to the spiritual world.

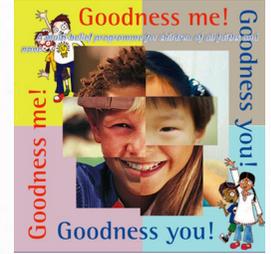
CELEBRATIONS

The most important Christian holiday is Easter, a spring festival that celebrates Christ's resurrection from the dead. Easter is immediately preceded by Holy Week, which includes Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday. The 40 days prior to Easter form the Lenten season, a time of fasting and repentance. Another holiday that came to be culturally important is Christmas, which commemorates the birth of Jesus on December 25. Saints' days are also important. Some of these, such as St. Patrick's Day and Valentine's Day, have come to play a prominent role in popular western culture.



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You can find the dates for these celebrations [here](#) on the interfaith calendar.

Easter

Easter Sunday is the culmination of Holy Week. Easter commemorates the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the most important Christian festival, and the one celebrated with the greatest joy. The date of Easter changes each year, and several other Christian festivals fix their dates by reference to Easter. Churches are filled with flowers, and there are special hymns and songs. But not all Easter customs are Christian; some, such as the Easter Bunny, are pagan in origin.

The Easter story is at the heart of Christianity:

On Good Friday, Jesus Christ was executed by crucifixion. His body was taken down from the cross, and buried in a cave. The tomb was guarded and an enormous stone was put over the entrance, so that no-one could steal the body. On the following Sunday, some women visited the grave and found that the stone had been moved, and that the tomb was empty. Jesus himself was seen that day, and for days afterwards by many people. His followers realised that God had raised Jesus from the dead.

Christmas

Christmas is marked on the 25 December (7 January for Orthodox Christians). Christmas is a Christian holy day that marks the birth of Jesus, the son of God.

Jesus' birth, known as the nativity, is described in the New Testament of

the Bible. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke give different accounts. It is from them that the nativity story is pieced together. Both accounts tell us that Jesus was born to a woman called Mary who was engaged to Joseph, a carpenter. The Gospels state that Mary was a virgin when she became pregnant.

In Luke's account Mary was visited by an angel who brought the message that she would give birth to God's son. According to Matthew's account, Joseph was visited by an angel who persuaded him to marry Mary rather than send her away or expose her pregnancy.

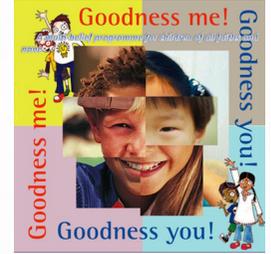
Matthew tells us about some wise men who followed a star that led them to Jesus' birthplace and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Luke tells how shepherds were led to Bethlehem by an angel. According to tradition, Joseph and Mary travelled to Bethlehem shortly before Jesus' birth. Joseph had been ordered to take part in a census in his home town of Bethlehem.

All Jewish people had to be counted so the Roman Emperor could determine how much money to collect from them in tax. Those who had moved away from their family homes, like Joseph, had to return to have their names entered in the Roman records.

Joseph and Mary set off on the long, arduous 90-mile journey from Nazareth along the valley of the River Jordan, past Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Mary travelled on a donkey to conserve her energy for the birth. But when they arrived in Bethlehem the local inn was already full with people returning for the census. The innkeeper let them stay in the rock cave below his house which was used as a stable for his animals. It was

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here, next to the noise and filth of the animals, that Mary gave birth to her son and laid him in a manger.

PRACTICES OF ROMAN CATHOLICISM

Roman Catholic beliefs do not differ drastically from those of the other major branches of Christianity - Greek Orthodoxy and Protestantism. All three main branches hold to the doctrine of the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, the inspiration of the Bible, and so on. But on more minor doctrinal points, there are clear Catholic distinctions in belief.

Distinctive Roman Catholic beliefs include the special authority of the pope, the ability of saints to intercede on behalf of believers, the concept of Purgatory as a place of afterlife purification before entering Heaven, and the doctrine of transubstantiation - that is, that the bread used in the Eucharist becomes the true body of Christ when blessed by a priest.

Catholic Mass

Services follow a prescribed liturgy and priests wear more elaborate vestments than most Protestant ministers. Catholics usually celebrate the Eucharist weekly, and sometimes daily, whereas Protestants celebrate it less frequently.

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Catholic sacraments

Catholics observe seven sacraments, which are religious rituals believed to be commanded by God and effective in conferring grace on the believer:

1. Baptism
2. Eucharist
3. Reconciliation
4. Confirmation
5. Marriage
6. Holy Orders
7. Anointing of the sick.

Other distinctive Catholic practices include veneration of saints and the use of rosary beads in prayer.

PRACTICES OF EASTERN ORTHODOXY

The Eastern Orthodox Church is made up of a number of self-governing Churches which are either 'autocephalous' (meaning having their own head) or 'autonomous' (meaning self-governing).

The Orthodox Churches are united in faith and by a common approach to theology, tradition, and worship. They draw on elements of Greek, Middle-Eastern, Russian and Slav culture.

Each Church has its own geographical (rather than a national) title that

usually reflects the cultural traditions of its believers.

The word 'Orthodox' takes its meaning from the Greek words orthos ('right') and doxa ('belief'). Hence the word Orthodox means correct belief or right thinking.

The Orthodox tradition developed from the Christianity of the Eastern Roman Empire and was shaped by the pressures, politics and peoples of that geographical area. Since the Eastern capital of the Roman Empire was Byzantium, this style of Christianity is sometimes called 'Byzantine Christianity'.

The Orthodox Churches share with the other Christian Churches the belief that God revealed himself in Jesus Christ, and a belief in the incarnation of Christ, his crucifixion and resurrection. The Orthodox Church differs substantially from the other Churches in the way of life and worship, and in certain aspects of theology.

The Holy Spirit is seen as present in and as the guide to the Church working through the whole body of the Church, as well as through priests and bishops.

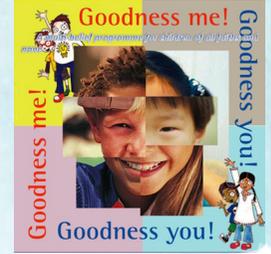
Are Orthodox Churches the same as Eastern Orthodox Churches?

Not all Orthodox Churches are 'Eastern Orthodox'. The 'Oriental Orthodox Churches' have theological differences with the Eastern Orthodox and form a separate group, while a few Orthodox Churches are not 'in communion' with the others.

Not all Churches in the Eastern tradition are Orthodox: Eastern Churches

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that are not included in the Orthodox group include the Eastern Catholic Churches.

The nominal head of the Eastern Orthodox Churches is the Patriarch of Constantinople. However, he is only first among equals and has no real authority over churches other than his own.

PRACTICES OF PROTESTANTISM

Protestantism originated in the 16th century Reformation, and most modern Protestant denominations can trace their heritage to one of the major movements that sprung up in the 16th century. Presbyterians are indebted to John Calvin and Reformed theology, as well as to John Knox and the Church of Scotland.

Anglicans and Episcopalians trace their heritage to the Church of England that resulted from King Henry VIII's break from the authority of Rome. Evangelicalism (and to a slightly lesser degree, Methodism) is indebted to Pietism, a 17th century Protestant movement emphasizing a holy life, individual study of the scriptures, and better training of ministers.

The variations of Protestantism

Protestant denominations differ in the degree to which they reject Catholic belief and practice. Some churches, such as Anglicans and Lutherans, tend to resemble Catholicism in their formal liturgy, while others, like Baptists and Presbyterians, retain very little of the liturgy and tradition associated with the



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Catholic church.

In common with Catholic and Orthodox Christians, Protestants adhere to the authority of the Bible and the doctrines of the early creeds. Protestants are distinguished by their emphasis on the doctrines of justification by grace alone through faith, the priesthood of all believers, and the supremacy of Holy Scripture in matters of faith and order. Most Protestant churches recognise only two sacraments directly commanded by the Lord - baptism and communion - as opposed to the seven sacraments accepted by the Catholic Church.

AT A GLANCE...

Place founded: Southern Levant (modern-day Israel, Palestine, and Jordan)

Clergy: Preachers, pastors, ministers, deacons, priests, bishops, cardinals and popes

Sacred text: The Bible

Special place: Church

Founder: Jesus Christ

Major branches: Roman Catholic; Eastern Orthodox; Protestant

Practices: Prayer, Bible study, baptism, Eucharist (Communion), church on Sundays, numerous holidays

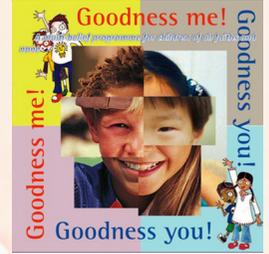
Celebrations: Easter, Christmas, saints' days
Theism: Monotheism

Beliefs: It should be understood that slight variances, exceptions, and additions to these doctrines exist within certain faith groups that fall under the broad umbrella of Christianity.

- There is only one God.
- God is three in one or a Trinity; God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.
- God is omniscient or 'knows all things'.
- God is omnipotent or 'all powerful'.
- God is omnipresent or 'present everywhere'.
- God is just or 'righteous'.
- God is love.
- God is the creator of everything that exists.
- God is infinite and eternal. He has always been God.
- God is immutable. He does not change.
- Jesus is fully God and fully man.
- Humans were created by God in the image of God.
- All people have sinned.

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- Death came into the world through Adam's sin.
- Jesus died for the sins of each and every person in the world.
- Jesus' death was a substitutionary sacrifice. He died and paid the price for our sins so that we might live.
- Those who reject Jesus Christ will go to hell forever after they die. Those who accept Jesus Christ will live for eternity with him after they die.
- Hell is a place of punishment. Hell is eternal.
- Jesus will return to the earth.
- Christians will be raised from the dead when Jesus returns.
- There will be a final judgment.
- Satan will be thrown into the lake of fire.
- God will create a new heaven and a new earth.

Symbols: Cross, dove, anchor, fish, alpha/omega, the Trinity

