

Christian History
An Overview

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Introduction

“It is impossible to understand the present state of Christianity without a knowledge of its history.”¹ In this paper I will provide a survey of the history of Christianity that covers the early church, the Middle Ages, the Reformation in Western Europe, the Modern Age and the Twentieth Century as outlined in chapter five of *Christianity: An Introduction* by Alister Edgar McGrath. Alister E. McGrath is a contemporary historian and Christian apologist currently serving on the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Oxford.

The Early Church (c. 100 – 500)

The *early church*, also known as the *Patristic period*, is the period when men such as Athanasius of Alexandria and Augustine of Hippo acted as founding fathers of the church. The early church period began as Christianity emerged from Judaism in urban centers such as Jerusalem and rapidly expanded throughout the Mediterranean world. The “apostolic age” was the earliest period where many of the apostles of Jesus of Nazareth were still alive and continuing His ministry. Early Christian communities were established by leaders such as Paul of Tarsus, who was responsible for establishing Christian churches throughout the Mediterranean world.

To make sense of the developments of the early church it is critical to understand the political environment of the Roman empire where first century Christianity emerged. The Roman empire was expanding their territory, influence and control during the early church. Augustus Caesar reigned as emperor at the time of Jesus’ birth and Tiberius Caesar during the

¹ Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 121.

life and ministry of Jesus. The Roman empire was at the peak of its power during the reign of Emperor Trajan. Trajan stabilized the empire, expanded their territory and initiated a major building program in Rome during the time the early church emerged from the region of Judaea. A Roman “civil religion” was established at this time linking worship of the emperor as a sign of allegiance to the Roman state.² During this early period, the Roman historian Tacitus (56-117 A.D.) characterizes Christians as “a class hated for their abominations” and records Emperor Nero made Christians the scapegoats for the Great Fire of Rome (64 A.D.). Luke reports that the Emperor Claudius had expelled all the Jews from Rome in Acts 18:1-3 and Pliny the Younger wrote to Emperor Trajan requesting advice on how to handle the growing number of Christians that refused to worship the image of the Roman emperor.³ Christianity could not be practiced in public and outsiders misinterpreted the eucharist for cannibalism. The Roman Empire was not a hospitable place for the early church.

However, the church persisted. Justin Martyr composed his *First Apology* in Rome (c.155) describing Christian worship services to include baptism, the eucharist, worshiping on Sunday, the first day of the week, and readings from the “memoirs of the apostles.” An early second century worship manual known as the *Didache* (teaching) also describes Christians meeting in private homes on the Lord’s Day to “break bread and give thanks”.⁴ During this period, the Christian Church did not have legal status and was subject to persecution to suppress its growth. At the height of the persecution, during the reign of Emperor Diocletian (284-313), an edict was issued to destroy places of Christian worship, to burn the books and to cease all acts of Christian worship. In 311, Galerius recognized that this tactic led to a hardening of Christians

² Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 124.

³ Ibid. 125.

⁴ Ibid. 126.

and issued an edict to stop the persecution. In 312 Constantine defeated Maxentius and was proclaimed emperor of Rome.⁵ Shortly thereafter, Constantine and the eastern emperor, Licinus, issued the Edict of Milan in 313 proclaiming freedom of religion in the eastern and western parts of the Roman Empire. “Christianity was offered the same legal protection as other religions, and Christians were granted freedom to worship as and where they pleased.”⁶ Following a brief setback during the reign of Julian the Apostate from 361-363, “Theodosius the Great, who reigned from 379 to 395, finally issued a series of measures that made Christianity the official religion of the Roman empire, bringing to conclusion the slow process of Christianization initiated by Constantine.”⁷ “Most historians regard the western Roman empire as coming to an end sometime around the year 476” following the defeat of Romulus Augustus by the German military ruler Odoacer, who then declared himself king of Italy.⁸

The Middle Ages and the Renaissance (c. 500 – 1500)

Following the collapse of the western Roman empire, regions and city-states began to emerge and compete for territory and influence. “The situation of Christianity in the Mediterranean region changed significantly through the rise of Islam – the religious belief system based on the teachings of Muhammad (570-632).”⁹ Islam expanded through military conquest through the Middle East, North Africa, Spain, Morocco and started moving into France by the eighth century. The great Byzantine city of Constantinople fell to Islamic armies in 1453 which led people to believe this was a possible end to a Christian Europe.

⁵ Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology an Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p.21)

⁶ Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 131.

⁷ Ibid. 131.

⁸ Ibid. 134.

⁹ Ibid. 135

However, a Christian missionary center was established in Ireland by Magonus Sucatus Patricius (c. 390-c. 460) that led to an expansion of Christianity in Scotland, Cornwall and Brittany. As a nomadic society, Ireland and others in the region were attracted to the monastic lifestyle of solitude and isolation. This led to the expansion of monasteries led by the abbot. The Irish monasteries used sea lanes to spread Christianity to the western Isles of Scotland, south and east toward England and France. “During the period 800 – 1100, it was schools attached to monasteries and cathedrals that began to achieve distinction as centers of scholarship. These were precursors of the great universities of Europe.”¹⁰

Stemming from the rivalry of the pope at Rome and the emperor at Constantinople, theological differences had been simmering between western and eastern Christianity for centuries. Tensions escalated in the middle ninth century highlighted by the Photian Schism (863-867) and the schism of 1054 which resulted in a breaking point known as the “Great Schism” between “Leo IX, the pope from 1049 to 1054, and Michael Cerularius, Patriarch of Constantinople from 1043 to 1059. Leo’s enforcement of western norms in southern Italian churches (which up until then had generally followed Byzantine liturgical and devotional practices) was seen as tantamount to a claim to papal sovereignty over the entire church.”¹¹ In an effort to save the identity of the Byzantine church and eliminate papal influence at Constantinople, Cerularius broke relations with Rome.

During this period, Islam’s expansion from southern Europe threatened the Christian church. In response to this threat, *crusades* were initiated by the church of Western Europe to stem the advance of Islamic territory gains. “The First Crusade (1096-1099) was fueled by a religious passion that prompted armies made up of both knights and peasants to journey to the

¹⁰ Ibid. 137

¹¹ Ibid. 139

Middle East. Jerusalem was captured in 1099.”¹² The Second Crusade (1145-1149) was in response to the defeat of Edessa in 1144. The Third Crusade (1188-1192) was an attempt to retake the Holy Land but failed to retake Jerusalem. The Fourth Crusade set out to capture Jerusalem but was diverted and ended up sieging and occupying eastern Christianity’s capitol city, Constantinople, in 1204. Any hope to restore relations following the Great Schism between the East and the West were permanently severed and eventually led to the decline of the Byzantine empire.

During the Middle Ages, Europe consisted of small principalities and loosely organized city-states and regions. By the thirteenth century, the church in Europe had become a major influence in international politics and also provided a sense of common identity and purpose to the local communities and individuals. “Under Innocent III (pope from 1198 to 1216), the medieval papacy reached a level of political authority without precedent in Western Europe.”¹³ In a decree issued in 1198, Innocent III “set out the principle of the subordination of the state to the church” asserting that “God ordained that the power of the pope exceeds that of any monarch.”¹⁴ Other reforms included the practice of the “conclave.” In response to the long time to elect Pope Gregory X, the Cardinals were isolated in a closed area (the “conclave”) where they were deprived of food and water to accelerate their decision for a new pope.

How did Christianity relate to the common people that were primarily agrarian and concerned with everyday issues of haymaking, disease, eye trouble and young women finding husbands? Many could not read so liturgy was supplemented by images of Biblical stories of saints painted on church walls. These Saints were believed to be “mediators of divine grace who

¹² Ibid. 140.

¹³ Ibid. 142.

¹⁴ Ibid.

would hear and mitigate the prayers of ordinary people.”¹⁵ Dating back to early Christianity this practice evolved to a Cult of the Saints where they would commonly follow three practices. First, they would set aside a specific day and time to commemorate a Saint called *Commemoration*. Second, they would maintain remains and material objects associated with Saints as “tokens” of the saint’s intercessory power called *cult of relics*. Third they would make *Pilgrimages to shrines associated with saints*.

By the beginning of the fifteenth century the Islamic leadership regarded the conquest of Christendom’s greatest city, Constantinople, as a *jihad* – Holy war. In 1452, the Ottoman’s Sultan Mehmed II cut off supply lines from the Black sea ports and in 1453 Mehmed conquered Constantinople. Mehmed continued to expand the Ottoman empire conquering many cities and controlling much of the Mediterranean Sea. “It seemed to some that the advance of the Ottoman empire was unstoppable. An Islamic Europe seemed a real possibility.”¹⁶ The Ottoman’s lost a major defeat of their navy in the battle of Lepanto (1571) and the land-based army was defeated at the Battle of Senta (1697) ending the Ottoman control of large parts of Central Europe.

The fall of Constantinople led to an exodus of Greek-speaking intellectuals to neighboring Italy marking the beginning of the *Italian Renaissance*. The Renaissance was a revival of art and literature in fourteenth and fifteenth century. The intellectual force within the Renaissance, referred to as “humanism,” was a cultural and educational movement that appealed to classical antiquity as a model of expression and eloquence. It elevated art, architecture and literature as valuable cultural resources. It was also a period of revival for the church with an emphasis on the New Testament as the foundation for Christian theology. Scholars became critical of the Latin translation of the Bible, the “Vulgate,” and initiated a program of “back to

¹⁵ Ibid. 144.

¹⁶ Ibid. 145.

the original sources.” The humanist program returned to the patristic writers and studying the Bible in the original languages. Erasmus of Rotterdam printed the first Greek New Testament in 1516 and initiated the important role of biblical scholarship to Christian theology.

Competing Visions of Reform (c. 1500-c. 1650)

The European powers of Spain, Portugal and France led a period of discovery to spread the Catholic faith and promote national influence. The Catholic church emphasized missionary responsibilities expanding in the sixteenth century to the Americas, Africa and Asia. Believing he could establish a faster route to India by traveling west, the Spanish sailor Christopher Columbus accidentally discovered the Americas, known as the “New World”. Vasco da Gama of Portugal established trade routes between the east coast of Africa to India and founded the East African colony of Mozambique as a staging post on the route to India. Spanish explorer Ferdinand Magellan discovered the islands of Southeast Asia where a program of evangelism was led by the Franciscans and Dominicans. These discoveries established Christianity beyond Europe becoming a global faith. At the same time, Christianity in Western Europe was undergoing reformations.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) “believed that the church had fallen into some form of Pelagianism, teaching that individuals could achieve, or even purchase, their salvation.”¹⁷ “In response, Luther developed the idea of justification by faith alone, according to which an individual receives salvation as a gracious gift from God.”¹⁸ This effort to reform church doctrine was known as “Lutheranism.”

Alister McGrath states of John Calvin, leader of the reformed church: “Calvin is of fundamental importance for understanding the direction of the second phase of Protestant

¹⁷ Ibid. 151.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Reformation.”¹⁹ The reformed church sought to reform the morals and worship of the church according to a more biblical pattern and became known as “Calvinism.” John Calvin’s book *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* provided instruction on:

1. “the knowledge of God the creator;
2. the knowledge of God the redeemer;
3. the manner of participation in the grace of Jesus Christ and
4. the external means or aids that God uses to bring us to Jesus Christ.”²⁰

Pastors of the reformed church were formally trained at the Genevan Academy founded in 1559.

The Radical Reformation is also known as “Anabaptism.” Primarily known for rejecting infant baptism and “insistence that only those who have made a personal, public profession of faith should be baptized,” they also promoted a distrust of external authority, common ownership of property, pacifism and non-resistance.

The Catholic Reformation followed the Council of Trent in 1545 to clarify the Catholic teaching on the “conduct of clergy, ecclesiastical discipline, religious education, and missionary activity.”²¹ The theological considerations focused on Scripture and tradition, justification by faith, and the sacraments.

The Reformation in England was led by Henry VIII’s initiative to suppress papal authority with the creation of the English National Church and, his daughter and successor, Mary Tudor’s effort to suppress Protestantism and restore Catholicism. Mary’s successor, Queen Elizabeth, established the National English Church as a reformed episcopal church with a mix of Protestant articles of faith and Catholic liturgy.

¹⁹ Ibid. 153.

²⁰ Ibid. 154.

²¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology an Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p.131)

The Society of Jesus, founded in 1534 by Ignatius Loyola, focused on a four-week program of prayer, meditation, and reflection as a “training manual for future combatants in a spiritual war.”²²

The rise of Protestantism and the revival of Catholicism resulted in political and social tensions leading to conflict. In 1562 war broke out in France and was settled by the Edict of Nantz (1598) protecting French Protestants. However, this led to an exodus of Protestants from the country. Other wars had religious aspects; however, the Thirty-Year War (1618-1648) was the most important conflict. The Thirty-Year War emerged from the Peace of Ausburg (1555) that ended the conflict between Catholics and Lutherans but did not account for Calvinism beliefs. The Thirty-Year War concluded in the Peace of Westphalia (1648), emphasizing peace and tolerance among competing ideologies.

From the Protestants emerged Puritanism and Pietism. Puritanism emphasized pastoral aspects of faith and teaching on “the death of Christ, and the divine sovereignty in providence and election.”²³ Puritans encountered hostility from the National English Church and the state, leading Pastor John Robinson to move his congregation to America on the ship the *Mayflower* in 1620. Pietism, in Germany, was founded by Nikolaus Zinzendorf and emphasized a “religion of the heart, based on an intimate and personal relationship between Christ and the believer.”²⁴ John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, emphasized the experiential side of Christian faith making Christian faith relevant to ordinary believers. “Pietism may be regarded as a reaction

²² Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 158.

²³ Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology an Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p.135)

²⁴ Alister McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 161.

against a one-sided emphasis upon doctrinal orthodoxy and affirming a personal faith that relates to the deepest aspects of human nature.”²⁵

America, seen by many Puritans as the “new Jerusalem,” provided a land where Puritans could follow God’s calling to form strong social and political communities. However, by the end of the first quarter of the eighteenth century Christianity had lost its way. In 1734, Jonathan Edwards led *The Great Awakening* of spiritual revival in America. Christianity became a popular movement appealing to the masses. Threatened by the movement, the Church of England refused to allow George Whitfield to preach in its churches. Instead, he preached in fields and towns growing the movement that contributed to the foundation for the American Revolution.

The Modern Period (c. 1650 – 1914)

Following the Wars of Religion that concluded with The Peace of Westphalia, Europeans were weary of conflict, tolerant of religious diversity, and evolved to be indifferent to religion. This situation allowed for the rise of rationalism known as “The Enlightenment.” Based on the principle of the omniscience of human reason, *The Enlightenment* reasoned that Christian beliefs were rational, and because they were rational, could be derived by reason itself. Therefore, there was no need to invoke divine revelation, firmly placing reason above revelation. The Enlightenment preceded the rise of Pietism in England whereby “the great evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century significantly blunted the influence of rationalism upon religion.”²⁶

In America, The Great Awakening had stirred resistance to the control yielded by the Church of England. Britain established Catholicism as the official religion of Canada with The Quebec

²⁵ Ibid. 161.

²⁶ Ibid. 165

Act of 1774. If Britain could choose the religion of Canada, what would they do in America? Religious freedom was one of many reasons including political and economic influences that led to the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the American Revolution.

A similar spirit of resentment grew in France, but toward the king and the Catholic Church. The storming of Bastille was seen as the beginning of The French Revolution (1789) which was committed to the liberation from tyranny and grounded in the anti-Christian belief of nature and reason. All church lands were nationalized and a program of dechristianization and church closure was put into place. The policies extended to neighboring regions. In 1798 the papal states were occupied and the pope was deported to France.

During the same period, a popular movement emerged in Greece which was aimed at liberation from Ottoman rule. The Greek revolution of 1821, supported by Orthodox Russia, Great Britain and France, pushed out the Ottoman Islamic army out and a new state of Greece was established during the 1830's.

“The First International Convention of the Student Volunteer Movement met in Cleveland in 1891 and adopted as its motto ‘the evangelization of the world in this generation.’ ”²⁷ The twentieth century would be the age of mission to spread Christianity throughout the world. As Britain gained political power in India, Baptist missionary William Carey started work in Bengal in 1793. James Hudson Taylor founded the China Inland Mission in 1865, but had limited success against the stigma of being western, and hence un-Chinese. The Baptist Missionary Society founded in 1792, along with other missionary societies, were very successful in spreading Christianity to all regions of Africa, Australia, and the whole of Oceania.

²⁷ Ibid. 171

Following the French Revolution and the efforts to revolt against the power of the Catholic Church, there was a reawakening for Catholicism and an initiative established during the Congress of Vienna (1815) to rebuild the Catholic church in Europe. An estimated 2.5 million Irish Catholics emigrated to the United States during this period, shaping religious views and Catholicism in the United States. In 1869 Pope Pius IX convened the First Vatican Council to establish doctrines of supremacy of faith over reason and *papal infallibility*, giving the pope “full and supreme power of jurisdiction over the whole Church.”²⁸

During the nineteenth century new denominations and visions of faith such as Mormonism, Christian Science, Jehovah’s Witness, and the Pentecostal movement developed in the United States. Charles Parham, a former pastor in the Methodist Episcopal Church, “asked his students to investigate the New Testament evidence for the continued activity of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life.”²⁹ Students reported that they believed spiritual gifts were still a possibility. Pentecostalism became the most significant form of religion to emerge, spread rapidly across the United States and become a global faith.

Twentieth Century (1914 to Present)

The Great War fractured relations between nations and churches. In 1915, during the Great War, the Ottoman’s committed a series of massacres that killed approximately 1.5 million Christian Armenian people, now known as ‘the Armenian genocide.’ In 1917 the Russian Revolution overthrew the czarist state and became a nation committed to the elimination of religion. Marx and Lenin believed religion was a tool of oppression and “the Soviet Union now became the first state to have the elimination of religion as its ideological objective.” By the time

²⁸ Ibid. 175.

²⁹ Ibid. 179.

of World War II, the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin had nearly eliminated the clergy, priests and Orthodox churches in the Soviet Union.

After The Great War, the German monarchy was replaced by parliamentary democracy. Following the Wall Street crash in 1929 and a slowdown of the global economy, Adolph Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' Party established Hitler as the German Chancellor in 1933. Hitler demanded control of German life including the German churches. The German Christian movement adopted a positive response to Hitler's program for national reconstruction and unity until a division arose over the "Aryan clause" that would allow no Jew to hold any office in the church. Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, leaders of the Confessing Church, rejected compromises with Nazism and issued the Barmen Declaration, declaring the church would not adjust to ideas according to "prevailing ideological and political convictions."³⁰ Hitler's anti-Jewish attitudes were ultimately expressed in the Holocaust significantly influencing Judaism and Christianity after World War II and played an important role in creating the state of Israel in 1948. "Today, Western Europe is now the most secular area in the world."³¹ The Second Vatican Council sought to understand how this could happen and developed a strategy to confront such cultural trends. Initiated by Pope John XXIII on October 11, 1962 and continued after his death by Pope Paul VI until closing December 8, 1965, the Second Vatican Council confirmed the bishops governing role in the church and encouraged peaceful relations with other Christian denominations and faith traditions. Another major decision was to translate the liturgy and the Bible into the language of ordinary people. This strategy signaled a new way to engage the world.

³⁰ Ibid. 187.

³¹ Ibid. 188.

After World War II, American wealth led to secular materialism and polarism between “Fundamentalists” who wanted to safeguard Christian heritage and the “unbelieving liberals” who rejected the core beliefs of fundamentalism. Darwinism became one of the main enemies of fundamentalism and many fought to exclude Darwin’s theory of evolution from public schools. This battle led to the prosecution of John Scopes for teaching evolution in Tennessee’s public schools. The Scopes “monkey trial of 1925” resulted in a loss and public relations disaster for fundamentalism.

The twentieth century ushered in many social and political changes in the world. In America, the black churches of the southern states became the key to the success of the Civil Rights movement. Triggered by the arrest of Rosa Parks in 1955 for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white man, the black Baptist pastor Martin Luther King led the Civil Rights Movement ending segregation and making it acceptable for churches and individual Christian leaders to become politically engaged. The election of Pope John Paul II from Poland caused a surge of national pride in Poland and invigorated the nation’s Catholic identity. Resistance to the communist party grew resulting in a strike to promote workers’ rights at the Lenin Shipyard at Gdansk and led by Lech Walesa. Marshal law failed to suppress the movement that was supported by John Paul II and served as a trigger for the other movements and eventual fall of the Soviet Union. Other “liberationist” movements sought to change social standards and established ideologies. “Feminism” campaigned for women to have greater representation within church clergy and argued that “Christian language” showed a bias toward male role models. Liberation theology, particularly emphasized in Latin America, teaches that “all Christian theology and mission must begin with the view from below – that is, with the

sufferings and distress of the poor.”³² Today Christianity has shifted from the West to be the predominant religion of the global South. 46% of Africa and the majority of Korea are now Christian. Christianity has also spread rapidly in China and could become the nation with the greatest number of Christians in the next few decades.

Conclusion

Christianity has resisted the social and political pressure to conform to evolving ideologies throughout history. Christianity from the Early Church to today has persisted through dramatic social, economic, technological and political change in our world. The Early Church creeds gave clarity to Christian’s core beliefs, the Middle Ages debated Christian doctrine and the Reformation purified Christian theology. Christianity survived the challenges of The Enlightenment and revisionism in the Modern Period and overcame the Holocaust and social change of the twentieth century. Persecution, competing ideas, wars, kings, governments and time have not changed Christianity, but Christianity has indeed shaped the history of the world.

³² Ibid. 196.

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