

A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years

Q & A with Diarmaid MacCulloch, Host



Q: *A History of Christianity* corrects several misconceptions regarding Christianity's past and traditions, beginning with the earliest days of the fledgling religion. How does the true history of Christianity's origins differ from the version most of us know?

A: Today, Christianity is seen as a Western faith. Indeed, many in the Muslim world would see Western lifestyles as Christian lifestyles. But Christianity is not by origin a Western religion. Its beginnings are in the Middle East, where there still exist churches which have been Eastern since the earliest Christian era. For centuries, Christianity flourished in the East, and indeed, at one point, it was poised to triumph in Asia, maybe even in China. The headquarters of Christianity might well have been Baghdad rather than Rome, and if that had happened, Western Christianity would have been very different. The story of the first Christianity tells us the Christian faith is, in fact, hugely diverse with many identities. The history of Christianity has been the never-ending rebirth of a meeting with Jesus Christ, the resurrected son of God. For some, like the Oriental and Orthodox churches, the meeting has been through ritual and tradition, or the inner life of the mystic. For Western Catholics, through obedience to the Church. In Protestant churches, through the Bible. And it's the variety that is so remarkable in Christianity's journey. It's reached into every continent and adapted to new cultures. That's the hallmark of a world religion.

Q: Why does Christian history fascinate you?

A: When I was a small boy, my parents used to drive me around historic churches searching out whatever looked interesting, but soon, they realized they had created a monster. The history of the church became my life's work. For me, no other subject can rival its scale and drama. For 2,000 years, Christianity has been one of the great players in world history, inspiring faith but also squalid politics. It is an epic story starring a cast of extraordinary people—from Jesus himself and the first apostles to empresses, kings, and popes, from reformers and champions of human conscience to crusaders and sadists. Religious belief can transform us for good or ill. It has brought human beings to acts of criminal folly as well as the highest achievements of goodness and creativity. I will tell the story of both extremes. Christianity has survived persecution, splits, wars of religion, mockery, hatred. Today there are two billion Christians, a third of humanity—Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, Pentecostal, and many more. Deep down, the Christian faith boasts a shared core—but what is it? This is something I wanted to explore on a truly global scale.

Q: Your search for Christianity's true history begins with a visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. Why does this location tell us about the Christianity's global roots?

A: The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is said to have been built where Jesus was crucified and buried. At its heart is what's believed to be his tomb. The church built around the tomb of Jesus is the starting point for a forgotten story, a story that may overturn your preconceptions about early Christianity. Pride of place in this building goes to two churches—the Greek Orthodox church and the Roman Catholic church. It's true that Orthodoxy and Catholicism dominated Christianity in Europe, in the West, for its first 1,500 years. But as you walk around the edges of the church, you can't fail to notice other curious little chapels. They're not Western or European. They're Middle Eastern and African, and they tell a very different story about the origins of Christianity. Around the back of Jesus' tomb is Egypt's Coptic church. There are plenty of other churches at this location, but you need to know where to look: the Syriac Orthodox church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, to name a few. Many versions of Christian history would make these churches unorthodox, yet they are far older than better known versions of Christianity like Protestantism. It's easy for tourists to dismiss these ancient churches as quaint or even irrelevant. But that would be a big mistake.

Q: What are some general differences between the expansion of Western and Eastern Christianity?

A: In the West, Christianity became the religion of an entire empire. This meant the end of persecution. It brought power and wealth. It gave the Christian faith a chance at becoming a universal religion. In theory, it embraced Christians in the Eastern Empire as well as in the West.

But in the East, many Christians were unimpressed by the new alliance—even hostile. At stake were fundamental disagreements about the direction the faith should take. Jesus had told people to abandon wealth, not to ally with the rich and powerful. It was Eastern Christians in Syria who led the way, showing Western Christianity a pattern for spiritual life. We call this pattern monasticism, a way of life involving isolation from the world, austerity, and suffering. The expansion of Eastern Christianity has often taken place apart from any empire. It has often been a religion of dialogue, not conquest.

Q: In the series, you point out that the big theme that distinguishes Roman Catholicism from other denominations is the centralization of power, both in the church as an institution in the lives of its followers and within the church itself. When did this transfer of power take place?

A: The crucial steps toward centralized power were taken 30 years after Constantine's death in 337, during the time of Pope Damasus I, when the Bishop of Rome was established as bishop in unbroken succession from St. Peter. I'll stick my neck out and say that I don't believe that Peter was Bishop of Rome. And you'd be hard put to find anyone before the time of Pope Damasus who would make that claim. But as the successor to Peter, the Bishop of Rome became the Holy Father, the pope of all Christians in the West. The Catholic church was no longer an upstart. It had friends in high places now, a religion fit for gentlemen. The centrality of church power increased further during the time of Pope Gregory, around the fifth and sixth centuries. Gregory wanted to micromanage the fate of every soul in Europe. And to drive through this change, the papacy first targeted the clergy. Gregory made a change that was to redefine the popular image of the catholic cleric. Before that, most clergy who were not monks were expected to marry, but Gregory started a campaign to make all clergy to be automatically celibate. That's because he wanted the best, the most disciplined, and the most loyal clergy possible. With its foot-soldiers in place, the Catholic church now had a presence in every village, town, and parish doing its best to control every aspect of people's lives. What emerged was a single Latin Western society, unified by the Latin language and underpinned by a complex religious bureaucracy

Q: What really happened in the time commonly known as the Dark Ages?

A: In the 5th century, Barbarian invaders overran the western half of the empire. And in 1410, they took Rome itself. At that moment, the Latin church could easily have crumbled and become a footnote in European history. The centuries while the church stood alone after the fall of Rome are often referred to as the Dark Ages, as if civilization collapsed. Actually, that's not true. The Church was not about to die with the Empire, but it was at a crossroads. How did the Latin Church survive on its own? Well, the decisions made by the wily politician Pope Damasus began to pay off. The church still had influential friends, and it survived because of the great choice made by the people still holding to the last shreds of imperial power—the Roman aristocracy. Once they'd ruled the Roman Empire, and now they decided to rule the Church. Roman nobleman became bishops to preserve the world they loved. When the empire collapsed, the church stepped into the power vacuum. The Western church had survived. It had adapted. 400 years earlier, Christianity was against the establishment. Now it was the establishment.

Q: What has been the prevailing religious feeling in the “Christian West” for the past fifty years?

A: I come from three generations of Anglican clergy. My father was a good and faithful priest, much loved by his congregation. His was still the church of Christendom, which had endured since the time of Constantine the Great. But even as a boy, I could see that the *sort* of church and society he served was dying. My own life story makes me a symbol of something distinctive to Western Christianity—a skepticism, a tendency to

doubt which has transformed Western culture and transformed Christianity. In the years after WWII, I was a little boy growing up in Suffolk. I knew of the challenges facing Christianity. In the 1950s, church attendance actually increased in a chastened, frightened Europe. But that mood passed. The horrors of the first half of the 20th century had raised the old question Voltaire had posed about the goodness of God: In Auschwitz, where was a loving God? Europe was sickened by any system which made absolute claims to truth: Communism, Fascism, Christianity. So it was hardly surprising that in the second half of the 20th century an unprecedented, almost frivolous mood confronted European Christianity: religious indifference and apathy. Social changes brought a more relaxed attitude toward sex and marriage, movement between social classes and more individual choice. In the face of that, fewer people chose to spend Sunday in church. For 2,000 years, the Christian answer to the big questions of existence was faith in God, as revealed in Jesus Christ. That made sense of life and death. It taught right from wrong. But the recent history of Christianity has been described as a sea of faith ebbing away before the relentless advance of science and reason and progress. It's actually a much more surprising story. The tide of faith, perversely, flows back in, for Christianity has a remarkable resilience. And in crisis, it has rediscovered deep and enduring truths about itself.

Q: So where is Christianity going in the twenty-first century? Should God be worried?

A: It depends where you look. In my journeys around Asia, Africa, and Latin America, I've been struck by the exuberance of Christian life. Pentecostals, in particular...I think they surprise us. In fact, they may surprise themselves by what they find on their own Christian adventure. Outside Europe, numbers of Christians are rising at a phenomenal pace, but in the West they are falling. So what of the church here, in the Christian continent which first discovered doubt? If the history of the church teaches us anything, it's that it has an exceptional knack for reinventing itself in the face of fresh dangers. The modern world has plenty to throw at the church—skepticism, freedom, choice, but modernity can't escape the oldest questions at the heart of the messy business of being human, questions of right and wrong, purpose and meaning. A wise old Dominican friar once reminded me of the words of St. Thomas Aquinas: "God is not the answer. He is the question." And as long as the church goes on trying to ask the question, it will never die. Remember that Christianity is a very young religion. It spans a mere 2,000 years out of 150,000 years of human history. It would be very surprising if it had already revealed all of its secrets. We'll wait and see. That's just what Christians have been doing ever since they gathered as the sky turned black in Jerusalem at the foot of the cross on Golgotha.



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