

Introduction: Why study Christianity?

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Fig. Intro. 1. This crucifix, crafted by an unknown twentieth-century El Salvadorian La Palma artisan, depicts the cross of Christ as the tree of life. The dove represents the Holy Spirit.

Why study religion?

Most humans dead and alive have been and are to some small or great degree religious. In past and present, people have lived within a community in which one or several religions determine the worldview, influence thoughts, and guide behavior. Twenty thousand years ago, enormous effort went into painting religious imagery far inside caves in present-day France and Spain, and scholars now can only speculate about the meaning of these works of art. Understanding centuries of human history requires consideration of the religious attitudes of the people involved. Currently, daily news items include sometimes comforting and sometimes horrific evidence that religion continues to inspire humankind. Thus like it or not, the human species is connected to religion. An educated person ought to know something about the ways that religion establishes values and creates psychological and social order for its adherents.

Such study will help a twenty-first-century person understand world events and may also assist in one's personal relationship to religion.

One way to study religion is to read primary religious texts. For centuries, persons engaged in religious practice have written down their understanding of the meaning and effect of their religion. Official religious documents indicate how the community's leaders hoped that religion would function for and by the people. On the other hand, individuals' accounts of religious experience are instructive, since not only do they indicate the power of religion in people's lives, but often individuals describe their religion in a way other than how their leaders taught it.

For about 150 years, scholars have attempted an objective study of the phenomenon of religion. These phenomenologists analyze a religion, oftentimes other than their own, to understand why humans engage in such behavior and what good or ill comes from its **practice**. What do people believe? What is their ethical system? What are their collective and personal rituals? How does this system form a community? A well-known example of such a theory is the one identified with Karl Marx, who believed that religion is a fraud invented by the rich to keep the poor content in their position of subservience. Other theorists proposed far more benign theories about what religion is and how it functions.

religion = a communal worldview about ultimate reality enacted in rituals and expressed through ethics

Given the universality of religion, the magnitude of effort, time, and resources consumed in religious behavior, and the persistence of religion over tens or hundreds of thousands of years, cultural ecologists argue that there must have been important adaptive advantages to religion during our evolution.—Brian Hayden¹

Why study Christianity?

In the twenty-first century, approximately one-third of the human race identifies as Christian. To be aware of what all Christians mean by what they say and do, a student of Christianity will need to learn something about what its leaders claim about that meaning, both what is universally accepted and what is hotly debated, as well as about the historical development of the religion and the lived experience of its practitioners.

Studying Christianity is not simple. Like an interstate highway, the road called Christian is extremely broad. Some cars are traveling fast, others slow. Some are obeying the traffic regulations, while others are pushing the limits or ignoring

to practice a religion = to participate regularly in its activities

Christianity = a worldwide religion based on **faith** in the **resurrection** of **Jesus Christ**

faith = a communal worldview appropriated by an individual that guides one's life; confidence in a saving **God**

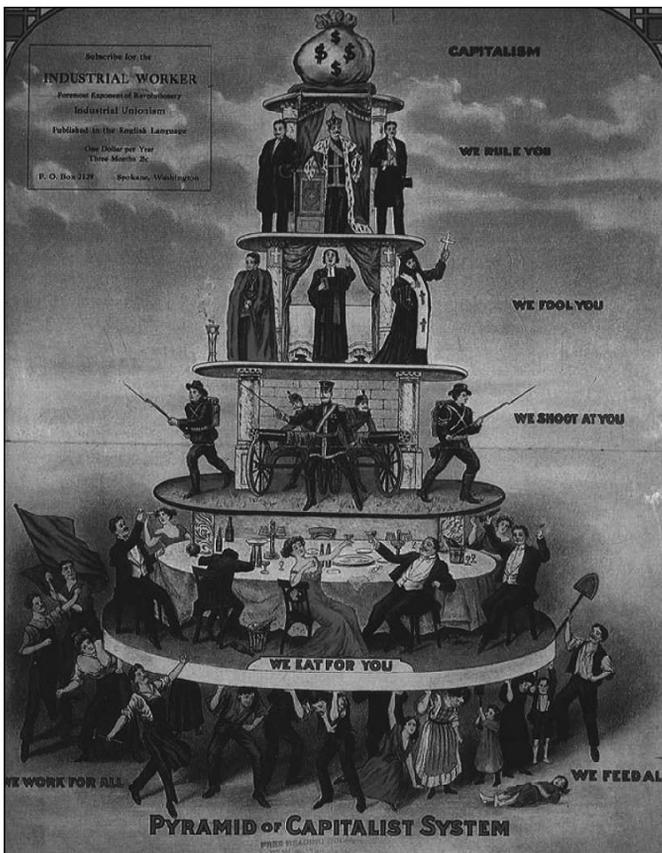


Fig. Intro. 2. Note the placement and role of religion in this 1911 poster depicting the Marxist Pyramid of Capitalist System.

God = (uppercase G) the supreme being

Jesus = the standard English spelling of Yeshua, the given name of a first-century Jewish preacher and healer

Christ = the anointed one, from the Greek *christos*, rendering the Hebrew *moshiach*, messiah

resurrection, being risen from the dead = a transformed human existence after death

theology = the systematic study of God and related topics

Trinity = the Christian mystery of one God as three, named Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

some of the rules entirely. There are shoulders alongside the roadway: Are the shoulders part of the roadway? There is, however, an edge where the pavement stops, so that everyone agrees that if you are driving through the adjacent cornfield, you are no longer on the highway. So it is that Christians over the centuries and around the world have practiced their faith in many and diverse ways.

An example of this diversity is another book titled *What Is Christianity?* In 1899, the historian Adolf von Harnack published a set of lectures that he had delivered at the University of Berlin, Germany, in which he argued that nearly all Christian teachings and practices were seriously in error.² Christians, Harnack said, are to imitate Jesus by living in the love of God and toward the neighbor—and that’s all there is to it. Harnack argued that nearly everything said in **theology** about Jesus and God, for example the teaching that God is a **Trinity**, was wrong and ought to be abandoned. Why Harnack’s answer to the question “What Is Christianity?” is so interesting is that, despite his fame as a theological thinker, nearly all teachers and believers of the religion reject his claims.



Fig. Intro. 3. What do you know about Christianity that could help you interpret this eighteenth-century painting?

Many different kinds of students take a course in Christianity. Some students are practicing Christians, some of whom are well versed in their own **branch** or **denomination**, some of whom know about the religion as a whole, and others who have only a rudimentary idea of what Christianity is all about. For some practicing Christians, the academic study of a wide range of Christian beliefs and practices may feel liberating, and for others it may be disturbing. For yet other students,

branch = one of the four major divisions within Christianity: Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Pentecostalism

denomination = a subdivision of a branch of Christianity, with a distinctive pattern of belief and practice



Fig. Intro. 4. What do you know about Christianity that could help you interpret this image? The man and the woman are not Jesus and his mother Mary.

Christianity is wholly unfamiliar, or their small knowledge of the religion may have been shaped by popular culture, for example by movies in which Christianity may be erroneously depicted. This textbook attempts to serve all these varied students by objectively describing commonalities and at least some of the differences within the religion.

How is this textbook set up?

Rather than a narrative history of the development of Christianity or a systematic study of theology, this textbook looks at the lived experience of the Christian **church**. Each of the twelve chapters addresses an issue that is fundamental to the Christian religion, and each chapter is subdivided into specific smaller questions. Each chapter includes:

church = any assembly of Christians; a building used for worship; a service of worship; also, a non-Christian religious organization; Church = part of the official title of an international, national, or local Christian organization

crucifix = the body of Jesus affixed to a cross, recalling his crucifixion, a method of execution in which the tortured victim was affixed to an upright stake and died of asphyxiation

1. A depiction of the **crucifix**, the primary symbol of Christianity, that is particularly appropriate to the topic, along with some information about the image
2. “An Answer from a scholar,” a short section in which one of the renowned scholars of religion answers the chapter’s question theoretically
3. “Answers from the churches,” an essay summarizing the Christian responses to the question in past and present, focusing on dominant agreement, yet with some reference to minority positions
4. In the sidebar, definitions of Christian terms that occur in boldface in the text
5. In the sidebar, quotations related to the text
6. Pictures to instigate discussion
7. Suggestions that include
 - a. A list of required vocabulary
 - b. Questions for further study
 - c. A topic for debate
 - d. A subject for a personal essay
 - e. A biblical passage, a short story, a novel, and a film that enhance consideration of the chapter’s question
 - f. A list of several books for further reading.

The textbook concludes with a chronology of Christian history and a book list.

Instructors can find useful additional information about the textbook's images and suggestions in a Teachers Aid provided on the product website.

Welcome, then, to this textbook and to its questions: *What Is Christianity?*

Suggestions

1. Review the Introduction's vocabulary: branch, Christ, Christianity, church/Church, crucifix, denomination, faith, God, Jesus, practice, religion, resurrection, theology, Trinity.
2. Compare the definition of Christianity given in this Introduction with other definitions in dictionaries and online, and present arguments for and against each.
3. Access and discuss a pie chart of the current global distribution of Christianity.
4. Discuss a current news item concerning some aspect of the Christian church. Do you understand the details that have been reported? What more information is needed?
5. Write a personal essay describing your connections with or knowledge of Christianity.
6. In the Bible, look up Acts 9:2 and Acts 11:26. Comment on the difference.
7. View and discuss the 1985 film *Agnes of God*, in which each of the three major characters holds a different understanding of Christianity.

For Further Reading

Micklethwait, John, and Adrian Wooldridge. *God Is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith Is Changing the World*. New York: Penguin, 2009.

Pals, Daniel L. *Eight Theories of Religion*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Putnam, Robert D., and David E. Campbell. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010.