

# Introduction: Why study Christianity?

## Crucifix, p. 1

The El Salvadorian folk painting of the crucifix combines the cross with the archetypal image of the tree of life. Since the second century there have been sermons and poems, and since the early Middle Ages church art, that describe the cross of Christ, not as the wooden pole of execution, but as a lush tree giving flowers and fruits to the whole world. The unknown artist of this folk crucifix shows Jesus himself becoming the tree of life. Efforts to discover the name of the artist were unsuccessful.

## Quotes and Images

p. 2: The cultural ecologist Brian Hayden presents a theory that accounts for the relationship between religious practice and the maintenance of human society from the beginnings of human history until recent times. His point: religion had to be of some good, or its practitioners would have lost out to nonreligious early humans.

p. 3: The Marxist poster, published by the *Industrial Worker* magazine in 1911, depicts religious authorities as fooling the poor into serving the upper classes.

## 2 What Is Christianity? Teaching Aids

p. 4: The painting by Antoni Viladomat (1678–1755) shows St. Francis experiencing a vision during which he received the wounds of the crucified Christ on his own body.

p. 5: The Eastern Orthodox icon reveres Emperor Constantine and his mother Queen Helena, who in her excavations in the Holy Land found what she and others considered to be the true cross of Christ.

### Suggestions, p. 7

6. In Acts 9:2, the emergent community is named the Way. Acts 11:26 reports that in Antioch, the religion was first given the name Christian. Luke wrote the Book of Acts in about 90 CE.

7. The 1985 film *Agnes of God*, adapted by John Pielmeier from his play by the same name, presents three different views of Christianity. One is held by the convent's mother superior, a sophisticated adult believer; another by a naïve, perhaps even insane, novice nun, who believes that her pregnancy was the result of a visitation by God; and the third by the critical court-appointed psychiatrist. In the film, the mother superior, played by Anne Bancroft, and the psychiatrist, played by Jane Fonda, argue about the meaning and value of Christian faith. Discussion of the film can contrast the three depictions. Another notable contrast is the many standard crucifixes in the film versus the tree-of-life crucifix heading this chapter.