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## The role of Judaism in Western culture and civilization

**Its historic role** Judaism has played a significant role in the development of Western [culture](#) because of its unique relationship with [Christianity](#), the dominant religious force in the West. Although the Christian church drew from other sources as well, its retention of the [sacred Scriptures](#) of the [synagogue](#) (the [Old Testament](#)) as an [integral](#) part of its [Bible](#)—a decision sharply debated in the 2nd century—was crucial. Not only was the development of its ideas and doctrines deeply influenced, but it also received an [ethical](#) dynamism that constantly overcame an inclination to withdraw into world-denying isolation.

It was, however, not only Judaism's heritage but its persistence that touched Western civilization. The continuing existence of the Jews, even as a [pariah](#) people, was both a challenge and a warning. Their liberation from the shackles of [discrimination](#), segregation, and rejection at the beginning of the modern era was understood by many to be the touchstone of all human [liberty](#). Until the final ghettoization of the Jew—it is well to remember that the term *ghetto* belongs in the first instance to Jewish history—at the end of the [Middle Ages](#) and the beginning of the [Renaissance](#), [intellectual](#) contact between Judaism and Christianity, and thus between Judaism and Western culture, continued. [St. Jerome](#) translated the [Hebrew Bible](#) into Latin with the aid of Jewish scholars; the exegetical work of the scholars of the monastery of St. Victor in the 12th century borrowed heavily from Jewish scholars; and the biblical commentary of [Rashi](#) (Solomon ben [Isaac](#) of Troyes) was an important source for [Martin Luther](#) (1483–1546). Jewish thinkers helped to bring the remarkable intellectual achievements of the [Islamic world](#) to Christian Europe and added their own contributions as well. Even heresies within the church, on occasion, were said to have been inspired by or modeled after Judaism.

**Its present role** In the modern world, while the influence of Jews has increased in almost every realm of cultural life, the impact of Judaism itself has diminished. The reason for this is not difficult to find. The [Gentile](#) leaders who extended emancipation to the Jews at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th were eager to grant political equality, but they also insisted that certain reforms of Judaism be accepted. With the transformation of Judaism into an [ecclesiastical](#) institution, largely on the model of German Protestant churches, its ideas and structures took on the cast of its [environment](#) in a way quite unlike what had ensued in its earlier confrontations with various philosophical systems. Indeed, for some, Judaism and 19th-century European thought were not merely [congruent](#) but identical. Thus, while numerous contributors to [diverse](#) aspects of Western culture and civilization are to be found among Jews of the 20th and 21st centuries—scientists, politicians, statesmen, scholars, musicians, artists—their activities cannot, except in specific instances, be considered as deriving from Judaism as it has been sketched above.

[Lou Hackett Silberman](#)

**Future prospects** The two central events of 20th-century Jewish history were the [Holocaust](#) and the establishment of the [State of Israel](#). The former was the great tragedy of the Jewish people, while the latter was the light of a rebirth, which promised political, cultural, and economic independence. The rest of the world has been forced to reconsider and reorient its relationship with Judaism and the Jewish people because of these two events.

At the same time, the centres of Jewish life have moved almost exclusively to Israel and [North America](#). The virtual absence of official [anti-Semitism](#) in North America allowed Jews to flourish in pursuits previously the preserve of Gentiles. Along with these developments, theological considerations and practical realities, such as interfaith marriage, have made Jewish religious culture a point of interest for many non-Jews.

In the early 21st century, Jewish religious life continued to fragment along ideological lines, but that very fragmentation animated both [moral imagination](#) and [ritual](#) life. While ultra-Orthodox Judaism grew more insular, and some varieties of Liberal Judaism moved ritual practice even farther away from traditional observance, a vital centre emerged, running from [Reform Judaism](#) to modern [Orthodoxy](#). This centre sought to understand Judaism within a broader [context](#) of interaction with other [cultures](#) while leaving unaffected the essentials of belief and practice. Predicting the future of Judaism is not an easy or enviable task, but there is reason to hope that the world will continue to draw upon the religious and cultural traditions of Judaism, both past and present.

[David Novak](#)

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## Judaism

Judaism is an Abrahamic religion -- one of the faiths that recognize Abraham as a Patriarch. Others include [Christianity](#) [Islam](#), and the [Baha'i Faith](#). Although Jews comprise only about 0.2% of the human race and 2% of the U.S. population, Jewish influence on the U.S. and the rest of the world has been vast -- far more than their numbers would indicate.

## Jewish history and texts

The term "G-d" is used in this essay to respect the Jewish prohibition against spelling the name or title of the deity in full. Dates listed which are prior to the 4th century [BCE](#) are approximate.

**Early History of Judaism, according to the Hebrew Scriptures:** Circa 2000 [BCE](#), the G-d of the ancient Israelites established a divine covenant with Abraham, making him the patriarch of many nations. The term *Abrahamic Religions* is derived from his name. These are the three or four major religions which trace their roots back to Abraham: Judaism, [Christianity](#), [Islam](#) and the [Baha'i Faith](#). The Baha'i faith is often not included among the Abrahamic religions. Also, smaller non-Jewish groups such as Falashas, Karaites, Mandaeanism, Rastafarians, Samaritans, etc. trace their spiritual roots back to Abraham. The use of this term is rapidly declining because the various religions that it refers to are evolving in different directions and becoming progressively different.

The book of Genesis describes the events surrounding the lives of the three patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (Joseph, who is recognized as a fourth patriarch by Christians is not considered one by Jews). Moses was the next major leader of the ancient Israelites. He led his people out of captivity in Egypt, and received the Mosaic Law from G-d. After decades of wandering through wilderness, Joshua led the tribes into the promised land, driving out the Canaanites through a series of military battles.

The original tribal organization was converted into a kingdom by Samuel; its first king was Saul. The second king, David, established Jerusalem as the religious and political center. The third king, Solomon built the first temple there.

Division into the Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah occurred shortly after the death of Solomon in 922 BCE. Israel fell to Assyria in 722 BCE; Judah fell to the Babylonians in 587 BCE. The temple was destroyed. Some Jews returned from captivity under the Babylonians and started to restore the temple in 536 BCE. (Orthodox Jews date the Babylonian exile from 422 to 352 BCE). Alexander the Great invaded the area in 332 BCE. From circa 300 to 63 BCE, Greek became the language of commerce, and Greek culture had a major influence on Judaism. In 63 BCE, the Roman Empire took control of Judea and Israel. Jewish developments during the 1st century CE:

About 24 religious sects had formed by the 1st century [CE](#) of which the largest were the Basusim, Essenes, Pharisees, Sadducees and Zealots. Many anticipated the arrival of the Messiah, a religious-political-military leader who was expected to drive out the Roman invaders and restore independence.

Christianity was established initially as a Jewish sect, centered in Jerusalem. The group followed the teachings of Yeshua of Nazareth, who is now commonly referred to by Christians as Jesus Christ. The group was led by James, one of Jesus' four brothers. They are generally referred to as Jewish Christians. Paul broke with this tradition, created an alternative belief system of Pauline Christianity and spread the religion to the Gentiles (non-Jews) in much of the Roman Empire. A third religion, Gnosticism, emerged in a number of forms, such as Christian and Jewish Gnosticism.

Many mini-revolts led to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 CE. The Jewish Christians were mostly wiped out and a few were scattered at this time. However, the movement started by Paul flourished and quickly evolved into the religion of Christianity. Jews were scattered throughout the known world. Their religion was no longer centered in Jerusalem; By the middle of the second century CE, Jews were prohibited from setting foot there. Judaism became decentralized and stopped seeking converts. The local synagogue became the new center of Jewish life. Animal sacrifice was abandoned. Authority shifted from the centralized priesthood to local scholars and teachers, giving rise to Rabbinic Judaism.

The period from the destruction of the temple onward give rise to [heavy persecution](#) by Christians throughout Europe and Russia. Many [groundless stories](#) were spread, accusing Jews of ritual murder, the desecration of the Catholic host, and continuing responsibility for the [execution of Jesus](#). Unsubstantiated rumors continue to be circulated today. In the 1930s and 1940s, Adolph Hitler and the German Nazi party drew on centuries of Christian-based anti-Semitism, and upon their own psychotic beliefs in racial purity. They organized the Holocaust, the attempted extermination of all Jews in Europe. About 6 million were killed in one of the world's largest examples of religious and racial intolerance.

The **Zionist** movement was a response within all Jewish traditions to centuries of Christian persecution. Their initial goal was create a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The state of Israel was formed on 1948-MAY-18.

There are currently about 18 million Jews throughout the world. They are mainly concentrated in North America (about 7 million) and Israel (about 4.5 million).

Below is a reasonably sized excerpt from the very lengthy, wide-ranging, and comprehensive entry found at

[Christianity | Definition, Origin, History, Beliefs ... - Britannica](#)

**Christianity** written by...Matt Stefon was a religion editor at Encyclopaedia Britannica. He earned B.A. degrees in English and American studies from the Pennsylvania State University and an M.A. in religion and literature and an...last updated: Nov 26, 2020 [See Article History](#)

**Christianity**, major [religion](#) stemming from the life, teachings, and death of [Jesus of Nazareth](#) (the Christ, or the Anointed One of God) in the 1st century ce. It has become the largest of the world's religions and, geographically, the most widely diffused of all faiths. It has a [constituency](#) of more than two billion believers. Its largest groups are the [Roman Catholic Church](#), the [Eastern Orthodox](#) churches, and the [Protestant](#) churches. The Oriental Orthodox churches [constitute](#) one of the oldest branches of the tradition but had been out of contact with Western Christianity and [Eastern Orthodoxy](#) from the middle of the 5th century until the late 20th century because of a dispute over [Christology](#) (the doctrine of Jesus Christ's nature and significance). Significant movements within the broader Christian world and sometimes [transcending](#) denominational boundaries are [Pentecostalism](#), [Charismatic](#) Christianity, Evangelicalism, and [fundamentalism](#). In addition, there are numerous independent churches throughout the world. *See also* [Anglicanism](#); [Baptist](#); [Calvinism](#); [Congregationalism](#); [Evangelical church](#); [Lutheranism](#); Oriental Orthodoxy; [presbyterian](#); [Reformed and Presbyterian churches](#).

This article first considers the nature and development of the Christian religion, its ideas, and its institutions. This is followed by an examination of several [intellectual manifestations](#) of Christianity. Finally, the position of Christianity in the world, the relations among its divisions and denominations, its missionary outreach to other peoples, and its relations with other world religions are discussed. For supporting material on various topics, *see* [angel and demon](#); [Bible](#); [biblical literature](#); [canon law](#); [creed](#); [Christology](#); [doctrine and dogma](#); [ecumenism](#); [eschatology](#); [exegesis](#); [faith](#); [grace](#); [heaven](#); [hell](#); [heresy](#); [Jesus Christ](#); [liturgical movement](#); [millennialism](#); [miracle](#); [monasticism](#); [monotheism](#); [New Testament](#); [Old Testament](#); [original sin](#); [papacy](#); [prayer](#); [priesthood](#); [purgatory](#); [sacrament](#); [salvation](#); [schism](#); [scripture](#); [theism](#); [theology](#); and [worship](#).

### **The essence and identity of Christianity**

At its most basic, Christianity is the faith tradition that focuses on the figure of [Jesus Christ](#). In this [context](#), faith refers both to the believers' act of trust and to the content of their faith. As a [tradition](#), Christianity is more than a system of religious belief. It also has generated a [culture](#), a set of ideas and ways of life, practices, and [artifacts](#) that have been handed down from generation to generation since Jesus first became the object of faith. Christianity is thus both a living tradition of faith and the culture that the faith leaves behind. The agent of Christianity is the church, the [community](#) of people who make up the body of believers.

To say that Christianity "focuses" on Jesus Christ is to say that somehow it brings together its beliefs and practices and other traditions in reference to a historical figure. Few Christians, however, would be content to keep this reference merely historical. Although their faith tradition is historical—i.e., they believe that transactions with the [divine](#) do not occur in the realm of timeless ideas but among ordinary humans through the ages—the vast majority of Christians focus their faith in Jesus Christ as someone who is also a present reality.

They may include many other references in their tradition and thus may speak of "God" and "human nature" or of the "church" and the "world," but they would not be called Christian if they did not bring their attentions first and last to Jesus Christ.

While there is something simple about this focus on Jesus as the central figure, there is also something very complicated. That complexity is revealed by the thousands of separate churches, sects, and denominations that make up the modern Christian tradition. To project these separate bodies against the background of their development in the nations of the world is to suggest the bewildering variety. To picture people expressing their [adherence](#) to that tradition in their prayer life and church-building, in their quiet worship or their strenuous efforts to change the world, is to suggest even more of the variety.

### **Christianity and world religions**

The global spread of Christianity through the activity of European and American churches in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries brought it into contact with all other existing religions. Meanwhile, since the beginning of the 19th century, the close connection between Christian world [missions](#) and political, economic, technical, and cultural expansion was, at the same time, loosened. Meanwhile, as the [study of religion](#) emerged as an academic [discipline](#), scholarship on non-Christian and non-Western religious traditions developed. Philosophers and writers in both [Europe](#) and the United States (particularly the [New England Transcendentalists](#)) drew from an increasing body of scholarly and missionary writing on Indian and Chinese traditions, incorporating some Eastern ideas—or at least their interpretations of them—into their own [idiosyncratic](#) religious visions of a reformed or reinvigorated Christianity. The World Parliament of Religions, held at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893, increased the visibility in the West of traditions from South and East Asia in particular.

After [World War II](#) the former mission churches were transformed into independent churches in the newly [autonomous](#) Asian and African states. The concern for responsible cooperation between the members of Christian minority churches and their non-Christian fellow citizens became more urgent with a renaissance of the [Asian](#) higher religions in numerous Asian states.

Missionaries of Asian world religions moved into Europe, the Americas, and Australia. Numerous [Vedanta](#) centres were established to introduce Hindu teachings within the framework of the [Ramakrishna](#) and [Vivekananda](#) missions. In the United States the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 dramatically increased the number of legal immigrants from East, Southeast, and [South Asia](#), the vast majority of whom were not Christians. In that year the [Hare Krishna](#) movement (formally the International Society for Krishna [Consciousness](#) [ISKCON]) was founded in the United States, attracting followers to its version of [Vaishnavism](#), one of the main branches of [Hinduism](#). Followers of South Asian [Theravada Buddhism](#); [Mahayana](#) Buddhism, particularly that of Japan (largely [Pure Land](#), [Nichiren](#) [especially [Sōka-gakkai](#)], and [Zen](#)); and Tibetan [Vajrayana \(Tantric\)](#) Buddhism founded temples (some of which were called “churches”), meditation centres, [community](#) centres, and other spiritual retreats. This influence penetrated Europe and [North America](#) on several fronts, whether in the form of a spontaneously received flow of religious ideas and methods of [meditation](#) through literature and [philosophy](#), through developments in psychology and psychotherapy, or through institutions within which individuals could develop a personal practice of meditation and participate in the life of the *sangha* (community). As a result, Christianity in the latter part of the 20th century found itself forced to enter into a factual discussion with non-Christian religions.

There has also been a general transformation of religious consciousness in the West since the middle of the 19th century. Until about 1900, [intimate](#) knowledge of non-Western world religions was still the privilege of a few specialists. During the 20th century, however, a wide range of people studied translations of source materials from the non-Christian religions.

The dissemination of the religious art of [India](#) and East Asia through touring exhibitions and the prominence of the [14th Dalai Lama](#) as a political and religious figure have created a new attitude toward the other religions in the broad public of Europe and North America.

In recognition of this fact, numerous Christian institutions for the study of non-Christian religions were founded: e.g., in Bengaluru (Bangalore), India; in Yangon, Myanmar (Rangoon, Burma); in Bangkok, Thailand; in Kyōto, Japan; and in [Hong Kong](#), China.

The readiness of encounter or even cooperation of Christianity with non-Christian religions is a phenomenon of modern times. Until the 18th century, Christians showed little inclination to engage in a serious study of other religions. Even though contacts with [Islam](#) had existed since its founding, the first translation of the [Qur'ān](#) (the Islamic holy book) was issued only in 1141 in Toledo by [Peter the Venerable](#), abbot of Cluny. Four hundred years later, in 1542/43, Theodor Bibliander, a theologian and successor of the Swiss reformer [Zwingli](#), edited

the translation of the [Qur'ān](#) by [Peter the Venerable](#). He was subsequently arrested, and he and his publisher could be freed only through the intervention of [Luther](#).

Christian exposure to Asian religions also was delayed. Although the name *Buddha* is mentioned for the first time in Christian literature—and there only once—by [St. Clement of Alexandria](#) about 200 ce, it did not appear again for some 1,300 years. [Pali](#), the language of the Theravada Buddhist canon (*see also* [Pali literature](#)), remained unknown in the West until the early 19th century, when the modern Western study of Buddhism began.

The reasons for such reticence toward contact with foreign religions were twofold: (1) The ancient [church](#) was significantly influenced by the Jewish attitude toward contemporary [pagan](#) religions. Like [Judaism](#), it viewed the pagan gods as “nothings” next to the true God; they were offsprings of human error that were considered to be identical with the wooden, stone, or bronze images that were made by humans. (2) Beside this, there was the tendency to identify the pagan gods as evil demonic forces engaged in combat with the true God. The conclusion of the history of [salvation](#), according to the Christian understanding, was to be a final struggle between [Christ](#) and his church on one side and [Antichrist](#) and his minions on the other, culminating with the victory of Christ.

### **Conflicting Christian attitudes**

The history of religion, however, continued even after Christ. During the 3rd and 4th centuries a new world religion appeared in the form of [Manichaeism](#), which asserted itself as a superior form of Christianity with a new universal claim of validity. The Christian church never acknowledged the claims of Manichaeism but considered the religion a Christian [heresy](#) and opposed it as such.

Christianity faced greater challenges when it encountered [Islam](#) and the religions of East Asia. When Islam was founded in the 7th century, it considered the revelations of the Prophet [Muhammad](#) to be superior to those of the [Old](#) and [New Testaments](#). Christianity also fought Islam as a Christian heresy and saw it as the fulfillment of the [eschatological](#) prophecies of the [Apocalypse](#) concerning the coming of the “false prophet,” as portrayed in the [Revelation to John](#). The religious and political competition between Christianity and Islam led to the [Crusades](#), which influenced the self-consciousness of Western Christianity in the [Middle Ages](#) and later centuries. In China and Japan, however, missionaries saw themselves forced into an argument with [indigenous](#) religions that could be carried on only with [intellectual](#) weapons. The old [Logos](#) theory prevailed in a new form founded on [natural law](#), particularly among the [Jesuit](#) theologians who worked at the Chinese emperor’s court in Beijing. The [Jesuits](#) also sought to adapt indigenous religious traditions to Christian rituals but were forbidden from doing so by the [pope](#) during the [Chinese Rites Controversy](#).

Philosophical and cultural developments during the [Enlightenment](#) brought changes in the understanding of Christianity and other world religions.

During the Enlightenment the existence of the plurality of world religions was recognized by the educated in Europe, partly—as in the case of the German philosopher [Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz](#)—in immediate connection with the theories of natural law of the Jesuit missionaries in China.

Only in the philosophy of the Enlightenment was the demand of [tolerance](#), which thus far in Christian Europe had been applied solely to the followers of another Christian denomination, extended to include the followers of different religions.

Some missionaries of the late 18th and 19th centuries, however, ignored this knowledge or consciously fought against it. Simple lay Christianity of revivalist congregations demanded that a missionary denounce all pagan “idolatry.” The spiritual and intellectual argument with non-Christian world religions simply did not exist for

this simplified [theology](#), and in this view a real encounter of Christianity with world religions did not, on the whole, occur in the 18th and 19th centuries.

[Ernst Wilhelm Benz](#) [John Hick](#) [The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica](#)

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## **The Christian religion: introduction - ReligiousTolerance.org**

**Current status of Christianity:** Christianity is the largest religion in the world, with a little over 2.4 billion members -- about one third of the world's population. This percentage has been quite stable for decades. It is significantly larger than the second largest religion: [Islam](#), which has about 1.6 billion members. Together, their followers form a slight majority of all humans.

Christianity is also the largest religion in the U.S. Canada, UK, Australia, New Zealand, much of Europe and some other countries. Conservative Christians provide the main opposition to freer [abortion access](#); equal rights [for gays, lesbians, bisexuals](#) and [transsexuals](#), including the right for [same-sex couples to marry](#); comprehensive [sex education](#) in public schools, etc. In contrast, liberal Christians promote these causes.

Worldwide, Christianity is now widely fragmented into approximately 30,000 denominations, sects, faith groups, etc. (Estimates differ). About 50% of persons worldwide who identify themselves as Christians are Roman Catholics.

### **Classifying individual faith groups:**

Many people view Christianity as a group of denominations rather than a single religious entity. Individual faith groups have been grouped as:

[Roman Catholic](#), the largest faith groups within Christianity;

[Eastern Orthodox Churches](#), 1 officially the *Orthodox Catholic Church*, is often referred to as the *Orthodox Church*, and *Orthodoxy*. It is a communion of 14 autocephalous (independent) churches in various regions that often coincide with national boundaries. Examples are the *Orthodox Church of Greece*, *Orthodox Church of Poland*, *Patriarch of Russia*, *Orthodox Church of Poland*, etc.

[Fundamentalist, other evangelical](#), mainline, and liberal Protestant,

[Progressive Christian](#), and others.

Sometimes the *Anglican Communion* is considered part of Protestantism; other times it is classified as a separate group within Christianity.

### **Distribution of Christian believers among the continents of the world:**

- About 33% of the world's population are Christian.
- Africa is home to more Christians than any other continent: 630 million believers are spread among four dozen nations. Zambia, Seychelles, Rwanda are more than 93% Christian. The *Pew Research Center* estimates that that up to 40% of all the world's Christians will live in sub-Saharan African nations by the year 2060,.

- Next are:
  - Latin America with 600 million;
  - Europe with 571 million;
  - Asia with 388 million
  - North America (U.S. and Canada) with 277 million
  - Australia with 29 million.

### **Decline of Christianity within the United States:**

The percentage of adults in the U.S. who identify themselves as Christians is in steady decline. A *Religious Landscape Study 2* was conducted by the *Pew Research Center* during 2007 and 2014. It showed that adult Christian affiliation decreased from 78.4% in 2007 to 70.6 in 2014. This is a decline of 7.8 percentage points over the 7 year interval, or about 11 percentage points per decade. If the poll were taken again, at the time this essay was last updated in mid-2018, at this rate of decline, the percentage of Christians in the U.S. would probably be close to two in three -- the lowest value in centuries.

Further analysis of the *Pew Research* data shows that between 2007 and 2014, the share of the population who identify as:

- **Mainline Protestants** dropped by **3.4%** percentage points from 18.1 to 14.7%.
- **Evangelical Protestant** dropped by **0.9%** percentage points from 26.3% to 25.4%.
- **Roman Catholics** dropped by **3.1%** percentage points from 23.9% to 20.8%.

Part of these changes was probably caused by the general secularization of America. Part was caused by a major rejection by older teens and young adults of the teachings of the faith group in which they were raised.

However, there was growth detected within two religious groupings in the U.S.:

- The market share of non-Christian faiths such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, etc. rose by 1.2 percentage points from 4.7% to 5.9%.
- Change among the religiously unaffiliated had by far the largest growth: by 6.7 percentage points from 16.1% to 22.8%. This group is commonly called the "nones." This is an unfortunate choice of terms because "nones" is a homophone<sup>3</sup> with the word "nuns." That is, they are two different religious words with the same sound and different meanings. Its use is confusing.

We recommend the term "**NOTA**" which is derived from "**NOT** Affiliated." Unfortunately, "Nota" is the name of an a cappella vocal group from San Juan Puerto Rico, the name of a car manufacturing company in Australia, and the acronym for the *National Organ Transplant Act* of 1984. However, "Nota" is used by the *Election Commission of India*, and similar groups in some other countries, to allow voters to express their support for "none of the above" candidates running for office.

### **What their religious beliefs are based upon:**

The main foundations for a Christian's beliefs are:

The [Bible's Hebrew Scriptures \(Old Testament\)](#) and [Christian Scriptures \(New Testament\)](#),  
 Church traditions,  
 A Christian's personal experience, and

Scientific knowledge.

Conservative groups tend to weigh the Bible and church tradition more heavily. Liberal groups tend to give greater weight to personal experience and scientific knowledge. To confuse matters further, different groups have derived different interpretations from the same biblical passages.

Many [core beliefs](#) are common to most Christian faith groups. e.g. the Trinity, the atonement, salvation by grace, etc. But many define the terms differently; they may agree on the name of the belief, but not its definition.

### **Interpretation of the Bible:**

Christian denominations approach the Bible with very different preconceptions. Although Christians largely agree on what the Bible *says*, they carry away very different beliefs about what the Bible *means*. They [interpret the Bible](#) in very different ways.

Some conservative Christian groups view the original autograph copies of the books in the Bible as [inerrant](#) -- without error -- written by authors who were directly [inspired by God](#). The Bible is viewed as totally consistent from Genesis to Revelation. Its teachings are valid from about 900 BCE when its first books were written, until today.

More liberal groups often view the Bible as a collection of historical documents written by fallible authors, each promoting their own spiritual and religious understandings and those of their faith groups. They note major conflicts within the books of the Bible which are partly attributed to the authors' differing beliefs and partly due to the evolution of beliefs among the Jewish and Christian communities of the approximately 1,000 years during which the 66 books of the Bible (73 books in the Catholic Bibles) were written.

With such a different fundamental understanding of the nature of the Bible, [denominations will inevitably disagree](#) about the [afterlife](#), [criteria for salvation](#), [atonement](#), [nature of God](#), [origin of the species](#), [the Earth and the rest of the universe](#), [divorce and remarriage](#), [eligibility for marriage](#), [the "fall" of humanity](#), [concern for the environment](#), the moral implications of a [homosexual and bisexual orientation](#), the moral implications of a [transsexual gender identity](#), and [dozens of other topics](#)

Unfortunately, there is no central authority within Christianity to whom Christians can appeal to resolve differences. Some pray to God for such resolution and believe that they obtain a response. However, there is some doubt about whether the response is actually coming from God. There have been a number of cases at denominational meetings where major disagreements occurred. The moderator asked that the attendees go off by themselves and pray. When they returned, both sides felt that God had approved their original beliefs. Few had changed their mind.

Among the denominations and faith groups that define themselves as Christian -- including the Catholic Church, Mormon churches, Jehovah's Witnesses, Southern Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, the United Church of Christ, Unification Church, etc., -- there are few major beliefs upon which everyone will agree completely.

Different Christian faith groups often define terms such as [Protestant](#), [Christian](#), [salvation](#), marriage, gender, etc. quite differently.

Every great moral and ethical conflict, including [human slavery](#), the [role of women](#), [abortion access](#), [homosexual and bisexual rights](#) has produced a major conflict within Christianity. Some have led to actual schisms. [Transsexual rights](#) almost instantaneously became the latest major topic of conflict in mid-2015 when the [U.S. Supreme Court settled the same-sex marriage debate](#) across the entire United States.

