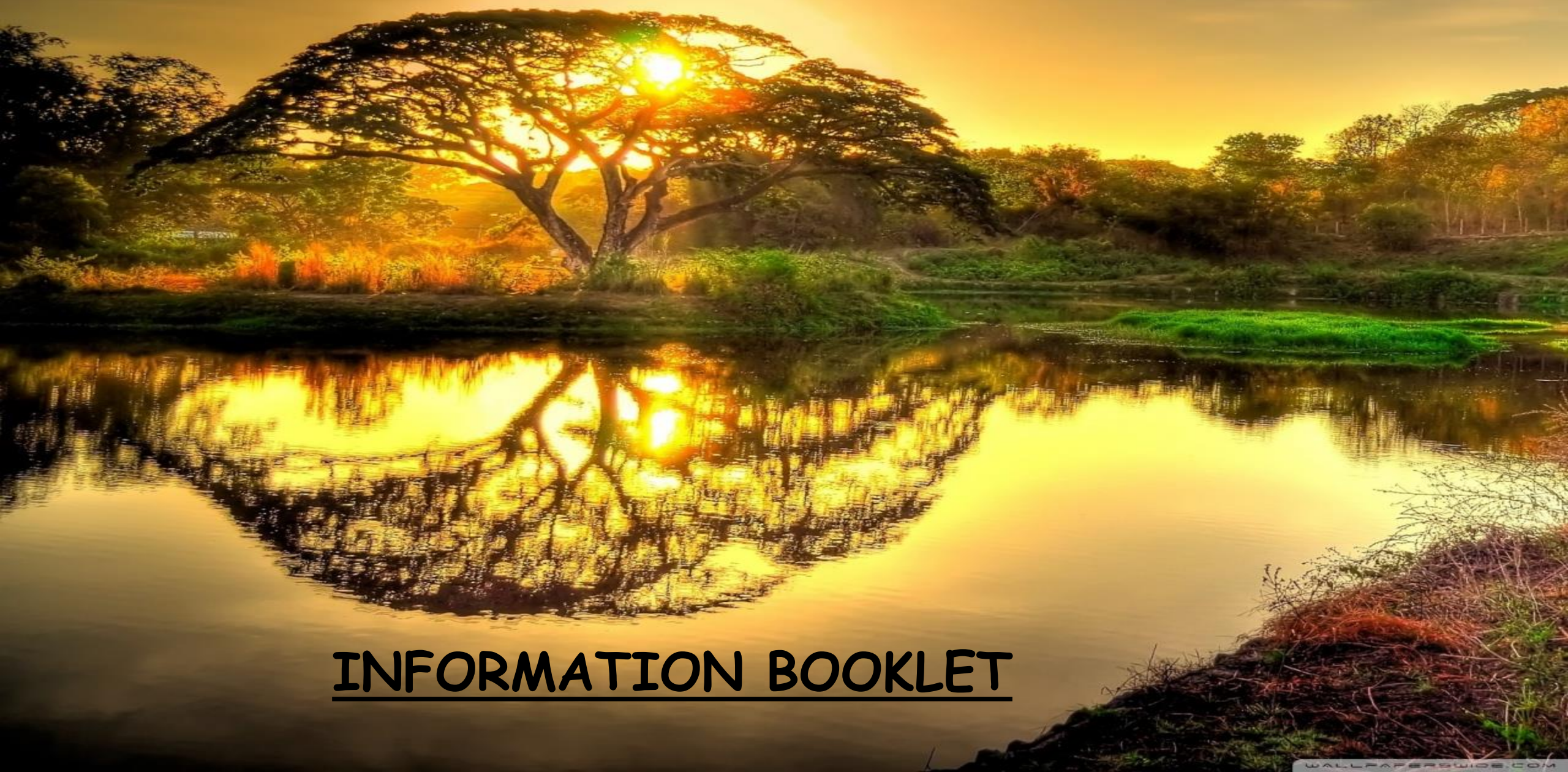
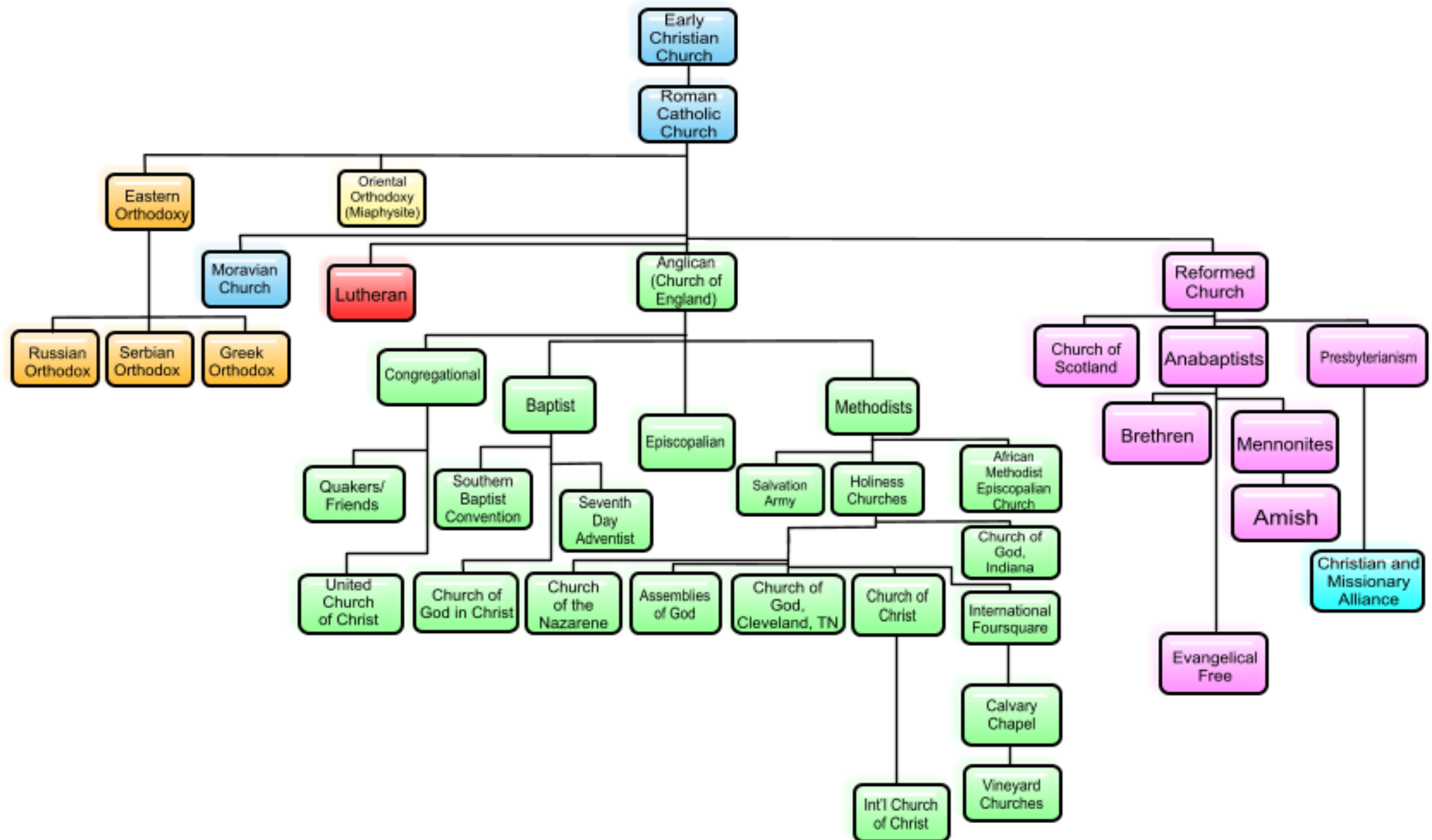


CHRISTIAN BELIEFS AND TEACHINGS



INFORMATION BOOKLET



The nature of God

Christianity as a world faith

Around one in three of the world's population claim to be Christians. Some are more committed to their faith than others but there is no doubting the fact that Christianity is a major influence on the lives of many people. Christianity is over 2000 years old, with roots that go even further back in history. It has had a massive influence on the history of the world and still exercises a great influence in the present day, even on people who are not Christians.

Christianity is founded on a belief that 2000 years ago Jesus died and rose from the dead. Christianity initially grew as early followers spread the teachings of the resurrected Jesus, and the messages inspired by Jesus' disciples and the apostle Paul. In the fourth century, it became the official religion of the Roman Empire when Emperor Constantine became a Christian.

In 1054 the faith split into Western Roman Christianity (now known as the **Catholic** Church), led by the Pope and Eastern **Orthodox** Christianity. These two groups still exist today, although the Western Roman Church in England was split in the sixteenth century when King Henry VIII declared himself the head of the newly established Church of England. Also during this period Christian's in Western Europe were breaking away from the Roman Church, and the **Protestant** branch of Christianity was forming. This is known as the Reformation. The Protestant Church has, since then, split further into groups (called **denominations**) such as the Baptist and Pentecostal Churches.

The three main branches of Christianity (Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant) now exist side by side and all three are rightly called Christianity.



All over the world the cross is a familiar symbol of Christian faith.

Beliefs about the nature of God

Even though the three branches of Christianity have some differences in their beliefs, ways of worship and lifestyle, their belief in God is universal. Christianity is a monotheistic religion. This means all Christians believe there is only one God, who they believe creates and sustains all that exists. God is believed to work through history, guiding and inspiring people to do God's will for the good of all people. Christians claim to have a relationship with God and communicate with God through prayer. A key statement of belief called the Nicene Creed begins: 'We believe in one God'. The first of the Ten Commandments that Christians should obey is:

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:2-3)



Here is God creating Adam in Michelangelo's painting for the Sistine Chapel.

It is important to remember that this commandment was first given to the Jews. Christianity has strong roots within Judaism including sharing the same God.

Although many Christians refer to God as 'he' and 'Father', they do not believe that God is male. God is thought to exist without the restrictions of gender, showing both traditional ideas of male characteristics, such as power and strength, together with traditional ideas of female characteristics, such as care, gentleness and love.

Describing God is very difficult. God is sometimes pictured in the sky in a human form but Christians do not believe God has a physical human body. The Bible says that God is spirit (John 4:24) and, in Luke 24:39, it is written that a spirit does not have flesh and bones. However in Hebrews 1:3, it says that Jesus was God's son, and is the exact representation of God on earth. God has no restrictions caused by physicality but exists as a spiritual being that defies description. Christians consider God to be holy, which means something set apart from everything else for a special purpose, and worthy of worship.

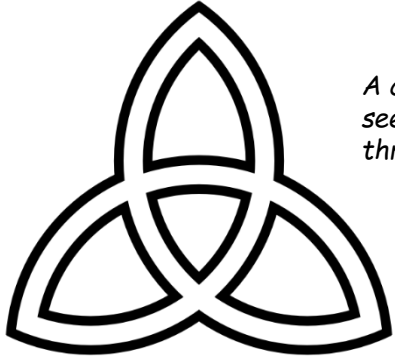
Study tip:

Even if you do not believe in God or the importance of God in the lives of others, it is important to remember that you are learning the views of Christians who do believe in God. It is not necessary to challenge these beliefs in the exam unless you are asked to do so in an evaluation question.

The Oneness of God and the Trinity

As we have already learned Christians believe in one God. This belief is developed further in the Trinity.

In simple terms, the concept of the Trinity is that there are three 'persons', all of which are God. Just as a clover leaf is made up of what seems to be three separate leaves, the one God is made up of three 'persons' - God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.



A common representation of the Trinity: You can't see where the lines begin or end, but there are three distinct parts

God is not a physical being, although one 'person' of the Trinity - Jesus (the Son) - did have a physical presence in history. It may be best to think of these three 'persons' as non-physical elements or realities. They are all God and so, within the Trinity, the idea of the Oneness of God should not be forgotten. God can be seen as one in three and three in one, all at the same time. This may seem like a contradictory idea, and difficult for the human mind to fully understand.

Another way to think about this is to consider ice, water and steam. These are different forms of the same thing (H₂O). The Trinity is similar: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit have different forms and are experienced in different ways even though they are all the same God.

The trinity describes all three of the following at once:

- There is only one God
- Each person of the Trinity is fully God
- The persons of the Trinity are not the same.

God the Father

Christians believe that the first person of the Trinity is God the Father. The Lord's Prayer, a prayer Jesus taught his disciples and which is commonly used in worship, begins with the words:

'Our Father in heaven'

God the Father is believed to be the creator of the earth and all living things on it. As creator of life, he acts as a good father would towards his children. He is believed to be all powerful (omnipotent), all loving (omnibenevolent), all knowing (omniscient) and present everywhere (omnipresent).

God the Son

The second person of the Trinity is often referred to as the Son of God and became incarnate on earth and in history through Jesus. Christians believe Jesus was both fully human whilst on earth and also fully God at all times.

God the Holy Spirit

Christians believe that once Jesus had left the earth, God sent the Holy Spirit to influence, guide and sustain the earth and all life on it. The Holy Spirit is believed to be the unseen power of God at work in the world in the past, present and future.

Key words:

Trinity: The belief that there are three persons in the One God; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are separate, but are also one being.

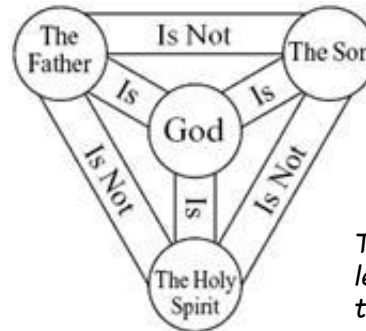
Holy Spirit: The third person of the Trinity whom Christians believe is the inspiring presence of God in the world.

Son of God: A title used for Jesus, the second person of the Trinity; denotes the special relationship between Jesus and God the Father.

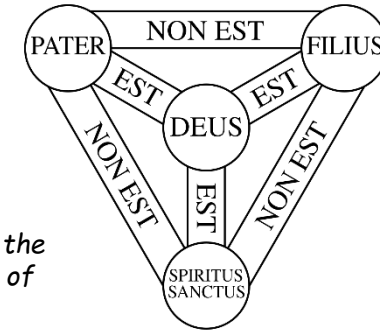
Incarnate: Becoming flesh, taking human form.

Omniscient: Knowing everything, a quality of God

Omnipresent: Present everywhere, a quality of God.



The Trinity: The diagram on the left is an English translation of the Latin text on the right



Study tip: Some find it easier to remember pictures and diagrams rather than words. Remembering the symbols on this page may help you recall what the Trinity is all about

Apostles Creed

I believe in God, the Father
Almighty,
Creator of Heaven and Earth
And in Jesus Christ
His only Son, Our Lord
Who was conceived of the Holy
Spirit
Born of the Virgin Mary
Suffered under Pontius Pilate
Was crucified, died and was buried.
On the third day, he rose again
He ascended into Heaven
and is seated at the right hand
of God, the Father Almighty.
He will come again to judge the
living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Holy Catholic Church,
the Communion of Saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting.
Amen.

Father: This suggests that God is the creator of the world. Also highlights his omnipotence

Son: This shows God as the saviour as he gave his only son Jesus to atone for our sins. Also highlights his Benevolence

Holy Spirit: This suggests that God is always protecting and watching over us. The Holy Spirit part of God also had a crucial role in the conception of Jesus. Also highlights his Benevolence

Different Christian beliefs about creation

Creation: Genesis 1:1-3

Christians believe that God created the earth and all living things on the earth. One story about the creation of the world is found in the first book of Genesis in Chapter 1. Many Christians believe that although it may not be scientifically accurate, this account contains religious truth, explaining that the process of creation was God's choice and that God designed and caused it to happen.

The book of Genesis begins:

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light" Genesis 1:1-3 (NIV)

The story continues by giving an account of how the universe was created, how the earth was made fit for life and finally how God created life, including humans, who were the last of God's creations. This is believed to have happened in six periods of time (days) after which God rested. While the whole story is interesting, for Christians the most important part is what is included in the quotation for the very beginning of the story (above), together with the belief that everything was created 'good'.

The importance of beliefs about Genesis 1 for Christians

Christians believe that the message within Genesis 1 is true and they live in an ordered world, created and sustained by God. The universe does not exist by chance and human lives have meaning and purpose. This belief encourages Christians to adopt a positive approach to life. Even when things go wrong, they retain this positivity, and they do not ignore issues but rather they think things through and act on their beliefs.

The statement that human beings are made in the image of God is highly significant for Christians. To be human is to have potential and this can be seen in the achievements made in the arts, science, medicine, sport and so on. Being in the image of God applies to all human beings, which means lives are of value, regardless of their physical, mental or intellectual capacity. Christians therefore believe they have a responsibility to treat everyone equally and to show all created beings, human and non-human, love and respect.

The role of the Holy Spirit

Many Christians interpret the story in Genesis 1 as a way of describing the creation of the world by God. Not all Christians believe that God made the world literally in six days. However, the belief that God is the creator, a role that continues today with the start of each new life, is central to their faith.

It is interesting to note the reference to 'the Spirit of God' hovering over the waters. It could be argued that even though God the Father is referred to as the creator, the Holy

Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, was the already active in what has become the world. This perhaps reinforces the Oneness of God rather than the three 'persons' of the Trinity.

Creation: John 1: 1-3

No one knows exactly when the story in Genesis 1 was first written but experts believe it to be around 500 BC. Around 600 years later, in the New Testament of the Bible, John opened his gospel with the following passage:

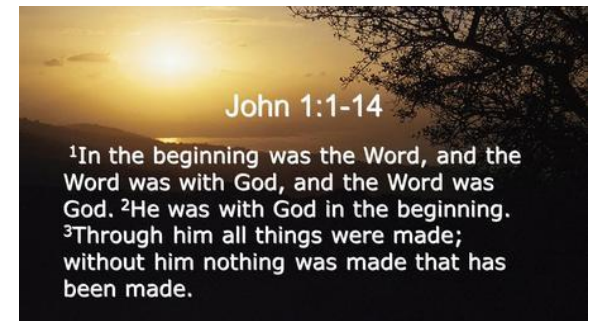
"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." John 1:1-3 (NIV)

Experts have discussed this extract for many years, and specifically the identity of the Word. Most are now agreed that 'the Word' refers to God the Son, who entered history as Jesus. This shows that not only was the Holy Spirit involved in the Creation, but that the Son was as well. Thus the whole of the Trinity were involved and have existed since the beginning. Christians believe that the three 'persons' of the Trinity are not part of a chain with God the Son replacing God the Father and in turn being replaced by the Holy Spirit. As explained before they all exist alongside each other within the same one God and always have done.

As the passage in the introduction to John's account of the life and work of Jesus, it shows that he clearly believed that Jesus was no ordinary man, not even just a special man, but God the Son, and therefore within the Oneness of God. The references to the creation of the earth in the Bible makes it clear to believers that the world was made by God. As mere humans, this is something our minds cannot fully comprehend, and is part of the mystery of God. Christians have used the concept of the Trinity to help them to understand that this is a divine mystery.



'Through him all things were made'



THE CHRISTIAN CREATION STORY

In the beginning, God created the universe. At first the earth was shapeless and covered in darkness, and God's spirit hovered over the waters. God said, "Let there be light". And there was light. God divided the day from the night, naming them 'day' and 'night'. This was the first day and God saw that it was good. On the second day God made the heavens to separate the water from the earth and on the third day he raised the dry land up from the waters below the heavens and commanded the earth to bring forth all plants. God saw that it was good. God then made the greater light for the day and the lesser light for the night, and he saw that it was good. This was the fourth day. On the fifth day God commanded the waters to fill with living creatures and the air to fill with birds. And he was pleased with what he saw. On the sixth day God commanded the earth to bring forth all kinds of living creatures and he saw that it was good. God then said "Let us make man in our own image". So God created man and woman in his own likeness and gave them authority over all living things. **God looked at everything he had made and it was very good.** On the seventh day, God rested.



The incarnation and Jesus, the Son of God

The incarnation

Belief in the incarnation is a central Christian belief. The word literally means 'embodiment', and refers to the belief that God took on human form as Jesus.

Many people in the world today know the Christmas story, the account of what happened when Jesus was born. Even though some of the details of the story we traditionally hear at Christmas may not be historically accurate, it does express basic Christian truths.

We don't know whether the people who lived at the time of Jesus, even many of those who followed him and believed that he was telling the truth, knew anything about the circumstances of his birth. He is often referred to as Jesus from Nazareth (the town in which he grew up) but there is little mention of Bethlehem, where he was born, apart from in stories about his birth. For Christian, the belief that Jesus was God in human form is more important than the details of his birth.

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke explain quite clearly that Mary, Jesus' mother did not conceive Jesus sexually. She was engaged to Joseph who took Jesus as his son, even though he knew he was not his natural father. An angel appears to Mary in Luke's gospel (Luke 1:26-38) and Joseph in Matthew's gospel (Matt 1: 20-21). In both cases explain that the conceptions was no ordinary conception and that the child would be no ordinary child. Mark and John do not include any information about the birth of Jesus. Maybe they do not think the story important, but they are both clear that Jesus is the Son of God.

"This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: his mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit." Matthew 1:18 (NIV)

Although many people question the virgin conception because it is not a natural thing to happen and is unlikely to have happened since, for Christians it is very important. It gives evidence for the belief, shared by all Christians, that Jesus is incarnate - made flesh in human form, fully God yet fully human and thus God the Son as part of the Trinity. It is a fundamental Christian belief that through the incarnation, God showed himself as a human being for around 30 years.



A stained glass window showing the baptism of Jesus



This stained glass window shows the angel Gabriel announcing to Mary the coming of Jesus

Son of God

Instead of telling the story of Jesus' conception and birth in his gospel, John is more interested in the meaning of it:

"The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

John 1: 14 (NIV)

Prior to this, in verse 1, John seems to identify 'the Word' as God the Son - one of the three persons of the Trinity. For Christians this gives clear support to the belief that Jesus was God incarnate, in the flesh as a man. This gives his words, deeds and promises great authority because they are the word of God, delivered by a man who was fully God as well as fully human. The belief that Jesus was God incarnate makes it easier for Christians to explain and accept as truth some of his actions whilst on earth, including miracles and his resurrection (rising from death).

Christians refer to Jesus as the Christ. It comes from the Greek word Christos, which means 'anointed one', which in turn is a translation of the Hebrew word *mashiach* (Messiah). The Jews developed an expectation well before Jesus was born that God would send a special leader, the Messiah, to save his people from tyranny and establish an age of global peace. Jews do not accept that Jesus is this Messiah. Christians believe that Jesus is the Messiah, but a spiritual one rather than a political one.

When Jesus was baptised, a voice from Heaven said 'You are my Son' (Mark 1:11). On one occasion, the disciple Peter referred to Jesus as the Christ. During this conversation at Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8: 27 - 30) Jesus immediately warned the disciples that they should not use this term for him, possibly because his opponents would have arrested him for blasphemy (claiming to be God). The gospel writers do not see it in their writings but it should be remembered that they were writing some years later. According to one of the gospel accounts, Jesus later accepted its use for himself at his trial when he was asked a direct question:

"Again the high priest asked him, 'Are you the Christ, the Son of God the Blessed One?' 'I am', said Jesus.."

Mark 14: 61b-62a (NIV)

"You may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.."

John 21: 31 (NIV)

"When Jesus was baptised, a voice from Heaven said 'You are my Son'."

Mark 1:11 (NIV)

What about Jesus' knowledge?

One problem that Christians have with believing in Jesus as both fully God and fully human is how to understand the knowledge of Jesus. There are many occasions recorded in the Gospels when it appears that Jesus' knowledge was limited. For instance, Mark writes about a time when people of Jesus' home town rejected him, which meant he was unable to perform any miracles there. When speaking about the end of the world, he said to his disciples that no one, not even he, knew when that would happen. If Jesus was really divine, how could he not do or know these things?

One possible answer to this can be found in Paul's letter to the Christians at Philippi, a Christian community in Macedonia. There he quotes from what many Christians think was a very early Christian hymn. It says that at the incarnation, Jesus willingly became fully human. Paul describes Jesus as coming in '*the nature of a servant*', which might be a pointer to the fact that Jesus was born into a poor family, shown because they could only give the '*poor man's offering*' when they went to the Temple after Jesus' birth. Christian writers say that God could only be properly human by giving up most of His divine knowledge. Jesus was still fully God in his relationship with and understanding of God, but he made this act of supreme self giving.

' Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God, something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!'

(Philippians 2:5-11)

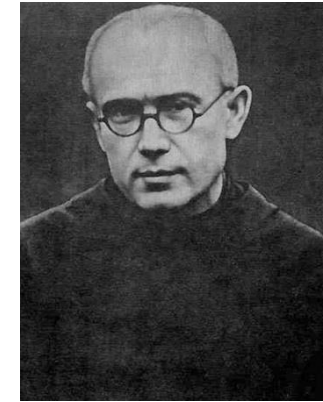
The importance of belief in the incarnation for Christian lifestyle

Belief in the incarnation is central to how Christianity understands the extent of God's love for humanity, but it also has great significance for how Christians believe they should live. The author of 1 John wrote 'This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another' (1 John 4:10-11)

This humility and selfless love for others can be seen in the lives of some Christians. For example, Mother Teresa left the relative comfort of her convent to live among the poorest people in India as one of them, and Father Kolbe offered his own life in order to save another's in Auschwitz.



Mother Teresa



Maximillian Kolbe

Key terms:

Incarnation: becoming flesh, taking on human form. (the word literally means 'embodiment', and the term refers to the belief that God took on human form as Jesus.)

Blasphemy: a religious offence which includes claiming to be God.

Atonement: restoring the relationship between people and God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The crucifixion

Jesus' crucifixion

One of the most detailed stories from the whole of Jesus' life is the account of how he died. He was sentenced to death by Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, and his death was to be by crucifixion.

Crucifixion was a particular form of execution favoured by the Romans. It consisted of the victim being laid down onto a large wooden cross, attached to it using nails, rope or sometimes both then having the cross lifted upright. Once the cross was upright in the ground, the victim waited for death, usually by asphyxiation (not being able to breathe). Some managed to resist death for a couple of days whilst others lasted a matter of a few hours. All of this happened in public. Jesus was crucified in a similar way to others, including the two men crucified on either side of him.



A representation of Jesus' crucifixion

Even though Christians believe that Jesus was the Son of God, it does not mean that he was in some way spared the pain and horror of his crucifixion. Not only was he fully God, he was also fully human, and had the same feelings as anybody else. However, according to Luke's version of the story, possibly told to him by people who were there, Jesus forgave the guards who crucified him because they did not realise the significance of what was going on. He also had conversations with the two men who were crucified with him, promising one of them that soon he would join God in paradise. Finally after around 6 hours on the cross:

"Jesus called out with a loud voice, 'Father into your hands I commit my spirit'. When he has said this, he breathed his last"

Luke 23-46 (NIV)

One of the Roman centurion in charge of the crucifixion praised God and acknowledge that Jesus had been a righteous man who had done nothing to deserve to be crucified. According to Mark 15:39 he said:

"Surely this man was the Son of God"

Mark 15:39 (NIV)

The impact of the crucifixion for Christians today

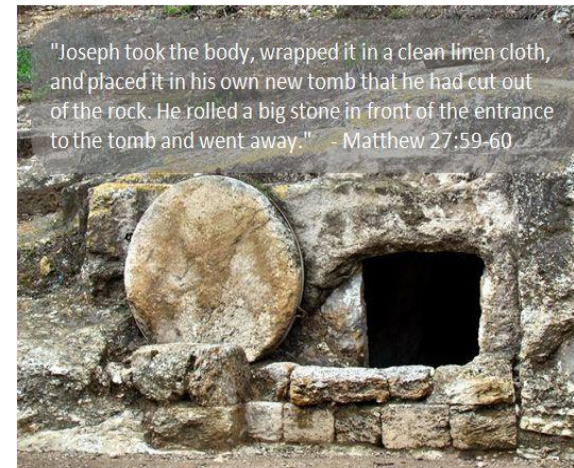
There are several ways in which the crucifixion affects Christians today. It give them confidence that if they accept Jesus' sacrifice, sin can no longer destroy their lives because God forgives those who faithfully ask for forgiveness. They believe that suffering is a part of life, just as it was a part of Jesus' life and that, having also experienced it God understands what the sufferer is going through.



A plain wooden cross is used by many Christians as a symbol of their faith.



Other Christians choose to use a crucifix as a symbol of their faith.



"Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away." — Matthew 27:59-60

Jesus is buried

Once Jesus was dead, and the Roman guards had made sure that he was, a man call Joseph for Arimathea asked for the body of Jesus so he could bury it. Joseph was a member of the council that had pressed for Jesus to be crucified but he had himself disagreed with it. As there was insufficient time to bury Jesus properly because the Sabbath day of rest and religious observance was due to start, he laid the body of Jesus in a cave-like tomb and rolled a large stone to block the entrance.

The Resurrection and ascension of Jesus

It is quite normal that once a person dies, they only live on in the memories of those who knew and loved them, and maybe in the work they did while alive. However, in Jesus' case his death was not the end. This only make sense if Jesus is, as Christians believe, the Son of God.

The resurrection of Jesus

According to accounts of Jesus' burial in the New Testament, he was place in a tomb late on Friday afternoon. We know this because it states that Shabbat (the Sabbath) was due to begin and Jews keep Shabbat at sunset every Friday. There was no time to anoint his body and bury him properly, so was laid in a cave-like tomb. How long he remained there is unclear because early on the Sunday morning after Shabbat had ended, some of Jesus' female followers went to the tomb to anoint the body and prepare it for proper burial. There are some differences in the gospels as to the identity of these women, although all four name Mary Magdalene as one of them, and according to the gospel of John she was the only one.

Although other details vary between the four versions of the story, they all make it quite clear that the body of Jesus was nowhere to be found, a fact that was reported to the disciples. Each story mentions the women meeting a man or two men, who may have been angels, who told them that Jesus had risen from the dead and that they should pass the word onto his followers, including the disciples. The belief that Jesus rose from the dead is as the resurrection and is a key teaching in the Christian faith. For Christians it is significant evidence of the divine nature of Jesus.

For the next few days or weeks, Jesus appeared to several people, including Mary Magdalene and the disciples, telling each that he had risen from the dead as he had predicted to them when he was alive. This ensured the story spread quickly and that there were several different witness to the claim that he had risen.



An empty tomb: a symbol of the resurrection of Jesus



This is one representation of Jesus' ascension.

The ascension of Jesus

Just as the resurrection is a matter of faith and interpretation, so is the **ascension**. There are other explanations but if Jesus had the special power to rise from the dead, it is equally possible that the same power means that he was able to leave the earth physically and return to **heaven**. Only Mark's and Luke's gospels finish off their story by telling their readers that, after meeting his disciples and asking them to carry on his good work, Jesus left them for the last time.

" When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven" Luke 24: 50-51 (NIV)

The significance of the resurrection and ascension for Christians today

- Christians believe the resurrection shows the power of good over evil.
- Christians believe that by accepting Jesus, they can also be resurrected in some way. Therefore they have no need to fear death.
- Jesus' resurrection assures Christians that God will forgive their sins if they follow the teachings of Christianity. By doing so, they will become closer to God in this life and beyond.
- For Christians, the ascension shows that Jesus is with God.
- It paves the way for the coming of the Holy Spirit to provide comfort and guidance.
- Without the resurrection there would be no Christian faith.

Key terms

Resurrection: 1. rising from the dead. 2. Jesus rising from the dead on Easter day. An event recorded in all four gospels and the central belief of Christianity

Ascension: the event, 40 days after the resurrection, when Jesus returned to God, the Father in Heaven.

Heaven: a state of eternal happiness in the presence of God; the place of eternal peace ruled over by God

Resurrection and life after death

For thousands of years, people have believed that death is not the end and that there is new life after death. Ancient civilisations such as the Egyptians invested a huge amount of time and money in preparing for death and burial long before an individual died. Many of the grave treasures buried with important people were put there for the dead person to use in the afterlife.

Going even further back in time, there is evidence that bodies were buried respectfully with flowers, jewellery, weapons and valued possessions. Christians may differ in their practices but the dead are treated with a similar respect, and life after death in some form is expected.

Resurrection

Many Christians believe that resurrection is a reality. However, there are different beliefs amongst Christians about what happens when a person who has died is resurrected. Some believe that a person's soul is resurrected very soon after death occurs. Others believe that some time in the future, when Jesus will return to judge, the dead will be raised. The Catholic Church and some Orthodox Churches are quite clear that this resurrection will be a bodily one and that people will once again receive their old body but transformed into a glorified state in which suffering will not exist.

"So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body."

1 Corinthians 15:42-44 (NIV)

What the resurrection of Jesus means for Naomi

I believe that the penalty for sin is to be separated from God, which I deserve. Since Jesus took that punishment himself when he died on the cross, by trusting in him I no longer face that penalty. Instead, while I know my life now is temporary, I have a certain hope of a permanent eternal future with Jesus. This changes my whole perspective in life. In 1 Corinthians it is written by Paul how Jesus has vindicated - proven right - in his resurrection, and all who are trusting in him can be sure they will have eternal life with him, so I am sure that it is true and am confident in the face of death.



Naomi believes that trusting in Jesus assures eternal life with him

Life after death

If resurrection is a reality for people once they have died, life after death must also be real. In the case study, Naomi makes it clear that her belief in life after death affects how she lives her life in a positive way. Like other Christians, she feels God's presence in her life and is confident of the love that God shows towards her. She believes that by trusting in God her life after death will remain in the presence of God.



The afterlife and judgement

The belief in resurrection complements the belief that there is another life when this one ends. For Christians, there are different 'options' which are seen as rewards or punishments. As these options last for eternity, the decision-making process has to be operated perfectly. Christians are comforted by the belief that this process is under God's control.

The afterlife

Religions have varying ideas on the afterlife, and groups within religions have slightly different views. Christians, for example, believe that human beings receive eternal life as a gift from God, and so a belief in the afterlife is for Christians dependent on a belief in God. The afterlife either begins upon death or at the Day of Judgement when Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead, as the Apostles' Creed says. At this time, Christians believe their souls, enter a different dimension about which little is known.

The Apostles' Creed, a statement of Christian belief dating back to around 400AD but which is still considered to be important today, contains the following beliefs:

"He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father,

And he will come to judge the living and the dead:

I believe in...

The resurrection of the body;

And life everlasting."

The Apostles' Creed

Judgement

Christians believe that it is God who decides the fate of those who die. God will take into account the life of the person and the extent to which they have tried to get close to him, by following the teaching and example of Jesus. Jesus told a parable recorded in Matthew's gospel that contains a vivid description of God in judgement:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was ill and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

Matthew 25:31-36 (NIV)

The 'sheep' on his right asked when they had done these things. They were told that whenever they have done them for others, they have done them for him. He then condemned the 'goats' for not acting in this way for others.

This passage gives Christians a good idea about the criteria God uses in judgement and shows what they need to do to be saved. Jesus makes it clear that in serving other people, Christians are serving him. In his gospel, John records a conversation Jesus had with a disciple Thomas, in which Jesus was preparing his disciples for his death. Jesus told them that he would go and prepare a place for them so that they could join him. Thomas said, 'We don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' Jesus answered him:

"I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to Father except through me."

So Christians believe that simply treating other people well and in accordance with Christian morality is not enough to guarantee a good afterlife. They believe that Jesus is the Son of God and following his teaching is also important.

Heaven and hell

The quote about judgment in Matthew 25 paints a vivid picture of what judgement may be like. The result of this judgement for Christians is either that they are to experience the presence of God eternally (heaven) or that they are unable to experience God's presence (hell). Catholics believe in an intermediate state called purgatory where souls of some Christians wait to receive their place in heave. Because nobody has experienced heaven, hell or purgatory and come back to earth to tell us about it, our knowledge of them is very limited and often linked to imagery from centuries ago.



Heaven

Traditional paintings of heaven show it as beyond the clouds and where God sits on a huge throne, surveying the earth with angels flying around. It is seen as a place of peace, joy and freedom from pain, and a chance to be with friends and family who are already in heaven. Whether this is a spiritual or physical existence is unclear. In pictures and images it is often represented as a physical paradise rewarding the good, possibly because this is the easiest way to represent it. However, this does not mean that Christians necessarily believe it is physical and not spiritual.

Among Christians there are different opinions about who will be with God eternally. Some Christians believe that only those who believe in Jesus will be with God in heaven.

Other Christians think that heaven is reserved for Christians and perhaps followers of other faiths who have lived good, principled lives and pleased God in doing so. Others believe it is for all those who call themselves Christians regardless of how they live their life, and that simply the act of being baptised into the faith is almost a guarantee of heaven. All Christians believe that God will forgive sins and this will enable people to approach God's presence. The Parable of the Sheep and Goats does seem to indicate that it is a reward for both faith and actions - only one is insufficient.

A more modern less literal view which many Christians hold is that heaven is a spiritual existence of peace and happiness in the eternal presence of God.

Hell

Hell is often seen as the opposite of heaven. Christians understand it to be a state of existence without God. It is often depicted in paintings to be a place of eternal suffering, terror, fire and torture ruled by the Devil (Satan). It is pictured as a fiery pit somewhere beneath the earth. This is perhaps a believer's image of what it would be like to be permanently without God.

This leaves the difficult question about whether non - Christians go to hell if heaven is reserved for Christians. This would appear to be very unfair and, as Christians believe God is incapable of being unfair, many believe that all those who believe in God and try to follow him will be accepted by God and be welcomed eternally into his presence.

However, there is great debate about whether a loving God would condemn people to eternal torment and pain. If this is not the case, perhaps a more modern interpretation is that hell is an eternal state of mind of being cut off from the possibility of God. This would be what awaits a person who throughout their life did not acknowledge God or follow his teachings.



The Sheep and the Goats

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

37 "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? 39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

40 "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

44 "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

45 "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

46 "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Sin and salvation

The origins and meaning of sin

Sin is any action or thought that separates humans from God, that is, an action or thought against God's wishes or against the principles of morality God requires his people to follow. Sinful thoughts such as anger can lead to sinful actions such as assault or murder; lust can lead to adultery or rape. Many sinful actions such as assault, murder and rape are also illegal (against the laws of the state) whereas some, such as adultery, are not. However, just because some sinful actions are not illegal, as far as Christianity is concerned it does not make them right. Christians believe that all humans commit sins. Indeed as nobody is perfect, it is impossible not to sin.

This is further reinforced by the idea of **original sin** in which some Christians believe. This idea suggests that human beings are born with an in-built tendency to do wrong. This idea is introduced in the story of Adam and Eve, who, despite the paradise they lived in, sinned against God by breaking an instruction from God. This instruction was not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Once they had done this, they became aware of sin through their own sinful action, an awareness that is shared by all humans descended from them. The result was a separation from God, and death.



This painting shows the serpent tempting Adam and Eve to eat the fruit, and the consequences of doing so.

Many have interpreted the serpent that tempts Eve to eat the forbidden fruit to represent Satan (the Devil) who is seen as a force of evil. Christians recognise that humans are tempted to do things that displease God, such as abusing drugs, misusing money by spending it on things God would not approve of or using the opportunities technology provides in a way that is harmful to others. As temptation is powerful and difficult to resist, some Christians believe its origins are with Satan who is constantly trying to tempt humans to disobey God.

Christians believe that God gave humans free will in order to choose how they live their lives. However, this does not mean that they can do whatever they want. They believe that if people use their free will to make choices that God would not approve of, these will be sinful and will separate them from God. The **Ten Commandments** (Exodus 20:1-19), the Beatitudes (Matthew 5: 1-12), and other Christian teachings give guidance to allow Christians to use their free will wisely rather than to commit sinful actions.

Salvation

In Christian belief, **salvation** means to be saved from sin and the consequence of it and be granted eternal life with God. Sin has separated human from God who is holy, and salvation enables humans to get close to God again. These are the main Christian ideas about how salvation can come about:

- Salvation through good works - the Old Testament makes it clear that a person achieves salvation by having faith in God and obeying God's law.
- Salvation through **grace** - salvation is given by God through faith in Jesus. It is not earned or deserved but is a gift for the faithful.

While salvation by works is a predominantly held viewpoint, many Christians dispute this and argue that elsewhere in the Bible there is evidence of salvation by grace alone (Ephesians 2: 8-9).

The role of Christ in salvation

The role of Christ in salvation

Many people have wondered why Jesus is seen by Christians to be so special. They accept much of his teachings as being a way of living a good life but find it hard to grasp the meaning behind Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

The book of Romans in the New Testament is believed to have been written by Paul, around 25 years after Jesus was crucified, to explain that salvation is offered through the life and teachings of Jesus:

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."
Romans 6:23
(NIV)

Christians believe that Jesus' death makes up for the original sin committed by Adam and Eve and so can bring people back to God. The crucifixion was the result of human evil set against an innocent man. As Son of God, Jesus could easily have avoided being crucified. Indeed, while he was being crucified, some people shouted to him that he should use his powers to get down from the cross. However, he knew that his death was necessary to restore relationship between God and believers and make the opportunity for salvation available to all people.

Jesus' resurrection, three days after his death, shows Christians that death has been defeated and that the goodness of Jesus had defeated the evil of sin. So Christians believe that through Jesus' death and resurrection, humans can receive forgiveness for sin, are able to get close to God and will receive eternal life.

" For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive."

Paul writing in 1 Corinthians 15:21 (NIV)

What salvation means for Charis

I believe in the teachings in the book of Romans. Sin is described as something so serious that God sent his son Jesus to die for it. As a Christian I believe that instead of facing death for sin, Jesus took my sin upon the cross. Since I was a child I have accepted this gift of god's love and put my faith in Jesus. Whether at home or at work, I choose to live a life of gratitude to God who has given me the greatest gift, salvation.

The fact that Jesus rose from the dead shows that God accepted Jesus' sacrifice as atonement, which means that Jesus restored the relationship between God and humanity. Jesus made salvation possible because God will now forgive anybody who asks in faith. Christians believe that this is why God came to earth in the form of Jesus and that it demonstrated the importance of following his teachings.

Atonement

As the Bible makes clear, atonement removes the effects of sin and allows people to restore their relationship with God. This is only possible because Jesus atoned for the sins of mankind when he died and rose again. In the first letter of John, it is written:

" ... if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father-Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the whole world."

I John 2:1-2 (NIV)

God is holy and so does not overlook sin. For many Christians, although the penalty of sin must be paid, Jesus took the sins upon himself and suffered the penalty for all humankind. He was the only one who could do this. Not only did Jesus pay the debt of sin on behalf of those who believe and put their trust in him but also made it possible for all those who follow his teachings to receive eternal life with God.