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Christianity as a Basis for Europe

Outline of Lecture

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Introduction

Christianity became the unifying center of a new culture, mingling elements of the Judaic and classical views into a new outlook on human nature and destiny, the world, and the character and purpose of God. Unlike other views to which people turned in the empire, Christianity made an appeal to all social classes. It said much which had been said before--reasserting many tenets of Judaism, borrowing heavily from classical thought to argue and explain its own beliefs, and adopting many features of Judaism and Roman government for its own worship and organization. At the same time, Christians proclaimed radically new beliefs which transformed all those borrowed elements into a new world view:

(1) Jesus, the Christ, or anointed one, fully God and fully man, had voluntarily suffered, died and risen to free men and women from the limitations of their nature and the defects of the natural world and to give them eternal life as unique persons;
(2) by his sacrificial life and death he had ushered in a new age, the Coming Kingdom of Heaven, and established a radical new ethic affecting all of life;
(3) the future as well as the past assumed new significance as mankind awaited and joined in achieving the coming kingdom both in this world and the next;
(4) empowered by their newfound freedom and worth as God's own, human beings had a powerful ethical basis for living which infused all social relations and human activities.

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1. Put those statements above in your own words. Don't use mine. Do they sound different in your own words?
 2. Are the statements above or your own phrasing of them an accurate version of what Christianity represented (represents)?
 3. Fully God and fully man? What does that mean? Does that statement alone define Christianity?
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It is perhaps even more difficult to be objective about Christianity than Judaism, since it has had a greater, more direct influence on the values and ideals of Europe than Judaism. Again, however, the historian must put his own faith, or lack of it, aside and attempt to see the Christian outlook as it was in the empire. This will not obscure the unique capacity of this faith to act as the formative force in the creation of a new culture--Europe. This chapter treats Christianity in its formative stage up to the end of the second century.

Frame of Reference:

Christianity from Judaic Beginnings to 200 A.D.

Christianity sprouted from the soil of Judaism. The central figure of the new faith and cult was a Jew, as were the leading figures and earliest adherents who saw Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfillment of their faith rather than the founder of a new one. So we must look briefly to [Judaism](#) of the mid-sixth to the first centuries B.C., if we are to understand the beginnings of Christianity. As Jews after the Restoration (540 B.C.) spread to all the

cities of the eastern Mediterranean and eventually the western region when Rome united the ancient world, they kept their distinctiveness as a people. They were distinguished by their ethical outlook and sense of purpose as a people united by a covenant with a single ethical God who revealed himself through actions on behalf of his chosen people. However, to these older beliefs were added several new ones in the centuries before Jesus--a messianic hope, spiritual and communal separatism, and a growing belief in an afterlife. That Judaism and early Christianity shared these beliefs explains why the two faiths were intertwined at the beginning.

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1. Are you shocked by the statement that Jesus was a Jew? Or that the first Christians were Jews?
 2. Given those facts, can you explain why some Christians have been anti-Semitic?
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Despite domination by Persia, the Greek kingdoms and, finally, Rome, Jews did not lose hope because they believed that history was moving in the direction they foresaw. They expected a great deliverer who would conquer Israel's enemies and usher in the new age. They were not agreed on how this [Messiah, or God's Anointed One](#), would appear or how he would accomplish their deliverance, but they believed that the time for his coming was imminent. By the time of Jesus the Messianic outlook was being expressed most dramatically by John the Baptist, who vividly proclaimed the coming day of judgment, baptized those who responded to his call for repentance, and lived a rigorous life of self-denial and renunciation of family and property.

Another new belief in Judaism was the [ideal of individual and communitarian withdrawal from society](#). Perhaps because of the experience of the Exile, some Jews concluded that those who truly wished to receive the promise of God had to live separate lives, either spiritually or literally in separate communities. Typical of this tendency was the sect of Essenes whose beliefs and practices foreshadowed many of those of early Christianity. They believed in [God's Final Judgment](#) and the necessity of living expectantly for that day in communal fashion. They practiced a ritual cleansing as initiation into the community, and observed a special communal meal as a token of spiritual unity.

A third new belief in Judaism was the hope of an [afterlife](#). From the Mosaic period down to the second century B.C. Jews had almost nothing to say about the afterlife. Although they proclaimed that God, a transcendent deity who was himself eternal, had created man in his own image, they did not follow this thought into a pronouncement of the eternal quality of man himself, leaving the afterlife to God.⁽¹⁾ Suddenly about 175 B.C., [Daniel 12:2](#) asserted that some would survive death in a new turn in Judaic thought about the afterlife. The Pharisees were the most fervent believers in the immortality of the soul and an afterlife in which God punished the wicked and rewarded the righteous. Sadducees continued to reject the idea whether by resurrection or through immortality. Thus Jews

were debating the afterlife by the time of Jesus even if they were not in agreement about it.

Thus the vision of Messianism, the movement towards withdrawal and a belief in an afterlife influenced the beginning of Christianity. In this sense the early Christian believers were correct when they said that the Messiah or Christ had come in the "fullness of time." In a time of tension created by Roman rule and of expectancy in Judaism, the central figure of the new faith was born.

Early Christians who preserved Jesus' teachings did not pay much attention to details of his life ([including his physical appearance](#)), focusing rather on his message and his death and resurrection. However, some details are apparent in, and other things may be inferred from, the accounts of the early believers which survive in the gospels of the New Testament. [Jesus](#) (or Jeshua, "savior") was born around 4 B.C. Until adulthood his life was unremarkable. His father was a village artisan in Nazareth in Galilee, a province in [northern Judea](#) and he probably followed the same craft. We know little of his education except that he was steeped in Jewish law ([Luke 2: 42-52](#)), knew how to read, and spoke the common language Aramaic (even after his resurrection and ascension he [spoke Aramaic](#)). He wrote nothing which survived. As an adult he suddenly became a public figure because of his teachings and actions which attracted a large following of men and women.

[Jesus' teachings](#) defy quick summary. There is a strong streak of the radical as well as the traditional in what he taught. He claimed to fulfill Jewish law in his message and actions and yet he also dissented from all legalism. The complexities and paradoxes of his message meant that there was always in Christianity a tension between what Jesus actually taught and what Christians at any time believed about him. For example, his teachings were later used by reformers and religious revolutionaries to challenge traditions and authority. And yet traditional authorities would cite him in defense of the status quo. These paradoxes and incongruities were to prevent Christianity from hardening into any system which could not renew itself. Christians who felt that the faith was straying from its true source and dissented from the accepted version could appeal to Jesus' teachings as the true well of faith and justify their beliefs. The result was that Christianity maintained a dynamic spirit which, despite all the failures to achieve its aims, prolonged its influence into modern times.

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1. Are you offended by the statement that Jesus taught radical beliefs? Or that his teachings were paradoxical? (Meaning that they contained seeming contradictions.)
2. Does this explain to your satisfaction why Jesus' teachings could be used both to conserve tradition and to reject it?
3. What do you make of the recorded statement that Jesus spoke Aramaic to Paul in the

famous encounter on the Damascus Road? Does this mean that God is tied to language, place and time, not to mention gender?

Central in Jesus' teaching was the concept of the [Coming Kingdom](#) ([Mark 1:15](#)) in preparation for which he called for repentance--a change of the inner man and a radically new direction in life. The new human being, Jesus said, would love as God loved ([Mark 12:30-31](#)), including strangers and enemies as well as friends. In his ethical teachings Jesus gave a new emphasis to the unique worth of the individual ([Matthew 10:29-31](#)) and to the lowly when he said that anyone who wanted to be first in the Kingdom must be last, and the servant of all.

Although a summary of Jesus' teachings implies that they were delivered in an organized formal manner, this was not the case. He taught not in lectures or philosophic dialogues with the disciples, but in imperative declarations and in remarkable stories or parables which had the effect of seizing the attention, instantly illuminating the deeper truth at stake, and reaching his hearers at a deeper emotional level than a formal statement of definitions and philosophic reasoning. These parables continue to fascinate even modern readers who do not share the faith behind them. In Jesus' day the effect, combined with his personality, was undoubtedly powerful.

After approximately three years of teaching and performing miracles (mainly for the benefit of others rather than his own advantage), Jesus ran afoul of both Jewish and Roman authorities who thought his teaching about the Kingdom was seditious and [crucified him](#) with other criminals about 30 A.D. Early Christians believed, however, that he rose from the dead and appeared to many of his disciples in a recognizable, solid body with real wounds. Thereafter, they believed, he ascended to heaven where he continued to commune with and sustain them until his return to reign over God's new kingdom. This was the center of the faith of his disciples: **that Jesus had been raised by God as a sign of the Coming Kingdom and the deliverance of those who believed.**

The stories of his resurrection and appearances convinced his followers that the end of history and the beginning of God's Kingdom were imminent and inspired them to spread the new faith beyond Jerusalem. As they converted non-Jewish believers in the far-flung cities of the empire, they had to explain Jesus' teachings and works to those who did not know or accept traditional Judaic beliefs and laws. By the end of the first century non-Jewish far outnumbered Jewish believers and found the complexity of Judaic law and ritual to be an obstacle to faith rather than an aid. At this stage, the influence of certain figures was decisive, particularly that of Saul of Tarsus, better known as Paul.

In his own person, Paul symbolized the tension between Jewish and Hellenistic Roman influences which Christianity faced. Born a Jew (c. 10 A.D.), he also was a Roman citizen through his father; he spoke Greek, knew Hebrew and possessed a thorough acquaintance with both traditions. He was easily the most educated and cosmopolitan of the early leaders of the faith. He first appeared about five years after the crucifixion as a fanatic defender of Judaism against the new believers. While engaged in this mission, he

had a blinding vision, as he explained it, in which Jesus identified himself as the Son of God and Messiah whose followers Paul was persecuting. Shortly thereafter Paul became as indefatigable in spreading the new faith as he had once been in stamping it out.

Paul's influence on Christianity was profound: by creating a broader theology than envisioned by Jewish Christians and by organizing numerous groups of Gentile believers, he cut free the new faith from its Jewish moorings and enabled it to push off by itself in the empire. [His theology](#) developed out of his attempt to explain his own experience and that of non-Jews with the Christ. For whom did the Messiah die? Jews alone? Was it necessary that Christians become Jews and keep the laws and rituals? What **was** required to please God? As Paul answered these questions, he veered ever more sharply away from Judaism and the leadership of Jewish Christians and toward a new understanding of God and a more nearly universal faith. The leaders of the Jerusalem church insisted that Jewish Christians also had to be devout Jews, practicing all the laws (including circumcision and dietary rules). They also wanted to make keeping the law a basis for separating Jewish and non-Jewish Christians. Paul, however, emphatically rejected such distinctions and in a conference with Peter, James and other leaders in Jerusalem in 51 or 52 A.D. successfully asserted that non-Jewish believers ought to be free from Jewish practices. He declared that Jesus had died to redeem all ([Galatians](#) 3:26-28) and went on to say that faith alone satisfied God's demand for righteousness, not keeping the law.

Paul's theology and sense of urgency about the end of time impelled him to spread and organize the new faith. As he traveled on his grueling and dangerous [missionary trips](#), he formed his converts into a new group or added them to an existing congregation (*ekklesia*, from assembly or gathering), which usually met in a home. In letters which became part of the sacred writings of the new faith, he watched the development of these churches and exhorted them when they had problems or needed encouragement. His permanent affect on Christianity was that, by the authority of his teachings and letters, he led the churches he founded away from Jewish Christianity. Paul's followers did not abandon their Jewish brethren; they sent money to Jerusalem from time to time to support the needy. But they did not recognize Jerusalem or the Jewish leadership as authoritative. When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and the church there with it, Christianity did not falter. The Jewish wing of Christianity died out, but Christianity itself emerged from the shadow of Judaism to become truly universal in its appeal to people in the empire. By the time Paul was crucified in Rome (c. 62 A.D.), the distinction between Christians and Jews in the empire was already substantially clear.

After Paul's death the church continued to gain new converts in the cities of the empire, the very centers through which Eternal Rome was thought by imperial apologists to express itself. The organization varied here and there according to local circumstances, but a formal structure did not hold believers together yet. The binding element was still the faith in Jesus the Christ and certain common practices. However, perhaps as early as 100 and certainly by 150 many Christians no longer believed in the imminence of the Coming Kingdom of heaven. As they realized that Christ's return would not be as soon as originally believed, they found it necessary to develop a creed, organize collections of sacred writings, agree upon special observances or sacraments and choose leaders.

Eventually, the simple formula of faith in God, the Father, Son and Holy Ghost developed into an unequivocal, detailed creed or confession of faith. God is the maker of heaven and earth; matter is not evil. God the Son was incarnated in human flesh; the body is not evil. Jesus did suffer and die; the figure on the cross was not an apparition. Salvation is not liberation from the physical body; the resurrected receive a new body. Salvation comes through forgiveness of sins and the work of God in the holy catholic church, not through secret knowledge (from Greek gnosis, knowledge) or punishment of the body. This statement was made in public confession similar to that found in the Apostles' Creed (traditionally dated from the first century) or the Nicene Creed (325 A.D.).⁽²⁾ By thus proclaiming their beliefs Christians committed themselves to the true faith, avoided the defiling effects of the mystery cults, and resisted the worst tendencies of the classical philosophies and Christian heresies.

Having confessed the faith, how were new converts to be instructed in it? At first they learned by hearing and memorizing the sayings of Jesus which were remembered by the disciples and passed with variations in detail from believer to believer. Paul composed the first written instructions (45-62 A.D.) for Christians in letters to specific churches which were circulated among other congregations. Between 65 and 150 other documents were written which were believed to be authoritative and authentic, i.e., written under the inspiration of the Spirit. These were letters, ascribed either to Paul or another of the Apostles, Acts, a history of the early church, Revelation, an apocalyptic vision of the triumph of Christ, and accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus called gospels (from Greek evangelion, good news). Three of these gospels--ascribed to Mark, Matthew and Luke,-- were remarkably similar although originating at different times and in different Christian communities from 70-90 A.D. A fourth, the gospel of John, appeared slightly later and differed from the others in that it focused explicitly on the incarnation--the Word of God made flesh--and presented Jesus forthrightly as the Christ, the Son of God. By 200 A.D. Christians essentially agreed that these documents constituted a "New Testament", which along with the Judaic writings or Old Testament were believed to be authoritative. The first list of the New Testament canon of twenty-seven writings appeared in 367.

Christians also came to agree that two rites--baptism and the Lord's Supper--had a special place in their faith and worship. Called sacraments (from Latin sacramentum, a military recruit's oath), they were considered to be special signs of God's grace conferred upon believers. Baptism cleansed the believer prior to full church membership. Mystery cults practiced this rite; so did the Jewish sect, the Essenes. Jesus himself had been baptized and Christians believed that they should be too as a sign of their death to sin and their resurrection to new life in the faith. Early Christians could not agree whether baptism should be performed on infants, undertaken at conversion, or at the point of death after sinning was finished and practiced all three forms. A second sacrament uniting Christians was the Lord's Supper or Eucharist, which Jesus, it was believed, had instituted. Therefore, when Christians met, after they had sung hymns, read the Scriptures, and heard an explanation of the reading or a sermon, they shared a common meal, or agape (from agape, love), at the conclusion of which they blessed and partook of bread and wine together, sharing the spirit of Christ, remembering his sacrifice for their sins, and

showing their unity as believers. Neither the rite of baptism nor communion was for the casual hanger-on. Only the committed participated. What these rites actually meant to early believers is not clear. By the time the church pronounced the sacraments as dogma, they were thought to have special efficacy and not just commemorations of Jesus' practices.

The leaders and structures of the church varied from congregation to congregation. In some churches leaders were called elders (from presbyteros, elder; in English, priest); in others, bishops (from episkopos, overseer; in English, bishop). By 100 A.D. bishops were preeminent among the elders because of special gifts as teachers or spiritual leaders. It was also argued that bishops had been designated as successors to the Apostles and thus deserved greater authority. As they designated their successors and ordained others to serve as leaders in the churches, bishops gained enormous power. It was they, for example, who controlled the worship of the church by possessing alone the authority to administer the rite of baptism and by ordaining those who administered the sacrament of communion. By 150 the Roman bishop was regarded as foremost over the others because Rome was the center of the empire (and because tradition had it that Peter was the first bishop of Rome). By 200 the bishops of Rome were broadening the claim of primacy to mean that the other bishops were subordinate to Rome. Thus did the early church in the empire organize its writings, theology, worship and leadership and become a shadow society and a counter-culture in the empire.

The next chapter will take up the development of Christianity after 200 and its relations with the empire and classical culture. Before that we need to consider the major elements of the Christian faith before 200. This discussion may seem to assume that these beliefs and values were static in the first two centuries. Such was not the case; we may infer from certain activities of the Church undeclared but unmistakable change by 200. Yet there was an abiding core to the Christian faith which the following pages state. With this caution in mind, what were the major tenets of early Christianity?

Revelation and Jesus Christ: A New View of God

The Christian view of God began with the Judaic affirmations. God is transcendent, essentially other than man or the world, and yet at the same time he is a personality who freely chose to reveal himself. He disclosed himself not as a remote abstraction, but as an ethical personality who acted in historical events to bring about his purpose for man and the world. God who was unlimited by anything outside himself had inexplicably decided to limit himself by choosing the children of Israel and making a covenant with them. He would be their God and use them in achieving his purpose; they would be his people and worthy of the status as his allies by high ethical conduct.

These tenets were also much of the substance of the Christian view of God, but there was more to it for them. Christians declared that the fullest revelation of God had occurred in the person of Jesus Christ; indeed, that Jesus was God. They were not taught this directly by Jesus. Indeed, he usually referred to himself as the Son of Man, not the Son of God or the Christ, and often seemed to want to play down his identity. When his disciple, Peter, made the ringing declaration "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God", Jesus acknowledged the significance of Peter's intuition, but charged him and the others that "they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ."⁽³⁾ Christians believed in Jesus' divinity because they believed the stories of his resurrection and appearance to the disciples. Thereafter, they were emphatic that he was the Son of God who had become fully human being while remaining fully God.

This belief set Christians immediately at odds with Judaism. The idea that Jesus could be the Messiah was not anathema in itself to Jews, but the claim that Jesus the Messiah was God himself was the height of blasphemy. The Messiah would be a great leader sent by God to deliver Israel, but he would be human, not divine. Judaism held fast to the oneness and indivisibility of God: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord."⁽⁴⁾ Christians, then, advanced a new view of God when they insisted on the divinity of Jesus and his kinship with God.

The sonship of Jesus also led to another new understanding of God: he is a Father. This image was not unknown in the Old Testament (Hosea 11:1). Jesus, however, emphasized it by frequently using the term Father (Aramaic, Abba) to refer to God and by teaching the disciples to pray using the phrase "Our Father" (Luke 11:2). In the well-known conversation with Nicodemus, the Pharisee leader, Jesus summed up the father imagery best when he said that God had "so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."⁽⁵⁾ Paul used the term often to convey the unique relationship which God had with those who believed in him: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, 'Abba, Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God, and fellow heirs with Christ...."⁽⁶⁾

In the life and sacrifice of Jesus, Christians saw another facet of God: the all-powerful maker of heaven and earth was also humble and lowly. He assumed human form as a simple craftsman. He lived an ordinary life, enjoying the company of outcasts and sinners rather than the respectable and powerful. He died the most ignominious death on humanity's behalf. His resurrection by God was a sure sign that all men who believed in him, regardless of status or wealth, would also enjoy eternal life.

Christianity thus posited a view of God which was at once old and new. It was Judaic in origin and yet radically different. It was also a mysterious combination of contradictory elements: transcendence and lowliness; miraculous power and humility; divinity and humanity. How did one grasp the meaning of the mystery of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ? By accepting it on faith (acknowledging it, believing in it), not by thinking

it through in logical terms. Paul summed it up as a logical contradiction: "...the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."⁽⁷⁾

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1. To believe in the Christian affirmations about God one has to reject at least one of the Jewish affirmations: God is one.
Agreed? What are the implications? Is the Old Testament passage "Hear Oh Israel, the Lord our God is One Lord" wrong?
 2. The ancient world's gods did not die for human beings. That was irrational, nonsensical. Where did Christians get the idea?
 3. Do you remember David Koresh (1993, Waco, Texas) who spoke of himself in Messianic terms? Most of us probably think he was a nut case. But we do not think the same about Jesus. What's the difference?
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Revelation and the Uniqueness and Worth of Man

The revelation of God in Christ issued in a vision of the worth and potentiality of mankind which again borrowed much from Judaism but contained new elements as well. Christians believed in the same paradoxical quality of man: created last as the finest of God's creation, man was only a little lower than God himself, and yet sinful as well. On the one hand, man enjoyed special status as the ultimate reason for creation. On the other, he sinned and alienated himself from God by freely choosing his own goals rather than God's. Thus, sin occurred because of the essential quality of man himself, his freedom of will. Man was not a pure spirit contaminated by the material or physical world which imprisoned the spirit and drew it downward into sin. God had created both man and the world; both were good in themselves.

Christianity gave sharper focus to the unique moral worth of the individual. In his ethical teachings, Jesus emphasized that God who knew and cared about even the least of his creatures cared even more for the individual human being: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."⁽⁸⁾ He seemed to have a special feeling for the lowly and powerless, for those he called "the poor in spirit", the "meek" and "those who mourn."⁽⁹⁾ In his

choice of companions Jesus seemed to prefer ordinary workers and tradesmen, the poor and the outcasts, valuing those who had no stake in society more highly than the leaders and the intelligentsia. He gave a new dignity to the lowly when he said that anyone who wanted to be first in the Kingdom must be last, and servant of all. The Kingdom, he said, belonged to those who had the faith of little children; the wealthy and the privileged would find it almost impossible to attain the kingdom. Paul also asserted the essential equality and worth of all since Christ had died to redeem all: "For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."⁽¹⁰⁾ (See also [1 Corinthians 11: 11-12](#) for another Pauline statement of male-female equality before God.) Here is the germ of the concept of the universal brotherhood of human beings. If God is the Father of all who believe, then all are brothers, regardless of nationality, sex or class.

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1. Do you agree with the assertion that Christianity gave sharper focus to the unique worth of the individual? Why? Why not?
 2. What about the idea of the universal brotherhood of human beings? If this comes from Christianity and Judaism, can an atheist believe in this concept?
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While teaching the spiritual worth of all, however, Christians hurriedly went on to say that men still needed regeneration. Jesus and Paul preached that the coming of the kingdom would see the transformation of human beings into new personalities living by new values. Human nature would be perfected and its potentiality fully realized by the power of love--God's love for man as Father and man's love for fellow man as brother. Thus man would be made new by God's help, not by political action or by taking thought, but by moral regeneration, and would be free to live as God had intended.

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1. Here we are again at the two programs for the betterment of man: the ancient Greco-Roman belief that political life or social influence shapes man for the better; and the Judaic-Christian belief that man is elevated only by inner moral transformation, coming from a higher religious power into the human personality and remaking it in the image of God. Which is correct?
2. When we were talking about the Hebrews and Greeks, I asked you to compare their ideals of the Good Life. The Hebrew ideal might be summarized as living by the Covenant. The Greek, by imitating the Hero (such as Achilles) or giving oneself (literally) to the Polis. The Christian ideal might be summarized as imitating Christ. Agree?

God's action was necessary to bring about man's regeneration because man could not do it freely himself: free to choose, he always chose the wrong. Paul's frustration was typical of Christians. No matter how much he wanted to please God, he could not. He could not help himself; it was in his nature to sin. "...I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."⁽¹¹⁾ Was there any hope? Yes, God through the presence of his Spirit was transforming him and all believers. For "if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new."⁽¹²⁾ As God perfected mankind he made them like himself. "All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.... We are the children of God; and if children, then heirs, heirs of God, and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him."⁽¹³⁾ A host of other passages clearly affirm that the new "redeemed" man would have extraordinary, astonishing powers: (1) to move mountains ([Matthew 17:20](#); [21: 21](#); [Mark 11: 23](#)); (2) to tread on snakes and scorpions without harm ([Luke 10:19](#)); to do the works of Jesus and indeed to outdo him ([John 14:12](#)); to possess all things –world, life, present, and future ([1 Corinthians 3: 21-22](#)).

This transformation from natural to redeemed man was not quick and simple. The individual slipped backwards as often as he moved ahead. He had to worry about his motivation as much as his behavior. He struggled with his inner self like a runner training himself for the race, a daily struggle. Trying to explain the unique situation of man as one loved by God, perversely rebelling against his love, Christians probed deeply into the personality and human motivation.

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1. The paragraph above and the earlier section on the Judaic view of man seem to be saying that Jews and Christians were the first psychologists in trying to understand the complexity of human behavior. Do you agree?
2. What about the powers of redeemed man? Do you read those above passages differently?
3. Is it a *fact* that man, far from being basically good, is instead inclined to evil? If so, Christianity is indeed a realistic portrayal of human nature, is it not? What contrary evidence is there about the basic goodness of man?

In the figures of Jesus, Paul and other leaders early Christianity defined personalities which were historical, rather than mythological; human, rather than single-dimensioned heroes. Jesus was a Galilean artisan who felt the same emotions and pains all humans felt.⁽¹⁴⁾ He suffered a mixture of hope and inner agony during his last days. The sense of abandonment he expressed in his last hours on the cross was real, not a noble pose. Paul also appears in his letters as a whole personality, the best and the worst sides equally displayed by his own pen. Veering from elation to depression, boastful of his

accomplishments and yet aware of his shortcomings, warm to his friends and implacable to his enemies, Paul reveals all facets of human nature, actual and potential. Only Christianity, and Judaism before it, has had such a clear-headed view of human beings, both as they are and as they can be, if freed to become what they were intended to be.

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Do you agree with the sentence at the end of the preceding paragraph?

Christians also believed that the unique personality which man had been in this life would survive death. One story Jesus told suggested that after death the individual would remember life as he had lived it: the poor man was comforted in heaven while the rich man suffered the torments of hell and agonized over his misspent life ([Luke 16:19-31](#)). Just before he raised Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary who had been entombed four days, Jesus declared "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."⁽¹⁵⁾ In his last moments on the cross, Jesus comforted a thief who was being crucified with him, "today you will be with me in Paradise."⁽¹⁶⁾ Later, Paul promised believers that as Jesus had been raised, so would they: "...We shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet...for the dead shall all be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.... Then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is the sting.'"⁽¹⁷⁾ Thus death was neither the extinction of the person nor a disembodied state. At the coming of the Kingdom the dead would be raised and given new bodies. (At least that is what [Luke 24:36-43](#) suggests). In the meantime, those who died would be with Christ.

At the same time, there was more than just life after death. Christianity affirmed a new life of transcendent meaning for the individual before, as well as after, death. Jesus spoke often of eternal life, a life of everlasting meaning, which constituted "a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys."⁽¹⁸⁾ Although Jesus met the physical needs of human beings, as in the feeding of the five thousand ([Mark 6: 34-46](#)), he was primarily concerned about spiritual needs, as in the story of the Samaritan woman ([John 4: 7-30](#)). Jesus promised that if she drank the water he offered she would never thirst because it was "a well of water springing up into everlasting life."⁽¹⁹⁾ Death could not interrupt the life Jesus spoke of because it was qualitatively different than, and transcended the material life of, this world.

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Think about it for a minute: the assertion that the individual will live beyond this life. How does the first person think such a thought? Not later persons, but the first one?

Revelation and the World

Early Christians did not spend a lot of time attempting to understand or explain the physical world. They had neither the time nor the inclination. They believed that the Kingdom of God was imminent and they were more concerned with understanding the truth of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ than in understanding God's creation which was about to be transformed in any case. However, they did possess an essential outlook on the world which served as a foundation for later attempts to explain the natural world more fully as worthwhile in itself and worth exploring. That outlook began with the Judaic view of the relationship between God and his creation. In the creation accounts in Genesis the world created by God was good, like all the rest of his creation, because he had created it and established the order by which it was governed. The world displayed God's glory and showed his handiwork, but it was not God and, therefore, not holy. At the same time, man had been given mastery of all creation. So a basic attitude toward the physical world was already set in Judaism. This view did not lead to any scientific or philosophic attempt to explain the world as in Greek culture. There was no science and philosophy in pre-Christian Judaism, because Jews focused on the revelation of God in history and time, not in the physical world. Their attitude might be characterized as one devaluing the natural world as inferior to God, the knowledge of whom was of greater value than knowledge of the natural world.

Christians took this attitude one step further. Because nothing for them was more important than the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, they insisted that all knowledge about man and the world was valid and useful only to the extent that it appertained to the mystery of God in Christ. Since traditional wisdom and learning alone had not brought men to him, God chose the illogical and the unthinkable to accomplish his end. "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe."⁽²⁰⁾ God deliberately chose foolishness to reveal true wisdom: "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong."⁽²¹⁾ Thus Paul declared, "...I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."⁽²²⁾ To understand the meaning of all things, including the purpose of creation, one had to accept by faith the mystery of God's revelation in Christ. Faith alone, not science or reason, was the beginning of true knowledge.

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This is the first expression of the important idea that the mystery of Christ (Fully God and fully human) is central to everything else. Faith in the mystery of Christ is the key to understanding all things. Is this true today, or passé because of modern science?

Christian interest in the natural world grew as their sense of expectancy about the imminence of the kingdom waned. As they encountered learned opposition in the second century, they began to try to explain the faith in terms which classical thinkers used and to defend it against the charge that it was irrational and absurd. As they did so, they developed an approach to relating traditional knowledge about the world to the order and purpose of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

The Coming Kingdom of Heaven and the Future

Time in the European sense began with the Judaic concept that God revealed himself in history. That is, God showed his character in the dimension of time, in unrepeatable historical events which, given the transcendence of God, were leading to a triumphal end. Time was the interval until the purpose should be achieved; history was the events occurring in time and leading to God's purpose. Christians added to this point of view a sense of urgency and immediacy about what was happening in history. They believed that with the appearance of Jesus Christ God was [bringing time and history to an end swiftly](#) in the Coming Kingdom. Jesus' message was simple: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel"⁽²³⁾ He never explicitly defined what the [Kingdom or Reign of God](#) was, but he said that it had begun with his own life and actions and would soon come fully bringing judgment for sin, the righting of all wrongs and a new era of justice and peace. Be ready, he said; leave the life of this world to others; live in simple purity of heart and love for others. Paul preached the same message with the same sense of urgency. By 200 Christians had begun to lose that sense of urgency. Perhaps the coming kingdom would be delayed; perhaps it would be delayed until the afterlife, rather than begin in this world and usher in the world to come. Still, Christianity never forgot that early memory. It bequeathed it to Europe in whose history the longing for the coming kingdom has been a seminal force. In this original vision history is moving, perhaps swiftly, to the perfection of mankind and society. The world will be reestablished on a proper basis and mankind will live by the ethic of love. In the meantime, evil exists until the new age dawns, although neither mankind nor the natural world is irredeemably evil. This idea has continued to bubble up over the centuries to stimulate reform or revolution not only in religion but many other areas of life as well. Its powerful influence was apparent on the Christian view about how men should treat each other and live in society.

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1. Have Christians lost the sense of urgency about the Coming Kingdom? Good? Bad?
 2. How long can one live with the idea that all things are about to pass away and all things become new? Weeks, months? Not years and years. Why?
 3. Do early Christians seem to have the same apocalyptic fervor the Branch Davidians had in Waco? Or not?
 4. Was Jesus wrong when he said the kingdom of God is at hand? It didn't come, did it? Or did it come in different form? What do you think?
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The Coming Kingdom and Society

Christians came late to a view of institutions and practical rules for ethical living. They were so swayed during the first two centuries by the vision of the Coming Kingdom that they did not think a lot about how to live in this world which they expected to end at any moment. It has even been suggested by some scholars that Jesus intended his ethical teachings with their radical demands to be an "interim ethic" for the short haul, rather than a program for reforming an existing society. The question cannot be settled from the historical evidence. Still, the early teachings about individual and social ethics as descriptive of the nature of the Coming Kingdom have exercised a powerful influence on later ages.

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1. What do you think about the idea of an "interim ethic"?
 2. Do you agree with the reason given for Christians not developing early a view of institutions and practical rules for ethical living?
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Jesus said that the Kingdom of God would be characterized above all by the rule of love: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength... [and] You shall love your neighbor as yourself."⁽²⁴⁾ Who were your neighbors? Not only family and friends, but strangers and enemies were neighbors as well. This was radical. In many respects he was talking about traditional qualities already proclaimed in Jewish law: showing compassion and mercy; being humble, honest, pure; preferring others to self; serving the poor, the helpless, the outcast. But this was the first time any teacher in Judaism had spoken of loving one's

enemies. "You have heard that it has been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thine enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you; that you may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.... Be you therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."⁽²⁵⁾ He made it clear that he was not talking about going only so far for your neighbor. When the disciple, Peter, asked him how often he should forgive his brother who had wronged him, and suggested seven times, Jesus replied, "I say not seven times, but seventy times seven."⁽²⁶⁾ You do not exhaust unconditional love by doing only certain actions. God wants us to love as he himself loves, Jesus said, for thus you do "the will of my Father who is in heaven."⁽²⁷⁾

Paul also spoke in radical terms about how those who believed were to live. They were to live, he said, as a new society or covenant bound together by God's grace and mercy rather than laws and rituals. They were to live joyously as new people, free from the law and free from the penalty of sin which was death. They were being remade by God into new human beings with a "... new nature which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful."⁽²⁸⁾

This perspective governed Paul's advice to early believers. The end is at hand; live accordingly. Do not let anyone question you about what you eat or drink, or whether you keep Jewish holidays and feasts. Do not marry, if you are unmarried. Be content as a slave, if you are a slave; you are still God's. If you are a master, treat your slaves justly and fairly; God is your master as well as theirs. If you are an outspoken woman, be subject to your husband and keep quiet during worship; God is not pleased by turmoil. If you owe taxes, pay them. Obey the political authorities; they serve God's purpose by keeping order. Above all, be guided by the spirit of Christ and live in love for one another. (Compare Paul's advice with the author of 1 Peter 2: 11, who described Christians as "aliens and exiles." Verse 13 of the same chapter urged believers to "accept the authority of every human institution,... as sent by him [God] to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right.")

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1. Does it change your view of Paul's teachings if you think that he gave advice about how to live only for the short haul?
 2. What about his supposed anti-feminism?
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Did early Christians follow these principles? Evidence suggests that they did, at least sufficiently to [set them apart from others in imperial society](#). (But there were some with less admirable natures: see [Acts 5: 1-11](#) for Ananias and Sapphira.) In an age which was brutal and heartless where human life and values were concerned, they offered love instead. They were the only group in the empire which condemned the barbarity and waste of the gladiatorial games and which attacked the common practices of abortion, infanticide, and the abandonment of unwanted children. In a society which was becoming ever more stratified, they offered spiritual equality and community. Living in tightly-knit groups, they welcomed all who had professed Christ as brothers and sisters, including slaves whom other groups in Roman society excluded. In an age lacking moral certainty, they offered conviction and assurance. For example, they attacked with intensity sexual practices tolerated by other groups, condemning in strongly moral tones incest (such as the brother-sister marriages tolerated in Egypt and the Near East), bisexuality, homosexuality and pederasty. Adultery was just as bad as murder. Divorce was absolutely prohibited. Even the remarriage of widows was discouraged. In some areas of sexuality, early Christian teaching veered toward the extreme, as in the upholding of virginity and sexual abstinence in marriage, which would have a strong influence on medieval Christianity and some later radical Christian groups. For modern man the great paradox in early Christianity is that Christians, who affirmed the universal brotherhood of man, did not attack the greatest evil of the ancient world--slavery. Why? Mainly because in the first two centuries they were convinced that the world and all its evil was soon coming to an end and would be regenerated by the gospel ethic of the Coming Kingdom. This attitude would change after 200, and with it would also change the Christian perspective on society and its institutions.

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1. Many others have weighed in about why Christianity did not condemn slavery. What is your view? For the record, neither did Judaism or Islam.
 2. On Christianity and abortion, for instance, see Paul's statement in Galatians 1:15: "... God, who had set me apart *even from my mother's womb* and called me through His grace..." Also see the [Didache](#), a handbook for newly converted Christians (circa 50 AD): "Neither murder a child by abortion, nor will you destroy what is born."
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To return to a comment made earlier in this chapter, Christian beliefs were not static up to 200. By then the sense of expectancy about the Coming Kingdom had begun to wane. Christians were still convinced that the kingdom would come, but they had begun to entertain doubts that it would come immediately or that it would come in this world. There is no written evidence to document this change. Instead, it may be inferred from other activities the Church was undertaking, all of which imply a search for authority sufficient for an extended period of waiting. The development of the church organization and a hierarchy of leaders is one example. Another is the formulation of rites and ceremonies of worship. A third is the writing down of the earliest traditions about Jesus'

teachings, the teachings of early Church leaders and the weight given to these writings in defining faith and conduct. All these activities suggest that Christians of the second century expected to wait longer for the coming than did believers of the first century.

Despite indications of the diminution of one of its central concepts, Christianity still constituted a counter-culture within the empire, not in the sense that it actively opposed the classical point of view, but because it was radically different from that outlook. It spurned reason and logic, as well as traditional classical sources, in understanding and explaining the order of things and the purpose of man. Instead, it trusted exclusively in faith--a will to believe in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the centrality of that revelation for all life. It affirmed the transcendent meaning and intrinsic worth of man as a consequence of the revelation of Christ. Although it did not seek to reform the evils of the ancient world, it contained significant and powerful concepts from which change which would later develop. The modern perspective tends to see Christianity as destined to triumph over the classical outlook, and yet that triumph was not assured when viewed from the vantage of 200 A.D. Christians then accounted for only a very small percentage of the population of the empire. After 200 A.D., however, disaster overtook the empire and caused such radical changes that there was less and less will to maintain the enormous burdens of the empire. In this declining phase of Rome Christianity appeared ever more clearly as the only outlook with sufficient vitality to survive and to save the best of what classical man had been able to achieve. We turn now to the period of transition in which Christianity triumphed and then prepared for a new beginning by saving what it thought best of the ancient world.

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Christianity was a counter-culture in the ancient world. Is it today? Why? Why not?

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1. . Isaiah 25:8. All quotations from the Bible are from the Revised Standard Version.
2. Augustine, Confessions, VIII, 5: those who were ready to receive baptism in Rome declared their faith "from an elevated place, in the sight of all the faithful, in a set form of words committed to memory."
3. . Matthew 16:13-20.
4. . Deuteronomy 6:4.
5. . John 3:16.
6. . Romans 8:14-17.

7. . I Corinthians 1:18-24.

8. . Matthew 10:29-31.

9. . Matthew 5:1-11.

10. . Galatians 3:26-28.

11. . Romans 7:19.

12. . II Corinthians 5:17.

13. . Romans 8: 14-17. Paul never uses kleos, the Greek word for personal renown or glory as pursued by Achilles and other Homeric heroes. Except for 1 Peter 2:20 the word is foreign, as is the ideal, to early Christians.

14. . John 11:35

15. . John 11:25-26.

16. . Luke 23:43.

17. . I Corinthians 15:52-55.

18. . Luke 12:33.

19. . John 4:14.

20. . I Corinthians 1:21.

21. . I Corinthians 1:27.

22. . I Corinthians 2:2.

23. . Mark 1:15.

24. . Mark 12:30-31.

25. . Matthew 5:43-48.

26. . Matthew 18:22.

27. . Matthew 7:21.

28. . Colossians 3:10-15.