Part I

The Making of a World Religion: Christian Mission through the Ages

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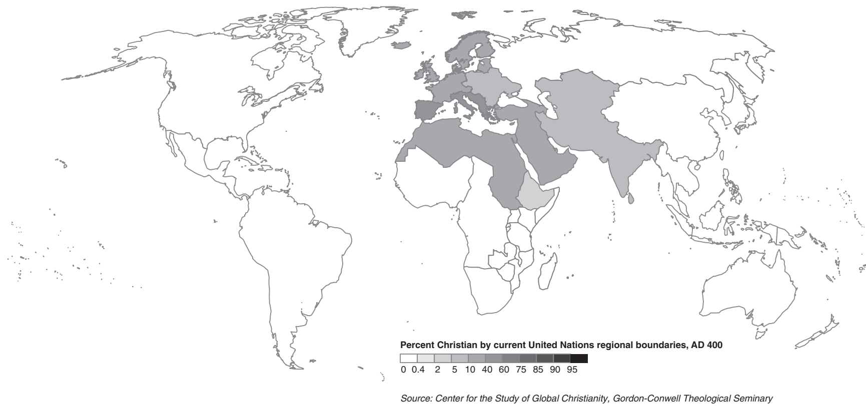
From Christ to Christendom

In 1970 the British rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* hit the shelves of record stores. The deceased Judas, who betrayed Jesus to the authorities who crucified him, appears in the afterlife and sings the title song, "Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, who are you, what have you sacrificed? Jesus Christ, Superstar, do you think you're what they say you are?" Referring to Jesus' humble origins in Palestine, an obscure province conquered by the Roman Pompey in 63 BC, Judas asks him, "Why'd you choose such a backward time and such a strange land? If you'd come today you would have reached a whole nation. Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication."

The conservative Christian establishment found the portrayal of an earthy "rock and roll" Jesus with his long hair and hippie commune of male and female disciples to be disrespectful, if not sacrilegious. But for many American baby boomers in the 1970s, *Jesus Christ Superstar* blew like a fresh breeze across their predictable and boring suburban churches. Suddenly Jesus seemed like one of them. He defied authority, was filled with self-doubt, and "hung out" with a pack of friends. Even before the rock opera opened on Broadway and in London, American high school students bought the record and staged their own productions.

At the same time, behind the Iron Curtain in Estonia, Soviet communism persecuted religions and denied education to active Christians. In the early 1970s, teenagers huddled in secret, listening to illegal recordings of *Jesus Christ Superstar* smuggled from the United States. The combination of the outlawed religion with forbidden western rock music was a potent mixture. Years later, a leading Estonian Christian reminisced that his first real understanding of the faith had come from the humanity of the rock-and-roll Jesus he secretly encountered in *Jesus Christ Superstar*. In the decades since it opened, the rock opera has been performed in Central America, eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and around the world.



Map 1 Christians by region in 400

While on one level *Jesus Christ Superstar* is a money-making musical, on another level its transcendence of Cold War geopolitical divisions – and the appeal of its rock-and-roll Jesus to youth everywhere – exemplifies the remarkable cultural fluidity of the Christian religion across the centuries. Whether told through music, art, sermons, or books of theology, the story of Jesus is repeatedly translated anew. Because of its embodiment in human cultures – an idea that theologians refer to as "incarnation" – the Christian message has outlasted clans and tribes, nations and empires, monarchies, democracies, and military dictatorships. When a handful of Jesus' Jewish followers reached out to non-Jews in the Roman empire, they unknowingly set their faith on the path toward becoming a world religion. It appears that Israel in 4 BC was not such a "backward" place after all.

By the third century AD, Christians could be found from Britannia in the north to North Africa in the south, from Spain in the west to the borders of Persia in the east. The eastward spread of Christianity was so extensive that the fourth-century Persian empire contained as high a percentage of Christians as the Roman, with a geographic spread from modern-day Iran to India. By the seventh century, Christians were living as far east as China and as far south as Nubia in Africa.

The rise of Islam in Arabia during the seventh century halted Christianity's eastward and southward expansions. Although Arab armies conquered the country of Jesus' birth, by the end of the first millennium after his death the Christian religion had pushed northward across Russia, Scandinavia, and Iceland. The first Christian arrived in North America in AD 986 when a short-lived colony settled in Greenland. By the late sixteenth century, substantial groups of indigenous Christians were thriving in Angola, Japan, the Philippines,

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Brazil, and Central America. By the early seventeenth century, South Africa, Vietnam, and First Nations Canada all had significant Christian populations. During the nineteenth century Christianity spread across North America, North Asia, the South Pacific, and into different regions of Africa. The most rapid expansion of Christianity took place in the twentieth century, as pockets of Christians throughout Africa and Asia grew into widespread movements.

But the story of Christianity around the world is not that of a simple, linear progression. To become a world religion, Christianity first had to succeed on the local level. Specific groups of people had to understand and shape its meaning for themselves. What in totality is called a "world" religion is, on closer observation, a mosaic of local beliefs and practices in creative tension with a universal framework shaped by belief in the God of the Bible, as handed down through Jesus and his followers. As a world religion, Christianity thrives at the intersection between the global or universal, and the local or personal.

A complicating factor in charting the spread of Christianity is that its expansion has not been a matter of continuous progress. Rather, growth takes place at the edges or borderlands of Christian areas, even as Christian heartlands experience decline. Christianity has wilted under assault from hostile governments, ranging from the Zoroastrian Persians in the fourth century to the communist takeover of Russia that killed millions of believers in the twentieth century. When circumstances change, loss of meaning can hollow out the faith from within. In the wake of two devastating world wars, secularism swept over Europe in the late twentieth century, and the percentage of practicing Christians dropped. The pattern that historian Andrew Walls calls "serial progression," including expansion and contraction over time, means that the history of Christianity cannot be treated as a monolithic enterprise, with its universal spread a foregone conclusion.[1] By the mid twenty-first century, the most populous Christian areas of the world are projected to be in the southern hemisphere, in Africa and South America.

The following chronology defines the history of Christianity as a movement rather than a set of doctrines or institutions, notwithstanding that doctrines and institutions are important markers of group identity. As a historical process, Christian mission involves the crossing of cultural and linguistic boundaries by those who consider themselves followers of Jesus Christ, with the intention of sharing their faith. The ongoing boundary crossings raise the question of how the meaning of "Christian" continues to include culturally disparate groups of people: how does Christian identity

[1] Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).

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change as it crosses cultures? The reverse question is also important, namely, how does Christianity shape the culture or worldviews of those who encounter it?

From Jerusalem into "All the World"

The creation and expansion of Christianity began with Jesus, a devout Jewish man who lived 2,000 years ago, never left Palestine, had a public ministry of only three years, and was executed by Roman authorities at age 33 by being nailed to a cross of wood in the manner of common criminals. Government officials hunted down and executed his most important followers. Yet within three centuries of his death, an estimated 10 percent of people in the Roman empire ordered their lives around communal memories of his life and teachings, faith in the defeat of death itself, and the affirmation that he was the "Christ" or "Lord," the unique embodiment of the one true God.

The writings generated by Jesus' disciples are the starting point for understanding the cross-cultural process of Christian adaptation. The New Testament was itself a collection of missionary writings written to help a scattered community remember its origins, and to provide a framework that described and justified the expansion of the faith beyond the first Hebrew believers. Documents were written in the commercial lingua franca of the Roman empire, common Greek, and then compiled into a portable book form, or *codex*. Greek was the language of philosophy, and so was well suited to the expression of theological ideas. By the second century after Jesus' death,, the Greek texts had been translated into Latin and Syriac, other major languages of the Mediterranean and western Asia.

The infrastructures of the Roman empire provided unprecedented opportunities for the spread of information from one region to another. With the *Pax Romana*, or peace enforced by Rome, followers of "the Way" – as early followers of Jesus called themselves – moved along the good Roman roads into the major cities of the empire, carrying letters of introduction from believers in other cities that convinced strangers to open their doors and host the traveling teachers.

Diaspora Jews scattered throughout the empire, in a wide variety of occupations, were interested in stories of one who had wandered as a teacher and healer in the mode of the biblical prophets, and who claimed to represent a fulfillment of Jewish destiny. And non-Jews, or "Gentiles" in Jewish parlance, sometimes admired the Jewish people for their ethical uprightness and belief in one God, and so were drawn to new interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures that welcomed non-Jewish members.

The idea of "mission" is carried through the New Testament by 206 references to the term "sending." The main Greek verb for "to send" is *apostellein*.[2] Thus *apostles* were literally those sent to spread the "Good News" of Jesus' life and message. Notable passages in the New Testament contain explicit commands to go into the world to announce the coming of God's reign, such as when Jesus sent seventy followers to preach to the Jews (Luke 10:1–12). After his resurrection from death and appearance to Mary Magdalene and other women who had gone to his tomb, Jesus told the women to "go tell" his male followers that they had seen him alive.

The most famous biblical passage used by Christians to encourage each other to spread the word about Jesus' life, work, and defeat of death occurred when after his resurrection Jesus ordered the gathered disciples to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19–20). The book of John phrased Jesus' post-resurrection counsel to the disciples with the words, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21).

Despite intermittent opposition from the Roman authorities, from Jewish religious leaders, and from adherents of Greek and Roman gods, early followers of "the Way" organized themselves into gathered communities called *ekklesia*, or churches. Dozens of different biblical expressions were used to describe the public witness or missionary existence of the *ekklesia*, such as "light to the world," "salt of the earth," and "city on a hill." Churches, therefore, were both the products of mission and the organizational network behind further spread of the message.

A century ago, theologian Martin Kahler remarked that mission is "the mother of theology."[3] Although the New Testament is not a systematic handbook of theology, its missionary character reveals that the early followers of Jesus believed they had a divine mandate to bear witness to what they had seen of his ministry, of his message, and especially of his stunning reappearances after the crucifixion. Early Christians believed that Jesus was fulfilling the Jewish prophecies that someday a Savior or Messiah would come to save Israel and inaugurate God's reign on earth. The significance for the history of Christian

[2] David Jacobus Bosch, "Reflections on Biblical Models of Mission," in James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote, eds., *Toward the Twenty-First Century in Christian Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 176.

[3] Ibid., 177. For overviews of the biblical and historical development of mission theologies, see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991); Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).

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mission does not lie in the numerous modern debates over the historical accuracy of the events around Jesus' death and miraculous resurrection, but rather in what the New Testament shows about the missionary consciousness of the early Christians. The transformation of a cowed and defeated handful of Jewish followers into a death-defying, multi-cultural missionary community was an amazing beginning to what is now the largest religion in the world.

The Apostle Paul as missionary

While the core followers of Jesus when he was alive were known as "disciples," Paul is remembered as the "apostle" to the Gentiles, or in modern terms a "missionary" – "one who is sent." Scores of books have been written about Paul as the archetype of the cross-cultural missionary, on Paul's mission strategy, or "Pauline" methods in missions. Yet Paul was only one of dozens of believers who traveled around the Roman empire, spreading the "Good News" about Jesus as Messiah, the chosen one of God. Paul has been remembered as the model missionary by Christians down through the centuries not just because he traveled an estimated 10,000 miles for his mission, but because the letters to the churches he founded are the oldest documents gathered into the New Testament and are foundational to Christian theology. The narrative of Paul's ministry is contained in the Acts of the Apostles, the fifth book in the New Testament.

Paul's personal story makes gripping reading: a follower of a Jewish religious sect called the Pharisees, a law-abiding and duly circumcised member of the tribe of Benjamin, and a Greek-speaking Roman citizen, Paul began his relationship with Christians by persecuting them. The followers of Jesus were standing up in synagogues and proclaiming that Jesus represented the fulfillment of Jewish Scriptures about the coming Messiah. When one of the early church officers named Stephen was stoned to death for blasphemy, Paul held the coats of the mob.

Yet one day, on his way to arrest some Christians in Damascus, Paul was blinded by a flash of light and heard the voice of Jesus asking him why he was persecuting him. After three days of blindness, Paul was visited by a church leader who restored his eyesight and told him how Jesus had been resurrected from death (Acts 9:1–19). This transformative experience was interpreted by Paul as God calling him to preach to Greek-speaking Jews and Gentiles on behalf of "the Way" of Jesus Christ.

Propelled by his vision, Paul traveled to provincial centers where he sought out the Jewish quarters and began proclaiming the message of Jesus as Messiah. Because the diaspora Jews scattered throughout the empire spoke Greek, and worked and traded in the wider Greek-speaking world, many

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had forgotten their native Hebrew. In the third century BC Jewish Scriptures had been translated into a Greek version called the Septuagint. As Paul interpreted the salvific role of Jesus according to the Hebrew Scriptures, he could be understood both by ethnic Jews and by non-Jews. The common Greek language – as well as Paul's theological interpretations – were bridges across which the meaning of Jesus' defeat of death traveled from an oral, Aramaic-speaking local Hebrew culture into the cosmopolitan Greek world. The Greek word for Messiah, or Lord, is "Christ."

In Antioch, where Paul spent a year, a decisive breakthrough among Greek-speaking Gentiles occurred, and the followers of the Way of Jesus began to be called "Christians." Paul's basic message was one of inclusion: through Jesus Christ, Gentiles were grafted on to God's promises for Israel: "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved' " (Romans 10:12–13). The biculturality of the diaspora Jewish population, as exemplified by Paul himself – a Greek-speaking Jew – was essential for the expanded meaning of salvation that included both Jews and Greeks. After Paul had gathered a community of believers in a particular city he moved on, but sent other workers to help the fledgling churches he had visited. A network of Christians – linked together by correspondence and itinerant teachers like Paul – began emerging in the cities across the Roman empire.

As more non-Jews were attracted to the Christian community, tensions grew between the Jewish believers, who continued to worship in synagogues and to follow Jewish law, and the new believers from other ethnic backgrounds for whom the Jewish law was unimportant. Many of Paul's letters dealt with the struggles of the infant churches to negotiate their internal cultural and economic differences. After fourteen years of successful ministry among the growing Gentile churches, Paul was summoned to Jerusalem to meet with the Hebrew Christians, directed by Jesus' brother James. The Christians in Jerusalem were skeptical that the non-Jewish Christians could be fully accepted by God without obeying Jewish law. In a crucial discussion, described in Acts 15, Jesus' chief disciple Peter, Paul, and his friend Barnabas convinced James and the Hebrew church elders that God was clearly speaking to the Gentiles. Evidence of God's love for non Jews was to be found in the miraculous healings and changed lives, the "signs and wonders," being performed among them. The Jerusalem Christians sent off Paul and Barnabas with some minimal instructions and a generous blessing for the non-Jewish Christians. This approval by the "Jerusalem Council" of Jewish leaders who had been close to Jesus himself ratified Christianity's already vigorous expansion into Syria, Cilicia, Antioch, and points eastward.

That so many non-Jewish believers were responding to the work of Paul and the other evangelists created a crisis for the original believers in Jerusalem, who sensed themselves losing control over the boundaries of the faith. This same dilemma has been repeated every time the gospel message makes itself at home among a new group of people. The cross-cultural spread of the message, including translating it into terms that made sense to a Gentile audience, set a pattern that not only separated Christianity from its Jewish background, but created a religion able to transcend cultural differences. The crucial decision to allow Greeks to become Christians and remain within their own cultural framework was the key that opened the future of Christianity to its global potential as a "world" religion, rather than remaining as a sect within Judaism.

The extent to which Christianity remains connected to its Jewish roots has been a source of disagreement throughout its history. Since Jesus was himself Jewish, as were his original disciples, Christianity was built upon Jewish foundations, upon continuity with Hebrew Scriptures, commonly called by Christians the "Old Testament." Yet the fact of cross-cultural transmission immediately opened the question of what changes and what is retained each time Christianity crosses into new cultures. Some early Greek Christians, notably Marcion, a wealthy shipowner from Sinope in Pontus, tried to strip the sacred writings of their Jewish elements and rejected the Septuagint, believing that they were a barrier to understanding Jesus in light of Greek philosophy. The rejection of Marcion and others like him by the majority of churches resulted in the biblical books, or "canon", being closed to further changes by the late fourth century. But the issue of authority, and how to define Christian tradition, even as Christian worldviews accommodate new cultural and generational understandings, is a perpetual balancing act in the Christian movement. The "first missionary," Paul, set the balance between innovation and tradition when he welcomed the customs of both Jewish and Greek Christians, but insisted that the core message of belief in "Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2) could not be compromised.

Expansion across the Roman empire and beyond

The book of Acts in the New Testament voiced the early self-perception of Christians as a multi-cultural people on the move. First came "Pentecost," the so-called birthday of the church, when a group of diaspora Jews in Jerusalem miraculously heard the good news of Jesus' resurrection in their own languages, "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews

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and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power" (Acts 2:9–11). The participants in Pentecost experienced a profound sense of the presence of the living God, the Holy Spirit, which they heard as a divine rush of wind (*ruah*). The empowered, multi-lingual messengers of the divine moved out from Jerusalem – and burst the seams of Jewish law and tradition.

By Acts 5, the Good News had reached the Samaritan people, a nontraditional and unpopular community north of Israel. In Acts 8, an Ethiopian eunuch, an African admirer of Judaism, became convinced by the apostle Philip that Jesus fulfilled the Hebrew Scriptures and was baptized. In Acts 10, the Holy Spirit fell upon the household of Cornelius, a righteous Roman centurion. They were baptized and admitted into fellowship with the believers. Samaritans, African eunuchs, and Roman oppressors – all were the kind of marginal participants in Judaism who were attracted to the early Christian message that they, too, were welcome among the believers in the one God as mediated by his son and messenger, Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. According to Christian tradition, Jesus' disciples took the message from Jerusalem into new regions in which they were eventually martyred – Mark to Egypt, Thomas to India, Philip to Africa, and Peter to Rome. Ancient churches today, including the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church of South India and the Christian Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt, consider these early apostles to be their founders. The very existence of a growing, multi-cultural network of churches was seen by Paul and others as theological proof that the kingdom of God, the peaceful reign of the one God of Jews and Gentiles alike, was at hand.

The story of Christianity during its first three centuries was that of a steadily expanding urban network, often along extended family lines, under the leadership of strong local leaders known as "bishops," or overseers.[4] Bishops ran social services, collected money for the poor, solved theological disputes, and were the first to be tortured and executed during waves of persecution. Gatherings of Christians met in house churches sponsored by wealthier members. Women played a prominent role as patrons of the movement that gained a reputation for female leadership and strict personal ethical codes.

Because of their loyalty to the one God, Christians refused to make sacrifices to the gods and emperor of the Roman empire. Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna, the last church leader believed to have known Jesus' disciples

[4] See Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd edn. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Howard Clark Kee, "The Context, Birth, and Early Growth of Christianity," in Kee et al., *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History*, 2nd edn. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998).

personally, was burned alive in AD 156 at age 86 because he refused to burn incense to Caesar. Christians were suspected of treason and suffered intermittent persecution, including being arrested, burned as torches by the Emperor Nero, and thrown into gladiatorial arenas to be torn apart by wild beasts. And yet the movement grew, as increasing numbers of people admired the Christians' strong community life and compassionate care for the poor. As the early church "father of Latin theology" Tertullian (d. 235) noted, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

During its first few centuries, Christianity spread through three main linguistic groups. North Africa became the stronghold of Latin-speaking Christians, with their headquarters in Rome. Greek speakers dominated the church in Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean. Syriac, the language most closely related to the Aramaic spoken by Jesus himself, became the sacred language of the eastern churches that spread beyond the Roman empire. Each linguistic grouping developed its own traditions of theology and worship. Strong ascetic practices marked believers' desire to identify with Jesus and his sufferings. Healings and miracles characterized the popular appropriation of the faith, with Christians particularly noted for their care of the sick during epidemics. Critics continued to accuse Christianity of being a superstitious cult that attracted marginal people – children, the poor, and women. Yet leading philosophers and intellectuals also joined the movement. By the end of the third century, Christianity had spread strongly into areas of Persian control, present-day Iran. Christian slaves, captured from Roman territory, began carrying their faith throughout Persia and along the Silk Road across central Asia.

Fourth- and fifth-century Christianities

In the fourth century, the scattered seeds of Christianity burst into bloom everywhere at once. Christianity became too widespread for political rulers to ignore. With persecution-tested bishops, a network of believers across cultural and political boundaries, schools for theological training, and sacred texts in the major literary languages, it seemed that Christianity's time had come.[5]

The most important major development of the fourth century was the legalization of Christianity in the Roman empire. Given that the traditional

[5] On the development of multiple Christianities during this period see Peter Robert Lamont Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, vol. 1: *Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001).

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Roman pantheon and imperial rituals were strongest among the landed gentry of the Mediterranean area, it is not surprising that the pressure to legalize Christianity came not from the old Roman aristocracy but sweeping down from the distant provinces. Just as Christianity had grown at the margins of society, so did its political establishment come from outside the core of the empire, in the person of a soldier Constantine (d. 337), who had gone to the northernmost Roman province of Britannia to help his father, the tetrarch Constantius I, exert military control over a rebellion. When Constantius I died in 306, the Roman troops in Britain declared his son emperor. No doubt young Constantine's military prowess and shrewd social policies made him popular in Roman Britannia. By separating the civil from the military realms, Constantine granted de facto religious toleration to the Christians there. Although it is unclear what percentage of the British were Christians at the time, rough estimates for the number of Christians in the empire at the time of Constantine were up to 10 percent – a large enough percentage to make a difference to contenders for the throne. His army hardened by frontier service in Britannia, Constantine fought his way into Rome in AD 312.

According to Christian tradition, Constantine had a vision from God that he should place the chi-rho, a symbol representing the first two Greek letters of the word "Christ," on the shields of his men, and God would grant them the key victory over his rival for the throne. After marching as victor into the city, Constantine broke with expected practice and did not sacrifice to the Roman gods. Instead, he soon issued his famous edict of religious toleration for Christianity. Under Constantine the Great, Christianity went from being persecuted, to being tolerated, to being the favored religion of the Roman empire. This sea-change in socio-political context had broad implications for Christian identity. Instead of being destroyed, churches were now built with government funds. A new Christian capital, Constantinople, signified the start of the new era. Army officers and young nobles patronized the favored religion, and masses of people began needing baptism and religious instruction.

With the regime change, formerly persecuted and isolated theologians and bishops came into the open. Perhaps predictably, they fought among themselves over the theological meaning of Jesus' identity, the nature of his relationship to God the Creator, and themes of church order. The multi-lingual and multi-cultural variety of religious practices prevalent when Christianity was underground needed to be reconciled with its new public face. Constantine himself, though not yet baptized into formal church membership, called a major church council in 325 in Nicaea (now Iznik, Turkey) to lay the foundations of a common theological understanding of the nature of

Jesus Christ as both fully human and fully divine. The formal theology patronized by the emperor became the law, and other versions of Christianity became illegal.

Once sacrifices to the Roman gods were eliminated as a requirement for public service, Christians took leading roles in the government and military. In 391, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire, and pagan religions were outlawed. Various emperors' determination that theologies were either "official" or "heretical" had profound implications for mission, as theologians judged to be heretics by major church councils fled beyond the areas of Roman control and spread their versions of Christianity there. In retrospect, some of the bitter theological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries can be explained by cultural and linguistic differences among Christians.

Government recognition of Christianity was a two-edged sword, depending not only upon one's theology, but also upon the empire in which one lived. What was good for Christian fortunes in the Roman empire was bad for them in Persia, Rome's chief rival. Sponsorship by Rome meant that Christians in Persia appeared to be enemies of the state. As self-proclaimed patron of the Christians, Constantine sent a letter to Shapur II (d. 379), the "shah of shahs," asking him to treat Christians better. Shapur II, with the assistance of Zoroastrian priests, launched a major persecution of Christians in 339. Christians were double-taxed, and their churches destroyed. They were ordered to worship the sun, the center of Zoroastrian ritual. When they refused, tens of thousands were tortured and executed, especially those native Persians who had converted to Christianity. In the capital city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, every bishop selected in subsequent decades was immediately executed. The rage of the Zoroastrians was especially directed against the many ascetic Christians who had taken vows of celibacy and thus appeared to "drop out" from social responsibilities. Thousands of celibate women, many of them deaconesses and nuns who held high positions in the Syrian church, were martyred. Educated individual Christians retained value for their service to the Persian state, but their safety was tenuous and subject to arbitrary swings between persecution and patronage.

Even as it functioned within Roman and Persian imperial frameworks, fourth-century Christianity helped to reshape particular ethnic identities. As different linguistic groupings interacted with the Christian message in their own languages, they solidified into ethnicities or nations with a shared history and tradition. The range of potential theologies increased in tandem with ethnic and linguistic differences. Thus the emerging fourth-century variations of Christianity should be seen as plural "Christianities," with each form developing according to its own cultural and political dynamics.

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While Edessa, now Şanliurfa in modern-day Turkey, was the first city to register a Christian majority, the conversion of Armenia was noteworthy because it was the first independent ethnic nation to become Christian. According to tradition, Gregory the Illuminator (d. circa 337) was born of Parthian parents who lived in Armenia. He became a Christian in Cappadocia and returned to Armenia around 300. Like Paul, he was a bicultural bridge from a parochial ethnic culture into a more universal Christian worldview. He refused to sacrifice to the Armenian goddess and was imprisoned in a pit for thirteen years. But when the king fell ill, Gregory was brought out to pray for his healing. Upon his recovery, King Tiridates II was baptized.

In 314, around the time of Constantine's conversion, Gregory became a bishop and established the church in Armenia. An Armenian script was developed for the purpose of translating the Scriptures. In the early years of the fifth century, the patriarch (head bishop) developed an alphabet and assembled a team of scholars to translate the Bible and liturgical and theological materials that became foundational for a national church. With a national identity molded by the acquisition of their own written language, a written history, and Scriptures, the Armenians were able to maintain their ethnic solidarity over many centuries despite the loss of their political independence. The unity of the Armenians helped them to withstand attacks from the Zoroastrian Persians in the fifth century, and similar pressure by the surrounding Turkish and then Soviet empires in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During World War I, an estimated 1.5 million Armenians were killed by the Ottoman Turks. The "Armenian massacres" became the modern prototype for ethno-religious genocide.

The fourth-century spread of Christianity into Africa also created an ethnic national Christianity that, despite pressure from Islam and then militant Marxism, has retained its identity to the present day. Axum was capital of a kingdom known as Abyssinia, now Ethiopia. In the early fourth century pirates on the Red Sea killed a Christian philosopher from Tyre. In the resulting shipwreck, his wards Frumentius (d. circa 380) and Aedesius were found by the Axumites sitting under a tree and studying. The king welcomed them and gave them high positions, as they were persons of knowledge. When the king died and left an infant son, the future King Ezana (d. circa 350), Frumentius became regent. Eventually Frumentius was consecrated by the bishop of Alexandria to organize the church in Axum. He converted the royal family, planted churches, ordained priests, and opened a school. Under King Ezana, the warrior kingdom of Axum shifted from worshiping various south Arabian pagan gods, to Christianity. A rich tradition of monasticism characterized Ethiopian Christianity, and Syriac-speaking missionaries translated the Bible into Ge'ez, the language of Axum.

In the fourth century the kingdom of Axum conquered Meroe, the combined kingdom giving birth to Nubia, another ancient African Christian nation.

Bicultural persons were the human bridges across which the "Good News" of Jesus traveled from one culture to another. In the 250 s, Goths on the northwestern shore of the Black Sea took to ships and raided the shores of Asia Minor. They seized many Christians, who witnessed to their faith among their captors. The bicultural son of a Goth and a Christian slave, Ulfila (d. 383) studied Greek, Latin, and Gothic. At age 30 Ulfila was sent to Constantinople as a diplomat, and was there consecrated as a bishop for the Gothic Christians. Known as the Apostle to the Goths, he returned to the Gothic lands and became leader of the church. This role included creating a Gothic alphabet and translating the Scriptures into Gothic – the first central European language to have the Bible. Around 347, Ulfila took a group of Gothic Christian refugees onto Roman soil for protection. He led the negotiations to allow other Goths to cross into the Roman empire in 376, as they fled from other hostile tribes on the move in central Europe.

To the cultured Mediterranean heirs of ancient Greek and Roman civilization, the Germanic Goths were primitive, forest-dwelling, northern "barbarians." Their theology was also seen as defective and inferior to the theological formulations of the Roman bishops. Known as Arianism, the Gothic theological system viewed Jesus as similar to a tribal chief's counselor, or go-between, who carried people's petitions to the ruler and who carried out the chief's orders. In various forms of Arianism, Jesus was seen as subordinate to the Father God and less than divine.

The Arian Christology differed from the Orthodox, or Catholic version, settled at the Council of Nicaea in 325. To followers of Constantine and the official Orthodox Christianity of the empire, Jesus was *homoousios*, or "one nature" with and therefore fully equal to the Creator. The paradox behind Jesus' miraculous life, death, and resurrection was expressed in the idea of his being simultaneously fully human and fully divine. Ultimately, the viewpoint of Ulfila and the Goths was condemned as heretical. Yet the creation of a Gothic Bible helped solidify Gothic identity in the same way that Armenian translations did for the Armenians in Asia Minor, and that the Ge'ez translation did for the Ethiopians in Africa. In 410, having gained in numbers and strength, a branch of the Goths invaded and sacked Rome. They credited their success in striking at the heart of the Roman empire to their superior "Arian" rather than "Catholic" theology. The theological problem of the exact relationship between religious beliefs and military victory or defeat was something that occupied famous theologians in the waning days of the empire.

By the fourth century, the story of Jesus Christ – with its varied theological interpretations – had moved outward from its beginnings in an Aramaic-speaking world through the wide geographic spread of common languages within the Greco-Roman and Persian empires, and even beyond. Bicultural apostles like the Jewish Roman citizen Paul, migrants like Gregory the Illuminator of Armenia and Frumentius of Axum, and even the slaves and their descendants like Ulfila of the Goths all translated the Christian message into the cultures of their own peoples.

The Creation of Catholic Europe, 400–1400

In histories of western civilization, the fifth century is typically considered the end of antiquity and the beginning of a period of chaos and uncertainty. As the western Roman empire disintegrated and its cities were laid waste, warring clans and tribes swirled across the European continent. When Islam rose in the seventh century, a vigorous Arabian religion swept over the old Christian heartland of Palestine, North Africa, and the Near East (including modern-day Turkey). The eastern Roman empire, Byzantium, was surrounded by forces hostile to Christianity. Once the Zoroastrian Persian empire (centered in current-day Iran and Iraq) fell to Islam, the Greek-speaking eastern Roman empire entered a centuries-long struggle for survival. But what seemed like the "dark ages" for the ancient classical Roman and Greek civilizations was the beginning of the creation of Europe: tribe after tribe of outsiders or "barbarians" from the wooded north entered the orbit of Catholicism, and allied themselves with the bishop of Rome, known as the Pope. With the help of church leadership, they acquired written scholarship, adopted Latin as a cultural lingua franca, and crafted written legal systems.

In the history of Christianity, the creation of Catholic Europe accompanied a major demographic shift of Christian population northward, away from the Mediterranean and western Asia. Some of the Gothic tribes that invaded Rome and North Africa in the fifth century were already Christians, though of the heterodox "Arian" variety that had grown up beyond the boundaries of the Roman empire. As each tribe eventually adopted the universal or "catholic" version of Christianity, a trend started by the Franks when King Clovis was baptized in the 480s, they allied themselves with the traditions of old Rome and what it represented in terms of religion, social organization, and intellectual tradition. The meaning of "catholic" is "universal": the attraction of Catholicism for the clan leaders and monarchs of Europe was that it welcomed them into a broader worldview, yet served

their local needs. With the adoption of Catholicism, tribal elites attached themselves to the expanding concept of Christendom. Clusters of interlinked Christian tribes developed over the centuries into linguistic and cultural blocs – the forerunners of nation-states. In the fourteenth century the last non-Christian tribes of Europe were defeated, and the basic geographic outline of European Christendom was complete.

Conversion to Christianity in Europe took place on multiple levels. Ultimately a sense of sacred order permeated all of society, from the kings who claimed "divine right" to rule based on their continuity with the Old Testament kings of Israel, to the bishops who declared themselves ambassadors of Christ, to the peasants who experienced the healing power of God through the rituals of the church. Popes and bishops, holy men and monks, royal elites and their Christian wives – each played a part in adapting the Christian gospel to the cultures and peoples of what today is called Europe.[6]

Popes and bishops

The creation of European Christendom was an immensely complex and multi-faceted process. But the role of ecclesiastical leadership was central in creating a context in which tribal groups decided to accept baptism and become Christian. According to a story recorded by the Venerable Bede (d. 735), the earliest historian of Britain, one day in the 590s Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604) was walking among the Roman slave markets and spied two boys for sale. Struck by their blond hair, he asked where they came from. Upon being told they were "Angles," he replied, "Not Angles, but Angels." Inspired by this encounter, Pope Gregory the Great, former prefect of Rome, former papal ambassador to Constantinople, monk and pastoral theologian, launched an official mission to lands beyond his jurisdiction.[7]

The leader of Gregory's own monastery traveled with forty men to Kent, located in the former Roman province of Britannia. The mission team processed before King Ethelbert (d. 616) with the pomp and glitter of Roman ecclesiastical garb and accouterments, thereby impressing the court with the magnificent resources available to those who would befriend the "holy catholic and apostolic church." No doubt Queen Bertha (d. 612) was pleased to

[6] See Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

[7] Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, Medieval Source Book, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/bede-book1.html>.

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see the monks, as she was a Frankish Christian who had persuaded her husband to be baptized and had sent messages to the Pope requesting the missionaries.

On Christmas Day 597, priests baptized the king and 10,000 English warriors. King Ethelbert gave the missionary Augustine (d. 604) the remains of an old Roman church at Canterbury for his use, and land on which to build a monastery. In the pattern of Roman leaders, monks assisted Ethelbert in drafting a set of laws for Kent. His legal code was the first composition ever written in English prose. Upon its adoption of Christianity and the codification of its laws, Kent became an ally of Roman civilization. Monks trained at Canterbury traveled far and wide as missionaries to other clans and kingdoms in northern Europe. Today, Canterbury remains the headquarters of the Church of England, under an archbishop whose historical lineage descends from the mission of Gregory the Great.

The story of Gregory, Augustine, Ethelbert, and Bertha reveals a great deal about the patterns of mission that prevailed during the early centuries of European conversion. As the western Roman empire crumbled, its beleaguered cities relied more heavily on the bishops, who took on responsibilities of civil administration in addition to their traditional care for the poor. Between the invasion of barbarians from the north and the surge of Islam from the Arabian peninsula during the seventh century, church officials gained greater authority as symbols of continuity with the old Roman civilization. Gregory the Great was a former prefect of Rome and thus brought considerable administrative skills to his office. The spiritual authority of the Pope was also assured by his claim to represent a biblical succession from Jesus to Peter, who according to tradition was the first leader of the church in Rome. Since the bishop of Rome was a central focus of resistance to northern invaders and to Muslims pushing from the south, the papal office gained prestige in direct relation to the collapse of civil government in the Mediterranean and to the Pope's ability to stave off invasion. Catholic Rome's need for allies – as well as its sense of spiritual responsibility to the unreached – made Gregory the Great's mission to Kent worth the expense and the risk.

Popes after Gregory also sponsored missions to the unconverted. Medieval popes made alliances with zealous northern rulers, especially the Franks, who traded physical support for Rome for the Pope's spiritual support and continuity with the early centuries of the faith. On Christmas Day 800, Pope Leo III (d. 816) crowned King Charlemagne (d. 814) of the Franks in Rome, thereby demonstrating papal ability to make or to break monarchs and, incidentally, founding the "Holy Roman Empire." Under papal sponsorship but paid by the Frankish king, in the 720s and 730s, the Saxon bishop

St. Boniface acted as missionary along the Germanic frontier, founding churches and drawing them under central control. His mission method included trying to demonstrate the greater power of the Christian God over druidic spiritual practices. He was finally axed to death by robbers in 754 while trying to evangelize Friesland on the North Sea.

The dark side of the growing power of Christendom was the increasing willingness of popes and kings to use force against groups that refused to accept the Catholic faith. This trend had begun with Constantine, but the conversion of the northern barbarians brought ethnic patterns of tribal violence into Christian culture. With the passing centuries the numbers of non-Christian tribes in Europe shrank. To combat the resistant pagans, church authorities ultimately embraced a violent crusade model of conquest over peaceful relationships with non-Christian peoples.

In 1095, Pope Urban II (d. 1099) delivered a speech urging the reconquest of the Holy Land from the Muslims. His speech launched thousands of European nobles and ordinary people in several waves of crusades to reconquer former Christian lands in Palestine, North Africa, Sicily, and other places that had come under Muslim control. In the medieval unity of church and state, coercion became intertwined with mission in both theory and practice. The spiritual devotion of the early Crusaders was undeniable, and they made huge financial sacrifices. But their medieval version of Christianity confused evangelization with violent conquest and the slaughter of people unlike themselves.

The relationship between the medieval European and Islamic worlds was just as competitive and troubled as was the enmity between the old Roman and Persian civilizations. As the descendant of Roman authority, the Pope remained the most visible public symbol of opposition to Islam. On the other side of the fence, while Islamic governments typically tolerated Christians and Jews as minorities, the lack of the ability to grow meant that churches in North Africa, the Middle East, and Turkey faced inevitable decline. Under Islamic law, conversion from Islam to Christianity was punished by execution, and mixed marriages always resulted in Muslim children.

On the eastern border between the old Roman empire and Asia, centuries of Byzantine resistance had held back the Huns and the Turks. Eastern Orthodox resistance to Islam allowed the time and space for the development of western Christendom. But the capture of Greek-speaking Constantinople by the Muslim Turks in 1453 ended the independence of Christian Byzantium. Constantinople was renamed Istanbul, and its beautiful Hagia Sophia cathedral converted into a mosque. Throughout the Muslim-controlled regions of the Near East, central Asia, and North Africa, ancient Christian churches faced inexorable pressure and gradually shrank

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over the succeeding centuries. By the mid fifteenth century, Roman Catholic Europe found itself isolated from the Middle Eastern "Holy Land" that had given it birth.

Monks and holy men

Monks were the grassroots missionaries in the conversion of Europe. From the early centuries of the church, wandering celibate holy men and women were honored witnesses to the peaceful lifestyle and suffering of Jesus. In the Syriac-speaking churches of the east, the ascetic feats and miracle-working of holy men caused people to admire Christianity and to seek baptism. Monasticism became a powerful countercultural witness during the age of Constantine in the fourth century, when holy celibates moved into the Egyptian desert in silent protest at the increasing prosperity and power of the now official legalized church. Groups of monks adopted rules to sustain themselves cooperatively under harsh conditions, often in dangerous settings.

As Roman outposts throughout North Africa and Europe collapsed under the weight of barbarian invasions, organized monasticism provided an anchor for the remains of Roman traditions and attracted ordinary people to Christianity through miracles and healings. St. Martin of Tours (d. 397) was a retired Roman military officer. He became a monk and built a monastery on the cliffs overlooking the Loire valley in rural Gaul. Pro-Roman Gaulish men of good education and family joined him as monks. Martin's spiritual power lay in his role as exorcist and destroyer of pagan religious sites. With the wood obtained from the sacred groves of the pre-Christian religion he built monasteries and churches on the sites of the pagan holy places, thereby helping the people to transfer their ritual allegiance to Christianity while retaining their sense of sacred space. With his reputation as demon fighter, he became bishop of Tours. In the fifth century the tomb of Martin at Tours became a pilgrimage destination for people seeking to be healed, and a basilica was built over it.

A former monk himself, Gregory the Great understood the missionary potential of a disciplined monasticism. When he sent Augustine to Canterbury, it marked a new phase in missionary monasticism because it merged a popular countercultural witness with the structures of the Catholic Church. Under instructions from Gregory, Augustine and his monks built the foundation of English Christianity on the culture of the people, for example transforming animal sacrifices into prayers of thanksgiving at mealtime. The literacy of monks meant they introduced the technologies of reading and writing into the oral cultures of Europe. They compiled written

legal codes for new Christian monarchs, who were very interested in purity regulations and proper conduct that would please God and thereby bring order and prosperity to their kingdoms. Over the centuries, monasteries became places where important Latin and Greek manuscripts were copied, and where oral traditions of the people could be preserved in writing. Without the writings of Christian monks, such pre-Christian classics as the poem *Beowulf* would not exist today.

When Augustine and his monks marched into Kent, they carried with them precious handwritten and painted manuscripts guaranteed to attract the king to the more advanced text-based Latin civilization. As sites of civilization and skills, monastic houses spread throughout Europe and provided the institutional structures that undergirded medieval Europe. In rural Scotland and Ireland people stored their wealth at monasteries for safe keeping. Monks introduced agricultural improvements, and in the Netherlands they even pioneered the system of dikes. As monks moved into the countryside individually or in teams, their reputation as wandering miracle-workers and holy men drew people into the church. The stability of their foundations during centuries of wars, plagues, and famines sustained the faithful. The combination of authoritative structures with the entrepreneurial flexibility of monks was one secret of evangelizing Europeans at all levels of society.

The tenacity of monks facilitated the conversion of Scandinavia. From the eighth to eleventh centuries, Vikings from Denmark, Sweden, and Norway swept down the coasts of Britain and Europe, looting monasteries and killing monks. Since in rural society the monastery was the major institution where wealth was concentrated, monasteries became the targets of regular raids. Severe disruption to the churches occurred, as generations of bishops and monks were killed and monasteries were forced to move inland. Over time Vikings began wintering over in the areas they attacked, and they assimilated to the Christian population. After conversion, Vikings became generous and pious patrons of the local churches, and soon moved into monastic and ecclesiastical positions themselves. When Iceland was settled by the Norsemen, both pagans and Christians went there, as some of the Vikings had already lived in Scotland and so took their faith with them to Iceland. The Viking settlement in Greenland became Christian sometime in the eleventh century, and in the twelfth century the doomed settlement in that frozen land got its own bishop – the first practice of Christianity in North America. Contrary to what is reported in US history books, the first baptized European child born in North America was not in Jamestown, Virginia. He was Snorri Thorfinnson, born in the twelfth century of Viking parents in Greenland.

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Monarchs, male and female

The role of monarchs in the expansion of European Christianity was important down to the modern period. In small-scale societies, people were expected to share the worldview of their rulers. The power of the ruler, in turn, was partly based on his ability to align his people with the divine will for their preservation and wealth. Thus in the tribal milieus of Europe and Africa, and later in the South Pacific, conversion of the people to Christianity took hold one tribe at a time, with ultimate success measured by the conversion of the leaders. Even in large multi-religious empires such as the Roman, Chinese, and Persian, the approval of the monarch was essential to the survival of a religion. In areas where the monarch was not a Christian, Christianity might exist, but it was unable to flourish because to neglect the official religion was seen as destructive to the nation as a whole. In some cases the churches never gained royal support: for example the Nestorians, who traveled from Persia to China along the Silk Road for hundreds of years beginning in the seventh century, were ultimately doomed to oblivion by the decision of the Chinese emperor to stamp out heterodoxy.[8] Part of the key to the success of Christianization in Europe, Armenia, Nubia, and other places, therefore, was the role of tribal chiefs and kings in approving and sponsoring Christianity.

After his baptism, King Ethelbert, like Constantine before him and Charlemagne and others after him, considered himself a protector of the church. The merging of monarchy with Christian leadership was justified on Old Testament grounds in which the kings of Israel clearly had a divine mandate to rule. Part of the idea behind the "divine right of kings," as it developed in Europe, was that God spoke directly to rulers and granted them authority. In a sense, monarchs were the most powerful laymen, according to Old Testament models, even as bishops were the most powerful churchmen.[9] This desire to be seen as protector of the church was similar to how Byzantine emperors viewed their task in the same time period. In some eastern Christian countries, such as Armenia and Georgia, the royal family's patronage of the church extended to providing its high priests from among its own ranks. Evangelization of their own territories was part of the responsibility of divinely ordained monarchs.

With the conversion of Europe from monarchs on down the social ladder, the strategic role of Christian women must also be considered as part of the

[8] On early Christianity in Asia, see Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1: *Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998).
[9] On the integrated medieval worldview, see Joseph H. Lynch, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History* (New York: Longman, 1992).

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historical record. When Queen Bertha sought the conversion of her husband, she was following in the footsteps of her great-grandmother Clotilde (d. 545), who had converted her husband Clovis (d. 511), king of the Franks. When the Slavic people of Kiev became Christians around the year 1000, it was partly due to the influence of Olga, grandmother of King Vladimir (d. 1015). Leading clerics encouraged Christian wives to use their influence on their husbands, who would then presumably convert the nation. In polygamous households, the Christian wife and mother competed with non-Christian wives who might be promoting other religions and advancing their own children to positions of leadership. Among the nomadic Mongols who galloped across and devastated central Eurasia in the thirteenth century, for example, were several notable Nestorian wives. Genghis Khan (d. 1227) and at least two of his sons married Nestorian women. The powerful Nestorian princess Sorkaktani Beki (d. 1252), the wife of his youngest son, became mother of the Great Khan of the Mongols (Khubilai Khan, d. 1294), an emperor of China, and an emperor of Persia. Although the Mongols did not become Christians, their tendency toward religious toleration in the thirteenth century, prior to their wholesale conversion to Islam, was partly due to the influence of powerful Nestorian wives and mothers.

As Islam gained strength across Asia, the desire to reconquer former Christian lands and to consolidate Catholic Christendom grew powerfully among monarchs on the Iberian peninsula, who had been fighting against Muslim invaders from North Africa since the early eighth century. With the assistance of various Crusaders, the kingdom of Portugal expelled Muslims and Jews in the thirteenth century. The prince of Portugal, Henry the Navigator (d. 1460), had a vision of sending ships around the coast of Africa in an attempt to break the Muslim blockade that kept Europe from trading with the Far East, and to capitalize on trade with Africa. He also sought to ally himself with a mysterious legendary Christian prince known as "Prester John," now believed to have been the king of Ethiopia. Portuguese sailing vessels crept down the coast of Africa, and eventually crossed the sea to India and the Spice Islands. In order to continue the struggle against the Muslims, as well as to evangelize newly discovered territories, fifteenth-century popes granted extensive control over church affairs to Portuguese rulers. The age of European exploration and conquest had begun.

Portuguese missionaries had surprising success in spreading Catholicism near some of their outposts, notably among the Kongo people of what is now Angola. Kongolese Catholicism played a historic role when, in 1521, the grandson of the first Kongo Catholic chief was consecrated as the first African bishop, Henrique. Over time, however, the Kongolese Church was dissipated through lack of support from Rome. There would not be another African

Catholic bishop until the twentieth century. Ultimately the Portuguese slave trade depopulated Angola and sent millions of Africans to Brazil as slaves.

After Isabella of Castile (d. 1504) married Ferdinand of Aragon (d. 1516), in 1492, their combined forces conquered Granada, the last Muslim outpost on the Iberian peninsula, and established the nation of Spain. As with Portugal, the spirit of *reconquista* accompanied overseas exploration. Even as Granada was falling, the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus (d. 1506) met with Queen Isabella to request support for his voyage of exploration across the Atlantic, in pursuit of a new path to the Indies and the lucrative spice trade.

Once Columbus "discovered" America in the name of Spain, the Portuguese and Spanish monarchs needed a way to adjudicate their claims to new territories. In 1493, Pope Alexander VI (d. 1503) issued the decrees *Inter caetera* and *Dudum siquidem*. The system of royal patronage, or *Patronatus Regalis* (*Padroado* in Portuguese and *Patronato* in Spanish), required the monarchs of each country to evangelize their conquered territories in exchange for title of ownership and the right to collect tithes and appoint church officials.[10] The Pope drew a line around the globe and allotted non-Christian lands from the Philippines to the Americas to Spain, and from Africa to Southeast Asia to Portugal. In line with the *Patronatus*, Christopher Columbus took priests with him on his second voyage to the Americas, as did the other major conquistadors of the sixteenth century. The conquest of Latin America was thus continuous with the well-established modus operandi of Christendom in the late Middle Ages – that of the church legitimizing evangelization in a context of military conquest.

King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella were powerful patrons of the Roman Catholic Church, and the most visible proponents of Christendom. The centuries of struggle against the Muslims had united church and state, similar to the way in which Muslim caliphs evangelized territories through conquest. Ferdinand and Isabella assumed the task of evangelization as part of the extension of their empires. Isabella took particular interest in the conversion of the American Indians. She ratified the system of *encomienda,* whereby Spanish conquerors received land grants with the provision that they convert the local inhabitants to Christianity. Like the monks of old among European peasants, members of religious and monastic communities were supposed to undertake the preaching, baptizing, and religious instruction of the Indians. But *encomienda* functioned as a violent system of conquest and enslavement rather than a means of peaceful evangelization.

[10] See Luis N. Rivera Pagán, *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

The greed of the Spanish and Portuguese settlers meant that the system of conversion exported to the New World was continuous with the crusading mentality that had characterized seven centuries of effort by the Spanish to free Spain from Muslim control. Just as being a Frank under Charlemagne meant being a Catholic, so did being a Spanish subject under Ferdinand and Isabella. The limitations of Christendom as a mission model became apparent when Christian rulers – often over the objections of individual monks and missionaries among the ordinary people – used conversion as an excuse for their wars of conquest and territorial aggression.

When Gregory the Great launched the first papal mission beyond the boundaries of the Roman empire in AD 596, he unwittingly built a bridge over which Latin culture and the Catholic faith could penetrate, shape, and unify tribal societies. In an age when material and spiritual realities were seen as tightly interwoven, the cooperation of bishops and popes, monks and monarchs was necessary for large-scale social transformation. Little did Gregory know that a thousand years after he had sent missionaries from the Mediterranean Christian world into the northern wilderness, the distant mission fields would become the heartland of an independent and ambitious Christendom. Connection with the church universal, its courts, structures, and the intellectual traditions that sustained it, laid the foundations for a common Europe.

The shaping of European Christendom occurred in the approximate millennium between the missionary actions of Pope Gregory the Great and Pope Alexander VI. In 1493, Roman Catholicism launched yet another phase of expansion when Pope Alexander VI validated the sending of priests to Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Once again, the commitment to crossing cultural and geographic boundaries would have a profound impact on the identity of Christianity, and would change the societies to which it traveled.