

# **The Abrahamic Religions:**

## **An Introduction to World Religions**

**Christianity: Denominations**

**Session Week 9**

---

**Abba Hailegebriel Girma**

***The Ethiopian Orthodox Theological  
College Houston, Texas, USA***

## Aim and Learning Outcomes – Week 9 Session

### Aims

- This session aims to explore Christianity: Denominations

### Learning Outcomes

- Students identify the main aspects
  - Christianity: Denominations.

# Christianity: Denominations (1)

- Most present day divisions within Christianity date from many major events.
- The first internal schism was in 451 AD at the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD). This was the main the schism among Christian brothers that created Chalcedonians and Non-Chalcedonians.
- The second such event was the demise of the Byzantine Empire in 1453 when the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople. Constantinople's fall accelerated Orthodoxy's gradual sub-division into many national churches.
- The third event was the Reformation in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century national which led to the emergence of numerous Protestant churches. However, the division between Catholicism and Orthodoxy predates both major events and, if we are to understand the denominational history of Christianity, we had best with this, the faith's one of great schisms.

## Christianity: Denominations (2)

- At one level the rift is easily explained: about a 1,000 years ago the popes in Rome and the patriarchs in Constantinople could not agree where supreme power and authority would lie within a unified Church, in Rome or in Constantinople. In this sense, therefore, the rift is an old fashioned story about power and authority and who is the boss.
- But the popes also had a tendency to insist that they were infallible. On the strength of this insistence some popes aspired to be the sole source of authority in the Church.
- Orthodox Christians were opposed to this idea arguing instead that final authority rested not with the head of the Church but with General Councils (Synod) representing senior Church figures such as bishops. Orthodox Christians were also suspicious of the tendency in the West toward centralisation. Autonomy had always been, and still is, a feature of Christianity in the east. Nonetheless, there were aspects to the dispute, aspects which take us into the realms of belief and practice.

## Christianity: Denominations (3)

- Councils of the Church are official meetings of bishops and others at various levels of the church to settle matters of doctrine of discipline. General Councils represent the whole Church.
- In Catholicism they are considered valid and infallible if summoned and confirmed by the papacy. Catholics today recognise no less than 21, the last of which ended in 1965.
- Orthodox Christians recognise only seven, the last concluding its business in 757. nor do Orthodox Christians believe the papal sanction is necessary for the General Councils. This means that, while Catholics accept refinements to belief and practice that have taken place since 757, Orthodox Christians accept modifications to belief and practice only up to and including the Council which concluded its deliberations in 757.

## Christianity: Denominations (4)

- If some of the reasons for the rift between Catholicism and Orthodoxy surround supreme authority, the idea of infallibility and the balance between centralisation and autonomy, then the other main area of concern surrounds the '*filioque*'.
- The Nicene- Constantinopolitan Creed says that "I believe .... in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and together is glorified".
- This is the version of the Creed still said in Orthodox churches (Oriental and Eastern) worldwide. However, perhaps in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, following a much earlier development in the church in Spain, the Creed was modified when the phrase "and the Son" – in Latin, "*filioque*" – was added so that the creed now read "I believe .... in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father and the Son".
- For Orthodox Christians this change was, still is, unacceptable. It was unacceptable because the Church Ecumenical Councils (Synods – Oriental Orthodox Church accept three Councils, Eastern Orthodox - seven) of the Church forbade changes to the Creed, the change had not been agreed by a General Council, and the change subtly transformed the way in which the Holy Trinity had traditionally been understood. On this last Orthodox Christians are adamant that the modification is heretical. Orthodox Christians hold that the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone, and not also from the Son. Orthodox Christians believe that the '*filioque*' destroys the balance and the relationship that originally existed between the three persons of the Holy Trinity.

## Christianity: Denominations (5)

- Catholicism and Orthodoxy have the same religious life in both denominations centres on the seven sacraments. However, other differences do exist. Catholicism insists on an unmarried, or celibate, priesthood, but Orthodox Christianity allows parish priests to marry demanding only that monks and priests destined for senior positions in the Church remain celibate. Rules about fasting vary somewhat, with fasting in Orthodox Christianity being taken more seriously.
- Catholic congregations have, historically at least, played a less active part in services than congregations in the east, but this has changed somewhat following the reforms initiated by Vatican Council II which ended in 1965. Last, design, layout and decoration of churches has taken distinctiveness and, of course, another source of controversy.
- Many Christians in the west, Protestant as well as Catholic, confuse Orthodox veneration of icons with idolatry. They fail to see that icons are not idols but mere symbols. Icons are not being worshipped, which would, of course, amount to idolatry. The icons are focal points for the worshippers' thoughts, feelings and prayers.

## Christianity: Denominations (6)

- In 1054 an attempt was made to heal the growing rift between Rome and Constantinople, but the negotiations proved unsuccessful.
- The pope excommunicated the patriarch, the patriarch excommunicated the pope and the rift became formal.
- The bulls of excommunication were finally revoked in the 1960s, but Catholicism and Orthodoxy are no more likely to unify now than in the 1050s.
- In the east, of course, there were already a few churches that existed outside the framework provided by the Orthodox Church.
- Such churches included the Armenian, Coptic (Egyptian) Ethiopian, Indian, Syrian (known as Oriental Orthodox). There are Nestorian separated churches.



# Christianity: Denominations (7)

- Eastern and Oriental differences with Orthodoxy centred on the Nature of Jesus.
- Common belief (Oriental and Eastern): Jesus as both fully human and fully Divine
- Difference: Eastern – thought of the two natures as being distinct from one another rather than unified – two wills. So the Eastern Orthodox churches are ***‘Dyophysite’*** Churches
- Oriental - believe Human and Divine Natures existing in a single unified personality (*‘Tewabedo’* Ge’ez word - meaning ‘made one’ or ‘united’) which is the best expression conveying the faith of the Church, since it emphasizes the inseparable union of the Godhead and manhood in the Person of Christ. The term *‘Tewabedo’* describes the belief that there is a perfect union between two natures in Christ, namely the Godhood and the manhood. This Christological exposition is developed based on St. Cyril’s formula **‘Christ is One Incarnate Nature of God the Word’**. The Oriental Churches believe in the union of the natures incarnate i.e. the two natures become one nature without separation, without division, without confusion, and without change. After the incarnation we never divide the deeds of Christ to that of His Humanity or that of His Divinity. Here it has to be noted that the word *‘Tewabedo’* and the expression in it: “One Nature ” of Christ from two natures, dose not indicate the natures into the other. So the Oriental Orthodox churches are ***‘Miaphysite’*** Churches.

## Christianity: Denominations (8)

- The fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453 hastened a process that had already begun, the gradual sub-division of Orthodoxy into various national churches.
- Indeed, by 1453 the Orthodox Church in Russia was already effectively independent, and the churches in Syria, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece gradually attained a comparable degree of independence.
- However, it is important to realise that, although now separate churches, they generally share the use of a different language – Arabic, Romanian, Serbian, and so on – for liturgical purposes.

## Christianity: Denominations (9)

- Most other divisions within the Christian family have their origins in the Reformation, a movement for theological and moral reform in the western Christianity during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.
- Theologically, the Reformation was an attempt to recover what was considered to be the teaching of the Bible and early Christianity. Biblical authority was asserted over that of tradition and the papacy.
- Salvation was alleged to be by faith rather than by works. Sacraments and worship were simplified, monasticism and priestly views of ministry were attacked, and lay status was elevated.
- Although a number of the concerns expressed by the reformers were first expressed by the Hussites at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, it was Martin Luther's "Theses" which triggered the Reformation in 1517. The more radical Zwingli reformed the church in Zurich at about the same time. A generation later Calvin in Geneva initiated another major Reformation tradition.

## Christianity: Denominations (10)

- In Great Britain the Reformation was triggered more by politics than by religion – the king wanted the pope to annul his marriage so he could remarry and have a male heir – and the established church that emerged, the Church of England, was more conservative, and therefore Catholic, than many of the Protestant churches encountered in Europe.
- By the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran and Calvinist churches existed in many parts of Europe, and other Protestant churches such as early forms of Unitarianism, the Society of Friends and Anabaptism had acquired their followers. Protestant traditions have had a tendency, like all others, to suffer schisms, and Methodism, inspired John Wesley and George Whitefield, split from Anglicanism.
- The Salvation Army was founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by a one-time Methodist, William Booth. Other Protestant traditions include the Plymouth Brethren and the Congregationalists.
- English Congregationalists and Presbyterians formed the United Reformed church in 1972.

## Christianity: Denominations (11)

- Other religious groups, sometimes thought to belong to the Christian family, have, generally speaking, less venerable histories. Such groups include Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostalists.
- Mormons, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, was founded in the United States by Joseph Smith who died in 1844. He claimed to have translated the Book of Mormons which supplements the Bible.
- Mormons believe that Jesus Christ was revealed to the early immigrants in America and that He will establish in America a New Jerusalem. Baptism and marriage can be contracted vicariously for dead to "seal" them in the faith.

## Christianity: Denominations (12)

- Jehovah's Witnesses, who take inspiration from Charles Taze Russell who died in 1916, are also American in origin.
- Witnesses interpret the Bible literally, reject the Trinity, and understand Jesus in Arian fashion (Jehovah's Witnesses believe Jesus is not one substance with God but was created by God the Father as the medium of creation. Christ, although not God by nature, is held to have received the status of Son of God from God because of his perfect goodness).
- Jehovah's Witnesses believe that the millennium has begun and that the final battle, or Armageddon, is imminent, after which the Jehovah's Witnesses will rule with Jesus.
- Pentecostalism has its origins in Los Angeles in about 1906. It has been characterised by spiritual healing and ecstatic speaking in tongues. The movement has been living in Africa, Latin, Europe, Asia so on. Since the 1960s, charismatic movements resembling Pentecostalism have appeared in Anglican and other Protestant churches and even in Roman Catholicism. Christianity may be raven with divisions.

## Christianity: Denominations (13)

- One of the main areas of distinction between Catholicism and Orthodoxy on the one hand and Protestantism on the other relates to the sacraments.
- At the Reformation Protestantism retained only baptism and Eucharist as sacraments, though some modern forms of Anglicanism have allowed a sacramental quality to rest.
- Two main groups to reject the use of sacraments are the Quakers, or Society of Friends, and the Salvation Army. Protestant use of sacraments is marked by great variety of interpretation and practice.
- Nowadays, of course, it is important to recognise that divisions exist not only between but also within denominations because of moral, ethical problems, structural and organisational issues such as the ordination of women.

## Christianity: Denominations (14)

- Now, the Church Ecumenical Movement, which dates from the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has sought to bring Christians to a better understanding of one another.
- In its early days in particular, the movement sought to unite denomination, but this has proved largely unsuccessful. Unions between Episcopal and non-Episcopal churches, or churches with and without bishops respectively, have been particularly hard to achieve.
- Nowadays, the movement is more anxious to promote mutual understanding and to identify social and political issues which allow Christians of many backgrounds to unify around an idea, problem or initiative of mutual interest.



# Reference

- Freeman, Charles (2011) *A New History of Early Christianity* (Yale University Press)
- Ware, Timothy (1993) *The Orthodox Church* (Penguin)
- Ware, Timothy (1982) *The Orthodox Way* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press)

## Next Session

- We continue to discuss about Islam: Historical Background and Beliefs