

Christianity: A History

A series of personal perspectives

Foreword

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Christianity: A History is the biggest project I have commissioned during my time at Channel 4. It's almost unheard of for a mainstream broadcaster to dedicate eight hours of prime time television to Christianity in this way. I think it's fair to say that it's a big risk, but a risk we really wanted to take.

Why? Because, of the sheer scale of the project and the complexity of the story at its very heart. As with all religions, the history of Christianity is not a simple one. It contains dark moments, compromises and great achievements, and features life changing heroes and villains. We feel that now is the right time for Channel 4 to present these stories in a way that will inform our audience about how this faith has shaped our world, and more specifically, our nation.

Two examples of Christianity's impact on our modern world are the Reformation and the Crusades. Without the Reformation we may not have become a Protestant nation with many of the characteristics, language and structures we take for granted today. And the Crusades? One of our presenters, Rageh Omar, argues in his film that we've forgotten its importance in the west, but that in the Muslim world, the brutality of the Crusades still resonates in the hearts of many Muslims and in the rhetoric of Al Qaeda.

So, **Christianity: A History** is not just another television series – for me it's more important than that, it's a lesson about today's world and an attempt to shed light on the history of a faith that continues to shape the destiny of all of us in some way or other. We hope it does that and that it makes just a few of us think about how we got to where we are today.

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Episode 1: Jesus The Jew

Writer **Howard Jacobson** talks of Jesus's Jewish background, the continuing rift between Christianity and Judaism, and why, despite not believing in God, he thinks knowing religious history can release us from the burden of history.



	6 BC	Quirinius becomes Governor of Syria and conducts census
	c8–4 BC	Birth of Jesus
	c28 AD	John the Baptist begins his ministry; he baptises Jesus and is later arrested and beheaded
	c29	Jesus begins ministry, preaching: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'
	c32	Execution of John the Baptist
	c30–36	Crucifixion of Jesus
	c37	Conversion of Paul
	c46–57	Paul's three missionary journeys
	c55	Paul writes his letter to the Romans
	c64	Nero blames Christians for the Great Fire of Rome Martyrdom of Paul
	66–73	Great Jewish Revolt
	70	Jerusalem falls and the Temple is destroyed
	132–135	Final Jewish revolt, Judea and Jerusalem erased from maps, and region renamed Syria Palaestina
	269	Anthony becomes a hermit – his life and actions lie at foundation of monastic movement
	303	Diocletian orders burning of Christian books and churches



he Judaism in which I grew up was not so much liberal or orthodox as befuddled. We were proud of being Jewish without knowing exactly what it was.

No bacon in the house, no Christmas tree, but we didn't keep the Sabbath and rarely visited the Synagogue. Yet we feared the cross as any vampire might. Because we'd been made outcasts in Christ's name, we were alarmed by every aspect of Christianity, no matter that what the first Christians said, they said *as Jews, to Jews*.

No one denies that Jesus was a Jew, but even the most charitable Christians believe he was on an errand to turn Judaism into something else. But the truth is he wasn't starting a new religion. He was a devout Jewish teacher committed to reawakening Jews to their Jewishness.

His Jewishness was systematically dismantled by the early Christians for whom it became essential, if they were to sell their new faith to the Roman world, that its Jewish origins be obscured. And the first stage in that re-telling of the truth was to turn the Jews into Christ killers.

Every historian knows that the Romans were largely responsible for the death of Jesus because they feared he would incite rebellion. Why would Jews have wanted him dead? Why would they have put a crown of thorns on his head and ironically titled him 'King of the Jews'? But in order to rescue Jesus from his Jewishness, the story had to go that Jews had killed him. The disowning was *theirs*. And in the popular imagination that fiction persists.

In 1965, the Second Vatican council removed the imputation of Jewish guilt and dropped a prayer for Jews to be redeemed through Christ. The Church, it seemed, at last accepted its responsibility for the libelling of Jews. To Jewish consternation around the world, Pope Benedict XVI has recently restored this prayer. So with every advance in scholarship and tolerance there is a theological setback.

The point of the programme *Jesus the Jew* is that knowledge is everything. Insofar as you can know what happened, don't tell lies about it, don't distort it, don't trust things, read for yourself. When I discussed this with a Cardinal in the film, in particular the verses in the Gospel of St John that describe the Jews as children of the devil, he said the Gospel of John was actually a Gospel of love and people should 'relativise' the meaning of these verses, but ultimately there was nothing we could do about the language because the Gospel was the word of God.

"The only way you lighten the burden of history is to know it."

But I believe that the Gospels are not the word of God, and not even reliably the word of Jesus. They were written many years after Jesus's death by people who had probably never met him. There is all the difference in the world between what the historical Jesus might have said and what later Christian propagandists *wanted* him to have said. Even believers must read critically.

Though of course I knew when I started to make this documentary that Jesus was



“The idea of people being immersed in water and then emerging in another faith always seemed to me so alien.”

Jewish, what I didn't appreciate was just *how* Jewish he was, how many of Christianity's key concepts are Jewish in origin. How many people, for example, know that when they sing along to Handel's *Messiah* they are singing words drawn largely from the Old Testament? Or that the promise of a 'Messiah' is Jewish, born out of Jewish longing and distress, and that it means 'the anointed one', not 'Son of God'?

According to Jewish prophetic books the Messiah would come to liberate the Jewish people from occupation and prepare them for God's kingdom on earth. When Jesus failed to fulfil that promise – for the world was not redeemed, God's kingdom had not been realised and the Romans remained in occupation – he could not be the Messiah. For him to become the Christian Messiah St Paul had to invent new meanings for the Messianic promise. By a theological sleight of hand the Messiah became a God, not a man, and the salvation he promised would not be of this world, but of another.

Much Christian vocabulary has always frightened me by association. Baptism – the idea of people being immersed in water and then emerging in another faith – seemed to me quite alien. But baptism was a Jewish rite. As witness the *mikveh*, the ritual baths which religious Jewish women still visit. So when John the Baptist baptised Jesus, he

wasn't baptising him *out* of Jewishness into another religion, but the very opposite. He was reaffirming his Jewishness. This partly explains the playing down of John the Baptist as one Gospel succeeds another.

Conversely, I did not take the measure, before I made this film, of the good feeling there is out there among Christians towards Jews, the new Vatican ruling notwithstanding. Historians now tell a different story to the old accepted one, and there is an acceptance that what happened to the Jews in Germany could not have happened had the emotional ground not been laid, had the vocabulary of hatred not been established over thousands of years, in Christian art and Christian liturgy, insisting that the Jews were a murderous and therefore expendable people, and that it was almost a Christian duty to get rid of them.

When I went to Israel to shoot part of this film, I found Jerusalem simultaneously exhilarating and depressing because the old conflicts have not been resolved. Every place is contested; every stone is the site of something sacred to somebody else. You look at it and think: this is a knot that will never be untied; this is insoluble.

But we hope against hope for someone to solve it for us. Half the world, it seems, believes that – maybe, just maybe – Obama will be the man to do it. If you want to know what Messianic expectation must have been like in Jesus's day you only have to look at what we are demanding from Obama. Kafka said Messiahs always come too late. I think they never come at all: it is the waiting that is everything.

Howard Jacobson

Episode 2: Rome

Former MP **Michael Portillo** turns his politician's mind to the stunning success of Roman Emperor Constantine, a man he describes as a master of the political arts who, out of a desire to stabilise his empire, resolved the fundamental debate about whether Jesus was human or divine.

	306	Constantine proclaimed Empearor
	312	Emperor Constantine's vision before decisive Battle of Milvian Bridge
	313	'Edict of Milan' establishes official toleration of Christianity by Rome
	325	Constantine calls First Council of Nicaea to unify Christianity and grants special recognition to Jerusalem
	c326	Consecration of Basilica of St Peter built by Constantine the Great over the tomb of the Apostle
	330	Constantinople inaugurated as the New Rome
	331	Constantine commissions Eusebius to deliver 50 Bibles for the Churches of Constantinople
	335	Consecration of Jerusalem Church of the Holy Sepulchre
	337	Death of Constantine
	380	Emperor Theodosius makes Christianity official religion of Roman Empire
	390–405	Jerome's Vulgate – translation of the Greek Bible into Latin
	395	Death of Emperor Theodosius
	396–430	Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, formalises Christian theology including the ideas of 'original sin' and 'just war'. His concept of the Church as a 'spiritual city of God' enables Christianity to flourish after the collapse of the Roman Empire
	430	Death of Augustine
	476	Traditional date for Fall of Rome



showered with riches and endowed with new churches. Eventually Constantine established the Church in the West and the East – what has since become the Greek Orthodox Church – a huge achievement. I like to think about this as a political issue. Why did Constantine convert? Was this idealism? Was this a sincere conversion? Was it politics? I think it has elements of all these.

His mother was a Christian and a very significant figure – she travelled around and established the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which is still an extremely important site of worship and pilgrimage. Constantine said that he had a vision; he painted the sign of the Cross on the shields of his soldiers and, though heavily outnumbered, he won a decisive battle at

“Christians went from being ferociously persecuted to being on the inside track, showered with riches and endowed with new churches.”

As a former politician and a former Christian, I wanted to find out why Constantine, that master of the political arts and leader of a pagan realm, chose to give his thumbs up to Christianity. And what were the consequences of his conversion for the Roman Empire and for the Christian faith.

My father, being Spanish, was a Catholic; my mother was Church of England but religious. I was brought up a Catholic and went to Mass every week until I was about

18. I'm now beyond being a lapsed Catholic, I think I'm an atheist. Every Sunday, when I recited the Nicene Creed – 'I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth...' – bits of it seemed very strange, like the description of Jesus Christ as being 'of one substance with the Father'.

This comes from the first Council of Nicaea, a special conference called by the Roman Emperor Constantine in 325AD to resolve major theological differences within the Church between those who thought Christ was a human being, and therefore couldn't be the same as God, and those who said, no, even though he came down to earth he was still part of God.

Constantine saw that this dispute had the potential to tear his empire apart. So he not only converted to Christianity, but effectively established himself as the head of the Church and summoned the Council at Nicaea to resolve this issue. And its key resolutions have lasted for 1,700 years. I now realise it was defining orthodoxy, which meant that it also defined heresy, and over the centuries the Church has put its heretics to the rack, the sword and the fire. When Constantine converted, he established empire-wide toleration (the next emperor, Theodosius I, would make Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire) so Christians went from being ferociously persecuted to being on the inside track,

Milvian Bridge and seized Rome. The Christians, who were about a tenth of the population of the Empire, resisted persecution. They had bishops and priests, an organisation, an infrastructure – a command structure – and it was probably useful for Constantine to get hold of that. But he was a pragmatic man, and didn't try to drive pagans out. He cohabited with pagans, particularly in the eastern side of the Empire, in Constantinople, the city which he modestly named after himself. I like his ambiguity; it is wonderfully political that he didn't really want to resolve the issue.

The thing that's uncompromising about Christianity – in common with Judaism and

Islam – is that there is only one God. All the other religions make it acceptable for you to believe in different people and things. Didn't Constantine understand that bit, that there is only one God? Well probably he did but he had political nous and didn't want to force the issue.

Anybody in politics, from a local councillor to Prime Minister, knows how you deal with difficult people, how you take people with you and don't offend certain groups. So almost every politician is like Constantine; on the other hand almost nobody's like Constantine because he was unbelievably successful. The way he handled the Christians and balanced them with the pagans reflects a subtle political mind. He wasn't going to make extra difficulty for himself by having unnecessary religious friction.

“People who believe that their only responsibility is to a life after death are very difficult to control.”

I don't want to paint an over-idealistic picture of Constantine. He was a ruthless, expansionist emperor who killed a lot of people. This was not a cuddly fellow. You might compare him with a Napoleon or a Charlemagne – one of these huge characters from history who are used to the military way of life and see it as their dynastic duty as well as their personal ambition to expand their frontiers as much as they can.

I would say that human psychology is probably much the same from age to age. It's a mistake to patronise the past. We think these people are not our intellectual equals

because they didn't have the same technologies as we have, because not as many books had been written in those days as we have now. But the theological debate about the nature of Christ is such a sophisticated argument, and the scholars of the day showed a wonderful depth of thinking and understanding.

There are parallels with the modern world, such as how politicians deal with what they regard as extremism. In a political system where emperors become gods after their death and you consult the gods before you take any action, it is potentially dangerous when a group comes along and says, no, there is only one God and this is an idea we are prepared to die for.

So from time to time the Christians are persecuted, they're fed to lions and chopped up by gladiators. But the people think there must be a lot to this religion if these people are willing to die for it.

People who believe that their only responsibility is to a life after death are very difficult to control. That's what the Romans thought about the Christians, and it's what we think about extremists today.

I think politicians love moderate religion and are terrified by extremist religion. Constantine probably did see that God-fearing people were likely to be more orderly and that putting himself in control of that Church structure would give him a position of power.

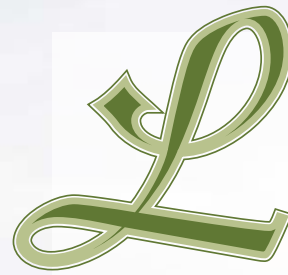
What's striking is not how much the Church has changed, but how Constantine established such a firm footing that the Christian Church of today is recognisably the Christian Church that he left behind.

Michael Portillo

Episode 3: Dark Ages

Challenging Christian theologian **Robert Beckford** shines a spotlight on the Dark Ages and discovers King Aethelbert whose conversion to Christianity brought literacy, law and a connection with Europe. To his surprise, he also uncovers a dynamic multicultural tradition which prompts him to rethink the meaning of English identity.

	c560–616 Life of King Aethelbert of Kent, who converts to Christianity
563 St Columba founds monastery on Iona in Scotland	
	570–632 Life of Prophet Muhammed
597 Pope Gregory sends Augustine to Britain to convert Anglo-Saxons	
	604 St Paul's Cathedral established in London
607 Pope Boniface III first Bishop of Rome to be called 'Pope'	
	630s King of Northumbria establishes monastery at Lindisfarne
664 Synod of Whitby unites Celtic Christianity with Roman Church	
	c672 Birth of the Venerable Bede, author of Ecclesiastical History of the English People
684 St Cuthbert elected Bishop of Lindisfarne	
	c700 Lindisfarne Gospels first created and decorated by Abbot Eadfrith
711–718 Islamic conquest of Iberia	
	718–1492 Reconquista, Christendom retakes Iberia
793 Viking raiders sack monastery of Lindisfarne	
	800 Pope crowns Charlemagne first Holy Roman Emperor
878 Alfred the Great defeats Danes at Ethandun [Edington in Wiltshire] and unifies England	
	c950 Russian Princess Olga converts to Christianity
954 Permanent union of England established	
	1054 Great Schism: Eastern and Western Churches split



Like most African-Caribbean kids of my generation, I went to church. At my Pentecostal Church they told me I was a child of God and what

was important was getting ready for heaven, whereas at my comprehensive school I was a black kid and the task was trying to get through the educational system. When I was about 14 I decided to take my education more seriously and use the experience of being black in Britain to interrogate the faith tradition I was brought up in.

My first degree focused on politics and religion. I got into black theology, a discipline that had emerged out of the civil rights and black power movements in North America in the 1960s – looking at how black political cultural nationalism gets mixed with revolutionary Christianity to produce a political faith.

For the last 10 years I've been writing about African and African-Caribbean religious traditions in Britain. I am critical of the tendency of Churches to interpret everything through a spiritual lens and I've argued that you need to understand things economically, politically and culturally as well.

So for example, if there's a school where the African-Caribbean kids are failing educationally, the Church will set up a supplementary school instead of saying to the mainstream school: we are paying taxes for you to educate our kids, not miseducate them. That inability to translate the Gospel message into a political and social theory has limited black Church life. I didn't know a great deal about the Dark Ages in England

before I made this film. At school you're taught 1066, the Industrial Revolution, the Second World War – nobody talks about the Dark Ages as a starting-point for understanding what Englishness is. So I had the opportunity to rethink what this history meant for me.

When Augustine came to England as a missionary to convert the pagans, King Aethelbert, in Kent, had a wife, Bertha, who was already a Christian. He twigged that if you convert to Christianity you don't just transform yourself spiritually, you also get the benefits of Christianity. In the ancient world that meant literacy, a law code, trade, and an opportunity to expand the esteem and value of your kingdom by engaging with this Europe-wide religion.

"Is it political expediency or is it a deep religious experience that leads monarchs to convert?"

There's always a tension: is it political expediency or is it a deep religious experience that leads monarchs to convert? There were Kings who converted to Christianity and then went to battle with no weapons, but just with a cross, thinking Jesus was going to somehow help them win against their fully armed-up opponents. Then there are examples like Aethelbert. Our scholars would say his conversion was political expediency – not really a spiritual conversion but a sense that there were political and economic benefits to be gained.

One unique thing about English religious experience is that there is a synthesis between the state and the Church, so by

the time we get to King Alfred, the two have become one. The film shows how this created a way of understanding England as fluid, not politically fixed. You could come into this entity known as Enga-land and be a Dane, an Angle, a Saxon or a Celt, and you could do your own thing as long as you were willing to be subject to the King and adhere to the traditions of Christianity. This suggests that, at the very formation of England as a political unity, there is a sense that Englishness is not fixed; it's dynamic, on a journey. That contrasts radically with how England is often presented today, as if what it means to be English is set in stone.

On one level the film is a critique of fundamentalism. One of the high points for me was going to Lindisfarne and seeing the Lindisfarne Gospels. These monks in the 8th century pulled together images and symbols from the known world to embellish their rewriting of the Gospels. So what they were doing wasn't just translation, it was also saying to everyone: 'You are included in this story, in this message of Jesus; you are part of it.'

It's the first example where we have a multicultural Christianity in England, an attempt to pull together different cultural ideas and say that they are part of the Gospel and have a place within the Christian message. For me that's a counter to attempts to link religion to a singular identity, which can lead to ethnocentrism and a kind of ethnic particularity – us against them. It also challenges fundamentalism which attempts to fix identity and fix religion by claiming that things must be read literally, in just one way.

What was crucial was that the Pope encouraged his missionaries to build on pagan religion, not demolish it. In the programme we represent paganism in

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a positive, constructive way. At Sutton Hoo, for example, archaeologists discovered ornate jewellery, fantastic ships – these pagans were really quite sophisticated and not the bloodthirsty, knife-wielding, long-haired brutal people they're often presented as.

During the filming we went to one location in the north of the England where the Christian Church and the altar are directly in front of a mound where the pagans used to bury their dead. Archaeologists skimmed the top part of the mound and found the bodies of single men – the monks were buried on top of the pagans, which demonstrates how Christianity built on top of paganism. Some of those traditions are still here: Christmas day and Easter are pagan festivals that Christianity built on; even the days of the week represent pagan deities.

I would argue that all religious traditions are synchronistic; they all are mixed with primary religious beliefs, whether it's paganism in England or animism in other parts of the world. I'm not against it, I think that's what Christianity is all about. It brings elements of Judaism into the 1st century world of Jesus, then Paul mixes them all together and produces Christianity.

Making this film was an incredible journey. Re-imagining what Englishness meant, not as something narrow and fixed, but as something which is broad and flexible, and developing an understanding of England that I feel comfortable with, has transformed me.

Robert Beckford

Episode 4: Crusades

Rageh Omaar, the war correspondent who became famous for his reports from Iraq, reveals how Pope Urban's interpretation of Christianity led people to kill for Christ and traces how jihad as we understand it today dates from the Muslim world's response to the Crusades.

	1095	Pope Urban II proclaims First Crusade
	1096	Crusaders reach Constantinople
	1097	Crusaders besiege Antioch and slaughter thousands of Turkish Muslims
	1099	Crusaders take Jerusalem and massacre inhabitants
	1122	Concordat of Worms ends divine right of kings
	1145–1149	Second Crusade Fall of the Crusader state of Edessa
	1187	Saladin recaptures Jerusalem from Christian rule
	1189–1192	Third Crusade headed by Philip II of France and Richard the Lionheart of England
	1215	Fourth Lateran Council among other things specifies procedures against heresy
	c1225–1274	Thomas Aquinas, theologian and philosopher
	1308–1321	Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy, an allegory of the Christian afterlife
	1337–1417	Hundred Years War
	c1350	Start of Renaissance in Italy
	1378–1423	Great Western Schism splits Roman Catholic Church
	1380–1382	John Wycliffe translates Old and New Testaments into English
	1431	Joan of Arc martyred
	1450s	Gutenberg begins printing the Bible



The First Crusades happened over 900 years ago, but they threw up issues that we're still living with today – Christianity's relationship with Islam, Islam's view of the western world, war and violence

blended into Christian religious belief and how Muslim people reacted to it.

I was brought up as a Muslim and I've reported on different jihadist movements in the Middle East over the last eight years but, speaking to different experts for this programme, it was clear that much of what we understand today as jihad came out of the Muslim world's reaction to the First Crusades. The Qur'an talks about jihad but that means 'struggle', an inward struggle, a bit like what Holy War meant for Christianity

before the First Crusades – fighting the devil in prayer. But the Crusades made fighting and killing an act of worship.

When Pope Urban declared that Christian lands in the Middle East had to be freed from the 'pollution' of Islam, and Christians went to fight a Holy War, Muslims who had been divided amongst different kingdoms realised that they had to fall back on something akin to what the Christians were doing in order to fend off these foreigners. The legacy that left for Muslims is the idea that jihad should actually mean Holy War, struggling for your religion against invaders.

A few days after the war started in Gaza, Osama bin Laden released a recording on behalf of al-Qaeda, calling for a jihad against what he called the crusading Zionists. The jihadist movement today sees itself not as fighting Christians but as fighting Crusaders, by which they mean westerners who are

"In the Middle East everyone is aware of the history of the Crusades and it means foreign Western armies coming to the Middle East."

coming to the Middle East. The Crusades are also an amazing human story. Medieval Europe was a closed, insular world. There weren't nation states, just battling feudal warlords. The genius of Pope Urban was to convince people that doing what they did every day – fighting, conquering and killing – could be turned against an outside enemy and that this would bring them closer to their Maker. It was a neat trick to get otherwise decent people to walk 3,000 miles through Europe and the Balkans, across what are today Turkey and Syria. This was a rag-tag

army; they brought their wives, their kids, and they won battles that they really should have lost. It was purely their religious devotion, their fanaticism if you like, that kept them going.

We wonder today how on earth a religious person could commit murder, kill innocent people and say they're doing it for God. But it's happened throughout history. During the Crusades it wasn't Muslims but people of another faith, and they were doing it because they believed this was what Jesus wanted good and faithful Christians to do. I remember clearly when George W Bush used the word 'crusade' in relation to launching the 'War on Terror' immediately after 11th September. I was watching the speech with a crowd of Muslims in the Middle East, and the instant the word came out of his mouth it had an impact. Why on earth did he use that word? In the Middle East stories are passed down from generation

to generation. Everyone is aware of the history of the Crusades and it means foreign Western armies coming to the Middle East.

What struck me in making this film is that the reverse is true in the West. Most people are not aware of what the Crusades were, and the word has come to mean something good, noble – a crusade against drugs, a crusade against drink driving. But, given the world we live in, it was the worst word George W Bush could have used because it's a gift to organisations like al-Qaeda, who want to say, 'Don't believe them when they say they're coming to fight for democracy. They're coming as the Crusaders came 900 years ago, to subjugate you, to occupy your land.'

"In the minds of quite a lot of people, rightly or wrongly, the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza are effectively the same as the Crusader settlement."

To have any impact on this people need to start being aware of other people's histories. A Palestinian historian in the programme said that he just wanted a Western audience to be aware of his history, his narrative of how he sees the Crusades. Not to accept it, just to be aware of it. And he would also ask his fellow Arabs to be aware of the Christian narrative of the Crusades. I think there's too much history and too much of a one-dimensional view of the Crusades in the Arab world, and almost nothing on the other side.

People also forget that there is a long-established community of Christians in the

Middle East. When Muslims talk about the Crusades, it's nothing to do with Christianity because they've lived side by side with Eastern Christians, Orthodox Christians, who thought the idea of Holy War was an anathema. They associate the Crusades with the West and Western power. And one has to remember that Saladin ended the Crusader kingdoms in the Holy Land and there was Muslim rule for seven or eight hundred years. It was only in the 19th century that suddenly the Crusades were rediscovered, and that coincided with Western imperial rule and the partition of Middle Eastern countries.

One thing that is often overlooked about the First Crusade is the pogroms against Jews in Europe as the Crusaders went towards the Holy Land. Today the notion of the Crusades still impacts on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In the minds of Palestinians the creation of Israel and the Zionist movement is tied in with Crusaders, because Jewish emigration to Palestine in the early 20th century was from Eastern and Western Europe. It may have been Jewish and it may have been Zionist, but this was seen as just another Western colonisation. And in the minds of quite a lot of people, rightly or wrongly, the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza are effectively the same as the Crusader settlement.

Today it has become very difficult to separate religion from politics, but I think it is possible. The vast majority of people do not want to live their lives that way. I think this programme and the whole series shows that when politicians, whether in the 10th, the 11th or the 21st century, mix their idea of religion, faith and duty with their political responsibilities, it ends up leading to a disaster for all of us.

Rageh Omaar

Episode 5: Reformation

Outspoken MP, **Ann Widdecombe** describes how her feeling that the Church of England had lost its focus led to her personal reformation and conversion to Catholicism, and why she believes that Martin Luther had no idea of the violence his campaign would unleash.

1453	Constantinople falls to the Ottoman Empire
1478	Spanish Inquisition founded by Ferdinand and Isabella
1492	Christopher Columbus discovers West Indies. His first voyage begins Spanish colonisation of New World
1494	Treaty of Tordesillas divides New World between Portugal and Spain
1509–1564	John Calvin, French Protestant theologian
1512	Copernicus circulates to friends his theory that the earth orbits the sun
1517	Martin Luther publishes 95 Theses against corruption in the Catholic Church
1518	Son of king of the Congo, Dom Henrique, consecrated as first bishop from sub-Saharan Africa
1520	Luther excommunicated
1522	Luther produces German translation of New Testament
1520s	Henry VIII sets himself up as head of the Church in England
1525–1534	William Tyndale translates New Testament into English
1534	Act of Parliament makes England's break from Rome official
1543	Copernicus publishes On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres in the year of his death,
1547	Protestant Edward VI succeeds Henry VIII
1549	Book of Common Prayer published
1553	Mary I becomes Queen. A devout Catholic, she has 288 Protestants burned for heresy
1558	Elizabeth I, a Protestant, comes to the throne
1560	John Knox founds Scottish Presbyterian Church



was brought up in a very strong Anglican tradition. My uncle was a vicar, my brother is a vicar, my nephew's just become a vicar. Church and Sunday school were absolutely taken for granted as part of my life. My secondary school was a Roman

Catholic convent but I felt no inclination whatever to join the Catholic Church.

When I was 18 I was confirmed into the Anglican Church but, over the years that followed, I felt that the Church of England was departing from its purpose. It was always compromising; it didn't seem to know what it believed and always wanted to follow current fashions. Later still I went

through a period of agnosticism. I came back as an Anglican which, possibly, was a mistake. The debate surrounding the ordination of women was the last straw. It wasn't about whether it was theologically possible (I didn't think it was); it was all about how, if we don't do this, we're not going to be in tune with the modern world. To me, the Church should lead, not follow.

So 15 years ago I went through my own personal reformation. The Church of England had abandoned its roots and traditions, and seemed immersed instead in the liberalism and political correctness of the modern world. I didn't feel I belonged there any more, so I left and became a Roman Catholic.

I jumped at the chance to make this programme because I'm particularly interested in the Reformation, which tore the Church apart. I believe the medieval Church was in need of urgent and sweeping reform.

But Martin Luther was proposing more than just an attack on corruption; he was mounting a challenge to the very nature and structure of the Church. He could never have realised it but he was unleashing one of the greatest political and religious revolutions in Europe's history. Five centuries ago I could have been beheaded as a traitor or burned alive as a heretic.

Luther believed that the Bible should be accessible to all Christians, so he translated it into the vernacular. That

has got to be right – now we take it for granted that we can all read the Bible. It was a great moment when I went to Wartburg Castle and saw the Luther Bible. He was also right to wage a massive campaign against some of the more corrupt practices in the Catholic Church. But the tragedy of the Reformation was that, instead of being a movement for reform from within, it became the tool of politicians and zealots. It set Christian against Christian; communities were divided for generations.

There is still a strong core of Protestantism in this country whose adherents actively dislike Roman Catholicism. When the Queen visited Westminster Cathedral, there was a large demonstration outside. She wasn't going to a Mass; she was doing no more than going into the cathedral for a service that embraced the Christian faith, not just Catholics.



I found the Lewes bonfire night the most difficult bit of the film. When they were burning the Pope in effigy, to hear them shouting, 'No Popery! Burn him! Burn him!' even if they didn't really mean it, was very disturbing. I wished I hadn't gone there. I was also shocked that Ian Paisley, in this day and age, was still prepared to say that the Pope was the anti-Christ. I gave him a chance to soften that – I said, 'Hang on, do you really mean that?' And he said, 'Yes.'

The reason that shocked me so much was because I've known Paisley for many years; we've got together on lots of moral issues in the Commons and I've always regarded him as a friend. But even now, after all that has happened in Northern Ireland, he thinks it is appropriate to call the Pope the anti-Christ.

If the Reformation had been handled differently we could have had all the benefits of what Luther did and none of the downside. I think the sort of gentle reforms we've seen in the Second Vatican Council, which have nothing to do with doctrine but everything to do with the rules of the Church, are to be profoundly welcomed. If only the Reformation had been carried out like that. But Luther couldn't control what he unleashed.

"The tragedy of the Reformation was that, instead of being a movement for reform from within, it became the tool of politicians and zealots."

The basic tenet of Christianity is: 'Love thy neighbour.' It has inspired tremendous works down the years and I don't accept the view

that the history of Christianity is all about violence. It is true that, at various points of Christian history, politicians have tried to harness it for their own ends. That's what Henry VIII did. He was in a struggle with the Pope and, lo and behold, the Reformation was ever so convenient for him.

There is virtually nothing that a politician won't harness for his own ends, whether good or evil. A good politician, though, will harness a mood. Today, when there are all manner of worries in our society about rampant materialism, selfishness, teenage pregnancies, the obsession with sex, I think people look round and say, 'Hang on, some of this has gone a bit too far.' But they've no idea what to do about it; they're all islands if you like.

I think the Church has got to regain its role in dispensing moral wisdom, in calling people to account for themselves, in reminding people that there is a judgement to come, that what we do does matter. The Anglican Church has backed off there and I don't think the Catholic Church has, but the Catholic Church tends to talk to itself.

People are terribly afraid of being judgemental, of saying, 'That is wrong,' if you're doing something wrong. It doesn't mean you can't be forgiven or are beyond redemption, but you are doing something wrong.

That is the message which should come from the pulpit, but it should also come through the media. The hierarchy of the Church should be standing up and saying to Britain, 'Don't just look at the government, look at individuals, look at yourselves, what you are doing is wrong.'

Ann Widdecombe

Episode 6: Dark Continents

Writer and playwright **Kwame Kwei-Armah** reflects on how the history of slavery is entwined with Christianity, and is intrigued by the way, all over the world, people create images of Jesus and Mary that look like themselves.

1572	St Bartholomew's Day Massacre: up to 4,000 Protestants are slaughtered in Paris	1562	John Hawkins leads first British slaving expedition
1600	Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno burnt at the stake for heresy for expounding the ideas of Copernicus	1588	The Pope blesses Spanish Armada as a Crusade against England
1605	Gunpowder Plot to assassinate James I	1603	James I of England/ James VI of Scotland rules Great Britain
1610	Using the telescope he has created, Galileo proves Copernicus' theory that the earth and planets revolve around the sun	1609	Baptist Church founded by John Smyth
1620	Pilgrim Fathers sail for America on the <i>Mayflower</i>	1611	King James (Authorised) Version of the Bible in English
1653-1658	Oliver Cromwell ruler of England	1625	Charles I comes to the throne
1673	Test Act excludes Catholics from public office	1660	Royal Africa Company given a monopoly over English slave trade
1701	Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts established	1690	William III defeats James II at the Battle of the Boyne in Ireland
Act of Settlement restricts British royal succession to Protestants		1738	John and Charles Wesley start Methodist movement in Britain



have traced my family story back to the West Indies, to a sugar plantation, where my ancestors worked as slaves for a British master. I discovered that they had originally come from Ghana in Africa. At school I was taught that

David Livingstone was a great hero – one of many missionaries who went to Africa as colonialists to open up the world’s ‘dark continents’ to European civilisation and convert their heathen inhabitants to Christianity. But this colonial enterprise also enslaved millions of people.

The slaves who survived the horrific journey to the Caribbean didn’t just lose their freedom, they lost their African identity as well. That’s how my family first encountered Christianity. My original family name was Roberts, which was the name of my ancestors’ last slave master. When I discovered my family’s history I decided to reclaim my African identity and take a Ghanaian name.

I go to Ghana often, but making this film meant looking at it through the lens of a Church, through the evangelical movement, the pre-evangelical movement, and the African spirit world. I learned so much about religious structures and why different cultures latch on to different manifestations of Christianity. We went to a mega-Church with thousands of people in the congregation, and arrived in the middle of what they call the Jericho Hour – an hour of very intense prayer. I defy anyone to enter into that arena and not feel something. Some people might feel fear, others might feel revulsion. As an African-Caribbean I’m used to that form of

expressive worship so it didn’t really frighten me, but it frightened some of the crew members. Even though the congregation was middle class and quite intellectual, many of them were not aware of Christianity having first arrived in Africa via Ethiopia and not via the missionary experience.

I define myself as an Afrocentric Christian – one who views Christianity through the lens of Ethiopia and not Rome. Arriving in Lalibela in the Ethiopian Highlands was amazing. They call it the Jerusalem of Africa. It is thought that Christianity was brought here by Greek and Egyptian monks in the 4th century, but some Ethiopians claim their faith goes right back to Old Testament times.

“I define myself as an Afrocentric Christian – one who views Christianity through the lens of Ethiopia and not Rome.”

I’d seen pictures of the churches in the rock but it’s a bit like looking at a football stadium through a keyhole. When you get there, the scale, the magnitude of it – it’s like seeing one of the wonders of the world. Looking at their 500-year-old Bible was wonderful. It has five more books than the Bible we use. All of a sudden you understand that what we have been told is absolute truth, is actually not.

The Mexican experience – climbing the pyramid at Chichen Itza, and seeing these structures, these magnificent manifestations of their Creator – was also amazing. The early Mayans merged their religion with Christianity – stuffed their idols inside

Christian idols and found ways of making them the same person. And La Virgen Morena, the Brown Virgin, was an example of people creating an icon in their own image.

In Ethiopia images of the Virgin Mary look Ethiopian. I think any person of faith who is troubled by images of Jesus that don't portray him as white Caucasian has to understand why Europeans needed their Jesus and their God to look like them. We should not accept that these are actual representations of the Creator; they're simply there for our simple brains to be able to grasp the concept, whatever culture we're from.

We are more anti-religion in Europe than people in the developing world and America. I don't necessarily think it's a bad thing for people not to believe. I have issues with religion, myself. I don't describe myself as a religious man but as someone who has faith.

If I had seen the Creator in someone who was a Buddhist or a Muslim, I would have been a Buddhist or a Muslim. I saw what I perceived to be the Creator in someone who happened to be a Christian, therefore I was able to access the Creator through that lens.

Also, in Europe the Church has been associated with the state and with the oppression, or indoctrination, of the masses. And so it's quite healthy that we view religion and religious structures as dodgy.

Faith for me is very personal; it allows me to believe in something greater than myself. When I have done everything that I humanly can, I perceive that I have somewhere else to go. Without getting too pompous, prayer for me is like communion, a conversation with my deeper self and what that is connected to throughout the universe.

I'm certainly not evangelical about it. My mother was devoutly Christian, my brothers and sisters all are, so I'm the rebel in the bunch. As I say in the film, I access Ishua or Jesus in the same way that I access Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey, who gave their lives to the dispossessed, who challenged the status quo, elevating those who might not be able to help themselves, articulating truths that allow people to live to their higher selves.

"In 1900 there were just 10 million Christians in Africa; today there are over 390 million..."

In 1900 there were just 10 million Christians in Africa; today there are over 390 million, and they are beginning to challenge the Western Christian establishment, particularly over issues like women priests and homosexuality, not issues that I agree with. But the real challenge is not just about social values but about the faith itself. These new Christians have harnessed a powerful spiritual force which many churches in the West have abandoned.

They believe that Europe now needs converting to the true faith. I think their proposition is that the West has got too comfortable; it thinks it is its own God. And there is some truth in that. But one can also have an intellectual relationship with faith. We have to be careful sometimes not just to see religion as something to make you feel good – I think we can and must apply stringent intellectual mechanisms to faith.

Kwame Kwei-Armah

Episode 7: God and the Scientists

Eminent scientist and uncompromising atheist **Colin Blakemore** is suspicious of Christianity's ability to adapt its previously unshakeable tenets in response to the challenge of scientific, evidence-based explanations of how the world works.

- 1789
Outbreak of French Revolution
- 1807
Slave Trade Act in Britain abolishes slave trade but not slavery itself
- 1829
British Parliament grants Catholic emancipation
- 1833
Slavery Abolition Act abolishes slavery in most of the British Empire
- 1834
Spanish Inquisition officially abolished
- 1838
Slavery abolished in the British Empire
- 1843
Church of Scotland splits over separation of Church and state
- 1859
Charles Darwin publishes *On the Origin of Species*
- 1868–1870
First Vatican Council defines doctrine of papal infallibility
- 1905
French law passed on separation of Church and state
- 1914–1918
World War I
- 1915–1917
Armenian Genocide
- 1917
Russian Revolution
- 1925
John Scopes convicted of breaking Tennessee law by teaching evolution



I was confirmed in the Church of England at about the age of 14 but was already beginning to harbour doubts. I saw that science could offer explanations for things for which religion had previously been the only source of evidence. By the time I went to university I'd pretty much abandoned all religious belief.

I like the Church tradition and the long cultural history yet, with every decade that's gone by, religion has had less and less significance for me. You can't just dismiss religious belief if you're a humanist or an atheist, but I genuinely think that a scientifically based, pragmatic approach, based on real knowledge, can offer the kinds of fundamental securities that used to come from religious belief.

One key feature of Christianity is its capacity to accommodate, to transform itself, to evolve. That makes me a bit suspicious about its integrity. What kind of belief system can yield to scientific evidence which contradicts all the scriptural doctrines about how the universe was created and how life was formed? As a scientist one tries to look for fundamental secure facts that don't compromise and accommodate, which one hopes are robust and good forever. It's a bit worrying to find that a belief system which has influenced hundreds of millions of people around the world can shift and move as the demands arise.

A line that's increasingly taken is that the Bible is metaphorical and allegorical; it reflects the culture in which it was written but shouldn't be taken literally. Well that's

a little bit odd! Four hundred years ago it was stoutly defended as the absolute truth. So if you're not going to defend what scripture says when it comes to historical facts or theories about how the world was made, why should you defend miracles, the virgin birth or life after death?

There is a resurgence of alternative belief systems, which I think reflects people's deep desire to understand the world, combined with increasing ignorance of how science works. Religions offer explanations that are fundamentally wrong but are nevertheless appealing. It's curious that, after four or five hundred years of scientific explanation giving human beings the capacity to do amazing things, there is an undeniable trend for people to revert back to alternative belief systems, including in the West, and particularly in the United States.

"It's a bit worrying to find that a belief system which has influenced hundreds of millions of people around the world can shift and move as the demands arise."

It's odd that the first country whose constitution separated Church and state should be a bastion of Christianity. I think it's partly explained by the geographical separation of the United States from the gradual evolution of philosophy and science and the retreat of Christianity in Europe. The USA was established by believers who left their home countries because they were persecuted, often for their religious beliefs. Those beliefs were fundamental and simple, and that thread still runs through America.



As the film shows, the word fundamentalism' originated in the USA in the early 20th century. People with a more sophisticated view of religion argue that human beings want answers to important questions which science can never address. They are usually questions that begin with 'why', like 'Why are we here?' I think these are non-questions because there are no real answers to them. Science does a brilliant job at answering the questions that begin with 'how' – 'How do things work?' 'How was the world created?' – but it cannot address the question of why we are here. But is that really a question which is worth asking?

The interesting question is why people everywhere ask those sorts of questions, and why supernatural beliefs are found in all human cultures. It's a bit like language: all people use language even though the exact form of it is different from place to place. The anthropologist, the biologist, the geneticist, would take the universality of language as evidence that it's built into our genes. So by the same argument you might say that religion is in our genes.

How that has happened is a scientific question which interests a lot of people. It reflects a way we have come to think of each other which is equally flawed but which works. We think that other people operate their free will, making their decisions because they have intentions and desires, but psychologists and brain researchers increasingly have explanations for behaviour that don't refer to 'intention'. But because the idea of 'intention' works so well in communicating with other people, we project that belief system on to the world around us. When we see a phenomenon we don't understand we tend to ask intentional questions such as 'Who's done this?' 'What was it done for?' and that's what generates the idea of God.

Of course it is difficult to rule out the possibility of a benign, intelligent deity which generated the world we live in and tinkers occasionally in its workings but basically set it up to run according to the rules of science. But why even postulate such a bizarre notion for all kinds of things that we now understand in terms of the laws of physics?

Despite a desire for supernatural explanations that's embedded in all of us, we have invented political systems which are basically pacifistic; we are learning to understand people who aren't related to us, we have concerns for the environment, all of which run against the natural inclinations of human beings. So we do have the capacity to stand back, but we never completely overcome the pressures of our own genes. For instance, most people accept the earth goes around the sun and yet we all describe the sun as rising, because that's the way it looks. We can live simultaneously with both levels of understanding.

My own view is that as over the last 500 years, more and more of the territory that was the domain of religion has been ceded to scientific explanation. We'll just see that process go on. It may take a long time and occur at different rates in different countries, cultures and religions, but there will be an inevitable trend for science to substitute for the things that religion used to explain.

In the end I think religion will just provide us with metaphors and stories which can be illuminating, telling us a bit about human nature, providing a historical background to how our culture emerged but no more realistic and convincing than the Genesis creation story is to most Western Christians now.

Colin Blakemore

Episode 8: The Future of Christianity

Lawyer and committed Catholic, **Cherie Blair** grapples with the legal and moral dilemmas thrown up by the genocides and human rights abuses of the last century. She explains her own enduring beliefs and assesses how the Church handled the liberalisation of the 1960s.

- 1939
Hitler invades Poland, starting World War II
- 1942–1945
Hitler's 'Final Solution', the culmination of the Holocaust in which six million Jews are murdered; victims of Nazis also included Gypsies, homosexuals, Slavs, people with disabilities, dissidents and others
- 1944
First woman ordained as Priest in Anglican Communion in Hong Kong
- 1947
Discovery of first Dead Sea Scrolls
- 1948
State of Israel founded in Palestine
World Council of Churches founded
- 1951
World Evangelical Alliance founded
- 1961
New English Bible (New Testament) published
- 1962–1965
Second Vatican Council introduces many progressive changes including dropping Good Friday prayer for the conversion of the Jews
- 1963
Martin Luther King leads civil rights march in Washington DC and makes 'I Have a Dream' speech
- 1966
Martin Luther King assassinated
Start of Liberation Theology
- 1970
New English Bible (Old Testament) published
- 1979
Moral Majority founded by Jerry Falwell
- 1989
First woman ordained as a Bishop in Protestant Episcopal Church in USA
- 2007
Pope Benedict reinstates older version of Latin Mass including Good Friday prayer for the Jews





Looking back over the last century, the two World Wars had a huge effect on people's views, but as many people found comfort in their belief in

God as blamed God for what had happened. Although the Holocaust, other genocides, the liberation of the 1960s, presented a challenge for the churches, many people's religious faith is still there. In Africa, Asia, South America, in the USA itself, religion is very important. In Western Europe church attendance has fallen but religion, and Christianity in particular, is still a very important force across the world.

Survey after survey shows that lots of people say they believe in God. But we also know that people like me, who go to church every week, are in a minority in Britain. The structures of the Church are not reaching out to all these people who believe in God, who are searching for meaning in their life.

In developing countries people get practical help as well as a comfort from the Church. For example, in his campaign against malaria, my husband has found that one of the best ways to distribute mosquito nets is through the mosques and churches, because they are the centres of their communities. In Western Europe people also have troubles. To some extent the Enlightenment and education have led people to be more questioning, but individuals can't have all the answers. We need to come together, listen to other people and share other people's ideas.

We grow as individuals in a community and that's one thing that churches offer. I have

been to many black churches here in the UK and have seen how they stress this community aspect. In the programme we go to America and see how churches there are thriving because they're very community based.

When one looks across the country, the parishes that are thriving are the ones that are actively involved in the community. Back in 1998 when we had the G8 summit in Birmingham, the local church that Tony and I attended in Great Missenden, near Chequers, was very involved with the Drop the Debt Campaign. In America we visit churches that are working with the homeless, with drug addicts, with disaffected youth. We can see lots of examples of practical Christianity, but that's also informed by prayer. Part of being a Christian is coming together in a group and sharing not just activism but also worship.

"Part of being a Christian is coming together in a group and sharing not just activism but also worship."

I believe that God is everywhere and that God works through the good actions that we see people doing in society; but God is also present when bad things happen. One question which interests me as a lawyer is about genocide. That's a moral issue but it is also a legal issue. The term 'genocide' was coined in the 1940s, after the Holocaust – at the same time as we tried bringing together all the religions and people of no religion to define international human rights. Ever since then we've been exploring how the law can cope when a society breaks down to such an extent that acts of genocide are committed.



Where you have such gross crimes, which go from the political leadership down to the foot soldiers who carry out the violent acts, how do you punish those people? How do you distinguish between them? And what do you practically do to bring people to justice?

“The message of Christianity is that we are all equal, we’re all God’s children and we all have to be respected.”

This challenge started with the Nuremberg Trials after the Second World War, but it has continued through the tribunals that were set up for Rwanda and Yugoslavia and now the International Criminal Court. I have been to Rwanda and seen the gacaca (pronounced gachacha) court approach [a form of justice designed to promote healing and moving on from the crisis]. I’ve also seen the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. How do you rebuild a society that has been through the horrendous impact of genocide and what role does the law play in that? We’re still groping our way towards answers.

In the film I talk to the niece of Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was executed in a concentration camp after being involved with a plot to kill Hitler. We would all like to think that we would be brave enough to stand up and speak out against injustice, but unless you’re actually in that situation how can you tell? It’s easy for us to condemn people who stay quiet but you might find it hard to be brave if you were in that situation and were putting your family at risk. A lot of people did engage in passive resistance; they may not have publicly dissented but

carried out small acts of kindness or tried to remain distant from the bad things that were going on. Many others, though, were led into participating.

For a Christian, the heart of the message is the dignity of every single human being. We need to keep hold of that idea instead of demonising people who are different from ourselves. The message of Christianity is that we are all equal, we’re all God’s children and we all have to be respected.

One key to progress during the 20th century has been education and allowing people to think for themselves. I was a teenager during the 1960s when suddenly this change in the culture came about. The Second Vatican Council responded to that – I saw it in my own school. Before that our nuns wore full gear down to the ground, with their heads covered, and suddenly we saw the nuns’ legs and more of their faces and they changed their names. The rituals of the Church opened up to the 20th century.

At the same time there was contraception, women’s rights and feminism; many women started to take control of their lives. The Church was rather hesitant and not sure how to deal with that. In the film we explore whether the Church’s attitude towards contraception alienated some of those women who would otherwise have been taking their children to Church.

But I firmly believe that religion has a real place in the future. Spirituality is an important side of human nature and I don’t think we will ever lose that; we all feel the need to pursue the search for meaning, and religion provides you with an answer to the question, ‘What is life about?’

Cherie Blair

NB: Timeline of Christianity

This timeline is not inclusive but marks the main milestones in the history of Christianity. Our knowledge, particularly of the early period is uncertain, so many of these dates are still being debated and are therefore approximate.

This booklet was produced to accompany **Christianity: A History** an eight-part series first shown on Channel 4 from January – March 2009, produced by Pioneer Productions in association with CTVC for Channel 4.

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Published by
Channel 4 Television
124 Horseferry Road
London SW1P 2TX
channel4.com



channel4.com/programmes/christianity-a-history