



# Christian Religion and Christian Spirituality

## What Is Christianity?

### Christian Religion and Christian Spirituality.

- The term “Christianity” carries four different meanings.
  - (1) **A cultural tradition** associated with Western (and American) civilization.
    - ▶ **Alan Bloom** in *The Closing of the American Mind* on Western civilization’s unifying revelation: “In the United States, practically speaking, the Bible was the only common culture, one that united the simple and the sophisticated, rich and poor, young and old, and – as the very model for a vision of the order of the whole of things, as well as the key to the rest of Western art, the greatest works of which were in one way or another responsive to the Bible – provided access to the seriousness of books. With its gradual and inevitable disappearance, the very idea of such a total book and the possibility and necessity of world-explanation [re: “worldview analysis”] is disappearing. And fathers and mothers have lost the idea that the highest aspiration they might have for their children is for them to be wise – as priests, prophets or philosophers are wise. Specialized competence and success are all that they can imagine. Contrary to what is commonly thought, without the book even the idea of the whole is lost.” [*The Closing of the American Mind* (Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 58.]

**[NOTE:** Bloom was a conservative Jewish professor of education at the University of Chicago.]
  - (2) **A religion** – with doctrines, institutions, traditions, rituals, etc.
    - ▶ EX: “Christianity is the largest religion in the world with more than 1 billion adherents.”
  - (3) **A spiritual** path and connection (or direct relationship) with God through faith in Jesus Christ – “the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”
  - (4) **A worldview** – a coherent, consistent and comprehensive belief system that incorporates...
    - (1) **Ontology** (the nature of being):
      - Who and what is God?
      - Who and what is humanity?
    - (2) **Epistemology** (the nature of knowing):
      - Why is there something rather than nothing?
      - Where did we come from?
      - Why are we here? (Does life have any purpose?)
      - Where are we going?

## What Is a Christian?

- Similarly, people describe themselves as “Christians” in three senses:
  - (1) **Culturally:** Their heritage is European or American culture with its particular heritage, traditions and values.
    - EX: All Americans are “Christians” unless they specifically identify themselves as Jews, Muslims, atheists, etc.
  - (2) **Religiously:** In terms of organizational identity, they are members of an organized church, or they hold to certain doctrines and beliefs about Jesus Christ.
  - (3) **Spiritually:** They have a personal, existential relationship with God and are committed to living by the teachings of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.
- A contrast of the religious and spiritual dimensions of our faith:

| <u>Two Dimensions of Christianity</u>  |   |
|--|---|
| <u>The Religious Dimension</u>   | <u>The Spiritual Dimension</u>  |
| The visible organized/institutional church.  | The invisible church of all believers in Christ who have been spiritually regenerated.  |
| The “body” of religious faith: church doctrines, practices, traditions, institutions, etc.   | The “soul” of religious faith: personal and direct communion with God.  |
| Emphasis on theology and orthodoxy.  | Emphasis on discipleship and orthopraxy.  |
| The “wineskin.”  | The “new wine.”   |
| Analogically: The mother board and circuitry that connect the believer to the power source.  | Analogically: The power source (the energy, or the electrical current) that animates the life of the believer.  |
| Historically: At times, the religious system has nurtured personal spiritual growth and generally enriched society and culture.<br>At other times, the religious system has been imperialistic and oppressive and a bastion of hypocrisy, greed, and corruption. | Historically: At times, the spiritual dimension has worked synergistically with the religious system.<br>At other times, the spiritual dimension has been at odds with the religious system and has functioned as a kind of spiritual protest and dissent from the visible, institutional church. |

## Christian Religion.

- The religious dimension emphasizes the rational, organizational, and practical aspects of Christian faith.
- Religion is an organized system that includes a general worldview, a body of literature, doctrines, institutions, rituals, traditions, and other means of expressing our relationship with God.
- Religion is important, but it is not the real thing – there is no life in religion *per se*.
- In fact, by focusing exclusively on the religious aspects, we can totally miss the essence – i.e., the real life – of the Christian faith.
  - ▶ **John Bunyan:** “It is possible to learn all about... the Bible and never be affected by it in one’s soul. Great knowledge is not enough.” [*Pilgrim’s Progress*]
- **A. W. Tozer** warned against the excessive preoccupation with religion:
  - ▶ “Every age has its own characteristics. Right now we are in an age of religious complexity. The simplicity which is in Christ is rarely found among us. In its stead are programs, methods, organizations, and a world of nervous activities which occupy time and attention but can never satisfy the longing of the heart. The shallowness of our inner experience, the hollowness of our worship and that servile imitation of the world which marks our promotional methods all testify that we, in this day, know God only imperfectly, and the peace of God scarcely at all.” [*The Pursuit of God* (1948), p. 17]

## Christian Spirituality.

- Spirituality is the heart and soul (or the life-blood) of religion.
  - ▶ Religion is external, whereas spirituality personalizes and internalizes the search for God.
- Christian spirituality is not so much theological and doctrinal as incarnational and existential.
  - ▶ In essence, Christianity is about a living relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.
  - ▶ It is the active presence of God in the world, historically incarnate in Jesus Christ and presently living in the hearts of Christian people in the person of the Holy Spirit.
- In the truest sense, a Christian is one whose mind and heart are in the process of being transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- This *sensus divinitatus* (divine presence) is the very essence of Christian faith.
  - ▶ **A. W. Tozer:** “The presence of God is the central fact of Christianity....  
 “Being made in [God’s] image we have within us the capacity to know him....  
 “We have almost forgotten that God is a person and, as such, can be cultivated as any person can....  
 “The moment the Spirit has quickened us to life in regeneration our whole being senses its kinship to God and leaps up in joyous recognition. That is the New Birth without which we cannot see the kingdom of God. It is, however, not an end but an inception, for now begins the glorious pursuit....” [*The Pursuit of God*, p. 14, 13, 14]
  - ▶ **C. S. Lewis:** You do not *have* a soul; you *are* a soul. You *have* a body.

- Despite the checkered history of the Christian religious tradition, the real work of the true church of Christ has continued unabated.
  - ▶ “The real history of Christianity is the history of a great spiritual tradition. The only true apostolic succession is the lives of [committed believers]. Clement of Alexandria compared the church to a great river, receiving effluent from all sides. The great river sometimes flows like a raging torrent through a narrow channel; sometimes it spreads out like a flood; sometimes it divides into several streams; and sometimes, for a time, it seems to have been driven underground. But [through it all], the Holy Spirit has never left himself without witness.” [Dean Inge, quoted in F.F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*]
  - ▶ In a world where most are trying to escape reality through money, power, materialism, sex, drugs, art or entertainment, the church should be the one place that confronts people with the reality of their spiritual condition and grounds them in reality.