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## EVERYTHING TO FIGHT FOR: A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY AND SECTARIAN VIOLENCE

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**Abstract:** *This article recounts Christianity's long history of sectarian strife and division. The article discusses Christianity's diverse and global presence, describes the sectarian strife of its early years, narrates a short history of Christian sectarianism up to the present, and concludes with a reflection on reasons why sectarian tensions persist within the religion. The article endeavors to assess why Christianity has struggled with sectarian tension, and posits that many of these tensions have arisen out of distinctions and differences within language and culture. Christianity's vast geography helps to explain how a faith that was once rather ethnocentric blossomed to become the largest religion in the world, thus creating deep tensions linked to geographical and therefore cultural complexity. The Protestant Reformation brought about many sectarian tensions that persist to the present. The modern ecumenical movement has provided hope for a way forward, although no clear resolution is in sight. The article concludes with a discussion of various global examples where ecumenical activity and greater fellowship is emerging amongst sects once firmly divided. Christian sectarian tension has cooled in Western Europe largely due to secularization tendencies, leaving Christians with little to fight for when it comes to religious belief.*

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## Introduction

Christianity has a long history of sectarian tension. It is ironic that Jesus Christ addressed this topic directly, yet to little effect. In the Gospel of John chapter 17 readers are presented with Jesus's striking words, "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their [apostles'] message, that all of them may be one."<sup>2</sup> Typically, Christians interpret this key text as Jesus' desire for unity among his followers. However, that unity for which he prayed has remained elusive.

In this article, I will: 1. discuss Christianity's diverse and global presence; 2. describe the sectarian strife of its early years; 3. narrate a short history of Christian sectarianism up to the present; and 4. conclude by briefly reflecting on reasons why the sectarian tensions persist.

### 1. Christianity's Diverse and Global Presence

Christianity may be the most splintered faith in history due to its vast size. As the world's largest religion, with well over two billion adherents and comprising around 33 percent of humanity, Christianity's diversity is obvious.<sup>3</sup> Due to cultural influences, it has adapted and assimilated to the point that it gets practiced in very different ways. While Christianity certainly has a "core" in its insistence that Jesus is uniquely connected to God, there is also tremendous breadth in how this conviction plays out among believers.

A second reason that Christianity has tended towards sectarianism is its decoupling of the religion from a particular language. Jesus spoke an Aramaic dialect, but was surrounded by speakers of Greek and Hebrew.<sup>4</sup> Aramaic was used by several Middle Eastern empires—Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian—at least a thousand years before Christ. The Dead Sea Scrolls discovery in the 1940s proved that the Hebrew language was alive and well at the time of Christ. Greek was extremely widespread during Jesus' lifetime, and the New Testament documents were composed in Greek.

Early Christianity began as a multi-lingual sect of Judaism. It was not considered a distinct religion from Judaism in its earliest decades, and it traveled to wherever the Jewish diaspora had a presence, such as to Persia, Ethiopia, Arabia, and India. Christianity was never dependent upon a language in the same way that Islam was connected to Arabic, for example. Christianity was multi-lingual from very early on.

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<sup>2</sup> John 17:1, 20–23. NIVUK (New International Version – United Kingdom). Italics are mine.

<sup>3</sup> For Christianity's current global demographics, see Pew Research, "Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," 19 December 2011, located at: <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>. See also Dyrn Daughrity, *The Changing World of Christianity: The Global History of a Borderless Religion* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 3. Some respected resources for understanding global Christian populations are the World Christianity Database (Brill), the CIA World Factbook, Pew Forum, and the U.S. Department of State's Report on International Religious Freedom.

<sup>4</sup> W. S. LaSor writes, "It is commonly accepted that Jesus spoke Aramaic." See LaSor, "Aramaic," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 233.

However, it is ironic that many Christians throughout history did privilege certain languages as being more sacred than others. There are many examples here. The Syrian liturgy has remained unchanged since the early generations of the faith. The Western Roman Empire preferred Latin as its textual language well up until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. There are signs that certain Greek Orthodox churches are willing to work with new converts, but the reality is that without a Greek connection — such as heritage, or through marriage—Greek Orthodoxy retains a sense of foreignness to non-Greeks. This same pattern persists in many of Christianity’s Orthodox traditions: Ethiopic, Coptic, Armenian, Romanian, Serbian, Georgia, and others. The liturgy is so closely aligned to the language that outsiders usually find it impenetrable, both linguistically and culturally, even with a translation alongside the tradition’s native liturgy.

The result of this situation is that Christianity has sectarian tendencies that are tied closely to language and culture. One illustrative example is the difficult relationship of the Georgian and Armenian state churches. Armenia became officially Christian in the year 301, and Georgia likewise declared Christianity its state religion in the 330s. However, due to linguistic differences these two churches — very similar in ethos, heritage, and geography—began to diverge from early on. Theological and political issues were involved in their long divorce, and language prevented them from developing the type of relationship one would expect for two Christian nations so similar. As of today, the Georgian Church identifies itself with the larger family of Byzantine churches linked to the Patriarch of Constantinople whereas the Armenian Church considers itself an Oriental Orthodox Church alongside the Coptic, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Syriac, and Indian Malankara churches.

A third reason for the sectarian tendency of Christianity is to be found in one of the primary ways that Christianity spread. Throughout Christian history, it was common for missionaries to take a trickle down approach to missions rather than a bottom up method. In other words, if missionaries could convert a political leader, it was expected that the masses of people would follow. This practice developed early on and developed into a remarkably effective strategy.

History’s “first Christian king” may have been in the ancient Syrian city of Edessa, the capital of the kingdom of Osroene, where Abgar VIII (the Great) ruled from approximately CE 177–212.<sup>5</sup> His reign occurred at a time when Persians and Romans were vying for influence over each other. Abgar’s Osroene is sacred to the memory of the Syrian church still today as “history’s first Christian kingdom.” Scholarly consensus is that “it is quite

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<sup>5</sup> The historic city of Edessa is located in the eastern Turkish city of Urfa (or, Sanliurfa). Since the forced mass exodus of Christians in the 1920s there are no known Christians residing there. See Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), p. 163. See also Speros Vryonis, *The Mechanism of Catastrophe* (New York: Greekworks.com, 2005) and Joseph Tarzi, “Edessa in the Era of Patriarch Michael the Syrian,” in *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 3:2 (2000), pp. 203–221. Tarzi reports the critical year was 1924, when the Syriac Orthodox population plummeted from 2500 to nothing.

likely” that Christianity came to occupy an official status in the city of Edessa around the year CE 200. This would make it the first Christian kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

In the CE 300s, several kingdoms and empires began to take Christianity on board as an officially sanctioned state religion. The traditional date of Armenia’s conversion to Christianity is in CE 301 when Gregory the Illuminator baptized King Tiridates III. Famously, Constantine—the great Roman Emperor — declared Christianity legal at the Edict of Milan in CE 313, and himself converted to Christianity, although he delayed his baptism until the end of his life. By the Council of Nicaea in CE 325 it was clear that Christianity was the Roman Empire’s privileged religion. Ethiopia declared Christianity as a state religion in the year CE 330, although the religion had been present since apostolic times as recounted in the book of Acts chapter 8 when Philip converted an Ethiopian eunuch. In the year CE 988 Russia’s Vladimir of Kiev converted to Christianity and is purported to have Christianized his people. Many other examples such as these can be found in the annals of Christian history.

What is relevant to the present study is that when Christianity received official endorsement from a political ruler throughout history, obvious problems arose regarding what exactly Christianity entails. What is it? How should it be practiced? Should it be used as a political tool to govern the people, or is it strictly a private faith? These are some of the great quandaries of Christian history.

The fear that many Christians have held throughout history is that when Christianity gets into too close of a relationship with an earthly ruler or empire, it becomes compromised. Constantine epitomized the dilemma. On the one hand, when he adopted Christianity, the church became favored, privileged, rich, and influential. It was able to shape society in unprecedented and lasting ways. On the other hand, many Christians—particularly Protestant Christians—deplore the “Constantinianization” of Christianity. In their view, the enmeshment of Christianity into any political system spells disaster. The church becomes corrupted, intermingled with issues of power.

There is a deep ambivalence within Christianity regarding these issues, and this ambivalence has become very clear in the Western world during an age of secularization. The present-day United States is an apt illustration of the tensions that exist today. There are those who pine for the days when Christianity and America were bedfellows. However, there are others who believe the secularization process in America is needed, so true Christians will persevere, regardless of the central government’s religious orientation.

## 2. Sectarian Strife in Early Christianity

Christianity was born into a context of sectarian conflict. The gospels reveal that Jesus was regularly critiqued by two prominent sects of Judaism during his life, the

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<sup>6</sup> In this paragraph I have used Samuel Hugh Moffett, *History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. 1* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), p. 57.

Sadducees and Pharisees. Undeterred, Jesus fired back with gusto, condemning them for their legalistic foci, as in the case of the “seven woes” of Matthew 23:13–36. Debates were common among the various Jewish sects during the life of Jesus. In addition to Sadducees and Pharisees, there were Essenes (often associated with the Quran/Dead Sea Scrolls community), and the Zealots who were noted for their rebellion against the ancient Romans. First century Jews had differing notions about how to interpret the Torah, how to deal with their Roman rulers, and how to relate to Gentiles.

As Christianity grew, it was not initially recognized as being a distinct religion. Indeed the apostles tended to continue meeting in synagogues and in the courts outside the Jewish Temple.<sup>7</sup> Jews at this time in history engaged in regular debates, and the apostle Paul would have been well within Jewish custom to try to persuade his interlocutors.

Many Jewish movements led by different rabbis and other various figures rose and fell in ancient Judaism. The book of Acts attests to the often rancorous and even violent debates that occurred. In Acts 5:17–41 there is a gathering which included the high priest and his Sadducee associates, the members of the Sanhedrin (Israel’s council of elders), and some of the apostles. The followers of Jesus were chastised and threatened violently. However, a respected Pharisee named Gamaliel stood and urged the Jewish council to use caution, saying, “If their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”

As Christianity became a more distinct movement, it was clear that the persistent infighting of Judaism was an aspect of that faith that Christianity tended to adopt. Even in the Bible we find evidence of infighting very early on among the various sects of Christ-followers. For example in 2 Peter, the author refers to “false prophets” and “false teachers” in the Christian community who will “exploit you with fabricated stories” (2 Peter 2:1–3). In the book of 3 John mention is made of one Christian leader named “Diotrephes, who loves to be first” (3 John 9). The writer has harsh words for him, accusing him of “spreading malicious nonsense (v. 10).” In the book of Jude we read of “certain individuals ... [who] have secretly slipped in among you ... These people are blemishes at your love feasts ... shepherds who feed only themselves” (Jude 4, 12). In the book of Revelation chapters 2 and 3 we read of various problems happening in the seven churches of the Roman province of Asia, several having to do with them following false prophets. These biblical examples betray a proliferation within the ranks of Christians over how to live and practice Christianity.

The famous Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 shows the early church struggling with another problem related to their Jewish background: how to interpret the food laws of the Torah. The decision of this Christian council was to abstain from three types of food: food sacrificed to idols, blood, and meat from strangled animals. Christians pay very little attention to these food laws today, but they and other Torah laws threatened the earliest Christian communities with the possibility of schism and sectarianism.

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<sup>7</sup> See Acts 17:2–4.

The separation of Christians and Jews was by no means a clean one. It was rather a process that played out in myriad ways and in many different places. The early church fathers had a name for those Christians who continued to hold too tightly to Judaism: Ebionites. These were essentially Jewish Christians who denied the divinity of Christ; however, they were roundly condemned by the church fathers for many of their beliefs and practices.<sup>8</sup>

In what follows, I will merely highlight the more notable Christian sects that made their mark throughout history. It should be noted that the notion of sect is closely connected to the idea of heresy in Christianity. However, one person's heresy is another person's orthodoxy. Where can the "true" or "pure" or "original" form of Christianity be found? That is a question each denomination has to determine for itself.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. A Short History of Sectarian Strife in Christianity

3.1. Early Gnostic sects. Although the term "Gnosticism" is well known to scholars of Christianity, it should be used with great caution. Contemporary scholars emphasize that there was no singular "Gnosticism" in the first few centuries of Christianity. Rather, there were many different groups with all kinds of different beliefs.<sup>10</sup> The term "Gnosticism" comes from the Greek word "gnosis" which means "knowledge." Gnostic movements often combined Christianity with various schools of philosophy, and even with other Hellenic religions, especially between the second and fifth centuries CE.

Perhaps the most recognizable name of the Gnostic movements is Valentinus, who lived in the mid-second century. A brilliant and eloquent man, he proved to be a formidable threat to Christianity, attracting the ire of the greatest Christian leaders of the time, such as Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, Irenaeus, and Tertullian. Valentinus blended together Platonism, Christianity, and all sorts of other ideas we could place under the Gnostic umbrella. Valentinus's sect of Christianity grew rapidly and attracted influential thinkers, and eventually "its exclusion from the church played a decisive role in the development of Christian orthodoxy."<sup>11</sup>

3.2. Marcionites. Marcion (died c. 154 CE) was an extremely important early Christian teacher who exerted much influence in Rome. He was wealthy and made a major donation to the church, although they returned it to him when they learned of his Gnostic ideas. Undeterred, Marcion established his own network of churches that proved a major threat to Christian unity. His chief ideas were that there were two gods: one was the incompetent and evil god of the Old Testament and the other was the god that Jesus revealed. He also denied the humanity of Christ since he believed all matter

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<sup>8</sup> See F. Stanley Jones, "Ebionites," in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity 2nd ed.* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 357.

<sup>9</sup> For a greater exploration of this concept, see Dyron Daughrity, *To Whom Does Christianity Belong?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Alister McGrath, *Heresy* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), p. 119.

<sup>11</sup> Karen King, "Valentinus," in *The Encyclopedia of Early Christianity 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.*, p. 1155.

was evil. Marcion is often credited with being “the first person to compile a collection of canonical New Testament scriptures.”<sup>12</sup> He believed Paul’s teachings were accurate in their interpretation of Jesus, and the only acceptable gospel was Luke’s. He is credited with forcing the church to clearly articulate its understanding of the relationship of the Old Testament to the New.

When Constantine rose to power in the early 300s, he openly persecuted Marcionites (as well as Valentinians) by banning their assemblies and confiscating all of their properties that were within his jurisdiction.<sup>13</sup> However, the Marcionites continued to enjoy success as they moved east, outside of Constantine’s realm, and proved to be a threat to Christianity in the east until the late seventh century.<sup>14</sup>

3.3. Montanists. Led by Montanus, it became such an influential Christian sect that even the great theologian Tertullian joined its ranks. They were rigorous in their fasting and asceticism, and emphasized the gifts of prophecy and having ecstatic revelations. Second marriages were forbidden and they were not allowed to try to escape martyrdom if it came to them. Their excommunication by Pope Eleuterus in the CE 180s is curious since “Charges that they were doctrinal heretics are unfounded.”<sup>15</sup> They died out shortly thereafter.

3.4. Arianism. One of the best known schismatics in the history of Christianity is Arius (CE 260–336). His name lives on in infamy, as any Christian theology that downplays the “orthodox” understanding of the Trinity inevitably gets slapped with his name: Arianism.

Arius was an influential presbyter in Alexandria at a time when Christianity’s fortunes were changing due to Constantine’s rise to Roman Emperor. Constantine’s great concern was unity in his empire, and Arius posed a threat to that unity. What did Arius say that was so offensive? “His main point is that the Logos does not have to exist: God wills the Logos or Son to be, so that scripture can legitimately say (as in Proverbs 8:22) that Logos or Sophia is ‘created.’”<sup>16</sup> A little jingle floated around and was repeated regularly by Arius’s followers: “There was a time when he [the Logos] was not.”

Arius had more impact than anybody on the Council of Nicaea in 325 because of his views shaping the Nicene Creed. Numerous phrases from the creed are explicit rejections of Arianism, for example, “true God from true God” and “one in substance [homoousios] with the Father.”<sup>17</sup> Arius was firmly condemned at the council, and consequently Constantine exiled him. This was only a slap on the wrist, however. He was readmitted to communion two years later, in CE 327, and his reputation and legitimacy as a cleric was being rehabilitated at the time of his death in 336.

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<sup>12</sup> Hendrik Stander, “Marcion,” in *The Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 716.

<sup>13</sup> See Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* (New York: Cosimo, 2007, originally 1890) *The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine*, ed. by Philip Schaff. See Book 3, Chapter 64, “Constantine’s Edict against the Heretics,” p. 1031, and chapter 65, “The Heretics are deprived of their Meeting Places,” p. 1031.

<sup>14</sup> See David Deakle, “Marcionites,” in *The Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 717.

<sup>15</sup> Dennis Groh, “Montanism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 778.

<sup>16</sup> Rowan Williams, “Arianism,” *The Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 107.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Kannengiesser, “Arius,” *The Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p. 115.

3.5. Council of Ephesus/Nestorians. The Council of Ephesus in CE 431 is infamous in church history because of its condemnation of a major sect of Christianity: Nestorianism. Nestorius (CE 381–451) rose to become bishop of Constantinople in 428. He was a brilliant theologian who made a name for himself by persecuting sects of Christianity that did not conform to his understanding. However, when the equally competent bishop and theologian Cyril of Alexandria took up the pen against him, he had met his match. The core of their argument with each other was this: Cyril wanted to refer to Mary as the “Theotokos”—the “Mother of God.” Nestorius despised this term for many reasons, chiefly because it compromised the integrity of God’s authority. Nestorius preferred to call Mary “Christotokos” (Mother of Christ, or Christ-bearer).

In the end, Nestorius was deposed by the Council of Ephesus, his writings burned, and he spent the last twenty years of his life in exile. His followers, however, lived on and became a formidable missionary power, establishing many Syriac-speaking churches and monasteries all over Asia. This group of Christians is still around today and goes by the name “The Assyrian Church of the East.”

3.6. Council of Chalcedon/Oriental Orthodox. Disaster struck Christianity again at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. In the aftermath of that council, a series of schisms within Christianity broke out. The goal of the council was to end the controversies once and for all about the nature of Christ: whether he has one nature or two. This long episode in Christian history is known as the “Christological Controversies.” While this council is considered “Orthodox” by both the Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox, several important and ancient churches do not recognize its authority: The Coptic Church (Egypt), Ethiopian, Eritrean, Syriac, Malankara Syrian (India), and Armenian. This council had the unfortunate consequence of marginalizing what is known today as the “Oriental Orthodox Churches.” As a result, the relationship between the Oriental Orthodox and the Catholic/Eastern Orthodox Churches has been strained for hundreds of years and is only now beginning to get rehabilitated. It is a deep wound in the history of Christianity.

3.7. The Great Schism of 1054. From early on in its history, Christianity developed as a Greek (Byzantine) tradition in the Eastern side of the Roman Empire and as a Latin tradition in the West. These two traditions had their differences, particularly linguistic differences, but overall it was one united church, signified in their Seven Ecumenical Councils that took places between the years of 325 (Nicaea) and 787 (Nicaea II). In 1054, however, whatever unity these two churches shared was swiftly rent into two over a disagreement. The issue had to do with authority.

The problems began when the Latin Church put pressure on the Greek churches in Italy to either conform to the Latin liturgy or else close their doors. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople responded in kind, closing the Latin churches in Constantinople. In 1054, Leo IX sent Cardinal Humbert to Constantinople, whereupon he placed a bull of excommunication on the high altar in the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia—the most important church in the Byzantine world—during the Divine Liturgy. In response, Byzantine Patriarch Michael Cerularius excommunicated Humbert. By this time, Pope Leo IX had died, so technically the famous “mutual excommunication” was not ratified

properly by a sitting Pope. However, the damage from those events has continued to divide Christianity to the present day.

In the year 1204, tragedy struck during the Fourth Crusade (1202–1204). During their travels from Western Europe to the Middle East, the Roman crusaders decided to attack Constantinople. A series of battles ensued beginning in July 1203. By April 1204 the Latin crusaders managed to gain the momentum necessary for victory. They first plundered the city and sent its prized possessions to the West, then set fire to it, destroying everything, including the famous library. They put thousands of Constantinople's residents to the sword and raped many of its women.<sup>18</sup> Constantinople was permanently weakened and was easily defeated by the Ottomans in 1453—when Sultan Mehmed II conquered the Byzantine capital and claimed it for Islam; it remained the Ottoman capital until 1923.

The Great Schism of 1054 and the Fourth Crusade of 1204 permanently fractured Christianity, and those fractures still exist to the present day. Historiographic fault lines were created by these disastrous events, and as a result Eastern Christians and Western Christians remain, largely, strangers. While there have been many ecumenically-minded leaders who have taken steps toward healing the longstanding rift in Christianity, the end result is that the coldness is only beginning to thaw.

3.8. Cathars. In the 12th to 14th centuries, a movement arose in southern France that attracted the ire of the Catholic Church. It was called Catharism, and those involved in the movement were called "Cathars" (from the Greek word *Katharoi*, or, "Puritans") or "Albigensians" (because of their strength in the French city of Albi). It was a form of piety influenced by Manicheism—a faith embraced by Augustine prior to his conversion to Christianity.<sup>19</sup> The Cathars made a distinction between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New. They also argued that once a person died, their soul would reincarnate. Those who followed the ascetic practices of Jesus could exit the cycle of reincarnation.

The Cathar movement became extraordinarily strong, and "By 1200 it seemed possible that southern France might become entirely Cathar."<sup>20</sup> The movement was attractive to people largely because it emphasized rigorous discipleship. It was also a protest against the Roman hierarchy with all of its power, riches, and laxity among the clergy. Pope Innocent III was incensed that a small band of poor, pious mystics could expand to such an extent. As a result, he persecuted them with a vengeance. Thousands of French crusaders took up arms against the Cathars, leading to many years of slaughter and violent persecution.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Judith Herrin, *Byzantium* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 264.

<sup>19</sup> See Owen Chadwick, *A History of Christianity* (London: Orion, 1995), p. 175. See also Tim Dowley, ed., *Introduction to the History of Christianity 2nd ed.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), pp. 233ff.

<sup>20</sup> Dowley, p. 234.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Gregory Pegg, *A Most Holy War: The Albigensian Crusade and the Battle for Christendom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Penguin, 2009), p. 408.

3.9. Waldensians. The Waldensian movement was started around 1170 by a wealthy man in Lyon named Peter Waldo (also known as Valdes). Like the Cathars they originated in southern France, thus were grouped in with the Cathars in the minds of church authorities, although in fact they had very little in common with Cathars. They were a reform movement that emphasized poverty among themselves, as Valdes had set an example by giving away his wealth to the poor. The chief attribute of the Waldensians was that they held to the belief that all Christians (including women) should be preachers—much like Luther’s later emphasis on the “priesthood of all believers.” As various Popes through the years opposed them, they grew in size and influence. They questioned virtually everything about the Catholic Church: feast days, festivals, even sacraments. They preached in the vernacular, as opposed to the Roman Catholic practice of allowing mass to be said only in Latin.

Eventually the Waldensians established a clergy of their own, held their own councils, and developed more sophisticated theologies. By the end of the thirteenth century, they had become extremely widespread across Europe.<sup>22</sup> During the Reformation many of their members joined up with Protestantism. Indeed, in many ways they are archetypal Protestants.

The 45,000-member Waldensian Church was thrust into the limelight in 2015 when Pope Francis offered them a public apology for the intense persecutions against them. Francis said to them inside a Waldensian church in Turin, “On the part of the Catholic Church, I ask your forgiveness; I ask it for the non-Christian and even inhuman attitudes and behavior that we have showed you. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, forgive us!”<sup>23</sup>

3.10. Inquisitions. The Catholic Inquisitions are known to most as one of the most brutal periods in Christianity, although in fact when compared to other periods of sectarian violence and persecution, they are rather mild. The Inquisitions frightened the public because of their well-publicized hearings that could ruin someone’s reputation. The accused person was put on trial and had to weigh the stigma of being labeled a heretic versus what punishment might be inflicted if s/he admitted to heresy.

The Inquisitions arose in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, basically to weed out and prosecute the Cathars and the Waldensians. Over time, however, the institution became huge, indeed transcontinental, as Spain and Portugal conquered much land in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Numerous inquisitions took hold in the new colonies: India, Peru, Mexico, and more. In time, the church’s system of Inquisition opposed virtually anything that deviated from church authority. Thus, Jews, Muslims, Protestants, unrecognized Catholic orders, and other groups came under intense scrutiny.

Historical estimates of how many people died due to the Inquisitions vary wildly. Some claim the total deaths as being in the hundreds of thousands or even in the millions. Rodney Stark studied the results of scholars who looked at records from the later period

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<sup>22</sup> Dowley, p. 236.

<sup>23</sup> See “Pope Francis asks Waldensian Christians to forgive the Church,” *Catholic Herald* (22 June 2015), located at: <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2015/06/22/pope-francis-asks-waldensian-christians-to-forgive-the-church/>.

of Inquisitions, beginning with Tomas de Torquemada's role as Grand Inquisitor in 1483, and going up to around 1700. His conclusion is that the total number of deaths during that 200-plus year period was around 2300. He concludes, "In context, then, the Spanish Inquisition was remarkably restrained."<sup>24</sup>

3.11. The Reformation. Many others before Luther argued similar ideas well before him. For example, Jan Hus (1369–1415) rebelled against the church in the 1400s and was burned at the stake as a heretic. His death outraged the people of Bohemia—where Hus lived—and led to the Hussite Wars which lasted from 1419 to 1434. When the wars ended, the Hussites had earned from Rome, although very begrudgingly, two privileges: 1. the right to administer the wine during the Eucharist (rather than the bread alone which the church had enforced for centuries), and 2. the right to celebrate the Mass in their own language—Czech.<sup>25</sup>

Jan Hus was an admirer of English clergyman John Wycliffe's (1320–1384) Lollard movement. Wycliffe was a theologian at Oxford University who famously translated the Bible into English—an illegal act at the time. He opposed many of the church's teachings such as papal authority, transubstantiation, veneration of saints, and Latin-only mass. Among church historians he is commonly known as "the morning star of the Reformation." He managed to live out his life in relative peace, but a few decades after his death his remains were removed from the grave, condemned officially by Pope Martin V, burned, and the ashes were cast into the Swift River.

Luther was acquainted with both Hus and Wycliffe. When Luther was on trial in 1521 at the Diet of Worms, he was accused of being a Hussite. However Luther's reforms created a sect of Christianity that mushroomed and proliferated beyond anyone's imagination. The Protestant Reformation spawned a vast array of sects that continue to rival the Roman Catholic Church in both number and influence. Listed here are only a few of the families of Protestants that exist today:

- Pentecostal (rooted in the global Pentecostal revivals): around 280 million members;<sup>26</sup>
- Methodist (rooted in John Wesley): around 80 million members;<sup>27</sup>
- Reformed/Presbyterian (rooted in John Calvin): around 80 million members;<sup>28</sup>
- The Anglican Communion (rooted in Church of England): around 80 million members;<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), p. 338.

<sup>25</sup> See MacCulloch, p. 572.

<sup>26</sup> See "Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," *PewResearch*, 19 December 2011, located at <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-movements-and-denominations/>.

<sup>27</sup> See World Methodist Council, located at <http://worldmethodistcouncil.org/about/member-churches/>.

<sup>28</sup> See World Communion of Reformed Churches, located at <http://wrcr.ch/our-story/>.

<sup>29</sup> See Anglican Communion, located at <http://www.aco.org/tour/>.

- Lutherans (explicitly identify with Martin Luther): around 70 million members;<sup>30</sup>
- Baptists (rooted in English Puritanism): around 50 million members;<sup>31</sup>

While these numbers are still rather small when compared to the large number of Catholics in the world today (around 1.2 billion), they are still significant, especially when taken together. One thing is unmistakable, however: Luther's revolt made an impact.

Protestant denominations fought hard for legitimacy. The frequent Irish Protestant-Catholic skirmishes of recent history pale in comparison with the profound violence that occurred in the aftermath of the Reformation. Indeed, casualties from the Thirty Years' War—which lasted from 1618 to 1648—is in the millions, especially considering the disease and pestilence that spread in the war's aftermath. The religious boundaries of the Thirty Years War “still survive in European society at the present day.”<sup>32</sup>

The Protestant Reformation imagined a world with no centralized authority, a world where the common man could read and interpret the Bible for himself, and a world where the individual conscience took precedence over the institutional hierarchy of a powerful church. Luther's defense at Worms epitomizes the heart of the Protestant cause:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason ... I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand. May God help me. Amen.<sup>33</sup>

One historian put it eloquently: “This can stand for the motto of all Protestants – ultimately, perhaps, all of Western civilization.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Conclusion: Why Christianity's Sectarian Tensions Persist**

Today, Christian sectarianism plays out in different ways. For example, in Latin America, there is still deep tension between Catholics and Protestants, largely because of Protestantism's relatively recent growth. Latin America is still staunchly Catholic—around 80%.<sup>35</sup> However, Protestantism is making major inroads, especially in Brazil and Central America.

In Eastern Europe, we are witnessing the re-Christianization of many lands as Soviet influence continues to wane. Orthodox Christianity seems to be filling a cultural power vacuum, and is becoming immensely popular once again.

Africa's colonial history is bound up with religious sectarianism. Ethiopia is an Oriental Orthodox society that was invaded by Catholics (Italians) in the 1930s. Former Catholic-

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<sup>30</sup> See The Lutheran World Federation, located at <http://www.lutheranworld.org/content/about-lwf>.

<sup>31</sup> David Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), p. 3. See also Baptist World Alliance, located at <https://www.bwanet.org/>.

<sup>32</sup> MacCulloch, p. 647.

<sup>33</sup> Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations, 2nd ed.* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 84.

<sup>34</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (New York: Penguin, 2003), p. 131.

<sup>35</sup> For statistics of global Christianity, see Dyran Daughrity, *The Changing World of Christianity*.

nation colonies like Rwanda, Burundi, and Angola have strong Catholic populations, but overall, Africa has far more Protestants (58%) than Catholics (32%).

Christian sectarianism exists in Asia, but is rarely deadly. One notable example of Protestantism's tendency to proliferate is in South Korea, where in a nation of about ten million Protestants, there are around one hundred different Presbyterian denominations.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of rampant denominationalism in South Korea, it is a very peaceful nation, and denominations often join together for ecumenical activities.

And this brings up another important point. In the twentieth century, Christianity saw the rise of an ecumenical consciousness. It rose out of the modern missionary movement. While abroad, Christian missionaries noticed that they had far more in common with each other than not. In 1948 this emerging consciousness culminated in the establishment of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Amsterdam. The WCC has been a powerful forum for Christians to confess their past hostilities and to emphasize Christian unity.

Without doubt the modern ecumenical movement has proven to be a success, if by that we mean a tendency towards unity rather than division. Younger generations of Christians all over the world emphasize their Christian identity much more than they do their sectarian (Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran) identities. Sociologists have described Americans as prone to the phenomenon of "religious switching," as Christians in America will likely switch denominations several times during their lives.<sup>37</sup>

Sectarian tensions persist in the Christian faith, but a general improvement of relations is taking place. The Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox have made great strides in recent years. The Catholic-Orthodox divide was addressed by Pope Francis and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill in 2016 when they met in Cuba to discuss paths toward healing the divisions from the destruction of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade.<sup>38</sup>

Much of the Western world has embraced secularism in recent years. For these people, doctrinal differences do not matter. As the title of this article suggests, there was a time when Christians had "everything to fight for," including salvation. But those hot topics have cooled, particularly in Western Europe, where secularization has taken hold.

Will religious pluralism lead to religious relativism? Only time will tell. It is already clear that Christianity in the West faces an uphill battle for its own relevance. Science and medicine seem to provide the answers that relics and prayers once did. Nevertheless, we can say with relative confidence that the death of the Christian religion has been greatly exaggerated. If history is any indicator of Christianity's future, then the world's largest faith will adapt, evolve, and will ultimately survive.

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<sup>36</sup> See "Korea, Republic of," at *Reformiert Online*, located at <http://www.reformiert-online.net/weltweit/land.php?id=75&lg=eng>.

<sup>37</sup> See Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012).

<sup>38</sup> See Jim Yardley, "Pope and Russian Orthodox Leader Meet in Historic Step," *New York Times*, 12 February 2016, located at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/13/world/americas/pope-arrives-in-cuba-for-historic-meeting-with-russian-orthodox-leader.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/13/world/americas/pope-arrives-in-cuba-for-historic-meeting-with-russian-orthodox-leader.html?_r=0).

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