

Unit 17

Christianity

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Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you will be able to:

- Describe the genesis of Christianity;
- Explain the message of the Bible;
- Out line the concept of the Trinity; and
- Describe Christianity in India.

17.1 Introduction

In this unit, the genesis of Christianity through historical evidences drawn from the Semitic religions viz. Judaism and Islam has been discussed. Evidences hint that the theological aspect of Christianity focuses upon the conception of divinity as a mission for believers leading them to build-up a society in the temporal world in accordance with the God as the sole authority; hence, section 1.3 elucidates the personality of God as a Creator of Heaven and Earth as well as the lord of history. The concept of God as Father is the focal point of subsection (1.3.1). It demonstrates the creation of world as God's will towards self-revelation for all human kinds in Christian social setup. However, the other aspect of evil that operates to divert the path of good deals in the Christian society has been viewed in section (1.4). Also the emergence of evil through its significant roots, as Christians believe is symbolized by 'Satan' who basically functions for the cause of seducing human-beings into sin, disturbing God's plan of salvation and accusing saints are the main issues of this section. However, the concept of Sin has been clarified in the subsection 1.4.1 of the section (1.4).

The sacred scripture, the Bible and its collections - The Old Testament (39 Books) and the New Testament (27 Books) - have been introduced along with messages which they transmit in a nutshell in the section 1.5 of the unit. Section 1.6 gives a picture of Jesus Christ and his teachings. The

birth of Christ as narrated by Gospel Lucke has been described in the subsection 1.6.1 while 1.6.2 sub section deals with the message of Jesus Christ. But, during this course of action, Jesus faces resistance which has been elaborated in subsection 1.6.3.

Section 1.7 gives a brief picture of the doctrine of the Church - Here God Himself reveals to the entire mankind a trinity in which the Holy Father, the Holy Son and the Holy Spirit are believed as creatures of universe. The section 1.8 provides the facts relating to the establishment of Christianity, while subsection 1.8.1 gives a note of confrontation with Islam during the spreading of Christianity.

The reformation in the Roman Catholic Church that resulted in the emergence of two great sects viz. Catholicism and Protestantism is analysed in Section 1.9, whereas the Christian ways of social life has been presented in subsection 1.9.1.

The spreading of Christianity in India and its significant feature with reference to Indian caste system have been the focal points of the section 1.10 and finally the summary of the whole unit is given.

17.2 Genesis of Christianity as a Religion

Christianity is a historical religion as well as one of the major religions of the world. It is an integral part of the Semitic religions such as Judaism and Islam. It locates within the event of human history both the redemption it promises and the revelation to which it lays claim. Christianity developed a very special pattern in emphasizing the transcendental character of its conception of divinity. The God which the Christians inherited from the Hebrews was the Creator-Ruler God (-*Yahweh* which is the God of nature and not God in the nature), sole creator and the governor of the world, which included the human condition generally - the condition of all peoples. The Christian theology focused specially on the conception of a divinely ordained, active mission for man. The book of Genesis (Old Testament - OT) specially mentions that the God created man "in His own image" because He wanted man to "do His will" on earth. That will, in turn, ordained the performance of a great collective task that eventually was believed to consist essentially of the building of a society in the temporal world in accordance with the divine plan. It contrasted very sharply with some of the Oriental religions that motivated "adjustment to" the immanent order of the non-empirical universe (Sills, 1968: 427).

This transcendental - activist outlook alone, however, does not account for the broad societal impact of Christianity. It has also characterized Judaism and Islam, but neither of these could generate a modern society on its own, whereas this religion furthermore did the development of religious orientation system itself. However, it was "rationalized" and systematized in a manner comparable with the aforementioned Semitic religions (Ibid: 427).

The theme of human limitation or rather imperfection, in sharp contrast with the transcendence and, thus, in some sense, the glory of God, is acutely accented in Judaism and became the basis of the Christian doctrine of sin. Such imperfection, however, was innately relative to the deep theme of the goodness of the divine creation, of which man, "created in God's image" was clearly the highest part of its ideology. It is not the "things of this world" or of the "flesh" which are inherently evil but primarily man's willfulness, his presumptuousness in disobeying the divine commandments and in thinking human being can do nothing without divine guidance (Sills, 1968: 427).

17.3 Major Features of the Concept of God

Within the specific Christian perception and experience of God, there are some definite characteristic features that stand out: The personality of God - God, as the person, is the "I Am That I Am" (Yahweh) designated in the Book of Exodus 3:14 (OT). The personal consciousness of man awakens in the encounter with God understood as a person: "The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex. 33:11). God as the creator - God is also viewed as creator of heaven and earth. The believer thus maintains, on the one hand, acknowledgement of divine omnipotence as the creative power of God, which also operates in the preservation of the world created by him and, on the other hand, trust in the world, which-despite all its contradictions - is understood as one world created by God according to definite laws, principles, and according to an inner plan. The decisive aspect of creation, however, is that God fashioned man according to His image and made the creation subject to man. This special position of man in the creation, which makes man a co-worker of God in preservation and consummation of the creation, brings a decisively new characteristic into the understanding of God. *God as the Lord of the History* - which is the main feature of the Old Testament understanding of God: God selects for Him a special people, with whom he contracts a special covenant. Through His Law, He binds these "people of God" to Himself; He sets before them a definite goal of salvation - the establishment of His dominion - through His prophets He has His people admonished through proclamation of salvation and calamity whenever they are unfaithful and disobedient to His covenant and promise. *God as a Judge* - The genuinely Israelite belief that God reveals himself in the history of His people leads, with an inner logic, to the proclamation of God as the Lord of world history and as the Judge of the world (*Britannica*, 1975:477).

The Specific concept of God as Father

What is decisively new in the Christian, New Testament (NT) faith in God lies in the fact that this faith is so closely bound up with the person, teaching, and work of Jesus Christ that it is difficult to draw boundaries between theology and Christology (doctrines of Christ). Jesus himself embraced the God of the Hebrew patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob), but he also understood himself as the fulfiller of the promise of the Messiah-son of man, who is bringer of the kingdom of God. The religious experience that forms the basis of the Messianic self-understanding of Jesus is the recognition that the Messiah - son of man is the son of God.

The special relationship of Jesus to God is expressed through his designation of God as Father. In prayers Jesus used the Aramaic word *abba* (father) for god, which is otherwise unusual in religious discourse in Judaism. This Father-Son relationship became a prototype for the relationship of the Christian to his God. Appeal to the sonship of God played a crucial role in the development of Jesus Christ's messianic self-understanding. According to the account of Jesus' baptism, Jesus understood his sonship when a voice from heaven said: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Faith in the Son also brought about an oneness with the Father. The Son became the mediator of the glory of the Father to those who believe in Him. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught his disciples to address God as "Our Father." The Father- God of Jesus after His death and resurrection becomes, for his disciples, the God and the Father of Lord Jesus Christ, who revealed his love through sacrifice of his Son who was sent to the world. The faithful-believer Christian can thus become the son of God.

The God of the Bible is the God of revelation; on His initiative, He presses toward revelation. The creation of the world is viewed as an expression of God's will towards self-revelation for all human beings. The Biblical understanding of God, however, was based upon the idea of the freedom of the Creator, Sustainer, and Judge of the world (Ibid: 478).

17.4 The Emergence of Evil

In the Bible, both the Old as well as the New Testaments, Satan (the devil/angel of darkness) appears as the representative of Evil. Satan represents the demonic side of the divine wrath. Only in post-biblical Judaism does the devil become adversary of God, the prince of angels, who was created by God and was placed as the head of the angelic hosts, and who enticed some of the angels into revolt against God. In punishment for his rebellion, He was cast from heaven together with his mutinous entourage, which was transferred into demons. As ruler over the fallen angels, he henceforth continues the struggle against the kingdom of God in a three fold function: the Satan seeks to seduce human beings into sin; he tries to disrupt God's plan for salvation; and he appears before God as the slanderer and the accuser of the saints, so as to reduce the number of those chosen for the kingdom of God. Even in the New Testament, the feature of an anti-Godly power is clearly prominent in the figures of the devil, Satan or Belial and Beelzebub - the "enemy." He is the accuser, the evil one, the tempter, the old snake, the great dragon, the prince of this world, and the god of this world, who seeks to hinder the establishment of God's dominion (*Britannica*, 1975:479).

Concept of Sin

Although the man was made by God in a state of holiness (from the very dawn of history). Yet he abused his liberty at the urging of personified Evil. Man set himself against god and sought to find fulfillment apart from God. Chapters one and two of the Book of Genesis (OT) tell the story of creation by God. God created all things (in the whole world) including man and woman and saw that they were good. But into this good world entered Sin. In the third chapter of Genesis, the man Adam rejects God and tries to become His equal. As a result of this original sin, the man feels alienated from God. He hides, when the God (creator) confronts him. Adam blames his woman companion Eve for his sin, and she in turn blames the serpent (Satan) for tempting them to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree of the Paradise. With disobedience, the man's guilt has distorted all his relationships. Sin has turned life into a harsh burden. The book of Genesis further depicts the escalation of sin in the world, rippling out from Adam's original sin. According to Genesis, a world of beauty was deformed by sin. The ongoing result has been division, pain, bloodshed, loneliness and death. As Saint Paul declared in the letter to the Romans (5:12), "Sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned."

17.5 The Bible: Its Books and Its Message

Sacred Scripture, the Bible, is a collection of books. The Old Testament of the Bible was originally written in Hebrew/Aramaic and is consisted of 39 books that were written approximately between the years 900 B.C. and 160 B.C. that is before the advent of Christ. Later they were translated by the Jews themselves into Greek (with seven new books added). The New Testament of the Bible was written wholly in Greek. The 27 books of the New Testament were written approximately between the years A.D.40 and A.D. 140.

The Old Testament collection is made up of historical books, didactic (teaching) books, Prophetic books (containing the inspired words of Prophets, people who experienced God in special ways and were his authentic spokesmen). In brief, the Old Testament books are records of the experience the Israelite people had of Yahweh, "the God of their fathers." As a whole, these books reveal Israel's insight into the personal reality of the one God, Yahweh, who acts in the human history guiding it with plan and purpose.

Box 17.1 The Ten Commandments

In the Old Testament, God gives Ten Commandments to His people through Prophet Moses as the Commandments of God. They are as follows: "You shall honour no other god but me. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord, your God. Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day. Honour your father and your mother. You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife. You shall not covet your neighbour's goods" (Exodus 20: 3-17; Deuteronomy 5:7-21).

The New Testament books, written originally in Greek, are made up of Gospels (which means proclamation of Good News) and Epistles (letters which were written in each case to meet the particular needs of the early Christian communities by the some disciples of Jesus). First, in the order in which they appear in Bible, are the Gospels of Mathew, Mark, Luke and John. The first Gospels are called *synoptic* (from the Greek *synoptikos*, "seeing the whole together") because they tell much the same life story of Jesus in much the same way. The fourth Gospel which is called as Gospel of John is followed by Acts of the Apostles (Formation of early Christian Communities).

The final book of the New Testament is the book of Revelation, a message of hope for the persecuted Christians, promising Christ's ultimate triumph in history. The basic theme of the New Testament is Jesus Christ. Each book reveals a different side of Jesus' mystery. The four Gospels record the words and deeds of Jesus as they were remembered and handed down in the early generation of the Church. They also specifically mention the story of Jesus' Passion and death, and what death means in the light of his Resurrection. In a sense, the Gospels began with the resurrection; Jesus' teaching and the events in his life made sense to early Christian only after his Resurrection. The Gospels reflect the shared faith of the first Christians in the Lord Jesus who is risen and now continues to dwell among us.

17.6 Jesus Christ and His Teachings

In the light of the New Testament, the significance of the person of Jesus is specified and seen as "Christ". However, beside this title, there are additional titles such as Son of Man, Son of God, Word of God (Logos), and Savior - given in an effort to account for that significance, for within the events of Jesus' human life the God of Israel and creator of the world had been disclosed (Pelikan, 1987:355).

Birth of Jesus Christ

The initial two chapters of the Gospel of Luke narrate regarding the nativity of Christ. God sent his messenger angel Gabriel to a town of Galilee called Nazareth to a young girl named Mary. She was betrothed to a man of David's lineage; his name was Joseph. The angel Gabriel said to her that the Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the most high

will overshadow you. Thus this holy offspring of yours shall be known as the son of God, and you shall call him Jesus. Joseph, the foster father of Jesus was a carpenter in the village of Nazareth. He was a deeply religious and an ever-faithful head and protector of the family.

Just before the birth of Jesus, the Roman emperor had decreed a census throughout the empire. According to the order, all were to go to the village of their family's origin to register their names, which meant for Joseph and his spouse Mary to go to Bethlehem (town of David). While they were still there, that time came for her delivery. She brought forth a son, her first-born, whom she wrapped in his swaddling clothes, and laid in a feeding-trough for animals, because there was no room for them in the inn. On the birth of Jesus, the shepherds were given the message by a multitude of angels: "Do not be afraid; behold, I bring you good news of great rejoicing for the whole people. This day in the city of David, a Saviour has been born for you, the Lord Christ Himself. This is the sign by which you are to know Him; you will find a Child still in swaddling-clothes, lying in a feeding-trough" (Luke 2: 10-12). Besides the shepherds three learned men (magi) from the neighbouring countries were led by a star to Bethlehem. When they found the child there with his mother Mary, they fell down to worship him. They offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Travers-Ball, 1962:15-6).

Jesus Christ and His Message

Jesus' teaching sought to return to the core of the Law's purpose and to reduce the burden of their interpretive tradition, the fence around the Law. He redrew the boundaries of the pure and impure in a way that offended some Jews and encouraged others. He preached the message of divine compassion and mercy, the acceptance of which spelled salvation and rejection of which meant spiritual disaster. One of the characteristics of his preaching was the Parable. A Parable, as told by Jesus, portrayed a kind of world-reversal and, as the parables unfolded, the reactions to it revealed the hearts of those listening to it. In their original settings, the parables were remarkably provocative ways of speaking about what the in-breaking reign of God looked like when expressed in thoroughly human terms. Besides the ten commandments of God, Jesus summarized the whole Law into God's two great commandments: "You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind,... You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Mark 12: 30-31).

Jesus called men and women to discipleship, a different way of acting from most Jewish teachers, who expected prospective students to take the initiative. The people most resistant to his teaching were those "good" fellow Jews who sought to let their righteousness protect them from the new grace that Jesus offered. People who were broken hearted in their guilt and those who were like "children" seemed most open to the gift of divine acceptance he preached. He related publicly to women in ways that did not respect the traditional boundaries of his days, thus implying that service of God's reign, as it was breaking in through Jesus' ministry, was transforming the customary lines of distinction. Jesus gathered about himself a community of disciples. An inner core was called the twelve Apostles.

Reflection and Action 17.1

Meet a Christian priest and ask him about Jesus and his Message. Write down what you learn from him in your notebook and discuss it with other students at your study centre.

Jesus told his disciples that he has come to this world to fulfill the law and not to destroy the age-old law. Besides the Ten Commandments, he gave to his disciples the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are a summary of the difficulties to be overcome by his faithful followers and the rewards that will be theirs if they are loyal in their following. The Beatitudes are blessed and the poor in spirit; the reign of God is theirs. Blessed are the sorrowing; they shall be consoled. Blessed are the lowly; they shall inherit the land. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for holiness; they shall have their fill. Blessed are those who show mercy; mercy shall be theirs. Blessed are the single-hearted; they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers; they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those persecuted for holiness' sake; the reign of God is theirs (Mathew 5:3-10).

Confrontation with Authority

During Jesus' ministry, he made some enemies. The Gospels portray the Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes and elders as his chief opponents. The increasingly excited crowds Jesus drew made his opponents fear that he was another messianic pretender. And Jesus' provocative act of symbolically interrupting the normal activity of the Temple would have profoundly concerned the priests in their delicate relationship with the Romans. They would not have had a difficult time persuading some Roman officials that Jesus posed a grave danger to the civil-religious "peace."

The actual trial of Jesus is difficult to reconstruct historically, but the sign over the cross suggests that he was executed by the Romans as a messianic pretender. The mode of execution was reserved in those times for slaves and for those who violated the "pax romana," the religio-political hegemony of the Romans. The final legal responsibility for Jesus' death on a cross lay with the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Before Jesus' crucifixion he had Last Supper (Passover meal) with his twelve disciples in an upper room. Thereafter, one of his disciples named Judas Iscariot betrayed him and sold him for thirty silver pieces to the Jewish authority (McDermott, 1997:453).

The stories of the Last Supper and the Agony in the Garden give expression to the freedom with which Jesus went to his death as a service of God and people in full continuity with his ministry. Soon after Jesus' subhuman death on a cross (ca. A.D. 30), he was buried and several events occurred. Some of Jesus' disciples visited his tomb and it was discovered empty (resurrection had taken place). Thereafter the disciples reported his appearances on several occasions. Jesus appears on his own initiative to his disciples and some other people who knew him before his death, he offered them companionship. Before ascending to heaven, Jesus sends them on a mission - "Go to the ends of the world and preach the Good News to all people and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." The disciples went on preaching that Jesus was the Christ or Messiah. The apostle Paul was responsible for the transformation of Christianity from a Jewish sect to a gentile movement by the end of the first century of the Common Era. The importance of this change for Christian history is impossible to exaggerate. Jesus had been born in an obscure corner of the Roman Empire, but now his followers took upon themselves the assignment of challenging that empire and eventually conquering it in the name of Jesus. The opposition between empire and the church sometimes during the second and third centuries took the form of persecution and martyrdom (Ibid: 450-1).

17.7 The Holy Trinity

The Trinity of God is defined by the Church as the belief that in God are

three persons who subsist in one nature. The trinity of persons within the unity of nature is defined in terms of "person" and "nature" which are Greek philosophical terms; actually the terms do not appear in the Bible. The ultimate affirmation of the Trinity of persons and unity of nature was declared by the Church to be the only correct way in which these terms could be used (McKenzie, 1984:899).

The Christians believe in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity that is a kind of a mystery of rational monotheism. This doctrine has its ultimate foundation in the special religious experience of the early Christian communities, but this basis of experience is older than the formation of the doctrine of Trinity. It consists of the fact that God comes to meet His people in a threefold figure: God the Father - who reveals himself in the Old Testament; as Creator, Lord of the history of salvation and Judge. The second figure of the Trinity is God the Son - as the Lord who in the figure of Jesus Christ, who came to live in the midst of human beings, who suffered, died on the cross and Resurrected from the dead and Christ will come again to this world to Judge the living and the dead. The Third figure of the Holy Trinity is God the Holy Spirit - to whom the faithful experience as the source of new life, healer and the miraculous potency of the kingdom of God. In the doctrine of the Holy Trinity the formal understanding of the oneness of God as well as the sameness of essence of the son and the Holy Spirit is maintained ("one substance - three Persons"). It is stated in short that the oneness of God and His self-revelation in the figure of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit - without rationalizing the mystery itself (Britannica, 1975:485-6).

17.8 The Official Establishment of Christianity

Almost more than two centuries, the Early Christian communities were persecuted on account of their faith. In year A.D. 64, when the emperor Nero set fire to Rome to destroy it so that he could rebuild the city to his own tastes, Nero made the Christians a scapegoat upon whom to divert public fury. The Christians were targeted by many Romans because they refused to acknowledge the gods of Rome and thus they were burnt alive in the fire.

Box 17.2 The Flaming Cross

The persecution of Early Christians continued under Galerius in the East and Constantius in the west until A.D. 311. Galerius wearily decreed the toleration of Christianity in his realm. In A.D. 312 Constantius' son, Constantine, defeated Maxentius, the son of an earlier Augustus of the West, in the battle of the Milvian Bridge near Rome, to secure his own succession in the West.

It was reported that Constantine prayed before the battle to the "supreme god" in an effort to ward off Maxentius' magical powers. He was rewarded with the vision of a flaming cross in the mid-day sky, bearing the inscription *In hoc signo vinces* ("In this sign you shall conquer").

Whatever the realities of vision and dream, the historical fact is that Constantine won the battle and the western throne, and he attributed his victory to the Christian God. In A.D. 313, he and Licinius, his counterpart in the East, agreed on an edict Promulgating universal religious tolerance. Constantine seems to have viewed Christianity as a potential unifying force in the empire, but there were ambiguities in his own attitude. Although he called himself a Christian, he was baptized only in A.D. 337, on Pentecost Sunday, a little more than 300 years after the Holy Spirit's descent upon the Apostles during the fateful Pentecost in Jerusalem.

Constantine's acceptance of Christianity and the eventual establishment of it as the official faith of the Roman empire is rightly seen as the most potential event-for good or ill or some combination of the two - in all Christian history: conversely, "the end of Constantinian era" (Ward, 2002:303).

Confrontation with Islam

The missionaries who brought the gospel to various tribes, people and even the barbarians in their own way and with it they gave them their culture too. Each in its own way, both Eastern and western Christendom were compelled, from the seventh century onward, to come to terms with the reality of Islam. During the one hundred years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632ce, the geographical spread of Islam was both more rapid and more effective than that of Christianity had been during its first several centuries. Several of the major centres of the Eastern churches - Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem itself - had a Muslim ruled government, although a large Christian population was able to practice its faith under varying degrees of pressure (Pelikan, 1987:351).

17.9 Reformation in the Church

Since the inception of the church many reform movements took place in order to rescue the church in times of crisis-until, through Martin Luther (1483-1546) and the reformation, a crisis arose in which the primary impetus for reform was to express itself not through monasticism or the papacy, but against both monasticism and the papacy (Luther, too, was originally a monk). Already in various late medieval reformations, such as those of the 'Spiritual' Franciscans and the Hussites, there was the sense that Christendom could be neither one nor holy nor catholic nor apostolic unless it had replaced the secularized and corrupt authority of bishop of Rome (Pope) with the authenticity of word of God (Bible), for which some looked to the church council while others put their confidence in the recovery of the message of the Bible. That sense finally found its voice in the programme of the protestant reformers. The reformers alienated themselves from the hierarchal structure of the Mother church as well as teaching of the church of their time and they were obliged to look or rather invent for alternative structures and teaching of their own (Ibid:351-2).

The principal difference, at least as seen both by the protestant reformers and by their Roman Catholic adversaries, lay in the area of religious authority: not the church or its tradition, not the Papacy or a church council, but the Bible alone, was to be the norm that determined what Christians were to believe and how they were to live.

In this reformation particularly at the religious level the crucial development was done by the reformer(s) that is the upgrading of the Christian laity and granting them a new role in the church. This was effected by ending the individual dependence on the sacerdotal (priestly) mediation. The individual soul stood in *immediate* relation to God through Christ. With respect to the ancient triad of functions the effect was to throw emphasis strongly away from the institutional forms of the "cure of the soul" and of "casuistry." It opened the door to an altogether new emphasis on "conscience" which emerged particularly in the Calvinistic branch once the more subjective concerns of Lutheranism had given way to concern with objective activism in secular callings. Although it is true that the basic status 'differential' was eliminated, this did not imply any lowering in the evaluation of the clergy or of the system, within which statuses had been "equalized" (Parsons, 1968:436).

Many of the corruptions that had acted as tinder for the Reformation received the careful attention in the council of Trent (1545-1564), with the result that the Roman Catholicism and the Papacy emerged from the crisis of the Reformation diminished in size but chastened and strengthened in spirit. The historical coincidence of the discovery of the new world and the protestant reformation, which both protestants and Roman Catholics interpreted as providential, enabled Roman catholic missionaries to recoup in North and South America the losses in prestige and membership caused by the reformation (Pelikan,1987:352).

The Christian Ways of Social Life

As a system of love - and love is the "greatest" and above all according to the formula of Saint Paul, Christianity presents itself to its hearer as a way of life. The Christian way of life as love is conventionally seen as finding its ultimate fulfillment in the church as the loving community of believers set apart from the world. But alongside that strain in the Christian tradition, there always stands a concern and a love for the entire world (Ibid: 361). At the Last Supper Jesus gives a new commandment to his disciples, "Love one another as I have loved you." And along with this new commandment, he sets an example of service by washing the feet of his disciples. It is the fundamental duty of each and every Christian to exhibit one's faith by imparting service to the poor and the downtrodden because Jesus has pronounced: "Whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters (a weaker section of the society) you have done it to me."

Action and Reflection 17.2

Meet members of the Christian community and ask them about their beliefs. Make a note in your note book about your findings.

17.10 Christianity in India

The first Prime Minister of India, Pandit J. Nehru, has once said that if anyone who says that the Christianity came to India with the colonial rule then they do not know the history of India. Before the Gospel could spread in Europe, one of the Apostles (out of twelve) of Jesus named Thomas (A.D. 45), came to south India to spread the Gospel. According to the traditions, Thomas founded seven churches in South India, where he was martyred. The early Christian community of India was small in number and had very limited influence over the rest of the existing religious sects.

In the sixteenth century, with the advent of colonial rule, the second phase of missionary activity took place. The mass conversion took place in various parts (coastal areas) of India where the Portuguese, Dutch and French had their colonial rule. In some places newly converted Christians were segregated from the local community and imposed upon them traits of western culture. A little over a century ago, the Christianity came to NEFA, where many tribals accepted the new faith. Today in some north-eastern States, Christianity is the major religion.

On commencement of the nineteenth century, the British India faced a severe draught. A large population of Dalits and the tribals were prey to the starvation and the outbreak of the epidemic. In this situation the missionaries erected the asylums for the needy and the sick to provide round the clock medical assistance and by opening community kitchen, a great number of ravenous were given a daily square meal. During this time, many tribals and Dalits accepted the Christian faith. However, in another instance, many lower castes (*Shudra* or *Atishudra*) were forced to accept the Christianity due to the atrocities done to them by the upper

castes - for example, the mass conversion of Nadar community (*Shanas*) of Tamil Nadu.

Today in India, the population of Christians is less than three percent but their contribution to the Indian society is immense. The Christians run almost many educational institutes as well as a number of hospitals equipped with medical facilities for the poor and the needy people of this country.

Christianity is an egalitarian religion which does not speak of inequality ideologically. Nevertheless, the Indian case of Christianity appears to be a peculiar one, as Indian Christians due to the conversion from different Hindu castes, seem to have retained the generations' old caste structure within their social setup. Various movements for the recognition of 'backward' class status within Christians are the sheer reflection of such an acceptance. In this connection, the anthropologists and sociologists seem to be agreed that Indian Christians are greatly influenced by the ideology and values of Hinduism, and particularly as being weakened against the pervasive influence of caste. For instance, Dumont treats the adherence values of monotheistic religion with egalitarian tendencies which are weaker than the fundamental values on which the caste system rests (1972: 251). Further, he believes that the influences of Hinduism on Indian Christians are contributing to the existence of caste-like elements among them (Ibid, 83-84). A number of studies clearly indicate that the social way of life of Indian Christians is very much influenced by caste-like structure. Here Fuller (1976: 65) narrates that the egalitarianism of Christianity had marginal impact on the Hindu way of life.

17.11 Conclusion

Christianity came into existence from Judaism because Jesus was a Jew by birth. And Jesus himself said: "I have come to fulfill the Law-Torah and not to destroy the Law." Jesus in his teaching stressed on love for God, the Father, as well as love for the neighbours.

While teaching the law of love he had confrontation with established religious authorities who crucified him on the cross. After his death, he resurrected himself from death and appeared to his disciples. After descending of the Holy Spirit, the disciples went on spreading the Gospel of Christ. The early Christian community faced persecution for about two centuries from the Roman Empire.

In the seventh century, the Christianity was encountered with the new emerging religion of Islam. And in the sixteenth century, a Man called Martin Luther brought first-major reformation in the Church. Later on, this was named as Protestantism. With this reformation, a new kind of religious ethic was emerged in the Christian Church and Papacy tradition. The Church preaching were replaced by extra emphasis on the teaching of the Bible and in this context a new interpretation of worldly life was commenced within the Christianity which later turned into Calvinism, resulting in modernism and capitalism in the society (Weber, 1930).

17.12 Further Reading

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