

# Preparing for A105: revisit Catholic and Protestant Christianity

From Book 2, *Tradition and Dissent*, Chapter 3 Tradition and Dissent in English Christianity, pp. 74-5.

## Catholic and Protestant Christianity

The historical label ‘Reformation’, used with reference to Europe in the era between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, signifies numerous complex movements and events, but in this chapter it signifies a period of intense debate and conflict about what it meant to be ‘religious’ or, more specifically, ‘Christian’. In order to understand the issues that arose in this period it is necessary first to summarise the core teachings of Christianity.

The central and defining Christian convictions are beliefs relating to Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ (4 BCE-29 CE). These can be outlined as follows:

- Jesus is both fully divine and fully human.
- Humankind is inherently sinful (the doctrine known as “original sin”), signifying estrangement from God as well as moral wrongdoing
- Jesus, the sinless Son of God, is the essential means of reconciliation between God and humankind.
- Jesus’ teachings, recorded in the New Testament, have unique spiritual and moral authority.
- Following on from his death on the cross and subsequent miraculous resurrection, which overcame the power of sin and death, Jesus is still living in heaven.
- All who have true faith in Jesus have the prospect of forgiveness of sins in this world and eternal life in the world to come.
- After Jesus’ life on earth, God sent the Holy Spirit to initiate and empower the church in its continuing witness to these central truths.

Mainstream Christianity thus teaches that God exists in three forms, or persons: the Father, who created the world; the Son, Jesus, who redeemed humankind; and the Holy Spirit, the continuing supernatural power in the life of the church.

This central core of belief has inevitably given rise to numerous questions and differences of interpretation that have divided Christians across the centuries. What does it really mean to say Jesus is/was both ‘fully divine and fully human’? What do human beings actually have to do to secure the forgiveness and eternal life promised to them through Jesus? Do they need help from other supernatural beings (for example, saints and angels) or from the rituals of the church, or is individual commitment and trust in God sufficient to attain salvation? Is one’s eternal fate, destined everlastingly for heaven or hell, irrevocably settled in this life, or is there still hope of changing one’s destiny even after death? How do Christians best gain a true knowledge of Jesus’ teachings – through the Bible which claims to record his exact original words, or through the church which claims the ongoing divine guidance of the Holy Spirit in interpreting him to each succeeding generation? In worship, is it better to follow tradition, maintaining the same rituals that have been carried on year after year, or should Christian practice be reshaped to reflect changing contexts or even the immediate personal convictions and experience of individual believers?